**Introduction**

In this paper we are faced with the formidable challenge of articulating the thought and anthropology of Friedrich Nietzsche. Due to his suspicion of systematization and its corresponding absolutist claims, as well as his admiration for a Dionysian unification and contradiction of opposites, Nietzsche intentionally never systematized his own writings; many are self-contradictory, aphoristic, and highly hyperbolic.¹ This of course has issued in vastly variegated interpretations of each of his works and his overall corpus.² Many view Nietzsche as primarily a psychologist, a master of emotional states and subconscious motivations.³ Others hold Nietzsche to be primarily a philosopher, but here divergences abound. Some hold that Nietzsche’s thought can be organized around a central idea. Among these are arguments for Nietzsche as a nostalgic romantic (Habermas), radical relativist (MacIntyre), ironist of reality’s contingency (Rorty), the father of postmodernity (Nehemas), and the consummation of the Western philosophical tradition, the end of

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¹ One of the ironies regarding this situation is that Nietzsche is extraordinarily readable, owing to his lucid prose, exacting passion, and compelling imagery. Few however have noted Nietzsche’s own caution regarding his writings: He says that he is “a teacher of slow reading… Nowadays it is not only my habit, it is also to my taste…No longer to write anything which does not reduce to despair every sort of man who is ‘in a hurry.’…it is more necessary than ever today…in the midst of an age of ‘work’, that is to say of hurry…which wants to ‘get everything done’ at once…learn to read me well!” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) preface, 5.

² Karl Jaspers writes, “For nearly every single one of Nietzsche’s judgments, one can find an opposite. He gives the impression of having two opinions about everything. Consequently it is possible to quote Nietzsche at will in support of anything one happens to have in mind.” Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1965), 10.

³ Freud himself said that Nietzsche “had a more penetrating knowledge of himself than any man who ever lived or was likely to live,” but recognizing his own ideas anticipated in Nietzsche, Freud stopped reading him. Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 2 (New York: Basic Books, 1955), 344.
metaphysics (Heidegger). This is to say nothing of those numerous interpreters who do not think Nietzsche can be unified under meta-rubrics.

This multiplicity is no less evident in the political sphere. Though himself vehemently opposed to anti-Semitism, nationalism and politics of power, Nietzsche has been misappropriated by many, from his anti-Semitic sister Elizabeth, to the Fascist and Nazi parties. Beyond these, Nietzsche has been appropriated and championed by “progressive democratic leftists, feminists, socialists, romantics, anarchists, American neoconservatives [and] social Darwinists.” Over two decades ago Eugen Biser commented on the “pressing need for a Nietzschean hermeneutics.” Today we are no closer to such an interpretive guide and this makes our task here quite daunting.

Can a unified Nietzschean anthropology be articulated? With sufficient qualifications in play, I believe that it can. Throughout what follows, I will deal with Nietzsche’s primary strands of thought: the death of God, his critique of “slave morality” and “herd” anthropology, nihilism, the embrace of life, the will to power, and his anthropological ideal, the Übermensch. In Part One of this paper, I will examine these many “strands” largely under the following three-part, anthropological grid: 1) what is the human ideal?; 2) what is the problem with humanity?; 3) and

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5 Typically these commentators include “The French Nietzscheans,” e.g., Foucault, Derrida, Kofman, Deleuze, and their schools of thought. These interpreters resist this effort to unify Nietzsche’s thought, arguing that his fluid meanings and contradictions resist unification, or any reading of him through traditional philosophical rubrics like epistemology, ontology, ethics, etc... Much of this work is a refutation of Heidegger’s influential metaphysical reading of Nietzsche in which he argues that “will to power” is an encompassing metaphysical principle. The French refutation focuses on the metaphorical character of Nietzsche’s prose, voice, style, and use of irony. How Nietzsche writes and the literary devices he employs are seen as hermeneutical keys for his content. Steven Taubeneck, “Nietzsche in North America: Walter Kaufmann and After,” in Ernst Behler, Confrontations: Derrida, Heidegger, Nietzsche, trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 159-77.
7 Ibid., 10-11.
9 This is variously translated “overman” or “superman.” Due to its use as a technical term in Nietzsche studies, I will continue to use the German in this paper.
what is the solution, embodied in an anthropological exemplar, the *Ubermensch*? Throughout these inquiries I will contend that the core of Nietzsche’s anthropological ideal is a full Dionysian embrace of life for its own sake, which is only possible for “higher men” who incarnate and master life’s fundamental principle, the “will to power,” through strength and self-interest, from which may issue an abundance of “gift-giving” and benevolence toward others. In **Part Two** I will offer a response to and critique of Nietzsche’s anthropology, focused again in three parts: 1) “will to power” as anthropological foundation; 2) the *Ubermensch* as human ideal; 3) and the critique of morality in light of the cross.

