

# The Death of God and the Death of Morality

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## ABSTRACT

Nietzsche famously proclaimed the “death of God,” but in so doing it was not God’s death that was really notable—Nietzsche assumes that most reflective, modern readers realize that “the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable” (GS 343)—but the implications of that belief becoming unbelievable, namely, “how much must collapse now that this faith has been undermined,” in particular, “the whole of our European morality” (GS 343). What is the connection between the death of God and the death of morality? I argue that Nietzsche thinks the death of God will undermine the “moral egalitarianism” that is central to modern morality, in both its deontological and utilitarian forms. I offer an account of how Nietzsche sees the connection, arguing that no one has yet offered a nontheistic defense of moral egalitarianism (I focus, in particular but not only, on Rawls). I conclude with some skeptical considerations about whether Nietzsche was right that atheism would, in fact, undermine morality.

A popular conceit in recent Anglophone philosophy, familiar from the writings of Derek Parfit and Peter Singer in particular, is that until philosophical ethics frees itself from “religion,” it will not be able to make progress. Parfit and Singer think of themselves as vanguards in this movement, a claim rich in irony for any student of Nietzsche.<sup>1</sup> For Parfit and Singer both, though in slightly different ways, treat everyone’s sentience and suffering as of decisive moral importance,<sup>2</sup> aligning themselves firmly with the egalitarian moral thinking central to Christianity. To be sure, Parfit and Singer detach themselves from certain sectarian doctrines of, say, the Catholic Church (Singer, for example, is happy to see infants and the disabled killed under the right circumstances), but their basic moral outlook is Christian to its core, as any Nietzschean would notice.<sup>3</sup>

That fact is not of much significance, of course, if there were some reason, separable from Christianity, for thinking everyone’s suffering deserves equal moral salience. But I take it to be one of Nietzsche’s most radical claims that a certain kind of Christian morality *cannot* survive the “death of God,” that is, the repudiation of a particular metaphysics and cosmology that has, in some sense to be specified, underwritten such morality. Anglophone philosophers, in their insular complacency, think the “death of God” does not matter to morality; Nietzsche, by contrast, does. My topic, in short, is why Nietzsche thinks the “death of God” also means the “death of

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morality,” or, at least, the death of Christian morality, or herd morality, or, as I have called it, “morality in the pejorative sense” (MPS) to mark off the diverse moral views he takes as his critical target.<sup>4</sup>

Recall Nietzsche’s Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil* (BGE), in which he writes that,

[T]he struggle against Plato, or, to speak more clearly and “for the people,” the struggle against the Christian-ecclesiastical pressure of millennia—since Christianity is Platonism “for the people”—has created a magnificent tension of the spirit [*hat . . . eine prachtvolle Spannung des Geistes geschaffen*] in Europe the like of which had never yet existed on earth: with so tense a bow we can now shoot for the most distant goals. The European feels this tension as a state of distress, to be sure; and there have already been two grand attempts to relax the bow, once by means of Jesuitism, the second time by means of the democratic Enlightenment . . . . But we, who are neither Jesuits nor democrats, nor even sufficiently German, we good *Europeans* and free, very free spirits—we have it still, the whole need of the spirit and the whole tension of its bow! And perhaps also the arrow, the task, and who knows, the goal.

To unbend a bow, an image familiar from the Homeric sagas, is to remove the taut string that has bent it (which is not easy to do!). An unbent bow is thus useless for shooting an arrow, as the bow straightens a bit and the string falls limp. When one unbends a bow one reduces *both* opposed forces (the bent bow, the taut string) simultaneously, thus eliminating the tension that makes shooting an arrow possible. The question then posed by the metaphor is: what was the tension, and how exactly did Jesuitism and the democratic Enlightenment try to unbend the bow, and thus eliminate the tension? A plausible reading must connect the Preface to the book’s title, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and to familiar Nietzschean themes, such as the death of God and the rejection not simply of the Church, but also of its “poison,” i.e., its moral doctrine (to paraphrase GM I: 9).

Nietzsche says the magnificent tension of the bow was created by the struggle (*Kampf*) against Platonism/Christianity. But who exactly was involved in this “struggle”? Obviously Nietzsche deems himself to be part of this struggle, but that is hardly illuminating in this context. The question is: *who else besides Nietzsche?* Presumably he has in mind *at least* the various nineteenth-century German Materialists, from Ludwig Feuerbach to Friedrich Lange and Ludwig Büchner, among other contemporaneous empiricists and naturalists who were opponents of religion. But their “struggle” against Platonism and Christianity was overwhelmingly against, roughly, Platonic/Christian metaphysics or cosmology (e.g., supernatural beings, disembodied souls, an afterlife, and so on), not against Platonic/Christian morality. In undermining the former, they generally did not take themselves to imperil the latter. Yet the thought was certainly prominent in the nineteenth century that the collapse of Platonic/Christian cosmology might pose a threat to morality: Dostoevsky was the most famous exponent of the idea that if God does not exist “everything is permitted” (or, more accurately, nothing is prohibited!). I take it

Nietzsche thinks the *real feeling of tension* results from repudiating Platonic/Christian metaphysics while trying to hold on to its morality.

