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Frontmatter
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FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

*Thus Spoke
Zarathustra
A Book for All
and None*

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Cambridge University Press
 0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra
 Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	<i>page</i> viii
<i>Chronology</i>	xxxvi
<i>Further reading</i>	xxxix
<i>Note on the text</i>	xliii
Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None	
First Part	I
Zarathustra's Prologue	3
The Speeches of Zarathustra	16
On the Three Metamorphoses	16
On the Teachers of Virtue	17
On the Hinterworldly	20
On the Despisers of the Body	22
On the Passions of Pleasure and Pain	24
On the Pale Criminal	26
On Reading and Writing	27
On the Tree on the Mountain	29
On the Preachers of Death	31
On War and Warriors	33
On the New Idol	34
On the Flies of the Market Place	36
On Chastity	39
On the Friend	40
On a Thousand and One Goals	42
On Love of the Neighbor	44
On the Way of the Creator	46

Cambridge University Press
 0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra
 Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

On Little Women Old and Young	48
On the Adder's Bite	50
On Child and Marriage	51
On Free Death	53
On the Bestowing Virtue	55
Second Part	61
The Child with the Mirror	63
On the Blessed Isles	65
On the Pitying	67
On Priests	69
On the Virtuous	72
On the Rabble	74
On the Tarantulas	76
On the Famous Wise Men	79
The Night Song	81
The Dance Song	83
The Grave Song	85
On Self-Overcoming	88
On the Sublime Ones	90
On the Land of Education	93
On Immaculate Perception	95
On Scholars	97
On Poets	99
On Great Events	102
The Soothsayer	105
On Redemption	109
On Human Prudence	113
The Stillest Hour	115
Third Part	119
The Wanderer	121
On the Vision and the Riddle	123
On Unwilling Bliss	127
Before Sunrise	130
On Virtue that Makes Small	133
On the Mount of Olives	137
On Passing By	140

Cambridge University Press
 0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra
 Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Contents

On Apostates	143
The Homecoming	146
On the Three Evils	149
On the Spirit of Gravity	153
On Old and New Tablets	156
The Convalescent	173
On Great Longing	179
The Other Dance Song	181
The Seven Seals (Or: the Yes and Amen Song)	184
Fourth and Final Part	189
The Honey Sacrifice	191
The Cry of Distress	193
Conversation with the Kings	196
The Leech	200
The Magician	203
Retired	209
The Ugliest Human Being	212
The Voluntary Beggar	216
The Shadow	220
At Noon	223
The Welcome	225
The Last Supper	230
On the Higher Man	231
The Song of Melancholy	240
On Science	245
Among Daughters of the Desert	247
The Awakening	252
The Ass Festival	255
The Sleepwalker Song	258
The Sign	264
<i>Index</i>	267

Cambridge University Press
0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra
Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Introduction

The text

Nietzsche published each of the first three parts of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (TSZ hereafter) separately between 1883 and 1885, during one of his most productive and interesting periods, in between the appearance of *The Gay Science* (which he noted had itself marked a new beginning of his thought) and *Beyond Good and Evil*. As with the rest of his books, very few copies were sold. He later wrote a fourth part (called “Fourth and Final Part”) which was not published until 1892, and then privately, only for a few friends, by which time Nietzsche had slipped into the insanity that marked the last decade of his life.¹ Not long afterwards an edition with all four parts published together appeared, and most editions and translations have followed suit, treating the four parts as somehow belonging in one book, although many scholars see a natural ending of sorts after Part III and regard Part IV as more of an appendix than a central element in the drama narrated by the work. Nietzsche, who was trained as a classicist, may have been thinking of the traditional tragedy competitions in ancient Greece, where entrants submitted three tragedies and a fourth play, a comic and somewhat bawdy satyr play. At any event, he thought of this final section as in some sense the “Fourth Part” and any interpretation must come to terms with it.

¹ Nietzsche went mad in January 1889. For more on the problem of Part IV, see Laurence Lampert’s discussion in *Nietzsche’s Teaching: An Interpretation of “Thus Spoke Zarathustra”* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 287–91. For a contrasting view (that Part IV is integral to the work and a genuine conclusion), see Robert Gooding-Williams, *Zarathustra’s Dionysian Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

Cambridge University Press
 0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra
 Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Introduction

TSZ is unlike any of Nietzsche's other works, which themselves are unlike virtually anything else in the history of philosophy. Nietzsche himself provides no preface or introduction, although the section on TSZ in his late book, *Ecce Homo*, and especially its last section, "Why I am a Destiny," are invaluable guides to what he might have been up to. Zarathustra seems to be some sort of prophet, calling people, modern European Christian people especially, to account for their failings and encouraging them to pursue a new way of life. (As we shall discuss in a moment, even this simple characterization is immediately complicated by the fact that Nietzsche insists that this has nothing to do with a "replacement" religion, and that the book is as much a parody of a prophetic view as it is an instance of it.)² In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche expresses some irritation that no one has wondered about the odd name of this prophet. Zarathustra was a Persian prophet (known to the Greeks as Zoroaster)³ and he is important for Nietzsche because he originally established that the central struggle in human life (even cosmic life) was between two absolutely distinct principles, between good and evil, which Nietzsche interpreted in Christian and humanist terms as the opposition between selflessness and benevolence on the one hand and egoism and self-interest on the other. Nietzsche tells us two things about this prophet:

Zarathustra created this fateful error of morality: this means he has to be the first to recognize it.⁴

(Nietzsche means that Zarathustra was the first to recognize its calamitous consequences.) And:

[t]he self-overcoming of morality from out of truthfulness; the self-overcoming of the moralists into their opposite – into me – that is what the name Zarathustra means coming from my mouth.⁵

That is, we can now live, Zarathustra attempts to teach, freed from the picture of this absolute dualism, but without moral anarchy and without sliding into a bovine contentment or a violent primitivism. Sometimes, especially in the first two parts, this new way of living is presented

² Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo* (hereafter EH), in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols*, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), §6, pp. 129–31.

³ Estimates about when Zarathustra actually lived vary from 6000 BCE to 600 BCE. Somewhere between 1500 BCE and 1000 BCE would appear the safest guess. Nietzsche, however, evinces virtually no interest in the historical Zarathustra or the actual religion of Zoroastrianism.

