

The Many Voices of the Higher Man

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The themes of revaluation, of overcoming, and of the eternal return loom large in the enigmatic fourth book of Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. That book revolves around Zarathustra's quest to find "The Higher Man." The Higher Man's cry for help (in German, *Nötschrei* - lit. "scream of necessity") is heard by Zarathustra in the form of the thought of the *Übermensch* – the thought that man is a bridge, a link in a chain, a portal to the future of a creature who transcends our comprehension, just as we transcend the ape's comprehension. This thought displaces the old superstitious conception of divinity called "God" – the thought that there is an omnipotent transcendent person who loves us and is concerned with us – and replaces it with a concept of nature's own divinity sufficiently deep to awaken the realization that, just as we should love those distant simian ancestors whose struggles enabled us to arise, the *Übermensch* will one day so love us. Nietzsche teaches that therein lies our greatest source of self-esteem, a self-esteem greater than the old pride of thinking of ourselves as the love-object of a supernatural being.

Zarathustra's quest is thus not the arrogant one of grounding some claim to *be* the *Übermensch*, or even to fathom what exactly becoming the *Übermensch* would mean. Zarathustra's quest is rather the quest to understand what it means to realize that we cannot conceive of that which will nevertheless make us seem meaningful in retrospect. This is a variation on the theme of the sublime in Kant's third *Critique* (perhaps analogous to the way in which eternal return is a variation on Kant's theme of the categorical imperative in the second *Critique*). According to Kant, I at first feel the fear of my quantitative insignificance or qualitative weakness, inspired by the failure of my ability to count in the face of an infinite quantity, or to survive in the face of an infinite force of nature. But if then that fear gives way to the realization that I *know* my insignificance, a kind of joy ensues. Upon understanding that unlike other animals, we must in some sense be transcending ourselves in order to make that very realization, I apprehend my connection with Reason - something which transcends me, yet is also a part of me. Just as the thought of what is good for "man in general" is, Nietzsche thinks, too vague to do any of the work Kant wants it to in the second *Critique*, the thought of "reason in general" cannot restore the kind of re-assuring dignity required to dispel the terror we feel in the face of our own vulnerability. It is not abstract Reason, but the very tangible thread of the great chain of being which runs through our very body - which *is* our very body - that Nietzsche thinks offers us a real sense of worth. Only a

taught rope becomes a path, and to be tight a rope must be anchored at both ends: in a love for the animal who was our ancestor and who still operates within us; and also in the future being who will overcome our problems along with ourselves, and for whose sake we struggle. For although man is outwardly incomprehensible to the ape, he is inwardly connected by the pains and the pleasures of the body: just so, we too are connected inwardly with that creature who will interpret, understand and utilize the body in ways we cannot comprehend. This interpretation of the thought of the *Übermensch* as the thought of a necessarily elusive entity, outwardly opaque but inwardly translucent if not transparent is thought by Nietzsche to transform man's self-understanding into a higher version of itself, and man himself into The Higher Man, no longer complacent in the decadent thought that evolution has culminated and terminated in he himself, but cognizant instead of the substantial responsibility which thinking of himself as a link in a chain entails.

Thus the Higher Man is the man who realizes that he cannot represent to himself the most important thing about himself: his potential to create something beyond himself. This thought can be interpreted in several ways, one of the most important of which is the ecological interpretation of the meaning of this adjective "Higher". "The Higher Man" on this interpretation means humans who are aware of the degree to which the future of this planet depends upon our actions now, and that thinking of ourselves as a link in a chain is in fact a higher vision of our dignity than thinking of ourselves as a reached goal. This understanding of ourselves is not necessarily or even primarily an intellectual attitude. Nietzsche's depiction of the higher men is not exactly a vision of an intellectual elite. The rag-tag collection of misfits and clowns populating book four show us that this is not what Nietzsche has in mind. Already in the "Old and New Tablets" in book three Nietzsche makes clear what he had indicated from the prologue onwards: that his new nobility are not distinguished by their ancestry, wealth, professional position or academic status. Nietzsche's new nobility are distinguished by one thing alone: their relation to the future. Like musical talent or other forms of artistic genius, Nietzsche's new nobility is thus not confined to any caste, class, race or party, but distributed chaotically throughout the world, scattered with a truly just indifference across all racial, national and economic borders. This nobility is able to be fostered or squandered, but it is not able to be taught, bought, or inherited. So just as the world's great artists, musicians and writers pop up randomly across the globe, and moreover are often far from the bourgeois ideals of civility, politeness and "class", just so, Nietzsche's new nobility are not what is usually thought of as aristocrats, and are not located in palaces nor found walking on red carpets. And just

as who the greatest artists actually are is often only clear in retrospect, likewise, who has been noble is also only apparent with the benefit of hindsight.

