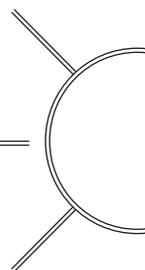


CHAPTER 12

ALL IN (NIETZSCHEAN ATHEISM)



So often I have lived as a closet Nietzschean. So often atheists who accept Friedrich Nietzsche's claim that God is dead have lived as closet Christians, whether they know it or not. There are numerous times when I live as if God is dead, and I have killed him. There are numerous times when these particular atheists live as if God is alive in their altruistic and noble care for others. While it is certainly not the case that all atheists are Nietzscheans, Nietzsche's influence has been broad and profound, manifesting itself ideologically and practically in diverse ways among both theists and atheists, ranging from the ethical egoism of Ayn Rand to the political policies of Nazi Germany. Nietzsche's penetrating words and analysis of our motives, particularly in relation to our motivations and self-interest, highlight a challenge that extends beyond armchair philosophy to our interactions, and most importantly our motivations behind such interactions. For this reason, Nietzsche will always be relevant to everyone, be they atheist or Christian.

In this chapter I will address nominal Christianity, nominal Nietzschean atheism, Pauline radicalism, and Nietzschean radicalism. While there may be other sets, I am centering my arguments on these four groupings, and so

my arguments are limited to them.¹ I will challenge both nominal Christians and nominal Nietzschean atheists to get out of their respective closets and go “all in”: nominal Christians to live in light of the crucified and risen God, and nominal and inconsistent Nietzscheans who claim that God is dead to live in light of this claim.

I encourage people to take seriously the relation of their worldviews to their lifestyles, thinking through where their convictions would logically or naturally lead them in terms of action. One thing I appreciate about the atheist Friedrich Nietzsche is that he sought to be consistent in this way. He carefully thought through the connection between his belief that God is dead and how people should live in view of this belief.

Now to be sure, I struggle with the notions of atheism and secularism, and not simply in terms of their adherents’ denial of theism. For one, even if somebody denies theism, such denial does not mean that one is denying deity. For as Paul Tillich wrote, whatever concerns us ultimately is our god.² Based on this definition of deity, even sex, money, power, and fame function as gods. And while secularists may deny sacredness in principle, many secularists affirm the sacredness of human life and nature. From this vantage point, humanity and the world can also function as deities.

While I struggle with the notions and definitions of atheism and secularism, I also struggle with atheists who affirm Nietzsche’s claim that God is dead and don’t live in light of that claim. I should add that I also struggle with myself—when I as a Christian don’t live in an intellectually honest way. The only way that a Christian can rightfully live out his Christianity is the way Paul did (Acts 20; 1 Corinthians 15; Philippians 1).

In Philippians 1:21, Paul is writing from a Roman jail cell and says, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” In Acts 20:24, 33–35, Paul is bidding good-bye for the last time in his life to the Ephesian church and says,

I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace. . . . I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help

the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

In 1 Corinthians 15:29–32, Paul continues:

Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them? And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour? I die every day—I mean that, brothers—just as surely as I glory over you in Christ Jesus our Lord. If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus for merely human reasons, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised,

“Let us eat and drink,
“for tomorrow we die.”

Everything Paul suffered, he did so based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, the resurrection hope he had, and the gracious love he experienced as Jesus forgave him for having persecuted the church and made him his ambassador in chains for the gospel. As a result, the least of the apostles worked harder than all of the apostles, and set us an example to follow, living in light of the grace of God and the risen Lord: “For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me” (1 Corinthians 15:9–10).

Some live as Christians for pragmatic reasons and not because of the resurrection; they would likely abandon the faith if they were to experience the suffering Paul mentions. Paul did not live out his Christian life to leverage Jesus for his own comforts and privileges. Often in discomfort and humiliation, Paul lived out his Christianity based solely on the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Paul could lay down his life because Jesus had destroyed the power of sin and death by rising from the dead, thereby securing Paul’s future and ours. There was no hedging his bets.

