

## The 'Superman' in Aurobindo & Nietzsche

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Was it from him that I learned the long bright silence? Or did he learn it from me? Or did each of us invent it independently? The origin of all good things is thousandfold; all good prankish things leap into existence from sheer joy: how could one expect them to do that only once?

- Friedrich NIETZSCHE

The 'him' to which Nietzsche refers is Winter, but never mind that-what fitting words! Two of the great thinkers of our time, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sri Aurobindo, independently arrived at the concept of 'the Superman.' Is this a coincidence? Are the two formulations completely unrelated? If not, in what ways are they similar? Is the Superman one of these "good prankish things?" This is what I set out to examine with this paper.

A word about terminology: Nietzsche's original term is *Übermensch*, which has been alternately translated as 'Superman' and 'Overman.' Thomas Common and George Bernard Shaw are more fond of the former, while Walter and Kaufmann and myself prefer the latter. Aurobindo's original term is 'Superman,' which he uses more or less interchangeably (one could argue) with 'Supermind.' However, 'Supermind' is not to be confused with the term 'Overmind,' which is a distinct and separate concept in his writings. To summarize, this paper focuses on the relationship between Nietzsche's '*Übermensch*' and Aurobindo's 'Superman.' I will try to spare the reader of confusion about this as much as possible.

Nietzsche and Aurobindo were apparently unrelated, although there is speculation that Aurobindo may have been informally exposed to the writings of the former in his university days.

### **Superman: God, or not God?**

To begin with, Nietzsche is quite emphatic that his Superman is not another word for God. "God is a conjecture," he repeats three times in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, whereas Aurobindo seems to view the Superman as an inherent stage of spiritual evolution towards God, hence a manifestation of God.

Only a single passage in Nietzsche is even remotely opaque on this point. In his chapter "On Poets," he writes, "Verily, it always lifts us higher-specifically, to the realm of the clouds: upon these we place our motley bastards and call them gods and overmen. For they are just light enough for these chairs-all these gods and

overmen." However, I think it is quite clear that the overmen which are here being equivocated with the gods are not true overmen, but misconceptions of such by poets (i.e. "motley bastards").

Every other mention of the overman is decisively juxtaposed with God: "'Dead are all gods: now we want the overman to live'-on that great noon, let this be our last will," "Once one said God when one looked upon distant seas; but now I have taught you to say: overman," "Could you create a god? Then do not speak to me of any gods. But you could well create the overman," and "God died: now we want the overman to live." When examined closely, the phrasing of the second quote especially begs the question: is Nietzsche not simply replacing God with another God-just one disguised behind a new name? Is it just a question of semantics? In Bernd Magnus' reading, "an übermensch is a secular god equivalent, the inverted embodiment of the God of the world-weary." Other critics have pointed out the overwhelming similarities between Nietzsche's portrayal of Zarathustra and the Christian portrayal of Christ. Perhaps his drive for the divine is so strong and uncompromising, that he refuses to accept any conception of the divine which emanates from anything less than the eternal itself.

If we focus instead on the third quote, perhaps the issue is whether gods and Overmen can be created. Nietzsche seems to be saying that we should focus on the Overman, because it is Life's next step for mankind, is within our grasp, and is within our scope to create. He writes, "I desire that your conjectures should not reach beyond your creative will." Yet isn't this the same Nietzsche who referred to God as a human invention or creation? Although his line of thinking gets tangled and reveals knots of paradoxes, he is apparently counseling us not to bite off more than we can chew.

The Superman for Aurobindo is, on the other hand, part and parcel of God. The divine has set in motion a process of involution whereupon it condensed itself into Matter. Evolution consists of unrolling this process upwards from Matter into Life, then Psyche, and then Mind. Meanwhile, the divine unfurls itself downward from Existence into Consciousness-Force, then Bliss, and then Supermind. Since "Supermind is superman," the Superman is obviously an advanced realization of God. In his own words, "Man himself may well be a thinking and living laboratory in whom and with whose conscious co-operation [Nature] wills to work out the superman, the God. Or shall we not say, rather, to manifest God?"

