

1 Nietzsche's Life

One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star.

—Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

Much has been written about Friedrich Nietzsche. Although he was not influential during his lifetime, his work has influenced and continues to influence many philosophers, writers, artists, painters, psychologists, sociologists, and revolutionaries. Although his influence in non-English-speaking continental Europe was much greater than in the rest of Western thought, Nietzsche is still one of the most influential, notorious, and most cited philosophers today.

A lot of what seems to be common knowledge about Nietzsche is myth. His work has been misinterpreted to support many controversial views, but it is the misuse of his writing, taken out of context. He was not a Nazi or an anti-Semite or a supporter of Hitler. This chapter uncovers how some of these beliefs came about.

Some of the other notorious things about Nietzsche *are* true. He did say, infamously, “God is dead.” He was an atheist, and he did suffer a mental breakdown and was committed to an asylum for much of the last part of his life. This chapter provides a timeline for Nietzsche’s work and some key events so that you can get a perspective of his life. Start by looking at his upbringing, influences, education, and key events, as covered here.

Early Education

Friedrich Nietzsche was born in Roecken, Prussia, on October 15, 1844, to Karl Ludwig and Franziska Nietzsche. His father was a Lutheran pastor,

as was his father before him. Karl died at the age of 35, when Friedrich was only 4 years old. Friedrich's younger brother, Joseph, died shortly after the death of his father, and Friedrich was raised by his grandmother, mother, two paternal aunts, and sister, Elisabeth. They doted on young "Fritz," who showed early promise as a poet, musician, and scholar.

Much has been said about the influence of being raised in such a feminine environment, but Nietzsche's writing about women does not enable the reader to draw one consistent conclusion. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche writes, "The true man wants two things: danger and play. For that reason he wants woman, as the most dangerous plaything." In *The Anti-Christ*, he writes, "Woman was God's second mistake." But then he says, "Yes, life is a woman!" in *The Gay Science*. Nietzsche neither married nor had any substantial love interest in his life.

In 1850, the family moved to Naumburg, and Nietzsche attended a private preparatory school. Nietzsche also began piano lessons and started creating his own musical compositions and writing poems.

In 1858, Nietzsche received a scholarship to a leading Protestant boarding school, which he attended until graduation in 1864. During this time, he and some friends created a literary society called "Germania." Every month, each member submitted and read an essay. They pooled their resources to purchase subscriptions to a popular German musical journal and also bought musical scores. Nietzsche started to suffer eye strains and migraines during this time, problems that would plague him his entire life.

From boarding school, Nietzsche went to the University of Bonn where he intended to concentrate on theology and *philology* (the study and interpretation of classical and Biblical texts). In the 19th century, philology referred to the study of both language and literature. The term is rarely used today because a distinction is drawn between literary and linguistic fields of inquiry.

Influences and College Years

During his days at the University of Bonn, Nietzsche was a student of Wilhelm Ritschl, a distinguished professor of philology and a classics scholar. Ritschl left the university after a feud with another philology professor and went to the University of Leipzig. Nietzsche soon followed him. Ritschl became Nietzsche's mentor and described his intellect:

However many young talents I have seen develop under my eyes for thirty-nine years now, never yet have I known a young man, or tried to help one along in my field as best I could, who was so mature as early and as young as this Nietzsche. . . . If—God grant—that he lives long enough, I prophesy that he will one day stand in the front rank of German philology . . . he possesses the enviable gift of presenting ideas, talking freely, as calmly as he speaks skillfully and clearly. He is the idol, and without wishing it, the leader of the whole younger generation of philologists here in Leipzig . . . and at the same time pleasant and modest (Kaufman, *The Portable Nietzsche*).

Rischl helped Nietzsche publish several articles in the philology journal. Nietzsche also switched his degree from theology to philology; his writings show his movement away from his Lutheran upbringing to an atheistic outlook.

During his college years (1865–1869), Nietzsche encountered many life-altering events, including his reading of Schopenhauer, his contraction of and treatment for syphilis, his year of military service, and his first meeting with Richard Wagner.

Schopenhauer's Will

In 1865, Nietzsche came across a book that changed his life and his philosophy: Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. Nietzsche claimed that reading this book turned him into a philosopher, and he founded the Schopenhauer Society in 1911. In this book, Schopenhauer presented his concept of will as the driving force behind life, and Nietzsche expanded and modified this idea into his own "will to power." Schopenhauer was the first openly and explicitly atheistic philosopher, and he was very pessimistic. He thought that life was rife with suffering and said that ". . . so long as we are given up to the throng of desires with its constant hopes and fears . . . we never obtain lasting happiness or peace." He was surprised when he was introduced to Hinduism and Buddhism, because his philosophy shared similar insights to these religions, both arrived at via different paths.

Schopenhauer had a pessimistic outlook on life, and Nietzsche differed here—a difference some critics fail to note. Nietzsche's outlook was life-affirming, and he eventually moved beyond Schopenhauer and his views, although they had a marked influence initially.