**Part One**

**I. Setting the Stage: ‘God is Dead’**

Nietzsche’s analysis of the Enlightenment’s impact on God and religion is crucial for a proper grasp of his anthropology. Nietzsche is famous for saying, or rather asserting, “God is dead.” Nietzsche foresaw this divine death as the inevitable consequence of the victory of Enlightenment secularism and was all too aware of the far-reaching implications:

> The greatest recent event – that ‘God is dead’, that the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable – is already beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe…. Much less may one suppose that many people know as yet what this event really means – and how much must collapse now that this faith has been undermined because it was built upon this faith, propped up by it, grown into it; for example, the whole of our European morality. This long plenitude and sequence of breakdown, destruction, ruin and cataclysm that is now impending – who could guess enough of it today to be compelled to play the teacher and advance proclaimer of this monstrous logic of terror, the prophet of a gloom and an eclipse of the sun whose like has probably never yet occurred on earth?”

One result of the death of God, Nietzsche surmised, would be the end of “the whole of our European morality.” As he indicates toward the end of this passage, the one proclaiming this to others would be considered an insane apocalyptic fundamentalist. Thus Nietzsche imagines himself

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as a madman among not believers, but the cultured despisers of religion who are oblivious to the magnitude of what has happened:

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. ‘Whither is God?’ he cried: ‘I will tell you. We have killed him – you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns?.... Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods too decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.’”

As this series of questions illustrates, Nietzsche took the death of God with utmost seriousness, and lamented the cataclysmic consequences that would follow. Ultimately, Nietzsche saw that this unchaining of the “earth from its sun” would end in nothing less than utter nihilism. Yet as he himself no longer believed in the Judeo-Christian God, Nietzsche also began to see that any continued affirmation of this decomposing deity, any ideals constructed and upheld on the basis of this non-entity, were themselves a negation of life and a capitulation to nihilism. Importantly, however, this nihilism does not follow merely from belief in a defunct deity; rather, such belief spawns and lends endurance to moral ideals that encourage a flight from this world and a diminishment of humanity. The ideals and their absolutist claims to the “good” over against “evil”…that is where the true culprit lies. However, before we can rightly grasp Nietzsche’s critique of morality and its exposure of the fundamental human problem, we must first examine his own construal of humanity’s ideal state.

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11 Ibid., 34-35.
12 Nietzsche’s family heritage included three generations of Lutheran ministers, his father being one. Having possessed a very heartfelt faith into his teens, Nietzsche, under the influence of historical critical methods, began doubting his faith, and eventually rejected it altogether. See Stephen N. Williams, *The Shadow of the Antichrist: Nietzsche’s Critique of Christianity* (Grand Rapids; Milton Keynes, UK: Blackwell; Paternoster, 2006). 25-28. Williams shows that among the most formative influences on Nietzsche, were David Friedrich Strauss’s *The Life of Jesus*, Ludwig Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity*, and Friederich A. Lange’s scientific materialism, articulated in his *History of Materialism* (1866).
13 Walter Kaufmann, the preeminent interpreter and translator of Nietzsche, summarizes the catch-22 involved here: “To escape nihilism—which…involved both asserting the existence of God and thus robbing this world of ultimate significance, and also in denying God and thus robbing everything of meaning and value—that is Nietzsche’s greatest and most persistent problem.” Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 102.
II. The Affirmation of Life as Will to Power

A clear grasp of Nietzsche’s constructive vision is elusive, not least in light of serious debates over the status of the Nachlass, his literary estate.14 This in part is why scholars so vehemently debate whether Nietzsche even has a constructive view to offer in place of his thoroughly deconstructive program, as nearly all of his affirmative statements are embedded in polemical arguments. However as noted above, I contend that Nietzsche indeed does have a constructive vision, albeit not a self-consciously metaphysical one, and it is one that proves determinative for his anthropology.

