

How does Nietzsche suggest that the 'self' be overcome?

In his writings, the much misunderstood, and maligned, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) suggests numerous ways in which the self can be overcome. Indeed, self-overcoming, is one of the main themes of one of his most popular and influential books: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In this essay, I will consider the key aspects of Nietzsche's notion of self- overcoming featured in his many thoroughly engaging works and attempt to offer some pertinent commentary and critique on them. According to Nietzsche, humanity must be overcome. This not only involves struggle (with oneself and others) but also careful, thorough introspection. Finally, it involves a positive affirmation of life and the complete embracing of the Will to Power (German: *der Wille zur Macht*) .

Firstly, Nietzsche suggests that self- overcoming is deeply connected to the overcoming of humanity in order for the Übermensch to be created:

'I teach you the superman. Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him? (Nietzsche 1988, p.41) .Throughout *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche provides the reader with a vivid account of human value and meaning as self-overcoming:

' And life itself told me this secret: 'Behold', it said, ' I am that which must

overcome itself again and again.' (Nietzsche 1998, p.138).

For Nietzsche, humanity is severely restricted by what he terms the slave-morality of Judeo- Christianity. Rather than valuing power and strength, slave morality values tame things like sentimentality, humility, pity and piety

Essentially, Nietzsche believes it's a 'no-saying' attitude, a type of resentment, notwithstanding its 'altruistic' pretence, against life's hardships and those who seem to thrive despite them. Consequently, he believes humanity in its present form, needs to be overcome.

Secondly, Nietzsche claims that self-overcoming involves introspection, self-knowledge, and self-critique. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that this is not intended to be performed in a dry, bloodless, analytical manner.

Seemingly, it is not Nietzsche's intention to provide us with a clear and precise model or a set of universal values. Rather, as an existential thinker (prioritising human individuality and authenticity over and above strict essentialist doctrines), he stresses growth, change as well as self-criticism, and self-improvement. Indeed, much of his critique of morality (and philosophy) is targeted at what he regards as its insistence on fixed and universal values, principles, and goals. The value of human endeavour, for him, lies not in strict adherence to these but rather in the constant transcendence of those standards. Nevertheless for Nietzsche self- introspection involves an honest investigation;

consequently avoiding comfortable conclusions since we are often inclined to simple solutions:

The entire surface of consciousness- consciousness is a surface- has to be kept clear of any of the great imperatives. Even the grand words, the grand attitudes must be guarded against! All of them represent a danger that the instinct will ' understand itself too early...

(Nietzsche 1986, p.65)

Another way in which Nietzsche suggests that the self can be overcome is via struggle. Nietzsche's notion of self-overcoming involves struggle with oneself and with others. It entails struggle with oneself in the sense that one seeks to transcend one's limitations (physical and mental) and move towards ever more vigorous *modi operandi* of action and expression. One must, according to Nietzsche, struggle with and ultimately overcome fear, insecurity, ignorance, and hubris, then we can become more complete human beings. Essentially, '... we need to overcome the divided self, free ourselves from narcissism and its pathological symptoms,..' (Stolz 2019, p.273)

Nietzsche strongly suggests that we must keep on improving our condition in life, '...the overman must overcome the lower self in order to realize the higher and total Self. He will be aware of unfolding deserts, but he must bring them to

the light of day. '(Morrish 1980, p.91)

With regard to Nietzsche's view of the self, it does appear to be paradoxical. On the one hand, he does not believe in the notion of a self. On the other hand, he does suggest the notion of a higher self, but one that is not pre-determined, not something we can discover, (notwithstanding the aforementioned quotation) but something we can ostensibly create in order to avoid the soul-destroying nature of modern, alienating existence where many individuals mask their deepest fears and refuse to deal with them directly:

' Deserts grow: woe to him who harbours deserts.' (Nietzsche, 1988, p.215)

According to Nietzsche, in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* the self is fictitious:

In his analysis of the self, Nietzsche contended: "the subject is only a fiction: the ego of which one speaks when one censures egoism does not exist at all" (WP, 370). Zarathustra said: "... soul is only a word for something about the body" (TS, 1/146). In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche described the "soul superstition, which in the form of the subject and ego superstition, has not yet ceased to do mischief" (BG Preface). He blamed this concept of the soul on a "seduction by grammar". (Elman

1983, p.685.)

