Friedrich Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche is considered one of the most influential German philosophers who was born in 1844 and he died in 1900. He was a nihilist who criticized the concept of a G-d being an all knowing, ultimate deity. Nietzsche was critical of the traditional values that dominated the European culture of his time. He attacked the reigning moral consciousness of the time and opposed institutionalized religion.

Nietzsche was born in Rocken Prussia and his father, a Lutheran Minister died when he was five years old. Nietzsche was raised by his mother, grandmother, two aunts and a sister. He studied classic philology and at the age of 24 became a professor of classical philology at the University of Basel. As an adult Nietzsche suffered from migraines and he had poor eyesight. He also reportedly had a mental breakdown in 1889 that prevented him from working to his potential. Nietzsche died at age 55 in 1900 in Weimar.

Despite a life cut short by poor health and an emotional disturbance Nietzsche produced several works including The Birth of Tragedy (1872), Thus Spake Zarathustra (1883), Beyond Good and Evil (1886), On the Geneology of Morals (1887), The Antichrist (1888) Ecce Homo (1889) and The Will to Power (1901). As we attempt to understand the influence of Nietzsche’s work, we must begin with recognizing that he rejected Christianity and its traditional teachings. His famous proclamation “G-d is dead” reflects and necessarily led to his conclusion that the values and precepts of Christian thought no longer influenced followers to lead

virtuous lives. By asserting that “G-d is dead” Nietzsche meant the death of our reliance and belief in G-d. In his book The Joyful Wisdom (1882) Nietzsche has a man with his lantern running through the marketplace, searching for G-d and finally concluding to a gathering crowd that G-d is dead. “Have you ever heard of the madman who on a bright morning lighted a lantern and ran to the market-place calling out unceasingly: “I seek God! I seek God!” As there were many people standing about who did not believe in God, he caused a great deal of amusement… The insane man jumped into their midst and transfixed them with his glances. “Where is God gone?” he called out. “I mean to tell you! We have killed him---you and I! We are all his murderers! But how have we done it? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon? What did we do when we loosened this earth from the sun? Whither does it now move? Whither do we move?… Is there still an above and below? Do we not stray, as through infinite nothingness? Does not empty space breathe upon us/ … God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How shall we console ourselves, the most murderous of all murderers? The holiest and the mightiest that the world has hitherto possessed, has bled to death under our knife—who will wipe the blood from us?…There was never a greater event—and on account of it, all who are born after us belong to a higher history than any history hitherto!” (Nietzsche, 1882, p.167)

In “Thus Spake Zarathustra” Nietzsche introduces us to the “Overman” or “Superman”:

“Can it be possible that you have not heard that G-d is dead? I teach you the Superman. Man is a thing to be surmounted. What have you done to surmount him? … Behold I teach you the Superman! The Superman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the Superman shall be the meaning of the earth” (Nietzsche, 1885, prologue)

To replace the conforming individual, Nietzsche created his Overman or Superman—an individual refusing to conform to traditional values, yet is secure and highly individualized; expressing their unique emotional and social needs in creative ways. For Nietzsche, the courageous individual willing to challenge conventional norms of behavior became the ideal, liberated human being. This individual, in creating his/her own morality independent from the prevailing influences of organized religion or society differentiated themselves from the masses. The Overman thus evolves by determining for him/herself what is worth pursuing—and in the end, experiences happiness. Nietzsche proclaimed that virtuous behaviors of showing kindness and compassion for the less fortunate only operated to weaken the Overman by interfering in the Overman’s quest for strength and liberation from ordinary, conforming and conventional existence. Nietzsche’s Overman is courageous and he transcends good and evil—renouncing conventional norms and values espoused by existing institutions. The Overman disdains the meek, weak individuals in need of compassion and mercy. For Nietzsche human beings are habitually dissatisfied and unwilling to admit that there is no meaning in life—that there is no meaning to anything one accomplishes.

