German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), a fierce critic of Christianity, also rejected much of traditional philosophy—including its style. His works are, for the most part, pastiches of aphorisms, stand-alone paragraphs and brief essays. Arguments often emerge over the course of a work or even several works. Nietzsche’s father and grandfathers were Lutheran pastors; one grandfather was a noted scholar of Christianity. But his father and younger brother died when Nietzsche was only four. Nietzsche himself suffered ill health for much of his life, suffering migraine headaches and stomach ailments, chest injuries from being thrown from a horse at twenty-three and, just three years later, catching diphtheria and dysentery while serving as a hospital attendant during the Franco-Prussian War. He became professor of classical philology at the University of Basel in Switzerland at twenty-four, but had to resign at thirty-five because of his failing health. He spent the last eleven years of his life incapacitated by mental illness.

Nietzsche’s unusual style and hostility to philosophical system-building make it difficult to summarize his thought. Some of his themes—especially his attack on Kant’s things-in-themselves and his version of relativism, often known as perspectivism—appear in a relatively early book, *Human, All Too Human*. His most characteristic theses emerge in the works of his middle period: *Beyond Good and Evil*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *The Genealogy of Morals*, and *The Cheerful Science* (usually translated *The Gay Science* or *Joyful Wisdom*). The last is famous for Nietzsche’s pronouncement that God is dead.

To understand what Nietzsche meant by that startling proclamation, contrast Nietzsche’s position with that of Hegel. Hegel tells the story of Spirit progressing through stages, coming to self-consciousness and ultimately realizing Absolute Knowledge. Though interpreters of Hegel differ, it is tempting to identify Hegel’s Absolute with God, and the state of Absolute Knowledge as unity with the mind of God. Nietzsche rejects not only the existence of God, as defended by Christianity and other religions, but also an Absolute and the possibility of Absolute Knowledge in any sense. He embraces Hegel’s historicism; our thought is indeed relative to the particular historical epoch in which we find ourselves. But he rejects Hegel’s identification of constant, dynamic principles governing the unfolding of human thought. The progression of human thought, Nietzsche contends, is not reducible to principles of logic or rationality, dynamic or otherwise. Indeed, it is to a large extent irrational, driven by a will to power and other factors. There is no reason to expect that it will reach some ideal fixed point of complete knowledge. In fact, there is no reason to expect it to progress at all.
Human thought sometimes advances, sometimes retreats, sometimes bogs down, and sometimes detours.

Hegel and Peirce have confidence in rational thought and in scientific method in particular. Nietzsche sometimes seems to view his own thought as scientific. But he urges us to think of science not as an earnest inquiry into the truth or even a process of self-criticism but rather a cheerful, playful enterprise of developing new ways of seeing, interpreting, and understanding the world. Science is not a tool for deciding between rival perspectives; there is no way to do that but to live them.

0.1 Friedrich Nietzsche, from Human, All Too Human

Source: Friedrich Nietzsche, Menschliches, Allzumenschliches, 1878. Translated by Daniel Bonevac. Copyright © 2008 by Daniel Bonevac.

Of the first and last things

1. The chemistry of concepts and sensations. Nearly all philosophical problems once again raise the same form of question as they did two thousand years ago: How can something develop from its opposite—for example, reason from the unreasonable, feeling from the dead, logic from the illogical, disinterested gaze from covetous wanting, altruism from egoism, truth from error? Metaphysical philosophy overcame this difficulty by denying the emergence of one from the other and accepting for the more highly valued things a miraculous origin in the core and nature of the “thing in itself.” Historical philosophy, in contrast, which no longer should be thought separate from the natural sciences—youngest of all philosophical methods—has discovered in individual cases (and probably will discover in all to come) that there are no opposites, except in the exaggeration of popular or metaphysical views, and that a mistake of reason underlies this confrontation. According to this explanation there is, strictly speaking, neither altruistic action nor a completely disinterested gaze. Both are only sublimations, whose basic elements appear nearly to have evaporated and can be seen only with the finest observation. Everything that we need and which can be given to us only now that the individual sciences have reached their present height, is a chemistry of the moral, religious, and aesthetic conceptions and sensations—likewise all the agitations we experience in the large and small traffic of culture and society, and even in isolation. What if this chemistry would reveal that in these areas too the most glorious colors arise from low, despised materials? How many will desire to pursue such investigations? Mankind loves to put questions of origins and beginnings out of its mind: doesn’t one almost have to be inhuman to feel in oneself the opposite inclination?

