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The Trouble with Creating Values after God's Death

Erli Mërtika[1]

Abstract

This essay examines how God's death affects the philosopher's task, which Nietzsche defines as creating, commanding, and legislating values (BGE §211). I argue that, unlike Plato, the new philosopher can no longer convince himself that his values are "the eternal treasure that just happened to have been found on his path" (WP §972). Plato assured himself of the legitimacy of his values by treating them as a "thou shalt" from somewhere beyond himself. The new philosopher can no longer believe in these beyonds, so he's left with no choice but to acknowledge his values as his own creations. As such, his first and most pressing task is to persuade himself that his values are worthy of devotion despite knowing they are a product of his all-too-human will, and thus neither true nor rationally justifiable. In short, I argue that the new philosopher must view himself as a commander, the source that grants his values their authority.

Keywords: *Nietzsche; genuine philosophers; commanding*

Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story.

—Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald, Book 1, line 1

In the parable of the madman, God's death is said to have "unchained the earth from its sun" (GS §125). Here, the "earth" stands for "the world of valuations"—the only world that "concerns human beings" (GS §301)—whereas the "sun" represents the metaphysical foundations that once secured belief in that world, namely, God, Plato's intelligible realm and other such *Hinterwelten*. The madman's worry is that without belief in these transcendent sources, values will lose their foundations and legitimacy. The result he fears is nihilism, a condition that has been variously described as a "flickering out of some erotic flame" (Pippin 54), a "crisis of piety in which aims…can no longer be affirmed" (Pooley 62), disorientation and despair (Reginster 34), and so on.

Taken together, the scholarship interprets God's death as a catalyst for a cultural decline in values. This essay examines how it impacts "genuine philosophers" in particular, because their task, Nietzsche explains, is to *create, command, and legislate values* (BGE §211). How has God's death influenced their work? Which part does it affect most directly? We can immediately rule out legislation, understood as an outward-facing part of their task, because their private unbelief does not alter their duty or their ability to persuade the public to embrace new norms.

I argue that the real problem with God's death is that philosophers can no longer persuade themselves. In other words, the issue is with *commanding*, which I understand as the inward-facing part of their task having to do with the authorization of values.

[1] Erli Mërtika, University of South Florida, FL, USA. E-mail: erlimertika@gmail.com

Nietzsche suggests that when philosophers believed in "God," they did not have to command, because they did not recognize the values they legislated as their own creations. He illustrates this by satirizing Plato for "persuad[ing] himself that the good, as he wanted it, was not the good of Plato but the good in itself, the eternal treasure that just happened to have been found on his path by some man called Plato" (WP §972). This "will to blindness," as Nietzsche calls it, allowed old philosophers to pose as *discoverers* of values already created and authorized by something or somewhere higher than themselves. Now that they can no longer "relieve [their] conscience with the hypothesis of a 'God' or 'eternal values'" (WP §972), they must finally acknowledge their own selves—*to themselves*—as creators and sources of authority. This, I argue, is what Nietzsche means when he says that godless new philosophers must be "*commanders and legislators*" (BGE §211). In this context, "command" refers to their internal relation to values, whereas "legislation" refers to their external relation to others.

The secondary literature tends to overlook the internal dimension of command. Laurence Lampert, for example, argues that when Nietzsche calls for philosophers to become "*commanders and legislators*" in BGE §211, he means that they must become "philosophical rulers who legislate for a whole age" (Lampert, *Nietzsche's Task* 199). Likewise, Paul S. Loeb takes the phrase to mean that real philosophers are creators of normative rather than descriptive values, i.e., they tell people how things *should be*, not merely how they are (Loeb, *Nietzsche's Metaphilosophy* 93). The trouble with these and other such readings[2] is that they collapse "commanding" into "legislating." If Nietzsche only meant that philosophers prescribe norms for a people and an age, there would have been no need to call them "commanders," because legislation already implies normativity. "Command" must therefore mean something distinct from "legislation."

