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FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE
Beyond Good and Evil



CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

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FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

Beyond Good and Evil

Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future

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Edited by Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman

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Introduction

I

Beyond Good and Evil (BGE) is often considered to be one of Friedrich Nietzsche's greatest books. Though it is by no means clear what criteria this assessment is based on, it is easy to understand how it comes about. It seems to be an expression of the feeling that in this book Nietzsche gives the most comprehensible and detached account of the major themes that concerned him throughout his life. Nietzsche was suspicious of almost everything addressed in this book – whether it be knowledge, truth, philosophy, or morality and religion. He regarded them as the source, or at least the effect, of a misguided tendency in the development of human nature: one that has led to disastrous cultural, social, and psychological consequences. At the same time he lets us share his more constructive views as well, mainly his views on how he wants us to perceive the world and to change our lives in order to live up to this new perception. He speaks of perspectivism, the will to power, of human nobility (Vornehmheit) and of the conditions of a life liberated from the constraints of oppressive tradition. In the middle of the book, he even adds a number of short

I thank Dartmouth College and especially Sally Sedgwick and Margaret Robinson, whose generous hospitality gave me the opportunity to write this text. Special thanks to Karl Ameriks and Gary Hatfield for transforming my "English" into English and to Andreas Kemmerling for helpful suggestions. Very special thanks to Dina Emundts for all sorts of comments. The version printed here owes much to careful editing by Hilary Gaskin.

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¹ See, for example, the Introductions to *BGE* by Walter Kaufmann (Vintage: New York, 1966) and Michael Tanner (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1999; translation R. Hollingdale), and also Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Meridian Books: New York, 1956), and Tanner, *Nietzsche* (Oxford University Press: Oxford/New York, 1994). References for all quotations from *BGE* are to section numbers



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aphorisms, and he ends the book with a poem that hints at the artistic background to his concern with decadence and the means for overcoming it. Thus it would seem that the whole range of Nietzsche's interests, his prejudices and his preferences, his loathings and his hopes, and above all his deep insights into our situation in the modern world, are united in an exemplary way in *BGE*, and for this reason it is a great book.

Although there is something to be said for this view, it is not the only view that is possible. There are quite a number of thinkers who would insist that it makes no sense at all to attribute greatness to any of Nietzsche's works. For these readers, all of Nietzsche's writings are flawed by serious shortcomings that justify fundamental complaints, ranging from accusations that they are utterly irrational, or devoid of informative content, to the conviction that they contain nothing but silly proclamations based on unwarranted generalizations — or a mixture of both. According to proponents of this view, the best way to think of Nietzsche's works is as the disturbing documents of the creative process of someone who was on the verge of madness. To call any of his works great would therefore amount to a categorical mistake. Interestingly enough, this bleak evaluation is not based on any disagreement with what the work's admirers tell us we will find in it, or even any disagreement with the claim that it gives us the quintessential Nietzsche.

It is a perplexing fact that it is by no means easy to decide which of these two conflicting attitudes towards BGE should prevail, and in the end it may be a rather personal matter. Nevertheless it is possible to identify some conditions that will influence how we are likely to think about the merits of this work. Three main factors should be taken into consideration. First, much depends on how we interpret the aims pursued by Nietzsche's work in general and BGE in particular. Second, our evaluation will depend on the amount of tolerance and sympathy that we are prepared to mobilize towards Nietzsche the person, and also towards certain tendencies in bourgeois culture in Germany in the second half of the nineteenth century. The third and most important factor, however, is the way that we feel about the very framework in which all our dealings with what we take to be reality are embedded: if we are confident that our normal outlook on whatever concerns us has been proven to be ultimately right, or at least on the right track, then chances are high that we will end up thinking of Nietzsche and BGE as a nuisance. If we are not convinced of the soundness of our normal views, then we might have second thoughts about things, and in



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that case a book like *BGE* might be considered illuminating and even helpful.

П

Let us start with Nietzsche the person. In the history of art, science, philosophy, and even literature one very often finds that in order to appreciate or to evaluate a work it is not much of an advantage to be familiar with its author and his life: an intellectual or artistic product is better judged on its own merits than on the basis of uncertain knowledge about the idiosyncratic features and muddled purposes of its author. Moreover, in some cases authors intentionally withdraw from their products in an attempt to become invisible and to let the work speak for itself, and thus leave us very few personal clues in their works. Rousseau could serve as an example of the first kind of case and Kant of the second; Kant goes so far as to use the phrase *de nobis ipsis silemus* ("of our own person we will say nothing") as a motto for his main work. We therefore tend to believe that a distinction can be drawn between the private views of the author and the meaning of the work which the author produces.

Yet there are some works with respect to which such a consideration does not so easily apply. These are works whose very meaning is tied intrinsically to the person of their author, as is the case with diaries, letters, personal notes, or autobiographies. Here our knowledge about the author, or perhaps an understanding of the situation the author is in, are necessary ingredients for an appreciation of the text. There are many reasons to presume that Nietzsche thought of many of his texts as being like diaries or personal notes that tell us something about himself and about his perspective on the matters they address, rather than as products that aim at objective, non-personal results. Hence, his biography may be of interest in any attempt to assess his work.

Nietzsche's life is surely not a success story; on the contrary, it is a rather sad story of misery and failure. It is the story of a man who from the beginning of his adult life, until the sudden and catastrophic end of his productive period, was confronted with embarrassing and humiliating experiences. This is true of his private life as well as of his relations with the intellectual community of his time. He was plagued by ill health, a psychosomatic wreck, suffering from all sorts of diseases ranging from chronic nervous ailments and severe eye problems, which left him almost



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blind, to extremely exhausting states of prolonged migraine. These conditions made life tolerable for him only in a few places in northern Italy (in the winter) and the Swiss Engadine (in the summer), and it is in these places that he spent most of his time in the 1880s. His social relations were always, to put it mildly, somewhat complicated. Those who apparently cared most about him, his mother and his sister, he found oppressive and distasteful because they represented a type of personality he deeply despised.2 Though he prided himself on being comfortable with women, he does not seem to have been very successful in establishing emotionally satisfying relationships with them, which is hardly surprising given his views on women and on femininity (Weiblichkeit) in general.3 Things did not go much better with his friends. The people whom he called "friends" he quite often spoke of with great resentment: he charged all of them with a lack of sensitivity toward him, he complained that none of them ever bothered to study his works, and he accused them of failing to defend him against public neglect.⁴ In short, he suffered deeply from a sense of solitude and isolation, from not being appropriately acknowledged because of the supposed imperfections of the people around him.

