

# Study Guide for Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Book One

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Friedrich Nietzsche is one of the most influential philosophers of the nineteenth century; but he was not influential *in* the nineteenth century. ([See notes on the influence of Nietzsche.](#)) For various reasons which we will discuss in class, his works have had their major impact in the twentieth century, and that impact has been astonishingly widespread and varied. His choice of poetic prose rather than rigorous dialectic has sometimes caused him to be called no philosopher at all; yet his literary style has attracted readers who would not have been drawn to a Kant or a Hegel. Because he does not use traditional formal logic, there are no simple ways to understand his writings. A grasp of his message can only be achieved by a gradual process of gathering in his major attitudes and themes and inferring the meaning of any single passage in the context of his work as a whole. Walter Kaufmann, Nietzsche's American translator and best explicator, provides on pages 3-22 a set of helpful translator's notes which you should read; but the following questions and comments are meant to step you through the assigned portions of the work in more detail and to stimulate your thinking about it. Some of the questions are open-ended prompts to think about the issues involved, to prepare you for class discussion.

There are certain central concepts that it is essential to keep in mind about Nietzsche's philosophy. He takes it for granted that the Enlightenment analysis of religion is correct, and that religion is a comforting but limiting self-delusion. He infers that all values (including religious values) are the creations of human beings and that therefore we are all responsible for creating high values and living up to them. Yet these values need not be shared. He is a thorough relativist, arguing that one person's virtue is another's vice. Once these basic principles are understood, most of his writing becomes quite clear. Another obstacle to comprehension, however, consists in his constant cultural references which may be unfamiliar to the untrained reader. Most of these will be explained in the following notes.

A final obstacle to comprehension is the simple aversion that his style arouses in some readers. Nietzsche writes sneeringly, imperiously, in a way that Americans in particular, with their national preference for self-deprecation and humor, find objectionable. It is pointless to waste much energy objecting to his tone; his message has been found appealing to many people who

don't share his emotional attitudes. Your task is to discover what it is in this message that has caused it to be so influential in the modern world.

Everyone finds something to object to in Nietzsche. Obviously conservative Christians find his anti-Christian attitudes objectionable, but even his most enthusiastic followers do not follow him on every point. As you will see at the end of this reading assignment, that is very much as Nietzsche would have wished it. Unlike in most of the works we are studying, the central figure here--Zarathustra--is to be identified with the author. Nietzsche merely uses him for a mouthpiece.

The numbers in the notes below refer to the section numbers in the Penguin edition of Kaufman's translation.

[Zarathustra's Prologue](#), [On the Three Metamorphoses](#), [On the Teachers of Virtue](#), [On the Afterworldly](#), [On the Despisers of the Body](#), [On Enjoying and Suffering the Passions](#), [On the Pale Criminal](#), [On Reading and Writing](#), [On the Tree on the Mountainside](#), [On the Preachers of Death](#), [On War and Warriors](#), [On the Flies of the Market Place](#), [On Chastity](#), [On the Thousand and One Goals](#), [On Love of the Neighbor](#), [On the Way of the Creator](#), [On Little Old and Young Women](#), [On the Adder's Bite](#), [On Child and Marriage](#), [On Free Death](#), [On the Gift-Giving Virtue](#)

### **Zarathustra's Prologue**

1: What other famous figure began his mission at the age of thirty by retreating into the wilderness? How long did the other figure stay there? How long does Zarathustra stay there? Much of the imagery here is probably borrowed from "The Allegory of the Cave" in Plato's *Republic*. (Nietzsche generally disliked Plato, and disagrees with him on many points; but he was greatly influenced by him nevertheless.) Plato says that an enlightened thinker is like a man who gradually struggles free of the chains of illusion in an underground cave and who learns by ascending to the world above and viewing things in the light of day, finally discovering the essence of truth by gazing at the sun itself. However, it is not enough for the philosopher to grasp truth for himself: he has a responsibility to descend back into the cave of illusion and free the prisoners of falsehood. This is what Nietzsche means by "going under." What arguments can you make that the discoverer of truth has an obligation to preach that truth to others?

