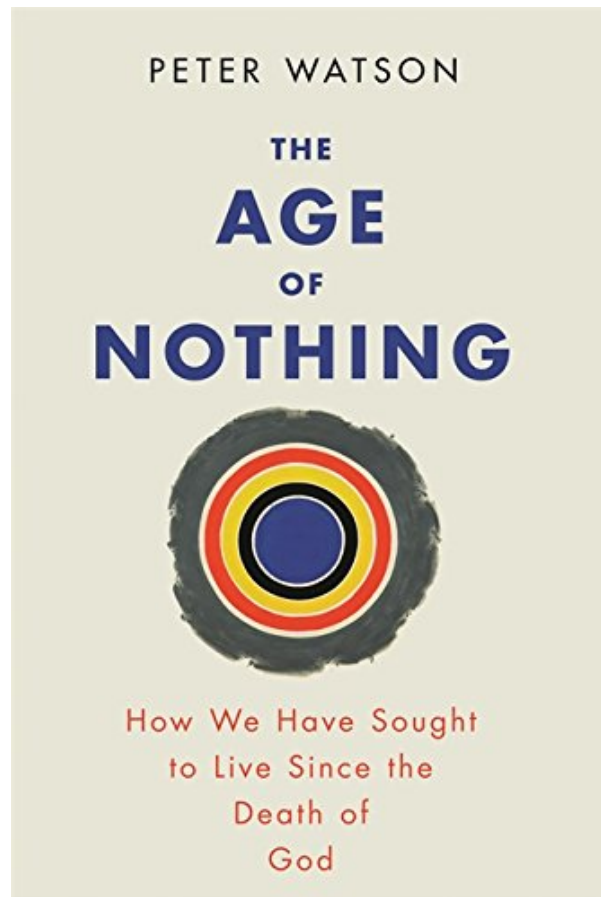


# THE AGE OF NOTHING BY PETER WATSON



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PETER WATSON

THE  
**AGE**  
OF  
**NOTHING**



How We Have Sought  
to Live Since the  
Death of  
God

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## Most helpful customer reviews

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

Losing our religion

By technoguy

Watson has written a cornucopia of philosophical musings, taking in science, poetry, history, sociology, philosophy, literature, painting, religion. Changing the title from an earlier *The Age of Atheism* to *The Age of Nothing*, since we live in a post-Christian, post-secular, post-Modern age. Watson describes the response of modern Western societies and their intellectuals to the decline of religion. The sweep is marvellous, from Gibbon and Hume, the French Revolution, Kant, Hegel, the Romantics, biblical criticism, Marx, Schopenhauer, Lyell, Darwin, we get 'the melancholy, long, withdrawing roar' of the sea of faith. Nietzsche's concept of nihilism, that there exists no perspective external to or higher than life itself, no transcendence, nothing metaphysical, there are no 'objective' value judgements: there are no facts, "no truths, only interpretations". Life itself has only the meaning we can give it. Nietzsche also saw science in comparative terms, the enlightenment desire to know everything was life-denying, the heir of Christian belief in rigour and honesty. The world is a chaos of multiple forces that cannot be reduced to unity. For Nietzsche only through the 'will to power' can we gain control over inanimate nature. We must live in the present more intensely. Though Nietzsche wrote *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in the 1880s, its influence wasn't felt until after his death (1900). His became the most popular work of philosophy in Germany in the 1st World War. The pursuit of disinterested truth had been the highest philosophic value prior to Nietzsche. Nietzsche's incoherence has led to his vast appeal to such a wide variety of people, he had a superb, aphoristic style, which often got lost in translation. He is at the heart of the university curriculum in the humanities.

