NIETZSCHE’S IDEA OF THE OVERMAN AND THE CURRENT STATE OF COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

by

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Abstract

Nietzsche’s idea of the overman has been interpreted in several ways and is often misunderstood. Observing people’s tendencies to act in specific ways along with the common forms of social organization and development provide us with a general overview of the collective consciousness, which suggests that many individuals are uncritical, conformist, and unhappy. The present work argues that the overman is a concept that aims toward the spiritual growth of the individual: overcoming the human means to reconcile with our true nature and achieve mastery of oneself. As an ideal, the overman has the potential to serve as a guide that helps the subject to better live their lives, regardless of its particular traits. If one succeeds in the task, the individual will empower him- or herself, and this leads to better societies eventually.
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Chapter 1. Introduction

The philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche has caught the attention of philosophers, humanists, scientists, religious people, and politicians alike. His theories of human nature and the composition of the world are as intriguing as they are complex, and many scholars have spent considerable effort attempting to decipher the true meaning of his ideas. Unfortunately, his thought has also been misunderstood; it has been used to bolster fallacious ideologies and reprehensible actions, thus raising many questions regarding the value of the ideas themselves.

When in what follows I speak of “collective consciousness,” I refer to the general way in which people think and how critical or uncritical they tend to be of themselves and the world. An assumption of this thesis is that most people can be more critical, joyful, and creative. Regardless of how good or virtuous a person might think they are, they can always improve themselves to refine their character and, as Nietzsche would say, “surpass the human.” I also assume that a life is more worth living when the subject realizes his or her true nature, rejects dogmas, and achieves self-mastery. Each of these becomes possible by pursuing the ideal of the overman.

The main objective of this thesis is to provide an interpretation of the overman that is useful as well as close to its original meaning and consistent with Nietzsche’s thought in general. Some limitations to be faced include the lack of clarity around the concept of the overman, some current beliefs people hold that prevent them from looking for another set of values, and finding the means that would allow people to assimilate such an ideal. A central question to be answered here is how a theoretical notion whose meaning is attached to a particular time and place in
history (nineteenth-century Europe) can become an ideal that is worthy of universal acceptance in the present.

This thesis consists of two parts. The first argues that the overman is a metaphor that points towards self-mastery and overcoming the human as a real possibility that allows each of us to be reconciled with our true self and to live in accordance with the true nature of the universe. It suggests that the Nietzschean idea of the overman can be interpreted in a way that may be assimilated and carried out by virtually anyone, all while remaining faithful to Nietzsche’s thought. If individuals learn to be critical of themselves and others, if they are able to examine their own values, if they gather more and more power, and put their creative capacities to use more often, this would eventually lead to better societies while allowing individuals to achieve their true potential.

Since the overman is among Nietzsche’s more ambiguous ideas, interpreting it demands a careful study of Nietzsche’s thought and style. Hence, a variety of primary and secondary literature will be analyzed in this work. Given that the concept of the overman is intimately related to other Nietzschean ideas, including the will to power and the eternal recurrence, I shall undertake some analysis of these concepts as well.
Chapter 2. Nietzschean Background

2.1 The Nietzschean Style

Before discussing Nietzsche’s thought itself, let us first focus on how he wrote these ideas and why his method is relevant when studying him. I will start to do so drawing by from a quote by Alexander Nehamas: “The serious discussion of Nietzsche’s style begins with attention to his use of the aphorism, a genre that Nietzsche employed at least partly because of his admiration for the pre-Socratic philosophers and for the French moralists, and of which he remains one of the great masters.”¹ Aphorisms are figures of speech that are usually used to manifest a particular thought or observation in a very concise manner. These forms of expression can usually be identified by their shortness and because of the challenge they represent in understanding their meaning. Aphorisms are considered to be one of the most difficult figures to interpret. Due to their sophisticated nature, they are seen as an elevated literary device as well.

Nietzsche did not use aphorisms to decorate his works but to conform them. Most of his books, from the first to the last, are written as a series of aphorisms that represent a portion of his thought. Such aphorisms do not seem to follow a particular order or sequence, so it is common to find an aphorism that is unrelated to the previous or following one, however, many aphorisms within one work can perfectly fit into the same category or topic, like morality or nihilism.

Due to his aphoristic style, as well as the cryptic and controversial nature of many of his statements, there has been much discussion of whether the works of Nietzsche can be seen as

systematic. There are some who claim that Nietzsche’s writings are not truly philosophical. The main argument is that if Nietzsche did not have a method, his thought has not the consistency that is typical of a philosophical system. Some also argue that Nietzsche’s works are much closer to literature or poetry than philosophy. A serious debate around the Nietzschean method and the exact nature of his writings would require another whole paper, so I will provide just a few thoughts that are useful to the main topic I am developing in this thesis.

Is there any logic behind Nietzsche’s writings? I believe there is, and more so if we aim to understand the whole of his thought instead of analyzing separate pieces of his work. It seems that Nietzsche was pursuing one main goal, and that every book he wrote points in that direction in its own particular way. It is true that his aphorisms are difficult to interpret and he shaped many different concepts, but all of these ultimately keep some relation to each other. The complexity of Nietzsche’s thought is too considerable to reduce his writings to merely literary or poetic art. His ideas are sophisticated and philosophical in nature since they provide abundant (and sometimes exuberant) food for thought and constitute an elaborate critique of much of the way of life of Europe at that time.

Walter Kaufmann was concerned about this problem and he shed some light in this regard. He argues that Nietzsche was not inclined to write within any particular system because he realized how inadequate the systems are. What could be wrong with systems, if they are ordered, reliable, and accurate? Further, some systems are considered the epitome of rational thinking due to their consistency. Nietzsche’s reasoning goes like this: systems are one-sided, that

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is, they exhibit a particular point of view and not others, and they fail to see outside it. Any system relies on their own premises, which must be granted because they are essential to it. Without these assumptions the system becomes meaningless: “The system is reducible to a set of premises which cannot be questioned within the framework of the system—and these basic assumptions give expression to the mental make-up of the philosopher.”

At some point in his life, Nietzsche decided not to follow the same steps of other great figures from the European tradition. He was a great scholar who studied many other philosophers; he spent a considerable portion of his life on two currents in particular: the ancient Greek school of thinking and German Romanticism, though we know that he studied many other thinkers. He had a proficient understanding of Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer; all three philosophers’ ideas cannot be assimilated before a careful revision of their works. It was from such study of other German philosophers that he criticized his own tradition: he was a scholar and part of it at the same time.

However, we must have in mind that Nietzsche was not completely against systems, as he recognized they also embody the greatness of a prodigious thinker. Nietzsche was convinced of the importance that extraordinary individuals can have to their culture; artistic creation and elevated ideas must be valued over common conceptions of the good and lack of judgment. For Nietzsche, systems have merit for what it took to come up with them. The problem arises when we blindly believe in them, without questioning their true value and take them as the most reliable path to knowledge, limiting ourselves to other possibilities (systems or just ideas).

4 Ibid., 81.
5 Ibid., 81.
It now makes sense why Nietzsche chose not to follow any particular system: to adopt a systematic mechanism to organize and express his thought would have been equal to moving within the kind of framework he criticized. To point out the flaws of systems but remain in any given one would have been contradictory. He was aware that being systematic would not have allowed him to be a free spirit.

Which was the style of Nietzsche, if he was not systematic? I have already introduced an important element: the aphorism, but it is still unclear how important it was for him and why it was picked over other styles. While systems are ordered and consistent, aphorisms are loose and allow for much more flexibility, the freedom of spirit that Nietzsche was longing for. There is more to it, as Kaufmann concisely describes: “Nietzsche’s aphoristic style appears as an interesting attempt to transcend the maze of concepts and opinions in order to get at the objects themselves.”6 This means that aphorisms can also be a more direct mechanism to translate our thoughts; instead of struggling with the limitations of systems and their corollaries, we can communicate ideas freely and spontaneously, though this may make it hard for others to understand us. But again, if aphorisms can be inspected without relying on presumptions, that is positive and is in line with Nietzsche’s perspective. Finally, regarding the conceptual unity of Nietzsche’s thought, Kaufmann affirms that “Life does indeed reside in the whole of Nietzsche’s thinking and writing, and there is a unity which is obscured, but not obliterated, by the apparent discontinuity in his experimentalism.”7

On the other hand, Nehamas does not completely agree with Kaufmann and argues that, while Nietzsche’s aphorisms are indeed in line with his perspectivism, he also has more than one

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6 Ibid., 85.
7 Ibid., 91.
style. Nehamas brings interesting observations to the discussion. He thinks that the metaphor is another important element of the Nietzschean style, yet there is something that Nietzsche uses even more than the aphorism and the metaphor: hyperbole.

The relevance of metaphoric language is further explained by Sarah Kofman, who emphasizes that, for Nietzsche, ordinary language fails to provide us with an authentic explanation of the world. Our concepts do not express truth, and we must therefore look for other symbols. The musical language is the best to approach and communicate something of the world because it is the only one that faithfully reaches the “will of things,” thus revealing their true nature. Music is universal: it can be understood and felt without speaking the same tongue, and melody is the primordial fact we count with, before any concepts. As Kofmann states it: “To speak in metaphor, then, is to have language regain its most natural expression, its ‘most accurate, most simple, most direct’ style.”

Nietzsche believed that artistic development is the best step towards the regeneration of a society. A society can be healthy or sick, and the examination of how its culture stands tells us how good it really is. Speaking in these terms, the elevated culture is the one that has cared about artistic creation and the individual’s capacity to use his or her imagination, to be innovative. According to Nietzsche, art has a special place among all the elements that constitute culture, and music has a special place among all the forms of art. This is why many scholars of Nietzsche have been interested in understanding music and art the same way he did.