⁴ EH, §3, p. 145.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Cambridge University Press
 0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra
 Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Introduction

in sweeping and collective, historical terms, as an epochal transition from mere human being to an “overman,” virtually a new species. This way of characterizing the problem tends to drop out after Part II, and Zarathustra focuses his attention on what he often calls the problem of self-overcoming: how each of us, as individuals, might come to be dissatisfied with our way of living and so be able to strive for something better, even if the traditional supports for and guidance toward such a goal seem no longer credible (e.g. the idea of *the* purpose of human nature, or what is revealed by religion, or any objective view of human happiness and so forth). And in Part III Zarathustra asks much more broadly about a whole new way of thinking about or imagining ourselves that he believes is necessary for this sort of re-orientation. He suggests that such a possibility depends on how we come to understand and experience temporality at a very basic level, and he introduces a famous image, “the eternal return of the same” (which he elsewhere calls Zarathustra’s central teaching), to begin to grapple with the problem. He himself becomes deathly ill in contemplating this cyclical picture; not surprisingly since it seems to deny a possibility he himself had hoped for at the outset – a *decisive* historical revolution, a time after which all would be different from the time before. Many of the basic issues in the book are raised by considering what it means for Zarathustra to suffer from and then “recover” from such an “illness.”

The interpretive problem

TSZ is often reported to be Nietzsche’s most popular and most read book, but the fact that the book is so unusual and often hermetic has made for wildly different sorts of reception. Here is one that is typical of the kind of popular reputation Nietzsche has in modern culture:

Together with Goethe’s *Faust* and the New Testament, *Zarathustra* was the most popular work that literate soldiers took into battle for inspiration and consolation [in WW I – RP]. The “beautiful words” of Zarathustra, one author wrote, were especially apt for the Germans who “more than any other Volk possessed fighting natures in Zarathustra’s sense.” About 150,000 copies of a specially durable wartime *Zarathustra* were distributed to the troops.⁶

⁶ Steven Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890–1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 135. The quotation cited is from Rektor P. Hoche, “Nietzsche und der deutsche Kampf,” *Zeitung für Literatur, Kunst und Wissenschaft* 39:6 (12 March 1916).

Cambridge University Press
 0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra
 Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Introduction

Now it is hard to imagine a book less suitable for such a purpose than Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. It is true that Zarathustra had famously said, "You say it is the good cause that hallows even war? I tell you: it is the good war that hallows any cause" (p. 33), but even that passage is surrounded by claims that the highest aspiration is actually to be a "saint of knowledge," and that only failing that should one become a warrior (what sort of continuum could this be?), and that the "highest thought" of such warriors should be one commanded by Zarathustra, and it should have nothing to do with states and territory but with the injunction that human being shall be overcome. (What armies would be fighting whom in such a cause?)⁷ Moreover one wonders what "inspiration and consolation" our "literate soldiers" could have found in the Fellini-esque title character,⁸ himself hardly possessed of a "warlike nature," chronically indecisive, sometimes self-pitying, wandering, speechifying, dancing about and encouraging others to dance, consorting mostly with animals, confused disciples, a dwarf, and his two mistresses. And what could they have made of the speeches, with those references to bees overloaded with honey, soothsayers, gravediggers, bursting coffins, pale criminals, red judges, self-propelling wheels, shepherds choking on snakes, tarantulas, "little golden fishing rods of wisdom," Zarathustra's ape, Zarathustra speaking too "crudely and sincerely" for "Angora rabbits," and the worship of a jackass in Part IV, with that circle of an old king, a magician, the last pope, a beggar, a shadow, the conscientious of spirit, and a sad soothsayer?

What in fact could *anyone* make of this bewildering work, parts of which seem more hermetic than Celan, parts more self-indulgent and bizarre than bad Bob Dylan lyrics? Do we know what we are *meant* to make of it? Nietzsche himself, in *Ecce Homo*, was willing to say a number of things about the work, that in it he is the "inventor of the dithyramb,"⁹ that with

⁷ In EH, §1, p. 144 when Nietzsche says that after Zarathustra "the concept of politics will have then merged entirely into a war of spirits" he does not pause to tell us what a war, not of bodies, but of *spirits* might be. And he goes on to say "there will be wars such as the earth has never seen," and we might note that he seems to mean that different sorts, *types* of "wars" will make up "great politics."

⁸ Cf. EH, §1, p. 144: "I do not want to be a saint, I would rather be a buffoon . . . Perhaps I am a buffoon . . . And yet in spite of this or rather not in spite of this – because nothing to date has been more hypocritical than saints – the truth speaks from out of me. – But the truth is *terrible*: because *lies* have been called truth so far."

⁹ A dithyramb was a choral hymn sung in the classical period in Greece by fifty men or boys to honor the god Dionysus.

Cambridge University Press
 0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra
 Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Introduction

TSZ he became the “first tragic philosopher,” and that TSZ should be understood as “music.” When it is announced, as the work to follow *The Gay Science*, we are clearly warned of the difficulty that will challenge any reader. Section §342 had concluded the original version of *The Gay Science* with “Incipit tragoedia,” and then the first paragraph of TSZ’s Prologue. Nietzsche’s warning comes in the second edition Preface:

“*Incipit tragoedia*” [tragedy begins] we read at the end of this suspiciously innocent book. Beware! Something utterly wicked and mischievous is being announced here: *incipit parodia* [parody begins], no doubt.”¹⁰

Are there other works that could be said to be both tragedies and parodies? *Don Quixote*, perhaps, a work in many other ways also quite similar to TSZ?¹¹ If Nietzsche announced that his TSZ can and should be read as a parody, what exactly would that mean? I do not mean what it would mean to find parts of it funny; I mean trying to understand *how* it could be both a prophetic book and a kind of send-up of a prophetic book. How it could both present Zarathustra as a teacher and parody his attempt to play that role? Why has the work remained for the most part a place simply to mine for quotations in support of Nietzschean “theories” of the overman, the Eternal Return of the Same, and the “last human beings”; all as if the theories were contained inside an ornate literary form, delivered by Nietzsche’s surrogate, an ancient Persian prophet? At the very least, especially when we look also to virtually everything written after the later 1870s, when Nietzsche in effect abandoned the traditional essay form in favor of less continuous, more aphoristic, and here parabolic forms, it is clear that Nietzsche wanted to resist incorporation into traditional philosophy, to escape traditional assumptions about the writing of philosophy. In a way that point is obvious, nowhere more obvious than in the form of TSZ, even if the steady stream of books about Nietzsche’s metaphysics, or value theory, or even epistemology shows no sign of abating. The two

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (hereafter GS), edited by Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), §1, p. 4.

