



# Nietzsche

Robert Wicks



*Beginners*  
**GUIDES**

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# Nietzsche

## A Beginner's Guide

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ONE WORLD

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A Oneworld Book

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The ideal of the most exuberant, life-filled, world-affirming person, who has not only learned to make peace with and to tolerate, what was and is, but who wants further to have just *how it was and is* repeated throughout all eternity, insatiably calling out “*da capo*,” not only to himself, but to the entire performance and show.

*Beyond Good and Evil*, §5

Cynicism is the unique form in which unpolished souls can come into contact with what honesty is. And the higher ones should open their ears to every coarse and refined piece of cynicism, and consider it fortunate, when the joker without shame or the scientific satyr speaks out to them.

*Beyond Good and Evil*, §2

I do not want to be a saint; better to be a jester. Perhaps I am a jester.

*Ecce Homo*, “Why I am an Inevitability,” §1

I am a disciple of the philosopher Dionysus; I’d prefer to be a satyr, rather than a saint.

*Ecce Homo*, Preface



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*For Catherine, Florence, Elaine and Charles*

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# Preface

Some problems are universal. Alexandra David-Néel (1868–1969) – the first European woman to explore the Tibetan capital of Lhasa (in 1924, in disguise) – was once given the same pragmatic advice by an unnamed hermit in the remote Himalayan wilderness as was offered to Nietzsche’s fictional character, Zarathustra, when he expressed his own desire to communicate his mountaintop-inspired thoughts to the general population. The hermit counselled David-Néel to resist publishing her knowledge of the “secret oral teachings in Tibetan Buddhist sects,” because it probably would be a wasted effort. The teachings could be published surely enough, but they would remain “secret” nonetheless, for few ears would be in tune with their message. Like Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra – A Book for All and None* (1883–85), David-Néel would be writing from the spiritual heights an essentially closed book, and would be offering an invitation to be misunderstood, neglected, and possibly condemned.

Having decided to brush against the social fiber, both David-Néel – religious scholar, adventurer, person-of-wisdom, and a prime candidate for a Nietzschean superhuman in her own right – and Zarathustra made light of the soberly hermetic advice and proceeded to put their thoughts into writing. Nietzsche’s philosophy, in particular, ended up expressing the frustration of the perennial tension between sociality and individuality, along with the uneasy interdependency between respectable tradition and the irreverent avant-garde. Nietzsche’s external life might have been unassuming, but he often experienced at a spiritual level the solitude of the absolute monarch whose distanced position requires the sacrifice of equal-to-equal friendships and comfortable community.

And thus was his *Zarathustra* written “6000 feet beyond people and time,” from a perspective that few, if any, of us will ever be able to appreciate abundantly from the inside. Perhaps Friedrich Nietzsche will never be understood as he wished to be understood, for how difficult it is to “overcome,” or go perspectively above, almost every ideal type that human culture has set forth to date as a matter of spiritual nourishment and cultural integration – above the ascetic priest, above the great-souled, magnanimous person of classical virtue, above the recognitions bestowed by worldly fame, above the greatest actors, actresses, and musicians, and above most of what we imagine to be the worthy dedications of our lives.

Perhaps Nietzsche was somewhat mistaken about his having been able to discern future social tendencies and, very possibly, over-zealous in his dedication to set forth the optimal conditions for a reinvigorating, down-to-earth health and flourishing. Such shortcomings would, fortunately, have the effect of rendering his thought more accessible than a more perfect realization of it might have allowed. And yet, despite its limitations, Nietzsche offers us some trying challenges, most of which amount to a dare to define ourselves realistically as complicated, living, now-existing, perishable, and thoroughly embodied creative creatures, as opposed to being a set of purely rational, eternal, and essentially simple souls, which are thought to be spatially, temporally, and only temporarily incarcerated in an alien physicality. Nietzsche longed for release and redemption within this world,

not another one; he longed for what he took to be real, rather than imaginary, freedom.

Some of the themes treated in this survey of Nietzsche's outlook — his doctrines of eternal recurrence, the will to power, the superhuman, the death of God, perspectivism, his critique of Christian morality, his intellectual relationships to Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer, his friendship with Richard Wagner, his influence on contemporary European thought — have been individually treated by numerous Nietzsche scholars in longer, more detailed works. The bibliographer will, I hope, direct those whose interest in Nietzsche has been stimulated by this study to enhance and transform their appreciation of his radical ideas. Of special note is the impeccable work of Maudemarie Clark, whose attention to Nietzsche's theory of knowledge has influentially structured the perspective offered here. I am also indebted to an anonymous reviewer of the manuscript and to my colleague at the University of Auckland, John Bishop, both of whom provided perceptive and constructively detailed criticisms of each chapter. My own approach to Nietzsche tends to reflect an interest in the existential and psychological import of philosophical theories.

Nietzsche's multi-layered texts present a formidable task for anyone who intends to outline their general contours. It is hoped that despite the very wide differences in interpretation among scholars, the present work succeeds in portraying the importance of change, expansion, self-criticism, and life energies within his philosophy. It can be said that Friedrich Nietzsche was the jester of metamorphosis, and that final interpretations of his thought run contrary to the unpredictable, tempting, and sometimes contemptible spirit of the mythic trickster. So this book is best regarded as one entrance into the fiery carnival of Nietzsche's thought, rather than as an ending, conclusion, or cap.

