

Nietzsche and the Fulcrum of History

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Friedrich Nietzsche's thinking fundamentally altered the trajectory of continental philosophy in a way only a few others have. Notoriously opaque but brilliant, Nietzsche's works span from aesthetics to morality to theology, forcing philosophers, historians and politicians of all stripes to wrestle with his ideas and their implications. Nietzsche's philosophical paradigm is based on a few central tenets, and these are primary features of his writing that deserve special attention. One of these is Nietzsche's idiosyncratic conception of the death of God. A second is Nietzsche's categorization of temporality. While scholars have contributed a wealth of literature on Nietzsche, both regarding the death of God¹ and his conception of Time² (Time in a metaphysical sense, not time as merely a succession of events), this essay seeks to situate Nietzsche's conception of the death of God *within* his temporal system, arguing that Nietzsche's framework is most potent when the two are properly considered as intimately connected.³

This essay will first give background on the philosophical milieu in which Nietzsche wrote, focusing heavily on the then-prevailing thoughts regarding Time. Based on a close reading of Nietzsche's texts, specifically *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, *The Gay Science*, and *The Will to Power*, I argue that the death of God should be understood as a temporal and embodied fulcrum within Time, which allows for non-dialectical progress.

Background

Friedrich Nietzsche rejected many of the philosophical notions that dominated the Academy, but his thought developed and remained in dialogue with that tradition throughout his life. The German idealist tradition reached its zenith of influence after Georg Friedrich Hegel published *The Phenomenology of Spirit* in 1807, which dramatically altered subsequent continental philosophy. His system sprouted from the roots of Kant's critiques of empiricism and rationalism in his treatise *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). In that *Critique*, he argued for transcendental idealism, the notion that nearly everything we experience is ideas, appearances generated and given meaning through mind.⁴ Hegel wrote in this academic German idealist vein, which rejected to varying degrees our understanding of the thing-in-itself (*Ding an sich*) by stressing the phenomenological barrier between the world-as-it-is and one's perception of it. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* argued powerfully

for a progressive view of Time borne out through the interactions of different regimes and societies. Reduced to its barest form, Hegel argued that the defining ideas within societies would conflict and eventually progress (later characterized by Johann Gottlieb Fichte as a thesis-antithesis-synthesis engine) towards a perfect system, deemed “the end of history.”

While Hegel and his disciples were influential and the prevailing Western philosophical school of their time, other German idealists did offer contrasting views on Time and progress. Coming before Hegel, Immanuel Kant’s transcendental idealism postulated a rather cold and static universe. According to Kant, while we might perceive change over time as a substructure that frames all of our experience, we can never meaningfully know the world itself is changing. The most notable influence on Nietzsche’s thought was Arthur Schopenhauer, who put forward a cyclical view of Time. In Schopenhauer’s conception, the noumenal was accessible and consisted of an all-encompassing will. This will, formulated in Schopenhauer’s most notable work *The World as Will and Representation* (1818), is blind and irrational, neither seeking to “go” anywhere nor “progress” towards anything. Schopenhauer wrote in *The World as Will and Representation* that:

The true philosophy of history consists in the insight

that, in spite of all these endless changes and their chaos and confusion, we yet always have before us the same, identical, unchanging essence, acting in the same way today as it did yesterday and always.⁵

Nietzsche believed Schopenhauer to be too pessimistic and world-denying, but Schopenhauer’s influence on him was nevertheless profound.

Throughout these thinkers, the common thread is their radical de-emphasis of the individual and personal autonomy in favor of larger metaphysical, historical structures. By far the most dominant thinker of this time, Hegel argued for an inevitable progressive history where individuals may further the march of history but not thwart it. One of Hegel’s protégés, Fichte, considered Hegel’s framework *too* agentive. He argued that self-consciousness itself was a social construct and that individuals are only self-aware via the existence of the whole.⁶ Fichte pushed this thought to an unsavory political conclusion, namely German nationalism. Schopenhauer believed that individuals were manifestations of a singular monad, the will. Schopenhauer’s ethics are even more self-denying, concluding that denial of life through asceticism was the only remedy to suffering. If characterized in broad strokes, the German tradition subsumed individual agency, preferring to examine universal superstructures and metaphysics.