¹¹ The intertwining of the two dramatic modes of tragedy and comic parody appear throughout the text. A typical example is at the end of “The Wanderer” in Part III, when Zarathustra laughs in a kind of self-mocking and then weeps as he remembers the friends he has had to leave behind. (p. 123). It is also very likely that Nietzsche, the “old philologist,” is referring to the end of Plato’s *Symposium*, where Socrates claims that what we need is someone who can write both tragedies and comedies, that the tragic poet might also be comic (*Symposium*, 223c–d).

Cambridge University Press

0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra

Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

more interesting questions are rather, first, what one takes such resistance to mean, what the practical point is, we might say, of the act of so resisting, what Nietzsche is trying to *do* with his books, as much as what his books mean, if we are not to understand them in the traditional philosophical sense. (It would have been helpful if, in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche had not just written the chapter “Why I Write Such Good Books,” but “Why I Write Books At All.”) Secondly, why has this resistance been so resisted, to the point that there are not even many disputes about TSZ, no contesting views about what *parodia* might have meant?

One obvious answer should be addressed immediately. It may be so hard to know what TSZ is for, and so easy simply to plunder it unsystematically, because the work is in large part a failure. TSZ echoes Romantic attempts at created mythologies, such as William Blake’s, as well as Wagner’s attempt to re-work Teutonic myth, but it remains so *sui generis* and unclassifiable that it resists even the broadest sort of category and does not itself instruct us, at least not very clearly or very well, about how to read it. That it is both a tragedy and a parody helps little with the details. Large stretches of it seem ponderous and turgid, mysteriously abandoning Nietzsche’s characteristic light touch and pithy wit. The many dreams and dream images appealed to by Zarathustra jumble together so much (in one case, grimacing children, angels, owls, fools, and butterflies as big as children tumble out of a broken coffin) that an attempt at interpretation seems beside the point. (When a disciple tries to offer a reading of this dream – and seems to do a pretty fair job of it – Zarathustra ultimately just stares into this disciple’s face and shakes his head with apparent deep disappointment.) These difficulties have all insured that TSZ is not read or studied in university philosophy departments anywhere near as often as the Nietzschean standards, *The Birth of Tragedy*, *The Uses and Disadvantages of History*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and *The Genealogy of Morals*.

This is understandable, but such judgments may be quite premature. Throughout the short and extremely volatile reception of his work, Nietzsche may not yet have been given enough leeway with his various experiments in a new kind of philosophical writing, may have been subject much too quickly to philosophical “translations.” This is an issue – how to write philosophy under contemporary historical conditions, or even how to write “philosophically” now that much of traditional philosophy itself is no longer historically credible – that Nietzsche obviously devoted

Cambridge University Press

0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra

Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

a great deal of thought to, and it is extremely unlikely that his conclusions would not show up in worked out, highly crafted forms. They ask of the reader something different than traditional reading and understanding, but they are asking for some effort, even demanding it, from readers. This is especially at issue in TSZ since in so far as it could be said to have a dominant theme, it is *this* problem, Zarathustra's problem: who is his audience? What is he trying to accomplish? How does he think he should go about this? While it is pretty clear what it means for his teaching to be rejected, he seems himself very unsure of what would count as having that teaching understood and accepted. (The theme – the question we have to understand first before anything in the work can be addressed – is clearly announced in the subtitle: *A Book for All and None*. How could a book be for all and none?)

Thus Spoke Zarathustra as a work of literature?

On the face of it at least some answers seem accessible from the plot of the work. Zarathustra leaves his cave to revisit the human world because he wants both to prophesy and help hasten the advent of something like a new “attempt” on the part of mankind, a post “beyond” or “over the human” (*Übermensch*) aspiration. Such a goal would be free of the psychological dimensions that have led the human type into a state of some crisis (made worse by the fact that most do not think a crisis has occurred or that any new attempt is necessary). Much of the first two parts is thus occupied with setting out these failings, and the various human types who most embody them, railing against them by showing what they have cost us, and intimating how things might be different. Some such failings, like having the wrong sort of relation to oneself, or being burdened with a spirit of revenge against time itself, are particularly important. So we are treated to brief characterizations of the despisers of the body, the pale criminal, the preachers of death, warriors, chastity, the pitying, the hinterworldly, the bestowers of virtue, women, priests, the virtuous, the rabble, the sublime ones, poets, and scholars. Along the way these typologies, one might call them, are interrupted by even more figurative parables (On the Adder's Bite, the Blessed Isles, Tarantulas, the Stillest Hour), by highly figurative homilies on such topics as friends, marriage, a free death, self-overcoming, redemption, and prudence, as well as by three songs, Night Song, Dance Song, and Grave Song.

Cambridge University Press
 0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra
 Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Introduction

However, we encounter a very difficult issue right away when we try to take account of the fact that in all these discussions, Zarathustra's account is throughout so highly parabolic, metaphorical, and aphoristic. Rather than state various claims about virtues and the present age and religion and aspirations, Zarathustra speaks about stars, animals, trees, tarantulas, dreams, and so forth. Explanations and claims are almost always analogical and figurative. (In his discussion of TSZ in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche wrote, "The most powerful force of metaphor that has ever existed is poor and trivial compared with the return of language to the nature of imagery.")¹² Why is his message given in such a highly figurative, literary way? It is an important question because it goes to the heart of Nietzsche's own view of his relation to traditional philosophy, and how the literary and rhetorical form of his books marks whatever sort of new beginning he thinks he has made. Philosophy after all has traditionally thought of itself as clarifying what is unclear, and as attempting to justify what in the everyday world too often passes without challenge. Philosophy tries to reveal, we might say in general, what is hidden (in presuppositions, commitments, folk wisdom, etc.). If we think of literature in such traditional ways, though, then there is a clear contrast. A literary work does not assert anything. "Meaning" in a poem or play or novel is not only hidden, and requires effort to find; our sense of the greatness of great literature is bound up with our sense that the credibility and authority of such works rests on how much and how complexly meaning is both profoundly and unavoidably hidden and enticingly intimated, promised; how difficult to discern, but "there," extractable in prosaic summaries only with great distortion. Contrary to the philosophical attempt (or fantasy) of freeing ordinary life from illusions, confusions and unjustified presuppositions, one way in which a literary treatment departs from ordinary life lies in its great compression of possible meanings, defamiliarization, "showing" paradoxically how much *more* is hidden, mysterious, sublime in ordinary life than is ordinarily understood. (One thinks of Emily Dickinson's pithy summary: "Nature is a haunted house, but art is a house that wants to be haunted.")¹³

¹² EH, §6, p. 130.

