BOOK SUMMARY

Ecce Homo

by Friedrich Nietzsche

Nietzsche rereads his life and books through an audacious literary self-portrait.

Summarized by SUN · sunapp.ai

Key ideas

1. **Becoming oneself.** One becomes what one is by not knowing too early, letting detours and mistakes serve a task that grows unseen.
2. **Small things matter.** Nutrition, climate, place and recreation shape a thinker more than the grand ideals philosophy has traditionally honoured.
3. **Illness as insight.** Long sickness taught Nietzsche to look at values from the perspective of both decline and health, and to switch between them.
4. **Amor fati.** Greatness means wanting nothing to be different, past or future, and loving what is necessary rather than merely bearing it.
5. **Reading the works.** Nietzsche rereads each of his books as a stage in one life task, the revaluation of all values.

sun | *Intelligent Audio*



sunapp.ai/download

Preface

Ecce Homo is Nietzsche's autobiography, written in Turin in October and November 1888, with revisions that continued until just before his collapse in January 1889. It was not published until 1908. The title comes from Pilate's words about Jesus in the Gospel of John, behold the man, and the subtitle, How One Becomes What One Is, adapts a line from the Greek poet Pindar. The irony is deliberate. Nietzsche presents himself to the world as a rival to the figure Pilate displayed, and he means to explain how his life produced his books.

The preface gives his reason for writing. He is about to make, he says, the greatest demand ever made on humanity, so he must first declare who he is, since no one has heard or seen him. He is no moral monster but the opposite of the type hitherto honoured as virtuous: a disciple of Dionysus who would rather be a satyr than a saint. He promises not to improve mankind or to set up new idols. His business is overthrowing idols, by which he means all ideals, because the invented ideal world has robbed the real one of its value.

His philosophy, he writes, is the air of high mountains, bracing for those built for it and chilling for others. The test of a mind is how much truth it can endure and dare, and error is not blindness but cowardice. He singles out Zarathustra as his greatest gift to humanity and quotes its gentle, halcyon tone, including Zarathustra's advice to his disciples to leave him and find themselves. A short interlude follows, dated to his forty-fourth birthday on 15 October 1888. Looking back over a year that produced Twilight of the Idols and the first book of the Revaluation, he asks how he could not be grateful to his whole life, and resolves to tell himself its story.

CHAPTER 1

Why I Am So Wise

The first chapter opens with a riddle: as his father he is already dead, and as his mother he still lives and grows old. Nietzsche's father, a Lutheran pastor, died at thirty-six, and in his own thirty-sixth year, 1879, Nietzsche reached his lowest point: he resigned his professorship at Basel, nearly blind, and spent a sunless winter in Naumburg. Yet in this weakness, he says, he wrote The Wanderer and His Shadow and then The Dawn of Day, and amid three-day headaches he thought with icy clarity. This double inheritance of decline and new beginning gave him his special gift: a nose for the signs of ascending and declining life, and the ability to switch perspectives between sickness and health.

He insists he is both a décadent and its opposite. The proof is that he always chose the right remedy for himself, solitude, discipline and refusing to be pampered, whereas the true décadent chooses what harms him. A basically healthy nature can use illness as a stimulus to life, and it was during his worst years, he says, that he stopped being a pessimist. He then sketches the well-turned-out human being: someone who enjoys only what is good for them, turns accidents to advantage, reacts slowly, believes in neither bad luck nor guilt, and is made stronger by what does not kill them. That, he announces, is himself.

The chapter also contains family history and character study. Nietzsche claims Polish noble ancestry, a family legend for which scholars have found no evidence, and calls himself a good European and the last anti-political German. He describes his father as tutor to princesses and himself as named after the Prussian king on whose birthday he was born. He says he has rarely met ill will, only too much goodwill, and that he never punished a pupil in seven years of teaching at Basel. Readers should know that this section exists in two versions: a harsher replacement passage about his mother and sister, found later among Peter Gast's papers, appears in modern critical editions but not in this older translation.

The last sections treat resentment, pity and war. Illness, Nietzsche says, breeds resentment, and the invalid's best defence is what he calls Russian fatalism: ceasing to react, like a soldier lying down in the snow. Buddha understood this, and his teaching against hostility is hygiene rather than morality. Yet Nietzsche is also a warrior, and he lists his rules of combat: attack only causes that are victorious, attack only where he stands alone, never attack persons except as magnifying glasses for a general evil, as with David Strauss and Wagner, and attack only where there is no personal grudge. Even his war on Christianity, he says, comes without bad experiences, since devout Christians were always kind to him.