2. The hereditary error of the philosophers.—All philosophers have the common failing that they proceed from men as they are and think that they can reach their goal by an analysis of them. They automatically think of man as an aeterna veritas (eternal truth), as a constant in the flux, as a safe measure of things to come. Everything that philosophers say about man is no longer fundamental, but tells us something about the men of a very limited period of time. Lack of historical sense is the hereditary error of all philosophers. Some even take, without being aware of it, the most recent organization of humans developed under the impress of certain religions or even political
events as the fixed form from which one must proceed. They do not want to learn that humans became what they are and that their cognitive ability also became what it is. Some of them, like spiders, even spin the whole world from this cognitive ability itself. Everything essential to human development took place in primeval times, a long time before those four thousand years, more or less, that we know about; in these humans may not have changed much. There, however, the philosopher sees "Instinct" in man as he is and assumes that these are among the constant facts of humanity and can deliver the key to understanding the world in general. The whole of teleology is built on talking about man of the last four millenia as eternal, to which all things in the world have had a natural direction from the beginning. Everything, however, became what it is. There are no eternal facts. There are no absolute truths. Therefore what is needed from now on is historical philosophizing and with it the virtue of modesty.

3. Estimation of inconspicuous truths.—It is the characteristic of a higher culture to value the small inconspicuous truths found by means of a rigorous method more highly than the felicitous and dazzling errors metaphysical and artistic ages and men have handed down. At first one has scorn on his lips against the former, as if it could not equal the others: so modestly, simply, soberly, apparently dishearteningly they stand; so beautifully, splendidly, intoxicatingly, or even rapturously stand the others. But truths that are hard-won, certain, lasting, and fraught with consequence are nevertheless the higher; to hold to them is manly and indicates bravery, sobriety, and restraint. Not only the individual but all mankind will gradually be raised to this manliness, if finally men grow accustomed to value durable knowledge more highly and lose all faith in inspiration and seemingly miraculous communication of truths.

The admirers of forms, with their standard of the beautiful and the sublime, will certainly have good reason to scoff at first, as soon as esteem for the inconspicuous truths and the scientific spirit begin to rule, but only because either their eye was not yet opened to the attraction of the simplest form, or because men educated in that spirit are not completely and internally filled by it for a long time, so that they still copy thoughtless old forms (and badly, like it someone who no longer pays much attention). Formerly the mind did not have to think rigorously; its importance lay in the spinning of symbols and forms. That changed; the importance of the symbolic has become characteristic of low culture. As our arts become more intellectual, and our senses more spiritual, and as, for example, one now judges what sounds pleasant to the ear completely differently from one hundred years ago: thus also the forms of our life become ever more spiritual, to the eye of older times perhaps uglier, but only because it is not able to see how the realm of the internal, spiritual beauty itself continually deepens and extends and how a glance can mean more to us all now more then the most beautiful human body and sublime building.

5. Misinterpreting the dream.—Humans in the ages of raw primordial culture believed that, in a dream, they got to know a second material world; here is the origin of all metaphysics. Without the dream one would have found no cause for splitting the world in two. Also the dismantling of a person into soul and body is connected with the oldest view of the dream, as is the acceptance of a life of the soul, thus the origin of all faith in spirits, and probably also faith in God. "The dead live on, for they appear to the living in dreams": thus one concluded formerly, through many thousands of years.
6. *The spirit of science is powerful in the part, not the whole.*—The separate, smallest areas of science are treated purely objectively. The general, large sciences, in contrast, taken as a whole raise a question, a quite unobjective question, certainly: for what? to what use? Because of this concern for use, they, as a whole, become less impersonal than their parts. Now, in philosophy, the pinnacle of the pyramid of knowledge, the question of use is automatically raised, and each philosophy has the unconscious intention to ascribe to knowledge the highest use. For this reason all philosophies embrace so much high-flying metaphysics and such a shyness at the seemingly insignificant solutions of physics. The importance of knowledge for life should appear as large as possible. Here is the antagonism between particular scientific fields and philosophy. The latter wants, like art, to give life and action depth and meaning. Science first looks for knowledge and nothing else—whatever the consequences. Up to now, there have been no philosophers, under whose hands philosophy has not become an apology for knowledge. On this point, at least, each is an optimist in thinking that knowledge must be accorded the highest usefulness. They all are tyrannized by logic. And logic is by nature optimism.

