

## Nietzsche's Nihilistic Triad

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**Abstract:** In this essay, I provide a construction of what I consider Nietzsche's nihilistic triad of the Christian/Jewish–German/Aryan–bourgeois/modern culture, arguing that his comments of one aspect of this triad ought to be read in junction with the other elements. I begin by revisiting Nietzsche's critique of Platonism and its implications upon nihilism, which lay the foundation for the three aspects of this nihilistic culture that Nietzsche diagnoses. I finally provide a grounded definition of nihilism not simply as the devaluing of the highest values as commonly referred to, but one mindful of nihilism's impact as the spiritualization, passivation, and privatization of humanity: The spiritualization of values through Judaism furthered by Christianity's globalized effort, the passivation of spirit by the idea of cultural superiority, and the privatization of affairs due to capital's productivity and the growing socio-economic modern stance.

**Keywords:** Nietzsche, nihilism, normative values, culture

To discuss nihilism in Nietzsche's philosophy is not a novel topic. Jill Stauffer highlights the detrimental effects of nihilism in that it wills nothingness only for a person to realize one's inescapability from it when nihilism climaxes to its extreme form.<sup>1</sup> This concept of nihilism seems to perfectly fit in Raymond Geuss's characterization as either the presence of too much normativity and the complete absence of such.<sup>2</sup> However, Keith Ansell-Pearson emphasizes how Nietzsche portrays nihilism as something lived and experienced as existential and historical phenomena, but ultimately

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<sup>1</sup> See Jill Stauffer, "The Imperfect: Levinas, Nietzsche, and the Autonomous Subject," in *Nietzsche and Levinas: "After the Death of a Certain God,"* ed. by Jill Stauffer and Bettina Bergo (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2009), 44.

<sup>2</sup> See Raymond Geuss, "10 Minutes with Raymond Geuss on Nihilism," *IIIIIII: four by three magazine*, 5 (2017), <<http://www.fourbythreemagazine.com/issue/nihilism-raymond-geuss-interview>>.

something to be overcome.<sup>3</sup> Within the plethora of Nietzschean references I wish to follow Kaityln Creasy in understanding nihilism from a psychological standpoint, thus its affective quality.<sup>4</sup> Morality previously served as an antidote to life's distraught conditions, yet its irony is that it eventually entailed life-negation.<sup>5</sup> This very inability of morality to provide meaning causes a psychophysiological futility.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the metaphysical emptiness following the realization of the absence or caused by the sheer abundance of decadent normative values accords with an ethical hollowness. Nihilism according to Creasy ultimately reveals a perversion of the will—a lust for the same, a subscription to a pathological desire, and a reversal of values.<sup>7</sup> Ansell-Pearson aptly captures this when he says “if God, and all that he stands for, is dead, and if Christian values can no longer provide European civilization with its ethical and cultural foundations, as he believed, then the question ‘immediately comes to us in a terrifying way: *Has existence any meaning at all?*’ (GS V:357).”<sup>8</sup> The value of meaning, of the decision to cling to the world or to the otherworldly, creates a reassessment of life.

In underscoring the affective component of nihilism, I seek to provide an alternative definition of what nihilism is. As mentioned in the introduction, nihilism is usually almost immediately defined by Nietzsche

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<sup>3</sup> Keith Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker: The Perfect Nihilist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 203.

<sup>4</sup> See Kaityln Creasy, “On the Problem of Affective Nihilism,” in *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 49 (2018), 32.

<sup>5</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente Sommer 1886–Herbst 1887* [5]71 and 1887 [10]192), <[http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/NF-1887,5\[71\]](http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/NF-1887,5[71])>. Hereinafter, cited as *NF* followed by year, journal number, and entry. All citations of Nietzsche's unpublished fragments are taken from the digital critical edition of the complete works and letters of Nietzsche, based on the critical text by G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin/New York, de Gruyter, 1967), ed. by Paolo D'Iorio; see Friedrich Nietzsche, *Digitale Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Werke und Briefe*, <<http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/>>.

<sup>6</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), §345.

<sup>7</sup> Creasy goes to ends to present the psychophysical attributes of nihilism found in Nietzsche's texts: exhaustion; disgust; weariness; fatigue; disappointment and the great nausea with oneself; a dull, debilitating, long-drawn-out painfulness; a lethargy, heaviness, and depression; a slow sadness; a dull pain; a lingering misery; and finally better captured as a resistance to life. In this we see “an overwhelmingly negative valence—sadness, heaviness, and misery dominate—coupled with a feeling of impediment, obstruction, inhibition, or motion arrested. This is felt as exhaustion, heaviness, debilitation, and depression.” Creasy, “On the Problem of Affective Nihilism,” 36, citing Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, in *The Genealogy of Morality and Other Writings*, ed. by Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. by Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), III:13–14, 19–20, and Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols: Or, How to Philosophize with the Hammer*, in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. by Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. by Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), II:1.

<sup>8</sup> Ansell-Pearson, *Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker*, 45.

scholars as simply the period in which the highest values devalue themselves.<sup>9</sup> This though I argue fails to capture the effect of such a period on the individual confronting this moment. I would rather offer to give attention to how nihilism perpetuates a state of lukewarm-ness and weariness. Nietzsche tells us that “we are *weary* because we have lost the main stimulus” in that the “sight of man now makes us weary – what is nihilism today if it is not *that?* – We are weary of *man*.”<sup>10</sup> Putting together these two ideas of Nietzsche written roughly around the same period, I offer to define nihilism as the experience of losing the fear of, hope in, respect for, and will to be human. Altogether, nihilism is the experience of having grown tired of both being human and of humanity.

