BOOK SUMMARY

The Will to Power

by Friedrich Nietzsche

An influential posthumous arrangement of notebook material.

Summarized by SUN · sunapp.ai

Key ideas

1. **Editorial construction.** Editors chose, ordered and titled scattered notes, so the book's apparent system reflects their arrangement as much as Nietzsche's intentions.
2. **European nihilism.** Nihilism arrives when the highest values devalue themselves, and Christian truthfulness finally exposes the fictions of Christian morality.
3. **Only interpretations.** There are no facts in themselves, only interpretations, each shaped by drives and needs seeking to impose their own perspective.
4. **Life as power.** Living things seek not happiness or mere survival but an increase of power, with pleasure as its accompanying feeling.
5. **Art against nihilism.** Art is a stimulant to life that lets us affirm a harsh world, since we have art so as not to perish of the truth.

sun | *Intelligent Audio*



sunapp.ai/download

Preface: The History of the Next Two Centuries

The Will to Power is not a book Nietzsche finished. From about 1885 he planned a major work under that title, with the subtitle An Attempt at a Revaluation of All Values, and he filled notebooks with drafts, plans and fragments for it. In late summer 1888 he dropped the plan. Some of the material went into Twilight of the Idols, and he turned instead to a work called the Revaluation of All Values, of which only The Antichrist was written before his collapse in January 1889. What readers know as The Will to Power was assembled after his death from his notebooks of roughly 1883 to 1888 by his sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, and his friend Peter Gast, the pen name of Heinrich Köselitz.

A first edition of 483 sections appeared in 1901, and an expanded edition of 1,067 sections in 1906; the Ludovici translation summarized here follows that numbering. The editors arranged the notes into four books following one of Nietzsche's outlines, dated 17 March 1887, choosing which fragments to include, cutting and combining some, giving them headings, and ignoring their dates. Later scholars, especially Karl Schlechta in the 1950s and Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, whose critical edition began appearing in 1967 and prints the notebooks in chronological order, showed how much this arrangement shaped the result. Most scholars today treat the compilation as an editorial construction, useful as a selection of notes but not as Nietzsche's system or final word.

The material placed at the front as a preface is a set of notes that read like the opening of the planned work. Nietzsche announces that he will relate the history of the next two centuries: the coming of nihilism. The signs are everywhere, he says. European culture has been moving for a long time with a tortured tension, like a river rushing toward its end, afraid to reflect. The speaker presents himself as Europe's first perfect nihilist, someone who has lived through nihilism to its end and left it behind him.

These notes also explain the intended title. The Will to Power: An Attempted Transvaluation of All Values names a counter-movement, Nietzsche writes, one that will replace nihilism but that presupposes it, logically and psychologically, because only after we have experienced nihilism can we see what our old values were worth. Read with the history above in mind, these pages give a sense of the ambition of the abandoned project. What follows in this summary describes the editors' four books in their order, while noting where the material echoes or differs from works Nietzsche published himself.

CHAPTER 1

First Book, I: Nihilism (§§1–56)

The First Book is called European Nihilism. It opens with a plan whose first line sets the scene: nihilism is at the door, the most uncanny of all guests. Nietzsche rejects the idea that nihilism is caused by social distress or physical degeneration. Its source, he argues, lies in Christian morality itself. That morality trained people in truthfulness, and truthfulness eventually turns against the Christian interpretation of the world and finds it to be false. The famous definition follows in §2: nihilism means that the highest values devalue themselves; there is no goal, and no answer to the question why.

Nietzsche asks what the Christian moral hypothesis had offered. It gave human beings an absolute value despite their smallness in the flux of becoming, it gave suffering and evil a meaning, and it served as a great antidote against despair. Once its claims can no longer be believed, the needs it created remain, and the result is a painful contradiction: we are no longer allowed to value what we believe, and cannot believe what we would like to value. In §12 he describes the collapse of cosmological values, which comes when we have sought a purpose, a unity or a true world behind events and found none.

Several notes distinguish kinds of nihilism. In §22 active nihilism is a sign of increased spiritual strength, a force that destroys values it has outgrown, while passive nihilism is a sign of weakness, a weary decline whose typical expression is a Buddhist-style longing for rest. Nietzsche also describes incomplete nihilism, the attempt to escape nihilism without revaluing values, for instance by keeping Christian morality without God, and says such attempts only make matters worse. A connected group of notes treats nihilism as an expression of décadence, physiological decline, rather than its cause.

