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Nietzsche and the murder of God

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Abstract: Nietzsche's tortured relationship to the Christian God has received scant attention from commentators. In this paper I seek to map out the central lines a proper understanding of Nietzsche in this regard might take. I argue that fundamental in such an understanding is Nietzsche's profoundly *corporeal* moral vocabulary, and I trace connections between this vocabulary and Nietzsche's concern with cleanliness, his asceticism, and the notion of a sense of common humanity with others.

His blasphemy is the uncanny expression of a perverse, despairing faith.[1]

Introduction: Nietzsche's murder of God and bloody hands

At section 109 of *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche writes:

> How one would like to exchange the false claims of the priests that there is a God who requires that we do good, is the guardian and witness of every action, every moment, every thought, who loves us and in every misfortune wants what is best for us – how one would like to exchange these for truths that would be as salutary, pacifying and beneficial as those errors! Yet there are no such truths … . The tragedy, however, is this: that one cannot *believe* these dogmas of religion and metaphysics if one has in one's heart and head the strict method of truth, while on the other hand one has, through the development of humanity, grown so tender, sensitive and afflicted one has need of means of cure and comfort of the highest form; from which there thus arises the danger that man may bleed to death from knowledge of the truth.[2]

This passage is extraordinarily defensive in tone, seeking to head off its own recognition of loss, abandonment, and tragedy with a bland reference to what 'one' cannot believe and the even blander reference to 'the development of humanity', as if the authorial voice were some disembodied consciousness surveying a spectacle to which it had no essential relation or which did not touch it personally. For sure, such a tone is consonant with Nietzsche's so-called

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positivism at this stage in his work, his imperfectly achieved attempt to adopt the cool, detached, urbane style of the French *moralistes*. But the achievement is, indeed, imperfect, since Nietzsche's strictly aphoristic work is nowhere near as good as that of La Rochefoucauld, Chamfort, and others, and, further, Nietzsche cannot wholly comfortably wear the urbanity he craved: again and again in the works of the period in question, a certain agony makes itself heard in his writing beneath the longed-for objectivity and lightness of touch.[3] So an appeal to Nietzsche's positivism does not do enough to answer to our interest in the defensive tone of the passage with which we have begun.

The defensiveness of the passage feeds off something that Nietzsche would like to believe but cannot: the 'one' who speaks at this point is Nietzsche himself.[4] Amongst the many reasons I have for this judgement is the fact that Nietzsche goes on, in the passage we are considering, to say:

> What is certain … is that any degree of frivolity or melancholy is better than a romantic return and desertion, an approach to Christianity in any form; for, given the current state of knowledge, one can no longer have anything to do with it without incurably dirtying one's intellectual conscience and abandoning it before oneself and others. This pain may be awful enough: but without pain one cannot become a leader and educator of mankind; and woe to him who wishes to attempt it but no longer possesses this clean conscience!

Nietzsche as teacher,[5] Nietzsche as one who keeps himself clean, intellectually, spiritually, physically: these are motifs that articulate Nietzsche's longings throughout his life. They reverberate back through the section of *Human, All Too Human* we are considering to indicate that the one who might bleed to death from what he knows is Nietzsche himself.

Something important here is blood – Nietzsche speaks, as we have seen, of bleeding to death – and the possibility of cleansing oneself of it. The madman who, in the famous section from *The Gay Science*, §125, runs into the marketplace seeking God, tells us that God is dead. But, and this is less often discussed,[6] he says that we have murdered him with knives and have blood on our hands.

Thomas Mann has suggested[7] that Nietzsche identified himself with Hamlet, the man who collapsed under the pressure of his knowledge. There is much to be said for this. But it should not lead us away from another Shakespearean parallel. For Nietzsche is, in some respects at least, as much Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as he is Hamlet. Driven by the ambition for power and glory, Macbeth and his wife murder Duncan; driven by the same ambition, in his guise of a teacher of mankind, Nietzsche murders God, plunges his knife into Him and, like Lady Macbeth, looks aghast at the blood all over his hands, unable to believe that he will ever be able to wash it off him. And, like Macbeth, Nietzsche, once he has started the murder, must wade deeper and deeper into blood in the hope of finding a way out: his principal victims are morality, truth, and philosophy itself.[8]

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But the madman says that we have all killed God. Yet the people who confront the madman in the marketplace did not kill God: they have turned their backs on God, or simply forgotten Him, or become bored with Him, or never cared much in the first place. If there is a precedent for the murder of God it is, according to Heine – and Heine, we know, very much influenced Nietzsche – to be found in the person of Kant. Heine's God was what Nietzsche later contemptuously called a 'cosmopolitan God', a God without national allegiance, a God who cared for all and thus had lost His identity except as a 'Menschenfreund, ein Weltbeglücker, ein Philanthrop'.[9] But Kant, says Heine, bumped God off and let Him swim in His own blood in the same spirit as a man might smash up the street lighting in order to show us how useful it is to have such lighting after all.[10] Yet Kant did do his best to set up the street illumination again, at least to his own satisfaction, and, we may suppose, did not notice, in the glare of the lighting, the blood on his hands. So, after all, Nietzsche felt that he alone had murdered God, or, at any rate, had to assume mankind's responsibility for this deed.

The status of Nietzsche's metaphors and his philosophical practice

What if someone says that this is all metaphorical, and that it is unclear what it really means? One cannot, it might be said, murder God. In one sense this is true: one cannot murder God and we are dealing with a metaphor. But the issue is more subtle and complex than this. If a person finds himself drawn to, attracted to, an idea, an image, a mood, a longing and finds this attraction oppressive, then he might well try to free himself of it. He will, in all likelihood, understand his attraction and his desire to release himself from it in and under certain images or metaphors: I must root this idea out of myself, strangle its hold on me, channel it into some distracting activity – all metaphors. The image, or, at any rate, an image, in terms of which Nietzsche seeks to release himself from the hold that the Christian God has over him, from the attractions of this God that he cannot help experiencing, is the image of murder. To understand the particular way in which he sought to free himself we have, then, to seek to understand that metaphor. It is not the only one he used for this attempt. Nor is it an obligatory one for any person who wishes to release himself from belief in God. But it is one that, because it is Nietzsche's, is the one we must look at if we are to understand him.

