

Nietzsche's concept  
of the ubermensch is  
a compelling vision of  
the future essay



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Frederich Nietzsche is a German philosopher who grapples directly with all the problems most central to contemporary civilization: the advancement of technology and its invasions of the human spirit; and the violation upon the individual by related forces, all acting to suppress and dampen the discovery of his own being. In popular culture, Nietzsche's notion of the ubermensch is one of his most memorable and significant ideals. However, the book in which the ubermensch is introduced, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra", is actually discussed rather little in the book. This essay will discuss why Nietzsche's concept of the ubermensch is such a compelling vision of human potential. As mentioned, Nietzsche deals with many of the crucial problems of contemporary life. Paramount among these issues is that of religion and, in particular, Christianity.

The idea of the ubermensch is summoned forth by Nietzsche under his notion that "God is Dead" (Nietzsche, 1967: 2). Christianity promised much (eternal salvation and happiness) and, like most promisers, redeemed little; consequently, civilisation is in a state of emotional depression, caused by the discrepancy between promise and performance. " (Rohatyn, 1977: 141) Because of the peculiar nature and character of the Christian brand of belief and mythology, the decline must pose a severe threat to the emotional health and well being of mankind. According to Nietzsche, most people, or "the herd" cannot live with the truth; they cannot accept it for what it is, and, if compelled to recognise it, it destroys their lives.

Nietzsche, 1967: 2) Christianity is not merely false; it is obsolete and outdated. But then what will replace it? And, if the majority are too weak to rely on their own intelligence, who will be strong enough to survive the

decline of one value system before we witness the universal advent of another? The question, then, is one of survival: who will survive the transition period between Christianity and that unknown, unnamed, 'X'? Clearly a new breed of individuals is required for this difficult and delicate task; a hardier race, emotionally and intellectually, than what the Earth has spawned or witnessed thus far. For this reason, the idea of the ubermensch is summoned forth by Nietzsche. Its introduction is explained by Nietzsche's own perception of the imminent dissolution of civilisation, as it is known, and the desire to assure a future for mankind during the chaotic and troublesome period that will inevitably follow upon Christianity's inescapable demise. When Zarathustra urges us to "break the old tablets" (Nietzsche, 1967: 200) he is not recommending vandalism, law-breaking, or even violence; he is pointing out that the old tablets have outlived their usefulness, and that, in the interim between their destruction and the universal adoption of new proposals, the minds of individuals must support and sustain themselves, both in general and with regard to their specific courses of action.

(Nietzsche, 1967: 200) In 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra' itself the idea of the ubermensch is presented as the idea that has come to Zarathustra during the ten years of solitude he has spent in a cave on a mountaintop. We learn in Zarathustra's Preface that he has retreated to this cave bearing the ashes of his dead god and of the faith that has guided and sustained him. He returns to the world of men, because he loves man, or as he hastily corrects himself, because he brings man a gift. As we soon discover, this rectification is critical, because Zarathustra does not love man as he is, but man as he might become.

In fact, he despises man as he is, and his 'gift' is not intended to gratify human beings but to bring them to despise themselves by teaching them to love something higher than themselves." (Gillespie, 2005: 53) This gift and goal is the idea of the ubermensch. To Nietzsche, the ubermensch must be capable of creating his own values, and of clinging to them ferociously and without uncertainty. (Magnus & Higgins, 1996: 186) He must create his own worldviews, because the society around him is devoid of them. He is isolated, on his own, all by himself. Nietzsche in effect specifies four criteria, four qualifications that amount to the necessary and sufficient conditions for possession of the ubermensch state.

The four criteria may be labelled as follows; "creativity in valuation, pertinacity in belief and action, kindness toward inferiors, and respect for equals" (Rohatyn, 1977: 147). These four taken together define ubermensch and indicate, indirectly, to what extent historical specimens do, or fail to, live up to some or all the criteria offered. Warren states that Nietzsche intended to avoid a utopian view of future possibilities. (Warren, 1988: 2) This meant that he had to find the elements of a new culture contained in the present one. All real possibilities for cultural renewal must emerge from our specific situation in history.

Although Nietzsche claims many times in "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" that "man is something that must be overcome" (Nietzsche, 1967: 3), he never suggests that post-modern man, his ubermensch, would consist of anything that does not in some way exist in present man. Only a jester thinks that man can be skipped over." (Nietzsche, 1967: 4) This is why Nietzsche

labours to criticize Christian and modern ideals: they can be 'revalued' only  
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immanently to the practices they sustain. In Nietzsche's view, so pervasive were the effects of Christian moral culture that the ubermensch is merely imaginable for him, but not identifiable, in the aftermath of cultural dissolution.