I want to suggest that something very much akin to this mix of unselfconscious buffoonery, and unstinting future-orientedness was exemplified by the recently departed Australian eco-celebrity, Steve Irwin. Steve Irwin was unusual among conservationists, for he devoted his life to affirming the predator. He thereby joined those who call for us to radically re-value our conventional moral judgments concerning nature's "nasty" or "bad" creatures – bad, that is to say, from our soft, fleshy, and highly edible human perspective. With irrepressible enthusiasm, Steve Irwin's antics called upon us to recognize as a kind of nihilism our squeamish feeling that nature would be "better" without its predatory aspect – and to realize that such a feeling is actually a kind of denial of reality and the adoption of a fable in its place, and moreover a fable which devalues itself. The delusion of the desirability of a nature stripped of its predatory aspect must, he thought, be overcome through undergoing actual encounters with these awesome creatures, encounters which disarm our prejudicial illusions, and remind us of the predator's essential innocence – its crucial distinction from the murderer. The predator does not kill gratuitously, and is in fact in a kind of dynamic equilibrium of mutual inter-dependence with its prey, a relation beneficial to both the health and the evolutionary creativity of both species. Such an overcoming through undergoing is entirely characteristic of the possibilities Nietzsche is attempting to access through the search for The Higher Man that constitutes book four of *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

Steve Irwin himself would never have put his own mission in life in Nietzsche's terms, nor even have understood such words had he read them. I doubt he read all that much. But in an utterly unselfconscious, even childlike manner, Steve Irwin simply delighted in the predatory aspect of nature, quite literally embracing it. He seemed to feel instinctively that something was amiss with humanity's presumption that it is entitled to pick and choose which aspects of nature are "good" and should exist, and which are "evil" and should be exterminated, especially given the massive powers of destruction now at an immature humanity's disposal. Any perception of an evil species is in fact due only to a local imbalance (a "weed" or "vermin" problem) and is due to an inadequate appreciation of the bigger picture of life on Earth as a whole, in which every species plays its own part, and "evil" is understood as an imbalance of species, a property of situations, not of any species in itself. Staying always "true to the Earth," Irwin insisted that nature is an all-or-nothing affair, that it has to be affirmed as a whole, and, even more importantly, protected as a whole

against the encroaching degradation due to the imbalances caused by human overpopulation. For those who love the Earth and strive to remain true to it, every species is beyond good and evil.

I doubt Steve Irwin had so much as heard of either Rousseau or Spinoza. But with unerring instinct, he demonstrated a conclusive refutation of both. Refusing to ignore the conflict, strife and struggle which he saw as essential to nature, Irwin simply affirmed the predator's necessity, thus calling the conception of nature as an ultimate harmony, shared by both Rousseau and Spinoza, unavoidably into question. Certainly, Nietzsche teaches, nature is always a question of balance. But such balance is always a balance BETWEEN harmony and dissonance, identity and alteration, system and chaos, creation and predation, being and becoming. Balances which are moreover maintained only through struggle. A belief that such balance is achieved maximally by nature entails that human interference to "fix" such struggle is inevitably a misguided meddling based upon an overestimation of the depth of human understanding.

But Irwin's unwitting sagacity in illustrating Nietzsche runs deeper still, for his very death itself was an uncanny echo of an episode from book four of Zarathustra. In the chapter entitled "Mittags" (At Midday), Zarathustra, fleeing his shadows, finds solace in noontime. With the sun directly overhead, the shadows disappear, and the possibility of an experience of that which the shadows cloak arises. In this high noon of solitude, Zarathustra is overcome by the desire to sleep beneath an old grapevine, and falls into a sort of lucid dream, asleep with his eyes open. Only partially conquered by sleep, Zarathustra says his soul remained awake while his mind slept. In this dream state he meets his soul, long and tired and strange, unfamiliar through having been obscured by the shadows with which his wanderings have been preoccupied, but happy and tired like an old traveler, weary from long voyages. He sees his soul savoring the sweetness of a perfect ending, of "dying at the right time" in recognition of the divine truth of finitude. "Wenig macht die Art des besten Glücks" - the best kind of happiness is little, he says. Limitation is sublime and finitude is the highest reality. Even his soul must die, pierced by a poisonous barb while diving amongst the Blessed Isles. I translate:

What is happening to me?
Listen! Has time flown away?
Am I not falling?
Have I not fallen – listen! – into eternity's well-spring?
What befalls me? Stillness!

