BOOK SUMMARY

The Wanderer and His Shadow

by Friedrich Nietzsche

A wandering conversation about freedom, custom, and the texture of everyday life.

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Key ideas

1. **The closest things.** Diet, place, routine and friendship shape a life more than the ultimate questions that religion and metaphysics taught us to revere.
2. **Free will as power.** People feel free where they feel strongest, so the doctrine of free will grew out of the experience of ruling classes.
3. **Dancing in chains.** Great artists, like the Greek poets, accept inherited constraints, add a new one, and overcome it so gracefully it looks easy.
4. **Disarming for peace.** Real peace would come only when a powerful nation voluntarily breaks its swords rather than living in armed mutual suspicion.
5. **Shadow and light.** The dialogue frame presents knowledge as needing its shadow, turning reflection into a gentle, witty conversation with oneself.

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Prologue: The Wanderer Meets His Shadow

The Wanderer and His Shadow opens not with an aphorism but with a short conversation. A wanderer, walking alone, hears a voice and realizes it is his own shadow speaking, weaker than his own voice but recognizably his. He swears “by God and everything else in which I disbelieve” that he does not believe it, and the shadow suggests they simply assume it exists and stop worrying, since in an hour it will all be over. The wanderer compares the experience to seeing first two and then five camels in a forest near Pisa. The tone is playful from the first line, and it sets the mood for a book that is lighter and more personal than Human, All Too Human.

The two quickly settle on terms. The shadow proposes mutual forbearance: if one does not know exactly how to answer, it is enough to say something, and during a long talk even the wisest man becomes a fool once and a simpleton three times. The wanderer at first suspects that a man’s shadow is his vanity, but the shadow points out that vanity never asks permission to speak; it simply speaks. The wanderer then declares that he loves shadows as he loves light. Beauty of face, clear speech, kindness and firmness of character all need shadow as much as light, and the two are not opponents but friends who hold hands.

The shadow, for its part, says it hates what the wanderer hates, which is night, and that it loves human beings because they are devoted to life and never tire of discovering. It describes itself as the shadow that all things cast when the sunshine of knowledge falls on them. This is the clearest hint of the book’s self-understanding. The aphorisms that follow are the shadow side of knowledge: the small, overlooked, unglamorous facts about everyday life, morality and culture that the great systems of philosophy have left in the dark.

The prologue also contains a joke about form. The wanderer refuses to write up their talk as a literary dialogue, saying that if Plato had found less pleasure in spinning dialogues out, his readers would have found more pleasure in Plato. A conversation that delights in life becomes, on paper, a picture with false perspectives. He will report only the points on which they agreed. So the 350 aphorisms that follow are presented as the fruit of this one long conversation, and the shadow returns at the very end to close the book as the sun sets.

CHAPTER 1

Good Friends of the Closest Things (§1–18)

The first aphorisms state the book's guiding conviction. In §1 Nietzsche writes that the tree of knowledge bears two fruits, probability but no truth, the appearance of freedom but no freedom, and that this is what distinguishes it from the tree of life. In §3 he warns against glorifying origins, calling it a metaphysical after-shoot. The more interesting move comes in §5 and §6. People say they eat only in order to live, which Nietzsche calls an abominable lie, and they speak with exaggerated reverence of the "most important things" while privately knowing that food, housing, clothing and company matter more to how their lives actually go.

Because everyday matters seem undignified, Nietzsche argues, nobody thinks about them seriously, and habit and carelessness win. He gives deliberately homely examples in §6: people who have eaten eggs all their lives without noticing which shape tastes best, who do not know that perfumes smell strongest in cold, clear air, or that talking well at a meal is bad for digestion. Out of such ignorance about the arrangement of one's day, the choice of friends, work and leisure, eating and sleeping, comes most of what makes the world a vale of tears. There is enough reason in the world, he says; it is simply directed away from these little intimate things toward salvation and the state.

The long §16 makes the argument explicit. It would be perverse to wait for science to settle the first and last questions, about God, the purpose of humanity and life after death, and meanwhile to keep believing in the old way. We do not need certainty about the farthest horizons to live a full human life, any more than an ant needs it to be a good ant. What we need toward these questions is indifference, not faith and not pretended knowledge. Nietzsche even says it is good that a belt of fog surrounds the region of knowledge, because the bright and accessible country inside looks more valuable by contrast.

