

# **‘Our atheists are pious people.’ Stirner and Nietzsche on the relationship between religion and science**

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## **Abstract**

Atheism is commonly justified by opposing religious belief to scientific reason. By using ideas and arguments found in the works of Max Stirner and Friedrich Nietzsche it is argued that atheisms justified in this manner ignore the inner connection between religion and science; both religion and science are modes of abstraction from immediate sensuality, and are logically and genealogically linked. It is shown that this insight could open the space for a new reciprocal understanding, establishing a common ground between religion and science.

**Keywords:** radical atheism; Stirner; the Ego; religion.

## **Introduction: ‘Standard’ and ‘Refined’ Atheism**

The most common form of atheism, which I will therefore refer to as ‘standard atheism’, is based upon an argument which can be reconstructed in a syllogism like this:

- a) Our best scientific theories represent, more or less, a true picture of the world.
- b) Religious beliefs – amongst them the proposition that there exists an entity called ‘God’ – contradict those theories.

Therefore:

- a) Religious beliefs are untrue.

This argument lies at the core of the recent movement of ‘New Atheism’, with leading protagonists such as Sam Harris, Michael Onfray, and Richard Dawkins. Dawkins sees religion as a mere ‘delusion’<sup>1</sup>, a harmful and evil by-product of biological evolution<sup>2</sup> that should be erased from the world.

There are many obvious objections to this argument. Principally, it is not clear if it is legitimate to claim that modern science can give an overall picture of the world. If there are not certain boundaries to scientific explanation, how can we account for certain phenomena that lie at the core of our common world-view but which cannot be explained by science, such as human freedom or morality?

I will, however, address this debate only indirectly in this article. Instead I want to take a step back and ask if the distinction between religion and science, that is supposed by both opponents and adherents of ‘standard atheism’ is valid at all. Further, I will investigate if there is a close link between our ordinary modern, secularized world-view, with science as its highest or ‘purest’ expression on the one hand, and pre-modern, metaphysical world-views, with religion as its highest or ‘purest’ expression on the other hand.

While Dawkins & co. would strictly deny such a link,<sup>3</sup> more moderate tones have been emerging in the religious philosophy of Jürgen Habermas, a philosophy that he has been developing in several talks, discussions, articles, and interviews over the last few years.<sup>4</sup> Habermas raises the question of whether secular modernity does not depend on normative sources that it cannot produce by itself, but have to be provided by religious institutions. This dependency is, however, *external* for Habermas; secular modernity stands on its own feet as it is, both logically and genealogically, independent from any footing in religious traditions. Habermas does, however, open the door to claiming a much stronger, *internal* dependency.<sup>5</sup>

In this article I will take up the latter trail; I want to give an argument that supports the view that there is an internal relationship between religion (at least in its Christian form) and science, that is ignored both by ‘standard atheists’ and by many supporters of religion. In order to undertake this I will use, maybe surprisingly, arguments I find in the works of two philosophers who are generally considered to be the most radical atheists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, if not of overall Western philosophy: Max Stirner and Friedrich Nietzsche. They both defend an atheism that I would call ‘refined atheism’. They do not simply take the position of ‘objective truth’ and rebuke religion from it, but show that the relationship between religion and scientific atheism is too complex to be reduced to a mere right/wrong-dichotomy; religion is atheist in itself and (scientific ‘standard’) atheism is in itself religious. Thereby, they point towards a more fundamental question than that of whether religion is true or not: if we really wanted to be true atheists we would also have to reject any claims to truth at all.

## Religion vs. the Ego-ness of the Ego: Max Stirner

Max Stirner is a rarely discussed theorist in contemporary philosophy. The reason for this is that his main claim could seem to be completely mad, childish, and absurd: that the whole existence of the world depends on my Ego, to which, accordingly, no moral claims at all possess any binding power. By looking at this apparently rather bizarre consequence, one could easily overlook, however, the arguments that Stirner gives in his quite lengthy main work *The Ego and Its Own*<sup>6</sup> in order to support them. In opposition to Nietzsche, who wrote most of his books in an aphoristic, metaphorical style that makes it hard to see much argumentation in them, Stirner follows a quite clear-cut Hegelian style of reasoning, making the book a rather classical systematic philosophical treatise.