(Warren, 1988: 141) Who, then, conceivably qualifies as ubermensch?

Socrates pre-eminently. Socrates cheated his own values - those of truth, unswerving intellectual rigor; and personal faith in his divine sign was part of his pertinacious opposition to the entire Athenian society, part too of his repeated attempts to elevate their standards to his level. " (Rohatyn, 1977: 103) The accusations that he corrupted the youth and did not believe in the gods of the society are in a certain sense just, for he was a law unto himself, and obeyed external standards of propriety only incidentally. Even in his decision to remain in jail and face death is unconventional, for he does not regard death as the worst fate that can befall a man, and refuses to escape in the cowardly manner that was customary for certain victims of political persecution of his time. (Gillespie, 2005: 3) His behaviour in the face of calamity, his refusal to compromise with his own principals, to accept exile, or to runaway from his (self-inflicted) legal punishment was all highly unnerving to the citizens around him. (Gillespie, 2005: 4) However close Socrates comes to fulfilling the Nitzschean ideal, in the end, he fails.

The Socratic conversations make failure to live up to Nietzsche's criterion, in particular the idea of ' kindness towards inferiors', all too abundantly evident.

" (Rohatyn, 1977: 105) So Socrates comes close, but is not an ubermensch, for he imposes on his inferiors in a way what Nietzsche is compelled to find distasteful and abhorrent. Jesus Christ, another ubermensch candidate fails  
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for similar reasons. He may indeed be tenacious, but it is doubtful whether “ in Nietzsche's eyes, he qualifies as original, inasmuch as his moral teachings allegedly embody the psychological culmination of the ‘ Jewish ethic. ’ ”

(Gillespie, 2005: 3) It is not at all clear whether the Son of God treats his inferiors, which means everyone, with kindness. His kindnesses are numerous, “ but his malicious glee at the prospect of his enemies getting their just desserts is chilling, and his one-upmanship with Peter as well as Pilate is both consistent and consistently appalling.

” (Rohatyn, 1977: 107) So then, who is Nietzsche's ubermensch? “ No-one. ”

(Nietzsche, 1967: 93) “ At a ceremony commemorating Germany's victory over Russia in the First World War, three books were placed in the

Tannenberg Memorial: Mein Kampf, Alfred Rosenberg's *Myth of the Twentieth Century*, and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. (Yablon, 2005: 744)

Nietzsche was by far the most prominent and respected philosopher utilised by the Nazis as a source and justification for their ideology.” It is not an

exaggeration to say that Nietzsche's work occupied a position of influence and authority in Nazi Germany not unlike that of Marx's work in the Soviet

Union. ” (Yablon, 2003: 740) It is tempting to say that the Nazis perverted the philosophy of Nietzsche, distorted many concepts, like the ubermensch,

so that they were vastly different from their original meaning, and simply ignored other Nietzschean concepts that were incompatible with Nazi

ideology. (Yablon, 2003: 739) In particular, they found his notion of the ubermensch a compelling vision of the future.

The ubermensch can be easily compared to the Nazis concept of the Aryan

race, a “ master race ” of people of northern European descent. However, the <https://assignbuster.com/nietzsches-concept-of-the-ubermensch-is-a-compelling-vision-of-the-future-essay/>

extreme and violent lengths to maintain the purity of this race through a far-reaching eugenics program defy most of the qualities that Nietzsche identifies in his ubermensch. (Yablon, 2003: 744) Nietzschean concepts provided a critical source and justification for many of the policies and reforms advocated in the Third Reich. It is worth noting that Nietzsche's thought largely stands opposed to Nazism. In particular, Nietzsche despised anti-Semitism and Nationalism, and took a dim view of German culture as it was in his time, and derided both state and populism. (Yablon, 2005: 745) He also far from being racist believed that the mixing with others could only increase the vigour of any population.

Yablon, 2005: 745) Nietzsche's concept of the ubermensch is a compelling vision of the future, but when Zarathustra gave the crowd in the marketplace a choice between the ubermensch and the last man, they chose the latter. And we, and the world in which we live are in a very real sense the products of such a choice. We recognise this fact and with it the banality of our lives. We are thus moved by Nietzsche's critique and his appeal for something higher and more meaningful than the bourgeois world we find ourselves in. In a strange way, we thus want the ubermensch, but we do not want him to disturb our comfortable lives. We want him as a kind of intellectual or cultural pleasure, but we do not want to pay Zarathustra's price.

Ultimately, the ubermensch is an empty category. There is no best, or ultimate human. There is only the ever-present possibility of a better human. Whatever the level of man at any given point in history, the possibility for greatness in a man exists, within and precisely because of that society.