But, one might feel like saying, what has this to do with philosophy and with the modern condition of unbelief? Do we not wish to understand the significance of the decay of Christian belief in the modern world, and to do this do we not need to try to get at some kind of general significance and meaning this has? Do we not need to extract from Nietzsche's thinking something that has general application, laying aside the vagaries of the specific images in which Nietzsche thinks his unbelief or his need for unbelief? Otherwise, have we not left philosophy

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behind and entered something else – psycho-biographical reflections, perhaps, or something like literary criticism, an attention to the style and form of a text and not its conceptual content?

Certainly there is a kind of philosophy that does not approach things as I am seeking to here. It is, indeed, the dominant way of thinking philosophy in the Western tradition. But not only does Nietzsche tell us in the first part of *JGB* that we cannot understand *his* philosophizing in this way, it may also be that the dominant way of understanding philosophy fails to see the ways in which, within that tradition, different texts trade off, feed from, various metaphors, images, visions, forms of resonance of language and tone, and so on. Philosophy may be the attempt to free human discourse of such, whilst being unable to do so. Philosophers may be inventors of metaphors, images, and the rest who long to be other than that.[11]

In any case, as I have already said, it is likely that any given person's response to something as complex and deeply and richly elaborated as Christianity, and its decline, will be mediated by images and metaphors, and that the attempt to get at what that is in a way that undercuts all such will fail to engage with the lived reality of that experience (or those experiences) for any given individual.

But are some images, such as those Nietzsche employs, too private? Well, perhaps. But we have no clear way of knowing that some metaphor is private and another not: not only would it be absurd to suppose that we are dealing with some kind of statistical evidence, as if we were to suppose a metaphor not private if others were already using it, the real issue is whether a metaphor can speak to someone. Nietzsche's metaphors speak to some and not to others. So be it, so far as I can see. This does not make them unfit for philosophical discussion.

The murder of God, pity and cleanliness

Nietzsche was haunted by God, and talk of his murdering God is talk of his attempt to exorcize God from his soul by thinking through in a way that perhaps no Christian thinker has ever done what it would be really to believe in God and really not to believe in Him. Thus:

> These serious, diligent, upright, deeply sensitive people who are still Christians from the heart: they owe it to themselves to try for once to live for some length of time without Christianity, they owe it to *their faith* in this way for once to sojourn 'in the wilderness' – if only to earn for themselves the right to a voice on the question whether Christianity is necessary … . [Y]our evidence will be of no weight until you have lived for years on end without Christianity, with an honest, fervent zeal to endure life in the antithesis of Christianity: until you have wandered far, far away from it. Only if you are driven back, not by homesickness but by *judgment* on the basis of rigorous *comparison*, will your homecoming possess any meaning. (*M*, §61)

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Nietzsche's desire to rid himself of a longing for God is only superficially articulated by his claim that it is intellectually impossible to believe in God. That would represent the state of affairs in question as if the real problem were that natural theology had not delivered on its claims. And whilst Nietzsche would not disagree with that, his own concerns were much deeper and more interesting.

In *Daybreak*, §91, entitled 'God's honesty', Nietzsche presents us with a nightmare vision in which God Himself becomes the object of the believer's pity since He, God, cannot make His existence and His concern clear to us.

> Must he [God] not then endure almost the torments of Hell to see his creatures suffer so, for the sake of knowledge of him, and *not* be able to help and counsel them, except in the manner of a deaf-and-dumb man making all kinds of ambiguous signs when the most appalling danger is about to fall on his child or dog? – An oppressed believer who draws this conclusion ought, indeed, to be forgiven if he feels more pity for this suffering God than he does for his 'neighbours'. (cf. *JGB*, §53)

No Christian, perhaps, had ever loved God with such intensity that he felt *pity* for God's inability to make Himself clear to His creatures; still less was this love and pity so suffocating that God had to be murdered in order to rid the creature of his concern for his creator. Nietzsche's deepest concern, as I have said, is not that God is dead, but that he had to murder God. Why?

In *Zarathustra* we hear the ugliest man say of God:

> His pity [*Sein Mitleiden*] knew no shame: he crept into my dirtiest corners. This most curious, most over-importunate, over-compassionate one had to die. He always saw *me*: I desired to have my revenge on such a witness – or not live myself. The God who saw everything, *even man*: this God had to die! Man cannot endure to have such a witness [*dass solch ein Zeuge lebt*] (*ASZ*: 'The Ugliest Man [*Mensch*]'.)

The ugliest man had a horror of God's feeling pity for him. Clearly Nietzsche knew this too – as I shall suggest later, the ugliest man is just man. Nietzsche feels pity for God in God's feeling pity for him: neither God nor Nietzsche can bear the pity each feels for the other. So Nietzsche murdered God to release them from their joint suffering.

Nietzsche has 'dirty corners'. Someone who thinks he has dirty corners is judging himself in the light of a certain conception of goodness and purity, in which light everything in the inner life seems compromised and tainted, as if one were nothing but a naked, lonely, shivering self, remorselessly driven by greed, envy, fear, and various other forms of self-assertion and self-concern. Who could bear to be seen in this way? Not Nietzsche. Nietzsche's longing to be clean is, at least in part, a longing to be free of all that. But his bloody hands after the murder of God show him that in the very act of killing God he is not clean: his bid to free himself is at the same time a confirmation of his dirtiness. Nietzsche's whole philosophy is, seen from one perspective, an attempt to wash the blood from his hands.