2: The Old Man represents traditional religious hermitism. How is Nietzsche criticizing the tradition of the hermit or cloistered monk? Frequently Nietzsche has his characters say not what they would say in real life, but instead reveal what he thinks are their secret feelings. In other words, he puts *his* analysis of their motives into their mouths. Would a real monk likely say that he has stopped loving man? Why would Nietzsche feel justified in saying that he has? Nietzsche is fond of self-quotation. Here Zarathustra is amazed that the Old Man has not heard of one of Nietzsche's most famous pronouncements: "God is Dead." (For the original context, see "The Madman" (Aphorism 125 in *The Gay Science*). This is probably the most widely-quoted and thoroughly misunderstood of all Nietzsche's sayings. He does not mean to imply that God was ever alive. A clearer statement (though less dramatic) would be: "That period in history during which the idea of the Christian God expressed the highest ideals of Western Civilization has passed, and it is now clear that belief in him is a dead burden on a society which has outgrown him." What changes in European culture might have led him to this conclusion? Have you ever

heard someone argue against his statement that God is dead? Did their arguments demonstrate knowledge of what Nietzsche was actually saying?

3: Nietzsche did not accept many of Darwin's findings, but he is clearly dependent on his theories for some of his language in this section. In what ways does his theory of the overman differ from the theory of Darwinian evolution? In what ways is it similar? What does he mean by saying the overman shall be the "meaning of the earth?" We often speak of *discovering* the meaning of something; why does Nietzsche instead depict meaning as something to be *created*? What effects does it have on people when they believe that truth is absolute, and must be discovered? What effects does it have on them when they believe that truth is relative, and must be defined by each individual? Which do you agree with? Why? What contrast is he drawing between those who are "faithful to the earth" and the preachers of "otherworldly hopes?" Given what was stated above about his death of God theory, what does he mean by the paragraph that begins "Once the sin against God was the greatest sin . . . ?" What change in values is he preaching? What has been the traditional Christian view of the body ("flesh") versus the soul ("spirit")? (Hint: there are many relevant passages in Paul. See for instance Romans 8:1-13. Please note that such attitudes are distinctly unfashionable today, but have been powerful and widespread in the past.) How does Nietzsche react to these attitudes? "The hour of the great contempt" is for Nietzsche a way of describing the point at which one realizes that one's earlier ideals were petty and mean, and aims for something higher. What is the effect of his constantly using the possessive pronoun in speaking of "your happiness," "your reason," and "your virtue?" Why does he criticize pity? Later Nietzsche will make a distinction between the sort of pity that he thinks is weak and self-destructive and the "gift-giving virtue," which is compassionate, but proud and strong. Can you find any signs of such compassion even in the small portion of the book you have read so far? "Meanness" here means "stinginess," "miserliness." Since he clearly does not believe in the traditional notion of sin, why does he say what he does about it? How does the image of lightning express the virtue that he is preaching in contrast? How does this contrast with Voltaire's fear of "enthusiasm?" Which do you think is the preferable view? Why?

4: The tightrope walker is a fairly obvious metaphor, spelled out by Zarathustra, of humanity in the process of transformation (going over) from the current stage of human consciousness to a more advanced stage. The speech that Zarathustra gives is clearly modeled on the Beatitudes (see Matthew 5:1-12). In what way does he think being "a great despiser" is a positive act? What is the difference between loving virtue in general and loving one's own virtue? What is it about the latter that Nietzsche approves of? Paraphrase into plain English this statement: "I love him who casts golden words before his deeds and always does even more than he promises." Why does he praise "going under?" In what way do these various people prepare for the development of the overman?

5: What is Zarathustra's explanation for the fact that the people do not welcome his message? In what ways is "the last man" the opposite of the overman? What are the last man's main characteristics? Why does he disapprove of quick reconciliation? What virtue might counterbalance it? Why does he scorn the caution about pleasure that aims above all at preserving health? What is the crowd's reaction to his description of the last man?