Stirner's central argumentative figure, which he develops in the first and critical part of *The Ego and Its Own*, works as follows: both on an ontogenetic and on a phylogenetic level, human consciousness makes the same logical development. In the first stage – the stage of polytheism and childhood – consciousness is bound to the force of the senses and thereby the outer world. It lives purely in the particular. This stage is a prison for consciousness. In order to break free of this it negates the realm of pure, immediate sensuality in a process of idealisation; it constructs a 'higher', 'over-sensual' world that is governed by universality and abstraction, ideals and morality. Stirner calls this second stage the stage of monotheism and youth. The problem that arises in this stage is that the means by which consciousness has realised its own self-emancipation – idealisation – turns against its own creations; it discovers that they are still too sensual, too particular, too concrete. A constant process of idealisation, creation of new ideals, and new idealisations take place, at the end of which nothing remains except the movement of negation itself: this is the abstract Ego, the thinker who is identical to the non-personal movement of thinking as the process of constantly overcoming the sensual.

At this point, something which can be called a 'catharsis' sets in: behind the thinking, the thinker becomes aware that the truth behind his or her thinking is his or her true, concrete Ego. Stirner's own language becomes a bit misleading and confusing at this point: this true, concrete Ego cannot be grasped by any concept, as it stands behind any concept as its creating force. Stirner clearly states that not even the concept of the 'transcendental I' that can be found in Fichte is capable of grasping the true Ego, as Fichte's Ego is still a universal concept.<sup>7</sup> Neither can the true Ego be reduced to its sensuality; it is the master both of its sensuality and its rationality. Therefore, the language of an impersonal creative force would seem to be much more adequate to describe it than the language of the 'I'. At the end of the book Stirner explicitly states:

They say of God, 'names name thee not'. That holds of me: no *concept* expresses me, nothing that is designated as my essence exhausts me; they are only names. [...] I am *owner* of my might, and I am so when I know myself as *unique*. In the

*unique one* the owner himself returns into his creative nothing, of which he is born.” (EO, 324)

The last sentence remains ambiguous, however, as it is still *the owner's* creative nothingness as if it could be his personal property. The Ego is just like the almighty monotheist God, who is not truly borne by something other, but gives birth to himself – whereby Stirner falls prey to all the contradictions and difficulties that are connected with the conception of *creatio ex nihilo*.

These self-inflicted confusions and contradictions point to the core of Stirner's philosophy: in order to remain able to speak about what he wants to say Stirner is – obviously enough – still dependent on using concepts that he finds in the tradition and does not create himself. In order to become what it truly is, Stirner's Ego has to go through the stages of sensuality and idealisation. It remains always dependent on that which it wants to exclude from itself. Stirner seems to completely overlook this point and this is what makes his philosophy so weak. If one wants to save some of Stirner's ideas one would have to draw a more complex picture of the relationship between the creating force and that which is created by it. This is exactly the point where Nietzsche comes into play. Before discussing this, however, I want to make clearer what we can learn from Stirner concerning the relationship between science and religion.

Religion is a ubiquitous phenomenon for Stirner; it is any form of perceiving an entity as somehow independent from me. Therefore, anyone who still accepts an entity to be independent from him or her can be called religious, even if this 'something' is nothing more than the pure movement of thinking; he would still not perceive himself as the true uncreated creator of every entity. This is the reason which Stirner gives for claiming that '[o]ur atheists are pious people' (EO, 166).

Of course, it would be easy to argue that this definition of religion is much too broad, and any claim about the relationship between science and religion based on it would be much too imprecise. Therefore I want to focus on the more specific things Stirner has to say about the relationship between Christian religion and science. According to him, both have in common that they rely on the principle of idealisation as described above, on the assumption that the particular in respect to the sensual should be overcome, in favour of the universal, in respect to the ideal. This is not just a structural similarity, but there is a genealogical connection insofar as science is the continuation of Christian religion. These two points seem to be highly plausible. Every science is based on certain fundamental presuppositions that it cannot prove within itself. Further, it has to work by abstracting the immediate particular sense data to universal laws. This method of reducing the particular to the universal is just the same method that Christian religion uses, in comparison to pre-Christian religions, when reducing an infinite plurality of gods and goddesses to one God, and a plurality of laws to one law. It is the same method that ancient philosophy developed in order to reduce the world to certain basic principles; a development which took place independently from Christianity but was easily melted together with it.