¹³ Emily Dickinson, *Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters*, ed. T. H. Johnson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 236. There is another text by a "Nietzschean" author that might also serve as, might even have been, a commentary on this aspect of TSZ – Kafka's famous parable, "On Parables:"

Cambridge University Press
 0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra
 Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Introduction

What would it mean to present a “teaching” with so many philosophical resonances, so close to the philosophy we might call “value theory,” in a way that not only leaves so much hidden, but that in effect heightens our sense of the interpretive work that must be done before philosophical reflection can hope to begin (if even then), and even further impedes any hermeneutic response by inventing a context so unfamiliar and often bizarre? There is a famous claim concerning truth and appearance and a set of complex images that are both relevant to this question.¹⁴

Truth, appearance, and the failure of desire

In more traditional philosophical terms, Nietzsche often stresses that we start going wrong when we become captured by the picture of revealing “reality,” the “truth,” beneath appearances, in mere opinions. This can be particularly misleading, Nietzsche often states, when we think of ourselves in post-Kantian modernity as having exposed the supposed groundlessness “underneath” the deceptive appearances of value and purpose, when we think that we have rendered impossible any continuation of Zarathustra’s pronounced love of human beings, life, and the earth. Some impasse in the possible affirmation of value (what Zarathustra calls

Many complain that the words of the wise are always merely parables and of no use in daily life, which is the only life we have. When the sage says, “Go over,” he does not mean that we should cross to some actual place, which we could do anyhow if the labor were worth it; he means some fabulous yonder [Drüben], something unknown to us, something that he cannot designate more precisely either, and therefore cannot help us here in the very least. All these parables set out to say merely that the incomprehensible is incomprehensible, and we know that already. But the cares we have to struggle with every day; that is a different matter.

Concerning this a man once said: Why such reluctance? If you only followed the parables you yourselves would become parables and with that rid of all your daily cares.

Another said: I bet that is also a parable.

The first said: You have won.

The second said: But unfortunately only in parable.

The first said: No, in reality; in parable you have lost.

Franz Kafka, *The Basic Kafka* (New York: Pocket Books, 1979), p. 58. It is well known that Kafka read and admired Nietzsche. The story about his vigorous defense of Nietzsche against Max Brod’s charge that Nietzsche was a “fraud” is often cited. See Klaus Wagenbach, *Kafka*, trans. Ewald Osers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 41.

¹⁴ I pass over here another complex dimension of Nietzsche’s literary style. Zarathustra is not Nietzsche, any more than Prospero is Shakespeare, and appreciating the literary irony of the work is indispensable to a full reading. I have tried to sketch an interpretation along these lines in “Irony and Affirmation in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,” in *Nietzsche’s New Seas: Explorations in Philosophy, Aesthetics, and Politics*, ed. Michael Allen Gillespie and Tracy Strong (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 45–74.

Cambridge University Press
 0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra
 Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Introduction

“esteeming”) *has* been reached (“nihilism”) but this “radical enlightenment” picture is not the right description. (See Zarathustra’s attack on the “preachers of death” and his rejection there of the melancholy that might result when “they encounter a sick or a very old person or a corpse, and right away they say, ‘life is refuted’” (p. 32).) And Nietzsche clearly wants to discard as misleading that simple distinction between appearance and reality itself. He is well known for claiming, in his own mini-version of the self-education of the human spirit in *The Twilight of the Idols*, that

We have abolished the real world: what world is left? The apparent world perhaps? . . . But no! *with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world.*¹⁵

However, even if this sort of suspicion of the everyday appearances (that they are merely a pale copy of the true world, the true ideal, etc.) is rejected, it is very much not the case that Nietzsche wants to infer that we are therefore left merely to achieve as much subjectively measured happiness as possible, nor does he intend to open the door to a measureless, wildly tolerant pluralism. As he has set it out, Nietzsche’s new philosophers (or post-philosophers) are still driven by what he calls a modern “intellectual conscience”:¹⁶ they want to know if what matters to them now ought to matter, whether there might be more important things to care about. Even though not driven by an otherworldly or transcendent or even “objective” ideal beneath or above the appearances, they should still be able to “overcome themselves” and in this way, to escape “wretched contentment.” That is, they cannot orient themselves from the question, “What matters *in itself*?” as if a reality beneath the appearances, but even without reliance on such a reality, a possible self-dissatisfaction and striving must still be possible if an affirmable, especially what

¹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, in *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, transl. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 50.

¹⁶ GS, §2, p. 29. See also the remark in *Daybreak*, about how the drive to knowledge

has become too strong for us to be able to want happiness without knowledge or [to be able to want the happiness] of a strong, firmly rooted delusion; even to imagine such a state of things is painful to us! Restless discovering and divining has such an attraction for us, and has grown as indispensable to us as is to the lover his unrequited love, which he would at no price relinquish for a state of indifference – perhaps, indeed, we too are unrequited lovers. (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale and ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), §429, p. 184)

Cambridge University Press
 0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra
 Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Introduction

Nietzsche sometimes calls a “noble” life, is still to be possible. And he clearly believes that the major element of this possibility is *his* own effect on his listeners. A great deal depends *on him* (just as in the “tragic age of the Greeks,” Socrates was able to create, to legislate a new form of life). In what way, goes the implied question or experiment, can a human being now tied to the “earth” still aspire to be ultimately “over-man,” *Übermensch*? How could one come to *want* such an earthly self-overcoming in these post-death-of-God conditions? Whence the right sort of contempt for one’s present state, and aspiration for some future goal? Whatever the answer to such questions, Nietzsche clearly thinks that the character of Zarathustra’s literary rhetoric must be understood in terms of this goal.

Parallel to the paradox of a book for all and none, this problem suggests the paradox of how Zarathustra by “going *under*” and by destroying hopes for a “hinterworld” in the names of “earth” and “life” can prepare the way for a new form of “going *over*,” can prepare the transition between human beings as they now are and an “overman.” One final version of essentially the same paradox: how can Zarathustra inspire and shame without being imitated, without creating disciples?¹⁷

For example, in the Preface to *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche notes that our long struggle with and often opposition to and dissatisfaction with our own moral tradition, European Christianity, has created a “magnificent tension (*Spannung*) of the spirit in Europe, the likes of which the earth has never known: with such a tension in our bow we can now shoot at the furthest goals.” But, he goes on, the “democratic Enlightenment” also sought to “unbend” such a bow, to “make sure that spirit does not experience itself so readily as ‘need.’”¹⁸ This latter formulation coincides with a wonderfully lapidary expression in *The Gay Science*. In discussing “the millions of Europeans who cannot endure their boredom and themselves,” he notes that they would even welcome “a craving to suffer” and so “to find in their suffering a probable reason for action, for

¹⁷ In EH, what distinguishes Zarathustra is said to be his capacity for contradictions like this (EH, §6, pp. 129–130). See also section I, “On Great Longing,” references to “loving contempt” (p. 179) and to the intertwining of love and hate for life in “The Other Dance Song” (p. 181). This is also the problem of “exemplarity” in Nietzsche’s *Schopenhauer as Educator* essay. There is an illuminating essay on this issue, “Nietzsche’s Perfectionism: A Reading of *Schopenhauer as Educator*,” of great relevance to TSZ, by James Conant in *Nietzsche’s Postmoralism: Essays on Nietzsche’s Prelude to Philosophy*, ed. R. Schacht (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 180–257.

