

# Nietzsche and the superman

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The philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche has four themes: nihilism, morality, the will to power, and eternal recurrence. It is important to know and to understand first these themes so as to comprehend the value of Nietzsche proclaiming the struggle to be a superman.

Nietzsche perceives nihilism as the product of an accelerating corrosion of religious and cultural beliefs at the heart of European civilization at the end of the 19th century. Thinkers during the Enlightenment period, who uphold the supremacy of reason over faith, challenge supernatural truths, demanding explanations of the afterlife, the soul, and God that are amenable to human logic and the senses. This mode of thinking seriously challenges and influences to undermine the basic tenets of Christianity and European culture.

The statement of Nietzsche, “God is dead,” is the greatest expression of nihilism. From a viewpoint that God is non-existent, Nietzsche sees man’s life as characterized by an aimless relativity that is experienced by him in every sphere of reality - cultural, political, historical, and philosophical. God, considered to be a supreme value, no longer exists. When the highest values consequently become devalued or rejected, nihilism emerges. A case in point, if a supreme value is non-existent, what is there that serves as basis for the existence of things? Man is therefore incapacitated to arrive at certainty about knowledge of reality or of his world.

The highest values become devalued not in the sense that man knowingly confronts an eternal abyss in fear and trembling, but the highest values simply no longer exist. These values no longer exert influence. Man accepts

this event not with stoic resignation but in total unawareness (Magnus, 1978: 11). Man lives in a society, and is bound by its conventions. When he is born, given to him are his race or ethnicity, status, and role to fulfill in society. Man takes these things and lives his life according to these, often done unconsciously.

The second theme of Nietzsche's philosophy is the master and slave morality. The master morality is born out of higher qualities inherent in the greatest men. Moral judgments are made according to the qualities of the person and not to his actions. A noble statesman is always deemed good, someone who is worth emulating. On the one hand, slave morality is an almost unconscious condition that holds sway over the vast majority of men. The moral standard is that which is useful or beneficial for the many or for the community.

The noble statesman, who is deemed good by the standards of master morality, is judged as vile according to the standards of slave morality. Majority of men are suspicious of the leaders that rule over them, and are influenced not immediately because their actions but by their role of ruling over the majority. This value system is an unfortunate vestige of millennia-old social and religious systems, which perpetuate outdated and corrupt moral values such as humility, sympathy, and the like (Magnus, 1978).

Nihilism is a life without depth. It is a life of endless wandering, moreover with the fact that man is often unconscious of it. Man hence has to be made to see that this nihilism is the form of life that he has become. He has become a slave, who is one among the many. He must come to know that he

lives a passive nihilism, submitting to the fate of the many, and must overcome this, which is to become a master. He must overcome himself. Indeed to change man's nihilistic idea, he has to change his habitual way of viewing the world. He has to transform his way of understanding religions, moral behavior, language, and political and social institutions of which he is a part (Magnus, 1978: 12). This is where the superman of Nietzsche gains significance.

Since the highest values no longer exert influence, Nietzsche proclaims that men have to struggle to become the superman. The superman represents ascending to life, self-overcoming, self-possession, and is to be contrasted with decadence, decomposition, and weakness. As an idealized type, he represents the highest possible integration of intelligence, strength of character and will, autonomy, passion, taste and perhaps even of physical prowess (Magnus, 1978: 34).

The task of the superman is to become individuated in an extreme degree and thus to rise high above morality and the herd morality. Man has to question conventional truths that have been accepted by society, and for him to in fact rise above these truths. He has to formulate those high values for himself, and thus end his aimless wandering.

There are three steps that Nietzsche espouses in struggling to become a superman. In his book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche portrays this struggle as the metamorphoses of the camel, the lion, and the child. First is that one must exert a will to power which is demonstrated in that person's extinguishing of his nihilism and in a profound reevaluation of traditional

moral ideas and the creation of radical new concepts. For this to be realized, one has to be immersed as an active agent with the structure in which one finds himself. Referring to the camel, it submits to burdensome labor. It offers itself to be employed in order for society to attain its good. In doing this, the camel realizes itself and acknowledges its value in that society.

Upon realizing that one's value or worth is endowed by society instead of emanating from oneself, the will to power must also manifest itself destructively in the form of an abhorrence and total rejection of the moral and social ideas hitherto believed by mankind.