11 Ibid., 209.
Irony is another resource that Nietzsche used repeatedly through his writings. I will provide two short but illustrative examples of Nietzschean irony. He wrote: “What? Is man just God’s mistake? Or is God just man’s mistake?”\textsuperscript{12} And also: “Life has become easy for me, and easiest when it is demanding the most difficult things.”\textsuperscript{13} The first quote is an open question while the second quote is a personal statement: two different ways to construct sentences that share a highly ironic element. The first claim invites us to think critically about the problem of God and religion. It is an attempt to lure people deeply into a (usually taken for granted) topic which stands brilliant in its simplicity. The second claim seems like nonsense, but it is in fact a profound philosophical revelation; we know that life was very difficult for Nietzsche, so why would he say it was easy? What he is trying to point out is that he has accepted life entirely, exactly as it is, with all the good and the bad, which resembles the assimilation of the eternal recurrence.

We have seen how reading Nietzsche poses a great challenge for several reasons, including the complexity of his ideas, the often cryptic language in which it is written, and the thematic discontinuity of most of his works, among others. The use of irony adds another layer of complexity to the problem. Unlike a typical systematic thinker who communicates ideas straightforwardly, Nietzsche is often unclear when expressing his ideas, so it can be hard to distinguish between a serious statement and a loose one. The study of the totality of his works eventually allows us to discern between the lines where Nietzsche is sharing his true point of view from the lines where he is being critical, sarcastic, or exploratory. Understanding Nietzsche is perhaps more demanding than understanding other thinkers.

\textsuperscript{12} Friedrich Nietzsche, \textit{Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with a Hammer} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 157.

For the purpose of emphasizing the relevance of the metaphoric figure for Nietzsche, I conclude by saying that he preferred it over most other discursive figures because it is compatible with the aphorism, hyperbole, and irony; metaphors enable such conjunction and allow the creative, playful speech that Nietzsche chose to question the idealism and systematic thought of his time.

Nietzsche’s proximity to the Socratic way deserves some attention. The Socratic method consists of questioning all we think we know constantly (even what seems obvious) so that we do not take any facts for granted and remain open to change our beliefs if new evidence contradicts our previous “knowledge” of the world. The Socratic style is similar to Nietzsche’s attempt to rupture the “unidimensionality” and rigidity of tradition: “Both Nietzsche and Socrates are intensely personal thinkers, actively engaged in changing, in one way or the other, the moral quality of the life of the people around them, though they pursue their goals in radically different ways.”

The main difference between these two, argues Nehamas, is that Socrates sees nearly any ordinary event as a possible source of problems for philosophical discussion, while Nietzsche usually begins with abstract philosophical content that might or might not be related to everyday situations. This stylistic trend in Nietzsche reflects one of his beliefs: ideas should not always be aimed to everyone; one must try to be as creative as possible, and thoughts have the right to be very complex, regardless of how many understand them.

If we try to find the historical figure who is closest to Nietzsche, it will likely be Socrates (despite Nietzsche’s scornful attitude towards him). The argument presented above is the first reason that accounts for this claim, but there are more similarities between them. Both characters

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15 Ibid., 26.
were ahead of their time, in the sense that most did not really understand them. As far as we know, Socrates and Nietzsche were perceived as rare and controversial characters who did not fit the standards of the majority. Hence, some people believed that their ideas could not be taken seriously. We also know that they lived humble lives, away from opulence and public recognition, and not knowing just how significant their legacy would come to be in Western thinking. Both also met tragic ends: Socrates was publicly executed while Nietzsche died insane, blind, and deaf.

However, it is important to recall that Socrates believed that each person has, as a rational being, the possibility of knowing the truth through a dialectical process in which he discards or embraces premises based on arguments, once he recognizes how little he knows about the world. Nietzsche was not so reliant and claimed that most people find it difficult to break through their own beliefs which conform to culture, tradition, and Christianity. The vulgarity of the many can undermine the geniality of the few.

It is no coincidence that Nietzsche criticized much of the philosophy of Plato, Socrates’ most remarkable student. Socrates’ style itself is a prime example of the Nietzschean will to power\textsuperscript{16} which “is manifested in the ability to make one’s own view of the world and one’s own values the very world and values in which others live.”\textsuperscript{17} Plato’s style is much closer to what has been typically reproduced in the Western tradition. Moreover, Plato believed in the world of the Ideas and focused on the concept of Form; this platonic idealism was among the philosophical ideas that Nietzsche most disagreed with, so he built an elaborate reply to show why Plato (and to a lesser extent Socrates) is mistaken.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 29.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 32.
Understanding how Nietzsche developed his thought helps us to grasp his philosophy. Now that different perspectives have been brought to the discussion, I will try to show how Nietzsche’s thought really stands. There are some points that are shared or agreed overall. Nietzsche was not systematic, dogmatic, or a traditionalist, and he was not a popular philosopher. He was open, critical, and preferred to write in aphorisms. He liked to include metaphorical and poetic elements in his writings and he was unconventional. Kaufmann affirmed that Nietzsche has a method, while Nehamas believes that Nietzsche employed a plurality of styles. I find the distinction between a method and a style relevant in this regard: a style is more encompassing and is used more slightly than a method, so for example we can have different writing styles, but when we talk about methods we are usually talking about something more specific, like when we follow the scientific method to acquire knowledge.

I am inclined to say that Nietzsche had one style that is dynamic in nature. To affirm that Nietzsche had a method would be closer to implying he was systematic. Nietzsche had a single style; his style was dynamic and changed over time, just as the man himself. As Nietzsche developed his thought and honed his skills he had more literary resources to express his ideas more in depth, yet all his works lie inside the frame of the same style. All his books from *The Birth of Tragedy* to *Ecce Homo* reflect the Nietzschean spirit, but in its own way. Advocating the unity of his style perhaps demands more effort to understand his thought than granting him a plurality of styles, but it is more accurate and aligned with the vitalism he proposed through the whole of his philosophy.
2.2 The Tragic Experience

The following argument supports the unity of Nietzsche’s thought: in order to fully understand his most sophisticated figures (like the death of God or the will to power), we must undoubtedly refer ourselves back to the other ones. I will discuss only a few topics that are fundamental to this work. His interpretation of Greek tragedy is particularly important not only because it is one of the first ideas he was concerned with, but also because it was the starting point for all that came afterwards, including his theory of overcoming the human. Moreover, we will see in a later chapter that the overman is the only individual above the tragic experience.

The largest portion of Nietzsche’s comments on Greek tragedy are condensed within the very first book he wrote, of which Kaufmann writes:

The key conceptions of *The Birth of Tragedy* are the Apollinian and the Dionysian. Apollo represents the aspect of the classical Greek genius extolled by Winckelmann and Goethe: the power to create harmonious and measured beauty; the strength to shape one’s own character no less than works of art; the “principle of individuation”; the form-giving force, which reached its consummation in Greek sculpture. Dionysius, in Nietzsche’s first book, is the symbol of that drunken frenzy which threatens to destroy all forms and codes; the ceaseless striving which apparently defies all limitations; the ultimate abandonment we sometimes sense in music.\(^{18}\)

The main plot of Nietzsche’s first book can be summarized as two forces that are opposed to each other, personified by the gods Apollo and Dionysius. Studying Greek mythology allows us to understand why these two deities are attributed with such qualities: Apollo is the god of the sun, music, and poetry, while Dionysius is the god of wine and wildlife. On one hand we have order, intelligence, clarity, and beauty, and on the other hand we have frenzy, ecstasy, and spontaneity. However, it is not straightforward to understand the way these two forces interact.

There is a difference between the ancient Greek perception of the Dionysian and Apollinian, the way Nietzsche conceived it, and how we can understand it today. Given the breach between the two gods, what they represent, and the values that we have today, our first impression may drive us to see the Apollinian as good and the Dionysian as bad, such that we should choose the Apollinian virtues if we had to pick between those two. This would be a misinterpretation. It is clear that these forces are essentially different, and some of their attributes have a counterpart in the other deity, but the Greeks conceived them both as important and “positive”; in fact, all of the ancient Greek deities were necessary, just because each had an element that was meaningful according to the ancient Greek worldview.

Nietzsche’s interpretation of the Apollinian and Dionysian is close to its original meaning, but it is not quite the same. He thought that these two forces oppose each other in a way that something new is created by this interaction; the Apollinian and the Dionysian are two poles that resist each other, need each other, and from the tension generated by this opposition something else emerges. I will draw a quote from David Allison to further clarify this point:

With the conjunction of the Dionysian and Apollonian attitudes, tragic Greek culture was able to provide itself with the resources of what Nietzsche saw as an extraordinary health.
For Nietzsche, this would be a culture imbued with a generous understanding of and toleration for the whole human experience, with a strength to survive in the face of personal and political adversity, a culture that would admit a wide latitude in the pursuit of individual creativity, coupled with a deep-seated feeling of social and political identity.  

First, the conjunction of the Apollinian and Dionysian brings something new and extraordinary. The Apollinian keeps the Dionysian in check, avoiding the fall into pure hedonism and channelling his creativity and power into something positive. Second, the outcome of the Apollinian and Dionysian together can grant the individual qualities to overcome its current situation, as problematic as it is. Here we have the first clue on how to understand Nietzsche’s thought, which always points to the affirmation of life without denying the nefarious that is also part of our experience. Finally, Nietzsche’s diagnosis of a society lies within its culture; a society can only be considered healthy as long as the values of the culture are the right ones.  

The Apollinian and Dionysian can also be interpreted as principles of pleasure and pain. For Nietzsche, such principles are the substratum or organic life, i.e., an inherent part of the nature of living beings. This principle, which is also a recurrent figure, can be understood as the disposition to seek all that will gratify us and avoid what will potentially harm us. However, pleasure and pain will be part of us no matter how hard we try to control external conditions. All life is driven by these principles, hence this representation (image of the world) allows us to understand other representations. Nietzsche saw life as a constant struggle, so the metaphor of

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Apollo versus Dionysius fits perfectly into his scheme: “Apollo could not live without Dionysius! The ‘titanic’ and the ‘barbaric’ were in the end not less necessary than the Apollinian.”

