BOOK SUMMARY

Daybreak

by Friedrich Nietzsche

A sustained investigation of the assumptions behind moral judgment.

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Key ideas

1. **The morality of custom.** For most of history morality meant obedience to tradition, so the free individual who acted on his own reasons counted as evil.
2. **Motives and interpretation.** Our conscious reasons are a fantastic commentary on drives we barely know, so moral explanations often misdescribe what really moves us.
3. **Against the cult of pity.** Pity mixes self-concern with kindness, and a morality that praises only selflessness serves a society's fear of the individual.
4. **The feeling of power.** Neither need nor desire but the love of power is the demon of mankind, shaping sacrifice, ambition, politics and culture.
5. **Experiments in living.** While old moral judgments lose their hold, individuals can treat their lives as experiments and found small experimental states of their own.

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Preface (1886): The Subterranean at Work

Daybreak first appeared in 1881 with the subtitle “Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality.” Five years later, for a new edition, Nietzsche wrote a preface at Ruta near Genoa in the autumn of 1886, and it gives the best short account of what the book set out to do. He describes its author as a “subterrestrial,” a mole digging and undermining in the dark, patient and even happy in his long privation of light, because he knows he will have his own morning. What was he looking for down there? Nietzsche’s answer is direct: he had begun to undermine our faith in morals, the oldest foundation on which philosophers had built, again and again, even though every earlier building had collapsed.

Why had no one dug there before? Because morality, Nietzsche says, does not permit criticism. Conscience, reputation, hell and sometimes even the police stand guard over it, and beyond intimidation morality has a gift for enchantment. It can paralyze the critical will with a single look, or turn it against itself like a scorpion stinging its own body. It is the Circe of philosophers. That is why every philosophical system since Plato has been built in vain: philosophers aimed in appearance at certainty and truth, but in reality they were building what Kant called “majestic moral edifices.” Kant himself, bitten by the “moral tarantula” Rousseau, invented an unknowable world beyond reason precisely to keep his moral kingdom safe from reason.

The preface then makes a surprising claim. This attack on morality is itself moral. Nietzsche and his fellow immoralists still obey a strict “thou shalt”: they refuse to return to anything they find unworthy of belief, whether it is called God, virtue, truth or love of neighbor, and they will not open a lying path back to old ideals. In this they see themselves as heirs of the old German uprightness and piety. If a formula is wanted, he writes, what happens in them is the self-overcoming of morality, translated here as “the autosuppression of morals.” Morality, followed through honestly, ends by questioning itself.

Nietzsche’s account of German philosophy in the preface is pointed. Kant, he says, believed in morality not because nature and history confirm it but in spite of their steady contradiction of it, and in this he resembled Luther, who asked what use faith would be if reason could grasp how a wrathful and malignant God could be merciful and just. Nothing has tempted the German soul more, he writes, than the principle “I believe because it is absurd,” and the same habit survives in Hegel’s dialectic, in which contradiction moves the world. Germans, he concludes, are pessimists even in logic. He then turns the point on himself: confidence in reason is also a moral phenomenon, and perhaps German pessimism has one last step to take, which is to doubt the trust in morality itself.

The last section asks the reader to slow down. Nietzsche says he has not been a philologist in vain: he is a teacher of slow reading, and he now writes slowly too. Philology is the goldsmith's art applied to words, and in an age of hurry that wants to get every book "done" at once, it teaches reading that is slow, deep, attentive and cautious, with doors left open. The preface ends with an instruction that applies to everything that follows: this book is only for perfect readers and philologists, so learn to read me well. The book's 575 numbered sections, arranged in five books, reward exactly that kind of reading.

CHAPTER 1

Book I: The Morality of Custom (§1–48)

Book I opens Nietzsche's inquiry into how morality began, and its central concept is what he calls the morality of custom. In §9 he states the thesis plainly. For thousands of years, long before recorded history, human beings lived under the rule of tradition, and morality meant nothing more than obedience to customs, whatever those customs were. Where there is no tradition there is no morality. In such societies the free man is immoral, because he wishes to depend on himself rather than on tradition. "Evil" originally meant the individual, the arbitrary, the unaccustomed and the incalculable. Even an action that tradition itself would approve counted as immoral if it was done for one's own reasons rather than because custom commanded it.

