

Nietzsche

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Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844–1900 CE) is one of the most controversial figures in the history of philosophy. He also has become one of its most diversely influential thinkers. He was never an “academic philosopher” either by education or by profession, and his influence in the academic philosophical community did not begin to be felt until long after his collapse in 1889 and his death in 1900, and then was clouded by the disaster of his appropriation by the Nazis. His productive life, moreover, was greatly hindered by debilitating health problems, and was cut sadly short when he was but forty-four. Yet Nietzsche left a rich legacy of challenges and contributions to philosophy, the importance and continuing relevance of which are becoming ever more apparent. He sought to revitalize and reorient philosophy, in ways freeing it from stultifying aspects of its past and attuning it to the demands of the pressing tasks awaiting it.

Friedrich Nietzsche was born on October 15, 1844, and was raised and educated in provincial Saxony (in what is now eastern Germany). His father was a Lutheran pastor in the tiny village of Röcken. Upon his father’s premature death in 1849, the four-year-old Friedrich and his mother and sister relocated to the nearby town of Naumburg. It was during his childhood there that his lifelong loves of music and literature developed and deepened. His precocious excellence in the classroom earned him a scholarship to the prestigious classics-oriented academy Schulpforta (which Fichte too had attended). While distinguishing himself there in his studies, Nietzsche also avidly pursued his musical interests, becoming a fine pianist and composing a considerable amount of music, ranging from *Lieder* to sketches of an oratorio and an opera. (His compositional efforts continued through his twenties.)

Nietzsche’s university education began at Bonn, where he hoped to pursue his diverse interests in composition and theology as well as in classical languages and literatures, and then continued at Leipzig, focusing upon classical studies. It was in Leipzig that he made two fateful and profoundly influential acquaintances: Arthur Schopenhauer, through his *The World as Will and Representation*, and Richard Wagner, whose sister was a friend of the wife of one of Nietzsche’s professors. It was though his encounter with Schopenhauer’s thinking that Nietzsche’s philosophical interests were stimulated and initially shaped. His relationship with Wagner began in hero worship, developed into intimacy, and ended in estrangement and scathing polemic. It was the single most important relationship of Nietzsche’s life, and was a kind of bellwether of his personal and intellectual development.

Nietzsche so impressed his professors that he was called to a professorship in classical philology at the Swiss university of Basel at the tender age of only twenty-four, before

he had even received his doctorate. He remained there for ten years, resigning his position in 1879 owing to both the deterioration of his health and his changing interests. Nietzsche's decade-long academic career was plagued by health problems, from which he had long suffered but which were greatly exacerbated by illnesses he contracted while serving as a volunteer medical orderly in 1870 during the Franco-Prussian war. But this decade was also eventful, marked by the 1872 publication of his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, and enlivened by his intense involvement with Wagner, by whom and whose operatic art the book was in part inspired.

By the time of his early retirement, however, Nietzsche had become disillusioned with and estranged from both Wagner and his discipline and profession. He turned his full attention and efforts to a different set of tasks he had begun to address in a number of essays written several years previously (the *Untimely Meditations* of 1874–6) and in a volume of aphorisms (the 1878 first volume of *Human, All Too Human*) published while he was still at Basel. He now continued their exploration in the further aphoristic works of what he called his “free spirit” series: two supplements to *Human, All Too Human* (1879 and 1880), *Daybreak* (1881), and the initial four-part version of *The Gay Science* (1882).

The Nietzsche of this period was the heir of VOLTAIRE (to whom he dedicated the first volume of *Human, All Too Human*), relentlessly pursuing the project of radical enlightenment. This period was also one of dramatic intellectual development on his part, in the course of which he made the transition from classicist, Wagnerian enthusiast, and cultural critic to philosopher. In his earlier writings, Nietzsche had looked to the Greeks and to Wagner for guidance in discovering a way to cultural and spiritual renewal, and for an alternative to both the Western world's waning intellectual traditions (both religious and philosophical) and the pessimistic tendencies heralded by Schopenhauer. He now recognized the inadequacy of his earlier assessment of the situation and of his first thoughts concerning possible responses to it, and set about providing himself with the intellectual means of improving upon them. During this period he developed analytical, critical, and interpretive tools and strategies that came to characterize his kind of philosophy.

