BOOK SUMMARY

Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks

by Friedrich Nietzsche

Portraits of the early Greek philosophers as distinctive ways of living and thinking.

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Key ideas

1. **Philosophy as character.** A refuted system still reveals an irrefutable personality, so a philosopher can be sketched from a few characteristic ideas.
2. **Culture justifies philosophy.** Philosophy flourishes in a healthy, unified culture like early Greece and isolates or harms where such a culture is missing.
3. **Becoming without guilt.** Anaximander saw change as a crime to be paid for, while Heraclitus saw it as the innocent play of a child.
4. **The cost of pure being.** Parmenides' flight into abstract being split reason from the senses, a division Nietzsche thinks has burdened philosophy ever since.
5. **Thinking as creation.** Philosophy leaps ahead by intuition and fancy, shaping a vision of the whole that logic and science only follow afterward.

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Preface and Later Preface

Nietzsche opens with a rule for reading philosophers. When we meet strangers, he says, we approve or condemn their aims as a whole. With people closer to us we look at the means they use, and we often love them for their style even when we reject where they are heading. Philosophical systems, he observes, are completely true only for their founders. To later philosophers they usually look like one big mistake, and to weaker minds like a mixture of mistakes and truths. Yet every system holds one point that cannot be refuted: a personal touch, a colour. Just as a plant tells you something about the soil it grew in, a system tells you about the person who produced it. That a certain way of living and seeing once existed shows that it is possible.

From this he draws his method. He will tell the story of the early Greek philosophers in simplified form, bringing out in each system only the small piece of personality that later knowledge cannot take away. The aim is to recreate these natures by comparing them, and to let "the polyphony of Greek nature" sound once more. The real subject, he says, is the thing we must always love and revere whatever science later discovers: the great man. The history he promises is therefore deliberately partial. It will not try to settle which early theory of nature was correct, a question later knowledge has mostly answered anyway, but to show what kind of human being each theory reveals.

A second, later preface, written toward the end of 1879, restates the plan with some candor. The book is short, Nietzsche admits, because it is incomplete on purpose. He has chosen only the doctrines in which the philosopher's personal element echoes most strongly. Textbooks that list every proposition handed down to us silence that element completely, which is why they are so dull. In a system that has been refuted, only the person can still interest us, because only the person is irrefutable. So he will try to pick three anecdotes out of each system and leave the rest.

These prefaces explain why the book reads less like a history of doctrines than a gallery of portraits. Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, Parmenides and Anaxagoras appear as characters with a temperament, a bearing and a style of thought, and their ideas are treated as expressions of that character. Readers expecting a balanced survey of pre-Socratic fragments will not find one. What they get instead is a young classicist's attempt to show how thinking and living once belonged together. Nietzsche was then a professor of classical philology at Basel, and the book grew out of his lectures on the pre-Platonic philosophers, though he turns scholarly material into something closer to a set of dramatic sketches.

CHAPTER 1

The Greeks Justify Philosophy (§§1–2)

Nietzsche begins by listening to philosophy's opponents. Some of the people's physicians, he notes, condemn it, and recommend instead purification through nature, as Goethe did, or healing through music, as Wagner did. Nietzsche grants them a good deal. Philosophy, he argues, has never cured a sick nation. When it helps, it helps the healthy, and it makes the sick sicker. The Romans at their best lived almost without it. An individual who has already walled himself off is only isolated further by philosophy. So the real question is how a healthy people uses philosophy, and the Greeks, as the truly healthy people, have answered it once and for all by philosophizing.

The Greeks also teach when to begin. Philosophy should not start in misfortune or from gloom, Nietzsche says, but in good fortune and maturity, out of the serenity of a brave and victorious life. He has little patience for scholars who line up Eastern masters beside Greek pupils, placing Zoroaster near Heraclitus or the Egyptians near Empedocles. The Greeks certainly borrowed, he agrees, but their genius was to learn productively, to hurl the spear further from the very spot where another nation had let it rest. Chasing origins only leads back into barbarism. What matters is that the Greeks tamed their thirst for knowledge by their regard for life.