All too often, unlike the apostle Paul, I hedge my bets and take calculated risks. I am not alone. Many other Christians do the same. We do

not believe in Christianity because we believe it to be true, but because we need it to be true. We often use Christianity for its moral aims and ends, and for how it benefits us in other ways. But what happens when we find that the faith does not benefit but hurts us, and we no longer “need” it? When we hold on to the faith for pragmatic reasons, we are halfway toward abandoning it.

As a Christian, given my belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, I should live as if Jesus’ bodily resurrection matters. The bodily resurrection certainly mattered to the apostle Paul, and as a result he cut his ties to calculated risk and went for broke. If Jesus had not been raised and if the world will not be raised through him, Paul would conclude that his own life of costly sacrifice was a total waste (1 Corinthians 15:30–32). With confidence that Jesus rose from the dead and that he would one day be raised too, Paul lived a life of reckless abandon for Jesus and others.

I should live honestly by cutting my ties to self-preservation and self-advancement and throw myself on the mercies of God to care for me while I care for others. After all, I believe that no matter what happens to me, he will raise me and secure me for eternity. My belief is grounded in a transcendent hope that intersects and transforms history.

This is one of the chief lines of demarcation between my beliefs and those of many atheists. My beliefs extend beyond this world order. While an atheist may hope in posterity or in the ideal of humanity, those ideals would perish in a nuclear holocaust that would wipe out humanity. I can hope in humanity even if it were to perish (and me with it) based on the conviction that Jesus will raise the dead. So I believe my hope in humanity is on much surer ground, and the basis for going all in for the sake of others is more credible. And yet I know atheists whose regard for human well-being surpasses my own. Without consideration of the logical basis for their practices, their authentic concern for their fellow humans humbles me. You may ask how they can humble me when they are not being consistent. They humble me by revealing to me my own inconsistency as they live out what I am called to do as a Christian—caring sacrificially for others by helping them up when they fall.

I am not sure I could say the same for their counterpart, Friedrich Nietzsche. For I am not at all convinced that Nietzsche’s call for the individual

to rise up to new heights as the superhuman (*Übermensch*) was really an affirmation of his fellow man. And still, at the very least, Nietzsche sought to live out his atheistic convictions. This atheist was no closet Christian.

Through his “Madman,” Nietzsche proclaimed that God—ultimately the crucified God—is dead and that we have killed him.³ Nietzsche was troubled that after proclaiming to the masses that God is dead, and although people knew that the church was an imposter, they still lived as if nothing changed with this knowledge; business went on as usual.⁴ For Nietzsche and his prophet Zarathustra, given that God is dead and we have killed him, we must see that we are the creators of our own destinies, including morals. There is no objective truth or goodness. There are only truths and moralities we create as expressions of our will to power, as matters of personal preference and taste.⁵ Now, if this is so, if destiny and morality are our own creations based on our own tastes and preferences and will to power, what is to safeguard meaning and purpose and life itself? For as Dostoevsky said, “If there’s no everlasting God, there’s no such thing as virtue, and there’s no need of it.”⁶

Nietzsche’s atheism was not coupled with naive, utopian optimism. He understood that nihilism and the denial of life were right around the corner, for if there is no God to ensure morals and life, we must ensure them by our own courageous activity and creativity. Nietzsche set forth the doctrine of eternal recurrence as an idea worthy of consideration in the attempt to affirm life in the face of nihilism. Eternal recurrence is an oppressive as well as liberating doctrine, for this teaching places ultimate responsibility on our shoulders. One version of eternal recurrence is that we will live this life over and over again for all eternity—an ancient and philosophically robust version of Bill Murray’s movie *Groundhog Day*.⁷ If we were to live in view of this idea, we would be sobered by its import: what we do at any given moment has eternally recurring implications. While fatalistic, it also suggests that all of what we do always matters and is full of meaning. Nietzsche presented the idea of eternal recurrence as a possible safeguard against nihilism and as an alternative to such Christian ideas as the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and the judgment to come.

