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# Gratitude and Sickness in The Gay Science

Barry Switay

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# GRATITUDE AND SICKNESS IN *THE GAY SCIENCE*

by

BARRY SWITAY

Under the Direction of Jessica Berry, Ph.D.

## ABSTRACT

Nietzsche frequently mentions gratitude throughout *The Gay Science*, but there is a lack of critical attention to this theme. The present essay seeks to situate this important theme in relation to other major themes of the work in order to show why gratitude is Nietzsche's response to the death of god. Ultimately, I show that there are at least three elements to Nietzsche's gratitude in this work: gratitude for perspectival flexibility, gratefulness to the chaos of existence, and gratefulness that "God is dead!" The essay concludes by highlighting three aphorisms which could extend this analysis further.

INDEX WORDS: Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Gay Science*, Gratitude, The Death of God, Sickness

GRATITUDE AND SICKNESS IN *THE GAY SCIENCE*

by

BARRY SWITAY

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Bachelor of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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GRATITUDE AND SICKNESS IN *THE GAY SCIENCE*

by

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GSU Honors College

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this to my mother, father, and brother. They have, and continue to be, the most important influences in my life. Also, this is for Dylan Jennings, Taalib Ali, Mr. Nesbit, Garfield Hendrix, and Dave Yarbrough—five people who, in their separate ways, have shown me something about gratitude.

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

D: *Daybreak*

EH: *Ecce Homo*

GS: *The Gay Science*

HH: *Human, All Too Human*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In the Preface to the second edition of *The Gay Science* (1886), Nietzsche informs readers that “Gratitude flows forth incessantly” from the book (1). It is “as if that which was most unexpected had just happened”—he claims he has recovered from something and that this recovery was not anticipated. His is thus the “gratitude of a convalescent” (1). This work touches on some of Nietzsche’s best-known themes, the death of god and the collapse of western values. In light of these topics, gratitude strikes one as a strange psychological attitude to hold.

It is important to keep in mind that Nietzsche does not blindly reject the Christian God. That is to say, while he appears to celebrate and even welcome the death of god (GS 343), he is well aware that this event is also tragic. In GS 125, for example, his madman laments, “The holiest and the mightiest thing the world has ever possessed has bled to death under our knives.”<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche is well aware that the waning influence of the Christian religion in western society means the loss of meaning and direction. We should *not* assume that the madman is expressing precisely what Nietzsche thinks, but should rather read this character as indicating Nietzsche’s awareness of a tragic element of the death of god. I note this at the outset to point out that Nietzsche’s gratitude does *not* come out of ignoring some of the darker themes present in GS, but from a capacity to *confront* them without avoiding the consequences.

It will be the aim of this paper to show that Nietzsche’s gratitude, as we find it here in GS, involves an ability to deal with a world in which the source of western Christian values is being (has been) destabilized. Importantly, rather than celebrating a new-found or replacement set of values, Nietzsche’s gratitude *in this work* emerges from the ability to do without values—or, as he says metaphorically, after the death of god, “finally our ships may set out again, set out

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<sup>1</sup> This claim finds support from works throughout Nietzsche’s productive career. For example, in EH (1888) “Destiny” 8, he writes that the “*uncovering* of Christian morality is an event without equal, a real catastrophe.”

to face any danger” (GS 343). Setting out to sea here suggests living in the absence of a stable set of values. Nietzsche sees an opportunity in the collapse of western values, but he is not unaware of the disastrous consequences of this collapse.

The role of gratitude in this work is complex and requires a fair amount of background information about Nietzsche’s project in GS. Indeed, I’ve already introduced a few terms like the death of god and the collapse of western values—certainly not self-explanatory Nietzschean notions. These concepts—along with Nietzsche’s sickness and health metaphors and his thinking regarding physicalism and how philosophers obtain perspectives—require a proper introduction. Thus, the first sections of the paper will be devoted to outlining what we will call philosophical sickness in order to suggest that gratitude as a psychological attitude, given the waning influence of Christian values that Nietzsche describes in this work, can be understood as a sign of health. I see a parallel between Nietzsche’s “test,” eternal recurrence—saying yes to the question: would you relive this life as you have lived it, in every detail, an infinite number of times (GS 341)—and gratitude. A person’s ability to say yes to the above question is indicative of well-disposedness and therefore a sign of psychological health.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, for Nietzsche, gratitude in an individual shows a well-disposedness to the conditions in which she or he lives. I’ll begin with a brief introduction to the text and the role of the 1886 Preface in GS. I’ll suggest that Nietzsche utilizes this second edition, retrospective Preface to give readers something like an overview of the project of GS and that this overview suggests that gratitude and sickness are intimately linked: even if only for a brief period of time, physical sickness pushes one to alter

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<sup>2</sup> There are a variety of perspectives on how one should read eternal recurrence (ER). Paul Loeb presents a completely different interpretation in an essay in the *Oxford Handbook of Nietzsche*. He claims that Nietzsche hoped his “appropriate readers would come to share his belief in the *truth* of eternal recurrence” (646, my emphasis). Loeb is suggesting that, rather than a thought experiment to test the psychological well-disposedness of a person, Nietzsche presents ER as a metaphysical fact about the universe.

one's lifestyle (e.g., take more rest, change diet, etc.) and thus can prevent static or permanent habits. As I'll show, Nietzsche places great value on this lack of static habits because it means an individual is forced into various bodily conditions, all of which come with different perspectives on life (GS P 3, 295). Indeed, he tells us in the GS Preface that "A philosopher who has passed through many kinds of health, and keeps passing through them again and again, has passed through an equal number of philosophies" (3). Precisely this shifting between perspectives is an object of Nietzsche's gratitude because it signifies the ability to live without needing to hold *one* perspective, an ability to be flexible. It is in this context that he asks, "And as for illness: are we not almost tempted to ask whether we can do without it at all?" (GS P 3).

