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Review of “The Death of God and the Meaning of Life”

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Book Review

The Death of God and the Meaning of Life, by Julian Young. London and New York: Routledge, 2003, 236 pp. (indexed). ISBN 0-415-30790-2 (pbk) US \$25.95

Julian Young's new book, *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*, is a narrative which traces, as the title suggests, the responses of several philosophers to the question: Can life be meaningful after the death of God? The book is accordingly divided into two parts: Part I is entitled "Before the Death of God" and Part II is entitled "After the Death of God." The first Part begins with a discussion of Plato, who provides the paradigmatic articulation of a grand metaphysical narrative before turning to a discussion of the "conservative Continentals:" Kant, Schopenhauer, (the early) Nietzsche, Hegel, and Marx. Each of these philosophers, on Young's account, responds to the question of the meaning of life "within the broad parameters of the traditional true-world narrative." Part II discusses the responses of 19th and 20th-century Continental philosophers to the death of God and the threat of nihilism. Nihilism is defined by Young, following Nietzsche, as the notion "*That the highest values devalue themselves. The aim is lacking...*" (p. 4). Perhaps more poignantly, for Young, the threat of nihilism is the "appearance that life, in the absence of the true world, is meaningless" (p.4). Young reconstructs the responses of Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, Foucault, and Derrida to the "threat of nihilism." These philosophers are "the radical Continentals," to use Young's terminology, who attempt to formulate a cogent account of a meaningful existence void of a grand metaphysical narrative. Each chapter begins with a brief biographical sketch of the philosopher in question, and the book moves chronologically, with two exceptions—Hegel is discussed after (the early) Nietzsche and the later Heidegger is discussed after Foucault and Derrida.

The first chapter of the book focuses on Plato's *Phaedrus* a dialogue which Young uses as the best articulation of a grand "true-world" narrative. A "true-world" narrative presents itself as a comprehensive picture. Such pictures further distinguish between the true-world of being, and the world of becoming. Thus Young, with a hint of irony, calls such pictures "true-world narratives". The book starts with Plato because Young, following Nietzsche, argues that Christianity is a form of Platonism. Due to historical importance of Platonism and Christianity, its "virtually complete hegemony over Western thinking from about the beginning of the fourth century until well into the eighteenth," Young begins with a discussion of Plato before turning to "Kant and Christianity" (p. 20).

In chapter 2 Young reconstructs Kant's argument found within *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant maintains that the world we occupy, the world described accurately by the natural sciences, is the world of appearance. By contrast, the realm beyond the grasp of science is the ultimate reality, the "thing in itself." The "thing in itself" is absolutely unknowable by the human mind. Young argues

that “Kant is claiming that Christian belief is ‘rational’ since, though we cannot prove it to be true, we need it to validate the inescapable sense that there is a moral task to which we are committed—and hence a meaning to our lives. Christian ethics does not make sense without Christian metaphysics” (p. 27). Young poses two criticisms of his own to the Kantian picture before turning in Chapter 3 to discuss Schopenhauer’s critique of Kant.

Schopenhauer accepts the Kantian distinction between of the world of appearances and the “thing in itself,” but rejects Christian theology. Young sensitively and lucidly articulates Schopenhauer’s conception of the “will” before addressing, and ultimately criticizing, Schopenhauer’s pessimism and “European Buddhism.” Such concepts are used to set up chapter 4 which presents the youthful Nietzsche, of *The Birth of Tragedy*, as explicitly presenting a more cogent account of an essentially Schopenhauerian position. Young argues: “The main significance of *Birth* is a kind of footnote to Schopenhauer that removes an inconsistency in European Buddhism” (p.53). Schopenhauer and a young Nietzsche are, for Young, both formulating a “true-world” story. “European Buddhism,” as Nietzsche himself later recognized and as Young skillfully argues, is an “exotic version of true-worldism” which should be abandoned.

Chapter 5 is devoted entirely to Hegel while chapter 6 discusses both Hegel and briefly Marx (“Hegel with a Postscript of Marx”). Young argues that the placement of Hegel and Marx after the discussion of (the early) Nietzsche is because “Hegel...is no Kantian”(p.58). Young clarifies his placement: “That is why, though he is their chronological predecessor, I have chosen to discuss him after Schopenhauer and the younger Nietzsche: whereas, so far as they are metaphysically concerned, they are Kant’s true followers, Hegel represents a radical rejection of Kantianism”(ibid.). If Hegel has radically rejected the Kantian picture, then why is he included within the Part of the book which advocates a “true-world” picture? For Young the answer is Hegel’s teleological conception of history, and in the fact that Hegel’s conception of history locates the “metaphysical comfort” in *this* world (p. 75). The meaning of life consists in, for Hegel, “the attainment of a ‘true world,’ a kind of utopia located at the end of history, a state of apocalyptic peace and harmony” (ibid.). However, for Young, this again is a variation of the “true-world” picture—“Hegelianism is, then, not an abandonment, but simply the relocation, of the ‘true world’” (ibid.). Young moves next to briefly criticize Marx on the same grounds.