Because modern people live in a world where custom has weakened, Nietzsche says, we find it hard even to imagine this past, and our explanations sound like slanders on morality. Yet its traces are everywhere. In §16 he cites the seemingly pointless rules of the Kamchadales, which forbade scraping snow off boots with a knife on pain of death, and argues that such rules exist only to keep the community constantly reminded that custom must be obeyed, and in §33 he shows how fear of demonic punishment taught people to ignore real causes and consequences. Bathing was commanded not for cleanliness but because the gods demanded it, so that reality came to matter only as a symbol. This, Nietzsche argues, is one source of a long inherited perversion of the human intellect, a contempt for natural causes in favor of imagined moral ones.

Two of the most striking aphorisms describe what it took to break custom. In §14 Nietzsche argues that almost every new idea in history came accompanied by madness. Only someone who seemed possessed, as frightening and incalculable as wind and sea, could cast off the spell of tradition, and so innovators who were not actually mad felt driven to make themselves appear so, or even to become so. In §18 he describes the morality of voluntary suffering: small, threatened communities enjoyed cruelty, imagined their gods enjoyed it too, and so came to see self-chosen pain as pleasing to heaven. The suspicion of happiness and trust in suffering, he suggests, comes from this very old root.

Book I also contains the first statements of a theme that will dominate the whole book, the feeling of power. In §23 Nietzsche writes that because people for ages believed things were alive and could thwart them, the feeling of impotence was far greater than it needed to be, and in response the human feeling of power became extraordinarily subtle. The means of creating that

feeling, he says, form almost the entire history of culture. Feelings themselves are not trustworthy guides: in §35 he notes that “trust your feelings” means trusting the judgments of our grandparents, since feelings descend from earlier judgments. In §38 he shows how one impulse becomes cowardice or humility depending on the moral label it receives.

Finally, the book examines the life of thought itself. In §42 Nietzsche offers a sharp genealogy of the contemplative life: in violent ages, men who were tired, sick or melancholy turned their pessimism into words, and became poets, thinkers, priests and medicine men, figures the strong both feared and despised. In §47 he warns that words block our path: wherever primitive people coined a word, they thought they had made a discovery, when they had really set up an obstacle. In §48, “Know Thyself is the Whole of Science,” he says that only when we know all things will we know ourselves, because things are only the boundaries of the human.

CHAPTER 2

Book I: Christianity and the Physicians of the Soul (§49–96)

The second half of Book I turns to Christianity, and it is the most sustained treatment of religion in Nietzsche's middle period. He begins with consolation. In §52 he asks where the new physicians of the soul are. The means of comfort that religions offered, he argues, have given life its fundamental melancholy, because they were intoxicants that relieved pain in the moment and deepened illness in the long run. Schopenhauer was right to take human suffering seriously; what is needed now is someone who takes the remedies seriously and exposes the quackery with which people have treated their souls. In §49 he adds that we can no longer feel great by pointing to divine descent, because the ape stands at that gate.

The most famous aphorism here is §68, "The First Christian." Nietzsche argues that Christianity as a world religion was the creation of Paul, one of the most ambitious and importunate souls that ever lived, full of superstition and cunning. Without Paul's history, there would have been only a small Jewish sect whose founder died on the cross. Paul, a fanatical defender of the Jewish law who found he could not fulfill it, came to suspect that the law itself provoked transgression, and found in the crucified Messiah a way to abolish the law and triumph over it. If his letters had been read honestly, as the confessions of a passionate man rather than revelations of the Holy Ghost, the Christian edifice would have fallen long ago, so clearly do they lay bare its origins.

Several aphorisms trace how Christianity used fear. In §72 Nietzsche notes that the idea of punishment in hell was already widespread in the Roman Empire through mystery cults, and that Epicurus and his Roman disciple Lucretius had tried to uproot it. Christianity revived the dying belief, which helped it win timid souls away from Mithras and Isis. In §76 he argues that the passions become evil when viewed with evil eyes: Christianity turned Eros and Aphrodite, powers capable of idealization, into hellish goblins by attaching pangs of conscience to every sexual impulse. In §77 he condemns the tortures of the soul that the Church inflicted for centuries, which no one has protested as loudly as they protest bodily cruelty.

Nietzsche is not simply dismissive. In §88 he praises Luther for awakening suspicion of the saints and the contemplative life, which made a non-Christian contemplative life possible again in Europe. In §92, "At the Death-bed of Christianity," he observes that active people now do without inward Christianity, and that the thoughtful middle classes hold only a softened version

in which a loving God arranges everything for the best. Instead of “God, freedom and immortality,” there remain benevolence and decent sentiments. This soft moralism, he says, is the euthanasia of Christianity. In §95 he adds that historical refutation is now decisive: where earlier atheists tried to prove God did not exist, we now show how the belief arose, and that makes proofs unnecessary.