In this 1886 edition, Nietzsche gives us a fifth book, a collection of poems, and a retrospective preface. This latter is written in the same spirit as other of Nietzsche's 1886 prefaces—e.g., in *Human All Too Human* and *Daybreak*—which serve the function of brief and often cryptic overviews of these books. In the second aphorism of the Preface, Nietzsche tells us that "in the best case" philosophy emerges from "the voluptuousness of a triumphant gratitude." As I'll seek to show, this philosophizing from a place of gratitude is to be contrasted with the "sick thinkers," who appear to use their philosophy as a kind of crutch. For this latter class, philosophy is a need and is used as "a sedative, medicine, redemption, elevation, or self-alienation" (2). The next two sections will be devoted, respectively, to explaining Nietzsche's physicalism (2) and his notion of philosophical sickness (3) in order to present necessary background information. I'll then move into the death of god (4) and a "catastrophe" (5) that Nietzsche thinks any intellectual searching for truth will encounter and have to deal with. Section 6 will tie these themes together and consider Nietzsche's gratitude regarding the perspectival flexibility from three angles: gratitude (A) 'for', grateful (B) 'to' and (C) 'that'. This section will

also hint at three aphorisms which could expand this topic and will be essential to any further explication of gratitude in this work.

## 2 NIETZSCHE'S PHYSICALISM

For Nietzsche, all thinking arises out of “physiological needs” (2). Philosophy does not take place in an objective realm where premises and conclusions are seen without influence from the physiology of the body. Nietzsche, along with Darwin, Marx and many others, belongs roughly to a move in the 19<sup>th</sup> century which seeks to explain human behavior in scientific, rather than religious or non-disconfirmable metaphysical terms. In general, this approach involves observation of human behavior and human reasoning and abstains from appealing to metaphysical explanations to ground its claims.

As early as *Human, All Too Human* (1878) we find Nietzsche very interested in this mode of inquiry. For example, Nietzsche draws an analogy between moral concepts and chemical compounds: just as a chemical can be explained by appealing to its constituent elements, so too might “moral, religious, and aesthetic” conceptions be explained in terms of causal factors *instead of* “eternal facts” or “absolute truths” (HH 1, 2). Importantly, these types of material or scientific explanations have the effect of demystifying that which they explain; they postulate the act of thinking in terms of the bodily processes which drive them. Thinking, on this account, is a material process. This is Nietzsche’s physicalism and it is extended and applied through his next published work, *Daybreak* (1881), where he interprets various character types through this physicalist lens. It remains an important way of explaining human behavior throughout Nietzsche’s productive career.

Nietzsche effectively seeks to collapse the distinction between mind and body so that one no longer speaks of a dualism between them. This makes the traditional perspective that the mind (and thus the thoughts that flow from it) is above or is morally superior to the body—whose fleshly desires only impede the process of rational inquiry—seem questionable at the very least. The body and the mind are thus part of one system and interact with each other.<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche's motive here is to destabilize the elevated role that the mind has had in the history of philosophy.

Thus, when Nietzsche tells us that perhaps “philosophy has been no more than an interpretation of the body and a *misunderstanding of the body*,” he is at least in part referring to the following: philosophers have missed an important aspect of what the act of thinking is by not *first* understanding themselves as physiological creatures. This understanding is important for philosophers to possess because it means that, as human beings, their physiology and psychological constitution influence their tendencies toward particular philosophical conclusions. In a sense, they have jumped into the world of ideas without asking what in themselves initially pushed them to their conclusions and perspectives. Here we can see that Nietzsche is connecting a physical or bodily condition to a philosophical condition in a very explicit way.

### 3 PHILOSOPHICAL SICKNESS

A section from GS Preface 2 provides insight into what philosophical sickness is and how Nietzsche sees it manifesting in philosophy.

Every philosophy that ranks peace above war, every ethic with a negative definition of happiness, every metaphysics and physics that knows some *finale*, a final state of some sort, every predominantly aesthetic or religious craving for some Apart, Beyond, Outside, Above, permits the question whether it was not illness that inspired the philosopher. The unconscious

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<sup>3</sup> In GS, Nietzsche does not insist on a distinction between the mind and body in any technical sense.

disguise of physiological needs under the cloaks of the objective, ideal, purely spiritual goes frighteningly far [...].

