

THE MEANING OF THE DEATH OF GOD IN PHILOSOPHY OF NIETZSCHE

Nietzsche Felsefesinde Tanrı'nın Ölümü Söyleminin Anlamı

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine Nietzsche's arguments about the death of God with reference to his claims of the death of God. In this study, Nietzsche's views on the death of God and the factors that led to this claim such as history of humanity, important historical developments, the perspective of humanity and the importance of all these developments were considered and evaluated. In addition, Nietzsche's views and the influences and ideas that inspired Nietzsche's views were also considered in this study. Thus, this article contains Nietzsche's understanding of "God is dead" and how the effects of changes in the collective thoughts of the masses in the Western world, when he says "God is dead". In this regard, the study contains a main question and two sub-questions (objectives) to explain Nietzsche's view that God is dead. As a result, based on Nietzsche's claim that "God is dead", the study examines Nietzsche's views on how humanity approach religion, God, traditions and customs, which are some of the elements of life, how they integrate them into their life and what the consequences of these things lead to in a deeper way. As a result, based on Nietzsche's claim that "God is dead", the study takes a deeper look at Nietzsche's views on how people deal with life, religion, customs and God.

Keywords: Nietzsche, God, custom, religion, nihilism

ÖZET

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Nietzsche'nin "Tanrı'nın ölümü" düşüncesine dair argümanlarını, onun "Tanrı öldü" iddialarından yola çıkarak ele alıp incelemektir. Bu çalışmada, Nietzsche'nin Tanrı'nın ölümü hakkındaki görüşleri ve bu iddianın ortaya atılmasının arkasında yer alan insanlık tarihi, tarihi gelişmeler, insanlığın bakış açısı gibi etkenler ve bunların önemi dikkate alınıp değerlendirilmiştir. Ayrıca Nietzsche'nin görüşleri ve Nietzsche'nin görüşlerine ilham veren etkiler ve fikirler de bu çalışmada dikkate alınmıştır. Dolayısıyla bu çalışma, Nietzsche'nin "Tanrı öldü" derken Batı dünyasında kitlelerin kolektif düşüncelerindeki değişikliklerin etkilerini neden ve nasıl "Tanrı öldü" şeklinde anladığını ve neden onun böyle bir yargıya vardığını içermektedir. Bu hususta çalışma, Nietzsche'nin Tanrı öldü görüşünü açıklayabilmek için bir ana soru ve iki adet alt sorular içermektedir. Sonuç olarak bu çalışma Nietzsche'nin "Tanrı öldü" iddiasından yola çıkarak; Nietzsche'nin insanların hayatın unsurlarından birkaçı olan dine, Tanrı'ya, gelenek-görenek ve adetlere karşı yaklaşımlarının nasıl olduğuna, bunları hayatlarına nasıl entegre ettiklerine ve bunların sonuçlarının nelere yol açtığına ilişkin görüşlerini daha derin biçimde ele alıp incelemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Nietzsche, Tanrı, gelenek, din, nihilizm

1. INTRODUCTION

In order to understand the true extent of depth of his arguments, we need to examine Nietzsche's claims of the Death of God in the context humanity's life is cut short by the necessity of death. This is of paramount importance of the existence of God in humans' lives in the first place. As we constantly decorate our lives with various sacred ideas and concepts that we have nurtured throughout humanity's history. Given the fact that humans are thinking creatures and inherently egotistical. Had the humans on their own, living in nature, they would have had less chance to survive. And, such life form would have led to a lonesome existence as they would have no or very seldom contact with other human beings. Thus, humans have created collective way of life in various size conurbations. That, living in groups; that is to say in the forms of cities, towns or villages need and order and smooth functioning.

So this is where "sacred symbolizing", in other words religion creation comes about. As such, throughout history, people in different parts of the world have brought about recognizable different lifestyles and habits. Therefore, with a view to our purpose of this article; exploring "the Death of God", we divide ways

of lives of societies in two distinct areas: Social culture values and religious values; profane and sacred respectively.