Book I closes with §96, “In hoc signo vinces,” which looks past Christianity altogether. Nietzsche admires the ancient Brahmins, who believed that priests and rituals were more powerful than the gods, and notes that the next step was to discard the gods, and the step after that to discard priests too, which is when the Buddha appeared, teaching self-redemption. Europe is still far from that stage. But when the customs that support gods, priests and saviors are gone, and morality in the old sense is dead, he asks what will come, and answers with a hope that people who have outgrown the old faith will recognize one another and become a power in Europe.

CHAPTER 3

Book II: Denying Morality, Knowing Ourselves (§97–130)

Book II begins by clarifying what it means to deny morality, and its key statement is §103. There are two ways to deny morality, Nietzsche says. The first, in the spirit of La Rochefoucauld, denies that people are really moved by the moral motives they claim, and calls morality a matter of words and self-deception. The second admits that moral judgments really do move people to act, but denies that those judgments rest on truths. Nietzsche takes the second position. He denies morality as he denies alchemy: there were real alchemists who acted on their beliefs, but their premises were false. He adds at once that he would be a fool to deny that many actions called immoral should be avoided and many called moral encouraged, only for different reasons.

The aphorism ends with one of the best-known lines of the book. We must learn to think differently, he writes, so that at last, perhaps very late, we can do something more: feel differently. This is the program of Daybreak in a sentence. It is not a call to abandon kindness or self-control, but to rebuild them on honest foundations. In §97 he says one becomes moral not because one is moral; submission to morality can be slavish, vain, resigned or thoughtless. In §108 he offers theses: moral precepts are directed against individuals rather than toward their happiness, and every stage of development has its own happiness, which is neither higher nor lower than another.

The middle of Book II examines self-knowledge and finds it thin. In §109 Nietzsche lists six methods for mastering a violent impulse, from avoiding temptation to exhausting oneself, and then adds the decisive point: the will to fight an impulse is not in our power. When we think we are struggling against a craving, it is really one impulse complaining about another, and the intellect is only the blind instrument of a rival drive. In §115 he observes that language has words only for extreme states, rage, love, joy and pain, while the quieter middle states that actually weave our character go unnamed and therefore unnoticed.

The long §119, “Experience and Invention,” goes further. Our drives are fed by chance experiences, some starving while others are overfed. Dreams, Nietzsche argues, are interpretations that drives invent for nervous stimuli during sleep, such as making up a story to explain the sound of bells. Waking life is not essentially different: our moral judgments are images and fantasies about physiological processes unknown to us, and all our so-called

consciousness is a more or less fantastic commentary on an unknown, perhaps unknowable, but felt text. In §116 he calls the belief that we know how human action arises the oldest of illusions, held even by Socrates and Plato.

This skepticism extends to the will itself. In §124 Nietzsche jokes about a man who steps outside at sunrise and says, “It is my will that the sun shall rise,” or who is thrown in wrestling and says, “Here I lie, but here I wish to lie,” and asks whether we do anything different whenever we say “I will.” In §130 he questions our belief in two realms, one of purposes and wills and one of accidents. Perhaps, he suggests, the iron hands of necessity shake the dice box of chance forever, and our most deliberate purposes are only some of the throws.

CHAPTER 4

Book II: Against the Morality of Pity (§131–148)

The last part of Book II is Nietzsche's first full critique of the morality of pity and altruism, which he would later call the morality of his age. In §132, "The Last Echoes of Christianity in Morals," he argues that the modern idea that the moral person is the one who performs sympathetic, disinterested and benevolent actions is perhaps Christianity's most general effect on Europe, though not part of its essential doctrine. As belief in dogma and personal salvation receded, people justified their separation from the Church by a cult of love for humanity. French freethinkers from Voltaire to Auguste Comte tried to outdo the Christian ideal, and Comte's formula "live for others" out-christianized Christianity; Schopenhauer and John Stuart Mill, Nietzsche adds, were only echoes, and socialist principles grew from the same ground.

In §133 Nietzsche asks what really happens when we jump into the water to save someone we do not care about. People say we act out of pity and stop thinking of ourselves. He replies that we do think of ourselves, unconsciously. Another's misfortune offends us; failing to help would expose our impotence or cowardice; accidents to others remind us of our own danger. We relieve this pain in ourselves by acting, and we may also enjoy the contrast with our own good fortune or the feeling of power in helping. What we call pity is a mixture of many motives, and calling it simply "unegoistic" is a thoughtless simplification.