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, transl. Judith Norman, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), preface, p. 4.

Cambridge University Press
 0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra
 Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Introduction

deeds.” In sum: “neediness is needed!” (“Not ist nötig”)¹⁹ In TSZ, the point is formulated in a similar way:

Beware! The time approaches when human beings no longer launch the arrow of their longing beyond the human, and the string of their bow will have forgotten how to whirl!

Beware! The time approaches when human beings will no longer give birth to a dancing star. Beware! The time of the most contemptible human is coming, the one who can no longer have contempt for himself. [p. 9]²⁰

In these terms Nietzsche is trying to create something like a living model for a new, heroic form of affirmation of life (something like the way Montaigne simply offered himself to his readers),²¹ and by means of this model to re-introduce this “tension” of spirit so necessary for self-overcoming. This picture of a living, complex Zarathustra and his unsettledness, his inability to rest content either in isolation or in society, his uncertainty about a form of address, his apostrophes to various dimensions of himself, his illness and recovery, are all supposed to provide us with both an archetypal picture of the great dilemma of modernity itself (the problem of affirmation, a new striving to be “higher”), but also to inspire the kind of thoughtfulness and risk taking Zarathustra embodies. In his more grandiose moments Nietzsche no doubt thought of Zarathustra’s struggles and explorations as reaching for us the same fundamental level as Homer’s Odysseus, as Moses, as Virgil’s Aeneas, as Christ. TSZ is somehow to be addressed to the source of whatever longing, striving, desire gives life a direction, inspires sacrifice and dedication. And it will be a very difficult task. There is a clear account of the basic issue in *Ecce Homo*:

The psychological problem apparent in the Zarathustra type is how someone who to an unprecedented degree says no and *does* no to everything everyone has said yes to so far, – how somebody like this can nevertheless be the opposite of a no-saying spirit.²²

¹⁹ GS, §56.

²⁰ See also “On Unwilling Bliss” in the third part, where Zarathustra speaks of the “desire for love” (p. xxx).

²¹ For more on Nietzsche’s relation to Montaigne and the French psychological tradition, see my *Nietzsche moraliste français. La conception nietzschéenne d’une psychologie philosophique*, forthcoming, 2005, Odile Jacob. Emerson is also clearly a model as well. See Conant, *Nietzsche’s Postmoralism*.

²² EH, §6, pp. 130–131.

Cambridge University Press

0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra

Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

And this way of putting the point makes it clear that Nietzsche also imagines that the experiment in so addressing each other might easily and contingently fail and fail catastrophically; it may just be the case that a sustainable attachment to life and to each other requires the kind of more standard, prosaic “illusion” (a lie) that we have also rendered impossible. The possibility of such a failure is also an issue that worries Zarathustra a great deal, as we shall see.

The problem, then, that Zarathustra must address, the problem of “nihilism,” is a kind of collective failure of desire, bows that have lost their tension, the absence of “need” or of any fruitful self-contempt, the presence of wretched contentment, “settling” for too little. And these discussions of desire and meaning throw into a different light how he means to address such a failure. As we have seen, even texts other than TSZ are overwhelmingly literary, rhetorically complex, elliptical, and always a matter of adopting personae and “masks,” often the mask of a historian or scientist.²³ He appears to believe that this is the only effective way to reach the level of such concern – to address an audience suffering from failed desire (without knowing it). Nietzsche clearly thinks we cannot understand such a possibility, much less be both shamed and inspired by it, except by a literary and so “living” treatment of such an existential possibility. And Nietzsche clearly thinks he has such a chance, in the current historical context of crisis, collapse, boredom, and confusion, a chance of shaming and cajoling us away from commitments that will condemn us to a “last man” or “pale atheist” sort of existence, and of inspiring a new desire, a new “tension” of the spirit. Hence the importance of these endless pictures and images: truth as a woman, science as gay, troubadours, tomb robbers, seduction, romance, prophets, animals, tightrope walkers, dwarves, beehives, crazy men, sleep, dreams, breeding, blonde beasts, twilight of the gods, and on and on. (It makes *all* the difference in the world if, having appreciated this point, we then appreciate that such notions as “the will to power” and “the eternal return of the same” *belong on this list*, are not independent “philosophical” explanations of the meaning of the list. It is not an accident that Nietzsche often introduces these notions with the same hypothetical indirectness that he uses for the other images.)

²³ For an extensive discussion of the issue of masks in TSZ see Stanley Rosen, *The Mask of Enlightenment: Nietzsche's Zarathustra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Cambridge University Press
 0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra
 Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Introduction

The dramatic action (Prologue and Part I)

However, as in many dramatic and literary presentations of philosophy (such as Platonic dialogues, Proust's novel, Beckett's plays, and so forth) there are not only things said, but things done, and said and done by characters located somewhere and at a time, usually within a narrative time that is constantly changing contexts, conditions of appropriateness, aspects of relevance, and the like. On the face of it this means that one ought to be aware of who says what to whom when, and what is shown rather than said by what they do and what happens to them. In this case, Zarathustra had left the human world when he was thirty and stayed ten years in the mountains. We are not told why, although it is implied that he had psychologically "burned up"; he carried his own "ashes" up to the mountain. In the section "The Hinterworldly" he also tells us that he managed to free himself (he does not tell us how) from the view that the finite human world was an imperfect copy of something better, "the work of a suffering and tortured god," that such views were a kind of disease he had recovered from, and that he now speaks of "the meaning of the earth" (p. 6). But we are not told exactly when this event occurred, before or after his voluntary exile, and the speech can be misleading unless, as just discussed above, it is read together with a number of others about self-overcoming. That is, it turns out not at all to be *easy*, having abandoned a transcendent source of ideals, to live in a way true to this meaning of the earth or to understand in what sense this is a "self-overcoming" way. The latter is not a mere "liberationist" project, but one that in some ways is even more difficult than traditional self-denying virtue.