Thus, we should think of attempts to “unbend” the bow as attempts to resolve the feeling of tension that arises from rejecting Platonic/Christian metaphysics, on the one hand, and continuing to accept Platonic/Christian morality, on the other. The latter was certainly a tension Dostoevsky felt keenly, to the point where he thought it was not possible: if God is dead, nothing is morally prohibited any longer! And this way of thinking about the tension would also make sense of the two intellectual movements Nietzsche names, Jesuitism and the democratic Enlightenment, both of which tried to block Dostoevsky’s dreaded conclusion. Jesuits cultivated the method of casuistic reasoning as a way of defending Christian morals, without recourse to claims about God’s will, Biblical authority, and so on.<sup>5</sup> So, too, the democratic Enlightenment tried to put reason’s imprint on central aspects of Christian morality (think of Kant or Bentham), while either expressing open skepticism about aspects of Christian cosmology or relegating it to the sphere of private faith, not public dogma. The tension, in both cases, results from the attempt to salvage the morality without its traditional metaphysical foundations. (Indeed, although Jesuits and the Enlightenment try to unbend the bow, their commitment to truth, and knowledge of the truth, has actually brought about “the death of God,” though most do not realize its ramifications, precisely the point of the famous “Madman” passage from *The Gay Science* [GS] to which we will turn momentarily.)

Nietzsche obviously rejects Platonic and Christian metaphysics and cosmology—so does most of reflective modernity, one of Nietzsche’s central points—but, as the title of *Beyond Good and Evil* and much of its content makes clear, Nietzsche also wants to repudiate the Platonic/Christian morality that went hand-in-hand with it, indeed, that was the actual motivation for the metaphysical systems of the “great” philosophers (as we learn in BGE 6). So Nietzsche will have nothing to do with the efforts of Jesuits and Enlightenment democrats to unbend the bow, by showing how a naturalistic and scientific world view—one which is incompatible with Platonic/Christian metaphysics—is, appearances notwithstanding, really compatible with Platonic/Christian morality. Nietzsche, instead, intends to repudiate the whole Platonic/Christian package, both its metaphysics and its morality. And this is why, by Nietzsche’s lights, this tension is “magnificent”: it enables one to shoot the “arrow” into a future “beyond good and evil,” in which the struggle against Platonism and Christianity is won on all fronts, metaphysical and moral. That, in any case, is the thesis I propose to defend in what follows.

### GOD IS DEAD, AND SO IS MORALITY

Let us begin with the famous passage from *The Gay Science* in which the “death of God” is announced (GS 125). Here it is in relevant part:

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the market place, and cried incessantly: “I seek God! I seek God!”—As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter . . .

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his look. “Whither is God?” he cried; “I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? . . . Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the godly decomposition—Gods, too decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.”

“How shall we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? . . . Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods if only to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us—for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.”

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. “I come too early,” he said then; “my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men . . . This deed is still most distant from them than the most distant stars—and yet they have done it themselves.”

Three points deserve special notice. First, the “madman” who ultimately announces that “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him,” first arrives on the scene “seeking” God, and is greeted with derision by those “who do not believe in God” (GS 125). These are, presumably, the “free thinkers” that Nietzsche repeatedly mocks in his work, those complacent atheists—think, in our own day, of Richard Dawkins, or just about any secular egalitarian, even if not as voluble as Dawkins—who do not believe in God, but who think this is quite compatible with essentially Judeo-Christian morality. Second, the madman’s primary message is that the death of God is a catastrophe, one that “wipe[d] away the entire horizon,” that “unchained this earth from its sun.” Wiping out the horizon, by which we orient ourselves in the world, or unchaining the earth from the sun, would indeed be events of catastrophic significance for life on earth. Why is the death of God supposed to be such a profoundly disorienting event? Third, and finally, there is the madman’s recognition that no one in his crowd of complacent atheists has any idea what he is talking about: “they . . . were silent and stared at him in astonishment” (GS 125). The madman concludes: “I come too early . . . This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering, it has not yet reached the ears of man . . . This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars—and yet they have done it themselves” (GS 125).<sup>6</sup>

My topic is not the sense in which Nietzsche thinks we have “killed” God, that we “have done it” ourselves: that is obvious enough. The Socratic elevation of knowledge

of the truth to the highest value, conjoined with Christianity's popularized Platonism ("the truth will set you free"), led naturally to the high estimation of pursuing the truth manifest in the modern sciences, whose discoveries then sealed the fate of Christian metaphysics: every advance in knowledge of the truth rendered more and more incredible every central claim of religious cosmology.<sup>7</sup> The "madman" of *The Gay Science* is a madman not because of this atheism, which his audience, as Nietzsche acknowledges, accepts: it is because he understands the import of that atheism in a way none of his listeners do. What is that import? Why is the "death of God" such a catastrophe, equivalent to unchaining the earth from the sun?

Later in *The Gay Science*, in the first section of the "Fifth Book" Nietzsche added several years after the original publication, he returns to the fact that "the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable" (GS 343), and emphasizes again that this "event itself is far too great, too distant, too remote." He then adds by way of explanation of this thought the following:

Much less may one suppose that many people know as yet *what* this event really means—and how much must collapse now that this faith has been undermined because it was built upon this faith, propped up by it, grown into it; for example, the whole of our European morality.

Nietzsche, himself, is clear that he welcomes this: the section is titled "the meaning of our cheerfulness" and concludes that when "we hear the news that 'the old god is dead' . . . our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, premonitions, expectations" (GS 343). But why is the "whole of our European morality" imperiled by the death of God? Nietzsche, as I read him, is concerned with one undoubtedly central aspect of European morality that he takes to be threatened by the death of God: its moral egalitarianism. It is to that we now turn.

Start Here

### THE DEATH OF GOD AND THE DEATH OF MORAL EGALITARIANISM

In the work immediately following *The Gay Science*, namely, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche refines his claim about the import of the death of God: what is imperiled, specifically, is the moral egalitarianism at the core of our modern morality. (Zarathustra, recall, is a parody of the Christ figure, preaching an anti-Christian message, but in the style of Christ's New Testament teachings. In general, it is safe to assume that Nietzsche endorses the content of these anti-Christian teachings, most of which find parallels in Nietzsche's other works.) In a section called "On the Higher Men" in the Fourth Part of the book, Zarathustra declares:

You higher men, learn this from me: in the market place nobody believes in higher men.