There is a parallel here with Buddhism. 'According to the Buddha, if a man would make himself the object of his own analysis, then he would discover his own impermanence and emptiness.' (Elman 1983, p.685.)

Consequently, like the Buddha, Nietzsche rejects the identification of the self with the I and consciousness. However, for him, it is the unknown self that is the real determiner of our actions and even of our conscious thoughts.

Simultaneously, struggle with others can often complement the internal process of self- overcoming, provided that those with whom we struggle are in a position to offer a genuine challenge and are not merely sycophants. It should be stressed that it is the challenge itself that is significant here. It is not meant to indicate, in the literal sense, that ultimately we should destroy/ terminate our enemies. With this in mind, Nietzsche draws a distinction between “hating” (Hassen) and “despising” (Verachten) and urges us avoid the latter attitude and embrace the former:

'You shall only have enemies to be hated, but not enemies to be despised. You must be proud of your enemies; then, the successes of your enemies are also your successes.' (Nietzsche, 1988, p.75.)

It is important at this juncture to distinguish between the two aforementioned terms. The original German makes clear the sense in which one have respect and regard for what one hates. However, to despise something is to consider it as unworthy of both. True friends and, thus, true expressions of love, henceforth, are not blindly accepting and complacent but rather steer oneself to continuous self-improvement. For Nietzsche, self-overcoming is certainly a struggle with one's enemies, one's friends, and with oneself. Furthermore, struggles with oneself and with others are likewise intrinsically linked, for in struggling with others I better, and thus overcome, myself, and in struggling with myself, I make myself a more worthy and valuable opponent.

The renowned 20th century Modernist poet T.S Eliot alludes to sloth (as well as wrath, pride and lust) one of the Seven Deadly Sins in his poem *Marina*. Like Nietzsche, he recognises that contentment can lead to degeneration (both emotional and psychological and in Eliot's case spiritual) :

' Those who sit in the sty of contentment meaning
Death.' (Eliot 1963, p. 151)

A further way in which Nietzsche claims that the self can be overcome is via saying yes to life. Nietzsche says that to avoid nihilism, we must avoid the temptation of sterile or apathetic contentment and say yes to life. Ostensibly, this is particularly difficult for many in our contemporary Western world given the sheer amount of easily accessible material comforts.

Making the courageous decision to positively affirm life, rather than try to escape it in myriad ways via belief in a spurious eternal afterworld, for example, is a key aspect of Nietzsche's notion of self-overcoming. Nietzsche, rather cynically states: 'It was suffering and impotence-that created all afterworlds; and that brief madness of happiness that only the greatest sufferer experiences.' (Nietzsche 1988, p.59). Like Plato who Nietzsche believed to have created the eternal world of Forms due to his fear of this world and all its chaos and suffering, those who cling to an afterworld cannot accept life as it is in all its fleeting, tainted glory. For Nietzsche Plato's need for metaphysical solutions masks a fatal, physiological flaw. Moreover, Nietzsche condemns, in a similar way, what he refers to as 'the preachers of death' (probably priests: 'There are preachers of death: and the earth is full of those to whom departure of life must be preached.' (Nietzsche 1988, p. 71).

Nietzsche deploys his notion of eternal recurrence (a thought experiment) in order to reveal the true test of life-affirmation, and Zarathustra goes through a deep trauma in confronting it. This thought experiment is featured appears in *The Gay Science* Aphorism 341, "The Greatest Weight".

