BOOK SUMMARY

On the Future of Our Educational Institutions

by Friedrich Nietzsche

Five lectures on education, culture, and the pressures of modern institutions.

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Key ideas

1. **Culture and utility.** Education is diminished when its value is measured only by economic usefulness or by what the State needs from it.
2. **Two harmful forces.** Education is pulled toward maximum expansion and toward narrow specialisation, and journalism is where the two meet.
3. **Language and discipline.** Strict, almost physical discipline in one's own mother tongue is the true foundation of any higher culture.
4. **Culture is not a career.** Institutions that teach people to succeed in life are valuable, but they are the opposite of institutions of culture.
5. **Teachers and obedience.** Culture begins not with academic freedom but with discipline and great guides, like an orchestra under a genius.

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Preface and Introduction

Nietzsche delivered these five public lectures in Basel between January and March 1872, a few weeks after The Birth of Tragedy appeared. He planned a sixth and seventh but never gave them, and the series was published only after his death. In a preface he names the readers he wants. They must read calmly and without haste; they must not keep putting forward their own "culture" as the measure of everything; and they must not expect new formulas or study plans for schools. He promises no reforms, only a view from a mountaintop, and warns that the schools and universities of his day may one day look like relics of the age of cave dwellers. Nietzsche was then twenty-seven and had taught classical philology at Basel for nearly three years.

The preface is written for the few who "still have time", who do not judge everything by the time it saves or wastes, and who keep thinking about a book long after they have put it down. Nietzsche asks his reader to be so highly educated that he could think meanly of his own education, and to be alert to the specific barbarism of the nineteenth century. He ends by calling on the lonely, unselfish and contemplative people who suffer from the corruption of the German spirit, and presents the book as their herald. He calls such a reader a frivolous spendthrift, meant as praise, and asks him to follow the author patiently even toward a goal the author cannot yet see. Anyone who thinks a prompt reform, or a new "organisation" introduced by the State, would solve the problem has, he says, misunderstood both the author and the problem.

In the spoken introduction Nietzsche explains his title. He is not judging Basel's schools, he says, since he is still a newcomer to the city, which he praises for doing so much for education relative to its size. He means German institutions in general: elementary schools, the classical secondary schools called Gymnasien (the translation says "public schools") and universities. Nor does he claim to be a prophet. Like a Roman haruspex reading entrails, he will only look for the future in tendencies already present. Between those who take every present arrangement for granted as self-evident, and those who despair and withdraw into solitude, he places the fighters who still have hope, and takes as their model Schiller as Goethe portrayed him in his Epilogue to Schiller's Song of the Bell.

He then sets out the scheme of the whole series. Two forces, apparently opposed but working together, dominate modern education. One drives toward the greatest possible expansion of education; the other narrows and weakens it, making it serve the State. Against them Nietzsche hopes for two opposite movements: one that limits and concentrates education, and one that strengthens it and makes it independent. The first pair, he claims, goes against nature, while

concentrating education for the few is in harmony with it. This frank elitism runs through everything that follows. He offers this scheme, he says, like a coat of arms over a door, to warn visitors who may prefer to turn back before entering the house.

Rather than argue in his own voice, Nietzsche announces at the start of the first lecture that he will recount a conversation he once overheard, by chance, between two remarkable men. He admits that he cannot claim their courage, either in speaking forbidden truths or in the boldness of their hopes, but says their ideas have so marked him that he falls into their way of thinking whenever he considers the subject. The device lets him stage the argument as a drama, with a teacher, a doubting pupil and two eager students, and it lets the strongest claims come from a character rather than from the lecturer himself. Readers should keep this distance in mind, while recognising that the philosopher's views are plainly the ones the lectures want us to take seriously.

