NIETZSCHE

Nietzsche died on August 25, 1900, at the age of 55, leaving a legacy of brilliant writings whose impact and influence were delayed until the twentieth century. His life was full of sharp contrasts. The son and grandson of Lutheran ministers, he was nevertheless the herald of the judgment that "God is dead" and undertook a "campaign against morality." He was raised in an environment thoroughly dominated by females, yet his philosophy of the Superperson is anything but nurturing. He called for the fullest expression of human vitality in the name of the Will to Power, yet he believed that sublimation and control are the truly human characteristics. While his writings are lucid, he ended his days in hopeless insanity.

Nietzsche's Life

Named after the reigning king of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche was born in Röcken, in the province of Saxony, on October 15, 1844. His father died when he was 4 years old, and he grew up in a household consisting of his mother, sister, grandmother, and two maiden aunts. At age 14 he was sent to the famed boarding school at Pforta, where for six years he underwent a rigorous education, excelling particularly in the classics, religion, and German literature. It was here that he came under the spell of ancient Greek thought, discovering it especially in Aeschylus and Plato. In October 1864 he went to the University

of Bonn but, unimpressed by the caliber of his fellow students, he stayed only one year. He decided to follow his excellent teacher of classics and philology, Friedrich Ritschl, who accepted a chair at the University of Leipzig. While at Leipzig he came upon the main work of Schopenhauer, whose atheism and antirationalism deeply influenced Nietzsche for a while and confirmed his own rebellion against contemporary European culture, which he came to despise as decadent. It was here also that Nietzsche came under the spell of Richard Wagner's music. "I could not have stood my youth without Wagner's music," Nietzsche said later. "When one wants to rid oneself of an intolerable pressure, one needs hashish. Well, I needed Wagner."

When the University of Basel was looking for someone to fill the chair of philosophy, Nietzsche's name figured prominently. He had not yet completed his doctoral degree, but some of his published papers attracted notice for their exceptional scholarship. On the additional strength of his teacher's enthusiastic recommendation, Nietzsche was appointed a university professor at the age of 24. After the University of Basel confirmed his appointment, the University of Leipzig conferred the doctoral degree on Nietzsche without examination. In May 1869 he delivered his inaugural lecture on "Homer and Classical Philology." During his years at Basel, Nietzsche visited Wagner frequently at his villa on Lake Lucerne. While this friendship was not destined to last, Wagner did exert an influence on Nietzsche's thought in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872). Of longer duration was Nietzsche's friendship with his older colleague, the eminent historian Jacob Burckhardt, with whom he shared a fascination for ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy. Nietzsche's wretched health and his dislike of his duties at the university led him to resign his professorship in 1879 at the age of 34. For the next decade he wandered through Italy, Switzerland, and Germany searching for some place where his health might be restored. In spite of his poor health, he wrote several books during the six-year period from 1881 to 1887, including *The Dawn of Day, Joyful Wisdom,* the famous *Thus Spake Zarathustra, Beyond Good and Evil,* and *A Genealogy of Morals.*

In 1888, when he was 44, Nietzsche enjoyed a brief respite from his prolonged cycle of sickness and recovery. During a span of six months, he produced five books: *The Case of Wagner, The Twilight of the Idols, Antichrist, Ecce Homo,* and *Nietzsche contra Wagner.* Shortly thereafter, in January 1889, Nietzsche collapsed on a street in Turin. He was taken back to Basel to a clinic. From there he was sent to an asylum in Jena and finally to the care of his mother and sister. For the last eleven years of his life, Nietzsche was irretrievably insane as a result of an infection that affected his brain. He was thus unable to complete his projected major work, the *Revaluation of All Values.* Nietzsche's books have great vivacity of style and are written with a passionate intensity. Even though some of his later works show signs of impending difficulties, scholars generally agree that we should not discount his writings because of his subsequent mental collapse.