“ In the loneliest desert, however, the second metamorphoses occurs, here the spirit becomes a lion which would conquer its freedom and be master in its own desert. Here it seeks out its last master: it wants to fight and its last god; for ultimate victory it wants to fight with the great dragon.” (Nietzsche, 2006: 14)

Referring to the lion, it projects pride, strength, autonomy, and passion to assert and to distinguish itself among the many. It strives to dominate or to be above the rest.

“ My brothers, why is there a need in the spirit for the lion? ...to create new values...that is within the power of the lion. The creation of freedom for oneself and a sacred “ No” even to duty – for that my brothers the lion is needed.” (Nietzsche, 2006: 15)

Last is that one must perpetually involve himself in an act of self-overcoming. The will to power is a struggle both against oneself and other

men that have adhered to conventions in society. Referring to the child, he is free from internal constraints. He is emancipated from the cares of this world.

“...my brothers, what can the child do that even the lion could not do?...A child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred Yes. For the game of creation, my brothers, a sacred “ Yes” is needed: the spirit now wills its own will, and he who had been lost to the world now conquers his own world.” (Nietzsche, 2006: 15)

A child creates and possesses his own values and sees the world according to these values. To become a child, to have a freedom like his, this is man has to struggle for.

The last theme in Nietzsche’s philosophy is eternal recurrence. This is his central and most famous philosophical idea. This his conviction that at some time in the future another individual would be born with precisely the same thought-processes and experiences as himself. Furthermore, Nietzsche’s principle of love of fate is purely antithetical to religion: rather than live your life in preparation for such supernatural illusions as heaven, one must rather embrace this life and wish every feature and moment of it to be repeated forever, since only this life exist and none other. This idea may be horrifying and paralyzing for most people but it is a necessary conviction for the attainment of full individuation.

The struggle to become a superman arises from an external force, that is social structures, and from an internal force, that is emanating from the individual. Man is born free, yet he is situated in a massive and oppressive social structure, which limits and alienates his activities. He lives with a set of beliefs and values that influence his thoughts and actions. But are these beliefs and values that he adheres to are instilled consciously by him? Not all, and even most of these beliefs and values are already present when he was born. He is born in a family, baptized or inducted into a particular religion, taught with customs and traditions of his native place, bounded to the laws of his people or nation, and the like.

As he matures, he takes these beliefs and values into himself without much evaluation since these are what he got to grow up with and such are the conventions that his society got used to live with. He is born a peasant or a working class. He would be taught or trained to be a worker; would have a family and would pass his learning to his children. He would unfortunately die a peasant or a working class. This is what usually happens to man. This is the curse of the many.

Is man totally free then? The answer is that an individual has the capacity to go beyond the present, to move toward the future. Man has the capacity to choose and decide for himself. What he does ought to be determined by him and not by the social laws or larger social structures wherein he is situated. Though he lives in a society, he is not bounded by its conventions. Man has the prerogative for transcendence, the surpassing of the given.

Freedom however demands that man be responsible for it. It is simply to take the consequences of choice. People are free to choose for themselves or to decide for their lives. They are responsible for everything they do. They have no excuses for the outcomes of their choice. And that is the staggering responsibilities of freedom, which cause anguish to some while a source of optimism to those who see their fate in their hands.

The struggle to become a superman involves that anguish because due to the staggering responsibilities of freedom. Friedrich Nietzsche in his work, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, has wrote:

" The Superman is the meaning of the Earth. Let your will say: The Superman shall be the meaning of the Earth! I conjure you, my brethren, remain true to the Earth, and believe not those who speak unto you of super earthly hopes! Poisoners are they, whether they know it or not. Despisers of life are they, decaying ones and poisoned ones themselves, of whom the earth is weary: so away with them!" (Nietzsche, 2006: 4)

It is a challenge to question a universal system of thought that reveals what is true, right, beautiful, and so on that led to the closure of philosophy and the human sciences. It is to challenge convention.

" Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the Superman - a rope over an abyss. A dangerous crossing, a dangerous wayfaring, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous trembling and halting. I love him who lived in order to know, and seek to know in order that the Superman may hereafter live. Thus seek he his own down-going." (Nietzsche, 2006: 6)



Life is a theatre, and we are the actors. We can choose to play our own roles, and not be determined by the roles that are given to us by society. That is the Superman.

## **References**

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