

Friedrich Nietzsche

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It was the theory of *evolution*, the idea that species randomly appeared upon the earth over tens or hundreds of millions of years. Depending on their adaptability to their environment, they survived and reproduced or they disappeared. The sticking point of the argument, of course, was the suggestion that human beings had also evolved. Some people were deeply offended that their great-grandparents turned out to be some sort of ape. Others found it blasphemous to suggest that chance and opportunity, not God, had created species. But even those who had no problem with the idea of human evolution, like Darwin himself, found themselves facing a momentous question. Could human beings still be evolving? If so, into what? Indeed, could we also be living just some brief, intermediary existence between the "lower" animals and some higher, mightier, or in any case more adaptive creature than ourselves?

It was toward the end of the century that such questions received their most shocking, provocative answers. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), wrote a flamboyant, fictional epic that purported to trace the educational exploits of a character named Zarathustra (intentionally named after the Persian prophet Zarathustra, or Zoroaster, who talked about the cosmic forces of good and evil). In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche offered up the incredible suggestion that human beings were nothing but a bridge between the ape, on the one side, and the *Übermensch* (superman) on the other. The future of "human nature" was now called into question.

Alternatively, in the same work, Nietzsche teasingly introduced a character called "the last man," a frightening (or flattering, depending on your point of view) possibility for the "end" of evolution. The last man is the ultimate bourgeois, the satisfied utilitarian, the absolute couch potato. "We have found happiness," says the last man, and blinks in dull contentment. This, Nietzsche warns, is also one of our possibilities. We can continue to consume our comforts, minimize dangers, ignore the mysterious and unknown, and discourage creativity, until the world is so safe for us that we will become "ineradicable, like the dog-flea." Or, we might strive to become something more than "human-all-too-human" and aspire to the *Übermensch*. To understand what the *Übermensch* might

be, however, we would have to reexamine the whole of Western history to see who we are and how we came to be what we have come to be.

In his insistence that we have to look back to history to appreciate what we are and what we can be, Nietzsche is reflecting not only Darwin but Hegel, Vico, and Herder. In tracing the evolution of Western thought, he looks back to early Christianity, to the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, and even earlier to Homer and the pre-Socratic dramatists. Nietzsche was by training a classical philologist, and he saw the West's Greek heritage to be in conflict with its Judeo-Christian background. He utterly rejected the "synthesis" of the two that had developed throughout the history of Christianity.

Nietzsche was struck, for example, by the difference between the two traditions' approaches to human suffering. While the Judeo-Christian tradition sought the explanation of misfortune in sin (a kind of "blame the victim" approach, in Nietzsche's view), the ancient Greeks took profound suffering to be an indication of the fundamentally tragic nature of human life. Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, analyzed the art of Athenian tragedy as the product of the Greeks' deep and nonevasive thinking about the meaning of life in the face of extreme vulnerability. Tragedy, according to Nietzsche, grew from this unflinching recognition and the beautification, even the idealization, of the inevitability of human suffering.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche speculated that the Greek view of tragedy reflected two different perspectives, which the Athenians associated with the gods Apollo and Dionysus. Dionysus, the god of wine, sexuality, and revelry, represents the dynamic flux of being, the acceptance of fate, the chaos of creativity. The individual is dispensable from this perspective, but the individual can find profound satisfaction in being part of the wild, unfolding rush of life. Indeed, from the Dionysian perspective, individual existence is just an illusion; our true reality is our participation in the life of the whole.

Apollo, the sun god, by contrast, reflects the Athenian fascination with beauty and order. From the Apollonian perspective, the individual's existence is undeniably real and human vulnerability is genuinely horrible. Yet the Apollonian perspective makes this reality appear beautiful and enables us to forget our vulnerability for a time and simply love our finite lives in the world.

The brilliance of Athenian tragedy, according to Nietzsche, was its simultaneous awakening of both perspectives in the observer. Although ostensibly reminding its audience of the senseless horrors of human existence, tragedy also provided the means to deal with them. Greek tragedy provided an experiential reinforcement of insights from Greek religion—that we can nonetheless marvel at beauty within life, and that our true existence is not our individual lives but our participation in the drama of life and history.