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This is at least in part – I think a large part – of what explains Nietzsche's concern with cleanliness, physical and moral. 'That which divides two people most profoundly', he tells us, 'is a differing degree of cleanliness'. He goes on:

> Of what good is all decency [*Bravheit*] and mutual usefulness, of what use is good will for each other: the fact still remains – they 'cannot bear each other's odour'. The highest instinct of cleanliness places him who is affected with it in the strangest and most perilous isolation, as a saint: for precisely this is saintliness – the highest spiritualization of the said instinct. To know an indescribable surfeit of pleasure in bathing [*eine unbeschreibliche Fülle im Glück des Bades*], to feel a longing and thirst which constantly drives the soul out of night into morning, and out of gloom and 'gloominess' into brightness, into the glittering, profound, refined – :such an inclination is *distinguishing* – it is a noble inclination – but it also *separates*. – The saint's pity is pity for the dirt of the human, all too human. And there are degrees and heights at which he feels pity itself as a defilement, as dirt … . (*JGB*, §271)

The saint is noble – itself an odd idea in the book from which this passage comes, since Nietzsche's general aim there is to set up a notion of nobility that is deeply pagan. The saint is clean, physically clean, and morally or spiritually clean. And Nietzsche, who, as we know, was himself, in his work, more or less obsessed with the idea of physical cleanliness, identifies himself in these remarks with the saint. The saint cannot stand the smell of others. There is a play here on a German idiom which cannot be captured in English: '*jemanden nicht riechen können*' is, literally, 'to be unable to smell someone', idiomatically, 'to be unable to stand someone/someone's guts'. So Nietzsche, as the saint, cannot bear the human, all too human; it gets up his nose.

Nietzsche's sense of smell is one of his prized possessions: 'My instinct for cleanliness is characterized by a perfectly uncanny sensitivity so that I physiologically perceive – or, what am I saying? – *smell* the proximity, the inmost parts, the "entrails" of every soul'; (*EH*, 'Why I am so wise', §8).[12] Nietzsche cannot bear God's view of him, for God can see Nietzsche's dirty soul, a dirt that is only made all the worse by the fact that Nietzsche himself feels pity for God in His, God's, suffering condition – for to feel pity can itself be a kind of defilement. This thought gets a bizarre sexual twist from Nietzsche's saying at *FW*, §13 that pity is the virtue of prostitutes. It is as if Nietzsche, in pitying God, has been physically penetrated by God – a thought we have already met in the ugliest man's saying that God crept into his dirtiest corners. There is a whole horror of our sexual being in that thought, as if Nietzsche saw all sex through the image of prostitution. And then Nietzsche retraces his steps, having murdered God, to find that God's blood clings to his hands, making him ever dirtier. He does all this as a saint, as one filled with the love of God – for God and from God. And it is not so much the sight as the smell of God as a body whose blood Nietzsche has on his hands that disturbs him: 'Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose' (FW, §125).

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Freud has taught us that an obsessive desire for physical cleanliness can betray a sense of moral inadequacy, failure, or remorse for some moral transgression. So far, what I have been arguing is consonant with this insight: Nietzsche's murder of God is an act that plagues his conscience and his longing for cleanliness is one expression of this. But in a less well-known passage, Freud refers to the case of a woman who suffered from a compulsion to clean, and about whom it is said that she suffered from this because she was expressing her sense that her parents had treated her as a servant.[13] Should we see in Nietzsche's obsession with cleanliness a kind of hostility to being God's servant? He would not be the first, and will not be the last, to think it beneath his dignity to be a servant of God. Nietzsche had a fascinated horror of servitude or slavery, of course. Did he think of himself as God's slave and did he wash so much in order to show God how disgusted he was with this?

It is easy, at first glance, to think that what we are dealing with in this context is some kind of peculiarity on Nietzsche's part, some obsession with cleanliness that he shares with few others. That there is some truth in that I am not disposed to deny. Indeed, I have been arguing that there is something special about Nietzsche's attitude to cleanliness since it is connected with the murder of God and his sense of guilt. But he is, surely, also articulating something central to the modern condition that we overlook only because we are so familiar with it. For the truth is that modern people are increasingly intolerant of smells, odours, dirt, and waste, an increasing intolerance whose development that has been marvellously traced by Norbert Elias.[14] There clearly is a sense in which we do value cleanliness – literal, physical cleanliness – and attribute to it a kind of quasi-moral status, as Hume noted.[15] Indeed, the notion of cleanliness seems deeply embedded in the very notion we have of the administered, bureaucratic, rationalized social and cultural world in which we live: tidiness, order, clean lines – these are central to such a world, our world.

But I have been arguing that Nietzsche's conception of cleanliness has important connections with the murder of God. Surely this, it might be said, cannot tell us much about the spiritual condition of modern people? Well, perhaps. But we cannot suppose that our treatment and understanding of our physical nature is never an expression of our spiritual condition. Surely we know that in all kinds of ways these are such an expression: the cult of the body – of the clean body – in the modern world is as much a cult of the human spirit, of a certain kind of spiritual condition. Could it be that our modern concern with cleanliness is itself, in part, an expression of our deep unease over, if not the murder of God, then, more vaguely, but connectedly, our spiritual hubris in recognizing nothing above us that we allow to constrain our Faust-like longing for knowledge which we yearn to satisfy even at the cost of spiritual disintegration? Do we, as Nietzsche intimates (*M*, §429), hate barbarity, at least in part, because it is so *dirty*, and is it not the case that we would rather destroy ourselves through our passion for

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knowledge, driven as far as it can be driven, than destroy ourselves through barbarity, since barbarity is so inimical to knowledge? And surely he is right that, because we care for cleanliness as we do, we can see something noble in 'doing things of the most evil odour, of which one hardly dares to speak, but which are useful and necessary' (*M*, §430). Or rather, he is surely right that we very often think of those things which we have to do because they are useful and necessary, but which we find morally suspect – much political life, for example – as being dirty, grubby, sordid, or squalid. Think, for example, of the fact that we talk of the 'problem of dirty hands'. The vocabulary of the body, of keeping the body clean, is very much to the fore here.

