

Nietzsche

Nietzsche was born in 1844 in the village of Rocken, Germany. His father was the local pastor. They appear to have been moderately well off – sufficiently well off to send Nietzsche to one of the top schools in Germany.

Nietzsche did well at school and went on to the University of Bonn to study Philology (a sort of combination of classical literary studies and linguistics - sounds fun). He went on to postgraduate study at the University of Leipzig. He published a couple of articles and acquired a reputation as a brilliant scholar. He also became interested in philosophy.

Nietzsche's postgraduate supervisor wrote to the University of Basel in Switzerland and recommended him for a professorship. They duly appointed him. It normally takes decades to become a professor, but Nietzsche managed it at age 24.

While at Basel Nietzsche met, and formed a close friendship with, the composer Wagner. They shared a love of classical music and of miserable miserabilist Arthur Schopenhauer's miserable philosophy. They got on like a really dreary house on fire.

During his time at Basel Nietzsche started to suffer from incapacitating migraines (headaches, vomiting, and distorted vision). These became more frequent until Nietzsche felt he could not continue teaching. He resigned in 1880. He was 36.

Living off savings and a tiny pension he spent the next nine years travelling around Europe, writing. He moved from town to town, not staying anywhere for more than three months.

His most famous works were produced during this time, including *Thus Spake Zarathustra* and *Beyond Good and Evil*. But without an academic post and with his reputation in tatters the works went largely unread. Indeed, he had great difficulty getting them published and had to self-publish some of them.

In 1883 Nietzsche travelled to Rome with his best friend, the psychologist Paul Ree. Through Ree he made the acquaintance of an attractive Russian student: Lou Salome. The three of them got on very well and they travelled around Italy together. Nietzsche quickly fell in love with Lou and proposed marriage. She wasn't keen on the idea and said she'd think about it. Then one day Salome and Ree disappeared. They'd run off together. He'd lost both the woman he loved and his best friend.

Nietzsche was understandably depressed. Nietzsche continued writing and travelling aimlessly. On 4th January 1889 Nietzsche was staying in Turin. He is reputed to have seen a horse being beaten in the main city square. He rushed over, embraced the horse, and then had some kind of seizure and lost his mind. From that moment until his death, 11 years later, he was completely insane. He never uttered another intelligible sentence and never wrote another word.

Ironically, it was during these years of insanity that Nietzsche became famous. He was completely oblivious to the fact. He died of a stroke in 1900. Nietzsche's philosophical writings are, well, quite something. He's generally recognised as a brilliant stylist. However, he doesn't set his case out in nice, neat arguments. Arguments, such as they are, gradually emerge but what they emerge from is a strange, euphoric, aphoristic, soup. He often contradicted himself, or said things in order to prompt a response. He is, needless to say, open to interpretation on a number of issues and some philosophers spend entire careers interpreting him.

God

Nietzsche's philosophy has a destructive, nihilistic part and a constructive, nihilism-defeating part. Let's start with the destructive part.

Nietzsche was an atheist. He famously wrote "God is dead". Nietzsche did not argue against the existence of God. He took God's non-existence for granted and explored what he thought to be its most important implication: the bankruptcy of conventional morality.

God, thought Nietzsche, plays a pivotal role in our received moral scheme, and without Him it all goes to pieces. We assume that moral norms are objective and unalterable. But if God does not exist, and more importantly, if we come to believe that God does not exist, then conventional morality is left without any objective, fixed foundation. So the death of God means the death of conventional morality.

Free Will

A second problem for conventional morality is that an important part of it (our blameworthiness and praiseworthiness for our deeds) presupposes that we have free will. And free will, thought Nietzsche, involves a requirement that we be the originators of our decisions: that our decisions are caused by ourselves and nothing but ourselves. As Nietzsche memorably put it, it requires the ability to "to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness". This requirement is impossible to satisfy. Thus the second destroyer of conventional morality – the second nail in its coffin – is the incoherence and impossibility of free will.

A debunking genealogy

Genealogy is the study of one's ancestors. Nietzsche talked about the genealogy of morality, meaning how morality has come to have the shape and character it has. He held that exposing the history of conventional morality would also serve to undermine it.

Our concept of morality is of something objective and fixed. But what if the history of morality shows it to be something unfixed?

What if it shows that morality's content has been determined by our attitudes rather than by God? And what if the attitudes that have determined – and continue to determine – our conventional morality are not very wholesome? What if, at root, the source of our conventional morality is envy and resentment of the powerful? Well, then the credibility of morality has been undermined. Our moral beliefs have been debunked, not vindicated.

Nietzsche held that our received ideas of what is right and wrong have followed history. At first, the strong (the nobles) valued themselves and sought to lead lives that exemplified certain virtues, not because they thought God approved of such things, but just because. They valued honour and heroism in battle, and were contemptuous of weakness. But then the weak, driven by envy of the power of the nobles, sought to try and wrest some of the power from the nobles and used morality to do so. By building a picture of the universe in which there is a God – a supreme noble – who values compassion and kindness – the weak (or "slaves" as Nietzsche would sometimes call them) pervert the values of the strong.

The weak promoted the values of generosity and care for the weak, not because they directly valued being generous and caring people, but as a mechanism for denying the strong (the noble) their power.

So, if we buy this account, we see how morality is not fixed, but can alter. And we also see how the values we take to be supreme (kindness, care for others etc.) actually have their historical roots in grubby envy and resentment.

Defeating Nihilism

If the above is correct, then morality as we know it is in tatters. Moral nihilism (the view that nothing is right or wrong) seems to be correct. But Nietzsche rejects nihilism. He rejects a morality, not all moralities. He held that it is possible to build a new morality, a morality that goes Beyond Good and Evil (the title of one of his most famous works).

How? Well, if the genealogy of morality tells us that morality is alterable, and alterable by us, then it is within our power to simply reinvent morality. After all, the original “master” morality, out of which our conventional moral ideas grew, did not presuppose either the existence of God or that morality is fixed and unalterable.

Recognising that God does not exist, means recognising that there is no external commander. But yourself – of giving yourself values to live by, of being your own authority. Of course, the weak – the slaves – will balk at this idea.

They want an external commander; they want a fixed, objective morality that they can maintain applies to everyone. They want to be told what to do; and they want to tell others what to do with the authority of something greater than themselves, and in this way achieve some control over the strong. But the strong (the masters among us) will not mind the absence of an external standard. They will happily set their own standard, make their own rules. That’s what being strong is all about. It’s about being your own God. Nietzsche describes such strong-types (types capable of rising to the challenge of forging their own morality, of being their own Gods) as “Übermensch”. The literal translation is “over-man” though it has historically been translated (rather unfortunately) as “superman”.

There’s debate over exactly what the Übermensch is. In some places the Übermensch seems to be the ideal towards which the strong strive, and in other places it seems to be a term to describe those who are forging their own morality.

Anyway, as far as Nietzsche was concerned, the strong types (the Übermensch, or those striving to be Übermensch) would have a self-centred set of values in which they prized their own strength and self-overcoming and had contempt for weakness, including the weakness (as Nietzsche saw it) of pity and charity. They would not care how other people saw them. Their morality would be all about them and not about others. Other people are mere means to your own glory: mere opportunities to demonstrate your own superiority and so on. Nietzsche enjoyed being provocative!

However, he does offer something in the way of practical guidance. In order to live in a way that you fully endorse (to live according to your own values) Nietzsche suggests you live each day as if you’re going to have to live in that same way again and again, for eternity. This has become known as the ‘Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence’: the thesis that every event in a person’s life recurs over and over again, in exactly the same way every time, and for eternity.