The section culminates in §55, a long note dated in the critical edition to June 1887 and written at Lenzer Heide. Here nihilism appears in its most extreme form as the thought of eternal recurrence: existence without meaning or goal, returning endlessly, nothing eternally. Nietzsche calls it the most scientific of all hypotheses and asks who would prove strongest in the face of it. His answer is not the most violent but the most moderate, those who need no extreme articles of faith and can admit a good deal of chance and nonsense into life. The note ends with a sketch of three periods of European nihilism, from obscurity to light to the great passions.

Nietzsche also stresses that nihilism is a transitional state. In §30 he writes that the time is coming when Europe must pay for two thousand years of Christianity: having lost the weight

that gave life its balance, it will hurl itself into opposite valuations with the very energy that its overvaluation of humanity produced. In §13 he calls nihilism an intermediate, pathological condition, arising either because creative forces are not yet strong enough or because decadence still hesitates. The diagnosis is therefore not simply gloomy. If the old values collapse because truthfulness has grown strong, the same strength may eventually create new ones. That double reading, nihilism as both a symptom of decline and a sign of growing power, runs through the whole compilation and explains why Nietzsche called himself a nihilist who had outgrown nihilism.

CHAPTER 2

First Book, II: The History of European Nihilism (§§57–134)

The second part of the First Book collects notes on modernity under three headings: Modern Gloominess, The Last Centuries and Signs of Increasing Strength. Nietzsche opens with an address to his friends: we had a hard time as young people, he writes, because we were born into an age of decay and uncertainty in which nothing stands firm. Many notes are lists of symptoms rather than arguments. He names the break-up of the family, the rootless official, the good man as a sign of exhaustion, the need for alcohol among workers, black music, the anarchist, and what he calls the three modern vices: overwork, curiosity and sympathy.

A recurring theme is modern play-acting. Modern people, Nietzsche says, wear a motley of borrowed costumes out of boredom; the journalist, the political man of nationalism and the virtuoso artist are all forms of mummery. Tolerance means the inability to say Yes or No, and the much praised breadth of sympathy is a third indifference, a third curiosity and a third morbid excitability. He warns of a second coming of Buddhism, announced by growing pity and spiritual weariness. Among the symptoms of pessimism he lists Russian novelists, art for art's sake and Schopenhauer, and he treats Wagner and Schopenhauer as typical décadents who deserve diagnosis rather than abuse.

Notes on the last centuries compare the seventeenth century, which suffered from humanity as a mass of contradictions and tried to understand it, with the eighteenth, which tried to forget what was known about human nature and dreamed with Rousseau of a good natural man. Nietzsche contrasts Rousseau with Voltaire, praises the grand style of earlier French writers, and asks why German music lacks a Goethe. He calls music the last breath of every culture, an idea that echoes his published writing on Wagner. He also rejects the slogan of a return to nature, arguing in §120 that there has never yet been a natural humanity; to be natural, he says, means daring to be as immoral as nature.

The final group looks for signs of strength amid decline. Every abundant growth, Nietzsche says, brings crumbling and decay with it, so symptoms of decline belong to great ages of progress. He sees a more innocent attitude to the senses and a prouder attitude to knowledge as gains of his century, distinguishes culture from civilization, and insists that people must have the courage of their natural instincts restored. Some notes here, such as his welcome for Europe's military development and his list of remedies including compulsory military service

and better nutrition, are among the passages that later readers found most troubling. They are sketches, often undeveloped, and the critical edition shows they were written years apart.

Political notes in this part are blunt. In §125 Nietzsche calls socialism the tyranny of the meanest and most brainless, the logical conclusion of modern ideas and their latent anarchy, though he adds that democratic comfort paralyses the capacity for decisive action. In §69 he traces a nihilistic trait across the natural sciences, where purposelessness and mechanism reign, politics, where the individual no longer believes in his own right, and economics. Readers will find that these notes repeat, in rawer form, the cultural criticism of Beyond Good and Evil and Twilight of the Idols. Their value lies less in finished argument than in showing how widely Nietzsche cast his net when he looked for signs of a civilization losing faith in itself.