Nietzsche lived in 19th Century. Born into a religious family, Nietzsche witnessed unprecedented changes in all facets of lives; 19th Century had colossal impact on humanity's life. Changes had been felt vividly in all aspects of life; arts, science and technology and so on, changes in politics and establishments of new nations and values; Modernism is an example which Nietzsche had disapproved; hence, he declared God is dead.

This article focuses on Nietzsche's arguments on "diminishing" religious convictions. Changes in life require constant adjustments. While maintaining the old order, we also keep abreast with changing values: Nietzsche must have seen people's struggle squeezed between the demands of changes for example in technology and thus people's trying to adapt loosening religious convictions to everyday life. This is the problem for Nietzsche that as he claims "God is dead". We shall now try to understand the claims he makes about the way he perceives why and how God is dead, and we also have these questions in mind: Was God alive at any time in humanity's history as Nietzsche claims so? If so, how and why Nietzsche argues that God is dead at this particular time?

2. THE PROBLEM OF WHAT THE MEANING OF THE "DEATH OF GOD" IS FOR NIETZSCHE

First of all, this is our main question in this article: How and why does Nietzsche think society killed the God? Interlinked with this main question I developed two article objectives. With reference to main question and article objectives that I set, I will make analysis. For this, I will provide answer to the objectives then I will try to answer what the meaning of the death of God is for Nietzsche by considering claims of Nietzsche and the views on Nietzsche, with reference to the main question and the objectives "a" and "b."

Objective a) The problem of who/what God is and why/whether humanity needs God, according to Nietzsche. By concentrating on this objective, I will try to understand the reasoning of theological God that society needs, and His functioning.

Objective b) How, and what the reasons are for Nietzsche, says that "God is dead". Via this objective, I will try to explore links with Nietzsche's claims and the dynamics of society, human consciousness, agents that facilitates changes in society. I will make attempts to link the outcome with the research question.

Here is our first objective that guides us to understand why/whether in the first place humanity needs God.

2.1. Objective A: The Problem of who/what God is and Why/Whether Humanity Needs God, According to Nietzsche

Under this heading, I am presenting the reasoning of theological God that society needs, and His functioning and the way He was killed as argues Nietzsche.

In the last three to four hundred years prior to Nietzsche's time -before Nietzsche had become insane - Europe and to lesser extend the rest of the world had gone under tremendous changes not comparable to the middle ages or earlier times. Nietzsche (1974) says when describing the meaning of the "Death of God" that; *"The greatest recent event—that "God is dead," that the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable—is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe."* (Nietzsche, 1974: 343). Moreover, according to him, the emergence of customs due to religious movements, political and industrial modifications, new economic theories and all other frontiers have played huge part in changing the mentality of society about the external world. In this context, Nietzsche states that; *"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."* (1974: 343). Consequently, Nietzsche discusses the changing customs and moral justifications of European society about the external world in this way.

In the light of the arguments above, here are some arguments that why we need God. Humans are social creatures, and these social creatures have thinking ability. While thinking human supports something using his thinking ability, it means that he also opposes anything else. So, this opposition can refer to the human's antagonistic nature. Nevertheless, if we consider a human in a society, the human - especially

before the birth of individualism- generally needs to be directed towards one goal for the benefit of society or the group. Given the fact that human in the society, people began to live together, and they continued to live together in various size conurbations as long as civilizations grow. However, societies generally need an absolute power that will provide them to live together. Otherwise chaos may prevail as everyone could come up with a differing agenda. In such cases, divine power often comes to mind as the absolute power. As absolute power, generally the God himself or sometimes or one accepted as God -a king who acknowledged a half-man and half-God, like Pharaoh- comes to our mind. As a result, God is generally required for cohesion in societies.

According to Nietzsche, a religion is harmful for people in terms of causing self-alienated and disregarding to world of appearances, because rather than a religion comes from the God, human practises and interpretations of the religion are reasons of self-alienation. On the other hand, when we look at the results of a research conducted by a psychologist named Bruce Hood, it argues that "*magical and supernatural beliefs are hardwired into our brains from birth, and that religions are therefore tapping into a powerful psychological force.*" and it claims "*humans are programmed to believe in God because it gives them a better chance of survival.*" (Daily Mail, 7 September 2009). Furthermore, Hood believes that "*it is futile to try to get people to abandon their beliefs because these come from such a 'fundamental level'. Our research shows children have a natural, intuitive way of reasoning that leads them to all kinds of supernatural beliefs about how the world works.*" (Daily Mail, 7 September 2009).