There are two reasons to interpret "command" in the psychological sense described above. First, contextually, Nietzsche tasks new philosophers with creating and legislating values in a godless world where belief in external sources of authority are no longer credible. Seeing that they can no longer appeal to anything beyond themselves, as their predecessors did, it stands to reason that they must acknowledge themselves—at least to themselves, though not necessarily to others—as the only authorizing force left. As such, it makes little sense to say that philosophers *command* when they tell an age how things should be, if they privately believe that they are only discoverers and servants of an authority higher than themselves.

The second reason is textual. In BGE §199, Nietzsche writes that "nothing has been exercised and cultivated better and longer among men so far than obedience," and as a result, "the need for it is now innate in the average man, as a kind of *formal conscience* that commands: 'thou shalt unconditionally do something, unconditionally not do

[2] For other interpretations of BGE §211 that overlook or collapse "command" into "legislation," see Schacht 16-17, 21, 343; Conway 59-60; Meyer 31; Rodgers 11, 15, 201. Schacht references BGE §211 to describe the philosopher's task "in terms of the 'creation,' 'determination' or 'legislation' of *values*," but he does not treat commanding as a distinct part of their task (Schacht 16-17, 21). Conway mentions "command," but only to dramatize "the legislative role of the philosopher" (Conway 59-60). Meyer's takeaway from BGE §211 is that "whatever the philosophy of the future is supposed to be, it is going to be a form of both legislation and artistic creation." Rodgers notes that Nietzsche uses a variety of terms to describe the task of philosophers and their relation to value, including "commanding," "determining," "creating," and "legislating," but he treats these terms largely as interchangeable and thus sums up the philosopher's task by saying, like Loeb, that "they are not describers of reality but creators and legislators of value" (Rodgers 11, 15, 201).

something else,' in short, 'thou shalt.'" Those who now find themselves in a position to issue commands, he adds, suffer from the bite of this herd conscience. They feel uneasy, sinful, guilty, and thus,

> find it necessary to deceive themselves before they could command—as if they, too, merely obeyed […] They know no other way to protect themselves against their bad conscience than to pose as the executors of more ancient or higher commands (of ancestors, the constitution, of right, the laws, or even of God).

Nietzsche's point is that millennia of moral cultivation has predisposed the conscience of modern man to automatically reject the notion that he could be the source of ultimate authority. The thought is unbearable, and the only way he knows to withstand it is by persuading himself that he actually obeys even when he commands. As such, BGE §199 presents *command* as a rare and difficult inner stance, but I argue that it also lays the ground for its use in BGE §211, where Nietzsche says that godless new philosophers must become commanders of their own values.

When we read BGE §211 through the lens of BGE §199, it becomes clear that Nietzsche means the godless new philosophers must overcome the "formal conscience" that compels them to think values created and authorized by an all-too-human will—*their* will—are always illegitimate. Lampert and Loeb overlook Nietzsche's implicit suggestion that the task of philosophers became psychologically harder now that they must bear the full weight of authority. If they can't bear the weight, they won't be able to perform their legislative task, because they'll think their own values are worthless.

So far, I have provided reasons for interpreting "command" as a psychological phenomenon and suggested it constitutes the real problem with creating values after the death of God. This argument is, however, still somewhat speculative, because we've yet to see Nietzsche explicitly linking this burdensome inner stance to the philosopher's task in his published works. It's possible, first, that the psychological dimension of command in BGE §199 has no relation to its use in §211.[3] Second, even though WP §972 is clearly a draft for §211, those crucial lines that define command in psychological terms do not appear in the published work, which simply states, without clarification, that genuine philosophers are "commanders and legislators." The argument thus needs robust textual evidence from the published works that brings together the threads of command, conscience, and value creation.

I argue this is found in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* in the section titled "On the Three Metamorphoses." As Paul S. Loeb notes, this section can be read as foreshadowing Zarathustra's spiritual journey (Loeb, *The Death of Nietzsche's Zarathustra* 202). Here, the narrator describes "how the spirit becomes a camel, and the camel a lion, and finally the lion a child." The lion is presented as freer than the camel, but not free enough to create values. For that, the narrator says the spirit must liberate itself from "its last master," viz., the great dragon.