Have I been stabbed – Oh the pain! – in the heart?
In the heart!
Oh break, heart, break, upon such happiness, upon such a stab.
Crikey! Has not the world just now become perfect? Round and ripe.
Oh the golden ring of ripeness – to where is its fullness flying?
Shall I pursue it?
Hush! Stillness!

My translation of Nietzsche's interrogative “Wie?” by Irwin's trademark Australian colloquialism “Crikey!” is no doubt going a bit too far. But Irwin's favorite idiom (a sublimation of taking Christ's name “in vain”) does in fact express something akin to the uncanny mix of amazement, curiosity and levity encoded in the Wie? characterizing Zarathustra's struggle to locate The Higher Man:

Strong limbed and nimble footed,
merry in war and feasting,
no mournful man,
no dreamy fellow,
ready for what is hardest as for a feast,
healthy and whole

This description by Zarathustra of “his own” in The Last Supper in Book Four reads like a eulogy to Irwin's own life. Or consider the Wizard's description of Zarathustra himself in The Song of Melancholy, later in Book IV:

"At home in any desert more than in temples
Wanton as any cat
Leaping through any window
Plumb into any adventure
Sniffing primeval forest
Hungrily, longingly sniffing
That you in primeval forest
'Midst striped and spotted beasts
May rove in sinful health and painted beauty."

Zarathustra first hears the call of the higher man in the second chapter of book four of Zarathustra, the book which revolves around the characters Zarathustra encounters as he is driven ever onward in his response to the "Nötschrei" of the Higher Man. "Nötschrei" is correctly translated “cry for help,” but the word literally means “scream of necessity.” Steve Irwin's "Nötschrei" to us was that we must save the major predators from their immanent extinction. The Higher Man's "Nötschrei" is

that we must protect the Übermensch by reorienting the disoriented orphans of God, calling them out of the lingering shadows of the dead God (see Gay Science §109) and towards the light of the sobering realization that the Übermensch is utterly dependent upon them. These two cries harmonize in the key of necessity – the necessity that is Zarathustra's highest possibility: his fate, his true love, his nature, his future: our Earth. This moment of self-esteem-restoring insight is also the overcoming of the revulsion for the herd, the great contempt for mankind that dogs Zarathustra's footsteps from the start of the Prologue onwards.

To see how this revulsion is overcome, we need to keep Nietzsche's perspectivism in mind when interpreting his elitism. Certainly, Nietzsche thinks all perspectives inevitably rank other people in terms of their value, and Nietzsche thinks that ideologies which deny this necessary differentiation are the source of great danger to humanity. But we must also guard carefully against a reversion to the absolutism which Nietzsche's perspectivism is designed to overcome. Just because Nietzsche is claiming all perspectives evaluate a rank ordering of individuals, this does not mean that Nietzsche is maintaining that there is such a thing as one actual class of individuals who constitute the elite, but rather that each perspective is oriented by an elite.

Clearly, which individuals are classified as elite depends entirely upon one's perspective. People valuing spectator sports highly affirm one particular elite (the top athletes). People valuing wealth highly affirm another elite (the super-rich). People valuing music highly affirm yet another (the world's great musicians). Nietzsche's suggestion, that we should value what the Übermensch values, of course raises the problem that as the Übermensch doesn't yet exist, we cannot say with certainty what those values will be. But we do have our relationship with the animals to orient our thought. The ape does not understand us from the outside, but it does know us from the inside, so to speak. It understands our hunger and lust and anger, but not our language nor our clothing. Attempts to describe the Übermensch from the outside miss the point entirely and can be ruled out in advance. But we need to remember that we do also in a sense know the Übermensch from the inside, in the same sense that the ape knows us "from the inside". What would be most valuable from that felt future perspective? Health. Creativity. Vitality. Spirit. Instinct. More than this we cannot say; but we can say that from the perspective which values the future, ecological campaigners can be said to form a heroic elite.