I extend further thanks to those teachers, scholars, friends, and students, living and deceased, who have motivated and encouraged my reflections on Nietzsche's philosophy from an assortment of life angles: William H. Hay †, Herbert Garelick, Kathleen Higgins, Jack Kline, Graham Parkes, Roger Peters, Jason Pilkington, Martin Schwab, Ivan Soll, Robert C. Solomon, Stephen Solnick, Paul Warren, Craig Wattam, Kenneth Westphal, Terry Winant, Julian Young, and Mitchell and Jill Zingman.

I also thank especially those Helens of Troy whose awakening presence in my life helped me appreciate Nietzsche's immaculate conception of Apollonian women: Gladys Eugenia Bustos-Giraldo, Susan Beth Silverberg, and Lisa Michelle Thompson.

The translations from the original German texts are my own.

Auckland, New Zealand  
September 2001

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# 1

## The churchyard echoes of Röcken

### From Jerusalem to Athens

If, as a Friedrich Nietzsche aficionado, one makes the “honored birthplace” pilgrimage to the German town of Röcken, one will be struck by the unassuming plainness of the roadside village. Röcken, located in the pastoral farmlands south of Leipzig, is a town too small for most maps: the village’s more expanded name is Röcken bei Lützen (Röcken near Lützen), and one will inevitably make one’s way first to Lützen. After passing through this moderate-sized community, a small cluster of buildings will soon appear alongside the main road, and if one’s eyes are keen, one will pick out a church building nestling among them. It was in this churchyard that Friedrich Nietzsche played as a boy, and it was in the large house next to the church – the one designated for the pastor and his family – where Nietzsche was born on 15 October 1844. Today, over a century and a half later, it is maintained as a historical site.

Nietzsche’s childhood was steeped in Lutheran heranism. His great-grandfather was a Lutheran minister, as were both of his grandfathers, as was his father. Little Nietzsche imagined that he would become a minister as well. One can imagine the youngster peeking through the doorway as his father gave his Sunday sermons, and maybe, as any child in such circumstances might, playing around the pulpit during the quiet countryside afternoons. The intimacy of the humble church and its surroundings is distinctive, and during the off-hours, the child could only have made himself familiar with every inch of the church’s interior, which was situated literally in his family’s backyard. In a real sense, Friedrich Nietzsche began his life in church.

Although Nietzsche’s childhood appears to have been predominantly happy, it was also unforgettably stamped with death. When Nietzsche was approaching his fifth birthday, his father died from a brain ailment, and within only six months, the life of Nietzsche’s younger brother, Joseph, who was only two years old, was ended by sickness as well. This was a terrible time for Nietzsche, as his own reported nightmares confirm.<sup>1</sup> Throughout his life, death’s shadow followed Nietzsche in the images of his father and little brother.

With the death of Röcken’s pastor, the Nietzsche family moved to the nearby city of Naumburg, where Friedrich lived with his mother, his sister, his two aunts, and his grandmother, until he entered the prestigious Schulpforta boarding school at the age of fourteen. It is fair to say that Nietzsche’s dramatic loss of significant male figures within his household at an early age, side-by-side with an overdetermination of living female figures, had a formative and lasting influence on his psyche.

The academic atmosphere at Schulpforta was disciplined and cloisterlike, and in a broad sense, Nietzsche’s environment did not radically change: Schulpforta opened his imagination to the Greek and Latin classics, but he remained in the Christian rural world and continued to be nurtured on

Lutheran values – ones which soon became amalgamated with affectionate feelings for his German homeland. During these teenage years, Nietzsche and a few of his friends formed a tiny club which they named “Germania,” the activities of which included a fateful subscription to a contemporary music periodical.

Through the club’s subscription to the music journal, the *Zeitschrift für Musik*, Nietzsche became familiar with the compositions of Richard Wagner (1813–83) – a composer whose works embodied many of the religious and cultural themes that captured the young Nietzsche’s heart, and for whom Nietzsche would develop a tremendous admiration in the years to come. Although he would never compare to Wagner as a composer, Nietzsche was not without considerable musical sensitivity, and by the time he reached his late teens he was writing music that could be played or sung respectably in church. Many of his compositions were stylistically reminiscent of those by Robert Schumann (1810–56), and can easily be mistaken for them by the naïve ear. At this time in his life, Lutheranism, choral and piano music, academic studies, and Germany, all coalesced within Nietzsche’s mind.

To understand the transformations that occurred in Nietzsche’s life once he entered college, we can reflect for a moment on some of the Christian ideas with which he grew up. One of the first that was impressed upon him – one not unique to Christianity, and which is at least as ancient as the Egyptians and their pyramidal tombs – was the concept of a world “beyond” the earthly one we inhabit, conceived of as a place to which people’s souls travel after their mundane death. Immediately after his father’s funeral, Nietzsche received a benevolent letter from a Lutheran pastor assuring him that his father, now standing before the throne of the Heavenly Father, continued to look down upon him from the higher world, wishing him well. At a very early age, he was impressed with the concepts of God, death, and the afterlife.

Another religious idea that entered Nietzsche’s highly reflective mind, and which appears significantly in his later writings, is the persistent question of why a Heavenly Father would allow not only his own father to be taken from him, but also his innocent two-year-old brother. Christians have struggled to find an adequate solution to this “problem of evil,” and witnessing the death of his younger brother only made the problem more dramatic for Nietzsche. From an early age, he was exposed to questions surrounding the meaning of life, of death, and of the world itself, all set within the atmosphere of accepting the existence of a morally good, all-seeing being called the “Heavenly Father” who was defined by his own fatherly elders as the object of unconditional love. In sum, Friedrich Nietzsche grew up as a Christian, and his personal life was marked by tragic events which eventually led him to question the Christian outlook and valuation of life, including the idea that the cosmos is, at its core, morally and good-naturedly constituted.

