

**From Science  
to Philosophy**

**Richard D. Chessick**

# **A Brief Introduction to the Genius of Nietzsche**

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# FROM SCIENCE TO PHILOSOPHY

## SCENE 1: HUMAN ALL TOO HUMAN

In his positivistic or scientific phase, as I have designated before to be the first part of the third phase of his life, from 1879 to 1882, Nietzsche wrote 5 books of aphorisms. The first of these, appearing already in 1878, was called *Human All Too Human*, a book which began emphasizing the irrational springs of human behavior and marked the transition of Nietzsche from a professional philologist to a maverick philosopher. This book is dedicated to Voltaire— a great insult to Wagner, who was violently anti- French. It abandoned all nationalism and introduced Nietzsche's idea of "the good European," which also was detested by Wagner.

Two short books followed in 1879 and 1880 called *Mixed Opinions and Aphorisms* and *The Wanderer and His Shadow*. Later these 3 books of aphorisms were then all subsumed under the one title *Human All Too Human*; today confusingly sometimes they are given by their individual titles and sometimes included underneath *Human All Too Human*.

The "shadow" in *The Wanderer and His Shadow* is the shadow of the God who has disappeared. All of these three books are made up of aphorisms less than a page long and the aphorisms are not connected; in other words they do not necessarily follow logically in any kind of order. They represent a kind of experimenting, the transitional period during which he was thinking about the will to power (sometimes he calls it here the striving for freedom), and they also represent his first fusion of philosophy and psychology.

It was an attempt to explain reality without metaphysics and to understand culture as having developed not through divine intervention or through God-given qualities, but through evolution. The influence of Darwin is tremendous. Nietzsche tried to explain how the lower qualities which men have in common with the animals evolved into our higher qualities. For instance, the desire for power and our fear of the powerful is the reason we developed sympathy and empathy according to Nietzsche, because if we develop these qualities it allows us extra alertness to the motives of others and protects us against danger.

Recent work in psychoanalysis on empathy (Kohut 1971) especially has tended to agree with this. For example studies of people who are exceptionally empathic (and even people who make good psychiatrists) have indicated that many of them developed this capacity for empathy as a way of dealing with, for instance, a very intrusive or very nervous mother. Such parents require the child to develop a special signaling system that makes them very sensitive to what is going on in other people's minds, in order to anticipate intrusion or attack. Nietzsche's argument was that these so-called wonderful qualities in us—the "God-given" qualities like altruism, sympathy, empathy, and charity—are not given by the divine but rather are adaptational mechanisms that evolved as useful in the struggle for power and survival.

The fourth of the aphoristic books is called *Dawn of Day*, written in 1881, and available in a fine translation (Nietzsche, 1982). In this book he expressed his contempt for the German Empire and for those who worship strength. He argued that there must be reason in strength or strength is evil and destructive. Again he addressed the question of how all behavior can be explained in terms of fear and the struggle for power. In the final aphoristic book in 1882, which is sometimes translated *The Gay Science* and sometimes *The Joyful Wisdom*, and is considered one of the greatest models of German prose, he returned to Pindar's idea of living dangerously, of attaining satisfaction with yourself, and deriving happiness from the sense of overcoming yourself.

This important book (Nietzsche 1974) contained some of Nietzsche's germinal thoughts that were much developed later. He again called for an "artistic Socrates." He offered his first formulations about the death of God and the eternal recurrence. He predicted the coming catastrophe in Europe and denigrated "consciousness." Above all, he viewed science as based on a "prejudice," postulating a meaningless mechanistic world and missing all that is really important in the life of man.

The point of the five aphoristic books is to try to put the development and behavior of man on some kind of a scientific foundation without appeal to religious or metaphysical grounding.

Up to the writing of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which represented the dramatic turning point in Nietzsche's thought, there are important polarities we should be aware of in his conceptualizations. The first of these is between Dionysus and Apollo, the second is between the animal or materialistic self and

the true self, and the third is between strength and reason. The integration by each individual of these polarities yields *greater* power than giving in to any one pole such as asceticism or brute strength. This is a new and fundamental idea of Nietzsche.