Surrounding this program are reminders of human smallness. In §14, titled "Man as the Comic Actor of the World," Nietzsche imagines that if a god created the world, he made man as his ape, a source of amusement in his tedious eternities, and that the music of the spheres might be the mocking laughter of other creatures. Yet even this humbling thought, he notes, flatters our vanity by keeping us at the center. The point of these opening pages is to bring philosophy down to earth, not to make life smaller. Later in the book he will put the same idea as two principles of a new life: build on the nearest and most tangible things, and rank them before choosing any final goal (§310).

CHAPTER 2

Free Will, Justice and Punishment (§9–45)

A long sequence of aphorisms examines responsibility, justice and punishment, carrying forward the attack on free will begun in Human, All Too Human. In §9 Nietzsche offers a psychological account of where the belief in free will comes from. Necessity rules one person through passion, another through obedience, a third through a logical conscience, a fourth through caprice. Each of them locates his freedom exactly where he is most firmly bound, like a silkworm seeking free will in its spinning. The reason is that we feel freest where we feel most alive and strong, and in society the strong are the free. The doctrine of free will, he concludes, is an invention of the ruling classes, a political experience projected into metaphysics.

In §11 he adds a second argument. Ordinary observation chops the continuous stream of our actions into separate “facts” with gaps between them, and the belief in free will depends on that atomic picture of the will. Words and concepts strengthen the illusion by making us think we have grasped the essence of an action when we have only named it. From here Nietzsche turns to the practice of punishment. In §23 he asks whether believers in free will even have a right to punish, and in §28 he notes how arbitrary punishment is: most criminals have done the same thing a hundred times before discovery, and habit, which ought to excuse, is treated as an aggravation.

His positive account of justice rests on what he calls the principle of equilibrium. In §22 he suggests that the robber and the powerful man who promises protection from robbers may be of the same mould, as merchant and pirate long were. The weak survive by grouping together or by submitting to someone strong enough to keep the balance. Law, in §26, holds good only so long as the parties to the contract are roughly equal in power. Equity, in §32, is a refinement of this balance that applies where no law prescribes anything. Justice, on this view, is not handed down from heaven but grows out of bargains between roughly matched forces.

The long §33 dissects revenge in a similar spirit. The single word, Nietzsche says, hides several different things, just as economists wrongly hunt for a single root meaning of “value,” as if words were not pockets into which several things have been stuffed. There is the almost reflexive counter-blow we strike even at a machine that hurts us, which is self-preservation; and there is the deliberate revenge that aims to restore one’s standing in the eyes of others. In §68, finally, he asks how we can forgive people who do not know what they do, and answers that we have nothing to forgive, because we never had the right to accuse and punish in the first place.

CHAPTER 3

Morality as Forgotten Usefulness (§40–72)

Nietzsche's account of how morality forms is compact and historical. In §40 he argues that actions first performed because they served the community were later repeated for other reasons: out of fear or reverence for those who demanded them, out of habit, out of the pleasure of approval, or out of vanity. Once the original motive of usefulness was forgotten, these actions came to be called moral. Forgetting, in other words, is part of what makes something feel like a moral duty rather than a convenience. In §44 he ranks the grades of morality, which begins as a means of preserving the community, works through fear and hope, and in its crudest form needs the strongest intimidation of all, the invention of everlasting hell.

His favorite illustration, in §57, is the way we treat animals. Where an animal is neither useful nor harmful we feel completely irresponsible and crush insects without a thought. Harmful animals we destroy, often cruelly, through a cruelty of thoughtlessness. Only when we learn that some animals reward care and breeding does responsibility appear, and then a man is indignant if another is cruel to his cow, exactly as primitive communal morality was alarmed when an individual endangered the group. The scene is set, characteristically, on the hottest day of the year, the "festival of the small animals," when we cannot walk without killing something.

Several aphorisms in this stretch take a cool look at celebrated feelings. In §50 Nietzsche notes that expressions of pity are often taken as contempt, because to be pitied is to have stopped being feared. In §53 the person who has conquered his passions is like a colonist who has drained a bog: the conquest is only a means, and if nothing good is sown, weeds grow back wilder than before. In §61 he criticizes what he calls the fatalism of the Turk, which sets man against fate as two separate things. In truth every person is himself a piece of fate, so that both struggle and resignation are fantasies.

Short aphorisms give the section its sting. In §55 Nietzsche writes that every word is a prejudice. In §64 he describes four eras of higher humanity, in which the noblest virtue is first courage, then justice, then temperance, then wisdom, and asks the reader which era he lives in. In §66, a tiny exchange, Melanchthon is made to say that we often preach our faith most loudly when we have lost it. Taken together these pieces sketch a natural history of morals that Nietzsche would develop far more ambitiously in Daybreak and On the Genealogy of Morals.