In this essay, I attempt to provide a grounded view of Nietzsche’s critique of nihilism through a construction of his nihilistic triad, which I source from different periods. I argue that Nietzsche’s criticisms of one part of this triad should be read alongside his views of the other elements. Usually, nihilism is defined in Nietzsche as simply the period in which the highest values devalue themselves. However, I seek to expand the sense in which the concept of the “highest values” (*obersten Werthe*) is to be understood, which is done in relation to Nietzsche’s criticisms of three elements: 1) Christianity and Judaism; 2) the German or Aryan race; and 3) the bourgeois or his modern culture. These three I coin collectively as Nietzsche’s nihilistic triad, arguing that his comments of one aspect of this triad ought to be read in junction with the other elements.

### Nihilism and Platonism

It is necessary to question the source of the nihilistic disdain to be human according to Nietzsche’s purview. For this, we must turn our attention to Platonism. Praises of the ancient world abound in Nietzsche’s texts, namely lauds of the Roman Empire, its civilization, Greek culture, and even the pre-Socratic mode of thinking-qua-living. In fact, his very first publication which marked his entire academic career is an exaltation of a Greek culture far different compared to how such was read in Nietzsche’s academic circles.<sup>11</sup> However, excluded from such praises is the tradition established with Socrates, documented by Plato, and refined by Aristotle. Nietzsche recognizes in this triad symptoms of decadence, noticeable with a

<sup>9</sup> See Nietzsche, *NF Herbst 1887*, 9[35].

<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche, *NF Ende 1886–Frühjahr 1887*, 7[8], D; Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, I:12.

<sup>11</sup> See Marianne Cowan, “Introduction to Friedrich Nietzsche,” in *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* by Friedrich Nietzsche, trans. by Marianne Cowan (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1962), 4.

tension in dualistic accounts of ideal-real, objective-subjective, and rationality-myth and that the ideal (world) is impossible to attain.<sup>12</sup> It ought to be clear here that this dualism between what is seen and what lies behind it is totally different from Nietzsche's treatment of the Dionysiac and Apollonian drives in his *The Birth of Tragedy*. The object of his critique is in fact reality's seeming dialectical construction between something overt and covert, obvious in his remarks against Kant and Schopenhauer.<sup>13</sup> Reality with Plato is understood less of drives and the "awareness of Being as the play of presence and absence" and more of "a conception of Being as pure or genuine presence, namely ... the *Idea*."<sup>14</sup> This Platonic standard thus became the measure to reality in terms of ascending dialectics that is later translated by Aristotle into a descending form.

Plato's caliber of defining reality based on an ascending dialectics presupposes the existence of an all-inclusive Idea or Form. This "non-hypothetical principle" is realized through an intuition, which in turn commences an ascent terminating with a beatific silence due to the contemplation of the primordial Idea, through which everything else becomes intelligible. This was seen through in Plato's dialogues featuring various intuitions: death (*Phaedo*), remembering (*Meno*, *Phaedo*), aesthetic sensitivity (*Symposium*), and the sciences (*Republic*).<sup>15</sup> The ascent dichotomizes reality into polarities of the physical and the metaphysical with a seeming antithetical relationship between the two. This desire to know, in the Greek world, though does not end as a mental exercise but affects one's entire totality, greatly seen in the characterization of Socrates's savant-like episodes of sinking into a trance of pure intellectual activity.<sup>16</sup> Such was considered a primal demonstration of this familiarity with the metaphysical, only to be interrupted by the crude physical reality. The equation therefore of knowledge or reason with virtue and happiness as opposed to the absence of these spiritual qualities comes as no surprise due to the premium given to the tie between thinking and living. However, for Nietzsche this equation of knowledge and virtue creates a crude equation of knowledge and power found in Plato, becoming the basis for the entire falsity of metaphysics'

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<sup>12</sup> See Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, II:2 and Tracy Strong, "Hammers, Idleness and Music," in *Twilight of the Idols*, xxii.

<sup>13</sup> See Christoph Cox, "Nietzsche, Dionysus, and the Ontology of Music," in *A Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. by Keith Ansell Pearson (Victoria, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 499–500.

<sup>14</sup> Stanley Rosen, *The Question of Being: A Reversal of Heidegger* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), xiv.

<sup>15</sup> See Dario Composta, *History of Ancient Philosophy* (Vatican: Urbaniana University Press, 1988), 164–165.

<sup>16</sup> See Peter Sloterdijk, *The Art of Philosophy: Wisdom as Practice*, trans. by Karen Margolis (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), §1.

inquiry into a “beyond,” a metaphysical faith in favor of an agonal encounter.<sup>17</sup>

The connection between Platonism and Christianity is not farfetched, and Nietzsche's contention with Christianity is the inversion of epistemic standards and the feigning of the soul's flight to objectivity which resound his criticism of Platonism. In fact, what is found in Christianity, following Nietzsche's arguments is a total disruption if not perfection of the ascending dialectics in that God stands as both the start and end of the human person's life. Nietzsche's purview of role of the concept of God is clear: God serves as the idealization of the human person, the perfection of humanity, happiness, and morality, yet these are merely invented goals for Nietzsche, which point to the more obvious reason of his relentless critique of Christianity.<sup>18</sup> Since God is this perfection, the human person is reduced to a state of guilt in offending the magnanimous God. Previously, Nietzsche explains, guilt was simply mete out with external punishment through the infliction of pain for a failed payment, yet Christianity internalized it as a self-corrective principle that created a memory for “improvement” and the possibility to make compromises.<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche further tells us, “Guilt before *God*: this thought becomes an instrument of torture to him. He apprehends in ‘God’ the ultimate antithesis of his own ineluctable animal instincts.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, in the concept of and belief in God we witness a certain twofold reversal of values: ontological (God–man) and epistemic (Ideal–real).<sup>21</sup> The merging of the two

