

# THUS SPAKE ZARATHUSTRA

## The First Postmetaphysical Spiritual Hero

Layman Pascal<sup>1</sup>

“Apes don’t read Nietzsche!” – Kevin Kline as Otto

“Yes, they do, Otto – they just don’t UNDERSTAND it...” – Jamie-Lee Curtis as Wanda

(A Fish Called Wanda, 1988)

### Introduction

In the late 19th century, Mr. F. Nietzsche (now deceased) transcended his previous romanticism, humanism, and nihilism in the form of an epic, complex, and hilarious philosophical rap-novel that introduced the first overtly postmetaphysical spiritual protagonist in Western literature. Thus Spoke Zarathustra (subtitled: A book for All and None) burst upon the brilliant, idiosyncratic depth-philosopher like a visionary revelation while he was hiking in the high Alps.

Half-conscious and half-unconscious, this multi-level metaphorical prose-poem might have been called a “subtle realm teaching” if the mustachioed Germanic sage had lived in a different cultural epoch. And why not? The writing of this book involves a disembodied ancient guru revealing a new doctrine through his devotee. Sri Zarathustra’s teaching concerns health, empowerment, and the emergence of a transcultural civilization based on the proliferation and intensification of “peak experiences” and “flow”. This is a developmental teaching which treats meaning as something we grow towards through exercises that unfold and spiritualize the self – practices instead of beliefs, humor instead of idealism, ecology instead of heaven, and the daring to see beyond our conventional metaphysical assumptions.

Nietzsche is notoriously easy to misinterpret. His work is cryptic, rhythmic, and aphoristic. It is specially designed to reveal layers of truth and travel across multiple, even contradictory perspectives if we are capable of “listening with the third ear” and avoiding the trap of assuming

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the normal positive and negative social implications associated with wild terminology. If, for example, Nietzsche calls someone a damned liar... well, you don't yet know whether he thinks damnation and deceit are criticisms or praise. It is a lot of work to read Nietzsche properly and in a balanced fashion. He repeatedly insists that his books are NOT for either the public or the universities. They are for a special class of adventurous, growth-oriented transperspectivalists who – he laments – might not even exist yet in the 1800s. But we 21st century integralites might even be the “new philosophers” and “free spirits” for whom Herr Nietzsche was writing. Certainly we, like he, are deeply concerned to embrace and go beyond relativism, to blend our intellect with our dancing spirit, to merge spirituality with cultural vitality and authentic health – and to evolve past the nihilism of flatland.

“Our task – to see things as they are! Our method – to look through millions of eyes!”  
(Nietzsche, 1888)

When the first few chapters of “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” poured like a torrent of bliss into Nietzsche’s troubled soul, vibrant like a new Gospel or a Beatles song waiting to be recorded, he was astonished to find within its curious fractal rhythms the answers to the philosophical questions he had been pondering for years. Questions like: How can culture be mythically revitalized without regression from Reason? How can science, art, and subjectivity work together to intensify truth? How can we create a meta-value system that privileges health, promotes “peak potential” and provides an operational ranking system for the relative utility of all values? And how can we guard ourselves against the constant encroachment of non-actual phenomena, impossible thoughts, metaphysical self-satisfaction, and self-destructive drives?

As he would later describe in his satirical autobiography *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche was converted by the whole mood of *Zarathustra* and his subsequent books were merely the unpacking and deployment of the profoundly happy insights which stared back at him from the pages of this revelation. The joyful, cynical, supra-humanist, and evolutionary attitude of these late works is what primarily inspired people like Aurobindo, Maslow, Jung, Freud, Deleuze, Teilhard de Chardin, Ouspensky, and many others whose own works flow into the river of integral philosophy.

What I intend to do is to provide a brief overview of the plot of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* with a few general indications that will allow an interested reader to explore that text with an eye toward the interplay of integrative sensibilities, spiritual development, and postmetaphysical worldviews. But before going any further we must get a quick sense of what “metaphysics” means for Nietzsche:

1. Metaphysics is not specifically religious. Nietzsche critiques metaphysics from a point of view that includes mythic dogmatists, rational scientists, and progressive social pluralists. They are all metaphysical thinkers in their own ways. His famous phrase: “We will not be rid of God as long as we have faith in Grammar” speaks to his universal and syntactical perspective on these matters. Even when we examine his most famous passage (“God is Dead”) we find that it is mostly concerned with critiquing the naiveté and gullibility of so-called atheists who blithely assume that they no longer *believe*.

