

Donald Trump is not Nietzsche's Superman

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Recently, several writers have tried to describe Donald Trump as an unwitting disciple of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.* I side with Rudy Koshar (rudykoshar.net) who claims that Nietzsche would refuse to shake Trump's hand, but not necessarily for the reasons he poses. Koshar is correct that Nietzsche would have found Trump to be a "vulgar and superficial man," and just as he would have rejected Hitler's "plebeian rabble-rousing." (Nietzsche was falsely accused of inspiring the Nazis.) Koshar is also right to quote one scholar: "Nietzsche [was] truly allergic to the idea of winners," especially of the brash Trumpian kind.

Nietzsche is notoriously difficult to interpret, and it is virtually impossible to defend a consistent reading of his many works. Contemporary scholars, however, have reached a consensus that the traditional view of Nietzsche's Superman (*Übermensch*, better but awkwardly translated as Overperson) is incorrect, and therefore not applicable to any of history's powerful leaders nor to any fictional superhero. I believe the key to a proper understanding of the Overperson is found in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the book that Nietzsche thought was his best. Daimon Linker's attempt to compare it to a Trump book "Thus Spoke the Donald" is particularly misguided in this light.

Austin Carty may be correct in saying that Zarathustra's imperative to take every "it was" or "it happened to me" and transforms it into a "thus I willed it," applies to Trump, but this is only the second stage of the Three Metamorphoses of the human spirit from Camel, to Lion, and finally to Child. The Lion, Titan-like, battles the dragon called "Thou Shalt," who rules over the camel, loaded with the burden of Judeo-Christian morality. Even though necessary and liberating, the Lion's work is ultimately negative and destructive. (The Lion is called "thief" as well as "predator" and this might provide a link to Prometheus stealing fire to create a new humanity.) The Lion opens up unlimited freedom and is thus effective in destroying old values, but because of its nihilism, it is incapable of creating new values.

The Promethean "No" of the Lion must be replaced by the sacred "Yes" of the Child, the third metamorphosis, the true Overperson. "The Child," as Nietzsche says enigmatically, "is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game [of creation], a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred Yes." The Child symbolizes the self's overcoming of its limitations, and the Overperson certainly does not seek power or dominance over any other being.

The Child has an ecological vision because she knows "the meaning of the earth." "I beseech you, my brothers," says Zarathustra, "remain faithful to the earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of [the] other worldly hopes" of the Camel. In former times the greatest sin was "against God," but "to sin against the earth is now the most dreadful thing." The Overperson is a person of the body and the elements: he is the "sense of the earth" and also "a sea" so clean that he will redeem a polluted humanity.

In his book *Composing the Soul: Reaches of Nietzsche's Psychology*, Graham Parkes proposes that we conceive of the Three Metamorphoses as a dialectical triad of "immersion, detachment, and reintegration." A person of the first stage is immersed in society and nature without any clear delineation of self and other. People at this stage typically take on the values that are given them, hence Nietzsche's image of a camel carrying the burdens of a herd morality. Persons in the second stage develop fully self-conscious egos and separate themselves from society/nature either through active protest and rebellion or ascetic withdrawal.

Parkes describes the third stage as a "return to participation, but now reflective and self-conscious. The self reengages with the world without being totally taken in by it." We are

obviously dealing with metaphors in the Three Metamorphoses and the reintegrated person will be *like* a child in her spontaneity, her acceptance of things, and her love of body and the earth. Unlike the literal child, the Overperson will have refined raw instincts into a harmonized life of impulse and reflection.

Parkes has inspired me and other comparative philosophers to look to Asia for Nietzschean themes. It is the Daoist Zhuangzi who gives us the richest harvest of comparative insights. Both Zhuangzi and Zarathustra play host to large numbers of strange characters, many of them crippled and deformed. For Zhuangzi the real deformity—being crippled by Confucian virtue—is far worse than any physical deformity. Indeed, Zhuangzi's monsters express unconditional self-acceptance and self-love in the Nietzschean sense.

While Zhuangzi's characters are generally self-affirming, Nietzsche's motley crew of "higher men" is in constant need of preaching and prodding. Zarathustra's advice to a group of cripples who besiege him is that they should not beg for miracle cures, but they should perform the greatest miracle themselves, namely, to use their own wills to overcome their handicaps. Zarathustra's rough treatment of the cripples is only a way of forcing them to stop their self-pitying and to start them on the road to self-love.

In the daily news we are continually reminded of handicapped persons who have overcome incredible odds to lead exemplary human lives. One such person is Serge Kovalski, a very able journalist suffering from arthrogryposis, who found no evidence for Trump's claim of thousands celebrating the 9/11 attack. Trump's mocking of Kovalski's awkward movements at a rally in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina was not tough love, but it was, according to polls, the one act that the American people find most contemptible about Trump, the most offensive presidential candidate in U. S. history.

Trump does indeed have a spoiled child's temperament, but this of course not what Nietzsche had in mind for the Third Metamorphosis. Trump is a marauding Lion terrorizing the political and cultural landscape, and his nihilism will have long-lasting repercussions.

Nick Gier taught philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Parts of this essay are adapted from his third book *Spiritual Titanism: Indian, Chinese, and Western Perspectives* (SUNY Press, 2000).

*Peter Wehner, "The Theology of Donald Trump" (*The New York Times*, July 5, 2016); Austin Carty, "Donald Trump: Nietzsche's Superman?" *The Huffington Post* (August 11, 2016); and Damon Linker, "How Nietzsche Explains the Rise of Donald Trump" *The Week* (August 11, 2015).