Friedrich Nietzsche stood outside this framework, forcefully critiquing the idealist tradition that dominated German philosophical schools. He made his disdain known in 1874, writing:

I believe there has been no dangerous vacillation or crisis of German culture this century that has not been rendered more dangerous by the enormous and still continuing influence of this philosophy, the Hegelian. The belief that one is a latecomer of the ages is, in any case, paralyzing and depressing: ... Such a point of view has accustomed the Germans to talk of a 'world-process' and to justify their own age as the necessary result of this world-process; such a point of view has set history, insofar as history is 'the concept that realizes itself', 'the dialectics of the spirit of the peoples' and the 'world-tribunal', in place of the other spiritual powers, art and religion, as the sole sovereign power.⁷

Nevertheless, while he rejected many idealistic premises and conclusions, Friedrich Nietzsche still attempted to answer the same question that post-Kantian idealism struggled with: What is Time, and where is history going? In the process, Nietzsche simultaneously rejects Hegel's dialectical progressivism while maintaining a meaningful sense of historical progress by radically empowering the individual. In his seminal work

Thus Spake Zarathustra, Nietzsche sought to topple the aforementioned visions of history and their individual-denying praxeology.

The Two Epochs and Individuality

This section will consider how Nietzsche conceives of Time, arguing that his framework supposes two distinct epochs: before the death of God and after the death of God. These epochs help to situate both the moral and political underpinnings of Nietzsche's other writings. Nietzsche discusses the concept of Time in many areas of his writing, often in confusing and contradictory ways. However, it is still possible and necessary to identify his temporal structure's main themes to better understand the moral and metaphysical implications of his other writings. *The Gay Science* contains the most crucial passage on Time:

The Madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "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? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? ... Do we not feel

the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him."⁸

The most striking feature is that, for Nietzsche, God may be dead, but yet He was alive. God's death is an event, a deed that is jarring and even bloody. He goes on to write that "[God] has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off of us?"⁹ While one might say Nietzsche is merely using an extended metaphor, that would be a bit reductionist, as it seems to embody more than pure allegory. Nietzsche writes at length about the event's material manifestations, calling attention to the physical space left by God, the coldness of the world without Him. Even the air's smell is affected, but this effect is not merely some physical manifestation, these changes specifically affect *us*. The Madman asks his audience (but, more accurately, Nietzsche asks us, his readers) if we smell anything, if we need lanterns, or if we feel the coolness of the air. The physicality of the new era the Madman heralds demands our attention.

The second peculiar aspect of this section is the way Nietzsche employs temporal language. The passage's

power is best laid bare in full:

"I have 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. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars—and yet they have done it themselves."¹⁰

The Madman laments that he came "too early," and this statement is never fully explicated. This essay will not specifically seek to answer why the Madman is too early, but it is important to hopefully prove that the deed's specific timing—both the death of God and the realization of His death as separate events—is essential to the author. For Nietzsche, "God is dead and we have killed Him" is not merely a statement of a fact that transcends Time but is a part of, and a defining event *in* Time. The temporality must be necessary since the Madman can be too early or too late.

When we view the death of God as an event, a happening, it provides clarity on Nietzsche's later writings in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. In *Zarathustra*, he writes: "Once blasphemy against God was the greatest blasphemy; but God died, and therewith also those blas-

phemers."¹¹ He is juxtaposing an individual's action within his temporal framework, where the same action can have the different ethical content *after* God's death but not *before*. Thus, in the Nietzschean sense, Time is not a progressive series of events but two societal ages that are radically, irreversibly, different because of the death of God. Nietzsche then widens the difference between his two epochs. In fact, the two seem to be practically opposite in character. His writings indicate that, as the nature of Time has changed, so has the way we relate to Time. For Nietzsche, the death of God broke the steady, cyclical nature of Time.

Before moving to Time after the death of God, it is first necessary to analyze Nietzsche's understanding of the older age. Nietzsche writes in *The Gay Science* that the old age focused on the "preservation of the species ... time and again [humanity] relumed the passions that were going to sleep" and that "the [passions] re-awakened again and again..." He further writes that "... the ploughshare of evil must come time and again."¹² The idea of an endless cycle returns in Nietzsche's *Notes on the Eternal Recurrence* where Nietzsche famously laments how at the "hour of Noon" humanity will consider "the mighty thought of the eternal recurrence of all things."¹³ This pessimistic and cyclical stasis is reminiscent of both Kant and Schopenhauer before him.