But what does Greek tragedy ultimately represent? Where does it come from? The tragic experience is the experience of death, the instant when we realize our own finitude. Silk and Stern add that “Nietzsche’s answer is coherent and impressive. Tragedy, he argues, presents us with the destruction of individuals in a way which is exalting, because it gives us a glimpse of the underlying deeper power of life.” The ancient Greek representation of tragedy served as a means to alleviate the anguish that is produced by the subject’s inevitable struggle against his or her own mortality.

Nietzsche realized that the representation of the tragic was a clever and lofty mechanism to carry such fatal experience into a sphere that let us play and deal with it more subtly. Through the representation of human tragedy we create a new language along with a new set of symbols. We then add elements of comedy and irony that enable us to perceive the tragic in a different manner. Seeing the tragic as something humorous instantly mitigates some of the pain it causes, thus providing the subject with a healthy optimism. Finally, since “life” is a central topic for Nietzsche, tragedy is all the more important because it indirectly emphasizes the value of life.

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Chapter 3. The Overman

3.1 The Origin of the Overman

This section provides a background on the Nietzschean figure of the overman and some preliminary thoughts around it. The German word that Nietzsche used for this concept was Übermensch. There have been many translations of the term Übermensch to English; the first one was the Beyond-Man. It was then translated as the superman, which was commonly used at the beginning of the twentieth century, but it was replaced for the term overman in order to differentiate it from the fictitious character of the same name created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster in 1933. Other translations include the Hyperman and the modern ones: the Superhuman and the Overhuman. I argue that “Overman” and “Overhuman” are the two English translations that best capture the essence of the Übermensch, since both have the prefix “over” which is key as it refers to “surpassing” or “overcoming” the human. From now on, I will use overman and overhuman to refer to the same concept, except for a slightly different connotation.

The overman is a weighty figure in Thus Spoke Zarathustra, where the character of Zarathustra plays the role of a prophetic sage who has discovered an authentic fact about the world. At the very beginning of the book, it is narrated that Zarathustra went to live in the mountains for ten years, and when he climbed down, he revealed to others a meaningful “truth”: “I teach to you the Overhuman. The human is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome it?” ²²

²² Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 11.
This quote, which introduces the overman in this book, tells us more than it might look at first sight; it describes what the overman is in a very simple way: the overcoming of the human. The question raised is an invitation for all to think critically about the way we have lived our lives so far, and if there is something we can do now to change for the better. Additionally, Zarathustra is “teaching” the overman, meaning that the overman is something that can be understood, assimilated, and experienced. Moreover, the overman is a way to be that can be achieved without fulfilling any particular conditions, such as belonging to a specific group of people or living in a certain place, to mention a couple of examples. What does it mean to overcome what is human, why is that something good and how can we do it? These are all questions that will be answered. The relation between the overman and the will to power, truth, and naturalism will also be explained.

3.2 Truth and the Will to Power

The will to power is another important Nietzschean metaphor, one that also requires careful study to be understood, but since this idea is intimately related to the overman, I must bring it in here and explain it to some extent. In order to better comprehend the idea of the overman, it is helpful to understand Nietzsche’s position regarding truth and the idea of the will to power.

Nietzsche held that all current interpretations of truth were inadequate, so he elaborated a critique of the way humanity had conceived truth and knowledge so far. It is noteworthy that the overman is, indirectly, part of that response against the common perception of truth, since the overman is a way to be that recognizes a particular set of values and beliefs as more genuine and reliable than the current ones that are typically carried by people.
Given that truth is not what people believe it is, the knowledge they seem to have must be mistaken as well. The arguments that Nietzsche found are diverse. As a scholar of Western thinking, he realized that metaphysics had been basically the same since Plato, that is, the aims of metaphysics had been the abandonment of what is “becoming” for the sake of what “is” (being), so being and becoming were thought as opposites.

However, Nietzsche believed that the only way to discover something closer to “truth” would be to reconcile being and becoming, as Cox argues: “In short, Nietzsche maintains that contrary to metaphysics, being and becoming are not opposed to one another. Rather, being is a mode of becoming.” It was thanks to Heraclitus that Nietzsche was so interested in the “world of becoming,” according to which everything is in constant change, including the appearance of things, as those are seen from different frameworks. Instead of conceiving the world in terms of truth and necessity, Nietzsche thought of it in terms of life and nature within history.

Scientists were so concerned with finding the absolute truth of the world (this attitude had its peak in positivism) that they never really questioned the value of truth or the negative consequences that it had caused, according to Nietzsche. There is no unconditional truth we can rely on, because all our facts and claims about reality are valid only according to a specific interpretation, and we have no objective right to determine which interpretation is the most accurate, e.g., our values change over time, the beliefs we hold in the present may be proved wrong in the future.

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24 Ibid., 32.
The last point regarding truth can be found through one of his earliest works, *On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense*, where he says that “Truths are illusions we have forgotten are illusions.”\(^{25}\) The problem with this quote is that it seems like he is saying “everything is false” which creates a contradiction. Clark argues that a possible answer to this difficulty lies in Nietzsche’s understanding of language and the way it works: “The distinction between truth and lies in the extra-moral sense arises, according to Nietzsche, only with the establishment of ‘uniformly valid and obligatory designations’ for things—that is, with the establishment of linguistic conventions.”\(^{26}\) In other words, for Nietzsche the meaning we attach to objects is just another agreement we have accepted beforehand; even the rules of logic are built within a certain symbology, therefore while some statements seem irrefutably true or false, that does not guarantee that such propositions are actually true or false, because they ultimately lie within the parameters of a terminology.

Unsatisfied with the first response she presents, Clark explores a phenomenological response. Her second response argues that, in correspondence to his own tradition, Nietzsche chose to believe there are objects that exist independently of consciousness, such that for him: “Since the thing itself remains hidden from us (precisely by our representations of it), its nature is also hidden. We can only conceive of this nature as an unknown and unknowable X.”\(^{27}\) This way, all truths are indeed illusions because we do not have access to things as they are absolutely, and our understanding is just an understanding of our representations of those things. Once we have


\(^{26}\) Ibid., 66.

\(^{27}\) Ibid., 83.
realized it is impossible to know anything as it really is, it becomes clear why the epistemological ambition to find any absolute truth was always meant to fail; our limited experience of the world will always fall short of capturing the true nature of things, and the insistence upon calling our conventions “truths” has cost much to humanity. While Clark favors the phenomenological response over the linguistic response, I see both responses as equally solid: each of them is just a piece of the complete answer.

Once Nietzsche identified what had been wrong with the concept of truth, his next task was to assign it a metaphor which could encourage others to think critically about it; and that is when he came up with one his most controversial exclamations: “God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!”28 This claim has been severely and constantly criticized, and with good reason. At first glance, such statements make no sense; if God does exist and has all the qualities that Christianity attributes to him then he can never die or cease to be because he would be eternal. If he does not exist then he cannot perish since he never existed in the first place. Furthermore, the claim reveals that we are the ones who killed God, which would also be impossible, and such an arrogant claim is a blasphemy.

What Nietzsche meant with such statements, however, is quite meaningful. I have discussed the importance of the metaphor for Nietzsche, and the death of God is one of his greatest metaphors. The figure symbolizes the end of a period and the transition to another one with a new set of values—and most, if not all, of those new values are carried by the overman. Metaphysics and science are both mistaken, and since God represents the maximum metaphysical truth, God must “die.” Only after his fall will our other misconceptions fall with him. The death of God is a poetic representation of us discarding the erroneous beliefs and interpretations we

28 Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra, 120.
have held so far. A key detail to understand this figure is how Nietzsche refers to “us” instead of just “him” making this action. Nietzsche is the first, but each individual has the capacity to relinquish himself of false concepts. Perhaps creating some general awareness is what Nietzsche was really trying to do, even though he did not express it openly.

Giving up our faith in science and dogmas would forcibly imply the end of the Age of Enlightenment and of positivism. The death of God also suggests the abandonment of religious life. For Nietzsche, religions are doctrines of false spirituality, distractions that have hampered our free and joyful will for a long time. If an individual succeeds in this extremely challenging task and gets rid of his or her misconceptions, he or she would be one step closer to becoming the overhuman, able to pursue a more authentic set of values. While Nietzsche did not believe in absolute truths, he recognized that some beliefs are more trustworthy than others, such that the noblest disposition is one that aims towards life itself. This attitude towards life reflects the vitalism present in his philosophy.

Nietzsche criticized Schopenhauer, for whom the will is, as David Lenson summarizes it, “a noumenal force that causes us to desire involvement with the world of representations.”\(^\text{29}\) But since for Schopenhauer the best way to live is suppressing our affections and giving all control to reason, Nietzsche identifies this attitude as a “will to nothingness,” and rather suggests a “will to power.” It is not entirely clear what Nietzsche was talking about when he speaks of a will to power, so many interpretations have emerged. Kaufmann highlights that Nietzsche uses the term in his early works almost exclusively to identify a certain evil: “he used it generally to explain behaviour he happened to dislike.”\(^\text{30}\) Any will to power can be conceived as actions that are

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undesirable: “our tendency to conform rather than realize ourselves,” an attitude that keeps us from being better. Later, Nietzsche uses the idea in a completely different way, and within the lines of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, “The will to power is conceived as the will to overcome oneself,” as Kaufmann notes. But what does it mean to overcome oneself and what does the will to power have to do with that?

“Will” is a force that incites us to move towards something. The right way to understand the will here is as a force of attraction, not repulsion, such that it would never make us move away from things. Of all the different meanings and uses that the word “power” has, the most accurate one in terms of Nietzsche’s thought (for the particular metaphor of the will to power) would be as “capacity to do something,” as the “potential” to do or change; much more so than as a strength, a political hierarchy or some kind of subordination relationship among individuals. To overcome oneself could also mean a few things, and an adequate interpretation requires us to remember Nietzsche’s critique of truth. Just as there are perspectives that are more reliable than others, an individual can be more or less in tune with his or her true nature. Becoming what we really are, thus overcoming what we are now, involves putting aside our prejudices, false spirituality, a tradition of decadence, scientific doctrines, and overall the misconceptions we have held about the world so far.

