

Institution: Birkbeck, University of London

Unit of Assessment: 32 Philosophy

Title of case study: Nietzsche and the ‘death of God’: influencing public ideas about the crisis of values in the 21st century

1. Summary of the impact

Between 2000 and 2013 Professor Ken Gemes collaborated with one of the Department’s Visiting Professors, Simon May, on Nietzsche and the ‘death of God’. They used Nietzsche’s discussion of nihilism as a foundation for exploring the idea that without religious belief, underpinning values lack secure grounding, resulting in a crisis of values. Their insights have been widely disseminated through publications, public lectures and podcasts, and have influenced ideas about the basis for values in a largely secular age.

2. Underpinning research

Nietzsche, after announcing “the death of God” in a famous passage in his work *The Gay Science*, prophesied that nihilism would shape the history of Europe for the next two hundred years.

The specific research findings that underpin this case study were based on research undertaken by Professors Ken Gemes and Simon May (Visiting Research Fellow since Oct 2001, and appointed a three-year Visiting Professor in January 2012) at Birkbeck between 2006 and 2012. The research aimed to explain nihilism and its destruction of our received notions of values and the self, and to explore ways in which new life affirming values might be constructed without reference to God. A key finding is that nihilism is not to be glossed simply as an intellectual belief, such as the belief that there are no ultimate values. More profoundly nihilism involves an affective disposition by means of which drives that would naturally be expressed in external actions are turned inwards and against the self. A further key finding is that free will and selfhood are achievements rather than a God-given birthright. The philosophical literature tends to argue that either all humans have free will or none do, and that every human has a self (or some such soul-analogue) or none do. Nietzsche’s work provides the basis for arguments to the conclusion that both free will and having a genuine self are accomplishments achieved by a select few. May subsequently went on to develop the idea that in the modern world the one unquestioned value that has survived the onslaught of nihilism is the value of love. In a thoroughly Nietzschean spirit he has produced a genealogy of various concepts of love.

Gemes and May’s research partnership dates back thirteen years. May’s first book on Nietzsche, *Nietzsche’s Ethics and his War on Morality* was published in 1999 and was the product of research he had undertaken as a visiting fellow at Birkbeck over the previous three years. When Gemes came to Birkbeck in 2000 he organized a series of weekly seminars with May that discussed May’s book chapter by chapter over a period of 8 weeks (Ref 5). Gemes and May subsequently met regularly at Birkbeck to discuss various Nietzschean topics. They have participated together in numerous conferences, three of which were organized by Gemes, including one that led to a jointly edited OUP volume (Ref 1).

Professor Gemes, with particular reference to Nietzsche, has written a series of articles (Refs 2, 3, 4) exploring the nature of nihilism, what notions of the self and freedom we can construct without reference to an immaterial soul, and how we might still find grounds for affirming life in the absence of God and the soul. Professor May, with reference to Nietzsche, has similarly explored the questions of nihilism, the self, freedom and affirmation in articles (such as Ref 6), and additionally

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has argued in his monograph (Ref 5) that, after the death of God, love remains as the one unquestionable value.

3. References to the research

1. Gemes, K. and May, S. (eds.) *Nietzsche on Freedom and Autonomy*. OUP, 2009 (hardcover) and 2011 (paperback).
2. Gemes, K. "[Nietzsche on Free Will, Autonomy and the Sovereign Individual](#)", in *Nietzsche on Freedom and Autonomy*, Oxford, eds. Ken Gemes and Simon May, Oxford University Press, 2009.
3. Gemes, K. and Janaway, C. "[Life-denial versus Life-affirmation](#): Schopenhauer and Nietzsche on Pessimism and Asceticism", in *The Blackwell Companion to Schopenhauer*, ed. B. Vandenberg, Blackwell, 2012.
4. Gemes, K. "[Nihilism and the affirmation of life](#): a review of and dialogue with Bernard Reginster", *European Journal of Philosophy*, 16:459-471, 2008.
5. May, S. *Love: A History*, Yale University Press, 2011.
6. May, S. "[Nihilism and the Free Self](#)", in *Nietzsche on Freedom and Autonomy*, eds. Ken Gemes and Simon May, Oxford University Press, 2009.

Research grants :

- April 7-9, 2006 £4,500 Institute of Philosophy; awarded for a three day conference 'Nietzsche on Self, Autonomy and Agency' at University of London. International speakers included Professor Robert Pippin from the University of Chicago, Committee on Social Thought.
- May 15-16, 2009: £1,200 awarded from the 'Nietzsche and Modern Moral Philosophy' AHRC Project for a two day conference 'Nietzsche on Nihilism and the Affirmation of Life', University of London.
- May 9-10, 2012 £2,500 Institute of Philosophy; awarded for a two day conference "Free Will Now and Then", University of London. International speakers included Professor Dan Dennett from Tufts University.

4. Details of the impact

The underpinning research has been presented in numerous public forums including non-academic books, public lectures and debates, radio programmes, literary festivals, YouTube videos and podcasts, and conferences for secondary school teachers (with information packs). This research has impacted on public ideas about the problem of values in modern society and whether it is possible to affirm the meaning of life without religion. Evidence of Gemes' and May's influence in this discourse lies in the strong interest reflected in the number of their podcasts that have been commissioned and downloaded, along with book reviews, radio interviews and invitations to speak at public events such as literary festivals.

