

# The Seeds of Modern Nihilism and the Origins of Postmodern Hope

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## I

In contemporary society and culture—postindustrial society, postmodern culture—grand narratives have lost their credibility. Whether it concerns speculative narratives or narratives of emancipation, it is tempting to see this decline as an effect of the renewal of liberal capitalism since 1960, a renewal that has eliminated the communist alternative and valorized the individual consumer, or, to see it as an effect of the blossoming of technology since the Second World War. However, whenever we go searching for causes in this way, we are bound to be disappointed. It is, of course, right to suppose that both liberal capitalist renewal and the disorienting upsurge of technology have an impact. But to adequately understand the decline we must first locate the seeds of nihilism that were inherent in the grand narratives of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

Publishing his essay on the postmodern condition in 1979, Jean-François Lyotard was writing too early to include what would very soon become the ubiquitous appeal to a new “neoliberal hegemony” by those searching for causes of the decline of the old “modern” grand narratives of progress and emancipation. The narrative-eroding power of liberal capitalist renewal and the blossoming of technology were, many searchers came to think, as nothing compared to the triumph of neoliberalism. Championed first by Reagan and Thatcher in the 1980s, the increasingly global domination of neoliberalism installed, in the place of narratives of

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, translated by G. Bennington and B. Massumi, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, 37-8 (modified and simplified translation); hereafter abbreviated to *PMC*.

spiritual progress and political emancipation, technological progress and market freedom as the only credible order of things (TINA).

But whatever its merits, it's not a credible story of the decline that Lyotard has in view. What Francis Fukuyama called the "thoroughgoing *economization* of life" had been the basic trajectory of all Western societies undergoing the twin processes of industrialisation and democratization in the nineteenth century,<sup>2</sup> and while this was doubtless whole-heartedly embraced by Reagan and Thatcher, Lyotard (like Fukuyama) would have seen the advent of neoliberalism as fundamentally continuous with that basic trajectory—optimization of the efficiency, performativity and functioning of the system was already the operational order of the day (*PMC*, xxiv). And Lyotard would have seen neoliberalism as continuous too with Western societies finding themselves increasingly (as Thatcher herself put it in 1979, before she came to power) "a world away" from a time when, for example, ideas of national or international "brotherhood" still had "warmth and dignity".<sup>3</sup> "Today", Thatcher reflected, we live in a time when "the old slogans and the old illusions crumble". Thatcher did not see her mission as one of crumbling the credibility of old ideas of progress and emancipation. The days of those old ideas had, she believed, already gone, and her mission was limited to giving newly creative life to the once "best" British economy, to "tilt the balance back towards the creative elements in our midst...Business has lacked the confidence to expand... The creative, we shall encourage and reward".

Anticipating nothing, since it was already underway, here is Martin Heidegger, writing in 1945, tracking the decline of the old modern grand narratives of spiritual progress and emancipatory politics into the creative entrepreneurial spirit and free market ethos that Reagan and Thatcher would so enthusiastically embrace thirty-five years later:

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<sup>2</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: The Free Press, 1992, 190.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Thatcher, [Speech to Conservative Rally in Cardiff](#), April 1979.

Into the position of the vanished authority of God and of the teaching office of the Church, steps the authority of conscience, obtrudes the authority of reason. Against these the social instinct rises up. The flight from the world into the suprasensory is replaced by historical progress. The otherworldly goal of everlasting bliss is transformed into the earthly happiness of the greatest number. [New ideals are set up: specifically, doctrines regarding world happiness through socialism.] The careful maintenance of the cult of religion is relaxed through enthusiasm for the creating of a culture or spreading of civilization. Creativity, previously the unique property of the biblical god, becomes the distinctive mark of human activity. Human creativity finally passes over into business enterprise.<sup>4</sup>

If we want to understand what is happening in our time, we need to resist the temptation to suppose that it is *geopolitical* events that explain the credibility-collapse of the grand narratives of spiritual progress and political emancipation. As Heidegger's summary suggests, we need to look instead at what one might call the *geophilosophical* event in whose wake such worldly events unfold: we need to look at the "tremendous event," "the greatest recent event" that Nietzsche claimed was "already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe" at the end of the nineteenth century; an event that Nietzsche announced, out of the mouth of a madman, with the now famous and familiar words—that "God is dead".<sup>5</sup>

Locating the first seeds of nihilism in those very developments where, in revolt against the old religious authorities, we put ourselves in charge—becoming, in that way, like creator gods ourselves—Nietzsche will tell a long-run story of European decline. It is also, however, a long-run story that opens onto what Nietzsche saw as a still-promising future for

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Nietzsche's Word: 'God is Dead'", translated by W. Levitt, in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1982, 64; hereafter abbreviated *NW*.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. *The Gay Science*, translated by W. Kaufmann, New York: Random House, 1974, 20; hereafter abbreviated *GS*.

Europe, for a Europe beyond its old modern narratives of progress and emancipation—a still-promising future, especially, for democracy beyond the processes of democratization which, were, he thought, in our time making ludicrous herd-animals out of us all.