The main concern in Nietzsche’s naturalism is life—this present life without hope of a “life afterwards” or a “world beyond.” In *On the Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche unmasksthe ascetic ideal, that is, the crystallization of religious thought that has imbued us with so many false values like pity and regret: “the ascetic ideal springs from the prophylactic and self-preservative

31 Ibid., 186.
32 Ibid., 200.
instincts which mark a decadent life…. [I]ts position is consequently exactly the reverse of that which the worshippers of the ideal imagine—life struggles in it and through it…. [T]hat fact is the diseased statue of the kind of man which has existed up to the present.”

For Nietzsche, the problem with these ideas is that they put us in a position where we mistake the “noble” for the “nefarious”: people want their life to end and to enter a “better” one, thus rejecting what is really the most precious thing we have. As long as morality carries the values of a decadent culture, it is better to live “immoral” lives, as far as we are able to do so, since false values just diminish our vitality.

The overman would not have the values of any culture we know about. Given that Nietzsche did not see religious and scientific values as worthy, his vision of the “best possible human” would not include such ideals. In other words, the overman would be different from the average person, different from anything the world has seen, and would have a new set of values, although Nietzsche did not state what these new values would consist of precisely. It could be that a specific variation of some of the values we currently hold become part of the overman.

3.3 Misconceptions of the Overman

Similar to some of Nietzsche’s other ideas, deciphering the true meaning of the overman is a very challenging task. Due to the complexity of the metaphor and the lack of definition from its author, the overman has given rise to many different interpretations, abundant discussion and controversy. Before keep going further into explaining what the overman is, it will be useful to describe what the overman is not.

For this purpose I will draw mainly from the study of Golomb and Wistrich,\textsuperscript{34} who describe how Nietzsche’s thought was misunderstood, manipulated, and used to serve particular political and social agendas. We know that some of Nietzsche’s ideas were the inspiration for two of the most regrettable episodes in modern history: the National Socialism of Adolf Hitler and the Fascism of Benito Mussolini. One of the ideas that was misunderstood is the will to power, by conceiving power as brute force and interpreting the submission of other subjects as the execution of such will to power. I have argued this is not how Nietzsche meant it. Here is a passage that tells us what the will to power truly resembles: “Triumph over blind nature and basic instincts, including the drive towards aggressive supremacy, is a sign of the powerful person.”\textsuperscript{35} Trying to force the will to power into an ideology that amounts to a scheme of conquest, supremacy, or other forms of domination reflects their incapacity to comprehend such an idea properly.

Understanding the will to power is relevant to the study of the overman because both ideas are intimately related to one other. Let us start by pointing out that “The optimal will to power is realized in the Übermensch,”\textsuperscript{36} i.e., some of the qualities that the overman has are precisely those that Nietzsche had envisaged as obtainable once the individual lives according to the will to power.

While it is true that Nietzsche’s words are generally ambiguous, a thoughtful reading of his works allows us to understand what he is saying more reliably. Since many terms that he used


\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 21.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 20.
have more than one meaning, and the lack of clarity of most aphorisms leaves room for interpretation, a careful review of those aphorisms is crucial. His perspective on becoming, and more specifically self-overcoming, aims at an inner spiritual development. True self-overcoming is not achieved by using physical strength, since this is considered to be a negative manifestation of power. Self-overcoming is achieved by directing the energy that stems from the will to power towards personal growth, as the development of the individual’s true self.37

Perhaps the most dangerous misconception of the overman is the eugenic one. The leaders of the Nazi movement found in Nietzsche the philosophical background to sustain their ideology: “Nazis, too, claimed Nietzsche as their forerunner, notably the previously mentioned Alfred Bäumler … [who] was a real, convinced and committed Nazi.”38 Some of their ideals included a belief in racial supremacy and in the extermination of the Jews. Out of its proper context and without a larger understanding of Nietzsche’s thought, the idea of the overman could indeed refer to a different “race” or “type” of human being that is better than others. Clearly, this is not the meaning that Nietzsche had in mind.

There are good arguments to affirm that the overman is not a eugenic idea. Nietzsche was concerned about the individual’s artistic expression and liberation from current cultural beliefs, not about the development of a particular race or society that would reign supreme above others. Some may claim that this statement is somewhat obscure, since Nietzsche did speak about Germany and other countries to discuss their values or their attributes to distinguish them from each other, but these remarks never revolved around eugenics.

37 Ibid., 25.
38 Kurt Fischer, in Golomb and Wistrich, eds., Nietzsche, Godfather of Fascism?, 293.
Another difficulty that arises when denying the eugenic dimension of the overman lies in the naturalistic element of Nietzsche’s philosophy, since it does involve an undeniable biological sense. However, it is part of a particular vitalism that seeks the enhancement of life as the higher value, not the development of any specific genotype. Sleinis sheds some light in this regard:

For Nietzsche, a principal requirement of values is that they enhance life…. Two closely related aspects are involved in the enhancement of life. On the one hand, there is the increase in the health, strength, vitality, and activity of life itself. In other words, an increase in the thriving and flourishing life, and thus an increase in the power with which life forms are drawn to their goals, and hence to an increase in value. This is the more directly biological aspect of the principle. On the other hand, there is the increase in the products of creative activity. In other words, there is the addition to life of knowledge, art, new modes of group organization, and so on, and thus an increase in “objects” to which people can be powerfully drawn, and hence to an increase in value. This is the more directly cultural aspect of the principle. To differentiate the two aspects, I will call the first the invigoration of life, and the second the enrichment of life.39

Neither of the two aspects explained by Sleinis refers to a set of physical traits that could be shared by a group of people; all that is obtainable through the enhancement of life can be reached by any human being, independently of his or her origin and traits. Some interpreters of Nietzsche even think that the true assimilation of power goes beyond the biological entirely: “Nietzsche’s

long list of predicates of persons endowed with positive power includes no biological values.”

This interpretation is well justified. The genuine manifestation of the will to power is free from any eugenic or biological sense, hence so is the overman since the two Nietzschean ideas are intimately related.

Nietzsche often seems much more interested in the particularity of the individual than in the masses (in general terms). The overman is not an actual type of human being but a metaphor that represents the individual’s self-mastery, the refinement of character and the reconciliation with one’s true self.

3.4 The Three Transformations

How does one become the overman, then, if this is not related to anything biological? Becoming the overman is a self-improvement, a change not of the body but of the spirit. The character of Zarathustra describes three transformations of the spirit: the camel, the lion, and the child. Each of these represents a way to be, and each has a different attitude towards life.

The first transformation of the spirit is the camel, which carries heavy loads: “There is much that is heavy for the spirit [of the camel], for the strong, weight-bearing spirit in which reverence dwells: the heavy and the hardest are what its strength desires.”

The camel carrying a heavy load represents the tradition that we all have to bear. Just as the camel carries objects on its back, so do we go with a heavy burden; our burden consists of false beliefs, credulity, religiosity, 

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40 Jacob Golomb, in Golomb and Wistrich, eds., *Nietzsche, Godfather of Fascism?*, 35.
41 Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 23.
42 Ibid., 23.
and all the values of decadence that were identified by Nietzsche. The camel is also destined to err constantly in its desert, and since it is tied to its own limitations this stage is the most detrimental for the spirit.

On the other hand, the lion does not have to go along with this burden. When the spirit is no longer a camel and becomes a lion, it gets rid of what was harmful for it: “in the loneliest desert the second transformation occurs: the spirit here becomes a lion: it will seize freedom for itself and become lord in its own desert.”\(^{43}\) The lion is no longer bound to its tradition and drops the heavy load it was carrying. It is now in a position to imagine new values: “To create freedom for oneself and a sacred Nay even for duty: for that, my brothers, the lion is needed. To seize the right to new values.”\(^{44}\) Another important trait that is present in the lion is its ability to say “I will” instead of following the “Thou shalt” that is so characteristic of Christianity: the lion can face life (this present life) with a round “yes” instead of a “no” like religious believers do.

There is one stage above the lion, and that corresponds to the child at play. Thanks to his or her joyful personality and innocence, the child can create and live according to new values: “Innocence the child is and forgetting, a beginning anew, a play, a self-propelling wheel, a first movement, a sacred Yea-saying. Yes, for the play of creating, my brothers, a sacred Yea-saying is needed: the spirit now wills its own will, the one who had lost the world attains its own world.”\(^{45}\) The child is gifted with creativity and will put that talent to good use. The child is also the only one who can actually live on his or her own terms, free from any established set of rules and moral behaviour.

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\(^{43}\) Ibid., 23.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 24.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 24.
The three transformations that Nietzsche depicted are a representation of how close any given person is to their own creativity. It is a metaphor of our potential to live free and to see beyond what is already there. The camel cannot see further than what lies ahead, so it will follow what it knows beforehand. The lion can see further, since it has realized that there is no need to go along with tradition, and there are plenty of other ways to be. However, it is not able to live according to the new forms it visualizes just yet, as is evidenced by the following lines: “To create new values—that even the lion cannot yet do: but to create for itself freedom for new creation—that is within the power of the lion.” Only the child can imagine new values and live life in correspondence to them, and this is why the child is considered the highest of the three transformations. For Nietzsche, the noblest aim we can aspire to is to be creative, free, spontaneous, and joyful, be able to create our own language, even though only we understand it, and see the world through different eyes, give it a new meaning.

These three transformations or stages represent how close or how far someone is to the overman. The arguments for this are as follows:

1. The metaphor of the three transformations is presented in the same book that introduces the overman, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In fact, the “On the Three Transformations” section and the first appearance of the overman are located very near to each other.
2. The overman is a way to be, and so are the three transformations that Zarathustra presents. They each involve a disposition towards the world.
3. For Nietzsche, the overman is the highest excellence anyone can achieve. The child at play is the ultimate transformation of the spirit, hence the best the spirit can be.
4. Many of the attributes of the child are shared with those of the overman, for example, the free will to live, a joyful attitude, and the tendency to create.