What we see with each of the examples Nietzsche provides here is a will to some kind of stasis—that is, a static or permanent structuring of values. Each of these systems seeks a clear, neat table of values according to which one may act and against which actions may be judged. There are three instances of this sickness in the above quote: the first two examples appear to be aimed at eliminating discomfort and chaos. One assumes that with peace, the world would be less filled with suffering and bloodshed. Similarly, a negative definition of happiness (e.g., Utilitarianism) might claim happiness consists in the absence of pain.<sup>4</sup> The obvious underlying value here is that a world without suffering and pain is more valuable or likable.<sup>5</sup>

The second example (metaphysics and physics) represents a desire to have some *telos*, some goal or end, toward which humankind can work. This kind of stability would, of course, clarify difficult questions about what kind of life one should live in order to achieve this “finale.” And the third example—this craving for a beyond—calls to mind the ascetic, who sees a deficit in her- or himself and longs for some metaphysical realm to which they could eventually ascend

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Jessica Berry has brought further support for these points to my attention by directing me to EH “Destiny” 4: “To consider all forms of *distress* as objections, as things that need to be done *away* with, is the *niaiserie par excellence* [highest folly], a real disaster in its consequences, a destiny of stupidity [...]. In the great economy of the whole, the horrors of reality [...] are incalculably more necessary than that form of petty happiness called ‘goodness’ [...].” Here Nietzsche is claiming that events or circumstances that we traditionally label negative or bad should be seen as essential in the sense that they cannot be extracted from life.

<sup>5</sup> According to Bernard Williams’s introduction to the Cambridge edition of *GS*, Nietzsche possessed “a total refusal to forget, not only the existence of suffering, but the fact that suffering was necessary to everything that he and anyone else valued. ‘All good things come from bad things’ is one of his fundamental tenets” (xiv). Williams is pointing out that Nietzsche sees suffering as a fundamental and, indeed, *important* part of life. Without suffering humans would perhaps not be able to create and appreciate “art, self-understanding, [and] nobility of character” because these “cannot in common honesty be separated from the knowledge of the horrors that have been involved in bringing these things about” (xiv).

and be made whole.<sup>6</sup> The ascetic seeks to rid herself of some quality which has been defined by a religion or philosophy as morally unacceptable or wrong. For Nietzsche, the ascetic essentially denies life by imagining that a better world would be one in which this undesirable aspect of herself were not present. If we grant the thesis that every element of character is necessary, in the sense that the interaction of this combination of character traits creates the person, so that the person could not be any way other than how they are, then to will any part of this characterological constellation away is to wish oneself to be other than one is. For Nietzsche, this is not wrong in a moral sense, but he thinks this ascetic attitude betrays shame and disgust toward oneself and is thus a marker of psychological illness. Similarly, needing the world to be different than it is, needing human life to be unchanging and without distress, and philosophizing *out of* this need—this act betrays an inability or unwillingness to confront the circumstances of human existence (misery, uncertainty, disappointment, failure at times).

As Nietzsche points out in the final sentence of the above-quoted passage, each of these examples can come with very sophisticated philosophical systems which might appear sound, but which “permit” the question of whether the individual was philosophizing *from* illness.<sup>7</sup> Nietzsche thinks they permit this question of illness because he reads the tendency in the history

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<sup>6</sup> In his 2008 book, Bernard Reginster provides a clear example of the Christian ascetic (along with Platonism, one of two perspectives which he claims negates life). This perspective encourages us to believe that “our life in this world is real, and so is the suffering essential to it, but it is a mere *transition* to another form of existence, one that is not only free from the objectionable features of this life...but will also make up for them” (48). The Christian ascetic perceives this life as a “bridge” to a better life, and thus “turn[s] against itself”—turns against its current and only verifiable life (48; Nietzsche GM III 11). The ascetic seeks to deny this life, perhaps because entry into the other, better, more static world hinges upon properly displaying that one is opposed to this life.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Permits’ is important here. Nietzsche is very hard to assign positions to because he very rarely writes “I think X.” He will rather phrase his thinking in terms of possibilities or hypotheticals. ‘Permits’ thus means that the question is allowed, not that it is necessary, or that these philosophies *must* be the result of sick thinking. The important point is that Nietzsche chooses his words carefully, and this is one instance of that caution. By approaching philosophy from this, what we might call *agnostic* position, Nietzsche is able to avoid committing himself completely. This is in line with his dislike of dogmatic positions that, he suggests, betray a need to know that one possesses the truth (C.f., GS 110, 347).



of philosophy to seek rational stability within philosophical systems as signifying an abhorrence of a chaotic world (GS P 2). The world, for Nietzsche, *is* chaotic and constantly changing and he sees in these philosophical systems a desire to achieve a stasis (GS 109). In the same way that we might imagine a reduction in anxiety resulting from mapping a previously unknown territory, so these philosophers seek to map existence, presumably to achieve some sort of direction for action—an answer to questions like: What should I do? Why am I here? And so on. Nietzsche warns against this postulation of rational stability. In an aphorism warning against many metaphysical propositions, he claims that “the development of the organic [is] the exception of exceptions” (GS 109). Nietzsche is saying here that the fact that human beings exist at all is mere chance. When one considers the circumstances necessary for life to emerge on earth, and one remains agnostic regarding a deity having created the universe, one can only marvel at the amazing odds for (human) life to have emerged.<sup>8</sup> For him, “the character of the world... is for all eternity chaos” (GS 109). The values and metaphysical claims about the world that religions and philosophical systems have proposed have not reflected the way human beings actually operate in the world, but have come from systems which have, at least in part, sought to make human life appear less chaotic, less random, less a result of chance. Philosophical sickness is the *need* to postulate these metaphysical truths in order to live one’s life. It is an attempt to avoid the fact that existence is full of randomness and that values are not objectively grounded. It is the need to know that one is in possession of some truth about existence which can guide one’s life.

