

## 8 Nietzsche's radical atheism?

After having cast doubt on the religionist interpretation of Nietzsche's words that God is dead and of the nature of his final ideal, this chapter asks if it makes sense to describe Nietzsche's mature philosophical thinking as "radical atheism". Although scholars of Nietzsche's philosophy who have emphasized his atheism often warn not to equate his thinking with "vulgar" atheism, they seldom specify how Nietzsche's position actually differs as an atheism.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the precise character of Nietzsche's atheism stands in question. The general trajectory of Nietzsche's criticism suggests that it is an atheism that goes beyond a mere intellectual rejection of the existence of God through a questioning of the emotional sources of religion. The investigation of mood supports the reading sketched in the introductory chapter that Nietzsche thinks a more thoroughgoing rejection is required, specifically a fundamental reorientation of desire or in other words an affective reorientation. Against this background, Martin Hägglund's thinking appears as particularly promising for the task of clarification, because he has advanced thinking about the question of desire like no other contemporary atheistic thinker. Drawing on Hägglund's thought arguably also allows one to appreciate the contemporary relevance of the central thrust of Nietzsche's criticism.

Given the pivotal role of the idea of a need for religion in 19<sup>th</sup>-century debates, it should not surprise us that precisely questions concerning the "need for God" or a "desire for transcendence" still are central to contemporary discussions in both theology and philosophical atheism.<sup>2</sup> Besides attempts to reconstruct and defend the notion of a need for God,<sup>3</sup> there have been plenty of attempts at deconstruction,

---

1 Michael Skowron has similarly argued that simply labelling Nietzsche an atheist does not tell much about the precise character of Nietzsche's atheism (Skowron 2002, 3). However, Skowron's attempt to cast Nietzsche's atheism as a specifically religious atheism is typical of attempts to deny the radicality of his atheism. While Skowron is correct to point out that (at least some forms of) Buddhism can be considered both religious and atheistic, it is precisely such analogies which are misleading, since all forms of Buddhism that can be defined as religious still hold on to an absolute value (Enlightenment/Nirvana) and consider transcendence of time desirable even if they deny that there are gods. Only by depriving the concept religion of any meaningful content can one claim that Nietzsche's atheism is religious. (Cf. Skowron 2002.)

2 Though I here emphasize the influence of 19<sup>th</sup>-century discussions, the roots of the debate arguably go back to the distant past. Nietzsche himself was convinced that the intellectual genealogy of the idea of the human as essentially religious went back all the way to Plato, who wanted to prove "*dass Vernunft und Instinkt von selbst auf Ein Ziel zugehen, auf das Gute, auf ,Gott'*" and Nietzsche also did not fail to add polemically that "*seit Plato sind alle Theologen und Philosophen auf der gleichen Bahn*" (BGE 191, KSA 5, 112). Judging from the frequent invocation of the name of Plato in the contemporary discussion, Nietzsche certainly has a point, although it must be added that Plato is nowadays at least as frequently criticized as followed on this point.

3 A case in point would be the theological movement of "radical orthodoxy" (Milbank and Oliver 2009), in which the idea of a *desiderium naturale* (a natural desire for God) is central and which

most of which do not go any further than Nietzsche already did in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As already suggested, a most remarkable exception is to be found in the work of Martin Hägglund, who has undertaken the task of rethinking the question of desire from the roots. Besides being at the forefront of serious atheistic thinking, his contribution to the understanding of desire is of such significance that it alone arguably justifies the critical attention his work has already attracted (e.g. Hägglund 2009).

## 8.1 Traditional and radical atheism

Hägglund bases his intervention in the philosophical discussion on atheism and religion on what he takes to be an important distinction between traditional and radical atheism. Traditional atheism questions and denies the existence of God, but does not question the desire for God and immortality (Hägglund 2008, 1). Radical atheism goes further as it also questions the desire for God and denies the desirability of God and of immortality (Hägglund 2008, 1 and 8). Because this distinction seems perfectly to fit the distinction between Nietzsche's own atheism and the kind of atheism he targets in his criticism, I will begin by questioning it critically; thereby also paying homage to the deconstructionist spirit of Hägglund's own efforts.