If we try to find out how people stand in such Nietzschean terms, we would probably realize that most live like the camel, since most individuals do not think critically and are guided by outer influences, like the general values of the culture and mass media. A smaller number of people would be like the lion, since these are ones who can see what does not work with the current forms of social organization and constantly question their own beliefs. Very few individuals would have the spirit of a child, since that is difficult to achieve.

3.5 The Qualities of the Overman

Some ideas around the overman have been discussed, but there are still many questions that must be answered. At this point it is not entirely clear how the overman would live and act, which would be by his/her values, how he/she understands the world, and why would he/she acts and lives in a certain way. This section helps to clarify this through Nietzsche's writings and interpretations of the overman by other thinkers.

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* has a few sections that speak of the overman directly. A chapter called “On the Superior Human” serves two main purposes: on one hand, it provides meaningful clues about how this “superior” human being would be, and on the other hand it criticizes the “average” person, the people who still hold the wrong beliefs, like having faith in God. What Nietzsche describes as an attribute of the superior person is also an attribute of the overman, and what Nietzsche repudiates cannot be an attribute of it. The term overman is found explicitly, and
the idea plays a central role in the chapter. This chapter tells us that becoming the overman cannot
be easily achieved and most people will be very skeptical about it: “You superior humans, learn
from me this: In the market no one believes in superior humans. And if you want to speak there,
very well! But the mob blinks: ‘We are all equal.’”\textsuperscript{46} If people do not believe in the overman, it
will be even more difficult for them to become one. Having a good idea of what the overman is
and what it represents is no guarantee that we shall become one, but overcoming the human is
nearly impossible if we ignore it or decide not to believe in it. The overman does not put faith in
God, and regards God as just an idea that must be left behind: “You superior humans, this God
was your greatest danger.”\textsuperscript{47} Only when God dies can the overhuman live, so they are mutually
exclusive. This is why it is necessary to put aside our theological beliefs and hopes in a world
beyond.

Another attribute of the overman is that he/she “thinks big.” He/she has great ambitions,
as can be inferred from the following passage: “Overcome for me, you superior humans, the little
virtues, the little clevernesses, the grain-of-sand considerations, the ant-like irritations, the pitiful
comforts, the ‘happiness of the greatest number’!”\textsuperscript{48} While it is important to be respectful towards
others, we should also aim high and try to be the best we can be. The overman is constantly
creating, just like a child who likes inventing her own games, plays by the rules she established,
and finds great joy doing so. The overman creates repeatedly, not because he has to do it or has
been asked to, but because he can, because it is something very natural to him, it is now part of
what he is. This idea is partially justified by Nietzsche, as he wrote: “So please unlearn this ‘for,’
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 249.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 250.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 251.
you creators: it is precisely your virtue that will have you do no thing ‘for’ or ‘in order to’ or ‘because.’” When Nietzsche says in his writings that we must be like children, he speaks figuratively, meaning that we must be free when we think and act, spontaneous and honest, perhaps more with ourselves than with others, but we must learn to be honest.

Some qualities of the overman can only be found reading between lines, through a very exhaustive review of what is explicitly written. One of these qualities is the disposition for self-improvement, which can also be called a positive and unyielding attitude towards life and oneself. The overman is aware of his/her own imperfection and finitude. It does not matter that his/her spirit has achieved the higher stage, the one of the child, nor that he/she has transcended the “human,” the tradition and mistaken beliefs. The overman is still flawed and he/she knows it. However, the acknowledgement of imperfection does not prevent one from acting and rejoicing. In fact all of that is but another reason to keep gathering power. It allows one to learn and try again, since one can laugh at oneself and forgive one’s own errors. The following quotes give credit to this argument: “You superior humans here, have you not all failed? … Learn to laugh at yourselves, as one has to laugh! No wonder then that you failed and only half succeeded, you half-broken creatures!” Also: “But it is still better to be foolish from happiness than foolish from unhappiness; better to dance clumsily than to walk lamely. So learn from me this piece of wisdom: even the worst thing has two good verso-sides,” and “Stout of hearth is he who knows fear, but conquers fear, who sees the abyss, but with pride.”

49 Ibid., 256.
50 Ibid., 258.
51 Ibid., 251.
The overman is “evil,” so to speak: whereas the society (which is “human, all too human”) praises “truth” and the “good,” the overman understands morality in a completely different manner and holds that any moral system is but another valuation that is relative to the perspective of those who carry it. Maybe Nietzsche was just pointing out, in a very critical way, how harmful some of our beliefs can be. Or maybe he believed that some kind of unconventional actions are needed to counter the prevailing social forms. This remains open to interpretation.

The overman has surpassed the human, but what does this mean in more depth? We already know the basics in this regard: if the current culture is decadent and ill, we should try to overcome it, abandon the negative values and ideals we have relied on. For Nietzsche, the nihilistic values Europeans held are historical, religious, political, moral, and aesthetic. Since we are the ones who create and perpetuate these values, it is we who have to change if we want our values to be different, and this is what overcoming the human means: seeing further than what is here and now, being willing to adopt a new system of values and ultimately jumping into the void (where we would be while the new values are coming). Such a transition does not necessarily mean we must discard everything we have achieved, as Kennedy suggests: “Man must not lose any of his knowledge, aptitudes, or new strength acquired in the course of his long and painful experience; but he must break up the old table of laws which at present hinder him in his march forward, replacing them by new commandments.” Given that the overman successfully obtains a new set of values, he/she is apt to change, be different, and move away from what is known and comfortable. It is logical to think that he/she would keep this attitude even though he/she has

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gained access to his/her true self. The overman also needs to remain critical of oneself and others, just as he/she did prior to becoming the overman.

Kauffman identifies some other qualities that belong to the overman as well. The overman is not an “end” but a realization of our highest self. For Nietzsche, the human is but a bridge to the overman. This does not mean that the overman should be thought of as the ultimate aim that must be accomplished for us to achieve fulfillment, but rather as a reconciliation with our true nature: “the Übermensch developed out of the insight that ‘the goal of humanity cannot lie in the end [Ende] but only in its highest specimens.’”54 That is to say, the individual who connects with his/her true self has found meaning, but one that keeps improving as he/she gains power. It is noteworthy that he/she is “over” the human; the bridge does not go forward but upward.

Another quality of the overman is that he/she has developed a nobility of character. This means that the overman possesses a specific style of acting and interacting with others, and we get to know how such a character is thanks to what has been said about it: “the man who overcomes himself, sublimating his impulses, consecrating his passions, and giving style to his character, becomes truly human or—as Zarathustra would say, enraptured by the word uber—superhuman.”55

According to such a description, the person who shapes their character in such a way that one is not driven by desires becomes the overman. This is because our passions and primitive impulses are closer to the animal part of us than to our truly human part.56

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55 Ibid., 312.

56 Ibid., 312.
over our passions allow us to acquire self-mastery, a characteristic of the overman that is quite similar to the stoic attributes of the sage. Living this way puts the overman apart from others, since people rarely achieve such high standards that enable them to live by virtue.

One example that illustrates the aforementioned nobility of character of the overman is his/her capacity to be tolerant, as can be seen in the next quote: “he disciplined himself to wholeness, he created himself” and became “the man of tolerance, not from weakness but from strength,” “a spirit who has become free.”57 Tolerance is one of his/her values. This point is quite significant because it contradicts interpretations that conceive the overman as entirely egoistic, or as if he/she has absolutely no concern beyond oneself. The overman can work as an ideal that has in consideration the whole of a society rather than exclusively a few privileged subjects.

There is another attribute indirectly belonging to the overman that Kauffman pointed out. The overman as a metaphor is a reaction against the romanticism of the time. It represents “the antithesis of any faith in infinite progress, whether it be evolution, Faust’s unbounded striving, or the endless improvement of the human soul in Kant’s conception of immorality.”58 The overman is not based on expectations that involve the continuity of the species but is related to our capacity to become better in this present life. While it is true that the overman is an ideal, it is not the same kind of ideal as found in German idealism.

Alexander Nehamas’ interpretation of the overman focuses on the concepts of the “will” and the “self.” Given that the will to power is the ultimate manifestation of all that exists in the

57 Ibid., 316.

58 Ibid., 321.
cosmos, an individual is only truly “being” when he/she is in tune with this principle. The overman is the individual who knows this fact and lives according to it. He/she will always exercise his/her power or empower him- or herself, that is, find the way to gather more of it—power understood as the force that allows one to do more.

The individual does not exist independently of one’s actions, as “Nietzsche believes that nothing is left over beyond the sum total of the features and characteristics associated with each object and that no person remains beyond the totality of its experiences and actions.” This point of view is radically different than most other ontologies and metaphysical theories; it implies that there is no “subject” that comes before and is separated from its actions, contrary to what we usually think (that objects possess a reality and qualities on their own). Hence, the Nietzschean philosophy suggests that the “self” is constituted by everything that it does instead of being a fixed essence or substance: “There is no such substratum; there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything.”

An individual is not constituted by what it is right now but by what it is becoming.

Additionally, Nehamas describes the Nietzschean characterization of morality. The overman understands morality in a very different way. Any morality is a subjective valuation which makes sense only to those who believe in it. It is not an accurate description of life. Moreover, facts cannot be moral; they are just facts: “There are altogether no moral facts....

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60 Ibid., 155.

61 Ibid., 172.
Morality is merely an interpretation of certain phenomena—more precisely, a misinterpretation.”

The overman does not try to be “beyond good and evil” because he/she finds him/herself more intelligent, insightful, or rightful than others, but because he/she knows that “good” and “evil” are two categories that are not real in the first place: “[Nietzsche] denies that the distinction between good and evil can be made at all, and suggests that the very same quality that is considered evil from one perspective may at least as accurately be characterized as good from another.” In other words, all the facts and phenomena that occur are fundamentally neutral; “good” and “evil” are two parts of the same thing, as nature holds the same capacity to affirm as well as deny. The overman is not immoral in the sense that he/she does not act with a set of values that guide him/her to live as best possible but perpetually challenges the reasons upon which such principles are based.