*Human All Too Human* (remember it was dedicated to Voltaire) stands between La Rochefoucauld and Freud. La Rochefoucauld was the famous French skeptic who made many incisive and rather cynical observations about human psychology. Freud is also skeptical but he is a determinist; he argued that people are the way they are because they *have* to be that way. Nietzsche was somewhere between them in *Human All Too Human*; he was very skeptical about people but he did not feel that they are immutably made the way they are. He pointed out that German idealist philosophy—like so-called analytic philosophy today—seems to be concerned with problems irrelevant to everyday living, and he demanded the scientific study of human actions. This is in the tradition that La Rochefoucauld calls "observations," but for La Rochefoucauld, observations were done more for literary pleasure than for science. Freud's work on the other hand, represents the culmination of Nietzsche's suggestions—studying the human as he is instead of the ideal.

As previously explained, there are a number of Freudian concepts which can be found already in Nietzsche. For example, Nietzsche wrote that in dreams we resemble savages and we gratify our impulses (this is already in Plato). He said that cognition is always unreliable and is colored by wishes, and memory is similarly unreliable and colored by wishes. He observed that the mother loves herself in her son more than she loves him, and wrote, "The unresolved dissonances in personality and opinion between the parents go on echoing the child's character, forming the history of his inner sufferings" (Stern 1979). He came close to the idea of the unconscious but he did not actually postulate such a realm, as did Freud.

It is curious that he rejected Schopenhauer's simplistic doctrine of Will but he came up with an equally simplistic doctrine to explain all mental actions and eventually to explain everything--the will to power. Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground* left a tremendous impact on Nietzsche, and *The Brothers Karamazov* is a novel with the closest affinity to Nietzsche's thought.

## SCENE 2: THE TURNING-POINT

The turning-point in Nietzsche's thought was heralded by a bizarre relationship between Lou Salome (1861-1937), Paul Reé (1849-1901)—another intellectual of the time and a friend of Nietzsche—and Nietzsche. There is a photograph of Lou Salome in a cart; in place of two donkeys pulling the cart there are Nietzsche and Paul Reé. Lou Salome is carrying a whip. She at this time was 21, and both Paul Reé and Nietzsche were contenders for her hand—although she later denied that Nietzsche ever specifically proposed to her. She rejected Nietzsche and immediately afterwards she went off with Paul Reé to Paris, leaving Nietzsche alone. Later this remarkable woman also became an admired friend of Freud.

Immediately afterwards, in 1883, in a frenzy he wrote the first 3 books of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in 10 days each. He was now 40; it was a time marked by severe insomnia. He went on in 1884 to write a fourth book of *Zarathustra* which was supposed to be the first part of a second 3-part book, but it was inferior and he gave it up.

The first 3 books of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* are highly original and are considered Nietzsche's greatest work. It opens with the will to power and closes with the notion of eternal recurrence. *Zarathustra* is written as a dithyramb, which originally was a lyric poem in honor of Dionysus, a poem in a wild irregular strain. It only represents his major philosophy when it is supported by the two explanatory books which followed it, *Beyond Good and Evil* and *The Genealogy of Morals*. He recognized that *Zarathustra* was obscure and metaphorical, and contains no philosophical argument, so in order to explain it to the world he wrote the other two books. All contain many foolish remarks about women mainly copied from Schopenhauer, although his defenders remind us that no woman ever loved Nietzsche. That seems to be true.

*Zarathustra* (Nietzsche 1968b) repudiated *The Birth of Tragedy*, repudiated the dualism of Apollo and Dionysus, or any dualism such as reason and the will to power, and made the will to power *the* basic and only urge of man. Later on in psychiatry Alfred Adler founded a school of psychoanalysis allegedly based on this theory. The will to power is a simplistic and monistic philosophy and it is undoubtedly wrong. Few critics or writers agree with it today, although some, like Michel Foucault, are profoundly influenced by it. Later on Nietzsche extended this notion to be the basis of the entire universe; even inanimate objects are power points in Nietzsche's metaphysics.



In *Zarathustra* the will to power means the will to overcome one's self. For example, he viewed the origin of morality and custom as a self-overcoming of the herd. The herd turns its desire for power against itself. Thus he concluded that the superman or overman is the person who achieves in himself what the herd has done. According to Nietzsche such a man is no longer an animal and he now has a positive value; he becomes the highest being.

Nietzsche's most important question, how in the absence of God do you justify the meaning of life, has now been given three answers. One in *The Birth of Tragedy* would be that life is justifiable and makes sense because it produces magnificent cultures and magnificent men as aesthetic phenomena. The second answer, during the positivistic phase, is that man is a creature which has evolved his higher qualities as the result of evolution and he can be understood scientifically without recourse to divine intervention. Now in *Zarathustra*, his final philosophy, he said that the justification of man, the meaning of life, and what makes life worthwhile is self-overcoming. What gives a person a positive value is to whatever extent he has overcome himself. We have here a substitute religion in which God is replaced by the superman or overman. Divine Grace is replaced by the will to power, and Eternal Life is replaced by eternal recurrence. His mature philosophy gives a new description of reality, attempting (unsuccessfully) to do so without metaphysics and drawn from a study of natural phenomena.