For two weighty reasons it is best to think of Hägglund's distinction as a heuristic construct, as a useful conceptual tool, rather than as a thesis that would apply generally to the history of atheism. First of all, it needs to be pointed out that not explicitly questioning the desire for God and immortality does not mean that one would accept that all men and women feel such a desire, not to speak of personally recognizing that one is driven by such a desire if asked about the matter. So unlike what Hägglund polemically suggests, the fact that atheists traditionally have concentrated on the question of God's existence instead of on the question of desire does not generally mean that mortal existence is still seen by all "traditional" atheists as a lack that it is desirable to transcend (cf. Hägglund 2008, 1). All that can be said is that merely denying the existence of God does leave the door open for thinking of the condition of the atheist as one of both denying and desiring transcendence. That would indeed be a lamentable condition, and types of atheism that do exhibit such a self-understanding need to be distinguished from more radical atheisms. Yet even if the distinction between traditional and radical atheism is in this regard more than a false dichotomy, it is in lack of unambiguous evidence simply unwarranted to ascribe

---

in this regard draws on earlier attempts to resuscitate that idea by Henri de Lubac (cf. Milbank 2005). The more mainstream appeal and influence of such ideas can be seen in Charles Taylor's influential tome *A Secular Age* (Taylor 2007). Taylor's historical excursions are all embedded in and serve to support the premise that all humans desire fullness and that perhaps only a reference to transcendence can fully account for the human condition. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that he expresses agreement with Milbank on this point and ends up pleading for a return to a "Plato-type" understanding of the human condition as a remedy to secularization (cf. Taylor 2007, 775).

to atheist X the view that transcendence is desirable. A case in point would be Bertrand Russell, probably the most widely read Anglophone critic of religion in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who in his published work on religion was very traditional and focused on the one hand on the question of the existence of God, specifically “belief in God and immortality”, and on the other on moral questions (Russell 2004, 2). Despite this focus, it is not hard to find traces of an anthropological view completely at odds with any desire for transcendence in his work; e. g. quite succinctly formulated in the conclusion of an essay from 1952, which remained unpublished during the lifetime of the philosopher:

My conclusion is that there is no reason to believe any of the dogmas of traditional theology and, further, that there is no reason to wish that they were true. Man, in so far as he is not subject to natural forces, is free to work out his own destiny. The responsibility is his, and so is the opportunity. (Russell 1997, 548)

In other words, the difference between traditional and radical atheism must be rethought as a difference of focus, if it is to be of any general use in making sense of the historical record.

Secondly, the distinction between traditional and radical atheism seems to bypass the fact that there is a great variety of atheistic traditions; a fact which the flowering of research on atheism in recent years has done much to illuminate.<sup>4</sup> The distinction conjures up the impression of a uniform tradition of atheism, which is confronted by a radical atheism without tradition, a radical break from tradition. It only needs to be added that Hägglund explicitly associates radical atheism with Jacques Derrida and no one else in order to arrive at the conclusion that the distinction is nothing more than a polemical invention meant to highlight the supposed originality and superiority of that French “master”. Although such a conclusion would be premature, there is still reason to be sceptical of Hägglund’s portrayal of the history of atheism. While his further elaborations do not give reason to think of traditional atheism as one single tradition, and fortunately also do not suggest that the story of radical atheism begins and ends with Derrida, he is far too keen to reduce history to fit his ends, i. e. to illustrate the distinction. Hägglund himself on one occasion speaks of three prominent models of traditional atheism: melancholic, pragmatic and therapeutic (Hägglund 2009, 228–229).

Melancholic atheism denies the existence of God, but assumes that humans still desire transcendence and are therefore doomed to disappointment. Pragmatic atheism likewise agrees that religious transcendence is an illusion, but that the desire for transcendence is nevertheless real and the question is how to channel this desire.

---

<sup>4</sup> For a taste of this variety, consult the *Oxford Handbook of Atheism*. See specifically the introductory essay for an overview (Bullivant and Ruse 2013). There the editors promise to present atheism in its varied manifestations (Bullivant and Ruse 2013, 4) and there is even mention of the “endless forms” of atheism (Bullivant and Ruse 2013, 5), which is perhaps going a bit too far.

