

Safranski on Nietzsche - Chapter 12

Setting the Stage for The Will to Power

THE CHAPTER IN ONE VIEW

Zarathustra's self-overcoming -> will to power as creative self-transcendence -> the struggle over knowledge and morality -> Nietzsche's unfinished plan to revalue all values

1. CENTRAL MEANING OF THE CHAPTER

- This chapter is a bridge. Nietzsche is moving from the poetry and symbols of Thus Spoke Zarathustra toward the sharper arguments of Beyond Good and Evil and On the Genealogy of Morals.
- The will to power becomes the organizing idea that links life, creativity, knowledge, morality, conflict, interpretation, and self-overcoming.
- Safranski does not present the doctrine as neat or finished. He shows its creative promise, its dark political and psychological possibilities, and Nietzsche's inability to turn it into a completed system.
- The central problem is this: after the collapse of traditional religious and metaphysical certainty, how can human beings create values and affirm life without deceiving themselves?

2. ZARATHUSTRA IS STILL TEACHING HIMSELF

- Zarathustra is not merely preaching to followers. By teaching, he is trying to absorb and test his own doctrines.
- The fourth part of Zarathustra suggests that Nietzsche had not fully expressed eternal recurrence, the Overman, or the will to power. These ideas continued to demand clarification.
- Nietzsche's earlier plan was to present eternal recurrence only at the end, after preparing the reader to receive it as a life-affirming teaching.
- His ideal is a joyful art of living: to bring light, play, love, and creative energy into existence. The difficulty is turning that poetic ideal into a practical way of life.

The Three Metamorphoses

- **CAMEL** - The camel bears inherited duties and the heavy burden of 'Thou shalt.'

- **LION** - The lion discovers 'I will' and fights inherited commands. Yet rebellion still depends on what it opposes; saying no is not genuine freedom's final form.
- **CHILD** - The child represents innocence, forgetting, play, a fresh beginning, and a wholehearted yes to life. Creative freedom begins when one can make new values rather than merely reject old ones.

3. LOVE, DANCE, GRAVITY, AND RENEWAL

- Safranski treats the will to love as one form of the will to power. Love transforms the world by making something appear lovable; it does not simply discover value already waiting there.
- The Night Song, Dancing Song, and Tomb Song trace a movement from lonely self-consciousness, through the desire to dance, into grief and finally renewed creative will.
- The 'spirit of gravity' represents heaviness, overthinking, moral burden, and the inability to surrender to life's movement.
- Nietzsche's problem is personal as well as philosophical: Zarathustra wants to dance, yet he repeatedly stops to analyze the dance. Reflection can deepen life, but it can also prevent participation.

4. WHAT THE WILL TO POWER MEANS

- It is not simply a wish to dominate other people. Its primary form is power over oneself: shaping impulses, overcoming paralysis, creating purposes, and becoming more capable.
- Life reaches beyond mere self-preservation. It interprets, reorganizes, risks, expands, and gives form. Safranski calls this movement self-enhancement or self-transcendence.
- The will to power is present even in creativity. A person must will the act of creating before creativity can pull him or her out of depression or passivity.
- Nietzsche describes a life that can, figuratively, pull itself out of the mud by its own hair. The image is logically impossible, but it captures the felt experience of self-renewal.
- Power is plural rather than a single substance. Life contains many competing forces, drives, interpretations, and centers of resistance.

5. KNOWLEDGE IS ALSO AN ACTIVITY OF POWER

- Knowing is not passive picture-taking. The mind selects, organizes, names, compares, and interprets. It brings a world into a form that can be thought.
- This creates a circle: Nietzsche uses the will to power to explain knowledge, while the knowledge that discovers the

will to power is itself an expression of that will.

- Perspectivism means that no single viewpoint captures the whole. The same world may appear as brutal struggle from one angle and as creative play from another.
- Nietzsche asks us to 'dehumanize nature': to stop assuming that the universe exists to provide human meaning, security, justice, or comfort.
- Yet there is a danger. If the will to power is treated as the one final explanation of everything, it begins to resemble the metaphysical systems Nietzsche attacks.