2. Metaphysics can be healthy or unhealthy. This is what we expect from a balanced postmetaphysical perspective – not a wholesale dismissal (as if that were even possible) but rather an intelligent and experimental re-examination. Not all metaphysics, nor value systems, are equally effective, true, or benevolent for human beings. Some unproven ontological assumptions are empowering and workable, helping us to thrive in a world we can never completely comprehend while other metaphysical notions about reality might be insidious and self-destructive quite regardless of how much we personally like them or how well they allow us to get along within our cultural groups. Some good-looking houses have asbestos in the walls and rotten floors – but not all good-looking houses.
3. Metaphysics is anti-evolutionary. I almost wrote “irrationally continuous.” Nietzsche is deeply concerned to get beyond the notion that an *effect* must have a *cause* that is qualitatively similar to itself. The metaphysical mind assumes that if we find Order in the universe then there must have been an Ordering Power at the beginning. If there is goodness it must come from the Original Good. This is profoundly anti-Nietzschean. He sees virtue evolving as the spiritualization of sin. He sees truth emerging downstream from ancient lies and order arising from chaos. Qualities are complex, non-dualistic, and emergent in the great flux of self-overcoming and energy that constitutes reality.

Thus to be postmetaphysical and spiritual in the Nietzschean sense means to treat spiritual virtues as a refinement and evolution of our lower qualities, to tease apart the healthy and possible from the unhealthy and impossible within our own highest values and worldviews, and never to rest in the idea that our current understanding of reality is free from the illusions, ignorance, and superstitions of the past.

## The Two Saints

Zarathustra begins his journey at a point beyond the plot of most novels. The Jungian search for Self has been already accomplished at the very beginning. He is “enlightened.” This is the reincarnation of the ancient Persian saint Zarathustra (aka Zoroaster) who is often credited as the inventor of the idea of a cosmic dichotomy between Good & Evil.

An aeon before Judeo-Christian and Islamic moralities arose in the West there was already a social doctrine that sought to cultivate and sculpt the human soul through its metaphorical participation in a cosmic battle between the God of Light and the God of Darkness. Who then would be best suited to help humanity evolve beyond the epoch of conventional morality? Who but the very man responsible for its promulgation across the Earth. So Zarathustra returns to help give birth to a trans-morality for the age of planetary civilization and inter-cultural crisis.

We join our hero, Sri Zarathustra, in his cave atop the spiritual mountain. He has been living the life of a yogic hermit for decades with only the company of his animal spirits – personified as an Eagle and Serpent. His exercises and meditation have yielded a remarkable new stage of consciousness in which transformational insight and ecstatic moods fill him continually and spill over into the world endlessly. Yet his awakening is just the beginning. He is soon filled with a strange mood and urgency. Overfull of luminous attainment and clearly aware that he is experiencing it and framing it in a unique manner quite distinct from traditional doctrines,

Zarathustra resolves to descend from his Alpine hermitage and give his teaching-transmission to the world. He is the bearer of a nondual, naturalistic illumination-beyond-beliefs.

The first person he meets descending the mountain is a holy man whom he met briefly, years earlier, when Zarathustra was first climbing up to find his cave. This is a genuine religious saint with a nourishing radiance. They are peers. He recognizes that, like himself, Zarathustra has undergone a radical transformation of consciousness. They see it in each other's eyes.

Passing a pleasant evening together, they ponder Zarathustra's plan to begin teaching publically. The saint is astonished at this scheme and avers that people generally do not wish to receive wisdom. They are not ready. They are busy and overwhelmed by options. Even a true teaching is only another burden or superficially exciting idea to them. Holiness cannot be conveyed in the market or given to crowds. It is based on the individual's private relationship to God.

Zarathustra does not challenge his friend's opinion but later, after dinner, he says to himself: Can it be? Has this old saint truly not heard that God is dead?

This is our first glimpse – and Western literature's first clearly spelled out exemplar – of postmetaphysical spirituality. It is the opening salvo of a soul that is spiritually illuminated *without a traditional ideology*. A critical, participatory mind in a complex social environment yet with full access through practice to the ancient human heritage of redemptive states and higher stages of consciousness.

The classical metaphysical apparatus that is epitomized in the idea of The God (the Guarantor of Reality who links being & knowing) is no longer necessary in order to attain the highest levels of truth, energy, and salvation possible for human beings.

## **Flatlanders vs. the Ultra-Human**

Pop culture is waiting in the Motley Cow. The Motley Cow (or: incoherent herd) is the name of the mythical city to which Zarathustra hies in order to make contact with the popular mass culture. He sits in the marketplace to observe and interact with ordinary folks – seizing every chance to preach his radical doctrine. Inner and outer life are both evolutionary, he tells them. Forget about heaven and emptiness and focus on the transcendental fullness of this world, this nature, this body. We are expressions of the multidimensional self-overcoming that characterizes all forms of energy in the cosmos. We have emerged from apes and one day something ultrahuman or transhuman will emerge from ourselves. Look beyond yourself. Intend to participate in the creation of something greater than yourself, greater than anything yet imagined by human beings.

