**Summary**

*Beyond Good and Evil* is a comprehensive overview of Nietzsche's mature philosophy. The book consists of 296 aphorisms, ranging in length from a few sentences to a few pages. These aphorisms are grouped thematically into nine different chapters and are bookended by a preface and a poem. While each aphorism can stand on its own, there is also something of a linear progression between aphorisms within chapters and from one chapter to another. Nonetheless, each aphorism presents a distinctive point of view, and even the individual chapter summaries omit a great deal.

The preface accuses philosophers of dogmatism, and the first chapter explores this claim. Every great philosophy, Nietzsche asserts, is little more than the personal confession. Philosophers build up complex systems of thought to justify their own assumptions and prejudices. If we can dig these out, we can see what these philosophers value most deeply, and so gain insight into their character.

Nietzsche contrasts their dogmatism with the "free spirit" that is not caught up in a particular point of view. He hopes the philosophers of the future will be characterized by such an experimental method, willing to try out any hypothesis, and follow any argument all the way to its conclusion.

After a discussion of the religious spirit, which he claims is a kind of dogmatism, Nietzsche embarks on a series of epigrams, most of which highlight our bizarre psychological make-up. Next, he looks at the long history of moral systems as a set of different attempts at self- overcoming. He speaks out strongly against the morality of the "herd" that encourages a dull mediocrity in all. He finds such a mediocrity in modern scholarship, which is overly concerned with digging up dry, dull facts. Nietzsche's ideal philosopher creates meaning and values, and does not simply deal with empty facts.

Nietzsche asserts that there is an "order of rank" according to which the spiritual strength of all people can be measured. Because of this difference between people, it would be absurd to apply one moral code to all people. Nietzsche suggests that the strongest people are marked by a cruelty to themselves, according to which they mercilessly expose their every prejudice and assumption in order to dig more deeply into themselves. At bottom, however, everyone has prejudices. To prove this point, Nietzsche launches an eight-page tirade against women.

Next, he addresses the question of nationalities and nationalism, drawing on a kind of Lamarckism that sees different nationalities or "races" as inherently having certain characteristics. Among other things, Nietzsche attacks anti- Semitism, criticizes the English, and advances the concept of the "good European," who rises above nationalist sentiment to find true individuality.

The final chapter presents Nietzsche's conception of "what is noble": a solitary, suffering soul, who has risen so far above the common rabble as to be unrecognizable and totally misunderstood by them. He closes the book with a weak poem about such a noble soul sitting on a mountaintop wishing he had more friends.

**Will to power**  -  The fundamental drive motivating all things in the universe. The will to power, which Nietzsche refers to elsewhere as the "instinct for freedom," is the drive for autonomy from and dominance over all other wills. This will to power can find unrefined expression in the rape, pillage, and torture of primitive barbarians, or it can be refined into a cruelty turned against oneself, struggling to make oneself deeper, stronger, and with an independent mind.

**Sublimation**  -  The act of repressing one's immediate instincts for power in order to achieve a more refined expression of power. For instance, if I can resist the temptation to assault others, I can turn that instinct for cruelty inward upon myself, making my mind and my will stronger.

**Eternal recurrence**  -  The central concept of ##*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*##, which is only touched upon in this work. The eternal recurrence concerns a recognition that everything is connected and nothing is permanent, and that if one says "yes" to one thing in the universe, one must necessarily then be saying "yes" to everything. Nietzsche's ideal is the person who has the strength and courage for this universal affirmation.

**Perspectivism**  -  Nietzsche's position regarding truth, which asserts that there is no such thing as an absolute truth, but merely different perspectives that one can adopt. We could think of truth as a sculpture, where there is no single "right" perspective to look at it. To properly appreciate the sculpture, we must walk around it, looking at it from as many different perspectives as possible. Similarly, Nietzsche insists that we should not get caught up in dogmatism, but rather look at the truth from as many perspectives as possible.

**Slave morality**  -  The morality of the slave caste, who are poor, sick, and unhappy, and are oppressed and made to suffer by their masters. They see life as something bad and wrong, and identify the masters as "evil" for enjoying life in all their health and riches. Consequently, they come to see themselves and all their sickly characteristics as "good." Also see master morality.

**Master morality**  -  The morality of the aristocratic, or noble, caste, who are rich, healthy, and cheerful. They celebrate themselves as "good," seeing in themselves everything that is noble. By contrast, they establish a distance between themselves and the poor, sick, unhappy slaves, seeing the slaves' lot as contemptible and "bad." Also see slave morality.

**Herd**  -  The name Nietzsche often gives to the common, mediocre masses. He sees them as herd animals, lacking any individual will and living by group instincts. Nietzsche often speaks of "herd morality" as the democratic will to render everyone equal in mediocrity.

