



## **#71 Nietzsche and Psychology: How To Become Who You Are**

In 1888, a few months before the end of his most prolific, and final period of writing, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in *Ecce Homo*:

“That a psychologist without equal speaks from my writings – this is perhaps the first insight gained by a good reader.” (*Ecce Homo*)

Nietzsche viewed himself as the first psychologist amongst the great philosophers, writing:

“Who among the philosophers before me was in any way a psychologist? Before me there simply was no psychology” (*Ecce Homo*)

Given that Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Alfred Adler, three giants of 20th century psychology, were all heavily influenced by Nietzsche’s psychological insights, his grandiose self-assessment seems to have contained at least a kernel of truth.

Nietzsche’s psychological investigations were not conducted for the sake of disinterested theoretical speculation; as in his eyes, knowledge should always be sought first and foremost for the purpose of energizing life. In his essay *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, he quoted Goethe:

“I hate everything that merely instructs me without augmenting or directly invigorating my activities.” (Goethe)

Nietzsche undertook his psychological ventures for the sake of discovering how to fulfill the maxim which formed the subtitle of his autobiography *Ecce Homo* – “How One Becomes What One Is”. In the *Gay Science*, Nietzsche echoed this idea:

“What does your conscience say? – ‘You shall become the person you are’.” (*The Gay Science*)



In this video we will shed light on what it means to “become who you are” and in the process explore some of Nietzsche’s fascinating psychological insights.

Countless philosophers have attempted to understand the human mind, discern its tendencies, biases, potentials, nature, and origin. But Nietzsche claimed that all those before him were blinded in their psychological ventures by an unquestioned acceptance of not only the socially prevailing beliefs and moral standards, but more significantly, by a fear of exploring the depths within themselves. In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche explained:

“All psychology so far has got hung up on moral prejudices and fears: it has not dared to descend into the depths.” (*Beyond Good and Evil*)

Nietzsche conceived the psyche as constituted by multidimensional layers and possessing a complexity which renders total and complete knowledge of it an impossibility. Heraclitus, the Presocratic Greek philosopher whose aphorisms exerted a heavy influence on the development of Nietzsche’s ideas, captured the complex quality of the psyche:

“If you went in search of it, you would not find the boundaries of the soul [psyche], though you traveled every road – so deep is its measure [logos].” (Heraclitus)

“How can the human being know itself? It is a thing dark and veiled; and if the hare has seven skins, the human can slough off seventy times seven and still not be able to say, ‘Now that is what you really are, that is no longer outer shell.’” (*Untimely Meditations III*)

Most individuals, fearing the complex depths within, remain at the superficial and surface layer of their psyche, “industriously mindful of their common comedy and not at all of themselves.” (*Untimely Meditations III*) Not one to follow the crowd, Nietzsche took an opposing approach:

“I undertook something that not everyone may undertake: I descended into the depths, I bored into the foundations.” (*Dawn of Morning*)



A fear of descending into the depths of one's psyche is not unfounded, which is why it is "something that not everyone may undertake". For those who lack sufficient courage and are ungifted in psychological investigations, a voluntary descent into the inner foundations of one's mind could engender temporary, or in rare cases, permanent, madness. Writing of the dangers which confront the "adventurer and circumnavigator of that inner world called 'human being'", Nietzsche wrote:

"He enters a labyrinth, and multiplies a thousandfold the dangers that life in itself brings with it – of which not the least is that nobody can see how and where he loses his way, becomes solitary, and is torn to pieces by some cave-minotaur of conscience." (Beyond Good and Evil)

While exploring the depths within may be a foolish danger for the many, it is a necessary endeavor for the few. The psyche of a small minority of individuals, in comparison with that of the overwhelming mass, is constituted by both greater depths and a higher degree of turmoil. To ensure they are not torn asunder by the contradictions, conflicts, and abysses within, such individuals are driven inward to explore and impose order on their psyche – fashioning and sculpting themselves into a "harmonious totality".

Nietzsche presented Goethe as the exemplary individual who was able to impose form on his inner chaos. Describing Goethe, Nietzsche wrote:

"What he wanted was totality...he disciplined himself to wholeness, he created himself." (Twilight of the Idols)

To create oneself does not mean to form oneself out of nothing. As humans, we cannot, as some falsely claim, be fashioned in any way we please. Each of us, according to Nietzsche, has a deep and abiding nature which places definite set limits on who and what we can become.

"At the bottom of us, really "deep down," there is, of course, something unteachable, some granite of spiritual fatum [personal fate or destiny], of predetermined decision and answer to predetermined selected questions.



Whenever a cardinal problem is at stake, there speaks an unchangeable “this is I.”  
(Beyond Good and Evil)

Our nature is sculpted not only by early personal life experiences and the traits and dispositions inherited from our ancestors, but also, according to Nietzsche, by historical forces. The traditions and “experiments” of past cultures continue to live on within us, influencing our life and experience from the deeper layers of our psyche.

“The past of every form and way of life, of cultures that formerly lay right next to or on top of each other, now...flows into us “modern souls”; our drives now run back everywhere; we ourselves are a kind of chaos.” (Beyond Good and Evil)

Given that the “the past of every form and way of life” continues to live on in us, Nietzsche proposed we need to engage in an active exploration of history, if we are to attain self-knowledge.

“Direct self observation is not nearly sufficient for us to know ourselves: we need history, for the past flows on within us in a hundred waves.”(Human All Too Human)

Just as the past continues to live on in modern cultures, embodied in myths, traditions, and institutions, so too our psyche has been shaped and sculpted by past ages.