6: In what ways is the jester like Zarathustra? Traditionally Christianity has offered as one of its main comforts the belief in life after death. How does Zarathustra offer the *denial* of life after death as a comfort? What problem in Christian belief is he hinting at here? (Hint: see Matthew

7:13-14.) The dying tightrope walker complains that if there is no life after death, his life has been meaningless. How does Zarathustra answer him? Does meaning have to be permanent to be worthwhile? Can you answer Nietzsche's critique of the Christian philosophy of death?

7-8: This passage rather ponderously makes the obvious point that Nietzsche's philosophy is aimed at giving meaning to life, and that death is irrelevant to it. Why doesn't it matter that Zarathustra breaks his promise to bury the dead man?

9: What contrast is Nietzsche making between "the people" and "companions?" Is Nietzsche a believer in equality? Does he think that everyone can become an overman? In what sense is the lawbreaker a creator? How does the one who rejects old values help to create new ones?

10: One traditional Christian interpretation of the fall of Adam and Eve is that they committed the sin of pride, believing that eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would give them the wisdom of gods (see Genesis 3). How does Nietzsche use the symbols of the serpent and the eagle to invert what he sees as traditional Christian attitudes? How do modern people feel about pride? Is it more often seen as a vice or a virtue? How about when we call it "self-esteem?" Nietzsche interprets the story of the fall as a parable denouncing the quest for knowledge, and by extension, science itself. Why might he have felt that Christianity was hostile to science? Do science and religion still come into conflict with each other at times?

## **Zarathustra's Speeches**

### **On the Three Metamorphoses**

In one of the most important passages of the book, Nietzsche describes three stages of human development. Each stage has its own virtue, and each contributes to developing the ideal which he calls the overman. What are the main qualities of the camel as he describes them? What criterion does the camel use to choose his tasks? What do all of the questions have in common which begin, "Or is it this?" What attitude toward virtue does the dragon symbolize? What traditional Christian virtues is he here inverting? Based on what you have read earlier, why is it important for the lion to slay the dragon? In what way is this act of destruction creative? What is the difference between the sacred "no" and the sacred "yes?" People influenced by Nietzsche often use the expressions "yea-saying" and "nay-saying." What attitudes are conveyed by these expressions? What does it mean to utter a sacred "Yes?" What does he mean by saying "he who had been lost to the world now conquers his own world?" Hint: throughout most of this book Nietzsche often says the same things over and over in different ways. You have already encountered these ideas in different forms.

### **On the Teachers of Virtue**

In praising sleep the sage praises the quiet conscience. He preaches the opposite of what Zarathustra preaches. What point do you think Nietzsche is making by letting his opponent express himself? What does Zarathustra's final blessing of the "sleepy ones" mean?

### **On the Afterworldly**

What by now familiar Nietzschean theme is the subject of this section? What does he say is the source of the human desire to create heavens ("afterworlds"))? How does he answer those who

think they have directly experienced spiritual realms "transported from their bodies and this earth")? Does he view such people as wicked or as sick? How does he say such people should be treated? How do you think he would react to people who say they have had "after death" experiences today?

### **On the Despisers of the Body**

What is the significance of believing that the "soul" is a function of the body rather than a separate entity? One of the more influential themes in Nietzsche's thought is his notion of the wisdom of the body. Can you think of any contemporary examples in which people seem to share that idea, for instance saying that one should "listen" to one's body? In what sense can the body be said to have created the spirit?

### **On Enjoying and Suffering the Passions**

Here Nietzsche is using the original meaning of the Latin word *passio*--suffering, and combining it with the more recent meaning of intense desire. What is his attitude toward passion? How is it similar to Faust's?

