

Thus Spoke Zarathustra is Nietzsche's literary-philosophical masterpiece. With this work we come to the summit of Nietzsche's attempts to do philosophy as art, to become an "artistic-Socrates" as he had previously suggested doing in *The Birth of Tragedy*. In it we find the key ideas of his mature thought—the notions of the *Overhuman*, the will to power, and the eternal recurrence—presented in the form of a fiction, or, to be more specific, as a "tragedy" as he suggests in aphorism 342 of *The Gay Science*. It is a work in four parts. Initially it concluded at the end of part three, but later Nietzsche added the fourth part. The key ideas are thus in the first three parts. Part four was added as a kind of parody, or rather, to make more evident that the whole work is best considered as a parody. It was certainly meant, in part, as a parody of the *New Testament*, of the idea of a teacher and his disciples coming to save humankind with new teachings. I doubt one can understand a word of the book unless one first gets this half-serious, half-joking, mocking tone of the book.

Part One

Prologue

The Prologue lays out the main theme of the book: Zarathustra coming down from his mountain cave to teach the new teaching about the *Overhuman*, or the transformation of humankind.

***[1] Dawn: Zarathustra steps from his cave to greet the morning sun. The Platonic metaphor of the cave is here inverted: the cave is a place of wisdom not ignorance. The sun is a very important image throughout this text. Notice how it is connected with images of overflowing. The sun is that which is perpetually overflowing, it continually gives its light, never needing a gift in return. This sun is the image for the transformation of human being that is the major theme of this book. Can a human being become like this sun? For the soul to become sun-like it must, like the sun, *go under*. The German word for "go under" means "to perish." Something must die before the soul becomes overflowing like the sun. At the close of the book at the end of Part Four this opening scene in which Zarathustra greets the morning sun is repeated.

***[2] On his way down from his mountain cave Zarathustra encounters the saint in the forest. The saint notices a change in Zarathustra. He asks Zarathustra why he has come down from his solitude. Zarathustra responds that he has come because of his love for man. The saint, however, does not love man, for man is too imperfect. He loves God instead. Zarathustra responds, perhaps a little sarcastically, "Did I speak of love? I bring men a gift." Perhaps this is to say, "Oh, is that what you mean by love? What I mean by love is a gift." The saint loves God instead of man because his love is not a gift. He is concerned not with giving but with getting something in return. As he departs from the saint Zarathustra wonders if it is possible that the saint had not yet heard of the death of God.

***[3] Zarathustra enters the town. While a tightrope walker begins his performance Zarathustra begins his teaching concerning the *Overhuman*. He is speaking here of a transformation, the further evolution of humankind. Humanity so far is portrayed as a polluted stream. The source of this pollution is the longing for eternity, a denial of this life, which leads the soul to look contemptuously upon the body and all of the earth. Through the *Overhuman* this sickness will be overcome. A hint that the transformation occurs in the hour of the great contempt.

***[4] The tightrope image is used to portray the precarious situation of modern man—in the wake of the "death of God" man is left standing on a tightrope over an abyss. Man is the rope between ape and *Overhuman*, the bridge not the destination. What Zarathustra loves in man is that he is a *going over* and *going under*.

[5] The people laugh at Zarathustra. They do not understand, they do not want to hear about contempt, and they are thus not interested in the *Overhuman*. Thus Zarathustra speaks to them of what is most contemptible, the *Last Human*. Characteristics of the Last Human: no longer has a goal, no longer seeks to become better. The Last Human wants everybody to be the same. No desire for or tolerance of difference. The Last Human is happy and content. The people clamor for this Last Human. They want to become these last men.

[6] The tightrope walker begins his performance. A jester sneaks up behind and makes the tightrope walker fall, landing broken, but not yet dead, at Zarathustra's feet. The dying man fears the devil may drag him to hell. Zarathustra reassures him that there is no devil and no hell, that his soul will be dead even before his body.

[7] Evening: Zarathustra sitting lost in thought next to the dead man. Human existence is still without meaning. A jester can become man's fatality. Zarathustra promises to teach men the meaning of their existence.

