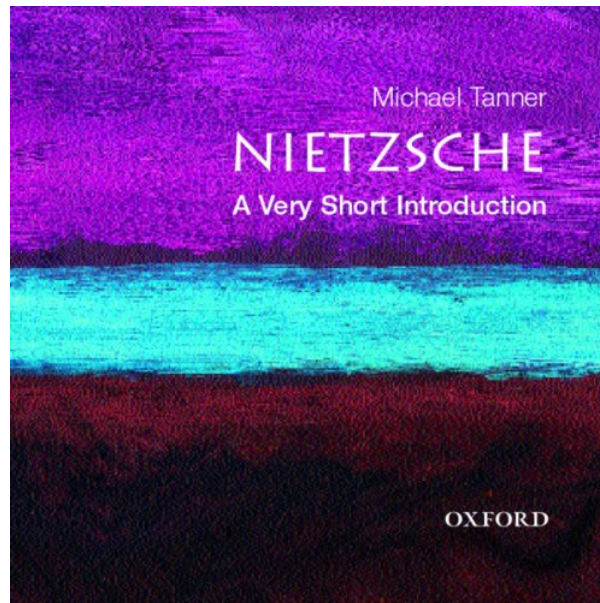
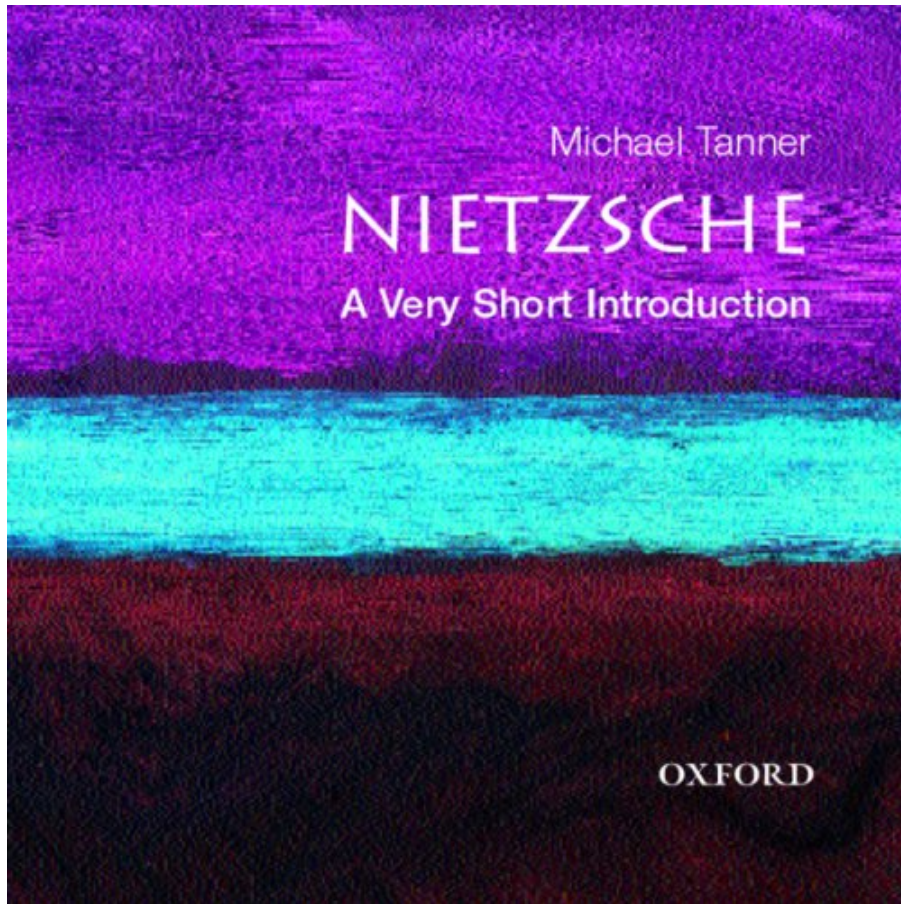


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With his well-known idiosyncrasies and aphoristic style, Friedrich Nietzsche is always bracing and provocative, and temptingly easy to dip into. Michael Tanner's introduction to the philosopher's life and work examines the numerous ambiguities inherent in his writings and explodes many of the misconceptions that have grown in the hundred years since Nietzsche wrote "do not, above all, confound me with what I am not!"