## II

Attempting to articulate a radical sense of our thrownness into the whereabouts of a specific horizon of understanding existence, Heidegger speaks of every *Dasein* (Heidegger's name for the entity that, in each case, we ourselves are) as having "factically submitted to a definite 'world'—its 'world'".<sup>6</sup> But perhaps this submission to a world as its world—a whereabouts that is the home-space and home-time of every *Dasein*'s existence—is not entirely independent of, or at least has not always been entirely independent of, submission to God's purpose. Nietzsche puts it as follows:<sup>7</sup>

Around the hero everything becomes a tragedy, around the demi-god a satyr-play; and around God everything becomes—what? Perhaps a "world"? —

As it is reproduced here, this remark is a self-standing aphorism in Nietzsche's text, belonging to a collection of short aphoristic remarks that comprise a chapter of *Beyond Good and Evil* entitled "Maxims and Interludes." The remark may be self-standing but it only just stands up, and the long dash at the end, beyond the "perhaps," the "perhaps" that perhaps marks the end of anything being certain for us, perhaps the long dash at the end stands even more defiantly as a moment of incompleteness, perhaps pressing us on to wonder what is "around" when God is no longer around; whether, the world that we now inhabit is an all-joined-up-world at all in such circumstances—whether, in the shadow of the death of God, it is at best a world-in-ruins.

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Heidegger *Being and Time*, translated by J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell, 1962, 344.

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated by R.J. Hollingdale, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973, 84; hereafter abbreviated *BGE*.

The transition for Europeans between how things were then (when the world was all joined up) and how things are now (when the world is in ruins) is characterised by a decline of the onto-theological default understanding of our own being, the European understanding of ourselves as the uniquely theomorphic and rational animal—the European understanding of the human as “man.” In the time between then and now, the authority of the once dominant and founding Greco-Christian narrative through which our lives made sense to us, weakens. This transition is typically understood as progress itself, inseparable from modern ideas of (especially) scientific progress. The progressive scientific spirit of European civilization—the spirit whose expression is visible throughout “the industry, architecture, music, the fascism and socialism, of our time”<sup>8</sup>—has its centre of gravity in the attained scientific understanding of the natural world and of ourselves as natural creatures. And it looks for all the world like progress; progress, especially, beyond the “enchanted” world of our religious past. But this scientific progress is also the unravelling of a life-conception in relation to which, as David Wiggins puts it, progress and emancipation were “the marks by which our minute speck in the universe can distinguish itself as the spiritual focus of the cosmos”.<sup>9</sup> Against such a life-conception, the greatest achievements of European science disclose the earth as *just a planet among planets*, and the supposedly theomorphic and uniquely rational animal as *just an animal among animals*. Wiggins inconclusively concludes that “perhaps [save the word, it may be all we have left. SG] that is what makes the question of the meaning we can find in life so difficult and so desolate for us” (*TIML*, 91). In the times of science, nihilism is at the door. We are nothing more than clever animals—and not very clever animals either.

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<sup>8</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Culture and Value*, Revised Edition, ed. G.H. von Wright, translated by Peter Winch, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998, 8 (translation modified); hereafter abbreviated *CV*.

<sup>9</sup> David Wiggins. “Truth, Invention, and The Meaning of Life”, in *Needs, Values, Truth: Essays in the Philosophy of Value*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, 91; hereafter abbreviated *TIML*.

### III

One way of explaining the specificity and the focus of “the question of the meaning we can find in life” for those for whom submission to God’s purpose was at the centre of their lived-out-lives would be to say: they inhabited a world. Period. Faith in God’s providence, having God and God’s plan for man at the centre of their lives, this was the crux of “what it was like to be alive then” (*TIML*, 89). They inhabited a world, and its history was providential. The murder of God is Nietzsche’s word for *the inner dissolution* of that world.

How goes the world of Western modernity in our time? One would have to have been asleep, and to have slept really well, to think that our mornings were still made bright by the old modern narratives of progress and emancipation. In our today, such grand philosophical-history-tellings are increasingly the object of widespread incredulity. As Alan Montefiore has put it, we live in a time in which such narratives “no longer have any plausibility for us”.<sup>10</sup> We inhabit the ruins of a still-hanging-on modern self-understanding, and some have been awake to that for a while now.

What is happening in our time, and where are we now heading? To help orient our wanderings into what Bernard Williams calls our contemporary “scepticism” about “*les grands récits*,” those grand narratives of philosophical history through which and in terms of which, in an earlier time, we modern Europeans had made (apparently) secure sense of our lives,<sup>11</sup> I want to track a developing worry that the end of history as the onto-theological, teleo-eschatological, history of “man” —whether that “end” is conceived as something now attained (or soon to be attained) or something now exhausted—announces *a return to animality*, and how, right there, even the *question* of the meaning we can find in life can be lost to us, forgotten.

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<sup>10</sup> Alan Montefiore, *Philosophy and the Human Paradox*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2021, 42.

<sup>11</sup> Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005, 47.

#### IV

Already waking up to what he saw as a modern “crisis” condition, when Paul Valéry looked over Europe in 1932, he saw a once great culture now calling into question the whole structure of, especially, its fiduciary life: all relations and institutions involving trust, already in 1932, seemed to him to be increasingly regarded with scepticism and incredulity. A Europe where everything had once seemed so “solid” was, as Marx put it so memorably, “melting into air.” Valéry did not see coming what Marx thought he saw coming in this new condition for modern Europe. For Marx this development promised a self-created life to come that no longer hangs-in-the-air of life-distorting ideological phantasms: the social revolution to come will have, as Marx put it in an essay on Hegel, returned social life to “its real ground,” to the concrete existence of “actual man” —a self-created life in which “its own *work*” (its own self-created existence) becomes properly, and for the first time, “its *own work*” —its own work now free of spiritually corrupting “ideological” phantasms, paradigmatically religious distortions and phantasms above all, but not limited to those.<sup>12</sup> Like the Russian-born French philosopher Alexandre Kojève, who in his own reading of Marx and Hegel was himself channelling something in both Nietzsche and Heidegger (the latter who was himself channelling something of Valéry—what a maze of spirits!), Valéry saw in this return to the “real ground,” this end of the Europe-adventure as it pierced the veil of its own fiduciary structures, not the attainment of Enlightened self-realization but something that Kojève