[8] Night: Zarathustra begins to carry away the corpse when the jester sneaks up behind him and promises to make him fall. After walking beyond the town, past some gravediggers, and after an encounter with an old hermit, Zarathustra finally buries the corpse in a hollowed out tree and then goes to sleep.

[9] Dawn: After a long time Zarathustra awakens to a new day with a new insight. He will not speak to the people, but rather to companions. Instead of trying to teach to the masses he will seek to lure a few away from the herd. He will seek fellow creators, those who write new values on new tablets.

[10] Noon: Zarathustra greets his first companions, his animals, the eagle and the serpent, the proudest animal and the wisest.

The Speeches of Zarathustra

[1] *On the Three Transformations*. The transformation of the spirit from the *camel* to the *lion* to the *child*. The camel is a beast of burden, it carries upon its back the values of the past. The camel speeds into the desert, the wilderness. (The wilderness—an image for nihilism, the crisis of modernity) In the desert the camel turns into the lion, the rebel, the one who challenges the dragon that holds all the values of the past. A further transformation of the spirit is needed if nihilism is to be overcome: the lion must become the child. The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, the creator of new values, a sacred "Yes."

[2] *On the Professorial Chairs of Virtue*. A critique of traditional morality. Zarathustra satirizes the "teachers of virtue" for teaching the "virtuous" how to "sleep well." Underlying the traditional virtues Zarathustra finds only the drive for happiness and contentment. The virtues are "opiate virtues." This passage draws comparisons with Dostoevsky's *The Grand Inquisitor*—where the question is raised whether human beings would rather have happiness rather than the burden of freedom, and also, of course, to Marx's view of religion as the opiate of the masses.

[3] *On Believers in a World Behind*. A critique of the longing for the afterworld. Zarathustra contends that the longing for an afterworld originates with a weariness with life. This passage recalls Nietzsche's commentary on the last words of Socrates (*The Gay Science*, 340). It also invites a comparison and

contrast with Kierkegaard: “Weariness that wants to reach the ultimate with one leap . . .” Zarathustra confesses to having cast his delusion beyond man like all the Afterworldly. But he came to his senses and realized that god was man-made and madness like all gods.

[4] *On the Despisers of the Body*. This passage expresses one of the main themes of Existentialism. Zarathustra speaks to the despisers of the body, telling them that the soul is only a word for something about the body. So far, philosophers have always thought that reason involves turning away from the body, a denial of the body and senses. But Zarathustra teaches that the body itself is a great reason.

*[5] *On Enjoying and Suffering the Passions*. One should not have one’s virtues in common. The creator will create new values, but will not impose them upon others: “This is *my* good; this I love; it pleases me wholly; thus alone to *I* want the good. I do not want it as divine law; I do not want it as human statute and need. . .”

[6] *On the Pale Criminal*. In the eyes of the pale criminal Zarathustra finds the the great contempt: when one’s contempt turns inward and one has contempt for oneself—when one longs for the ego to be overcome.

*[7] *On Reading and Writing*. Zarathustra is perhaps giving some hints about reading this text, a text “written in blood and aphorisms.” What does it mean to write in blood? Perhaps that the writings of this philosopher are not at all impersonal? Anyway, there are some splendid aphorisms:

"True, we love life, not because we are used to living but because we are used to loving. There is always some madness in love. But there is also always some reason in madness."

Perhaps a hint concerning Nietzsche’s critique of the Judeo-Christian concept of God—too serious:

"I would believe only in a god who could dance. And when I saw my devil I found him serious, thorough, profound, and solemn: it was the spirit of gravity—through him all things fall."

And a hint about Nietzsche’s critique and this book:

“Not by wrath does one kill but by laughter. Come let us kill the spirit of gravity!”

Is Nietzsche is a joker and this book a sort of joke?

**[8] *On the Tree on the Mountainside*. Zarathustra gives advice to a youth. The soul is like a tree: the higher it reaches toward the heights with its branches, the deeper it must sink its roots into the earth. The soul is rooted in the body.