In 1864, when he entered the University of Bonn as a theology and philology student at the age of nineteen, life changed for Nietzsche. Not only was he situated relatively far from home for the first time, his university studies in philology also took a deep hold upon him. These drew his scholarly interests further away from the study of biblical texts towards that of the Greek and Latin classics – a field into which he had been initiated at Schulpforta. Nietzsche was reborn in Bonn, for he loosened the bonds of the church-related world he inherited from his father and his rural upbringing, and soon developed what turned out to be a lifelong affection for Athens and Rome, always set in an uneasy and ambivalent contrast to Hebraic and Arabic Jerusalem. It is well-known that Nietzsche ranted against Christianity at the end of his career, but his attitude towards Middle Eastern culture in general was less cut and dried: while scorning institutionalized Christianity and its roots in Judaism, Nietzsche discerned important virtues in both the Hebrew Scriptures and in Christian asceticism, and he later chose as the figurehead for his own philosophic vision the character of Zarathustra, the Persian prophet of Zoroastrianism. The prophetic Nietzsche derived much of his historical inspiration from the Middle East, despite his condemnation of the highly institutionalized European Christianity that

later prevailed closer to his home in Germany.

Despite the various doctrinal changes that were to characterize his philosophical thought, Nietzsche's love of music remained rock-solid, and in Bonn he developed his artistic interests, along with his attraction to the classics. Nietzsche studied with a biographer of Mozart, Otto Jahn (1813–69), who was the same age Nietzsche's father would have been, and who had been academically trained by Karl Lachmann (1793–1851), a well-known philologist of the time. Lachmann specialized in the Roman philosopher Lucretius (98–55 BC), and in the study of “textual recension” – a genealogical dimension of philology which determines the original authorship of texts by comparing and contrasting secondary and derivative versions. This idea of “genealogy” would later become central to Nietzsche's own philosophical style. Nietzsche was also taught by Friedrich Ritschl (1806–76), a specialist in the Roman classics, who was particularly expert on the Roman comic poet Plautus (254–184 BC).<sup>2</sup> All of these subjects – classics of tragedy and comedy, genealogy, music, philology – remained with Nietzsche for the rest of his scholarly life.

During his university studies in the mid-1860s, Nietzsche made the momentous encounter, either through the legacy of their books or in person, of two of the most influential figures of his life – the recently deceased Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) and the still living Richard Wagner (1813–83). Both men became his heroes, but sharing the fate of many heroes and idealized father-figures, they were to be replaced by others whom he grew to idealize, ultimately being unseated by the notion of a larger-than-life, super-healthy type of Nietzsche's own creation. In the end, as we shall see, having become disillusioned with existing examples, Nietzsche became his own teacher, and styled for himself his own ideal in the form of the superhuman, or *Übermensch* – a super-healthy, super-strong, and yet far from supernatural type. As the years went on, he tended to measure famous individuals against this idealization, offering his applause for Caesar, Napoleon, Goethe, Dostoevski, Thucydides and the Sophists, while at the same time roasting characters such as Rousseau, Hugo, Sand, Michelet, Zola, Renan, Carlyle, Mill, Eliot, Darwin, and Dante.

In 1865, when still at the outset of his intellectual odyssey, the twenty-one-year-old Nietzsche came across Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*, which had originally been published forty-seven years earlier, in 1818. Schopenhauer achieved fame only at the end of his life, however, and his name was a new and fashionable one within academically-legitimated circles when Nietzsche discovered him for himself. Schopenhauer's philosophy revealed to the still-impressionable Nietzsche a way to interpret the world that, despite having an atheistic twist, shared much of the Christian sentiment with which Nietzsche grew up, as well as the classical Greek philosophy with which he had become enamored. While retaining in substance the traditional Christian moral imperative to resist harming others, Schopenhauer advanced a metaphysical vision that was at odds with Christianity: in the place of an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good God at the ruling center of the universe, Schopenhauer substituted a blind, aimless, and fundamentally senseless energetic urge that he could describe as nothing more than the blind force of sheer “will.”

Schopenhauer did not explain this “will” in reference to physical forces. He turned the usual conception inside-out, and explained physical forces in reference to the manifestation of an essential, non-physical “will,” which he defined as the “inner” force that metaphysically underlies all things in the cosmos, just as one's conscious will is the inner force that motivates and animates one's observable bodily actions. Schopenhauer believed that if we direct our attention to the mental energy that we use, for example, to move our hand when we will it to move, then we can have an intuitive feel for the kind of energy that moves the universe, or, more precisely, obtain a bare sense of the energy which itself constitutes the universe. The energies of the universe flow through everything, so they flow through us. And according to Schopenhauer, our will is nothing more than a refined manifestation of this blind cosmic will.

Schopenhauer accounted for the evil in the world partly in terms of the nature of this universal will itself, which he described as a pure, aimless, raw striving. Contributing to this account, and completing the picture, is the constitution of our minds. For, given the kind of analyzing and systematizing minds we happen to have, we are obliged to perceive this universal will as an energy that manifests itself objectively as a world extended in space and time, and as filled with individual things. For Schopenhauer, the individual things in the world – among which are numbered our physical bodies – are images we have constructed for ourselves. He believed that our experiences of a world that contains inherently selfish, self-serving, competing, and violent beings, whether we realize it or not, is a grand construction of our own intellectual making.