Here we have introduced a further complexity into our investigation, repeated in the following passage. "The animal is a laboratory in which Nature has worked out man; man may very well be a laboratory in which she wills to work out superman, to disclose the soul as a divine being, to evolve a divine nature." So it is Nature who is generating the Superman! Of what consequence is that? Well, for Nietzsche, any association whatsoever to the conventional God of the Judeo-Christian world is repulsive, but associations to Nature are another matter altogether! Zarathustra beseeches people to "remain faithful to the earth" and not to "believe those who speak ... of otherworldly hopes!" Thus, Nietzsche differentiates between Nature-or the earth-and the God whose death he has proclaimed. Aurobindo does not make this division. God is a constant interplay of Nature (Prakriti) and Soul (Purusha). The Superman is simply a further drawing out of Purusha out of Prakriti: "For that which is above the mental being is the superman. It is to be the master of thy mind, thy life and thy body; it is to be a king over Nature of whom thou art now the tool, lifted above her who now has thee under her feet." However, Aurobindo does demonstrate

an understanding of the concerns that motivate Nietzsche's blunt polarization. He writes, "We must not commit the mistake of emphasising one side of the Truth and concluding from it or acting upon it to the exclusion of all other sides and aspects of the Infinite." We can then tentatively conclude that the apparent difference of opinion between the two thinkers regarding the Superman's relationship to God disappears when reframed.

### **Superman: Man, or not Man?**

The next subject of consideration is the relationship between Superman and man. Aurobindo and Nietzsche both agree that the Superman is qualitatively different from man. In the two quotes above, Aurobindo likens man to a laboratory in which the Superman can be fashioned. This seems to imply that there is a fundamental difference between the two, but leaves some room for interpretation. However, in the following passage, he draws the line of demarcation more clearly.

Supermanhood is not man climbed to his own natural zenith, not a superior degree of human greatness, knowledge, power, intelligence, will, character, genius, dynamic force, saintliness, love, purity or perfection. Supermind is something beyond mental man and his limits; it is a greater consciousness than the highest consciousness proper to human nature.

Nietzsche, of course, will go to any length to stress that the Overman is a far cry from man. If he is vociferous in his contrasting of it with God, he is even more passionate in his contrasting it with man. Be it in his famous line about the ape - "What is the ape to man? A laughingstock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughingstock or a painful embarrassment." Or about the polluted stream - "Verily, a polluted stream is man. One must be a sea to be able to receive a polluted stream without becoming unclean. Behold, I teach you the overman: he is this sea; in him your great contempt can go under." Elsewhere, he writes, "Never yet has there been an overman. Naked I saw both the greatest and the smallest man: they are still all-too-similar to each other. Verily, even the greatest I found all-too-human." Finally, towards the end of Zarathustra, "I have the overman at heart, that is my first and only concern-and not man: not the neighbor, not the poorest, not the most ailing, not the best."

### **Man as Transitional**

Nietzsche and Aurobindo are also in agreement about the transitional nature of man. In Aurobindo's words, "Man is a transitional being; he is not final. For in man and high beyond him ascend the radiant degrees that climb to a divine supermanhood." In Nietzsche's words, "Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman-a rope over an abyss." He often summons the image of a bridge, as he does here in his perhaps most definitive passage about the Overman:

There it was too that I picked up the word "overman" by the way, and that man is something that must be overcome-that man is a bridge and no end: proclaiming himself blessed in view of his noon and evening, as the way to new dawns-Zarathustra's word of the great noon, and whatever else I hung up over man like the last crimson light of evening.