### **On the Pale Criminal**

How do you think Nietzsche would react to contemporary calls for more capital punishment? What arguments might be made to support his position that executions should not be a form of revenge? What arguments might be made against it? Why does he reject terms like "villain," "scoundrel," and "sinner?" What is different about the terms he proposes to use instead? The Pale Criminal here is often compared to Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, who fantasized becoming a Napoleonic hero by rejecting ordinary morality and committing a robbery/murder with total disregard for normal ethics. However, he found he was not capable of such lofty detachment, and was haunted by a guilty conscience. Interestingly, Nietzsche had not read *Crime and Punishment*, and arrived at this portrait quite independently. Clearly Zarathustra does not really mean to praise murder or robbery, so why does he criticize the criminal's inability to admit to himself that what he really wants to do is commit a murder? How does this relate to the sentence, "Much about your good people nauseates me; and verily, it is not their evil?" What familiar Nietzschean theme is he continuing here?

### **On Reading and Writing**

What does it mean to write with your blood? Is this a classical or romantic attitude? Why does Nietzsche think universal literacy is a bad thing? What influence might he think it has had on the quality of writing? Remember, magazines, newspapers and books were the mass media in the nineteenth century. According to Zarathustra, how are madness and reason related? What is his metaphor for the spirit of lightness and joy which he praises? Hint: this passage suggested the great waltz section in Richard Strauss's tone poem *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (the opening of the work is well-known as the "theme from *2001: A Space Odyssey*").

### **On the Tree on the Mountainside**

Why does Zarathustra feel the youth is not yet ready for freedom? Does he feel that freedom is good in and of itself? Do you agree with him? What criticisms does he make of those who pursue skepticism for its own sake in the paragraph that begins "Alas, I knew noble men . . .?"

### **On the Preachers of Death**

This is largely a repetition of ideas already discussed in the sections entitled "On the Afterworldly" and "On the Despisers of the Body," but he also takes up hostility toward sexuality. What are some of the kinds of people which he calls "Preachers of Death?"

### **On War and Warriors**

Besides "God is dead," this passage is probably quoted out of context more than any other part of Nietzsche's writings. What is a warrior of knowledge? Nietzsche was an outspoken critic of German nationalism and militarism. What kind of war is he speaking about? What is the difference between a soldier and a warrior, as he uses the terms? (Hint: the first comes from the name of a Roman coin with which soldiers were paid, and originally designated a hired fighter.) Why does he object to uniforms? Interpret this sentence: "Your enemy you shall seek, your war you shall wage--for your thoughts." Is he speaking here about traditional warfare, involving masses of soldiers obeying the orders of officers? Why does he say that you should find a cause for triumph even in defeat? Do generals tell their armies, "It isn't who wins that counts, it's how you fight the battle?" The next few phrases are frequently cited to show that Nietzsche was a proto-Fascist militarist who would have supported Hitler. Is this a fair interpretation? Explain. What good qualities does he say have been encouraged more by war than by the Christian virtues of neighborly love and pity? Is this an unconventional view? Why does he say you must not despise your enemy? Can you reconcile the seeming contradiction between the paragraph on recalcitrance and obedience with his earlier objection to uniformity and his general insistence on fighting for one's own individual cause?

### **The State**

German nationalism was on the rise at this time, as the modern country was slowly unified out of a variety of small principalities. How does he make clear in this passage that his praise of war must not be taken to support warfare in support of the modern state?

### **On the Flies of the Market Place**

What qualities does he praise that conflict with a Hitleresque idea of the importance of the state? What does it mean to say "Never yet has truth hung on the arm of the unconditional?" Technically this statement contains a self-contradiction; can you re-word it so that it still conveys his meaning without being self-contradictory?

### **On Chastity**

Why does he feel that chastity can be a vice for some people? Strikingly, he links suppressed sexuality and cruelty in much the same way that Freud was to do later in his theory of masochism. To understand the "parable" he offers, read Mark 5:1-20. Does he say that everyone should indulge in sex? What does he mean by saying that "dirty" truths are not as bad as shallow ones?