"God Is Dead"

Nietzsche wrote philosophy in a manner calculated more to provoke serious thought than to give formal answers to questions. In this regard he resembled

Socrates and Plato more than Spinoza, Kant, or Hegel. He produced no formal system because system building, he thought, assumes that we have at hand self-evident truths on which to build. He also believed that building systems lacks integrity, since honest thought must challenge precisely these self-evident truths on which most systems are built. We must engage in dialectic and be willing at times to declare ourselves against our previous opinions. Moreover, most philosophic system builders, he thought, try to solve all problems at once by acting as the "unriddler of the universe." Nietzsche believed that philosophers must be less pretentious and pay more attention to questions of human values than to abstract systems. Philosophers should also focus on immediate human problems with an attitude of fresh experimentation and a freedom from the dominant values of their culture. Nietzsche took a variety of positions on important problems, and because of this it is easy to interpret his views in contradictory ways. Moreover, he expressed his views on issues with brief aphorisms instead of detailed analyses, leaving the impression of ambiguity and ambivalence. Still, Nietzsche formulated many distinctive views, which emerge from his writings with considerable clarity.

While others saw in nineteenth-century Europe the symbols of power and security, Nietzsche grasped with prophetic insight the imminent collapse of the traditional supports of the values to which modern people committed themselves. The Prussian army made Germany a great power on the Continent, and the astonishing advances in science further animated the feeling of optimism. Nevertheless, Nietzsche boldly prophesied that power politics and bloody wars were in store for the future. He sensed an approaching period of *nihilism*, the seeds of which had already been sown. He did not base this either on the military power of Germany or on the unfolding advances of science. Instead, he was influenced by the incontrovertible fact that belief in the Christian God had drastically declined to the point where he could confidently say that "God is dead."

Although Nietzsche was an atheist, he reflected on the "death" of God with mixed reactions. He was appalled at the consequences that would follow once everyone became fully aware of all the implications of the death of God. He thought about both the collapse of religious faith and the mounting belief in the Darwinian notion of a relentless evolution of the species. He could see in this combination the destruction of any basic distinction between human and animal. If this is what we are asked to believe he said, then we should not be surprised when the future brings us colossal wars such as we have never seen before on earth. At the same time, the death of God meant for Nietzsche the dawn of a new day—a day when the essentially life-denying ethics of Christianity could be replaced with a life-affirming philosophy. "At last," he said, "the sea, *our* sea, lies open before us. Perhaps there has never been so open a sea." His ambivalent reaction to the nihilistic consequences of the death of God turned Nietzsche to the central question of human values. In his search for a new foundation for values in a day when God could no longer be the goal and sanction of human conduct, Nietzsche believed that aesthetics was the most promising alternative to religion. Only as an aesthetic phenomenon, he said, are human existence and the world eternally justified. The Greeks, he believed,

originally discovered the true meaning of human effort. He initially drew his fundamental insights about human nature from the Greek conceptions of Apollo and Dionysus.

The Apollonian versus Dionysian

Nietzsche believed that aesthetic value results from a fusion between two principles, which are respectively represented by the Greek gods Apollo and Dionysus. Dionysus symbolized the dynamic stream of life, which knows no restraints or barriers and defies all limitations. Worshipers of Dionysus would lapse into a drunken frenzy and thereby lose their own identity in the larger ocean of life. Apollo, on the other hand, was the symbol of order, restraint, and form. If the Dionysian attitude was best expressed in the feeling of abandonment in some types of music, then the Apollonian form-giving force found its highest expression in Greek sculpture. Thus, Dionysus symbolized humanity's unity with life whereby individuality is absorbed in the larger reality of the life force. Apollo, then, was the symbol of the "principle of individuation"—the power that controls and restrains the dynamic processes of life in order to create a formed work of art or a controlled personal character. From another point of view, the Dionysian represented the negative and destructive dark powers of the soul, which, when unchecked, culminate in "that disgusting mixture of voluptuousness and cruelty" typical of "the most savage beasts of nature." The Apollonian, by contrast, represented the power to deal with the powerful surge of vital energy, to harness destructive powers, and to transmute these into a creative act.

Greek tragedy, according to Nietzsche, is a great work of art. It represents the conquest of Dionysus by Apollo. But from this account Nietzsche drew the conclusion that people are not faced with a choice between the Dionysian and the Apollonian. To assume that we even have such a choice is to misunderstand the true nature of the human condition. The fact is that human life inevitably includes the dark and surging forces of passion. What Greek tragedy illustrates, according to Nietzsche, is that instead of abandoning oneself to the flood of impulse, instinct, and passion, the awareness of these driving forces becomes the occasion for producing a work of art. This would be so whether in our own character through moderation or in literature or the arts through the imposition of form upon a resisting material. Nietzsche saw the birth of tragedy—that is, the creation of art—as a response of the basically healthy element in a person, the Apollonian, to the challenge of the diseased frenzy of the Dionysian. On this view art could not occur without the stimulus of the Dionysian. At the same time, if the Dionysian were considered either the only element in human nature or the dominant element, we might very well despair and come finally to a negative attitude toward life. But for Nietzsche the supreme achievement of human nature occurred in Greek culture where the Dionysian and Apollonian elements were brought together. Nineteenth-century culture denied that the Dionysian element had a rightful place in life. For Nietzsche, though, this only postponed the inevitable explosion of vital forces, which cannot be permanently denied