6. THE COSMIC GAME - AND ITS DANGER

- The cosmic-game image presents existence as an endless transformation of forces rather than as a world moving toward a divine goal.
- The language of play encourages flexibility and self-relativizing: one recognizes that every interpretation is itself part of the game.
- The darker version treats power as the first cause of everything. That version can become harsh, violent, and self-glorifying.
- Safranski points to Nietzsche's chilling late rhetoric about destroying what he called decadent or parasitic. The doctrine can support creative self-

mastery, but it can also become a fantasy of revenge and domination.

- The chapter therefore keeps two readings in tension: life as a grand, shifting game of forces and life as a battlefield ruled by power.

7. THE UNWRITTEN MAGNUM OPUS

- Nietzsche planned a major work first called *The Will to Power* and later connected with the subtitle or project *The Revaluation of All Values*.
- Its goal was to use the will to power as a basic principle of life and then reconsider inherited moral values from the ground up.
- He repeatedly reorganized the plan, but never completed the systematic book. By late 1888 he abandoned the title and treated *The Antichrist* as the completed revaluation, although much of the larger project remained unused.
- After Nietzsche's collapse, his sister Elisabeth Forster-Nietzsche and Peter Gast selected and arranged notebook passages into a book titled *The Will to Power*.
- Essential caution: the posthumous *The Will to Power* is not a finished book authored and approved by Nietzsche. It is an editorial compilation of notes from an abandoned and changing project.

The Publishing Crisis

- Nietzsche wanted to leave Ernst Schmeitzner, whose publishing circle was tied to anti-Semitic Bayreuth material, and return to E. W. Fritsch.
- He discovered that more than two-thirds of his books remained unsold and that only about five hundred copies of all his works had been sold. He was talked about more than he was read.
- New prefaces written in 1885-86 helped Nietzsche reinterpret his earlier books as stages in one developing philosophy and present a more unified authorial identity.

8. BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL

- This book carries major parts of the abandoned project into a finished form. Nietzsche questions philosophers who present their private drives and values as timeless truth.
- He argues that moral systems are not neutral discoveries. They express particular forms of life, rankings, fears, needs, and relations of power.
- The book does not merely tell readers to become immoral. It asks them to investigate where moral judgments came from, whose interests they serve, and what kind of human beings they produce.

9. ON THE GENEALOGY OF MORALS

Written rapidly in Sils-Maria during the summer of 1887, the work develops Nietzsche's historical and psychological attack on conventional morality in three essays.

- **FIRST ESSAY** - 'Good and Bad' originally expressed the self-description of nobles: strong, proud, fortunate, and socially elevated. 'Bad' meant common, low, or ordinary.
- **RESSENTIMENT** - The opposition of 'Good and Evil' develops when the weak reinterpret the strong as evil and define their own humility, patience, obedience, and harmlessness as good.
- **SLAVE REVOLT** - When people cannot act directly against those they resent, they gain imaginary revenge by changing the moral meaning of strength and weakness. Resentment becomes creative and produces values.
- **GUILT** - The second essay asks how guilt, debt, punishment, memory, and bad conscience formed. Aggressive energies once directed outward are turned inward against the self.
- **ASCETIC IDEAL** - The third essay examines the ascetic ideal: self-denial, discipline, and hostility toward sensual life. The ideal may oppose life, yet it also gives suffering a meaning and directs human energy.

The Will to Truth Becomes a Problem

- Nietzsche recognizes that his own devotion to knowledge resembles ascetic discipline. The philosopher who attacks asceticism may still be an ascetic of truth.
- Modern science and honest atheism grow out of Christianity's long demand for truthfulness. That demand finally turns against Christian belief itself.
- The deepest question is not only whether a belief is true, but why we value truth so absolutely and what kind of life this unconditional demand produces.

10. THE UNRESOLVED PROBLEM: SELF-ENHANCEMENT AND SOLIDARITY

- Nietzsche is strongest when explaining how individuals overcome inherited limits, create values, and resist conformity.
- He is much less clear about how self-enhancement can coexist with equality, compassion, democratic responsibility, and solidarity with vulnerable people.
- His 'pathos of distance' and language of rank can encourage excellence, but they can also justify contempt and isolation.
- Safranski leaves the tension open: a philosophy of creative power needs an account of mutual dependence, restraint, and shared life if it is not to collapse into domination.