Saying Yes to the repetition of life includes all the things that causes sorrow or anger. all the things that we regret and despise, all the things that go against what we find meaningful. If an individual is well adjusted in all its light and dark shadings then Nietzsche believes he/ she is able to accept the affirmation of eternally returning to life. Moreover, Nietzsche identifies this complete acceptance of life with the god Dionysus:

The saying of yea to life, including even its most strange and most terrible problems, the will to life rejoicing over its own inexhaustibleness in the sacrifice of its highest types - this is what I called Dionysian.

(Nietzsche 2003, p.188)

According to Greek mythology, Apollo and Dionysus are both sons of Zeus. Apollo is the god of the sun and order. Nietzsche equates this god with logic, harmony, prudence and purity. On the other hand, Dionysus is the god of wine

and dance, ecstasy, irrationality and chaos. For Nietzsche, he represents our emotions and instincts. Apparently, the ancient Greeks did not consider the two gods in terms of opposing forces, nor did Nietzsche in the sense that they merge together in Greek tragedy. Indeed, often the two deities were believed to be joined by nature.

Nevertheless, the Dionysian aspect is particularly significant for Nietzsche in terms of positively affirming life. In marked contrast, to the Apollonian concern with order and asceticism, the Dionysian mode of existence constantly seeks to affirm life whether one is in the depths of despair or experiencing the sublime heights of joy. For Nietzsche, the intoxicating revelry presented by the Dionysian approach to life overcomes an overtly analytical outlook and represents the growth and flourishing of visceral life forces:

Dionysus is the god of chaos and destruction, but he is also the god of fertility and productivity. He is the old nature god of Greek mythology, connected with vegetation and fruitfulness, who comes to life in spring and brings all men together in joyful intoxication and abandonment. (Pfeffer 1972, p. 30)

Surely, Nietzsche was also influenced here by the German poet and playwright Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller (1759– 1805) whose poem *Ode To Joy* (immortalised in Beethoven's 9th Symphony) celebrates, among many other noble things, human courage and optimistic resilience even in the midst of great suffering.

Finally, Nietzsche suggests that the self can be overcome by creating new values that express the Will To Power. Clearly, this phrase is disturbing for many due to the many connotations we make when we come across the word 'power.' particularly given the evils of totalitarianism.

'What, then, is the will to power? In his published writings, Nietzsche describes it in deliberately provocative terms: Life itself is essentially appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker; suppression, hardness, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and at least, at its mildest, exploitation—but why should one always use those words in which a slanderous intent has been imprinted for ages? ' (Reginster 2008, p.126)

Nevertheless, the concept of the Will to Power seems not to have been intended by Nietzsche, (albeit his ambiguous aphoristic style leave him wide open to myriad types of interpretations) as leading to all kinds of vile tyranny, rather for him it is ostensibly a never ending desire for unlimited growth. With this in mind, it is important to point out the overman is not a physically superior

person, a racially superior person (as envisaged by the Nazis), or anything that purports to such egregious elements within human beings. Indeed, Nietzsche decried German jingoism and the blatant anti- Semitism of his former friend: the composer Richard Wagner. In stark contrast to the popular misconception of Nietzsche as a rabid racist, he implies that the overman is the person who has actualised his potential and realised his freedom to manifest power by becoming one with the Will to Power to become the self-overcoming person:

It is this emphasis on the feeling of power which leads Nietzsche to his account of autonomy as self-overcoming, that is, ethical labour on the self directed towards self-mastery, since it is overcoming those aspects of ourselves which constrain our mastery of ourselves that we experience the feeling of power. (Owen 1995, p.105)

For Nietzsche, the Will to Power needs to be channeled via self- mastery and self-transformation, regardless of easily misinterpreted words such as ' imperious/ and ' domineering"

That commanding something which the people calls ' spirit' wants to be master within itself and around itself and to feel itself master: out of multiplicity it has the will to simplicity, a will which binds together and tames, which is imperious and domineering. (Nietzsche 1990, p.160)

However, Nietzsche claims that it is only rare people who can achieve this noble state. Most individuals simply lack the capability and the motivation:

' Today you still suffer from the many, O man set apart: today you still have your courage and your hopes.' (Nietzsche 1988, p.89)

With this in mind, it is perhaps interesting to note that Nietzsche, who lived a decidedly solitary existence, didn't seek the company of crowds.