CHAPTER 3

Second Book, I: Criticism of Religion (§§135–252)

The Second Book, Criticism of the Highest Values That Have Prevailed Hitherto, begins with religion. Its first notes offer a psychology of the origin of religions. Primitive people, Nietzsche suggests, experienced sudden feelings of power or of fear and did not believe they could be their own authors, so they attributed them to a stronger being outside themselves. Religion thus splits a person in two, assigning everything strong and surprising to God and everything weak to man. He also examines the priest, who wants to be recognized as the highest type and the indispensable mediator, and discusses the Law of Manu as an example of a holy lie used by a ruling caste.

The longest section concerns the history of Christianity, and it closely parallels The Antichrist. Jesus, in these notes, went straight to the kingdom of heaven within the heart, taught non-resistance, made no distinction between foreigners and fellow countrymen, and lived a practice rather than a creed. Everything else, the God who died for our sins, salvation by faith, resurrection after death, Nietzsche calls counterfeit coin, for which he blames Paul. He claims the church turned symbols into crude realities, absorbed Platonism through Augustine, mystery cults and Oriental asceticism, and became the very opposite of what Jesus lived.

As in The Antichrist, these notes include hostile generalizations about Jews, here in the context of the claim that Christianity grew out of a priestly Judaism. They also include sharp observations about the social reality of early Christianity: the warmth and mutual help of small dispersed communities, which Nietzsche calls the real basis of its power, and the value of persecution in creating martyrs. The founder of a religion, he remarks, may be quite insignificant, a match that lights a fire. In §180 he rejects the romantic story that Christianity was a young and innocent people rising against an old culture, arguing instead that its psychology cannot be understood that way.

The final group, Christian Ideals, attacks poverty, humility and chastity. Nietzsche grants that such ideals were once useful medicines in the decadent Roman Empire, like poisons that cure certain diseases, but argues that all ideals become dangerous when they slander reality. Christianity, he says, treated the body as an enemy and produced a cycle of guilt and redemption that he compares to a manic illness. In §220 he names Buddhism and Christianity as the two great nihilistic movements, and elsewhere he insists that Christianity is possible as the most private form of life, but that a Christian state or Christian politics is a contradiction.

Nietzsche's general verdict appears in §152, which calls nihilistic religions systematized case histories of sickness written in religious and moral terms: pagan cults revolve around the great cycles of the year, while Christianity revolves around a cycle of paralysis. In §141 he examines the holy lie, the principle that lying is permitted for holy ends, and notes that philosophers who aspired to lead humanity have claimed the same right as priests. The way to refute priests and religions, he concludes in §157, is not to argue against their truth but to show that their errors are no longer beneficial, so that their own proof of power no longer holds.

CHAPTER 4

Second Book, II: Criticism of Morality (§§253–405)

The criticism of morality is the largest section of the Second Book. Nietzsche proposes to investigate morality without being charmed by it. By morality, he says in §256, he means a system of valuations related to the conditions of a creature's life, and every valuation has a purpose: the preservation of an individual, a community, a race, a church or a culture. Moral judgments that have proved false may still be necessary, because reasons cannot eradicate false values any more than they can cure astigmatism. Several notes argue that moral values were established by immoral means, through force, lies and the passions of those who needed them.

A central group of notes concerns the herd. European morality, Nietzsche argues, rests on what is useful to the herd: the average, the predictable, the harmless. The herd defends itself against two kinds of deviation, the degenerate criminal and the superior innovator, and it calls the pleasant feeling of security that a just and benevolent person gives it goodness. Nietzsche insists in §287 that his aim is not an individualistic morality but a new order of rank. The herd's morality should rule within the herd, he says, but not beyond it; leaders and independent spirits require different valuations.

Under the heading How Virtue Is Made to Dominate, Nietzsche writes ironically about the great politics of virtue: how a morality wins power by presenting new values under old names, promising happiness as a reward, slandering rivals and exploiting martyrdom. He also analyses the moral ideal as a form of hidden will to power by the weak. The virtuous person, he says, has no personality of his own but takes his value from conforming to a fixed scheme. Virtue, he jokes, is still the most expensive vice, and he claims to have lent it a new charm by making it feel forbidden.

Further notes criticize the concept of the ego and the morality of selflessness. The subject, Nietzsche writes, is a fiction, and the ego people condemn when they blame egoism does not exist as a unit. He describes the turning inward of instincts that cannot discharge outward, an idea familiar from the second essay of the Genealogy of Morality, and the great counterfeits of nihilism: love as self-effacement, pity, and the impersonal philosopher. The section ends with a standard for judging moral values: the contradiction between becoming more moral and the elevation and strengthening of the human type.

