

# INDIVIDUUM



Evolution does not desire happiness; it wants evolution and nothing more. – Only if humanity had a universally recognized *goal* could one propound ‘such and such *should* be done’: for the time being, there is no such goal (Nietzsche, *Dawn* aphorism 108).

...if a goal for humanity is still lacking, is there still not lacking – humanity itself? (Nietzsche, ‘Of the Thousand and One Goals’, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*)

1. Nietzsche conceived the *Übermensch* as a response to the crisis of European civilization, namely, the death of God and the arrival of nihilism. It is a notion that many of the most creative philosophers of the twentieth century took up and transformed under a Nietzschean inspiration. The question is what it is to mean to us today. There is a legacy here that needs working and thinking through. As the late French philosopher, Dominique Janicaud advised us, in confronting our fluid human complexity...

We must know how to establish...a paradoxical “economy” strategically combining a *cautious humanism*, warning against the inhuman or the subhuman, and an *opening up to possible*

superhumans...that lie dormant in us. On the one hand, the *defence* of the human against the inhuman, on the other, the *illustration* of what surpasses the human in man.

2. In *Dawn* Nietzsche declares that “we are experiments” and the task is to want to be such (D 453). What is his meaning? In what sense *are* we experiments? And what is the experiment about? I believe it’s a modest proposal on Nietzsche’s part, in which he attacks the “bloodless fiction” and “abstraction” of *the* human being (D 105). It’s an argument in favour of human pluralization and working against the closure of the human being. As Nietzsche writes in a note .

My morality (*Moral*) would be to take the general character of man more and more away from him...to make to a degree non-understandable to others (and with it an object of experiences, of astonishment, of instruction for them)...Should not each individual (*Individuum*) be an attempt to achieve a *higher species than man* through its most individual things? .

3. What does Nietzsche teach in *Zarathustra*? Not only does he express his desire for the superhuman or overhuman, but equally his love for humankind and to whom he wishes to bring a gift (Prologue 2). If the superhuman is to be the new *Sinn* of the earth, it is also the case that humanity itself is lacking. If God is dead then the superhuman or overhuman is the gift that can now be presented to humankind: ‘*I teach you the Superhuman*. The human is something that should be

overcome. What have you done to overcome him?' (ibid. 3) As Zarathustra notes, all creatures have created beyond themselves.

The question facing the human being is whether it wishes to be "the ebb of this great tide" or return to the animals and not overcome itself. The human is to become for the superhuman what the ape is to the human, namely, a laughing stock or a painful embarrassment. Continuing with this quasi-evolutionary parable, Zarathustra says that if we have made our way from worm to man, there still remains much within us that is worm, and although we were once apes man is now more of an ape than any ape. The superhuman is to be our new hope, the lightning and madness that emerges out of the dark cloud of man and in which man can find his purification:

In truth, the human is a polluted river. One must be a sea, to  
receive a  
polluted river and not be defiled.

Behold, I teach you the superhuman: he is this sea, in him  
your great  
contempt can go under.

What is the greatest thing you can experience? It is the hour  
of the great contempt. The hour in which even your happiness  
grows loathsome to you, and your reason and your virtue also

4. In Nietzsche's famous image the human is a rope fastened  
"over an abyss" and between animal and superhuman: "A

dangerous going-across, a dangerous wayfaring, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and staying-still" (ibid. 4). Furthermore, what is great in the human is that it is a bridge and not a goal: the human is the site of life's self-overcoming. Instead of seeing in the human the fundamental lack of life or entirely senseless forces, Nietzsche posits the becoming of superabundant forces in which life is able to become an exploration and experimentation:

I love those who do not know how to live except their lives be  
a down-going, for they are those who are going across...

I love him who lives for knowledge and who wants knowledge  
that one day

the superhuman may live. And thus he wills his own downfall...

I love him who throws golden words in advance of his deeds and  
always

performs more than he promised: for he wills his own downfall...