Saints, slaves and asceticism

Nietzsche would like to smell only sweet smells. He would like to free himself from his own bad smell, which is, or is generated by, the pity he feels for God, and then the remorse he feels for having God's blood on his hands. The pity can survive the murder, indeed the murder can make it all the more tormenting. Nietzsche is the saint and slave who cannot bear his own smell in either capacity.

In fact, Nietzsche's most extended analysis of the saint makes it clear that the asceticism of the saint itself involves the tyrannizing of one part of his nature over another part, that is, a division in his own nature such that one part exercises control and domination over the other. Nietzsche runs together his analysis of saintly asceticism with an account the asceticism of the thinker.

> [M]any a thinker confesses to views which plainly do not serve to increase or improve his reputation; many a one downright calls down the disrespect of others upon him when by keeping silent he could easily have remained a respected man; others retract earlier opinions and are not afraid of henceforth being called inconsistent … . (*MAM*, §137).

What is so astonishing is how clearly this fits Nietzsche's later description of the philosopher's work as providing a confession and an involuntary and unconscious memoir of himself. For all that Nietzsche says of 'the thinker' in this passage can serve as a description of himself.

It is true that in his later, great discussion of asceticism in the third essay of the *Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche denies that the ascetic ideal has any other purpose for the individual philosopher than to create the optimum conditions for his work. The philosopher, he says, affirms existence and only his existence. But Nietzsche's discussion is deeply unstable. There are many reasons for this. For instance, he is operating at a level of abstraction that is unhelpful: it is no use being told what the ascetic ideal means to 'the philosopher' since what it means, if it means anything at all, will mean different things to different philosophers.

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Indeed, Nietzsche well knows this, for he disparages what the ascetic ideal meant to Schopenhauer, suggesting that it grew in him from a horror of sexuality and sexual neediness and desire (*GM*, III, §6). Certainly Nietzsche goes on to say that there is something typical in Schopenhauer's commitment to the ascetic ideal, namely, 'a peculiar philosophers' irritation at and rancour against sensuality' (*GM*, III, §7). But he does not explain how this is supposed to be distinguished from *Schopenhauer's* peculiar hostility to sexuality.

And, in any case, what are we supposed to make of the idea of a 'rancour' against sensuality? This could be read in a benign fashion, meaning nothing more than a turning away from sensuality in order to get on with one's task, channelling or sublimating one's energies into one's philosophical work. But the word hardly sits well with such an interpretation, and suggests something more like the hostility to pleasure and the desire to inflict pain on oneself that is (part of) the ascetic ideal Nietzsche so detests. Moreover, when Nietzsche describes the ascetic priest's methods for alleviating, or providing consolation for, his flock's suffering or displeasure, something he does in order to gain power over them in such a way as to embed their suffering in a deeper sense, he describes one method which he says is the reduction of 'the feeling of life in general to its lowest point' (*GM*, III, §17). This method involves the abolition of the will and of desire to the greatest possible extent, a kind of 'hibernation' which is 'the minimum metabolism at which life will subsist without really entering consciousness' (*GM*, III, §17). He says such a state puts one 'beyond good and evil'; it is a kind of redemption. Yet in *Ecce Homo*, when Nietzsche describes his own attempts to come to terms with his sickness, itself a kind of *ressentiment*, he describes a method he calls 'Russian fatalism' which is itself hardly distinguishable from the ascetic priest's method: 'This fatalism … can … preserve life under the most perilous conditions by reducing the metabolism, slowing it down, as a kind of will to hibernate' (*EH*, 'Wise', §6).

In any case, Nietzsche is explicit about the fact that 'we men of knowledge of today, we godless men and anti-metaphysicians, we also still derive *our* flame from the fire ignited by a faith millennia old, the Christian faith, which was also Plato's, that God is truth, that truth is *divine*' (*GM*, III, 24). Nietzsche believes that faith in truth and faith in God are both expressions of the ascetic ideal. He believes in the ascetic ideal because, amongst other things, he believes in truth.[16] But, of course, he also wishes to escape this belief because it is such an expression.

Hence it is – as has been implicit in much of what I have been arguing – that Nietzsche's texts often work as patterns of repression or suppression.[17] Nietzsche, as I have said, is trying to convince himself, to root out of himself what one might call certain needs of the soul which assert themselves despite the deliverances of the intellect.[18] Nietzsche gives an example of when these needs might reassert themselves:

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> However much one may believe one has weaned oneself from religion, the weaning has not been so complete that one does not enjoy encountering religious moods and sentiments without conceptual content, for example in music; and when a philosophy demonstrates to us the justification of metaphysical hopes and the profound peace of soul to be attained through them, and speaks for example of 'the whole sure evangel in the glance of Raphael's Madonna', we go out to meet such exclamations and expositions with particular warmth of mood; the philosopher here has an easier task of demonstration, for he here encounters a heart eager to take what he has to offer. (*MAM*, §131)

Nietzsche speaks further in this passage of a hunger of the soul that does nothing to show that the food to satisfy it exists. The intellect is, as it were, the finger that points at the table bare of food.[19] Nietzsche is tormented by having too little too eat.