By the time Nietzsche adds a fifth book to GS (1887), he has clarified what sickness is and relates it to strength and weakness. In an aphorism entitled, “Believers and their need to believe” he writes, “The extent to which one needs a *faith* in order to flourish, how much that is

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<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche’s agnosticism will be covered in the next section.

‘firm’ and that one does not want shaken because one *clings* to it—that is the measure of the degree of one’s strength (or, to speak more clearly, one’s weakness)” (GS 347). By “faith” Nietzsche does not necessarily mean faith in a god. He is speaking more generally about faith in the truth of one’s values or beliefs—be they moral, religious, philosophical, or more generally intellectual. Nietzsche values a kind of flexibility in perspectives on the world, on human life; and the “need” to have the true, right, correct belief is a sign of rigidity that cannot survive confrontation with the full range of life experiences. As we will see in the next two sections, after the influence of Christianity has waned, Nietzsche thinks that those who will flourish will be those who can embrace this flexibility. Section 6 will show that this flexibility is precisely what Nietzsche is grateful for.

We will now turn to the death of god, a topic that has received much critical attention. GS approaches the catastrophe of the death of the Christian God as a central theme and Nietzsche’s gratitude should not only be read as gratitude *for* this event, but gratitude *that* he possesses the ability to face the chaos of existence and the lack of grounding of values and not need to seek a “solution” to the death of the Christian God. For him, and perhaps others of the proper character type, gratitude comes out of the ability to live without attachment to a particular faith.

#### 4 THE DEATH OF GOD

This is perhaps Nietzsche’s most widely-known and misunderstood themes. We see it emerge three separate times in GS. The first appearance is in GS 108. Here, Nietzsche gives readers a brief hint at this seemingly vague notion:

*New Battles.*—After Buddha was dead, they still showed his shadow in a cave for centuries—a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way people are, there may still for millennia be caves in which they show his shadow.—And we—we must still defeat his shadow as well!

Here Nietzsche states that “God is dead,” but gives readers no real explanation. In suggesting that there may be millennia during which his shadow is shown, he seems to mean that despite this death, there will be “caves”—perhaps segments of western culture—which still believe in this god or in which his “shadow,” Christian morality, can still be found. This aphorism is the first of Book III—the book in which Nietzsche presents a literary explanation of the death of god just a few pages later—so it seems that this aphorism might serve as a means of introducing a concept which Nietzsche will return to.

And indeed he does. The second occurrence of the theme is GS 125, in which a madman appears in a marketplace early in the morning and says he is looking for god. The crowd around him laughs and makes fun of the man. The madman jumps “into their midst and [pierces] them with his eyes,” claiming “God is dead! God remains dead! and we have killed him!” The madman, in a hardly forgettable rant, asks the shocked listeners, “But how did we do this? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained the earth from its sun?” These questions reveal the madman’s realization of the significance of the event and his lack of understanding of the cause. Yet he seems to communicate, with much literary flair, that the consequences are disorientation and a loss of direction—the destruction or wiping away of the horizon—and he assigns blame to all present, including himself (“we,” he says).

For Nietzsche, the death of god does not simply symbolize the waning influence of a Christian God in Western culture—what we might call secularization—but a loss of the possibility that anything can be as important or holy as this god once was. To this point Nietzsche’s madman laments: “How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers!

The holiest and mightiest thing the world has ever possessed has bled to death under our knives” (GS 125). It is not simply that we now know that prayers go unanswered, but that the belief that we live in the kind of universe in which there could be an answer has been lost, killed.

Nietzsche’s madman hints at this loss of direction with his dramatic questions: “Where is it moving to now? Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling?”<sup>9</sup> There is a clear sense that without this god, this guiding force in the culture, there is now a sense of lost direction and deep disorientation.

In the opening aphorism of Book V of GS, the third appearance of this death of god theme, Nietzsche gives readers a clearer picture of what it means: “The greatest recent event—that ‘God is dead’; *that the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable*—is already starting to cast its first shadow over Europe” (343, my emphasis). Importantly, Nietzsche is not claiming that there is no god—he is not making an *atheistic* argument.<sup>10</sup> To do this, he would need to make metaphysical claims about the nature of the universe in order to argue that it is incompatible with a Christian God. There are many examples of this kind of argument in the history of philosophy; for example, the classic argument from evil.<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche’s approach to

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<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche’s sun metaphor here might be compared with Plato’s allegory of the cave, where the sun represents the form of the Good which, by shining, illuminates Truth. The sense of detachment from a sun—and Nietzsche’s comments in other places (e.g., GS 343)—that with the death of god “some kind of sun seems to have set,” strengthens a reading that claims the death of god to be a deeper loss than the waning influence of religious beliefs.

<sup>10</sup> As Janaway (2013) suggests, “neither complacent unthinking atheism nor the ‘heavy’ desperation of the madman can be a final resting place for Nietzsche” (256). Both of the two options Janaway mentions here are too rigid for Nietzsche, who wants to avoid hardline judgements such as these.

<sup>11</sup> The argument from evil runs as follows:

- a. The Christian God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good.
- b. This God knows of evil in the world, is capable of extricating it, and is, by definition (all-good), required to do so.
- c. There is evil in the world.  
Therefore,
- d. There is no God of the description in premise a.

philosophy tends more toward psychological investigation than abstract syllogisms. That is, he is mainly concerned with how and what peoples, cultures, and eras think and value. Rather than claiming that there is no God, Nietzsche claims that—based on signs he sees in the culture—the Christian God is *no longer believable*. This is not a claim about the nature of the universe, but a claim about the values of the culture.<sup>12</sup> It is therefore *agnostic* in that it abstains from making a claim about the actual existence of god. Indeed, Nietzsche’s move here makes the metaphysical position irrelevant: the consequences of this loss of belief will be the same whether a god exists or not. The death of god is the loss of belief in him, thus his is a death in the collective mind of a culture.

