

The *Übermensch* as a union of opposites

Nietzsche does not explain in detail what he means by the *Übermensch*. This scarcity of explanation, and wanton vagueness, has led to multiple interpretations of what he might have had in mind, some of which are fanciful and even absurd.¹ It is therefore essential that any attempt at an explanation be kept in check and correspond appropriately to such meagre and piecemeal textual evidence as there is. The fragments that Nietzsche provides imply a submerged richness of thought, but we are denied any further insight into this thought, which is frustrating. Keith May takes the sense of frustration further by maintaining that Nietzsche himself does not know what the *Übermensch* means (May, 1990, pp. 167–168). Kurt Rudolph Fischer, however, claims that this frustration and lack of definition are necessary aspects of the *Übermensch*, for ‘it is part of the determination of the “Übermensch” not to be determined’ (cited in Aschheim, 1992, p. 8).

It is in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883) that the fragmentary description of the *Übermensch* appears. After this work, the term *Übermensch* does not appear again in Nietzsche’s works except in *Ecce Homo* (1888), where he writes more about *TSZ* than any of his other books. In his allusion to *TSZ* Nietzsche writes: ‘Here man is overcome at every moment, the concept “superman” here becomes the greatest reality’ (*EH*, ‘*TSZ*’, 6). Nietzsche chooses ‘Zarathustra’ as the prophet of the *Übermensch* because he

was the first to see in the struggle between good and evil the essential wheel in the working of things . . . Zarathustra created the most portentous error, morality. Consequently he should also be the first to perceive that error.

(*SNZ*, I, p. 5n)

Zarathustra is thus seen by Nietzsche as having invented the opposites of good and evil and then as having come back to try to unite them. Zarathustra returns to improve on his former invention; in particular, to resolve the conflict between good and evil because Christianity cannot do it. In *TSZ*, we see the Christian point of view represented by the old man in the forest, who has no contact with the world and with humanity (*TSZ*, prologue, 2). Because Christianity is no longer in touch with the world, Zarathustra must be reborn; he must come back to show that

God is dead and that there is no difference between good and evil. His aspiration is, therefore, to overcome the opposites of good and evil from a standpoint that is beyond the opposites: he seeks a unification of opposites. Nietzsche saw in Zarathustra the first one to make mankind conscious of itself. For, as we saw in Chapters 2 and 3, it is Nietzsche's claim that the individual needs to promote conflict and opposition within himself if he is to aspire to greatness and fruition (*TI*, 'Morality as Anti-nature', 3); and now Zarathustra explicitly proclaims that 'one must have chaos in one' (*TSZ*, prologue, 5). Zarathustra is going to teach the opposites; he will teach both wise and poor men 'until the wise among men have again become happy in their folly and the poor happy in their wealth' (*TSZ*, prologue, 1). He is going to redress the balance; he is going to destroy a one-sided outright dominance and replace it with a competitive opposition, a creative tension that seeks strength in growth and productivity over that which seeks strength in sheer magnitude. Zarathustra is going to turn one element into two opposing elements, not in order to separate the two, but in order that they may be complementary to one another and seek unification – a unification that, as we saw in Chapter 2, following Heraclitus' model of polarity, is 'the diverging of a force into two qualitatively different opposed activities that seek to reunite' (*PTAG*, 5). Christianity failed, therefore, because it promoted the metaphysical model of static opposites, so that 'good' and 'evil' never sought unification. The thought of Zarathustra and Christianity are in direct opposition. Zarathustra is the 'dancing star' (*TSZ*, prologue, 5) who is fully conscious of his body and makes good use of the conflict of which it is composed, while the Christian is defined by rigidity and is taught to mortify and repress the flesh, so that he is divided and alienated from his very humanity. The *Übermensch* that Zarathustra proclaims is not like the Christian who promotes opposition and division *against* himself, thereby promoting one side of his humanity and alienating another; rather the *Übermensch* promotes opposition *within* himself (*WP* 966), thereby promoting every conflicting aspect of his humanity.