Then he names his company: Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, Parmenides, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, Democritus and Socrates. Each, he says, is hewn out of one stone, with a strict necessity between thinking and character, and none was shaped by a profession of scholars, because none yet existed. Borrowing Schopenhauer's phrase, he calls them a Republic of Geniuses in which one giant calls to another across the ages. Other nations have their saints, he writes, the Greeks have sages. Elsewhere the philosopher is a chance wanderer in hostile country. Among the Greeks of the sixth and fifth centuries he appeared as a noble warner amid the wealth and luxury of the colonies, serving the same purpose for which tragedy was born. Without a real culture, the philosopher becomes a terrifying comet; within one, he is the central star.

Section 2 draws a line at Plato. Something new begins with him, Nietzsche says. The older thinkers were pure types; Plato is the first magnificent hybrid, mixing Socratic, Pythagorean and Heraclitean elements in his ideas and his person. Later philosophers found sects that seek redemption for individuals and small circles, while the older ones, without knowing it, worked to protect the whole culture. Since Plato, the philosopher is in exile and conspires against his homeland. Nietzsche laments that the works of Heraclitus, Empedocles and Democritus are lost

while the Stoics, Epicureans and Cicero survive, and he notes that the first edition of Schopenhauer's main work was pulped as waste paper. Still, what survives is enough to show that the Greeks justify philosophy. Modern Germany, with its "general education" but no unity of style, keeps philosophy under police supervision as learned show. Philosophy's reply, in his imagined speech, is blunt: first acquire a culture.

CHAPTER 2

Thales: Everything Is One (§3)

Greek philosophy seems to start with an absurd idea: that water is the origin and womb of all things. Nietzsche gives three reasons to take it seriously. It says something about the origin of things; it says it without myth or fable; and hidden inside it, like a chrysalis, is the thought that everything is one. The first reason keeps Thales among religious and superstitious people. The second makes him a natural scientist. The third makes him the first Greek philosopher. No collection of observations about water could have produced such a vast generalization, Nietzsche argues. What drove Thales was a metaphysical conviction born of mystical intuition, one that every later philosophy keeps trying to express better.

To show how philosophical thinking works, Nietzsche paints a scene. Two travelers stand by a wild mountain stream full of rolling stones. One leaps lightly across, using the stones even as they sink behind him. The other must first build a path that can bear his heavy step, and sometimes no god helps him across. The leaper is philosophy, carried by a strange illogical power Nietzsche calls fancy, jumping from possibility to possibility and grasping likenesses in a flash. Calculating reason comes panting after, trying to turn likenesses into equalities. Even when the scientific supports for “everything is water” collapse, something remains, and that remainder carries the hope of future fertility.

The value of Thales lies precisely in his refusal of allegory. The Greeks around him believed essentially in the reality of men and gods and treated nature as a masquerade of god-like humans. Thales said, in effect, that not man but water is the reality of things. His contemporary Pherecydes of Syros still pictured the earth as a winged oak that Zeus clothed in an embroidered robe. Nietzsche then turns to the Greek word for sage, which he links to tasting, and to Aristotle’s remark that what Thales and Anaxagoras knew was unusual, astounding, difficult, divine and useless. Philosophy, on this account, is a matter of taste: it selects what is worth knowing and legislates what counts as great, while science pounces greedily on everything knowable.

The section ends with a portrait of the philosopher as a kind of artist. He lets the whole chord of the universe echo inside himself and then projects it outward in concepts, keeping the cool head of a dramatist who becomes his characters while writing their lines. Dialectic is to the philosopher what verse is to the poet: a way to hold fast an enchantment. But it is also a poor, metaphorical and inexact translation of what was seen into another language. Readers of

Nietzsche's essay On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense, written the same year, will recognize the theme.

CHAPTER 3

Anaximander: The Guilt of Becoming (§4)

Anaximander of Miletus, the first Greek philosophical author, writes in what Nietzsche calls a grand lapidary style, every sentence a milestone. His one surviving saying says that things must return to where they came from and pay penalty for their injustices according to the order of time. Nietzsche calls it the enigmatic utterance of a true pessimist, an oracular inscription on the boundary stone of Greek philosophy, and sets out to explain it. The saying is remarkable, on his reading, because it does not simply describe how things arise and decay. It speaks of penalty, judgment and injustice, as if the mere fact of existing as a separate thing were a debt that must be paid back.