And if you want to speak there, very well! But the mob blinks: "We are all equal."

"You higher men"—thus blinks the mob—"there are no higher men, we are all equal, man is man, before God we are all equal."

Before God! But now this god has died. And before the mob we do not want to be equal . . . .

You higher men, this god was your greatest danger. It is only since he lies in his tomb that you have been resurrected . . . .

God died: now *we* want the overman [or “higher man”] to live . . . . (Z IV:13)<sup>8</sup>

Nietzsche’s hypothesis—it turns out to be not only his, since many contemporary religious philosophers endorse it<sup>9</sup>—is that belief in God is essential (in some sense yet to be specified) to the egalitarianism that marks post-Enlightenment modernity, that is, the idea that (at least) *every human being* is of equal moral significance or equal moral worth, such that it would be wrongful to discount and ignore the interests (rights, utility, etc.) of some human beings in favor of others. It would be impossible to overstate the importance of this post-Enlightenment egalitarianism, both culturally and philosophically. Take three important, and very different, thinkers of the post-Enlightenment era: Jeremy Bentham, Immanuel Kant, and Karl Marx. Each subscribe to what I will call *moral egalitarianism*, though they differ on the relevant dimension of equality (and they all officially deny that belief in God is relevant to this moral equality). For Bentham, moral equality resides in sentience, in the capacity to feel pleasure and pain, which puts humans and beasts on an equal plane, as Bentham himself made clear. For Kant, moral equality resides in rationality (or, more precisely the capacity for autonomous action, i.e., “moral freedom”), which excludes beasts but includes almost all humans, the cognitively impaired to one side. For Marx, the theorization of moral equality is the least explicit, since Marx believed, obviously rightly, that nothing would turn on the correct theory of moral equality<sup>10</sup>—but when Marx says the communist ethical ideal is “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs,” he certainly seems to be affirming that human *need* is basic to the moral equality that counts (and on the assumption that all humans share certain basic needs, they are in that regard moral equals).

There are, of course, complications and nuances on each kind of view. On utilitarian views, trade-offs among humans (or among humans and sentient nonhuman animals) are permissible, based on differences in *the morally salient* property, but what is crucial on this kind of view is that *all utility-capable beings* count equally: it is neither permissible to fail to count some creature’s utility nor permissible to make trade-offs on the basis of criteria unrelated to utility. On this kind of view—what I will call *Counting Moral Egalitarianism*—no one’s morally relevant attribute can be discounted and trade-offs are only permissible based on the morally relevant attributes that count. *It is crucial for Counting Moral Egalitarianism that everyone (at least most humans) have the feature that counts (even if they do not have it equally):* this is central to the dispute with Nietzsche as we will see. On deontological views, by contrast, moral egalitarianism is more demanding: trade-offs among humans are forbidden, and one’s rights or interests set a floor below which treatment can never fall. I will call these views *Minimal Treatment Moral Egalitarianism*. What both views share is that (at least) all humans are equal in a morally relevant respect.

Nietzsche rejects the egalitarian demand in both forms *and* he thinks the plausibility of it depends on belief in God. That he rejects the egalitarian demand is not

controversial,<sup>11</sup> but more puzzling, at least to contemporary readers, is why he thinks atheism—rejecting belief in God—bears on it. But that he does also believe the latter is clear well beyond *Zarathustra*. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, he complains that people “with their ‘equality before God’ have prevailed over the fate of Europe so far, until a stunted, almost ridiculous type, a herd animal, something well-meaning, sickly, and mediocre has finally been bred” (BGE 62). Later in the same book, revisiting a favorite theme—namely, that “[m]oral judgment and condemnation is the favorite revenge of the spiritually limited against those who are less so”—Nietzsche remarks that,

It warms the bottom of their hearts for there to be a standard that makes them the equal of even people who are teeming with all the qualities and privileges of spirit:—they fight for ‘equality of all before God’ and almost *need* to believe in God for this reason alone. Among them are the strongest opponents of atheism. (BGE 219)

And then, in one of his last works, *The Antichrist* (A), Nietzsche returns to the same point, declaring that,

The ‘equality of souls before God,’ this falseness, this *pretext* for the rancor of everything low-minded, this explosive concept which finally became a revolution, a modern idea, and the principle of the decline of the whole social order—is *Christian dynamite*. (A 62)<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, Nietzsche suggests that,

Christianity owes its *victory* to *this* miserable flattery of personal vanity,—it is precisely the failures, the rebellion-prone, the badly developed, all the rejects and dejects of humanity, that Christianity has won over by these means. ‘Salvation of the soul’—in plain language: ‘the world revolves around me’ . . . . The poisonous doctrine ‘*equal rights for everyone*’—Christianity disseminated this most thoroughly . . . . Christianity has waged a deadly war on every feeling of respect and distance between people, which is to say the *presupposition* of every elevation, of every growth of culture,—it has used the *ressentiment* of the masses as its *main weapon* against *us*, against everything on earth that is noble, joyful, magnanimous, against our happiness on earth . . . . Granting ‘immortality’ to every Tom, Dick, and Harry<sup>13</sup> has been the most enormous and most vicious attempt to assassinate *noble* humanity. (A 43)

Moral egalitarianism, in short, appeals to the vanity of those who are not otherwise equal to other humans along many other dimensions of human character and ability.