In GS 343, Nietzsche tells readers more about the consequences of this event: “How much must collapse because it was built on this faith, leaned on it, had grown into it—for example, our entire European morality” (343). This sentence shows Nietzsche acknowledging the sick thinkers’ fear of a world without stable and static values: a world after the death of god—this “greatest recent event”—does not provide the clarity regarding moral decisions or life direction that philosophers had presumably hoped for (GS 343). In other words, the death of god does not simply represent the loss of a belief in a Christian God, but a loss of the ability to believe in a universe that could have universal values—those that apply to everyone and are absolutely right or wrong. Thus, this death is the death of belief in a basis for concrete, clear and objective values. While for the Christian, the death of god means the waning influence of this

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This argument claims that we live in a particular kind of universe (one in which evil is present) and that a God of the above description and evil cannot coexist. There are, of course, many complications regarding definitions (God, evil, etc.) and many responses.

<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that both Nietzsche’s madman in GS 125 and his remarks in GS 343 explicitly convey that “this tremendous event is still on its way”—that for many people in the culture, the waning influence of the Christian God has not yet become apparent (GS 125). In GS 343, Nietzsche remarks that he and other free spirits “look forward to this darkening,” again suggesting that the consequences are still to come. The event is the death and the consequences seem to come later, seem slowly to unfold.

god, for the philosopher it means the loss of unchanging values. One can no longer appeal to a universal ground of values because it is precisely this ground that has been lost, killed at the hands of western culture. And this death leaves a void—one that “has probably never before existed on earth” (GS 343). Nietzsche reads god as a universal ground for values—that is, as the final arbiter of right and wrong. And he encounters philosophies that claim not to be explicitly religious but that still have a kind of place holder which serves the end of grounding universal values—for example, reason in Kant’s categorical imperative, or a teleology of progressive advancement of degrees of freedom, as we find in Hegel. These are absolutes—aspects of philosophical systems which are held to be true and form the basis of these systems—in the sense that they underlie the claims of these thinkers.<sup>13</sup> This type of philosophical move can be seen as repackaging god in one form or another, and Nietzsche’s madman’s declaration that god is dead suggests that this ground for values—either explicitly or implicitly titled god—has been exhausted and shown to be unstable.

Significantly, Nietzsche claims later in Book V that it was “the concept of truthfulness that was taken ever more rigorously...that actually triumphed over the Christian god” (GS 357). Truthfulness—a concept that Nietzsche links explicitly with Christianity—eventually began to chip away at the very system which held it up as such a prime virtue. Nietzsche sees the concept of truthfulness—a drive toward accuracy in beliefs and values—as being “translated and sublimated” into the discipline of science, and even sees science as at least partially rooted in Christianity *because* of its commitment to the value of truth (GS 357). In GS 37, he suggests that one reason science was promoted throughout the preceding centuries (presumably, roughly, the

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<sup>13</sup> To his credit, Hegel tried to be somewhat empirical with his claims—by reviewing the progression of events throughout history. Perhaps the error Nietzsche might point out here is faith in the extrapolation of this advancement of degrees of freedom into the future.

15<sup>th</sup> through the 19<sup>th</sup>) was that a more accurate understanding of the world would provide a better understanding of “God’s goodness and wisdom.” The assumption underlying the advancement of science in this perspective is that God exists behind the world somehow, waiting to be discovered through scientific inquiry and a more precise understanding of the “laws” of nature. At some point, there was a bridge between Christian truthfulness and the motives of the scientific thinker: the “father confessor’s refinement of the Christian conscience, translated and sublimated into a scientific conscience, into intellectual cleanliness at any price” (GS 357). Nietzsche here suggests that the Christian virtue of truth—believing in one true God, confessing or admitting to one’s sins, and so on—is clearly linked with the value of truth in scientific inquiry. His claim is that a split occurs between the scientific inquiry into truth and the Christian drive to clean one’s conscience, forcing Christianity and scientific inquiry into separate spheres which appear at odds with each other. The result of this conflict, this split, is “an animal” that has a tension between a need to know why it exists (GS 1)—and the truth drive, which constantly destabilizes the sources of these ‘whys.’

It is precisely in the thinker that this conflict plays itself out with the greatest intensity. And I will now explore this figure of the thinker—the person in whom the split is most profoundly visible and catastrophic—in order to explicate the intricacies of this Nietzschean gratitude.

