

# A CRITIQUE OF RICOEUR'S CALL FOR FAITH FROM THE ATHEISM OF NIETZSCHE: GOD IS STILL DEAD

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Discourse has been analyzed in philosophy since the earliest thinkers. It can be understood as the saying of something about something through language. As such, it encompasses both speaking and writing, and requires interpretation on behalf of all parties involved. Discourse displays, or makes manifest, a world of concerns. As a referential facet of discourse, this entails the taking of given words or objects to convey certain meanings.<sup>1</sup> For Paul Ricoeur, this is a "metaphorical reference," in which this making manifest occurs against the understanding of metaphors. This is in the context of the field of hermeneutics, of which the central problem is, for Ricoeur, interpretation.

In his work, *Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics*, Ricoeur connects the revealing of meaning through metaphor to the hermeneutic duty of interpretation by displaying the parallels between metaphor and text. Including both under the heading of discourse, Ricoeur displays how the understanding of metaphor can adequately explain the proper understanding of larger texts, including the world (given the metaphor of the world as a text). With an understanding of this project, and its conclusion that the interpretation of metaphor can be used to explain hermeneutical problems of interpreting larger texts and even the world, Ricoeur undertakes in other works the task of interpreting the metaphorical reference found within religion, faith, atheism, and so on.

In his essay, "Religion, Atheism, and Faith," Ricoeur undertakes such a project. His hypothesis, as I will explore in much more detail below, asserts "atheism is not limited in meaning to the mere negation and destruction of religion but that, rather, it opens up the horizon for something else, for a type of faith that might be called, in a way that we shall further elucidate, a postreligious faith or a faith for a postreligious age."<sup>2</sup> This hypothesis is formed with respect to a Nietzschean atheism, and includes Ricoeur's interpretation of

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such. In the following pages I wish to offer an analysis of Ricoeur's project. This will include a discussion of Ricoeur's notion of "metaphorical reference" with regard to hermeneutics, and how it is utilized in his essay. I will also analyze Nietzsche's atheism through a brief treatment of *The Gay Science* (specifically, section 125 of Book Three, *The Madman*). Upon offering an understanding of each, and displaying what it is that Ricoeur is attempting in his essay, I will develop an argument against Ricoeur's original hypothesis, showing that it is impossible for any system of faith or morality to emerge from Nietzsche's notion of the death of God.

Nietzsche utilizes a type of hermeneutics that entails a critique of cultural representations, which he considers to be disguised effects of the will and of fears. For Nietzsche, Ricoeur suggests, "the cultural dimension of human existence, to which ethics and religion belong, has a hidden meaning which requires a specific mode of interpretation, a stripping-away of masks."<sup>3</sup> Ricoeur names the hermeneutics of Nietzsche "reductive hermeneutics." It is a reduction of such cultural representations, the "stripping-away" mentioned above, which drives Nietzsche's perspectivist view of interpretation. Nietzsche's hermeneutics works as a genealogy, i.e., in *The Genealogy of Morals*, he attempts to get back to the origin of religious values and morality.

Nietzsche reveals the notion of a supreme or ideal being as an exterior realm, both outside of and superior to human volition. From this exterior realm, then, humans receive restrictions and condemnation. However, Ricoeur suggests that, for Nietzsche, this realm is "nothing."<sup>4</sup> As Nietzsche blatantly explains early in *The Genealogy of Morals*, this realm is nothing more than the result of the weakness, rancor, and resentment of the slave morality. Nietzsche's hermeneutic task, then, is to reveal this origin of religious values as nothingness or void, exposing hence, that the God of morality—or on a metaphysical level, the absolute good or the One—does in fact not exist. Ricoeur notes, and rightfully so, proposing such a reduction of hermeneutics brings about the destruction of metaphysics and necessarily leads to nihilism.<sup>5</sup> What Nietzsche attempts to do, is to expose the emptiness behind the genealogy of morals, thus destroying the foundation of metaphysics, in order to move, as he asserts, beyond good and evil.

Ricoeur elaborates this notion with the example of *The Madman*. With regard to the well known assertion of this section in *The Gay*

*Science*, that God is dead<sup>6</sup>, Ricoeur posits what he believes to be the more central question. He notes, "But the true question is to know, first of all, which god is dead; then, who has killed him (if it is true that this death is a murder); and finally, what sort of authority belongs to the announcement of this death."<sup>7</sup> In an analysis of the madman's words, we can answer at least the first two of these questions. The madman cries:

Whither is God? ... I will tell you. *We have killed him* — you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? ... Are we not plunging continually? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? ... God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.<sup>8</sup>

As to Ricoeur's second question, the madman explains that this death in fact was a murder, and that the murderers are us; we have killed God. Ricoeur suggests that it is not the atheist that has killed God, but rather this nothingness that lies beneath the notion of the ideal, i.e. the process of nihilism as mentioned above.

