

# Competing for the Human: Nietzsche and the Christians

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## I

It is about sixty years since Frederick Copleston was required by the ecclesiastical censor to insert 'some unambiguous condemnation of Nietzsche' into a new edition of his *Friedrich Nietzsche, Philosopher of Culture*.<sup>1</sup> Copleston thought the work 'disfigured' as a result, sensing perhaps that the addition would reinforce crude misunderstandings of his subject. He was aware of something that probably passed the ecclesiastical censor by, that whatever is to be said of Nietzsche's relation to Christianity, it is not straightforward. Nietzsche is not Voltaire. He does not fit the typical lines of antagonism which have characterized the struggle between Christianity and its enemies since the Enlightenment. The typical lines are set out in the gospel account of the man who built bigger barns, a story which implicitly contrasts two ways in which people secure their lives against the changes and vicissitudes of temporal existence. There is a self-centred, worldly way, and a generous, religious way. The man in the story uses economic power to expand his barns, so that whatever happens to the weather, or the economy, or world history, his food situation will not change, and he will be provided for. There is no requirement that he appear before God as fundamentally needy. As the gospel points out, he has a weak flank, in that however much he secures his situation so that it is immune from the world's changes, he is himself subject to change, and will die that very night.<sup>2</sup> The gospel recommends that he turn to the one whose action underlies all of world history, who represents real security in face of it all, enduring when houses are blown down, and human tents folded up. A traditional Christian sensibility

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1. Frederick Copleston, *Friedrich Nietzsche, Philosopher of Culture* (London: Search Press, 1975), vi-vii.
2. Luke, 12.20.

sees only these two possibilities, that we set out to control our lives so that our salvation is our own work, or we give ourselves over in love and trust to the one who can secure a real future for us. What is striking here is the large amount of *agreement* between the two sides. They share the premise that life on earth is fundamentally unsatisfactory, beset by tensions which require resolution.

Nietzsche wants to attack this prior premise. His position is often misunderstood, because he holds that God and his promises are no longer an option for contemporary people. So it can look as if he is affirming the opposite, a grasping 'worldly' solution to the human dilemma. It does not help when he refers to the 'will to power' or the 'master race' or the moral 'superman', phrases that seem to confirm the worst suspicions. But he is deeper and more interesting than this, and raises a disturbing possibility. What if we undercut both the religious position and its opposite, by attacking their common premise? He wants us to try thinking of life on earth, not as a problem which needs a solution, but in its own terms, as something irreducibly temporal and irresolvable, yet still loveable. Nietzsche thinks that if we set out in this direction, we might discover a reconciliation and love that is not possible so long as we remain within the categories offered by the Christian tradition. So he proposes a new moral ideal, which accepts the bitter beauty of life in time, and has no thought of escaping it or transcending it, or mending it in any way. Humans spend themselves on so many reckless enterprises, especially love for other people, knowing that eventually they will go down to oblivion. To be prepared to face and accept this in its own terms, and not to hate or resent it, is the Nietzschean version of human greatness. He proposes a life framed by a temporal beginning and end, which will be passionate, courageous, and generous, and will refuse any recourse to promises of security, or hopes of escape from the temporal order. Reference to a 'beyond' is a failure of nerve, and sends us back into a world constructed for children.

For all its anti-religious tenor, a position like this expresses an almost religious yearning for reconciliation with our lives, the earth, and the passing of time. It resonates deeply with aspects of Western intellectual history of the last two centuries, its sense of loyalty to this world and the passing lives it encloses, along with a visceral distaste for ultimate authorities. To acknowledge a life lived, as Camus says 'without consolation',<sup>3</sup> brings a strange satisfaction, perhaps a sense that if it is so comfortless and yet beautiful, it must reflect reality. Like the great stage tragedies of literary history, such lives would not be the same if they were not stories of defeat. In this atmosphere, promises of redemption or eternal life can look banal. If Nietzsche represents a moral shift, it is not to a lack of morality, but to an alternative morality.

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3. Albert Camus, *Selected Essays and Notebooks* (New York: Penguin, 1979) 241.