Naturally, one can be sceptical about how Stirner presents his argument. Compared to Stirner's claim that all pre-Christian cultures can be unified under one single conception and compared to childhood on a phylogenetic level, Hegel's strong historical claims appear as detailed, evidence-based historiography.<sup>8</sup> In any case, historical accuracy is rather evidently not the main concern of Stirner; it is to analyse a logical structure inherent to Western culture – idealisation, its meaning, and its internal contradictions. To what extent other cultures may already have known idealisation – and it is quite obvious that idealisation is not just a phenomenon of Western culture but of human civilization in general – is a secondary question in this respect.

## **Religion and Science as Asceticism: Friedrich Nietzsche**

There are deep methodological differences between Stirner and Nietzsche. While Stirner writes in a very systematic, Hegelian style, and was also deeply influenced by Hegel,<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche's great philosophical teacher was Schopenhauer, and he preferred a highly anti-systematic, sometimes even non-philosophical style for expressing his thoughts.

The opposition of Hegel and Schopenhauer shapes the whole philosophical opposition between Stirner and Nietzsche. While Stirner remains in the language of subjectivity, although his 'I' is more an impersonal creative force than an actual subject in any comprehensible sense of the word, Nietzsche explicitly attacks subjectivism and the notion of an 'I' in favour of an impersonal creative force which lies behind any subjectivity, for which he uses several names and metaphors of which no single one seems to be sufficient for him.<sup>10</sup>

The most striking philosophical similarity of Nietzsche and Stirner is, however, their akin views on science and the Christian religion. In Nietzsche-scholarship it is often overlooked that Nietzsche's criticism of Christian religion has a 'dialectical' structure that makes it very similar to Stirner's<sup>11</sup>: just as for Stirner, for Nietzsche, modern atheism (including his own kind of atheism) is the result of the self-sublation of Christianity, he does not simply impose his view on to religious views.<sup>12</sup>

This has to do with the fact that with the 'death of God', Nietzsche does not mean only the secularisation of the Western world that he encountered in his life-time. This would be the interpretation of the crowd at the marketplace that does not understand the madman in the famous aphorism 125 of *The Gay Science* (2001, 119 f.). Their basic failure is that they do not understand the real depth of this event; the 'death of God' does not only endanger the existence of churches but the existence of Western culture as a whole. In this sense it is truly *our deed*, as it points right to the core of our culture, and is not something that comes from the outside or is accidental.<sup>13</sup>

This is so because Nietzsche, just like Stirner, assumes that Western culture is basically a culture of idealisation. While Nietzsche, in opposition to Stirner, does not think that idealisation is fully absent in other cultures, he nevertheless claims that in Western culture idealisation has an entirely different meaning. While in other cultures,

like that of the ancient Greeks, idealisation was always bound back to sensuality, the main form of idealisation being art, in Western culture the realm of ideals becomes somehow independent from the senses; idealisation itself becomes the main ideal of all life, an end in itself instead of one pleasant form of human consciousness amongst others.<sup>14</sup> To put it in other words; Western culture is the culture of Truth, it is dominated first by philosophy and religion, later by its most 'pure' form, modern science – it is a culture reigned over by the 'ascetic ideal'.<sup>15</sup>

Within Western culture, Nietzsche sees just the same self-destructive tendency that Stirner described; the process of idealisation goes so far as to destroy the ideal of idealisation<sup>16</sup> itself, by means of scientific enlightenment. This process of self-destruction of Western culture is exactly what Nietzsche calls the 'death of God'. 'God' is just a name for the ideal of idealisation itself.<sup>17</sup> This is the reason why he can state in aphorism 377 of *The Gay Science* that even 'we' as the most 'free spirits' have a belief that forces us to destroy all ideals – it is the belief in science itself (2001, 241 ff.). As for Stirner, also for Nietzsche, atheists are pious people.