To make things even worse, Nietzsche was not given the opportunity to compensate for the shortcomings of his private life by enjoying institutional and public success in his roles as a university teacher and author. Although he made a very promising start – he was appointed professor of classics at Basle university at the early age of twenty-four – his academic career disintegrated rapidly, in part because of his poor health and in part because he became annoyed with his teaching duties. As for his fortunes as an author, not much can be said that is positive. His first book, the now highly acclaimed treatise *The Birth of Tragedy*, did at least attract the attention of classicists (though their reaction to it was for the most

- ² See the annihilating remark aimed at both of them in *Ecce Homo* which culminates in Nietzsche's pronouncement: "I confess that the deepest objection to the Eternal Recurrence, my real idea from the abyss, is always my mother and my sister" (KSA VI, § 267, translation from Tanner, *Nietzsche*, p. 68). KSA refers to Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari, 15 vols. (de Gruyter: Berlin, 1980); this edition is based on the critical edition of Nietzsche's works, Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari, 28 vols. to date (de Gruyter: Berlin, 1967–).
- ³ Though Nietzsche addresses this topic in *BGE* as well (§ 232 et seq.), the general tendency of his outlook on women is documented most succinctly in the relevant passage of *Ecce Homo* ("Why I write such good books," § 5).
- 4 A good example of this assessment of his friends is again to be found in *Ecce Homo* ("The case of Wagner," § 4).



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part emphatically negative) and of members of the Wagnerian community (including Wagner himself).⁵ But soon he had to realize that there was only a marginal interest among the public in his way of dealing with issues, whether they were philosophical topics such as truth and the metaphysical foundations of knowledge, topics concerning the history and value of religion and morality, or topics such as the critical assessment of modern culture and ideas about how to overcome what he considered to be the fundamental problems of modernity. This lack of interest showed in the dismal number of copies sold of his books.⁶

The most discouraging experience for Nietzsche, however, may not have been this failure to gain a wider recognition. If he could have believed that his few readers represented some sort of elite, perhaps a group of distinguished intellectuals, then their taking notice of his writings would have been of importance to him and this might have counterbalanced his lack of public success. Unfortunately he could not entertain even that belief. From the very few reactions he became aware of – mostly reviews of his books in more or less obscure journals – he had to conclude that he was read by only a few readers – and the wrong ones. In his view, his readership consisted of people either unable or unwilling (or both) to understand him adequately. He blamed his readers for not being in the least prepared to give credit to his intentions and for being attentive only to those points which conveniently confirmed them in their own negative preconceptions. What he was missing on a fundamental level was a readiness on the part of readers to explore things his way, a feeling of intellectual kinship between author and audience, or, to put it another way, he deeply craved recognition from an audience that he thought fitting. This is touchingly expressed in two short remarks from *Ecce Homo*. The first relates explicitly only to his Zarathustra, though it is quite likely that Nietzsche thought it true of his other writings as well: "In order to

⁵ See the Introduction by Raymond Geuss to the edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* in this series (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁶ Of the book Nietzsche valued most, *Zarathustra*, whose first three parts were published separately in 1883 and 1884, only about sixty to seventy copies each were sold within the first three years after their appearance (see letter to Franz Overbeck, summer 1886: *KSB* VII, pp. 206–9). The fourth part of the *Zarathustra* was published in 1885 in a private edition of only forty copies and was not accessible to a wider public before 1892. *BGE* did not fare much better: 114 copies were sold within a year (see letter to Peter Gast, 8 June 1887: *KSB* VIII, pp. 86–8). Nietzsche comments (in the same letter to Gast): "Instructive! Namely, they simply don't want my literature." It seems that most of his other books had the same fate – they too were utterly neglected during the period in his life when he would still have cared about their success.



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understand anything at all from my *Zarathustra*, you might need to be conditioned as I am – with one foot *beyond* life."⁷ The second remark delineates what he takes to be his ideal reader, and there is no doubt that he meant what he says: "When I call up the image of a perfect reader, what emerges is a monster of courage and curiosity, who is also supple, clever, cautious, a born adventurer and discoverer."⁸

What emerges is a picture of a totally isolated, highly neurotic man who had to try hard to avoid thinking of himself as a complete failure. His way of dealing with this situation seems to have been simply not to accept the idea that all these annoying circumstances might have been brought about partly by particularities or deficiencies that could be traced back to his own person, so he managed to combine a perfectly clear and even realistic assessment of what was happening to him with an unshakeable conviction that all this had nothing to do with him and revealed nothing about him. It is this ability which, in my view, accounts for two dominant traits that appear in his published works. The first is that he never even came close to considering the possibility that – given the general intellectual climate of his time – his lack of success as an author might have something to do with his pursuing the "wrong" topics in a "wrong" way. It never crossed his mind that what he thought to be an interesting, novel, and valuable insight might indeed have been exactly what it seemed to be to almost all of his contemporaries – an overstated triviality, an extremely one-sided exaggeration or an embarrassing piece of bad reasoning. He simply stuck to the points he felt he had to make, deeply convinced of being on the right track, and fending off all signs of criticism or neglect with the maxim "so much the worse for the critic."9

⁷ Ecce Homo ("Why I am so wise," end of § 3).

⁸ Ibid. ("Why I write such good books," end of § 3). In the same text he mentions explicitly the reactions to BGE as an example of how severely it was misunderstood or, to use his terminology, how gravely this book was sinned against because its readers were not up to its challenge ("Why I write such good books," end of § 1).