As it can be seen, humanity in general need a power that will make their weaknesses invisible and protect them from being incapacitated, so moral and religious beliefs have always had a high influence and protective feature on people. In summary, humanity needs God for the above reasons.

2.2. Objective B: On the Reasons Why Nietzsche Says "God is Dead"

According to Nietzsche, "God is dead" has an abstract meaning rather than physical, because this saying is a serious criticism against the religious effects on society such as the Christian church. This criticism is also against medieval religious mentality, because some people –such as priests- used the name of God to create dominance on societies, control and manage them. At this point, "God is dead" may describe the betrayal of humanity against God. At the same time, the meaning of "the Death of God" can show us people tend to follow some social customs; for example, moral laws, traditions, beliefs, and so on. Instead of ordered rules by God, these customs were created by people have been accepted as if sacred and truth. So, these customs were put at the centre of society's life.

While making this claim; Nietzsche (1974) conveys the idea that God is dead to us with the famous Madman example; "*The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; 'I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? ...Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.'*" (1974: 181). Thus, he argues that God is dead, and he gives a number of reasons as seen above as to why God is dead. In particular, society's growing gradual indulgences and emergence of nihilistic way of life, in Nietzsche's view, had accelerated "*process of the Death of God*".

Moreover, as seen in the Madman example, we can state about why people are blamed, because people chose to believe these customs without questioning the meaning of religious orders as time passes. So, instead of using the free will, people followed this mentality. For example; if the answer of "*Why do you think suicide is wrong?*" question is only depends on just as the Bible's answer for a Christian person's answer, or the answer of "*Why is punishment of criminals justified?*" is only related with the remark of "*summum bonum*" for utilitarian, just like the positivists' approach to get a reference from "*the authority of sensory experience*" for the answer of "*Why do you believe in the existence of everyday physical objects?*" (Gemes, 1992: 50). At this point, we can say that Nietzsche believed all answers in the example are obstacle to achieve free –individual- will. Actually, we look as if we gave a superficial answer when we respond completely based on "the Bible", "*summum bonum*", and "*the senses*" without comprehending them. In this case, we can say that man-made customs (truths) are reasons preventing respond with our free will.

In this context, we should define what our main position is against the mission of truth: Is truth a factor that helps us closer to God, or is it the main factor of Nietzsche's saying; "*God is dead.*"? At this point, when

we look at Nietzsche's ideas, he supports thinking and acting by questioning for all aspects of life. Therefore, we can say that man-made customs, or truths, are one of the major reasons of *"the Death of God"*. If we go even further, we can say that perhaps we believe in order to look like someone who believes.

On the other hand, if the answer of society is like that; *"suicide is forbidden by the Bible"*, instead of; *"I think suicide is wrong because life has been entrusted to us by God"*, it shows there is investigator and inquisitive will within our purposes. Therefore, we can accept that traditions and ethical rules consist of truth that is a vehicle on the *"believe without questioning"* road. As a result, because of the distortion of religion by some people, all these man-made customs took over the concept of God.

Furthermore, we can say that some changes in society such as the rapid growth of the European population since the 16th century, and then European powers occupying new territories and colonialism greatly influenced the European society's mentality. In addition to these developments, the enrichment of the bourgeoisie and the rise of capitalism occurred especially in Europe. At this point, in the period from 1760s to 1840s, The Industrial Revolution appeared especially in Great Britain, and then, it spread to Continental Europe and North America rapidly. So, this development was the preparation for the French Revolution. At this point, people understood that kingdoms, which claim that sovereignty had received from God, can be destroyed. Also sovereignty was considered to belong to the public. And, a political structure that supports the industrial revolution and industrial society occurred with the French Revolution. At this point, we can say that the industrial revolution led to the emergence of a new working class – proletariat- and the changing structure of the bourgeois class in Europe. With regard to the rights of the working class created by the industrial revolution, socialism emerged under the leadership of Marx and Engels. In this political period, the principles of equality, freedom and justice regained importance. So, the French Revolution has a profound impact on mentality of the society.