Nietzsche also separates the origin of a value from its worth. In §254 he insists that investigating where our moral valuations come from has nothing to do with criticizing them,

though discovering a shameful origin does weaken a value's prestige and prepares a critical attitude. The real question is what valuations are worth for life. In §345 he describes the tendency of moral evolution: the weak and mediocre of all ages have tried to weaken the strong and bring them down to their level, with moral principle as their chief weapon. Yet in §404 he adds that we ought to be profoundly thankful for what morality has achieved so far, since it disciplined individuals and served the future of the species, even if its reign as the supreme value is ending.

CHAPTER 5

Second Book, III: Criticism of Philosophy (§§406–465)

The third part of the Second Book turns on philosophers. Nietzsche begins by listing superstitions to be cleared away. Philosophers, he says, have always loved contradictions in terms, trusted concepts unconditionally while distrusting the senses, and failed to see that words and concepts are inherited. In an age of criticism like Kant's, the need for unconditional authorities still proved stronger than the need for criticism. He sketches portraits of German philosophers: Hegel's popular doctrine of war and great men, in which the victor represents progress, and Kant's kingdom of moral ends, both of which he reads as attempts to prove the rule of morality.

The critique of Greek philosophy follows the line of Twilight of the Idols. From Socrates onward, Nietzsche argues, Greek philosophers are a symptom of decadence, as anti-Hellenic instincts took control. The Sophists and the earlier thinkers, Anaxagoras, Democritus and the Ionians, were still Greek; Socrates and Plato turned reason, clarity and logic into weapons against wild instincts that threatened to run out of control. Dialectics and the faith in reason, he says, rest on moral prejudices, and the Greek philosophers made the profound error of treating the conscious state as the more valuable one.

In The Truths and Errors of Philosophers, Nietzsche presses his charge that philosophers lack intellectual integrity. They know in advance what they must prove, and their real task is to justify the values they already hold. He mocks Kant's definition of philosophy as the science of the limits of reason, and the very idea of a truth that one could gradually approach. Error, he says in §454, is humanity's most expensive luxury, especially physiological error, and what mankind has paid for most dearly are its so-called truths. In §458 he attacks the separation, in Kant and in the ancients, between theoretical and practical reason, which let moral convictions escape the standards applied to knowledge.

The section closes with notes on his own place. In §463 he names his precursors: Schopenhauer, whose pessimism he says he deepened by reaching its extreme opposite, the higher Europeans who were pioneers of great politics, and the Greeks. He sets himself against all philosophies that seek a world beyond this one, and prepares the way for the Third Book, where the editors gathered his attempts to state a positive alternative. In §408 he sums up what

philosophers have lacked: a sense of history, a knowledge of physiology, a goal in the future, and the ability to criticize without irony or moral condemnation.

The most generous notes here concern the philosophers before Socrates. In §437 Nietzsche calls them the real philosophers of Greece: distinguished men who stood apart from the people and from custom, travelled, knew the business of state, and anticipated all the great concepts that later sages would merely develop. In §428 he complains that no ancient philosopher dared to deny free will or to identify happiness with the will to power, because the pleasure of power was considered immoral. This contrast, between the bold early Greeks and the moralizing tradition from Socrates onward, repeats a story Nietzsche told from his early Basel lectures on the pre-Platonic philosophers to Twilight of the Idols.

CHAPTER 6

Third Book, I: The Will to Power as Knowledge (§§466–617)

The Third Book is titled The Principles of a New Valuation, and its first and longest part, called in this translation The Will to Power in Science, gathers notes on knowledge. It opens with the remark that the distinguishing feature of the nineteenth century is not the triumph of science but the triumph of scientific method over science. Nietzsche then attacks the starting point of modern epistemology, the supposed facts of consciousness. Nothing, he says, is more deceptive than the inner world we observe with the so-called inner sense; our belief that the will is a cause, for instance, is an interpretation projected after the event.

The most quoted note in this part is §481, directed against positivism. Facts are precisely what is lacking, Nietzsche says; there are only interpretations. Even the claim that everything is subjective is an interpretation, and the subject itself is something added by invention. The world is knowable in so far as knowledge has any meaning, but it has no single meaning behind it, only countless meanings. He calls this perspectivism, and he grounds it in the body: it is our needs and instincts that interpret the world, and each instinct is a kind of lust for power with its own perspective.