7. *The troublemaker in science.*—Philosophy separated from science when it asked the question: what knowledge of the world and of life helps people lead the happiest lives? This happened in the Socratic schools. The point of view of happiness constricted the veins of scientific research—and it still does so today.

8. *Pneumatic explanation of nature.*—Metaphysics explains the writings of nature as it were pneumatically, as the church and its scholars formerly explained the Bible. It takes very much understanding of nature to use the same kind of explanatory art as the philologists created for all books: with the intention of understanding simply what the writing wants to say, but without catching a whiff of, or presupposing, a double sense. We have not completely overcome, however, bad explanatory art even in reference to books, and one encounters allegorical and mystical interpretation even in the best company. Thus it stands in reference to nature—in fact, even more badly.

9. *Metaphysical world.*—It is true, there could be a metaphysical world. The absolute possibility of it can hardly be resisted. We regard all things by means of the human head and cannot cut it off. The question remains, nevertheless, what of the world would still be there if one had cut it off. This is a purely scientific problem and not very likely to worry people. But everything so far that has made metaphysical assumptions valuable, frightful, delightful, is passion, error, and self-deception—the worst methods of attaining knowledge, not the very best, have taught us to believe in them. If one uncovers these methods as the foundation of all existing religions and metaphysical systems, one disproves them. The possibility still remains; but one can do nothing at all with it, let alone base happiness, welfare, and life on the spider-thread of such a possibility.—One could assert nothing at all about the metaphysical world, except as other—as another world, inaccessible and incomprehensible to us. It would be a thing with negative characteristics.—If the existence of such a world were well proven, then knowledge of it would nevertheless stand firmly as the most useless of all realizations: more useless than knowledge of the chemical analysis of water would be to the sailor in the midst of a storm.

10. *The harmlessness of metaphysics in the future.*—As soon as the emergence of religion, art and morality have been described so that one can explain them completely
without the acceptance of \textit{metaphysical interference} at the beginning and along the way, one no longer has the strongest interest in the purely theoretical problem of the “thing-in-itself” and “appearance.” For religion, art, and morality do not reach the “nature of the world in itself.” We are not in the realm of concepts; “notions” can carry us further. Fully at peace, we can leave to the physiology and ontogeny (developmental history) of organisms and terms the question of how our conception of the world differs so dramatically from the disclosed nature of the world.

16. \textit{Appearance and thing-in-itself}.—Philosophers put themselves before life and experience—before what they call the world of appearance—as if before a painting, which once and for all unfurls and constantly shows the same event. One must interpret this event correctly, they think, to draw any conclusion about the way in which the painting was brought about. They thus maintain the thing-in-itself as sufficient reason for the world of appearance. Against this, more rigorous logicians, after defining the metaphysical world sharply as the absolute one, have unbendingly determined each connection between the absolute world (the metaphysical world) and the world of appearance: so that in appearance the thing-in-itself does not appear at all, and any conclusion from one to the other is to be rejected. Both sides, however, ignore the possibility that the painting, which we now call life and experience, has become and is still completely in process of becoming, and so is not to be regarded as a fixed magnitude from which one might draw or even reject a conclusion concerning its author. Because we looked at the world for thousands of years with moral, aesthetic, religious demands, with blind inclination, passion, or fear, and abandoned ourselves to the bad habits of illogical thinking, this world has gradually become so wondrously multicolored, terrible, meaningful, soulful, that it has taken on color—but we have been the colorists. The human intellect projected its errors as appearances and its basic assumptions into things. Late, very late, does it deliberate. Now the world of experience and the thing-in-itself seem so extraordinarily different and separate that it rejects conclusions about one from the other, or, in an unearthly, secret way, asks us to give up our intellects, our personal wills, in order to come to the essence of things by clinging to what is essential. Others have collected all the characteristic features of our world of appearances—our inherited conception of the world spun out of intellectual errors—and instead of accusing the intellect, have blamed the nature of things for causing these hard facts, this very uncanny character of the world, and preached its release.