[3] BGE §199 does not explicitly mention philosophers. It discusses the inner dimension of command as it applies to political leaders, and culminates with the figure of Napoleon as an exemplar of someone who "commands unconditionally."

Who is the great dragon whom the spirit no longer wants to call master and god?

> "Thou shalt" is the name of the great dragon. But the spirit of the lion says "I will."
>
> "Thou shalt" stands in its way, gleaming golden, a scaly animal, and upon every scale "thou shalt!" gleams like gold.
>
> The values of millennia gleam on these scales, and thus speaks the most powerful of all dragons: "the value of all things—it gleams in me.
>
> All value has already been created, and the value of all created things—that am I. Indeed, there shall be no more 'I will!'" Thus speaks the dragon.

The great dragon named "Thou shalt" tells the spirit it can only have one attitude towards values, namely, *obedience*. Values are only ever legitimate, the dragon says, when they're found gleaming on its scales, i.e., when they're viewed as its commands or "thou shalts." The lion fights back with "I will," which posits that values can be legitimate as creations and affirmations of his own will. *Thou shalt* and *I will* are thus opposing inner stances towards what makes values legitimate. One tells the lion to only view them as discovered and commanded from above and the other tells him to assert his own will and command from within.

This parable makes the connection between BGE §199 and §211 clearer, because it shows that the struggle of value creation takes place in the conscience of the creator. The context and *causa belli* for the conflict—laid out in the preface of *Zarathustra*—is God's death. That suggests that earlier philosophers did not have to oppose and defeat "Thou shalt" in themselves. Plato, as we've already seen, embraces the dragon's edict, because he does not view himself as a *creator* of values or someone who asserts his own will to authorize them. He views himself as a chance discoverer of eternal values gleaming on the dragon's scales. As Nietzsche puts it in the draft for BGE §211, Plato acted as if his values were "the eternal treasure that just happened to have been found on his path." Thus, when God was still alive, "Thou shalt" was a friend and a "means of consolation" (WP §972). It is only now that "no thinker can any longer relieve his conscience with the hypothesis of a 'God' or 'eternal values,'" that "the claim of the legislator of new values arises with a new and unprecedented terror" (WP §972).

The similarities between "On the Three Metamorphoses" and BGE §199 are unmistakable, and one does well to recall that Nietzsche told Burckhardt in a letter from 22 September 1886 that *Beyond Good and Evil* says "the same thing as [his] *Zarathustra*, but differently, very differently." Both texts, as we've seen, deal with the same psychological obstacle faced by creators after God's death. *Zarathustra* calls it the great dragon named "thou shalt," and *Beyond Good and Evil* calls it the "formal conscience that commands 'thou shalt.'" In both cases, Nietzsche suggests that modern creators experience an inner compulsion to view themselves as mere executors of higher commands.

This connection has gone largely unnoticed. As a result, the psychological struggle behind the creation of new values after God's death has been misunderstood and

understated. In his reading of "The Three Metamorphoses," for example, Lampert says that "to become Zarathustra's brother," meaning a fellow creator, one must "perform the destructive act of intellectual conscience that removes at a stroke values that have withstood the millennia" (Lampert, *Nietzsche's Teaching* 34). According to this fairly standard reading, the lion defeats his last master with a "single deed," viz., by overcoming old and sacred values in himself. This, I argue, does not get to the heart of the matter, because Nietzsche says old and sacred values gleam on the dragon's *scales*. As such, they are merely his armor, which means that to defeat the dragon, the lion must pierce deeper. In other words, he must overcome the *underlying criterion*—his "formal conscience"—which says that to be legitimate, all values must be discovered and obeyed, rather than created and commanded. If the lion overcomes old and sacred values but does not part with his formal conscience, he would still lack the freedom necessary to perform the philosopher's task, because he'd still judge his own creations as worthless. The scaleless dragon, his formal conscience, would still be there to persuade him they're merely his, merely human, and thus unworthy of his or anyone else's devotion.