## II

Nietzsche thinks that in the past, the human race came to terms with temporal existence by denying that it was really, in the end, temporal. Time was the image of the eternal, and offered the chance of entry or re-entry into the heavenly realm, for those who knew how to go about such a thing. This position fits well with the Christian doctrines of creation and redemption, the view that the entire temporal order depends on God's creative act for its genesis and conservation, and groans until it reconnects with the divine life from which it first proceeded. Nietzsche's attack extends beyond just the Christians, given that many ancient Greeks, who did not share the Christian doctrine of creation, nonetheless saw temporal life as a representation of something eternal. Plato famously described time as 'a movable image of eternity'.<sup>4</sup> Aristotle thought that the urge in animals to breed was an attempt on their part to share in the life of eternity in the only way that was open to them.<sup>5</sup> Time acquired a meaning through contact with eternity. Thought-patterns that suffuse a culture in this way do not depart overnight. Nietzsche was struck by the complacency of thinkers in the late nineteenth century, who had farewelled God and the divine from public discourse, but thought that otherwise, it was business as usual. In a certain sense, the change was too momentous to be noticed. People thought life could go on, with much the same institutions and values, and that if it lost its theology, this made no great difference. In a famous remark, Nietzsche says that '(t)he event itself (of the death of God) is far too great, too distant, too remote from the multitude's capacity for comprehension even for the tidings of it to be thought of as having *arrived* as yet.'<sup>6</sup> It was as though he looked round and saw cartoon characters still running, unaware that they are already over a cliff. Nietzsche needed no reminding that in philosophy, one can run in this way for quite a while.

The first target of Nietzsche's attack on philistinism of this sort was David Friedrich Strauss, who in 1871 published a book *The Old and the New Faith: A Confession*, that proposed a new sort of faith grounded upon scientific optimism and belief in progress. Strauss had given up on belief in God in any traditional sense. But he thought it did not matter too much. Nature itself could stand in the place that God had once occupied, in that it showed a general benevolence that humans could rely on. Because nature was on our side, life retained its old upward lift, and faith in the cosmos could replace faith in a deity. Nietzsche's critique of Strauss is one of his earliest polemics (against an adversary who was taken by surprise, and wondered what he had done to offend). Nietzsche asks why, if Strauss does not believe the old theological stories any more, he retains the optimistic belief that nature is somehow 'for' us, so that life remains good

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4. Plato, *Timaeus*, 37d, cf. Plato, *Timaeus, Critias, Cleitophon, Menexenus, Epistles*, trans. R.G. Bury (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1929), 77.

5. Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 415b.

6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, n.343, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 279.

and benevolent. Nietzsche thinks there is no evidence whatever for this. If Strauss still holds to the benevolence of nature, it is because he retains a remnant of the old theological belief in a good and loving spirit who created it all. He has not let go of God the Father, and this enables him to have his cake and eat it, thinking he has got rid of the old beliefs, but that otherwise, not much has changed. Nietzsche thinks a great deal has changed. Not only has the theology fallen away, but the places where a sense of the transcendent intruded even into non-religious concepts, are changed forever.<sup>7</sup> He describes various fundamental human concepts as the ‘shadows’ of God, and tells the story of the Buddha, whose shadow was still seen in his cave for years after he died.<sup>8</sup> This represents the belief of enlightened Westerners, who thought they could get rid of the deity, and leave the shadows untouched. Nietzsche wants to finish the job and get rid of the shadows as well. The first shadow is the traditional notion of morality. Talking about the end of theological belief, he writes:

Much less may one suppose that many people know as yet *what* this event really means—and how much must collapse now that this faith has been undermined because it was built upon this faith, propped up by it, grown into it; for example, the whole of our European morality.<sup>9</sup>

In other places Nietzsche refers to a second shadow, the traditional notion of truth, which again has been suffused by a sense of eternity, in that once a thing is true, it is thought to be always true, so that our true statements partake of an eternal order. In a famous early work, Nietzsche suggests that this impossibly exaggerates the status of what is in the first place just a particular use of words. The fact that a use has become so familiar to us, that we think it is ‘fixed, canonical, and obligatory’,<sup>10</sup> in other words as ‘true’, does not alter its status as a use of words, whose origins are here with us, part of the temporal economy, and liable to perish with it.