Many of our values are contaminated. Although they provoke “high sentiments” and “ascending aspirations” they may actually keep us trapped in a flat circle of life because they either propose untrue visions *that devalue reality by comparison* OR because they fail to emphasize the growthmentality that encourages actual development. Living values are grown by our efforts. When values are assumed to be pre-given or equal or based in nonexistent other worlds (or in nonexistence itself) then we are deprived of the organic conditions that provoke meaning and

depth. The image of the ultrahuman being which might transcend and include humanity is the epitome of what we could create by a naturalistic discipline of growth and self-transcendence.

I implore you, my brethren, REMAIN TRUE TO THE EARTH, and believe not those who speak unto you of supra-earthly hopes! Poisoners are they, whether they know it or not.

Despisers of life are they, decaying ones and poisoned ones themselves, of whom the earth is weary: so away with them! Once blasphemy against God was the greatest blasphemy; but God died, and therewith also those blasphemers. To blaspheme the Earth is now the dreadfulest sin, and to rate the heart of the unknowable higher than the meaning of the earth!

Once the soul looked contemptuously on the body, and then that contempt was the supreme thing:—the soul wished the body meagre, ghastly, and famished. Thus it thought to escape from the body and the earth. Oh, that soul was itself meagre, ghastly, and famished; and cruelty was the delight of that soul! But ye, also, my brethren, tell me: What doth your body say about your soul? Is your soul not poverty and pollution and wretched self-complacency?

Verily, a polluted stream is man. One must be a sea, to receive a polluted stream without becoming impure.

(Zarathustra's Prologue, 1883)

The crowd is not impressed. Obvi. Why would they be? Surely we must be already fairly “evolved” to understand a doctrine of spiritual evolution. They mock or ignore Zarathustra. This continues until, later in the day, a tightrope walker performs high above the crowd's heads, demonstrating the kind of ambidextrous balance and risky consciousness that Zarathustra has been preaching – for humanity is also a kind of high-wire act from the beast to the God, the primate to the ultra-human. The whole scene comes to a climax when a malevolent dwarf darts out upon the same tightrope, vaulting the balancing artist and causing him to tumble to his death on the pavement below.

Zarathustra realizes that the old saint was correct – the public is not the place for a spiritual teaching. Carrying away the body of the fallen gymnast, he tries to preserve some sanctity for the corpse and then reconsiders his approach to spiritual transmission...

## **The Enlightened “I” and the Depressing “We”**

*Beyond the Collective: The Hyper-Personal. Another Preliminary Observation. A feeling to be overcome: Discouragement.* (De Chardin, 2008/1959)

Having been disappointed by the marketplace of ideas, Sri Zarathustra resolves to teach only a small handful of specially prepared pupils. People who are already bright, well-balanced, integrative individuals who can explore his teaching intelligently and spend personal time with him to receive wisdom and energy-transmission. Many talks are recorded as he addresses every aspect of life and history from the point of view of his realization. Especially in helping them to

re-envision the world as more vibrant, more worthy than metaphysics where the notions of unreality and emptiness and a better universe exemplify our tendency to devalue the actual.

Things go a little better and years pass but slowly Zarathustra realizes that this form of life among the devotees also has an insidious limitation. It is impossible for his devotees to fully realize this new consciousness simply because HE is the limitation. They cannot become enough of themselves when they are busy trying to receive his wisdom and understand the blossoming of his individuality. In the end he has no choice but to close up shop and send them away – telling them to return when they have outgrown him.

Alone again, Zarathustra sets out on a spiritual adventure where he befriends pirates, fools, and adventurers whose rugged life, experimental orientation and sturdy self-esteem impresses him. He travels among exotic islands seeking an answer to the problem of the conveyance of wisdom to humanity.

He begins to suspect that the problem is not with human beings but rather with his subtle antagonism toward them. A disgust with humanity lingers in his soul. As profound as the effect he has upon others can be, his personal illumination cannot become transpersonal awakening for others because of his instinctive nausea that he (and we) feel for the great, wrong-minded masses of petty fools. It is while pondering this that he undergoes his great revelatory dream which he later recounts to his shipmates. What he realizes in this dream is a solution to his disgust with humanity.