### **'The Clark Kent Theory' or 'The Krypton Theory'?**

So enough of the apparent similarities between the two thinkers! How does their conception of the Superman differ? One glaring contrast is the direction from which

the Superman comes. For Nietzsche, he rises up from below, while for Aurobindo, he descends from above. For the former, this is clear as an unmuddied lake: "You that are lonely today, you that are withdrawing, you shall one day be the people: out of you, who have chosen yourselves, there shall grow a chosen people-and out of them, the overman." For the latter, it is somewhat more complicated.

On first impression, it appears that Aurobindo sees the phenomenon of the Superman as descending from the divine along with Supermind. "For a real transformation here must be a direct and unveiled intervention from above," he writes. Yet, he describes it elsewhere as a bi-directional process:

The Divine descends from pure existence through the play of Consciousness-Force and Bliss and the creative medium of Superman into cosmic being; we ascend from Matter through a developing life, soul and mind and the illuminating medium of Supermind towards the divine being.

Referring to the attributes of the Superman, he writes, "These things thou art," stressing that they were already present in man, hence ascending. So, although at first the Superman seems like a descent for Aurobindo, the movement is more accurately described as a simultaneous rise and fall-the type often modeled by Edgar Morin in his diagrams.

### **The Function of the Superman**

The function of the Superman differs as well - it is a creator of new values for Nietzsche, and a divine fulfillment (hence vehicle of pre-established values) for Aurobindo. For Magnus, "the Übermensch is a response to what Nietzsche sees as a value crisis. This crisis arises out of the circumstance characterized by the proclamation that God is dead." What is this circumstance? According to Heidegger, it is the point at which man must outgrow his placement of responsibility in the Godhead, and accept global responsibility as his birthright. The Overman is what is needed for man to successfully "assume dominion over the whole earth." This value crisis is a vacuum, which Zarathustra strives to fill with bridges to the Overman, but which also threatens being filled up by all of the remnants of the old order which he lashes out against. "Thus we do not just need new positive values, we also need to overcome the ingrained negative valuations left behind... For this we need the Übermensch."

For Aurobindo, the Superman is more of a reconciliation of the divine and the less-than-divine.

The appearance of a human possibility in a material and animal world was the first glint of some coming divine Light, the first far-off promise of a godhead to be born out of Matter. The appearance of the superman in the human world will be the fulfillment of this divine promise.

This glorious new being will not be first and foremost a creator of values, but a reconnection to the eternal values of all creation. The closest that Aurobindo comes to Nietzsche's point of view that the Superman is the lynchpin of all creativity, is when he concedes that the Superman participates (at least) in the divine transformation. Yet, more by intention and readiness than by genius:

Man's greatness is not in what he is, but in what he makes possible. His glory is that he is the closed place and secret workshop of a living labour in which supermanhood is being made ready by a divine Craftsman. But he is admitted too to a yet greater greatness and it is this that, allowed to be unlike the lower creation, he is partly an artisan of this divine change; his conscious assent, his consecrated will and

participation are needed that into his body may descend the glory that will replace him. His aspiration is earth's call to the supramental creator.

### **Astrologically Speaking**

It is worth noting that while Nietzsche has a tight Sun - Pluto opposition, in a T-square with Saturn, Aurobindo has Pluto squaring his Sun - Jupiter - Venus stellium. In Aurobindo's case, Pluto is also in a grand trine with Saturn and Mercury. This makes sense in the light of Nietzsche's more polarized depiction of the Plutonic Superman at the expense of Saturnian tradition (i.e., the concept of God), as opposed to Aurobindo's eloquent (Mercury) portrait of the Superman as flowing and continuous with Saturnian conceptions of the divine.