A Visit to a Brothel Has Consequences

Also during his university days, Nietzsche is rumored to have visited a brothel, and some surmise that here he contracted syphilis (one of the main attention-grabbing items mentioned about Nietzsche). He was treated for syphilis in 1866, although until the invention of antibiotics, the disease wasn't really that treatable. There is a lot of speculation about when Nietzsche may have contracted this illness, but there is no definitive answer. It is doubtful that he was sexually promiscuous or a homosexual (other myths). It is argued that the doctors who treated him did not tell Nietzsche of the seriousness of the prognosis, because Nietzsche does not mention the disease in any of his writings for the next two decades.

More Bad Luck

In 1867, Nietzsche began his one year of required military service. He first attempted to enlist in a Berlin regiment, but because this regiment was not accepting one-year volunteers like Nietzsche, he instead became part of a mounted field artillery unit near Naumburg. During his military service, he lived at home with his mother.

In the military, he suffered a chest injury when he slammed his chest against the saddle horn after a jump while on horseback. The chest injury did not heal properly until four months later after a visit to a specialist. He returned to Leipzig in the fall of 1868.

This injury added to his syphilis; recurring migraines and eye problems were just the start. Nietzsche suffered additional health problems when he served in the Franco-Prussian War, and his health was always a problem. One of Nietzsche's themes is suffering and its role. Rather than deny his pain, Nietzsche sought to embrace it. He writes in *The Gay Science*, "Whoever commits to paper what he suffers becomes a melancholy author: but he becomes a serious author when he tells us what he suffered and why he now reposes in joy." He also says:

And as for sickness: would we not almost be tempted to ask whether we can in any way do without it? Only great pain is, as the teacher of great suspicion, the ultimate liberator of the spirit. . . . It is only great pain, that slow protracted pain which takes its time and in which we are as it were burned with green wood, that compels us philosophers to descend into our ultimate depths and to put from us all trust, all that is good-hearted, palliated, gentle, average, wherein perhaps our humanity

previously reposed. I doubt whether such pain “improves”—but I do know it deepens us.

Suffering is a central theme in Nietzsche's work (as you'll read in the next chapter). He suffered not only from bad health, but also from a lack of friends, partners, readers, and money. Suffering is a common theme in philosophy; it is a hallmark of a long list of philosophers who also suffered greatly (sometimes from disease, but often due to persecution for their beliefs).

Friendship with Wagner

One of Nietzsche's more important friendships, one that would affect him for good and bad throughout his life, was his friendship with the composer and musician Richard Wagner (1813–1883). Nietzsche became acquainted with the composer's music during the period of his literary club, Germania. He also knew that Wagner was a fan of the philosophy of Schopenhauer. Nietzsche met the composer in November 1868.

Wagner played an important role in Nietzsche's life. He was about the same age as Nietzsche's father would have been; they were both born in the same year. He also had attended the University of Leipzig. Nietzsche visited and spent a lot of time with Wagner and his wife, Cosima, at their Swiss home in Tübingen, a small town near Lucerne, and in Bayreuth, Germany.

Initially, Nietzsche thought that Wagner represented the ideals he espoused in *The Birth of Tragedy*, a work that Wagner greatly praised. Later, he became disillusioned with Wagner's misuse of religious sentimentality and his hypocrisy, especially in Wagner's *Parsifal*. He also disagreed with Wagner's anti-Semitism. He broke painfully with his mentor and, in his last days, wrote two works addressing their relationship. Nietzsche lost other friendships during his life and suffered, in addition to his physical ailments, a deep loneliness. A reader can find many places where Nietzsche addresses his loneliness, as in this quotation from *Twilight of the Idols*: “To live alone, one must be either an animal or a god—says Aristotle. Leaving out the third possibility: one must be both—a philosopher.”

Professor Nietzsche

Right around the time that Nietzsche met Wagner, Ritschl recommended Nietzsche for a position at the University of Basel, and in 1869, the

University of Basel took that recommendation, making Nietzsche a professor of classical philosophy. In an unusual gesture, the University of Leipzig awarded Nietzsche a Ph.D. without a dissertation. Nietzsche began his teaching career at the age of 24.

He continued to teach there for ten years although the academic life did not suit him. He taught classes such as Greek Lyric Poets, Latin Grammar, Introduction to the Study of Plato, and Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*. He took a leave to serve as a volunteer in the Franco-Prussian War, and he began his publishing career.

A Medical Orderly in the Franco-Prussian War

Nietzsche served as a volunteer medical orderly in 1870 after the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War. His ill health again affected his service; he contracted dysentery and diphtheria and returned to teaching. These additional illnesses added to his already problematic health, and his health never recovered.

His First Books

During his tenure at the University of Basel, Nietzsche published several essays, but his first major work, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, was published in 1872. This book argues that the Apollonian elements of reason, logic, and order have overtaken the Western world to the world's detriment. A better alternative is a balance of these elements and Dionysian elements, including instinctual, wild, creative forces. Nietzsche thought that these forces were best represented in contemporary German music. (You can read more about this work in Chapter 3.) Wagner praised the book, but it did not receive the same welcome from scholars.