While it is unclear if Nietzsche believes this "eternal return" is a permanent fixture of life, his earlier writings indicate that he thinks that after the death of God we have transcended the eternal recurrence and have entered a new, and scarier, age. In *The Gay Science*, The Madman cries out in fear: "What did we do when we unchained the Earth from its Sun? Whither is it moving? Whither are we moving now?" For Nietzsche, while it may be good that we are not bound in a static cycle, we are now pulled in different and unpredictable directions. After God's murder, we are chaotically free. In the wake of the event of God's death, Nietzsche foretells of a new "age" beginning that will be more "manly," "war-like," and will prepare humankind "for one yet higher."¹⁴

It may seem that Nietzsche embraced a form of progressive history like that of Hegel, but there is one crucial distinction in Nietzsche's framework. Hegel's understanding of the movement of history is predominantly, if not entirely, apersonal. Rather than individual actors with their own motives and desires, the "Geist" or "world-spirit" is the ultimate actor in a Hegelian framework. His philosophy is detached from any examination of individuals, which he considers "most tedious dead-and-alive stuff... it gives evidence of the pure selfishness of baseless pride, the word most on its lips is 'people.'"¹⁵ People are not entirely unimportant—but only insofar as they are useful examples and instru-

ments of the Hegelian superstructure of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. The superstructure of the system remains the crucial object of analysis. This overarching vantage point is most salient in Hegel's conception of the "end of history," the final point that is inevitable as Time moves forward. There is no room for agency and personal action within the Hegelian framework to thwart history's continual movement and progress. The future is not unmoored as it is in the Nietzschean sense, nor does it remain static in the Kantian sense, but instead there is one unchanging direction to the arc of history.

For Nietzsche, this is untenable. Nietzsche's writings strongly reflect a view that gives space for an individual's agency to move history. It is important to note that history is not moving "forward" nor "backward" within the Nietzschean paradigm. The very fact that the world's history can move at all shows that any sense of anchoring to a single world-historical point is unintelligible. History is unmoored, which precisely renders the notion of "forward" and "backward" arcs of history impossible. If history were moving from one point to another, then moving "forward" would not constitute a true agentive movement but the Hegelian historical current carrying individuals towards a goal. There is no arc-of-history for Nietzsche, which emphasizes the individual nature of his framework.

His views on an individual's impact can be observed in three distinct ways. The first is how Nietzsche sets the scene(s) in which his characters tell the audience his philosophy. Nietzsche typically speaks through a singular individual, whether that be Zarathustra in *Zarathustra* or The Madman in *The Gay Science*. When Zarathustra brings the word of God's death to the masses, the focus is always squarely on him, the *one person* who does some great heroic deed or speaks with philosophical insight. The significance of this device is brought into relief by comparison. Hegel, in contrast, seeks to "bring Philosophy closer to the form of Science" and writes with a systematic but opaque style.¹⁶ Marxist dialectical materialism, whether it is in *The Communist Manifesto* or *Das Kapital*, focuses on "class warfare" in a similar way. Marx is quite explicit in the depersonalization inherent in his philosophy. The subsumption of the individual into classes is a necessary part of the paradigm, writing: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" in *The Communist Manifesto*.¹⁷

Nietzsche's literary focus on individual characters and how they affect the story and history is only part of his overall emphasis on how we are free to be uniquely ourselves after God. The second component of his work in this regard is in his writings on the Übermensch ("Overman"). Hegel, somewhat surprisingly, found himself in

awe of what he saw as a “world-soul ... who ... reaches out over the world and masters it” in Napoleon.¹⁸ His awe is unexpected because it cuts against Hegel’s framework that history is moved and created by unceasing dialectical processes rather than people. This is precisely Nietzsche’s view. However, the Overman is not a caricatured warlord or petty dictator who seeks exclusively to dominate others. The Overman is part of a larger society that humanity will eventually reach. As society chaotically moves forward, certain Overmen will begin to transcend beyond being human, all too human. In such a society, we would see our present humanity as a bridge to a better society. Crucially, the responsibility for reaching this society is not externalized onto “the proletariat” or “the Geist” but calls the reader to action. We are asked by Zarathustra: “What have you done to overcome [humanity]?”¹⁹ The focus continues to remain on us to act and fill God’s void.