Finally, therapeutic atheism, which Hägglund claims originates with Epicurus and Lucretius and which he furthermore associates with psychoanalysis, tries to cure the desire for transcendence. (Cf. Hägglund 2009, 228–229.) What is wrong with these types of atheism, according to Hägglund, is that all simply assume that each and every desire at its most fundamental really functions as a desire for transcendence.<sup>5</sup> Needless to say, all of these types of atheism can be found in 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century history; the melancholic model is found in Ernest Renan (cf. Chadwick 1975, 248 and 254), the pragmatic in Ludwig Feuerbach and Auguste Comte (cf. Watkin 2011, 2; cf. Chadwick 1975, 238), and the therapeutic in Sigmund Freud (Hägglund 2012, 110–111). The question is rather whether the 19<sup>th</sup> century with its turn to the human was typical in this regard, and whether there were not also atheists in that era as well as in others who simply would have denied that any such desire existed in the first place.<sup>6</sup>

Far from being a reason to dismiss the distinction altogether, this lack of concern with historical detail is rather a sign that for Hägglund allusions to historical models of atheism serve only to introduce the argument proper. Likewise, Derrida's thinking serves Hägglund only as a favoured example of the "logic of radical atheism". This of course does not mean that the strict definition of the distinction is worthless for historical research. To the contrary, it is especially fruitful to understand the contrast between certain prominent 19<sup>th</sup>-century atheisms, above all that between Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's atheisms, which means that the distinction is also useful to understand the history of atheism after Nietzsche. While it is hardly meaningful to try to write a comprehensive history of radical atheism, as such an effort could easily degenerate to a kind of cataloguing, the value of the distinction lies in its capacity to illuminate specific cases. For example, Hägglund's distinction can be applied to understand the difference between the atheism of Jacques Lacan and that of Jacques Derrida: Lacan acknowledges that God is an illusion, but nevertheless thinks humans necessarily desire the impossible existence of God, whereas Derrida denies both the existence and desirability of God (cf. Hägglund 2008, 192–193). It has to be explicitly pointed out, however, that this means the distinction can definitely

---

5 "The common denominator for all these models of atheism is the assumption that the religious desire for absolute immunity is *operative*. When we desire the good we desire an absolute good that is immune from evil, and when we desire life we desire an absolute life that is immune from death. The fundamental drama of human existence is thus seen as the conflict between the mortal being that is our fate and the immortal being that we desire." (Hägglund 2009, 229)

6 As a historical curiosity it is also worth mentioning that it is very well possible to deny the desirability of the existence of God without necessarily denying the existence of God, e.g. one might take the Promethean view that the interests and desires of mankind conflict with those of God and that God must be overthrown. That there have been a number of thinkers who have espoused such views is worth recognizing, but unfortunately the recent "history" of such thinkers by Bernard Schweizer, which for the most part reads more like a catalogue, is unduly sensationalistic in general and utterly misleading in particular for its treatment of Nietzsche as someone whose criticism of religion was above all an expression of hatred against God (cf. Schweizer 2011).

not be used to distinguish “philosophical atheism” of the continental kind from popular kinds of humanistic and naturalistic atheism, because philosophical atheism might just as well be traditional as radical and because most humanists who subscribe to a naturalistic view of the human would deny that there really is such a thing as a desire for transcendence.<sup>7</sup>

To conclude the introductory clarification of Hägglund's distinction, it has become clear that the definition of traditional atheism has to be reinterpreted if not reformulated if it is to apply to the history of atheism in general: if one reads the word “question” in the sentence “traditional atheism does not question the desire for God” (cf. Hägglund 2008, 1) in the sense of explicitly questioning (and not in the sense of denying), everything is in order insofar that traditionally atheists have concentrated on the question of the existence of God and not on the existential question concerning the desirability of God. Nietzsche of course is one of the few thinkers critical of religion, who were more concerned with the latter question than the former, which is hardly of any concern to him. On account of this focus, he stands out in the history of atheism (before the 20<sup>th</sup> century). Hägglund, however, has not thus far mentioned Nietzsche in his major works<sup>8</sup> and first masked his radically atheist theory of desire as a reading of Derrida. Nevertheless, or rather precisely therefore, it is of great scholarly interest to confront Nietzsche's thinking with Hägglund's theory. Therefore, I will in the following section ask in what specific sense Hägglund's radical atheism questions the desire for God, before turning back to Nietzsche.