Professor May's book, *Love: A History*, has received numerous reviews in major periodicals, including *The Financial Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Guardian*, and *The Independent* (Source 1). It was incorporated in Antonio Riello's art performance piece "Ashes to Ashes", exhibited in several major cities including Venice (as part of the 54th Biennale di Venezia, 2011), New York (Museum of Art & Design, August 2012), Rome, London and Paris. Professors Gemes and May have been the focus of three *Philosophy Now* programmes on Resonance Radio which has 30,000 listeners for its live shows; it was also podcast on the *Philosophy Now* website (Sources 2-4). The assistant editor of *Philosophy Now* writes, 'We changed service provider a year or so ago, and since that time have not been able to collect statistics for the downloads. I can tell you that at the time of the change, Ken's Nietzsche show was the most popular of all the shows,

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and had downloads of just under 25,000. The Love one was almost as popular, with coming up to 20,000, and the Tragedy one lagging only a bit behind with just under 15,000. Judging by the patterns of growth at that time, it's reasonable to say that the stats would have at least doubled by now, and probably more; so conservative estimates would be 50,000, 40,000, and 30,000 respectively, but they may now each be tens of thousands higher' (Source 5). Simon May has also given interviews in relation to his book (Ref 5) on Philosophy Bites (source 6) and Radio 4 *Women's Hour* (source 7).

Gemes has given invited talks on Nietzsche and free will, nihilism, the affirmation of life and the Death of God at multiple public events at universities internationally, including Harvard, Brown, Colorado, Princeton, Wake Forrest, Oxford, Cambridge, Stirling, and London. He has also been invited to give talks at schools including St Paul's School for Boys, University College School, Highgate School, City and Islington Sixth Form College, and Sevenoaks School. He is a popular speaker at public events including the *How the Light Gets In* Festival of Philosophy, 2013 (source 8). He has been invited twice to speak at the very popular 'My Night with Philosophers' at the Institut Français in 2012 and 2013. According to the organiser, 'Ken was programmed in Les Salons in 2012: 70 people attended (the maximum capacity is 60) and in Salle Iselin in 2013 where 127 people attended (capacity 120)' (source 9). He was also invited to speak at the 4 day Academy of Ideas conference (July 2013), attended by over 200 people, where his lecture was one of the most well-received (Source 10). In 2012 he spoke at an event organised at Conway Hall, London, attracting a packed audience of Muslims and viewable on a Youtube video with over 1900 views (source 11).

In April 2013, the University of London International Programme invited Professor Gemes to record two hour-long lectures to be made available on its VLE, directed at students at HEIs around the globe, on "Nietzsche on the Value of Truth" and "Nietzsche on Nihilism and the Death of God".

Professor May was invited to discuss his book *Love: A History* at the Hay-on-Wye *How the Light Gets In* Philosophy Festival June 2011. He gave a keynote lecture; and participated in panels on selfhood, with Henrietta Moore (Professor of Anthropology, Cambridge University), Barry Smith (Birkbeck) and Julian Baggini; on 'beyond good and evil', with Prof Anthony O'Hear and Dr Carol Diethe; on nature and value of happiness, with Professor Richard Layard and Jesse Norman MP; and on the body in a post-religious world, with Minette Marrin and Finn McKay. He was invited to lead a seminar on *Love: A History* at the Goethe Institute in Boston in October 2011. He contributed an invited op-ed piece on love for the Washington Post in February 2013, reprinted in the *Denver Post*.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

Radio programmes/podcasts and public events

1. To be supplied on request: A file of reviews of Simon May's monograph *Love: A History*, including reviews from *The Financial Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Guardian*, and *the Independent*.
2. [The Tragedy of Life](#): Grant Bartley from *Philosophy Now* talks to Christopher Hamilton, Simon May and Ken Gemes. First broadcast on 21 February 2012 on Resonance FM.
3. Assistant Editor at *Philosophy Now* discusses the influence and ideas of [Friedrich Nietzsche](#), with Ken Gemes, Professor of Philosophy at Birkbeck. First broadcast on 8 November 2011 on Resonance FM.
4. Assistant Editor at *Philosophy Now* discusses love and questions at the heart of our emotional lives with [Simon May](#), author of the recent *Love: A History*. First broadcast on 22 November 2011 on Resonance FM.
5. Testimonial 1 from Assistant Editor, *Philosophy Now* (factual statement)

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6. Philosophy Bites (07.05.11): interview with [Professor May on Love: A History](#)
7. Interview with May, Radio 4 Woman's Hour (26.05.11): interview with [May on Love: A History](#)
8. Festival programmes for *How the Light Gets In*, Simon May: '[Beyond Good and Evil](#)', 28 May 2011; and Ken Gemes: [Is Honesty Always the Best Policy?](#) May 28 2013
9. Testimonial 2 from the organiser of *My Night with Philosophers* at the Institut Français (factual statement) and podcasts: [Simon May](#) (2013: 81 views); [Ken Gemes](#), (2013: 63 views); plus the [2012 programme](#)
10. Testimonial 3 from Director, Academy of Ideas (factual statement)
11. [The Great Debate: God v Atheism; Islam v Secularism](#)