Nietzsche illustrates this herdlike reflex to reject norms when they're thought to be man-made in a poem from *The Gay Science* titled "The Pious One Speaks" (GS: "Joke, Cunning, and Revenge" §38):

God loves us *because* he created us!
'Man created God!' – respond the jaded.
And yet should not love what he created?
Should even deny it *because* he made it?
Such cloven logic is limping and baited.

The first line expresses a premise even atheists once accepted, namely, that creation is not necessarily an obstacle to love, because God was thought to love us precisely *because* He created us. The second line quotes the insight that set the crisis of our time in motion, viz., that "man created God!" On this jaded view, creation discredits love. The realization that we created God becomes the very reason to now deny Him. But why should that follow? In the third and fourth lines, Nietzsche exposes the contradiction in this "cloven logic" by suggesting that jaded atheists accept that it's possible (at least in principle) to embrace what is created when the creator is God, but then reject that same possibility when the creator is man. What is it about man that makes his creations automatically worthless in their eyes? Nietzsche's answer is in the title, "*The Pious One* Speaks," which suggests that the godlessness of modern atheists is superficial, because they still adhere to the old Christian prejudice that only something divine, perfect, or in any case separate and beyond man can create values worthy of love and devotion. Man's only role in this pious schema[4] is to discover and obey divinely authorized norms, because he does not have the right to create and command his own.

As we've seen, Nietzsche argues that the modern conscience cannot stand the sight of its own authority. It cannot bear to admit or affirm its own creations, for the very reason that they are its own creations. This was not a problem when "God" was still alive and philosophers could hide creation from themselves, but now that He's dead, the only

[4] See Pooley's essay, "Nietzsche, Nihilism and the Crisis of Piety," which argues that nihilism "refers to the inability to overcome faith" (Pooley 61).

path forward is teaching "man the future of man as his *will,* as dependent on a human will" (BGE §203). This is why jaded atheists must shed their lingering piety, why the lion must defeat the great dragon, and why the philosopher must overcome his "formal conscience." These examples circle the same central point, namely, that to perform their task, godless philosophers must have reverence for themselves, love of mankind,[5] and the strength to withstand the heavy weight of command.

Jordan Rodgers offers a similar interpretation in his dissertation, *Nietzsche and the Task of Philosophy*. On his reading, as in Pippin, nihilism is understood narrowly as a psychological condition where values fail to inspire devotion, and more broadly as an ascetic disposition that allows devotion only when values are purported to be true or rationally justified (Rodgers 190). Rodgers argues that philosophers can solve nihilism in the narrow sense by framing their values as discovered and true, but notes that doing so is unwise, because it caters to the underlying "ascetic sensibilities" that perpetuate the broader and more entrenched form of nihilism (Rodgers 191-93). Hence, to tackle the problem at its root, he argues that Nietzsche thinks philosophers should tell themselves and their audience what neither of them wants to hear, viz., the honest truth, that values are "argumentatively unmotivated personal desires" and thus neither true nor rationally justified (Rodgers 193).[6]

This interpretation accords well with my reading, which holds that philosophers hid creation from themselves to appease the psychological demands of what Nietzsche calls "formal conscience" in BGE §199, and "the great dragon," in Z I: "The Three Metamorphoses." What Rodgers calls "ascetic sensibilities" can be understood as an alternative name for these same demands. Our accounts part ways on the question of which aspect of the philosopher's task is most problematized by the death of God and the ensuing nihilism. On Rodgers' reading, philosophers can still assure themselves that they discovered their values and then legislate them to others by arguing for their truth. He points out this would not solve the problem of nihilism, but he does allow for philosophers to carry on as they did before God's death (Rodgers 189-91). On my reading, this self-deception is no longer possible. As I've argued above, when Nietzsche says "God is dead," he means that "no thinker can any longer relieve his conscience" with narratives that reframe their created values into discovered treasures (WP §972). Much like the jaded atheist who admits that "man created God!," a genuine philosopher today cannot help but admit that "man created values." As such, his first and most pressing problem is persuading *himself* that his created values are worthy of his love and devotion. If he cannot overcome this inward-facing hurdle, his legislative project will never get off the ground. Rodgers emphasizes the outward-facing part of the philosopher's task.[7] He thus interprets

[5] In the second section of the preface, Zarathustra contrasts himself with the old saint who says that he can only love God, by stating that he goes down to the people because he "loves mankind."