CHAPTER 2

Why I Am So Clever

Nietzsche explains his cleverness by saying he never wasted strength on questions that are not real questions. He never felt sinful, and atheism came to him by instinct, because God is too crude an answer and amounts to a ban on thinking. The real question on which humanity's salvation depends, he says with deliberate provocation, is nutrition. He recalls the bad cooking of Leipzig, where he discovered Schopenhauer, condemns German food as the origin of German indigestion of the mind, praises the cooking of Piedmont, and advises spiritual natures to avoid alcohol, drink water, take strong tea only in the morning, and trust no thought not born in the open air while walking.

Climate is the second choice one must not get wrong. Genius, Nietzsche claims, thrives in dry air, citing Paris, Provence, Florence, Jerusalem and Athens, and he lists the damp, wrong places of his own life: Naumburg, Pforta, Leipzig, Basel and Venice. His greatest error was idealism, ignorance of his own physiology, which led him into philology instead of medicine or science, and into a selfless routine at Basel that squandered his strength. Illness, he says, first brought him to reason. The third choice is recreation. For him that means reading, but only a few books: the French moralists, Pascal and Montaigne, Stendhal, whom he envies for the joke that God's only excuse is that he does not exist, and Heinrich Heine, with whom he expects to be named as the greatest artist of the German language.

Wagner, he says, was the deepest refreshment of his life. He would not give up the days at Tribschen, the Swiss villa where he visited Wagner and Cosima, at any price, and he calls Tristan and Isolde Wagner's unsurpassed work, while admitting that Wagner was a poison as well as an antidote to everything German. He wants music cheerful yet profound, like an October afternoon, and would give up all other music to keep Chopin, Rossini and his friend Peter Gast. When he looks for another word for music, he finds only Venice, and the section ends with a short poem about a gondola song heard from a bridge at night.

Section 8 defines taste as the instinct of self-defence: say No as rarely as possible by staying away from what would force you to keep saying it, and do not wear yourself out reacting. The scholar who reads two hundred books a day loses the ability to think and can only react. Section 9 finally answers the subtitle. One becomes what one is only if one does not know too early what one is. Detours, mistakes and even years spent on the wrong tasks can serve the hidden task growing beneath the surface. Nietzsche says he never struggled or willed anything, and that he became a professor at twenty-four without seeking it. He ends with his formula for greatness,

amor fati: to want nothing to be different, forward, backward or in all eternity, and not merely to bear what is necessary but to love it.

CHAPTER 3

Why I Write Such Excellent Books

Nietzsche begins by separating himself from his books and admitting that his time has not yet come: some are born posthumously. One day, he predicts, there will be chairs for the interpretation of Zarathustra. For now, people cannot hear what lies outside their experience, and those who think they understand him usually remake him in their own image, often as an idealist. His word for the higher type, the Übermensch, rendered here as Superman, has been taken as a half-saint, half-genius ideal or as a piece of Darwinism or Carlyle's hero worship. He once told someone to look for this type in a Cesare Borgia rather than in a Parsifal, and the listener could not believe his ears.

He boasts of readers in Vienna, St Petersburg, Stockholm, Copenhagen, Paris and New York, though none in Germany, and of being loved by the market women of Turin, who pick out their sweetest grapes for him. He jokes that he has the smallest ears ever seen, making him the anti-ass and therefore the Antichrist. His ideal reader is a monster of courage and curiosity, an adventurer and explorer, and he quotes Zarathustra's words addressed to daring seekers who sail beneath cunning sails on terrible seas. He adds that the habitual reading of his books spoils one's taste for every other book, philosophical ones above all.

On style, Nietzsche says every style exists to communicate an inner state and its tempo through signs, and since his inner states are many he commands more styles than anyone. There is no good style in itself. He claims to have discovered the grand rhythm of the German language, pointing to The Seven Seals at the end of the third part of Zarathustra. He also calls himself a psychologist without equal and lists errors that morality has spread, such as the idea that egoism and altruism are opposites or that happiness is the reward of virtue.

This chapter also contains some of Nietzsche's most notorious remarks about women. He calls women more wicked and cleverer than men, treats the campaign for women's equal rights as a symptom of sickness, and defines love as war between the sexes. Readers today will find these passages crude and prejudiced, and they are best read as part of the self-dramatizing excess of the book rather than as considered argument. More characteristic of his best writing is the closing quotation from Beyond Good and Evil describing the genius of the heart, a tempter who makes everyone who meets him richer in himself, which he forbids readers to identify, though the original passage names Dionysus.