His friendship with Wagner was beginning to show strains with Nietzsche's second book, *Human, All-Too-Human* (1878), which he completed during the end of his university career. The characterization of "the artist" is said to represent Wagner.

The Wander Years

Nietzsche did not enjoy the life of the academic; he often criticizes this lifestyle. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he writes "I am not, like them, trained

to pursue knowledge as if it were nutcracking.” He criticizes them descriptively in this passage from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

They are good clockworks; but take care to wind them correctly! Then they indicate the hour without fail and make a modest noise. They work like mills and stamps: throw down your seed-corn to them and they will know how to grind it small and reduce it to white dust.

He resigned his university position in 1879, because of poor health. His first book alienated Nietzsche from his mentor, Ritschl, the academic community, and his students, and it was probably this as much as his illness, which led him to retire. From that point on, he devoted his life to writing. From 1879 to January 1889, he traveled and spent time in various locations, from boarding houses in Switzerland to the French Riviera, and all over Italy (Turin, Genoa, Florence, Venice, Rome, Rapallo). He published *Daybreak* (1881), *The Gay Science* (1882), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883 and 1885), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), and *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887). Many of these works were published using his own money, and none had a big audience. He also finished in his last active year *Ecce Homo*, *Twilight of the Idols*, *The Case of Wagner*, *The Anti-Christ*, and *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, a great volume of work produced in only a few years by an ill man who was essentially an invalid.

Unrequited Love

Nietzsche was devoted to writing, and he did not have a very active love life. He had only one substantial love interest. At age 37, he met and fell in love with Lou Salomé, a 21-year-old Russian student. She was in Zurich studying philosophy and theology. Nietzsche proposed marriage, but Salomé declined. She was more interested in Nietzsche's friend, Paul Rée, a psychologist. Later Salomé would become the mistress of poet Rainer Maria Rilke and the confidant of Sigmund Freud. She would also write of her relationship with Nietzsche.

In 1876, Nietzsche had earlier proposed marriage to Mathilde Trampedach, a Dutch piano student in Geneva, but she had also declined.

Descent into Madness

In January 1889, Nietzsche had a mental breakdown when he witnessed a coachman beating an old horse in the street in Turin, Italy. A friend brought

him from Italy back to Basel, and he spent the last years of his life in an asylum in Basel, under his mother's care. When his mother died in 1897, his sister took over his care (moving him to a different location) until his death on August 25, 1900. He died of pneumonia and is buried in Roecken, the town where he was born. Nietzsche died before he had the opportunity to fully develop his thinking.

The Nazi Sister

Nietzsche's sister, Elisabeth, took and maintained control over his estate and used it for her own personal agenda. Elisabeth was married to Bernhard Forster, and they had moved to Paraguay to start an Aryan, anti-Semitic German colony called "New Germany." They were leading anti-Semites, a view Nietzsche did *not* share. The colony failed, and Forster committed suicide. Elisabeth returned home to Germany, yet this did not stop Elisabeth from using Nietzsche's writing for her own purpose.

Elisabeth published several of his works after his collapse, including *The Anti-Christ* and *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*. These works are not as much in doubt as is *The Will to Power*, which was published from collected notes and published in 1901. It was also Elisabeth who aligned herself with Hitler and invited him to the Nietzsche Archive. Nietzsche did not support Nazism; his writing shows he opposed any such ideas. He lived most of his life outside of Germany and was not an anti-Semite. He did make comments and was interested in the origins of Christianity from Judaism, both positive and negative. In *Human, All-Too-Human*, he praise the Jewish race:

[I]n the darkest time of the Middle Ages, when the Asiatic cloud masses had gathered heavily over Europe, it was Jewish free-thinkers, scholars, and physicians who clung to the banner of enlightenment and spiritual independence in the face of the harshest personal pressures and defended Europe against Asia. We owe it to their exertions . . . that the bond of culture which now links us with the enlightenment of Greco-Roman antiquity remains unbroken.

He also did not advocate a German Aryan master race (related to his version of superman) or the annihilation of Jews.

In the end, Nietzsche died alone, misunderstood, unacclaimed, and unaware of the immense impact he would have on future generations of thinkers, scholars, writers, and philosophers. He came nowhere close to the ideal death he imagined and described in *Twilight of the Idols*:

To die proudly when it is no longer possible to live proudly. Death freely chosen, death at the right time, brightly and cheerfully accomplished amid children and witnesses: then a real farewell is still possible, as the one who is taking leave is still there; also a real estimate of what one has wished, drawing the sum of one's life—all in opposition to the wretched and revolting comedy that Christianity has made of the hour of death.

Yet, he did achieve something else he strived for, cited in the same book (*Twilight of the Idols*): "To create things on which time tests its teeth in vain; in form, in substance, to strive for a little immortality—I have never yet been modest enough to demand less of myself."