expression. To ask whether life should dominate knowledge or knowledge dominate life is to raise the question concerning which of these two is the higher and more decisive power. There is no doubt, Nietzsche argued, that life is the higher and dominating power, but raw vital power is finally life-defeating. For this reason Nietzsche looked to the Greek formula—the fusion of the Dionysian and Apollonian elements—by which human life is transformed into an aesthetic phenomenon. Such a formula, Nietzsche thought, could provide modern culture with a relevant and workable standard of behavior at a time when religious faith was unable to provide a compelling vision of human destiny. What disqualified religious faith, he believed, was the essentially life-denying negativity of Christian ethics.

Master Morality versus Slave Morality

Nietzsche rejected the notion that there is a universal and absolute system of morality that everyone must equally obey. People are different, and to conceive of morality in universal terms is to disregard basic differences between individuals. It is unrealistic to assume that there is only one kind of human nature, whose direction can be prescribed by one set of rules. Whenever we propose a universal moral rule, we invariably seek to deny the fullest expression of our elemental vital energies. In this respect Judaism and Christianity are the worst offenders. Judeo-Christian ethics, he argues, is so contrary to our basic nature that its antinatural morality debilitates humanity and produces only "botched and bungled" lives.

How did human beings ever produce such unnatural systems of ethics? There is, Nietzsche says, a "twofold early history of good and evil," which shows the development of two primary types of morality: the *master morality* and the *slave morality.* In the *master morality* "good" always meant "noble" in the sense of "with a soul of high calibre." "Evil," by contrast, meant "vulgar" or "plebeian." Noble people regard themselves as the creators and determiners of values. They do not look outside of themselves for any approval of their acts. They pass judgment upon themselves. Their morality is one of self-glorification. These noble individuals act out of a feeling of power, which seeks to overflow. It is not out of pity that they help the unfortunate, but rather from an impulse generated by an abundance of power. They honor power in all its forms and take pleasure in subjecting themselves to rigor and toughness. They also have reverence for all that is severe and hard. By contrast, the *slave morality* originates with the lowest elements of society: the abused, the oppressed, the slaves, and those who are uncertain of themselves. For the slave, "good" is the symbol for all those qualities that serve to alleviate the existence of sufferers, such as "sympathy, the kind helping hand, the warm heart, patience, diligence, humility and friendliness." This slave morality Nietzsche argues, is essentially the morality of utility, since moral goodness involves whatever is beneficial to those who are weak and powerless. With the slave morality the person who arouses fear is "evil," but with the master morality it is in fact the "good" person who is able to arouse fear.

This revenge took the form of translating the virtues of the noble aristocrat into evils. Nietzsche's great protest against the dominant Western morality was that it exalted the mediocre values of the "herd," which "knows nothing of the fine impulses of great accumulations of strength, as something high, or possibly as the standard of all things." Incredibly, the "herd mentality" in time overcame the master morality by succeeding in making all the noble qualities appear to be vices and all the weak qualities appear to be virtues. The positive affirmation of life in the master morality was made to seem "evil" and something for which one should have a sense of "guilt." The fact is, Nietzsche says, that

> men with a still natural nature, barbarians in every terrible sense of the word, men of prey, still in possession of unbroken strength of will and desire for power, threw themselves upon weaker, more moral, more peaceful races. . . . At the commencement, the noble caste was always the barbarian caste: their superiority did not consist first of all in their physical, but in their psychical power—they were *complete* men.

But the power of the master race was broken by the undermining of its psychological strength. Against the natural impulse to exert aggressive strength, the weak races erected elaborate psychic defenses. New values and new ideals, such as peace and equality, were put forward under the guise of "the fundamental principle of society." This, Nietzsche said, was a not-so-subtle desire on the part of the weak to undermine the power of the strong. The weak have created a negative psychological attitude toward the most natural human drives. This slave morality is, Nietzsche says, "a Will to the *denial* of life, a principle of dissolution and decay." But, he continues, a skillful psychological analysis of the herd's resentment and its desire to exact revenge against the strong will show what must be done. That is, we must "resist all sentimental weakness: life is essentially appropriation, injury, conquest of the strange and weak, suppression, severity, obtrusion of peculiar forms . . . and at the least, putting it mildest, exploitation."