Only six years of productive life remained to Nietzsche, however, before his complete physical and mental collapse (probably of syphilitic origin) in January 1889, from which he never recovered. (He died in Weimar eleven years later, on August 25, 1900, after years of incapacitated subsistence.) During the first three of these six years, moreover, while he continued his practice of keeping voluminous notebooks, he published only *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (in four parts, 1883–5). All the other writings he produced, from *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) to his autobiographical *Ecce Homo* (written at the end of 1888, just prior to his collapse), were written in a remarkable burst of activity in the final three years (1886–8). They further included an expanded second edition of *The Gay Science* and *On the Genealogy of Moral* (1887); and *The Case of Wagner*, *Twilight of the Idols*, and *The Antichrist* (all written in 1888). His writings from this period also include a great mass of notes in his notebooks, a small selection of which were published in his name after his death, under the title *The Will to Power*, by his sister. (It was her long campaign to promote and exploit his reputation that culminated in the travesty of his embrace by the Nazis.) The significance of the *Nachlass* is controversial. Much of it is very rough, and it was never intended for publication. Yet

Nietzsche did write it, and his productive life ended very early and abruptly. Its interest is enhanced by the fact that it contains much more material relating to some topics than is to be found in the writings he published or completed.

Nietzsche's initial impetus toward philosophy was a fundamental problem with which he became increasingly concerned during his Basel years, in the aftermath of his encounter with Schopenhauer, and as his intellectual conscience pulled him away from Wagner and drew him in the direction of Voltaire. This problem had to do with the erosion, untenability, and impending collapse of the interpretive and evaluative foundations of our entire Western culture and civilization, as traditional ways of thinking about ourselves and the world and what matters lose their capacity to convince and sustain us, leaving a void that neither modern science and Enlightenment rationalism nor even modern art and Wagnerian romanticism can fill. This pervasive intellectual, cultural, and spiritual crisis, which Nietzsche came to refer to as "the death of God," was already at hand, heralded in Schopenhauer's pessimism, and threatening to develop into a full-fledged nihilism that Nietzsche feared could prove to be catastrophic if no life-affirming alternative capable of withstanding all possible disillusionment could be found. The diagnosis of this predicament, the assessment of what we have to work with, and the quest for such an alternative therefore became his passion and mission. It was in his extraordinary literary-philosophical *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that he gave expression to the main elements of the reinterpretation and revaluation of human life that were his response to this challenge, in a form intended to make them accessible to anyone in need of them and ready for them.

Thus, "the death of God" and the advent of nihilism in its wake were Nietzsche's points of departure; and coming to terms with the former without succumbing to the latter was his fundamental project. He was convinced of the untenability of the "God-hypothesis" in all its religious and metaphysical variations involving the postulation of some sort of transcendent absolute reality, and of all interpretive and evaluative schemes depending upon anything of the kind. His preferred way of disposing of such notions and associated ways of thinking was by what might be called their "genealogical subversion," showing that they and their appeal can very plausibly be accounted for in all-too-human terms, and arguing that there is no good reason to suppose there is anything more to them than that – thereby fatally undermining their credibility and viability. Breaking the grip of such notions upon our thinking involves more than providing this sort of critique, however. It also involves freeing ourselves of our addiction to absolutes that prompts us to seek others in place of those we have formerly embraced but can no longer take seriously – or else to be devastated by their absence when none are to be found. This, for Nietzsche, is the first crucial step toward the overcoming of nihilism, the stage for which is set by the inculcation of this addiction.

But this is only the first step. The overcoming of nihilism for Nietzsche further requires the finding of a way and means to a new "affirmation of life" unmediated by any dependence upon transcendence, in radical contrast to Schopenhauer's advocated negation of willing, and therefore of life and the world as he understood them. It is in this connection that Nietzsche introduced and chiefly employed a number of his most highly charged images, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in particular: the "Übermensch" or "overman" as "the meaning of the earth," "the idea of the eternal recurrence," and

"*amor fati*" or "love of fate." "The figure of the "overman" is emblematic of Nietzsche's conception of the qualitative "enhancement of life" (rather than anything transcendent) as the new this-worldly locus of value. The idea of the "eternal recurrence" – the conception of things forever recurring as they now occur – supremely tests one's ability to affirm life and the world as they are rather than as one might wish them to be. And "*amor fati*" (replacing "*amor dei*") signifies the attainment of the radical reorientation of affirmation Nietzsche envisions.