There is a collection of posthumous fragments with motifs resembling the just finished *Gay Science* under the title *Tautenburger Aufzeichnungen für Lou von Salomé*. Here Nietzsche expresses his thesis of the self-sublation of religion in the following pointed way in three subsequent aphorisms: '*Der Freigeist als der religiöseste Mensch, den es jetzt giebt*', '*Gott hat Gott getödtet*', and '*Die Moral starb an der Moralität*' (1977, 26; § 74-76).<sup>18</sup> In Nietzsche's own view he did not murder God; God murdered himself.<sup>19</sup>

Differently from Stirner, Nietzsche sees 'the death of God' as a highly ambiguous event. On the one hand, it refers to a cultural catastrophe; since the process of idealisation destroyed both any ideals and any connections to sensuality, Nietzsche sees the danger of a deep nihilism.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, he strongly affirms the death of God as it frees consciousness from any boundaries it might have, and makes the way free for a new age of experimental freedom in which new ideals can be created.<sup>21</sup> Here we have to note another decisive difference between Nietzsche and Stirner: while Stirner, following Hegelian tracks, sees history as a progress from bondage to freedom, comparing the state of complete bondage to childhood and the state of total freedom to adulthood, Nietzsche has an entirely different view of history. Childhood is for him the metaphor for the highest form of human freedom, and the adult who wants to become free from moral boundaries has to become somehow 'childish' again.<sup>22</sup> Further, while Nietzsche seems to think that our modern era gives the opportunity of a freedom never before reached in human history, he clearly states that there were other free individuals and groups in history before, and that there will be unfreedom again, as childhood cannot remain an enduring state but has to lead towards the foundation of new ideals, therefore the coming-back of a new age of idealisation, a new self-sublation of this age, and so on, and so on.<sup>23</sup> This is the historical aspect of the famous doctrine of the 'Eternal Recurrence'. For Nietzsche there is no 'end of history' but the eternal recurrence of the same basic patterns of human civilization.<sup>24</sup>

This different view on history from Stirner naturally implies an entirely different picture of the relation ‘science – religion – atheism’. While Nietzsche clearly praises atheism and seeks, just as Stirner, a state of pure freedom from any moral boundaries, he neither thinks that this ‘state’ can be a permanent one, nor that it can be completely reached. Idealisation is a necessary part of human existence and ideals can always become new gods; or even one God which represents The Ideal.<sup>25</sup>

## Summary

The main conclusion of Stirner and Nietzsche’s arguments as presented so far is that atheism is an intrinsic danger to Western culture, a result of Christianity itself. Christianity is in itself an atheist religion, a religion that sublates itself. Put the other way around, in scientific atheism, Christianity, insofar as it is the religion of idealisation, is still at work, and scientific atheism sublates itself when completely denying Christianity. As long as we have not found an entirely different way of relating to idealisation there is no way in which this contradiction can be solved. It is possibly *the* inner contradiction of Western culture.

This insight should make both atheists and Christians more sympathetic towards each other. Both science and Christianity are based on the fundamental assumption (which cannot be scientifically ‘proven’ in any way) that idealisation is valuable in itself, that we should honour religion or respect Science and belief in them. On the other hand, this opens up the stage for a much more radical criticism of Western culture as a whole, which goes beyond the opposition between atheism and religion.

Both Stirner and Nietzsche share the assumption that this ‘beyond’ is the realm of a nameless, impersonal creative force, which constitutes ideals, and even idealisation itself, while not itself being an ideal. For Stirner, freedom means to become aware of this force and to become identical with it. Nietzsche, however, would describe it in an entirely different way: the force necessarily manifests itself in ideals of various kinds; therefore, while freedom in its negative significance is somehow connected to freeing oneself from any kind of ideals and becoming identical to the impersonal creative force, in its positive significance freedom is also the active creation of new ideals through the encounter with the active force. Thus, there is no way out of the constant interplay (or even war) between ideals as manifestations of the force and of the force itself.

While Nietzsche criticises Western culture for being too alienated from the active force – which is just another way of describing its nihilism – and therefore proposes a reopening of Western culture towards it, he is, on a ‘meta-level’, aware of the fact that there might, and will be, a re-closure after the re-opening and so forth.