He felt that they were incapable of actualising their potential in life and hindered the development of others who could become overmen:

' Today you still suffer from the many, O man set apart: today you still have your courage and your hopes.' (Nietzsche 1988, p.89)

Alternatively, as Bob Dylan so eloquently expresses in his challenging counter-culture song: It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding):, it's important not to become too influenced by those who acquiesce to the status quo, if one wishes to live an authentic existence:

While one who sings with his tongue on fire

Gargles in the rat race choir

Bent out of shape from society's pliers

Cares not to come up any higher

But rather get you down in the hole

That he's in.'

(Dylan 1965.)

In addition to this, Dylan's song *Maggie's Farm* rather sardonically addresses the difficulties of living out an authentic existence in the modern world:

' I try my best to be just like I am,

But everybody wants you to be just like them.

They say sing while you slave,

But I just get bored.' (Dylan 1965)

Indeed, Nietzsche felt that most people were invariably not very well- balanced and consequently unable to live out an authentic existence, not surprisingly.

' Madness is something rare in individuals- but in groups, parties, peoples, ages it is the rule.' (Nietzsche 1990, p.103)

Nietzsche suggests that, in the absence of God, individuals should create themselves in a similar way to artists whether they be sculptors or painters:

In no small part, the attainment of one's higher self is a matter of artful construction, of self-sculpting, even as what we make "beckons toward" the highest self, the "far and immeasurable." Successful natures, Nietzsche claims, act "not according to the dictum 'know thyself,' but as if there hovered before them the commandment: will a self and thou shalt become a self"(AOM 366). It is difficult to deny that Nietzsche understands the transition from ego to a higher self not as a task for detached contemplation, but as an accomplishment of willed artistry. If such natures happen to be ours, we will see that "we want to be the poets of our life" (GS 299) (Miner 2011, p.348).

Like art, it is something we can fashion out of the materials (however base) we have at our disposal. It is not something preordained, but something that has to be shaped in a highly creative way. Although at times, Nietzsche dismisses the notion of free- will, it can be argued that a certain amount of freedom is

required in order to actualise one's potential. Indeed, it is difficult to see how it could all be a matter of deterministic drives given the way Nietzsche promotes ideas such as having the courage of one's convictions to mould an authentic self which seem to imply some kind of decision- making

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. (Huskinson 2004, p.33)

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Nietzsche wants to create something new and life-enhancing/ vital out of the ruins of the old.

' Shatter, O my brothers, shatter these ancient law- tables of the pious! Shatter by your teachings the sayings of the world-caluminators!' (Nietzsche 1988, pp. 222-223.)

Here Nietzsche is referring to what he regards as the slave morality of time-honoured Judeo- Christian values. Since, according to him, God is dead and henceforth such values are no longer relevant to the modern age. Formerly, such values provided order, coherence and a sense of meaning to humankind.

However, since, according to Nietzsche, they no longer have currency, there is a pressing need to start from scratch and create a new value system. Instead of, what he perceives as, life-denying religious values, he wants to create something that will positively affirm life, rather than perpetually seek to escape it.

For Nietzsche (inspired by ancient Greek art), sheer vitality (the Dionysian instinct), even in the face of suffering, is essential in terms of providing meaning to life.

' The great health. - We new, nameless, ill-understood premature- born of a yet undemonstrated future- we need for a new goal also a new means, namely a new health, a stronger, shrewder, tougher, more daring, more cheerful health than any has been hitherto.' (Nietzsche 1977 , p.210)

Nevertheless, this idea seems paradoxical (in the sense if all former values are removed what then constitutes value. Furthermore, it is not clear what this value system will comprise of apart from being new and different.