We begin with an anthropologically pregnant moment in Nietzsche’s provocative work, The Anti-Christ [AC], in which Nietzsche’s attack against other ideals runs flush up against his own constructive vision:

It is a painful, a dreadful spectacle which has opened up before me: I have drawn back the curtain on the depravity of man….I find that depravity precisely where hitherto one most consciously aspired to ‘virtue’, to ‘divinity’. I understand depravity, as will already have been guessed, in the sense of decadence: my assertion is that all the values in which mankind at present summarizes its highest desideratum are decadence values.

I call an animal, a species, an individual depraved when it loses its instincts, when it chooses, when it prefers what is harmful to it. A history of the ‘higher feelings’, of the ‘ideals’ of mankind... would almost also constitute an explanation of why man is so depraved. I consider life itself instinct for growth, for continuance, for accumulation of forces, for power: where the will to power is lacking there is 14 This collection of letters, aphoristic writings and other prose pieces was posthumously collected, edited, and published by his sister Elizabeth Forster Nietzsche under the title, The Will to Power. The significance of this collection is that in it, Nietzsche appears to construct a metaphysics of his famous “will to power,” which has huge implications for how his whole philosophy is interpreted. It led, for instance, to Heidegger’s influential view that Nietzsche is the last metaphysician in the Western philosophic tradition. However since the 1979 publication of the new critical Colli and Montinari edition of his works, scholars have discovered that Nietzsche never intended to publish what two generations of commentators regarded as the major centerpiece of his philosophy (The Will to Power). What is more, of those entries that his sister selected for publication, Nietzsche had given over two-thirds to a friend for disposal. Among these discarded entries is the famous 1067, which outlines his attempt to make the will to power into the fundamental principle of all being. His published writings, however, limit the will to power to an animating principle of living things, and focus particularly on human individual and societal expressions of this power. For an exhaustive treatment of all relevant historical materials and implications for interpreting Nietzsche, see Bernd Magnus, “Nietzsche’s Philosophy in 1888: The Will to Power and the Ubermensch,” in Richard White, ed., Nietzsche (Aldershot, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate; Dartmouth, 2002), 99-118.
decline. My assertion is that this will is lacking in all the supreme values of mankind – that values of decline, nihilistic values, hold sway under the holiest names.”

Nietzsche’s polemics here lead us through three steps toward his affirmative vision. First, his association between humanity and other animals through common traits of instinct and capacity for self-preservation, suggests a naturalistic view of humanity. The animal comparison reveals that Nietzsche holds an anthropology of man as instinctual animal, though his own development of this point may indicate otherwise. Second, human beings can oppose nature and embrace masochism precisely by creating “ideal” values anchored in metaphysical truth, which amounts to decadence and depravity. Third, we find out why moral structures are actually hazardous for human beings. Inasmuch as an ideal locates and reifies a “reality” or “truth” outside this world, it is a denial of life, a repudiation of the world.

In response, Nietzsche offers his view of “Life” as the proper alternative to such nihilism. For him, life itself is an “instinct for growth” or “continuance,” but ultimately it is a “will to power.” The essence of “will to power” is that all living things operate on a principle of creative exchange, dynamic impulse and perpetual “self-surpassing.” Thus Nietzsche’s most famous literary figure, the sage Zarathustra, says “Wherever I found a living thing, there I found Will to Power…. And this secret Life spake herself unto me. ‘Behold,’ said she, ‘I am that which must ever surpass itself. To be sure, ye call it will to procreation, or impulse towards a goal, towards the higher, remoter, more manifold: but all that is one and the same secret.”

15 Nietzsche, AC, 6. For this work and Twilight of the Idols, we are using the Penguin Classics edition: Friedrich Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ, R. J. Hollingdale, trans. (London; New York: Penguin Books, 1990). Nietzsche’s understanding of the world as “will” is largely due to the immense influence of his mentor, Arthur Schopenhauer, and his seminal work, The World as Will and Representation (1819). Though Nietzsche eventually rejected Schopenhauer’s pessimistic approach to the world as will, his entire corpus is marked by Schopenhauer’s enduring influence.

16 We will return to this point in Part Two of this paper, in the critique section on will to power.

17 Although this text merely alludes to this assertion in the word “ideals,” it is a word that points to Nietzsche’s sustained critique of the “aesthetic ideal” which is bound up to a “faith…in a metaphysical value, an intrinsic value of truth, of a character that is only warranted and guaranteed in this ideal.” GM III.24.