As we have seen above, Stirner explicitly gives his Ego the same attributes that are usually given to God. The use of prophetic language in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* also should not be understood as mere satire, but as a trial by Nietzsche to really establish a new kind of faith: faith in the ‘Will to Power’, ‘eternal return’, and ‘Super-/Overman’.<sup>26</sup> In *Ecce Homo* he calls himself ‘a disciple of the philosopher Dionysos’ ((1954b), 812; §

2). The radical atheism of Stirner and Nietzsche leads to a new kind of religion in both.<sup>27</sup> A ‘religion’, however, that is aware of the fact that it cannot grasp the essence of the world completely, that does not reduce the transcendence of that which is beyond human consciousness to pure immanence. This could be taken as a definition for authentic religion – a religion that is aware of itself as a construction (even if this authenticity may not be possible at all times).

## Conclusion

It can be concluded that there is no hard distinction between science and religion regarding human creative-interpretative practice, but only a difference between an authentic and an inauthentic stance towards these practices of creation-interpretation. Dawkins, and other ‘standard atheists’, have an inauthentic stance towards their own practice. While Ludwig Wittgenstein, for example, admits that something ‘inexpressible’ exists which cannot be represented by language, but presents itself,<sup>28</sup> Dawkins presupposes that modern science gives the only plausible world-view which he describes as follows:

An atheist in this sense of philosophical naturalist is somebody who *believes* [my emphasis; PS] there is nothing beyond the natural, physical world, no *supernatural* creative intelligence lurking behind the observable universe, no soul that outlasts the body and no miracles – except in the sense of natural phenomena that we don’t yet understand. (2006, 14)

It is striking that Dawkins uses the term ‘belief’ in this context. Not only here, but throughout his book, Dawkins describes his conviction that science is something that has an emotional, non-scientific background. He is a good follower of the ideal of idealisation, who has devoted a main part of his life to the fight against what he sees as opposed to this ideal. He is, however, not consequent enough: his belief in science is not self-reflective. He admits, for example, that one has to use non-argumentative, manipulative means to fight against religion.<sup>29</sup> He sees these means, however, as necessary only because religion uses irrational means. Yet how did he himself (and other atheists) become atheists in the first instance? They must have been convinced by irrational means as well. Thus, why is science the pure truth and religion pure delusion?

On the one hand, Dawkins insists against agnosticism: ‘There is a truth out there and one day we hope to know it, though for the moment we don’t.’ (ibid., 47) On the other hand, he states from his biological point of view:

‘Really’ isn’t a word we should use with simple confidence. [...] ‘Really’, for an animal, is whatever its brain needs it to be, in order to assist its survival. And because different species live in such different worlds, there will be troubling variety of ‘really’. What we see of the real world is not the unvarnished real world but a model of the real world, regulated and adjusted by sense data – a model that is constructed so that it is useful for dealing with the real world. (ibid., 371)

What else should be the ultimate foundation of science other than sense data, than our natural way of dealing with the world as the kind of animals we happen to be? Even if we somehow transcend these foundations by the use of scientific methods and tools, how would it be in principle possible to ever leave them? It is not possible – if there is no ‘real’ there can be no ‘scientific real’ and accordingly no truth, even after millions of years of research.<sup>30</sup>

There is, of course, always some inauthenticity at work in our attempts to creatively interpret the world, and this may even be necessary. Nietzsche would be the first to highlight that fact. This tendency towards inauthenticity, however, is dangerous insofar as it blocks our openness towards the world and towards other perspectives towards the world. Insofar as a certain way of interpreting the world also represents a certain ideology, it is also an ideological way of looking at the world that blocks different views on society, and even any feeling of radical discomfort within society at all.<sup>31</sup>

This way of conceptualising the relationship between science and religion may make it possible to set the discussion between religion and science on a new level that may prove more productive than earlier attempts. For example, a more dialogical relationship could be established towards modern Islamism, if it was looked at it as not something entirely different to secularised culture, but as representing a certain emotional drive that is also present within secular culture, namely the same drive for idealisation that lies at the foundation of both science and Christianity. That does not mean that it might not be good to fight against Islamism, but even in a fight one should never perceive one’s enemy as somehow ‘evil’ or inferior to oneself, but remain holding a deep respect for the different perspective of the other that can always teach one something about oneself. Declaring the Islamists to be absolutely evil and totally different to our own good societies does not only seem to be just too similar to the way they talk about Western culture; it is obvious enough that secularised Western societies are not perfect even according to their own standards, and there are many reasons to have a deep feeling of discomfort within (post-)modern culture.