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The Will to Brevity...

By ewomack

No one can reasonably expect to sum up Nietzsche's views and philosophy in under 100 pages. The reader should not go into this work expecting to come out understanding Nietzsche, but maybe make him a little less obscure or receive a slight bit more context in which to read Nietzsche's books. For those who have already read some Nietzsche and are left nonplussed, this tiny book may help you out as well (it did me).

The book follows Nietzsche's publications more or less in chronological order. The longest and most difficult chapter is the one on "The Birth of Tragedy." This work gets the most attention of all of Nietzsche's works, presumably because it is easier to "sum up" or encapsulate than any of his other works. For instance, the section on "The Genealogy of Morals" will leave you wondering what the book is about (in fact, reading the book itself may also have this effect - it's a tad difficult).

"Morality and its Discontents" is one of the most illuminating chapters, and will shed some light on Nietzsche's proclamation that "God is dead" which is probably his most infamous and misunderstood concept (there's also a lot more meat to it than the eternal recurrence and the *Übermensch*, which Tanner points out).

Overall I agree with Tanner's assessment of Nietzsche's "Thus Spake Zarathustra." It was the first book of his I read, and I came out of the experience energized, but I had no idea why. "Zarathustra" is a passionate but potentially misleading read. It's nothing like his other works, and introduces concepts that never come up again, though they seem to be of utmost importance in the context of the book (i.e., the eternal recurrence, *Übermensch*, and the will to power - at least in his published works).

The pace of Tanner's book quickens and the delineation of Nietzsche's texts becomes more and more sparse towards the final few chapters. There is very little information about Nietzsche's insanity, or Lou Salomé or even the details of his life. The book is almost completely dedicated to Nietzsche's philosophy. In fact, the book ends as abruptly as Nietzsche's own sane life must have. There's a slight feeling of "so what's next?!?"

at the end of the last and shortest chapter that discusses the works of 1888 in a flash.

Nietzsche is a huge subject, and his books are thick conceptually if not physically. He was a thinker that wanted to teach us to think differently, which makes him a valuable read no matter what your stance on the views he covers. This minute book will help you peek through the keyhole of this enormous and overwhelming subject.

Lastly, Richard Wagner figures hugely in Nietzsche's work. Knowing more about Wagner will only elucidate some of Nietzsche's works and concepts. Tanner also supports this view.

15 of 15 people found the following review helpful.

Grandiloquent Slog

By Kevin L. Nenstiel

If, like me, you struggle with Nietzsche's almost self-consciously opaque writings, Michael Tanner would like to offer his services as a Virgil to guide you through this particular tangled wood. A noted Nietzsche scholar, Tanner's years of immersion in the field help dispell common myths that have accrued to the Great Man's name. But unfortunately, he often falls prey to the same limitations that make Nietzsche's own books such a tough slog.

Tanner starts with a brief overview of Nietzsche's life. Not much of one, though. Tanner demonstrates little interest in Nietzsche as a person, limiting such intrusions to where we absolutely need them to understand his subject's thoughts. Though I tend to see the producer and the product as a piece, Tanner would rather respect Nietzsche himself, who explicitly disagrees.

From there, Tanner moves through the canonical texts, mainly (though not exclusively) in chronological order. His in-depth analyses clarify at least the earliest texts. Tanner is remarkably forthright, pointing out contradictions and elisions that the author evidently missed or ignored in his own work. He even points out places where Nietzsche made points just one time in his early books, then took it for granted that we'd remember his intent for the rest of his career.