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<sup>17</sup> See Geoff Waite, *Nietzsche's Corpsle: Aesthetics, Politics, Prophecy, or, The Spectacular Technoculture of Everyday Life* (London: Duke University Press, 1996), 279 and Louis Althusser, “The Transformation of Philosophy (1976),” in *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists & Other Essays*, ed. by Gregory Elliott, trans. by Ben Brewster, James H. Kavanagh, Thomas E. Lewis, Grahame Lock, and Warren Montag (London and New York: Verso, 1990), 251. See also Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §344.

<sup>18</sup> See Nietzsche, “The Four Great Errors,” in *Twilight of the Idols*, 8. See also Paolo A. Bolaños, *On Affirmation and Becoming: A Deleuzian Introduction to Nietzsche's Ethics and Ontology* (Newcastle upon Tyre: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 37. The human person must act in obedience to God for God's offering of himself is done as good; God is good and everything he does is done *sub specie boni*. See Nietzsche, November 1887 – März 1888, 11[57].

<sup>19</sup> See Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, II:13.

<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, II:22.

<sup>21</sup> Sufficient to say now is that Christianity's moral valuation is gleamed dependent on affinities to God – hence the valuation *good* and *evil*. The opposite of good is evil and God is taken as man's opposite, *all that is not man*. The question comes as which takes the role of good and of evil? If God is absolute, omniscient, and omnipotent then he *must* be good, and due to the polar opposites, man necessarily becomes evil in face of this good God. To appease ourselves from this contemptable conclusion, the Christian appraisal of the divine act of God saving man becomes praiseworthy: “God himself sacrifices himself for the guilt of mankind, God himself makes payment to himself, God as the only being who can redeem man from what has become unredeemable for man himself – the creditor sacrifices himself for his debtor, out of love (can one credit that?), out of love for his debtor!” (Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, II:21). The problem

for Nietzsche is a further repression of the individual's capacity done in praise of God in that God stands as man's ultimate comfort yet negator, refuge and constraint. In turn, God's greatness is measured upon man's imperfection, and so the same force that thrusts man to feign God thrusts him now to be *contra* God, to kill him; "What? Is humanity just God's mistake? Or God just a mistake of humanity?"<sup>22</sup>

Nietzsche therefore rejects Platonism and Christianity, and along with these, the entire history of western metaphysics. For him, Platonism represents the metaphysical element of reality that ought to be killed, and Christianity stood as Platonism for the people;<sup>23</sup> similar to how Marx much later described it as opium for the populace. The reason that man killed God, following Nietzsche's account, is the contempt for the antagonistic otherworldly, metaphysical perfection. In being Platonism for the people, Christianity spiritualized passions as God stood as man's antithesis.<sup>24</sup> Christianity *idealized* what it meant to be man, and therefore asceticism is a faithful's way to get a glimpse of the truth beyond this world. With the ontological reversal of values of God becoming man comes an epistemic reversal that infringes on ethical concerns—a denial of the body and a hope for the soul. Platonism, the impasse in thinking and idealization, is given a moral face through Christianity. For Nietzsche, God and the Platonic ideals stand not as a source of freedom but as a "transcendent prohibition" that limits freedom. Rather than enabling potentials, these have become an opiate: God has become an inhibitor; truth has become a deception.

With the remarks on the tie between nihilism and Platonism, I may appropriately continue turn to what I consider Nietzsche's nihilistic triad of the Christian/Jewish–German/Aryan–bourgeois/modern culture. My formulation of this nihilistic triad comes from Nietzsche's own criticism of practices during his time:

I also do not like these latest speculators in idealism, the anti-Semites, who today roll their eyes in a Christian-Aryan-bourgeois manner and exhaust one's patience by trying to rouse up all the horned-beast elements in the

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with the good–evil valuation is the lack of any physiological basis which is therefore relegated to a theo-ontological grounding. Nietzsche describes this divine act in a caricatural manner—in that the creditor (God) takes the place of the debtor (man) to pay of a debt (in atonement of sin). The creditor takes the place of the debtor for a debt owed to himself, out of love!

<sup>22</sup> Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, "Epigrams and Arrows," §7.

<sup>23</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, ed. by Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman, trans. by Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), Preface.

<sup>24</sup> See Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, V:1.

people by a brazen abuse of the cheapest of all agitator's tricks, moral attitudinizing (that *no* kind of swindle fails to succeed in Germany today is connected with the undeniable and palpable stagnation of the German spirit; and the cause of that I seek in a too exclusive diet of newspapers, politics, beer, and Wagnerian music, together with the presuppositions of such a diet: first; national constriction and vanity, the strong but narrow principle "*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles,*" and then the *paralysis agitan* of "modern ideas").<sup>25</sup>

The way Nietzsche explicitly lumps together those clinging to idealism, anti-Semites, and the triad of the Christian–Aryan–bourgeois manner discloses certain affinities which I wish to draw out in this essay.

