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## Note

> If there are any persons who contest a received opinion . . . let us thank them for it, open our minds to listen to them, and rejoice that there is some one to do for us what we otherwise ought, if we have any regard for either the certainty or the vitality of our convictions, to do with much greater labor for ourselves.
> —John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*

> [He] who hath to be a creator in good and evil—verily he hath first to be a destroyer, and break values in pieces.
> —Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844–1900) believed that far more important than having the courage of one's convictions, one should have the courage *to attack* one's convictions. By living his own philosophy, he identified and conceptualized the will to power as well as the problem of values for the dawn of a new era, and influenced Western culture and thought more than any other philosopher of modern times. In addition to that appellation, it is equally apt to label him poet, social critic, and even psychologist—Freud himself acknowledged a debt to Nietzsche. Likewise, he has been claimed by the existentialists as one of their own, and it is fair to say at the very least he shared important elements of the existential temper and sensibility—as well as helped inspire it. Together his life and thought influenced an entire generation of thinkers and writers: Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Oswald Spengler, Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, Rainer Maria Rilke, André Gide, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, George Bernard Shaw, W. B. Yeats, among many, many others.

Nietzsche was born the son of a Lutheran minister, Karl Ludwig Nietzsche, in Röcken, in the Prussian province of Saxony, in 1844. His was a pious upbringing since both sides of his family had extensive and longstanding connections with the Lutheran Church. His father's death when Nietzsche was not quite five had a profound effect upon the family—they lost both their status and financial stability all at once. Karl Ludwig died of what was then called "softening of the brain," a condition that rendered him insane prior to his death. Ironically (or not), his son suffered eleven unbroken years of insanity until his death in 1900. Scholars are in general agreement, however, that the condition was not inherited, and that Nietzsche probably contracted syphilis during his student days when he twice visited a brothel; although others find it equally plausible that he caught the disease while serving as a medical orderly with the Prussian army during the Franco-Prussian War (1870). It was then that he suffered both dysentery and diphtheria while tending ceaselessly for three days and nights to six severely wounded soldiers stricken with these infections. (This particular theory of the origins of his syphilis is bolstered by the shared belief among his close friends and associates that he never wavered from the path of sexual asceticism.) This wartime experience also surrounded him in an emotional gloom that aggravated his physical collapse. What is apparently indisputable in all this is that after returning from his term of duty in the Franco-Prussian War, Nietzsche's broken health would plague him for the rest of his life, and would help spawn the lifestyle that nurtured his writings.

After his father's death, the family moved from their small town— where they had enjoyed considerable comfort and respect—to a city where they were unknown. This emotional hardship fostered the circumstances that would isolate the young introvert even more than his natural inclinations might have on their own. The young Nietzsche was a frail child who started missing school from the age of twelve when he complained of severe headaches. Early on, he developed his lifelong passion for the arts—especially music—preoccupations which helped separate him from his companions and more childlike pursuits. Furthermore, Nietzsche was the only male member of an all female household, which may help explain the mature Nietzsche's strong mysogynistic streak, shamelessly expressed in some of his writings and painfully expressed in his life. In particular, his overbearing and possessive sister Elizabeth undoubtedly helped provoke his negative mindset toward women. If he sought out people at all, it was male role models he sought—as exemplified in particular by Schopenhauer (as the model of the lonely genius, and through his writings), and later, but only for a time, by acquaintance with the great composer, Richard Wagner



(through the man himself—a contemporary of Nietzsche's father's generation—with whom the young Nietzsche enjoyed an active friendship, as well as through Wagner's life and music).