The *Übermensch* is anticipated in the thought of early Nietzsche, for it is the Dionysian impulse that enables 'nature which has become alienated, hostile, or subjugated' to celebrate 'once more her reconciliation with her lost son, man' (*BT*, 1). In complete contrast to Christianity, with its need to alienate man from nature, the *Übermensch* proclaims: 'Learn to become nature again yourselves and then with and in nature let yourselves be transformed' (*UM*, IV, 6). The *Übermensch* is identified with nature itself, a 'Dionysian' nature. The *Übermensch* is the one who has identified with primary unity, its pain and contradiction and thereby 'suffers in his own person the primordial contradiction that is concealed in things' (*BT*, 9). He is a tragic figure, or a tragic 'artist', who expresses nature's 'exuberant fertility' and 'creative joy' and uses such power to substantiate his own perfection.²

Nietzsche hoped that the future would be characterized by a 'supra-national and nomadic type of man' who would possess 'as its typical distinction a maximum of the art and power of adaptation' (*BGE*, 242). The *Übermensch* will draw upon

his creative capacities in order to unite the opposites within him; he will 'educate himself' and 'draw forth and nourish all the forces which exist . . . and [will] bring them to a harmonious relationship with one another' (*UM*, III, 2). The *Übermensch*, like his prophet Zarathustra, is conscious of his psychological make-up, of how his instincts conflict, and of which ones are currently dominating others. He is therefore in a position to recognize which weaker instincts should be exaggerated in order to promote further conflict and strife, and a stronger capacity for creation. By drawing upon his artistic 'power of adaptation', the *Übermensch* increases opposition within him and thereby increases his capacity for creativity.³ This process never ends; overcoming the instincts is never an end in itself, but is a means toward the higher goal of self-perfecting. Nietzsche writes:

The man who has overcome his passions has entered into possession of the most fertile ground . . . to sow the seeds of good spiritual works in the soil of the subdued passions is then the immediate urgent task. The overcoming itself is only a *means*, not a goal; if it is not so viewed, all kinds of weeds and devilish nonsense will quickly spring up in this rich soil now unoccupied, and soon there will be more rank confusion than there ever was before.

(*WS*, 53)

Nietzsche says: 'I believe that from the presence of opposites and from the feelings they occasion that the great man, *the bow with the greatest tension*, develops' (*WP*, 967). The greatest being is the one who unites the most antagonistic traits (*WP*, 881, 966). Nietzsche observes that commonplace beings 'perish when the multiplicity of elements and the tension of opposites, i.e., the preconditions for greatness in man, increases' (*WP*, 881). The *Übermensch* must therefore be preconditioned to be able to endure such inner tensions. In the commonplace being 'the tension, the range between the extremes . . . [is] less . . . the extremes themselves are . . . obliterated to the point of similarity' (*TI*, 'Expeditions of an Untimely Man', 37). It is different for the *Übermensch*: 'It is in precisely this compass of space, in this access to opposites that Zarathustra feels himself to be the *highest species of all existing things*' (*EH*, 'TSZ', 6). The *Übermensch*, however, does not merely represent opposites in their multitude; rather, he symbolizes the unification and synthesis of opposites that is appropriate to the further promotion of creativity. In other words, the *Übermensch* does not seek a mere accumulation of antithetical elements, but an 'increased co-ordination, of a harmonizing of all the strong desires' (*WP*, 800). Thus, 'Greatness of character does not consist in not possessing these affects – on the contrary, one possesses them to the highest degree – but in having them under control' (*WP*, 928). As we saw in Chapter 2, Nietzsche's notion of control is expressed in his concept of self-mastery, which is itself explained in terms of equilibrium (*WS*, 22) and moderation (*BT*, 25). He maintains that the most moderate will prove to be the strongest (*WP*, 55). We also saw in that chapter that the Apollinian and Dionysian impulses have to be balanced by one another if either is to be activated to its highest degree.

The notion of complementary opposites is continued throughout Nietzsche's thought, including his idea of the *Übermensch*. The *Übermensch* must promote both opposites in the binary pair, unlike the 'typical man', who

does not understand the necessity for the reverse side of things: that he combats evils as if one could dispense with them; that he will not take the one with the other . . . approving only of one part of [a thing's] qualities and wishing to abolish the others . . . the ideal conceived as something in which nothing harmful, evil, dangerous, questionable, destructive would remain.

