

# Nietzsche's Übermensch as a Metaphor for Education

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*Rather than appealing to universal truth or morality based on the power of reason, Nietzsche's impassioned plea for resuscitating the embodied self as a source of ethics provides a new perspective on educational philosophy. Within the concept of will to power, he offers the notion of the Übermensch as a model of overcoming the social limitations of Christian morality and the dictates of fashion. In a formative state, 'untimely men' (and here, read 'Nietzsche') stand outside the homogenising influence of the State. Nietzsche's Übermensch, involving a continuous process of 'overcoming' and 'becoming', is suggested as an alternative to the autonomous liberal subject as an educational ideal. It provides a perspective that contrasts with the egalitarian and collectivist notions that underpin social democracy and social justice as guiding ideals for educational endeavour. This paper questions the liberal hope that education is automatically the path to freedom and autonomy, arguing that education can be valued as a means of developing a reflective or critical view on our social predicament. Übermensch, perhaps the closest Nietzsche comes to an educational ideal, represents agonistic engagement with our social predicament and an overcoming of instrumental views about education. This paper investigates Nietzsche's figure of the Übermensch and examines some functional aspects of that same figure that help to explain the notion of education relevant to this paper.*

## Who Was that *Übermensch*?

Nietzsche's themes of *eternal recurrence* and *will to power* are brought together in his *Übermensch* figure, first referred to explicitly in his *Gay Science*. Although not constituting a definition, overman is characterised therein as the individual who can "posit his own ideal" and "derive from it his own law, joys, and rights" (GS §143). Given Nietzsche's rejection of conformity and transcendental ideals, *Übermensch* then becomes a metaphor for a plurality of norms in keeping with his announcement of the death of God, an undermining of the doctrine of one normal human type, and the possibility for multiple perspectives. In fact, Zarathustra is later to announce, "Dead are all gods: now we will that overman live!" (Z I, *On the Gift-Giving Virtue* §3).

Nietzsche's process involves admiration, emulation, and then a *moving beyond* the images of people, real or imaginary, that he considers worthy of being our educators. In this process, we learn to become who we are, or who we can be. The desire to relive each moment forever is possible only for a being that experiences and celebrates life to the full. Finding Nietzsche's *Übermensch* is not a simple task, and given that he never defined an actual *specimen* for us, we are left to determine possibilities from the literature that preceded Nietzsche, from his references to *Übermenschlich* qualities of the people he admired, and from his depiction of his own physical health and socio-cultural predicament. Inherent in *Übermensch* is the notion of continuous and dynamic overcoming

of the currently known; of something beyond what is currently known as ‘man’: “Man is something that shall be overcome ... a rope, tied between beast and overman—a rope over an abyss” (Z I, *Prologue*).

Nietzsche’s concept of the *Übermensch* has been interpreted by some critics as one that advocates a master-slave society and justifies totalitarian government. Kaufmann is one of many to refute this connection and attribute it to misinterpretation. Tyranny over others is not part of Nietzsche’s vision, although Kaufmann suggests the failure to indulge in it is no virtue unless one has the power to become a tyrant and refrains deliberately (1974: 316). An unpublished note from Nietzsche posits as the ideal “the Roman Caesar with Christ’s soul” (WP §983), a phrase that represents for Kaufmann the “very heart of Nietzsche’s overman, capable of both sympathy and hardness” (WP §983n).

Kaufmann rejects the interpretation of *Übermensch* as a model of totalitarian domination, devoting a whole chapter of his (at the time) definitive text on Nietzsche to a refutation of the idea that Nietzsche was a precursor to Nazism. He notes in particular that Nietzsche did not consider the Germans a ‘master race’ (p. 284); that various writers (Oehler, Bäumler and Hartle) misrepresented and misquoted Nietzsche for their own ends (pp. 290-1); that Nietzsche explicitly rejected nationalism and race hatred (p. 295); and that Nietzsche’s occasional comments on ‘blood’ and ‘breeding’ were metaphoric rather than biologicistic – more commonly found in his unpublished notes than elsewhere (pp. 305-6). Oscar Levy, prefacing a 1921 collection of Nietzsche’s private letters, reminds us that Nietzsche was, in fact, half-Polish and an outspoken critic of German nationalism, citing as examples Nietzsche’s view of Prussia as “a power full of the greatest danger for culture” (Levy, 1985: *viii*) and the spirit of Germany at that time as “the stupidest, most depraved and most mendacious form of the German spirit that has ever existed” (*ibid.*).