This affirmation in turn is the cornerstone of Nietzsche's alternative to traditional ways of conceiving of value and its basis or foundation; and, conjoined with his naturalistic reinterpretation of human life, it provides the context in which he undertakes his "revaluation of values" and develops the distinctive approach to value theory underlying it that is one of his most important contributions, to which his "genealogical" approach to morals and other revered things is preliminary. His project of reinterpreting human life in the context of his efforts toward a "de-deification of nature" and "translation of man back into nature" thus de-deified, is another, extending to his naturalistic reconsiderations of human knowledge, consciousness, action, and our psychological and "spiritual" nature more generally.

Nietzsche indisputably often referred to himself as a philosopher, and called for "new philosophers" to take up the kinds of questions he began to explore in a self-consciously philosophical manner in his *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (*The Gay Science*) and his "Prelude to a philosophy of the future" – the subtitle of *Beyond Good and Evil*. His kind of philosophy is avowedly both *interpretive* and *evaluative*. All human thought, he contends, is interpretive in character; and so in philosophy we are inevitably interpreting and reinterpreting and assessing alternative interpretations of matters many of which themselves are in significant ways constituted or shaped by prior interpretations. It does not follow from this, however, that all interpretations are on a complete (epistemically neutral) par with each other. In at least some contexts prevailing interpretations can be improved upon, and comprehension deepened and refined. Nietzsche sought to direct attention to matters with respect to which this is possible, to find fruitful ways of pursuing such inquiry, and to put them into practice, both by way of illustration and in an attempt to enhance our understanding of a variety of phenomena with which he was concerned. And beyond this he concerned himself intensively and extensively with problems of value, and with the possibility of a "revaluation of values" yielding insightful assessments of all that makes a difference to the quality of human life.

Perhaps no part of Nietzsche's thought has given rise to more confusion than his thinking with respect to truth and knowledge. Some of his comments have been taken to amount to a radical repudiation of the very possibility of anything deserving of either name. Yet he also makes much of the importance of truth, truthfulness, knowledge, and intellectual rigor and integrity, properly understood and in contexts such as those of scientific and philosophical inquiry. At times (particularly in his earlier writings) he makes much of the contingent, artificial, and merely conventional and perspectival character of most of what passes for truth and knowledge in various human contexts, and of the impossibility of coming up with anything that would satisfy the criteria of truth and knowledge to which philosophers from PLATO to DESCARTES and KANT and beyond have subscribed. On other occasions, however, he draws attention to the

problematic character of these criteria, explores alternatives to them, and attempts to give the notions of truth and knowledge a new and more fruitful lease on life. Here "truth" may be conceived in terms of something like *aptness*, and "knowledge" in terms of doing (greater or lesser) *justice* to the matter under consideration.

There can be no reasonable doubt, Nietzsche came to understand, that there are many contexts in which it makes good and important sense to retain and employ these notions, notwithstanding all relevant considerations pertaining to contingency, conditionality, conventionality, and perspective. Our ability to shift perspectives actually can enable us to come to understand a good deal about ourselves and our human world. It remains an open question, however, how far such comprehension may be extended, beyond human affairs and into the larger world in which human life goes on. As long as the perspectives available to us may reasonably be supposed to be strongly associated with the ways in which various domains of phenomena are configured, the notions of truth and knowledge clearly can be salvaged without depriving them of cognitive significance. The more dubious that supposition becomes, however, in domains owing less to our involvement, the more attenuated and problematic become any such claims on behalf of interpretations of them one might still venture to offer.

Nietzsche's proffered interpretation of life and the world in terms of "will to power" is an obvious case in point. While rejecting the very idea of any "true world of being" transcending this life and this world, Nietzsche is no naive realist with respect to the character of the world of which we are a part. What obtains and transpires in this world admits of being interpreted in many and very different ways, which are by no means all on a par with each other. No such interpretation may ever be complete, final and certain; but Nietzsche is quite prepared to accord epistemic superiority to some over others – even if he is also concerned to make the point that a very different rank-ordering may well be appropriate in the context of other kinds of interest. He further is well disposed to the various regional interpretations emerging and developing under the aegis of the maturing natural and biological sciences – at least as far as they go. But he advances the idea that the general scientific world-interpretation in terms of dynamic quanta arrayed in systems and fields of force is incomplete, and can be improved upon by construing all such phenomena in terms of power-relationships and all dynamic quanta as inherently disposed to enter into such relationships.