(WP, 881)

The *Übermensch* stands apart from this ideal. In Nietzsche's words:

With every increase of greatness and height in man, there is also an increase in depth and terribleness: one ought not to desire the one without the other – or rather: the more radically one desires the one, the more radically one achieves precisely the other.

(WP, 1027)

The tension between opposites must be maintained to generate dynamic creativity; the victory of one element over its opposite, as with the superiority of good over evil in Christianity, will lead to stagnation and decay. The *Übermensch*, accordingly, is beyond good and evil; he will unite good and evil and will embody Zarathustra's teaching that 'the highest evil belongs to the highest goodness' (TSZ, II, 'Of Self-Overcoming'). Nietzsche writes:

One cannot be one without being the other . . . with every growth of man, his other side must grow too . . . That man must grow better *and* more evil is my formula for this inevitability.

(WP, 881)

If the tension of opposites is the formula of human growth, then the *Übermensch*, the master of humanity, would have the greatest concentration and tension of contrary instincts. Nietzsche writes:

Most men represent pieces and fragments of man: one has to add them up for a complete man to appear. Whole ages, whole peoples are in this sense somewhat fragmentary; it is perhaps part of the economy of human evolution that man should evolve piece by piece. But that should not make one forget for a moment that the real issue is the production of the synthetic man.

(WP, 881)

The *Übermensch* is not the disorganized totality of unconnected fragments of the mediocre man. He has synthesized every aspect of himself into a productive

whole; he is 'a full, rich, great, whole human being in relation to countless incomplete fragmentary men' (WP, 997).⁴ The *Übermensch* encompasses the fullest range of human capacities; he is synthetic because he must artificially exaggerate weaker instincts so that a greater conflict of drives can be promoted within him. Unlike the typical man who merely arranges the 'pieces of mankind', the *Übermensch* possesses

the mighty capacity to draw together and unite, to reach the remotest threads and to preserve the web from being blown away . . . who unites what he has brought together into a living structure.

(UM, IV, 4)

Patricia Dixon (1999), in her discussion of the importance of harmonizing the instincts for Nietzsche, traces the notion of 'living structure' to *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), where Nietzsche describes

a ruling structure that *lives*, in which parts and functions are delimited and co-ordinated, in which nothing whatever finds a place that has not first been assigned a 'meaning' in relation to the whole.

(GM, II, 17)

Speaking through Nietzsche, Dixon asks: 'Where . . . do we discover a harmonious whole at all, a simultaneous sounding of many voices in one nature?' Nietzsche replies:

[In] men in whom everything, knowledge, desire, love, hate strives towards a central point, a root force, and where a harmonious system is constructed through the compelling domination of this living centre.

(UM, III, 2; cited in Dixon, 1999, p. 332)

In *The Gay Science* (1882) Nietzsche further notes that

Many hecatombs of human beings were sacrificed before these impulses learned to comprehend their coexistence and to feel that they were all functions of one organizing force within one human being.

(GS, 113)

The 'living structure' of the *Übermensch* thus exhibits a unity dictated by a central organizing power that gives the opposite instincts 'their way and measure' (WP, 84) and 'precision and clarity of . . . direction' (WP, 64), so that they can develop and work for the whole. In other words, the *Übermensch* possesses 'all the strong, seemingly contradictory gifts and desires – but in such a way that they go together beneath one yoke' (WP, 848). As a 'unifying principle' Nietzsche must promote one instinct above all others, one that can be justified as having static dominance,

one that destroys the ascetic ideal and expresses the individual's life as inherently valuable. In my reading of Nietzsche, this 'central organizing power' is the 'power of adaptation' (*BGE*, 242), or the 'Will to Power' (which is described by Nietzsche as 'the strongest instinct': *TI*, 'What I Owe to the Ancients', 3): that power that increases the capacity for creation through the union of opposites.

Creation is precisely that which is required in Nietzsche's 'revaluation of values'. Creation is the process and principle that enables the individual to travel across the tightrope from the 'mediocre, typical man' to the noble *Übermensch* and safely cross the abyss of nihilism.⁵ The effective expulsion of God from nature has motivated individuals to *recreate* themselves, to get rid of 'the shadow of God' and the idealistic dependency that God decreed, and to return to the earth (*TSZ*, prologue, 3), to become the first 'natural' man, the 'Dionysian' man.