18 Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None, Thomas Common, trans., in The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Oscar Levy ed., vol. 11 (NY: Russell & Russell, 1964), II.23. Henceforth we will cite this work as Z, followed by I-IV (indic. major subdivisions), and the entry number.
most clearly in *Beyond Good and Evil [BGE]*, where he says that “a living thing desires above all to vent its strength – life as such is will to power.”

The same reality of will to power holds true for the human sphere, for both individuals and societal structures: the “*primordial fact* of all history,” of every human being or social grouping, is that it pulses with a drive to become “the will to power incarnate,” seeking “to grow, expand, draw to itself, gain ascendancy–not out of any morality or immorality, but because it *lives*, and because life *is* will to power.”

Not least in light of the Nazi (to mention only one ideology!) misappropriation of Nietzsche’s “will to power,” we must be clear about what he means by this. Nietzsche’s will to power is not a craving for domination that presupposes a thirsty subject with a “will,” actively seeking out “power” to slake his ambition. Rather, when Nietzsche says that this essential fundament of life *necessarily* means “appropriation, injury, overpowering of the strange and weaker, suppression, severity, imposition of one’s own forms, incorporation and…exploitation,” we must recognize that his comments are descriptive of life as he sees it, and not ideologically prescriptive. With this in mind, interpreters have also spoken of the human manifestation of “will to power” as “the urge to shape, to work upon, to transform,” or the “driving motor of all exploration, all searching and curiosity.” Above all, as a fundament of life, Nietzsche’s “will” is not as much a *thing* as it is an impulse or grouping of impulses; a dynamism that marks change and ascendancy; or best of all, an *event* or “family of events.” Bernd Magnus offers an excellent depiction of this will-as-event interpretation:

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20 *BGE*, 259.
21 Ibid.
22 This claim will be further substantiated later on in my treatment of Nietzsche’s *Ubermensch*. Here we agree with Alastair Kee when he argues that the will to power provides a “criterion for determining the value of human actions,” a “natural basis for values” that circumvents metaphysical or religious bases of morality (93-94). However, against Kee, in Part Two we will suggest that Nietzsche may have been unaware of the full implications of this criterion. In short, if Nietzsche’s ideal is to say “yes” to life and embrace will to power, then that would imply Nietzsche’s advocating of domination and oppression, and preclude his attempts to establish virtues beyond good and evil.
On such a view, the paradox is that a world of only wills, only events, is necessarily formless and formed at the same time. Formless, because wills conceived as events are form-giving while possessed of no fixed or inherent structure of their own, apart from their contextual articulation, apart from what Nietzsche called their ‘interpretation.’ Formed, because wills conceived as families of events are always acting upon one another, are always imposing form upon one another. The paradox is intractable. If we are no longer to think of ‘wills’ as ‘things,’ we can form no clear mental image of them…. will to power is the general characterization of this action of will upon will, in which form is imposed by will upon will, that is, by event upon event, in which there is visible only the articulation which we call ‘the world.’

Now, having established what Nietzsche means by “life as will to power,” we must take the next step and examine the ideal human posture toward that reality. It is crucial to understand that for Nietzsche, the fundamental posture toward life should be affirmative; he seeks above all else to say “Yes” to life in all its vicissitudes, exaltations and sufferings. Here is the place, I contend, that the heart of Nietzsche’s constructive efforts are unavoidable. This affirmative posture arises from Nietzsche’s passionate devotion to a Dionysian “will to life.” In Twilight of the Idols [TI], a brief summary of all his thinking, Nietzsche indicates this debt in an entry entitled “What I Owe to the Ancients”:

I was the first to take seriously that wonderful phenomenon which bears the name Dionysos as a means to understanding the older Hellenic instinct, an instinct still exuberant and even overflowing: it is explicable only as an excess of energy. For it is only in the Dionysian mysteries, in the psychology of the Dionysian condition, that the fundamental fact of the Hellenic instinct expresses itself—its ‘will to life’....Saying Yes to life even in its strangest and hardest problems; the will to life rejoicing over its own inexhaustibility that is what I called Dionysian…in order to be oneself the eternal joy of becoming, beyond all terror and pity—that joy which includes even destroying....I again plant myself in the soil out of which I draw all that I will and can – I, the last disciple of the philosopher Dionysos—I, the teacher of the eternal recurrence.