In the dream he encounters again the dwarf who killed the balanced acrobat in the town square. This dwarf is the Spirit of Gravity and he guards the gate of infinity. From this portal all time splits, spreads, and repeats itself endlessly. The vision of the Eternal Return comes upon Zarathustra in which every object, every event, even ourselves are plural infinity in which each experience is repeated endlessly. Are we horrified or liberated by the endless return of different versions of the Same? Have we the health to affirm such a world? But then the howl of a distant hound leads Zarathustra to discover a sleeping shepherd in whose throat a poisonous snake has lodged and bit deeply. Trying to pull the snake out of the man's throat accomplishes nothing but pain and waking the shepherd but then something truly remarkable happens. Zarathustra advises the man to BITE and he does – biting down on the snake's neck – spitting out the serpent's dark body and leaving the head within himself.

And then he laughs...

Zarathustra's weariness with "man" is but one example of the kind of depressing implication that the world contains but which, in eternity, recurs forever, cannot be escaped. The solution, integrating aggression, is assimilate the very head of the serpent – say yes to the negative. And by this method is produced an ecstasy that exceeds the human condition.

This is the climax of the novel. Although we must work to decipher it, it is singled out by Zarathustra as the solution to both his questions and to redemption of humanity in the context of the ultrahuman. The journey that begins with enlightenment still must solve the problem of other

people, of the world. After that he can begin to evaluate what actually works in terms of a prescription for the future of us all...

Listen, you daring ones around me, you venturers & adventurers, whoever has embarked with cunning sails on unexplored seas! You enigma-enjoyers! Solve this enigma that I beheld & interpret to me the vision of the most lonesome one! For it was a vision and a prophecy – what did I behold in that parable? And who is it that must come some day? Who is the shepherd into whose throat the serpent crawled? Who is the man into whose throat all the heaviest and blackest things will crawl? The shepherd bit as my cry had admonished him; he bit with a strong bite! Far away did he spit the head of the serpent and sprang up. No longer shepherd, no longer man – a transfigured being! A light-surrounded being, that laughed! Never on earth did a mortal man laugh as he laughed! O my brothers, I heard a laughter which was no human laughter – and now it gnaws thirsty in me, a longing that is never allayed. My longing for that laughter gnaws at me. How can I still endure to live after this but after this could I endure to die! (Zarathustra III:46, 1890)

## The Dionysian Mood

After overcoming his disgust with actual humanity, Sri Zarathustra returns to his cave and arranges a celebratory party for all the greatest and deepest human souls. They are numerous different kinds and qualities of people but they have in common the fact that they transcended the ordinary ego and established radiant new depth and force-of-being. They are the best fruit of the species but Zarathustra still sees how far away they are from the ultra-human that he has foreseen.

He no longer suffers from them, no longer is heavy with the necessary limitations of the human condition, no longer confused about the way forward. He gives them food and drink and in the midst of the party goes outside to spent a little time with his old friends the animal spirits.

When we returns, he finds the “higher men” are drunk, hilarious, and pretending to worship a donkey. Zarathustra is not displeased. This mock celebration of the YAY-saying animal, this Ass Festival, is a glimmer of the ultrahuman future.

He tells them that although they are still a long way off from the emergent supermind beings of the ultra-human, their best approximation of the way forward is to combine irreverent mockery and play with their own serious spiritual work on themselves.

Think of your favorite president making jokes at the annual Correspondents Dinner. Think of Christ laughing. Think of what Osho Rajneesh called Zorba the Buddha. In his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche looked toward a “Musical Socrates” as a figure of redemption. Think of Confucius dancing. Think of Gandhi playing like a child. Think of the Pope burning down the Vatican.

This double image of authentic saints and creative irreverence, of profound sobriety and light-hearted intoxication, of natural chaos combined with the discipline of human development is a means of approximating the “dionysian” mood that leads us toward the ultrahuman.

Spiritual discipline works. It does not require beliefs and it should be blended with skepticism, humor, artistry and playful sacrilege. Imagine a world that is overfull of its own transcendence and lacks any “other realm” in which to spill. A world in which spiritual ascent is not an idealism that moves away from materiality and worldliness and negative emotions but which embraces, enfolds, and assimilates them like the snake head left inside the shepherd’s body. The paradigm for the spiritual transformation of individuals is that of adventure, exploration, discovery – not obedience, escape, or purity.

If we do not make this orientation more and more real in our experience then our “balancing act” will be destroyed by the Spirit of Gravity. Zarathustra is the prophet of Levity. Zarathustra is an embodiment and teacher of pro-ecology (“Remain true to the Earth, O my brothers!”), an exemplar of skeptical, embodied, rational-poetic, good-humored, individuality-cultivating, multidimensionally engaged, postmetaphysical integral spirituality.

So he is... OUR hero.

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