The myth of Dionysus tells how he was born of an incestuous coupling between Zeus and his daughter, Persephone. In her jealousy, Hera (the wife of Zeus) aroused the Titans to attack the infant. These monstrous beings enticed Dionysus with toys and cut him to pieces with knives.⁶ After the murder the Titans devoured the dismembered corpse. But the heart of Dionysus was saved and brought to Zeus by Athena. Dionysus was born again, for Zeus swallowed the heart and gave birth to him with Semele. In his anger at the Titans, Zeus destroyed them with thunder and lightning; but from their ashes humankind was born.⁷ Dionysus is thus a man of 'creation', an embodiment of death and rebirth, and of those conditions necessary for creation – pain and great suffering. Nietzsche continues the depiction of Dionysian man:⁸

The word '*Dionysian*' means: an urge to unity, a reaching out beyond personality, the everyday, society, reality, across the abyss of transitoriness: a passionate-painful overflowing into darker, fuller, more floating states; an ecstatic affirmation of the total character of life as that which remains the same, just as powerful, just as blissful, through all change; the great pantheistic sharing of joy and sorrow that sanctifies and calls good even the most terrible and questionable qualities of life; the eternal will to procreation, to fruitfulness, to recurrence; the feeling of the necessary unity of creation and destruction.

(*WP*, 1050)

Dionysus calls on mankind to unite with nature and to unite the good with 'the most terrible'. The Dionysian man is reunited with humanity and all that is passionate, chaotic and irrational within him. He must joyfully and tragically restore himself to nature and experience 'an ascent – up into a high, free, even terrible nature and naturalness' (*WP*, 120). This terrible experience must be 'blissfully' endured over and over again, for Dionysus affirms nothing more than the tragedy of the eternal recurrence. There can be no self-overcoming without struggle and suffering; there will always be obstacles within the individual's path, for self-overcoming is a process without end and without reward. The eternal

recurrence is, therefore, ultimately a teaching of strength through despair. The *Übermensch* is thus the

ideal of the most exuberant, most living and most world-affirming man, who has not only learned to get on and treat with all that was and is but who wants to have it again *as it was and is* to all eternity.

(BGE, 56)

The *Übermensch* is the being who promotes the ‘Yes-saying instinct’ as his unifying principle (AC, 57; EH, ‘TSZ’, 6), which gives him the strength for *amor fati*, to endure the unification of good and evil, to live a cursed existence, and to transmute this into the Dionysian intoxication of tragic acceptance.

Nietzsche regarded Goethe as the exemplar of the Dionysian, ‘higher man’ (TI, ‘Expeditions of an Untimely Man’, 49). What Goethe ‘aspired to was *totality*; he strove against the separation of reason, sensuality, feeling, will . . . he disciplined himself to a whole, he *created* himself’. Nietzsche awards him the highest of all his honours:

A spirit thus *emancipated* stands in the midst of the universe with a joyful and trusting fatalism, in the *faith* that only what is separate and individual may be rejected, that in the totality everything is redeemed and affirmed – *he no longer denies* . . . But such a faith is the highest of all possible faiths: I have baptized it with the name of *Dionysos*.

(ibid.)

Goethe, according to Nietzsche, achieved humanity in its highest form: he exhibits a unification of the greatest contrary instincts (that is, reason, sensuality, feeling, and will) in the realization of *Übermenschlichkeit*. The *Übermensch* is the symbol of human totality, the unification of opposite instincts in the pursuit of creation. The individual who has realized such totality and unification of his human faculties is no longer all-too-human; he is indeed the *Übermensch*.

Nietzsche is aiming for a Derridian style of writing where 'philosophical criticism' is replaced by something closer to an 'art criticism' that leads the reader to a greater enlightenment and personal depth of feeling through the sheer provocation of its style; the reader is not given 'answers' but is asked actively to seek the themes presented within the text.