Nietzsche’s philosophical program is not for the faint of heart. In comparing and contrasting Nietzsche and William James, one of the fathers of American pragmatism, Edward Craig writes,

James's writing exudes a certain easy confidence that Nietzsche altogether lacked and could never have approved. His optimism, where it is found, is hard-won and precarious. He feels very keenly something of which James shows little awareness and most certainly does not emphasise, that the realisation that a belief is held for pragmatic purposes is halfway to its abandonment. Where pragmatism enters, "Nihilism stands at the door," [taken from *Will to Power*, paragraph 1] and to accept nihilism and to overcome it calls for a degree of inner strength far beyond the normal. Hence the force of its competitors, as Nietzsche well knew.⁸

Like Nietzsche's philosophy, the apostle Paul's doctrine of the crucified and risen God was not for the faint of heart. Neither Nietzsche nor Paul was pragmatic. Pragmatism is not a good alternative to their radically consistent philosophies of life. It is not as personally demanding or as consistent as their views. I may well become nihilistic in my worldview if someday I were to conclude that Jesus did not rise from the dead, that the dead will not be raised, and that God does not exist. I might well follow the apostle Paul into nihilism apart from optimism if he and I were to conclude that these things are not true. For Paul at least, if Jesus has not been raised from the dead, we are the most pitiful of all people; if Jesus is not raised bodily from the dead, those of us claiming to follow Christ should eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we will die (1 Corinthians 15:12–34).

We Christians should not try to have our cake and eat it too. However, I find that we often do just this: we believe to the extent that we hedge our bets. We sit on the fence, believing in Christ not because we believe him to be the truth but because it helps us live moral and profitable lives according to Christian standards, including assisting us in raising our kids in a supposedly wholesome way. On my best nonpragmatic days I don't believe in Jesus because I need him to be true. On my best days I believe in him because I believe him to be the truth. However, I am of the conviction that many in the church believe in Jesus because he profits them emotionally, spiritually, and even materially. In other words, we often believe in him for pragmatic and naively optimistic reasons—something Paul would never do, just as Nietzsche would never hold to a belief for pragmatic reasons.

Now, although Nietzsche could not be accused of espousing naive optimism, how does he not disregard certain forms of human life in view of his nontheistic affirmation of the will to power? While Nietzsche could affirm life through consideration of the idea of eternal recurrence, one must still ask, “Whose or which life?” To affirm life in all its particulars throughout history certainly does not lead us to differentiate good and bad. Are we endorsing all forms of the will to power of life? On this view do not good and evil blur into each other? Could not Nietzsche’s atheistic model lead to the affirmation of certain forms of life at the expense of others, to the advance of the strong at the expense of the weak? For if our identity and meaningfulness are bound up with our own acts of creativity—and those alone—must we not impose our will on our surroundings and other people? If the world and everything in it is simply the playing field for our own creative exploits, does not the end of exercising the will to power justify the means?

At least Nietzsche was creative. In place of his creativity, many of us have moved toward consumerism and moral mediocrity. It is not always the most creative who are most valuable and who win today; sometimes it is those who consume the most and who get by at the least cost to themselves. We have replaced rigor and moral excellence and creativity with compulsive consumption and moral mediocrity. In one sense many of us in the church have no trouble believing in Jesus for a life of prosperity in the here and now, eating and drinking as much as we can and trying to put off as long as possible the day when we will die and stand before God. Nietzsche knew what he rejected, whereas we Christians often reject with our lives what we believe but do not understand.

Nietzsche rejected the apostle Paul’s doctrine of the crucified God (1 Corinthians 1), considering Paul’s religion the most harmful teaching ever taught. He believed it kept humanity from rising to new heights because it esteemed the weak, the despised, and the herd. Here is what Nietzsche says in his book *The Antichrist*:

