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The Mad Man and the Old God.

An Essay on Friedrich Nietzsche's  
Apocalypse of Human Existence

Revised Version

By

**Edmund Weber**

The sun was shining at the marketplace when a mad man was looking with a lamp for God. The astonished people scornfully told him God may be sick or he may be travelling. But the mad man answered:<sup>1</sup>

*Where has he gone? He called, I will tell you” We have killed him, - you and me! We all are his murderers! ... God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.*

*Do we still hear nothing of the noise of the grave-diggers who are burying God? I*

These very famous sentences Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) wrote in his book *The Gay Science* (Book 3.125) are not aimed at traditionally pious people to dissuade them from believing God or to convert them to atheism.

His horrified outcry was aimed much more at atheists or other indifferentists. However, his outcry does not serve to stabilise their atheism or indifferentism. NO! He shouted out that incredible truth ‘God is dead!’ and ‘we have killed hm’ to confront them with the question whether they are even aware what they have done, whether they are aware of the horrible consequences of their outrageous deed.

By no means the mad man distances from his listeners; on the contrary he expressly identifies himself with them.

However, in contrast to the addressed murderers of the God the mad man is completely aware of the terrible existential catastrophe they have caused.

Who is this dead God, whom the mad man and his listeners have murdered?

That old God is a result of the original experience of mind after having lost the security of instinct. Therefore, human beings were forced to build existence by their own i.e. by self-created targets and self-manufactured instruments i.e. they are forced to live culturally.

But the fundamental result of the loss of instinct consisted in mind’s confrontation with its uncontrollable and infinite foundation. This infinite moment of existence made the mind realise all the necessarily self-made cultural constructions could not be a real foundation of existence.

This foundation is nothing else than mind’s basic freedom from all cultural products and its freedom to create all cultural products. Yet, the basic cultural product is meaning. The freedom from meaning is the only substance of the real i.e. abysmal foundation.

However, consciousness was shying away from the abysmal freedom, from the indeterminable foundation, from a world beyond meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. The English translation: <https://www.holybooks.com/wp-content/uploads/The-Gay-Science-by-Friedrich-Nietzsche.pdf>

The mind was shying away because it deeply felt not its performances, passions and aims, not its ever and ever restricting positioning, but only its own power of negativity, its urge to infinity, and the unleashing of all possible kinds of its cultural products, the breaking all cultural chains and the crossing of all cultural borders, makes up its human essence.

That original experience of one's inborn power of negation or transcendence effects the ultimate uselessness of all constructions of existence to function as its foundation.

However, that existential truth became unbearable as if mind remembered its former safety under the rule of instinct and drive.

Mind ignored its real foundation and tried to replace it by a self-made surrogate. That's why mind produced the imagination of the old God and his creation of meaning, in the hope to neutralise the frustrating and frightening experience of abyss or freedom of its existence.

The old God had the duty and task to cover all those unbearable existential experiences by creating, regulating and stabilising the self-made constructions of a world of meaning.

In this way mind restricted itself to the form of its finite and arbitrary creations. By producing the imagination of the old God mind deceived itself about its own shocking truth.

However, mind could not completely repress that truth because its real foundation, the power of negating and transcending all meaning is always present and working even if consciousness covered it. That's why mind cannot totally and for ever merge into its finite products like horizons of meaning, divine or natural orders or arbitrary shapes of chaos. Instead, mind is forced by its even covered foundation to rip these finite chains.

Killing the highest and all-determine product of mind i.e. the old God, the murderers unintentionally lost their constructed metaphysical backing of their existence which allegedly was guaranteed by the meaning-making old God.

However, not acknowledging their deed the murderers were not ready to draw consciously the consequences from their murderous act.

The mad man tried to open the murderers' eyes to their horrible deed and its horrible consequences. He tried to wake them up from their nostalgic illusion one could give meaning to existence.

Although the listeners had killed the old God he is - in a cryptic way - still existentially working in their unconsciousness. Although the murderers had really killed the old God, they were still clinging to his existential work - the idea there would exist as a meaningful order which formerly the killed old God had to create and to justify.