He reaches first for Schopenhauer, whom he calls the only serious moralist of the century. Schopenhauer had written that each human being is really a creature that ought not to exist and that expiates its existence through suffering and death. Anaximander, Nietzsche suggests, extended this melancholy view from human life to all existence: all becoming is a punishable breaking away from eternal being, a wrong paid for by destruction. Whatever has definite qualities perishes, whether a human life, water, heat or cold. So the true origin of things cannot have definite qualities, or it too would perish. Its eternity lies not in being inexhaustible but in lacking the qualities that lead to death. Hence its name, the Indefinite, which Nietzsche compares to Kant's thing in itself.

Nietzsche mocks commentators who argue over whether this primal stuff was something between air and water. The point is that Anaximander no longer treated the origin of the world as a purely physical question. As the first Greek to do so, he grasped the deepest ethical problem: how can anything perish that has a right to exist? Nietzsche imagines him leaning out of a metaphysical castle and asking all beings what their existence is worth. Look how your earth fades, he has him say; the seas dry up, the sea shell on the mountain shows how far they have already sunk, and fire is already consuming your world.

Such a man, Nietzsche says, lived as he wrote. Tradition reports that he walked about in dignified dress with a tragic bearing, as if life were a tragedy in which he was born to play the hero, and in this he was the model for Empedocles. His fellow citizens chose him to lead an emigrating colony, perhaps glad to honor him and be rid of him at once. His thought also founded colonies, in Ephesus and in Elea. Anaximander went two steps beyond Thales: he asked how plurality could arise from an eternal unity, and he judged plurality morally, as guilt.

But how the definite could ever come out of the Indefinite he left in darkness, and the closer one came to that problem, the darker the night became.

CHAPTER 4

Heraclitus: Becoming as the Play of Zeus (§§5–8)

Into this night, Nietzsche writes, Heraclitus of Ephesus came like a flash of lightning. Where Anaximander saw guilt, Heraclitus watched becoming closely and saw lawfulness, certainty and justice everywhere. He beheld not the punishment of what has become but the justification of becoming. From this he drew two denials. He rejected the split between a physical world and a metaphysical one, and then he went further and denied being altogether. There is nothing but becoming, Nietzsche has him say; firm land in the ocean of becoming is an illusion of limited sight, and the river you bathe in a second time is no longer the same river.

Heraclitus thinks by intuition rather than by logical chains, and he seems to enjoy contradicting reason with sayings like “Everything has always its opposite within itself,” for which Aristotle charged him with violating the law of contradiction. Nietzsche admits that pure becoming is an appalling idea, like the moment in an earthquake when the ground can no longer be trusted. Heraclitus turned it into something sublime by seeing all change as polarity: one force dividing into opposites that strive to reunite, wrestling like two athletes. Honey is sweet and bitter; the world is a drink that must be stirred. This struggle is itself justice. Nietzsche calls it Hesiod’s good Eris, the spirit of healthy contest, raised into a cosmic principle, drawn from the Greek gymnasium, festivals and politics. Schopenhauer described the same strife in nature, but for him it was the will to life devouring itself, a horror rather than a game.

Heraclitus then dared a bolder thought: the one is the many. The world is the game of Zeus, or more physically the game of fire with itself. Fire passes into water and earth and back again, and the world periodically ends in a universal fire before a new one emerges. Here Nietzsche raises a danger. If the return to plurality after fire’s satiety came from hybris, the crime of excess, then the world would be punishment again and Heraclitus would become the weeping philosopher of later legend. That word hybris, he says, is the touchstone for every Heraclitean. The answer is that guilt and contradiction exist only for the limited human eye. For the contemplative god everything converges into harmony. The eternal fire builds and destroys in innocence, like a child piling sand by the sea and knocking it down, then beginning again from a renewed impulse to play.

Such a philosophy, Nietzsche says, offers no ethics of “thou shalt.” Human beings are necessity through and through, and most fail to live by the logos because their souls are damp. Asked why fire is now water and now earth, Heraclitus would answer: “It is a game, don’t take it too pathetically and still less, morally.” Nietzsche rejects the old complaint that Heraclitus wrote

obscurely on purpose. He wrote briefly and abruptly, which is obscure only to hasty readers, and the Stoics later flattened his vision into a crude optimism about human advantage.