⁹ In Ecce Homo Nietzsche even presents an explanation as to why he believes this stance to be perfectly reasonable: "Ultimately, nobody can get more out of things, including books, than he already knows. For what one lacks access to from experience one will have no ear. Now let us imagine an extreme case: that a book speaks of nothing but events that lie altogether beyond the possibility of any frequent or even rare experience — that it is the first language for a new series of experiences. In that case, simply nothing will be heard, but there will be the acoustic illusion that where nothing is heard, nothing is there... Whoever thought he had understood something of me, had made up something out of me after his own image... and whoever had understood nothing of me, denied that I need to be considered at all." "Why I write such good books," § 1,



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This attitude becomes increasingly visible in his writings after Zarathustra and culminates in his late texts of 1888, especially in Ecce Homo. Here we find brilliant and witty remarks which rightly became notorious (though Nietzsche himself might not have found them very amusing, because they can also be read as documents of despair). I quote two of them: "We all know, several of us even know from experience, what it is to have long ears. Well then, I will dare to claim that I have the smallest ears. This is of no little interest to women – it seems they think I understand them better? ... I am the anti-ass par excellence and this makes me a world-historical monster – I am, in Greek, but not only in Greek, the Antichrist."10 The other is: "I know my fate. One day, my name will be associated with the memory of something tremendous -acrisis the like of which the world has never seen, the most profound collision of conscience, of a decision brought about against everything that has ever been believed, demanded, or held holy so far. I am not a man. I am dynamite."11

The second trait which we find in Nietzsche's writings is closely connected to his inability to assess himself in the light of others' reactions. It consists in his total unconcern about the tenability of his views when judged according to standards that he thinks are alien to his approach. Starting from the conviction that there is no common ground between him and his reader, that what he has to say is most likely incomprehensible to almost everybody else, he does not feel obliged to enter the social game of competitive discourse. He refuses to try to convince people by somehow connecting to their way of thinking; he does not refute possible arguments against the points he wants to make by giving reasons in their favor. Instead, he makes abundantly clear his contempt for "normal" thinking and his impatience with the evaluations of others. It is this stance which gives so many readers the impression of an overwhelming polemical element in Nietzsche's literary presentation of his views. He reinforces it by insisting over and over again that what he has to tell us are above all his truths. The claim to exclusivity is meant to imply both that his main concern is not whether we find these truths convincing, and

translation from W. Kaufmann, On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo (Vintage: New York, 1967), p. 261.

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¹⁰ Ecce Homo, "Why I write such good books," end of § 2, translation Kaufmann, p. 263.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, "Why I am a destiny," beginning of § 1, translation Kaufmann, p. 326.



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that he does not pretend to have found *the* Truth, for he thinks this is a metaphysical illusion anyway.

Thus we find embedded in Nietzsche's basic view of himself the recommendation not that we read his texts as aiming at "objectively valid" judgments, at judgments that are (metaphysically) true irrespective of the cultural and psychological context in which they are made (whatever that may be), but that we think of them as narratives that he invites us to listen to, without really obliging us to believe them if we are not the right kind of person. This does not mean that the stories he has to tell us about, say, truth, morality, the will to power, or culture are, in his view, on a par with fictions, pleasant or otherwise. On the contrary, he believed his stories to be the ultimate stories, the stories that are destined to become the standard versions of our assessment of these phenomena. This is not because his narratives are objectively, or in a context-free sense, the most fitting; rather, they will succeed because eventually people will change to a condition where they appreciate the fact that these narratives are best suited to capture their sense of the right perspective on phenomena if they are considered against the background of what for them is the real meaning of life.

Before looking more closely at some aspects of BGE itself, let me summarize what I take to be the lessons for approaching Nietzsche's writings that can be learned from his personal situation and his way of dealing with it. They take the form of three warnings: (1) do not expect these writings to express impartial views on whatever subject they address - they express, in an emphatic sense, Nietzsche's own views; (2) do not be annoyed by his obsession with apodictic statements whose immense generality very often contradicts both normal expectations of modesty and the most obvious requirements of common sense - these stylistic eccentricities reflect his resolute disdain for what most people cherish, especially people who he suspects are not willing to listen to him; (3) never forget that the author does not want to get mixed up with "us," his normal insensitive "academic" readers. He does not want to be "one of us" - instead he insists on what he calls "distance," in order to uphold his view of himself and to remind us of his uniqueness. A last quotation from Ecce Homo may highlight these points: "Listen to me [the emphasis is on the 'me']. For I am thus and thus. Do not, above all, confound me."12

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¹² Ibid., Preface, § 1.



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Ш

BGE is the first book Nietzsche published after Thus Spoke Zarathustra. He never gave up on the notion that all he really wanted to say is contained in Zarathustra, and this led him to claim that the works he wrote after Zarathustra are essentially nothing but elaborations and explications of ideas already present in his opus magnum. This claim has been disputed by quite a number of his commentators, firstly because many of the most central ideas in Zarathustra cease to play an important role in his later writings, and secondly because the literary form of the later writings connects them much more closely to his books prior to Zarathustra than to Zarathustra itself.¹³ However that may be, Nietzsche himself was of the opinion that Zarathustra set the stage for everything he had to do subsequently. He writes: "The task for the years that followed [i.e. the years after Zarathustra] was mapped out as clearly as possible. Once the yes-saying part of my task had been solved [by means of Zarathustra], it was time for the no-saying, no-doing part."14 This seems to imply that he regarded his post-Zarathustra writings as consisting of predominantly critical essays.

BGE is best known to a wider public for its proverbs. Indeed, some of Nietzsche's best-known maxims are assembled in this text, ranging from perspicuous insights to highly controversial statements. Starting with the Preface, where we find his much used and misused saying, "Christianity is Platonism for the 'people,'" almost every one of the nine parts of the book contains lines that have entered the repertoire of educated or polemical discourse: "life as such is will to power" (§ 13); "humans are the still undetermined [nicht festgestellte] animals" (§ 62); "When a woman has scholarly inclinations, there is usually something wrong with her sexuality" (§ 144); "Morality in Europe these days is the morality of herd animals" (§ 202); and (slightly paraphrased here): "saintliness—the highest spiritualization of the instinct of cleanliness" (§ 271).

These proverbs are in a way the least of what *BGE* has to offer. Its primary fascination lies on a deeper level: this book introduces us into a world of remarkable conjectures, suspicions, and implications. Though one might say this is true of most of Nietzsche's other published works as well, with the exception of *Zarathustra*, there is nevertheless a difference

¹³ See, e.g., M. Tanner, Introduction to BGE and Nietzsche, p. 59.

