



Friedrich Nietzsche

Julian Young

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In this beautifully written account, Julian Young provides the most comprehensive biography available today of the life and philosophy of the nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Young deals with the many puzzles created by the conjunction of Nietzsche's personal history and his work: why the son of a Lutheran pastor developed into the self-styled "Antichrist"; why this archetypical Prussian came to loathe Bismarck's Prussia; and why this enemy of feminism preferred the company of feminist women. Setting Nietzsche's thought in the context of his times - the rise of Prussian militarism, anti-Semitism, Darwinian science, the "Youth" and emancipationist movements, as well as the "death of God" - Young emphasizes the decisive influence of Plato and of Richard Wagner on Nietzsche's attempt to reform Western culture. He also describes the devastating effect on Nietzsche's personality of his unhappy love for Lou Salom? and attempts to understand why, at the age of forty-four, he went mad. This book includes a selection of more than thirty photographs of Nietzsche, his friends and his work sites. Seventeen of the philosopher's musical compositions, which are key to a deeper understanding of his intellectual project are available online.

To listen to Nietzsche's compositions, visit: <http://www.cambridge.org/us/nietzschemusic>

Friedrich Nietzsche Details

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John says

I am considering the possibility of writing an "intellectual biography" of Margaret Fuller. A rather voluminous body of biographical narratives of MF's life appears to exist, and I've read at least five books that recount the sequence of events in Fuller's life as an interested contemporary might have observed and recorded them. Then there is Murray's examination of the emotional/psychological domains of MF's inner life. And of course, there exists shelf upon shelf of books that critics have produced to document their evaluations of bits and pieces of MF's literary work. I can't find, however, any single book that presents a comprehensive treatment of MF's intellectual life and its productions. Perhaps such a work exists; perhaps it doesn't. And even if it does, there's always room for one more - not that I would ever, ever seek publication, because that would spoil everything. My work on this subject would represent nothing more than private amusement.

But my purpose raises the question: What is intellectual biography? Inevitably such a question has no answer, or more accurately as many answers as one cares to formulate. The result of a search of Goodreads for "intellectual biography" is a listing of over 100 books - some of which appear highly interesting.

The first of these that came to hand (at an arm's reach, actually) is Young's book, which I read a second time with the purpose of ferreting out Young's method. Nothing out of the ordinary: brief sections of biographical narrative; summaries of works in the order of their publication; a drift of critical comments; notice of connections and affinities within/among pertinent sections of FN's publications; quotations from relevant passages in letters, journals, diary entries, etc., etc. What I don't see is an account of how curiosity, cognition, intellection, ratiocination and rationalization operated in this mind? How did this mind come into being? Is there any foundation in documentary evidence for an explanation of these operations? And so on.

What impresses me most from a second reading of Young's account is how easily FN was persuaded of the absolute, universal truth of the thoughts he chose to record. FN makes endless claims about "man" without so much as a nod to qualification, quite as if his claims hold absolutely across all space and time, since the very first specimen of homo sapiens appeared on the planet. I simply can not get past the question: How is it possible that strength of conviction or the strength of feeling that his ideas are "true" persuaded FN (or anyone else, for that matter) that he has discovered or formulated "truths" that are indeed true and that exist and abide independently of his personal existence? Especially in view of the epistemology FN affirms - perspectivism - why did FN believe - apparently - that his thought was exempt from the limitations and qualifications at the source of all thought - according to the results of his own analysis? Isn't any affirmation of this kind convincing evidence of Nietzschean megalomania? As far as I can tell - and I have no intention of reading his work - the content of FN's books reveals nothing so much as evidence of upheavals in the writer's emotional/psychological life.

But for my purposes that is sufficient. It's utterly pointless to concern myself with the "truth value" - whatever that is - of a thinker's expressions of fact and faith. What interests me are his affirmations and negations, what he deemed undecidable, the questions/issues he ignored or found altogether uninteresting; the route a mind took to arrive at judgements/conclusions (and so on) - and why.

And so I've found my second reading of Young's book quite valuable - for my purposes. One thing further. Once upon a time, I wondered why analytic philosophy had become the dominate mode of "philosophical" thought - in the West, at least. Now I am quite clear as to the cause - logic and analysis of mind still make

some sort of sense, I suppose. Better to leave all the rest to historians, biographers and antiquarians.