[6] Pippin, Rodgers, and I share the view that Nietzsche's treatment of value is best understood through a psychological framework. Pippin treats nihilism broadly as a modern condition characterized by a "failure of desire, the flickering out of some erotic flame" (Pippin 54). Rodgers applies this psychological framework to the philosopher's task but does not distinguish between commanding and legislation (Rodgers 189-93). In this essay, I build on this framework but argue, first, that self-authorization (command) is a task in its own right, distinct from legislation, and second, that it is the first and most pressing problem for philosophers in a post-theistic world.

[7] Rodgers acknowledges that philosophers have "the same psychological hang-up, born of the same underlying ascetic ideal" that makes everyone else demand values not be rooted in desires, but he does not identify this as "commanding" nor as a primary obstacle, without which philosophers can no longer perform their task (Rodgers 190).

Nietzsche to have meant that Plato persuaded himself that he *found* his values to avoid having to face up "to the fact that he was attempting…to have his own personal value judgments gain power over *others*" (Rodgers 187).[8] This essay prioritizes the inward-facing part and thus interprets Nietzsche to have meant that Plato lied to have his values gain power over *himself*. In other words, Plato posed as a discoverer of already authorized values to avoid having to authorize them himself. Seeing that philosophers no longer have this "means of consolation" (WP §972), I argue that their first order of business is granting themselves the same authority they once granted God. If they cannot do that, meaning if they cannot command, then it's possible that genuine philosophy dies alongside God.

The Cost of Command

Nietzsche calls the philosopher's task "hard," "unwanted," but also "inescapable" (BGE §212). Even the very few called to it, he says, are often tempted to "slip out of that duty, as if out [of] their greatest danger…through some trick or other:"

> for example by telling themselves that the task is already solved, or is insoluble, or that they don't have the shoulders to carry such burdens, or that they are already weighed down with other, more immediate tasks, or even that this new, distant duty is a seduction and a temptation, a diversion from all duties, a sickness, a kind of madness (WP §972).

Zarathustra provides us with a good example of this, because he, too, tries to flee from what he perceives as his greatest danger through a series of self-deceiving tricks. For example, when "The Stillest Hour" reminds him that he had not performed his task—what he knows but does not speak—he tells her that "it is beyond [his] strength," and that he fears being crushed by its weight. When she tells him to do it anyway, even if he breaks, he comes up with another excuse, this time telling her that it's not *his* task. "Who am I?" he asks, "I am waiting for one more worthy; I am not worthy even of breaking under it." When that doesn't convince her, he says that he can't do it, because he "lacks the lion's voice for all commanding." The Stillest Hour cuts that excuse down by telling him that he has already forgotten how to obey and must now command. She thus lets him know, in language reminiscent of "The Three Metamorphoses," that he's ready to "become a child" (Z II: "The Stillest Hour"). The child's task, as we've seen, is to create values. Indeed, as Zarathustra explains a few sections prior to this one, the "stillest hours" are those quiet moments in a philosopher's cave when "the greatest events" take place. "Not around inventors of new noise does the world revolve," he tells the fire hound, "but around the inventors of new values; *inaudibly* it revolves" (Z II: "On Great Events"). The "Stillest Hour" is thus a moment of reckoning when Zarathustra, the godless philosopher, confronts his unwanted but inescapable burden.

Finally, after running out of tricks, Zarathustra admits that he is ashamed, but he just does "not want to." Upon hearing this, his stillest hour laughs, and that pitiless laughter, Zarathustra says, tore open his entrails, slit his heart, and compelled him to abandon his friends and finally face his difficult task. "Oh Zarathustra," she then tells him, "your fruits are ripe but you are not ripe for your fruits!" (Z II: "The Stillest Hour"). In

[8] Emphasis mine.

other words, Zarathustra's values are ready, already created, but he is not ready to bear the thought of *commanding* them.