The key point is that the western intellectual ideals of philosophical contemplation involving a supra-sensory Reality, and the Christian other-worldly and saintly gospels, are all opposed by Nietzsche. He argued that the philosopher should not be a withdrawn introverted thinker but a "happy warrior," whose questions are meant to disturb us and alter the existing order of our lives.

It is possible to argue that Nietzsche is actually deeply religious. He seemed to be always grappling with the issue of whether there is or is not a supra-sensory order and whether our life does or does not have a justifiable meaning, very much in the way historical religious figures grappled with such questions. Like them, he really appeared to be suffering with the intense and urgent process of seeking answers to religious-type questions.

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the work of an utterly lonely man, Part I introduces the final concept of the will to power. This will to power is seen in *Zarathustra* as the basic force underlying all human

activities. Kaufmann (1968) points out that it is "a striving that cannot be accurately described either as a will to affect others or as a will to 'realize1 oneself; it is essentially a striving to transcend and perfect oneself."

Even from this brief description, it should be clear that the will to power is intimately connected with Nietzsche's second basic concept, that of the overman or *Übermensch*. Both Parts I and II of *Zarathustra* concentrate considerably on the concept of the will to power, the overman, and what we would call today "sublimation."

Kaufman (1967) wrote: "The overman is the type approximated by Goethe—the human being . . . who has organized the chaos of his passions, given style to his character, and become creative. Aware of life's terrors, he affirms life without resentment." As this concept developed later in Nietzsche's thought, he began to think of the overman as a superior individual who has the courage to revalue all values and respond with freedom to his will to power. Stumpf (1966) pointed out that, "Such an overman is not to be confused with a totalitarian bully." The overman would have to possess a balanced unity with Dionysian and Apollonian elements, the passionate man who has his passions under control. The passions, or the Dionysian element, are not to be repressed but rather harnessed or sublimated in the service of creative work.

It is probably already clear to the discerning reader that little information is really given in detail on how to *become* the overman, and that the wider the application of concepts such as the will to power or the overman to human psychology, the more indefinite does the whole matter become. Copleston (1965) rather uncharitably described the overman as, . . . all that ailing, lonely, tormented, neglected Herr professor, Dr. Friedrich Nietzsche would like to be."

Nietzsche's intuitive psychological genius is revealed in his advice to the adolescent in Part I of *Zarathustra* where sublimation, self-healing, self-development, and overcoming are presented in poetic form.

The first two parts of *Zarathustra* also have something to say to those who would teach and to those who would heal others. Nietzsche (1968b) wrote: "Physician help yourself! Thus you help your patient too. Let this be his best help that he may behold with his eyes the man who heals himself." Nietzsche also

pointed out, "it is by invisible hands that we are bent and tortured worst," and he presented what ought to be the working slogan of every practicing psychotherapist. "But the worst enemy you can encounter will always be you, yourself; you lie in wait for yourself in caves and woods."

All of *Zarathustra* is sprinkled with psychological insights. The section on the "pale criminal" anticipates modern psychodynamics by a hundred years; as does the comment, "What was silent in the father speaks in the son; and often I find the son the unveiled secret of the father" (1968b).

Part III deals with Nietzsche's concept of the eternal recurrence, which is presented as an explosive discovery of the most important magnitude, and which, to those trained in modern biology, evolutionary theory, and thermodynamics, appears to be completely unintelligible and out of date. Yet the doctrine of eternal recurrence is absolutely necessary to Nietzsche's thinking and must be understood as central to his heroic attempts to overcome modern day nihilism, which after all, is the whole point of his agony and philosophy. This is discussed at length by Heidegger (1982).

Morgan (1965) offered as reasoned a discussion of the eternal recurrence as one can possibly expect, although others such as Danto (1965) have attempted to present it as a more formal philosophical theory. Stambaugh (1972) made a brave attempt to rescue this muddled vision by distinguishing between "recurrence" and "return" to resolve the fantastic metaphysical and physical paradoxes it implies. Jaspers (1966) claimed that no one has taken this doctrine seriously since Nietzsche first proposed it—although it is the *decisive* point in his philosophizing! Attempts to explain or assimilate Nietzsche have usually sought to avoid it, and the reader can imagine the reaction that scientifically trained physicians or psychologists have when they are confronted with it.