## **5 THE THINKER AND THE CATASTROPHE**

While Nietzsche is unclear as to whether the thinker refers to philosophers, scientists, or all those engaged in intellectual pursuits, it is likely that he means the latter—all those engaged in intellectual pursuits. In GS 110 he mentions “the thinker” and my working definition will be

one who takes the acquisition of truth to be primary. Philosophers, scientists, and intellectuals generally comprise this category. Nietzsche locates this figure in the middle of a crisis as the one who will probably be most affected by the death of god: it is the thinker who has been driven by the desire to ascertain the truths of existence—whatever those might be. One need not reach far to find evidence that philosophy has, at least to some extent, justified itself as a discipline on the grounds that it can disclose or discover truths about existence, the world, etc., and it is therefore this motive of truth-finding that philosophers have (generally speaking) held up as their prime motive. But this desire for truth is not confined to philosophy: Nietzsche tells us that at some point in human history, “knowledge and the striving for the truth finally took their place as a need among the other needs” (GS 110). Acquisition of truth became not simply a hobby, but eventually a condition for life—a “need.” Once this need appeared, it was only a matter of time until a serious collision occurred: “finally knowledge and the ancient basic errors struck against each other, both as life, both as power, both in the same person. The thinker—that is the being in whom the drive to truth and those life-preserving errors are fighting their first battle” (GS 110). This “battle” will be distressing for the philosopher, who, we are told in GS 110, literally has opposing drives—both of which are necessary for survival. Hence, “In relation to the significance of this battle, everything else is a matter of indifference” (GS 110).

The very person who hoped to uncover the truths of existence is forced to confront an ironic and weighty question: “to what extent can truth stand to be incorporated?” (109). Nietzsche is warning that this inquiry into truth might not be as easy as had previously been thought. The results of this inquiry—destabilized beliefs in social progress through seeing the plausibility and desirability of this progress as an assumption or the emergence of increasingly biological understandings of human nature, which tend toward viewing humans as essentially



animals—will be difficult to tolerate. The difficulty in tolerating this knowledge is that it makes comforting metaphysical and religious explanations of human nature less convincing.

Nietzsche's next declarative sentence in GS 110—"that is the question; that is the experiment"—should be taken to mean that the crux of his project in GS is to confront this very collision. This collision between truth and the beliefs that Nietzsche sees it as having destabilized is the catastrophe the thinker must deal with.

The weight of this question—to what extent can truth stand to be incorporated?—is not something all thinkers can handle, but it seems to be one that Nietzsche thinks philosophers of the future will be unable to avoid. It is this question that undergirds the abhorrence the sick thinker has for a lack of stability regarding values: perhaps insight into truth or truths about what it is to be human will not bring peace, will *not* still the chaos of existence, will not disclose the "toward what" of all morality, but will rather display the heaviness and ambiguity of life without these truths. We will now turn away from the background themes and dive directly into Nietzschean gratitude.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS REGARDING NIETZSCHE'S GRATITUDE

### *A. Gratitude 'for': coping with the death of god*

We have seen that Nietzsche reads a person's—and especially a thinker's—"need" to believe as a measure of their strength—or lack thereof—and that philosophical sickness consists, on this account, in needing to believe that one knows the truth (GS 347). This need does not allow one to be flexible and vary perspectives—which Nietzsche sees as essential after the death of god, especially for the thinker. This thinker seems to be approaching an inevitable collision between the need to acquire truth and the difficulty in its acquisition. We can ask now: in the

midst of this process—the waning influence of an irreplaceable god, the impossibility of future holiness, and the realization that progress toward truth does not validate traditionally flattering perspectives on human nature—in the midst of this, why is Nietzsche grateful? As we noted in the introduction above, it is not as if Nietzsche is unaware of the tragedy in this death. As early as *Human, All Too Human* Nietzsche observes that the “cessation of the metaphysical outlook” brings an over focus on the individual lifespan and that the consequential unimportance given to the establishment of institutions “intended to last for centuries” is essentially a “disadvantage” (22). Nietzsche has thus been dealing with this theme for quite some time and has observed the difficulty that results from it. The question, in other words, is what does Nietzsche have to be grateful for when he seems clearly to acknowledge that a crisis is at hand?

Nietzsche sees himself as uniquely positioned to confront this crisis, and this ability comes out of his erratic health and a physiology which seems to require brief habits. He expresses gratitude for his physical constitution early in Book IV of GS in an aphorism worth quoting in its entirety.

*Brief habits.* — I love brief habits and consider them invaluable means for getting to know *many* things and states down to the bottom of their sweetness and bitterness; my nature is designed entirely for brief habits, even in the needs of its physical health and generally *as far as* I can see at all, from the lowest to the highest. I always believe *this* will give me lasting satisfaction—even brief habits have this faith of passion, this faith in eternity—and that I am to be envied for having found and recognized it, and now it nourishes at noon and in the evening and spreads a deep contentment around itself and into me, so that I desire nothing else, without having to compare, despise, or hate. And one day its time is up; the good thing parts from me, not as something that now disgusts me but peacefully and sated with me, as I with it, and as if we ought to be grateful to each other and so shake hands and say farewell. And already the new waits at the door along with my faith—the indestructible fool and sage! —that this new thing will be the right thing, the last right thing. This happens to me with dishes, thoughts, people, cities, poems, music, doctrines, daily schedules, and ways of living. *Enduring* habits, however, I hate, and feel as if a tyrant has come near me and the air around me is *thickening* when events take a shape that seems inevitably to produce enduring habits—for instance, owing to an official position, constant relations with the same people, a permanent residence, or uniquely good health. Yes, at the very bottom of my soul I am grateful to all my misery and illness and whatever is imperfect in me because they provide a hundred back doors through which I can escape enduring habits. To me

the most intolerable, the truly terrible, would of course be a life entirely without habits, a life that continually demanded improvisation—that would be my exile and my Siberia (295).