### Christian/Jewish Element

I now turn to the three elements, or rather the connection of the three elements in Nietzsche's critique of nihilism. For this first element, it is unsurprising that people associate Nietzsche with anti-Christianity and antisemitism considering that one of his books is entitled *The Antichrist* and numerous passages of his other works contain rather dangerous notions such as that the Jews are a people born for slavery, they began the revolt in morality;<sup>26</sup> or that the Jews are a potential necessary scapegoat for the improvement not simply of European civilization but also of one's race.<sup>27</sup> It is easy to get lost amidst the numerous passages contained in Nietzsche's works, yet what ultimately earns his ire is how these two religions promote the ascetic ideals. The association of the Christian and the Jewish element is not just due to the obvious religious affinities, but due to what which Nietzsche considers as life-negating psychocultural or psychosocial disposition in these religions.<sup>28</sup>

It is remarkable, as Nietzsche notes, how it is the Jews who begin utilizing the emotions in service of life-negating values, transforming anger,

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<sup>25</sup> See Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, III:26.

<sup>26</sup> See Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §195 and *The Genealogy of Morality*, I:7.

<sup>27</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), §475.

<sup>28</sup> See Yirmiyahu Yovel, "Nietzsche contra Wagner on the Jews," in *Nietzsche, Godfather of Fascism? On the Uses and Abuses of a Philosophy*, ed. by Jacob Golomb and Robert S. Wistrich (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 132; and Weaver Santaniello, *Nietzsche, God, and the Jews: His Critique of Judeo-Christianity in Relation to the Nazi Myth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 141–144.



or its usual cause of something bad, into something sacred as done by the Divine or their angry prophets.<sup>29</sup> These angry prophets, whom Nietzsche mentions, are those who conveyed the message of the angry YHWH and preached against the waywardness of the Jews in the Old Testament, yet what Nietzsche seems to maintain in this association is how the anger comes from a self-righteousness, a recognition that one is above another. This in turn fuels one's apparent indignation at the perceived wrong done by the other. This idea from *Daybreak* we may associate with his remark in *On the Genealogy of Morality* in which Nietzsche recounts that *ressentiment* itself turned creative and birthed life-negating values.<sup>30</sup> The First Essay is devoted to explaining the inverse relationship between the valuations of the master's description of good–bad as opposed to the slave's evaluation of good–evil. Nietzsche traces the origins of morality to a pre-moral living condition with illustrative categories of good and bad, yet, from these descriptive qualities of existence, the slaves narrowed them to a moral valuation: goodness referred to their base state and evilness was to incite blame and guilt on the masters.<sup>31</sup>

Christianity's role in this narrative is quite significant since, according to Nietzsche, the idea of punishment in Hell is Christianity's own doing. With the reversal of values in Nietzsche's fictitious master-slave dialectic (which he ties with Judaism), a social and political manifestation of such an occurrence was demonstrated by Christianity's existence within the Roman Empire: what was once persecuted eventually dictated the reigning morality.<sup>32</sup> Christianity's takeover of political power or space seemed to be thrust by its capture of time, not of the present but of eternity. In "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," Nietzsche writes how art and religion are eternalizing forces in that they construe a seemingly nihilistic relationship between an individual and history.<sup>33</sup> Religion makes an individual forget becoming in that time is historicized, presented as something which life is in service of.<sup>34</sup> While Judaism signified the realization of valuation's spatial quality (through the pathos of distance), Christianity represented time's relegation to either the past's constant remembrance or *anamnesis* and the future's impending judgement. Christianity further

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<sup>29</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, ed. by Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), §38.

<sup>30</sup> See Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, I:10.

<sup>31</sup> See Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Ethics and Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 33.

<sup>32</sup> See Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, §72.

<sup>33</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. by Daniel Breazealy, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), II:10.

<sup>34</sup> See Gianni Vattimo, "Nihilism and the Problem of Temporality," in *Dialogue with Nietzsche*, trans. by William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 11.



subverted time by equating suffering and eternity as a consequence of today's valuation of action as either good and evil. Thus, while the spirit of revenge is from Judaism, Christianity globalized this impetus of rage tied with *ressentiment*.<sup>35</sup>

With the moral premise of doing good and avoiding evil, a seeming ascending dialectics emerges here in that the somatic is denied in favor of a perceived or yet to be intuited spiritual reality. The ascent is fueled by asceticism, whose ideals stem from "a desire to *deaden pain by means of affects*."<sup>36</sup> Ironically, affects are employed by the ascetic ideals in order to temper the passions. In honing this somatic quality of emotions or passions, the ascetic ideal turns the body against the body and "enshrines the life of self-denial as the highest expression of human flourishing."<sup>37</sup> Maudemarie Clark provides the transition of this hypothetical belief into normative responsibilities by drawing attention to the slave's mantra of "I do not want to" or "I will not" as opposed to "I ought not" in part three of the second essay of the *Genealogy of Morals*.<sup>38</sup> This amply shows how by taking the ascetic beliefs as not an external regulatory idea but a personal desire, the reactionary morality has become imbedded in the social consciousness, and the ascent has become society's normative condition.

In confronting life's difficulties, ascetic beliefs conjure certain practices to make sense of reality. Such a type of belief may be considered as beliefs-as-vouchsafe that provide the epistemic and ethical normative conditions for making sense of reality. It is a belief in something since others believe in it. For Nietzsche, the ascetic ideals are nothing but gaps in existence, a type of restriction promoted in order not to explain, justify, and understand suffering.<sup>39</sup> The formation of these ideals stems from a spirit of revenge, rooted in what Nietzsche hypothesizes as the slaves' revolt in morality.<sup>40</sup> Revenge is in fact mirrored by the anger felt by the "holy" prophets whom Nietzsche likewise criticized due to their incessant otherworldly justification of physical reality. Thus, these beliefs are testament to a basic fact of the human will, of its desire to have a goal and fear of its absence, rather willing nothingness than not to will at all.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> See Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, V:195.