I love him whose soul is overfull, so that he forgets himself  
and all things

are in him: and thus all things become his downfall

5. The emphasis in the book, when Nietzsche presents the doctrine of the superhuman, is on the experimental character of our knowledge of the human and of the earth. In the discourse which closes Part One of *Zarathustra*, significantly entitled 'Of the Gift-Giving Virtue', bearing testimony to the spirit of generosity and excess Nietzsche is in search of, he writes:

The body purifies itself through knowledge; experimenting with knowledge it elevates itself: to the discerning human being all instincts are holy; the soul of the elevated human being grows joyful.

Physician, heal yourself: thus you will heal your patient too. Let his best healing-aid be to see with his own eyes him who makes himself well.

There are a thousand paths that have never yet been trodden, a thousand forms of health and hidden islands of life. The human and human earth are still unexhausted and undiscovered ('Of the Bestowing Virtue',).

6. The superhuman seems to be the universal goal Nietzsche thinks humanity is in need of, as that which will give meaning to the earth in the wake of the death of God and the emergence of nihilism: "*All gods are dead: now we want the superhuman to live*" – let this be our last will one day at the great noontide!" (ibid. 3) However, it's a universal of new peoples, affirming a genuine pluralism of values and modes of life: each people are to be an experimenter. In the crucially important discourse entitled 'Of Old and New Law-Tables' Nietzsche argues that a new nobility is needed, one that will oppose all mob-rule and despotism, and he adds:

For many noblemen are needed, and noblemen of many kinds, for nobility to exist! Or, as I once said in a parable: 'Precisely this is godliness, that there are gods but no God!' ('Of Old and new Law-Tables', 11)

Nietzsche's great hope is that the human animal will cease being a piece of chance and a meaningless accident. The contrast made is with "the last human", a human that has discovered an easy contentment ("happiness") and then blinks.

For Zarathustra this is the most contemptible human being,  
knowing little of love, creation, and longing.

7. Nietzsche has Zarathustra declare that the *Übermensch* is his paramount and sole concern, not man – and not the neighbour, not the poorest, not the most ailing, and neither the best (Z 'Of the Higher Man,').

In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche stresses that the *Übermensch* is a "very thoughtful word" (*ein sehr nachdenkliches Wort*). Most commentators in the Anglo-American reception see it as little more than a part of the misguided dreamy and utopian Nietzsche.

However, it is a notion that a number of post-Nietzschean thinkers have made use of and adapted to the concerns of their own philosophical programmes. Heidegger holds to different views of it at different times in the development of his own thinking. At one point it is judged to symbolise the consummate subjectivity of the reign of planetary technology and the supreme realisation of the modern "will to will"; at another time it is construed as the exact opposite, as "the shepherd of Being".<sup>3</sup> In key strands of post-war French thought the superhuman or overhuman assumes an emblematic role and stands as the key word for designating new modes thinking, feeling, and existing.

We see this configuration at work in the writings of Deleuze, Foucault, and Derrida. In *Les Mots et les choses*, for example, Foucault argued that the overhuman signifies the point at which Nietzsche discovered the double death of God and man, to

the extent that: "It is no longer possible to think in our day other than in the void left by man's disappearance". For Foucault, this void does not mark a deficiency or constitute a lacuna that needs to be filled. Rather, "It is nothing more, and nothing less, than the unfolding of a space in which it is once more possible to think". For Derrida it becomes the deconstructive figure par excellence, the figure who does not mourn the loss of the question of Being but who dances playfully **outside the house of Being**.

**8.** More recently, has reclaimed Nietzsche's metaphor for the purposes of discrediting the modern utopian notion of a tragic, heroic subjectivity, and it is this interpretation that I think captures well a key aspect of Nietzsche's *post-metaphysical* move., Nietzsche's thought is not the pure symptom of crisis and decadence but offers a possible proposal for a breakthrough. The breakthrough is to a post-metaphysical human being conceived as a plural subject capable of living his/her interpretation of the world without needing to believe that it is "true" in the metaphysical sense of the word (grounded in a secure and steadfast foundation).<sup>6</sup> The superhuman is a new non-dogmatic image of thought: a seduction, a temptation, an experiment, and a hope.