Kate says

I think I just wasn't intellectually adequate to this, but I was enjoying it before I abandoned ship.

Frederic says

Incredibly dense, well-researched and very readable although it took me more than a month to read and I gave only a cursory glance to all the Notes...but I had to return it to the library...worth reading and worth owning for future reference...

Douglas says

This excellent book gives the modern reader deeper insight into and understanding of the unusual life of this legendary and often misunderstood philosopher. I commend this book to all who wish to know what Nietzsche really meant when he wrote that "God is dead" and about "free spirits" and the existence of "superman."

Michael A. says

exhaustive look at Nietzsche's life and philosophy. honestly his life interested me more than his philosophy. i only read this so i could read on nietzsche by bataille. the author sometimes injects snark and sarcasm that always falls flat and seems resolutely intent on debunking the Nietzsche was Gay theory every time he can. other than that it is written in a very readable manner and his philosophy is presented in an approachable way. it is not an exaltation nor demonization of nietzsche. it seems critical yet sympathetic, but more sympathetic I'd say. Also Julian Young randomly throws in jabs at "postmodernists" and explicitly references Foucault to jab at him in a dumb way and alludes to Derrida, although in a more neutral way (???). Though, still if you're super interested in Nietzsche you should read this probably. maybe i can read deleuze's and klossowski's book on him too now...

Greg says

This book arrived in the mail today. So far, I'm through the first half of the second chapter. I think I'll enjoy reading it a great deal.

It's an intellectual biography of Nietzsche, and it seems to me to be really well-put-together. It includes thirty photographs of persons and places important in Nietzsche's life, as well as an accompanying website where Nietzsche's own musical compositions can be heard. Plus, it's a big book with fairly small type and has a

nice, hard cover. I feel so much more worldly having it on my bookshelf (IRL).

When I call it an intellectual biography, I am thinking of Ray Monk's *The Duty of Genius*, an intellectual biography of Ludwig Wittgenstein that I enjoy very much and have read twice. In that book Monk attempts to reveal connections between events in Wittgenstein's life and his philosophical output at the corresponding times. Young is up to the same thing with respect to Nietzsche in this book.

I'll update this review after I've finished it.

Update: May 18, 2010

I just finished *Friedrich Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography* tonight, and I can assuredly state I am glad to have read it. Before I began with it, I had read only bits and pieces of Nietzsche's various works, as well as all of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *Twilight of the Idols*, and while I felt as though I understood certain aspects of his philosophy well enough, Young's biography has given me a much clearer picture of the shape and scope of Nietzsche's thought across the span of his productive life. It's a book I wanted to read very quickly—it's fluidly written, without a ton of graduate-level technicalities or esoteric jargon, and at times the pages seem to breeze by—but I frequently found myself having to slow down to fully grasp the facts and analyses I was encountering. Young presupposes a moderate level of philosophical familiarity in his readers, but barring that, his book is most definitely appropriate for those only recreationally interested in Nietzsche, a category in which I myself fall.

The subject matter in *Friedrich Nietzsche* is arranged, for the most part, chronologically. Young divides his discussions primarily into biographical and philosophical sections, the former addressing events in Nietzsche's life and the latter issues in his philosophy, especially in the context of his written output at the corresponding times. Most of the twenty-eight chapters in the book devote equal time to each sort of discussion though some are strictly biographical and others purely philosophical.

I really enjoy Young's voice as a biographer. It is at once genial and professorial. He has a taste for relating what he is examining to modern-day topics including global warming and twenty-first-century environmentalism, hippies, the scientific outlooks of Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, and (if I recall correctly) even *American Idol*, among others. (Someone correct me if I have remembered incorrectly.) He advances the claim, controversial among Nietzsche scholars, that Nietzsche possesses a considered political philosophy mirroring Plato's conception of the ideal republic, which itself is comprised of a broad sector of craftsmen and peasants as well as two other closely allied classes of ruler-warriors and philosopher-kings. Young also advances the (perhaps more) controversial claim that Nietzsche is a religious communitarian, i.e., that in the future society he envisions, religion, as such, will not be abolished but will be supplanted by a life-affirming "game plan" according to which men and women will be given common cause in this thing we call life. He regards the theory that Nietzsche's madness resulted from tertiary syphilis as unlikely and hypothesizes plausibly that he actually suffered from bipolar disorder with later-life psychotic manifestations.