The same goes for the debate between secularism and Christianity within secularised culture. Especially we, as scientists, should not treat religious people (or adherents of a more ‘naïve’ faith than us) as somehow ‘mad’, or ‘evil’, but as finite beings trying to cope somehow with the essential contingency of life. Of course, we can expect the same respect from them. Despite all concessions, Habermas’ approach seems to be half-hearted in this respect. He acknowledges religion only insofar as it possesses a useful function for secular discourse (which is not even necessary), and demands religious participants in common discourse to play this supportive role, and translate their convictions in secular terms (even if secular participants should help them). As far as I can see, from a strict post-metaphysical point of view, as I have tried to develop in this essay, there follows a strong presumption of equality between all sorts of consciousness. All convictions are mere constructions, no one can claim to be superior to the other in principle. In the dialogue between secular modernity and religion, *both* sides should try to translate their convictions into the language of the other. Thus,

scientific or otherwise secular convictions, can be translated into more religious language, even if they may seem completely ‘obvious’ to us. The interpretation of Western culture presented in this article could be a way of undertaking this process of reciprocal translation in order to foster mutual understanding; despite all their differences, secular and religious participants could agree that they both share a common mistrust in particularity, sensuality etc. and prefer the conceptions of idealisation. This might not seem much, but it is a starting point at least. From a secular point of view, this implies the acknowledgment of religious, rationally unjustifiable, foundations of one’s own world-view; for a religious person this may just be another way of defining the inner core of monotheist belief. If this effort is not taken, and one still tries to find a common ground of understanding, secular mainstream thought may, as Habermas fears, become somehow ripped from its essential core, and may fall prey to a disastrous nihilism that can already be observed in current Western culture, while religion may be in danger of isolating itself and becoming sectarian or even fundamentalist.

Further, one should attempt to keep a dialogue open with forces that reject the ideal of idealisation completely. In order not to confuse the main argument I have treated the concept of ‘idealisation’ as something more or less purely intellectual. Yet indeed it is, for both Stirner and Nietzsche, not just a form of consciousness but at the same time a way of living that implies certain sacrifices that one has to take upon oneself in order to become a rational subject. While both Stirner and Nietzsche acknowledge that there are good reasons and great benefits of this way of living, they at the same time remember these sacrifices, and point to the self-contradictions that are connected with them.<sup>32</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the title of his most popular book on this topic, the best-seller *The God Delusion* (2006).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the section *Religion As A By-Product of Something Else* in 2006, 172 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Dawkins even denies that there is any inherent link between our modern morality and religion. (Cf. the chapter *The Roots of Morality: Why Are We Good?* in 2006, 209 ff.)

<sup>4</sup> Habermas began to engage in the issue of religion and its relation to modern, rational, secularized discourse in his acceptance speech for the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in 2001, *Faith and Knowledge* (2014). A discussion between him and the future pope Benedict XVI., then cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, took place in 2004 and was published in English under the title *The Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (2007). In the following years two additional discussions were documented in anthologies, a symposium in Vienna (Langthaler / Nagl-Docekal 2007), and an interesting encounter between Habermas and several Catholic theologians in

Munich (Habermas *et al.* 2010). Several essays and interviews by and with Habermas concerning this topic are collected in the anthologies *Between Naturalism and Religion* (2008) and *Nachmetaphysisches Denken II* (2012). Some English-speaking commentaries on this debate are collected in the comprehensive anthology *Habermas and Religion* (Calhoun / Mendieta / VanAntwerpen (2013)). Habermas is currently preparing a major work on religion under the title *Versuch über Glauben und Wissen* ('Essay on Faith and Knowledge') (cf. *ibid.*, 707).

<sup>5</sup> The question, if the relationship between Western secular discourse is external or internal, is the main point of disagreement between Habermas and his Catholic opponents in Habermas / Ratzinger (2007) and Habermas *et al.* (2010). While his opponents highlight the essential historical and logical connection between Christian faith and modern discourse (as I will – however from a different point of view – in this essay), Habermas denies it. This evidently leads them to very different conclusions; while Habermas sees the role of religion in a secularised discourse as merely supportive, and demands religious participants in the discourse to translate their claims into a language intelligible to non-religious participants (even if he also wants the secular participants to engage in helping the religious to translate them and acknowledges a certain peculiarity of religion), his Catholic opponents seek to defend a more equal relationship between both forms of discourse, and for the independent truth of religion which does not have to be justified to secular common-sense. I will return to this issue in the concluding section of this essay.