Interestingly enough, Saturn can also connote 'Father Time,' or Kronos. Sleinis writes that, "the possible existence of the Übermensch, the high valuation of the Übermensch, and the will to power are clearly complementary conceptions," and Nietzsche's Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence might as well be included here. Zarathustra: "I come back eternally to this same, selfsame life, in what is greatest as in what is smallest, to teach again the eternal recurrence of all things, to speak again the word of the great noon of earth and man, to proclaim the overman again to men." Another way of viewing the Overman-than as the creator of new values-is as the metaphysical being capable of grasping and embracing the theory that everything recurs eternally. Hence, Nietzsche developed these concepts in order to avoid "the fearful consequences that are bound to ensue unless the Übermensch comes into being and breaks man's intolerable bondage to Time." This way of seeing time as an oppressive prison is another logical expression of Nietzsche's T-square involving Saturn. His revelation of how to break free of this gridlock-the Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence-is to fully embrace one single moment, which "if we affirm it, we affirm the whole of existence" (the Solar identity of all Plutonic existence).

Aurobindo's conception of time is two-fold: on the one hand, Existence simply is, timeless and spaceless. On the other hand, time and space represent the divine's 'material-ization' of itself, which will eventually be transcended when 'spiritualization' is complete. This flowing view of (Plutonic) evolution which does not see (Saturnian) time as problematic is very fitting for Aurobindo's Saturn trine Pluto.

### **Chaudhuri**

Haridas Chaudhuri, Sri Aurobindo's close disciple, devotes an entire chapter of his Sri Aurobindo: The Prophet of Life Divine to an examination of Aurobindo's concept of the Superman. One of the sub-chapters focuses on "Nietzsche and Sri Aurobindo." Chaudhuri is obviously much better versed in Aurobindo's thought than I am, and it is on the whole a well informed comparison; unfortunately, however, it doesn't seem to completely do justice to Nietzsche.

Referring to Nietzsche's concept of the Overman, Chaudhuri writes, "The devout Christian gladly accepts suffering and rises triumphantly over it, whereas the Superman fiercely and arrogantly repels all suffering and misery, and is a complete stranger to the ideal of sorrow and service as liberating forces."  
"Arrogantly repels all suffering and misery?" Is this the same Nietzsche I know? The one who writes,  
that the creator may be, suffering is needed and much change. Indeed, there must be much bitter dying in your life, you creators. ... To be the child who is newly born,

the creator must also want to be the mother who gives birth and the pangs of the birth-giver.

True, the character of Zarathustra tends to be quite hard on suffering, but as I interpret it, only when it is a question of suffering for the sake of suffering. Suffering for the sake of the Overman is another story. This is made quite clear in "On the Higher Man:"

what are your many small short miseries to me? You do not suffer enough to suit me! For you suffer from yourselves, you have not yet suffered from man. You would lie if you claimed otherwise! You all do not suffer from what I have suffered.

Chaudhuri does make a good point when he states, "We may at the very outset set on one side the aristocratic conception of Superhumanity as a possibility restricted to a privileged few or to some exceptionally gifted persons." This does appear to be a substantial difference between the two thinkers. Chaudhuri proceeds to align himself more with George Bernard Shaw's perspective that we need a 'democracy of Supermen.' It is true that Nietzsche sees the attainment of the Overman as within the reach of the fewest of the few. Aurobindo doesn't think evolving into the Supermind will be a piece of cake either, but he definitely paints it as much more of a collective transformation than does Nietzsche.

Another place I feel Chaudhuri misses the mark is in his critique of Nietzsche's glorification of power. He appreciates Nietzsche's swing of the pendulum away from the Christian over-emphasis on 'love', and towards 'power,' but feels that he swings it too far. "Intoxicated by the cult of Power, he turns a blind eye to the sublime significance of suffering, fails to grasp the truth of vicarious atonement, and misses the secret of self-fulfilment through self-sacrifice." I wholeheartedly disagree. I have already commented on the dimension of suffering above, so I will now concentrate on "the secret of self-fulfilment through self-sacrifice." Consider the following: "I love those who do not first seek behind the stars for a reason to go under and be a sacrifice, but who sacrifice themselves for the earth, that the earth may some day become the overman's." The suffering, atonement, and self-sacrifice of sheep, because that is what is expected of them, is quite different from that of the shepherd.