The Will to Power

Exploitation, according to Nietzsche, is not some inherently degenerate human action. Instead, it belongs "to the nature of the living being as a primary function." Exploitation is "a consequence of the intrinsic Will to Power, which is precisely the Will to Life—a *fundamental fact* of all history." The Will to Power is a central drive within human nature to dominate one's environment. This is more than simply the will to survive. It is, rather, an inner impulse to vigorously affirm all of our individual powers. As Nietzsche says, "the strongest and highest Will to Life does not find expression in a miserable struggle for existence, but in a Will to War. A Will to Power, a Will to Overpower!"

European morality denied the central role of the Will to Power—and did so in a dishonest manner. Nietzsche put the blame for this on the slavish morality of Christianity. He writes, "I regard Christianity as the most fatal and seductive lie that has ever yet existed—as the greatest and most *impious lie*." He was

appalled that Europe should be subjected to the morality of that small group of wretched outcasts who clustered around Jesus. Imagine, he said, "the *morality of paltry people* as the measure of all things." This he considered "the most repugnant kind of degeneracy that civilization has ever brought into existence." To Nietzsche it was incredible that in the New Testament "the least qualified people . . . have their say in its pages in regard to the greatest problems of existence." Christianity contradicts nature when it requires us to love our enemies, since nature's injunction is to *hate* our enemies. Moreover, Christianity denies the natural origin of morality since it requires us to first love God before we can love anything. By injecting God into our affections, we subvert the immediate and natural moral standard that involves affirming life. By diverting our thinking toward God, we dilute our strongest and most vital energies. Nietzsche admitted that the "spiritual" people of Christianity performed invaluable services in Europe by offering comfort and courage to the suffering. But at what price was Christian charity achieved? The price, Nietzsche writes, was "the deterioration of the European race." It was necessary "to *reverse* all estimates of value—*that* is what they had to do! And to shatter the strong, to spoil great hopes, to cast suspicion on the delight in beauty, to break down everything autonomous, manly, conquering, and imperious." Christianity thus succeeded in inverting "all love of the earthly and of supremacy over the earth into hatred of the earth and earthly things."

Nietzsche was willing for the weak herd to have their own morality, provided that they did not impose it on the higher ranks of humanity. Why should people of great creative abilities be reduced to the common level of mediocrity characteristic of the herd? Nietzsche spoke of rising "beyond good and evil," by which he meant rising above the dominant herd morality of his day. He envisioned a new day when, once again, the truly complete person would achieve new levels of creative activity and thereby become a higher type of person—the Superperson (*Übermensch*). This new person will not reject morality; he or she will reject only the negative morality of the herd. Again, Nietzsche argued that the morality based on the Will to Power is only an honest version of what the slave morality has carefully disguised. If the Superperson is "cruel," Nietzsche said, we must recognize that, actually, almost everything that we now call "higher culture" is simply a spiritualized intensification of cruelty. "This is my thesis," he said, that "the 'wild beast' has not been slain at all, it lives, it flourishes, it has only been—transfigured." For example, ancient Romans took pleasure in the gladiatorial contests. Christians experience ecstasies of the cross. Spaniards delight at the gory sight of the bullfight. French workers are homesick for a bloody revolution. These are all expressions of cruelty.

From the vantage point of the master morality, the word *cruelty* refers simply to the basic Will to Power, which is a natural expression of strength. People are differentiated into ranks, and it is only quantity of power that determines and distinguishes one's rank. Thus, ideals such as political and social equality are nonsensical. There can be no equality where there are in fact different degrees of power. Equality can only mean the leveling downward of everyone to the mediocrity of the herd. Nietzsche wanted to preserve the natural

distinction between two types of people, namely, between that "type which represents ascending life and a type which represents decadence, decomposition, weakness." To be sure, a higher culture will always require a mediocre herd, but only to make possible the development and emergence of the Superperson. If the Superperson is to emerge, he or she must go beyond good and evil as conceived by the lower ranks.