Danto (1965) too, refutes the reading of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* as a “return to the instinctual swamplands of the primitive psyche” (p. 194) and a “seeming nostalgia for the Neolithic freedom of the happy brute living in unaware animal felicity” (p. 187). He also rejects images of a physical superman or dominating overlord, suggesting that the prefix *Über* connotes ‘over’ in the sense of ‘over the hills and far away’ rather than taking orders from someone ‘over me’; in other words, a sense of *beyondness* rather than *superiority*. As a defensible ethical project for education, then, *Übermensch* is interpreted as *overman* rather than *superman*; a symbol of the ‘repudiation of any conformity to a single norm’; the ‘antithesis to mediocrity and stagnation’; a model of *self-integration*, *self-creation*, and *self-mastery*; the ‘Dionysian’ man who has “overcome his animal nature, organised the chaos of his passions, sublimated his impulses, and given style to his character ... a spirit who has become free” (Kaufmann, 1974: 316).

Kaufmann provides a brief genealogy of the idea of *Übermensch*, tracing similar concepts back to as early as the second century A.D. with the *hyperanthropos* found in the writings of Lucian. *Übermensch* also featured in the work of Heinrich Muller in 1664. In other words, Nietzsche did not invent the term so much as appropriate it to his own philosophy. Later literary occurrences of *Übermenschen* are also noted, particularly in the work of Goethe, with whom Nietzsche was very familiar. Kaufmann concludes that the English term ‘superman’ does not sufficiently capture the connotation for Nietzsche, in that it fails to incorporate an element that was important to Nietzsche – the idea that *Übermensch* involved a spirit of self-overcoming: “Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?” (Z I, *Prologue* §3).

In clarifying the nature of the overman, Nietzsche posits other types; on the one hand his antithesis – the *last man*: “the extreme representative of weakness, a man frozen at the level of passive nihilism, totally reduced to a ‘herd animal’, rendered uniform, equal, and level – the man who has found happiness” (Haar, 1985: 24). On the other hand is the *higher man*, searching for scientific knowledge and therefore still the prisoner of an ideal. Although engaged in more worthy endeavour, for Nietzsche, the higher man is also engaged in a nihilistic quest in that he posits a goal outside life itself. In contrast to the current (and not yet good enough) state of man, Zarathustra is very clear about the importance of Nietzsche’s overman: “I have the overman at heart, *that* is my first and only concern” (Z IV, *On the Higher Man* §3).

In 1907, Simmel identified the overman not as a rigid structure with an absolutely determined content, but as “indicating the human form that is superior to the present real one ... independent

of all the limits typical of reality” (Simmel, 1991: 175). This interpretation is supported by Nietzsche’s own reflection that the word ‘overman’ designates a type of supreme achievement, as opposed to ‘modern’ men (EH, *Why I Write Such Good Books* §1).

Although it was mid career when Nietzsche formulated his notion of *Übermensch*, the very act of establishing such a value constitutes *Übermenschlich* activity, suggesting that he was already living his ideal before his conceptual clarification of the idea. According to Salomé’s (1988) rendition, Nietzsche’s *Übermenschlich* tendencies began in relation to his family, to German culture, and to the God of his youth. In fact, his life’s philosophical work can be seen as a series of attempts to overcome – not only the nihilism of Western culture and his own ill health, but his previous philosophical endeavours as well. This is very clear in his later appending of prefaces and commentaries to his earlier works, and especially so in the stern self-criticism of *Ecce Homo*, where he blatantly qualified, undermined and/or refuted some of his earlier major works.