Nietzsche's name for this basic and ubiquitous assertive, expending-expanding disposition is "will to power." It might be thought of as the disposition to *ordering transformation*. The conception of power figuring in this hypothesis refers not merely to the more obvious forms of domination and control, but also to a whole range of much more subtle forms of the attainment of mastery and of supremacy. "Power" for him is fundamentally a matter of the imposition of some new pattern of ordering relations upon forces not previously subject to them. It is one of his more astute psychological insights that frustration in the attempt to achieve one sort of power commonly leads to the development of another, or of alternative forms of competition in which power is both differently won and differently measured. In extending the idea of "will to power" to the interpretation of life and the world more generally, as he clearly was inclined at least tentatively and experimentally to do, he was venturing to be something of a philosophical biologist and cosmologist as well.

It is human life more specifically, however, and our human nature, variability, and

possibility, to which Nietzsche devoted most of his attention; and in reinterpreting our humanity naturalistically he contributed significantly to the development of a philosophical anthropology sensitive to its biological, social, and historical dimensions. His common association with KIERKEGAARD and the existentialists has obscured this importantly different interest and manner of pursuing it. While his concern focused above all on evaluative considerations relating to the quality of human life and its possible enhancement or decline, he considered it imperative to understand the sort of creature we have come to be, in the course of our biological and historical development, in order to know what we have to work with – and this means coming to appreciate both the “all too human” features of ordinary humanity and the more exceptional human possibilities that hold the key to any attainable sort of higher humanity.

Nietzsche pursued this multi-perspectival interpretation of human reality from his earliest writings to his last, with increasing explicitness from *The Gay Science* onward. His general way of doing so is to examine a wide variety of human phenomena, reflecting upon basic human traits and their common manifestations and also upon their more uncommon and exceptional transformations and developments, and then further to bring a wide range of human-scientific observations – evolutionary, physiological, psychological, sociological – to bear as well, leavening the mix with further observations deriving from all of the intellectual, literary, linguistic, cultural, and experiential resources at his disposal.

While Nietzsche's thinking with respect to our humanity remained tentative and unsystematic to the end, there can be no doubt about its generally naturalistic contours. We are a kind of creature among others that has evolved on this planet, but has come to be significantly different from others owing to certain peculiarities in our evolutionary history, in which social factors have played a significant role. All human intellectuality, spirituality, and psychological reality is the result of this process and of the contingencies that have occurred along the way. Human beings differ in many ways that matter, however, both by nature and owing to what transpires in the course of their lives. Human worth is best conceived in terms of the cultivation of abilities that are not shared in equal measure, and more specifically in terms of the attainment of various forms of excellence in which these abilities are employed and expressed, with a premium upon creativity (rather than rationality, morality, individuality, or subjectivity). Cultural life is the arena of such activity, with art as its paradigm; and the enhancement of life – Nietzsche's emblem of which is the *Übermensch* or “overman” – is fundamentally a matter of its ongoing creative transformation along these lines.

Nietzsche's “revaluation of values” is thus closely linked to his reinterpretation of life in general and of human life in particular. If there is nothing beyond this life in this world that can serve as a standard or basis for value and value-determinations, as Nietzsche supposes, then value too must be “naturalized,” and understood in relation to something having to do with life. Value must reflect the basic character of life, the requirements of flourishing life, the general idea of the enhancement of life, or the sort of thing that the enhancement of life involves – and in Nietzsche's hands it winds up reflecting all of these things at different junctures in his thinking about value. The basic character of life as “will to power” sets the context for the identification of the artistically conceived enhancement of life as the locus of value, with creativity as its watchword. And when Nietzsche undertakes his “revaluation” of things commonly

valued either positively or negatively, it is with the question in mind of whether they are not merely life-preserving but life-enhancing – and if so, for what or whom, in what respects, under what circumstances, and with what larger consequences.

The things Nietzsche subjects to revaluation are numerous and diverse, ranging from Christianity to Richard Wagner and his operatic art, to various other types of art, knowledge, and social institution, to many sorts of phenomena and putative virtues and vices. He was convinced, for example, that people tend to attach much too much importance to pleasure and pain and to happiness and suffering; and that such traits as cooperativeness and pity are commonly overvalued as much as self-assertiveness and competitiveness are under-appreciated. He was particularly critical of the sort of morality that seemed to him to have triumphed in the modern Western world; hence his readiness to style himself combatively as “immoralist” as well as “anti-Christian,” and his choice of the equally misleading slogan “beyond good and evil” for his efforts to inaugurate a “philosophy of the future” that would no longer be under the spell of either traditional religious or conventionally moralistic ways of thinking. Yet the real and fundamental thrust of his moral philosophy was in the direction of a naturalistic moral theory grounded in a more comprehensive value theory and sensitive to human differences of circumstances, requirements, and capacities.

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