¹⁴ Ecce Homo, 'Beyond Good and Evil', § 1, translation Kaufmann, p. 310.



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in emphasis between BGE and the other writings. Whereas the other texts pursue their subjects from many different angles, BGE (like The Genealogy of Morals, which Nietzsche announced on the back of its title page as "a sequel to my last book, Beyond Good and Evil, which it is meant to supplement and clarify") is highly focused on the psychological aspects of its topics. In BGE Nietzsche confronts us primarily (though not exclusively) with a dimension of his thought that he was particularly proud of – his psychological stance. This integration of what he calls a psychological point of view into his general practice of casting doubts on received convictions by tracing their origins, of throwing into question our most fundamental beliefs by pointing out their shakiness, and of scrutinizing available alternatives in the light of a new vision of the value of life – this I take to be the most distinctive feature of BGE.

Nietzsche himself gives the following account of what he is doing in *BGE*: "This book (1886) is in every essential a *critique of modernity*; modern sciences, modern arts, even modern politics are not excluded. Besides this, it is an indication of an opposing type, which is as un-modern as possible, a noble, yes-saying type." Though this characterization is accurate and confirms the view that Nietzsche considers his task to be mainly a critical one, it is by no means complete. Interestingly enough, it does not mention two topics which some readers take to be the subject of the most disturbing reflections in the book: morality and religion. This is surprising because these are the topics which seem to emerge most strongly in any consideration of its main message.

In order to appreciate the distinctive approach which Nietzsche favors in *BGE* in his dealings with what he calls "modernity," it might be worthwhile to say a few words about his more general outlook. The starting point for almost everything Nietzsche is interested in throughout his entire intellectual career can be nicely summarized in the form of the question "how are we to live?" or, more poignantly, "how are we to endure life?" He considered this question to be of the utmost importance, because of three interconnected convictions that he treated virtually as facts. His first conviction was that life is best conceived of as a chaotic dynamic process without any stability or direction. The second is articulated in the claim that we have no reason whatsoever to believe in any such thing as the "sense" or the "value" of life, insofar as these terms imply the idea

15 Ibid.

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of an "objective" or "natural" purpose of life. The third is that human life is value-oriented in its very essence — that is, without adherence to some set of values or other, human life would be virtually impossible. Whereas the first conviction is supposed to state an ontological fact, the second is meant to be an application of the ontological point to the normative aspects of human life in particular. The third conviction, though somewhat at odds with the other two, is taken by Nietzsche to reveal a psychological necessity. (How Nietzsche came to hold these convictions, and whether they can be supported, there is not space to examine here, although a closer look would no doubt lead back to his use of some of Schopenhauer's ideas and to his picture of what constituted the cultural life of pre–Socratic ancient Greece.)

Against the background of these convictions, Nietzsche became interested in the question of the origin of values, a question that eventually led him to a whole array of unorthodox and original answers. All his answers ultimately follow from a pattern of reasoning which in its most basic structure is quite simple and straightforward: if there are no values "out there," in the sense in which we believe stars and other physical objects to be "out there" and if, at the same time, we cannot do without values, then there must be some value-creating capacity within ourselves which is responsible for the values we cherish and which organizes our lives. Though presumably we are all endowed with this capacity, ¹⁶ there are very few of us who manage to create values powerful enough to force people into acceptance and to constitute cultural and social profiles. To create such constitutive values seems to be, according to Nietzsche, the prerogative of real philosophers (not philosophy professors), of unique artists (if there are any), of even rarer founders of religions, and, above all, of institutions that develop out of the teaching of creative individuals, i.e., of science, philosophy, and theology. Thus, anyone interested in the function and the origin of values should scrutinize the processes which enabled these persons and institutions to create values.

At this point Nietzsche's more detailed investigations tend to start spreading out in a remarkable number of different directions. It is here, too, that in one sense we should take *BGE* to have its point of departure. That the detailed analysis of all the phenomena connected with the

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¹⁶ For, after all, there seems to be no reason to think that Nietzsche would not allow in principle that each of us could be transformed into a "free spirit," i.e., a person who has the capacity and strength to create and stick to the "right" values.



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concept of value is a very tricky task methodologically is documented not only in *BGE* but also in almost all of Nietzsche's other writings. Acknowledging the fact that the different features of the value-creating processes are much too complex to be accessible by means of a single explanatory scheme, Nietzsche tentatively pursues several different approaches. He merges psychological hypotheses with causal explanations, and combines them with historical observations and linguistic considerations into a multi-perspectival technique that he fondly refers to as his "genealogical method." In *BGE*, where he is occupied mainly with the psychological dimension of the process of value formation, he applies this method primarily in an attempt to come to an understanding of those aspects of the value problem that pertain to its normative elements, that is, to the question of good and bad.

At the risk of oversimplification one can say the bulk of this work addresses three topics, each one of which can be expressed best in terms of a question. The first is this: why is it impossible for us to live without values, why do we need values at all, or, more in line with Nietzsche's terminology, what is the value of values? The second is this: how does it happen that the values we and the overwhelming majority of the members of our culture subscribe to have either been bad from the beginning or have degenerated into bad values? The third topic is this: what is the right perspective on values; what should we expect values to be? Though these three questions are in a certain sense perennial, Nietzsche relates them directly to what he saw as the manifest historical situation of his age and the prevailing conditions of the cultural tradition he lived in, so much of what he has to say is deeply rooted in his response to late nineteenth-century central European conceptions. This is something we should never forget when we confront his texts. Nietzsche speaks to us from the past, and this fact alone might account for some features of his writing that we would now consider idiosyncratic – for example, his way of talking about women and about national characteristics.