- 8 However, Paul de Man in *Allegories of Reading* (1979) shows that Nietzsche consistently rejects metaphysics by deconstructing it and destabilizing it from within. He maintains that there is a distinction in between what a statement literally asserts and what it does or shows. In Nietzsche there are statements with an obvious metaphysical content, and if we are concerned only with what these statements literally assert then we must conclude that Nietzsche is indeed a metaphysician who contradicts his own criticism of metaphysics. But, if we are concerned instead with what these statements actually do, we see that they undermine their own authority and reveal their own inadequacy. De Man therefore asserts that statements can show what they cannot literally assert without falling into contradiction. He therefore considers language to be metaphorical, that is, grounded in rhetoric rather than logic, and incapable of corresponding to anything non-linguistic, which is contrary to the metaphysical demand. De Man therefore believes that the limitations of rational-discursive thought can be shown when its origin in rhetoric or metaphor is revealed, but that this origin cannot simply be asserted because this assertion would itself presuppose the validity of rational-discursive thought. The apparent contradiction between Nietzsche's theory and practice of metaphysics does not, therefore, reveal any inadequacy and inconsistency in his thought, since it is only by means of such contradictions that the illusions of metaphysics can be exhibited. Nietzsche's thought is therefore not a claim to truth, for if it were, Nietzsche would be wrong when he claims that all truth is illusion, and his thought would remain inconsistent. (When Nietzsche says life is chaotic and stable he does not assert the truth, for this would contradict with his assertion that life cannot be articulated adequately in language.) Therefore, to avoid rendering Nietzsche's thought inconsistent, De Man insists that Nietzsche remains immersed within the errors he sought to expose. According to De Man, the allegory of errors found in Nietzsche's thought is 'the very model of philosophical rigor' (ibid., p. 118).
- 9 Although art is no longer required in its illusory capacity (that is, to mask the terrors of life in a veil of comfort), it is still endorsed by the later Nietzsche in its *creative* capacity. In Chapter 4 we shall see that Nietzsche's notion of the Will to Power is the 'artistic' power of adaptation that increases one's capacity for creativity through the union of opposites. Later we shall see that the unification of opposites does not lend itself easily to intellectual, scientific examination; it's meaning is better conveyed through symbols. Also, we shall see that Nietzsche's notion of art has religious connotations. In this sense we could say that the psyche still requires 'art' for its expression.

4 The *Übermensch* as a union of opposites

- 1 Perhaps the most notorious misinterpretation of the *Übermensch*, as a doctrine of the 'Master Race', is made explicit in Nazi distortions (see Heller, 1988; Aschheim, 1992, pp. 232–272, 315–331).
- 2 Nietzsche writes: 'In art, man takes delight in himself as perfection' (*TI*, 'Expeditions of an Untimely Man', 9; *WP*, 852). 'Art' here does not refer to art in its illusory capacity, but in its creative capacity. For clarification of my interpretation see Chapter 3, note 9.
- 3 Other commentators on Nietzsche have defined the *Übermensch* in similar terms as

‘uniting the instincts’, in the pursuit of increased creation, by the ‘power of adaptation’. Arthur Danto writes:

The *Übermensch* is not the blond giant dominating his lesser fellows. He is merely a joyous, guiltless, free human being, *in possession of instinctual drives, and so is in a position to make something of himself rather than being the product of instinctual discharge* and external obstacle.

(Danto, 1965, p. 200, italics mine)

Kaufmann writes: ‘[The *Übermensch*] has overcome his animal nature, organized the chaos of his passions, sublimated his impulses, and given style to his character’ (Kaufmann, 1968, p. 316). Richard Schacht writes: ‘The *Übermensch* is the essence of the “higher man”; he is vital, healthy, self-controlled . . . and he is creative’ (Schacht, 1983, p. 340).

- 4 Zarathustra also takes up this theme:

Truly, my friends, I walk among men as among the fragments and limbs of men! The terrible thing to my eyes is to find men shattered in pieces and scattered as if over a battle-field of slaughter. And when my eye flees from the present to the past, it always discovers the same thing: fragments and limbs and dreadful chances – but no men!

(TSZ, II, ‘Of Redemption’)

- 5 Karl Jaspers also maintains that creation is integral to Nietzsche’s philosophy and necessary to the ‘the highest type’ (Jaspers, 1966, p. 152). For

Creation is *evaluation* . . . Creation is *faith* . . . Creation is *love* . . . In creation is *annihilation*. All creation is *communication* . . . Still, all of creation is great pain and lack of knowledge . . . In creation *authentic being is attained*.