Revaluation of All Morals

What does Nietzsche want to put in the place of traditional morality, which he clearly believed was dying? His positive recommendations are not so clear as his critical analysis. However, we can infer much of the content of his new values from his rejection of the slave morality. If the slave morality originated in resentment and revenge, there must again occur a *revaluation* of all values. By *revaluation* Nietzsche did not mean the creation of a new table of moral values. He meant rather to declare war on the presently accepted values, like Socrates "applying the knife vivisectionally to the very virtues of the time." Since traditional morality is a perversion of original natural morality, *revaluation* must consist in rejecting traditional morality in the name of honesty and accuracy. Revaluation implies that all the "stronger motives are still extant, but that now they appear under false names and false valuations, and have not yet become conscious of themselves." It is not necessary to legislate new values but only to reverse values once again. Just as "Christianity was a revaluation of all the values of antiquity," so today the dominant morality must be rejected in favor of our original and deepest nature. Thus, Nietzsche's plan of *revaluation* was essentially a critical analysis of modern human ideals. He showed that what modern people called "good" was not at all virtuous. Their so-called truth was disguised selfishness and weakness, and their religion was a skillful creation of psychological weapons with which moral pygmies domesticated natural giants. Once the disguise is removed from modern morality, then true values will emerge.

In the final analysis moral values must be built on our true human nature and our environment. Unlike Darwin, who stressed external circumstances when describing the evolution of the species, Nietzsche focused on the internal power within individuals, which is capable of shaping and creating events—"a power which *uses* and *exploits* the environment." Nietzsche's grand hypothesis was that everywhere and in everything the Will to Power seeks to express itself. "This world," he says, "is the Will to Power—and nothing else." Life itself is a multiplicity of forces, "a lasting form of processes of assertions of force." People's psychological makeup shows that our preoccupation with pleasure and pain reflects a striving toward an increase of power. Pain can be the spur for exerting power to overcome an obstacle, whereas pleasure can involve a feeling of increased power.

The Superperson

Nietzsche's notion of the Will to Power is most clearly represented in the attitudes and behavior of the Superperson. We have already seen that Nietzsche

rejected the concept of equality. He also showed that morality must suit each rank. Even after the *revaluation* of all values, the "common herd" will not be intellectually capable of reaching the heights of the "free spirits." In short, there can be no "common good." Great things, Nietzsche says, remain for the great, "everything rare for the rare." The Superperson will be rare but is the next stage in human evolution. History is moving not toward some abstract developed "humanity" but toward the emergence of some exceptional people; the *Superperson* is the goal. But the Superperson will not be the product of a mechanical process of evolution. The next stage can be reached only when superior people have the courage to revalue all values and respond with freedom to their internal Will to Power. Human beings need to be surpassed, and it is the Superperson who represents the highest level of development and expression of physical, intellectual, and emotional strength. The Superperson will be the truly free person for whom nothing is forbidden except what obstructs the Will to Power. The Superperson will be the very embodiment of the spontaneous affirmation of life.

Nietzsche did not think that his Superperson would be a tyrant. To be sure, there would be much of the Dionysian element within the Superperson. But these passions would be controlled, thereby harmonizing the animal nature with the intellect, and giving style to his or her behavior. We should not confuse such a Superperson with a totalitarian bully. As a model Nietzsche had in mind his hero Goethe, as well as "the Roman Caesar with Christ's soul." As Nietzsche's thought matured, his ideal person would have to possess a balanced unity of the Dionysian and Apollonian elements. Earlier, when Wagner and Schopenhauer influenced his thought, Nietzsche criticized Socrates for having caused Western thought to take a wrong turn toward rationality. In later years he gained a greater appreciation for rationality. Even at the end, though, he believed that rationality must be used in the service of life and that life must not be sacrificed for knowledge. Still, Socrates was important historically precisely because he saved people from self-destruction. The lust for life, Nietzsche says, would then have led to wars of annihilation. The Dionysian element by itself leads to pessimism and destruction. So it was necessary to harness people's energies, which required the kind of influence that Socrates provided. Although the Apollonian element of rationality risks subverting the vital streams of life, Nietzsche nevertheless believed that we cannot engage in life without some rational form-giving guidance. Socrates became important for Nietzsche precisely because this ancient philosopher was the first to see the proper relation between thought and life. Socrates recognized that thought serves life, whereas for other philosophers, life served thought and knowledge. Here, then, was Nietzsche's ideal: the passionate person who has his or her passions under control.