But as the subject matter gets more intense, Tanner's writing becomes more elliptical. He lapses into the same grandiloquent academese that makes Nietzsche such tough sledding for lay readers. I can't make heads or tails out of some passages, even after multiple readings. I suspect Tanner can't either, at least on the evidence of a particularly dense paragraph about halfway through, which Tanner concludes by essentially throwing his hands in the air and sighing, "That, at any rate, is how I understand it, and him."

Tanner has simplified certain points about Nietzsche for me. I now understand some of my own reading mistakes, not least my own desire to find through-lines which don't exist, and starting in later books without the prior assumptions Nietzsche expects me to bring from earlier texts. But in terms of actually understanding the conclusions and resolutions I ought to gain from the books, I'm only marginally wiser than when I started out. Perhaps I'm naive, but I expect "A Very Short Introduction" to be more introductory, and less jargon-rich, than this.

34 of 39 people found the following review helpful.

Interesting -- but not a good introduction for newcomers to Nietzsche

By Robert Moore

This brief book on Nietzsche contains many good things, though I'm pretty confident that it is not a very good introduction to his thought. Twenty years ago when I was studying philosophy in grad school I read through most of Nietzsche's works at one time or another and delved fairly deeply into the secondary literature. I picked this up as something of a refresher, but was quite surprised at what a poor job it did at explaining and summarizing what Nietzsche said and why he said it. The book's main interest comes from its analysis of where Nietzsche's thought fails to maintain coherence as well as some misunderstandings of his

thought by various scholars. The book is useful as a corrective and at pointing out where Nietzsche sometimes fails to make sense, but this is pretty far down the list of books that I would recommend as an introduction. As such, it is one of my least favorite of the books that I've read in Oxford's Very Short Introduction series.

Even if one thinks that much of what Nietzsche says, however important it may be despite that, ultimately fails to be coherent, it is essential before saying why what he says is wrong, to say as clearly as possible what it is that he does say. The problems become pretty early in the book. The summary of *THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY* is patchy and barely explains -- which is what one would expect in an introduction -- the contrast between the Dionysian and the Apollonian. Tanner nicely explains Nietzsche's idea that suffering is the central fact of human existence, but the content of many of his books is left something less than clear. Worst of all, Tanner -- despite in the final section of the book writing that he assumes that everyone will grasp how much he admires Nietzsche -- doesn't make clear why Nietzsche is important. He doesn't explain precisely why Nietzsche is regarded as one of the most important thinkers of the past two centuries.

In short, I do not think that this is a good first book for those wanting to explore Nietzsche's thought. The truth is that while there are several excellent books on Nietzsche, most of these are for people who are already familiar with at least some aspects of his work. There is one book that I would recommend as a first introduction, R. J. Hollingdale's intellectual biography. The problem with that one is that it is only available in a ridiculously high priced paperback (I own what was in the 1980s a very reasonably priced paperback). Hollingdale, Nietzsche's most important translator into English after Kaufmann, writes clearly and sympathetically about Nietzsche. Like Tanner I am not a fan of Walter Kaufmann's famous work on Nietzsche. Like Tanner I am a big fan of Alexander Nehamas's book, but it is definitely not an introductory work. Possibly the best secondary work after Hollingdale to find a way into Nietzsche may be *THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO NIETZSCHE*. It is not any cheaper than the Hollingdale book, but it is a book not useful exclusively to beginners. I have not read Safranski's biography, but that is a book that I would investigate if I were a beginner. But perhaps the best approach is simply to plow through Nietzsche's books. I think what Tanner suggests about the best way to read *THE BIRTH OF TRAGEDY* holds true for most (though perhaps not for the late works written during his last year of sanity) of Nietzsche's books: read through quickly the first time to get a sense of the overall shape and form of the book. Then read it through slowly and carefully a second time. Nietzsche is a difficult thinker, not least because he is almost intentionally messy. He makes sudden and surprising transitions apparently unrelated to what has gone before and it is often difficult to grasp what he is talking about. Despite this, he is a brilliant writer, often writing breathtaking passages, with many unforgettable sentences. However one is introduced to his thought, he repays the effort.

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