### III

The first shadow of the deity is therefore the moral call, or at least the moral call in as much as it is understood as imposing an obligation from beyond, which should be obeyed at any cost. There is a famous place in the *Antigone* of Sophocles, foundational for the moral thinking of the West, where Antigone has decided that she must bury her brother, even though the king has said that for reasons of state, anyone who attempts to bury the brother will be put to death.

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7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, n.7 trans. R.J.Hollingdale (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), 29-34.
  8. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, n. 108, 167.
  9. *Ibid.*, n. 343, 279.
  10. ‘Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense’, in *Truth and Philosophy: Selections from Nietzsche’s Notebooks of the 1870’s* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979), 84.

He has been involved in a coup against the state, and the king wants the body to remain unburied and exposed *pour encourager les autres*. In a celebrated speech to the king, Antigone says she does not think that his decrees are of such force that they can override ‘the unwritten and unfailing statutes of heaven. For their life is not of today or yesterday, but from all time...’<sup>11</sup> Antigone feels the source of the moral call here as going right to the origins, so that it expresses obligations that originate with the gods. A call that relates to the deepest things in this way, takes on the aura of a holy duty. Antigone buries her brother, and pays with her life. It is a kind of martyrdom story, and it has the oddness of martyrdom stories, where a value appears in our life as part of our life, obscurely felt as a value *for* our life, and yet which requires that we lose our life. This is a paradox which long exercised the genius of Plato, who felt that while a beautiful action like this certainly benefits the person who does it, the benefit is not obvious.<sup>12</sup> This paradox attends to any ‘high’ notion of the moral good, which sees morality as touching something that is holy, which intrudes into our lives from the sphere of eternity.

Antigone has generally been well thought of as a character in the history of reception of Sophocles. Lately however, the contemporary American ethicist Martha Nussbaum has revived a criticism of Antigone which sees her as inflexible, showing perhaps a hatred of this life, as though an ideal of moral purity is more important to her than her relations with those around her.<sup>13</sup> This is a significant discussion, which exactly parallels the criticism Nietzsche makes against traditions which appeal to a notion of eternity. The criticism is that such a notion inevitably encourages resentment against temporal existence.

Martha Nussbaum shows how the ethical side of Nietzsche’s project can be developed in a contemporary setting. She thinks that the task of ethics is to find a way of coping with the natural vulnerability of the human, and that this is the deep question which ethical theories have tried to address, though they have not always recognized this. Like Nietzsche, Nussbaum is critical of solutions that try to connect the human with the divine, attempting to render the human invulnerable, so that the fundamental fragility of temporal existence is overcome once and for all. Plato and Christianity are seen as the chief offenders here, the former with his vision of a philosophical life that has risen above mere bodily interests, and the latter with its promise of a life in the beyond which shares in the attributes of divinity. Nussbaum thinks that such attempts effectively destroy large parts of human life, in that they abolish the limitations which are needed for it to achieve its distinctive flavour. In this they show the familiar hatred towards temporal existence, which Nietzsche thought an inevitable

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11. Sophocles, *Antigone* 1.450, trans. Sir Richard C. Jebb, cf. Aeschylus, *Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), 135.

12. For example, Plato, *Greater Hippias*, 303e.

13. Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64.

accompaniment of such views. By contrast, Nussbaum holds that the ethical task is not to overcome these limitations, but to learn to accept and love them, realizing that for all their tragic overtones, they are responsible for some of the most precious features of human existence, so that we cannot overcome them without destroying part of our own identity.<sup>14</sup>

She is therefore against attempts to measure human ways of acting by a norm which lies beyond them, like the will of God, or the idea of reason in itself, or a stable human nature that is constituted in a fixed manner by the creator. We must not render our actual selves, with our current insights and practices, beholden to something outside them, as though we are always fundamentally lacking, and need to correspond to ideals which are beyond us, like the one proposed by the gospel injunction to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. We do not need ethical principles from outside the sphere of the temporal. For Nussbaum, so long as we live in a functioning ethical tradition, we have all the ethical principles we need. The kind of ethics she favours proceeds not by placing the temporal up against the eternal, but by comparing various possible human lives with one another, and recognizing that some are better than others. Our ethics should recommend and promote those which are better.