CHAPTER 1

First Lecture: The Philosopher in the Woods

Instead of a treatise, Nietzsche tells a story. As a student spending a carefree year at the University of Bonn (Nietzsche himself studied there in 1864–65), the narrator and a friend had once founded a small club, pledging to present each other with a poem, essay, design or composition every month for mutual criticism. They had vowed to return each year to the spot near Rolandseck on the Rhine where the idea came to them. On the chosen day they slip away from a noisy student outing and go up into the woods to practise pistol shooting, aiming at a pentagram they once carved into an old oak. The club, the narrator recalls, had been the only truly fruitful society of their school years, and the anniversary was meant to be spent not doing anything but sitting still and reflecting on their future.

Their shots bring an angry old man with a large dog and a younger companion. The old man assumes they are fighting a duel and lectures them on the folly of the code of honour. When the students reply that they have their own points of view, he snaps that people should not have points of view, but thoughts. He turns out to be a philosopher who has come to this spot to meet an old friend. After some friction the two parties agree to share the place, and the students sit on a distant bench, intending to meditate in silence on their own education. The philosopher jokes that the students should imitate the Pythagoreans, who kept silent for five years, by keeping silent for five times fifteen minutes. When they say they wanted to consider how to become men of culture, he growls that this is a great deal and very little at once.

Gradually they find themselves eavesdropping. The philosopher is scolding his companion, a former pupil who has given up teaching for solitude. He reminds him of the principle he once taught: very few people are truly cultured, and a vast educational apparatus exists so that those few can arise. The secret of culture is that a multitude labours, apparently for itself, so that the few can reach it. Modern education, he says, democratises the rights of genius so that everyone can sit in its shade without working for it. As they listen, the students reflect gratefully that their club had kept them free of the State's habit of exploiting youth through severe examinations to rear obedient officials quickly; they had not even chosen careers. The philosopher, meanwhile, warns his pupil that solitude takes its revenge on those who seek it too soon.

The companion defends himself by describing the two forces from the introduction. The drive to expand education comes from political economy, whose formula is as much knowledge as possible, hence as much production and happiness as possible. Its goal is to produce "current" people, current like coins, who can earn money. The State also wants broad education for its

officials and soldiers. The drive to narrow education shows itself in science, where specialisation turns the scholar into something like a factory worker who spends his life turning one screw. The philosopher interjects that this view hides a danger: the masses may one day demand the earthly happiness that education seemed to promise, which is what people call the social question. The most general form of culture, he adds, is simply barbarism.

The two forces meet, the companion argues, in journalism. The newspaper steps into the place of culture, and the journalist, the servant of the moment, replaces the genius, who frees people from the tyranny of the moment. How can a single teacher hope to sow real culture when a pseudo-culture will roll over it? The philosopher softens. His companion is right about everything, he says, except his despair, and he promises words of comfort. This sets up the next lecture, in which the philosopher tries to show that things are less hopeless than they seem, and that the present system already carries the signs of its own end.

CHAPTER 2

Second Lecture: The Mother Tongue and the Gymnasium

The philosopher's comfort is that the present state of the schools cannot last; its days are numbered. Many gifted people know privately what they suffered at school and want to spare their children. When an honest man finally speaks plainly, thousands will echo him. He adds that our philosophy of education must begin not with wonder but with dread at the poverty of current pedagogic writing. The companion asks for a concrete example, and they turn to the Gymnasium, the classical secondary school, which the philosopher considers the key institution: the universities, he says, are by now little more than its annex. So far, he says, those who were horrified have run away, as his pupil did, while the sober and fearless have laid heavy hands on the most delicate technique there is, the technique of education.

His first test is the teaching of German. In an age of newspaper German, he argues, a school should take gifted young people and put them under strict linguistic discipline. A teacher should tell them to take their own language seriously, to feel physical disgust at journalistic jargon, and to learn from the classical German writers, line by line, how carefully every word must be chosen. Instead, schools treat the living language historically, as if it were dead, dissecting it like a corpse. If that proved impossible, the philosopher remarks, he would rather pupils spoke Latin than such bungled German. The teacher should forbid fashionable journalistic phrases and make pupils express the same thought ever more exactly, until the less gifted fear their language and the gifted love it.