In §134 he judges pity, in so far as it causes suffering, a weakness like any other injurious emotion. It increases the amount of suffering in the world. If it ruled for even one day, he writes, humanity would perish. The Greeks, he notes, treated pity as an unhealthy periodic emotion to be discharged now and then, which is how he reads their tragedy. In §135 he observes that among some peoples to be pitied was felt as contempt, and in §142 he gives a physiological account of sympathy: we understand others mainly by imitating their expressions in our own bodies, a skill fear made subtle long ago.

Even our tenderness toward people we admire, Nietzsche suggests in §138, has a hidden economy. When we discover that someone we revere is suffering, our love becomes more tender, because the distance between us seems to shrink and we can at last give something back. We offer kind words, services and even pretended suffering, and enjoy the pleasure of active gratitude, which he calls a kind of good-natured revenge. If our friend refuses all of it, we leave chilled and almost mortified. Observations like this are not meant to make kindness impossible. They show how much more complicated it is than the single word "unegoistic" suggests, and why a morality built on that word misreads the very people it praises.

Nietzsche's point is not that one should be cruel. It is that the morality of the age praises a single feeling uncritically and calls it the whole of goodness. In §144 he asks whether we serve the suffering by letting our sky be darkened by every complaint, since gloom only adds to their burden. In §146 he asks whether the nature of true morality really lies in considering only the immediate consequences of our actions for our neighbor, and proposes looking beyond the neighbor toward larger goals, even if they cause him pain. In §148, "Looking Far Ahead," he concludes that if moral actions are only those done for others or from free will, there are none. Once we correct these errors, he suggests, egoistic actions will regain their value and mankind will lose its bad conscience about them.

CHAPTER 5

Book III: Work, Security and the Commercial Age (§149–186)

Book III turns from the history of morality to modern society. It opens with a practical demand in §149: small unconventional actions are necessary. Nietzsche criticizes freethinking people who keep their opinions private while doing whatever is expected, the atheist who has his child baptized, the man who condemns hatred between nations but serves in the army, the one who marries in church to please a religious family. Nothing matters more, he says, than that a powerful, irrational custom should be broken now and then by an act that shows it is no longer believed. Thought that never becomes action leaves custom untouched.

The center of Book III is a diagnosis of the modern worship of work and safety. In §173, “The Flatterers of Work,” Nietzsche argues that behind the praise of hard labor lies a fear of everything individual. Work from morning to night is the best police: it uses up nervous energy that would otherwise go into reflection, dreams, love and hatred, and it keeps everyone in check. A busy society is a secure society, and security is now worshipped as the supreme deity. Yet the joke, he adds, is that the worker himself has now become dangerous, and behind him comes the danger of dangers, the individual.

In §174 he connects this to the moral fashion of a commercial society. Behind the principle that moral actions are those performed out of sympathy for others, he sees the social instinct of fear in an intellectual disguise. Only actions that serve general security are called good. People who accept this, he says, must have little joy in themselves, and the result of the great project of smoothing away every sharp edge in life is to turn mankind into sand, small, soft, round and endless. In §175 he describes the soul of a culture of traders, which values everything by what the consumer will pay, and in §179 he pleads for as little state as possible, since politics and economics do not deserve the best minds.

Nietzsche’s social criticism in this book is not conservative nostalgia. In §163, “Against Rousseau,” he reverses Rousseau’s claim that a contemptible civilization has corrupted our morality, suggesting instead that our weak and soft morality is to blame for a contemptible civilization, and then leaves the reader to decide. In §164 he notes that people outside conventional morality are starting to organize themselves, which may bring insecurity but reminds us that no single morality has the right to exclude all others. In §206, “The Impossible

Class," he tells factory workers that higher wages will not cure their impersonal enslavement as screws in a machine, and urges them, startlingly, to emigrate in swarms rather than accept it.

Other passages describe the toll of modern life on individuals. In §177 he urges the poor fellows in the great centers of politics to learn solitude, since their constant agitation leaves them no inner life. In §178 he describes talented young men who were never given time to choose their own path and have been trained to be worn out by daily toil, and in §189, "High Politics," he argues that what drives nations to war is less utility than the need for the feeling of power, which periodically seizes whole peoples.

CHAPTER 6

Book III: Greeks, Germans and Good Europeans (§168–207)

A second strand in Book III compares modern Europeans with the Greeks. In §168 Nietzsche says he values Thucydides more than Plato. Thucydides takes an artless pleasure in the typical in people and events, seeks out the good sense in each type, and never reviles those he dislikes. He represents the last bloom of a culture of disinterested knowledge whose poet was Sophocles, whose statesman was Pericles, whose physician was Hippocrates and whose natural philosopher was Democritus, a culture that deserves to be named after its teachers, the Sophists. Nietzsche's esteem for the Sophists over Plato here is one of his more provocative reversals.