That Nietzsche sees this connection between “the death of God” and moral egalitarianism explains why the “madman” of *The Gay Science* concludes that the event has not yet been understood: for despite the fact that belief in God is incredible, belief in moral egalitarianism has, during this same time, become more and more widespread. That is central to Nietzsche’s complaint in the *Genealogy* (GM) that those he

derisively calls “free spirits” affirm that, “Leaving the church aside, we, too, love the poison” (GM I:9), i.e., the “poisonous doctrine” of moral egalitarianism (cf. A 43, above). Or as Nietzsche puts it in *Beyond Good and Evil*: “God ‘the Father’ has been thoroughly refuted . . . [yet] [i]t seems to me that the religious instinct is indeed growing vigorously—but that it rejects any specifically theistic gratification with profound distrust” (BGE 53). This “religious” instinct does not express itself in terms of a belief in God (which would be a “theistic gratification”), but rather in belief in a kind of Christian morality, in particular moral egalitarianism. As Nietzsche writes in one of his last books, “everyone knows” that God is dead, that, as he says explicitly, “‘free will’ and ‘moral world order’ are *lies*” and “*yet everything goes on as before*” (A 38). That, of course, describes our contemporaries, Parfit and Singer, and most contemporary moral philosophers. Most believe that God is dead, and yet believe in free will and morality: in the domain of moral egalitarianism, “everything goes on as before.”

But what precisely is the connection between the nonexistence of God and morality? The connection is partly discursive or inferential: belief in the existence of a certain kind of God *appears* to justify moral egalitarianism. But it is not *only* discursive or inferential: it is central to Nietzsche, as it is to David Hume, that reason underdetermines what to believe, such that *no beliefs* are actually epistemically warranted (see Chapter IV of Leiter [2019] for a more detailed discussion). Belief fixation—the psychological fact that someone believes some proposition and will act upon it—must always be explained by reference to some nonrational fact about persons, such as a disposition or a desire (or what Nietzsche often calls an “affect”), that explains the leap from the point where discursive justification runs out and belief fixation sets in. Consider Hume: people observe the constant conjunction of X and Y, but then a brute fact about creatures like us, a natural disposition to view such constant conjunctions as involving the causal necessitation of an effect, explains why we believe that X necessarily causes Y. I take it that Nietzsche’s view about the relationship between the death of God and the demise of morality is similar: it will suffice to establish a relevant connection, for Nietzsche’s purposes, between belief in God and belief in Christian morality that the former stands in some strong but underdetermining justificatory relationship with the latter, with the explanatory gap between the justification and the belief fixation filled in by some other nonrational facts about creatures like us (e.g., that belief in God satisfies our instinctive cruelty, or appeals to our desire to punish, or renders *ressentiment* meaningful, etc.). If the nonrational factors are fairly stable dispositional characteristics of creatures like us, then the only way, on this psychological scenario, to undermine the belief is to undermine the justificatory element, and that is Nietzsche’s target.

How then might belief in God seem to supply a justification for moral egalitarianism? We need here to start with a brief detour into what is known in contemporary philosophy as the “basis of equality” problem, for the absence of a nontheistic basis for moral egalitarianism helps explain why belief in God is the necessary causal element to bring about belief in egalitarianism. The “basis of equality” problem is this: on what basis, or in virtue of what, is it that all human beings are entitled to equal moral concern? <sup>14</sup> We can remain agnostic on the relevant metric of moral concern



(e.g., utility or respect). The debate about the basis of equality problem assumes that there must be some loosely-speaking empirical attribute the possession of which creates an *entitlement* to (or desert of) equal moral concern. It turns out that no one has an answer to this question, even though moral egalitarianism is now assumed across the spectrum of academic philosophers and political theorists in the capitalist societies.<sup>15</sup>

Here is the dilemma that haunts the basis of equality problem: any feature of persons one might identify as *justifying* their equal treatment is not, in fact, shared equally by persons, thus raising the question how it could justify *equality* of moral consideration. People differ, for example, in their rationality, their sensitivity to pleasure and pain, and their moral capacities, not to mention, to put it in more banal terms, their intelligence, alertness, and empathy.<sup>16</sup> If what warrants equal moral consideration is reason, sentience, or moral sensitivity, then there is no reason to think humans per se warrant equal moral consideration given how much they differ in these attributes.

The most prominent attempt to avoid this dilemma has been Rawls's appeal to "range properties," properties where differences of degree or scale, do not matter. Rawls writes:

[T]he property of being in the interior of the unit circle is a range property of points in the plane. All points inside this circle have this property although their coordinates vary within a certain range. And they equally have this property, since no point interior to a circle is more or less interior to it than any other interior point. (1971, 508)<sup>17</sup>

But what range property relevant to moral egalitarianism is possessed by all human beings? Rawls's answer was "the capacity for moral personality," which includes, for Rawls, the capacity for developing "a sense of justice" (1971, 505–506). We could, of course, ask why possession of a possibly unrealized *capacity* is relevant to equal moral consideration, but put that to one side. Richard Arneson has raised a far more devastating objection (1999, 108–109); I quote it at length:

The difficulty with Rawls's proposal regarding the basis of equality is that no plausible reason is given for regarding the possession of more or less of the Rawls features once one is above the threshold as irrelevant to the determination of one's moral status. For simplicity, consider just the sense of justice . . . . This is a steady disposition to conform one's conduct to what one takes to be basic norms of fairness along with some ability reasonably to identify these fairness norms. But the disposition to be fair obviously admits of degrees; one can be more or less committed to behaving as one thinks fair. And the ability to deliberate about candidate norms of fairness and select the best of them also varies by degree.