25 Though here it is important to remember that since “life” is will to power, the “will to power” takes up the Dionysian “will to life” up into itself and supercedes it. Thus spake Zarathustra: “He certainly did not hit the truth who shot at it the formula: ‘Will to existence’: that will—doth not exist! For what is not, cannot will; that, however, which is in existence—how could it still strive for existence! Only where there is life, is there also will: not, however, Will to Life, but—so teach I thee—Will to Power!” Z, II.24.
26 TI, 10.5; 10.6. Later on in this paper we will describe in more detail what Nietzsche means here by “eternal recurrence.” In short, it is Nietzsche’s “doctrine” that all things which can happen in existence, will happen again in an infinite number of cycles. Thus life in general, and one’s own life in particular, are repeated an infinite number of times. For Nietzsche, this is a necessary corollary of cutting out any appeal to transcendent categories.
For Nietzsche, the human ideal, then, is to embrace life, to say “Yes” to life in all its cosmic unity and allow the full release and creative growth of the “will to power.” It follows then, that any human construct which inhibits this life-impulse or fails to align with it, can only mean decadence, decay and eventually nihilism. Thus as we move to speak of humanity’s fundamental “problem,” for Nietzsche it is nothing less than the creation of moral structures or lofty ideals that say “no” to life, whether by obstructing the will to power, or by taking flight from the world through an “ascetic ideal” that is either religious or metaphysical in character.

Consequently, Nietzsche sought to permanently replace any and all moral or metaphysical ideals, a “transvaluation of all values” based on the affirmative embrace of life as will to power. In the process, he brilliantly castigates the embodiment of all that is wrong with humanity, the dominant value-system which personifies what is, in his view, a full-fledged embrace of nihilism. Ultimately, it is against Christianity’s “slave morality”– its life-denying “ascetic ideal” and ineradicable “morality of pity,” being rooted in a crucified God – that Nietzsche levels his most vehement vilification, naming Christianity “the will to make of man a sublime abortion.”

III. The Human Problem: Morality and the Ascetic Ideal

The origin and nature of human moral valuations was of such import to Nietzsche, that it is the central focus of his two most mature and developed books, BGE and The Genealogy of Morals [GM]. However, Nietzsche sought more than just an understanding of moral origins. Rather, he sought to go further to ask the question: “what intrinsic value do they possess in themselves?” For some time Nietzsche had wondered at the fact that philosophers of ethical theory have all “wanted

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27 As we will presently see, this also forms the core of Nietzsche’s conception of the Ubermensch, the human being who can indeed say yes to life in every way.
28 BGE, 46, 62.
30 GM, Preface, 3. Unless otherwise noted, emphasis is always original, as it is here.
to furnish the *rational ground* of morality” while taking morality itself as an unassailable given.\textsuperscript{31} Thus in *GM*, Nietzsche took up the task of questioning, in normative terms, the “given” status of morality: “Let us speak out this *new demand*: we need a *critique* of moral values, the *value of these values* is for the first time to be called into question.”\textsuperscript{32}

In his account of the origins of moral structures, Nietzsche argues that in various cultural contexts, aristocratic classes or those in power defined themselves and their actions as “good” in the sense of “noble” or “high;” this, in contradistinction to the working classes, the vulgar and plebian folk, who were seen as “low” or “mean,” and in that sense came to be indicated as “bad.” Nietzsche contends that out of these social class distinctions would eventually arise a “master morality” and a “slave morality.”\textsuperscript{33} In other words, moral constructs arose simply through the absolutization of perspectival difference between strong and weak. Indeed for Nietzsche, it is the *tension* between the two that eventually gives rise to the valuations “good” and “evil,” and the responsibility for this move lies on the shoulders of the weak. Given time’s passage and continued menial position, the *ressentiment* [resentment] of the weak ones caused them to characterize the “good” traits of the strong as “bad,” and their own mean traits as virtue.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{31} *BGE*, 186. Cf. also *GM*, Preface, 9. Given his critique of Enlightenment “faith” in secular rationality, Nietzsche thus belongs to what some have called the “counter-Enlightenment,” since in many ways he exemplifies and anticipates the postmodern critique of modernity. Merold Westphal’s comments here are helpful: “While Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche share a deep hostility to biblical religion, Freud and Marx, as sons of the Enlightenment, retain a faith in its essentially secular Reason, whereas Nietzsche sees Reason as an ersatz god through whom modern secularism seeks to salvage as much of God as possible…. If Christianity is Platonism for the masses, scientific objectivity is Platonism for the enlightened elites of modernity.” Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (NY: Fordham University Press, 1998), 226 and 227.