While the sick thinker is trapped by a constant desire for stasis, Nietzsche here suggests that he has learned throughout his life, based in part on his physiological incompatibility with enduring habits, to live without these enduring habits, thus to live without the stasis that we discussed above. As Nietzsche is quick to point out, it is not as if he does not desire stasis or believe at times that he has found it. He rather *is capable* of doing without this stasis, which enduring habits seem to provide. Nietzsche does not give us a direct link between this tendency of his to move between habits and its importance in confronting the death of god and the resultant questions, but one obvious effect of this not-sticking-to-habits is that it seems to have trained Nietzsche in the art of avoiding being trapped, one might say, in a particular perspective.<sup>14</sup> As I noted in section 2 regarding Nietzsche's physicalism, a person's physical condition structures the perspective they hold. Thus, if his physical condition constantly changes, it follows that Nietzsche's perspective will also constantly change. Nietzsche's claim that he says farewell to these habits and moves on displays his ability not to settle with one habit, but to be able to move from one to the other. He is grateful for this ability.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The link between perspective and habits or ways of living is clear if we keep in mind Nietzsche's tendency toward materialism. While Nietzsche's move is not quite as strong as Marx's—that is, Nietzsche is *not* as committed to the "truth" of materialism; Nietzsche *does* turn the idealist on her head by suggesting that material conditions structure the range of possible perspectives one can hold, as we noted in the discussion regarding Nietzsche's physicalism.

Marx and Nietzsche do not exactly use the term materialism in the same sense (and Nietzsche does not explicitly use it at all in GS, as far as I know), but I use the term here in contrast with idealism in the Hegelian sense. Rather than seeing humans as creatures who first think and then act based on mind or rationality, both Nietzsche and Marx see human beings as creatures whose actions (and even ideas) are structured by the material circumstances of their life. Thus, for Hegel, humans are *top-down* creatures, capable of thinking and acting based on this thinking. For Nietzsche and Marx, humans are basically the opposite: thinking follows from material conditions. Perhaps with regard to materialism Marx and Nietzsche share little beyond this general contrastive definition.

<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that in EH "Wise" 1 Nietzsche cites this ability to move from perspective to perspective as important to his overall philosophical project: "I have a hand for switching *perspectives*: the first reason why a

*B. Grateful 'to': the chaos of existence*

A second important point here is that Nietzsche did not implement the art of holding brief habits as a strategy himself—he is grateful *to* his erratic health and “whatever is imperfect in” him (GS 295). The lack of agency in this picture is of no small import: it further separates Nietzsche from prescriptionist interpretations—interpretations that claim that he wants to provide solutions to particular problems. And critics who wish to interpret Nietzsche’s remarks about art and distancing oneself as a kind of “program” push Nietzsche in this direction.<sup>16</sup> In GS 295, however, he is speaking of his own (chance) capacities. And the fact that they were not actively selected opens him up to a kind of beauty in life: When one (A) confronts the lack of stasis in life—or the inability of human beings to acquire stasis while remaining honest (GS110)—and (B) refrains from assigning responsibility for the outcome of seemingly providential events to a god (GS 277), then one can see the “music,” the apparent “harmony” in existence. And its beauty is intensified by the element of chance. One can appreciate the difficulty in life circumstances unfolding with coherence and can recognize that it was neither personal nor divine agency that brought this coherence about. Nietzsche’s gratitude here is thus not simply that he believes he has the ability to live without getting “stuck” in a particular perspective. We must keep in mind that the fact that he did not choose the conditions of his physical constitution (“misery and illness”) which have led him to have a nature “entirely designed for brief habits” (GS 295). This

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‘revaluation of values’ is even possible, perhaps for me alone.” Again, Dr. Berry drew my attention to this sentence.

<sup>16</sup> For example, Stern (2013) reads Nietzsche’s concept of *amor fati*—the love of life (GS 276), to be contrasted with the ascetic mentioned in section 3.—as suggesting the following: because error is a condition of life for human beings (GS 107) and is thus necessary, the method we have for coping “with our immersion in error” is to use these “erroneous practices to make this error beautiful” (156). This paints Nietzsche as seeing error as a problem to be overcome and Stern reads Nietzsche as suggesting that in a world full of uncertainty and error, the solution, the best one can do, is use error to make this situation beautiful. The prescriptionist interpretation sees the project of GS as providing a solution to a problem.

suggests that the chance circumstances of life—what Nietzsche will call “fate” (GS 276, c.f., EH “Clever” 10)—is also an object of gratitude. Another way of saying this is that Nietzsche is grateful to life in all its chaos and chance because it is precisely this chance that has given him the capacity to avoid being stuck in enduring habits (GS 277, 295).

*C. Grateful ‘that’: “God is dead!”*

Returning to GS 343, Nietzsche tells us that this “greatest recent event—that ‘God is dead’,” is worthy of gratitude for the “philosophers and the ‘free spirits’.” Indeed, rather than dreading, these individuals “look forward to this darkening” and “are not at all sad”—and anticipate surprising consequences: “a new and barely discernible type of light, happiness, relief, amusement, encouragement, dawn” (GS 343). Nietzsche’s poetic and celebratory language here is meant to capture an expression of gratefulness toward this event: “our hearts overflow with gratitude, amazement, forebodings, expectation.” Nietzsche is grateful for this event because it opens a kind of sea, clears the horizon. He speaks in metaphor, but his meaning is not completely ambiguous in light of what we have said so far: “finally our ships may set out again, set out to face any danger...the sea, *our* sea, lies open again; maybe there has never been such an ‘open sea’.” As in other places in GS (e.g., 124, 125, 289), the sea metaphor represents this process of pushing out into a lack of stasis, of seeing the absence of grounding in values and perspectives. As we noted above, with the death of god comes a void or instability that had not existed before. When the Greek and Roman gods died, there was a new (Christian) god to take their place. The catastrophe of the death of the Christian God is therefore heightened by the fact that this death is not a movement from a single god to a “better” one, but rather from an all-powerful god to none. In other words, the status that western culture has raised this one god to has increased the dependency upon it and thus the disappearance of him is more intensely felt. It is like an investor

who unknowingly puts most of his assets into a Ponzi scheme, thinking he is increasing his security: his massive investment has made him vulnerable. And he feels it when the bottom falls out of the market.