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<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, translated by A. Jolin and J. O'Malley, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970, 30-1.

explicitly called “a return to animality”:<sup>13</sup> “and we shall witness,” says Valéry, “at last the miracle of an animal society, the perfect and ultimate anthill”.<sup>14</sup>

We should note that Valéry is almost certainly drawing on Dostoyevsky’s underground man here, who observed that social engineers of all types imagine “constructing” a future world in which the perfect is finally completely attained for “man” – and who compared that “achievement” with an “amazing building” of an apparently very different type, a type that, in fact, already exists in nature: “the anthill”.<sup>15</sup> There where the human “adventure” is finally made “done,” in a world where we no longer head off by “exchanging the present, the palpable, the ponderable, the real...for imaginary advantages,” we may have attained a “happy condition for humanity, or at least a stable, pacified, organized, comfortable condition,” but even if such a happy condition could ever actually be attained (which is by no means clear to Valéry or Dostoyevsky) “we realize that it brings with it, or would bring, a most tepid intellectual temperature: in general, *happy peoples have no spirit*” (*HP*, 109-110, emphasis in original). What Wittgenstein called the “hot or cold” temperature of a genuinely spiritual life,<sup>16</sup> would have altogether gone.

Dostoyevsky may have had socialists in view with his achieved-anthill metaphor, and Valéry too certainly saw socialism as a leading example. However, neither thinker supposed that what the underground man called the “twice two is four” life-ambition of a finally attained rationally organised and scientifically justified life (*NU*, 31) as belonging to the politics of Marxist scientific socialism alone. In Valéry’s case, the ideal of creating a “new

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<sup>13</sup> Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the "Phenomenology of Spirit"*, translated by J.H. Nichols Jr, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980, 161; hereafter abbreviated *IRH*.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Valéry, *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry Vol 10: History and Politics*, translated by D. Folbot and J. Mathews, New York: Pantheon Books, 1962, 30; hereafter abbreviated *HP*.

<sup>15</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from Underground*, translated by R. Wilks, London: Penguin Classics, 2009, 30; hereafter abbreviated *NU*. I am grateful to Steven DeLay for drawing my attention to this implicit reference in Valéry’s text.

<sup>16</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough*, ed. Rush Rhees, translated by A.C. Miles revised by R. Rhees, Doncaster: Brynmill Press, 1979, 5.



man” in accordance with a properly scientific understanding of ourselves was, he suggested, also visible in, for example, the eugenics laws and ideas of a specifically biological racial science envisaged by Nazism and fascism too, and those developments were also making themselves felt in the European world that he was observing in 1932 (*HP*, 103). However, we should also not forget that Valéry’s reference to “happy peoples” belongs first and directly to a description (in its own words as it were) of life in the United States of America (*HP*, 227). In America, a similar positive-scientific spirit of Great Progress, especially scientific-technological progress, would urge us to find all our needs satisfied in the lukewarm “comfortable condition” of life serviced 24/7 by a single convenience store with a gas station. Kojève too had said something similar, conceiving the return to animality that belongs to what he conceived as the attained end of the Hegelian-Marxist history of man becoming actual in “the American way of life” (*IRH*, 161).

Valéry did not think “we are anywhere near” the “comfortable condition” of “happy peoples” he felt us nevertheless sliding towards (*HP*, 110). Kojève’s capacity for ironic announcements of the attained end of history (it was, he declared, really all over in 1806, with the attainment of a consciousness of the principles of liberty and equality that emerged in the wake of the French Revolution) makes it harder to estimate his view of how far we have slid back or might ever finally sink back into human animality. He certainly saw promise in the developing European Community, and left academia to work for France on its emerging institutions. (He was by all accounts an influential and effective bureaucrat—and by some accounts a Soviet mole.)

On the other hand, there is a considerable irony even in Valéry’s effort to give strength and speed to the adventures which would propel us into an unpredictable future. He retained a sense that our now “*backing into the future*” adventures could go too far in the other direction: like Icarus we risk “departing perhaps *too far* from the primary and natural

conditions of his species” (*HP*, 113, emphasis mine). The deep (tragic) irony here is that the more we live our separation from the original ground of life in terms of what Wiggins called a “too easy a distinction between human welfare on the one side and the environment on the other” (*TIML*, 103-4, fn. 15), the more we risk living a life that has *also* effectively returned to animality.

## V

Central to Wiggins’s concerns with a life lived according to this “too easy” distinction is that taking it too far has both encouraged us to and inured us to the ongoing human subjection of animal life (for example, in modern industrial, factory farming) and environmental destruction (for example, in deforestation, mineral extraction, fossil fuel exploitation, climate change) that has been taking place since the industrial revolution on a scale never seen before in the history of the world—whatever the (considerable) “human welfare” benefits it has also (very unevenly) delivered for many of us. This is a case that Derrida too explicitly identified as among the most serious in our time, or rather, as having “always been a serious one,” but which he thinks is becoming “massively unavoidable” today.<sup>17</sup>

Reflecting on a documentary film he had seen about creatures eating one another at the bottom of the ocean, Wiggins concludes his discussion as follows (*TIML*, 103):

If we can project upon a form of life nothing but the pursuit of life itself, if we find there no non-instrumental concerns and no interest in the world considered as lasting longer than the animal in question will need the world to last in order to sustain the animal’s own life; then the form of life must be to some considerable extent alien to us.

He continues this thought with a worry in a footnote (*TIML*, 103-4, fn. 15):

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<sup>17</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, translated by P. Kamuf, Abingdon: Routledge, 1994, 85; hereafter abbreviated *SM*.