The murderers objectively have killed that old God, but subjectively they still live as if he is continuing his traditional work of endowing their respective culture with meaning.

After having destroyed their traditional self-made foundation i.e. the old God of meaning the listeners must recognise that their existence is precipitating into hollowness:

*Where is it moving now? Where are we moving? Far away from all suns? Are we not falling continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions?*

However, they didn't recognise their deed and its consequences. They continued to suppose existence has and must have a meaning, an order, an 'up and down', but that was a nostalgic orientation which after the murder of the old God was done:

*Where are we moving to? Away from all suns? Are we not continually falling? And backwards, side wards, forwards, in all directions? Is there still an up and a down? Aren't we straying as though through an infinite nothing? Isn't empty space breathing at us?*

The murderers have to face the existential fact that they have irrevocably set in motion an existential Copernican Revolution; they did it by destroying the rule of meaning. Therefore, the mad man urgently reminded his murderous contemporaries what they had done:

*What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun?*

Didn't they deprive themselves of their allegedly firm foundation of existence? Where was the chain, the firm conviction, that everything on this earth, in this meaningful cultural world has a meaning, where was that chain chaining all constructions to the sun, the finite mind which had thrown the web of meaning over all existence hiding in this way the truth of the latter?

The murderers must understand their real murder of the old God, their actual godlessness or atheism have its own unavoidable effect which they cannot repress in the long run.

When the listeners killed the old God the whole world of meaningful culture lost all its magical power. The result of the murder was that not only the old God has become a phantom but also his meaningful world.

Then it is indeed paradox that the listeners continue to presuppose that dead old God's meaningful order is still valid – even without him.

No wonder, the listeners blankly reacted to this affliction:

*And they, too, remained silent and stared at him in amazement.*

Too strange was the idea that they have killed the old God and by that have lost their meaningful world, too.

Too strange was the idea that their killing the old God could have any catastrophic consequences. The mad man understood this reaction. The horrible deed and its horrible consequences went beyond their imagination:

*This tremendous event is still on the way and wandering, - it has not yet penetrated to the ears of the people ....*

*Lightning and thunder take time, the light of the stars takes time, deeds need time, even after they have been done, to be seen and heard.*

This deed and its consequences were still more distant from their actual thinking than the most distant stars - and yet they have done it. The asynchrony of the deed and its existential acknowledgement let people think the old God is done; but they could live as before when they firmly believed in the old God. Therefore, they believe they could keep their old world of meaning. They believe it, and at the same time they think the old God is not even an object anymore to be worth to think and speak about.

Because of this superficial disregard of the function of the old God for his world of meaning the murderers believe they could also ignore the horrible consequences of what they have done. However, the killing the old God means also the destruction of their meaningful world order.

Because the murderers didn't want to recognise their real murder the phantom of the old God can secretly and undistorted cause their illusion, that their existence is still imbedded in a meaningful horizon. That's why they continue to believe in the meaningfulness of existence.

But they have murdered the old God, and therefore they must bear the consequences, the downfall of their meaningful existence, whether they accept it or not. So as not to allow the awareness of the existential consequences of the old God's murder they cover their contradictory position by splitting their consciousness and by separating it into an unarticulated atheism on one side and a cryptic piety on the other side.

The murderers split their consciousness so radically that the mad man exclaimed resignedly:

*This deed is still farther to them than the stars, - and yet they have the same done.*

Although their consciousness is far away from their deed, they are actual murderers having killed the old God forever.

Although their split consciousness is swimming in nostalgia, there is not the slightest doubt that they lost in fact their self-made illusion of the meaning-making foundation of their allegedly meaningful culture.

Despite such an existential catastrophe the murderers do not realise their crash into the bottomlessness of existence; They take refuge in the next illusion – believing in a godless world of meaning. The reason is: If they would accept that

there is no longer any meaning consciousness had to face the horror of freedom, of the emptiness of meaning, of the nullity of their illusionary justification of existence.