The constant and laborious progress of science, which will finally celebrate its highest triumph in a \textit{history of the development of thought}, will end all these views decisively. It might conclude with this proposition: What we call now the world is the result of a number of errors and fantasies, which have gradually developed throughout the whole evolution of organic nature, have intertwined with one another, and are now left to us as the cumulative treasure of the entire past—as treasure, because the value of our humanity rests on it. From this conceptual world rigorous science can actually free us only in small measure—a fact we hardly wish—to the extent that it cannot substantially break the force of age-old habits of feeling. But it can gradually, bit-by-bit, clear up the history of the emergence of that conceptual world, and advance us at least for a moment above the whole process. Perhaps we will recognize then that the thing-in-itself is actually worthy of Homeric laughter: that it seemed to be so much, everything, and is actually empty, i.e., empty of meaning.
17. Metaphysical explanations.—Young people appreciate metaphysical explanations, because they exhibit something most significant in things found unpleasant or contemptible. If they are dissatisfied with themselves, then this feeling is facilitated if they recognize in what they so greatly disapprove the deepest riddle or misery of the world. And they feel less responsible for things, which are at the same time more interesting. That is the double blessing of metaphysics. Later, certainly, they grow to distrust the whole metaphysical kind of explanation. Perhaps then they see that those effects can be attained in another way, just as well and more scientifically. Physical and historical explanations cause at least as much of that very feeling of irresponsibility, and inflame their interest in life and its problems perhaps even more.

0.2 Friedrich Nietzsche, from The Cheerful Science


108. New struggles.—After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave—a tremendous, shiver-inducing shadow. God is dead; but given humans as they are, there may be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow is shown.—And we—we still have to defeat his shadow!

124. In the horizon of the infinite.—We have left the land and gone to sea! We have burned the bridge behind us—even more, we have destroyed the land behind us! Now, ship, look out! Look ahead! Beside you lies the Ocean. To be sure, it does not always roar, and every now and then it lies there, like silk and gold and a fantasy of grace. But hours will come when you will recognize that it is infinite and that there is nothing more terrible than infinity. Oh, the poor bird that felt free and now pushes against the walls of this cage! Woe, if homesickness for the land strikes you, as if there would have been more liberty there—and there is no longer any “land”!

125. The madman.—Have you not heard of that madman, who lit a lantern in the bright morning, ran to the market and cried incessantly: “I’m looking for God! I’m looking for God!”—As there were many who stood together there who did not believe in God, he excited much laughter. Is he lost? said one. Did he wander off like a child? said another. Or does he keep himself hidden? Is he afraid of us? Did he go to sea? emigrate?—in such a way they laughed and yelled in disorder. [Nietzsche here echoes Elijah taunting the priests of Ba’al, reported in 1 Kings 18:27.] The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his gaze. “Where is God?” he cried. “I will tell you! We killed him—you and I! We all are his murderers! But how did we do it? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon? What did we do, when we loosed this earth from its sun? Where does it move now? Where do we move? Away from all suns? Don’t we continually fall? And backwards, sideways, forward, in all directions? Is there still such a thing as up or down? Don’t we wander as through an infinite nothing? Don’t we feel the breath of empty space? Didn’t it become colder? Doesn’t night follow night? Don’t lanterns have to be lit in the morning? Do we still hear nothing of the noise of the gravediggers who bury God? Do we still smell nothing from the divine decay?—for gods too decay! God is dead! God remains dead! And we killed him! How can we
comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? The holiest and most powerful one
the world possessed bled to death under our knives—who will wipe this blood off us?
With what water could we clean ourselves? What ceremonies of atonement, what holy
games must we invent? Isn’t the size of this deed too large for us? Don’t we have to
become gods just to appear worthy of it? There was never a larger deed—and whoever
is born after us will belong to a higher History than all history so far!”—Here the
madman fell silent and gazed at his listeners again. They too were silent and looked at
him in astonishment. Finally he threw his lantern on the ground. It broke into pieces
and went out. “I come too early,” he said then, “It is not yet time. This tremendous
course of events is still on its way. It has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and
thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds require time, even after
they are done, in order to be seen and heard. This deed is more distant than the furthest
stars—and yet they have done it themselves!”—It is said that the madman that same
day forced his way into different churches and therein intoned his Requiem aeternam
deo [eternal rest to God]. Led out and called to account, he answered in each case:
“What are these churches, if they are not the tombs and crypts of God?”

179. Thoughts.—Thoughts are the shadows of our feelings—always darker, emp-
tier, simpler.

269. What do you believe?—This: that the weights of all things must be determined
afresh.

270. What does your conscience say?—“You are to become the person you are.”