Nussbaum develops these insights in relation to a striking interpretation of the ethics of Aristotle. She accepts that if we are to judge certain human lives to be better than others, we are already in the grip of deep moral principles, and could not divest ourselves of these even if we tried. They stand behind our everyday moral judgments, at times directing us to rearrange more detailed moral beliefs so that they better cohere with our deeper principles. We do not need anything more fundamental than this. In particular we do not need to claim that our deepest principles *themselves* correspond to some absolute foundation outside them. The kind of necessity we feel in moral matters need not go back to anything deeper than attitudes of ours, which are part of what we see as a good life. Nussbaum thinks that the fact our lives include such feelings and intuitions, in such a way that they have us in their grip, is enough.<sup>15</sup> She hopes that such an ethic will be more tolerant of the human and its inevitable failings, leaving behind the sense inculcated by the Christian tradition that humans are always failing to some degree at the only task that matters, and need help from outside themselves if they are to get anywhere.

#### IV

The second major area where eternity makes inroads into time is with the notion of truth. As traditionally understood, truth is oddly independent of the vicissitudes of time, in that once we have it, nothing can alter it, or take it away again. In order to preserve this insight, the Western tradition has taken for

14. *Ibid.*, 357.

15. 'Certain things are so deep that either to question or to defend them requires us to suspend too much, leaves us no place to stand.' See Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 321.

granted a key distinction between truth itself, which does not change or develop, and our access to it, which is limited and time-bound, and part of the earthly economy of interests and advantages. This accounts for the fact that truth appears within our lives, as playing a functional part in our day-to-day existence, like our money or our food, and yet makes a demand that we conform our lives to it. While the value of many daily beliefs goes back to their success in advancing our interests (like my belief that it is possible to walk through doors, but not through walls), the notion of truth claims to get beyond this, and to access an area where our interests and efforts are themselves measured. If we are at a function and do not like the food, we blame the food, or the caterers, and say they don't measure up. But if at a function we hear the truth, and we don't like it much, we don't blame the truth, and say that we will have to look for another one, but blame ourselves. Or if we do not do this, we accept that it is what we *should* do. We may not much like what we hear, but if it is true, we feel a strange duty of obedience to it. ('Was I rude to so-and-so yesterday?' 'Yes you were.' 'Oh bother!'). In behaving this way, we feel we are in touch with a standard beyond us, and that our lives should correspond to it. We have a striking sense that it is in our ultimate interest to conform ourselves to the truth, even though it threatens other parts of our lives. One thinks of the strange detail in the gospel of Mark, that King Herod, although he knew John the Baptist was his enemy, liked to hear him speak.<sup>16</sup> The word of truth comes to us like the voice of the divine.

In *Twilight of the Idols*, published in 1888, at the end of his writing life, Nietzsche suggests that the contrast between eternal truth and merely useful beliefs depends on the familiar interplay between eternity and time. He does not so much want to assert one side against the other (though he tends to this in some earlier writings), as to remove the dividing-line which says that these are the only two alternatives, and which forces us to one side or the other. As he puts it: 'The true world we have abolished. What world remains? The apparent world perhaps? But no! *With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one.*'<sup>17</sup> What is being suggested here is deep and elusive, and a favourite current object of philosophical enquiry. Pre-modern philosophers like Aquinas had thought that not only are there things in the world, but there is a certain way that some of the things are, independently of how the human mind happens to see them. He connected this with the thought of God the creator, who knows things in an original creative way that gives them an identity. The ideal of truth was to uncover this identity and to conform ourselves to it. But the last few centuries of philosophical history have seen a long erosion of this notion of an original way that things are, to which our knowledge should correspond.

