NIETZSCHE, Friedrich (1844-1900)

Friedrich Nietzsche, son of a Lutheran minister, was a German philologist, philosopher, and iconoclast. He is best known for his controversial but powerful “revaluation” of traditional Western morality, epistemology, and theology.

His early academic career was devoted to philology, with a professorship at Basel University at the age of 24 despite having failed to obtain his doctorate at Leipzig. Most of his philosophical training came outside of his specialty. His principle resources were Arthur Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation,* followed by Richard Wagner’s revolutionary music. Though he admired Schopenhauer’s stark premise that existence was a chaotic affair guided by a will-to-life, Nietzsche later replaced Schopenhauer’s embrace of ascetic “will-less-ness” as the only response to suffering with the “will to power”: the idea that man “will rather will *nothingness* than *not* will” (*Genealogy of Morals,* III: sec. 1, Nietzsche’s emphasis). His first book was *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* (1872; title altered in subsequent editions), which explained Greek tragedy by revealing the “wrestling” of two intellectual energies within it. His most famous argument here is that “it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*” (sec. 5, Nietzsche’s emphasis). The Dionysian (choric) element was collective and orgiastic, while the Apollonian element (the tragic hero) was individuated and rational. Nietzsche’s pre-Socratic Greeks could produce tragedy because of their ability to balance the two energies, while the Socratic emphasis on “truth-seeking” led to reason’s subsequent dominance.

Upon retirement for medical reasons, Nietzsche published *Untimely Meditations* (1879) and a collection of aphorisms called *Human, All Too Human* (1978). *The Gay Science* (1882) first expressed his mature thinking, including the “eternal recurrence” and the “death of God.” His literary experiment *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-85), a quasi-scriptural blend of poetry, allegory, and prophecy, was Nietzsche’s attempt at a grand synthesis, and it was his favorite. *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) was a more classically philosophical text that clarified the ideas presented in *Zarathustra*. Nietzsche wrote six more books before his mental collapse in 1889: *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887), and *The Case of Wagner*, *Twilight of the Idols*, *The Antichrist* and *Ecce Homo* (all 1888). His self-proclaimed magnum opus, *The Will to Power*, was never finished or published in his lifetime. Nietzsche’s sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, who had strong nationalist-racist leanings and became head of the Nietzsche Archive, assembled the fragments inbook form. She subsequently edited and doctored many of her brother’s works. Nietzsche died in 1900 after a series of strokes, possibly brought on by the late stages of syphilis.

Nietzsche believed that late nineteenth-century Europe was suffering a crisis in moral values that produced hypocrisy and pessimism. On the one hand, the old substantive metaphysical certainties—divine authority, the Judeo-Christian moral tradition, and epistemological or scientific absolutes—had been undermined by Immanuel Kant’s transformation of philosophy into formal “critique,” that is, into mere clarification of what we can and cannot know. On the other hand, bourgeois society maintained the illusion that its received wisdom was still viable, though in increasingly diluted form. English Utilitarianism was one of Nietzsche’s targets. It sought to achieve by rational calculation what Christian piety had demanded by faith, now reduced to hollow cant. Nietzsche called this empty moral pretense the passive nihilism of his era.

The key to overcoming this life-denying nihilism was the denial of the “ascetic ideal” that Nietzsche also called a reactive, “slave,” or “herd” morality. Judaism and its offshoot Christianity had turned the active “master morality” of the ancient Greco-Roman nobility on its head. While antiquity’s powerful elites had defined themselves as *gut* (good) and the common and powerless as *schlecht* (bad), the priestly Jews and then the Christians, filled with *ressentiment* toward their rulers, taught on the contrary that whatever is powerful and self-affirming (and therefore oppressive to the powerless) is *böse* (evil), while the the impotent and the meek—who, Christ promised, would one day inherit the earth—are actually *gut*. For Nietzsche, an exhausted, democratic and socialist Europe meant that Christ’s slave morality had triumphed.

In response, Nietzsche advocated what he alternately called active nihilism, which negated the asceticism of Christianity, and life-affirming *amor fati*, or “love of one’s destiny.” This latter denotes a joyous, spontaneous celebration of life without objective truth or moral certainties and an individual (called the *Übermensch*, that is, “overman” or “superman”) who was free to engage in the creation of new myths and new truths. The idea of a “superman” has at times been taken to support eugenics (as in George Bernard Shaw’s thinking), and there is good textual evidence that Nietzsche often thought in racial terms. “The spell of certain grammatical functions is ultimately also the spell of *physiological* valuations and racial conditions. So much by way of rejecting Locke’s superficiality regarding the origins of ideas” (*Beyond Good and Evil,* sec. 20, Nietzsche’s emphasis). But it seems clear that Nietzsche was less interested in biological breeding than in the ascendancy of a new perspective on morals. The “eternal recurrence of the same” is first a way of refuting all bourgeois European notions of historical progress by recalling the cyclical time of the ancients (and of Giambattista Vico). It supports Nietzsche’s focus on moral “genealogy,” which assumes that morality is not the consequence of continual improvement, as often assumed, but is instead a consequence of the “extra-moral” conditions of its origins. Second, the eternal return is also a moral ideal in itself, borrowed from Goethe. It is the fulfillment of Faust’s desire—brokered by Mephistopheles—for a moment of exalted experience about which he can say that it should never end, an ideal also embraced by Walter Pater, Victorian aestheticism, French decadence, and much of modernism after Oscar Wilde. Nietzsche was the first to apply the chemical term *sublimation* to human psychology, and his analysis of the origins and nature of guilt (in the *Genealogy of Morals*) was equally transformative. Both concepts were fundamental for Sigmund Freud (who implausibly claimed he had borrowed nothing from Nietzsche). From Max Weber to Adolf Hitler to Jean-Paul Sartre, Nietzsche shaped the twentieth century, for good and ill.

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