Nietzsche infinitely preferred this tragic resolution of the problem of evil to the Judeo-Christian resolution in terms of sin and salvation. He also preferred it to the reactive pessimism of his philosophical hero Schopenhauer and to that modern, scientific optimism which ignores the tragic and pretends that all problems that concern us are correctable through technology. Nietzsche applauded the ancient Greeks for their ethical outlook, which stressed the development of

excellence and nobility in the face of fate, in contrast to what he saw as the gloomy Judeo-Christian obsession with sin and guilt.

Plato and Aristotle still displayed vestiges of that more ancient outlook, but they were already "decadent," according to Nietzsche. The Greeks he admired were the pre-Socratic playwrights and the warrior heroes they described. Socrates had defended the ideal of reason, according to Nietzsche, too vigorously, changing it into a "tyrant" over our natural impulses. Aristotle had defended the virtues, but they were only faintly related to those fatalistic virtues that one found, for example, in Homer's heroes.

Referring to those early Greeks, Nietzsche fantasized, "They knew how to live!" Insofar as they had a "morality," it was based on healthy self-assertion, not self-abasement and the renunciation of the instincts. In Nietzsche, more than any other philosopher, the new physics of energy enters into his thinking, not only in his spectacularly energetic writing style but in his very notion of human nature. Enough of the traditional emphasis on "peace of mind" and *apatheia*. Our ideals must be energetic ideals, creative ideals.

Like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche contends that human beings and other beings in nature are essentially willful, but Nietzsche goes further and suggests that we (and all of nature's creatures) are "will to power," driven by the desire to keep expanding our vitality and strength. Survival, Nietzsche adds, is secondary. Against Schopenhauer's pessimism about the meaning of life, Nietzsche insists that vitality is itself the meaning of life, and it is the affirmation of life that should be the conclusion of philosophy, not its rejection, not "resignation."

In contrast with the morality of the ancient Athenians, a morality of heroism and mastery, Christian morality has made the bland, mediocre person the moral exemplar. Worst of all, the Christian moral worldview has urged people to treat the afterlife as more important than this one. Instead of urging self-improvement in earthly terms, the Christian moral vision emphasizes abstaining from such "selfish" concerns. The person who does essentially nothing with his or her life but has avoided "sin" might merit heaven, on the Christian view, while a creative person may be deemed "immoral" for refusing to follow "the herd." This, Nietzsche protests, is backward, and it will lead (and has led) to the downfall of the human race.

According to Nietzsche, many if not most of the prohibitions of Judeo-Christian (and Kantian) ethics are "leveling" devices that favor the weak and mediocre and put more talented and stronger spirits at a disadvantage. Accordingly, Nietzsche defends a view "beyond good and evil," beyond our tendencies to pass moralistic judgments on our own and others' behavior, toward a more creative psychological and naturalistic perspective.

Nietzsche brought to an end what might be seen as a long progression of attempts to gain access to a transcendent world. He did this by denying, in the most vituperative terms, the very idea of such a world, a reality behind the appearances, a world that is other than—better than—this one. Nietzsche's attacks on the "otherworldly" had their most obvious target in the Judeo-Christian tradition, with the idea of an all-powerful benign deity behind the scenes. Accordingly, he called for the redirection of human energies back into the life

of this world. As an antidote to the Christian worldview, which treats human life as a mere beeline to the afterlife and celebrates an "eternal" world outside time as more important to this one, Nietzsche advocates a revival of the ancient view of *eternal recurrence*, the view that time repeats itself cyclically. If one were to take this image of eternal recurrence seriously and imagine that one's life must be lived over and over again, in just the same way, the same joys, same pains, same successes, same failures, suddenly there is enormous weight on what otherwise might seem like a mere "moment." It is life, this life, that alone counts for anything.

Nietzsche's indictments reach beyond Christianity back to Plato, whom he also sees as a proponent of the view that another world is more important than this one. Indeed, Nietzsche's attacks are addressed at virtually the entire Western tradition in philosophy. He sometimes even rejected the very idea of "truth," suggesting that ideas we take to be true are just those beliefs, possibly false ones, that have proven to be useful. He also defended the notion of "perspectivism," the idea that all our "truths" are relative to our particular perspectives, which are historically and individually contingent, and which we cannot escape.

Against the philosophers and social thinkers of his day, Nietzsche urged a return to a primary emphasis on the vitality of the lives we live, not detached truth and a hypocritical, merely leveling morality. Philosophical thought, he insisted, should always be subordinate to our efforts to live well, never the other way around.