Here, I think, or in this neighbourhood, lies the explanation of the profound unease that some people feel at the systematic and unrelenting exploitation of nature and animals which is represented by factory farming, by intensive stock rearing, or the mindless spoliation of non-renewable resources. This condemnation of evil will never be understood till it is distinguished by its detractors from its frequent, natural but only contingent concomitant—the absolute prohibition of all killing not done in self-defence.

What Wiggins is saying is that the “profound unease that some people feel” in the face of an increasingly global political economy which plays out a distinction between human welfare on the one hand (economic growth and prosperity) and the natural world on the other (whatever) is due to such people seeing humanity having become like those ocean-bottom-feeders, with “no interest in the world considered as lasting longer than the animal in question will need the world to last in order to sustain the animal’s own life.” The evils of factory farming, the whole business of the mechanized food industry, the mechanized forestry industry, and the spoliation of non-renewables are not to be understood as such because, say, they involve us killing animals and destroying forests—but because it shows us as a creature without interest in the future of life on earth (human or not) beyond the presence of those who are currently present and living there. Our modern lives are no sort of contribution to, contain no kind of promise to, human adventures that are yet to come: we are breaking the promise for the ongoing human adventure that, in the name of Great Progress, we claim to be keeping. Uncannily, we would, in this more than ever separated-from-the-soil condition, have become akin to a form of life that we cannot but think of as “to some considerable extent alien to us”: the most un-separated of animals, ocean-bottom-feeders. Living mostly on the crust of the planet rather than the ocean floor we are not just becoming ant communities: we are waking up to find ourselves transformed into cockroaches on the face of the earth.

## VI

Modernity has delivered immense life-benefits, it has immeasurably enhanced the welfare, the prosperity, convenience and comfort of millions and millions of human beings. But the powerful immunitary life-survival system of modernity (the 24/7-convenience-store-with-a-gas-station system), constructed with ever more life-intrusive invasiveness, also, and at the same time, risks unleashing devastating forms of autoimmunity, as well as massively intensified differences in human life-quality and prosperity across the globe. “Progress” may be, as Wittgenstein puts it, “the form” of Europe’s modernity, but “making progress is *not* one of its properties” (*CV*, 9, amended word order). “Its activity,” he goes on to say, “is to construct a more and more complicated structure”, our anthill (*CV*, 9), and while its “coming collapse” seemed to him still “a *long* time” off (*CV*, 72), he nevertheless supposed it very plausible that, with “the idea of Great Progress,” “humanity, in seeking it, is falling into a trap,” a death trap: it is not at all “absurd” to think that “the scientific and technological age is the beginning of the end for humanity” (*CV*, 64). The nineteenth century idea of Great Progress is not Enlightenment attained but, Wittgenstein suggests, a blinding illusion. Modern Scientific Enlightenment [*Aufklärung*] is, at least in certain respects, Modern Scientific Bedazzlement [*Verblendung*] (*CV*, 64).

But we have to be careful not to make a story about the collapse of the old modern grand narratives, and the earth-destruction that comes in the wake of the distinction between human welfare on the one hand and the natural environment of the other that these grand narratives of Great Progress made easy for us, into a new Great Story About Us. Here is Nietzsche thinking about what might give our existence the kind of meaningful character we would still most like it to have; namely, a final end or goal of history in which we ourselves

play the starring role, we ourselves the centre of significance, *even if our central place is due to our, finally, destroying everything*:

This meaning could have been: the “fulfillment” of some highest ethical canon in all events, the moral world order; or the growth of love and harmony in the intercourse of beings; or the gradual approximation of a state of universal happiness; *or even the development toward a state of universal annihilation*—any goal at least constitutes some meaning. What all these notions have in common is that something is to be achieved through the process—and now one realizes that becoming aims at nothing and achieves nothing.<sup>18</sup>

Nietzsche wants us cheerfully to welcome the new condition we are now beginning to see as ours—but without seeing the human adventure as a kind of cosmic epic, whether we play the hero or the villain. From now on, there is no longer any future for conceiving “mankind” as “the collaborator, let alone the centre, of becoming” (*WTP*, 12):

What has happened, at bottom? The feeling of valuelessness was reached with the realization that the overall character of existence may not be interpreted by means of the concept of “aim,” the concept of “unity,” or the concept of “truth.” Existence has no goal or end; any comprehensive unity in the plurality of events is lacking. (*WTP*, p. 13)

Heidegger, who also thought we lived in a time of decline, affirming, indeed, that “‘Europe’ is the actualization of the *decline of the West*”,<sup>19</sup> quite famously stated in a newspaper interview in which he spoke of this decline—an interview that he agreed to give only if it was published after his bodily death—that “only a god can save us”.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, translated by M.A. Scarpitti, London: Penguin Classics, 2017, 12, emphasis mine; hereafter abbreviated *WTP*.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Ponderings XII-XV, Black Notebooks 1939-1941*, translated by R. Rojcewicz, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017, 217.

<sup>20</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Only a God Can Save Us” in *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker*, ed. T. Sheehan Trans. by W. Richardson, 1981, 45-67. Online text: <http://www.ditext.com/heidegger/interview.html>.

Nietzsche, whose madman announces that “God is dead” to summarize our new condition, in fact gave to that same madman a construal of what might be required of us in its aftermath that seemed to go beyond Heidegger’s sense that the best we can achieve ourselves would be to awaken a readiness to wait for the appearance of a god:

How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers! The holiest and the mightiest thing the world has ever possessed has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood from us? With what water could we clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what holy games will we have to invent for ourselves? [*Welche Sühnfeiern, welche heiligen Spiele werden wir erfinden müssen?*] Is the magnitude of this deed not too great for us? Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it? (*GS*, 120; emphasis mine)

I will come back to what Nietzsche might have had in view when his madman asks if we must ourselves become gods to become worthy of the deicidal deed shortly. But his talk of our having to invent new “festivals of atonement” and “sacred games” is, on the face of it, a more familiarly human challenge, although not one that it is easy to imagine Europeans of today, those who, as we have seen, seem most keen to make creative gods of themselves, being particularly well prepared for at all.