The listeners have destroyed the fundament of their self-constructed house, but they pretend they could continue to live in its apartments.

This existential self-deception is possible because the listeners try to resolve that existential contradiction with the idea that the question of the meaningfulness of existence is no more a question of reasonable discourse. Their reasoning answer to the question of the meaning of existence is locked up in the isolation ward of privacy and is no more a subject of serious discourse on the public marketplace. In this way they believe unscathed to be able to claim meaning unquestioned.

This is how the murderers try to cover their new existential reality.

But there is no protection from the merciless demons of existential freedom which the murderers have irrevocably hissed and summoned.

Yet, the listeners are not ready to understand the terrifying effect of their deed. They think the non-existence of the old God is so natural that they could only react to mad man's action with mockery and ridicule. In this way they demonstrate their delusion given the fact of the seriousness of the existential situation they have conjured up.

Resigned the mad man throws at his listeners that they are still unable to grasp the consequences of their murder.

He knows it takes time until the murder and its consequences are subjectively realised. This realisation will happen when the death of the old God and the decline of his world of meaning penetrates the listeners' actual consciousness and feeling.

When the death of the old God, the creator, regulator and guarantor of the illusion of a meaningful existence, is deeply felt, then the chain - connecting earth with sun - is also subjectively broken, and then they become 'gods'.

Because there is no meaning anymore the listeners however escape into their privacy where they believe, supposedly protected from the attacks of existential freedom, they could continue to give meaning to their existence.

The mad man does not share his listeners' illusion that the old God should be extinguished because he is just a mythological figure.

The original experience of internal freedom in history was indeed mythologically expressed.

But the intention, the thought of many imaginations is very clear: it is the expression of the real foundation of existence.

On the other side, humans terrified by the internal freedom of existence imagined personal gods or impersonal forces by whom they created, regulated and justified a meaningful world - a world according to their own ambitions and intentions.

By these divinised surrogates the real foundation of existence was not destroyed but only covered.

Although gods were needed for creators, regulators and guarantors of a fictitious ultimate meaningfulness of culture, in the hope to escape the existential pressure of the abysmal freedom, i.e. the ultimate freedom from any meaning, the same human consciousness also imagined just the opposite idea - the idea of the free and souverain God being uncontrollable and beyond all orders and borders of meaning. With this imagination humans mythologically reflected their experience of the abysmal foundation, of its frightening and liberating freedom.

The mad man recognised that the people were not yet ready to face that basic human condition i.e. the absolute freedom from meaning of their existence: Therefore, humans tried and are still trying to connect earth and sun with a chain to establish an existential hold, a horizon or wall of meaning in order to beat back the attacks of infinite freedom. And exactly that wall the murderers of the old God have teared down; they have teared out the chain.

But because they did not accept their new actual situation, they chose self-deception rather than recognition of the unbearable truth of their existential condition.

The mad man asked his listeners about their right of razing all the traditional walls erected against the attacks of their inborn freedom of existence:

*Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon?*

That has been done by the freedom of existence they unconsciously had set in motion, and what the mad man clearly expressed by exclaiming: "God is dead". Killing the old God modern men took a dangerous step which forces them to live

*In the horizon of the infinite.*

Even if this experience of infiniteness, of freedom, and boundlessness of existence is so frightening that the listeners try to escape once more into a cultural refuge of meaning, it will not work:

*Woe, when homesickness for land affects you, as if there has been more freedom. – but there is no land anymore!*

Therefore, after their killing the old God the listeners are forced to walk on the waters because there is no turning back to a safe 'land' i.e. to any existential security of meaning.

Existence is nothing else than free – that may be frightening or enjoying; it does not matter.

Here arises the question: Why did the Nietzsche speak about the old God only? Why had Nietzsche only an eye on the idea of the culturally dominant old God as the guarantor of a culture of meaning?

Why did he not consider the free and sovereign God?

In the time of Nietzsche, the rule of the old God, the creator, regulator and guarantor of meaningful existence, was total. The free and sovereign God was forgotten. On the mythological level just the sovereign God endows existence with grace i.e. without any meaning. In other words: Existence is basically free from any meaning.