\textsuperscript{32} *GM*, Preface, 6. Of course the querying of the “value” of values, itself implies a value-system against which the original moral structures are to be measured against. Thus in the background of his examination of morality lies Nietzsche’s own Dionysian, life-embracing will to power.

\textsuperscript{33} *BGE*, 260.

\textsuperscript{34} Many commentators use the French term, *ressentiment*, in order to emphasize the thorough difference between Nietzsche’s intended meaning in using this word, and current definitions of mere “resentment.” Burston’s definition of *ressentiment* here is helpful: It is “the presence of malice, vindictiveness, and a thirst for revenge, not as transient states or impulses, but as abiding traits of character that warp our judgment and rob our life of companionable pleasure.” Daniel Burston, “Scheler, Nietzsche, and Social Psychology,” in *Existential Analysis* 14:1 (January 2003), 4. For further study on the difference between these two, see Bernard N. Meltzer and Gil Richard Musolf, “Resentment and Ressentiment,” in *Sociological Inquiry*, 72:2 (Spring 2002), 240-255.
morality” predicated on resentment would come to demonize such attributes as power, self-sufficiency, ambition, pride or idleness, while beatifying the traits of the poor, such as humility, meekness, pity, diligence, and the like.35

Eventually, Nietzsche argues, “The revolt of the slaves in morality begins in the very principle of resentment becoming creative and giving birth to values—a resentment experienced by creatures who, deprived as they are of the proper outlet of action, are forced to find their compensation in an imaginary revenge.”36 In their resentment these lowly ones come to see their powerful opposites not only as “bad,” but as “evil.” And, for Nietzsche, once the powerful capitulate to this “revaluation of values” and begin to judge themselves according to different moral definitions, the “slave revolt” has taken hold and eventually brings about a complete reversal of “good” and “evil.”

Just such a reversal or “revaluation of values” illustrates, for Nietzsche, the way that will to power is the operative principle beneath the very moral fabric upon which humanity depends. The “true” or the “good” to which moral valuations point is merely a matter of divergent perspectives, the tensions and resentment arising from them.37 This, in Nietzsche’s view, reinforces his view that life is ever self-surpassing, revaluing and creating anew. Here we cite more fully what was previously touched upon:

Wherever I found a living thing, there I found Will to Power; and even in the will of the servant I found the will to be a master....And this secret Life spake herself unto me. ‘Behold,’ said she, ‘I am that which must ever surpass itself....Verily, I say unto you: good and evil which would be everlasting—it doth not exist! Of its own accord must it ever surpass itself anew. With your values and formulae of good and evil, ye

35 The clearest summary of this whole exchange is in BGE, 260.
36 GM, I.10.
37 Nietzsche summarizes what has become known as his “perspectivism,” the idea that, in anticipation of postmodern epistemology, we can only know things from a certain perspective: Henceforth, my dear philosophers, let us be on guard against the dangerous old conceptual fiction that posited a ‘pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject’; let us guard against the snares of such contradictory concepts as ‘pure reason,’ ‘absolute spirituality,’ ‘knowledge in itself’: these always demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing something, are supposed to be lacking; these always demand of the eye an absurdity and a nonsense. There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective ‘knowing.’ GM, III.12 (bold emphasis mine).
exercise power, ye valuing ones: and that is your secret love. and the sparkling, trembling, and overflowing of your souls.  

In a very real way then, Nietzsche’s argument resembles that of Feuerbach (whom Nietzsche read profusely), that God is merely an anthropomorphic projection of humanity’s highest ideals. Yet unlike Feuerbach, Nietzsche argues that beneath it all is the pulse of life as will to power. Ultimately then, Nietzsche’s own constructive vision is not another “revaluation” revolt, but rather an unprecedented “transvaluation of all values.” He seeks to move humanity “beyond good and evil” to the embrace of life’s undercurrent, the will to power. Only this “yes” to life can, in the wake of God’s death and the end of morality, offer hope of a bulwark against nihilism.

It follows then, that anyone seeking to hold fast to nihilistic ideals, anyone saying “no” to life, must be vehemently opposed. Thus when it comes to making his own value judgments of morality, Nietzsche launches into an attack against the dominant morality of his time. This of course is a Christian morality, and Nietzsche equates it to a “slave morality” of “resentment,” which can only lead to the most repugnant withering of humanity as a whole. He passionately decries any moral construct that is self deprecating or world denying, vilifying what he calls the “ascetic ideal” as well as a “morality of pity.” For Nietzsche, the ideal of asceticism, of any morality construed in terms of repressing life or self, or flight from creaturely concerns, is altogether horrific.