## 8.2 Hägglund's argument: The logic of radical atheism

Hägglund's most basic claim is that all purported desire for immortality (or God, viz. an incorruptible instance) is preceded by an investment in survival which contradicts it from within. Hägglund does not simply seek to replace the notion of a constitutive desire for immortality by positing something like a more basic drive or desire for survival (cf. Hägglund 2012, 12). Rather than substituting one teleological principle with another, i.e. a theological with an atheistic principle, he seeks to develop a theory of desire that allows one to take account of the purported desire for transcendence without taking the self-interpretations of those who write about such a desire for granted as expressing the truth of desire. Consequently, he writes about the “so-

---

<sup>7</sup> In recent years, quite a few scholars have sought to distance the more philosophical forms of atheism that they consider intellectually respectable from what they consider the naïve atheism of certain popular authors, and have consequently emphasized the difficulty of atheism. It is therefore necessary to point out that Hägglund's distinction cannot in itself be used to serve that purpose, unless one adds to it some theory about the lasting power of religious ideals on humanistic forms of atheism, which I assume is only to a limited extent possible.

<sup>8</sup> However, I have been informed this will change with the publication of Hägglund's next book, currently entitled *This Life: On Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*, scheduled for release in 2019.

called desire for immortality" (Hägglund 2008, 1), and the task he puts to himself is to take account of how such a desire can arise within mortal life. Put in more Hägglundian terms, he seeks to read the "desire for immortality/God" against itself from within. Therefore, it is necessary to provide a short characterization of the model of desire against which Hägglund works.

The view that Hägglund seeks to deconstruct is the view that what we really desire is immortal, and the two canonical texts that he above others singles out as having formed this view are Plato's *Symposium* (Hägglund 2012, 2) and St Augustine's *Confessions* (Hägglund 2008, 107). In the platonic dialogues, though especially in the *Symposium*, Socrates argues that all desire is fundamentally desire for what is immortal; for that which cannot be lost. In Augustine's formulation, all desire is desire for God, the eternal. The logic behind the view is that one can only desire what one does not have or what one is not. So if I truly am happy, I cannot desire to be happy. In other words, one desires what one lacks. One strives for fullness because one lacks fullness. When someone who is or seems happy then objects that he or she does still desire to be happy this is because he or she is not perfectly happy since the happiness can be lost (Hägglund 2012, 4). Only that which is eternal is perfect and safe from corruption, wherefore the desire for happiness is really a desire for that which is eternal. Following this logic, only that which is eternal can satisfy desire and as all desire is fundamentally desire for the eternal it is wise to rise up from mortal desires toward the immortal. In other words, Plato's Socrates teaches an orientation of desire to the transcendent; to another world. From this view there is only a short step to Augustine's influential and more rigid understanding of detachment from the mortal as a precondition for the turn to the immortal, to God (cf. Hägglund 2008, 109).

In the texts of Plato and Augustine, Hägglund nevertheless finds traces of an alternative understanding of desire, in which desire is conceptualized as essentially conditioned by time. In this alternative view, which is present in the texts and yet suppressed by the authors in question, the reason why someone who is happy still desires to be happy is not interpreted as suggesting a desire for perfect happiness, which requires transcending time, but as a desire to hold onto the happiness one has, which requires a continuation of life within time (cf. Hägglund 2012, 4–5). So within all desire there is a desire to go on. The desire to live on, to survive, cannot in its turn according to Hägglund aim at immortality, at transcending time, since time is the condition of survival, and transcending time would erase the possibility of desiring anything just as much as it would erase the frustration of desire (Hägglund 2008, 2 and Hägglund 2012, 9). Hägglund explicitly cautions that this does not mean that desire never reaches its goals, but rather that any fulfilment is necessarily temporal and bound to pass away. In this sense, Hägglund finds in all desire, or better yet: at the root of all desire, an "unconditional affirmation of survival" (Hägglund 2008, 2), or what he later specifies as a "constitutive investment in survival" (Hägglund 2012, 13). This means nothing more than that for a living being, it is impossible to be completely indifferent to survival; to living on in time. If life

could not be lost, if the objects of desire could not be lost, one would not care about anything at all. It is the bond to temporal life that opens up the possibility of both positive and negative affective responses, the chance of life and of death. In other words, one can seek to weaken or even destroy the bond to life instead of continuing it, but one cannot be indifferent to it, unless one is already dead.<sup>9</sup>

