

Western Cultural Overview: The Death of God, Modernism and Existentialism

This workshop considers Nietzsche's account of the 'death of God' in his parable of the madman, exploring what it means (and what it doesn't mean!) that 'God is dead' in Western culture. We see how the death of God leads to the death of meaning, man and the author. We then follow this current through the modernism of the early twentieth century to the heyday of existentialism on the Parisian left bank of the 1950s, picking up themes from the thought of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. No prior philosophical knowledge is assumed, and the seminar is introductory in nature. Most of the material will be familiar to those who have studied these areas at university level. Each of these sessions will include a 'toolbox' section on how to appreciate and engage with the ideas covered from a Christian point of view, as well as time for discussion.

Chris Watkin is a lecturer in the department of French at the University of Cambridge, and a fellow of Murray Edwards College. His publications include Phenomenology or Deconstruction? (Edinburgh University Press, 2008), Difficult Atheism (Edinburgh University Press, 2011) and From Plato to Postmodernism (Bristol Classical Press, 2011). Difficult Atheism argues that 'atheism' as traditionally conceived is increasingly inadequate to describe the positions taken by French philosophers today, and that philosophical atheism is, as yet at least, non-existent. From Plato to Postmodernism takes the reader on a cultural journey through 3000 years of Western history, telling the story of the philosophy, literature, music and art that has shaped Western civilization. He is currently working on the notion of equality in contemporary thought and society. Chris completed his doctoral thesis in philosophy (on the relation of deconstruction and phenomenology) at Cambridge University in 2006, looking particularly at the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricœur, Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Derrida.

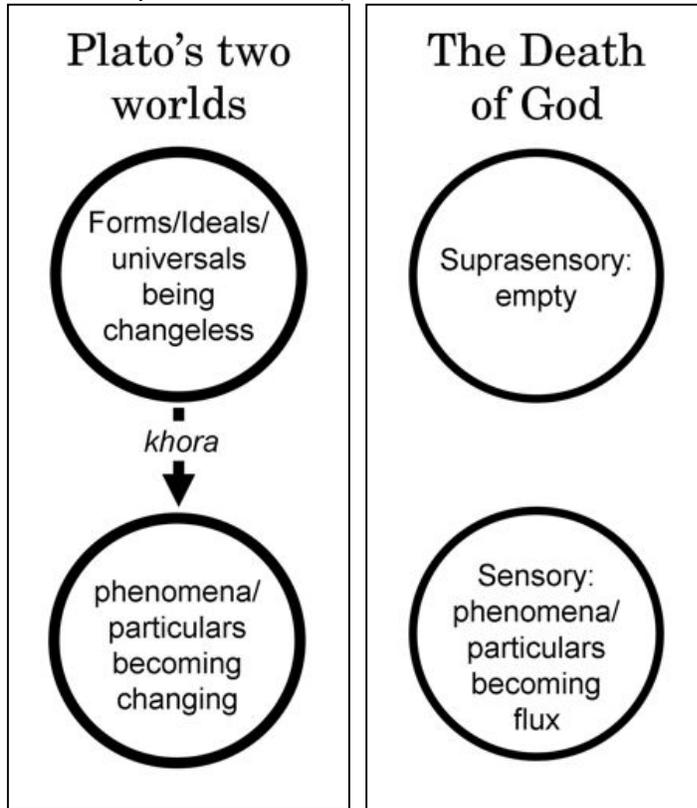
I. The Death of God

Throughout western history most people believed in some sort of God or gods, from the Yahweh of the bible and Homer's pantheon through Aristotle's Prime Mover and the Neoplatonic One to the Supreme Being of the Enlightenment or the divine nature of the Romantics. Outright professions of atheism before the eighteenth century are rare and ambiguous, but with the Enlightenment the view that there is no God or gods gained currency in the West. What we see with Nietzsche is by no means the first denial of God's existence, but rather a thinking that seeks to follow through with particular rigour the consequences for Western thought and the western sensibility of the absence of God.

A) What is the death of God?

"Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? [...] Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 1882)

Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than most distant stars—and yet they have done it themselves. (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 1882)



B) Consequences of the death of God

The whole natural law lies in that faith, and that if you were to destroy in mankind the belief in immortality, not only love but every living force maintaining the life of the world would at once be dried up. Moreover, nothing then would be immoral, everything would be lawful, even cannibalism. (Fyodor Dostoyevski, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 1880)

I am afraid we are not rid of God because we still have faith in grammar. (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*)

What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions—they

are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins. (Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On Truth and Lies in an Extramoral Sense')

II. Modernism

A) Positivism and Auguste Comte (1798–1857)

There is no impression of life, no manner of seeing it and feeling it, to which the plan of the novelist may not offer a place; you have only to remember that talents so dissimilar as those of Alexandre Dumas and Jane Austen, Charles Dickens and Gustave Flaubert, have worked in this field with equal glory. Don't think too much about optimism and pessimism; try and catch the colour of life itself. (Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction', 1884)



Gustave Courbet, *The Meeting, or "Bonjour Monsieur Courbet"* (1849). Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Gustave_Courbet_010.jpg