Lovitt (1977) makes a worthwhile contribution to the interpretation of *Übermensch* as well, noting that the term is often generally translated as ‘superhuman’, ‘demigod’, or ‘superman’. He contends that the term ‘overman’ provides a better connotation than ‘*the overman*’ in that it refers to generic man – to humanity, rather than any particular individual. Lovitt suggests *Übermensch* might be translated “man-beyond” (p. 96), for overman stands in contrast with what we know of man up until now. However, it would be wrong to talk of an ‘ideal’ man since that would posit a predetermined formulation, whereas Nietzsche’s path to greatness shunned idealism in favour of present reality: “One has deprived reality of its value, its meaning, its truthfulness, to precisely the extent to which one has mendaciously invented an ideal world” (EH, *Preface* §2). It is this ‘going beyond’ and not the achievement of ideals that constitutes the challenge for education.

We are not given a clear definition of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, although several individuals are referred to in his work as having many *Übermenschlich* qualities. Notable among these was Goethe, a creative spirit seen by Nietzsche as fully connected with life in its fullest sense, striving against any separation of reason, sensuality, feeling, and will. Perhaps as close to a definition of *Übermensch* as anywhere is Nietzsche’s poetic portrayal of Goethe’s character:

A strong, highly cultured human being, skilled in all physical accomplishments, who, keeping himself in check and having reverence for himself, dares to allow himself the whole compass and wealth of naturalness, who is strong enough for this freedom; a man of tolerance not out of weakness, but out of strength, because he knows how to employ to his advantage what would destroy an average nature; a man to whom nothing is forbidden, except it be weakness.... 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 (TI, *Expeditions of an Untimely man* §49).

### **What Is that *Übermensch*?**

With some idea of the development of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, it is now possible to examine a few functional aspects of that same figure that help to explain the notion of education at the heart of this paper. The discussion focuses on the ontological relationship with human ‘being’, the pathological relationship with Nietzsche’s own state of health, the historical relationship with evolution, and the ethical relationship with Kant’s *noumenal* world.

First, a focus on *Übermensch* is not so much an examination of an ontological state, as a form of critical engagement with social and cultural mores that shape educational development, an engagement easily interpreted as Nietzsche’s early articulation of subjectivity. The word ‘subject’ derives from the Latin *iacere* – to throw or toss and the prefix *sub* – meaning under. One ‘throws oneself under’ a particular regime at the same time as one ‘is thrown under’ – simultaneously an active and a passive process. For Nietzsche, ‘going under’ was a necessary but only preparatory step in the *Übermenschlich* trajectory: “an *overture* and a *going under*” (Z I, *Prologue* §4). What is important here is the upward direction as the driving force in life – to ‘throw over’ or go above – although

there is also room for the sense of ‘overthrow’ of adversarial forces implicated in the Nietzschean process of becoming: “I love those who do not know how to live, except by going under, for they are those who cross over.”

According to Nietzsche, the unthinking masses conform to tradition, and subject themselves to an other-worldly morality as a means of diminishing their involvement in this life: “All the sick and sickly instinctively strive after a herd organization as a means of shaking off their dull displeasure and feeling of weakness” (GM III §18). The ‘other world’ is a realm lambasted by Nietzsche as a “revenge” on life and a “moral-optical illusion” (II, *Reason in Philosophy* §6), whether it be the heavenly after-life of Christian belief, or Kant’s formulation of morality in its dependence on the world of reason unattainable in the phenomenal world: “If one shifts the centre of gravity of life out of life into the ‘Beyond’ – into nothingness – one has deprived life as such of its centre of gravity” (AC §43). A focus on *Übermensch*, however, provides a countermeasure to the nihilism of modernity after the death of God – a move towards creating value in a celebration of this life; a celebration in which the creator is secure, independent, and highly individualistic, with a healthy balance between passion and reason – characteristics that Nietzsche admired in Goethe: “What he aspired to was *totality*; he strove against the separation of reason, sensuality, feeling, will... he disciplined himself to a whole, he *created* himself (II, *Expeditions of an Untimely man* §49).

Zarathustra states clearly, “I teach you the overman” (Z I, Prologue §3). In his teaching, *Übermensch* is always a bridge and not an end. It is a process rather than an endpoint – a journey rather than a destination. For Nietzsche, there is no ‘being’ behind the ‘doing’ – ‘the doer’ is “merely a fiction added to the deed” (GM I §13). With this in mind, the ontological problem of whether *Übermensch* can exist is not a huge concern. The critical question becomes how do we work towards this *Übermensch*. Based on the analysis so far, a focus on *Übermensch* is less about being than becoming.