<sup>36</sup> Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, III:15.

<sup>37</sup> Daniel Conway, *Nietzsche and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1997), 101.

<sup>38</sup> Clark, *Nietzsche on Ethics and Politics*, 35.

<sup>39</sup> See Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, III:28.

<sup>40</sup> See Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, I:7. See also Vattimo, "Nihilism and the Problem of Temporality," 15.

<sup>41</sup> See Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, III:1.

Nietzsche ultimately warns us of a time that “*the necessary is spoiled to us.*”<sup>42</sup> Blindly following mere obligations and prohibitions creates rigid living conditions in which the will wills nothing but mere obedience, wherein the belief is empty yet reified—metaphysical emptiness. It is concerning this point that Nietzsche declares the death of God in order to exasperate those living with such a decadent culture. This ends my discussion of the first element of the nihilistic triad. What I tried to underscore here was the ties between Judaism and Christianity and how the ascetic principle was truly the object of Nietzsche’s critique.

### German/Aryan Element

I now turn to the second element of the triad, the entire German or Aryan culture. The Aryan and German races are closely linked in Germany’s history. The story of a pure, strong, master race that dominated Europe or at least Germany that Nietzsche links to the Goths was an accepted historical narrative during his time.<sup>43</sup> Nietzsche alludes to a history—to be precise, a philologically reconstructed history—that places the origin of this type of people much north, later migrating toward the European plains, where they eventually were known as the Teutonic tribes, from which we get the word *Deutsch*.<sup>44</sup> We can playfully assimilate the biological blond beast befitting of

<sup>42</sup> Nietzsche, *NF* Ende 1886–Frühjahr 1887, 7[8], D. Translation is mine.

<sup>43</sup> See Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, I:5. In particular, it was commonly accepted then that the Aryans were a *Urvolk* from India that invaded Europe. This led to philologists establishing the Indo-European link in languages. Drochon gives an excellent commentary on this. See Hugo Drochon, *Nietzsche’s Great Politics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016), 83–84.

<sup>44</sup> There is no clear root to this word, yet there are several ways at tracing the development. The PIE root is *teuta* meaning “tribe” and the Old English *‘peod* “people, race, nation” and *\*peodisc* “belonging to the people.” *\*peudō* eventually gave shape to the Proto-Germanic *\*theudō* meaning “popular or national” hence is the same root for *theodiscus* or *teuton* which means people or nation. From *teutonic*, a consonant shift from t to d made it into *deutsch*. (See Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. “teuton,” <<https://www.etymonline.com/word/teuton>>, s.v. “Deutsch,” <<https://www.etymonline.com/word/deutsch>>, and s.v. “dutch,” <<https://www.etymonline.com/word/dutch>>.) Conversely, we observe the Latin *Germania* with Caesar’s writing and Tacitus affirms a long narrative. See Julius Caesar, *De Bello Gallico*, trans. by W. A. Macdevitt, <<http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/10657/pg10657-images.html>> and Publius Tacitus, *On Germany*, trans. by Thomas Gordon, <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2995/2995-h/2995-h.htm>>. *Germanus* was a person who lived beyond the natural borders of Danube and Rhine of the Roman Empire. The Romans feared these formidable barbarians. The crossing of the Rhine of the barbarian tribes marked a catastrophic turn for the Roman Empire. The Romans had a great fear of the Goths, the Germans. In particular, the Gallia Celtica experienced constant raids from the Germanic tribes that eventually gained control of the region by the 5<sup>th</sup> century. My other adjectives of these tribes came from the alleged Celtic origin, yet further research still needs to delve into possible affinities

mythical status to these people: the noisy, rowdy, ill-mannered yet strong and fierce tribes; the shouting neighbors across the Rhine, this people mindful of their strength and power were the blond Germanic, Teutonic beasts.<sup>45</sup> Yet, Nietzsche's fascination of these powerful individuals, as I will argue, is not the same exuberance shared by Aryanists during his time or much later by the NSDAP (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*) or National Socialist German Workers' Party (more commonly known as the Nazi Party).<sup>46</sup>

Nietzsche's close relations with the Wagner household not only fueled the perception of his support of antisemitic principles but also an Aryanist. Besides this, his own sister, Elisabeth married a notorious antisemite named Bernhard Förster who founded a colony set up with the ideals of a pure Aryan race in Paraguay named Nueva Germania. Several times did Elisabeth invite Nietzsche to invest in the colonial venture, but he shrugged the offer away — not even any sign of support and even caricaturing his sister as “the llama [who] has jumped away from me and gone among the anti-Semites.”<sup>47</sup> War-torn Paraguay was not similar to modern Europe; only 40 families signed for the venture without knowing “exactly where Nueva Germania was [for the] Försters had brought their countrymen out to populate a concept, a fiction, a nowhere.”<sup>48</sup> Ben Macintyre paints a good picture of the Försters' personae and the aftermath of their ideological stint. In order to expedite things, faced with economic and health problems in handling the colony, Bernhard committed suicide in 1893 that ingrained in Nueva Germania some traces both of German culture and Aryan ideology. Elisabeth later sought to publicize her husband's death as a heroic gesture and with the turn of events Hitler sent a package of German soil to be placed on Förster's grave as a sign of commitment to racial purity.<sup>49</sup>

What lies at the heart of this perceived racial superiority is obviously questionable based on today's standards, however, power is still the main attribute. What Aryanism offered was an alternative to long-standing aristocratic claims of European superiority based on Biblical and religious traditions. Affirmed by this type of racial claim is the separation of science

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with the Celtic *Germani*. A useful thing to consider is that one of the official titles of the king of Sweden is “King of the Goths” used since the 1100s.