With the death of God comes the loss of objectivity: all that remains is our own perspective, and we must make of it what we can. Watson's encyclopaedic knowledge is amazing as he moves on through the whole range of literature in French, German and English, taking in the post-Impressionist and modernist painters and discovering interesting and idiosyncratic reaction to the news of God's death. He concludes that there is only one stand-in for God and that is the intense moments of experience. According to him, the most important influence in shaping this search for the sacred moment was Husserl, the founding father of phenomenology, who held that experience is the reality against which theories are tested. This idea was given literary form by Robert Musil, and philosophical form by Martin Heidegger. On the way he gives a lot of weight to the poetry of Rilke and Wallace Stevens. Walt Whitman said evolution 'betrayed a want of living glow, fondness, warmth'. We've come up against our own loss of enchantment and technological limitations. Science has opened up a world of wonder, but also not provided any more answers on how we should live our lives. The sense of the sublime and the infinite that comes from mathematics, also makes us fall back in on ourselves, explore our own individualities, phenomenologically.

However, the God-hungry atheism of the mid-20th century has a slightly quaint air today. The life-cult of DH Lawrence, the socialist progressivism of HG Wells, the naïve optimism of John Dewey, the existentialist nihilism of Heidegger and Sartre—all such religious substitutes have lost their appeal, and we're left with an encounter between evangelical atheists, who tell us that religious belief is nonsensical and wicked, and defenders of intelligent design who look around for the scraps that the Almighty has left behind. A Theory of Everything will not solve our modern dilemma. Freud's import has been immense with his psychologising of the theological instinct. In the new wasteland where were values going to come from? They can only come from basic appetites and instincts, which has led to the perversions of Nazism amongst other things. We've also seen the rise and fall of Communism and Maoism, as post-Christian atheistic beliefs. A return to God has come through a form of religious atheism. The idea for our survival is through love and relationships, forms of moral behaviour, as EO Wilson says, empirically grounded in our evolutionary history, linking the sciences and the arts and the humanities through 'consilience'. Humility in ethics, adaptation to the cosmos, and all of the life on the planet. I think a really important part of the book is how he covers the philosophy of politics, the democratic elements of a secular society through thinkers like Nozick, Dewey, Rorty, Dworkin and Habermas. This covers a real need in a world grown dangerous through the extremism of politicised religion in the fundamentalist Christian and Islamic worlds. Also the alliance between the White House and the state of Israel only exacerbates the problem of disbelief having real dignity.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

A Fascinating View

By Dr. Peter Davies

I enjoyed this book. It is a superb summary of 20th century thought about God and godlessness, and the implications this holds for our view of ourselves, and how our behaviour can be grounded if there is no god to ground them in.

It shows how many people, across the world, and in many different fields— art, novels, philosophy, religion, theology, architecture, came to respond to Nietzsche's bold declaration that "God is dead, and we have killed him." It is a tremendous synthesis of many themes and currents of thinking, many of which are still active today.

It explains well the consequences of the death of "grand narratives" (although this view is itself something of a grand narrative...) and how people have learned to become more proximate and limited in their thinking. There's something to be said for this— it's an Aristotelian pragmatism— some reasonably justifiable action needs to be made now— as opposed to the often rather idealised Platonic forms of abstract ideas such as Justice, Health, Morality etc. Such ideas are fascinating, but get more elusive the more you try to define them completely and competently. God can be seen as the biggest Platonic form of them all— and in the twentieth century such large ideas came to be seen as untrustworthy, and indefinable. The logical positivists in Austria went as far as to say nothing meaningful could be said about God.

This book explains a lot about our current age and how we have arrived at where we are. It's a great book for history, and reflection, and also recognition of current limits to our thoughts and ideas.

It shows clearly that where we are now is not a complete intellectual ending, but this book is a good review of progress to date. It's written fairly and accurately, and without imposing any one viewpoint on the ideas it discusses. It's more like a map of relationships between ideas than an argument towards a particular outcome. It's a better book for using this writing strategy.

This book can be recommended to all those of us— whether theistic or atheistic— who want to understand where our current ideas have come from, and are willing to reflect on why we choose the particular ones we

hold.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

A beautiful tribute to the creativity, ingenuity and diversity of the human spirit

By Lachlan Dale

Humans have been attempting to orientate themselves in the universe for millennia. Once our physical needs of food, water and shelter are met, we tend to pursue the higher goal of living a good or meaningful life. Some try to master this art of living intuitively, but others seek to formalise and classify experience to bring their lives under the service of some theoretical value.