3.6 Heidegger’s and Kauffman’s Interpretations

In order to understand the concept of the overman, it is helpful to have other sources in consideration. Kaufmann’s and Heidegger’s interpretations of the overman are similar. Some ideas concerning Kaufmann’s understanding of the overman have been provided, but there is more to be said. His interpretation is intimately related to the eternal recurrence, while for

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62 Ibid., 203.

63 Ibid., 211.
Heidegger the overman is the crystallization of two metaphysical concepts: the eternal recurrence and the will to power.

Kauffman describes how Nietzsche used the term Übermensch as an attempt to oppose established moral and social rules: “To Nietzsche these Übermenschen appear as symbols of the repudiation of any conformity to a single norm: antithesis to mediocrity and stagnation.” Here the prefix “over” makes sense as it suggests an overcoming. What has to be overcome is “man,” and doing that will place us further away from our animal attributes, since the human is a bridge between the animal and the overman, as we have seen, i.e., the human is not an end (neither is the overman) but is a step to something more elevated. Overcoming the human thus means becoming what we really are, as Kaufmann realizes through his reading of Nietzsche: “The ‘human, superhuman’ then refers to our true self, and the ‘superman’ is the one who has transfigured his physis and acquired self-mastery.” That which the overman has achieved can be simplified as “will in its purest form.”

The overman is the symbol of the individual who has also discovered and assimilated the eternal recurrence of the same: “this Übermensch would also realize how inextricably his own being was involved in the totality of the cosmos: and in affirming his own being, he would also affirm all that is, has been, or will be.” For Nietzsche, the eternal recurrence is the will that enables all that is. According to this metaphysical concept, the eternal recurrence allows

64 Kaufmann, Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist, 309.
65 Ibid., 310.
66 Ibid., 312.
67 Ibid., 320.
everything to happen and repeat itself; the same events will occur again and again an infinite number of times.

The implications of the eternal recurrence are important, for Nietzsche, since this idea justifies his vitalism and his particular understanding of the will. This is one that seeks anything that directly or indirectly enhances life, as strange as it appears to others, because this present life will be lived again, and such a life is worthy to be lived only if our actions that enhance it are greater than the actions that impoverish it. One’s will wants to say “yes” to this present life. The overman wills all that enables her to affirm herself.

Kaufmann also emphasizes how the Nietzschean metaphysical intuition of the eternal recurrence is not like the Kantian categorical imperative, as some thinkers, including Heidegger, have argued. Kant’s moral maxim dictates that you should act in such a way that your action can be universalized. The eternal recurrence would suggest a careful consideration of the circumstances before acting, given that we are destined to live the same life over and over. However, Nietzsche is more concerned with the individual68 than with the general fate of the masses. For Kaufmann, the overman is more about the perfecting of the self and his empowerment than about the essence or destiny of the world.

Heidegger, on the other hand, argues that the overman is closely related to both the eternal recurrence and the will to power. As an ontologist, Heidegger explained the overman as intimately related to the concept of being. His interpretation of Nietzsche and the overman is complex, but it can be more easily grasped if we have in consideration Heidegger’s ontological perspective and his background in German idealism.

68 Ibid., 325.
The overman can be understood as consisting of two parts. On one hand it is the ultimate manifestation of the will to power, as a being that seeks more power and constantly improves its own character. On the other hand it is a manifestation of the eternal recurrence as it is a being that embraces this present life, is aware of the cyclical nature of the universe and can see the big picture. This dual characterization of the overman was articulated by Heidegger as follows: “However, the human being who in the midst of beings comports himself toward that being which as such is will to power and as a whole is eternal return of the same is called the overman.”69

Heidegger believed that Nietzsche was indeed a nihilist, or that he was when speaking of the overman at least, since for Heidegger “The overman certainly negates the former essence of man, but he negates it nihilistically.”70 It is nihilistic because it denies the most representative trait in modern history: our trust in reason. Before Nietzsche, reason had consistently been the common denominator in metaphysics when trying to explain the essence of human beings, but the overman finds his essence (thinks Heidegger) to be the will to power. The will to power has to be our true essence because the will to power is in fact the true essence of all things, though it can only be absolute in human beings. It is through the body that the will to power can manifest at all times, because the body is the most immediate to the subject who is capable of understanding the world from the representation of it (the world as the set of all objects perceived by the being as subject, the being that is becoming).71

70 Ibid., 217.
71 Ibid., 223.
For Heidegger, the overman traces the path to the eternal recurrence. Once the being realizes that the will to power is the primordial truth, such a being wants to stand above all beings; the being wills itself from its need to be congruent with beings as a whole, i.e., the overman is the experience of the human being that refers to itself because it is aware of its true essence: “At the time of the most luminous brightness, when beings as a whole show themselves as eternal recurrence of the same, the will must will the overman; for only within the prospect of the overman is the thought of the eternal return of the same to be borne.”

The overman is thus the being that has achieved mastery. However, it is not a mastery over other individuals but a mastery of oneself, of the senses and the earth. The overman is the ultimate embodiment of the will that is empowered, allowing one to be freer. “Overcoming the human” can also be translated as “dehumanizing our being,” for the sake of what is truly human, meaning that we get rid of old assumptions that do not make sense in this new context: “humanization through the overman is ‘dehumanizing.’ It frees beings from the valuations prior to man.” Despite differing in some points, the interpretations of Kaufmann and Heidegger both help to better understand the overman.

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72 Ibid., 227.
73 Ibid., 229.
Chapter 4. The Overman Ideal in the Present

4.1 The Current State of Collective Consciousness

I suggest that the metaphor of the overman be reinterpreted as an ideal that could help people to live better lives. In order to do so, some description of current ways and motivations of individuals is needed, for example, how they think, what their interests are, or which values they hold. When I speak of “collective consciousness” I am referring to the overall way of thinking or the reasoning forms that people usually have recourse to when they choose and act. A less accurate way to understand collective consciousness is the average intellectual skills of a group of individuals, e.g., how critical or uncritical they are about any given matter, or their capacity to solve problems.

Identifying this collective consciousness is on its own quite a challenging task for a few reasons. Groups of people around the globe have different values and ways of understanding the world in which they live. Perhaps the most distinctive trait that lets us know about the disparity among the societies of the world is their culture, since the culture is directly related to the forms of social, political, and economic organization. Furthermore, some thinkers argue that we cannot really think or comprehend life beyond our particular culture, as our culture shapes so much of our ideology and character.

The level of education is very uneven across the nations of the world. “First-world” countries typically display high levels of education and more educational institutions than other countries, however, we can find a considerable percentage of individuals who did not receive an optimal formation or were not able to attend school at all even in countries with good educational
systems. Education is not the only factor that counts for the cultivation of the individual, but it does weigh heavily.

Finally, spiritual beliefs are also very diverse. While it is true that some religions are more popular, some places have an outstanding number of religions professed by members of that society at the same time. Spiritual beliefs (or the lack of them) are relevant to our analysis because they constitute a portion of the subject’s perspective and representation of the world, the meaning or end of this life.

There is no homogeneity through all the different groups of people. However, there are some attributes that continue to be widespread, that are found in most individuals of a specific place. Hence, I will focus on those attributes to try to provide some idea of what this collective consciousness is. This will not be entirely accurate, but hopefully it will be good enough to allow the development of the argumentation that comes after.

What similarities, then, do people have? The world seems to be in a strange position right now. Many countries experience a series of problems, domestically and internationally: poverty, violence, ignorance, war, and many other issues around the globe. These circumstances generate a feeling of discomfort and anxiety for many individuals, regardless of whether they are being directly affected by them or are merely witnesses of what is happening. The grief caused by such experience reduces the life quality of the subject in many ways, e.g., it can disempower them.

When thinking about the near future and the possible outcome of events that will occur next, individuals often find themselves worried or discouraged. There seems to be much uncertainty regarding the fate of humanity as a whole and people may feel overwhelmed by it. Uncertainty like this can turn into a kind of void within the subject which one has to deal with, whether one is aware of it or not. Kierkegaard described this as the existential struggle we go
through as human beings. This is, then, another collective attribute that seems widespread at present.

As we move to the rational dimension, we should ask how intellectually cultivated and critical such people are. Considering that most of the world population cannot have access to high-level education, whether because they do not have enough resources or because there are not enough mechanisms that encourage this, it follows that most people have a poor to average intellectual development. This was pointed out by Nietzsche when he said that people lack an intellectual conscience,74 and that observation remains true to this day.

A distinction must be made between being intellectually cultivated and being able to think critically, since being critical means being capable of constantly questioning our own beliefs and what we see and hear from the outside. Thus someone can be proficient intellectually but not very critical at the same time.

The majority of countries have been the target of campaigns with questionable purposes: politically and economically powerful groups, through mass media communication, have ensured that ordinary citizens are as misinformed and uncritical as possible. If people are in agreement with their current government, for example, such governments will find it easy to stay in power and perpetuate the status quo. Naturally, political actors are different in all countries, and some governments are less corrupt and have tried to balance the scale a bit better with strategies such as participatory democracy in action, yet some degree of crowd control still persists in those places.

The mentality of the herd keeps appearing everywhere since many people cannot (or do not like to) think for themselves. This mentality consists of two parts: on one hand, the subject

does not lead himself nor others, just follows. He/she likes what is easy and does not find joy in thinking, so he/she does not strive to find answers or acquire self-mastery. On the other hand, the subject hopes for a world beyond this world; he/she feels empty and unhappy with one’s current situation yet does little to change that. He/she expects the afterlife to be idyllic, and the thought makes life more bearable.