*[9] *On the Preachers of Death*. Those who preach of an eternal life beyond this life are ridiculed as preachers of death. The desire for “eternal life” is exposed as a weariness with this life—the very source of nihilism. This same point is made in Nietzsche’s commentary in *Twilight of the Idols* on Socrates’ last words.

*[10] *On War and Warrior-Peoples*. Due to its metaphor of warfare, a very troubling passage—but perhaps those who are repelled by its rhetoric have not noticed that the war Zarathustra speaks about takes place on the battlefield of knowledge. The philosopher is a warrior because he seeks knowledge not contentment. Rather than seeking the peace of an unquestioned life, he accepts the challenge of questioning in the war of ideas.

[11] *On the New Idol*. A political critique of the state, on the “coldest of cold monsters,” which imposes a sameness upon all: no one is allowed to be a creator, no one is allowed to be original, to think for themselves, to think differently, to be different. Difference is not tolerated in the state. The state turns the people into the *Last Human*. Only were the state ends can the *Overhuman* begin.

[12] *On the Flies of the Market-Place*. Zarathustra encourages the friend, the one who would be a creator, to avoid the clamor of the market place and the rush for fame. These would only turn one into the *Last Human*. To be a creator one must go into solitude.

[13] *On Chastity*. In contrast to the traditional teachers of virtue, Zarathustra does not teach that one must turn away from the body and the senses.

“Do I counsel you to slay your senses? I counsel the innocence of the senses. Do I counsel you to chastity? Chastity is a virtue in some, but almost a vice in many.”

[14] *On the Friend*. What is a true friend? Does a friend always only comfort a friend, or must a true friend sometimes be hard on a friend? For Zarathustra, “In a friend one should have one’s best enemy.” Neither the slave nor the tyrant are capable of this friendship.

**[15] *On the Thousand Goals and One*. In his travels through many lands Zarathustra finds a different tablet of good and evil over every people. In contrast to Plato, there is no one true good and evil for all people. Every people, every culture, has their own tablet of good and evil. Tablets of good and evil are recognized as human creations. Morality has a human origin; it is not handed down to us on tablets written by God, but rather, in Nietzsche’s famous phrase, is only “human—all too human.”

“A tablet of the good hangs over every people. Behold, it is the tablet of their overcomings; behold, it is the voice of their will to power.”

This is the first mention of the important concept *will to power*. From this context it is clear that Zarathustra is not speaking of a desire for power, a desire which we could, if we so chose, to hold in check. The *will to power* is that within a people, within a human being, which values. It is not something that we could choose not to have. In a sense, it is that which makes life possible. One simply could not live without valuing, without selecting some things as valuable and some things as not. The tablets of good and evil that hang over every people are a product of this valuing.

[16] *On Love of One’s Neighbor*. Zarathustra draws a contrast between the friend and the neighbor. The neighbor only wants to comfort. The friend is the one who is capable of being an enemy, i.e., one who is capable of being hard on a friend, capable of pushing a friend to overcome himself. The friend is the one with an overflowing heart—the one whose love is like a gift that seeks no return.

*[17] *On the Way of the Creator*. After encouraging the friend to go into solitude in order to be a creator, now Zarathustra speaks of the difficulties that await the way of the creator.

"Can you give yourself your own evil and your own good and hang your own will over yourself as law? Can you be your own judge and avenger of your law? Terrible it is to be alone with the judge and avenger of one's own law. Thus is a star thrown out into the void and into the icy breath of solitude."

[18] *On Old and Young Little Women*. A very obscure and troubling passage about men, women, love, pregnancy, and childbirth. Perhaps it is good to remember not to take any of this literally. As the theme of the whole of the First Part of *Zarathustra* concerns the metamorphosis of the spirit from the camel to

the child—the stage of the creator, the one who would overcome himself, the one who would become *Overhuman*—perhaps when Zarathustra is speaking of women he is not referring to the female sex but rather to the child-bearer in all of us.

[19] *On the Bite of the Adder*. A adder bites Zarathustra but Zarathustra tells the snake that it is not rich enough to give. Incapable of truly giving the adder licks the wound and takes back the gift. Another obscure passage, but some more fine aphorisms:

“It is nobler to declare oneself wrong than to insist on being right—especially when one is right. Only one must be rich enough for that.”