<sup>6</sup> I will cite *The Ego and Its Own* (Stirner 1995) using the abbreviation EO.

<sup>7</sup> 'Fichte's ego too is the same essence outside me, for every one is ego; and, if only this ego has rights, then it is "the ego", it is not. But I am not an ego along other egos, but the sole ego; I am unique.' (EO, 318 f.)

<sup>8</sup> Widukind De Ridder even goes so far as to read the whole first part of Stirner's book as a parody of Hegelian philosophy (2008).

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence S. Stepelevich even states that Stirner's 'formal acquaintance with Hegelian philosophy and Hegelian philosophers [was] much more extensive than that obtained by *any* of the Young Hegelians' (1985, 603).

<sup>10</sup> The most important of course being the famous 'Will to Power' which he introduces as a quasi-metaphysical principle in *Beyond Good and Evil*, while at the same time explicitly stating that it is only an interpretation (1954a, 405 f.; § 22) and a mere 'attempt' (*ibid.*, 421 ff.; § 36). Another name for this force seems to be just 'Life'.

<sup>11</sup> A remarkable counter-example is the excellent comprehensive study by Claus Zittel, *Selbstaufhebungsfiguren bei Nietzsche* (1995) in which he analyses in great detail the different figures of self-sublation in Nietzsche's whole work (for the connected self-sublation of morality, science and religion cf. especially *ibid.*, 83-96).

<sup>12</sup> For example, Christopher Hamilton completely overlooks this point when he says that 'Nietzsche murdered God' (2007, 169).

<sup>13</sup> Martin Heidegger rightly stresses this point in his essay *Nietzsche's Word: 'God Is Dead'* (2001): 'Nietzsche's word ['God is dead'; PS] gives the destiny of two millennia of Western history.' (ibid., 160)

<sup>14</sup> Cf. aphorism 143 of *The Gay Science* (Nietzsche 2001, 143 f.).

<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche analyses the 'ascetic ideal' and the sublimation of the Christian ideal into modern science in the most detail in the third part of *The Genealogy of Morals* (1956, 231 ff., esp. 289 ff.; § 25).

<sup>16</sup> This term, while not used by Nietzsche, should resemble his term '*Sittlichkeit der Sitte*' which he first introduces in *Daybreak*, aphorism 9 (1971, 17 ff.).

<sup>17</sup> 'In "God is dead" the name "God", thought essentially, stands for the supersensory world of ideals[.]' (Heidegger 2001, 165) This process is described maybe most pointed by Nietzsche in the section *How the True World Finally* [which is the 'supersensory world' that Heidegger has in mind; PS] *Became a Fable* in *The Twilight of the Idols* (1899, 124 f.).

<sup>18</sup> 'The freethinker as the *most religious* human being that currently exists', 'God murdered God', and 'Morals died from morality' (my translations).

<sup>19</sup> In all passages cited so far Nietzsche clearly treats the 'death of God' as something that he only observes or comments on, not something that he does. The same goes for aphorism 343 of *The Gay Science* (2001, 199).

In Aphorism 153 of *The Gay Science* (2001, 132) Nietzsche brings, similar to the 'madman' of aphorism 125 (ibid., 119 f.), a 'homo poeta' on the stage of his book that declares 'I myself have now in the fourth act slain all gods, out of morality!' (ibid., 132) Here again Nietzsche explicitly distances himself from the murdering of God and hints at the idea of the self-sublation of religion through the same morality that it brought into life.

<sup>20</sup> This is the version Nietzsche gives in aphorism 125 of *The Gay Science*.

<sup>21</sup> This positive interpretation of the 'death of God' is expressed in aphorism 343 of *The Gay Science* (2001, 199).