If we compare the European societies that Nietzsche was describing with most societies in the present, we realize that things are almost the same in some regards. Some achievements have been made concerning what is right or wrong and how we perceive ourselves and others. For example, we have more liberties when it comes to expressing our sexuality, and freedom of speech is an exercised right in some places. However, there are many obstacles that keep individuals from being free and joyful, from becoming who they really are. Let us suppose that an individual gives some credit to these words, and then tries to find out how they stand in relation to the general consciousness to see if they can change their character for the better. They probably will not have a clear idea of what they need to look at or how to do so. Self-appraisal is always difficult and, moreover, people rarely meditate about their own personal development, not to say about overcoming the human. If we want to know how close or far we are to becoming the overman, we need only to remember which are its qualities and compare them with our current attributes. For example, if we are not open, critical, or joyful, if we do not live according to the will to power or strive to attain nobility of character then we know there is much to be done in order to achieve mastery over our self.

Some societies are evidently better than others in terms of social progress and life quality in general, yet that does not guarantee they have the right intellectual consciousness nor that they are truly happy. We can use Canada as an example. This is a country that has plenty of resources,
wealth is relatively well distributed, and one of their values is openness to different cultures. However, such apparent well being can conceal what is left to be done, as there is always room for improvement: people may feel satisfied with how they are currently, so they will not search for what would lead them to live better lives. Furthermore, everything can be all right on the surface while individuals are not being authentically free or joyful, especially in the terms that Nietzsche suggested. Therefore, we all need to be careful and reflexive; we should be on a constant quest to gather more power, refine our character, and achieve self-mastery.

4.2 Problems with the Overman

The main proposal of this thesis is that the Nietzschean idea of the overman can be assimilated by individuals in such a way that it helps them to be more critical, autonomous, and creative, thus leading them to live more free and worthy lives. A review of the difficulties that the concept of the overman raises is needed. The overman is an ideal that is both philosophically elusive and hard to pursue through our actions, that is, theoretically and practically. This section will encompass both concerns.

A few difficulties have already been presented, like the lack of clarity of some concepts in Nietzsche’s writings. Since the meaning of some ideas is not clear (like the overman), those ideas can be interpreted in several ways, often missing their original sense. Looking at the context substantially helps to clarify their meaning. In the particular case of the overman, the looseness of the concept can actually be good as well in that it allows some freedom to be creative with it, reinvent it, and to think it in such a way that it is a positive influence, all while remaining faithful to Nietzsche’s line of thinking.
Is the overman merely a metaphysical notion or is it a way to be that can be achieved effectively? We know that Nietzsche wrote largely in aphorisms, that he loved metaphor, and that his books display encrypted content. The overman is one of his central metaphors, and as such it must not be considered literally but as serving the purpose of helping us realize our flaws. It also tells us how much better we can live. It is true that we have no certainty that the overhuman is reachable, or that Nietzsche even took his own ideal that seriously. However, we have good reasons to believe so. In the passages that speak of the overman, Nietzsche left clues not only about how such an overman would be but also about how to become such. If he did not believe that an individual can become the overhuman then why leave hints about it? Depending on how we understand the overman, it will be more or less difficult to become one, but it is possible in most interpretations. Finally, many Nietzsche scholars identify problems that concern the concept itself more than the likelihood of becoming one. For example, Wolfgang Muller-Lauter considers that the biggest problem is that there are two apparent kinds of overman: one that negates current values in order to have one’s own and one who affirms all in this life.75

Such a dichotomy raises another issue: how can the overman negate all and affirm all at the same time? The answer lies in the interaction between the two attitudes of rejection and acceptance, thinks Müller-Lauter: “Nietzsche cannot admit such mutual exclusion without destroying the previously demonstrated foundations of his philosophy. His ‘belief’ is that if the two conclusions are pushed to their extremes, they will not lead apart, but rather will converge into one.”76 The overman is the subject in whom such reconciliation is possible. It cannot happen

75 Wolfgang Müller-Lauter, Nietzsche: His Philosophy of Contradictions and the Contradictions of His Philosophy. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 84.
76 Ibid., 84.
within an ordinary individual. If true, this would have significant implications. First, the contradiction is solved and the overman is no longer logically impossible. Second, the overman becomes even more promising as he/she would possess one more quality that sets him/her aside from everyone else. Müller-Lauter’s hypothesis is justified within the lines of Nietzsche’s thought. We can draw an analogy between the reconciliation of these attitudes and the tension generated from the Apollinian and Dionysian, which generates something new.

I argue that the biggest problem with the overhuman is actually ontological: if we are human, how are we ever going to overcome the human? We cannot perform such a gigantic leap because that means going against what we are. If our humanity is part of our essence, there is nothing we can really do to change it, since that is what it means. If we understand the essence as what makes something what it is and not something else, and being human is part of our essence, becoming the overhuman would mean ceasing to be. Thus, surpassing the human could not happen, as we cannot go against our nature nor change what constitutes us ontologically in order to pursue this Nietzschean ideal.

However, this ontological obstacle is removed if the overman is true or close to our understanding of it. We have said that the overman is not a eugenic ideal, but rather a metaphor of our potential to overcome modern nihilism. The overman is an opposing force to the path of decadence we are following. It embodies the ultimate will that wills enough to have its own values, its own standards, and wants more of itself. In this sense, overcoming the human means overcoming the human foundations we have carried so far—our misbeliefs—instead of overcoming our human self.

There is yet another possibility through which this issue is solved: what if our true essence is the overhuman, instead of the human? We identify ourselves as the human species, and we
have developed plenty of theories and concepts to define what we are and why we behave in such ways as an attempt to understand the world and our place in it. While this understanding of ourselves may not necessarily be mistaken, it seems inaccurate, as if something is missing. It could be that, at this point, we human beings are more complex (or simply different) than that which we have said about us so far, such that we cannot describe us precisely. We may only have intuitive, subjective knowledge regarding our own self and our “true” self is what Nietzsche was visualizing as the overman.

We cannot know the essence of things, because we only have access to the phenomenological world. This means that we have an idea of how our being is, therefore our nature can be more alike to the overhuman than to the human. The reason why we conceive our being in the way we do (in general) may be due to our limited appreciation through its manifestation, that is, the phenomenological representation. In other words, our true self can be the overman and we have the potential to be much more; it is just that our true being is not being expressed as such right now. Under this argument, Nietzsche’s own description of the overman fits perfectly into the hypothetical true being that individuals are, since the path to becoming the overman is the process of “becoming what we really are.”

4.3 Assimilating the Ideal of the Overman

Now that some major problems around the overman have been raised and answered, let us discuss how this Nietzschean concept can be understood and assimilated so people get to know it and have the possibility of living in accordance with it. The main assumption from this point forward is that individuals can become the overman or get closer to becoming such, and this
would be good for them since they would be able to better understand the world, be autonomous, freer, and use their creative potential more easily.

We must find a way to become the overhuman, since Nietzsche did not state explicitly how such a process can be accomplished. As Paul Kirkland remarks: “Zarathustra poses the demand to create something more than man, to live for something that is more than preservation and comfort, but he offers nothing specific to this goal. At most, he offers the formulation for a goal as yet unspecified.”

Once it is clear that it is up to us to discover how a human being can turn into the overhuman, a wide variety of possibilities may be considered. However, remaining close to the philosophy of Nietzsche will guide us and help to discern how such overcoming can happen.

Many scholars agree that, for Nietzsche, culture and values are pivotal to everything else. We can see this through Sleinis: “Nietzsche’s principal concern was with values. From the beginning of his productive life to its end, questions of values predominate.” And Blondel: “the central problem posed by Nietzsche’s enigmatic thought concerns an obscure, polysemic and perhaps contestable notion, that of culture.” Therefore, the study of values eventually leads to the overman. It is along with new values that the overman can emerge, as he/she is the one who carries them.

Our big task is to re-evaluate current values, in order to give birth to new ones. In this regard, Sleinis provided a thorough analysis by categorizing the place where values may fit. The

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values can be cognitive, moral, religious, or aesthetic. The proof that such a division is trustworthy is that a particular revision of any value we can think of belongs to one of the four categories listed. Regardless of which category they belong to, all new values we are looking for must fulfill one criterion: they must enhance life, as has been previously stated. The values of the overman must enable him or her to gather more power, since he/she is the ultimate manifestation of the will to power (power understood as a potential, a degree of the capacity to do or be). For example, a value that is dogmatic in nature cannot be a genuine value for the overhuman because it would limit their power to understand the world, while a value that is essentially open-ended can belong to the overhuman since it would empower the individual by allowing him/her to consider a multiplicity of viewpoints through a constant questioning of one’s own beliefs and representations.

When judging how worthy any new value we are considering may be, we must have in mind how much or how little it would enhance our lives, i.e., what degree of power can provide us with. We can ask ourselves: will this value help me to empower myself, or will it limit me more than it will allow me? That being said, it must be noticed that such a procedure is a way we can approach the matter through our reason. New values can be apprehended (perhaps more reliably) through many other ways. The values of the overman must be mainly intuited, just as the figure of the overman comes from an intuition: they must be lived or experienced more than thought or imagined.

Despite having discussed many issues around the overman in the previous section, there is yet another problem that must be brought in here. It is not plain if the overman is a permanent state of the being or a transitory way to be. It could be that an individual who has become the overman remains as such until he dies, or it could be that an individual can live as an overman
only whenever the requirements are being met. The former possibility can be compared with the Stoic philosophy, according to which one will always remain a sage once one’s spirit has truly achieved the stage of wisdom that enables one to live by virtue. If the overman is like this, the only concern would be around the difficulties to become one. The latter possibility seems more likely because we are constantly changing, and that includes our way of thinking and our trends; if an individual becomes the overman by adopting new values and living in accordance with the will to power, they will no longer be the overman if they return to the old values. It is logical to think that the reverse process of the mechanism that allows us to overcome the human can, contrarily, make us fall from the overman to the human. It makes more sense to believe that the overman persists only as long as the conditions that enable him are met.