[20] *On Children and Marriage*. More on love and the creation of the child:

“Marriage: thus I name the will of two to create the one that is more than those who created it. Reverence for each other, as for those willing with such a will, is what I name marriage.”

“But even your best love is merely an ecstatic parable and a painful ardor. It is a torch that should light up higher paths for you. Over and beyond yourselves you shall love one day. Thus *learn* first to love. And for that you had to drain the bitter cup of your love.”

[21] *On Free Death*. On dying at the right time, not too early, not too late. Remember that the *overcoming* requires a *going under*, a perishing of a sort.

“Thus I want to die myself that you, my friends, may love the earth more for my sake; and to the earth I want to return that I may find rest in her who gave birth to me.”

**[22] *On the Bestowing Virtue*. —At the close of the First Part a restatement of the major themes: a critique of the longing for afterworlds and a teaching of the gift-giving love expressed in the imagery of a golden sun.

“Remain faithful to the earth, my brothers, with the power of your virtue. Let your gift-giving love and your knowledge serve the meaning of the earth. Thus I beg and beseech you. Do not let them fly away from earthly things and beat with their wings against eternal walls. Alas, there has always been so much virtue that has flown away. Lead back to the earth the virtue that flew away, as I do—back to the body, back to life, that it may give the earth a meaning, a human meaning.”

Second Part

*[1] *The Child With the Mirror*. Zarathustra returns to his mountain and the solitude of his cave and is startled by a dream in which he looks into a mirror carried by a child. He is startled because he sees in the mirror not himself but a devil. As Zarathustra interprets the dream, his teachings are in danger of being misunderstood:

"my *teaching* is in danger; weeds pose as wheat. My enemies have grown powerful and have distorted my teachings till those dearest to me must be ashamed of the gifts I gave them. I have lost my friends; the hour has come to seek my lost ones."

Zarathustra decides he must go down again to his friends and even his enemies. He knows that his wild wisdom may frighten his friends. They may even want to run from it, along with his enemies.

**[2] *Upon the Isles of the Blest*. Upon arriving at the blessed isles where his friends are, Zarathustra begins to review his teachings which are like ripe figs falling from trees. The first of these figs is that his friends should stop thinking about God and think about Overhuman instead. Zarathustra says that “God is

a conjecture.” This is not necessarily to say that God does not exist. Whether God exists or not, any image or idea of God that a human being may have is only a human conjecture, a hypothesis, a supposition, a guess.... It would be impossible to determine whether there exists a God apart from human interpretation, human conjecture. If one follows out the thread of Nietzsche’s *perspectivism*, the “truth” of the matter would actually be irrelevant—as it is impossible to know *anything* apart from human perspective. Nietzsche’s first point is that all of human knowledge is just that—human, all too human. To pretend otherwise, to claim to have the “truth” apart from any human perspective, is simply to avoid taking responsibility for the conjecture. All of human knowledge, whether of God or of anything, is a product of the human creative drive to interpret the world. As Zarathustra puts it:

"And what you have called world, that shall be created only by you: your reason, your image, your will, your love shall thus be realized."

What counts is not the “truth” of a conjecture, but its consequences. One of the consequences of the Western conjecture about God is that human beings are regarded as weak and sinful, and ultimately incapable of the kind of transformation that Zarathustra calls “Overhuman.” In this respect, Zarathustra’s teaching is not unlike Buddhism—as the whole focus of the religion concerns a transformation of human beings rather than worship of a God.

The target of Zarathustra’s criticism of the conjecture of God is the metaphysical supposition that true reality is unchanging, and all that changes, all that passes in time, all that is impermanent, is not real:

"God is a thought that makes crooked all that is straight, and makes turn whatever stands. How? Should time be gone, and all that is impermanent a mere lie? To think this is a dizzy whirl for human bones. . . ."