IV

At this point we face a problem that I take to be crucial for any adequate assessment of Nietzsche's project. It concerns the manner in which we are to comprehend his approach to the topics under examination. Now that we have identified a number of central questions that he discusses in

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BGE, it is tempting to proceed in the way normally used in dealing with philosophical texts: stating the questions addressed, and then trying to line up the arguments that the advocate of a position puts forward in favor of the answers he comes up with. However, in the case of Nietzsche and BGE it is by no means evident that such a procedure would capture what Nietzsche is doing and what BGE is all about. There are few arguments to be found in BGE, and those which can be extracted are seldom of the most convincing kind. Following the normal procedure would also encourage the illusion that Nietzsche designed BGE to be understood simply in terms of arguments, whether good or bad, and I cannot find anything in BGE which would encourage such an illusion.¹⁷

There is considerable evidence that we should try a different approach, and the clue lies in Nietzsche's numerous allusions to the practices of what he calls the "new philosophers." To be the type of philosopher Nietzsche values is to follow hunches, to think at a "presto" pace (§ 213), to embark on experiments both intellectual and existential (§§ 205, 210), 18 to transform and to create values (§§ 203, 211), to put forward hypotheses that are risky: in short, to be interested in what he calls "dangerous perhapses" (§ 2). One would not expect a person with this conception of philosophy to hold the idea that what counts most in the endeavor to reach highly unorthodox and sometimes even shocking insights is to be in possession of a "good argument," and that one could or should present one's views in compliance with this idea. Rather, one would expect such a person to pursue a very different path in expressing his views, which would involve starting with a bold claim or striking observation and then using it in a variety of different ways. It might form the basis for an analysis of something in terms of that claim or observation, or it might point to a symptom, presupposition, or consequence of a very general or a very particular state of affairs. It even might be related tentatively to topics which at first sight have nothing

¹⁷ There are passages that make it very hard to believe in this illusion. See, e.g., remarks in § 5 that the activity of reason-giving is a *post hoc* affair intended to justify "some fervent wish that they have sifted through and made properly abstract," or (in the same section) his making fun of Spinoza's *mos geometricus* as a masquerade. In my eyes, the most striking passage for discouraging this illusion is to be found in § 213, where Nietzsche talks about what he calls philosophical states or moods. Here he compares the "right" way of doing philosophy with the "normal" attitude and writes concerning the latter: "You ['normal' philosophers] imagine every necessity is a need, a painful having to follow and being compelled." This "having to follow" and "being compelled" I read as a reference to the procedure of establishing results via sound arguments.

¹⁸ Nietzsche uses the German word Versuch (attempt, experiment) in a broad way which makes that term cover the connotations of Versuchung (temptation) and Versucher (tempter) as well. Cf. § 42.



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to do with what the original claim or the first observation was about. In short, one could envision a philosopher under the spell of Nietzschean "new philosophy" as someone whose methodology is deeply entangled in and in thrall to what could be called "what if" scenarios. ¹⁹

If this is how a "new philosopher" approaches problems, it seems beside the point to treat Nietzsche's proclaimed insights as based on arguments. The concept of a "result" or a "solution" also becomes obsolete, since this type of philosophy is obviously not oriented towards results and solutions understood in the sense of statements which can be defended against thorough critical resistance. Its aim consists instead in the uncovering of surprising possibilities and the playful presentation of innovative perspectives that do not aspire to the status of rock-hard "truths" but are meant to be offerings or propositions for a like-minded spirit.²⁰

Nietzsche obviously intended *BGE* to exemplify as clearly as possible all the characteristics he attributes to the style, the method, and the intentions of the "new philosophers" – and yet it is remarkable how often this fact is not sufficiently acknowledged by his interpreters. This oversight is remarkable not only because it seems to be in part responsible for awkward attempts to integrate Nietzsche's intellectual products into traditional academic philosophy,²¹ but above all because it tends to miss what might be called, for want of a better term, the "socio-hermeneutical" dimension of what has become known as his doctrine of "perspectivism." This doctrine

- ¹⁹ It should go without saying that this imagined scenario does not exclude "good arguments." Rather, the scenario is meant to show that if one deals with topics in the way outlined above, the guiding intention is not to give or to find "good arguments." In Nietzsche's terminology, this amounts to the claim that a "good argument" is not an overriding methodological "value." Invoking his polemical inventory, one could say, in his spirit: to be obsessed by "the will to a good argument" indicates bad taste.
- ²⁰ Again, this characterization is not meant to suggest that what these "new philosophers" are proclaiming is something they are not serious about or do not want us to take seriously. It is only meant to emphasize that what they put forward is connected very intimately with their personal point of view, and hence it is nothing that they can force on someone if there is no shared basis of experience, of resentment (*ressentiment*), or suffering. See *BGE* § 43, where Nietzsche expresses this point in an especially belligerent fashion.
- These attempts do not necessarily result in uninformative or misleading accounts of aspects of Nietzsche's thought. On the contrary, many of them shed considerable light on the historical background of his ideas and on the impact they could have on various discussions that happen to take place within the framework of academic philosophy. They are, however, operating under the unavoidable (and, perhaps, reasonable) restrictions of that framework. This puts them in the position of having to abstract from the personal or "perspectival" features essential to Nietzsche's conceptions. That there is a price to be paid for this "academization" is obvious. It is revealed in the difference between the excitement and fun that one can have in reading Nietzsche and the boredom that one sometimes experiences when reading the literature on him.



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in its most trivial reading amounts to the claim that our view of the world and, consequently, the statements we take to be true, depend on our situation, on our "perspective" on the world. Perspectivism thus understood gives rise to the epistemological thesis that our knowledge claims can never be true in an absolute or an objective sense, partly because of the necessary spatial and temporal differences between the viewpoints that each knower is bound to occupy when relating to an object, and also because of the fact that we can never be certain that what appears to us to be the case really is the case. Though it is true that in some of his more conventional moods Nietzsche seems to have thought about perspectivism along these lines, this reading gives no hint whatsoever of why he should have been attracted to such a doctrine in his more inspired moments. In this epistemological version the doctrine is neither original nor interesting, but merely a version of skeptical or idealist claims that used to be connected in popular writings with names like Berkeley and Kant.22

However, perspectivism takes on a much more promising dimension if it is put into the broader context of the problem of justifying or at least of making plausible an insistence on integrating a personal or subjective element into the expression of one's views as a condition of their making sense at all. By looking at this doctrine in this context, we can appreciate it as stating conditions for understanding an expression that purports to express something true, be it a text, a statement, or a confession. These conditions can be summarized in terms of two essential convictions. (1) In order to understand a claim for truth embodied in an expression, one has to have an understanding of the situation from which that claim originates, and this presupposes being acquainted with and involved in the personal attitudes, subjective experiences, and private evaluations which form the basis of the view expressed. (2) In order