Salvation – conceived of as akin to a spiritual salve for the world's frustrating and self-conflicting nature – Schopenhauer discovered through artistic (especially musical), moral, and ascetic-religious-mystical experience. He argued that by listening to music, or by contemplating a painting or sculpture we can temporarily lift ourselves out of our daily worries and our mundane way of intellectualizing and individualizing the world. He conceived of aesthetic experience as a balm for dissatisfaction, as a gaze at universality, and as a transcendence of the finite human condition.

Schopenhauer's view appealed to Nietzsche, for it allowed him to hold on to his inherited Christian morality, while it also liberated him from an all-seeing watcher – not to mention a moral judge and executioner – in the heavenly skies. At this point, Nietzsche was less troubled by the effects of traditional moral values themselves, than by the super policing-force that allegedly enforces these values, namely, a powerful guilt-generating being called "God" who absolutely penetrates everyone's mind and spiritual privacy. Schopenhauer's philosophy had the merit of recognizing no intrusive God even though it preserved Christian moral values. Schopenhauer also allowed Nietzsche to contemplate more clearly what must have been prodding at the back of his mind for years – the suspicion that in itself, the world might lack intrinsic meaning and redeeming value. This painful, and yet also potentially liberating, thought rose to the surface in Nietzsche's reading of Schopenhauer, and it led him to confront – in a forceful, explicit, and intellectually sophisticated manner – the possibility that God might not exist.

Schopenhauer also supported Nietzsche's enthusiasm towards an assortment of non-monotheistic interpretations of the world – ones that included not only Schopenhauer's particular brand of atheism but also the more polytheistic and mythic worlds of ancient Greece with which he had been familiar. For at least the next seven years of Nietzsche's development, the Greek mythical outlook stood side-by-side with Schopenhauer's atheistic one, and Nietzsche's philosophical reflections can be conveniently described during this period as fundamentally Schopenhauerian, and as displaying an increasing predominance of ancient Greek influence as time progressed. Soon, during the late 1870s, this amalgam was transformed by Nietzsche's growing interest in the scientific, biological, and physiological perspectives that were gaining currency during the second half of the nineteenth century. The creative, imaginative, visionary, myth-loving artist and the cool, objective, reality-seeking scientist formed an unstable mix, as they combined and recombined continually within Nietzsche's struggling and aspiring mind. The tension was paralleled by his efforts to interpret the world as a meaningful place which could ground a desire to live, side-by-side with a deep suspicion that, objectively considered, the world is intrinsically meaningless and life is without a point.

Nietzsche's other hero during his early twenties was Richard Wagner. He had known of Wagner's music as a teenager, and as he was about to complete his studies in classical philology at the University of Leipzig – the institution to which he had followed his teacher, Ritschl, in 1865 – he was personally introduced to Wagner. Partly on the basis of their shared enthusiasm for Schopenhauer, the two men struck up a father-son style of friendship (Wagner, like Otto Jahn, was born in the same year as Nietzsche's father), and they remained in contact for the next decade, until Nietzsche's growing



anti-Christian view of life became incompatible with Wagner's more traditionally Christian, albeit German-mythic, outlook.<sup>3</sup> Wagner's anti-Semitism also began to upset Nietzsche, and Nietzsche's enthusiasm for Schopenhauer also waned.<sup>4</sup> Wagner also had become a cultural superstar by this time while Nietzsche had remained an unknown.

Wagner loomed large in Nietzsche's reflections to the very end, and until immediately prior to his collapse in January 1889, Nietzsche continued to define himself against Wagner, fighting inwardly to avoid being eclipsed by his conception of the man. Their eventual differences notwithstanding, Nietzsche found in Wagner an intellectual equal, a musical superior worthy of respect, the embodiment of a social ideal (given Wagner's fame), a substitute father-figure, and a person who helped channel his literary energies in a productive, if not competitive, manner.

One notable result was Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy, Out of the Spirit of Music*, which integrated the themes that had been circulating within Nietzsche's life – the meaning and value of existence, the Greeks, music, tragedy – and which concluded by celebrating Wagner's music, alongside that of Bach and Beethoven, as the potential savior for Germany's, and Europe's, weakening cultural spirit. The book was rich in thematic material, and it stood as a tribute to his older friend. But Nietzsche paid a high price for his celebration of Wagner's music and for his critique of contemporary German culture: the book's grandiose aspirations, along with its imaginative style and scope, did little to enhance Nietzsche's academic reputation as a classical philologist.

During their best times together, Nietzsche and Wagner shared a common intellectual ground in the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer – a philosophy written with artists, ascetics, and mystics positively in mind. Schopenhauer's views were somewhat ahead of their time for the nineteenth-century philosophical world, and it was uncommon for anyone to claim that even though the world was godless, salvation was possible through the arts, and especially through music, supposedly the highest art. Schopenhauer's core assertion that the world is fundamentally absurd was a bold proposition for 1818, for such views did not become common currency until the next century, in the aftermath of the First World War. For Nietzsche and Wagner to read, moreover, that music was the highest, the most profound, and the art form most akin to the ultimate truth, must have been music to their ears.