We also have no clear sense of what Zarathustra did all day, every day for ten years; he seemed mostly to think, contemplate, and talk to animals, especially his favorites, his snake and eagle (already an indication of a link between the low and the high in all things human). But we do know that something happened to him one day, his "heart transformed," and he resolved to re-enter the human world. We might assume, given Nietzsche's own diagnosis of the age, that this change was brought about by a sense of some coming crisis among humans. That is, Nietzsche is well known for calling this crisis "nihilism," and eventually many of Zarathustra's speeches express this urgency about our becoming the "last human beings," humans who can no longer "overcome themselves." But initially Zarathustra's return is promoted by motives that are explicit and

Cambridge University Press

0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra

Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

somewhat harder to understand. He had become “weary” of the wisdom gained while in isolation and needs to distribute it, much as the sun gratuitously “overflows” with warmth and light for humans; he would be in some way fatigued or frustrated by not being able to share this overflow. In a brief exchange with a hermit on the way down, we learn two further things about Zarathustra’s motives. His generosity is prompted by *a love of human beings*, and those who remain in hermit-like isolation can do so only because they have not heard that “God is dead.”

These references to love, gift-giving, and Zarathustra’s potential weariness are quite important since they amount to his further figurative answers to questions about the intended function and purpose of TSZ; it is a gift of love and meant to inspire some erotic longing as well. (This assumes that Zarathustra’s fate in some way allegorizes what Nietzsche expects the fate of TSZ to be and, while this seems credible, Nietzsche also ironizes Zarathustra enough to give one pause about such an allegory.) The images suggest that the lassitude, smug self-satisfaction, and complacency that Zarathustra finds around him in the market place and later in the city define the problem he faces in the unusual way suggested above. It again suggests that what in other contexts he could call the problem of nihilism is not so much the result of some discovery, a new piece of knowledge (that God is dead, or that values are ungrounded, contingent psychological projections), nor merely a fearful failure of will, a failing that requires the rhetoric of courage, a call to a new kind of strength. As noted, the problem Zarathustra confronts seems to be a failure of desire; nobody wants what he is offering, and they seem to want very little other than a rather bovine version of happiness. It is that sort of failure that proves particularly difficult to address, and that cannot be corrected by thinking up a “better argument” against such a failure.

The events that are narrated are also clearly tied to the question of what it means for Zarathustra to have a teaching, to try to impart it to an audience suffering in this unusual way, suffering from complacency or dead desire. Only at the very beginning, in the Prologue, does he try to “lecture publicly,” one might say, and this is a pretty unambiguous failure. He is jeered at and mocked and he leaves, saying “I am not the mouth for these ears” (p. 9). The meaning of his attempt, however, seems to be acted out in an unusual drama about a tightrope walker who mistakenly thinks he is being called to start his act, does so, and then is frightened into a fall by a “jester” who had attempted to leap over the tightrope walker. It

Cambridge University Press
 0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra
 Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Introduction

is not uncommon in TSZ that Zarathustra later returns to some of these early images and offers an interpretation. In Part III, in the section called “On Old and New Tablets,” Zarathustra remarks,

This is what my great love of the farthest demands: *do not spare your neighbor!* Human being is something that must be overcome.

There are manifold ways and means of overcoming: *you see to it!* But only a jester thinks: “human being can also be *leaped over.*”
 (p. 159)

This is only one of many manifestations of the importance of understanding Zarathustra’s “love” and his intimations of the great difficulty involved in his new doctrine of self-overcoming. Here it is something that must be accomplished by each (“*you see to it!*”) and even more strikingly, the reminder here of the Prologue appears to indicate that Zarathustra himself had portrayed his own teaching in a comically inadequate way, preaching to the multitudes as if people could simply begin to overcome themselves by some revolutionary act of will, as if the overman were a new species to be arrived at by “overleaping” the current one. We come closer here to the parodic elements of the text; in this case a kind of self-parody.

The wandering Zarathustra (Part II)

The other plot events in the book also continue to suggest a great unsettledness in Zarathustra’s conception and execution of his project, rather than a confident manifesto by Nietzsche through the persona of Zarathustra. He had shifted from market place preaching to conversations with disciples in Part I, and at the end of that Part I he decides to forgo even that and to go back to his cave alone, and warns his disciples to “guard” themselves against him, and even “to be ashamed of him” (p. 59). At the beginning of Part II he begins to descend again, and again we hear that he is overfull and weary with his gifts and with love (the image of love has changed into something more dramatic: “And may my torrent of love plunge into impassés!”), but now we hear something new, something absent from his first descent: he is also concerned and impatient. “My enemies have become powerful and have distorted the image of my teaching.” He will seek out his friends and disciples again (as well as his enemies this time, he notes) but he seems to have realized that part of the problem with the dissemination of his teachings and warnings

Cambridge University Press

0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra

Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

lies in him, and not just the audience. He admits that his wisdom is a “wild” wisdom that frightens, and that he might scare everyone off, even his friends. “If only my lioness-wisdom could learn to roar tenderly!” he laments, a lesson he clearly thinks he has not yet learned.

The crucial dramatic event in Part II is what occurs near the end. Until then many of Zarathustra’s themes had been similar to, or extensions of, what he had already said. Again he seeks to understand the possibility of a form of self-dissatisfaction and even self-contempt that is not based on some sense of *absence* or incompleteness, a natural gap or imperfection that needs to be filled or completed, and so a new goal that can be linked with a new *kind* of desire to “overcome.” He discusses that issue here in terms of “revenge,” especially against time, and he begins to worry that, with no redemptive revolutionary hope in human life, no ultimate justice in the after-life, and no realm of objective “goods in themselves” or any natural right, human beings will come to see a finite, temporally mutable, contingent life as a kind of burden, or curse, or purposeless play, and they will exact revenge for having been arbitrarily thrown into this condition. What he means to say in the important section “On the Tarantulas” is something he had not made clear before, least of all to himself. Indeed, he had helped create the illusion he wants to dispel. He now denies that he, Zarathustra, is a historical or revolutionary figure who will somehow save all of us from this fate, and he denies that the overman is a historical goal (in the way a prophet would foretell the coming of *the redeemer*) but a personal and quite elusive, very difficult new kind of ideal for each individual. In this sense TSZ can be a book for all, for anyone who is responsive to the call to self-overcoming, but for none, in the sense that it cannot offer a comprehensive reason (for anyone) to overcome themselves and cannot offer specific prescriptions. (It is striking that, although Zarathustra opens his speeches with the call for an overman, that aspect of his message virtually drops out after Part II.)²⁴ Indeed Zarathustra’s role as such an early prophet is again part of what makes his early manifestation comic, a *parodia*. He is clearly pulling back from such a role:

But so that I do *not* whirl, my friends, bind me fast to the pillar here!
I would rather be a stylite than a whirlwind of revenge!