And yet perhaps it is not so far from what we are, still today, familiar with. Although we will have reason to come back to it more favourably, I don’t think “festivals of atonement” is quite right as a translation of “*Sühnfeiern*” (festivals of atonement would just be *Sühnfest*), or at least does not register the seriousness or solemnity of *feiern* (celebrations) in religious language, as in “celebrating mass” (*Messe feiern*). Speaking of *Sühnfeiern* recalls, in particular, Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, a day when an annual ritual is performed to take away the sins of *all* the people (Leviticus 23, Hebrews 9:22), or the Christian day of atonement for (precisely) the death of (the) God (incarnate) as the scapegoat

for *all* our sins. And “*heiligen*” does not just mean holy or sacred (*heilige*) but refers to acts which hallow or sanctify, these are hallowing or sanctifying games, ceremonial games, perhaps intended also to draw children, the inheritors of all our acts, into the *all* who must atone.

Nietzsche’s *Sühnfeiern* and *heiligen Spiele* are invoked in the context of a great task of remaking or recovering a sense of our lives as meaningful in the wake of the death of God, a task which is itself inflected in an unquestionably religious register. It calls for a resurrection of a sense of life not just called to celebrating or honouring what is holy, but, as hallowing celebrations, ceremonies that bring the holy *back to life*. This is more or less exactly what Heidegger’s preparatory waiting is about too. And not at all the sort of thing we usually expect to hear today about how we might shape our lives in the future.

While not altogether unfamiliar to us, these Europeans living on the other side of the event of the becoming-unbelievable of the Christian God, do seem (how shall we put this?) *less modern* than we have become and remain in our postmodern times. Not only do they seem more seriously ceremonial animals than we are, their lives seem more closely to resemble the religious lives of Europeans of the past than the lukewarm narrowness of the religious culture that still dominates Europe today, the respectable moral order of Christian teaching. And that order is one that many of us are mostly lost to anyway. The idea of inventing new *Sühnfeiern* and *heiligen Spiele* may seem to take us back into a religious world we might well have thought...we had only just left.

## VII

“What atonement celebrations, what hallowing games shall we have to invent?” Beyond Yom Kippur, beyond the day of atonement, where all atone for wrongs done against God, the wrong against God that Nietzsche’s madman announces as having happened is of a completely different order to the ones our old ceremonies religiously celebrated: we have

(all) killed Him as the one who does *not* remain dead. One might wonder if modern Europeans as they have existed hitherto are up to the task of taking responsibility for what they (as yet know not they) have done: “Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Won’t we have to become gods ourselves just to appear worthy of it? [*Ist nicht die Grösse dieser That zu gross für uns? Müssen wir nicht selber zu Göttern werden, um nur ihrer würdig zu erscheinen?*]”

On this conception of the deed whose doing has yet to land with us, it is not, as Heidegger would have it, that only a god can save us. The suggestion from Nietzsche’s madman seems to be that only by becoming gods ourselves can we become “worthy” of being his murderer, and thus create a future for ourselves beyond our presently attained still-modern condition. We would ourselves become gods by becoming capable of atoning for the deicide that we will have come to see that we have all done. Through a transformation of spirit that would go beyond the old modern table of historical measures, we would become the ones who can own the deed.

Heidegger’s response, taking the task of saving finally out of ordinary human hands, such hands left to the humbler, more life-like, work of thinking and poetizing that might prepare a readiness for the god’s appearance or the return of the Holy, may seem more realistic and responsible than the response of Nietzsche’s madman, at least fundamentally less hubristic. Stephen Mulhall for one, a great reader of both Heidegger and Nietzsche, recoils from the madman’s becoming-gods hope for us, seeing in it an all too human case of “the prideful human craving to be God”, “a human denial of the human” that philosophy should want “to combat”:<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Stephen Mulhall, *Philosophical Myths of the Fall*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, 94-6; hereafter abbreviated *PMF*.



[Nietzsche supposes] we should think of life after God's murder as requiring that we establish a new, decentred mode of inhabitation of the natural world, one founded on a conception of nature as lacking any inherent, extra-human structure of meaning, and hence requiring a conception of ourselves (understood as simply part of nature) as embodying only the significance we can confer on ourselves (perhaps through festivals of atonement, perhaps through holy games)... Those who want to live in a world without God must accept that they can do so only if they can accept and even welcome a conception of themselves as God's murderers. The applicability of that self-description is not an essentially transitory fact, a simple condition that prepares the way for inhabiting a world in which God is simply absent; rather, it travels with us into that higher history, and its continued applicability to us grounds our claim to be living in that new dispensation of human culture. (*PMF*, pp. 24-25)

But Mulhall is far from certain that such a dispensation can be achieved, concerned above all that all it can achieve is simply "a further exemplification of the perennial human desire to be god—to deny the human" (*PMF*, p. 44):

This was, after all, an implication glanced at by Nietzsche's madman, when contemplating the magnitude of the deicidal deed for which he claims that we are responsible: "Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it?" If so, then Nietzsche's critique of Christianity's so-called libel against ordinary, embodied, historical human existence is in fact a further expression of that libel. (*PMF*, 44-5)

As Mulhall acknowledges the libel would belong to the madman here, not straightforwardly to Nietzsche. Moreover, when the madman himself responds to his own question whether we must become gods ourselves in the sentence immediately following it—the sentence that in fact concludes his announcement and after which he "fell silent"—he drops the religious

register of his rhetoric. Mulhall includes this rhetorical shift in his own description of the “continued applicability” of the deicidal deed to our lives beyond shadow-dwelling.

