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# The Unique One meets the Overhuman

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Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch* or overhuman is easily one of the most recognized ideas in his thought. However, it actually plays a small and somewhat vague role in the entirety of his philosophy. Nietzsche's definition and characterization of the overhuman is also very limited. The overhuman is discussed with any depth only in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

The overhuman is a problematic concept for understanding of Stirner and his influence, because it has been associated with the unique one. The same body of literature that intends to establish Stirner as Nietzsche's predecessor, also tends to see the overhuman as a poetic restatement of the unique one. In addition, a significant number of the scholars who argue that there are profound differences between Stirner and Nietzsche, also see parallels between the unique one and the overhuman, arguing that the concepts are similar egoist reactions to both humanism and modernity.

But these efforts are specious, even with the scant and ambiguous information Nietzsche provides about the overhuman. About all that Nietzsche says about the overhuman is that it

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- (a) is a collective concept, not a reference to an individual;
- (b) is devoid of the timidity, cowardice, and pettiness that frequently characterizes modern human beings, especially those in leadership positions;
- (c) aspires to warrior values of greatness and nobility;
- (d) acknowledges and relishes the fact that life is risky and adventurous. What appears to matter more than the specific qualities of the overhuman is the rationale for its coming, and what humans must do to prepare for it.

In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche discusses the inspirations and frustrations he experienced as he wrote *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, thus creating the concept of the overhuman. When his health permitted in the spring and winter of 1881, Nietzsche would walk in the mornings from Rapallo on the Italian Riviera, where he was living, to Zoagli amid the pine trees. In the afternoon he would walk along the bay from Santa Margherita to Portofino. It was on these walks that the concept of Zarathustra “as a type” came to him, or, as he put it, “overtook me.” To understand Zarathustra as the prophet of a great change, he suggests that one must review his concept of “great health,” which he initially elaborated in *The Gay Science*. “Great health” is an acknowledgement, an appreciation, and a frustration with the intellectual journey toward discovering new goals, new values, new means, and new ideals, particularly those pertaining to human beings and their actions. The beautiful views of the Mediterranean contrasted sharply with his ill health, shaking Nietzsche with a profound agony that became a metaphor for his disgust with the values and archetypes of modernity.

Nietzsche claims insight because he suffers deeply but still appreciates beauty and majesty.

After such vistas and with burning hunger in our science and conscience, how could we still be satisfied with present-day man? It may be too hard but it is inevitable that we find it difficult to remain serious when we look at his worthiest goals and hopes, and perhaps we do not even bother to look anymore.

Nevertheless, Nietzsche looks at “modern man.” He finds the values, hopes, and lives of modern humans inadequate. When we first meet the hero in the early pages of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he has emerged from the cave in the mountains where he has spent the past decade in isolation. He is now a transformed human, overburdened with the wisdom that he wants to bestow and distribute until the wise are once again “glad of their folly” and the poor are once again “glad of their riches.” He encounters a holy man as he descends but he soon parts company, astonished to learn that the holy man has not heard that “god is dead.” He comes to a crowded market in a town and dramatically announces the coming of the overhuman, telling the crowd that the overhuman is to the human what the human is to the ape. His appeal to the mob in the market is that the greatness in humanity, or in themselves, is found in the efforts of persons to lay the foundation for the arrival of this being, or ideal, that transcends the human.

“What is great in the human is that it is a bridge and not a goal: what can be loved in the human is that it is a going-over and a going-under.” Zarathustra says that he loves the humans who sacrifice themselves for the earth so that it will one day belong to the overhuman. He loves those who “will” their “going under” so that the overhuman may live, and those who prepare a home with animals and plants so that the overhuman will have a home with the resources needed to live. Zarathustra’s initial message is not only to announce the coming of the overhuman, and the overcoming of the human, but to instruct his audience in what they need to do to prepare the way for the life of the overhuman and the death of the human. This preparation involves both a “going-over” the bridge that is humanity and a “going-under” so that the human will “live no more.” Individual human beings are not the overhuman and neither is Zarathustra. Zarathustra is the “herald of the lightning from the dark cloud of the human,” and the lightning is the overhuman. Zarathustra’s task is to rally the humans to be more than themselves by contributing to the arrival of the overhuman. Nietzsche

tells us directly that Zarathustra is the promoter of a cause, which is the arrival of the overhuman, and he demands the sacrifice of the thoughts, feelings, and activity of individuals to the cause, so that they can be part of something that is more than themselves. Their purpose, the meaning of their lives, the goal they should set for humanity is to assist in the creation of something better than themselves.