There is an aspect of Nietzsche's asceticism which deepens our reflections so far. For when Nietzsche starts to explore the idea of a God of love creating human beings who suffer as we do, he suggests, deepening his nightmare vision, that God did so in order to cause suffering for *Himself* at the sight of His suffering creatures and thus tyrannize over Himself. He goes on to suggest that 'Dante, Paul and Calvin and their like may also once have penetrated the gruesome secrets of such voluptuousness of power'. He then asks:

> Could not this circle be run through again from the beginning, holding fast to the basic disposition of the ascetic and at the same time that of the pitying God? Thus, doing hurt to others in order thereby to hurt *oneself*, in order to triumph over oneself and one's pity and to revel in an extremity of power! (*M*, §113)

Nietzsche, I have been arguing, murders God because God pities man and because Nietzsche pities God. But then could it not be that Nietzsche himself, that is, Nietzsche as an ascetic, or in an ascetic mood, in murdering God, is seeking to overcome the pity he feels for God, in order to enjoy his power over himself as he seeks to overcome his pity? One may feel that one is losing one's grip on the convoluted nature of Nietzsche's relations with God, but, in fact, the suggestion would be strengthened by the thought that Nietzsche is extremely susceptible to pity and that his constant hostility to pity is, in part, motivated by his desire to free himself from it. His murder of God may be an attempt to gain power over his own pity and therefore over himself.

Nietzsche is caught in a strange complex of ideas. This is because, even as he seeks to repudiate the experience of pity, his attachment to the idea that the entrails are important in moral understanding drives him back towards a sense of the value of pity in moral experience. For when Nietzsche says that he can smell the moral quality of another in the odour of that person's entrails he is appealing to a classical Greek thought. For in Greek thought it is a person's entrails – his *splanchna* – that reveal what he is, what he is feeling. And they conceal that too since one cannot directly see another's entrails. Yet one cannot know another

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until one knows his *splanchnon*. Further, *splanchna* feel – and they feel, amongst other things, pity: the New Testament word *splanchnizomai* is 'I feel pity'. Nietzsche could not possibly have been unaware of this, philologist that he was who had also studied theology. But in any case, the important point is that Nietzsche's attempt to extricate himself from the pity he feels for God is hampered by his very invocation of the notion of entrails as central to his moral understanding. The *corporeality* of Nietzsche's moral imagination is part of what it is that connects him to God through his pity for God, even as he wishes to distance himself from God. This point, and also its application to Nietzsche's understanding of other human beings, will, I hope, become more plausible in the discussion that follows.[20]

Nietzsche's moral vocabulary of the body and a common humanity

Nietzsche made a consistent attempt to interpret moral matters in terms of the body – in terms of taste, smell and touch (the mouth, the nose, the hands). His metaphors for moral understanding are pretty much all drawn from these sense modalities and he left as more or less irrelevant the eyes and sight which have provided, since at least Plato, one of the dominant images of moral understanding. And, of course, his use of such metaphors constitutes an attempt to reconfigure moral understanding, not leave it where it was when he found it, as it were, and simply provide it with a new vocabulary. I wish to consider one important aspect of Nietzsche's emphasis on corporeality in moral judgement. I approach things obliquely at first.

In an acute discussion of the idea of what it is to have a sense of one's common humanity with others – of what Joseph Conrad called 'that feeling of unavoidable solidarity; of the solidarity in mysterious origin, in toil, in joy, in hope, in uncertain fate which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world' – Cora Diamond has remarked that this sense of solidarity rests for such thinkers as Conrad and Dickens in such unlikely things as an evocative description of the 'smell of a Christmas pudding, taken out of the boiling water and unwrapped'.[21] I cannot, and need not, detail all of Diamond's argument. Her salient point for us is that the smell of a Christmas pudding can be part of the work of imagination that is necessary if one is to think of other human beings as having a life to lead in the way one does oneself. That is, an imaginative effort is needed if one is to have a sense of sharing a common lots with others, and a live and living grasp of others' ability to take the kind of pleasure one does in the smell of Christmas pudding, with (I now elaborate on Diamond's thoughts) all this invokes about custom, tradition, shared practices, the cycle of the seasons, and so on is one of the things that in some given person might be central to this imaginative effort and thus to his sense of sharing a common lot with others.

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Now, Nietzsche could use his sense of the centrality of corporeal imagery in moral judgement to provide an evocation of the kind of sense of a common humanity of which Diamond speaks, for the body holds out such a possibility in a way that, arguably, an emphasis on sight and the eye does not. Hence the aptness of Diamond's (strictly: Dickens's) talk of the smell of Christmas pudding. But Nietzsche does not do this at all. He takes the opposite tack. He uses this imagery in question not to forge a sense of common fellowship with other human beings, but to undermine that possibility by speaking of the physical disgust he feels in the presence of (most) others. He cannot stomach others, finds they smell bad, thinks they are contrary to his taste, would not touch what they lick and fumble (cf. *JGB*, §263), and so on.[22]

What has this got to do with Nietzsche's murder of God? This, I think: when Nietzsche murders God, this is, at least in part, an expression of his disgust with human beings and his failure to have – or failure of a desire to have – a sense of common fellowship with them. The two express the same determination: to need no one, to be utterly free of dependence on anyone for his self-understanding. For he cannot bear to see himself through the eyes of God or other human beings: in both cases, he would deliver over his self-understanding, at least in part, to others. This is why there is a deep affinity between his moral vocabulary in terms of the sense modalities of touch, smell, and taste – what one might call a moral vocabulary of the body – and his talk of plunging knives into God: both express the same *corporeal* horror in the face of others. God is physically disgusting because He touches – creeps into, says Nietzsche – the dirtiest corners of a human being. He is himself contaminated, polluted, and must die.