Now, according to Hägglund, it is precisely the co-implication of desire and mortality that leads religious teachers to preach detachment as the way to God or salvation. Desire for the mortal, attachment to mortal life, is necessarily haunted by loss and hence it has been reasoned that detachment is the way to God and immortality, to a state beyond loss. By redirecting desire, it is then argued, one could transcend the inevitable extinction of life and of all that is valuable. However, and this is the radically atheist point, immortality is equivalent to absolute death. In a state where there is no loss, there is also no time of survival, no time of life. Moreover, the radically atheist logic of desire implies that the religious ideal of detachment and the desire for immortality are born out of a preceding attachment to life. This is because attachment to transient things and mortal beings, *chronophilia*, is necessarily accompanied by fear of loss, *chronophobia*, which in its turn can generate the idea that one could escape time into a state where nothing can be lost. For Hägglund then, it is the very commitment to mortal life that engenders the turn away from the mortal. The turn away from the mortal is however, if drawn to its conclusion, a turn toward death because life, mortality and the desirability of anything are inextricably linked. This means that the prospect of immortality, when thought through, cannot cure the fear of loss and death, i.e. cannot cure *chronophobia*, since immortality/God is death. Neither can the prospect of immortality satisfy the desire to live on for the very same reason. There is, in other words, a contradiction in the supposed desire for immortality, as the state where nothing can be lost is arguably undesirable (cf. Hägglund 2008, 111). Thus, Hägglund concludes that the “desire for fullness/absolute emptiness is not the truth of desire but rather a self-defeating attempt to deny the attachment to temporal life that is the source of all care” (Hägglund 2012, 9). The logic of the argument is admittedly elegant, but I am here not concerned with evaluating its truth. Instead, I seek to show what use can be made of it for understanding Nietzsche's criticism of religion.

In concluding that desire for absolute transcendence is desire for death, that God is death/nothingness, Nietzsche and Hägglund are in full agreement.<sup>10</sup> However, it is

---

<sup>9</sup> “I am not claiming that temporal finitude is desirable as such but that it is the condition for both the desirable *and* the undesirable.” (Hägglund 2012, 14) Ergo: “finitude is not something that comes to inhibit desire, but precipitates desire in the first place. It is because the beloved can be lost that one seeks to keep it, and it is because the experience can be forgotten that one seeks to remember it.” (Hägglund 2008, 111)

<sup>10</sup> Of course one can ask if this is the only possible understanding of the concept God, and Nietzsche himself associates it most with the Christian concept of God (A 47, KSA 6, 225), whereby he seems mostly to refer specifically to a “Platonic” concept of God, in which the attribute of immortality is



also worth asking whether the logic of desire that Hägglund elucidates can be considered a challenge to Nietzsche, and this is the question I will pursue in the next section, after initially showing why it is worth asking. A particularly noteworthy consequence of Hägglund's theory is that there can be no full affirmation of life. Just as he argues that the idea of immortality cannot cure *chronophobia*, he also argues that more *chronophilia* cannot cure *chronophobia* (Hägglund 2012, 111). It is rather the case that the more one is attached to mortal things, to life, the more one will fear loss and the greater will the desire be to keep what one loves safe from time. If one did not fear death and loss, one would be indifferent and incapable of attachment. This means that the affirmation of the human condition, or generally the condition of any mortal being, is always haunted by death and that one is always moved by both *chronophilia* and *chronophobia*. So in this perspective, "therapeutic atheism" is misguided, if and when it seeks to cure religious desires for immortality by encouraging either acceptance of death or love of life. As Nietzsche seeks to reorient desire to the earth, and seeks the highest possible affirmation of life, the question is whether his philosophy does not amount to yet another futile attempt to cure *chronophobia*?

### 8.3 Nietzsche's ideal mood: Escape from time or heightening of experience in time?

The distinction between traditional and radical atheism allows one to read the dispute between Schopenhauer and Nietzsche as a dispute over desire, more than as a dispute about epistemology and the existence of another world.<sup>11</sup> Schopenhauer thinks that there is a metaphysical need to transcend time, to rise from becoming into being/non-being, and teaches detachment from mortal life as the path to fullness/emptiness. By contrast, and as a reaction, the entire trajectory of Nietzsche's criticism of religion is shaped by his privileging of becoming within time, and he con-

---

central and is thought of in terms of being as opposed to becoming. Not least due to Augustine's influence, such an understanding of God has been dominant in the Western tradition of religious thinking. Whereas Augustine's God is where his heart finds rest beyond time, Nietzsche identifies the desire for rest with disease and absolute rest with death (e.g. GS Foreword 2, KSA 3, 348; cf. NL 1887, 9[60], KSA 12, 365). There are perhaps other ways to conceptualize the final end of religious life, even within the Christian tradition, e.g. as ever closer union (without ever coming to rest), but that is beyond the point here. Hägglund's point can also be expressed thus: insofar as there is a God or are Gods, he/she/it/they must be mortal.