²⁴ For more detail on the relation between the first two parts and the last two, see Pippin, “Irony and Affirmation.”

Cambridge University Press

0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra

Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

Indeed, Zarathustra is no tornado or whirlwind; and if he is a dancer, nevermore a tarantella dancer! (p. 79)

Even so, this dance of some escape from revenge is hardly an automatic affirmation of existence as such. Throughout Part II, there are constant reminders of how *hard* this new sort of self-overcoming will be. The “Famous Wise Men” did not know the first thing about what “spirit” truly was:

Spirit is life that itself cuts into life; by its own agony it increases its own knowledge – did you know that?

And the happiness of spirit is this: to be anointed and consecrated by tears to serve as a sacrificial animal – did you know that? (p. 80)

Other dimensions of this “agony,” and the failed hopes of the beginning of his project start appearing. He says that “My happiness in bestowing died in bestowing, my virtue wearied of itself in its superabundance” (p. 82). Paradoxical (to say the least) formulations arise. “At bottom I love only life – and verily, most when I hate it!”

The problem of self-overcoming

But he seems also to be gaining some clarity about his earlier aspirations and about the nature of the theme that plays the most important role in TSZ, “self-overcoming.” In a passage with that name, he comments on the doctrine most associated with Nietzsche, “the will to power.” But again everything is expressed figuratively. He says that all prior values had been placed in a “skiff” as a result of the “dominating will” of the inventors of such values and he suggests that this “river of becoming” has carried those values to a disturbingly unexpected fate. He counsels these “wisest ones” not to think of this historical and largely uncontrollable fate as dangerous and the end of good and evil; rather the river itself (not a psychological will for power on the part of the creators) is the will to power, the “unexhausted begetting will of life,” the current of radical historical change “upon” which or in terms of which obeying and esteeming and committing must always go on. And he notes that he has learned three things about this process. (1) Life itself (that is the possibility of *leading* a life) always requires “obedience,” that is, the possibility of commitment to a norm or goal and the capacity to sustain such commitment.

Cambridge University Press

0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra

Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

(2) “The one who cannot obey himself is commanded.” (If we do not find a way of leading our life, it will be led for us one way or another.) And (3) “Commanding is harder than obeying.” He then adds what is in effect a fourth point to these, that the attempt to exercise such command is “an experiment and a risk”; indeed a risk of life. He tells us that with these questions he is at the very “heart of life and into the roots of its heart” (p. 89). There, in this heartland, he again confronts the problem he had discussed earlier in many different ways, the wrong sort of self-contempt, the absence of any arrows shot beyond man, no giving birth to stars, the bovine complacency of the last human beings. He asks again, that is, *the* question: without possible reliance on a faith in divine purposes or natural perfections (that river has “carried” us beyond such options), how should we now understand the possibility of the “intellectual conscience” without which we would be beneath contempt? That is, whence the experience that we are *not* as we could be, that what matters to me now might not be what should matter most, that our present state, for each individual, must be “overcome?” Why? Since the summary “secret” that Zarathustra has learned from life is expressed this way – “And this secret life itself spoke to me: ‘Behold,’ it said, ‘I am that *which must always overcome itself*,’” – it appears that what is at stake for him is the possibility of coming to exercise power *over oneself*; that is, to lead one’s life both by sustaining commitments (right “to the death,” he often implies, suggesting that being able to lead a life in such a whole-hearted way is much more to be esteemed than merely staying alive) and by finding some way to endure the altering historical conditions of valuing, esteeming, such that one can “overcome” the self so committed to prior values and find a way to “will” again. One could say that what makes the “overman” (*Übermensch*) genuinely self-transcending is that he can over-come himself, accomplish when necessary this self-transcending (*Selbst-Überwindung*.) He thereby has gained power “over” himself and so realized his will to power:

That I must be struggle and becoming and purpose and the contradiction of purposes – alas, whoever guesses my will guesses also on what *crooked* paths it must walk!

Whatever I may create and however I may love it – soon I must oppose it and my love, thus my will wants it. (pp. 89–90)

Likewise, Zarathustra stresses that good and evil, any life-orienting normative distinctions, are hardly everlasting; rather they “must overcome

Cambridge University Press

0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra

Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

themselves out of themselves again and again.” That is, self-overcoming is not transcending a present state for the sake of an ideal, stable higher state (as in a naturally perfected state or any other kind of fixed telos). All aspirations to be more, better than one is, if they are possible at all in present conditions, are provisional, will always give rise to further transformed aspirations. Zarathustra’s questions about this do not so much concern traditional philosophical questions about such a form of life but a much more difficult one to address: could we *bear, endure* such a fate? Clearly Zarathustra’s own starts and stops, and the effect these have on him, are meant to raise such an issue dramatically. (And it is not at all clear that this issue is in any way resolved, or that a resolution is even relevant.)

Two other things are quite striking about these formulations. The first, as the autobiographical inflection of such passages makes clear, is that we have to see Zarathustra as embodying this struggle, and thus must note that this possibility – the heart of everything, the possibility of self-overcoming – seems thereby also tied somehow to *his* problems of rhetoric, language, of audience, friends, his own loneliness, and occasional bitterness and pity. Some condition of success in self-overcoming is linked to achieving the right relation to others (and so, by implication, is inconsistent with a hermit-like, isolated life). The second emerges quickly from the first. We have to note that Zarathustra, as the embodiment of this struggle, whatever this relation to others turns out to be, is completely uninterested in gaining power *over others*, subjecting as much or as many as possible to his control or command. (“I lack the lion’s voice for all commanding” (p. 116).) *Self-commanding* (and, dialectically, self-obeying) are the great problems. (In fact he keeps insisting that the *last* thing he wants is the ability to command them. His chief problem is that whenever he hears them re-formulate what he thinks he has said or dreamt, he is either disappointed, or perhaps anxious that he does not understand his own “doctrine”; they may be right, he may be wrong, and no intellectual conscience could sustain a commitment that was suspected of being delusory.) Even when he appears to discuss serving or mastering others, he treats it as in the service of self-mastery and so again possible self-overcoming. (“[A]nd even in the will of the serving I found the will to be master” (p. 89).)²⁵

²⁵ There are of course other passages in Nietzsche which seem to encourage a violent upheaval, all so that the strong can rule over the weak and so forth. I have only space to say that if we use TSZ

Cambridge University Press
 0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra
 Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Introduction

These are less formulations of a position than fragmentary and largely programmatic aspects of Zarathustra's self-diagnosis and the cure he at least aspires to. Many philosophical questions arise inevitably. *What* would be amiss, lost, wrong in a life not fully or not at all "led" by a subject? How could this aspiration towards something believed to be higher or more worthy than what one is or has now *be directed*, if all the old language of external or objective forms of normative authority is now impossible? On what grounds can one say that a desire to cultivate a different sort of self, to overcome oneself, is really in the service of a "higher" self? Higher in what sense? What could be said to be responsible for (relied on for) securing this obedience, for helping to ward off skepticism when it arises? Under what conditions can such commitments and projects be said to lose their grip on a subject, fail, or die?