But the thought goes deeper. When in Shakespeare's play *King Lear* Gloucester and Lear meet in the country near Dover, after the heath, and after Gloucester's blinding, Gloucester exclaims: 'O! Let me kiss that hand', to which Lear replies: 'Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality'. It is, I want to suggest, Nietzsche's disgust with the corruptibility of human flesh, with the decay that is constantly at work in the human body, with our smell of mortality – in a word, with death – that means that he reaches so readily for a moral vocabulary of the body. For he sees that corruptibility as wholly incompatible with love.

> When we love a woman, we easily conceive a hatred for nature on account of all the repulsive natural functions to which every woman is subject. We prefer not to think of all this … . Then we refuse to pay any heed to physiology and decree secretly: 'I want to hear nothing about the fact that a human being is something more than *soul and form.*' 'The human being under the skin' is for all lovers a horror and unthinkable, a blasphemy against God and love. (*FW*, §59)

There is, obviously enough, an intense disgust with human beings in this, hardly something one might have expected, or hoped, from a self-proclaimed affirmer of life. Slightly less obviously is the sense in the passage that God stands condemned because He created something that has the inner workings of a human being;

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moreover, something with such workings that make love of these beings impossible. Further, this is made all the worse by the fact that the Christian God requires us to love our fellow human beings even though He made us such that it is impossible to do so. Indeed, His creation of us is a blasphemy against Himself. So God is polluted and contaminated because He can stand the sight of, can bear to touch, the inner side of the human body, that which lies under the skin. Nietzsche writes, famously: 'Oh, those Greeks! They knew how to live. What is required for that is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearances, to believe in forms, tones, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance. Those Greeks were superficial – *out of profundity*' (*FW*, Preface to 2nd edn). This is usually interpreted as Nietzsche's expression of the need to be light of spirit, to give up metaphysical torments and worries and the like.[23] But the imagery of the skin needs to be taken more seriously than that. Nietzsche's desire for lightness of spirit is, amongst other things, a desire to escape the human body, to think of the human being as having no physical inside.

God had to be murdered because He saw the inside of the human body; and knowing He saw this, Nietzsche had to get rid of Him, in order to free himself of his own thought of that inside. The ugliest man was not ugly because of what his face looked like, but because of what was under his skin. To that extent, the ugliest man is just the human being.

I said that Nietzsche has no room in his thought for a sense of fellowship with other human beings. This goes hand in hand with God's demise, for Nietzsche says that love of one's fellow man – that one loves another *as* one's fellow man – is only saved from being absurd insofar as it is a case of love of others for the sake of God (*JGB*, §60). But now we can see something important, namely, that Nietzsche took it that having a sense of common fellowship with others involves loving them. But does it? Is there between contempt for others and this kind of love a sense of fellowship that is not this love, does not think of human beings as sacred or precious,[24] but is, nonetheless, a genuine sense of common fellowship? And if there is, what would that involve in terms of one's treatment of other human beings?

I think there is such a sense, and that it is best articulated by the character of Falstaff in an exchange between him and Prince Hal in Shakespeare's *I Henry IV*.[25] Falstaff has been conscripting troops and letting off those who have the money to buy their way out. When Prince Hal expresses his contempt for the recruits, Falstaff replies: 'Tut, tut, good enough to toss; food for powder, food for powder. They'll fill a pit as well as better. Tush man, mortal men, mortal men' (4.2, 62–64).

Now, this passage has received some attention lately in the work of Alan Donagan and Raimond Gaita, the latter offering a critique of the former's reading of the passage. Donagan claims that 'for all his misdeeds, Falstaff respects other human beings as he respects himself, irrespective of esteem'.[26] Gaita objects to

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Donagan's Kantian construal of Falstaff's respect in terms of its being respect for other human beings as rational beings, but nonetheless goes on to say that Donagan is right in thinking that, because it articulates a certain conception of our mortality, one in which death is spoken of 'in the accent of pity [,] … Falstaff's remark to the Prince is a reminder of [our human] fellowship … and it is a reminder that a fellow human being is a certain kind of limit to our will'.[27]

It seems to me that both Donagan and Gaita misread the passage. Falstaff *does* have a sense of human fellowship, and we could perhaps think of this in terms of pity, but it leads to nothing by way of action on Falstaff's part – certainly to nothing that one might helpfully think of as expressible in terms of human beings' constituting a certain and special kind of limit on the will. Indeed, I take it that part of Shakespeare's point is that it is possible to have a sense of common fellowship with other human beings and be quite indifferent to their fate, even conspire in their downfall – as Falstaff does, to whom it is unimportant if they end up in the pit.

For our purposes, the most interesting thing is that it is as if Nietzsche had misread Shakespeare in this way just as Donagan and Gaita have – by which I mean that he overlooked the possibility of a kind of fellowship that, I am arguing, is found in Falstaff's comment. For we clearly have in the Shakespearean passage a conception of common fellowship that not only does not involve love,[28] but which also trades heavily on our sense of our corporeality precisely because it connects that fellowship to our mortality. At this point it becomes clear that Nietzsche's concern with our corporeality, and, in particular, with our fleshly corruptiblity, prevents him even from having a sense of common fellowship with others that prescinds from issues of love. Yet such a notion would otherwise be ready made for Nietzsche, since it clearly does *not* involve the thought that Nietzsche supposed any conception of common humanity must involve, namely, that human suffering ought to be reduced to a minimum – something, Nietzsche imagined, that would flow from a sense of *loving* one's fellow human beings. Falstaff clearly does not think that suffering ought to be reduced to a minimum, just as he does not love his fellow human beings. For Nietzsche was, of course, in complicated ways deeply opposed to the reduction of suffering, at any rate beyond a certain level, since he believed that to remove suffering from life would be to destroy human life as such.