<sup>45</sup> See Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, I:11.

<sup>46</sup> Nietzsche was even clear when he says: “although between the old Germanic tribes and us Germans there exists hardly a conceptual relationship, let alone one of blood.” Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, I:11.

<sup>47</sup> Nietzsche as quoted in Sue Prideaux, *I am Dynamite: A Life of Friedrich Nietzsche* (London: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), §18.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> See Ben Macintyre, *Forgotten Fatherland: The Search for Elizabeth Nietzsche* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992).

from ecclesiastical tutelage matures.<sup>50</sup> In fact, what is affirmed is not simply the possibility or plausibility of constructing society beyond the Christian purview but a further marginalization of Judaism, which still plays a role in Christianity's development. What is alarming about this is the prominence that Social Darwinism had during Nietzsche's time. While the Enlightenment is credited to be the source the correct use of reason, it is likewise the source of racist views in history.<sup>51</sup> Thus, this type of societal evolutionary theory coupled with a fictitious origin of Aryanism fueled discussion in academic circles.

In a fragment toward the end of his life, Nietzsche lists seven arguments against Darwinism, which we may take also against Social Darwinism. For purposes of this essay, I focus solely on the last point: "—if only what was *continuously* proved to be useful has been preserved, then first and foremost the damaging, destructive, dissolving abilities, the senseless, accidental,—."<sup>52</sup> Nietzsche discusses the qualities of a species preserved or sustained, and rather than that which is powerful, he sides with the contrary. What is in fact useful (*nützlich*) for him is not what is predictable, but the senseless (*Sinnlose*) and the accidental (*Zufällige*).

Nietzsche admits though that at one point there was something fascinating with the Germans of the past or rather the Germany that Goethe, Schiller, von Humboldt, Hegel, and others lived in. Yet, while other cultures were drawn to the "Milky-Way shimmer [...]" these same Germans began to exert themselves to get rid of this Milky-Way shimmer; they knew too well that they had not been in the heavens – but in a cloud!"<sup>53</sup> The romantic drive then at the same time brought about Germany's intellectual death; contrary to the Enlightenment's aims, Nietzsche sees in Germans the tendency for false beliefs and dependence on superstition, a will to truth and belief; "their vices are, as they have always been, drunkenness and a tendency to suicide ... their danger lies in everything that suppresses the reasoning faculties and unchains the emotions."<sup>54</sup> In this same quotation, Nietzsche exhibits that a

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<sup>50</sup> See Jonathan Judaken, "Léon Poliakov, Philosophy, and the Secularization of Anti-Judaism in the Development of Racism," in *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 35 (2014), 188.

<sup>51</sup> See Heinz-Georg Marten, "Racism, Social Darwinism, Anti-Semitism and Aryan Supremacy," in *Shaping the Superman: Fascist Body as Political Icon Aryan Fascism*, ed. by J.A. Mangan (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 27.

<sup>52</sup> Nietzsche, *NF* Ende 1886–Frühjahr 1887, 7[25]. Translation is mine, but the emphasis is maintained.

<sup>53</sup> Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, §190.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, §207. We can trace Nietzsche to German Philosophy through his academic take of Schopenhauer's ethics which was in reaction to Kant's. Nietzsche's radical pronouncement especially in his later works indeed, as I read it, follow the tradition of German Philosophy, yet he wished his works to be a reevaluation of such esteem. The romantic tradition that Nietzsche was closest to (in historical proximity), is for him that which signaled the apparent end. See

fault of the Germans is their inability to improvise, their deep reliance on obedience, of following order, and observing rules. Nietzsche criticizes the Germans' lack of accidental qualities, the smallness of the German spirit, exposing that this seeming type of rigidity is detrimental for society's betterment.

Perhaps a fitting criticism of the smallness of this spirit is found in Zarathustra's discourse on the virtue that makes small, in which he is taken aback by the small people and their preaching of their own small virtue.<sup>55</sup> Of course the adjective small (*kleine*) here is not to be taken literally but ought to be read in relation to downsizing, decreasing, or shrinking (*verkleinern*). This for Zarathustra refers to their disposition toward life. Their own virtue makes them smaller because what they ultimately desire is not virtue but falsity, contentment, mediocrity, and cowardice. Bridging this to the German spirit, we read in *Beyond Good and Evil* that "Everything ponderous, lumbering, solemnly awkward, every long-winded and boring type of style is developed by the Germans in over-abundant diversity."<sup>56</sup> Nietzsche's characterization here refers to the narrowness of the German spirit, developing in abundance yet seemingly the accidental which is in fact useful. He thus concludes that they are not spirited enough, needing still the tension of the bow and the goal of being one.<sup>57</sup> This spirit is boring, lacking in lust, and, quoting Michelet, a spirit that is fatalist, ironic, and metaphistophelic.<sup>58</sup>

It is for this reason that Nietzsche distances himself from such small virtue, from this small spirit, and identifies himself more with Europe than Germany. In a letter to his mother, he writes that it is good for the antisemites to go with Förster to Paraguay than to stay in Europe "for even if I shall be a bad German—I am in any event a very good European."<sup>59</sup> He resented the German culture that he viewed as decadent, drunk, and petty. And so, rather than the greatness that the NSDAP recognized in the German race or the positive qualities which Wagner equates with Aryanism, Nietzsche finds in this type of spirit a smallness denotes nihilism. It is a smallness that ultimately truncates one's understanding of being human and dampens one's desire to be one.