The overman is mostly a way to be, but it can also be understood as a state of consciousness. The recent observations about the nature of the overman suggest that the overman is a disposition towards life, involving a specific intention, some kind of awareness of the world and of the will to power that rules it. In this argument, it is possible to talk about degrees of awareness an individual can have; the more aware one is about this will and the need to enhance life, the closer one is to becoming the overman. This idea is justified by Nietzsche’s own claim, according to which the human is a bridge to the overhuman; the human being is the middle point between the animal and the overman. This means that when we are driven mostly by our instincts —our “will to survival”—our being manifests itself poorly, while when we are driven by higher ideals and the will to power our being manifests itself more nobly.
This late section presents some further ideas about how to spread the ideal of the overhuman in society. First, it explores who would be apt to know about this concept and why. Second, it states what concrete actions people can do in order to be closer and closer to overcoming the human, along with a discussion about the duties that a subject has if he/she chooses to follow this path. Finally, I shall describe the advantages that living as the overman would represent for the subject and others around him or her.

From the argumentation provided earlier, which identifies the overman as a way to be or as a state of consciousness, it follows that virtually any person can become such an overman, regardless of his or her particular race, gender, age, traits, origin, or external conditions. However, as Nietzsche himself predicted, this ideal is not really suitable for everybody; many will not understand it or choose not to believe in it. The idea itself could be presented to anyone, and it is up to each individual to judge if it is useful or flawed, and whether it makes sense to them or not. Due to the way the overman is achieved and the free will that individuals have, such an ideal cannot be imposed upon anyone. Moreover, we only overcome the human if we are truly convinced of its credibility and worth. Intuiting the overman is complex and intricate, so it requires that individuals possess a certain degree of maturity or understanding of the world for better chances to assimilate it correctly. This point is quite similar to the reason why philosophy is not usually taught to kids or at early levels of education—as the content to be learned is abstract, and human beings typically do not develop the skills needed to understand it until later in their lives.
Those who decide to become the overman may ask themselves how exactly that will happen, what they can do specifically to accomplish such a goal. The path to the overman was not traced straightforwardly by Nietzsche, so the following lines are speculative ideas based on his philosophy. First, we must look for the enhancement and preservation of life above all else. If we suspect we can do something that would help ourselves or others to heighten life in some respect, we should do it—as long as the action does not harm any other being in some way at the same time. By living like this we fulfill the main premise of the will to power.

We ought to live joyfully. We can find gratification from even the most unexpected sources if we know how to accept our reality as it is right now. This does not mean we should not try to improve ourselves or fight for what we consider right nonetheless. Additionally, the overhuman has a positive attitude. Just as the decadence of many societies had its roots in nihilism, the recovery of a culture is based on the extent to which individuals can affirm life and carry values that facilitate such a disposition. Furthermore, the subject must not have a predetermined ideology and must be very open, constantly doubting one’s own beliefs, including the epistemological, religious, and moral ones (to mention a few). The very ideal of the overman must also be challenged; we must be willing to set it aside if it is proven unworthy.

The overman is not exempt from the legal, political, and moral responsibilities that are entailed by living in society. This point is important as it could easily be believed that, since the overman will disagree with many different things and has the urge to walk his/her own way, it is acceptable for them to ignore the rules upon which we live as a whole. Such a supposition is not valid because living in a community always demands the fulfillment of norms that are imposed by the community. Regardless of how undermining, alien, or contradictory are these norms to the overman, he/she must live in correspondence to them. Refusing to do so may bring all sorts of
negative consequences, and may put one in a position where one is further limited to live according to one’s own perspective. Another clue we have in this regard is the fact that Nietzsche himself did not live outside of the law or even most of the social norms of his time. However, the overman must feel free to express his nonconformity about all that which he finds problematic. The best way to do so is by showing why something is mistaken. One ought to try to demonstrate through speech or actions that there could be other standards, that higher values can be imagined.

Finally, all who seek to become the overman need to be creative. One of his/her most distinctive traits is that he/she has a passion for artistic creation. He or she can produce pieces of art that counter the monotony of everyday life. Being creative goes beyond producing aesthetic objects and includes developing new ideas or solving problems. These can also be a way for individuals to manifest their creativity and thus live as the overman.

But how good is living as the overman for the individual and their society? This question is difficult to answer, but we can guess how positive this is going to be for anyone who succeeds in this task. First, the overman has reached the highest stage possible; the subject is in tune with their true nature. Second, one has an accurate understanding of the universe, since one has realized that everything is driven by the ultimate force which is the will to power. One is also prepared for anything that is to come. Since one has achieved excellence, such an individual has the best tools at his disposal to face any challenge encountered and will see such difficulties as issues to be solved instead of misfortune (bad luck) or as a punishment imposed by metaphysical entities (God).

Additionally, the overman lives more freely than others. They are unattached to things and find themselves “beyond good and evil.” They accept everything about this life and constantly empower themselves, and so fear neither death nor pain. They are the individual who has truly
overcome the tragic experience. He or she finds amusement through very simple things, while portraying the most elevated values and a refined character. Their epistemic position allows them to understand other ways of thinking, without having to compromise anything for it. Due to all these attributes and creative skills, he or she will probably be an outstanding individual in their society. While some will reject his or her ways, others will notice something worthy and unmatched in their being. They will be an example that individuals can be much more if they try, and who is more suitable to show the path than the one who has crossed it?

4.5 Final Considerations

This last section contains ideas of a mixed nature whose purpose is to outline problems for further investigation. Given that there is no precise method for becoming the overhuman, there could be several other ways to do it. This work is just one proposal based on Nietzsche’s philosophical arguments. Hence, I do not claim to have provided the ultimate answer, nor the only arrangement of possibilities that allow overcoming the human. Perhaps more elaborated research could develop more specific details about what individuals can do in order to pursue such a goal.

The concept of the overman may appear egotistical since it points to the perfecting of the individual independently of other individuals who surround him or her. Even though Nietzsche implied many times that the subject must primarily look to himself (at the expense of others if necessary), his true agenda remains unknown. There are indications of a genuine concern for others and the future of humanity as a whole through all of his writings. I believe he too was worried about the right development of societies as well as the individual itself. Why else did he
put so much effort into understanding and describing the historical and cultural decadence of Europe if not because that is the first step to its restoration? Maybe he thought that the overman is the best way to start rehabilitating the culture, beginning with the exceptional individual and then aiming towards the many. Let us remember that the epitome of Nietzsche’s thinking never got to be captured as he became incapacitated due to his illness. Even if Nietzsche was not concerned with the well being of the masses, that would not pose a major problem for us, since we can reshape the ideal of the overman into something that helps a large number of individuals anywhere to live better lives by keeping what makes such an ideal valuable.

He seems to have believed that a society is perceived and remembered in relation to its outstanding individuals: “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.”\textsuperscript{80} I must disagree with his interpretation; it is true that a few exceptional characters usually get to be known and may become more meaningful to their society than other unnoticeable individuals, but societies are also remembered for what they did as a whole. The description of a culture can always focus on the general rather than the particular, and around the average attributes of its people. A society is constituted by the majority to a greater extent than by a few remarkable figures. How fair is it to talk about a society if we only have in mind the exceptional subjects that represent a very small portion of it?

It is intriguing to imagine what the future of religiosity might become. Human beings are spiritual by nature—proof of this is the relevance that spirituality has had for us since time immemorial—but humans are not necessarily religious. Religions are popular mechanisms we

\textsuperscript{80} Nietzsche, \textit{The Future of our Educational Institutions} (Edinburg: Morrison and Gibb Limited, 1911), 75.
adopted to satisfy our spiritual needs and give meaning to some of our metaphysical concerns, however, we do not need religions to live our spirituality, and the proof is that spirituality is not defined in terms of religion alone. Hence, I visualize the overman as entirely detached from any religious doctrines. Perhaps only when we surpass religious institutions will we start experiencing true spirituality.
Chapter 5. Conclusion

Now that the discussion of the overman as an ideal is complete, let us summarize the most relevant ideas that were found along the way. First, it is crucial to understand the overman as a metaphor that points towards the self-improvement of the individual. Conceiving the overman in this manner helps avoid misinterpretation and also enables us to realize the concept’s potential to serve as a guide that leads toward better lives. This also implies that any individual can become the overman (the overhuman), regardless of race, gender, age, culture, or any other attributes that he or she may possess, although some degree of intellectual development is necessary to assimilate such an ideal. An individual becomes overhuman in overcoming the human, that is, when realizing one’s true self. The overman has discovered his/her true nature and is in tune with it. He/she recognizes the will to power as the ultimate force that is present in all things. To live according to such an idea means either manifesting power or trying to gather power, and as much as possible. This kind of power is the capacity to do something in particular.

Life is immeasurably valuable for the overman. All of their values need to enhance life in some way. Their understanding of morality is very different since they know that any moral valuation is a subjective misrepresentation of phenomena. While they live according to principles that guide them in living their lives, such principles must help him to affirm life and are not absolute. Given that we cannot have access to any absolute truth or know the essence of things, we must stop relying too much on our current symbols, which are merely conventions we have accepted. We also need to give up our assumptions and hopes in a world beyond. The death of God is a metaphor that invites us to discard our metaphysical dogmas and start to truly live this
present life. The overman does not follow any religion, since they are doctrines of false spirituality. They do not believe in any dogmas and constantly question all representations, including their own perspective of the world.

Cultivating a positive attitude towards everything that happens to him/her is another quality of the overman, as they are aware that all facts are neutral in nature. It is in this sense that they place themselves “beyond good an evil.” They have achieved self-mastery, suppressing and controlling desires, and refining their character. Finally, he/she is the only subject who has overcome tragic experience and no longer struggles against the fact that he/she is going to die. The overman ideal has the potential to help individuals be more critical, joyful, creative, and free, thus enhancing their lives. Pursuing the ideal of the overman may benefit the individual even when one does not succeed in acquiring all of its qualities.

In order to strengthen the argumentation presented here, further investigation is required. It is unclear which would be the best way to popularize the concept of the overman, were someone to undertake such a project, or what kind of resources would have to be invested for it to have some impact. We also need to think about the means of assessing any particular new values reliably in order to avoid falling into complete subjectivism.
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