In §169 he observes how foreign the Greek genius is to us. Modern and Asiatic art revels in enormous masses, while Greek architecture at Paestum, Pompeii and Athens expressed the sublime with small masses. The Greeks were simple in their idea of themselves; we far surpass them in knowledge of man, and our souls are labyrinths. If we built in the style of our souls, a labyrinth would be our model, and our music, where we let ourselves go, shows it. In §172 he argues that tragedy suited warlike men like the Greeks of Aeschylus's day, who were hard to move and found pity a rare, intoxicating drink, but is wasted on modern people whose sympathies fill like sails at the slightest wind.

Germany comes in for criticism and some hope. In §190 Nietzsche recalls that the Germans first interested other nations through a culture they have since shaken off like a disease, putting nothing better in its place than political and national lunacy. In §197 he describes the German hostility to the Enlightenment, which in the early nineteenth century turned philosophy back to concepts instead of explanations, history back to folklore, the Middle Ages and Christianity, and natural science against Newton and Voltaire, so that the cult of feeling replaced the cult of reason. In §207 he says the German obeys whenever he can, and becomes capable of great and dangerous things only on the rare occasions when he must obey himself.

Other aphorisms sketch the European of the future. In §195 Nietzsche laments a so-called classical education that wasted his youth on dead languages taught without hunger, when it should have begun by making pupils feel the despair of ignorance about their everyday surroundings. In §201 he describes the aristocrat's bearing, which never slumps into a chair and keeps its composure under provocation, and suggests that the nobility's future lies in entering

the domain of knowledge, where it can find new consecrations and new forms of chivalrous service. In §205, written in a Europe where antisemitism was rising, he speaks admiringly of the European Jews, whose eighteen centuries of hardship have given them extraordinary resourcefulness of mind and soul, and predicts they will become either masters of Europe or lose it. He hopes they will become pioneers and guides of Europe and, in great intellectual works, turn their long history into a blessing for it. Even this praise relies on generalizations about a whole people, a habit of thought that marks many of Nietzsche's remarks on nations.

Health and diet become serious subjects. In §202, titled "The Care of the Health," he argues that there is no essential difference between criminals and madmen and that criminals should be treated with medical skill and goodwill rather than with condescending pity, offered a cure, freed from remorse and allowed to make amends by benefiting others, and in §203 he attacks the meals of the well-off, with too many dishes prepared for appearance rather than nourishment. These short entries anticipate the attention to climate, food and bodily regimen in his later autobiography Ecce Homo.

CHAPTER 7

Book IV: The Feeling of Power (§208–270)

Book IV is the most varied of the five, made up mostly of short and middle-length aphorisms, but one idea keeps returning and becomes the book's great discovery: the feeling of power. In §262, "The Demon of Power," Nietzsche states it outright. Neither need nor desire, but love of power, is the demon of mankind. Give people health, food, shelter and pleasure, and they remain unhappy and capricious, because the demon is waiting to be satisfied. Take everything else away and satisfy it, and they will be almost happy. He adds that Luther already said this better in his hymn, with the line about the kingdom. The thought is a precursor of the later doctrine of the will to power, though here it remains a psychological observation rather than a theory of everything.

Many aphorisms trace the feeling of power in unexpected places. In §215, "The Morality of Victims," Nietzsche tells enthusiasts of self-sacrifice that they enjoy the intoxicating sense of being one with the powerful being, God or man, to whom they sacrifice themselves, and so share in his power. In §245 he shows Napoleon, who knew he spoke badly, deliberately speaking even worse in order to enjoy his authority over his listeners. In §348 he distinguishes the person who wants the feeling of power, who seizes any means however petty, from the person who already has it and has grown fastidious. In §113, back in Book II, striving for distinction was already described as a desire to leave one's mark on another soul, a long ladder running from torture to admiration.

Nietzsche applies the same lens to punishment and justice. The short §208 asks what new thing he wants, and answers: we no longer want causes to be sinners and effects to be executioners. In §236 he notes how strange punishment is: it does not cleanse the criminal or expiate anything but defiles both the punished and the punishers. In §252 he observes that the person punished is no longer the one who did the deed; he is always the scapegoat. These remarks carry forward the attack on free will and retribution that runs through all of Nietzsche's free-spirit books.