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Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §11. Brian Leiter sheds more light on this in his introduction to Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, xiii–xxvi.

<sup>55</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Virtue that Makes Small," in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, ed. by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin, trans. by Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>56</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §28.

<sup>57</sup> See *Ibid.*, Preface.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, §209.

<sup>59</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, letter to his mother, quoted in Yovel, "Nietzsche contra Wagner," 133.

## Bourgeois/Modern Element

Having gone through the two elements of the nihilistic triad, this section focuses on the final division composed of the merge between the bourgeois and modern culture. The tie between the modern period and the rise of the bourgeois class may be summarized by the effects of modernity upon society's arrangement for modernity's embrace of secularization and privatization recontextualized politics while introduction of a political economy disrupted the hierarchical nature of social organization, through the creation of a *middle* class. Keith Ansell-Pearson thus rightly notes how Nietzsche's political thought is fundamentally characterized by the desire to transcend the atomistic and individualistic nature of modern society.<sup>60</sup>

Ian Cooper provides the historical basis for this when common in Europe was the emergence of "a bourgeoisie, a class of entrepreneurs whose existence relied not on the state, but rather on private profit, and who became the site of economic (as opposed to political) power."<sup>61</sup> The goals therefore of this class or rather of this way of living was strictly economic and not cultural. Modernity's reception of the reactive morality served not as a counterbalance to the decadence but its prolongation and putting to use the old tablets as morality.<sup>62</sup> Their morality "is herd instinct in the individual."<sup>63</sup> Modernity, aided by the economic promise of the bourgeois class, limited the goals of society and dominated by philistinism that Nietzsche found in "a dull and safe 'bourgeois' existence."<sup>64</sup> Humanity has become homeless because of nihilism, conserving nothing, not seeking a return to the past nor working for real progress.<sup>65</sup> The liberal, *bourgeois* culture has conflated humanity's desire to merely economic success that offers comfort and security. Modernity made use of the ascetic ideals to make citizens follow the wave of the Enlightenment, forging capitalist ethics.

In aphorism 329 of *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche provides his critique of the United States' gold rush and points out a development in modernity's understanding of virtue as the state of "doing something in less time than someone else."<sup>66</sup> Though this description might seem harmless, it has enormous effects upon society's ordering. Virtue in this modern period is

<sup>60</sup> Ansell-Pearson, *Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker*, 87.

<sup>61</sup> See Ian Cooper, "Nietzsche, Money, and *Bildung*," in *Nietzsche, Power and Politics: Rethinking Nietzsche's Legacy for Political Thought*, ed. by Herman W. Siemens and Vasti Roodt (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, GmbH, 2008), 608.

<sup>62</sup> See James Luchte, Preface to Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Peacock and the Buffalo: The Poetry of Nietzsche*, trans. by James Luchte (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), 27.

<sup>63</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §116.

<sup>64</sup> Ansell-Pearson, *Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker*, 5.

<sup>65</sup> See Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §377.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, §329.



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reduced to an individual's relationship with time, or rather the possibility of its consumption in favor of some purported end rather than the more immediate and natural recognition of virtue in the enactment of good acts following the master's description. What is praised in this modern culture is an individual's efficiency and the opportunity this provides for a rather democratic organization of society. This seems to be in direct opposition to Nietzsche's blatantly hierarchical consideration of society. In fact, he directly blames the economic concerns of his day for the disruption of beliefs and the dissolution of classes.<sup>67</sup>

Turning to another passage, Nietzsche continues this critique of work by highlighting its crude form not simply in industriousness but one that is compelled simply by gain: "it is aware of itself and of its objectives, and desires with possessions power, with power the greatest possible freedom and individual nobility."<sup>68</sup> Nietzsche mentions two types of work. We're asked the first type is because of necessity, the second time seems to stem from a pathological desire to make oneself too secure. Connecting this to the earlier aphorism, what is noticeable in both of these passages is the haste that characterizes this crude form of work, that type which just acts based on the desire for more. This is a mood that lacks depth, spirituality, and ultimately control of oneself.<sup>69</sup> This loss of spirit [*Geistlosigkeit*] is the dampening of the affects which ultimately points to the nihilistic element central to this third part of the triad.

The question that arises in relation to work is whether labor is indeed life-affirming or life-negating. The gauge of whether an activity may be considered either is recognized through the test that Nietzsche provides us with in the eternal return:<sup>70</sup> What if life is to return, would one find oneself still melancholic in the workplace? Incentives or bonuses are a crucial consideration when selecting one's profession or actual work today. More premium is given to wage or benefits rather than the degree in which that particular labor contributes to the proper expenditure of oneself. Although it would be hypocritical for me to say that incentives should not play a big role, the danger that Nietzsche points to is the reality that these considerations eventually take center stage in our selection of professions. Taking it a step further, what Nietzsche is critical of is this highly reactive culture that is a product of this variance of work as the emptiness of *bourgeois* values leaves the individual to decide for himself:

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<sup>67</sup> See Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, III:4.

<sup>68</sup> See Nietzsche, *Human, All too Human*, §478.

<sup>69</sup> See Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §329.

<sup>70</sup> See *Ibid.*, §341.