Nietzsche describes this same moment of reckoning in the draft for BGE §211, where he says that after exhausting all their tricks, most value creators *are* eventually "reached by that *redeeming hour, that autumn hour of ripeness*, where they had to do what they did not even 'want' to do – and the deed they had most feared fell easily and undesired from the tree, as a deed without choice, almost as a gift (WP §972)."[9]

As such, Nietzsche presents the philosopher's task as a psychologically crushing burden. To even recognize the task as his own, the philosopher must fight against protective instincts that try to lead him astray. If he's ever reached by his stillest hour, he must still resist the impulse to view his values as a discovered treasure, as Plato did. If he gets past that—and now that God is dead, he has no choice—he must then figure out a way to regard his values as authoritative and binding despite acknowledging them as his own creation. Zarathustra tells his friends that commanding means becoming "judge and avenger and victim of [one's] own law" (Z II: "On Self-Overcoming"). By contrast, the apostle Paul tells *his* friends to "not take revenge…but [to] leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'it is mine to avenge'" (Rom. 12.19, *New International Version*). The problem for Zarathustra and his godless friends is that they have no such room in their hearts, so if they break their law, they must avenge it themselves, even when that means victimizing themselves.

Old legislators of value never had to be judges and avengers and victims of their own law, because they never saw it as *their* law. They assured themselves of its legitimacy by treating it as a "thou shalt" from somewhere beyond themselves. As one can imagine, it is easier to obey a divine command to kill one's own son, to cite an extreme case, than it is to command oneself to do so, assuming that is what the law requires. By saying it is *easier*, I don't mean to imply it is easy. As Kierkegaard reminds us, Abraham's struggle was profoundly crushing in its own right (Kierkegaard 76). In the end, however, Abraham believed in the divine authority of God, and that "means of consolation" (WP §972) makes all the difference in these extreme cases.

The example of Abraham illustrates why Nietzsche thinks commanding is nearly unbearable. As difficult as Abraham's task was—and it was so terribly difficult that he's called "the father of faith" for his trouble—it pales in comparison to the difficulty faced by those who must command *themselves*. To grasp the weight of it, let us imagine Abraham as one of Nietzsche's godless new philosophers. Let's say that he was the camel that became a lion, and the lion that defeated the great dragon to become a child. Let's say he overcame his formal conscience, that he pushed past self-protecting tricks, and then went on his way to create a new standard and a new law. After all that trouble, he must still become judge, avenger, and victim of that law. In other words, he must somehow regard his law as legitimate and binding despite acknowledging it as the product of his all-too-human will.

[9] Emphasis mine. See also *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Preface §2, where Nietzsche uses the same imagery to say, "our values, our yeas and nays, our ifs and buts, grow out of us with the necessity with which a tree bears fruit."

Now suppose that law—which he knows and loves as his own creation—dictates that he kill his own beloved son. Can this godless Abraham really bring himself to perform such a repulsive act? Can he possibly have enough love of mankind, enough reverence, enough faith in himself to actually avenge *his own* law? Can anyone?

Conclusion: Is a Godless Abraham Henceforth—Possible on Earth?

The death of God marks the end of an age when philosophers could ease their burden by posing as "executors of more ancient or higher commands" (BGE §199). Now they must command, which means viewing themselves as creators and executors of their own laws. This, I've argued, is the first and most pressing problem for philosophers after God's death. Their challenge lies in getting themselves to regard their values as worthy of devotion while knowing that they willed them into existence. Nietzsche is not clear that this is possible, which is why, after describing their task, he asks: "Are there such philosophers today? Have there been philosophers like this? Must there not be philosophers like this?" (BGE §211). Or more poignantly, in GM III §10, "Is there sufficient pride, daring, courage, self-confidence available today, sufficient will of the spirit, will to responsibility, freedom of will, for 'the philosopher' to be henceforth—possible on earth?"

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