Young concludes the first section of his book by arguing that, “Marxism, like Hegelianism and all other versions of the true-world account of the meaning of life, is, then, a myth. It does not merit belief; it deserves to die” (p. 79). What then, for Young, is the significance of the death of god? The answer is that the “death of god” not only refers to Western culture becoming a secular culture, which it surely does, but it further refers to the problem of making sense of ourselves without recourse to an entrenched metaphysical picture. We have lost the transcendental and the universal underpinning for our morals, and this leaves us open to nihilism. The question of whether or not we can live a meaningful life which is non-religious and is void of a “true-world” narrative is imperative. The responses of the 19th and 20th-century Continental philosophers to this type of question will occupy the next section of the book.

Chapter 7 discusses the work of the “Later Nietzsche.” For Young, the work of the later Nietzsche begins with *Human, All-Too-Human* and stretches through the remainder of his corpus to *Ecce Homo*. To be sure, contemporary Nietzsche scholars have forcefully and convincingly, I think, argued that the later Nietzsche begins after *Human, All-Too-Human* with *Daybreak*. However, all

would agree with Young that such a Nietzsche has broken with Wagner and with a Schopenhauerian-Kantian strand of metaphysics.

Young argues, focusing primarily upon the works *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *The Gay Science*, that, for Nietzsche, we can give life meaning by being the “hero’s” of our lives through a type of artistic organization. On Young’s reading of Nietzsche we choose rather than discover the meaning of our lives. If this reading is correct, then Nietzsche’s answer to the question regarding the meaning of life after the death of God raises two problems: (1) the “problem of the immoral script”—or how does my “chosen” life connect with morality? and (2) the problem of authority—namely, is there an external check by which I can tell if the life I have created for myself is indeed an admirable and moral life?

As far as I can see the problem of “the immoral script” arises only if you follow Young’s reading of Nietzsche. Young argues, with some qualifications, that the later Nietzsche holds an essentially “Cartesian view of the self as disconnected, self-sufficient, atomic individual; an individual who is, in Nietzsche’s own language, ‘beyond good and evil,’ one with free horizons,’ a blank sheet characterized by nothing but the power of choice” (p.96). Young’s reading here seems much too strong. As far as I can see Young does not place enough emphasis upon the points, in *Beyond Good and Evil* for example, in which Nietzsche is highly critical of both the “absolute free will” as well as a deterministic picture of the self. Nietzsche opts, it seems to me, for a compatibilist conception of the self. If this reading is right, then it seems that Nietzsche can evade the problem of “the immoral script.”

In chapter 8, “Posthumous Nietzsche,” Young discusses the *Nachlass*, the writings from Nietzsche’s late notebooks 1883-1888, later published by Elizabeth Foster-Nietzsche under the title of *The Will to Power*. Young criticizes philosophers, like Heidegger, who suggest that Nietzsche’s doctrines of the eternal return and the will to power find their best expression in the writings of the late notebooks. This sets the stage for Young’s discussion of the early Heidegger.

Chapter 9 focuses on the “early Heidegger” of *Being and Time*. Young does an excellent job of making Heidegger’s philosophy accessible. Focusing on the key concepts of “Dasien,” “authenticity,” “inauthenticity” and “death,” Young argues that the early Heidegger has an answer “the problem of authority” which evades Nietzsche. The meaning of life, for the early Heidegger, can be found communally rather than individually (198). However, for Young, the early Heidegger’s solution remains problematic because Heidegger fails to find a solution to “problem of an immoral script.”

Chapters 10 and 11 deal with “Sartre I” and “Sartre II” respectively. Both chapters focus primarily upon *Being and Nothingness* with chapter ten dealing with sections one and four, and chapter eleven focusing upon sections two and three. Young divides Sartre’s philosophy into two chapters because he finds two different, and incompatible, Sartre’s within the text *Being and Nothingness*.

Chapter 12 focuses primarily on *The Myth of Sisyphus* in which Camus famously argues that the only pressing philosophical question is whether or not we should commit suicide. That is, Can we judge whether life is worth living? Young moves to a discussion of Camus’ conception of the “absurd” before concluding that Camus is wrong to suggest that “life...will be lived all the better if it had no meaning” (p.172).

Chapter 13 is devoted to Foucault while chapter 14 to Derrida. Contentiously, perhaps, Young argues that both philosophers have little to add to the debate; Foucault because his answer to the question of the meaning of life is essentially a repetition of Nietzsche and, being of this character, it is inadequate in the same ways” (p.187) and Derrida because his “philosophy, far from being an antidote to nihilism of postmodernity, is a manifestation of it. Derrida belongs to the problem, not to its solution” (p. 196).

The final chapter of the book is reserved for the work of the “later Heidegger” who provides, in Young’s estimation, a “unique answer” to the question of the meaning of life after the death of God (p. 198).

Young’s book offers an excellent introduction to the problem of formulating a cogent account of a meaningful life after the death of God. The book is well written and is full of anecdotes and clever asides. Though it is selective and at points contentious it should be read by students approaching this interesting debate for the first time, as well as those who have ever paused to wonder if there is an answer to the question: Can life be meaningful after the death of God?

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