The second aspect to be examined in relation to *Übermensch* is the importance Nietzsche attaches to the notion of overcoming adversity, evident in his famous aphorism claiming that “what does not kill me makes me stronger” (II, *Maxims and Arrows* §8), and underlined in a posthumously published note:

A full and powerful soul not only copes with painful even terrible losses, deprivations robberies, insults; it emerges from such hells with a greater fullness and powerfulness; and, most essential of all with a new increase in the blissfulness of love (WP §1030).

His personal struggle and self-overcoming typifies his formulation of the ‘overman’ concept, with his friend and confidante, Lou Salomé, suggesting that his philosophy may have been driven by a lifelong personal struggle against illness, against convention, and against his eventual insanity. She argues that his illness necessitated taking himself as the material of his thought, that his health was ever-present as an issue, and that his philosophical world picture derived from the driven suffering of his own inner being. What she noted was a “compulsion” (1988: 56) toward self-isolation and torment as a means of generating ideas. Although the pathological story is not accepted as sufficient explanation for all of Nietzsche’s ideas, the severity and ongoing nature of his health problems clearly influenced his focus on life and health, grounding the concept of challenge and overcoming difficulties as a means of realising one’s own strength. This is nowhere more obvious than in his musings on the advantages conferred on him by his fickle health:

Constantly we have to give birth to our thoughts out of our pain and, like mothers, endow them with all we have of blood, heart fire, pleasure, passion, agony, conscience, fate, and catastrophe... And as for sickness: are we not almost tempted to ask whether we could get along without it?... Only great pain, the long, slow pain that takes its time... compels us philosophers to descend into our ultimate depths... it makes us more profound (GS *Preface for the Second Edition* §3).

A third aspect worthy of consideration is the relationship between *Übermensch* and Darwin’s famous theory of the origin of species. To the degree that *Übermensch* might be considered a continuous evolutionary process, Nietzsche could be accused of being a social Darwinian.

Nietzsche certainly knew of Darwin and there are explicit references in Zarathustra to the relationship between ape and man. However, adopting an evolutionary model would imply a teleological view of progress with more value attached to each 'better' stage achieved, since Darwin's theory held that "as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowment will tend to progress towards perfection" (Darwin, 1966: 489). Thus, it is by virtue of the final goal that a string of historical changes might be construed as an ascending hierarchy of these stages rather than a mere succession of equivalent stages.

For this reason, Simmel (1991) argues that Nietzsche is not Darwinian, suggesting that historical changes to culture result from "accidental occurrences" (p. 11) rather than a prescribed purpose or a rational master plan for existence. Instead, he suggests, life is development and continuous flux, with each constitution of life finding its higher and meaning-giving norm in its next stage. Nietzsche's 'overman' is nothing but a level of development which is one step beyond the level reached at a specific time by a specific mankind. In this argument, mere change becomes evolution in the evaluative sense only through a goal that has somehow been presupposed. Evolution presupposes an extrinsic purpose for life, so to agree with Darwin would be to "smuggle an absolute final goal through the back door" (Simmel, 1991: 7) and thus undermine the value that Nietzsche attributed to life itself. Evolution is often thought of in terms of survival of the fittest, although, says Nietzsche, where there is struggle in life, it is not a struggle for *survival*, but "a struggle for power" (II, *Expeditions of an Untimely Man* §14).

Nietzsche distances himself further from Darwin in his idea of *eternal recurrence*. Taken literally, the idea posits that history will, at some future time, be repeated in every minute detail, implying a return of an *identical* self at some future point, leaving all creation of no lasting value – a concept that doesn't sit easily with Darwinian evolution. Nor, though, as a metaphysical theory, does it reconcile with the notion of a creative conscious self who would recognise such a cycle, and, in the spirit of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, commit to overcoming previous limitations. Klossowski (1997) attempts a reconciliation by providing for the possibility of a 'multiple alterity' inscribed within an individual. There is room for such flexibility within the notion of 'transitoriness' in Nietzsche's notes about the enjoyment of productive and destructive force – explained as "continual creation" (WP §1049). Such an interpretation leaves us with a *cycle* of creation rather than the specific creations themselves as the destiny for *eternal recurrence*.