One might argue that this Overman society is an example of history moving “forward,” which would contradict Nietzsche’s earlier question “Whither are we moving? ... Backward, sideward. forward. in all directions?” However, Nietzsche discusses the kind of humanity that will arise from the death of God, not the manner of society that will be formed by them. Nietzsche gives little idea about the societal structure of the society of the Overmen, be it hierarchical, egalitarian, democratic or

monarchical. For him, it is not an end to history, but part of the continual process of historical disclosure.

Nietzsche’s third and most explicit way of showing his emphasis on personal praxis lies not in *The Gay Science* or *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, but in *The Will to Power*, a manuscript published posthumously in 1901 and again in 1906. Hints of his aims can be seen in his other works, such as when he tells his readers to “live dangerously” and instructs the audience to “be robbers and conquerors” in *Zarathustra*.²⁰ However, in *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche finally lays the individual ego as one of his philosophy’s cornerstones. He writes: “Insight: all evaluation is made from a definite perspective: that of the preservation of the individual, a community, a race, a state, a church, a faith, a culture ... he raises himself to justice—to comprehension beyond esteeming things good and evil.”²¹ It is clear that Nietzsche’s framework prioritizes the “evaluation” of the individual over that of the collective. He fervently argues for the reader to realize that one can, and should, seek their own will to power. He writes “...you yourselves are also this will to power—and nothing besides!”²² This passage shows the definitive break he had with the earlier German idealists and is a particular rebuke of Schopenhauer, who suggested that individuals seek to destroy the will. Willing oneself to power is not a collective pursuit, for Nietzsche and is, in fact, necessarily a rivalrous one: “The great man

feels his *power* over a people."²³ He writes derogatorily of slave morality and the equality that accompanies it: "Egoism! ... everyone unconsciously thinks every ego is equal to every other ego. This is a consequence of the slaves' theory of *suffrage universal* and 'equality.'"²⁴ These writings paint a more complete picture of his temporal structure, one without direction that can be altered by anyone with the singular will strong enough to change humanity's trajectory.

Nietzsche's Temporal Implications

Nietzsche's philosophical totality is not without sizeable gaps. His framework is openly nihilistic with little room for meaning, transcendental or not. Frustratingly, Nietzsche gives little clear guidance on how The will to power should manifest itself in the reader's life. Nietzsche's very own model, Zarathustra himself, ends with his legacy still unfulfilled. Zarathustra's aphoristic style even seems contradictory at intervals, a charge that Nietzsche might even concede. *The Will to Power* praises "the wisest man" who, Nietzsche believes: "would be the one richest in contradictions."²⁵ The paradigm Nietzsche creates is not a systematic examination of ethics. However, his thoughts on Time and individuality are often tragically misunderstood. This is particularly true in how he views the death of God, which I would argue is a robust philosophical conjecture.

It is a common misperception that Nietzsche glorified and reveled in the death of God, but as I have argued, he instead viewed it as a watershed moment in Time. For Nietzsche, this change may be—but is not necessarily—a positive good. "Must not we ourselves become gods simply to seem worthy of it" is written as a challenge to be met but can also be read as a threat.²⁶ A plain-text reading of the Madman's speech in *The Gay Science* does not leave the reader with joyful auspices for the future. It is interesting to note, although perhaps unsurprising, that Nietzsche puts himself (the killer of God and the messenger of His death) at the fulcrum of history on which our very conception of Time itself shifts.

The main question that remains is whether Nietzsche's notion of Time and individuality is accurate. On a meta-physical level, I would argue it holds up to serious scrutiny. There are two schools of thought that Nietzsche responded to and against which his thought should be compared: dialectical progressivism and cyclical stasis. Hegel's dialectical idealism was highly influential in Nietzsche's day, both politically and intellectually. However, his predictions carry less weight as his socio-political engine of "progress" no longer appears inevitable. Some might argue that "progress" has slowed or reversed. The Prussian-German monarch that Hegel

adored was overthrown, with little advancement made. The restoration projects of the German nation-state in the 20th century left millions of corpses, and an entire continent decimated. Our modern electoral processes do not appear to fit the mold of progressive synthesis. Political parties and voters behave haphazardly, almost as if they were unfocused.