It goes without saying that his envisioning of a "Superman [who] would be all love to the striving soul and relentless power to the forces of darkness & evil" doesn't square too well with Nietzsche's Overman ("The greatest evil is necessary for the overman's best" ). Chaudhuri goes so far as to say, "Nietzsche's Superman is indeed the deification of the demon in man." Although Aurobindo and Nietzsche obviously view evil quite differently, I don't think this is a sufficient reading of the latter. Alas-this would be a thesis in and of itself.

Chaudhuri effectively communicates the difference in feeling tone between Nietzsche's iconoclastic Overman and Aurobindo's "expressive of divine glories" Superman. In his words, "The Superman is essentially the playmate of the Divine in His cosmic self-expression and creative adventures." The role of the Superman is not to make a dramatic break with all concepts of good and evil: "morality is not negated, but is transformed beyond itself into spirituality." In closing, I feel that Chaudhuri's otherwise insightful study tends to misread Nietzsche, in that he confuses his own, actual thought with how has been interpreted and misinterpreted since.

## **Finale**

Two of the great thinkers of our time, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sri Aurobindo, apparently arrived at the concept of 'the Superman' independently from one another. However, given the breadth of each of their visions of the future of evolution, it is understandable that they both posited such a heroic figure as "the next distinct and triumphant evolutionary step to be reached by earthly nature." I hope I have succeeded in pointing out some of the manifold ways in which their conceptions of the Superman overlap with each other, as well as their apparent contradictions. I would argue that despite appearances to the contrary, namely Nietzsche's caustic formulation vs. Aurobindo's harmonious one, the two share a core vision of what the leap forward of the Superman will entail. I will leave you with a particularly Nietzschean passage in Aurobindo to help drive this point home.

If [the modern thinker] sees a vision of the Superman, it is in the figure of increased degrees of mentality or vitality; he admits no other emergence, sees nothing beyond these principles, for these have traced for us up till now our limit and circle. In this progressive world, with this human creature in whom the divine spark has been kindled, real wisdom is likely to dwell with the higher aspiration rather than with the denial of aspiration or with the hope that limits and circumscribes itself within those narrow walls of apparent possibility which are only our intermediate house of training. In the spiritual order of things, the higher we project our view and our aspiration, the greater the Truth that seeks to descend upon us, because it is already there within us and calls for its release from the covering that conceals it in manifested Nature.

## **APPENDIX:**

A List of All of the Occurrences of the Übermensch in Nietzsche's Thus Spoke Zarathustra\*

p. 12 "I teach you the overman. Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?"

What is the ape to man? A laughingstock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the overman: a laughingstock or a painful embarrassment.

p. 13 "Behold, I teach you the overman. The overman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the overman shall be the meaning of the earth!"

"Verily, a polluted stream is man. One must be a sea to be able to receive a polluted stream without becoming unclean. Behold, I teach you the overman: he is this sea; in him your great contempt can go under.

p. 14 "Where is the lightning to lick you with its tongue? Where is the frenzy with which you should be inoculated?"

"Behold, I teach you the overman: he is this lightning, he is this frenzy."

"Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman—a rope over an abyss.

p. 15 "I love those who do not first seek behind the stars for a reason to go under and be a sacrifice, but who sacrifice themselves for the earth, that the earth may some day become the overman's."

"I love him who lives to know, and who wants to know so that the overman may live some day. And thus he wants to go under.

"I love him who works and invents to build a house for the overman and to prepare earth, animal, and plant for him: for thus he wants to go under.

p. 16 "Behold, I am a herald of the lightning and a heavy drop from the cloud; but this lightning is called overman."

p. 18 ...for at this point he was interrupted by the clamor and delight of the crowd. "Give us this last man, O Zarathustra," they shouted. "Turn us into these last men! Then we shall make you a gift of the overman!"

p. 20 I will teach man the meaning of their existence-the overman, the lightning out of the dark cloud of man.

p. 24 "I shall join the creators, the harvesters, the celebrants: I shall show them the rainbow and all the steps to the overman.