More in keeping with Nietzsche's philosophy, though, is the interpretation of *eternal recurrence* not as descriptive of reality, but functioning instead as a hypothetical imperative to live in such a way that we would will to live that way forever, *as if* there was an *eternal recurrence*. The affirmation of life central to Nietzsche's *amor fati*, or love of one's fate, prescribed that life should be lived in such a way that that "one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary... but *love* it" (EH, *Why I am so Clever* §10). *Amor fati* was Nietzsche's formula for the greatness of a human being, for to celebrate what *is* with a sense of joy gives meaning to life in this world. With such an all-embracing perspective, the past can be reconstituted (or at least celebrated) as a product of the creative will, with redemption springing from the ability to "recreate all 'it was' into a 'thus I willed it'" (Z II, *On Redemption*). *Übermensch*, then, as the one who teaches and affirms the doctrine of *eternal recurrence*, carries awesome responsibility for life's direction.

The fourth aspect of Nietzsche's *Übermensch* to be explored here concerns its relationship with the *noumenal* world of Kant. Nietzsche's *Übermensch* and his notion of overcoming was a continuous thread throughout his philosophy. In some respects, it could be argued that the ethical prescription is similar to that presupposed in Western society and underpinned by Kant's autonomous individual. One might argue that, like Kant's moral realm, *Übermensch* is unattainable, unknowable in its essence, and beyond our current reality, while at the same time accepting that it provides normative direction for personal and social life. Underlying both philosophies is also the importance of freedom. For Kant, morality is only possible where the individual is free. For Nietzsche too, there is value in the freedom to explore new possibilities for man.

There is a fundamental difference, however. For Kant, morality arises in, and is dependent upon, an individuated rational being, resulting in exclusion of otherness; particularly the "earthly kingdom of desires" (WP §509) that Nietzsche embraces as a driving force in life. The resulting

deification of universal reason underpins much of Nietzsche's criticism of Kant, in particular Kant's quest to demonstrate the existence of a higher morality. Nietzsche's famous declaration that God is dead (GS §108) lays siege to Kantian reason as the suffused image of God – a 'tremendous, gruesome shadow' that may be projected for thousands of years, 'a spectre to overcome' as man is 'reintegrated into nature': "When will all these shadows of God cease to darken our minds? When will we complete our de-deification of nature? When may we begin to 'naturalise' humanity in terms of a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature?" (GS §109).

From the perspective that God is dead, there is no basis for shadows to persist. Nietzsche argues that when one gives up Christian belief, one thereby deprives oneself of the right to Christian morality, since it is true only if God is true. Any remnants of intuition about good and evil are then merely a legacy of Christian morality, whether conscious or not. So arises the possibility for *Übermensch* to arise and challenge currently accepted truths. This type of challenge is more than rational inquiry and intellectual posturing. It incorporates rather than excludes *otherness*, embracing the impulsive side of human nature and the creative force immanent in the formulation of new values. This was for Nietzsche, the realm of *Übermensch*:

the Dionysian man ... who has overcome his animal nature, organised the chaos of his passions, sublimated his impulses, and given style to his character – the man of tolerance, not from weakness but from strength," "a spirit who has *become free*" (Kaufmann, 1974: 316).

The formulation of Nietzsche's *Übermensch* as 'overcoming' challenges some common assumptions about human identity. Unlike the autonomous individual espoused by Kant, *Übermensch* is particular rather than reflective of some universal prescription; it is impassioned in its engagement with others rather than operating inside a reasoned moral frame; it is cast in the image of man rather than as a shadow or temporal image of a deity; it is embodied rather than spiritual; and it is worldly rather than ideal or transcendental. *Übermensch* is social, interactive, and pragmatic; and – through agonistic contest and social engagement – incorporates *otherness*. The ethical content of such a formulation is a strong critique of the Kantian principles that underpin a universal ethics, highlighting the contestable nature of what counts as education, and the political context in which that contest is usually played out. The relationship between 'self' and society is complex, and to tip the balance in favour of a creative and unruly subject is to challenge the familiar edifices and societal controls, not only of our prized educational institutions, but of Western civilisation. For an educator, such a move is possibly uncomfortable in that it paves the way for unpredictability and chaos, yet such a move is vital if one is to challenge the limits of our current perspective, to engender richer possibilities for one's educational endeavour, and to allow for the emergence of those who will be more than we currently are. As Zarathustra preaches, "One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star" (Z I, *Prologue* §5).