One way to translate the other-worldly metaphysics out of of the decision-procedure which the thought of eternal return represents is to recast it as something like “will those actions which result in an increased level of sustainability.” Sustainability can thus be employed as a non-nihilistic metric of eternal return. The sustainable return of our Earth in its orbit and the seasons in their courses is the human meaning of eternity, eternal return thought little. But for this return to remain sustainable (“eternal”), the herd must be on board. The ludicrous sight of a mankind choking on the fumes of its own inventions is a monument to our tragic hubris on a scale unimaginable even a century ago. Now today, as the economic elite and the ecological elite are locked in mortal conflict, The Higher Man must find a way to interpret this tension such that the need for a balanced mix of sustainable prosperity and future responsibility becomes obvious to all. No amount of elitism can get around the fact that we necessarily all share the same atmosphere. The necessity for this interpretation cries out in the many voices of the ecological elite, the united chorus of the many voices of the Higher Man.

Just after the heart-stabbing midpoint of *Mittags* (and in fact just after the midpoint of the whole of Book Four, and even of the whole of *Zarathustra* in so far as each of the four books are a cyclic reiteration of the previous books on a new level of understanding), Zarathustra realizes that the "Nötschrei" he had heard actually emanates from his own cave, and that it consisted not of any one of the characters he has sent there to wait for him, but of the chorus of all of their voices. Voices like Steve Irwin's, Dianne Fossey's, David Attenborough's, Jane Goodall's, Tim Flannery's and Bob Brown's: the celebrity-conservationists who are really the P.R. people for the small but devoted army of individuals who are actually attempting to tackle the alarming environmental crisis currently underway. All these voices can be heard in multi-part harmony singing the one refrain: “Stay true to the Earth”, for the world, though deep, is fragile. Thus the Higher Men in “The Greeting” sing: “Nothing more delightful grows on Earth, O Zarathustra, than a lofty, strong will: that is the Earth's most beautiful plant”. A strong will, like a good heart, is instinctively aware of its own motivation, beating “without a why,” without depending upon a teleological goal, and therefore not pining away in its absence (“the death of God”). For a strong will, a dead God is no more a catastrophe than a dead grandparent: not a tragedy properly speaking, but rather the right thing happening at the right time, no matter how sad the actual occasion. Good grief is not twisted by anger at nature, only suffused with the pain of a detachment made bearable by the thought of finitude. Mortality, the thought that we are little, is a thought enabling a lightness only a mortal can know, and which we can know only so long as we remember our mortality.

Lightness and playfulness characterize every step in Zarathustra's non-teleological quest to realize his own potential, just as Irwin's enthusiasm disrupted the monotonous teleology of the media with its indomitable disruptive mischievousness. "Kluge Narrn reden besser": clever clowns tell better tales, confesses Zarathustra "At Midday", asking the puzzling Wizard (whom Nietzsche will have reiterate the "Klage der Ariadne" later in Book Four): "who could still successfully seek greatness?", immediately answering his own question: "Only a fool: only fools succeed." Irwin's foolish cheerfulness was also a mask for his resolute optimism in the face of the overwhelming statistic that since Nietzsche wrote Thus Spake Zarathustra, we have succeeded in wiping out over one third of the biodiversity on this unique planet, with many thousands of species irretrievably exterminated. The levity of style balances the gravity of the situation: this is why Irwin's laughter, like Zarathustra's, was "holy." (Of the Higher Man §18)

"The Greeting", which follows "At Midday", finds Zarathustra back at his cave, his rag-tag band of approximations of The Higher Man gathered around Zarathustra's one central insight: the eagle stands "bristling and restless" with the serpent around its neck. This deepest symbol of Zarathustra's is Nietzsche's cypher for an alliance of transcendence and immanence not reducible to a synthesis of the two, and a sign indicating what man might be able to become. The eagle, symbol of transcendence, noble beast of distant perspectives and sharpest vision; and the serpent, gnostic symbol of wisdom, diabolical mediator of the ambivalent interconnection of life and death, companion of Hermes and Dionysus, skin-shedding, pharmakon-brewing, immanence incarnate, mercurial and resilient. Together they symbolize the way über – the way to grow a will like a towering tree, a sustainable will-to-life, right here, right now. For man is above all the imitating animal, and the forms of life on Earth form a kind of symbolic lexicon for this compulsive copier. Will we imitate our own herd animals and act like cows, sheep and pigs? Or the industrious insects of the hive, towering like bees in silicon skyscrapers? Or will we imitate our own pets, and fight like cats and dogs? Or will we follow Zarathustra, and value the wild animal and above all the wilderness within ourselves?