In general Zarathustra does not fully accept the burden of these questions as ones he must assume. For one thing he clearly does not believe that the inspiration for such an attempt at self-direction and something like "becoming better at becoming who one is"²⁶ can be provided by an argument or a revelation or a command. One would already have had to measure oneself and one's worth against "arguments" or "revelation" or "authoritative commands" for such different calls to be effective and it is to *that* prior, deepest level of commitment that Zarathustra, however indirectly and figuratively, is directing his rhetoric. And given the great indeterminateness of his approach, he is clearly much more interested in the qualitative characteristics of such commitments than with their content. The quality he is most interested in turns out to be extremely complex: on the one hand, "whole-heartedness" and an absorbed or passionate "identification" with one's higher ideal; on the other hand, a paradoxical capacity to "let go" of such commitments and pursue other ideals when the originals (somehow) cease to serve self-overcoming and self-transcendence, when they lead to complacency and contentment.

However, to come to by far the most complicated issue introduced by Zarathustra's speeches, he clearly also thinks that such qualitative considerations – the chief topic of the book, the qualitative dimensions

as a model for reading Nietzsche, and attend to issues like voice, persona, irony, and context, we will see a Nietzsche very different from the traditional one. For more on the political issues in Nietzsche, see my "Deceit, Desire, and Democracy: Nietzsche on Modern Eros," *International Studies in Philosophy*, 32:3 (March, 2000), pp. 63–70.

²⁶ That is, better at becoming who one truly is, beyond or over one's present state.

Cambridge University Press
 0521841712 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Thus Spoke Zarathustra
 Edited by Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Introduction

of a self-relation that will in the present circumstances make possible a yearning for a self-overcoming and escape from mere contentment – will also *rule out various contents*. It is clear that he, and in this case Nietzsche as well, thinks that one cannot whole-heartedly and “self-overcomingly” be a “last human being” or any of its many manifestations (a petty tyrant, a pale atheist, a “reactive” type, a modern ascetic). Such types embody forms of a “negative” self-relation that are “reactive” and self-denying in a way that makes true self-overcoming and self-affirmation impossible and so will not allow that form of identification with one’s deeds that Zarathustra suggests should be like the way a “mother” sees herself in her “child.” (“I wish *your* self were in the deed like the mother is in the child; let that be *your* word on virtue” (p. 74).) Yet it is also clear that one cannot simply *will* “to have contempt for oneself as Zarathustra recommends.” The right relation between shame and yearning is as delicate and elusive as are Zarathustra’s strange speeches and dreams and visions. And, as we have been seeing, he also clearly thinks (or he experiences in his own adventures) that only *some kinds of relations to others* are consistent with the possibility of such genuine self-direction. Merely commanding others, discipleship, indifference, or isolation are all ruled out. Since we also do not ever get from Nietzsche a discursive account of what distinguishes a genuine form of self-direction and self-overcoming from an illusory or self-deceived one (whatever such a distinction amounts to, it is not of the kind that could be helped, would be better realized, by such a theory), elements of how he understands that distinction emerge only indirectly and, together with a clearer understanding of self-overcoming and the social relations it requires, would all have to be reconstructed from a wide variety of contexts and passages. Moreover, to make everything even more complicated, Nietzsche also clearly believes that such a whole-hearted aspiration to self-overcoming is also consistent with a certain level of *irony*, some distance from one’s ideals, the adoption of personae and masks, and even a kind of esotericism when addressing different audiences.

Illness and convalescence (Part III)

But while Zarathustra does not treat these issues as discursive problems, as if they were problems about skepticism or justification, he does *suffer* from them, suffer from the burden that the thought of such contingency imposes on any possibly worthy life. He becomes ill, apparently ill with

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction*

the human condition as such, even disgusted by it, and a great deal of the latter four speeches of Part II and the majority of Part III involve his possible recovery from such an illness, his “convalescing.” There is in effect a kind of mini-narrative from the speech called “The Soothsayer” in Part II until the speech “On Unwilling Bliss” in Part III that is at the center of the work’s drama, and the re-orientation effected there is played out throughout the rest of Part III, especially in “The Convalescent.” Dramatically, at the end of Part II Zarathustra again resolves to return home, and in Part III he is underway back there, and finally reaches his cave and his animals.

“The Soothsayer” begins with remarks about the famous doctrine mostly attributed to Nietzsche, but here expressed by a soothsayer and quoted by Zarathustra. (In *Ecce Homo*, the idea is called the “basic idea” and “fundamental thought” of the work.)²⁷ This notion, that “Everything is empty, everything is the same, everything was!” is promptly interpreted in a melancholic way, such that “We have become too weary to die; now we continue to wake and we live on – in burial chambers” (p. 106). It is this prophecy that “went straight to his [Zarathustra’s] heart and transformed him.” He does not eat or drink for three days, does not speak, and does not sleep. In typically figurative language he explains the source of his despair in a way that suggests a kind of self-critique. He had clearly earlier placed his hopes for mankind in a dramatic historical, epochal moment, the bridge from man to the overman, and he now realizes that it was a mistake to consider this a historical goal or broad civilizational ideal, that such a teleology is a fantasy, that rather “all recurs eternally,” that the last human being cannot be overcome in some revolutionary moment. In the language of his strange dream he finds that he does not, after all, have the “keys” to open the relevant historical gate (he thought he did, thought he need not only keep watch over, but could open up, what had gone dead), that it is a matter of chance or a sudden wind whether or not a historical change will occur within individuals, and if it does, it might be nothing but the release of what had been dead. His disciples promptly interpret the dream in exactly the opposite way, as if Zarathustra himself were “the [liberating] wind.” Zarathustra merely shakes his head in disappointment and continues his wandering home.

²⁷ EH, §1, pp. 123 and 124.