Perhaps more significantly in relation to Nietzsche's philosophical concerns, though, Schopenhauer believed that salvation from the world's ills could be achieved by cultivating a level of expanded consciousness through which one's finite individuality could be oceanically dissolved – a level within which one could identify oneself more broadly with the entire cosmos or, alternatively, feel oneself in unity with the heartbeat of humanity. This, for Schopenhauer, was the level of moral consciousness, where the pains and joys of other people become none other than one's own pains and joys, and where the act of hurting another being becomes none other than the act of hurting oneself. This standpoint has noticeably Christian overtones, and prior to Schopenhauer, it was expressed memorably by the poet, John Donne (1572–1631) in 1624:

Who bends not his ear to any bell which upon any occasion rings? But who can remove it from that bell which is passing a piece of himself out of this world? No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls: it tolls for thee.<sup>5</sup>

## Arthur Schopenhauer and the problem of evil

The problem of evil, as formulated within the Western philosophical and theological traditions, presupposes that one acknowledges a majestic God who is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good. If such a being exists, then the existence of evil becomes a moral mystery. On the face of things, an all-good God would desire to eliminate evil; an all-knowing God would know how to eliminate evil; an all-powerful God would be able to eliminate evil. Evil should not exist, if God exists, because everything should already be perfect, precisely because the world is the product of a perfect creator. It is painfully apparent, however, that the world is filled with suffering. So either God does not exist, or God has reasons to allow evil to exist, although such reasons might be inscrutable to human beings. Owing to evil's existence, one must therefore either abandon the belief in God's perfectly allied omnibenevolence, omniscience, and omnipotence, or, accepting that such a God exists, discern the divine reasons for evil's existence, or, if failing in that superhuman effort, engage in humanly reasonable speculation about God's difficult-to-grasp ways. Most extremely and ultimately, one may be led to submit oneself faithfully to the utter mystery of God's ways, resting content with the hope that there are good, albeit inscrutable, reasons why the world contains the misery it does.

Within the traditional framework, there are many solutions to the problem of evil: some say that every instance of evil either prevents a greater evil from occurring, or serves as a necessary precondition for a greater good; some say, alternatively, that evil is the human being's own making, and not God's doing, because God gave humans free will, and humans use this gift unwisely; some say that evil is God's just punishment for all of our crimes; some say that if there were no evil, then the concept of "good" would make no sense; some say that without evil, then there would be no resistance against which we could positively build our characters; some say that Satan is responsible, and not God. Common to all of these responses is an underlying assumption that the world is intelligible in principle, and that there is a reason for everything, even if it is a reason that God only knows.

As someone who did not recognize God's existence, Schopenhauer remained theoretically unmoved by the theistic formulations of the problem of evil. And yet he was not insensitive to the general philosophical desideratum to understand the nature of suffering, and was not intellectually content to accept evil as a brute fact. Among the various traditional solutions to the problem of evil, it is intriguing that Schopenhauer's understanding of the situation reflects one of the most austere traditional solutions, namely, that human beings themselves are the main culprits, and not God. This solution asserts that human beings are almost entirely responsible for evil, because, as noted above, God gave humans free will, and humans have chosen to use their God-given powers unwisely. Such an explanation, its defenders readily admit, does not account for natural evils such as disease, earthquakes, floods, and the like, but it goes a long way towards accounting for much of the pain humans experience: it is obvious that if people stopped harming each other as they have for millennia, the world would be a less threatening and more peaceful place in which to live.<sup>6</sup>

Schopenhauer's uncompromising view locates itself within the above intellectual sphere, for he claims that evil is mainly the result of human nature, reckoning that there is something truly diseased about the human being. Rather than associating human nature exclusively with free will, as is traditionally done, Schopenhauer goes a step further, and maintains that it is the rationalizing and will-pervaded human consciousness itself that is largely responsible for the world's evil. To understand this philosophical idea, it is important to recall that Schopenhauer's understanding of the human mind, although not his relatively negative assessment of it (which was Schopenhauer's own), was adopted in the main from Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). As we shall see, there is also much in Nietzsche that is Kantian.

According to both Kant and Schopenhauer, the rational human mind is not like a quiet mirror which immediately reflects that towards which it is aimed. It is more of an active processor: the mind actively organizes, and gives form to, sensory data directly presented to it, much as a computer

organizes bits of electronic information into the readable form that appears on a computer screen. More specifically, the human mind is said to organize this sensory data – the materials of vision, hearing, touch, taste, smell – in a way that reflects the mind’s own rational nature. And, according to Kant, it is the nature of the human mind to organize its sensory data both into a logical order, and into a sequential order in terms of space and time. Kant and Schopenhauer maintained that the world as it appears to us does not reflect how the world is “in itself,” and that the way it appears within our human experience – as a causally-ordered world of individual things in space and in time – is partly, and yet ineradicably, due to the way we organize and inform what is given to us in sensation. For these two thinkers, there is more artificiality, artifactuality, and artistry in our perception of the world than is usually thought. To them, the world of daily experience is a synthetic product.

Kant’s account of the human mind might sound commonsensical on first hearing, since computer-processing is now a familiar model that can retrospectively inform his eighteenth-century view, but as the implications and details of Kant’s proposal are brought into close range, one’s natural perspective is turned inside-out. To consider a simpler model for a moment, Kant’s theory suggests that our minds are more like cookie-cutters that impress their form upon the “given” cookie-dough, rather than like mirrors that never touch what they reflect. He believed that his view was as philosophically revolutionary as the proposal that the observed daily movements of the stars and sun across the sky are not explained by referring to the intrinsic movements of those celestial bodies, but are explained in reference to our own movement. As we now know, the observed movement of the sun across the sky each day is due to the spinning of the earth, just as the surrounding landscape appears to be spinning when one is on a merry-go-round.