Worse is the German composition, in which pupils are invited to judge poems, characterise historical figures, discuss ethics or describe their own development. Nietzsche sees this as a premature demand for originality that flatters immature minds. Teachers then punish whatever is genuinely individual, which at that age can only appear as awkwardness, and reward a dull average. The result, he says, is a school that breeds the irresponsible scribbling of the "free personality" and prepares the way for journalism, while true education would teach obedience to the sceptre of genius. The philosopher finds this "personal doing" dangerous because it is the first time a young mind takes literary form, a moment of seductive excitement that never returns. Only one in many thousands, he says, has any right to call himself literary.

Learning the language properly, he says, is like a recruit learning to march: painful, slow, apparently unnatural, until a second nature forms and one can walk with new grace and laugh

at the untrained. Only through this discipline does one acquire a lasting disgust for the elegant style of newspaper writers and fashionable novelists. The Gymnasium's claim to give a "classical education" is therefore largely a pretence, since the Greeks and Romans treated their own languages with exactly the seriousness the schools neglect. Its one healthy feature is the strict study of Latin and Greek grammar. For the schoolboy, he adds, the Greeks are dead: Homer amuses him less than a novel by Spielhagen, and Greek tragedy moves him less than Freytag's modern comedy The Journalists.

The true path to the Greeks, he argues, runs through the great German classics, Goethe, Schiller, Lessing and Winckelmann, who worked their way toward Greece with enormous effort. Friedrich August Wolf once tried to make the Gymnasium a home of higher culture rather than a nursery for scholarship, but his reform failed because teachers were never transformed. A real reform of the schools can only follow a renewal of the German spirit, which the philosopher locates in the Reformation, German music and German philosophy. The lecture ends on a doubtful note: who will lead it? Nobody, he insists, reaches antiquity by a leap into the dark. The fashionable "German culture" of the day he dismisses as a cosmopolitan aggregate imitating France, set against the deeper spirit he hopes to revive.

CHAPTER 3

Third Lecture: Too Many Schools, Too Many Teachers

After a long silence the companion declares that he has regained his courage and regrets his flight into solitude. The philosopher warns him that he will face not refutation but laughter, from the great mass of teachers who were never fitted for the task. The best teachers, he argues, are the least suited to the crowded, unselected classes of the modern Gymnasium, while mediocre teachers feel perfectly at home there, and it is they who keep demanding new schools. The noise about an unprecedented thirst for education, he says, hides something else. The companion now says he wants nothing for himself, and that if he falls in this battle someone else will pick up the banner. The philosopher answers, laughing, that he speaks like a man who fears being laughed at more than drowning.

Here the philosopher states his position at its most blunt. Those who call loudest for the “education of the people” want unlimited freedom for themselves, which would end in something like a barbaric saturnalia; many people, he says, are born to serve and to obey. The aim should be the education of a few chosen individuals for great and lasting works, since posterity judges an age by its few great solitary figures. Readers today will find this frankly anti-democratic, and it should be read as such, not softened. Even universal compulsory education, he argues, can reach the masses only outwardly: the levels where a people nourishes its religious instinct, its myths and its faith in its customs and language are not touched by schooling, and he speaks of preserving the people’s wholesome unconsciousness, its sound sleep.

Yet the philosopher also gives the people a role. Genius, he says, has a metaphysical origin, but it can only appear and mature within the protective care of a people’s culture, which he compares to a mother. A genius who grows up without such a home will slink away like a stranger driven onto a snowy waste. The companion admits he is puzzled by this metaphysics of genius but agrees about the surplus of schools and teachers. The simile matters because it shows that the philosopher’s elitism is not mere contempt for the people. He imagines genius depicting a people’s noble destiny in a lasting work and so making the nation itself eternal, with a healthy popular culture as its soil.