There is a mistrust of these modern ideas here, there is a disbelief in everything built yesterday and today; perhaps it is mixed with a bit of antipathy and contempt that can no longer stand the bric-a-brac of concepts from the most heterogeneous sources, which is how so-called positivism puts itself on the market these days.<sup>71</sup>

The human person is not anymore one that acts and expends, not a master of one's own capacities, but today this person has become a slave to what the dictates of the economy are. In a certain sense, we may say that this dependency on external factors is an experience of nihilism's affective form, especially when one finds oneself compelled to do a type of work that is not fulfilling—yet it pays well. Modernity hegemonized ideals, merging boundaries, lowering standards, and reducing tensions, and in this condition, Nietzsche tells us, “we fail to recognize our best power and underestimate ourselves ... We are *neither as proud nor as happy* as we might be.”<sup>72</sup> The danger of this experience is the thought that such nihilistic experience is the end in itself; instead of lusting after life, an individual is reduced to the monotonousness of everyday existence, captured entirely by Sloterdijk's cynical subjects.<sup>73</sup>

What is nihilistic in this third element the overly quantified component in society, be it wealth, intelligence, or the sheer number of one's military capacity.<sup>74</sup> This criticism is equally raised to individuals who act not with culture or politics in mind but profitability and success. This becomes the tyranny of the *bourgeoisie* in that the “bourgeois logic of cultural consumption has become allied to nationalist will to power, the shallow satisfactions of the *Kulturstaat*.”<sup>75</sup> The pettiness of the German spirit, which was the critique of the previous section, is extended here to the inherent pettiness of bourgeois individualism and the atomized subject of modernity. Modernity's industriousness is an object of Nietzsche's critique in that it serves as another way for individual to vainly establish security for themselves, without leaving open the possibility of living dangerously.<sup>76</sup> It is a disposition that has taken on action to be more important than life.

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<sup>71</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §10.

<sup>72</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §301.

<sup>73</sup> See Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. by Michael Eldred (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

<sup>74</sup> See Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, II:6.

<sup>75</sup> Cooper, “Nietzsche, Money, and *Bildung*,” 613.

<sup>76</sup> See Michael Kilivris, “Beyond Goods and Services: Toward a Nietzschean Critique of Capitalism,” in *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy*, 5 (December 2011), 31.

Nietzsche criticizes this lack of play that does not allow the Dionysian spirit to be manifest in an overly worked world.

### Do We Need Nihilism?

What I have done in this essay was to present the greater context of Nietzsche's critique. He did not simply promote antisemitic feelings, unpatriotic sentiments, or socialist doctrines but criticized these in order to make us realize the greater nihilistic sphere or the greater ontological pathology. What I ultimately argue is that the Christian/Jewish–Aryan/German–bourgeois/modern context paved the ascetic ideals' **spiritualization**, **passivation**, and **privatization** of humanity: The spiritualization of values through Judaism furthered by Christianity's globalized effort, the passivation of spirit by the idea of cultural superiority, and the privatization of affairs due to capital's productivity and the growing socio-economic modern stance. This nihilistic context, which I have surmised in three ways, heralds a great crisis in authority as religious, cultural, and social affairs are plagued with decadence.<sup>77</sup> However, it should remind us of our immense possibilities. Rather than a conclusion, I end this essay with a rejoinder to Nietzsche's philosophy as a whole.

Mindful of his style of writing, the hyperbolic characterizations utilized to express his critique requires one to be critical of any initial impressions that are sustained; although Nietzsche stresses the nihilistic elements in the three strands discussed throughout this essay, Platonic idealism is also presented to a more matured reader:

All philosophical idealism to date was something like a disease, unless it was, as it was in Plato's case, the caution of an over-rich and dangerous health, the fear of over-powerful senses, the prudence of a prudent Socratic.—**Perhaps we moderns are merely not healthy enough to be in need of Plato's idealism?** And we are not afraid of the senses because—.<sup>78</sup>

The physician that Nietzsche presents himself to be diagnoses us anew. He underscores our weakness to fully be free of the shackles of our reactive morality. The emphasis I add to the quoted passage highlights his changed presentation of Platonism—and perhaps even of nihilism. Nietzsche criticizes nihilism's ascetic content yet does not totally denounce it. He maintains his

<sup>77</sup> See Ansell-Pearson, *Introduction to Nietzsche as Political Thinker*, 102.

<sup>78</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §372. Emphasis is mine.

reverence for the ascetic ideas in so far as they are true;<sup>79</sup> as long as they are life-affirming, they earn his reverence or respect while their life-negating qualities garner his staunch criticism. The nihilism that we find ourselves in through the deaths of God, culture, and modernity, allow us to understand the fundamental roles we allowed these “idols” to play in our lives. It is only through their deaths that a second innocence can arrive.<sup>80</sup> Nietzsche tells us ““Either abolish your reverences or—*yourselves!*” The latter would be nihilism; but would not the former also be—nihilism?—This is *our* question mark.”<sup>81</sup> He provides us with various facets of his own time (the three elements I presented in this essay) in order to exasperate us of nihilism with the ultimate aim of showing how we must overcome our culture, our very selves. Confronting humanity’s great question mark means to reckon our powerlessness in merely embracing the ideological confinements that the latter coerces on each person. This remains the challenge for the philosophers of the future who live with dangerous perhapses, those who are still to come.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> See Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morality*, III:26.

<sup>80</sup> See Bolaños, *On Affirmation and Becoming*, 37.

<sup>81</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §346.

<sup>82</sup> Nietzsche differentiates between “new” or “real” philosophers vis-à-vis “normal” philosophers, and Rolf-Peter Horstmann gives a superb overview of the former as those, in short, interested in what Nietzsche calls “dangerous perhapses” (I:2). See Rolf-Peter Horstmann, “Introduction,” in *Beyond Good and Evil*, xix.

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