I walked away from this biography with an impression of Nietzsche as a socially conservative, mannered, sickly and health-obsessed, regrettably misogynist (though rarely in his personal relationships), and uniquely prodigious and self-consciously "untimely" man. He was possessed of a genuine anti-anti-Semitism and would often praise Jews not as individuals, but as a race of people—as opposed to his fellow Germans, whom he missed no opportunity to disparage. His personal and intellectual relationship with Richard Wagner was undoubtedly the most important of his life, and even after their falling out, Wagner's shadow continued to hang ominously over him for the rest of his life. Ancient Greece is the only authority more important for

Nietzsche than Wagner, and Schopenhauer is identified as his only true teacher. One other thing I would like to mention is that the judgment Young ultimately passes on Nietzsche's sister Elisabeth is a decidedly unfavorable one, a fate she unquestioningly deserves for the familial injustices she perpetrated against her brother and their mother—and the literary injustices she perpetrated against Nietzsche and his friend Heinrich Köselitz—from the point of Nietzsche's mental collapse in 1889 until her death in 1935.

I really enjoyed reading *Friedrich Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*, and I only hope I can retain what I have learned for longer than two weeks.

Annie says

Honestly, it's time I face the facts: I just don't care enough about Nietzsche to ever finish this book. From what I remember it was well-written, but it's getting a hard pass from me. DNF.

Miha Mazzini says

'A Philosophical Biography', it says on the cover and it delivers. Not just the life of Nietzsche but analysis of his works too. Author says his opinions clearly, but I didn't feel it like interference. A lot to read; take it on the holiday.

Chris says

A very well put-together intellectual biography. I found myself skimming parts of the philosophical exegesis in favor of following Nietzsche's wild life, but those parts came together very nicely in the last arguments against misrepresentations of his philosophy.

Colm Gillis says

An exhaustive biography on one of the most controversial thinkers of the 19th century. Young demonstrates an encyclopaedic knowledge of Nietzsche's life and work and he also engages in some pressing analysis of the German thinker. He avoids either side of the partisanship surrounding Nietzsche. He neither condemns Nietzsche nor does he eulogise over him. He presents in very bald terms Nietzsche's thought and also his unusual lifestyle. His great works were explored and presented in a short, but sufficient manner. The book was impressive, but lacked a certain amount of energy. It felt difficult to be engaged and there were few times when one really enjoyed reading, as opposed to gaining information on Nietzsche. The weight of scholarship compensates a lot for other deficiencies of the book. Although I would be one of those who is slightly appalled by Nietzsche, the author does leave you room to make up your own mind.

Ron says

Great. Biographies bore me, but this was exciting since it followed Nietzsche through his life identifying the origins of his ideas and tracing their development. This also explained much to me about his philosophy that I didn't previously understand, especially since I haven't read all of his books.

Don Ringeinstein says

A judicious mix of biography and philosophy, Juilan's book does a very nice job summarizing and developing the main strands of Nietzsche's thinking. He does well to also downplay the significance of the Nachlass, and it's problematic child, the notion of Will to Power. In the end, a good read and valuable tool.

Samson Blackwell says

I got to page 47. Sorry Young (and Nietzsche), too many other things going on right now to focus on a tome this dense.

Ian Stewart says

It took me four months to read and along the way I dipped into much of Nietzsche's early writing as I went along, and read up on 19th century Germany, while listening to Wagner and Beethoven to get a feel for the times. It was a journey. Nietzsche was a strange, tortured, and passionate man. I'm glad to have learned more about him and his thinking. Much of that thinking is repellent but then some of it is heroic and inspiring. Some of it touched by madness. This bio was an incredible, entertaining guide to it all. Nietzsche's conception of Apollonian vs Dionysian art, his passion for healthy culture, the Eternal Return as a metaphorical goad for life design — these things will likely stick with me. Recommended without question for anyone interested in him. I loved it.