It is thus not only the case that Nietzsche fails to use the imagery of the body to forge a sense of human fellowship that does not involve love and the reduction of suffering, it is also that his very invocation of this imagery *blocks* such a possibility, for as he construes that imagery it involves a disgust with our mortal corruptibility, as we have seen.

There is a connection at this point with Nietzsche's loneliness. For sure, he was lonely in the ordinary sense that he often had no one to talk to, no one to read his books, rarely shared meals with friends, never, as Stefan Zweig put his sense of

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Nietzsche's loneliness, felt at night the warm naked body of a woman next to his,[29] and so on. That kind of loneliness is bad enough. But he was lonely in a deeper sense. He tells us so himself:

> A human being who strives for something great regards everybody he meets on his way either as a means or as a delay and hindrance – or as a temporary resting-place. The lofty *goodness* towards his fellow men which is proper to him becomes possible only when he has reached his height and rules. Impatience and his consciousness that until that time he is condemned to comedy – for even war is a comedy and a concealment, just as every means conceals the end – spoil every association with others: this kind of man knows loneliness and what is most poisonous in it. (*JGB*, §273)

Nietzsche expresses in this passage his sense that he is prepared to sacrifice anyone else to himself, but himself to no-one. This represents one of the deepest aspirations of Nietzsche's thinking: it is the desire to need no-one. It is a thought that leads ineluctably to an absolute loneliness. Paul Kahn has put this extremely well: 'To discover in oneself an unwillingness to sacrifice [oneself] for the other is to experience an ultimate loneliness'.[30] Nietzsche's loneliness and his rejection of a sense of a common fellowship with other human beings support and express each other.

And now one last point comes into view, a point which complicates things still further. I suggested earlier that Nietzsche's murder of God involved an attempt to overcome his pity for God. But if I am right that Nietzsche links a sense of common fellowship with other human beings with a love of God, then his murder of God can be read as an attempt to root out from himself a sense of a common fellowship with other human beings. In other words, it is not as simple – as I have been suggesting so far – as that Nietzsche had no sense of such a fellowship. Indeed, I believe that many of his works, especially those up to and including *The Gay Science*, display a very keen sense of just that. It is rather that he found such a sense oppressive. And I have already mentioned one reason why he felt this, namely, that he believed that to have a sense of such a fellowship was to reject the world in all its morally suspect manner. And he believed that to do this would be to reject the standing conditions of life in the only way we humans can live it, that is, as a life involving much that is morally reprehensible. For Nietzsche, that thought was disgusting, unworthy of human beings. He was trapped between a sense of common fellowship with other human beings, and a desire to affirm life as it actually is. Unable to do either, he tyrannized over his own nature, exercising, but seeking thereby to exorcize, the asceticism he abhorred, and murdering God in the process.

Conclusion

I have sought to show in this paper that Nietzsche's response to the Christian God is a great deal more complicated and fractured than is often

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supposed. That this is often missed lies, I believe, as I have tried to show, in the fact that it can only really be understood by taking Nietzsche's metaphors seriously: they are not incidental to his understanding of the issues discussed, as if one could simply extricate from them what he 'really' or 'most fundamentally' thought. In particular, I have argued that his understanding of pity, asceticism, and the body cannot be detached in his work from the images of blood and cleanliness. I have also argued that Nietzsche's moral vocabulary of the body could have allowed him to formulate a conception of a common humaity, but that he supposed, mistakenly, that such a notion involves love of one's fellow human beings. Yet, I have suggested, in Nietzsche's earlier writings there is such notion at work, something of which he loses sight in his later writings.[31]

Notes

1. Stephen Greenblatt, discussing Christopher Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* in 'Marlowe and the will to absolute play', in *idem Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 214. Greenblatt's essay helps one see the many ways in which Nietzsche can be helpfully illuminated by the comparison with Marlowe. Something similar may be said of L. C. Knights's essay on Marlowe, 'The strange case of Christopher Marlowe', in *Selected Essays in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
2. All translations from the German in this paper are my own, unless otherwise indicated. Citations from Nietzsche are from: Nietzsche, *Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, G. Colli and M. Montinari (eds), 15 vols (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2nd edn, 1988). For Nietzsche's works, I have used the following abbreviations:

   AC: *Der Anti-Christ* (*The Anti-Christian*)
   ASZ: *Also sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*)
   EH: *Ecce Homo*
   FW: *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (*The Gay Science*)
   GD: *Die Götzen-Dämmerung* (*Twilight of the Idols*)
   GM: *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (*The Genealogy of Morals*)
   JGB: *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (*Beyond Good and Evil*)
   M: *Morgenröte* (*Daybreak*)
   MAM: *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches* (*Human All Too Human*), I, IIi and IIii

3. A surprising parallel can be found here in the work of Hume, at least in parts: the surface of Hume's texts reveals an urbane acceptance of things, yet underneath there is often a despair about man's faculty of reason and the very nature of philosophical thought itself. Hume's texts themselves might therefore be read as, in part, patterns of suppression: he often would like to believe what he cannot believe, though in Hume's case the object of such longings is certainly not Christianity; he had a much more thoroughly secular mind than Nietzsche did.
4. Surprisingly few commentators on Nietzsche have taken seriously his longing for Christianity, for reasons which are obscure, but may be due to the deeply secular nature of most modern philosophy. Two notable exceptions are: Karl Jaspers *Nietzsche und das Christentum* (Munich: Piper, 1952), and F. A. Lea *The Tragic Philosopher: Friedrich Nietzsche* (London: Methuen, 1957).
5. For an excellent exploration of Nietzsche's pedagogic impulses see Ernst Bertram *Nietzsche: Versuch einer Mythologie* (Berlin: Georg Bondi, 1918), *passim*.
6. Though it is discussed, in part, by René Girard in 'Superman in the underground: strategies of madness – Nietzsche, Wagner and Dostoyevsky', *Modern Language Notes*, **91** (1976), 1161–1185.
7. Thomas Mann 'Nietzsche's Philosophie im Lichte unserer Erfahrung', in *Leiden und Größe der Meister, Gesammelte Werke in Einzelbänden* (Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1982), 838–875.