**Free spirit**  -  Someone who has the flexibility of mind not to be caught up in any one point of view or dogma. A free spirit looks at the world from many different perspectives, uncovering the prejudices and assumptions that underlie any particular point of view.

**Good European {good Europeans, good European, *good Eurpoeans*}**  -  Nietzsche's ideal citizen of Europe, who rises above nationalist sentiments in order to assert a free spirited individuality. Nietzsche considers Goethe, Napoleon, and Stendhal, among others, to be "good Europeans."

**Self-overcoming**  -  According to Nietzsche, we are both creature and creator. We are both the animal with its instincts for cruelty and aggression and the overman with his self-made will and set of values. In order to become more noble, to approximate the overman, we must turn our animal instincts for cruelty against the creature in us. In a painful process of self-examination and inner struggle, we must make ourselves deeper and stronger. Nietzsche calls this self-punishment "self-overcoming."

**Overman**  -  Often also called the "superman," the overman is nowhere mentioned in *Beyond Good and Evil,* but he is alluded to in the commentary. The term is derived from ##*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*##, in which Nietzsche proclaims the overman as the end goal of humanity. The overman is someone who has so refined his will to power that he has freed himself from all outside influences and created his own values.

**Nihilism**  -  Literally, a belief in nothing. Nietzsche characterized his age as nihilistic, because of its unswerving faith in a science that describes the world as meaningless and under the sway of unchanging laws.

**Overall Analysis and Themes**

An understanding of Nietzsche's work as a whole relies on a solid grasp of his views on truth and language, and his metaphysics and conception of the will to power. At the very bottom of Nietzsche's philosophy lies the conviction that the universe is in a constant state of change, and his hatred and disparagement of almost any position can be traced back to that position's temptation to look at the universe as fixed in one place. Nietzsche is skeptical of both language and "truth" because they are liable to adopt a fixed perspective toward things.

Words, unlike thoughts, are fixed. Our thoughts can flow and change just as things in the universe flow and change, but a word, once uttered, cannot be changed. Because language has this tendency toward fixity, it expresses the world in terms of facts and things, which has led philosophers to think of the world as fixed rather than fluid. A world of rigid facts can be spoken about definitively, which is the source of our conception of truth and other absolutes, such as God and morality.

Nietzsche sees the facts and things of traditional philosophy as far from rigid, and subject to all sorts of shifts and changes. He is particularly brilliant in analyzing morality, showing how our concept of "good," for instance, has had opposite meanings at different times. The underlying force driving all change is will, according to Nietzsche. In specific, all drives boil down to a will to power, a drive for freedom and domination over other things. The concept of "good" has had different meanings over time because different wills have come to appropriate the concept. Meaning and interpretation are merely signs that a will is operating on a concept.

Because facts and things depend for their meaning on ever-shifting and struggling wills, there is no such thing as one correct or absolute viewpoint. Every viewpoint is the expression of some will or other. Rather than try to talk about the "truth," we should try to remain as flexible as possible, looking at matters from as many different perspectives as possible. Nietzsche's ideal "philosophy of the future" is one that is free enough to shift perspectives and overturn the "truths" and other dogmas of rigid thinking. Such philosophy would see moral concepts such as "good" and "evil" as merely surfaces that have no inherent meaning; such philosophy would thus move "beyond good and evil." Nietzsche's ideal philosophers would also turn their will to power inward, struggling constantly against themselves to overcome their own prejudices and assumptions.

Nietzsche's unorthodox views on truth can help to explain his unusual style. Though we can follow trains of thought and make connections along the way, there is no single, linear argument that runs through the book. Because Nietzsche does not see the truth as a simple, two-dimensional picture, he cannot represent it accurately with a simple linear sketch. Nietzsche sees the world as complex and three-dimensional: more like a hologram than a two-dimensional picture. And just as a hologram is a three-dimensional image made up of infinitesimal two- dimensional fragments, each approximating the whole, Nietzsche presents his worldview in a series of two-dimensional aphorisms, each approximating a more complex worldview. *Beyond Good and Evil* is Nietzsche's perspectivism in practice: we can read every aphorism as one different perspective from which to look at Nietzsche's philosophy. There is some sort of line we can trace, moving from perspective to perspective, but essentially we end up with Nietzsche's philosophy in 9 big pieces and 296 smaller fragments. In this way, Nietzsche attempts to find the expression of his thoughts in language that best preserves their fluidity and three-dimensionality.