Art, music and theater are examined for their psychological effects. In §240 Nietzsche argues that anyone who thinks Macbeth deters ambition is mistaken, and so is anyone who thinks Shakespeare believed it. An ambitious man delights in seeing himself in Macbeth, and the hero's destruction is the sharpest spice in the drink. In §255, a dialogue on music, one listener is overpowered by a piece and the other proposes to overpower it in turn by talking through the drama it hides, and in §250 he remarks that hearing, the organ of fear, developed so finely in

the night, which is why music belongs to it. In §218 he advises dealing with one's own weaknesses as an artist does, by making them necessary and even attractive parts of the whole.

The feeling of power has a strange counterpart. In §271, "Festive Moods," Nietzsche notes that the people who strive hardest for power find it indescribably pleasant to be overpowered: to have the reins snatched from their hands, to sink into a feeling as into a whirlpool, to be for once the plaything of elemental forces. He compares it to the dream of an exhausted mountain climber who falls asleep below his goal and imagines rolling effortlessly downhill. This, he says, is what happiness looks like in a badgered and ambitious society. The observation helps explain the appeal of intoxication, music and mass enthusiasm, and it shows that even the wish to surrender belongs, on Nietzsche's reading, to the economy of power.

CHAPTER 8

Book IV: Sketches of the Human Animal (§271–422)

The rest of Book IV is a gallery of psychological sketches, often only a few lines long, in the manner of the French moralists. Nietzsche watches vanity, gratitude, friendship and pride at close range. Vanity, in §365, is the fear of appearing original. In §385 vain people are compared to shop windows that keep arranging, concealing and lighting the qualities others attribute to them. In §287 two friends break off their friendship at the same moment, one feeling too misunderstood and the other too well known, and both are wrong, because neither knows himself. In §393 a man who forgets nothing but forgives everything is doubly hated, because he shames us twice. The method is the one Nietzsche admired in La Rochefoucauld: a single sharp observation that turns a familiar virtue inside out.

Some of the sketches touch on the Greeks again. In §306, “The Greek Ideal,” Nietzsche asks what the Greeks admired in Odysseus and answers: his capacity for lying and shrewd revenge, his being equal to every circumstance, his ability to appear nobler than the noblest when it suited him. What is remarkable, he says, is that the contradiction between seeming and being was not felt and so not judged morally. Were there ever such accomplished actors? This picture of a culture that admired cunning without guilt is a pointed contrast to Christian sincerity.

One of the most memorable entries is §327, “A Fable.” Nietzsche imagines a Don Juan of knowledge, whom no poet or philosopher has yet discovered. He does not love the things he knows, but he has wit and a passion for the hunt and its intrigues, which carries him to the most distant stars of knowledge, until nothing is left to pursue except knowledge that harms, like a drunkard who ends by drinking absinthe and acid. At last he longs for hell, the final seduction, and if that too disappoints him, he becomes the Stony Guest, longing for a supper of knowledge that will never be served. The fable is a warning about the passion for knowledge that Book V will celebrate.

Nietzsche is especially suspicious of virtues that look like firmness. In §301, “Strength of Character,” he asks why the motto “What I have said once I will do” is admired, when so many actions are carried out not because they are the most reasonable but because, at the moment we thought of them, they flattered our ambition or vanity, so that we blindly see them through to confirm our belief in our own character. In §298 he describes the fanatic of a living ideal, who is terrible in negation because he knows intimately what he denies: he comes from there and secretly fears being forced to return. Each of these sketches loosens a familiar moral label by showing the mixed motives it covers.

Other sketches return to everyday conduct. In §322 Nietzsche notes that a sick man under a doctor's orders lives more carelessly than one who must watch his own health, because rules distract us from their purpose; one can imagine how reckless people would become if they entrusted everything to God. In §364 he advises against living where one can neither keep a dignified silence nor voice one's higher thoughts, so that only complaints are left to say. In §376 the best remedy for being weary of oneself is plenty of sleep, in both senses, and in §382 he warns the thinker to be the gardener of the gloomy conclusions that spring up in him like fungi, not merely the soil they grow from. In §397 education is described as a continuation of procreation and often a kind of supplementary varnishing of it.

CHAPTER 9

Book V: The Passion for Knowledge (§423–475)

Book V has a different atmosphere. It opens with §423, “In the Great Silence,” set by the sea near Genoa at evening. The town’s bells ring the Angelus and then fall silent. The ocean, the sky glowing red, yellow and green, the small rocks reaching into the sea, all are mute, and their beautiful silence seems both awe-inspiring and deceitful, as if nature could speak, and speak cruelly, if it wished. Nietzsche turns from nature to himself: he comes to hate speaking and even thinking, because behind every word he hears the laughter of error, imagination and insanity. Sea and evening, he concludes, are bad teachers, because they teach a person to stop being human. The scene sets the tone for a book of solitude, sea and open horizons.