11. CHRONOLOGY TO KEEP STRAIGHT

DATE	DEVELOPMENT
1881	Sils-Maria inspiration: eternal recurrence and early plans for a larger doctrine.
1883-85	Thus Spoke Zarathustra appears in four parts; the will to power emerges through self-transcendence.
1885-86	New prefaces, publisher negotiations, and continuing plans for a magnum opus.
1886	Beyond Good and Evil and the fifth book of The Gay Science develop major themes.
1887	On the Genealogy of Morals analyzes resentment, guilt, and ascetic ideals.
1888	The Will to Power/Revaluation plan is abandoned; The Antichrist becomes its compressed outcome.

12. KEY TERMS IN PLAIN LANGUAGE

- **WILL TO POWER** - Life's drive to organize, interpret, overcome resistance, create form, and expand capability.

- **SELF-TRANSCENDENCE** - Going beyond one's present condition by reshaping oneself rather than merely preserving oneself.
- **PERSPECTIVISM** - Every act of knowing comes from a standpoint; no single view exhausts reality.
- **REVALUATION** - Reexamining inherited values and asking what kind of life each value supports.
- **RESSENTIMENT** - Stored-up resentment that cannot act directly and therefore creates a moral reversal.
- **ASCETIC IDEAL** - A disciplined denial of desire that gives suffering meaning but may turn life against itself.
- **PATHOS OF DISTANCE** - A feeling of rank or separation between higher and lower types of human achievement.
- **COSMIC GAME** - Existence imagined as endless play and transformation among forces, without a final goal.

13. BOOK-CLUB QUESTIONS

- Is the will to power best understood as domination, self-mastery, creativity, interpretation, or some mixture of all four?
- Why does Nietzsche believe the lion's rebellion is not enough? What can the child do that the lion cannot?
- Can a person create values without pretending those values are universal truths?

- Does perspectivism lead to humility, or does it allow the strongest interpretation to win?
- When does self-overcoming become healthy growth, and when does it become contempt for weakness?
- Is Nietzsche fair when he explains morality as a struggle between strong and weak groups? What does his account leave out?
- Can the demand for truth become life-denying? Are there humane illusions that people need?
- What responsibilities do editors have when publishing an author's unfinished notebooks?

14. FOUR POINTS TO REMEMBER

- **ONE** - The will to power begins with self-overcoming and creative transformation, not merely control over others.
- **TWO** - Knowledge and morality are interpretations shaped by human needs, histories, and power relations.
- **THREE** - Nietzsche's critique of morality culminates in *Beyond Good and Evil* and *On the Genealogy of Morals*.
- **FOUR** - Nietzsche never finished a book called *The Will to Power*; the familiar volume is a posthumous editorial compilation.

15. USING THE CHAPTER IN DISCUSSION

- **BEST ENTRY POINT** - Start with the three metamorphoses. They make the chapter's movement easy to remember: carry inherited values, rebel against them, then create anew.
- **EVERYDAY EXAMPLE** - Use an ordinary example. Learning a difficult skill can involve discipline, resistance, failure, self-command, and the expansion of one's abilities without requiring power over another person.
- **KEY TENSION** - Keep both meanings of power visible. Nietzsche can mean creative self-mastery, but his language can also slide toward hierarchy, exclusion, and domination.
- **GENEALOGICAL METHOD** - Ask what a value does. Instead of stopping with 'Is this value true?' Nietzsche asks, 'Who created it, from what need, and what kind of person does it encourage?'

Interpretive Cautions

- Nietzsche's genealogies are powerful interpretations, not complete documentary histories of every culture or moral tradition.
- His attack on resentment should not be used to dismiss every moral protest by oppressed people; some protest

responds to real injustice rather than envy.

- His criticism of pity and equality raises a serious question: can admiration for strength be joined to humane care for people who are dependent, ill, poor, or vulnerable?
- The chapter is most fruitful when the will to power is treated as a problem to investigate, not as a slogan that explains everything.

ONE-PARAGRAPH SYNTHESIS

Chapter 12 shows Nietzsche trying to turn the poetic discoveries of Zarathustra into a broader philosophy of life. The will to power names life's capacity to interpret, create, struggle, overcome itself, and give form to experience. That idea illuminates knowledge and morality, but it also threatens to become a new metaphysics or a justification for domination. Nietzsche never resolved every tension or completed the planned masterwork. His most successful results appeared instead in *Beyond Good and Evil* and *On the Genealogy of Morals*, works that force readers to ask not only whether values are true, but where they came from and what kinds of human life they encourage.

Prepared from the Chapter 12 photographs supplied for the Nietzsche reading project.