CHAPTER 4

The Birth of Tragedy

Here begins the second half of Ecce Homo, a review of each of Nietzsche's books in turn. To be fair to The Birth of Tragedy of 1872, he says, one must forget a few things, above all the way it was read as a manifesto for Wagner. A better title would have been Hellenism and Pessimism, because the book shows how the Greeks overcame pessimism. He recalls thinking out its problems in September 1870 under the walls of Metz while serving as a medical orderly in the Franco-Prussian War. He admits that it smells of Hegel and in places of Schopenhauer, and that it is politely silent about Christianity, which it treats as neither Apollonian nor Dionysian.

He names the book's two decisive innovations. The first is its understanding of the Dionysian among the Greeks, which he calls the first psychological analysis of that phenomenon and the single root of Greek art. The second is its view of Socrates as a décadent and of reason at any price as a danger to life. From these he draws the contrast that shapes all his later work: on one side the degenerate instinct that turns against life with vengeance, as in Christianity, Schopenhauer and in part Plato, and on the other a Yes to life born of abundance, which accepts even suffering and guilt.

Nietzsche therefore calls himself the first tragic philosopher, the antipode of a pessimist. Quoting Twilight of the Idols, he defines the tragic not as Aristotle's purging of pity and fear but as joy in becoming that includes even the joy of destruction. Only Heraclitus came close, with his affirmation of change, conflict and becoming, and the Stoics show traces of the eternal recurrence. He then turns to Richard Wagner in Bayreuth, the fourth of his early essays, and claims that its portrait of Wagner was really a portrait of himself. Wherever the essay says Wagner, he tells readers, they may read Nietzsche or Zarathustra, and Wagner himself did not recognize himself in it.

CHAPTER 5

Thoughts Out of Season

The four essays known in this translation as Thoughts Out of Season, and elsewhere as the Untimely Meditations, are in Nietzsche's words thoroughly warlike. The first, of 1873, attacked German culture after the victory over France, insisting that military success proved nothing about culture. The second, of 1874, exposed the dangers of the modern scholarly enterprise, and for the first time treated the historical sense, the pride of the century, as a sickness. The third and fourth held up Schopenhauer and Wagner as two untimely types full of contempt for Empire, Culture, Christianity, Bismarck and Success, which is to say, he adds, Nietzsche.

The attack on David Strauss, author of a popular book called The Old Faith and the New, caused a storm, and Nietzsche relishes the replies. The term he coined there, cultural philistine, passed into common German. He lists the few who defended him, including the theologian Heinrich Ewald, the Hegelian Bruno Bauer, and above all the critic Karl Hillebrand, who called the essay the best polemic in the German language. Following Stendhal's advice to enter society with a duel, he says, he chose his opponent well, the leading free-thinker of Germany, and since then nobody has dared to meddle with him. He calls himself the first immoralist.

Of the essays on Schopenhauer and Wagner, Nietzsche now says they are less about their subjects than about himself. He used the two famous names as Plato used Socrates, as a cipher for his own ideas. Schopenhauer as Educator records his own development and his idea of the philosopher as a terrible explosive; Wagner in Bayreuth is a vision of his own future. His years as a scholar, he concludes, were a necessary detour: to become one thing, he had to be many things in many places. Being a scholar for a while, he says, was simply part of his fate.

CHAPTER 6

Human, All-Too-Human

Human, All-Too-Human, with its two sequels, is called here the monument of a crisis, a book in which Nietzsche purged himself of everything foreign to his nature. The title means: where you see ideal things, I see human, all too human things. Its free spirit is a spirit that has become free and taken possession of itself again. He notes that it appeared in 1878, the hundredth anniversary of Voltaire's death, and describes its method in a memorable image. It does not refute ideals but lays them on ice one after another: genius freezes, the saint freezes, the hero freezes, and finally faith itself.

The book began, he says, at the first Bayreuth festival in 1876. He felt like a stranger there and hardly recognized Wagner, who had been translated into German. The Wagnerites had become Wagner's masters, and among them was even the anti-Semite. In the middle of the festival he packed his trunk and retreated to a village in the Bohemian Forest, where he began jotting down the hard psychological notes that fed the book. The break with Wagner, he now sees, was a symptom of a wider error: a whole decade of dry philology had starved him, and he turned instead to physiology, medicine and the natural sciences.

Illness then freed him. It allowed him to give up his duties without any violent break, forced him to stop reading, and so let his buried self speak again. The book was largely written in Sorrento and completed in Basel, where Peter Gast took dictation while Nietzsche's head was bandaged; Gast, he jokes, was the real writer and he only the author. When the finished book went to Bayreuth, a copy of Wagner's Parsifal libretto crossed it in the post, inscribed by Wagner as Ecclesiastical Councillor. It sounded, Nietzsche writes, like two swords crossing. Wagner had become pious.