However, he does not further comment on it. It is a rhetorical shift that places the event back into human history, rather than a beyond-human transformation: “There was never a greater deed—and whoever is born after us will on account of this deed belong to a higher history than all history up to now!” (*GS*, 120).

A higher history for humanity in a newly decentred condition. And higher for just that reason. It would be, as Mulhall puts it, “a conception of ourselves (understood as simply part of nature) as embodying only the significance we can confer on ourselves (perhaps through festivals of atonement, perhaps through holy games),” festivals and games through which human beings come to terms with their responsibility for bringing the Holy back to life in the wake of the murder of God.

Mulhall’s first parenthesis, “(understood as simply part of nature),” quietly runs Nietzsche’s discourse on radical self-responsibility (“only the significance we can confer on ourselves”) back into the natural/supernatural distinction that belongs to the onto-theological register that is falling apart. We should not let that pass without more ado, and I will come back to this. Nevertheless, it perhaps helpfully signals the perceived threat that faces us, the tidal wave that threatens to overwhelm us when, as Heidegger puts it, “the suprasensory world is without effective power...bestows no life” (*NW*, 60): all we would be left with is indeed a spiritless understanding of ourselves “as simply part of nature”. There where “man” has been understood as essentially *more* than a merely living being, more than merely natural, more than merely part of nature, the becoming unbelievable of the suprasensory world threatens, by subtraction, a “return to animality” that only brings nihilism to the door. The feeling of valuelessness is reached.

## VIII

Nietzsche's madman wondered, at least for a moment, whether we must "become gods ourselves" simply to appear worthy of what is happening in our time, worthy of the unbolting of the world that he calls the "murder" of God, the One who died but who does *not* remain dead, henceforth, he supposes, *remaining* dead.

Becoming gods ourselves? Is that what is required for us to become worthy of the deed? The idea that Nietzsche himself gets caught up in an all-too-human call for us to become human-superhuman beings we can call gods is, of course, something of an interpretative commonplace. Isn't Nietzsche's most famous hope that we may see the arrival of the *Übermensch*?

But Nietzsche's calling us to overcome "man" really does not mean believing that we might become human-superhuman beings we can call gods: it means attaining to an as yet unattained condition for what and *beyond* what we have called "man" hitherto, the one whose history is narrated as the magic-religion-science history of Great Progress. It means attaining to (*being as humanly existing*) a new meaning of our being, a meaning "embodying *only* the significance we can confer on ourselves" —that is to say, an understanding of the meaning of human existence *not* "simply as part of nature" but drawn from ourselves for ourselves as "an *artistically creative* subject":<sup>22</sup> a being "*whose nature has not yet been fixed*" (BGE, 69).

Nietzsche's *Übermensch*-arrow into the future does assign, as "the distinctive mark" of the human, a power of "creativity" that had been, as Heidegger says, "previously the unique property of the biblical god." But with Nietzsche such creativity does not aim merely at (say) the creation of a successful "business enterprise" (although, why not) but, ultimately, at *the creation of a creature* — it aims at spiritual transformation for the self-creating animal

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<sup>22</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense", in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. R. Geuss, translated by R. Spiers, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 148; hereafter abbreviated *TL*.

that we are, the animal for which, as Nietzsche puts it, “*creature and creator are united*” (*BGE*, 136).

The old conception of ourselves as “man”, the old European onto-theological metaphysical conception of ourselves as the uniquely rational and theomorphic animal, lies nowadays in ruins, and finding ourselves standing about just then in those ruins, the possibility of *a new meaning of our being* now has, as Derrida puts it, “the chance of heralding itself – of promising itself” (*SM*, 74). Nietzsche’s heralding call to make preparing for the arrival of the *Übermensch* our new calling belongs to that nowadays promising chance. In view would be a concept-web formation with a new spiritual focus: not the “I seek God” of the authentically religious believer hitherto, but the “I seek the *Übermensch*” of the one “wanting the *Übermensch* to live”, the one called to overcome “man” so that the *Übermensch* might live.<sup>23</sup>

Like any other habitable place to dwell, this new concept-web formation would have to be a “delicate enough to be carried along by the waves, strong enough not to be blown apart by every wind” (*TL*, 147). And Nietzsche is optimistic here: Europe’s old “soil” is, he says, “still rich enough” to grow “a high tree” (*ZD*, 10). But this high tree of the day after tomorrow will be quite unlike the high tree of Europe’s religious past: it must be able to survive the storms on a ground that is now experienced as a groundless ground, a ground held fast by nothing but a profound trust in the promise of our own promise, earthly life giving meaning to earthly life *without* appealing to “superterrestrial hopes” (*ZD*, 5).

The madman wonders whether any of this future-carrying high-tree growing work will be possible without a past-carrying acknowledgement of what we have done to “what was holiest and mightiest” in the European world hitherto. And he imagines we might have to

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<sup>23</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zarathustra’s Discourses*, translated by R.J. Hollingdale, London: Penguin Classics, 1995, 86; hereafter abbreviated *ZD*.

become alive again to the kind of atonement observances that had been life-meaning-conferring for religious Europeans the day before yesterday, in the God-bolted world, and which have become mostly meaningless for the still-modern Europeans of today. We can conceive the focus of such new atonement observances as making amends for our no longer being able to believe in the One who does *not* remain dead, something that is inseparable from our taking responsibility for following after “man” conceived as the creature of God—with “man” as hitherto understood both behind us and, since we now understand ourselves explicitly as following after “man” thus understood, still with us, and even, since we are following after “man” thus understood, in a certain way still ahead of us as those who really did manage to grow a high tree in Europe’s soil.