The Christian movement, as a European movement, has been from the start a collective movement of the dross and refuse elements of every kind (these want to get power through Christianity). It does *not* express the decline of a race, it is an aggregate of forms of decadence of locking together and seeking each other out from everywhere. It is

not, as is supposed, the corruption of antiquity itself, of *noble* antiquity, that made Christianity possible. The scholarly idiocy which upholds such ideas even today cannot be contradicted harshly enough. At the very time when the sick, corrupt chandala strata in the whole *imperium* adopted Christianity, the *opposite type*, nobility, was present in its most beautiful and most mature form. The great number became master; the democratism of the Christian instinct *triumphed*. Christianity was not “national,” not a function of a race—it turned to every kind of man who was disinherited by life, it had its allies everywhere. At the bottom of Christianity is the rancor of the sick, instinct directed *against* the healthy, *against* health itself. Everything that has turned out well, everything that is proud and prankish, beauty above all, hurts its ears and eyes. Once more I recall the inestimable words of Paul: “The *weak* things of the world, the *foolish* things of the world, the *base* and *despised* things of the world hath God chosen.” This was the formula: *in hoc signo* decadence triumphed.

God on the cross—are the horrible secret thoughts behind this symbol not understood yet? All that suffers, all that is nailed to the cross, is *divine*. All of us are nailed to the cross, consequently *we* are divine. We alone are divine. Christianity was a victory, a nobler outlook perished of it—Christianity has been the greatest misfortune of mankind so far.⁹

Karl Barth contends that Nietzsche understood Christianity better than most if not all its defenders and the rest of its critics in the nineteenth century. Nietzsche understood what Christianity is about at its core—Christ as the Neighbor, who cares for the downtrodden, the weak, the despised.¹⁰ In place of the crucified God, whom, according to Nietzsche, Paul “created” and proclaimed, Nietzsche put forth Dionysius and his prophet Zarathustra—which are really one and the same.¹¹ In fact, they are realized in Nietzsche himself. They stand opposed to Paul’s crucified God.

It should be made clear that in Nietzsche’s later works, Dionysius is not the god of pagan revelry and debauchery of ancient Greek culture but the iconic figure who embraces life in all its terror and tragedy. Dionysius and Zarathustra are those who embrace the tragedy bound up with soaring to the mountain heights of azure isolation, despising the herd mentality,

the democratic spirit, and care for the weak, which, as Nietzsche sees it, is bound up with a world-negating escapist outlook.

Walter Kaufmann argues that in *Ecce Homo*, Dionysius epitomizes for Nietzsche the heroic figure who embraces a tragic existence:

Looking for a pre-Christian, Greek symbol that he might oppose to “the Crucified,” Nietzsche found Dionysius. His “Dionysius” is neither the god of the ancient Dionysian festivals nor the god Nietzsche had played off against Apollo in *The Birth of Tragedy*, although he does, of course, bear some of the features of both. In the later works of Nietzsche, “Dionysius” is no longer the spirit of unrestrained passion, but the symbol of the affirmation of life with all its suffering and terror. “The problem,” Nietzsche explained in a note that was later included in the posthumous *Will to Power* (section 1052), “is that of the meaning of suffering: whether a Christian meaning or a tragic meaning. . . . The tragic man affirms even the harshest suffering.” And *Ecce Homo* is, not least of all, Nietzsche’s final affirmation of his own cruel life.¹²

In the end Nietzsche and Paul present opposing views of suffering, meaning, and life. While Nietzsche affirms tragedy and suffering, he rejects the view that we ascend by suffering and dying. For him we suffer and die as we ascend. Greatness involves the willingness to go it alone and experience loneliness and the tormenting pain of the pursuit of excellence, forsaking the comforts of the herd. For many of us in consumer Christianity, we ascend by affirming our base passions and by avoiding suffering and tragedy. Against this backdrop those atheists who affirm Nietzsche in principle yet fail to follow through on his logic and, instead, sacrifice themselves by raising up the weak and foolish come much closer than the nominal church and I do to reflecting Paul’s Jesus. Having said that, they are inconsistent; they are not cutting off all ties to a Christian worldview.

These Nietzschean-affirming atheists need to go all in and cut off all ties to Christian philanthropic forms and follow Nietzsche’s Dionysius. So, too, the nominal church and I need to count the cost and move beyond hedging our bets and die to Dionysius and follow Paul’s Jesus. I don’t want to settle for a version of Pascal’s wager, betting that it is best to side with Paul

rather than with Nietzsche, given that we gain or lose much if Paul is correct (eternal rewards or punishments) and gain or lose nothing if Nietzsche is. I need to wager that the best life is lived based not on quantitative rewards or punishments but on the reward of loving my neighbor and living authentically before God because God has laid down his life so that I can truly live.