CHAPTER 4

Prisoners, Saviours and Socrates (§74–86)

A compact group of aphorisms addresses Christianity, mostly through psychology and parable. In §74 Nietzsche argues that prayer makes sense only if the divine will can be changed and the worshipper knows what he really needs, two assumptions Christianity denies. Keeping prayer anyway, he says, showed the Church's "wisdom of the serpent." In §78 he observes that Christianity first painted the devil on the wall and brought the idea of sin into the world. Belief in the cure has been shaken, but belief in the disease remains. In §83 he compares Jesus as physician of the soul to a dentist who cures every toothache by pulling the tooth, as in the advice to pluck out an offending eye.

The most memorable piece is the parable in §84, "Prisoners." One morning the warder fails to appear. A prisoner steps forward and announces that he is the warder's son, that the warder knows of their misdeeds and will judge them harshly, but that he will save those who believe in him. An old prisoner replies that if he really is the son he should put in a good word for everyone and leave belief out of it. A younger one says he does not believe him at all. Then the last prisoner arrives with the news that the warder has just died suddenly. The self-proclaimed son answers gently that he will free all who believe in him, as surely as his father still lives. The prisoners do not laugh; they shrug and leave him alone.

The parable is one of Nietzsche's earliest literary treatments of the death of God, two years before the madman of The Gay Science. Its point is not mockery. The prisoners' shrug is the response of people for whom the drama of salvation has simply lost its force. In §85 Nietzsche turns sharper, accusing Paul and later Calvin of imagining that countless creatures were damned from eternity so that God's glory might shine, which would make heaven and hell exist to feed a cruel divine vanity. Paul, he concludes, remained Saul, the persecutor of God.

Against all this he sets Socrates. In §86 he predicts that, if things go well, people seeking moral guidance will one day take up Xenophon's Memorabilia of Socrates rather than the Bible, with Montaigne and Horace as guides to understanding him. In Socrates the roads of many different philosophical temperaments meet, all directed toward delight in life and in oneself. He surpasses the founder of Christianity, Nietzsche says, in his cheerful seriousness and his wisdom full of roguish pranks. This warm portrait is worth remembering, because Nietzsche's view of Socrates was later to grow far more hostile.

CHAPTER 5

Learning to Write Well (§87–148)

The longest continuous theme in the book is writing, and much of it is about German prose. In §87 Nietzsche argues that the age of good speaking is over because the age of the city-state is over. Aristotle limited a city to the size at which a town crier could be heard by all its citizens; modern writers want to be understood across national borders. So every good European must learn to write well and ever better: to find matter worth sharing, to be translatable into neighboring languages, and to prepare for the remote day when good Europeans take on the guardianship of a world culture. Whoever preaches indifference to good writing and reading, he says, is a foe to free spirits.

He is hard on his compatriots. In §95 he says no cultured nation has prose as bad as the Germans', and in §125 he mocks publishers for declaring fifty new "German classics," as though any writer dead for thirty years could be resurrected as a classic. Of the six great fathers of German literature, he says, five are antiquated or becoming so, and only Goethe stands outside national literature, living for the few. In §109 he names the treasure of German prose: apart from Goethe, and Eckermann's conversations with him, which he calls the best German book in existence, he lists only Lichtenberg's aphorisms, Jung-Stilling's autobiography, Stifter's Indian Summer (St. Martin's Summer in this translation) and Keller's People of Seldwyla. Portraits of Lessing, Wieland, Herder and Jean Paul follow, each balancing praise and diagnosis.

The craft advice is concrete. Style improves only when ideas improve (§131). Images and similes persuade but do not prove (§145). The last quality a good author acquires is copiousness (§141). The ability to read aloud well requires the ability to declaim, which modern readers lack (§116). Every word has its scent, and there is a harmony and discord of scents (§119). Pithy conciseness, repose and maturity in an author should be greeted, says §108, as a rare festival. These short rules show Nietzsche consciously training himself as a stylist in the years before Zarathustra.

The most quoted entry in this section is §140, "Dancing in Chains." Of every Greek artist or poet, Nietzsche says, one must ask what new constraint he imposed on himself and made attractive to others. Invention, in meter for instance, is always a self-imposed fetter. Homer danced within a circle of inherited formulas and then created new conventions for his successors. The Greek poets first accepted many constraints from their predecessors, then added a new one and cheerfully overcame it, so that the constraint and the victory were both visible. The idea that freedom in art grows out of discipline, not its absence, became one of Nietzsche's lasting convictions.