The first question, as to *which* god is dead, is answered upon a closer analysis. Let us examine some of the repercussions of this death. The madman wonders where the world will move now, how the entire horizon has been wiped up, and whether we are not amid a continual plunge consequently. Such consequences suggest that the death results in total chaos; *Being* itself will be cast into all directions. In the suggestion of lighting lanterns in the morning, we even receive the notion of insanity or simply the suggestion of being lost, not knowing what to do, and hence, doing something as ridiculous as lighting lanterns in the morning. Such effects of this death point to which god is dead. It is precisely as Ricoeur suggested, as I noted earlier, the god of metaphysics. And, as Ricoeur notes, "insofar as theology rests on the metaphysics of the first cause, necessary being, and the prime mover, conceived as the source of values and the absolute good,"<sup>9</sup> it is also the god of theology, or the god of morality.

It is here where Ricoeur introduces the notion of accusation, which is imperative to his hypothesis. Accusation, is what lies at the

root of any principle of obligation. Through his reductive hermeneutics, Nietzsche strips away the a priori character of such a system, what Ricoeur names onto-theology, using the terminology of Heidegger.<sup>10</sup> Ricoeur elaborates this notion by explaining that accusation appears as the truth of formal obligation and the root of duty, but does so only by the uncovering of the hermeneutic method. Nietzsche's reductive hermeneutics replaces normal abstractive methodology with that of a genealogical and philological methodology.<sup>11</sup> Hence, and so much is suggested in *The Genealogy of Morals*, this reductive hermeneutics reveals the illusion of the so-called "autonomous will." He exposes what was hidden in its background, namely the resentment of the will of the weak. Ricoeur asserts, "Because of this exegesis and this genealogy, the god of morality, to speak in the manner of Nietzsche, reveals himself as the god of accusation and condemnation."<sup>12</sup>

We can now turn to Ricoeur's third question; again, the question asks what sort of authority belongs to the announcement of this death. We have already suggested which god is dead, namely the god of morality, and as well, have agreed that the cause of this death was nihilism and its resulting destruction of metaphysics. As to this third question, however, Ricoeur suggests that everything becomes problematic. Ricoeur asserts, "This positive Nietzschean philosophy, which alone is capable of conferring authority on his negative hermeneutics, remains buried under the ruins that Nietzsche has accumulated around him."<sup>13</sup> If the authority of this announcement is suggested by Zarathustra, few individuals can live up to his level, or to the level of the overman. Ricoeur suggests here that Nietzsche's work remains an accusation of accusation, and hence falls short. From this, Ricoeur concludes that everything is left open. At this point, he moves back to his original hypothesis. Ricoeur asserts:

It seems to me that only one path has been decisively closed off, that of an onto-theology which culminates in the idea of a moral god, conceived as the origin and foundation of an ethics of prohibition and condemnation. I believe that we are henceforth incapable of returning to an order of moral life which would take the form of the simple submission to commandments or to an alien or supreme will, even if this will were represented as divine.<sup>14</sup>

Ricoeur is suggesting that, although Nietzsche's reductive hermeneutics leaves no room for the existence of a god of morality, or on a metaphysical level an ideal, absolute good, that an opening to faith still is possible.

Here, Ricoeur introduces his relationship to word, specifically, all forms of word that say something about beings and about Being. The editor of this essay, James M. Edie, suggests that this has been translated in the Heideggerian context, "word" coming from the French *la parole* ("speech" or "spoken language").<sup>15</sup> In this sense, he explains, "word" is used as the "third sense" between language and the "speaking" of the subject—"word" comes to us, it is not at our disposal. In other words, although we have control over our act of speaking, the words which we use are conventionally predetermined; they are not freely chosen by us. Hence, through this relationship to word, Ricoeur implies a notion of obedience that is independent of any sort of ethical implication; in order to understand anything about Being, we obediently depend upon word which, again, is not at our disposal. Ricoeur adds in light of this, "It is this non-ethical obedience that can lead us out of the labyrinth of the theory of values."<sup>16</sup> It is this notion which drives Ricoeur's hypothesis, that a postreligious faith can stem from Nietzsche's destruction of the god of morals.