Offhand the task of specifying some threshold level of these abilities such that further variations in the abilities above the thresholds should have no bearing on moral status looks hopeless. A further clue that something is amiss is that

Rawls makes no attempt to specify the relevant threshold. Rawls stipulates that these features of moral personality are range properties. Once one is above the threshold, one is in the range, and no one, whatever his exact levels of the moral personality capacities, is in the range to a greater extent than anyone else with above-threshold levels. But it is not at all clear where one might non-arbitrarily place this threshold such that all beings above it are persons and all beings below are nonpersons. It might be thought problematic that according to a range view, it matters immensely whether one is just above or just below the threshold that marks the line separating persons and nonpersons. This problem arises from conceiving of the threshold line as very thin, so a tiny difference in possession of a capacity makes a disproportionately huge difference to one's moral status. But one need not conceive the threshold line as very thin. The line separating persons and nonpersons might be very thick, such that below the lower boundary of the line it is clear that beings in this range are not persons and above the upper boundary of the line it is clear that beings in this range do qualify as persons. Beings with rational capacities that fall in the gray area between the upper and lower boundaries are of indeterminate status. My worries then are that even if the line separating persons and nonpersons is taken to be thick, it seems arbitrary where exactly the line is placed, and that above-threshold differences are stipulated not to affect fundamental moral status.<sup>18</sup>

As a preliminary point, we should note that Rawls only claims to be offering a *sufficient* condition for equal moral consideration, not a *necessary* one (Rawls 1971, 505),<sup>19</sup> but that just means that his account is not really a response to the basis of equality problem, understood as the problem of why (at least) all human beings are necessarily entitled to equal moral consideration. But even as a purportedly sufficient condition it is vulnerable to all of Arneson's objections *unless* one thinks moral status is more like a legal status—say, citizenship—in which (1) a thick or thin threshold suffices, and (2) differences over the threshold are irrelevant. Legal statuses like this are, of course, familiar, and their under- and overinclusive natures can be justified in a variety of ways, though not obviously ones compatible with moral egalitarianism. If you are born in the United States, you are a citizen of the U.S., which entails a whole host of legal benefits. But why should that thin requirement, being born in the U.S., have such monumental consequences for one's benefits and burdens in life? Citizenship is, from the moral point of view, arbitrary; there are practical and realistic reasons why such arbitrariness is probably unavoidable (that is, there are reasons pertaining to the self-interest of countries and rulers why it is unavoidable), but it is hard to see how any of that could be helpful to an attempt to provide a theoretical justification for moral egalitarianism: entitlement to moral treatment should not be morally arbitrary, even if legal status often is. This is precisely why the basis of equality problem is a hard one: being denied equal moral consideration demands a morally weighty justification, not the arbitrariness of line-drawing we acquiesce to in respect of citizenship.<sup>20</sup>

Given the absence of real arguments for moral egalitarianism, it should not be surprising that contemporary philosophers betray the flabbiness of their dialectical position when it comes to the problem of basic equality.<sup>21</sup> Ronald Dworkin, for example, says “the best, perhaps the only, argument for the egalitarian principle lies in the implausibility of denying” it.<sup>22</sup> He is echoed by Will Kymlicka who endorses “the idea that each person matters equally is at the heart of all plausible political theories.”<sup>23</sup> Plausibility, like beauty, is usually in the eye of the beholder, absent some further argument—but no such argument is actually in the offing as we have already seen. It certainly seems “plausible” to Nietzsche that the interests of higher human beings—human beings like Goethe and Beethoven, who really did have greater talents and capacities than most people—deserved more weight than the interests of the “herd” of mediocre humanity. His sympathies on this score may be shocking, but it is not clear they involve any cognitive error, as the failure to produce a rational justification for moral egalitarianism might suggest.

Of course, there may still be justifications of basic equality that we have not considered. Indeed, as Arneson notes elsewhere regarding moral egalitarianism, “So far as the Western European and Anglo-American philosophical tradition is concerned, one significant source of this thought is the Christian notion that God loves all human souls equally.”<sup>24</sup> Arneson here echoes, no doubt unintentionally, Nietzsche’s point in the many passages quoted earlier: belief in a certain kind of God does seem to underwrite or justify moral egalitarianism.<sup>25</sup> The precise dialectical details do not matter to believers, but presumably one plausible way to reconstruct them would go something like this:<sup>26</sup>

1. There exists a God.
2. God determines moral value.
3. All human beings have the following property: an immortal soul bestowed by God.
4. This soul is the basis of moral equality because God deems it so.
5. Therefore, all human beings enjoy basic equality.

This is to be artificially formal about it, but such formalities do show that there is a valid argument in support of the conclusion that moral egalitarianism can be vindicated by the existence of God.<sup>27</sup> Several premises might be challenged here (and my version of premise 3 is particularly Christian in form), though they are not the premises that afflict the earlier arguments for basic equality we considered. The voluntarist hypothesis (roughly, premise 2) that God determines moral value is perhaps vulnerable to *Euthyphro*-style objections, for example: if God does not deem human souls equal *because of some property* of human souls, then his deeming them of equal moral value is simply arbitrary; but if, instead, God deems them of equal moral value *for a reason*, then we are back to the basis of equality problem (namely, what reason is there for treating all humans as equal?).<sup>28</sup> But Nietzsche’s focus is on premise 1, since, the inferential details to one side, that is the root of the whole thing. If there were a Judeo-Christian God, or a comparably egalitarian God, then moral egalitarianism

would enjoy a rather powerful imprimatur, whatever the dialectical details. But if there is no such God? As Nietzsche writes,

When one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality out from under one's feet. This morality is by no means self-evident . . . . Christianity is a system, a *whole* view of things thought out together. By breaking one main concept out of it, the faith in God, one breaks the whole: nothing necessary remains in one's hands. (TI "Skirmishes," 5)

I want to focus on the first point Nietzsche makes ("[t]his morality is by no means self-evident"), since, as we have seen, some contemporary philosophers think moral egalitarianism *is* self-evident. But that they do so is what we would expect, if Nietzsche is right that people, even nonbelievers, do not yet appreciate the import of the "death of God." So when Nietzsche says it is not self-evident, he presumably means that moral egalitarianism is not self-evident when examined with even a modestly skeptical eye (especially one informed, as Nietzsche's is, by the historical record of nonegalitarian moral cultures). And here Nietzsche is, I believe, correct.