<sup>22</sup> Nietzsche develops this idea in a quasi-dialectical way in the speech *The Three Metamorphoses* in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1954c, 23 ff.). In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche develops this topic further by asserting that '[t]he maturity of man [...] means, to have reacquired the seriousness that one had as a child at play.' (1954a, 456; § 94)

<sup>23</sup> 'Perhaps the most solemn conceptions that have caused the most fighting and suffering, the conceptions "God" and "sin", will one day seem to us of no more importance than a child's plaything or a child's pain seems to an old man; – and perhaps another plaything and another pain will then be necessary once more for "the old man" – always childish enough, an eternal child!' (1954a, 442; § 57)

<sup>24</sup> This historical reading of the doctrine of the 'Eternal Recurrence' is developed e.g. in the first aphorism of *The Gay Science* where Nietzsche speaks of the 'new law of

ebb and flood' (2001, 29) that implies that there is an eternal interplay between the comical and the tragic in order to preserve life. There will always be a change between the comical eras and those where tragic predominates, each one dialectally becoming the other.

<sup>25</sup> This seems to be the reason why Nietzsche speaks of 'the moment of the shortest shadow' (1899, 125) (not, as one may suspect, the complete absence of shadow) in the comment on the last sentence of *How the True World Finally Became a Fable* which describes the final stage of the development of the 'true world': 'We have done away with the true world: what world is left? perhaps the seeming? ... But no! *in doing away with the true, we have also done away with the seeming world!*' (ibid.)

<sup>26</sup> Nietzsche even describes faith as something explicitly valuable and necessary for a productive, creative, authentic life, when talking to the inhabitants of the 'land of culture': 'Unfruitful are ye: *therefore* do ye lack belief. But he who had to create, had always his presaging dreams and astral premonitions – and believed in believing!' (1954c, 131) Zarathustra himself (who does not contradict) is referred to as 'the most pious of all those who not believe in God' (ibid., 289) by the old pope.

<sup>27</sup> Some interpreters such as Eugen Biser, in his very insightful study *Nietzsche. Zerstörer oder Erneuerer des Christentums?* ('Nietzsche. Destroyer or Renewer of Christianity?'; my translation) even goes so far as to claim that Nietzsche in the end would not want to destroy Christianity, but only to defend what he sees as true Christianity against Paulinian doctrine. While I see clearly the possibility and productivity of such a reading, I do not support it on two grounds: 1) This 'true Christianity' (which would be more or less identical with the teachings of Zarathustra) does not have much to do with what is normally considered Christian, it is even in many aspects exactly the opposite. 2) It is correct to say that Nietzsche, especially in *The Anti-Christ* (2005), distinguishes between Paulinian and original Christianity, and directs his critique primarily against the first. It is, however, also clear that he criticises Jesus himself and that there is a dialectic between Jesus and Paul. For a different account which stresses the differences between Jesus' and Nietzsche's philosophy, cf. Bellioti (2013).

<sup>28</sup> 'There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself.' (Wittgenstein (2006), 29) This seems to be exactly the point where Wittgenstein becomes surprisingly similar to Nietzsche – he remains bound, however, in the strange dualism between scientific, self-evident sentences and 'the inexpressible' that Nietzsche (and Stirner) try to undermine.

<sup>29</sup> For example, he tolerated the title *Root of All Evil?* for a documentary he did for Chanel Four (which clearly implies that religion is – or at least could be – the root of all evil) despite the fact that in fact he does neither believe that religion is the root of all evil nor that there could be a root of all evil in principle (2006, 1). Here his faith in truth and truthfulness is shown to have a boundary. He would surely strongly condemn similar behaviour by religious missionaries.

<sup>30</sup> Of course, our scientific world-view is highly plausible as it allows us to interact with nature in an – apparently – very efficient, successful way. But this has nothing to do with it being true in the strict sense of the term.

<sup>31</sup> For Habermas, this ability to point towards something that is missing in the current social order is one of the most valuable features of religion, that should also be appreciated from a secular point of view (Cf. the title of Habermas *et al.* 2010).

<sup>32</sup> In conclusion I would like to thank all the various people who helped me in some way or other to complete this article. First of all Frederick Myles, who helped me to improve this text (not just) on a linguistic level. For the deep discussions about Stirner, Nietzsche, Feuerbach, Marx etc. I want thank Georg Spoo. I also should not forget to mention the always helpful advice and support of Christoph Menke, the supervisor of my MA thesis on Nietzsche's critique of Truth, the participants of the annual Nietzsche-workshop organised by Helmut Heit and Hannah Große Wiesmann, and my friends from my local Nietzsche reading-group in Frankfurt am Main.

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