Many notes take apart the categories of thought. Descartes's I think, Nietzsche argues, assumes the grammatical habit that every action needs a doer. In §490 he suggests the subject may be a plurality, an aristocracy of cells or drives cooperating under a ruling power. Logic depends on the fiction of identical cases; the concept of a thing is borrowed from the concept of the ego; and cause and effect, subject and object, thing in itself and appearance are interpretations that were perhaps necessary for preserving life. In §493 he defines truth as the kind of error without which a certain species of living being could not live.

These notes also reject the distinction between a true world and an apparent one. If the true world goes, Nietzsche argues, the apparent world goes with it, since appearance is a form of reality in a world where there is no being. He attacks Kant's thing in itself as absurd, criticizes determinism and teleology, and insists that necessity is an interpretation, not an established fact. Science, he concludes, is the transformation of nature into concepts for the purpose of mastering it. Readers should know that several of these ideas, including the critique of the true world, appear in finished form in Twilight of the Idols and Beyond Good and Evil.

Knowledge, on this view, is a tool of life rather than a mirror of reality. In §515 Nietzsche writes that the aim is not to know but to schematize, to impose as much regularity and form on chaos as our practical needs require; reason, logic and the categories arose from the need to classify and calculate. In §600 he adds that every interpretation is a symptom of growth or decline, that the wish for a single unified view of the world is a need of inertia, and that plurality of interpretation is a sign of strength. In §605 he distinguishes the ascertaining of facts from the creative work of philosophy, which is to give a meaning to things where none already lies in them.

CHAPTER 7

Third Book, II: The Will to Power in Nature (§§618–715)

The second part of the Third Book collects Nietzsche's most speculative notes, in which the will to power is extended beyond psychology to nature as a whole. In §619 he says the physicists' triumphant concept of energy needs completing with an inner will, which he calls the will to power: an insatiable urge to manifest power, or the use and exercise of power as a creative drive. All movements and laws, he suggests, must be understood as symptoms of an inner process, using the analogy of the human being. He criticizes mechanism and atomism as translations of events into the symbols of sight and touch, and argues that a fixed relation between phenomena shows not a law but a relation of power between forces.

Under the heading The Will to Power as Life, Nietzsche turns to biology. The will to power can manifest itself only against resistance, he says in §656, so it seeks what resists it, like protoplasm stretching out its pseudopodia. Nourishment, growth and reproduction are forms of appropriation and overpowering. Self-preservation is only an occasional consequence, not the basic drive, and hunger is a will to power that can no longer master. He disagrees with Darwin: in §649 and §685 he argues that what drives life is the feeling of increasing strength rather than utility in the struggle for survival, and that history shows not the triumph of the stronger but often the triumph of the average and the weak.

The notes on man apply the same idea to psychology. In §688 Nietzsche proposes a unitary theory: the will to power is the primitive drive from which all others derive. Living things do not strive for happiness; happiness is the feeling of power attained. Pleasure and pain, he says in §702, are accompanying phenomena, and every living creature seeks an increase of power, which is why it needs resistance and even pain. Pain as an obstacle to power is a normal ingredient of life, whereas exhaustion, a real loss of strength, is something different.

The final group sets out a theory of valuation. Values, Nietzsche argues, are the conditions of preservation and enhancement of complex but relatively stable formations of power; there are no lasting units, no atoms, no monads. Every life must justify itself through itself, and life is the expression of forms of growth of power. God, in §712, is the culminating moment of an endless process of deifying and undeifying. Scholars disagree about whether these notes amount to a metaphysics of will to power that Nietzsche held, or experiments he chose not to publish; in his

finished books the idea appears most fully in Beyond Good and Evil §36, framed explicitly as a hypothesis.

Several notes here are openly tentative. In §639 Nietzsche suggests that the only way to keep the concept of God would be to treat it not as a motive force but as a condition of maximum power, an epoch in the development of the will to power. In §645 he says that heredity and adaptation are names for problems, not explanations, and that even a perfect account of forms would describe without explaining. Such notes show him trying out a vocabulary for biology and physics, drawing on his reading of contemporary science. They read as experiments in thinking rather than as settled results, which is one reason Nietzsche held back from publishing most of them.