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Here I have to confess that this sketch of the epistemological interpretation of Nietzsche's perspectivism may not be the most sympathetic one, and no doubt one can find in the literature much more sophisticated versions of this doctrine. However, this does not affect the main point I want to make, which consists in the claim that the epistemological reading misses the central feature of Nietzsche's doctrine. There are some other misgivings concerning the reading that deserve mention. The first consists in the fact that Nietzsche – especially in *BGE* – is not in sympathy with skepticism (see § 208). Hence, why should he be interested in putting forward a doctrine containing skeptical implications? A further reservation about the feasibility of the epistemological reading can be seen in the annoying consequence of having to credit Nietzsche with all sorts of paradoxical and self-refuting claims such as "If perspectivism is true we cannot know it to be true." It should be noted that the "German form of skepticism" discussed approvingly in § 209 has nothing to do with epistemological skepticism.



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to judge the correctness, or perhaps merely the plausibility, of such a claim, one has to have an experiential or existential background similar to that of the person who made the claim. It is because of this insistence on integrating subjective aspects into the process of understanding, and because of the idea that judging the truth of a view presupposes shared experiences, that I call this the "socio-hermeneutical" reading of perspectivism.

If perspectivism is understood in these terms, then much of what is going on in BGE and other texts by Nietzsche begins to look considerably less arbitrary and idiosyncratic than has been claimed. For example, his so-called "theory of truth" which he alludes to quite often in the first two books of BGE, seems less absurd than many commentators have taken it to be. According to these critics Nietzsche's perspectival conception of truth endorses the following three statements: (1) there is no absolute or objective truth; (2) what is taken to be truth is nothing but a fiction, that is, a perspectival counterfeit or forgery (Fälschung) of what really is the case; and (3) claims (1) and (2) are true. These three statements together seem to imply the paradoxical claim that it is true that there is no truth. So the critic argues.²³ However, when read in the light of the preceding remarks a much less extravagant interpretation of Nietzsche's theory of truth suggests itself which is completely independent of the issue of whether he really subscribes to these three statements. On this interpretation, Nietzsche's theory claims only (1) that there are no context-free truths, where a context is to be defined as the set of subjective conditions that the utterer of a truth is governed by and that anyone who wishes correctly to judge it is able to apprehend.²⁴ It also claims (2) that as an utterer or judger of a truth we are never in a position to be familiar with a context in its entirety, that is, with all the conditions that define it, and therefore we have to settle for an incomplete version of a context where the degree of incompleteness depends on differences between our capacities to understand ourselves and others. From this it follows (3) that, given our situation, every truth is defined by this necessarily

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²³ That there are many epistemological and logical problems connected with holding such a paradoxical claim is not difficult to point out. The most comprehensive discussion of these problems with reference to Nietzsche that I know of is by M. Clark, Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1990).

²⁴ Put a bit more bluntly, this claim amounts to the assertion that the concept "objective or absolute truth" is an empty concept when understood in contraposition to "perspectival truth."



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incomplete context. Thus every truth is a partial truth or a perspectival fiction.²⁵

This "socio-hermeneutical" reading of perspectivism points to a more commonsensical understanding of Nietzsche's claims regarding truth. It also suggests that some of the stylistic peculiarities of BGE and other texts had a methodological function. BGE, like most of Nietzsche's other texts, has an aphoristic form.²⁶ It looks like a collection of impromptu remarks, each of which explores to a different degree of depth some aspect or other of a particular observation, specific claim, or surprising phenomenon. These remarks are numbered and loosely organized into topic-related groups, each one of which carries a short descriptive phrase that functions as its title. The impression is of an apparently arbitrary compilation of notes which are actually presented in an artful, though idiosyncratic way. Thus it has been maintained that we should approach BGE as we would a work of literature rather than strictly in terms of philosophical text. Though this impression is by no means misleading, it fails to be sensitive to the intentions guiding the architectonic of this text. If a claim is fully comprehensible only when placed in its appropriate subjective and existential context, then it is incumbent on an author to convey as much information about this context as possible. One way of doing this consists in presenting a whole array of thoughts which are designed primarily to inform us about the various subjective stances characteristic of the individual making the claim. The resulting collection may seem random because it can include almost any conceivable digression under the pretense of being informative about the subjective context. However, if the socio-hermeneutical interpretation is correct, the seeming randomness of Nietzsche's aphorisms can equally well be taken as a calculated and methodologically appropriate consequence of his perspectivism. In Nietzsche's writings, as in life, randomness can turn out to be an applied method in disguise.

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²⁵ It should be noticed that this reading is compatible with some of the most disturbing features of Nietzsche's talk about truth. It allows us to make sense of his insistence that there are degrees of truth, which is exhibited most clearly in BGE in his reflection on how much "truth" one can take (§ 39). It also makes understandable the idea, very important to him, that truth is just a special case of error. And it allows for the use of personal pronouns in connection with truth, a habit Nietzsche is very fond of (cf. §§ 5, 43, 231).

²⁶ Though there is some question as to the applicability of terms such as "aphorism" or "aphoristic form" to Nietzsche's texts, he himself does not seem to have problems with such a characterization. His own use of these terms in reference to his writings is documented in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Preface § 2 (KSA V, p. 248) and § 8 (KSA V, p. 255) and in *Twilight of Idols*, §§ 9, 51 (KSA VI, p. 153).



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BGE deals with questions of how values arise psychologically and how we should evaluate them. It discusses the origin and the meaning of philosophical values such as truth, the religious practice of establishing and enforcing specific values such as faith, piety, and love of man, and the motives and mechanisms involved in our cultivation of moral values such as pity, fairness, and willingness to help each other. It also treats such political and social values as democracy, equality, and progress, seeing them as means of oppression and as indicators of decay and degeneration. Most of this is done with the aim of finding out what brought about the modern way of life, and what made modern culture such a doomed enterprise. The general tendency of the book is to claim that at the base of the most deeply habitualized normative evaluations that modern people take for granted, their most fundamental judgments about what has to be considered "good" or "bad" in almost every sphere of human activity, there ultimately lies a mixture of appalling character traits, ranging from weakness and fear to wishful thinking and self-betrayal, and all these find their symptomatic expression in the modern condition.