By referring to all these developments, we can mention the importance of rational thinking principles. For example, obtaining scientific knowledge through the mind gained a great importance instead of scholastic mentality. It means that the occurrence of scientific and technological development through rational thinking principles triggered religious discussions. At this point, religious reform movements against medieval –dark ages- mentality have affected the human consciousness such as the Protestantism by Martin Luther, and Calvinism by John Calvin.

Thus, after meeting with the mentality of the Renaissance and all these technological, political and theological movements, they have changed the life of society and its ethics. As a result, many people are exposed to many changes wanted to get rid of the *"Dark Ages"* mentality.

Nietzsche states that *"How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves?"* (1974: 181). In this context, when we consider all these developments in which the human being played the leading role, and also Nietzsche's determinations about what happened to humanity and God, based on the famous example of madman, all these developments that humanity is in can be considered as a touchstone that led to the death of God. These developments led to the formation of modernity, so humanity began to pursue worldly goals. The purpose of human life has changed direction. In the modern era, people began to live entirely by calculating what benefits life would provide them. So, the society has become secularized. Therefore, the transcendental purposes have been pushed to the background, and sometimes they were ignored by some people. For example; humanity started to pray to God and remember Him only in tougher times.

Because of the Christian church, people were like trapped in a cage in terms of free will in the scholastic period. As a result of the previously mentioned reasons, people were able to escape from the scholastic era. Customs and rules began to be formed based on human rather than God, but this did not change anything in terms of preventing people against Nihilism.

In this case, people are increasingly pushed into nothingness, because they continue to live without having transcendental purposes. This nothingness means that Nihilism. The emergence of nihilism also justifies Nietzsche's thesis that God is killed by human hands.

As a result, when we consider all these causes, Nietzsche states that Christian God is no longer seen by people as the source of moral disciplines at all. At this point, these arguments within *"God is dead"* were

developed by him while huge changes in society in terms of moral disciplines and the manner of religious beliefs.

3. CONCLUSION

Within the limits of this article, I did try to explore how and why Nietzsche has claimed God is dead.

The question of why Nietzsche says “*God is dead*” perhaps one of the most discussed philosophical issues throughout the academia, because it was an extreme criticism. For someone, his claims may be associated with atheism. Actually, accusing Nietzsche of Godlessness or atheism because of this famous criticism is one of the misinterpretations of the thesis that “*God is dead*”. Nietzsche's attitude in the examples given above shows that he is not seeking some sort of theism-atheism comparison. On the contrary, it shows that Nietzsche is worried because humanity tends to conveniently misunderstand God and his commandments, and that the main point of attention is this attitude of the people. According to him, the main issue that needs to be discussed is that humanity exhibits such attitudes and behaviours increasingly. Thus, we must view “*God is dead*” from a different standpoint.

At this point, his striking claims about “*the Death of God*” include a serious warning about man-made customs, in other words truths. Therefore, this is a danger that we have to suffer the consequences. It is just as the madman came to warn us by saying; “*Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.*” (Nietzsche,1974: 181). In this case, all so-called truths such as man-made customs, technological and social changes, and the attitudes of the religious leaders disrupted the structure of our free will for ages. Therefore, humanity could not have own free will and they began to believe “truths” instead of the God. So, we no longer need him. Due to truths, we killed him knowingly or unknowingly. If we consider the madman's phrases, we can say that society's tragedy is perhaps still continuing in today's world. As the madman says; “*I have come too early... My time is not yet*” (Nietzsche,1974:182), we can say that humanity are not aware of danger, and people are out for the count. So, the meaning of the “*the Death of God*” will be understood, perhaps after many years.

In a nutshell, as we have seen in this article, Nietzsche's intention is to demonstrate all these dangerous effects occurred due to people only focused on so-called truths. Because people have already exchanged God with so-called truth, Nietzsche began to demonstrate these awful situations from here by saying “*God is dead*”.

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