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16. Mark 6, 20.

17. *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (London: Chatto and Windus, 1971), 486.

The most recent version of this development centres on the influence of language on the world which appears to us. We notice that most of the objects we encounter in the world are unimaginable without a language, and start to mean something only in the light of a language. This applies to everyday objects like for example, the midday train which we catch to somewhere. When we try to isolate the identifying features of the object which this phrase refers to, we stumble on hidden complications. The train in question is not a particular set of carriages. The carriages could all be different tomorrow, and yet it might still be the same train, in the sense intended. On particular days the train in question might not even leave at midday. While the train seems to sit at its platform as an object that anybody could point to without further ado, it is in fact quite a complicated thing to see, and requires a series of 'achievements' on the part of the person knowing, as Husserl puts it,<sup>18</sup> if it is to be identified at all. In the background of what seems to be a simple act of recognition lies a whole vocabulary that talks about commuting, regular services, timetables and so on, so that the midday train appears only as a correlate of a particular way of talking.

Some thinkers who push this view of the relation between language and the world agree that statements we make within a particular vocabulary can be true or false, but hold that the vocabulary as a whole is never true or false. While it is true or false that the midday train is standing at the platform, the vocabulary within which the situation is constituted, which interprets things in terms of commuters, timetables and transport services, is not true or false. We pick a vocabulary and things are true or false within it, but we don't have criteria of truth or falsity for the vocabulary itself. The position known as 'internal realism' is one version of this. It points out that objects only ever 'are' in a certain way, within a vocabulary. I can see an animal like a cat in various ways, as an obstacle blocking the television screen, a plaything, a foot-warmer, a nuisance, a travelling mousetrap, or I can see it just as a cat. Aristotle would have thought that the last of these possibilities stands out from the others, in that it tries to capture the thing that is originally there, independently of its secondary qualifications.<sup>19</sup> But it is possible to argue that the description of something as a 'cat' is no different from the other descriptions in the list. They are all subject-centred, in that they describe the thing in relation to the one making the description. The concept 'cat' assumes a particular way of dividing things up into genera and species. This is not to say that what is there is arbitrary. When I am trying to get near the fire and the cat is blocking the way, it is 'objectively' a nuisance, in that I don't just make it up. But the whole context in which this is possible comes back to me and my interests. A cat appears against a horizon of projection, so that the property of being a cat seems to follow the imposition of a certain grid of mine. Here is the philosophical theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff:

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18. *Leistungen*, cf. Edmund Husserl, *Ideen* n.88 (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1950), 219.

19. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1003a33-1003b19.



Reality does not come ready-made into cats and the property of being a cat or indeed, into properties generally. It is we who *decide* to count a certain segment of reality as a cat, another, as a property. In short, existence and truth are relative to conceptual schemes because *identity* is relative to conceptual schemes. And that is why the anti-realist says that ‘it is characteristic of this view to hold that *what objects does the world consist of?* is a question that it only makes sense to ask *within* a theory or description.’<sup>20</sup>

As the philosopher Richard Rorty says, our words never cut nature along its own joints, because until we use words, nature has no joints.<sup>21</sup> It has no fundamental truth of its own. This means that the notion of truth survives at best in an attenuated form, one of the more mysterious implements of our conceptual tool-box, but missing the aura of the divine which it once bore. It is hard to see why it should be an object of *contemplation* any more.

## V

These late descendents of the Nietzschean tradition account for a peculiar tone of impatience that can be discerned in discussions between society and religion in the contemporary Western world, a sense that religion represents intransigence, a hostility to the current models of compromise which seem to offer the best hope of progress. Religious people are always trying to reach outside the area of space and time, to discover the ‘unwritten and unfailing statutes of heaven’, and this looks like an attempt to stop the clock, or to turn it back. The depth of this antagonism can be underestimated, in that it is often thought to come down to an accusation of dogmatism, the refusal to consider other possibilities. The philosophical reflections make it clear however that the abyss is deeper than this, and comes down to the question of whether, in the sense that renders things worthy of contemplation, there is an ultimate way that things ‘are’ at all.