The theme of Book V is the passion for knowledge. In §429, “The New Passion,” Nietzsche asks why we dread a return to barbarism. Not because barbarians were unhappy; barbarians of all ages, he admits, were happier than we are. It is because knowledge has become a passion that would not trade itself for the happiness of a strong delusion, as an unhappy lover would not trade his love for indifference. Humanity might even perish of this passion, and still we would prefer it to a regression of knowledge. If mankind does not perish of a passion, it will perish of a weakness, he writes, and the question is whether we want its end to come in fire and light or in the sand.

This passion requires a new method and a new kind of person. In §432 Nietzsche says there is no single correct method of knowing. One investigator treats things like a policeman, another like a confessor, a third like a curious traveler. Investigators, like conquerors and navigators, have a daring morality and must accept being considered evil. In §425 human beings are “gods in exile,” whose errors about their origin and mission have filled the world with suffering. In §441 he explains why the nearest things grow ever more distant for the thinker: the more we live with all that has been and will be, the paler what is present becomes.

The book’s best-known aphorism is §453, “A Moral Interregnum.” Nietzsche admits that no one can yet describe what will replace moral feelings and judgments, however sure we are that they rest on error. The sciences of physiology, medicine, society and solitude can supply foundation stones for new ideals, but not the ideals themselves. Meanwhile we live in an interim, and the best we can do is to be our own kings and found small experimental states. “We are experiments,” he writes: if we want to be so. In §454 he adds a note on how to read the book: it is not meant to be read straight through or aloud, but taken up on walks and travels, a little at a time, away from one’s usual surroundings.

Other aphorisms describe the virtues the knower needs. In §459 Nietzsche notes that Rousseau and Schopenhauer took as their motto "to dedicate one's life to truth," and suffered because they could not make truth fit their lives; the noblest virtue of a thinker is the magnanimity to sacrifice himself to knowledge, often with a smile. In §474 he rejects both Plato's claim that dialectic is the only way behind appearances and Schopenhauer's opposite claim, since what they point to does not exist, and in §460 he notes that we learn most thoroughly what threatens us, as Tiberius must have understood Augustus better than any historian.

CHAPTER 10

Book V: Solitude and Its Companions (§476–520)

The final hundred aphorisms are largely about the conditions of an independent intellectual life, and solitude is their recurring theme. In §491 a short dialogue explains why the thinker returns to the desert: he is not a quick thinker, the water from his own spring rises slowly, and among the multitude he thinks like them and feels robbed of his soul. In §485 another speaker explains that alone he sees his friends in a clearer and rosier light, and that he needs distant perspectives in order to think well of things. In §499 he recalls Diderot's remark that only the solitary are evil, notes that Rousseau's offense proved Diderot right, and observes that society forces every evil instinct into masks while solitude lets them fall away, and in §503 he notes that antiquity, which prized friendship above sexual love, would never have thought that philosophy makes one useless to friends.

The thinker's solitude is also a matter of choosing companions among the dead. In §481, "Two Germans," Nietzsche compares Kant and Schopenhauer with Plato, Spinoza, Pascal, Rousseau and Goethe, and finds the two Germans poorer, because their thought is not the passionate history of a soul, with crises and death struggles, but in Kant's case merely the biography of a head. In §495 he warns that the young choose their teachers carelessly from their own time and later have to expiate those teachers in themselves. In §496 he recalls Plato's observation that the philosopher, as critic of his society's morals, is bound to look like the very principle of evil, and suggests that Plato's three journeys to Sicily were an attempt to become a lawgiver, as Mohammed later was for the Arabs.

Some of the most liberating thoughts in this part of Book V concern time and truth. In §501 Nietzsche calls the abandonment of belief in the immortal soul perhaps the most useful conquest knowledge has ever made. As long as the salvation of an immortal soul depended on what a person could learn in one short life, decisions had to be reached in haste. Now humanity can afford to wait, test ideas slowly and leave questions open. In §507, "Against the Tyranny of Truth," he adds that even if all his opinions were true he would not want them to rule alone: truth needs opposition, and we need to rest from it at times in falsehood, or it will grow dull and powerless and make us so too. In §535 he notes soberly that truth in itself has no power at all; it must draw power to its side or perish.