(Jaspers, 1966, pp. 151–152)

The greatest capacity for creation is attained when all instincts are subordinate to the unifying principle: the Will to Power. The Will to Power is the dominating instinct. Nietzsche refers to it as:

The dominating passion, which even brings with it the supremest form of health; here the co-ordination of the inner systems and their operation in the service of one end is best achieved – but this is almost the definition of health!

(WP, 778)

Sickness and weakness are defined by entropy, an absence of creativity; sickness occurs when there is a ‘multitude and disgregation [sic] of impulses and the lack of any systematic order among them’ (WP, 46). Strength and health, on the other hand, are defined by ‘their co-ordination under a single predominant impulse’ (ibid); that is, when the impulses are coordinated by the Will to Power.

- 6 This version of the myth is found in Hornblower and Spawford (1999, pp. 479–482). There are variations of the story; for example, in another version the Titans whiten their faces with chalk and attack the infant Dionysus as he looks into a mirror. It is interesting to note the corresponding section at the beginning of TSZ, II, entitled ‘The Child with the Mirror’, in which Zarathustra looks into the child’s mirror and sees himself as a Titan-like devil. Zarathustra understood this as a warning that his ‘Dionysian’ doctrine was in danger (see Chapter 11 for discussion of this).

- 7 This myth supports the notion that mankind is composed of opposites: the human body is vulgar and evil (since man sprang from the Titans) and the human soul is pure and divine (for the Titans have devoured the god). Thus, in its current state mankind is mediocre, but has within it the potential to be *Übermenschlichkeit*.
- 8 Nietzsche here is discussing his later notion of the Dionysian, which can be construed as a union of Dionysian and Apollinian elements.

5 Opposites in the Jungian model of the psyche

- 1 Here I am referring to the realm of the unconscious itself. I am not referring to the contents of the unconscious, which can, according to the intensity of its energetic charge, become conscious and therefore accessible to, and no longer alienated from, the individual.
- 2 However, according to Hillman (1979), a major proponent of the Archetypal School of Jungian thought, the dream is complete in itself. It must be taken literally and there is no need to talk about the dream compensating consciousness. Hillman writes: 'Theory of compensation appeals to the dayworld perspective of ego and results from its philosophy, not from the dream' (Hillman, 1979, p. 79).
- 3 According to Jung, this explains

why people who have unrealistic ideas or too high an opinion of themselves, or who make grandiose plans out of proportion to their real capacities, have dreams of falling. The dream compensates for the deficiencies of their personalities, and at the same time it warns them of the dangers in their present course.

(MHS, p. 40)

- 4 This corresponds to the 'inverse cripples' of Nietzsche, who 'lack everything except one thing, of which they have too much' (TSZ, II, 'Of Redemption').
- 5 From out of this scheme, of implementing the two attitudes and the four functions, it is possible to produce a total of sixteen different personality types. Jung says that there is no a priori basis for these different types. He distinguishes the four functions as the criteria for these types 'because they cannot be related or reduced to one another' (Jung, 1921, par. 731).
- 6 It is clear that Jung is implementing his theory of opposites in the construction of his system of typology. Jung divides the four functions into opposing categories of rational and irrational, and separates a superior and dominant function from its opposing inferior function, attributing the former to consciousness and the latter to the unconscious. It must be noted that the superior and inferior functions do not each represent one of the opposing categories of rationality and irrationality; rather Jung conceived the superior and inferior functions to come from the same category, that is, to be both rational or irrational. Thus, intuition and sensation are opposites because they both share in irrationality. I think it is more fitting to have intuition and thinking as true opposites, as representing rational and irrational tendencies. However, as we have noted, the rational functions are evaluative and the irrational are perceptive, and two corresponding functions of similar disposition cannot operate at the same time; that is, two evaluative functions or two perceptive functions cannot be simultaneously applied to measure the same thing. In accordance with this, Samuels writes: 'Jung felt that, as a person is more likely to be rational or irrational, the important question typologically would have to be answered from within either the rational or the irrational category' (Samuels, 1985, p. 63).
- 7 It is inherent because it is part of the individual's natural disposition. Jung writes: 'The type antithesis must have some kind of biological foundation' (Jung, 1921, par. 559).

Nietzsche and Jung

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