Kant philosophically expanded upon this merry-go-round idea, claiming that the “out-there-ness” of things – that is, space itself – is also better understood by drawing an analogy to the movements of the sun and the stars: the world that appears to be “out there” he regarded as a construction of our own mental activity. He did acknowledge a foundational being that can be said to “be” quite independent of us, but the “out-there-ness” of this being, Kant believed, is an attribution projected from our own minds. For all we can know, he argued, the true Being – the “thing in itself” – could be independent of space and time, just as God is often thought to be independent of space and time.

A further analogy is useful here to convey Kant’s central idea. Just as the experienced sweet taste of sugar is not “in” the sugar itself as it sits untasted in the sugarbowl on the kitchen table, the space, the time, the individual things which are all causally and scientifically connected to each other within our experience – in other words, the entire physical universe as we experience it, including human history itself, and including our bodies right here and now – do not, according to Kant, represent in a pure and transparent way the innermost reality of the way things are in themselves. We live in a world of “appearances” or “phenomena,” he claims.

For Kant, the philosophical status of the world of daily experience, especially in reference to its dependable geometric and mathematical structure, is more analogous to the taste of sugar – a quality of human experience that arises internally when sugar crystals stimulate someone’s tongue – than it is like the sugar crystals as they are in themselves, before they are tasted. Looking at an object in space is like tasting sugar – both involve experiences whose qualities are as much due to our own constitution as they are due to the constitution of whatever we happen to be tasting or looking at. Within Kant’s view, this means, quite profoundly and also importantly with respect to a good portion of Nietzsche’s views, that human beings are not in the position to know the exact nature of ultimate reality, even in principle. Every Kantian sees through a glass, very darkly, and they believe that everyone else’s perception is similarly restricted.<sup>7</sup>

Strange to say, the human mind itself stands in the way of knowing the absolute truth on this Kantian position, because the human mind is finite, and must inform whatever it knows in its own

particularly finite way. If one were only a tongue, so to speak, and were only in a position to know what sugar is by tasting it, then one would never be able to know what sugar is in itself, as it is independently of its being tasted. That dimension of the sugar would remain an eternal mystery for a being whose connection to the world was exclusively through the sense of taste. Just as the taste of sugar significantly reflects the structure of our tongues, perceived colors, in turn, reflect the structure of our eyes, and experienced sounds reflect the structure of our ears. Far more than is usually imagined, our perception of the world echoes our own modes of perception. Kant philosophically extends and deepens this basic idea, referring not especially to the superficial limits of our eyes, ears and tongues, but to the limits of our very intellect, in conjunction with the limits of our spatial and temporal awareness.

Although Schopenhauer more optimistically believed that humans could know, or at least come close to knowing, the absolute truth, he agreed with Kant that the world of space and time is mostly a human construction, and that with respect to the way things are in themselves, independently of human existence, space and time do not necessarily apply. Reality in itself – what would remain if there were no humans – could be spaceless and timeless. Given this Kantian view of the human mind and of the world of human experience, the realm within which suffering occurs – the spatial and temporal world – becomes an artifact of human making, and a direct reflection of human nature's activity.

Schopenhauer, who accepts Kant's views on the nature of space and time, thus maintains that human beings are themselves the creators of evil in the world, insofar as their own minds express the general conditions through which evil is made possible. For him, the human mind structures raw fields of disjointed sensory data into a single world which contains individuals arranged across a spatial and temporal expanse. And if there were no individuals, then there would be no suffering. And if there were no humans, then there would be no individuals, so the Kantian theory suggests, since individuation is only a feature of our human way of connecting our consciousness to what is there independently of our existence.

At one point Schopenhauer describes our creation of our commonly experienced world as the “will – that is, reality itself – shining through our minds, as if our minds were a “magic lantern,” and as if reality itself were a single, undivided light. The poetic beauty of the image notwithstanding, it conveys an appreciation of how Schopenhauer explains the existence of evil and why, moreover, he ultimately turns his attention away from the mundane world. He writes:

Just as a magic lantern shows a multitude of different pictures, all of which are illuminated by one and the same flame, so it is within all of the manifold appearances which together fill the world, or which follow each other as events, that only *one will* appears, whose visibility the objectivity of everything is, and which remains unmoved throughout each change.<sup>8</sup>

The “magic lantern” is our mind that apprehends, as it expresses, the more encompassing universal will under the condition that this single will appears as fractured into innumerable objects that are distributed mosaically across space and time. The sands of time are, in effect, the sands of our own mindscape; the infinity of space, as far as can be known, is nothing more than an infinity projected by our own consciousness. Schopenhauer observes, quite painfully, that this renders the human mind responsible for constructing an appearance, or grand theater stage, that involves, for instance, animal fighting and eating each other, people warring against each other, innumerable harms, and virtually endless suffering. We human beings, on this Schopenhauerian vision of the world, by the virtue of our ability to organize diverse sensory data into individual things – by virtue of our original capacity to know anything at all – reveal ourselves to be monstrous playwrights who are the scene-setters of a terrifying vision. Such is the bitter fruit of knowledge. It is perhaps not a mere coincidence that Mary

Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein*, was also published in 1818 – the same year as the publication of Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* – for they both associate humanity with monstrosity, especially in relation to those aspirations which involve the desire to become superhuman?