As the “herald of the lightning,” Nietzsche speaks through Zarathustra about the failures, limitations, and inadequacies of human beings, encouraging and applauding their “going under,” their sacrifice, in favor of the overhuman. He counterposes the overhuman with “the last human,” and warns his audience about the final, most despicable humans. The last humans are despicable because they have abandoned all interest in transcending the human. They no longer understand or seek to understand love or creation. They have made the earth small and petty. They have contrived happiness. They no longer challenge themselves, but seek only comfort, warmth, and a little pleasure. They do not even realize how despicable they are. But there is still some “chaos” within the souls of humans and Zarathustra will exploit this chaos, work with the “higher humans” to bring about the overhuman. To make way for the overhuman, the human and all of the products of human folly must be overcome.

Zarathustra critiques the “new idols,” but this is not the critique of dialectical egoism.

The state is especially singled out for Zarathustra’s wrath because it is the implacable enemy, not of the unique one, but of “peoples and herds” who have a faith and serve the cause of life. The state is the annihilator of peoples; it rules by the sword and generates a “hundred desires” in people, while “moderate poverty” should be praised. Where peoples, tribes, cultures still exist, they despise the state as an abomination against customs and morality. The state creates its own concepts of good and evil, and undermines traditional notions of customs and rights. The state gen-

meaning in life. He wants it recreated in the form of a new being and a new morality. For Stirner, god was not dead but resurrected as humanity. Humanity is the supreme being of modernity.

Stirner objects to the imposition of meaning and purpose by culture and social institutions. Individuals can determine for themselves what matters in their lives. They can appropriate and consume what they find meaningful. Self-liberation is not a matter of discovering prefabricated meaning or waiting for the overhuman to provide it. Perfection and improvement are not measures of liberation, they are external images of how people should live, think, and behave. Ownness is a quality or the act of determining for oneself what images one will use to live; dialectical egoism is the philosophy of living without external measures of value, meaning, or purpose.

It challenges the notion that harshness is better than gentleness, that duty is better than choice, that necessity is better than freedom, that perfection is better than imperfection. Stirner did not seek a new morality, a new spiritual ideal, nor a new, improved version of human collectivities. He did not disparage persons; he disparaged social systems, the state, and “the dominion of mind” for what they do to persons. Stirner rejected all supernal and mystical essences. In *The Ego and Its Own*, humanity is a “spook.”

The overhuman is also a spook.

Danger reveals the destiny of persons; those who accept and confront danger transcend humanity and modernity, those who refuse to confront it are condemned to extinction .

Other archetypes of "modern man" are equally problematic in Nietzsche's concept of the overhuman. Those who idolize the protection and security provided by the state, those who idolize acquisition and consumption, and those who refuse to challenge the Christian ideal of humanity are "worms," "mere animals," "mechanical robots;" collectively, they are a "herd ." Nietzsche's criticism of modernity is a protest against the weakness, complacency, and fake civility of Christian humanism because it imposes a distorted image of what human beings can be. He demands the transcendence of humanity and modernity that will negate the entirety of Christian humanitarianism . Modern human beings must be transcended by the overhuman. The only hope is that the "higher men," those humans who can still despise themselves, as Nietzsche did during his walks along the Italian Riviera, will recognize the need for a transcendence, and assist the being who can impose some meaning on the purposeless existence of humanity.

The "humanity" that Stirner targeted was rooted in Christianity, but it was not a Christian idea; it was the atheist idea of Feuerbach and Bauer. Stirner's conflict was not with modernity as a catalog of human failures and inadequacies, it was a fight with modernity as a social system that dispossesses persons of power and property, a culture and ideology that infuse the world with spooks, and a form of cognition and everyday behavior that converts persons into ragamuffins who welcome their dispossession.

The unique one is not the overhuman and does not transcend the human. The unique one is the practicing egoist, the individual human being who owns his or her life, thoughts, and actions.

There is no external, overarching purpose for humans. There is no external, overarching meaning. Purpose and meaning are created, destroyed, recreated, and ignored by persons continually. Nietzsche is bothered by the death of god and the lack of inherent

erates superfluous, unnecessary persons who clamor for equality, rights, and material desiderata . It separates people from nobler values of duty, honor, and struggle because its reason for being is to provide security, rights, equality, and freedom from material deprivation. Only where the state ends is where the overhuman begins. Zarathustra assails the political products of equality and individual rights in a similar manner.