But, how is this move possible? Ricoeur suggests that the only way to think ethically in this situation is to begin by thinking non-ethically. This is indicative of something along the lines of Nietzsche's notion of the Will to Truth stemming out of the Will to Ignorance. Ricoeur asserts, "In order to attain this goal, we must discover that place where the autonomy of our will is rooted in a dependence and an obedience that is no longer infected with accusation, prohibition, and condemnation."<sup>17</sup> The pre-ethical situation Ricoeur describes is indicative of a Heideggerian *hearkening*, in which there is revealed a mode of being which is not yet a mode of doing. In other words, "word" says something; it reveals not only something about the meaning of beings, but as well, something about Being itself.<sup>18</sup> Coinciding with the notion of a non-ethical obedience, it is important to note that with Ricoeur's understanding of word, as with his understanding of metaphor, something is said or revealed of which he is "neither the source or the master."

In this situation, where the philosopher is independent of the source and mastery of the meaning of being, an obedience is estab-

lished with regard to the power of "word." This allows for a non-ethical obedience and concern, what Ricoeur names the postreligious faith. Hence, the philosopher is still not capable of designating a kind of word that could truly be called the word of God. However, Ricoeur contests, she is capable of designating the type of being that would make something like the word of God possible.<sup>19</sup> Prior to all moralism, Ricoeur continues, we perceive of this *hearkening*, the foundation of all other modes of listening. He concludes, "This analysis, and 'the fundamental analysis of Dasein' to which it pertains, reveals the horizon and opens up the way to approximations, yet to be established, to a relation to God as the word which proceeds all accusation and prohibition."<sup>20</sup> In other words, a non-ethical obedience can stem from the situation of *hearkening*, through which one must listen to the independent word which is indicative of the meaning and instance of Being, this word being non-accusing and non-prohibiting, but being itself, as Ricoeur readily suggests, God. In other words, the ultimate word of Being, which is not at our own disposal, but rather, comes to us, is the word of God. This suggests, then, an ethical situation that is merely an ethics of our desire to exist, an appropriation of our effort to be.<sup>21</sup>

I wish to offer here a different interpretation which Ricoeur has overlooked. Let us return to his answer to the third question posited earlier. What sort of authority is invested in the proclamation of the death of God? As displayed above, Ricoeur concludes first, that only one path has been closed off, that being an onto-theology with the idea of a moral god conceived as the origin of an ethics of prohibition and accusation. Next, he develops this non-ethical obedience through the Heideggerian concept of *hearkening*, allowing for an ethical system of faith dependent upon our desire to be. However, I am not convinced that Ricoeur has constructed a complete analysis. Let us look again at *The Madman*, in Nietzsche's work.

I wish to propose a hermeneutic analysis similar to Ricoeur's, one of metaphorical reference. Let us imagine that God is merely a metaphor signifying the metaphysical concepts of the ideal or absolute good. As Sarah Kofman points out in her work, *Nietzsche and Metaphor*:

Knowledge and mastery are one and the same thing: one cannot aim at 'objectivity' by cutting oneself off from every 'point of view' but, on the contrary, one needs to multiply

perspectives in order to see 'the world' with the greatest possible number of 'eyes,' constructing and deconstructing worlds as an artist.<sup>22</sup>

The Nietzschean idea Kofman seems to be alluding to directly pertains to *The Madman*. Again, let us consider God as a metaphor. This perspectivism of "the greatest possible number of 'eyes'" suggests that we discount no interpretation as to the meaning of metaphor.

Let us now consider Ricoeur's own metaphorical reference. He states, "Literal meaning is the totality of the semantic field, the set of possible contextual uses which constitutes the polysemy of a word."<sup>23</sup> Thus, the literal meaning of the notion of God would require such a totality of contextual uses. What Nietzsche is suggesting in *The Madman* is the impossibility of this very notion. One could not possibly entertain the concept of God in totality. Such, at a minimal level, includes the notion of an infinite, supreme, all-seeing, all-knowing being who is unseen and immaterial yet denotes the power to interject within our lives. It is entirely impossible for humans to comprehend such aspects, and thus, it is impossible to conceive of God as possessing any literal meaning. Hence, Nietzsche seems to be asserting to his readers the fact that, due to this impossibility, no one is truly capable of taking seriously the idea of God, and hence, God is not only a metaphor, but a *dead* metaphor. Therefore, we find the assertion of the madman that God is dead.