Nietzsche so excelled academically that he won the equivalent of a full scholarship to the most famous Protestant boarding school in Germany at the time—Schulpforta (1858–1864). His university education began at the University of Bonn where his studies focused on theology—the direction his family wished him to pursue—and classical philology. It was during this time that Nietzsche first had the notion that he no longer believed in God and decided definitively against continuing his courses in theology. In 1865, he followed his classics professor, Friedrich Ritschl—another significant male figure in Nietzsche's life—to the University of Leipzig. It was in Ritschl's prestigious journal that Nietzsche's writings on classical literature were published. Due in part to Ritschl's recommendation, at the age of twenty-four, Nietzsche was offered the chair in classical philology at the University of Basel in Switzerland even though he had not yet produced his doctoral thesis. As further tribute to the young Nietzsche's genius, without any dissertation or examination—on the basis of his articles alone—he was awarded his doctorate from the University of Leipzig. From about 1869 until 1879, he ostensibly made teaching his career, but this was frequently disrupted by bouts of illness as well as his increasing disillusionment with the field of philology and its constraints. Eventually, due to his own disaffection and the air of controversy that was already stirring about him, he severed his connections with the stifling world of academia. This break—which started in about 1872—marked the beginning of a period of productivity that included *The Birth of Tragedy* (an unorthodox approach to ancient Greek culture, one of his primary preoccupations since his boarding school days), *Thoughts Out of Season* (a collection of essays), *Human, All-too-Human: A Book for Free Spirits* (which marks a distinct change of focus from mythology and metaphysics to culture and realism), *The Dawn: Thoughts on Moral Prejudices*, and *The Gay Science* (which contains his first published pronouncement that 'God is dead!').

In 1882, Nietzsche's life took a brief romantic turn in the person of Lou Salomé, a young Russian aristocrat with whom he fell in love. Enchanting and brilliant, she later became the lover of Rainer Maria Rilke, as well as friend and disciple of Sigmund Freud. Scholars differ on some of the particulars of their relationship, but it ended badly for Nietzsche after his sister Elizabeth's pernicious meddling crushed any hope for its future. The trauma of disappointment and ensuing sense of emotional desolation left Nietzsche severely depressed.

This period of intense despair was followed by a recovery marked by

a creative rebirth that gave expression to his most poetic and imaginative work, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Written in four parts from 1883 to 1885, it was not published as a whole until after Nietzsche's death. It has the distinction of being at once his most popular *and* his most enigmatic work; it also presents the full panoply of his philosophy up to that time. Nietzsche chose Zoroaster, the Persian prophet, as his persona. Like other iconoclasts of his time, Nietzsche chafed against the constraints of traditional modes of expression and so freely experimented with different styles. *Zarathustra* exemplifies this predilection. Furthermore, the heavily autobiographical content of the work is thus conveniently disguised in the extensive use of parable to convey the wisdom he wishes to impart from the experience of his own life and the fruit of his thought. Nietzsche's background in philology provided him with a valuable tool in identifying the power that language has to shape ideas, and the dangers inherent in the misuse of that dynamic. New ideas require new modes of expression, and his unconventional format and use of language in *Zarathustra* reflect that point of view.

It was Nietzsche's wish as well as his intention that his works be regarded in their totality: that one not be considered apart from another one, that together they form a unity, and that only a consideration of it could lead to a proper understanding of his thought. This admonishment is especially appropriate in the case of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. He knew full well that his work would otherwise be misunderstood and misinterpreted; he emphasized time and again, when reading his works, *context is everything*. Taken out of context, and out of the framework of his entire opus, his ideas could be perverted and exploited, as indeed they were by the Nazis, even though Nietzsche himself was a staunch opponent of anti-Semitism.

In *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche portrays himself as a moral relativist in his affirmation of the will to power in redefining human values. He was a ruthless seeker after the essential truths of human nature—"All truths are for me soaked in blood." He abominated virtue that had its roots in fear. He abhorred any system—Church or State—that attempted to enforce a universal moral code, since he equated such prevailing morality with conformity. He believed instead that morality was a prescription for living with one's passions, and different people require different prescriptions; further, that artists, poets, masters of some skill—the best that society produces—emanate from an environment that values the individual over the masses. For Nietzsche, "one thing is needful: that a human being attain his satisfaction with himself . . . Whoever is dissatisfied with himself is always ready to revenge himself therefor; we others will be his victims."



After *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, between 1885–1888, Nietzsche produced about eight more major works. But this feverish pace was suddenly and permanently interrupted in January of 1889 by his mental collapse on the streets of the Turin, Italy (coincidentally the home of Cesare Lombroso, the author of *Genius and Insanity)*, where he was observed embracing a horse who had just been flogged by a coachman. He never recovered from this bout of insanity, living his remaining years first in an asylum, then with his mother, and finally with his sister Elizabeth, until his death on August 25, 1900.