Consider: human beings differ along a multitude of dimensions, from intelligence to beauty, from strength to emotional sensitivity, from artistic talent to athletic acumen, from congeniality to sexual prowess. Why think creatures that differ along so many dimensions, and sometimes differ dramatically, are all entitled to equal moral concern? It is certainly true that antiegalitarianism has acquired a bad reputation precisely because its proponents have reverted to proxies for worth or value—proxies like class or race or gender—that, to put it mildly, fared badly under scrutiny in the sense that they did not end up tracking any characteristics that were in fact actually deemed valuable. (Plenty of White people turned out to be tedious brutes; plenty of Black people turned out to be inspired creative geniuses.) But that does not change the fact that human beings *really do differ with respect to all kinds of important attributes*, and it simply is not self-evident why these differences would not (or should not) matter to the standing of humans in practical deliberation, in particular, in thinking about how they ought to be treated, in how their interests ought to be weighed.

Egalitarian moral philosophers are all familiar with the Trolley Problem, the problem of when it is permissible to sacrifice one to save five. Many contributors to the literature (largely middle-class and upper-class academics in Western universities) share the intuition that it would be permissible to throw the rail switch so that a runaway trolley hurtling down the tracks towards five individuals, would be diverted on to a track where it would hit only one person. Many of the same participants in the debate feel it would be wrongful, however, to push a "fat man" off a bridge so that he blocks that same trolley hurtling towards five innocents on the track. The puzzle is to explain the difference between the cases, on the assumption that the outcome is the same.

But for a nonegalitarian like Nietzsche, the Trolley Problem is misconceived from the start: for him, the most important question is: *who are the five, and who is the one to be sacrificed?* More precisely, an inegalitarian like Nietzsche denies that the features

of the five and the one are in any way related to the features that are deemed morally significant by either the Counting Moral Egalitarian or the Minimal Treatment Moral Egalitarian, both of whom find ways to treat *humans*, or at least *most humans*, as within the sphere of moral consideration. Consider the “Nietzschean Trolley Problem” (apologies for anachronism): a runaway trolley is hurtling down the tracks towards Beethoven, before he has even written the *Eroica* symphony (which, of course, he will write if he lives); by throwing a switch, you can divert the trolley so that it runs down five (or fifty) ordinary people, nonentities (say university professors of law or philosophy) of various stripes (“herd animals” in Nietzschean lingo), and Beethoven is saved.<sup>29</sup> For the Nietzschean antiegalitarian, this problem is not a problem: one should of course save a human genius at the expense of many mediocrities.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, for the antiegalitarian, this misstates the conclusion: the interests of the mediocrities do not count at all. To reason that way is, of course, to repudiate moral egalitarianism. Belief in an egalitarian God would thwart that line of reasoning; but absent that belief, what would?<sup>31</sup>

End Here

## CONCLUSION

The evidence that Nietzsche believes that the “death of God” implicates the “death of morality” is overwhelming. But why does Nietzsche believe that? I have argued that the moral egalitarianism that is central to modern morality cannot be defended on any basis other than the supposition that there is an egalitarian God that invests everyone with equal moral worth. Defenders of morality argue that this aspect of morality can be defended without any theistic assumptions, even though, as I have suggested, moral egalitarianism appears to be nothing more than a legacy of Judaism and Christianity.

Counting against Nietzsche’s skepticism about the ability of morality to survive the death of God is precisely the fact that he calls repeated attention to, namely that, in the domain of moral thought “*everything goes on as before*” (A 38), that is, that the egalitarian moral ideals have expanded their scope rather than receding in the wake of modern atheism (cf. [Leiter 2013a](#)). Of course, the more accurate thing to say is that, *for the last 150 years or so*, “everything goes on as before.” Might this change in a Nietzschean direction? Of course, it could, and we cannot rule that out. But it counts against Nietzsche’s prediction that the death of God will produce the death of morality that 150 years later, it really is true that “everything [still] goes on as before.”<sup>32</sup>

To be sure, to the extent Nietzsche is making a prediction—as when he says “Christianity *as dogma* perished of its own morality [i.e., the demand to be truthful]; in this manner Christianity *as morality* must now also perish—we stand at the threshold of *this event*” (GM III:27)<sup>33</sup>—he presumably is not making a prediction about what the vast “herd” of humanity will come to believe, only about his rightful readers, that elite he imagined were predisposed for his insights—or at least those benighted atheists who have not yet thought clearly about the implications of the death of God. Even if we assume the prediction pertains to the latter, it is still striking that *even among atheists*, “everything goes on as before” in matters of morality.