CHAPTER 8

Third Book, III: Society and the Individual (§§716–793)

This part applies the will to power to social life. The state, Nietzsche writes in §717, is organized immorality: within, it is police, penal law, rank, commerce and family; without, it is the will to war, power, conquest and revenge. A crowd will do what no individual would, because responsibility is divided and the virtues of obedience and patriotism are called in. In §718 he observes that people lack the courage to kill or flog a man themselves, but the machinery of the state lets them disown responsibility for what is done in its service.

Nietzsche analyses obedience, duty and devotion as disguised forms of the will to power of the weak, and utility as dependent on purposes that are themselves set by degrees of power. Morality, he says, is a shield, the armour of an incompletely developed person; the fully developed person is armed for attack. He writes on punishment, which he argues once had a religious meaning of purification, on crime, and on the modern demand for equality, which he reads as a revolt of the underprivileged that loads its resentment onto the consciences of the ruling classes. Several notes here propose policies such as incentives for marriage and fatherhood that are best read as provocations.

The notes on democracy are hostile. The will to power, Nietzsche says in §751, is so hated in democratic ages that their whole psychology aims to belittle it, and he insists that the herd is a means, not an end, so that conferring higher rights on the collective than on the individual is a fundamental error. Modern socialism, he writes, wants to turn everyone into a perfect instrument without knowing for what purpose. In §720 he says the fundamental human wish is the desire for power, which people call freedom, and that ethics has always tried to restrain it, slandering the would-be tyrant while glorifying charity and the ambition of the herd. In §770 he defines freedom as the degree of resistance one must constantly overcome to stay on top.

The section on the individual explores selfishness, praise, gratitude and the passions. Individualism, Nietzsche says in §784, is a modest and still unconscious form of the will to power, the wish to be free of the power of society, state or church. He also treats the passions as forces to be mastered rather than extirpated, notes that fear of the senses is already a sign of weakness, and writes in §790 that if one is clear about the why of one’s life, the how will take care of itself. A note on the innocence of becoming, freedom from the morality of motives, links this part with his published work.

One note, §749, shows the swagger of these years. Nietzsche tells the princes of Europe that they cannot do without the immoralists, who alone can win without allies and even without lying. Such passages read today as fantasy, but they reveal what he meant by great politics: a politics of values rather than of parties or states. Alongside them are quieter observations, for instance that genuine goodness is a form of squandering that springs from abundance and does not give in order to receive, a note the editors placed later, in §935. Taken together, the notes on society apply a single question to every institution: whose power does it serve, and does it strengthen or weaken those who live under it?

CHAPTER 9

Third Book, IV: The Will to Power in Art (§§794–853)

The notes gathered under The Will to Power in Art develop the physiological aesthetics of Twilight of the Idols. Our religion, morality and philosophy, Nietzsche writes in §794, are decadent institutions, and the counter-agent is art. Its root is intoxication, which he defines in §800 as the feeling of increased power. Embellishment, simplification and the grand style are expressions of a triumphant will. He distinguishes the Dionysian and Apollonian states as forms of intoxication with different tempos, and points to love, in which a lover transfigures the smallest details of the beloved, as the most astonishing proof of art's power to transfigure.

Art, in these notes, works as a tonic. It acts on the muscles and senses, kindles desire and the feeling of strength, and its essential feature is that it perfects existence and affirms it. Nietzsche argues that states often called morbid, such as heightened sensitivity and compulsion to imitate, belong to the artist's stronger constitution. He prefers artists to philosophers, because artists at least did not lose sight of life's great course and loved the things of this world and their senses. At the same time he observes that artists are not, as they claim, people of great passion, because they watch themselves too closely.

Several notes discuss style and modern music. Romantic expressiveness, Nietzsche says, is a sign of lack rather than strength, and Wagner's music, as part of French Romanticism, is ultimately literature, the charm of the exotic for sensitive stay-at-homes. He asks whether the contrast between classic and romantic conceals the deeper contrast between active and reactive, and defines the romantic as an artist whose discontent with himself makes him productive. He praises Offenbach as a high-spirited satyr and calls for an aesthetics that would give musicians a conscience. In §849 he sets classical taste against the romanticism of great passion, insisting that classical taste requires a measure of coldness, lucidity and hardness, together with consistency and concentration.

The section ends with a retrospective note on The Birth of Tragedy. Behind that book, Nietzsche writes, lies a deeply gloomy conception: there is only one world, and it is false, cruel, contradictory and without meaning. We need lies to rise above this truth, in order to live, and art is the great stimulant to life. The editors placed here his blunt formula from §822: truth is ugly, and we have art so that we do not perish of the truth. The note restates, in late form, the claim of his first book that existence is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon.