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8. After completing this essay, I read Stephen Mulhall's *Philosophical Myths of the Fall* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). Chapter 1 of that work discusses the imagery of blood in the passage from *FW* under consideration, and also compares Nietzsche to Macbeth. Mulhall develops these themes in a different way from that which I take in this paper, but what he has to say, in general, complements my approach.
9. Heinrich Heine *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland*, (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1997), 90. One might compare here Heine's comments on Christ, suffering, pity, and love in his *Die Stadt Lucca* in *Reisebilder* (Berlin: Goldmann Verlag, 2001), 453. I hope elsewhere to trace the influence of Heine's thinking here on Nietzsche, especially this suggestion: '*Das Mitleid ist die letzte Weihe der Liebe, vielleicht die Liebe selbst*'.
10. *Ibid.*, 104–105.
11. Cf. Iris Murdoch *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Ark, 1986), 93–94.
12. Cf. here Freud's comments on the Ratman: 'Our patient showed himself to have [more literally: to be] a nose, who, by his own admission, in his childhood could recognise every person by his smell, and for whom even today the olfactory sense was more important than for others. I have found something similar in other neurotics, compulsives and hysterics … . Quite generally I should like to raise the question whether the inevitable atrophy of the sense of smell and the organic repression of the pleasure in smell that came with man's turning away from the ground is not heavily implicated in man's capacity to experience neurotic illness'; Sigmund Freud, 'Bemerkungen über einen Fall von Zwangsneurose', in *Gesammelte Werke* VII (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999), 462. Nietzsche tells us that a person's sexuality reaches into the heights of his spirit; and we know that his sexual experiences were extremely impoverished. Freud's comments might helpfully be read in the light of Thomas Mann's suggestion that Nietzsche *deliberately* infected himself with syphilis in a brothel in Cologne whilst a student in Bonn. I do not know what evidence Mann had for this claim, but it would certainly fit in with Nietzsche's ferociously ascetic way of life. Cf. my comments on Nietzsche's asceticism below.
13. Sigmund Freud 'Zur Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens', in *ibid.*, IV, 47.
14. Norbert Elias *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), tr. Edmund Jephcott.
15. See David Hume *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), Sect. VIII: 'Among the other virtues, we may also give Cleanliness a place; since it naturally renders us agreeable to others, and is no inconsiderable source of love and affection. No one will deny that negligence in this particular is a fault'.
16. That Nietzsche is himself ascetic is not something that many commentators have wanted to acknowledge. An exception is Henry Staten *Nietzsche's Voice* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).
17. Cf. René Girard 'Nietzsche and contradiction', *Stanford Italian Review*, **6** (1986), 53–65, 1–2.
18. Cf. Erich Heller 'Man ashamed', in *idem In the Age of Prose* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 227ff.
19. Nietzsche brings together the ideas of insatiable hunger for sex, food, and knowledge in an extraordinary passage in *M*, §327, entitled 'The Don Juan of knowledge'. One might compare here Kafka's short story 'Der Hungerkünstler' ['The hunger artist'] as another exploration of the spiritual hunger of the modern world.
20. In my comments in this paragraph I have drawn heavily on Ruth Padel *In and Out of the Mind: Greek Images of the Tragic Self* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), ch. 2, esp. 12–18.
21. Cora Diamond 'The importance of being human', in David Cockburn (ed.) *Human Beings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 35–62, at 50.
22. One might compare here Kafka's reflections on his own meanness: 'Meanness [*Geiz*] is, you know, one of the most reliable signs of being unhappy; I was so unsure of everything that I really only possessed that which I already had in my hands or mouth'; Franz Kafka *Brief an den Vater* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2003), 31. Following this lead, one might trace a kind of meanness in Nietzsche's use of the imagery of the body in his moral understanding. Indeed, in a way, in my reflections below, I am sketching part of one such possibility.
23. But cf. Sarah Kofman *Nietzsche et la scène philosophique* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1986), ch. 8.
24. Raimond Gaita takes it that having a sense of common humanity involves seeing other human beings as precious. See his *A Common Humanity* (London: Routledge, 2000).
25. I am extremely grateful to Peter Byrne for reminding me of the importance and significance of this passage for my concerns here.

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26. Raimond Gaita *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 25.
27. *Ibid*., 27.
28. I can find no reference to Falstaff in Nietzsche's published work or in the *Nachlaß*. However, there are two references in the letters, and it is interesting to note that in both cases Nietzsche directly connects Falstaff's name to his, Nietzsche's, love for a friend – in each case the recipient of the letter in question – and to the idea of a fantastically generous form of *giving*. The relevant passage is *I Henry IV*, 3.3, 131–132. See the letters of 4 July 1864 to Wilhelm Pinder and of 30 April 1872 to Erwin Rohde; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Briefe* G. Colli and M. Montinari (eds), 8 vols (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2nd edn, 1986).
29. Stefan Zweig *Der Kampf mit dem Dämon: Hölderlin, Kleist, Nietzsche* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998), 245.
30. Paul Kahn *Law and Love* (New Haven CT and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 148.
31. Earlier versions of this paper were presented in 2005 at the Welsh Philosophical Society and at King's College London, and I am grateful to the audiences for their comments. I would also like to thank two anonymous referees for *Religious Studies* for their comments on an earlier draft of this work. And I am especially grateful to Peter Byrne for his extreme patience and tact in helping me to get clearer on what it was that I wanted to say in this piece.

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