Humans are not equal and never will be. The deception of equality generates nothing but petty resentment and a desire for revenge; the deception of equality represses nobility. The overhuman will not bring equality nor individual rights, but a clash of rich and poor, the high and low so that life can overcome itself again and again. "And because it needs the heights it needs steps and opposition among steps and climbers! To climb is what life wills, and in climbing to overcome itself."

Nietzsche's critique of politics and society is not oriented toward the overcoming of the individual's alienation from self, nor toward the individual's assertion of ownership of thought, behavior, and property. His critique is oriented toward the coming of the overhuman. Nietzsche's assault on the state, culture, religion, and science does not establish any sort of compatibility with Stirner either in form, content, or purpose. Nor does it make him an anarchist or atheist. Nietzsche attacks authority in order to recreate it. Nietzsche attacks the human abstraction, the human essence, in order to make way for the overhuman, a new abstraction, a new essence. The state, culture, religion, and science must go so that there is no competitor for the attention, trust, loyalty, and adulation due to the overhuman.

Nietzsche's Zarathustra wants to rally the mob so that they can sacrifice themselves, effecting the transition to the overhuman. He is not rousing the rabble so they can make the internal and external changes needed to appropriate and consume their own lives. God and the state must die, and so must the human, but this is so the overhuman can live. It is significant that Stirner not only counter-

posed the state in the abstract to the egoism, the "I," of the unique one, but he attacked the state in its specific historical and ideological manifestations: the Greek, Roman, Christian Germanic, liberal, socialist, and humanist. In each case, he outlined the specific form of opposition of the state to the egoism of the individual, extracting from each form the antagonism between the "cause" of the state and the "ownness" of the person. Stirner's critique of culture, virtue, religion, and science has a similar trajectory: the historical and ideological facts are opposed to egoism, the "I," and the unique one. They are eventually related back to the opposition between the external "cause" and the ownness of the person. Stirner's critique of the abstraction – god, state, and humanity – was based on an objection that the essence supplanted the real, concrete individual. The overhuman is an abstraction, an essence, a spiritual ideal. It is another cause that is "more to me than myself." Zarathustra proclaims the downfall of modernity, conventional values, and the birth of a new era with a new morality and a new view of greatness that ordinary humans cannot envision, much less achieve.

Zarathustra attacks individual humans for what they are, how they live, what they value, and what they aspire to become. They are disparaged because they do not fit the spiritual ideal of the overhuman.

He announces the death of god, but does not attack the supernatural and mystical expressions of human thought because he knew it would destroy any notion of the supernatural dignity of humanity as the precursor of the overhuman. He wants to resuscitate the supernatural and the mystical so that the overhuman is greeted with awe and admiration. As a supernatural and mystical being, the overhuman dominates the passions and lesser values. The overhuman forms his or her own character *ab novo*, valuing creativity above all else.

The overhuman accepts that life is hard, that injustice occurs, but chooses to live without resentment or any form of pettiness. The overhuman is not motivated by everyday commerce, the necessity

of meeting everyday needs, but by the opportunity for greatness and nobility.

The overhuman is the alternative to both god and humanity. Unlike god, the overhuman is not perfect. Unlike humanity, the overhuman embraces perfection as a life-goal. The overhuman struggles for perfection in a world without inherent meaning and without absolute standards. There is no meaning in life except the meaning that persons give their life. There are no standards other than those people create. Most humans – the last humans – settle for petty values and do not attempt to surpass the mediocrity and cowardice of modern life. To raise themselves above meaninglessness, mediocrity, and cowardice they must cease being merely human, all too human.

They must be harsh on themselves and each other. They must be disciplined to endure deprivation with joy. They must become creators instead of remaining mere creatures. Nietzsche says that suffering strengthens people and prepares them to overcome mediocrity and cowardice.

Harshness, suffering, and discipline are important because there is no other way to prove one's worth or to transcend modern values.

The death of god is an opportunity, not a lament, because a world without god demands that humans transcend themselves. Perfectibility or improvement is the task of the overhuman made possible and necessary by the death of god. The overhuman demands more of self than human beings.

The overhuman welcomes difficulties and duties in contrast to humans who demand nothing special, who seek only comfort and satiation, and fail to push themselves toward perfection. The overhuman accepts the risks, terrors, and deprivations inherent in living, but values life without hesitation. The existence and vocation of the overhuman is dangerous.