Other notes make art a model for understanding the world. In §796 Nietzsche speaks of the world as a work of art that gives birth to itself, and in §797 he says the artist is the easiest phenomenon to see through, because in him one can look down on the basic instincts of power and nature, and even of religion and morality: play and uselessness are the ideal of one overflowing with power, like the play of a child or of a god. In §818 he defines the artist as someone who treats what others call form as the real substance, which means the artist lives in a world turned upside down. These ideas echo his earliest claim that existence is justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon.

CHAPTER 10

Fourth Book, I: The Order of Rank (§§854–1002)

The Fourth Book, Discipline and Breeding, opens with the order of rank. In an age of universal suffrage, Nietzsche writes in §854, he feels compelled to re-establish rank. He distinguishes the type that represents ascending life from the type that represents decline, and asks how there could be any doubt about their relative worth. In §866 he describes a counter-movement to the ever more efficient use of human beings as cogs in an economic machine: the emergence of a stronger, higher type, with different conditions of origin and survival, for which his word is the Übermensch, translated here as Superman.

Many notes in this part are among the most disturbing in the compilation, and they did the most to shape the book's later reputation. They speak of a teaching that should strengthen the strong and paralyse the world-weary, of the destruction of decaying races, of rearing a new ruling caste, and in §960 of international unions that will set themselves the task of rearing a race of lords of the earth. Readers should be aware that these are unpublished jottings, that some sit beside opposite remarks, and that Nietzsche's published work also attacks nationalism and anti-Semitism. They are nonetheless his words, and Nazi-era propagandists, aided by the compilation's arrangement, used them selectively.

Other notes concern the strong and the weak and the noble person. Nietzsche writes that the same discipline that makes a strong nature stronger breaks the mediocre, and wishes his disciples suffering, loneliness and self-doubt, because only so can they prove whether they are worth anything. He asks what is noble, and answers in §943 with a punctilious manner that keeps others at a distance, a light surface protecting inner hardness, a slow step and a slow glance, slowness to admire, and the ability to bear poverty and illness; in §949 he adds that risking one's life comes from high spirits rather than philanthropy. He mocks the golden rule as English silliness and John Stuart Mill's faith in it.

The last sections treat the great man and the philosopher as legislator. Great men, Nietzsche suggests, arise when long periods of strict discipline have tensed the bow, and they may be counted among the wicked as easily as among the virtuous. Philosophers fail so often because they need a multiplicity of qualities that ruin ordinary people. The new philosophers must create values; they are lawgivers who describe an order of rank and teach estrangement rather than equality. In §997 he states that a single person may justify millennia of existence. The part ends with a dedication to the lucky stroke of nature, carved from one block, hard, sweet and fragrant, a passage Nietzsche reused almost word for word in Ecce Homo.

Some notes on education and character are more measured. In §912 Nietzsche says nobody can make up for missing a good, strict school at the proper time, though illness sometimes supplies the lost discipline. In §881 he defines the mediocrity of the typical person as the failure to see that things necessarily have their other side, and the wish to abolish evil as if it could be detached from good. In §868 he pictures the future European as an intelligent, industrious, pampered and weak-willed herd animal, and asks how a stronger type with classical taste, a will to simplicity and concentration, could be bred from him. Such passages show how much of the order of rank concerns discipline and taste, not only domination.

CHAPTER 11

Fourth Book, II: Dionysus (§§1003–1052)

The section titled Dionysus gathers notes on affirmation. Nietzsche hopes to reach a height from which one could see that everything happens as it ought to, and that imperfection and the pain it brings belong to what is most desirable. If moral values have been the highest values, then bringing them down alters the whole order of values. His standard, he says in §1009, is whether abundance or need is the active force behind a valuation, whether one acts out of accumulated strength or reacts out of lack. In §1010 he even asks whether our whole understanding of the universe might be a misunderstanding sanctioned within a higher perfection that matches neither our logic nor our ideas of beauty, goodness and truth.

Several notes list what he affirms. In §1021 he names his five Noes, beginning with his fight against the feeling of sin and the introduction of punishment into the interpretation of the world. In §1033 he lists the Yes-saying passions: pride, joy, health, sexual love, enmity and war, reverence, beautiful gestures and manners, strong will, discipline of the spirit, the will to power, and gratitude to the earth and to life. A rich soul, he writes, not only survives losses and insults but emerges from such hells with greater fullness and power. In §1027 he describes the human being as a combination of beast and super-beast, and the higher human being as a combination of monster and superman.

