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Tracing Thoughts: Nietzsche to Sartre

John Martone

In the chronicle of western philosophy, Friedrich Nietzsche represents the dethroning of traditional ideas; the philosophy driven by, for the most part, classical Christian assumptions now had a rival. He unleashed atheistic thought upon the philosophical world and was a key influence for much of what was to come in the twentieth century. A particular field of philosophy that incorporated Nietzsche's ideas was existentialism, a field that is most identifiable through the work of Jean-Paul Sartre. The existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre incorporated the older ideas of Nietzsche and brought them to the forefront of human life. It was a philosophy that celebrated humanity by believing in the power of man to be free and responsible. Sartre viewed man as lacking any pre-determined essence, emphasising the freedom and responsibility man has and how this affects man's state of being. These concepts appear earlier in Nietzsche's work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in the form of the *Übermensch*. The *Übermensch*, or roughly overman in English, is a higher state of existence seeking to surpass the feeble tendencies of the human condition. There is a great amount of overlap between Sartre and Nietzsche's tendency to give prominence to human being; however there are a few key differences that arise through comparison and will thus be examined. In particular, this paper seeks to analyse the concept of the *Übermensch* in Nietzsche's work, examining to what degree Sartre's existentialism relates.

Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch* is central to his work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Through this concept of the *Übermensch*, Nietzsche is able to explore several themes that build up his overall philosophy. The first concept that the reader encounters is the idea that God has died, "This old saint has not yet heard anything of this, that God is *dead*!" (Nietzsche 12). The idea that God has died is not intended to be taken literally, but rather to serve as a contrast from the orthodox thought of the time. Many philosophers that preceded Nietzsche had made basic assumptions that God was a suitable source to look for answers to questions. Nietzsche, however, rejects this, leaving man free to seek answers for himself. In the context of the quote, Zarathustra has met a saint that is dedicated to praising God while living alone in the forest, representing the old monastic style of life that Nietzsche is firmly rejecting. The absence of a god to dictate what should and should not be done by man results in the opportunity for man to define himself. The idea of the *Übermensch* itself can be understood as a higher form of humanity that one may ascend to through a conscious decision. F. C. Copleston defines this ascension as "the higher man emancipates himself from a morality, from the code of ethics asserted by the herd, and is a creator of values..." (235). Without a god, without a morality, without any sort of pre-existing influence, man is now free, free to define himself as whatever it desires to become. In the state of the *Übermensch*, the higher man forsakes the weaknesses of humanity and becomes someone that exists in the present.

In order to further understand the *Übermensch*, one must also understand the themes of freedom and responsibility. The ability of man to actively pursue a greater state of being is, fundamentally, an act of freedom. As said before, man may rise to *Übermensch* solely because there is no commanding power such as God to dictate

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choices. However, when there exists no supreme law by which one must measure oneself, there is a new possibility for man to define himself. Therefore, the ascension to the *Übermensch* is a choice taken by man alone to achieve a higher state.

Going further, the *Übermensch* itself is meant to be a higher state. There seems at first to be no fundamental reason why it is a step beyond good, but in reality, the *Übermensch* goes beyond the ancient moral code of good and evil. Copleston addresses this same question, answering it, “he is a more *complete* man, the noble and aristocratic man. We are to conceive of the “higher man” as physically healthy and strong, as powerful and devoid of weakness,” he continues, “The ‘higher man’ is endowed, not merely with physical vigour, but also with intellectual power, independence of the soul” (235). In a sense, the higher man is a higher man because of his independence; he is great because of his qualities that allow him to be independent. His ability to think freely, to become the opposite of a follower, makes him an innovator: makes him the overman. The *Übermensch* does not follow the slave morality set forth by the Christians, but rather embodies the essence of what it meant to be aristocratic. By becoming independent and free to make one’s own choices, by having the ability to fail or succeed as one wishes, by becoming the exact antithesis of a human bound by a supreme code of law, this is what truly makes him over-man.

Sartre on the other hand, did not have a specific theme that is identifiable with his work, but rather held a myriad of ideas at the core, changing them as his thought evolved. However, a fundamental concept that was perhaps the most constant in his work is the idea that existence precedes essence. Sartre explains it as such, “what do we mean here by “existence precedes essence”? We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself” (Sartre 22.) Man at the beginning is nothing, void of any inherently human qualities that determine behaviour. Sartre does not assume there exists a divine morality, allowing the assumption that man is nothing. The freedom given by the act of materialising as nothing allows man to define himself as he wills it. The nature of existence precedes essence is summarised best by Sartre himself:

Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism. (22)

With the freedom to define himself, man also takes on the responsibility to define himself in an ideal way. Man is thrown into a situation where he is absolutely free to make his own decisions, making all excuses for actions void, and therefore man must be held responsible for the decisions he makes. As man seeks to define himself in a certain way, he is defining all of humanity in that certain way; if a man wishes to live a modest life, he is making a conscious decision to live a modest life, and therefore accepts living a modest life as an ideal. He is portraying to all of humanity that this is the right way, he is legislating a common set of ideals that the whole of humanity may share.