CHAPTER 6

Portraits of Musicians (§149–169)

Nietzsche was a trained pianist and amateur composer, and a run of aphorisms gives short, sharply drawn portraits of composers. Of Bach, in §149, he says that unless we are connoisseurs of counterpoint we hear his music as if present, in Goethe's phrase, at God's creation of the world: something great is in the making but not yet made. Bach still has too much crude Christianity, Germanism and scholasticism; he stands at the threshold of modern music but looks back to the Middle Ages. Handel, in §150, was bold and heroic in invention but often stiff and weary in composing, glad merely to be finished. Haydn, in §151, had as much genius as a man who is merely good can have.

The comparison of Beethoven and Mozart in §152 is especially vivid. Beethoven's music sounds like a deeply moved meditation on unexpectedly hearing a long forgotten piece again; it is music about music. He gathers melodies like a bee from beggars' songs, vagrant Italians and village dances, and treasures them as memories of a better world, like Plato's ideas. Mozart, by contrast, takes his inspiration not from hearing music but from looking at life, the vivid life of southern lands, and dreams of Italy whenever he is not there. Schubert, in §155, had the largest inheritance of musical wealth and spent it freely, leaving inventions others will use for centuries.

Other portraits are brief and pointed. Mendelssohn's music in §157 is the music of good taste that enjoys all the good things that ever existed; it always points backward, and he had the rare artistic virtue of gratitude. Chopin, in §159, is the last modern musician who worshipped beauty, like the poet Leopardi, and showed a princely freedom within conventions, as Raphael did with traditional colors. §160 describes the moment of rapture in his Barcarolle. Schumann, in §161, is linked with the romantic "Stripling" of German and French lyric poetry.

The modern scene draws less kindly remarks. In §166 the music of today, with strong lungs and weak nerves, is said to be frightened above all of itself. In §167 music reaches its height only among people who lack the ability or the right to argue, such as the courts of princes and societies forced into silence. Wagner is not named in these entries, but the contrast between the classical composers and the restless modern style is clear. At the end of the sequence, in §169, Nietzsche speaks of remaining good friends with music as one does with moonlight, which neither seeks to replace the sun nor to keep us from it.

CHAPTER 7

Culture, Machines and the Good European (§170–233)

This part of the book looks at modern culture with the eye of a social observer. In §170 Nietzsche argues that we have the conscience of an industrious age, which keeps us from giving our best hours to art. Art becomes a matter of leisure and recreation, left to the idle, and great art has to coarsen and disguise itself to survive in an atmosphere suited only to light entertainment. In §218 he describes the machine as a teacher: it trains masses of people to work together, each doing one thing, and so serves as a model for party organizations and armies, while teaching the advantages of centralization rather than individual distinction.

Fashion gets a surprisingly positive reading in §215. National costume survives where ignorance, dirt, superstition and priestly power are strong; fashion rules where communication and prosperity have spread. A man in fashionable rather than national dress announces that he does not wish to stand out as a member of a class or race, that he is a worker with little time for self-adornment, and that he identifies with the learned callings as a European. Nietzsche sees in this a small sign of the coming European culture he hopes for, beyond nationalism.

The great writers of that culture are named in §214. In reading Montaigne, La Rochefoucauld, La Bruyère, Fontenelle, Vauvenargues and Chamfort, he says, we are nearer to antiquity than in any group of six authors from other nations. They form a link in the still continuing chain of the Renaissance and contain more real ideas than all the books of German philosophers put together. By contrast §221 warns about the danger of Enlightenment once it was bound to the theatrical, sentimental and cruel passions of revolution embodied in Rousseau. Left to itself, Nietzsche says, enlightenment would have passed quietly through the clouds like a shaft of light; tied to revolution, it became violent.

Several aphorisms record his ideal of a quiet, thoughtful life. In §192 the luxury of Epicurus is “a garden, figs, a little cheese, and three or four good friends.” In §227 Epicurus is said to live in every period, unknown even to those who call themselves Epicureans, having forgotten his own name as the heaviest luggage he ever cast off. In §189 Nietzsche turns hopeful about population growth, imagining humanity as one tree overshadowing the earth, whose growth should be the measure of a person’s usefulness. In §213 the skeptic Pyrrho tells an elder that he will teach distrust of everything, including himself, as the only road to truth.