For the Overman to be capable of differentiating good from evil, he/she must trust their intuition. Nietzsche believed that man created G-d out of a desperate need to impose meaning in a world devoid of meaning. The discovery that the world is just what we experience and nothing more—that human beings were placed in the world to pursue their own destiny independent of a deity imposing a morality and value system to create meaning and purpose in life is too unbearable for man. Nietzsche argues that this realization gave rise to the establishment of the institution of religion. Without G-d and Christianity, man would then understand that it was incumbent on him to determine why and how he was placed in the world—and what to do with his life.

Nietzsche was a nihilist and asserted there are no absolute truths. Truths are illusions and he insisted human beings operate with a “will to power” that expresses our need to control and structure our lives. He was very critical of organized religions such as Christianity because it prescribed morality and how to be a just, ethical and obedient human being. Nietzsche defined people who honored established morality as being members of a “slave, herd morality.” Virtues such as humility, selflessness and compassion are seen by Nietzsche as values of a passive being that is indoctrinated by a deceptive institution called religion. Nietzsche’s Superman or Overman then enters and transcends the restrictions imposed by religion and morality. He is intolerant of the weak, vulnerable being worshipping a deity and he disdains the slave to institutionalized faith.

Nietzsche’s conception of humanity as G-dless and a grand illusion is consistent with Freud’s treatment of religion. In his book “The Future of an Illusion” Freud claimed that religious beliefs derived from man’s desperate desire to gain protection from the uncertain forces in the world— that religion arose out of our anxiety surrounding violence and death. The purpose of religion was to comfort us and create meaning in a world that was uniquely meaningless. For Freud religion was: “Born from man’s need to make his helplessness of his own childhood and the childhood of the human race.” (Freud, 1927, p. 18)

For Nietzsche followers of Christianity represented a “slave morality”; were members of a herd conforming to mass Christian thought. The ordinary man, according to Nietzsche was “bungled and botched.” Nietzsche explained that individuals responsible for encouraging moral, ethical and virtuous behavior were doing so out of self-interest and self-promotion. With regard to good and evil in the world, Nietzsche declared that Christianity, with it’s emphasis on performing acts of kindness to win entrance to heaven only interfered with the Overman’s pursuit of defining for him/herself what is good and evil. The ordinary human beings refusal to admit that there exists nothing more than what he observes empirically, aroused incredible anxiety and resulted in the creation of G-d and the potential for entry to heaven by being kind, compassionate and omniscient. The Overman logically argues he cannot see heaven and thus dismisses the existence of heaven. Since Nietzsche’s Overman understands there is nothing beyond life, he lives life fully.

Nietzsche asserted that Christianity seductively persuaded human beings to pursuing a virtuous life. Since the Overman is G-dless, he/she defines for him/herself what is good and evil in an ever-changing world. In this way, the Overman evolves daily by adapting to his/her changing environment. Nietzsche asserts that his Overman is pursuing a path of self-discovery as he/she adapts, changes and overcomes him/herself. This conceptualization of man is consistent with the perspective of man attempting to achieve his fullest human potential—to evolve into everything he/she was innately meant to be realized.

In German, the Overman was termed “Ubermensch.” Nietzsche’s Overman, in his/her quest to become the driver of his/her own life creates a “master morality” free of the influences of contemporary culture; fully liberating him/herself from modern, social life. In other words, the Overman exercises his/her “will to power” by overcoming him/herself and realizing innovative, genuine and more pure ways of living. The Overman then becomes his/her own hero in the process. Among Nietzsche’s list of individuals who became the Overman are Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Shakespeare. Goethe and Julius Caesar. Nietzsche’s “will to power” refers to each human being’s desire to structure their life in ways that create predictability, control and self-satisfaction. Since human beings uniquely express themselves, all of behavior is a product of individual values and predilections. Nietzsche would assert that the unique expressions of human behavior simply represent different power modes or positions of individuals.