Neither this critical message nor the material Nietzsche relies upon in order to substantiate his assessment of modernity is peculiar to *BGE*. In almost all his other writings,²⁷ he discusses the shortcomings of philosophy, the dangers of religion, the built-in biases of science, and the damaging consequences of institutionalized moral and cultural values, and he arrives at similar bleak conclusions. Thus, the message of *BGE* is just another version of Nietzsche's general project. However, *BGE* is distinctive not only in its emphasis on a psychological explanation of the rise to dominance of specific values, but also in two further respects. The first relates to the doctrine of the "will to power," the second to his views on what might be called "good" or "adequate" ways of confronting reality. Both topics belong to his relatively rare excursions into the world of "positive" thinking.

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²⁷ Obviously this overlap is intended by Nietzsche. It seems to be an architectonic device, for he frequently quotes from and alludes to his other texts. The best example of this practice is to be found right at the beginning (§ 2) of BGE where he cites almost verbatim from the beginning of Human, All Too Human. This quotation refers to his diagnosis of the most fundamental mistake of traditional metaphysicians, i.e., their conception of the origin of oppositions. Cf. B. Glatzeder: 'Perspektiven der Wünschbarkeit'. Nietzsches Metaphysikritik in Menschliches Allzumenschliches (Philo Verlag: Berlin, 2000). In quoting this appraisal, which forms the basis of his far reaching criticism of metaphysics and its notion of "objective" truth, he can treat it like a result whose justification is already given elsewhere.



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The "will to power" makes its first public appearance in *Thus Spoke* Zarathustra. There it is introduced as one of the three major teachings Zarathustra has to offer, the other two being his advocacy of the overman (Übermensch) and the conception of the Eternal Recurrence. It is somewhat surprising that in Zarathustra Nietzsche has little to say about what the "will to power" means. Fortunately he is a bit more explicit in BGE, although here too the doctrine receives what is by no means an exhaustive treatment. 28 There is, however, some evidence that he wants us to think of this doctrine as advancing or at least implying an ontological hypothesis. Focusing on the hints he gives in BGE, the following picture emerges: if we look at the phenomenon of organic life as an integral part of reality, we find that it consists not in a static condition but in a dynamic and chaotic process of creation and decay, of overpowering and becoming overpowered, of suppressing and being suppressed. This suggests that what governs these processes is some sort of power struggle where every single form of life has a tendency to overpower every other form. However, to think of life in this way we have to assume that each living particle is endowed with a certain amount of power that it has a will to realize. This amount is supposed to define its "will to power" and thus is ultimately decisive for its ability to develop itself and to survive, or, to use a famous Nietzschean phrase, for its potential to become what it is. It is this line of thought which led Nietzsche to the assertion that life is "will to power" (§§ 13, 259).

But this is merely one part of the story. In *BGE* Nietzsche tentatively tries to pursue the conception of a "will to power" in a further direction. He aims at a broader application of the conception by transforming it from a principle of organic life into a much broader axiom pertaining to the essence of nature in general. It is here that it acquires an ontological meaning. The main motive for his attempt to conceive of the "will to power" as a general ontological principle seems to be that there is no

It is because of the relatively superficial and vague treatment of this doctrine in his published writings that many interpretations of the meaning and function of "will to power" rely heavily on Nietzsche's Nachlass, the voluminous collection of his unpublished notes. However, though the Nachlass indeed contains a considerable amount of material pertaining to that conception, it has the disadvantage of giving support to widely divergent, if not contradictory, interpretations. This is due to the fact that Nietzsche seems to have been experimenting with different meanings of this concept without reaching a definite position. To appreciate the whole range of readings possible see, for example, G. Abel, Nietzsche: Die Dynamik der Willen zur Macht und die ewige Wiederkehr (de Gruyter: Berlin, 1998, 2nd edn), and V. Gerhardt, Vom Willen zur Macht: Anthropologie und Metaphysik der Macht am exemplarischen Fall Friedrich Nietzsches (de Gruyter: Berlin, 1996).



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reason to restrict the explanatory force of that concept to organic life. Why not think of inorganic matter, of the material world, in terms of "will to power" as well? Matter would then have to be conceived as "will to power" paralyzed, as "will to power" in a state of potentiality. According to Nietzsche this view would allow for a unified account of the world in its totality: "The world seen from inside, the world determined and described with respect to its 'intelligible character' — would be just this will to power and nothing else" (§ 36). This view would also have the advantage of overcoming the basic bias of traditional metaphysics that there is a difference in kind between being and becoming, because it implies that being static and stable is in the end nothing but a degenerative form of becoming, or nothing but an unactualized power process. It goes without saying that Nietzsche is very much in favor of this claim.

Even if it is conceded that Nietzsche never really elaborated his concept of the "will to power" sufficiently, it does not appear to be one of his more attractive ideas. The reason for this is that it purports to give us insight into the essence of nature, what nature is "in itself," but this does not square well with his emphatic criticism, put forward in *BGE* and elsewhere, of the very notion of an "in itself." According to Nietzsche there is no "in itself," no essence, no fixed nature of things, and all beliefs to the contrary are founded on deep and far-reaching metaphysical illusions. It seems therefore that one cannot avoid the unsettling conclusion that the doctrine of a "will to power" shares all the vices which Nietzsche attributes to metaphysical thinking in general.

There are no such untoward consequences of the second piece of "positive" thinking in *BGE*, but this is because it scarcely qualifies as thinking at all, consisting instead of fantasies about what the ideal conditions would be for a person to be able to participate in productive thinking. Here productive thinking seems to mean the capacity to live up to the task of enduring an unbiased assessment of reality. Nietzsche summarizes these fantasies in the picture he gives of the "new philosophers" and in remarks on what it means to be noble. Nobility, for him, has to do with putting oneself at a distance from people and things. It is rooted in and is the product of the "pathos of distance," to use his influential formula (§ 257). This pathos has to be conceived as the socially inherited ability (1) to have a sense for differences in rank between persons, (2) to accept these differences as pointing to differences in distinction (defined as a positive quality of worthiness), and (3) to strive for higher distinction. A person possessing

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this ability is able to strive for unique states of awareness: "Without the pathos of distance... that other more mysterious pathos could not have grown at all, that demand for new expansions of distance within the soul itself, the development of states that are increasingly high, rare, distant, tautly drawn and comprehensive, and, in short, the enhancement of the type 'man,' the constant 'self-overcoming of man' (to use a moral formula in a supra-moral sense)" (§ 257). The ability to achieve such states seems to function as a condition of gaining important insights and having the psychological resources needed to live with them, and it indicates a certain stance towards reality superior to "normal" or "common" attitudes (cf. § 268).