### ***Übermensch* and Education**

*Übermensch* as a metaphor for education challenges some current conceptions of 'education'. The liberal ideal of the autonomous subject fails the screening test, in terms of its requirement to adopt universal laws, its insistence on rationality as the over-riding concern, and its separation of a moral will from subsequent action: "One must follow the instincts, but persuade reason to aid them with good arguments" (BGE §191). There are problems, too, for communitarianism and other collectivist notions of society and culture, in their insistence that individuals defer to group norms and values. The imposition of a levelling morality acts as a preventative for the emergence of genius and constitutes the egalitarian focus of Nietzsche's *slave rebellion* or what he called the "herd instinct in the individual" (GS §116). His central objection to egalitarian movements, drawn from Aristotle, appears to be that they treat people as equal when they are really not so, an objection obvious in his attack on Rousseau:

The doctrine of equality! ... But there exists no more poisonous poison: for it *seems* to be preached by justice itself, while it is the termination of justice... 'Equality for equals, inequality for unequals' – that would be the true voice of justice: and what follows from it, 'Never make equal what is unequal' (II, *Expeditions of an Untimely Man* §48).

Educational ideals of democracy, justice and equality thus fail to the degree that all individuals are accorded equal value, when the creative splendour of Nietzsche's *Übermensch* clearly occupies a different status from the nihilistic *last man*. Finding the "little garden of happiness" (HAH I §591) that accompanies being resigned to small or moderate achievements is, for Zarathustra, a 'wretched contentment' – the "hour of the great contempt... in which your happiness, too, arouses your disgust" (Z I, *Prologue* §3). Deficient also is the *higher man*, whose struggle is recognised as ongoing, with failure imminent: "The higher its type the more rarely a thing succeeds" (Z IV, *On the Higher Man* §15), although there can be no substitute for the ongoing commitment.

Although Nietzsche acknowledged some value in technicist education, he saw much academic endeavour as scholarly grinding (II, *Expeditions of an Untimely Man* §29). His notion of *Bildung* recognised the need for mass education although he also saw the need for special individuals to arise above mediocrity. His higher process involves admiration, emulation, and then a *moving beyond* the images of people, real or imaginary, that he considers worthy of being our educators. In this process, we learn to become who we are, or who we can be. So Nietzsche's mantra, "You shall become who you are" (GS III §270) involves personal commitment to surpassing that which we already know and that which we have learned to value.

Education for Nietzsche was not separate from culture; it was the role of culture to nurture the genius, who in turn might lead man to new heights. It was not possible for everyone to aspire to genius, but it was our educational duty to prepare the way for his development – "to prepare within themselves and around them for the birth of the genius and the ripening of his work" (UM III §6). Disciplined training in language was important then, as a means of learning one's traditions, of withstanding the dictates of fashion or social pressure, and thus intensifying culture.

In contrast with Nietzsche's aristocratic notion of 'true culture', the idea of emancipation for the masses characterises what he sees as the worthless character of modern education, in that it is an attempt to democratise the rights of the genius and to overthrow 'the most sacred hierarchy in the kingdom of the intellect': the servitude of the masses, their submissive obedience, and their instinct of loyalty to the rule of genius. This notion of education, training for the masses, is perhaps best thought of in terms of the German words *Bildung* and *Lehre*, in terms of providing instruction in the disciplines, and bringing human beings into culture. This image fits with Nietzsche's image of *the herd* as a description of ordinary folk whose welfare and general education could not suffice as the aim of education.

The education of the masses cannot, therefore, be our aim; but rather the education of a few picked men for great and lasting works. We well know that a just posterity judges the collective intellectual state of a time only by those few great and lonely figures of the period, and gives its decision in accordance with the manner in which they are recognised, encouraged, and honoured, or, on the other hand, in which they are snubbed, elbowed aside, and kept down (FEI III).

He argues that great leaders are necessary, and that all culture begins with obedience, with subordination, with discipline, with subjection.<sup>1</sup> He talks of an 'eternal hierarchy' and a 'pre-established harmony' in which leaders must have followers and followers must have a leader. His model here is the transformation of a weary sounding orchestra when a genius is substituted for a spiritless conductor.