We Christians can die to our unbridled passions and our compartmentalization of the faith (bound up with comfort and privilege) because Jesus died to affirm life—our lives. We Christians can be truly for God and for our neighbors—secularist, atheist, and theist alike—becoming truly world-affirming rather than world-negating, laying down our lives for others, especially the downtrodden, because of Jesus' loving sacrifice for true life. Jesus' life of sacrificial love makes it possible for me to go all in and live out authentic faith, laying down my life for the weak and despised.

I am grateful to God for Jesus. I am also thankful to God for Nietzsche. Sometimes the worst enemies of the Christian faith are our best friends. His own brutal honesty, consistency, courage, and logic help me come to terms with my faith and move me to struggle to go all in and be broken for my neighbor in need, as his "adversary" the apostle Paul did.

CHRISTIAN CONSISTENCY

While I am thankful for Nietzsche's consistent and courageous logic, I am even more thankful for a modern-day Paul—Paul Isihara. I want to share the story of his care for my family and me when we were in great need, for we are concerned not simply for logic but for life itself. Paul did not hedge his bets with my family and me, but he lived in view of the apostle Paul's crucified God, sacrificially caring for us—the lowly and despised. Though a math professor by trade, and the son of a famous physicist, he didn't use calculations at all. Or, to be more accurate, he used Christ's kingdom calculations. My family and I were Nietzschean dross and refuse at the time. Having been overseas, we suddenly had to return to the States without work or a place to live. Paul let us use his suburban home and his car, and he even paid for our utilities until we were back on our feet. At the time Paul lived in an apartment in the inner city of Chicago, working in

a community development project among the poor and commuting to the suburbs to teach at his college. As he gave to us, he also gave to others. He made this his life's ambition—he still does.

Paul never expected for us or the others he would take into his home from time to time to pay him back. No doubt such care hurt him professionally, for it is very difficult to advance one's career when helping others not fall through the cracks. Coupled with others, we did more than tax and inconvenience his life, career, and bank account; we turned his ascent into a descent. But that was what he was about; following his Lord, Paul carried his cross. I am not sure I would ever do the same, for I value comforts, convenience, and privileged status; but with the inspiration of Paul's life, I might. Paul shows me up, but even more important, he shows me how to live a more noble way.

Certainly I could mention other Christians who lived by heavenly calculations that involved great risk to themselves by caring for the distressed—Christians such as St. Francis of Assisi, who abandoned his father's wealth for his heavenly Father's kingdom to father those orphaned by society, or William Wilberforce, who sacrificed his body and his career to free slaves and transform morals in the British empire, or Mother Teresa, who laid down her life daily to touch the untouchables in India's ghettos. But I would rather talk of Paul Isihara—my own St. Francis right here in the States—because at the time of our return to this country, my family and I were the ones in need. We were the ones in danger of falling through society's cracks and in need of a helping hand, not able to pick ourselves up by our own bootstraps. If it had been up to Nietzsche, God might not have been the only one who died; we might have too. Nietzsche's doctrine is for the strong and superhuman, and there are times when I have been all too weak and all too human. Now the philosophically alive question before me is: Will I do for others what Paul Isihara did for me, going all in?

NIETZSCHEAN ATHEIST CONSISTENCY

While I don't believe Hitler's appropriation of Nietzsche's superhuman concept would have pleased Nietzsche in the slightest, I do believe there is

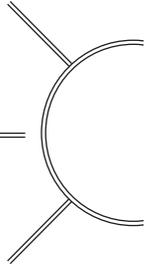
nothing in Nietzsche's thought to guard against Hitler's emergence in one form or another.¹³ There is certainly nothing in Nietzsche's thought that would give rise to a Mother Teresa or Paul Isihara. They can give sacrificially to their downtrodden neighbors because Christ has risked everything to secure for them life eternal. But if God is dead, and we were the ones who killed him because we no longer need him, how can we not take matters into our own hands to guard against meaninglessness? We must continue imposing our will on our surroundings, continue creating, and continue taking because nothing is given to us.