Jaspers (1966) writes: "Stated simply, the doctrine is to the effect that being is not an endless becoming of novelties, for everything recurs in extraordinarily great periods of time . . . . All that is has existed countless times and will return countless times." As Nietzsche (1968b) put it in *Zarathustra*:

Everything goes, everything comes back; eternally rolls the wheels of being. Everything dies, everything blossoms again; eternally runs the year of being. Everything breaks, everything is joined anew; eternally the same house of being is built. Everything parts, everything greets every other thing again; eternally the ring of being remains faithful to itself. In every Now, being begins; round every Here rolls the sphere There. The center is everywhere. Bent is the path of eternity.

It should be noted that Zarathustra's immediate response to this doctrine as enunciated by his enemies is to criticize them for turning the doctrine into a "hurdy-gurdy song." In other words this doctrine is to be taken in a somewhat mystical fashion: ". . . that all things recur eternally, and we ourselves too; and that we have already existed an eternal number of times, and all beings with us" (1968b).

What are we to make of this? The conception of the eternal recurrence was the "ultimate fruit of his study of the Greeks," according to Hollingdale (1965) and it is "the fundamental idea" of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Later on in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche described how it flashed into his consciousness and he regards the idea of the eternal recurrence as "the extremist formula of affirmation that can ever be attained." Morgan (1965) felt that this notion was developed by Nietzsche in order "to generate the greatest possible degree of energy." The purpose of generating this energy is to drive the individual *to live in such a way as he would be willing to have the life he has chosen recur again and again eternally*. It was Nietzsche's attempt to get the individual to overcome himself with the highest possible charge of energy—an exaltation of life—in which the individual attempts to become what he is to the fullest possible extent and which enables the individual to face the abyss and horror of the human predicament with "laughter" rather than despair, pessimism, and surrender. Thus Nietzsche introduced this important doctrine in an effort to stir the individual into a frenzy so as to aid him to affirm human life and live moment to moment.

This, of course, represents the starting point of much existential philosophy and existentially oriented psychotherapy. It suffers as one might expect from a certain mysticism and vagueness, and really offers little in the way of guidance for the individual who wishes to find out *how* to achieve overcoming, authenticity, and the condition of the overman. For Nietzsche it presents a more powerful argument for his doctrine of the "revaluation of all values." Let us not forget that Nietzsche is tackling the question of what modern man must do in a situation where God is dead and, as Dostoevsky pointed out, thus anything is permitted. The revaluation of all values is Nietzsche's positive prescription for a critical analysis of modern man's ideals in order to develop a new approach to life that he may use, free of religious superstition, and leading to happiness, exaltation and a sense of the worthwhileness of existence.

The most impressive aspect of Nietzsche's life and thought has not been stressed yet in this book; his absolute integrity and sincere search for truth. It might be argued that such an integrity in our era almost *must* culminate in despair, since there are limits to truth beyond which humans cannot pass. Copleston (1965) suggested that what is really significant in Nietzsche "is not his proposed antidotes to nihilism but rather his existence and thought considered precisely as a dramatic expression of a lived spiritual crisis from which there is no issue in terms of his own philosophy."

In fact the best way to appreciate Nietzsche is to read Kaufmann's (1968) biography and follow this up with Middleton's excellent collection of Nietzsche's (1969) *Selected Letters*. As we read about Nietzsche's life and hear him speak in his letters, we can experience at least empathically the terrific agony of a man tearing himself away from middle class values and a secure professorship with a brilliant future, and forcing himself to look directly into the abyss of the truth and nihilism in our time. He warned us in *Beyond Good and Evil* "If you look upon monsters take care you do not become one yourself, for, should you gaze down into the abyss, the abyss may enter into you" (Nietzsche, 1968a). And indeed this is what happened to Nietzsche.

Jaspers (1966) described "the essential nature of the scholarly investigator: his incorruptibility, his ceaseless critical struggle with his own thinking, his simple and guileless passion." During the entire decade of Nietzsche's professorship, he lived in a state of tension, ceaselessly striving to preserve as much energy as possible from his rigorous professional duties to devote to the as yet indefinite calling which attracted and agitated him. Following Nietzsche's life and works as he attempts to become his authentic self and to pursue his philosophical star is an experience intensely personal and vital to anyone who sincerely wishes to live an honest life!

