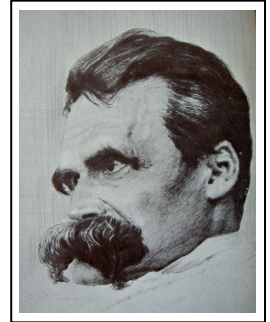




## Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 - 1900)



Nietzsche was born in Röcken, the Prussian province of Saxony, on October 15th, 1844. At fourteen, the young Nietzsche was awarded a scholarship to enter the preparatory school, Schulpforta, with the intent of training for the clergy. He excelled in religious studies, German literature, and classical studies. Unfortunately, at this relatively early age he began to suffer from migraine headaches, an ailment that would trouble him for most of his adult life. He graduated in 1864, but nonetheless continued studies in theology and classical philology and the University of Bonn. However, he soon gave up theology and transferred to Leipzig, where he was introduced to the works of Kant, the composer Richard Wagner and Schopenhauer.

Although Nietzsche served in the army in 1868, his appointment was cut short by illness. Fortunately, because he was considered to be a brilliant student, the University of Basel called him to the chair of classical philology at the age of 24, even though arrangements to award him a doctorate had to be made shortly thereafter. Then, during the Franco-Prussian war, he served as a medical orderly for a brief period, returning this time to Basel in ill-health, and although he managed to continue teaching from 1869-79, he was again forced by his health to retire early.

It was in Basel that Nietzsche became a close friend of Richard Wagner, and the second part of his *The Birth of Tragedy* is devoted to Wagner's music. With the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* in 1872, Nietzsche returned to Basel to lecture. Upon his rise to celebrity, he sought to bring his friend along, and together, they managed to convince the government to fund the construction of the Bayreuth theatre, built to feature Wagner's work. The theatre was completed in 1876 and Wagner's self-proclaimed masterpiece, *The Ring of the Nibelung*, was performed for the Emperor. His friendship with Wagner ended in 1878, during the time that Nietzsche discovered the French Enlightenment. Subsequently, tensions between the two arose since Wagner disapproved of the French and Nietzsche refused the cult of Wagnerian ideals in Bayreuth, particularly as it propagated anti-Semitism.

Nietzsche remained stateless for the rest of his life, preferring the life of a tourist-scholar and spending his time writing in boarding houses - the summers in Switzerland and the winters in Italy. During this time, he published nine books (between 1872 and 1888) while preparing four others for publication.

In his first published book, *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geist der Musik* (*The Birth of Tragedy*), he posited that human beings are subject to Dionysian instincts - unconscious desires, impulses, or overwhelmingly self-destructive tendencies. Nietzsche pointed out that the Greeks had opposed Apollonian principles of sobriety



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and rationale to such destructive drives. These became two major principles in his future work, the Dionysian and Apollonian, one of chaos, dream and intoxication, the other one of order and the lending of form.

*Also Sprach Zarathustra (Thus Spoke Zarathustra)* was formally published first in three parts in 1883-1884 and then 1892. Central to his thinking is the notion of the will to power, the eternal return and radical nihilism, which together negotiate pain, suffering and contradiction as expressions of existence and its actual tensions instead of objectionable phenomena. Nietzsche opposed the Darwinian idea of the progress of species as theorized by Darwin, preferring instead the idea of an eternal recurrence with an accompanying positive power of heroic suffering. Zarathustra is the figure of the 'higher' man, and his thought is poetic. This superman rejects faith and morality upon the assumption that either "God is dead," or that his role in human development ended shortly after Creation. Nietzsche believed that an ideal society should form its own morality outside of religious morality, suggesting even that the use of Judeo-Christian morality was often the cause of the avoidance of decisive actions or the acceptance of our fundamental existence in the material world. The failure to live, take risks and decisive actions is a failure to realize actual human potential - for nothing exists beyond life.

His most influential work, *The Will to Power*, published posthumously in 1901, was based on a series of notes in his journals and contains his strongest oppositions to idealism. This anti-idealist stance not only had an influence on thinkers such as Bataille, but continued to shape the thought of existentialists, post-modernists and post-structuralists well into the 20th century. The work is a continuation of key principles of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The will to power is foundational to his anti-idealist stance; it is an affirmation of life, a vision of the world itself as a will to power. The implications are profound as all simplistic oppositions between subject and object, between will and apathy, being and nothingness are divisions *within the world as will to power itself*. There is nothing else besides, and identity itself is to be constructed in the plurality of forces for which there is no unity of reality behind appearance. Following Kant's thought on the necessary affirmation of values, Nietzsche saw the revaluation of values as the equivalent of making values within the play of forces of the will to power.

Near the end of his life, Nietzsche's productivity stopped in January 1889 when he suffered a mental breakdown upon seeing a coachman cruelly whipping his horse. This drama had him sobbing with his arms around the beast's neck. He was housed in an asylum at first, and then placed in the care of his family. During his illness he was mostly pleasant, engaging in conversation when he was more lucid. However, his health deteriorated, and in the final decade of his life he was generally dysfunctional, dying in 1900 in Weimar. His sister Elisabeth secured the rights to his unpublished literary works, and edited them for publication although sometimes in rather disjointed form. To further complicate matters, Elisabeth was married to a prominent member of the German anti-Semite movement, which Nietzsche loathed; the supposed nature of his influence



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of Nazism served to make the interpretation of his texts difficult. He rejected biological racism and German nationalism, writing “every great crime against culture for the last four hundred years lies on their conscience.” His ideas were first championed by the Danish critic, Georg Brandes, who lectured on Nietzsche in Copenhagen in 1888. Nietzsche’s work has influenced among others Thomas Mann, Herman Hesse, André Malraux, André Gide, Albert Camus, Rainer Maria Rilke, Stefan George, Sigmund Freud, and Jean Paul Sartre.

Source: Adapted from the *European Graduate School (EGS)* Library holdings ([www.egs.edu/library/](http://www.egs.edu/library/))

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