This again draws a comparison with Buddhism—for the transformation of human being known as *nirvana* involves an acceptance of impermanence (one of the primary Buddhist teachings is that everything is impermanent). Perhaps the underlying motive for the metaphysical denial of impermanence is that with change there inevitably comes suffering. As with Buddhism, the central problem in the transformation of human being Zarathustra speaks of is the problem of suffering. The solution to the problem of suffering, according to Zarathustra, involves the metamorphosis of the spirit to the child, the creator.

“Creation—that is the great redemption from suffering, and life's growing light. But that the creator may be, suffering is needed and much change. Indeed, there must be much bitter dying in your life, you creators.”

[3] *On Those Who Pity*. This section focuses on the issues of shame and pity. Shame, according to Zarathustra, has so far been the history of human being. Or rather, it is with the doctrine of “original sin” that shame becomes the history of man. Zarathustra teaches differently concerning “original sin”:

"As long as there have been men, man has felt too little joy: that alone my brothers is our original sin. And learning better to feel joy, we learn best not to hurt others or to plan hurts for them."

Along with avoiding shaming others Zarathustra cautions against pity. Zarathustra regards pity as one of the greatest dangers for the friend:

“But if you have a suffering friend, be a resting place for his suffering, but a hard bed as it were, a field cot: thus will you profit him best.”

[4] *On the Priests*. Zarathustra identifies priests as his "evil enemies." It is clear that in his criticism of “priests,” it is the *spirit of revenge* that Zarathustra opposes. Because of this spirit of revenge, a religion that was based on a teaching of love became a means of persecuting others:

“They have called ‘God’ what was contrary to them and gave them pain; and verily, there was much of the heroic in their adoration. And they did not know how to love their god except by crucifying man.”

[5] *On the Virtuous*. Zarathustra finds more signs of the spirit of revenge—in the Christian teaching of eternal reward and punishment:

“Alas, that is my sorrow: they have lied reward and punishment into the foundation of things, and now also into the foundation of your souls, you who are virtuous.”

[6] *On the Rabble*. Zarathustra says that life is a well of joy, but this well is poisoned by the rabble, those who are afflicted with the spirit of revenge. The most difficult thing Zarathustra has to accept in order to affirm life, is the existence of the rabble. But it is not hatred that gnaws at Zarathustra at the sight of the rabble, it is *nausea*.

*[7] *On the Tarantulas*. The tarantulas are those whose souls are poisoned by the spirit of revenge. Zarathustra addresses the secretly vengeful tarantulas summing up his criticism of Christianity:

“For *that man be delivered from revenge*, that is for me the bridge to the highest hope, and a rainbow after long storms.”

*[8] *On the Famous Wise Men*. Zarathustra addresses famous wise men (philosophers) and their "will to truth." Behind this "will to truth" Zarathustra finds the will of the tyrant. The "will to truth" is here then opposed to the will to question. The "will to truth" is linked to the camel-spirit. Zarathustra leads the camel into the desert, where the camel becomes lion:

“ Truthful I call him who goes into godless deserts, having broken his revering heart. In the yellow sands, burned by the sun, he squints thirstily at the islands abounding in wells, where living things rest under dark trees. . . .
Hungry, violent, lonely, godless: thus the lion-will wants itself.”

*[9] *The Night-Song*. Whereas all the previous sections ended with “Thus spoke Zarathustra” the next three sections are not speeches but songs. Instead of speeches that express Zarathustra’s teachings, his criticism of the old philosophers and preachers, these three sections seem to deal with the inner turmoil of Zarathustra’s own soul. This beautifully poetic song expresses the anguish of the sun in solitude. In contrast to the night sky where the stars are many, in the day the sun shines in solitude. This section perhaps provides a key to the sun-like transformation of the soul that Zarathustra calls *Overhuman*. To become like the sun and have the gift-giving love that overflows like fountains, one must master solitude. The soul that sings here has not yet overcome the loneliness of the solitude of the sun.

*[10] *The Dance-Song*. Zarathustra attempts to overcome the *spirit of gravity* with a dancing song. Yet in this song, Zarathustra’s soul sinks into the unfathomable when he looks into life’s eyes. Zarathustra is not yet ready to look into life’s eyes without being overcome by the spirit of gravity.