The companion then attacks the young philologists who become Gymnasium teachers. They show no awe before antiquity and build their miserable nests in its temples. Many have fled

from the Greeks themselves into comparative linguistics, a field where even mediocre gifts are useful and dullness passes for talent. The philosopher adds that his own generation could read Plato or Tacitus with pleasure, while today's pupils become "little Sanskritists" and etymologists. The schools may still be seats of learning, but of a learning that resembles the swelling of an unhealthy body. And what, the companion asks, will happen to the many teachers with no gift for culture? Pressed by the boasts of the newspapers, "We are culture!", they will flee into the most sterile scholarship, like ostriches burying their heads in the sand.

Why, then, so many schools? The answer is the modern State, which has come to see itself as a "Culture-State". Prussia, the philosopher says, has taken this most seriously, and has inherited from Hegel's philosophy the glorification of the State as the end of all education. Ancient Greek states protected culture as a strong companion and friend; the modern State supervises and uses it, producing uniformly educated subjects much as conscription produces uniformed soldiers. The true German spirit, the philosopher concludes, passes by this State culture like a noble exile. Hegel, the philosopher notes, called the State an absolutely complete ethical organism and the end of everyone's education, and a hard-pressed State gladly embraces any ally that flatters it in this way.

CHAPTER 4

Fourth Lecture: Culture and the Struggle for Existence

The fourth lecture draws the central distinction of the series. A person must learn a great deal in order to live and to take part in the struggle for existence, the philosopher says, but nothing learned for that purpose has anything to do with culture. Culture begins in a sphere above necessity and need, where a person can forget the ego and contemplate what is timeless and impersonal. He insists that this culture, a fastidious and delicate goddess, must not be confused with the useful maid of all work that also calls itself culture but merely serves practical needs and a livelihood. Many people, he grants, use learning to enlarge the ego, collecting, travelling and studying, but this keeps them inside their restless personality. Any training that holds out bread-winning as its aim is a set of rules for surviving the struggle for existence, not a training for culture.

He does not despise training for a career. He honours the schools where boys learn arithmetic, modern languages, geography and natural science, and predicts that their graduates will soon be admitted to universities and government posts on equal terms (a footnote by the translator remarks that this prophecy came true). For most people, he grants, such training is of the highest importance. His objection is only to calling these institutions places of culture. As one example of what true education needs, he says a young person's direct, almost personal relation to nature, to woods, rocks and butterflies, must not be broken too early. Most young people, he admits, must instead learn early to subdue nature to their own ends. What he rejects is the claim that schools preparing civil servants, merchants, officers, farmers or physicians for the battle of life are institutions of culture; their rules would be crimes in a true one.

As night falls the philosopher repeats that we have no true educational institutions, and a falling fir cone startles him into noticing the darkness. The two students, overwhelmed, rush out to embrace him; the dog bites the narrator's friend, the philosopher stumbles, and the scene dissolves into comedy. The students then raise objections. Surely there are countless degrees between the masses and the geniuses at the top, since nature makes no leaps. And did Germany's great poets need special institutions to become great? The companion goes further: Germany's celebrated geniuses seem to have grown great without the education the philosopher demands, so perhaps their very lack of it is justified by the results.

The philosopher explodes. Do the Germans think their geniuses are brought by the stork? Far from nourishing them, he says, German barbarism wore them out: Lessing exhausted in battle with theatres, scholars and theologians; Winckelmann driven to seek help from the Jesuits; Schiller hunted to an early death. Their works were created against the resistance of the “stupid world”, as Goethe put it. A real institution would have protected such men. The need for one is as concrete as the need for warmth in the snow. He blames the Hegelian belief in the reasonableness of everything that happens for excusing this neglect, and sees immaturity, overstrained nerves and wasted gifts among poets, philosophers, painters and sculptors alike.