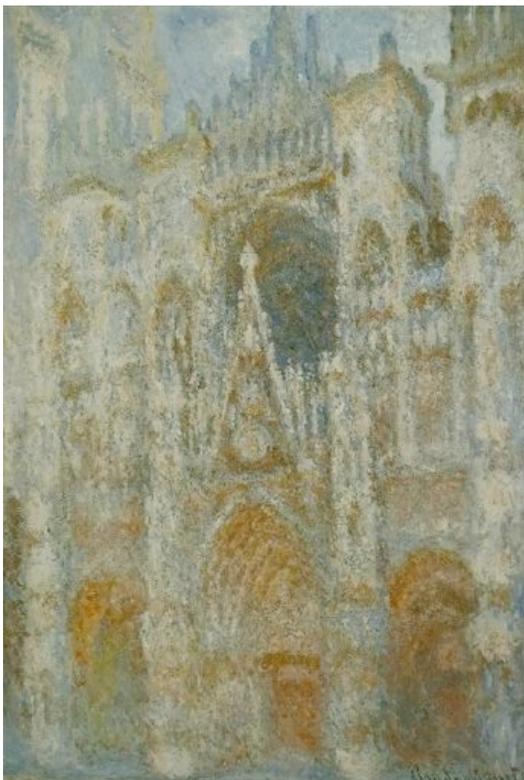
B) Changing understanding of history

There are no eternal truths. Every philosophy is the expression of its own and only its own time (Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 1918)

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world (William Butler Yeats, *The Second Coming*, 1919)

Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind. (Karl Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 1848)

C) Art: Impressionism, Cubism, Abstract Expressionism



Claude Monet, West façade of Rouen cathedral.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Claude_Monet_-_Cath%C3%A9drale_de_Rouen._Harmonie_bleue.jpg

With the onset of modernism confidence in the accessibility of such Courbet's realist, objective reality is thrown increasingly into doubt.



Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. No. 146) (Version O)* (1925).

Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Les Femmes d'Alger \(O.J. No. 146\) \(Version O\).jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Les_Femmes_d'Alger_(O.J._No._146)_Version_O.jpg)

The lack of depth suggested on Picasso's canvas is similarly revolutionary, breaking with artistic practice set down and followed since Leon Batista Alberti's (1404-1472) *On Painting* (1435), according to which a painting is a 'picture-window' onto the world.



Jackson Pollock, 'Untitled No. 3'.

Source: <http://www.arthistoryspot.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/pollock8.jpg>.

The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation from value — political, aesthetic, moral.
(Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New*)

D) Literature: Joyce and Kafka

James Joyce, (1882-1941) Ulysses (1922)

The stream of consciousness

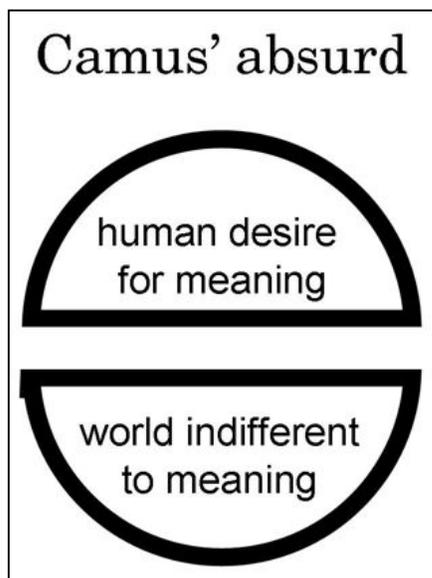
Franz Kafka (1883-1924), The Metamorphosis (1914)

One morning, as Gregor Samsa was waking up from anxious dreams, he discovered that in his bed he had been changed into a monstrous verminous bug. (Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*)

III. Existentialism

A) Samuel Beckett

They give birth astride a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more. (Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*)



B) Albert Camus

The Absurd

The Myth of Sisyphus (1942)

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. The universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. (Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*)

Some suggested further reading which you may find helpful:

Primary:

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Gay Science*, § 125 (Parable of the Madman).

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/nietzsche-madman.html>

Sartre, Jean-Paul. 'Existentialism is a Humanism'.

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm>

Secular Perspective:

Howells, Christina. *The Cambridge Companion to Sartre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Hughes, Edward J. *The Cambridge Companion to Camus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Levenson, Michael H. *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Magnus, Bernd, and Kathleen M. Higgins. *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Noble, Thomas F. X. *Western Civilization: Beyond Boundaries*. Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth.

Tarnas, Richard. *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View*. London: Pimlico, 1991.

Christian Perspective:

Carson, D. A. *Christ and Culture Revisited*. Nottingham: Apollos, 2008.

Colson, Charles W., and Nancy R. Pearcey. *How Now Shall We Live?* London: Marshall Pickering, 2000.

Dooyeweerd, Hermann. *Roots of Western Culture : Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options*. Translated by Mark van der Vennen, Bernard Zylstra, and D. F. M. Strauss. Lewiston, N.Y.: E. Mellen Press, 2003.

Hoffecker, W. Andrew. *Revolutions in Worldview: Understanding the Flow of Western Thought*. Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2007.

Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.