*[11] *The Grave-Song*. Zarathustra laments what is buried in tombs: the visions of his youth:

"All beings shall be divine to me."

"All days shall be holy to me."

Zarathustra’s soul is drawn down by the spirit of gravity, wounded by nausea, the disgust with life. His highest hope (the *Overhuman*) remains locked up in tombs. Now Zarathustra will speak of what enables the soul to rise out of such tombs.

***[12] *On Self-Overcoming*. If the main point of Zarathustra's teaching concerns the transformation or self-overcoming of humanity, then the title of this section indicates its importance. The values of the past are not the result of the "will to truth" but rather of the *will to power*. Zarathustra teaches that the values of the past are the result not of the "will to truth" but rather the "will to power." In other words, the values of a people are not something that is passively discovered but rather something that is the creative product of a people.

[13] *On Those Who Are Sublime*. Zarathustra criticizes the ascetics of the spirit. Some claim that there is no disputing over tastes. But Zarathustra claims that all of life is a dispute over taste and tasting.

[14] *On the Land of Culture*. Zarathustra addresses contemporary education. He mocks those who pretend to be completely objective in their knowledge.

*[15] *On Immaculate Perception*. Here an interesting contrast is drawn between the metaphors of moon and sun. Whereas the sun continually gives its light, the moon only reflects the light of the sun. The moon is completely passive, like Plato thought the soul is when it turns away from the senses and contemplates "true reality."

[16] *On the Scholars*. Zarathustra further marks his departure from traditional scholars.

[17] *On the Poets*. According to Plato poets are a danger to the good society, because they do not speak the truth, and because they turn the attention of the soul back to the body and the senses. Zarathustra acknowledges that he is a poet, and yet he also acknowledges that poets lie too much. Compare this with Nietzsche's reflections on truth and lie.

[18] *On Great Events*. A ship anchors at an island volcano. The sailors go ashore and at noon they see Zarathustra descending into hell, into the volcano. Zarathustra returns some days later to tell them of his conversation with the fire-hound concerning the sickness of the earth..

**[19] *The Soothsayer*. This passage presents Zarathustra confronted with the crisis of modernity as he listens to a soothsayer's doctrine: "All is empty, all is the same, all has been!" Zarathustra becomes sad and weary in this twilight. He falls into a deep sleep while his disciples await his recovery. When he awakens Zarathustra relates a strange dream. In the dream it is midnight and Zarathustra is a night watchman and guardian of tombs at the lonely castle of death. He is fumbling with the keys to the most creaking of all gates. A roaring wind tears open the gates. A black coffin arises and from out of this coffin burst a thousandfold laughter. This passage is a prelude to "On the Vision and the Riddle," which is the key to the whole drama of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The powerful dream and the disciples' attempt to interpret the dream anticipates Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

**[20] *On Redemption*. Another important prelude to "On the Vision and the Riddle." Zarathustra crosses over a great bridge to find man in ruins: "Verily, my friends, I walk among men as among the fragments and limbs of men. This is what is terrible for my eyes, that I find man in ruins and scattered as over a battlefield or a butcher-field." Humanity lies in ruins because it is the *spirit of revenge* that has so far been the driving force behind the values of the past. The source of this revenge turns out to be the "will's ill will against time and its 'it was.'" The key to overcoming the spirit of revenge turns out to have to do with time. Here it is revealed that the bridge to the *Overhuman* requires overcoming the *spirit of revenge* and this involves a confrontation with the problem of time and time's passing.

[21] *On Human Cleverness*. Zarathustra mocks those who take pride in being "good and just":

“Verily, you who are good and just, there is much about you that is laughable, and especially your fear of that which has hitherto been called devil.”

[22] *The stillest hour*. Zarathustra returns to the solitude of his cave, this time without joy. His angry mistress, the stillest hour, tempts him: "You know it, Zarathustra, but you do not say it!" Zarathustra is as yet reluctant to fulfill his destiny, he has yet to become the child. She speaks to him further:

"It is the stillest words that bring on the storm. Thoughts that come on dove's feet guide the world."