Morgan (1965) pointed out that the preponderant type of man in Nietzsche's day was "the Philistine," the "flock animal," who permitted himself occasional excursions into art or philosophy, but was careful to distinguish these amusements from the "serious business" of life, that is, making money. "Not so much his mediocrity as his shameless self-satisfaction in mediocrity, as if he were rightly the measure of all things aroused Nietzsche's ire." Perhaps when we recognize what Nietzsche had worked through in his own mind in contrast to the absolute indifference of the rest of the world to his writings, we can understand better the shrill tone of his 1888 writings.

What is most essential in Nietzsche is his unblinking honesty and personal integrity. His life depicts the abyss we all face, to which there is as yet no solution (a situation that Clark [1969] has called "the fallacy of hope"). Although personally he was a tragic and ironic failure, he was yet a man of great intellectual honesty and courage. Nietzsche's "lived spiritual crisis" reminds us intensely of his idea of living so that you want life repeated eternally. Thus it is Nietzsche's agony that has the great appeal, an agony which he compared to that of Christ's crucifixion.

Nietzsche anticipated his own problem, for he wrote in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

Independence is for the very few; it is a privilege of the strong. And whoever attempts it even with the best right but without inner constraint proves that he is probably not only strong, but also daring to the point of recklessness. He enters into a labyrinth, he multiplies a thousand-fold the dangers which life brings with it in any case, not the least of which is that no one can see how and where he loses his way, becomes lonely, and is torn piecemeal by some minotaur of conscience. Supposing one like that comes to grief, this happens so far from the comprehension of men that they neither feel it nor sympathize. And he cannot go back any longer. Nor can he go back to the pity of men (Nietzsche, 1968a, pp. 231-2).

### SCENE 3: NIETZSCHE'S HISTORICAL POSITION

Nietzsche had a great sense of historical consciousness; he wrote in that sense like Hegel. Some scholars have claimed that he was a moralist not an immoralist, for the reason that he was constantly asking how to live well. One of his crucial arguments was that a man is harmed if he is taught to be content with small pleasures, for this makes him unfit for enterprises requiring daring and independence. This was one of his big quarrels with the bourgeois morality that he was always writing about and complaining about.

One of the most important concepts in Nietzsche is expressed by "God is dead." Something that men have lived on for centuries has vanished and so he predicted the catastrophes that are to come in the twentieth century; he announced that they will be unlike anything yet known. In his passion for integrity he tried to fashion a value system without God, based on the affirmation of man. He was absolutely obsessed in 1883 with the profound aloneness of modern man. Part of this was probably a reflection of his personal loneliness. His answer was that unless man becomes himself, unless we become ourselves, life is meaningless.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* life is given meaning through its aesthetic values, through art, through

culture. In his *Zarathustra* phase, which is now two steps of thought later, he underplayed the importance of man as an aesthetic phenomenon and the importance of beauty, and he emphasized our responsibilities to ourselves for our own existence. This, of course, is where the philosophy of Sartre starts from.

For Nietzsche the highest ideal was the grand romantic artist or the philosopher or the genuine Christian. He asked us to conceive of life grandly and throw ourselves into it without reserve. He attacked certain characteristic individuals again and again, such as the "culture Philistine"—the hypocritical Christian, the man devoted to making money who just goes to sermons on Sunday morning.

He especially attacked Kant in that he disagreed with Kant's entire argument that philosophy should limit reason to make room for faith. The whole stated point of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was to delineate the limitations of philosophy to make room for Kant's arbitrary pietistic other-worldly faith. Technically speaking, the philosophy of Nietzsche may in a sense be thought of primarily as an attempt to refute the philosophy of Kant.

He attacked Hegel, who attempted to read a divine process into history, reaching its culmination naturally in the philosophy of Hegel. Nietzsche was not a totalitarian, he was antinationalist, he detested the state, he was completely individualistic and in this sense he much disagreed with Hegel. He argued over and over again that all states inhibit and restrict, and the more totalitarian a state the more it inhibits and restricts. He called the state "a coldest of cold monsters." His burning desire was for a higher culture than has ever been before, what he called an ascending culture, and his problem was, how can this be accomplished without God or the state or Hegel's Absolute Ideal. Philosophy for Nietzsche was an earnest and passionate struggle—which is characteristic of all existentialist philosophy. He was obsessed with these problems and wrote about them over and over again, exhausting himself and his readers. For the rest of his sane life he remained an eccentric, living only to write.