The tendency of the modern individual to feel he has been arbitrarily thrown and abandoned into an absurd world is the direct result of lacking what Nietzsche called a “historical sense” – of having no conscious connection to the past, and therefore failing to dig one’s roots through the strata of history.

In an early essay titled On the Use and Abuse of History for Life, Nietzsche contrasted “the condition of a people which has lost faith in its ancient history and has fallen into a restless...and a constant search for novelty after novelty”, with the individual who has cultivated a “historical sense”, and attained “the sense of well being of a tree for its roots, the happiness to know oneself in a



manner not entirely arbitrary and accidental, but as someone who has grown out of a past, as an heir, flower, and fruit.”

But it is not only the cultures of past millennia which continue to live on within us. For in the deeper layers of our psyche exist prehistorical drives and impulses. Just as our body contains relics of earlier developmental stages, stretching back even to the reptilian age, so too our psyche contains within its depths primitive drives which stretch back into the prehistory of humanity and animality.

Every human being, no matter how civilized and developed on the surface, is still an animal and archaic man within the depths of his being.

“I have discovered for myself that ancient humanity and animality, indeed the entire primal age and past of all sentient being continues in me to create, to love, to hate, to infer.” (The Gay Science)

In these uncivilized layers reside what Zarathustra called “the beast within” – potentially destructive inclinations which can overtake and possess the human being, such as the drive to aggression and unbridled sexual lust.

Instead of advocating for the repression of the beast within, Nietzsche recommended we explore and become familiar with these potentially destructive vestiges of the ancient past. Just as a raging river can be harnessed for its energy, so too the uncivilized layers of the psyche, if channeled and handled properly, can vitalize life.

“[The] most shortsighted and pernicious way of thinking wants to make the great sources of energy, those wild torrents of the soul that often stream forth so dangerously and overwhelmingly, dry up altogether, instead of taking their power into service and economizing it.” (Nietzsche)

But it is not only destructive drives and impulses which reside in the prehistoric layers of our psyche; there also exists what Nietzsche called the “divine animal” – ancient instincts, “regulating, unconscious and infallible drives” (On the Genealogy of Morality), which enabled our ancestors to survive and even flourish



in harsh and uncertain environments prior to the emergence of the modern form of consciousness.

The modern individual has all but lost touch with these ancient instincts. Relying solely on his consciousness, his “weakest and most fallible organ”, he stumbles blindly through life, oblivious that in the recesses of his mind are archaic helpers, which, if he knew how to harness them, could assist him in the many situations in life where consciousness fails.

Speaking of the modern individual, Nietzsche wrote:

“He has lost and destroyed his instinct, and can no longer trust the “divine animal” and let go the reins when his understanding falters and his way leads through deserts.” (Untimely Meditations II)

The presence of historical, prehistorical, and animal drives has contributed to the existence of an “abundance of contrary drives and impulses” within us – “we ourselves are a kind of chaos”, as Nietzsche put it. In contrast to other philosophers who have posited the human mind to be above all something unitary, Nietzsche radically proclaimed it to be a multiplicity, an aggregation of intertwined psychological entities.

“The most general picture of our essence is an association of drives, with constant rivalry and particular alliances with each other.” (The Will to Power)

Conceptualizing the human psyche “as social structure of the drives and affects” – as a sort of city, in which numerous conflicting sub-personalities simultaneously live – the task Nietzsche set for himself, and his readers, was to harmonize the “abundance of contrary drives and impulses”, and provide coordination to the plethora of competing forces within.

He proposed that such coordination can be attained via the agency of an “organizing idea”, or “ruling passion” – a dominant “master” drive that forms the “living centre” of the psyche, and co-opts all the other drives to act in subordination to its end. The organizing idea is not found through an act of will, but, possessing a type of intelligence of its own, reveals itself throughout the



course of one's life. One merely has to remain on the lookout for such a master drive, and not hinder its growth and activity.

“[T]he organizing “idea” that is destined to rule keeps growing deep down – it begins to command; slowly it leads us back from side roads and wrong roads; it prepares single qualities and fitnesses that will one day prove to be indispensable as means toward a whole – one by one, it trains all subservient capacities before giving any hint of the dominant task, “goal,” “aim,” or “meaning.”” (Ecce Homo)

The organizing idea, in other words, arranges the plethora of competing forces in one's psyche in a manner that allows one to strive with single minded devotion towards a heroic goal which gives meaning to life.

Nietzsche summarized the importance of the organizing idea in giving form to one's psyche in the following unpublished note:

“It is a myth to believe that we will find our authentic self after we have left behind or forgotten one thing or another...To make ourselves, to shape a form from various elements – that is the task! The task of a sculptor! Of a productive human being!” (Nietzsche)

Nietzsche's psychological insights are wide, varied, and always penetrating – a result of his ardent conviction that the psyche of modern man was in dire need of being dissected.

But despite his piercing observations, there are critics who claim his insights into the nature of the human mind are irrelevant because of the fact that at the young age of 44 he fell victim to a mental illness which remained with him until the end of his relatively short life. Ignoring the fact that his illness may have been of an organic origin, there are some who may ask: Why should anyone pay attention to ideas on how to “become who you are” from a man who went mad?

To respond to this question, we'll conclude with an eery passage from Nietzsche's unpublished notes, in which he seems to foreshadow the fate which would befall him later in life.



“There is a false saying: “How can someone who can’t save himself save others?”  
Supposing I have the key to your chains, why should your lock and my lock be the  
same?” (Nietzsche, KSA 10:4[4])