Section 8 is a portrait of pride. Heraclitus never wrote for a public. Pythagoras and Empedocles also held themselves in almost religious esteem, but their sense of the unity of all life drew them back toward other people. Heraclitus, the recluse of the temple of Artemis, felt no wish to help or heal. Nietzsche calls him a star without an atmosphere. Even watching noisy children at play, he was thinking of the play of the great world child, Zeus. “I sought and investigated myself,” he said, as though he alone fulfilled the Delphic command to know oneself. The world needs his truth eternally, Nietzsche concludes, though he has no need of the world.

CHAPTER 5

Parmenides: The Cold Bath of Being (§§9–11)

Against Heraclitus stands his contemporary Parmenides, another prophet of truth, but made of ice rather than fire. Nietzsche tells his story as a drama in two acts. In his early years Parmenides built a physical system answering Anaximander. He sorted qualities into positive and negative pairs, measuring each against bright and dark: light against heavy, rare against dense, warm against cold, male against female. Even heaviness, which the senses feel as positive, he counted as a mere absence of lightness, a sign of his defiant gift for abstraction. Positive qualities he called the existent and negative ones the non-existent, and becoming arose when the two were drawn together by a mysterious attraction he personified as Aphrodite and pulled apart again by hatred.

Then came a single moment of pure abstraction, which Nietzsche calls un-Greek, and which split both Parmenides' life and pre-Socratic thought into an Anaximandrian half and a Parmenidean half. Scholars often credit the influence of Xenophanes of Colophon, the wandering poet and critic of Homer worship, athletic glory and statues of the gods. Nietzsche doubts it: Xenophanes reached unity as a religious mystic, Parmenides by logic. The decisive question was whether a quality that does not exist can be a quality at all. The only knowledge we trust absolutely is the tautology A = A, and it told him: what is, is; what is not, is not. His earlier system, which treated the non-existent as real, now looked like a logical sin. On his way into the depths he met Heraclitus, and his anger at people "who seem to have two heads and yet know nothing" follows naturally.

From this point Parmenides plunged into the cold bath of his abstractions. Being cannot have come into being, since it could have come only from non-being, which produces nothing, or from being, which is already there. It cannot pass away, change, grow, shrink or move. It is indivisible and complete, balanced like a sphere though not in space, and there can be only one of it. The senses, which show change and plurality, must be deceivers. "Do not follow the dim-sighted eyes," he commands. Nietzsche calls this the first critique of the apparatus of knowledge, and a disastrous one, because it tore senses and reason apart and started the split between mind and body that, especially since Plato, has lain like a curse on philosophy. Truth now lives in the emptiest words, and the philosopher sits bloodless among his formulas.

Section 11 asks how a Greek could flee into such emptiness. Nietzsche stresses that this was not Indian world-renunciation; it lacked all mystical fragrance, color and religious warmth. It was a ferocious hunger for certainty, and he gives Parmenides a prayer: grant me one certainty, even

if it is only a board in the ocean of uncertainty broad enough to lie on. Then he criticizes the argument itself. Parmenides concluded that being exists because he could think it, but, as Aristotle and Kant showed, existence cannot be drawn out of a concept, and logic cannot test content. Of a tree I can say that it is, that it becomes, and, while it is still a shrub, that it is not yet a tree. Words, Nietzsche writes, are only symbols for the relations of things and nowhere touch absolute truth, and even the word “being” comes from a root meaning to breathe, a human metaphor carried over to everything else.

CHAPTER 6

Zeno and the Infinite (§§12–13)

Parmenides had a second idea of even greater import, Nietzsche says, which his pupil Zeno applied more sharply: nothing infinite can exist, because a completed infinity is a contradiction. Since the world everywhere seems to present such infinities, the world must be a deception. Zeno argued by indirect proof. Achilles can never catch the tortoise, because to reach the point where it started he must first cross half the distance, then a quarter, then a sixteenth, without end. The flying arrow is at rest at every instant, and a sum of rests cannot make a motion. The infinite, in Nietzsche's image, works like an acid that dissolves reality.