With this plea for nobility Nietzsche states again his conviction that what ultimately counts in our epistemic dealings with reality is not knowledge per se, that is, knowledge detached from the knower. What deserves the title of knowledge has to be intimately connected with the special and unique situation a knowing subject is in. This is so not only because according to Nietzsche knowledge is not an "objective" or impersonal affair, something one can have like a detached thing that one possesses, but above all because the knowing subject has to live his knowledge. The extent to which a subject can do this depends on personal constitution, character traits, and intellectual robustness. Knowledge thus becomes associated with the question of how much truth one can endure (cf. § 30). It is in this context that the concept of nobility reveals itself to be part of a "positive" teaching: nobility that is the product of the social pathos of distance increases the potential of a subject for enduring "uncommon" knowledge because it promotes more comprehensive states, and these in turn indicate a growing strength in the subject's character that enables it to cope with more of "the truth." This at least seems to be Nietzsche's message.

What is it that makes reading BGE and other writings of Nietzsche such an attractive and stimulating experience? The main reason, I believe, has little to do with the plausibility, let alone the correctness, of his views. On the contrary, we like many of his ideas precisely because of their pointed one-sidedness, their extravagance, and their eccentricity. Nor, I suspect, are we now especially preoccupied with the topics which he obviously took to be decisive for an evaluation of our way of living under modern conditions. Many of his themes we now consider rather obsolete, and to some of them we no longer have any immediate access because they

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are deeply rooted in their nineteenth-century contexts. The fascination his works still have must therefore originate from somewhere else. If one wants to account for the appeal of his writings, it is perhaps advisable not to look too closely at his actual teachings, but to think of his texts as a kind of mental tonic designed to encourage his readers to continue to confront their doubts and suspicions about the well-foundedness of many of their most fundamental ideas about themselves and their world. This would suggest that Nietzsche's works may still be captivating because they confront a concern that is not restricted to modern times. They address our uncomfortable feeling that our awareness of ourselves and of the world depends on conceptions that we ultimately do not understand. We conceive of ourselves as subjects trying to live a decent life, guided in our doings by aims that fit the normal expectations of our social and cultural environment; we believe certain things to be true beyond any doubt, and we hold others and ourselves to many moral obligations. Although all this is constitutive of a normal way of life, we have only a vague idea of why we have to deal with things in this way; we do not really know what in the end justifies these practices. In questioning not the normality but the objectivity or truth of such a normal world view, Nietzsche's writings can have the effect of making us feel less worried about our inability to account for some of our central convictions in an "absolute" way. It is up to each of us to decide whether to be grateful for this reminder or to loathe it.

Rolf-Peter Horstmann

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978-0-521-77078-1 - Friedrich Nietzsche: Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future

Edited by Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman

Frontmatter

More information

Chronology

1844	Born in Röcken, a small village in the Prussian province of
	Saxony, on 15 October.
1846	Birth of his sister Elisabeth.
1848	Birth of his brother Joseph.
1849	His father, a Lutheran minister, dies at age thirty-six of "softening of the brain."
1850	Brother dies; family moves to Naumburg to live with father's mother and her sisters.
1858	Begins studies at Pforta, Germany's most famous school for education in the classics.
1864	Graduates from Pforta with a thesis in Latin on the Greek poet Theogonis; enters the University of Bonn as a theology student.
1865	Transfers from Bonn, following the classical philologist Friedrich Ritschl to Leipzig where he registers as a philology student; reads Schopenhauer's <i>The World as Will and Representation</i> .
1866	Reads Friedrich Lange's <i>History of Materialism</i> .
1868	Meets Richard Wagner.
1869	On Ritschl's recommendation is appointed professor of classical philology at Basle at the age of twenty-four before completing
	his doctorate (which is then conferred without a dissertation); begins frequent visits to the Wagner residence at Tribschen.
1870	Serves as a medical orderly in the Franco-Prussian war; contracts a serious illness and so serves only two months. Writes "The Dionysiac World View."

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More information

Chronology

- Publishes his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*; its dedicatory preface to Richard Wagner claims for art the role of "the highest task and truly metaphysical activity of this life"; devastating reviews follow.
- Publishes "David Strauss, the Confessor and the Writer," the first of his *Untimely Meditations*; begins taking books on natural science out of the Basle library, whereas he had previously confined himself largely to books on philological matters. Writes "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense."
- Publishes two more *Meditations*, "The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" and "Schopenhauer as Educator."
- Publishes the fourth *Meditation*, "Richard Wagner in Bayreuth," which already bears subtle signs of his movement away from Wagner.
- Publishes *Human*, *All Too Human* (dedicated to the memory of Voltaire); it praises science over art as the mark of high culture and thus marks a decisive turn away from Wagner.
- Terrible health problems force him to resign his chair at Basle (with a small pension); publishes "Assorted Opinions and Maxims," the first part of vol. II of *Human*, *All Too Human*; begins living alone in Swiss and Italian boarding-houses.
- Publishes "The Wanderer and His Shadow," which becomes the second part of vol. II of *Human*, *All Too Human*.
- 1881 Publishes Daybreak.
- Publishes *Idylls of Messina* (eight poems) in a monthly magazine; publishes *The Gay Science*; friendship with Paul Ree and Lou Andreas–Salomé ends badly, leaving Nietzsche devastated.
- Publishes the first two parts of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*; learns of Wagner's death just after mailing part one to the publisher.
- Publishes the third part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.
- Publishes the fourth part of *Zarathustra* for private circulation only.
- Publishes *Beyond Good and Evil*; writes prefaces for new releases of: *The Birth of Tragedy, Human, All Too Human*, vols. I and II, and *Daybreak*.

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