The outgrowth of dialectical Idealism and dialectical materialism slowed significantly after 1989 with the Soviet Union's collapse. However, the promise of a peaceful communist end-of-history ended earlier in 1968 in Prague when Leonid Brezhnev sent Soviet troops to quell the Czechoslovakian reform attempts. Marx's "specter of Europe" was but a ghost.

Conversely, the Kantian and Schopenhauerian temporal framework of the static or cyclical "thing-in-itself" seems inaccurate. The "thing-in-itself" may indeed be beyond our reach, but we phenomenologically do experience meaningful changes in history and time, which cannot be ignored. This notion was capitalized on by Freud and Heidegger, who both contend that rather than focusing on the Kantian noumenal, philosophical examination should focus on thorough self-examination and ontology. Neither the static nor cyclical views of Time adequately account for the historical and personal trends that shape our being.

The Nietzschean answer appears more compelling: the death of God fundamentally changed our conception of Time and individuality. Before that event, history was in a state of stasis. Admittedly, kings died, and territory changed hands, but this did little to affect the overall epoch's *regime* of kingship, warfare and religiosity. "Slave morality" reigned. Over and over again, masses lived and died at the hands of rulers claiming divinity or who derived their authority from the gods. The death of God shook this concrete pillar of civilization, and with it, our conception of history itself. It threw us into a chaotic and uncertain reality where individual will is now prominent.

The phenomenologically-experienced world seems to match Nietzsche's philosophical predictions. Restricting our historical focus to the Western civilization, the culture and geography Nietzsche inhabited, we see that Time, metaphysically, has changed. It is more chaotic. Before the death of God, regimes persevered through great political, economic and sociological struggles. Ancient Egypt, from the reign of Narmer until the mid-4th century, maintained its authority for nearly 30 centuries.²⁷ Egyptian rule was not universally constant, but yet powerfully static in comparison to modern nation-states. The Roman era, characterized generously as beginning with the Roman Kingdom in 753 B.C. until

the fall of Rome in 476 A.D., endured for around 1,500 years. The Byzantines managed to continue for another thousand years afterward, indicating the lasting power of the Greco-Roman civilization.²⁸

After the death of God, though, regimes and entire paradigms collapsed practically instantaneously. Politically, the Third Reich, characterized as an instantiation of the Roman Empire, lasted little more than a decade. Napoleon, a man so world-historical even Hegel took notice of his influence, was emperor for less than ten years. Modern democratic elections typically cycle through candidates within eight years or less. The primary modern economic system, capitalism, requires constant “creative destruction” by rewarding individual breakthroughs to function properly. Technological obsolescence forces rapid change, often at startling speeds. Stability is so unusual, in fact, that regimes such as Putin’s Russia, Xi Jinping’s China or Kim Jong Un’s North Korea are examples of modern political *failures*. Our globalized world is not Hegel’s stable “end-of-history” nor Kantian stasis. Quite the opposite, the modern world is a rootless one that is “plunging continually, Backwards, sideward, forward in all directions,” as Nietzsche wrote.

Nietzsche’s work on Time and the individual requires serious consideration. Both have significant ramifications for the way we view ourselves and the age we live in. His

temporal paradigm challenged Marxism, and while this may have regrettably exposed his work to co-optation by right-wing nationalists, his thought was also used by anarchists and revolutionaries.²⁹ While Nietzsche’s musings on Time and individuality are interesting in their own right, I argue these philosophical concepts are most robustly understood as being linked. The connective tissue between these two is the death of God, properly understood as a historical event upon which the two metaphysical eras turn. Hegel’s work in these fields had a massive impact on the socio-political landscape, but the influence of Nietzsche’s work is difficult to overstate. While Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer and Marx’s grand systems are bold and daring attempts at explaining the world, many of their historical conceptions have lost their intellectual luster. In contrast, Nietzsche’s emphasis on the seismic impact of the death of God and the way it empowers our individual agency in the development of history continues to resonate to this day.

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