Of course, in our own time—a time after Copernicus and after Darwin—“man” understood as the creature of God has already received a body blow. But that does not mean that we now already inhabit a world cut to the cloth of a life that understands itself as following after “man” understood onto-theologically: we are mostly still doing what we can “to save a ‘world’ that we no longer inhabit” as Derrida puts it.<sup>24</sup> We do our best to keep the nihilism at the door on the other side of the door by denying we are no longer at home. In 1906 the young Paul Valéry, in a letter written to his friend André Lebey, noted that with the arrival of Darwin “the whole of history is changed. I mean all thinking about history” (*HP*, 6). We should note, however, that Valéry says this only because he is struck by the fact that all thinking about history has *not* changed. Indeed, the old programme of Great Progress is still with us, even if that is mostly now understood in the shallow secularised shadow terms of techno-scientific progress, economic freedom, and the mastery of nature.

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<sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Economies of the Crisis”, in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*, edited and translated by E. Rottenberg, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, 70.

## IX

What might it mean, then, to follow after “man” conceived as the creature of God? Let us ask: what did it mean to conceive “man” as the creature of God in the first place? Here is the old testimony: “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Genesis 1: 26). What is the meaning of “man” understood in that likeness? We read in Genesis that in giving man that likeness, God, *the absolute sovereign*, first of all and without more ado, gives man *deputised sovereignty* over His creation. The first meaning of that likeness is announced, that is to say, in terms of giving man *earthly dominion* (domination, rule): “dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth” (Genesis 1: 26). It will be as the ones who must make their way in the wake of what we have made of that old testimony concerning the distinction of man—and the distinction between man (and his welfare) and nature (and its) that this distinction of man carries even as it draws man and nature together, the one with dominion over the other—that “the applicability of [the] self-description” of ourselves as “God’s murderers” will be, for us, “not an essentially transitory fact” but something that “travels with us into that higher history.”

There we find, as the new task of the “artistically creative subject” that we are, the task of creating what Derrida calls (borrowing a form of words from Carl Schmitt) the “honest fiction” of a sovereignty,<sup>25</sup> a sovereignty conception that does *not*, then, constantly suffer from the hubris, the pride and vanity, “the prideful human craving to be God” (*PMF*, p. 94), “a human denial of the human,” that philosophy (and not just philosophy) should, indeed, still want “to combat” (*PMF*, 96).

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<sup>25</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, translated by G. Bennington, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009, 76; hereafter abbreviated *BS*.

In a time after Copernicus and Darwin we (already) do not now think of ourselves in this way as the centre of cosmic significance or made in God's likeness. The passage Nietzsche describes from "man" to the ones who follow after "man" is, in this sense, already underway. On the other hand, what is underway in our time is not (or not yet) a life called to affirming a "decentred mode of inhabitation of the natural world...requiring a conception of ourselves...as embodying only the significance we can confer on ourselves." On the contrary, with respect to the old testimony it is its secularised *upgrade*: a shift from understanding ourselves in terms of (shepherding) dominion over nature, to understanding ourselves in terms of (technological) mastery over it—with the latter as the modern inheritance of the former, the former opening the space for the latter.

We in our time need already to atone for what we have done in the age of technological progress and the mastery of nature that inherited the mantle of "man" understood as having deputised sovereign dominion over the earth, animals and plants. We removed the God-deputy badge and made ourselves sheriff-gods—and now threaten to destroy everything. Nevertheless, and in the same space of our newly decentred condition, the shape, the "face," of life with an internally pride-limiting "honest fiction" of sovereignty, a new form of earth-guardian-life, is, in Nietzsche's wake, making its way, even today, by those whose inventive work is dedicated to building a new "house" for the ones who follow after "man" and to preparing a new relation to "earth, animals and plants" in so doing (*ZD*, 8). The shape of such an earth-guardian-life "remains", Derrida suggests, "to be found out" (*BS*, 76). We will *be* most ourselves, I believe, when we *remain* inventively working on it.

## X

Those who follow after "man" belong, Nietzsche's madman says, to a "higher history." They do not, that is to say, fit into the modern timeline history of Great Progress—the transition for "man" from primitive magic through traditional religion to modern science—as its newly

anticipated ideal end. Wanting to reach the ideal end of that timeline is, in fact, the counter-concept to a life lived wanting the *Übermensch* to live: reaching the end of that modern timeline would be the end of man as having an end to come, the end of man as having a future beyond itself. Wanting nothing more, with nothing left to be desired as still to be attained or remaining to come, it is the contemptible life of “miserable ease” of what Nietzsche calls the *Letzter Mensch*, “the Last Man” (ZD, 10, trans. mod.): the man who no longer has any desire or longing or yearning for attaining anything beyond himself. Having made it to the end (with, for example, fully implemented democracy or finally actualised communism) we will have “discovered happiness”, and as far as future-making is concerned, we’re all done (ZD, 11).

Nietzsche was perhaps the first to describe this condition of happy peoples as a “return to the animals” (ZD, 4). Belonging to a higher history is not, therefore, a new higher stage within the old modern universal history of “man” and the classic developmental schema of the magic-religion-science passage of human spiritual/cultural evolution. It is precisely *beyond that*. So, let’s set the table again, and look at the old schema in terms of its sequence of “spiritual” [*Geistlich*] shifts concerning what Nietzsche calls “the meaning of the earth” (ZD, 5), and then add the Nietzschean over-addition that is not simply an addition.