**11** In this regard, it is particularly interesting to note that Nietzsche, in his early critique of Schopenhauer, concedes that there might be a metaphysical world, but argues that the desires that have led to thinking that a metaphysical world would be valuable to us arise from self-deception and error, and that if there was a metaphysical world it should be of no concern to us (HH I 9, KSA 2, 29–30). In his late work, Nietzsche is very clear that it is precisely Schopenhauer's nihilistic interpretation of desire, i.e. of the Will, that interests him as a psychologist (cf. KSA 6, 125).



sequently advocates a greater love of earthly life. This love of the earth is however not a simple love of what has been and what is, but of the possibilities of becoming, and specifically of a heightening of life. This heightening is expressed as high moods within this life (cf. BGE 257, KSA 5, 205), and it is through such moods that one reaches the highest possible affirmation of life.

Basically, two options of reading Nietzsche's thinking about the highest possible affirmation are worth considering. One can either read it as an escape from time as Julian Young does, i.e. as an immunization strategy, or as an enhancement of experience in time, i.e. as an optimization strategy. Just as one would expect from Hägglund's theory, Nietzsche's statements about the affirmation of temporal life seem contradictory, but I do think the evidence speaks stronger in favour of the latter interpretation. The apparent contradictoriness is most evident in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where Zarathustra on the one hand praises the embrace of transience and all the pain of loss as a precondition of the life he considers desirable (KSA 4, 110–111), but on the other speaks of how a mere acceptance of transience cannot be satisfying and that time and all its woe have to be redeemed (KSA 4, 180–181). The greater the attachment, the greater the pain, and the temptation to deny all attachment. Nietzsche's Zarathustra seems to be aware of this basic problem, and his only answer is this: "Woe says: Now Go! Yet all joy wants Eternity" (Parkes 2005, 199; KSA 4, 404). While it is clear enough that the formula that all joy wants eternity cannot be interpreted in terms of a traditional religious desire,<sup>12</sup> and that instead of pointing to a specific human desire for what is eternal it rather expresses a desire for becoming within all desire, one must ask what consequences this understanding of desire has for the high moods that he holds out as desirable. Nietzsche's protagonist clearly rejects the adequacy of the solution that "not-willing" at all is the answer (cf. KSA 4, 181), that one could escape time, and instead simply emphasizes that the pain that wants to end attachment is not as original as the joy that wants to go on in Eternity. This suggests that Nietzsche does not seek to cure *chronophobia* with *chronophilia*, but rather simply to point out that *chronophilia* is more fundamental in the same way that he speaks of all life as fundamentally will to power (cf. GM III 7, KSA 5, 350; cf. GS 349, KSA 3, 585–586). This view has consequences for Nietzsche's thinking on the heightening of life, as the question then is whether there is a way of dealing with the necessary pain of life other than through detachment; without turning away from life. What is the highest possible affirmation of life, once one recognizes that even the fullest affirmation will be marked by pain?

---

<sup>12</sup> This is of course how Charles Taylor seeks to reinterpret Zarathustra's/Nietzsche's words that all joy wants eternity. Taylor specifically interprets it to mean that death undermines meaning (cf. Taylor 2007, 722), whereas to me it seems that Nietzsche is far closer to Hägglund's understanding of time, loss and death as preconditions for meaning. Nietzsche repeatedly emphasizes that if there is to be creation, there has to be destruction; a view from which it follows that it is misguided to think that death threatens meaning as it is far more the precondition of meaning.