On the other hand, for the rare individual at least:

The motivation for re-engaging in re-evaluative projects makes more sense if we understand, on some level, that we have fallen short and are therefore dissatisfied with what we have ended up with as the result of a particular self-transformative project. In this way my constant striving to overcome myself would not be arbitrary, but might be explained in terms of the necessarily always limited attempt of trying to get closer to an ethical ideal, underwriting what might be required to possess "the power" [and also the reasons] to create for ourselves our own new eyes and ever again new eyes that are even more our own (GS 143). (Mitchell 2016, p.341)

To conclude, Nietzsche's notion of self-overcoming clearly involves struggle, self-appraisal, self-critique, dedicating oneself to a positive affirmation of life and creating new values with which to live by in an authentic way , not merely following the herd morality designed for the ' benefit' of the amorphous masses. Although it is a moot point, from my perspective, how a new system of values could be created in contemporary society. It does seem as though it is the

exception rather than the rule in this case as only rare individuals like poets, prophets and saints could possibly achieve it. Nevertheless, I find the idea of self-creation very appealing due to the fact that an individual who has liberated him/herself from societal conventions can then create his or her own laws and values, notwithstanding that, 'It is terrible to be judge and avenger of one's own law...to be like a star thrown forth into empty space and into the icy breath of solitude.' (Nietzsche 1988, p. 89) The Romantic poet William Blake seems to echo Nietzsche's 'Of the Way of the Creator' (Nietzsche 1988, p.88) here in several lines from his epic poem Jerusalem:

'I must create a system, or be enslaved by another man's./ I will not reason or compare; my business is to create.' (Blake, 1998, p. 11)

Like Nietzsche, Blake emphasises the creative aspect of self-overcoming in order to be authentic and not just another cog in the monotonous social machine.

Furthermore, Nietzsche seems to promote the concept of becoming in contrast to the notion of being. Overcoming, creating, growing, changing, developing,, struggling; all the main themes in Nietzsche's oeuvre emphasise the processes of

becoming rather than fixed states of being. With this in mind, it is perhaps worthy of attention that Nietzsche, who predominantly deploys aphorisms in his writings, which can be interpreted in many different ways, doesn't refer to a specific individual as "an overman." rather the overman is a metaphorical notion; it is something toward which we strive: 'What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal.' (Nietzsche 1988, p.44) Nevertheless, Nietzsche alludes to certain role models who exemplify the overman:

The philosopher, artist, and saint are exemplars precisely in the sense that they model a more vital, authentic, and self-aware way of living; they inspire others to break out of their lazy conformity and transfigure their own lives.

(Franco, 2018, p.57)

Moreover, Nietzsche does specify an amalgam of great historical figures that could constitute the overman. In his book *The Will to Power* he emphasises how, albeit contradictory forces that could constitute the overman:

As a close reading of WP 983 shows, by " the Roman Caesar with Christ's soul" Nietzsche means the self that creates itself through ruler virtues, the self that can most strongly posit itself, mastering even benevolence and compassion in its relations with others.

(Steinbuch 1994, p.89)

However, again the ever elusive Nietzsche appears to be deploying Caesar and Christ as symbolic figures rather than particular/ specific human beings in order to unite dichotomous natures (cold, austere discipline and command merged with warm, unconditional compassion). For Nietzsche self- overcoming is an ideal that we must strive for continuously.

Consequently, self-overcoming is not something that one accomplishes. It is not an end state to be achieved. At no point in time can individuals say that they have successfully overcome themselves and, henceforth, there is no further work to be done. Instead, self-overcoming should be understood as a never-ending process of self-appraisal, self-critique, and self-improvement. The moment an individual relinquishes his/her duty to perform this process , then, from a Nietzschean perspective, one ceases to continue on the path of attempting to be fully human and an inauthentic and mediocre existence awaits him/her.

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