CHAPTER 8

Democracy, Property and the Means to Peace (§275–293)

The political aphorisms near the end of the book are among Nietzsche's most surprising, because they treat democracy as inevitable and in some respects promising. In §275, titled "The Age of Cyclopean Building," he calls the democratization of Europe a resistless force. Even its enemies use democratic means and so speed it along. He feels some pity for the honest workers on this project, whose faces look grey and dusty, but he suspects that posterity may see their work as we see the building of stone dams: dirty, dulling labor that nonetheless protects the fields from floods. Democracy, he writes in §289, acts as a quarantine against the old plague of tyrannical desire.

In §292 he makes a forecast. All political powers exploit the fear of socialism, but democracy will gain in the end, because every party must flatter the masses. The masses do not actually want socialism as a doctrine of property; once in control, they will tax capitalists progressively and gradually create a middle class that forgets socialism like a cured disease. The practical result, he predicts, will be a European league of nations in which each nation, with sensible geographical borders, has the standing of a Swiss canton. Historical memories and national claims will count for little.

Property and labor get careful treatment. In §285 Nietzsche asks whether property can be squared with justice. Equal plots of land would breed envy and soon be undone by inheritance, and common ownership would turn people into careless tenants. His own proposal is to keep every path open to small fortunes earned by work, to prevent sudden and effortless wealth by taking transport, trade and above all the money market out of private hands, and to regard those who own too much, like those who own nothing, as a danger to the community. In §286 he questions the attempt to measure the value of labor by time and effort, since the whole personality would have to be weighed and no one is ultimately responsible for what he produces. In §288 he notes that machinery humiliates by stripping work of its personal pride, so that where buying from craftsmen once honored a person, we now live in an anonymous and impersonal serfdom.

The most remarkable aphorism here is §284, "The Means towards Genuine Peace." Every government, Nietzsche observes, claims its army is purely defensive, which means presupposing evil intentions in the neighbor and good intentions in oneself, a hypothesis he

calls as bad as war or worse. The armed peace of his day expresses a disposition that trusts neither itself nor its neighbor. Gradual disarmament will not work. Instead he imagines a day when a nation famed for its wars and military discipline voluntarily breaks its swords and makes itself defenseless out of loftiness of feeling. Better to perish, he writes, than to hate and fear, and twice as good to perish than to make oneself hated and feared.

CHAPTER 9

Noontide and the Golden Maxim (§294–350 and Epilogue)

The final stretch returns to the private life of the thinker, and it contains some of Nietzsche's most beautiful prose. In §295, "Et in Arcadia Ego," he describes a mountain scene in the evening light: a milky green lake, old firs and pines, cattle moving in the clear air, a bull wading into a foaming brook, two herders from Bergamo, snowfields and ice peaks shimmering above. Everything is large, silent and bright. Without thinking, he writes, one peoples such a scene with Greek heroes and feels it as Poussin did, at once heroic and idyllic, and Epicurus invented a philosophy in this heroic-idyllic spirit. In §308, "At Noontide," he describes the moment in a stormy life when everything grows still, the god Pan seems to sleep, and the soul feels a heavy happiness, a death with waking eyes.

Alongside these scenes are rules for living well. In §333 Nietzsche says we should not let ourselves be burned for our opinions, since we are not certain enough of them, but we might let ourselves be burned for the right to hold and change them. In §332 the three good things a thinker desires are greatness, calm and sunlight. In §306 having found oneself, one must know how to lose oneself from time to time and find oneself again. In §314 he warns against being ill for too long, since spectators grow impatient with sympathy. Many of these maxims are recognizably the notes of a man in poor health who has decided to treat his life as an experiment.

The book's last aphorism, §350, "The Golden Maxim," sums up the free-spirit project. Man has been bound with many chains so that he might stop behaving like an animal, and he has become gentler, more intellectual and more joyful than any animal. But he still suffers from having worn his chains so long, and these chains are the heavy errors of moral, religious and metaphysical ideas. Only when this disease of chains is overcome will humanity be truly separated from the brute. The work must go carefully: only the ennobled person can be granted freedom of spirit, and the motto of peace and goodwill toward the most familiar things belongs, for now, to individuals. It is still, he says, the age of the individual.

Then the shadow speaks again. It says what pleased it most was the promise to become good neighbors to the most familiar things, which will benefit shadows too. The two banter about freedom; the wanderer says he wants no slaves around him and so does not care for dogs, which follow their masters like… and the shadow finishes, "like his shadow." It has been the longest

day, the grass is damp and the shadow feels cold. When the wanderer asks if he can do anything for it, the shadow asks only what Diogenes asked of Alexander the Great: to move a little out of its light. The sun sets, and the book ends with the wanderer calling, “Where are you? Where are you?”

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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