The philosophy of existentialism is heavily rooted in humanism: forsaking outside influences, and raising man to the position of self-determination. When man becomes aware of his own existence, he soon realises his responsibility to the whole of humanity. Through the conception of no ordained morality there develops a responsibility in man to

define his own morality. It is a paradox to say that there are bad actions when there are no pre-determined rules, but under the assumption that man can will his own freedom, there is a responsibility to define what is right and what is wrong. This new morality does not exist *a priori*, but rather exists as a product of man's own freedom to define the rules in regards to what he values. The collective willing of freedom creates a group morality based on the very thing that is valuable to man, or what is valuable to all humanity. Man materialises with the ability to define himself, and on a larger scale humanity; the willing of many creates a morality ingrained in humanity, which exhibits optimism toward humanity.

How then are these two philosophies related? From the analysis of Nietzsche and Sartre, there are three clear principles of their philosophy that overlap: freedom, responsibility, and morality. The differences in these principles are, however, rather significant. Beginning with freedom, freedom is an aspect of the *Übermensch* that is fundamental to its meaning; it acts as a quality that separates it from the basic level of humanity. "Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman—a rope over an abyss" (Nietzsche 14). Man is not thrown into the world with absolute freedom; he must break from the aspects of the beast and ascend to the overman. The portrayal of man tied between beast and overman is a central difference between the definition of freedom for Nietzsche and Sartre. In the case of the overman, man must work and obtain a higher level of humanity to become independent. This splits freedom into two different meanings; on one hand, man is free to make the choice to become independent, however, independence or freedom is not an inherent quality in man. This is vastly different from Sartre's interpretation of man's state of existence. Sartre posits man comes into existence absolutely void of any of qualities or essences. Therefore, by the very fact of having nothing, he is announcing that he is bound to no one, each and every one of his actions becomes his own, which is what makes man free. Man's choice to commit himself to certain aspects is a side effect of his freedom, not by any inherent nature. Sartre's belief in no human nature is what makes man free, whereas Nietzsche sees human nature as a stifling state and ascension to *Übermensch* is what can make man independent. Nietzsche's belief in human nature is what defines the *Übermensch* as a higher independent state; he views human nature with contempt, believing it to be weak and simply the opposite of what the *Übermensch* is.

Yet, Nietzsche did not see the *Übermensch* as a responsibility for everyone, nor is there a sense that the *Übermensch* is a state that affects more than just one's self. Sartre's understanding is, however, quite different. Sartre's notion of existence preceding essence is not a notion that one ascends to, as is the case of the *Übermensch* in Nietzsche's work; it is a fundamental and universal condition of humanity, not one particular person. Therefore, because of its application to everyone, and its idea that when one man wills something he is willing it for all of man, a certain responsibility is created. Man develops a responsibility to others to use his freedom authentically; he must will only what is truly desired, and to do otherwise would be an act of bad faith. This responsibility of man is non-existent in Nietzsche's work, as once man ascends to the overman, he is free of base human morality, he is independent.

Morality, while not outright spoken of in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, is an idea that heavily defines the *Übermensch*. Copleston asserts this connection as such: "the higher man emancipates himself from morality, from the code of ethics asserted by the herd, and

is a *creator of values*; but that is not to say that he is a slave to the lusts of the flesh or to any other lust, for he is the very opposite of a slave” (235). The *Übermensch* is free to shift morality as he sees fit; what is useful to him shall become good and what is useless will become bad. He is in a position to command and to create. This very notion of creating morality appears in Sartre’s definition of the human existence, however, for Sartre morality is created by the universality of the freedom that man holds. Man as a whole, not the overman, wills actions based on freedom, and by choosing these actions, he is defining these actions as good, or favourable. He is portraying to all of man that this is what he believes in, which therefore creates a morality without there being an *a priori* existence of one. The concept of morality is vital to both philosophies. However, there are key differences that are quite apparent. Namely, the difference in the universal ability to create morality stands out. For Nietzsche, only those who have risen to the level of the *Übermensch* may redefine morality as they so choose, but for Sartre, the whole of humanity takes part in the creation of a universal human morality.

The philosophy of existentialism appears in many forms, and was advocated in its respective forms by many different philosophers. Nietzsche’s philosophy however had a considerable amount of influence on Sartre’s particular branch of existentialism. In the case of the *Übermensch* there was overlap with three main aspects: freedom, responsibility, and morality. Freedom in Nietzsche’s writing was an ideal that must be achieved, a task that was earned; whereas for Sartre, freedom was a quality man gains upon becoming conscious of himself. This could possibly stem from what Nietzsche saw as ideal. He praised the aristocratic model of morality, and despised the solidarity that slave morality imposed on people. Sartre, however, was a Marxist and, in general despised the bourgeoisie. It is hard to explain the differences in responsibility as these differences come down to possibility versus obligation. Man is put into a state of anguish under the existentialist philosophy; man is free to choose, however, is always bound to choose. He has a responsibility to act authentically as his actions define both himself and humanity. Nietzsche, however, does not intend for the *Übermensch* to become the rule, but the exception. Man has an option to transcend his human flaws, but is by no means obligated to do so. Morality is similar to this in the sense that for Sartre morality exists simply as a product of the choices that man makes. As man continues to will choices, a sense of normality becomes established. Nietzsche’s morality comes from an act of having the power to establish a morality; the *Übermensch* is self-aware where as the “last man” is not and through his self-awareness gains the option to redefine morality. Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* and Sartre’s existentialism exhibit very similar concepts and it is evident that there is some influence of Nietzsche in Sartre’s writings, however there are changes in these ideas that demonstrate the evolution of thought and stress on the human condition that had taken place between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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