Nietzsche's emphasis on becoming allows him to conceive of a distancing from one's own pain and from one's own time that does not entail detachment from mortal life, but rather a heightening of one's experience in time. This distancing is enabled by an orientation toward the earthly future; an orientation which, as his writings suggest, makes possible experiencing moods that are in effect moods of the future. This is the case, because Nietzsche thinks the orientation toward the future is indissociable from the creation of the future; it is not a real orientation unless it informs all of one's actions.<sup>13</sup> One can thus conceive of the following scenario: As Nietzsche through thinking and writing orients himself towards the greater independence that characterizes his philosophers of the future, who have overcome the religious past, he already experiences a distancing from his own era and an approximation of the desired independence. As he thinks about and works towards the affirmation made possible by that independence, about the affirmation that characterizes their relation to life, he already experiences a greater joy. That Nietzsche himself sought to live with his pain through such a strategy is certainly suggested in his published writings as well as in his letters. In one particularly striking letter to his sister from summer 1883, in which he complains about the dreadful impact of the weather on his health, he goes as far as to state that thinking about the future of humanity is his only solace.<sup>14</sup> Whatever value one might ascribe to such biographical speculation, one thing is clear: As Nietzsche's thinking expressed in his texts is fundamentally oriented toward the earthly future and that which is possible in time, instead of toward a timeless state of being, it qualifies as radically atheist.

That Nietzsche's thinking can be considered radically atheist of course does not mean that his thinking about the highest affirmation is unproblematic, nor that his statements about high moods are free from contradiction. Needless to say, having eyes only for the future necessarily has devastating ethical consequences, and in Nietzsche's case it is especially clear that a distancing from his own pain goes hand in hand with a distancing from the pain of those around him. One might seek to point out that the philosopher is but one mask of the human being, but the philosophical Nietzsche's emphasis on treating all of life as an experiment speaks against any attempt to treat his thinking as harmless in this regard. When it comes to moods, there is also a very strong tendency or drive toward wholeness, to the idea of one dominating mood (e.g. GS 288, KSA 3, 528–529; cf. NL 1882, 1[3] 252, KSA 10, 83), and consequently, one finds justifications of such practices as slavery for the purpose of creating or literally breeding beings capable of dwelling in high moods (cf. BGE 257, KSA 5, 205). In the *Nachlass* one can of course find notes cautioning against the idea of privileging one mood (e.g. NL 1882, 1[70], KSA 10, 28),

---

<sup>13</sup> E.g. when Nietzsche, in order to challenge the joy of the free spirit, introduces the thought of Eternal Recurrence, the affirmation of which he considers the highest affirmation possible (cf. NL 1888, 16[32], KSA 13, 492), he specifically asks if incorporating the thought would not inform all of one's actions (GS 341, KSA 3, 570).

<sup>14</sup> "Die Zukunft der Menschheit – daran zu denken ist mein einziges Labsal" (KGB III/1, Bf. 453).

and in the published works there are statements about the value of being capable of many different affects (e. g. GM III 12, KSA 5, 365), but there is no suggestion that this would have any ethical consequences. For example, the capacity to feel compassion [*Mitleid*] is in this view certainly valuable, but that does not mean one should direct such feelings at the weak. In other words, statements stressing an openness to different affects and moods do not have to do with the fundamental orientation that Nietzsche strives toward, which is perhaps best thought of as a background mood from within which specific affects are felt and which constrains the expression of specific feelings. Whether one can, and to what extent it makes sense to, dissociate Nietzsche's thinking on mood from his specific visions is ultimately a philosophical question that should not concern us here. However, let it be said that Nietzsche's emphasis on independence by necessity forces the reader to make up his or her own mind about what is valuable in the philosopher's thinking.<sup>15</sup>

To conclude, Nietzsche's thinking on desire and his communication of mood do not contradict his atheism. To the contrary, viewing Nietzsche's criticism of religion from this perspective allows one to specify that his atheism is a radical atheism that not only denies the existence of God but also questions the desire for God. Nietzsche's questioning of the desire for God leads him to think that a reorientation of desire toward the earthly future is an opportunity that should be pursued, not least because of the promise of a higher culture of higher moods.

---

<sup>15</sup> Just as one can question William James' reasons for thinking that only a religious perspective can open up the "strenuous mood" of striving (cf. Lekan 2007) one might dispute that Nietzsche has valid reasons for thinking that heightening moods requires deepening social hierarchy. The difficulty of course is that Nietzsche, unlike James, is not all too clear about his reasons when it comes to this particular issue and prefers to speak in a prophetic voice on the matter. Perhaps this preference means that there is all the more reason to question Nietzsche's interpretation.