## Preface

 Summary

Nietzsche opens with the provocative question: "Supposing truth is a woman--what then?" The dogmatism of most philosophers, Nietzsche suggests, is a very clumsy way of trying to win a woman's heart. At this time, no dogmatism seems wholly satisfactory and philosophy has yet to conquer the truth.

While dogmatism bumbles along in all seriousness, earnest of its purpose, Nietzsche suggests that the foundations of all dogmatism are based on childish superstitions or prejudices. He cites as examples the "soul superstition" which remains even in atheistic philosophy as the "subject and ego superstition" as well as seductions of grammar, or gross generalizations based on a narrow set of facts.

Dogmatism has been responsible for ##Plato##'s ideals of pure spirit and the Form of the Good which Nietzsche calls "the worst, most durable, and most dangerous of errors so far," and he also indicts Christianity as "Platonism for 'the people.'" However, the struggle against this dogmatism has created a tension in the spirit of modern Europe, and, Nietzsche suggests, "with so tense a bow we can now shoot for the most distant goals." He accuses Jesuits and democrats of trying to ease this tension rather than feeling it as a need, a means to a goal. This "magnificent tension" is valued by the kind of people Nietzsche values: "good Europeans and free, very free spirits."

### Commentary

Nietzsche's association of philosophy with dogmatism was more apt in his day than in ours, but to his credit, he is in part responsible for philosophy's renunciation of dogmatism. Nineteenth- century German philosophy was particularly rife with "system" philosophers--the greatest of which was ##Hegel##--who developed from a few basic principles vast, complex systems that were supposed to provide complete and thorough explanations of the human experience. Because this was the philosophical mood of his day, we should not be surprised that Nietzsche was inclined to see the entire history of philosophy in the systematic terms in which his contemporaries interpreted it.

In particular, Plato is far from being a dogmatist in many senses, though many persistently try to read him as such. As a result, Plato's influence has largely been propagated according to dogmatic readings. The reading of Plato that Nietzsche associates with dogmatism interprets Plato as saying that the world of the senses is illusory, and that truth and reality reside in invisible, eternal, and unchanging Forms that underlie and animate the less real material objects that we perceive. This Plato, who had a tremendous influence on Christianity, suggests that our bodies are only temporary, physical things, but that we have a pure spirit, or soul, that is immortal and which animates us. Plato also posits the Form of the Good as being the highest of all Forms, that which is the ultimate ground for all reality. As a result, our task as human beings is to pursue and approximate the Form of the Good, and this task is essentially what all morality is based upon.

Nietzsche identifies dogmatism in this belief in the "pure spirit" and the Form of the Good. These beliefs are dogmatic to Nietzsche because they serve as foundations that do not themselves admit of criticism. According to the popular reading of Plato, the Form of the Good is the anchor for the rest of the Platonic "system" of philosophy. If we can believe in the Form of the Good as an absolute, everything else follows from it. Similarly, belief in the absoluteness and eternality of the pure spirit within us allows for a number of inferences about human nature, human society, and human morality.

Dogmatism, to Nietzsche, is taking any claim as an absolute truth that does not need to be justified. While philosophers claim to base everything in reason and to take nothing on faith, Nietzsche argues ultimately that all philosophy is grounded on some leap of faith. It is logically impossible to create a system where every claim in the system is justified by another part of the system. If we see a system as a building, where every block has to rest upon another block, we ultimately must arrive at the foundation blocks upon which all the other blocks rest. Philosophers generally take the foundations of their systems to be very simple and indubitable truths. Nietzsche, on the other hand, takes these foundations to be childish superstitions and prejudices. Nietzsche operates on the maxim that a claim taken as obviously true is really just based in assumptions so deep that we no longer recognize them as assumptions.

Nietzsche is often difficult to understand because he argues against anything that parades itself as an absolute truth, and our thinking is so influenced by a belief in absolutes that it is often difficult to take Nietzsche at face value. His position, which has been called "perspectivism," insists that there are not absolute truths, but only different and equally valid perspectives with which we can look at the truth. We might think of truth as of a sculpture: by looking at it from only one side, we don't understand or appreciate the whole sculpture. Only by walking around it and looking at it from all different angles can we properly appreciate it.

Nietzsche's main objection to Platonism is that it fixes our perspective, saying "there is only one truth and it must be looked at in this way." Such an insistence paralyzes our understanding and makes it impossible for us to reason freely. Nietzsche's ideal of "free spirits" is of people who do not allow themselves to be tied down to any one perspective, dogmatism, or faith.

The themes outlined in this preface serve to introduce the frame of mind with which the rest of the book must be approached. Nietzsche is essentially saying: "check all your assumptions at the door. I will not accept any objections that are based on any kind of dogmatism."