In connection with Schopenhauer's interpretation of Kant, one can say that Kant ascribes virtually godlike powers to the human being, for according to him, humans are the very creators of space and time. And as noted, Schopenhauer observes almost ironically that if humans are the creators of space and time, then they are the authors of a warlike scene: the infinity-projecting human nature gives birth to terror, one can say, just as the godlike aspirations of Dr. Frankenstein gave birth to a creature comparably imperfect. So it is not the misuse of free will that is responsible for evil, as some traditionalists claim. It is the very presence of rational human consciousness in its quest for knowledge. We have no choice but to generate evil, if, as Schopenhauer believes, the world itself is "will." For once the will is divided against itself, conflict arises. Which is to say that Schopenhauer regards the human condition as both awesome and awful, terrific and terrifying, for we seem to be condemned to both amaze and appall ourselves.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the less attractive aspects of the human being were becoming more explicitly thematized, and the raw, instinctual, amoral energies within us which Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) later referred to as the "id," or the "it," were beginning to emerge as a subject for reflection.<sup>9</sup> Peaceful beauty was giving way to breathtaking sublimity as the leading aesthetic value, and by the beginning of the twentieth century, sublimity and the awe-filled quality of experience gave way to the straightforwardly distorted and awful, at least when judged by the lights of neoclassical tastes. During Schopenhauer's time, however, such initial apprehensions of the irrational disproportionate, and overwhelming were still being conveyed within a context where traditional morality maintained a strong psychological force, with the consequence that many of the monstrous apprehensions that were initially expressed remained set within a wider, more kindhearted, thematic one where human history retained the quality of a morality play. Witness one of the earlier dawns of the nihilistic mentality – one that Nietzsche would later consider with far more intestinal fortitude – expressed in the year 1800 by the German Idealist philosopher, Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814). Fichte formulated the following vision, only to reject this idea of a meaningless universe as psychologically unbearable:

I should eat and drink, only in order to hunger and thirst again, and eat and drink, merely until the open grave under my feet swallows me up as a meal for the earth? Should I create more beings like myself, so that they can eat and drink and die, and so they can leave behind beings of their own, so that they can do the same as I have already done? What is the point of this continual, self-contained and ever-returning circle, this repetitive game that always starts again in the same way, in which everything is, in order to fade away, and fades away, only in order to return again as it was – this monster, continually devouring itself in order to reproduce itself, and reproduce itself, in order to devour itself?<sup>10</sup>

Fichte rejected the above ouroboric scene in favor of a more linear world-interpretation within which everything acts naturally, inevitably, and progressively towards a moral and harmonious end, even if this end is a perpetually long-distant one.<sup>11</sup> He was able to lift the veil from the possibility of a thoroughly meaningless world only for a moment's glimpse, and he needed to let the comforting prospect of a rational and meaningful world's-end drop quickly back into fundamental place. Schopenhauer held up this veil for a noticeably longer period of time, but he too eventually retreated into another kind of salvation, one that involved the dissolution of one's individuality and a flight into universal forms of consciousness. Nietzsche gazed at this "ceaseless and unvarying round" even longer, and after having allowed himself to become more deeply burned by the Medusa-like vision of paralyzing meaningfulness, fought to develop a more down-to-earth, existentially-centered view in

recognition of such a threatening experience. Nietzsche's "yes" to life is none other than his fully fledged engagement with the self-propelling wheel of birth and death.

Schopenhauer, while accepting the Kantian position that humans are themselves responsible for the appearance of there being a multitude of objects in the world, did not follow Kant in regarding this as a morally neutral fact; Schopenhauer was viscerally repulsed by the productions and projections of his own human nature. For without the diverse objects of experience, there would be no fighting and no conflict. So Schopenhauer – known popularly as a “pessimist” – can be appreciated in his less-than-contented attitude, if we note how he regarded humans as being metaphysically diseased, since the very mechanism we must use to attain any knowledge at all produces a morally-disheartening experiential scene, namely that of a “dog eat dog” natural world which is thoroughly “red in tooth and claw.” The scenario Fichte initially described is the very production of human nature itself, according to Schopenhauer. Nietzsche, apprehending the same vision, adopted an entirely different attitude towards the world's pain and violence, observing how such ostensibly negative aspects of the world can nonetheless sustain a positive value. In the end, though, he often drifted towards the conclusion that the human being is “human, all-too-human” and that it needed to be “overcome.” Nietzsche loved to celebrate life, but he frequently had a very difficult time celebrating humanity.

Schopenhauer thus established a philosophical interpretation of the world where the idea of “life,” as involving suffering, cannot be avoided in ordinary human experience. Not only is the core of reality on Schopenhauer's view a blind urge that is nothing more than unceasing want, the mind of the human being is considered to be a kaleidoscope of terror that multiply fractures the raw urge of reality and sets it against itself.<sup>12</sup> Since the individuated and dissociated will that “feasts on itself” is an appearance generated by the human being, Schopenhauer could not say “yes” to the analytic and dissecting human mind. He assigned all responsibility for the existence of individual suffering to the human being, and judged that human nature has a negative value. This is one of Schopenhauer's major points of difference with Nietzsche, who strove for a more positive interpretation of the human condition, although Nietzsche usually did so, not in reference to humanity as a whole, but in connection with particular individuals and particular types of individuals. Schopenhauer wrote:

If one wants to know what people are worth, morally considered, in full and in general, one should consider their fate, in full and in general. This is privation, wretchedness, misery, agony and death. Eternal justice reigns; if they were not so generally despicable, then their fate, considered in general, would not be so pathetic. In this sense we can say: the world itself is the judiciary of the world. If one were to put all of the world's misery on one side of the scale, and all the world's guilt on the other, the pointer would be right at the center.<sup>13</sup>

The religious and philosophic question which Nietzsche inherited, then, is whether Schopenhauer was correct to ascribe a negative value to human life, even if human life involves great misery, and even if humans themselves are mostly to blame for their tragic condition. Nietzsche searched for an interpretation of the world-situation which did not require faith in God to justify the existing suffering – an interpretation within which one can nonetheless say “yes” to life, even though life might be miserable, and even though life might not be miserable merely in this or that instance, but fundamentally permeated with pain and disappointment, no matter what kind of life one lives.