## **On the Friend**

Nietzsche seems to feel that having a friend makes one vulnerable. What qualities does he think a friend should have to prevent these dangers? Why does he argue that women are not yet capable of friendship? Do you think the desire for love can interfere with the ability to make and keep friends? Do you think such interference happens more among men or among women? Why does he think women's love is inferior to friendship? Note: many readers are particularly offended by Nietzsche's calling women cats, birds, and cows; but it is important to note that he has much harsher (and clearer) things to say about them than this (see *On Little Old and Young Women*). What does it imply when he says that woman is "not yet" capable of friendship? How does he use his comments on women to attack men?

## **On the Thousand and One Goals**

Nietzsche strongly rejected the notion that there is one single purpose in life that all of us should discover and pursue. But he felt that peoples create an identity for themselves which is based on their group values. How does he say they choose these values? What did he think was the main value of the Greeks? "Zarathustra" is the name of a Persian prophet. What does he think the main values of the Persians were? What famous people took as central law "To honor father and mother?" How do you think Zarathustra reacts to this kind of virtue, judging by what he has said earlier? The fourth group of people is the Germans. In what way is his summary of them less neutral than the other three? Nietzsche says that the notion of the individual as a creator emerged only in recent times? What evidence is there in history to support this view? To what degree is it an overstatement? What mechanism does he argue has traditionally hindered individualism? How does he think humanity should define itself? Is the emergence of individualism entirely a good thing? Can you think of any disadvantages it has had?

## **On Love of the Neighbor**

As in *On the Friend*, he argues that the need for close friends is a danger. What does he feel this danger consists in? Of all of Nietzsche's teachings, this is probably the least followed. Most people who have been profoundly influenced by Nietzsche have also praised friendship highly.

## **On the Way of the Creator**

What in this section repeats Zarathustra's comments on freedom in "On the Tree on the Mountainside?" What is it that he calls on one to "murder" in the last paragraph on p. 63? Is he advocating literal murder of another human being? To what in history is he referring in his warning against holy simplicity? What does he say is your worst enemy?

## **On Little Old and Young Women**

It is obvious that this passage expresses outrageously sexist attitudes toward women. What is not so obvious is that they are simply a more brutal expression of common nineteenth-century ways of *praising* women. Can you translate some of his statements into gentler-sounding equivalents that most nineteenth-century men and women might have agreed with? What kind of men does the old woman say that women hate? Why do you think she urges men to use the whip (violence) against women? Why do you suppose this is the only passage in which Nietzsche's views are expressed through a character other than Zarathustra?

### **On the Adder's Bite**

What variations does Zarathustra make here on the Sermon on the Mount? (See Matthew 5:38-48.) He is not simply turning Jesus' teachings upside down. How is he changing them? What are your own reactions to his suggested changes?

### **On Child and Marriage**

This is pretty much just an editorial in favor of the overman, arguing that without the goal of producing a superior child, marriage is pointless, even destructive.

### **On Free Death**

How does his teaching on dying at the right time relate to hotly-debated issues today? He says that Jesus ("that Hebrew") died too early. What does he think would have happened had he lived longer?

### **On the Gift-Giving Virtue**

- 1: Nietzsche argues that one should not idealize the poor as morally superior to the rich or idealize giving to them out of pity. What does he suggest should be the motive of charity?
- 2: Here he summarizes his basic teaching. What is his central point? Why would it be illogical to expect him to have described the overman in detail, with all his important characteristics?
- 3: How does he try to demonstrate that he wants each person to find his or her own truth?

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What elements of Nietzsche's thinking do you think are agreed with by most Americans these days? What elements do you think would be most widely rejected? Do most Americans believe in absolute values, relative ones, or a mixture of the two?

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The only major idea of Nietzsche's which is not addressed in these sections is "the eternal recurrence." You will find a collection of links to various discussions of this mysterious and difficult subject at <http://www.ewige-wiederkehr.de/>.

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First mounted June 14, 1995.

Revised March 2, 2000.