Nietzsche draws the opposite lesson. If space, time and motion are taken as eternal truths, he argues, every one of our concepts produces contradictions. That shows how little our ideas reach the heart of things, not that the world is false. The Eleatics assumed without proof that our power of forming concepts is the highest judge of what is real. Their concepts came from experience, yet they turned around and used them to condemn experience. To secure this authority, Parmenides had to declare thinking and the motionless sphere of being identical, a leap of fancy with no possible illustration, whose very conflict with the senses served as its guarantee.

Section 13 then lays out two objections that can be turned against Parmenides on his own terms. The first, the objection of mobile reason, says that thinking itself moves from idea to idea; if thinking is real, so are motion and plurality. The second, the objection from the origin of appearance, asks: if the senses are mere appearance, to whom do they appear, and how can something unreal deceive? The non-existent cannot even deceive. Grant both objections and keep Parmenides' main principle, that being neither arises nor perishes, and a new picture follows. The world must consist of many truly existing things that are eternal and unchanging in themselves, and all apparent change is just their motion: together, apart, up, down, mixed in every way. That, Nietzsche says, is the doorway to Anaxagoras.

CHAPTER 7

Anaxagoras: Many Substances and the Mind (§§14–16)

Anaxagoras accepts Parmenides' chief doctrine: nothing comes from nothing or vanishes into nothing. But he also rejects the older idea that the many could come from one primal substance such as water, fire or the Indefinite, since the unequal can never come from the equal. So there must be innumerable real substances, never more, never fewer and never new, and change is only their rearrangement, like dice thrown again and again. Against Parmenides he proves that motion is real by appeal to the plain succession of our own thoughts. Here, Nietzsche says, we stand at a crossroads: depending on how one explains what sets the many substances moving, one enters the world of Anaxagoras, of Empedocles or of Democritus.

This raises the hard question: what moves the substances? Nietzsche imagines Parmenides' rejoinder. Two substances that are completely independent and different have no bridge between them; they cannot touch, push or attract, and so motion explains nothing. Anaxagoras, and Democritus after him, escaped by assuming that every real thing is a space-filling lump that can collide with others. Nietzsche calls this a logical oversight. If the substance "red" acts on others only through a hidden, qualityless piece of matter underneath it, then it is not really unconditioned, and all change depends on what the substances share rather than on what makes them different.

There is also the problem of number. Asked how many substances there are, Anaxagoras answered "infinitely many," and with that, Nietzsche says, plurality, motion and infinity, all banished by Parmenides, came back from exile to wound his opponents. Nietzsche considers how Parmenides might have answered, as Kant did, that succession belongs only to the form of our inner sense, and he quotes the critic Afrikan Spir's reply that on such a view Caesar and Socrates would not really be dead. Change cannot be denied: thrown out of the window, it slips back through the keyhole. From the evident fact that his thoughts move themselves and also move his body, Anaxagoras inferred a self-moving substance, the Nous, or mind. He imagined it as a very fine matter with the power of thinking and free will. Nietzsche notes drily that in separating mind from the brain that produces it, Anaxagoras forgot the brain.

Section 16 explains Anaxagoras' chaos. Watching nature, he concluded that everything comes from everything: white snow melts into dark water, and bread becomes flesh, blood and bone in the body. So everything must contain everything. Gold contains tiny amounts of silver, snow,

bread and flesh, and is named for whatever predominates. Since all becoming is a sorting of like to like, the original state must have been a complete mixture down to the infinitely small, which Aristotle described in terms of homoiomeries, particles alike to their whole. Nietzsche insists this differs from Anaximander's Indefinite: that was a unity, while this is an aggregate. One thing alone was never mixed: the Nous, which rules matter by seizing and moving it.

CHAPTER 8

Anaxagoras: The Whirl and the Artist Mind (§§17–19)

How does an ordered cosmos, with regular orbits, seasons and days, come out of this chaos with no new substances or forces? Through motion alone. The Nous starts a small rotation at one point in the mixture, and the circle widens through all of being, sorting like to like. Dense goes to dense, dark to dark, moist to moist. Warm, bright, thin matter collects as ether, and cold, dark, heavy matter as air, which gathers in the middle like debris in an eddy. Out of it separate water, then earth, then stones. Some stones are flung outward into the fiery ether, where they glow and become the sun and stars. Nietzsche admires the daring simplicity of this picture and its lack of clumsy purpose. He compares Anaxagoras to Kant's early cosmology and quotes Kant's boast: give me matter and I will build a world out of it.