This is the purpose of philosophy: to study existence in order to better know ourselves, and to determine what is meaningful or worth pursuing.

Whether or not you believe Objective Truth is accessible to humans is almost incidental, for, even shorn of its lofty goals, the act of philosophic self-examination provides a way for humans to slowly mould and direct the way they live their lives. The practice of philosophy is the cultivation of consciousness; a method by which we can 'self-create' and imagine new forms and ways of being in the world.

The Age of Nothing: How We've Sought To Live Since The Death of God by Peter Watson

This passion for philosophy is what brought me to Peter Watson's heavy, grey tome, *The Age Of Nothing: How We Have Sought To Live Since The Death Of God* – a book which attempts to chronicle the incredible varieties in ways in which humans (predominantly Westerners) have approached the question of life in a post-religious context.

That might sound a little dry, but what makes *The Age of Nothing* so engaging is that it doesn't limit itself to discussion of academic philosophy. Watson analyses dancers, painters, and musicians; political movements, New Age spiritualists, and scientists; psychologists, poets and playwrights, in addition to the ideas of some of the greatest philosophers from the last century. This is wholly appropriate, for the art of living is not merely a question of constructing theories about living, but about action and dynamic engagement with the universe.

The book's starting point is Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God, as published in 1882's *The Parable of the Madman*:

"The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "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? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? 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."

"How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is

not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us – for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.”

The parable is a concise expression of the existential crisis Nietzsche saw threatening mankind. In a Christian world all value comes from God; an entity who has pre-ordained an order of what is good and bad, right and wrong. When that paternalistic overseer is removed from the equation, the universe – and all human striving – loses all meaning.

Fearing civilisation’s potential collapse into debilitating nihilism, Nietzsche attempted to forge a new system of post-religious meaning that would allow humanity to continue to build, dream and survive. Innumerable people followed Nietzsche in this goal, and the diversity of ways in which they did so is mesmerising.

Watson chronicles the diverse movements which sprung up on the wake of Nietzsche, including the development of Impressionism, Dadaism, and Surrealism; Phenomenology and Existentialism; the Dionysian body-affirmation of modern dance; the changing role of poetry; the rise of nationalism as a substitute for religion; the philosophy of jazz and bebop; the disaster of the Russian Revolution; the theological core of National Socialism; and the incredible impact the development of psychology had on philosophy and religion.

His tome also acts as a brilliant primer to the artistic, philosophical and cultural developments of the 20th Century, introducing readers with figures such as Richard Dworkin, William James, Freud, George Santayana, E. O. Wilson, Lenin, Van Gogh, Heidegger, Kafka, Dali, Rilke, Beckett – the list could go on.

While many people fear the idea of a world without God, I couldn’t help but feel uplifted by humanity’s immense potential after reading *The Age of Nothing*.

In the past few centuries we’ve begun to suspect there is no mythical entity to absolve us of the incredible responsibility we have over our actions. As Nietzsche anticipated, the rules we once imagined have disintegrated in our hands, leaving us to directly confront the incredible chaos and complexity of the universe.

As a result, we’ve slowly awakened as self-creators of meaning. At times this terrifying freedom has caused us to surge desperately towards man-made systems that promise to resolve life’s ambiguity. Some of these systems have caused immeasurable suffering – as with the horrors of the Red Terror and Auschwitz, or even the egoist absurdity of Scientology – but we have also created beautiful, new constellations of the mind.

Peter Watson’s *The Age Of Nothing* is a beautiful tribute to the creativity, ingenuity and diversity of the human spirit. At 600 pages – and with language that can at times be quite technical – it is certainly no easy read, but those who take the time will arm themselves with powerful tools to help attain peace and purpose in life.

(Originally published at  
<http://www.lachlanrdale.com/the-age-of-nothing-how-we-have-sought-to-live-since-the-death-of-god/>)

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