CHAPTER 7

The Dawn of Day and Joyful Wisdom

The Dawn of Day, known elsewhere as Daybreak, opens Nietzsche's campaign against morality, but quietly. There is no artillery in it, he says, not a single attack or piece of malice. Almost every sentence was caught among the rocks near Genoa, where he lived alone and shared secrets with the sea, and he compares himself to a sea creature basking between two rocks. The book takes its motto from an Indian saying, that there are many dawns that have not yet shone, and the new dawn it looks for is a revaluation of all values. Morality is not attacked; it simply ceases to be taken into account. The book is the only one, he notes, that ends with the word or.

He then states his life task. Humanity is not divinely guided, he argues, and under its holiest values the instinct of decline has ruled. He wants to prepare a great noon, a moment when humanity looks back and forward and asks for the first time why and to what end it exists. The proof that the priest, including the priest disguised as a philosopher, has become master everywhere is that selflessness now counts as an absolute value and egoism is everywhere suspect. A physiologist knows that a body whose organs stop asserting themselves degenerates.

Joyful Wisdom, better known as The Gay Science, receives only a brief note. Like Daybreak it is a Yes-saying book, and in almost every sentence profundity and playfulness go hand in hand. Nietzsche quotes the poem of gratitude to January that opens its fourth book, points to the first appearance of Zarathustra at the close of that book, and praises the songs of Prince Free-as-a-Bird, mostly written in Sicily. Their spirit, he says, recalls the Provençal gaya scienza, the union of singer, knight and free spirit, and the final poem, To the Mistral, is a dance on the corpse of morality.

CHAPTER 8

Thus Spake Zarathustra

The chapter on Thus Spoke Zarathustra is the longest and most famous of the book reviews. Its basic idea, the eternal recurrence, which Nietzsche calls the highest formula of affirmation ever attained, came to him in August 1881 beside a pyramid-shaped rock near Surlei on the lake of Silvaplana. He wrote it down with the note: six thousand feet beyond man and time. He traces signs of it in a change in his musical taste that spring at Recoaro with Peter Gast, and in his Hymn to Life, a choral setting of a poem by Lou von Salomé whose last words he admired because they treat pain as no objection to existence.

The first part was written in the winter of 1882 to 1883 on the Gulf of Rapallo, on walks up the road to Zoagli and around the bay to Portofino, and Nietzsche notes that it was finished in the very hour Wagner died in Venice in February 1883. The second part came at Sils-Maria in ten days, the third in Nice the following winter, with the chapter Old and New Tables composed on the steep climb to the village of Eze. He describes Zarathustra's physiological precondition as great health, quoting the passage from The Gay Science about Argonauts of the ideal who must keep losing and regaining their health.

His account of inspiration is one of the most quoted passages in his work. One hears, one does not seek; a thought flashes like lightning with necessity, accompanied by ecstasy, tears and involuntary changes of pace, and images present themselves as if all things wanted to become metaphors. He also describes the price: the rancour of greatness, by which a finished work turns against its author, a silence around him that turns friends into new deserts, and a raw sensitivity to every small pinprick. Outside the brief bursts of writing, he says, these were years of unparalleled distress.

Nietzsche then makes enormous claims for the book. Beside Zarathustra, he says, Goethe and Shakespeare could not breathe and Dante is merely a believer. The psychological problem of the type is how one who says No to everything hitherto affirmed can still be the most Yes-saying of spirits, a dancer who bears the heaviest fate, and his answer is that this is the very idea of Dionysus. He quotes The Night Song, a lament of a soul condemned by its own light never to love, and Zarathustra's resolve to redeem the past by turning every it was into thus I willed it. The chapter ends with the command harden yourselves, which he calls the mark of a Dionysian nature.

CHAPTER 9

Beyond Good and Evil, The Genealogy of Morals and The Twilight of the Idols

After Zarathustra, Nietzsche says, the Yes-saying part of his task was done and the No-saying part began: the revaluation of all values and the great war. All his later writings are bait, cast to find allies, though no fish came to bite. Beyond Good and Evil, of 1886, is in all essentials a critique of modernity, its science, art and politics, together with hints toward an opposite, noble type, which makes it a school for gentlemen in a deeper sense. After Zarathustra's far-sightedness, it forces the eye to focus on what is near, and it contains, he says, not a single good-natured word. He ends with a theological joke: the devil is merely God's idleness on the seventh day.