**9.** Notwithstanding the reputation he enjoys, Nietzsche is a thinker of modesty. He calls for a new style of philosophy, which he calls, historical philosophizing, and with it a new virtue, namely, that of modesty (HH 2). In addition, against the claims of morality Nietzsche says that his task – the self-overcoming of morality – favours "more modest words" (D Preface). And in a note of 1884 he says that humankind is now entering a new phase in its existence, that of "the modesty of consciousness", in which the "human" is to be overcome (WP 676). The experiment Nietzsche envisages, the experiment of the human future, is a modest one, even though this might strike many of us as incredulous. The portentous language of

*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* may conceal this important fact.

we need to get beyond tragic and negative nihilism and see nihilism as an indicator of, in the West, our emancipation, namely, our emancipation from moral monism, dogmatism, and absolutism. As Nietzsche expresses it, "I have declared war on the anemic Christian ideal...not with the aim of destroying it but only of putting an end to its tyranny and clearing the way for new ideals..."

**10.** The attempt is often made, for good reasons, to save Nietzsche from the charge of being a nihilist. However, at the same time it is important not to lose sight of the pedagogic aspects of his treatment of the problem. As one commentator has noted, if the sickness and malaise of modern humans is a symptom of nihilism, it is nihilism that is also the cure.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in one sketch Nietzsche conceives nihilism as tremendous purifying movement in which nothing could be "more useful or more to be encouraged than a thoroughgoing *practical nihilism*" (WP 247).

Nietzsche is not the only thinker in the latter part of the nineteenth century to be perturbed by growing pessimistic suspicion towards the human animal grounded in statements on the futility of human existence and reflecting a fundamental disaffection with this impossible animal.<sup>9</sup> However, he is, I believe, the only philosopher to welcome nihilism and actually embrace it. Nihilism is ambiguous since on the one hand it could be a sign of the increased power of the spirit but on the other hand it could equally be a sign of the decreased power of the spirit (WP 22).

Nietzsche insists on this ambiguity in a number of notes from this period, for example: "Overall insight: the ambiguous character of our modern world – the very same symptoms could

point to *decline* and to *strength*" (WP 110).

Close beside the modern malaise there is an untested force and powerfulness of the spirit, so that the same reasons that produce the increasing smallness of man drive the stronger and rarer individuals up to greatness (WP 109). Indeed, Nietzsche wonders whether it's not the case that every fruitful movement of humanity does not create at the same time a nihilistic movement: "It could be the sign of a crucial and most essential growth, of the transition to new conditions of existence..." (WP 112; see also 113A) In active nihilism spirit has grown so strong that previous goals, including convictions and articles of faith, have become incommensurate and the desire is to negate and to change one's faith (one is no longer flourishing within the conditions of existence one finds oneself in). Or one may be experiencing a crisis of faith but one lacks the strength to posit a new goal.

This experience reaches its "maximum of relative strength as a violent force of destruction". The opposite is passive nihilism which denotes a weary nihilism that does not wish to attack anything. Here the spirit finds itself exhausted and the synthesis of values and goals dissolves; disintegration or mummification follows, in which whatever refreshes, heals, calms, and numbs emerges into the foreground in various guises (religious, aesthetic, moral, political, and so on) (WP 23). Nietzsche is insistent that nihilism must be faced since any attempt to escape it without revaluing our values so far will only produce the opposite and make the problem more acute (WP 30). In a note of 1886-7 Nietzsche writes:

The whole *idealism* of humanity...is on the point of tipping into *nihilism* – into the belief in absolute *valuelessness*, that is, *meaninglessness*...

The annihilation of ideals, the new wasteland, the new arts of enduring it, we *amphibians*.

He insists that this process must be endured and persisted with; there can be no going back, no ardent rush forwards, and for the time being an attitude of parody in relation to all previous values is to be taken up and out of plenitude.