That it does so perhaps should not be surprising. The best scholarly evidence suggests that moral attitudes shift in response to changes in the economic and material circumstances in which people live, a thesis defended, in different forms and with different kinds of evidence, by the economist and social theorist Karl Marx, the anthropologist Marvin Harris, and the classical archaeologist Ian Morris. It could turn out that Nietzsche was, as it were, insufficiently naturalistic, ascribing too much causal import to an obviously incredible belief—belief in a supernatural agency called “God”—and not enough to the material circumstances affecting the vast majority.<sup>34</sup> If the paradigmatic failing of Marx was to pay insufficient attention to individual psychology, the paradigmatic failing of Nietzsche, that other giant of nineteenth-century debunking of morality, was to pay insufficient attention to the socioeconomic world. Of course, Marx thought that the eventual collapse of capitalism would fatally undermine theism, and if he is right, then we may yet find out whether Nietzsche is right about what remains of our so-called “moral” beliefs and practices in a nontheistic world. But, ironically from a Marxian point of view, the evidence so far is that where capitalism has triumphed—namely, Europe and North America—theism has declined compared to other parts of the world.<sup>35</sup> (Theism declined in former communist countries that suppressed it by force, but that is less surprising or interesting.) Why that should be true is also not surprising: the rationality of capitalism is the rationality of “what do you want?” and “what is the most efficient way to get what you want?” and until God interferes with the price mechanism, his dominion is bound to shrink—assuming, as seems plausible, that humans want lots of things (wealth, power, glory, sadistic or sexual pleasure, etc.) of which the Judeo-Christian God, at least officially, does not approve. So God is dead, but morality may yet outlive him.<sup>36</sup>

## NOTES

1. As Nietzsche quips (thinking of George Eliot, not Parfit or Singer obviously, but apparently the habit is of longstanding with Anglophone writers): “When the English actually believe that they know ‘intuitively’ what is good and evil, when they therefore suppose that they no longer require Christianity as the guarantee of morality, we merely witness the *effects* of the dominion of the Christian value judgment and an expression of the strength and depth of this dominion . . .” (TI “Skirmishes”: 5). I return to this important passage later.
2. Indeed, Singer takes it a step further: *every creature’s* sentience and suffering counts the same.
3. One irony is that Parfit and his followers like to argue that because secular “moral theory” is a young field, it has not made the kind of progress that would produce convergence of opinion. Yet most fields with factual subject matters have usually managed to make progress, as measured by convergence among researchers, over the course of a century—and especially during the last century, with the rise of research universities. Moral theory is the odd man out, when compared to physics, chemistry, biology, or mathematics. Even psychology, the most epistemically robust of the ‘human’ sciences, managed to make progress: e.g., the repudiation of behaviorism, and the cognitive turn in psychology in just the last fifty years. Even more importantly, the idea that “secular” moral theory is a recent development is implausible—once one recognizes, of course, that contemporary secular moral theory is an heir to Christian sentiments as well. Spinoza, Hume, Mill and Sidgwick (among many others) may not have advertised their secularism, but the idea that their moral theories are for that reason discontinuous with the work of the past hundred years does obvious intellectual violence to the chains of influence of ideas and arguments. It should be particularly striking that so-called “secular” moral theory regularly conceives itself in relation to a history that stretches back in time (sometimes back to the Greeks)—contrast that with the relative youth of modern physics!—so that it becomes unclear why the bogeyman of the deity was supposed to

have constituted the insuperable obstacle weighing down intellectual progress. Most contemporary deontologists may be atheists, for example, but it is not obvious that their atheism enabled them to make stunning intellectual progress beyond Kant.

4. As I argue in [Leiter \(2015a\)](#) [especially Chapters III and IV]), MPS has deontological and utilitarian elements, with the wrongfulness of suffering looming large along both dimensions.
5. In the *Nachlass*, Nietzsche says Jesuits “weakened and softened the claims of Christianity” as a way of asserting its power (KSA 7:30[33], p. 743). Late in BGE, he again accuses the Jesuits of working towards the “annihilation of the exceptional man” and trying “to break every taut bow or—even better!—“unbend[ing] it . . . with friendly pity: that is the true art of Jesuitism, which has always known how to introduce itself as a religion of pity” (BGE 206). As will become clear, the role of “friendly pity” is in defending moral egalitarianism. (Thanks to Chris Fowles for guidance on these passages.)
6. The first mention of “God is dead” in *The Gay Science* (GS 108) introduces the idea that its import will not be known for a long time: “After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave . . . God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown.—And we—we still have to vanquish his shadow too.” GS 109 then describes these “shadows” as including the supposition that the world reflects “order, arrangement, beauty, wisdom and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms”; the supposition that any “of our aesthetic and moral judgments apply to it”; that it has “any instinct for self-preservation”; that “there are laws in nature [when in fact] there are only necessities: there is nobody who commands, nobody who obeys, nobody who trespasses.” The passage concludes: “When will all these shadows of God cease to darken our minds? When will we complete our dedeification of nature? When may we begin to ‘*naturalize*’ humanity in terms of a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature?”
7. See, e.g., GS 357: “You see what it was that really triumphed over the Christian god: Christian morality itself, the concept of truthfulness that was understood ever more rigorously, the father confessor’s refinement of the Christian conscience, translated and sublimated into a scientific conscience, into intellectual cleanliness at any price” (see also GM III:27: “the awe-inspiring *catastrophe* of a two-thousand-year discipline in truth, which in the end forbids itself the *lie involved in belief in God*”). In a later work, Nietzsche even says that “[t]he priest knows as well as anyone that there is no ‘God’ any more, that there is no such thing as ‘sin’, or the ‘redeemer’—that ‘free will’ and the ‘moral world order’ are *lies*—the seriousness, the profound self-overcoming of spirit does not *allow* people *not* to know this anymore” (A 38).
8. The image of the *Übermensch* is peculiar to *Zarathustra*, an artifact, in my view, of the rhetorical style of the book as a parody of the New Testament. Elsewhere, Nietzsche’s real concern is with *higher* human beings, not the “overman.”
9. See, e.g., [Waldron \(2002\)](#) (although partly an interpretation of Locke, Waldron’s aim is to raise doubts about whether secular political philosophers, like Rawls, have, in fact, justified moral egalitarianism); [Taylor \(1992\)](#); [Wolterstorff \(2009\)](#).
10. See [Leiter 2015b](#), 38–40.
11. It is not controversial, at least, among serious scholars, as opposed to superficial appropriators like Stanley Cavell or apologists like Walter Kaufmann. Nietzsche could hardly be clearer: “There is no more poisonous poison anywhere” than “the doctrine of equality” (TI “Skirmishes”: 48).
12. Cf. A 43: “That as immortal souls, everyone is on the same level as everyone else, that in the commonality of all beings, the ‘salvation’ of *each* individual lays claim to an eternal significance, that the small-minded and the half-mad can think well of themselves.”
13. Peter and Paul in the German, but the basic meaning is the same (though the German names have obvious Biblical connotations).
14. I am already prejudging an issue, since some do not treat species as even relevant to the actual basis of equality, but we should bracket that here, since it will turn out the problem cannot be resolved even with respect to the human species
15. I owe to Nethanel Lipshitz this understanding of the literature; in his brilliant Ph.D. dissertation, Lipshitz argues that there is a nonempirical answer to the question, one that avoids being question-begging. I bracket the possibility of such an account for purposes of discussion here.
16. Such differences may not necessarily matter to Counting Moral Egalitarianism, but they will if they are taken to justify a complete *discounting* of a person’s moral interests, as they seem to in Nietzsche’s case. See the discussion of the Nietzschean Trolley Problem, below.
17. Note that geometric properties do not seem to involve any thought about *desert*.
18. Cf. Arneson’s equally devastating discussion of the Kantian answer (1999, 119–20).