p. 35 I shall not go your way, O despisers of the body! You are no bridge to the overman!

p. 38 It is not enough to make your peace with the man you kill. Your sadness shall be love of the overman: thus you shall justify your living on.

p. 51 Where the state ends-look there, my brothers! Do you not see it, the rainbow and the bridges of the overman?

p. 56 You cannot groom yourself too beautifully for your friend: for you shall be to him an arrow and a longing for the overman.

p. 61 I teach you not the neighbor, but the friend. The friend should be the festival of the earth to you and an anticipation of the overman.

p. 62 Let the future and the farthest be for you the cause of your today: in your friend you shall love the overman as your cause.

p. 66 Let the radiance of a star shine through your love! Let your hope be: May I give birth to the overman!

p. 71 Over and beyond yourselves you shall love one day. Thus learn first to love. And for that you had to drain the bitter cup of your love. Bitterness lies in the cup of even the best love: thus it arouses longing for the overman; thus it arouses your thirst, creator. Thirst for the creator, an arrow and longing for the overman: tell me, my brother, is this your will to marriage? Holy I call such a will and such a marriage.

p. 77 You that are lonely today, you that are withdrawing, you shall one day be the people: out of you, who have chosen yourselves, there shall grow a chosen people-and out of them, the overman.



p. 78 And that is the great noon when man stands in the middle of his way between beast and overman and celebrates his way to the evening as his highest hope: for it is the way to a new morning.

p. 79 "Dead are all gods: now we want the overman to live"-on that great noon, let this be our last will.

p. 85 Once one said God when one looked upon distant seas; but now I have taught you to say: overman.

Could you create a god? Then do not speak to me of any gods. But you could well create the overman. Perhaps not you yourselves, my brothers. But into fathers and forefathers of the overman you could re-create yourselves: and let this be your best creation.

p. 88 The beauty of the overman came to me as a shadow.

p. 93 Never yet has there been an overman. Naked I saw both the greatest and the smallest man: they are still all-too-similar to each other. Verily, even the greatest I found all-too-human.

p. 101 I do not wish to be mixed up and confused with these preachers of equality. For, to me justice speaks thus: "Men are not equal." Nor shall they become equal! What would my love of the overman be if I spoke otherwise?

p. 128 Verily, it always lifts us higher-specifically, to the realm of the clouds: upon these we place our motley bastards and call them gods and overmen. For they are just light enough for these chairs-all these gods and overmen.

p. 142 My will clings to man; with fetters I bind myself to man because I am swept up toward the overman; for that way my other will wants to go.

p. 144 What is great is so alien to your souls that the overman would be awesome to you in his kindness. And you who are wise and knowing, you would flee from the burning sun of that wisdom in which the overman joyously bathes his nakedness. You highest men whom my eyes have seen, this is my doubt concerning you and my secret laughter: I guess that you would call my overman-devil. Alas, I have wearied of these highest and best men: from their "height" I longed to get up, out, and away to the overman.

p. 198 There it was too that I picked up the word "overman" by the way, and that man is something that must be overcome-that man is a bridge and no end: proclaiming himself blessed in view of his noon and evening, as the way to new dawns-Zarathustra's word of the great noon, and whatever else I hung up over man like the last crimson light of evening.

p. 211 ...and what would my love for the overman and for all who shall yet come amount to if I counseled and spoke differently?

p. 221 I come back eternally to this same, selfsame life, in what is greatest as in what is smallest, to teach again the eternal recurrence of all things, to speak again the word of the great noon of earth and man, to proclaim the overman again to men.

p. 287 God died: now we want the overman to live.

I have the overman at heart, that is my first and only concern-and not man: not the neighbor, not the poorest, not the most ailing, not the best.

Overcome these masters of today, O my brothers-these small people, they are the overman's greatest danger.

p. 288 The greatest evil is necessary for the overman's best.

\* = Nietzsche, Friedrich. (1891, 1982) Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None (Walter Kaufmann translation). New York: Penguin Books.

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