Kofman points out a few of the consequences of this notion. We shall consider these in regard to Ricoeur's question of the authority of proclaiming God's death. She asserts:

After the "death of God" all concepts change their meaning, lose their meaning: the madman who lights a lantern in broad daylight to look for God symbolizes the confusion of man when the traditional norms collapse, when meaning is removed. From that point on, all "lunacy" becomes possible and all absurdity licit: day no longer means day, nor night, night, when the rigorous architecture of the concepts is dislocated and reduced to fragments of wreckage floating without direction on an enigmatic and infinite sea. The "death of God," abolishing any proper, any absolute centre of reference, plunges man into Heraclitus' "becoming-mad."

Thus ... all hierarchical oppositions based on an absolute distinction between "high" and "low" collapse.<sup>24</sup>

Ricoeur was correct in his assertion that the death of God results in the destruction of metaphysics through Nihilism, but it does not follow that anything particular is left open as he suggests. As Kofman notes, all hierarchical oppositions, i.e. "high and low" and "good and evil," collapse. This is what Nietzsche means by his notion "beyond good and evil." With no such binary opposition left, there is no room for any type of morality or faith.

Since Ricoeur proposes the notion of a non-ethical obligation via our driving effort for existence, he presupposes that existence is superior to non-existence. This suggests the continuation of hierarchical opposites, which are destroyed with the death of God. There is left no possibility of any system of merit, which Ricoeur's postreligious faith seems to depend on. The authority of the madman's proclamation of the death of God, then, is rather Nietzsche's call for a move beyond good and evil. Neither is deemed superior, for such binary opposites no longer apply. On the other hand, he calls to the free spirits, or the new philosophers, who will utilize this perspectivist hermeneutics of "the greatest possible number of 'eyes'." In doing such, a faith may exist in this very perspectivism, but it could have no possible association with God, the ideal, or an absolute good, for each of these maintain the notion of a hierarchical opposition.

The closing words of the madman are also important. He states, "This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars — and yet they have done it themselves."<sup>25</sup> Keeping in mind the above analysis of the death of God, in which God has become a dead metaphor, it is the people who have created God as a dead metaphor, this has been done as a result of the impossibility of conceiving God in a literal sense. He therefore has become stale or dead, in that it proves impossible to take his meaning seriously. In the case of metaphors, we do not realize when they become stale or dead. No one can point to the particular time when such occurs, it does so at a distance from us.

As well, the section following *The Madman* seems to coincide with what I am suggesting here. It reads, "Mystical explanations are considered deep. The truth is that they are not even superficial."<sup>26</sup> In other words, mystical explanations are not explanations at all, they



only seem to be. As such, any notion of faith related to God — even this non-ethical one that Ricoeur is suggesting — is not a true explanation. And, as well, it definitely cannot follow from the death of God, and consequently of metaphysics.

Ricoeur provides an excellent analysis of Nietzsche's atheism. His inquiry into *The Madman* is quite good, well thought out and complete. However, I must disagree with his hypothesis. Although the nihilism of Nietzschean atheism creates the collapse of metaphysics, it does not seem to allow any room for a postreligious faith. Although Ricoeur's conclusion is coherent and seems to make sense, it does not follow from Nietzsche's thought. Hence, I am forced to conclude that Ricoeur's hypothesis is not valid. He suggests that atheism is not limited to the mere negation and destruction of religion, but rather, that it opens the horizon for a postreligious faith. I suggest in reply, the impossibility of such: God is *still* dead.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Silverman and Idhe (eds.), *Hermeneutics & Deconstruction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), p.28.

<sup>2</sup> Ricoeur, Paul. *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*. "Religion, Atheism, and Faith." (RAF). (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 440.

<sup>3</sup> RAF, 442.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, 443.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*. (GS). (NY: Vintage Books, 1974), 125.

<sup>7</sup> RAF, 445.

<sup>8</sup> GS, 181.

<sup>9</sup> RAF, 445.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, 445-6.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, 446.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, 447.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, 449. (footnote)

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, 449.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, 449-50.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, 450-1.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, 451.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, 452.

<sup>22</sup> Kofman, Sarah. *Nietzsche and Metaphor*. (NM). (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 102.

<sup>23</sup> McNeill, William and Karen S. Feldman (eds.). *Continental Philosophy: An Anthology*. (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998), pp. 194-202. Ricoeur, Paul. *Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics*, p. 197.

<sup>24</sup> NM, 108.

<sup>25</sup> GS, 182.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, 126, 182.

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