Calmer, he describes the choice before the young men. One road leads to honour and comfort as part of a vast rank and file that obeys and crushes those who refuse. The other has few companions. For the many, an educational institution means training to fit into the ranks; for the few, it would be a shelter that keeps them together, protects them from the flattering temptations of the age to cultivate their own personalities and win public applause, and directs them toward impersonal work. The companion responds by invoking the unruly horse of Plato’s Phaedrus, which he struggles to control. The students, for their part, recognise that their objections came less from reason than from anxiety about whether they themselves would land in the higher or the lower group. The philosopher, gentler now, tells them to carry the question with them day and night, since they stand at the parting of the ways.

CHAPTER 5

Fifth Lecture: The University and Academic Freedom

Just as the philosopher is about to leave in irritation, a coloured flare and a chorus of voices rise from the Rhine: the signal of his long-awaited friend. The students answer it with pistol shots, until a shooting star distracts them and the philosopher cries “False time!” Torches appear on the far bank, and the narrator realises that his fellow students from Bonn are bringing the friend across in boats. The philosopher is dismayed that even at midnight on a mountain he cannot escape students, and this sets up the final subject: the university. He had hoped to meet his friend alone after a long separation, he grumbles, and cannot see why the friend would bring a crowd of witnesses. His companion suggests that the philosopher, who once taught at several universities, simply judged ordinary student life more severely than anyone else.

Asked what the Gymnasium is for, the students reply that it prepares them for the freedom of university life, and that even the German composition and the scientific study of Latin and Greek train their independence. The philosopher mocks this independence. How is the student connected to the university? Only by the ear, as a listener. One mouth speaks to many ears and half as many writing hands, each side free to say or hear what it likes, and this double independence is celebrated as “academical freedom”. Behind both, at a modest distance, stands the State. The university, he concludes, is merely an appendage of the Gymnasium. The culture that results is, in his word, merely acroamatic, passed from mouth to ear, and the independence the Gymnasium pretended to cultivate now struts about as academic self-training.

He then measures the student by three standards: the need for philosophy, the instinct for art, and Greek and Roman antiquity. Youth is the time when life’s problems first appear with a double gleam, and a young person badly needs a guide. Instead, “historical culture”, which the translator glosses as Hegel’s system, smothers the philosophical impulse with questions about what this or that philosopher thought. Universities have no relation to art at all, and they train philologists only to produce more philologists. The modern student, he concludes, is a barbarian who believes himself free. Without philosophy or art, the student has no reason to seek out the Greeks either, so the philological chairs simply produce more philologists for the schools in a vicious circle, useful to no one.

Yet the philosopher pities this student as a “guilty innocent”. The most gifted, left alone too young, swing between despair and frantic work and end up despising themselves; some become

journalists and enemies of the culture they once wanted. He points to one real attempt to found a true educational institution: the early Burschenschaft, the patriotic student movement formed after the wars of liberation against Napoleon. He praises its seriousness and, uncomfortably, reads the 1819 murder of the playwright Kotzebue as a sign of its passion, while concluding that it perished because it had no leaders. Did the university protect these students when the princes persecuted them, he asks, by declaring that their enemies would have to kill it first? The answer, he implies, shows whether the German university is an educational institution at all.

From this he draws his final principle: all culture begins not with academic freedom but with obedience, discipline and subordination to great leaders, in a natural hierarchy of minds. His closing image is an orchestra. Watched with the sound turned off, the players look comic; led by a dull conductor, they sound torpid; but put a genius at their head and a single spirit seems to enter them all. That pre-established harmony between leader and followers is what he means by a true educational institution. The translator notes that Nietzsche's fragmentary plans for further lectures were never worked up, and that he later abandoned the nationalism of these pages. The friend arriving with the torchlit students never speaks in the surviving text, so the series ends on this image rather than on a resolution, a manifesto for an education the philosopher can describe mainly by contrast with what exists.

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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