The ideal Nietzsche sets against the restless idealists of his time is an ancient one. In §546, "Slave and Idealist," he praises Epictetus, the Stoic who was born a slave. His followers, with their constant inner watchfulness, reserve and laconic speech, would not appeal to modern

idealists who long above all for expansion. Yet the Stoic's pride does not disturb others; it can even smile. Above all, Nietzsche writes, he is free of the fear of God, believes strictly in reason and preaches no penitence. His ideal person can be found in any rank, even among the lowest, as a silent and self-sufficient human being in the midst of general servitude. Unlike the Christian, who hopes for unspeakable glory as a gift of grace, Epictetus already holds his best treasure in his own hand and defies the world to take it.

CHAPTER 11

Book V: The Aeronauts of the Spirit (§521–575)

The last aphorisms ask how a thinker should hold his own views. In §553 he even asks whether his whole philosophy is a roundabout translation into reason of personal cravings: a mild sun, sea breezes, short meals of meat, eggs and fruit, quiet walks for days, little talking and living alone. In §573 he writes that the snake that cannot shed its skin perishes, and so do minds prevented from changing their opinions. In §542 he warns against letting old age judge life, since evening likes to pass weariness off as wisdom, and in §547 he mocks philosophers who wanted to solve everything at a stroke, like Alexander cutting the Gordian knot.

Book V also gathers Nietzsche's positive virtues. In §556 he lists four: honest toward ourselves and toward friends, brave toward the enemy, generous toward the vanquished, polite always. In §552, "Ideal Selfishness," he compares the thinker's life to pregnancy: everything one does is shaped by care for what is growing within, and one waits in a pure feeling of irresponsibility for it to come to light. In §548 he hopes that the worship of power and genius will one day give way to valuing how much reason governs power. In §560 he says, in a passage few readers expect from him, that we can be gardeners of our drives, cultivating anger, pity or brooding as one trains a plant on a trellis, in the French, English, Dutch or Chinese style.

Nietzsche also gathers some of the book's conclusions into a few plain sentences. In §563, "The Illusion of the Moral Order of the Universe," he writes that there is no eternal justice demanding that every fault be atoned and paid for; that belief was a terrible delusion, useful only within limits, as is the belief that everything felt as guilt really is guilt. Mankind has suffered most, he says, not from things themselves but from opinions about things that do not exist. In §571 he asks what the most effective remedy is in the soul's field hospital, and answers with one word: victory. These short sayings show the cheerful hardness that Book V aims for, a mood in which the end of old moral certainties feels less like a loss than like convalescence.

The book ends with §575, "We Aeronauts of the Intellect," one of Nietzsche's finest passages. All daring birds that fly far out into space will at some point be unable to go on, and will settle on a mast or a narrow ledge, grateful even for that. All our great teachers came to a standstill this way, and so will we. But other birds will fly farther. Looking out to where all is sea, Nietzsche asks where we are going and why we fly in the direction where all the suns of humanity have set. Perhaps people will say of us that we too steered westward hoping to reach India, and that it was our fate to be wrecked on the infinite. The book ends not with an answer but with a question addressed to his brethren, left open on the page.

The image of open sea and new dawns recalls the book's title, Morgenröte in German, literally the red of morning. In §568 the phoenix shows a poet his work burning, because it contains neither the spirit of the age nor that of its opponents, and tells him this is a good sign: "There is many a dawn of day." The title page carried a line from the Rig Veda about the many dawns that have not yet broken. Daybreak does not offer a new morality to replace the old one. It offers an experiment, carried out patiently from below, which Nietzsche would continue the next year in The Gay Science.

About Friedrich Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche was born on 15 October 1844 in Röcken, a village near Leipzig in Prussian Saxony, the son of a Lutheran pastor who died when Friedrich was four. He studied theology and then classical philology at Bonn and Leipzig, and in 1869, at just 24 and before he had formally completed his doctorate, he was appointed professor of classical philology at the University of Basel. There he became a close friend of Richard Wagner, whose music and cultural ambitions shaped his first book, The Birth of Tragedy, in 1872.

Chronic illness forced Nietzsche to give up his professorship in 1879. For the next decade he lived on a small pension, moving between the Swiss Alps, the Italian Riviera and Turin, and wrote the books for which he is best known: Daybreak, The Gay Science, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Beyond Good and Evil, On the Genealogy of Morality and the works of 1888. In January 1889 he suffered a mental collapse in Turin from which he never recovered, and he died in Weimar on 25 August 1900.

After his collapse his sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, took control of his papers and published selections from his notebooks, most famously The Will to Power, shaping his reputation in ways later scholars rejected. The critical edition by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari restored his texts. His ideas about the death of God, the will to power, eternal recurrence, the Übermensch and the genealogy of values went on to influence existentialism, psychoanalysis, modern literature and much of twentieth-century philosophy.

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