In §1041, a version of a passage he later used in the preface to Ecce Homo, Nietzsche describes philosophy as he had lived it, a voluntary exploration of the repulsive and questionable sides of existence, and asks how much truth a spirit can endure. This leads to a Dionysian affirmation of the world as it is, without subtraction or selection, which he calls amor fati. In §1050 he defines the Dionysian as an urge to unity, a reaching beyond the person, society and everyday reality, and a passionate, painful overflowing, set against the Apollonian urge to perfect self-sufficiency and clear form.

The part closes with §1052, which sets two types against each other: Dionysus and the crucified Christ. The difference is not in the suffering but in its meaning. For the Christian, suffering is an objection to life and a road to a holy existence elsewhere; for the tragic person, existence is holy enough to justify enormous suffering. Dionysus cut to pieces is a promise of life, eternally reborn. The same contrast closes Ecce Homo, which shows how closely the notebooks and the finished books worked together in Nietzsche’s last year.

Not every note in this part is solemn. In §1039 Nietzsche sketches a little ideal that he seizes every five weeks on a lonely walk: to spend one's life among delicate and absurd things, a stranger to reality, half artist, half bird, half metaphysician. In §1020 he lists the main kinds of pessimism, of sensitiveness, of an unfree will and of doubt, as a step toward describing a pessimism of strength. The variety is the point. The Dionysian, as these notes present it, is not one doctrine but an attitude that can hold contradiction, play and terror together, which may be why he named it after a god rather than a concept.

CHAPTER 12

Fourth Book, III: Eternal Recurrence (§§1053–1067)

The final section contains notes on eternal recurrence, the thought that everything returns endlessly in the same form, which Zarathustra calls his most abysmal thought. In §1053 Nietzsche calls it the great disciplinary thought: those who cannot bear it will perish, and those who feel it as the greatest blessing are destined to rule. Elsewhere he outlines a book on the doctrine with sections on its exposition, its proof, the means of enduring it, and its probable results. Freedom from morality, he says in §1060, is necessary to endure it, along with new attitudes to pain and a delight in uncertainty.

A group of notes attempts a cosmological argument for recurrence. If the universe had a goal, Nietzsche reasons in §1062, it would have reached it already, since an infinite time has passed. If the world is a definite quantity of force in an infinite time, then every possible combination must already have occurred, and occurred infinitely often. In §1063 he says that the principle of conservation of energy demands eternal recurrence. Scholars note that Nietzsche never published such a proof, and many think he presented recurrence in his books chiefly as a test of one’s attitude to life rather than as a claim about physics.

Other notes place recurrence within the history of thought. In §1058 Nietzsche says the two greatest philosophical viewpoints, both discovered by Germans, are that of becoming and evolution and that of the value of existence, and claims to have reconciled them decisively: everything becomes and returns forever, and there is no escape. He calls the thought of recurrence a principle of selection in the service of power. In §1061 he writes that the two extremes of thought, the materialist and the Platonic, are reconciled in eternal recurrence, both treated as ideals. These are compressed jottings, often only a line long, and they show the doctrine still being tested from several directions at once.

The book ends with §1066 and §1067, the editors’ choice for a finale. The universe exists without beginning or end and needs no creator. Nietzsche then describes the world as a monster of energy without beginning or end, a fixed quantity of force that neither grows nor shrinks, a sea of forces storming and flowing into itself, eternally changing and eternally returning, a becoming that knows no satiety, disgust or weariness. He calls it his Dionysian world of eternal self-creation and self-destruction, his beyond good and evil without goal, and closes: this world is the will to power, and nothing else, and you yourselves are this will to power, and nothing besides.

This note, dated to 1885 in the critical edition, is the most famous passage in the compilation and a good example of how its arrangement works. Placed at the end of a book called The Will to Power, it reads like the conclusion of a system. In the notebooks it is one draft among many, and Nietzsche revised it and did not publish it. Read with that history in mind, The Will to Power remains valuable: it shows a great writer thinking aloud about nihilism, knowledge, art and affirmation. But it is best read alongside the books he finished, and ideally in the chronological editions that let the notes speak in their own order.

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/the-will-to-power-by-friedrich-nietzsche

sun | *Intelligent Audio*



sunapp.ai/download