Schopenhauer regarded the human being – in its condition of complete philosophical enlightenment and wisdom – as the bearer of all the world's suffering. A superhuman level of strength is thus required – virtually the strength of a god – to “affirm life,” which is to say that, for Schopenhauer, the truth of the human condition is essentially unbearable: “According to the true nature of things, each person has as his own, all the suffering of the world, and must indeed consider all possible sufferings as actual for him, so long as he is the firm will to live, i.e., says ‘yes’ to life with his full strength.”<sup>14</sup>

What we encounter here is an outlook suggesting that if we are to affirm life with all of our

strength, we must become akin to the tortured Jesus, who is said to have taken upon himself all of the world's sins and suffering, all of its guilt, and all of its pain. If we intend to affirm life with all of our strength, we must be confident about having a virtually superhuman strength, lest we end up being crushed by the consequences of having said "yes" to life. Implicit in Schopenhauer's vision, then, is the thought that life-affirmation requires fortitude of a superhuman kind. Schopenhauer ultimately preferred peace of mind over the struggle to achieve a life-affirming attitude, and he advocated a withdrawal from life as a means to secure a transcendence of life's sufferings.

Schopenhauer's resulting conception of the human condition is noticeably dim, for he regarded individual human life as a very sad joke. He could not see the value in choosing to remain within its mundane constraints, and he yearned for alternative, extraordinary, and universalistic states of mind that provide a liberation from suffering, from wanting, from willing, from the world of individuals in conflict; he yearned for states of mind that induce a profound distancing from the unbearable stage upon which the tragicomedy of life transpires. He sought to transcend human nature itself. Hence, at the endpoint of Schopenhauer's view, we find him opting for the ascetic life of renunciation and "life negation," for he believed that once one apprehends the truth of the human situation, the idea of affirming life and humanity becomes repulsive and devastating. In short, Schopenhauer sought for some potent spiritual relief from this tragic world.

Consider, in sharp contrast, a passage from the beginning of Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–85) – a passage that reads almost as if it could be Nietzsche (as Zarathustra) conversing with Schopenhauer (as the saint):

Zarathustra climbed down from the mountains alone, encountering no one. But when he came into the forest, there stood before him a venerable old man, who had left his holy hut to look for roots in the forest. And thus the old man spoke to Zarathustra:

"This wanderer is not an unknown to me: many years ago he went by here. Zarathustra he was called; but he has changed.

At that time you carried your ashes to the mountains: will you now carry your fire into the valleys? Don't you fear to be punished as a fire-starter?

Yes, I recognize Zarathustra. Pure are his eyes, and his mouth betrays no disgust. Does he not walk along like a dancer?

Zarathustra is a changed man, Zarathustra has turned into a child, Zarathustra is an awakened-one: what do you want then, with those who are asleep?

As in the sea, you lived in solitude, and the sea carried you. Well now, you want to climb up onto the land? Well now, you want to drag your body along again?"

Zarathustra answered, "I love people."

"Why," said the holy man, "did I go into the forest and into isolation? Was it not because I loved people so very much?"<sup>15</sup>

Now, I love God: the people I do not love.<sup>16</sup> The human being is for me a too-imperfect thing. Loving people would kill me."<sup>17</sup>

Drawing the respective correspondences to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche from the above characters, we can regard the saint as a person who, after having, Jesus-like, assumed the burden of the world's suffering, found the vision of humanity's truth too much for a finite person to bear. Hence, the "love of people" would kill the saint if he remained within that down-to-earth world. Drinking from this fountain would poison his sensitive soul. In contrast, Zarathustra embodies Nietzsche's dissatisfaction with such a seemingly escapist, ascetic, and superficially holy alternative, for Zarathustra intends to remain in a condition of "loving" the human being – a condition which entails "affirming life" rather than denying it.<sup>18</sup> And indeed, the saint, given his moral commitments, retreats from life with maybe good reason: the prospect of being obliged to forgive unconditionally and with pure, unselfish love the heartless murderers of one's own children and relatives – forgiving the unforgivable – could be too much of an affront to an ordinary person's sense of justice.<sup>19</sup>

This general theme of "the struggle to affirm life" directly in the face of its pains permeates most Nietzsche's writings. In such reflections, he battles with traditional Christian morality, and eventually

rejects it outright, not so much to preserve his sense of justice, but to preserve his sense of bodily and spiritual health. His antagonism towards some traditional reactions to life's ills, which he interpreted as prescribing an escapist attitude, is centered in his conviction that it is of absolute importance to remain completely down-to-earth and in contact with experienced reality and with life itself. Living in denial of life's ills conflicts with his philosophical urge to be true to life. Nietzsche did his best to refrain from all spiritual anaesthetics, striving to gain in character by directly "toughing" life out.



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