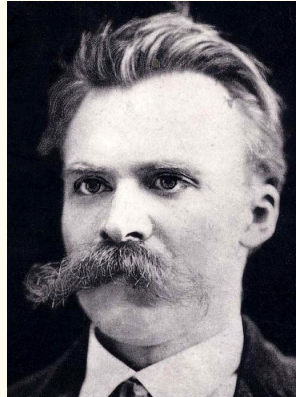


Part 5. Nietzsche's Life and Influence

21. Who was Friedrich Nietzsche?

“That which does not kill us makes us stronger.” “Live *dangerously!*”⁴⁶

Friedrich Nietzsche was a nineteenth-century German philosopher famous for his worship of human potential and for encouraging individuals to seek great heights and make real their creative dreams. He is also famous for his absolute loathing of all things small, cowardly, or mediocre.



Friedrich Nietzsche

In his writings we find a corresponding reverence of all things great, noble, heroic. He spoke directly and passionately to the best within each of us: “Do not throw away the hero in your soul” and “Hold holy your highest hope.”⁴⁷ And for those of us who sense we have a creative spark that must be honored and nurtured—“the noble soul has reverence for itself.”⁴⁸

One indication of the importance of Nietzsche is the pantheon of major twentieth century intellectuals whom he influenced.

He was an influence on Jean-Paul Sartre and Hermann Hesse, major writers, both of whom won Nobel Prizes. He

⁴⁶ EH “Why I Am So Wise” 2 and GS 283.

⁴⁷ Z I.

⁴⁸ BGE 287.

was an influence on thinkers as diverse in their outlooks as Ayn Rand and Michel Foucault. Rand's politics are classically liberal—while Foucault's are far Left, including a stint as a member of the French Communist Party. There is the striking fact that Nietzsche was an atheist, but he was an influence on Martin Buber, one of the most widely-read theologians of the twentieth century. And Nietzsche said harsh things about the Jews, as we will see—but he was nonetheless admired by Chaim Weizmann, a leader of the Zionist movement and first president of Israel.

So what is the attraction of Nietzsche? There is the exciting, sometimes scorching prose—Nietzsche was a stylist *par excellence*. There is his romanticism of life as a great, daring adventure. And of importance to serious intellectuals, there is the fundamentality and sheer audacity of the questions he raises about the human condition.

According to his teachers and professors, the young Friedrich Nietzsche showed extraordinary intellectual promise. He was appointed professor at University of Basel in Switzerland—at the age of twenty-four, which is unusually young for a professor. Even more unusually, he was appointed before finishing his doctoral degree, which was almost unheard of.

As brilliant as Nietzsche was, he was not suited for academic life. By most accounts he was a terrible lecturer, and he suffered from chronic health problems, which contributed to a general nervous collapse in 1870.

From the late 1870s, he wandered mostly alone and lonely over Europe, surveying the cultural landscape.

And when we take stock of the world in the late nineteenth century, what do we learn?