19. Thanks to Josh Cohen for raising this point.
20. I should acknowledge, as Manuel Vargas pressed on me in discussion, that there can be epistemic arguments for moral egalitarianism, such as doubts about whether we can really discriminate in the right way between the persons in terms of the treatment they deserve. Such arguments have to concede, however, Nietzsche's main target, namely, that we have no reason to think of people as morally equal.
21. I was first helped to see this by an excellent, but still unpublished, paper by N.A.T. Coleman on "Nietzsche and 'the Negro': The Challenge of Aristocratic Radicalism." Coleman confronts head on the nonresponses of philosophers like Dworkin and Kymlicka, though he is primarily concerned with the racialized dimension of antiegalitarian positions in the last century or so.
22. [Dworkin 1983](#), 37.
23. [Kymlicka 2002](#), 4.
24. [Arneson 2013](#).
25. This is a very important respect, obviously, in which Christianity is not *simply* "Platonism for the people" (BGE Pref), for Plato's own doctrine was radically inegalitarian, in a way that has parallels to Nietzsche's own views, a topic, on which, alas there has been little serious work to date.
26. The version of the argument in [Waldron \(2002\)](#), which is attributed to Locke, is different, but as a matter of empirical psychology, it is doubtful the differences matter. The version in [Wolterstorff \(2009\)](#) is a bit closer to the version in the text. Wolterstorff argues that what is crucial is that all human beings are "redemptively loved by God permanently and equally" and that any "creature that stands in this relationship to God, does, on that account, have great worth" (2009, 419). In both cases, the idea that an omnipotent supernatural being values everyone equally is surely more than adequate to produce belief in moral egalitarianism.
27. The most obvious nonrational part of the argument comes in bringing about belief fixation regarding premise (1).
28. I am skeptical that the Euthyphro-style objection is successful if it takes seriously the idea of God's perfection and infinite power, which voluntarist positions usually assume. A perfect and omnipotent God is infallible, and there is no reason to think we imperfect mortals could understand how. (Of course, why anyone should believe the latter nonsense will require nonrational explanation!)
29. The Trolleyologists are after a different target to be sure—namely, why features that seem irrelevant in one case (flipping the switch) seem relevant in another case (pushing the "fat man")—but that is a purely sectarian dispute, of no interest to antiegalitarians. Egalitarian Trolleyologists are not going to endorse the considerations that a Nietzschean might think relevant.
30. This involves a kind of "counting," as most forms of consequentialism do, but it is one in terms of attributes that are so unequally distributed as to make a mockery of the idea that such a view treats humans equally.
31. A rule-utilitarian might object in predictable ways, but rule-utilitarians have to admit that sometimes the rule is defeated by the circumstances of the particular act.
32. Perhaps Nietzsche thinks that the death of God *should* lead to loss of faith in morality. But that cannot be Nietzsche's position, since he thinks no beliefs are rationally warranted. All we learn from any particular instances of belief fixation is something about the believer, his strength or weakness, his health or sickness.
33. *Dergestalt gieng das Christenthum als Dogma zu Grunde, an seiner eignen Moral; dergestalt muss nun auch das Christenthum als Moral noch zu Grunde gehn,—wir stehen an der Schwelle dieses Ereignisses.*
34. There is the further irony that Nietzsche is basically a kind of sentimentalist about moral judgments (see [Leiter 2013b](#)), and given his largely noncognitive view of emotions, it should hardly be surprising that the sentiments underlying moral judgments can easily survive the abandonment of certain putatively factual premises.
35. On this point see, for example, [Norris and Inglehart \(2006, 2011\)](#), which do a good job of both presenting data suggestive of a large-scale decline in religiosity in postindustrial societies, and responding to apparent counterexamples sometimes cited to deny this trend (i.e., the atypical stability in reported levels of religious observance in the United States, Italy, and Ireland).
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