The three essays of On the Genealogy of Morality each begin coolly and ironically and end, he says, amid thunder with a new truth. The first shows Christianity born from the spirit of resentment, as a revolt against noble values. The second shows conscience to be not the voice of God but the instinct of cruelty turned inward when it can no longer discharge itself outward. The third explains the power of the ascetic ideal: it flourished not because God stood behind the priests but because it was the only ideal on offer, since humanity would rather will nothingness than not will at all. He calls the book the first psychology of the priest.

Twilight of the Idols, written in a few days, is in his description cheerful and fateful, like a laughing demon, and the best quick introduction to how everything stood on its head before him. Its idols are simply the old truths, now on their last legs. He then records, with dates, the writing of the first book of the Revaluation, now known as The Antichrist: begun with its preface on 3 September 1888 at Sils-Maria, interrupted by a dangerous journey through flooded Como, resumed in his lodgings in Turin, and finished on 30 September, the seventh day, which he calls the leisure of a god on the banks of the Po.

CHAPTER 10

The Case of Wagner

To understand The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche writes, one must suffer from the fate of music as from an open wound, because music has lost its world-transfiguring, Yes-saying character and is no longer the flute of Dionysus. Seen in that light, the pamphlet is mild and even considerate. He could have trained his heavy guns on Wagner, but he kept the decisive things to himself, because he loved Wagner. The real target, he says, is the German people, who swallow faith along with science, Christian love along with anti-Semitism, and the will to power of the Empire along with the gospel of the humble, without indigestion.

The chapter then becomes an indictment of Germany. Nietzsche accuses the Germans of every great crime against culture for four centuries. Luther restored the church and Christianity just when the Renaissance had defeated them at their seat; Leibniz and Kant built back stairs to the old ideals; and the German wars of liberation robbed Europe of the meaning of Napoleon, who might have united it. The result is nationalism, which he calls a national neurosis, and a Europe broken into petty states. He also mocks nationalist and anti-Semitic history writing and the court historian Heinrich von Treitschke.

The Germans, he complains, have no psychologists and no sense of distance or rank; they put everyone on an equal footing. Apart from a few artists, above all Wagner, he says he never spent a pleasant hour with Germans, and he notes pointedly that he found tact and delicacy among Jews but not among Germans. It took a Dane, Georg Brandes, who lectured on his philosophy in Copenhagen in the spring of 1888, to break the silence around his name. He ends by congratulating the Germans, with heavy irony, for responding to The Case of Wagner exactly as he expected.

CHAPTER 11

Why I Am a Fatality

The final chapter contains the book's most famous lines. Nietzsche knows his destiny: one day his name will recall a crisis without equal, a collision of consciences and a verdict against everything hitherto believed. I am not a man, he writes, I am dynamite. Yet he wants no believers, fears being declared holy, and would rather be a clown than a saint. His truth is terrible because lies have hitherto been called truth, and he predicts that the revaluation of values will bring upheavals, with politics turned into a war of spirits and wars such as the earth has never seen. Readers have long debated how literally to take this prophecy, written weeks before his breakdown.

He then explains why he chose the name Zarathustra. The historical Persian prophet was the first to see the struggle between good and evil as the driving wheel of things and to turn morality into metaphysics. Because he created that error, he must also be the first to recognize it, and because his teaching made truthfulness the highest virtue, morality can overcome itself through truthfulness. That self-overcoming of the moralist into his opposite, Nietzsche says, is what Zarathustra means in his mouth. In other words, Nietzsche chose the founder of moral dualism as the voice that would undo it.

Next he explains the title he claims for himself, immoralist. It contains two denials: of the type hitherto honoured as highest, the good, kind and charitable person, and of Christian morality as morality in itself. The good, he argues, can exist only by refusing to see reality as it is, and to treat every distress as something to abolish is as mad as wanting to abolish bad weather out of pity for the poor. Quoting Zarathustra, he calls the good the beginning of the end, because they crucify those who write new values on new tables and sacrifice the future to themselves.

The last sections sum up his discovery: he unmasked Christian morality. Its concepts, God, the beyond, the soul, sin and free will, were invented, he says, to slander the only world there is, to despise the body, and to make people neglect the things that matter most, such as diet, dwelling, health and climate. Morality itself he defines as the idiosyncrasy of décadents seeking revenge on life. Whoever exposes this, he writes, breaks human history in two. The book ends with a single line that compresses his whole late philosophy into a contest of symbols: have you understood me? Dionysus versus Christ.

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.

Listen to this summary, or turn the book into a podcast or course, at webapp.sunapp.ai/books/ecce-homo-by-friedrich-nietzsche

sun | *Intelligent Audio*



sunapp.ai/download