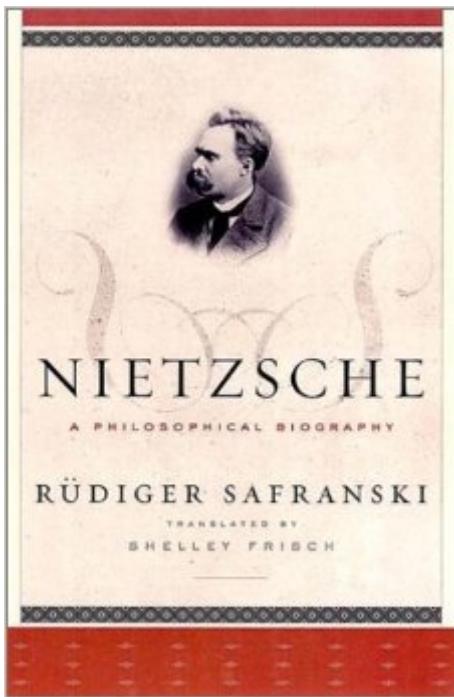


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Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography



Synopsis

A look at the life and work of the influential philosopher reveals his anguished existence and assesses the philosophical connotations of his morality, religion, and art.

Book Information

Hardcover: 418 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company; 1st edition (December 3, 2001)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0393050084

ISBN-13: 978-0393050080

Product Dimensions: 9.6 x 6.4 x 1.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.6 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (18 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #995,185 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #660 inÂ Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Professionals & Academics > Philosophers #2503 inÂ Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Modern

Customer Reviews

I would imagine that one of the toughest subjects for an author today would be Friedrich Nietzsche. Not so much in terms of difficulty, but in terms of previous output. There have been quite a few, to say the least, books on Nietzsche over the past few years. They seem to have left no stone unturned in their quest for material. There have appeared books on almost every aspect of Nietzsche's philosophy and life: Nietzsche as a young man, the later Nietzsche, Nietzsche and the Jews, Nietzsche's last days, Nietzsche and the Nazis, Nietzsche's influence on the French, English, the young, modern thought, what have you. There have even been biographies of Nietzsche's friends and family members. Where else is there left to go? It would seem that the vein of Nietzsche studies has been tapped dry. Rudiger Safranski has managed to put an new and entertaining spin on things by giving the reader a philosophical biography of Nietzsche, focusing on the development of Nietzsche's ideas rather than his life. Rather than asking how Nietzsche's relationship with the Wagners affected his later life, Safranski asks how the relationship affected the development of Nietzsche's later ideas; which were developed, which were jettisoned and which would later emerge because of the realtionship. Safranski's thesis is backed, as usual, with clear, concise writing free of the stifling style and jargon that has come to dominate Nietzschean studies. Safranski's style reminds one of Walter Kaufmann in the respect that he is writing for an intelligent public rather than

fellow academics or students for whom this tome would be a required, and expensive textbook. If you want a straightforward exposition of Nietzsche or just want to get to know this elusive philosopher better, you can't do better yourself than this book.

"I mistrust all systematizers and I avoid them. The will to a system is a lack of integrity."--Nietzsche, Aphorism #26 of "Maxims and Arrows," in TWILIGHT OF THE IDOLS (translated by Walter Kaufmann). Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900) thought of his philosophical adventures as the explorations of a "Columbus of the spirit," a thinker who was an "attempter" or "experimenter" in the realms of wisdom and knowledge. He circled around and around a problem, seeking to gain perspectives on the "truth," boldly venturing into uncharted regions of a wild and restless sea "where there be dragons." Although one finds certain key ideas in Nietzsche's philosophy--the death of God, the Übermensch (overman), the eternal recurrence of the same, master morality vs. slave morality, and the will to power--one should not expect to find in his works a dogmatic system. The "will to a system," he said, "is a lack of integrity." One cannot, nor should one try, to wrap the "world" (the universe or cosmos) in a neat rational package tied with the bow of certainty. Whoever claims to have done so is pathetically self-deceived. In NIETZSCHE: A PHILOSOPHICAL BIOGRAPHY, Ruediger Safranski has written the most engaging exposition of the development of Nietzsche's thought since the late Walter Kaufmann's NIETZSCHE: PHILOSOPHER, PSYCHOLOGIST, ANTICHRIST (1950; Fourth Edition, 1974). Born in Germany in 1945, Safranski is one of the most renowned scholars of German philosophy in the world. His previous books include SCHOPENHAUER AND THE WILD YEARS OF PHILOSOPHY (1991) and MARTIN HEIDEGGER: BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL (1998).

I was at first enthusiastic about Safranski's literate and flowing biography of Nietzsche, but became increasingly dissatisfied with it as I went along. The fundamental problem is that Safranski grants himself the liberties of a literary stylist while tackling the explanation of difficult philosophical texts. This strategy is hardly unusual in European philosophy but will create problems for the empirically minded American reader. The crux is Safranski's weakness for muddling citation with interpretation. He typically begins and ends a two or three paragraph passage with a definite quotation or reference, but in between spins out an interpretative elaboration in which the distinction between what Nietzsche wrote and what Safranski believes Nietzsche meant is completely blurred. Thus, Nietzsche is directly quoted as wanting to "move human knowledge forward" at the top of p. 157, and at the bottom of the page as believing that "myths ... now struck him as mystifications that would

need to be combatted." but that claim is unreferenced. where did nietzsche write that? or is that safranski's inference from several passages, and if so, which ones?safranski's expositions of background material often lack gist, mostly because he prefers to talk in generalities or abstractions rather than specifics. it's interesting to learn of the precedents in max stirner's philosophy (pp.125-131), but we don't get a clear statement of what stirner advocated. we're airily told that stirner was a "radical nominalist" and believed "thinking is creativity", not that he repudiated all social norms and most social relations -- including marriage and keeping promises, and even keeping promises to oneself.

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