### **Epochal European *Geisten***

#### **Magic**

Attitude: Veneration

Time: Recurrently Annual

Earth-animals-and-plants: Participation

Entelechy: Attunement

Goal: Harmony



Activity: Offering

Poesis: Ceremony

Earth-meaning-Geist: *himmlisch-überhimmlisch Wesen* and *ortlich-überortliche Wesen* and *menschlich-übermenschliche Wesen* and *tierlich-übertierliche Wesen* and *pflanzlich-überpflanzliche Wesen, etc.*

## **Religion**

Attitude: Devotion

Time: Fall-Redemption

Earth-animals-and-plants: Dominion

Entelechy: Faith

Goal: Eternal Peace

Activity: Contemplation

Poesis: Prayer

Earth-meaning-Geist: *Gott*

## **Science**

Attitude: Action

Time: Progress

Earth-animals-and-plants: Mastery

Entelechy: Knowledge

Goal: Truth

Activity: Construction

Poesis: Technology

Earth-meaning-Geist: *Mensch*

How do we add the Nietzschean over-addition? The spiritual shaping of lives lived in the madman's "higher history" cannot but begin from where we already are, the period and place where we are still more or less at home, "the town to which [our] heart is attached", and which Nietzsche calls "The Pied Cow" [*Die bunte Kuh*] (ZD, 23, 80). Recalling the "many-coloured" aspect that was central to Plato's description of it, this heart-attached place is perhaps best understood in terms of the old name "Democracy." Here is the spiritual "face" of democracy in our many-coloured Pied Cow places today; democracy, that is, in the times of science:

### **Democracy Now**

Attitude: Community Action

Time: Political Progress

Earth-animals-and-plants: Humanitarian Preservation and Elimination

Entelechy: Happiness

Goal: A Community of Friends (equality in liberty)

Activity: Planning

Poesis: Political Party organisation

Earth-meaning-*Geist*: *the Letzter Mensch*

"Democracy": it is a singular name for a profoundly non-singular thing: it is the place of the unpredictable production of the many-coloured productions that we are. It is, for us, both the point of departure and future for the creation of a creature that, even today (at least officially, and at least until the end), loves nothing more than to create beyond itself. "The creative, we shall encourage and reward." That's progress after all.

"Democracy": it is thus also the name for the only political culture or culture of politics that regards the possibility of its own overcoming (the downfall, perishing or ending of its at any time presently attained condition) as its best realization. It is with this good

(healthy) autoimmune feature to the fore that we can glimpse its specifically Nietzschean “face”, the “face” of life in what Nietzsche himself describes as “democracy” conceived as “something to come”.<sup>26</sup>

### **Democracy to Come**

Attitude: Bestowing

Time: Endlessly Finite

Earth-animals-and-plants: Guardianship of companions

Entelechy: Self-destroying

Goal: A Community of Friends (equality in singularity)

Activity: Creation

Poesis: Art

Earth-meaning-*Geist*: the *Übermensch*

The madman’s projected atonement celebrations and sacralising games belong to a life run through with a spirit that remains both alive to all its memories and open to its own self-overcoming self-transformation, a life marked by both piety for the past and profound trust in its own promising future. The spirit of life in such a life, life lived so that the *Übermensch* might live, is thus perhaps closer to the spirit of traditional religion than modern science: while those who follow after “man” are still lovers of knowledge, science is not their passionate obsession: the singular uniqueness of every Dasein, every life that is “my life”, and the enabling of its entelechy, and hence its best appearing, is.

Nietzsche calls life in this new condition of ongoing self-transformation, life in a “democracy” —or rather, in a “democracy to come”. Perhaps there really is no alternative for us—no alternative for us, at least, to democracy. But that also means: an altogether other

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<sup>26</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human, Part II*, translated by P.V. Cohn, New York: MacMillan, 1913, 345; hereafter abbreviated *HH*.

inheritance of democracy is always possible. Indeed, Nietzsche has given us pitch-perfect words for its new formation. The very opposite of our worn out, exhausted and still-modern herd-animal democracy, the democracy of the *Letzter Mensch*, Nietzsche anticipates a democracy to come that would be a great politico-economic set up that would, he says, “create and guarantee,” for each in the all, “as much independence as possible in their opinions, way of life and occupation” (*HH*, 344).

In this democracy of the *Übermensch*, the space is open for the arrival of “*new philosophers*” (*BGE*, 108). Not those who seek “the happiness of the herd” (*BGE*, 54) and not those who are willing to shoulder this or that intellectual responsibility either, but those capable of “the most comprehensive responsibility” (*BGE*, 67), responsibility, that is, for “the artistic refashioning of *mankind*” (*BGE*, 71). For his part resolutely demanding, above all, “a commitment to embody the virtue of *honesty*” in this creation,<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche calls on those with the spine to inherit the old testimony on the meaning of “man” to do so *without* superterrestrial hopes.

We live today in a cultural space forged by great scientific achievements that knocked “man” off his pedestal. We have, in these upheaval events, come to terms with ourselves as an animal among animals living on a planet among planets. But we are not thereby fated to a nihilism in which we encounter ourselves as “simply part of nature”. There where “some sun seems to have set and some ancient and profound trust has been turned into doubt”, there too “the sea, *our* sea, lies open again” (*GS*, 199). Right there, in the ruins of the old world, a new beginning is announced. Right there, the creation of another creature, an “*other man*”, now “has the chance of heralding itself – of promising itself” (*SM*, 74).

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<sup>27</sup> Rosen, Michael. *The Shadow of God: Kant, Hegel, and the Passage from Heaven to History*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2022, 247.