Now that our ancient and noble alliance with the horse has been broken and replaced with the fetish of the auto-mobile, many humans have little if any significant contact with animals. But the vocabulary of animal analogies remains a potent aspect of our psychological vocabulary. We call someone a dog, a parrot, a pig, a cow, a rat, a snake, an eagle, a stallion, a wolf, an ass, a butterfly,

a love-bird, a rabbit, a mouse, a toad, a shark, a dinosaur, or any one of innumerable other analogies. By each we intend an entire ensemble of traits summed up succinctly in one metaphor, which is of course highly culturally variable. Thus for Nietzsche to array the higher men around the symbol of the snake and the eagle reconciled is for him to ask us to imagine the possibility of a humanity oriented by the thought of a union of our basic planet-bound immanence with our dreams of transcendence. If made unafraid of each other, these symbols can indicate the possibility of a this-worldly sensualism whose energy is not alienated into tension with the dream of other-worldly transcendence. The non-otherworldly magic of the eagle's soaring flight and the non-denigrated immanence of the snake's sensual mortality are envisaged as being bound in a union which (like all symbols) cannot be reduced to an identity (representation). But it can be captured in an attitude of reconciliation between our yearning to pursue our highest possibilities while at the same remaining mindful of our limitations, and true to ourselves as utter Earthlings.

The greed epidemic currently sweeping the planet, whose outer manifestation is the obesity phenomenon but whose inner meaning is the panic of a disoriented will is only one component of a syndrome of maladies haunting us like so many insoluble riddles. These also include such otherwise disparate problems as declining Western birth rates, the global prevalence of drug and alcohol abuse, the mysteriously rising suicide toll, and the strange contradiction of cultures which ban euthanasia but practice capital punishment. Without denying that an extremely complex array of factors are at play in each of these difficult problems, each exhibits in its own way a disorientation of will with nothing to believe in - in other words, nihilism. Purpose and motive turn against one another, the drives pull in competing directions without orchestration, and the individual swerves like a car in which a fight is going on behind the wheel. Orientation dissipates chaotically, and the laws of nature assert their irresistible pull back into immanence, as the temporary transcendence we call "driving" ("living") dissipates and is gone: the car crashes, the nihilist slides into decadence and dissipates.

There are now many hands "on the wheel" of our atmosphere: either their struggle will stabilize, and an orientation toward sustainable atmospheric health shall emerge, or else it will fragment into instability, and we can aim for the kind of runaway greenhouse effect that boiled Venus' oceans. This was probably caused by a meteor collision (the sea beds and continental coastlines are now mapped in some detail), creating permanent global cloud-cover, with a surface temperature in the region of 500°C, a surface air pressure around 90 times that of Earth's atmosphere, and a

concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere of 96%, a similar concentration to that on planet Earth before three billion years of life got it all the way down to its current 0.024% (now rising rapidly again). Where did all that CO₂ go? The carbon went into making you, me, the wood in the frame of your house and every plant on the planet, and the oxygen is 21% of the air currently entering your nostrils. As Venus is unique in being a close twin to the Earth in mass and size, it is in fact our best guide to a “worst-case scenario” for the outcome of the “experiment” currently being undertaken by the economic elite on planet Earth: the carbon and the oxygen re-united, global cloud-cover, toxic rain, and at most a population of microbes.

The alignment of the will in its inner diversity of drives is the job of culture. But to catch on, culture must appeal and inspire, and not simply censure. Certainly there was something of the circus performer about Steve Irwin's act, but this foolery was really just the bait to catch the interest of the masses. The real cultural message was the same deep one that Nietzsche strove also to convey: that only the love of nature can now reorient “restless, erring, straying men” (“Of The Higher Man” §6) and teach us all to struggle in the same direction. This is not merely a matter of government. It is more importantly a matter of the heart.