In modern time the meaning of human existence consists in self-determination, in the idea that one must procure meaning for oneself. It is obvious: Meaning seems to be necessary. But being only a transitory product of mind meaning cannot rule it. Mind is beyond and above all meaning. Nevertheless, the humans mostly believe they could ultimately constitute and destroy their meaningfulness. It is the idea that existence must have a meaningful target which must be reached. If one misses the target the existence fails.

This meaning making old God and his kingdom of meaning have only covered the overwhelming accomplishment of human mind which is indeed able to distance from all its self-produced meaning, is able to emancipate itself even from its own self-construction, from the idea of a self-made meaningful identity.

According to mad man's picture the infinite space, free of any horizon of meaning, traditionally imagined as the free and sovereign God express that existence is beyond identifiable sense, beyond value and meaning.

In contrast to the old God the thought behind the imagination of the free and sovereign God is mind's limitless freedom from all meaningful settings of existence.

Mad man's madness does not consist in propagating any abstract atheism, but in discovering the irreversible result of modern men's actual killing their old God.

The mad man is mad because he reveals the disastrous consequence for the old God's murderer's existence, the loss of all meaning of existence.

The mad man is mad because he wants to stop the existential schizophrenia of the self-styled enlightened people.

The madness of the mad man consists in the apocalypse of modern man's existential truth.

The mad man could not find the old God, but he discovered the mystery of modern men: Existing in the freedom from all meaning.

Nietzsche is neither an abstract atheist nor an abstract theist; he is a defender not of the *imagination* but of the *thought* of the free and sovereign God.

It is Nietzsche's merit to have destroyed all the illusionary ideas of abstract atheism and abstract theism which consciously or unconsciously acknowledge and worship the old God's work of meaningful existence.



Nietzsche does not re-imagine the free and sovereign God. The reason was not a scientifically motivated negation of mythology because he frankly used the mythological imagination 'gods' for humans who stand existence without meaning.

Nietzsche's excluding differentiation does not exist in mythology vs. atheism but in freedom from meaning resp. in submission to the dictation of meaning.

But human beings, they may be atheists or theists, both are still unable or unwilling to stand their existential reality, they are not accepting their own breaking the chain which once connected earth with sun i.e. meaningful culture with the creator, regulator and guarantor of meaning. They all have killed the old God but are still something like secret worshippers of his meaning giving power; they believe human existence must have an aim, a target, a value, a determination, a basic meaning.

Therefore, Nietzsche was primarily not interested in criticising the mythological figure of the old God but his existential content or thought.

The thought of the old God consists in the existential illusion that existence must be ruled by a basic meaning, it must be imbedded in a system of sense according to a popular version: Life must have a sense even if it is a non-sense.

In this perspective the old God was not illusionary because he was a mythological figure but because he belonged as stabiliser to a system of the basic existential illusion.

Nietzsche criticised the atheistic and theistic<sup>2</sup> murderers that they killed resp buried the old God but ignored the result of that deed i.e. they refused the subjective negation of the illusion that existence needed basic meaning.

Only the listeners' clinging on that illusion was the real target of his criticising their existential inconsistency.

Nietzsche, the mad man, is indeed one of the greatest revolutionaries of the existential freedom from all determining meaning, of existing beyond internal and outside control. In other words: Mind's essential power consists in transcending all its definitions. However, the mad man knew his time was not ripe for his apocalypse of modern man:

*I have come too early," he said then; "my time is not yet.*

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<sup>2</sup> When the mad man visited the churches calling them crypts of the dead God and singing the requiem aeternam for the buried old God he was led out and called to account by the pious people; but he still called to them to face their objective new existential situation that they have committed the murder even if they still think they believe in the old God. The mad man leaves no doubt that the churches have become only mere museums which expose only y mummies from the tome when the old God of meaning totally ruled over the whole existence. *'What then are these churches now if not the tombs and sepulchres of God?'*