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<sup>1</sup> Although out of fashion today, such vocabulary could accurately describe today's system of modern apprenticeships with their subordination and obedience to a master tradesman.

It is as if this genius, in his lightning transmigration, had entered into these mechanical, lifeless bodies, and as if only one demoniacal eye gleamed forth out of them all. Now look and listen – you can never listen enough! When you again observe the orchestra, now loftily storming, now fervently wailing, when you notice the quick tightening of every muscle and the rhythmical necessity of every gesture, then you too will feel what a pre-established harmony there is between leader and followers, and how in the hierarchy of spirits everything impels us towards the establishment of a like organisation. You can divine from my simile what I would understand by a true educational institution, and why I am very far from recognising one in the present type of university (FEI V).

Rising out of the herd would be those uncommon individuals who had a higher destiny, exemplified in Nietzsche's frequent depictions of the artist and the philosopher as the creators of new metaphors for life – as new manifestations of the genius. Significant in this portrayal is his honouring of "philosophers of the future" (BGE §42), free spirits and higher types unshackled from conformity and tradition, and able to exercise their creative abilities to the full. One such philosopher was Nietzsche himself, who looked to Schopenhauer as his early mentor. Schacht (1995) points out the use of the German word *Erzieher*, in the title of Nietzsche's essay about Schopenhauer, signifying a different sort of education in recognition of Schopenhauer's significance for his own intellectual development, representing the way in which one thinker may be educated by another without thereby becoming a mere disciple:

by challenging, provoking, stimulating, and inspiring, but above all by serving as an *exemplar*, by what he sought to do and how he sought to do it. It is in this sense that 'educator' is here to be understood (Schacht, 1995: 157).

*Übermenschlich* education involves making human beings human through developing their intellectual and creative abilities to the full. It advocates breaking free from conventionality, being responsible for creating one's own existence, and overcoming the inertia of tradition, custom, and any assumed 'self': "God guard me from myself, that is to say from the nature already educated into me" (UM III §1). The task is to follow the difficult path towards a higher, and as yet unknown, self, "for your true nature lies, not concealed deep within you, but immeasurably high above you, or at least above that which you usually take yourself to be" (UM III §1).

Clearly, Nietzsche's idea of 'true self' did not relate to a fixed internal identity or to any persona adopted in relation to an inadequate culture, i.e., "that which you usually take yourself to be" (UM III §1). Nor could it be found by attempting to "tunnel into oneself and to force one's way down into the shaft of one's being" (ibid.) in a journey of psychological discovery. A necessary step in discovering how we have become who we are is to examine our revered objects and educators of the past. Examining those held in high esteem was, for Nietzsche, the path to our 'true selves':

Let the youthful soul look back on life with the question: what have you truly loved up to now, what has drawn your soul aloft, what has mastered it and at the same time blessed it? Set up these revered objects before you and perhaps their nature and their sequence will give you a law, the fundamental law of your own true self. Compare these objects one with another, see how one completes, expands, surpasses, transfigures another, how they constitute a stepladder upon which you have clambered up to yourself as you are now" (UM III §1).

An educator, he claimed, should recognise and develop particular strengths in a pupil, while on the other hand, "draw[ing] forth and nourish[ing] *all* the forces which exist in his pupil and bring[ing] them to a harmonious relationship with one another" (UM III §2). The educative function is determined by the pupil, who adopts the challenge of achieving the standard set by his exemplar.

One might also extract from Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditation* on Schopenhauer (UM III) some general themes that with minor interpretation would be recognisable within existing educational discourse; for example, recognition and encouragement of individual excellence; the role of



leadership and authority; individual responsibility in setting one's own goals; working together for a common purpose in the building of culture; a broadly based education for life rather than the learning of technical skills for the workplace; and the role of language in cultural development.