Christians have often reacted tactically against the Nietzschean position by distancing themselves from the Greeks, saying that the Greeks did what Nietzsche accuses them of doing, seeking to engineer an escape from time. Christianity encourages by contrast an involvement in this world, the patient acceptance of poverty and suffering which the scriptures recommend. The gospels promote a strongly practical faith, so that if they promise heaven, it is to those who feed and clothe the mystical Christ in suffering humanity, and visit him in prison and so on. There is, in other words, a marked difference between Platonism and Christianity, so that the former falls victim to Nietzsche, but not

20. Nicholas Wolterstorff, ‘Are Concept-Users World-Makers?’, in James E Tomberlin (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives* (Atascadero, California: Ridgeview, 1987), 260, see William P Alston (ed.), *Realism and Antirealism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002), 93.

21. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), xxvi.

the latter. The Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor develops some of this defence in his review of Martha Nussbaum's *The Fragility of Goodness*.<sup>22</sup> Among other things he points out that Christianity does not rely simply on a category of 'eternity' as an escape from the perils of time. It also reverses the direction of this move, in that it sees the divine as having entered into temporal life, so that the process of coming to touch the divine is also a process of entering 'into Christ', which means coming fully into temporal existence. Christians are not to protect themselves from the dangers of time, but to enter into them in love and trust, given that they represent the will of a loving creator for us. The gospel encourages humans to give their lives away like this. Nussbaum responds with some generosity to this critique, agreeing that the fact of the incarnation adds a dimension to Christianity which takes it beyond just another religious escape from the shortcomings of time. For all that, she questions how much this Christian ideal has affected the mixed history of Christianity, and tends to think that any direction of attention towards a 'true world' beyond this one, leads us to denigrate this one.<sup>23</sup>

One has the impression that contemporary Christianity has pushed this reply quite hard, so that large dogmatic beliefs about an afterlife have effectively receded, and now play little part in day-to-day operations. The unbelieving physicist Steven Weinberg suggests that the concerns of Christians have pretty much come down to the best concerns of everyone else, as far as the working part of religion is concerned. He is happy with this development, but suggests it erodes religious belief of most of its substance.

Occasionally I have found myself talking with friends, who identify themselves with some organized religion, about what they think of life after death, or of the nature of God, or of sin. Most often I've been told that they do not know, and that the important thing is not what you believe, but how you live. I've heard this even from a Catholic priest. I applaud the sentiment, but it's quite a retreat from religious belief.<sup>24</sup>

Contemporary Christian funerals could serve as an example, the absence of drama concerning the beyond which seems to characterize them these days, so that they are reduced to a celebration of the bitter beauty of a completed life and little more. The old beliefs about judgment and afterlife seem close to the wheel described by Wittgenstein, which still turns, but is no longer connected to the engine.

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22. Charles Taylor, 'Critical Notice of Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*,' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* (18) 1988, 805-814.  
 23. Martha Nussbaum, 'Transcending Humanity', in *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1990), 365-391, 370.  
 24. Steven Weinberg, 'Without God', in *The New York Review of Books*, Volume LV, Number 14, September 25, 2008, 73-76, 75.

If we question such developments, the key focus should be the striking premise which Nietzsche shares with Thomas Aquinas, that truth and moral goodness as traditionally understood, presuppose a belief in God, and cannot survive in the way that they used to, if such a belief falls away. From this common premise, Aquinas and Nietzsche go in different directions. Aquinas wants to defend both a belief in God and a robust ‘correspondence’ understanding of morality and truth. Nietzsche wants to do away with both of these. But the two thinkers agree that the concepts are connected, so that understanding of morality and truth is changed by the loss of theistic belief. There is evidence that the West, having largely lost its public belief in God, might be coming to see that robust notions of morality and truth cannot just go on as before, and will not in fact survive his demise. This shows what some recent Western history did not suspect—that belief in God makes a difference.

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