The claim that Nietzsche values this variety of perspectives and considers it useful in dealing with the death of god is supported by a passage in Book III entitled, “The greatest advantage of polytheism.” Here Nietzsche writes that in polytheism, “one got to see a *plurality of norms*: one god was not the denial of or anathema to another god!” (GS 143) Under this mythological metaphysics, we are told, there was no single normal type of god, and consequently, no one normal type of human. We should read this as meaning that there were a variety of approaches to existence, a pantheon of ways to live. Nietzsche contrasts this with monotheism, “this rigid consequence of the teaching of a normal human type—that is, the belief in a normal god next to whom there are only false, pseudo-gods” (GS 143). Where polytheism offers variety, monotheism constricts and preaches a single “normal” type. In line with what we have said about philosophical sickness, monotheism represents a drive toward a stasis, a oneness, a singularity. Rather than making space for a variety of approaches to existence, a variety of perspectives, monotheism constricts and narrows.<sup>17</sup> And this constriction represents “the greatest danger to humanity for far” because it “threatened us with...premature stagnation” (GS 143).

Nietzsche’s comments about the advantages of polytheism should *not* be taken to mean that he wants to return to a Homeric mythological metaphysics, however much he praises the Greeks for their creativity. Nietzsche does not really tell us why polytheism worked for the Greeks, although he appreciates it as a sign of variety and health (GS 143). As Christianity emerges, and truth is held up as a supreme value, this monotheistic religion must defend itself

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<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche praises the discovery of what he calls “new worlds” in GS 289. By “new worlds,” he means a variety of “overall philosophical [justifications] of [ways] of living and thinking”—that is, a variety of perspectives.

against threats. This is to say that Christianity must live up to its own value of truth and show *itself* to be true—a kind of apologetic theology that Nietzsche does not seem to think was as central in Greek polytheism. Yet, as we saw in section 4, it was this value that began to destabilize Christianity. There is thus no return to a cultural condition in which god is a solution to the dynamic nature of existence. Christianity and science essentially push god as a solution to its breaking point and Nietzsche sees a god no longer viable (GS 285). Nietzsche’s praise of polytheism should be taken to mean that this style of metaphysics possessed a type of health to be contrasted with monotheism. The response to the death of god thus requires that one not appeal to some kind of stasis, but embrace a of flexibility in perspective.

Nietzsche’s gratitude here is that the conditions of the culture have forced the thinker to confront the facts of existence—e.g., misery and other difficult feelings, the implausibility of flattering metaphysical pictures of human nature—yet dealing with this by appealing to a god is no longer an option. Under these precise conditions, Nietzsche suggests, humanity might grow, “rise ever higher”: accepting the implications of the death of god—for example, that “there is no more reason in what happens, no love in what will happen to you; [that] no more resting place stands open for your heart in which to find and no longer seek”—might provide humankind the ability to abstain from postulating metaphysical or supernatural beings in order to justify the difficulty of life (GS 285). In others words, Nietzsche is grateful that god is dead because it provides conditions in the culture in which investigation into human life requires scientific rigor and honesty, yet does not permit god as a means of coping with the difficult results of this investigation.

In conclusion, I should note that this essay has left out two very important aphorisms which explicitly mention art as an object of gratitude (GS 78, 107), and one in which Nietzsche

remarks on the difficulty of expressing gratitude (GS 100). Future research, in line with the interpretive work I have done here, could read the first two aphorisms as suggesting the following point: art—and particularly theatre—can be thought of as providing human beings with a capacity to see themselves from a distance and from a variety of perspectives. I have focused here primarily on the relation between gratitude and Nietzsche’s desire to live without static values—an ability necessary after the death of god. Yet *how* one can do this has not really been a part of this analysis. GS 78 and 107 could provide answers to the following questions: how is art related to the capacity to live in this absence of static values? As we saw (III), placing truth as the highest value can destroy value systems—Nietzsche thinks this placing truth above all else killed the Christian God. Yet, contrary to what some critics suggest (e.g., Stern 2013, Reginster 2009), Nietzsche does *not* claim falsification of the circumstances of one’s life as a way to deal with the death of god and the collapse of values which results. Nietzsche does not suggest art as a means of *avoiding* the difficulties of life. As this essay has aimed to show, Nietzsche’s “cheerfulness” and gratitude are to be understood precisely in terms of a willingness to face the difficult circumstances of life, one of which is the death of god (GS 343). Future research seeking to incorporate these two important aphorisms connecting art and gratitude (GS 78 and 107) therefore cannot fail to take into account Nietzsche’s desire to confront the full weight of the death of god while refraining from falsifying the circumstances of life (GS 2).



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