The promotion of *Übermensch* as a notion then does hold some relevance to established traditions in educational philosophy, although “never yet has there been an overman” (Z II, *On Priests*). Even if Nietzsche's somewhat idealised human form may be desirable, it remains to be seen whether the defining features of that form are consistent with attempts to bring it about through education. Educational hope for the *Übermensch* relies at least on the possibility of overcoming the nihilism of social conditioning, and more positively, on providing some aspect of value for a ‘better’ life. That hope depends to some extent on whether overcoming nihilism is possible, whether *Übermensch* provides access to anything that is of value, and whether that value can in some way ground a desirable social space.

## Conclusion

To posit *Übermensch* as a goal for education is to adopt an instrumental view of education: i.e., education as a mechanism for achieving a particular outcome. In today's educational milieu, there seems little wrong with such an idea, particularly if one is comfortable with approaches to education involving pre-specified outcomes, measurable goals, achievable objectives, instructional modules, and standardised assessment. Such an approach might attempt to identify the essential features of an *Übermensch*, and then set about devising teaching and learning strategies that would achieve the desired effect. Some kind of assessment would then be called upon to check for learning effectiveness. However, to call upon education in this way is to treat education as a technology – not just in the sense of increased efficiency or in the sense of computer mediated learning, but in the sense of packaging and commodifying its participants.

Clearly, when one of those participants is an aspiring *Übermensch*, educational rhetoric that espouses high ideals such as ‘achieving one's potential’ or ‘nurturing the whole person’ might go some way towards providing a suitably challenging environment or sufficiently inspiring mentors to facilitate ‘overcoming’. Such talk is becoming rare now, though, as education is becoming increasingly commercialised. In a competitive market environment, educational institutions are called upon for the efficient production of qualifications, to provide more consumer choice, and to satisfy the needs of a predatory job market. Within a ‘knowledge economy’, education is called upon to produce saleable workplace skills in areas of knowledge that have commercial currency. Education in this mode is merely instrumental, emerging in the form of training and as skill development in the acquisition of useful qualifications. Such education, with its focus on uniformity of reproduction, may generate willing subjects for societal reproduction, but is obviously not sufficient for *Übermenschen*.

Less obvious, however, but perhaps just as insidious, is the burden of expectation that education in a less instrumental form must face. Even the least commercial education can be revealed as instrumental when it is called upon to produce certain ends for society, for individuals, and in particular for our *Übermensch*. Hopes for education are embedded in modernist notions of renewal, in our cultural traditions, in language and in notions of ‘betterment’, all framed in terms of societal values. Evidence of success would be recognisable in terms of our best students stepping forward to take their place as leaders and high achievers within society, or at least as willing and able to uphold certain principles. In other words, such a guided framework prepares us well for a ‘higher man’ status, leaving the subjects of such well-intentioned education able to preserve all that we have learned to value. But the question is not, says Zarathustra, how man is to be *preserved*, but “How is man to be overcome?” (Z IV, *On the Higher Man* §15). Educational institutions, therefore, can do little to *create* the *Übermensch*. Their role, as Nietzsche called it, is to prepare the way for such development so that our aspiring *Übermensch* might step out independently – even in despair of the ‘small virtues’ – overcoming the nihilism, in favour of creating new values and different ways to fly.

Let us therefore *limit* ourselves to the purification of our opinions and valuations and to the *creation of our own new tables of what is good*, and let us stop brooding about the “moral value of our actions”! ...We, however, want to become those we are – human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves (GS §335).

## Note

*Nietzsche's works are cited using alphabetic references below, followed by (a) Roman numerals to indicate major segments of the work (e.g., a 'book' or 'essay'); and (b) the section number indicated by the symbol '§'. Where there is no segment or section number, the relevant title has been used.*

*Abbreviations are as follows:*

- AC: The Anti-Christ; (Nietzsche, 1990);  
 BGE: Beyond Good and Evil (Nietzsche, 1990a);  
 EH: Ecce Homo (Nietzsche, 1989);  
 FEI: On the Future of Our Educational Institutions (Nietzsche, 1909);  
 GS: The Gay Science (Nietzsche, 1974);  
 HAH: Human All Too Human (Nietzsche, 1986);  
 TI: Twilight of the Idols (Nietzsche, 1990);  
 UM III: Schopenhauer as Educator – Third Untimely Meditation (Nietzsche, 1983);  
 WP: The Will to Power (Nietzsche, 1968);  
 Z: Thus Spoke Zarathustra (Nietzsche, 1982).

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