There is no place for Nietzsche-affirming atheists to live like closet Christians. If Nietzsche's brutal calculus is right, the well-meaning atheist philanthropist cannot exhort us based on a universal, ethical argument or pragmatics that we should care for our downtrodden neighbors by helping them up. Rather the Nietzschean formula dictates that we should leave them to fend for themselves if we truly care that humanity ascends to new heights. On Nietzschean grounds we can never rest but must continue to ascend by continuing to create meaning by imposing our wills; otherwise, we will cease to be, for it is only our own creative action that safeguards meaningful existence. There is no rest on this model and no naive utopian optimism, just precarious life and dangerous logic.¹⁴

So will I go all in and do for others what the crucified God and his servant/my friend Paul have done for me? Or will I live by nominal Christianity or by Nietzschean consistency? Hopefully I will choose the former and reject the latter two options. Hopefully the atheist who has affirmed Nietzsche's "God is dead" doctrine and his rejection of the crucified God will go all in with his beliefs or, better yet, come to embrace Paul's crucified God. To me, to scorn nominal Christianity and die to myself in view of the crucified and risen God is a risk well worth taking. Will fellow Christians and Nietzschean atheists go all in and do the same?

CHAPTER 25

RESPONSES TO “ALL IN”



Thomas W. Clark

I appreciate the opportunity to comment on Paul Louis Metzger’s challenge in “All In” to act in accordance with our worldviews. He makes many good points, but atheists (more broadly, naturalists) need not follow Nietzsche in abandoning conventional morality to live consistently with the claim that God is dead. Absent God, morality survives in us.

He is right that pragmatic grounds for belief are insufficient. We want to know what’s true independent of what it might benefit us to believe, otherwise we might well deceive ourselves. This means putting epistemology first: What constitutes reliable grounds for belief? Theism and naturalism differ in their epistemic commitments, and from there diverge in their claims about the world.

Naturalists believe, on the basis of empiricism, that there is likely nothing supernatural, so no extra-natural foundations for morality exist. Instead, we find our moral instincts to be just that: hardwired dispositions for fairness, reciprocity, caring for the young and helpless, not inflicting unnecessary harm, and other naturally selected other-regarding propensities that make

social life possible. Nietzsche's big mistake was to disown the moral side of human nature, to condemn it as a hindrance to total self-actualization. There's no reason naturalists must follow him in this, and I know of no contemporary secular philosophers who endorse the unchecked will to power as a force for good. If there are such, I will join Metzger in repudiating them.

That we are by nature moral creatures (and yes, selfish too) is why naturalists believe we don't need supernatural backup to justify the rightness of self-sacrifice. Generosity feels good, and is judged virtuous, because evolution has made concern for others one of our primary, basic values by which we evaluate action. This is why Republicans and the Right ignore economic inequality at their peril: their apparent lack of concern for the unlucky in life puts them in a morally untenable position as we instinctively judge it.

For Metzger good works only have meaning and value if God exists. The reduction in suffering here on earth isn't an intrinsic good, despite the manifest importance people place on reducing their suffering right now. This, perhaps, is why Metzger is humbled by atheists' altruism: they apparently don't need cosmic justification for good works, so their concern is in a sense more authentic, more direct. Altruistic naturalists are just doing what comes naturally, as they see it. And they are being epistemically consistent: since life on earth is all we reliably know we have, we can and should be fully engaged with terrestrial suffering.

The essential safeguard against nihilism, something Metzger thinks can only come from God, exists in the robust moral inclinations of each normally endowed human being. But because we are also naturally selfish, it's of course nearly impossible to go completely "all in" for the other. The tension between self-actualization and meeting the basic needs of others presents an inescapable moral dilemma that not even a god could resolve. Naturalists don't have it easy, but we are pretty sure it is real.

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