Section 18 tests the scheme against mechanics. A tiny rotation in a world of infinite matter would be crushed at once by the surrounding weight, so the Nous must have started it with enormous force and speed, a whirl of the kind Democritus also imagined. The wider the rings spread, the slower they must turn. And a particle spun only around itself would move nothing else, so the first motion must have traced a circle slightly larger than a point, knocking against neighbors and spreading a growing tumult. Both the timing and the manner of that first push, Nietzsche concludes, are arbitrary acts of the Nous.

Why did the mind begin when it did? Anaxagoras, Nietzsche suggests, would answer that the Nous is free and has no duty or goal, and if pressed he would reach for the word Heraclitus would use: play. The mind is an artist, a supreme genius of mechanics and architecture. It is as if Anaxagoras pointed to the cosmos as to the Parthenon and said that becoming is no moral but only an artistic phenomenon. Aristotle reports that when asked what made life worth living, he answered: contemplating the heavens and the whole order of the cosmos. Nietzsche pictures the Athenian circle of Anaxagoreans reading the gods and Homer as symbols of nature, with Euripides leaking some of its daring through the tragic mask, and Pericles as its greatest pupil. When Pericles spoke, calm and unmoving as a marble Olympian, his speech seemed an image of the original whirl, catching and ordering the whole nation.

Later ancient philosophers thought Anaxagoras had found a great tool and failed to use it. Plato complained that he should have shown why everything is arranged for the best. Nietzsche defends him. Anaxagoras asked what causes motion, not what motion is for, in the true spirit of

natural science. If the Nous had followed a purpose, it would have been bound by it eternally, there could have been no moment before motion began, and the chaos would become impossible. So Anaxagoras had to insist on the mind's free will, and a free will without purpose can only be imagined like a child's play or an artist's impulse. After the first push, everything unfolds mechanically. The order we admire is the result of blind motion, not of design.

CHAPTER 9

Notes for a Continuation: Empedocles, Democritus, Plato

The finished text breaks off with Anaxagoras. What follows are Nietzsche's notes, dated to early 1873, for the chapters he never wrote, and they are terse lists rather than prose. They begin with a principle: the successors of Anaxagoras improved his doctrine by economy, preferring the explanation that needs the fewest and simplest forces. Empedocles drops the Nous as far too complicated to explain something as simple as motion. There are only two motions to explain, toward and away, and he names their forces Love and Hatred. For Anaxagoras the original state was a heap of stones on a building site. For Empedocles it becomes the most blessed state, the Sphairos, in which everything was joined by love.

The notes on Empedocles are among the most suggestive. Sexual love, as in Plato's fable, expresses a longing for a lost oneness; living beings are pieces of an immense living whole that hatred tore apart. Blind Love throws the scattered elements back together to see whether they will live again, and sometimes succeeds. To kill life, Nietzsche notes, is a terrible crime, because it works back toward the original discord. He jots that Empedocles reinterpreted Pythagorean and Orphic doctrine in the manner of natural science, mastered both poetry and argument and so was the first rhetor, had political aims, combined a competitive and a compassionate nature, and attempted a total reform of Greek life.

Democritus represents the greatest possible simplification. Because there is motion, there must be void, and so a non-existent. Secondary qualities such as color and taste exist only by convention, not in matter itself. Motion belongs to the atoms, and thinking is the motion of fire atoms. Nietzsche notes the value and the embarrassment of materialism, calls Democritus the homeless, noble seeker for truth, credits him and the Pythagoreans with founding natural science, and asks why experimental physics stalled in antiquity after him. A brief note on Plato traces him from Heraclitean flux through Socrates to the permanent ideas of the good and the beautiful, and finally to skepticism.

The concluding notes gather the whole project. Greek thought in the tragic age, Nietzsche writes, is either pessimistic or artistically optimistic; it seeks the One as an escape from becoming, or it sees the world as artistic play. None of these thinkers assumes a good god who made everything for the best. Show them a tragedy, he suggests, and each would read it through his own system. With Socrates a new optimism begins, with purpose, faith in a good god and

faith in the enlightened good man, and with it a dissolution of the instincts. Readers of The Birth of Tragedy will recognize the argument. Nietzsche never finished or published the work, and it appeared only after his death.

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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