Christianity, in worshipping a crucified God, has reified the “unegoistic instincts” of self-denial, suffering, surrender and selflessness. Further, Nietzsche argues that Christianity’s “morality of pity” has made a virtue out of compassion to the lowest of the low, issuing in a resounding “no” to the self-surpassing, ever-expanding will to power that would raise humanity to its intended heights. The anthropological result, for Nietzsche, is the perpetuation of an inferior “breed” of humanity as “a shrunken, almost ludicrous species, a herd animal, something full of good will,

38 Z, II.24.
39 Though Nietzsche’s explicitly stated goal was such a transvaluation of all values, one puzzle in GM is that throughout his treatment of moral origins he clearly favors the aristocratic moral valuations as somehow “better.” Their estimates of moral worth stem, in Nietzsche’s view, from their own goodness did not depend on such envy or resentment; “they did not have to manufacture their happiness artificially through looking at their enemies.” GM, I.10. Nietzsche’s well-known proclivity for aristocratically structured society makes good sense of his Ubermensch who rises above “the herd” of ordinary people, but Nietzsche’s favoritism for aristocratic virtues appears to contradict his whole argument about morality.
sickly and mediocre...the European of today.” Nietzsche faced the dire consequences of this anthropology of piteous “instincts” with a resolute sobriety tinged with dread:

But against these very instincts there voiced itself in my soul a more and more fundamental mistrust, a scepticism that dug ever deeper and deeper: and in this very instinct I saw the great danger of mankind, its most sublime temptation and seduction—seduction to what? to nothingness?—in these very instincts I saw the beginning of the end; stability, the exhaustion that gazes backwards, the will turning against Life, the last illness announcing itself with its own mincing melancholy: I realised that the morality of pity which spread wider and wider, and whose grip infected even philosophers with its disease, was the most sinister symptom of our modern European civilisation; I realised that it was the route along which that civilization slid on its way to—a new Buddhism?—a European Buddhism?—Nihilism?

Why, asks Nietzsche, did Christianity have to:

…work at the preservation of everything sick and suffering, which means in fact and in truth at the corruption of the European race? Stand all evaluations on their head—that is what they had to do! And smash the strong, contaminate great hopes, cast suspicion on joy in beauty, break down everything autocratic, manly, conquering, tyrannical, all the instincts proper to the highest and most successful of the type ‘man’, into uncertainty, remorse of conscience, self-destruction, indeed reverse the whole love of earthly dominion over the earth into hatred of the earth and the earthly—that is the task the church set itself and had to set itself, until in its evaluation ‘unworldliness’, ‘unsensuality’, and ‘higher man’ were finally fused together into one feeling…does it not seem that one will has dominated Europe for eighteen centuries, the will to make of man a sublime abortion?

Christianity—in its embodiment and active endorsement of the abortion of humanity’s potential, in its glorification of the piteous “herd” creature and slave morality of resentment, in its violent nay-saying to life and will to power by locating truth and ultimate meaning outside this world—is for Nietzsche, the pinnacle of decadence and nihilism, an intractable pestilence visited upon humanity. Thus he saw the dire need to take the whole morality of self-renunciation to task in the high hopes of a final “transvaluation” of its values that would issue in a new, yea-saying anthropology of the “higher man,” the Ubermensch who would embrace the will to power. To this

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40 BGE, 62.
41 GM, Preface, 5 (emphasis original).
end, Nietzsche took to himself the name “Anti-Christ” and called his whole crusade, “Dionysius against the Crucified.”

III. Nietzsche’s New Anthropology: The Übermensch of Will to Power

Here we come to the heart of Nietzsche’s anthropology embodied in his Übermensch, variously translated “overman” or “superman.” Against the willing of a slavish and piteous morality predicated on resentment, against that nihilistic attenuation of humanity which Nietzsche calls “the domesticated animal, the herd animal, the sick animal man – the Christian,” Nietzsche proclaims the need to “breed” or “will” a different version of humanity into being. Such human beings would rise above “the herd” and embody his transvaluation of all values. Thus far in human history, precious few such human beings have emerged only as a “lucky accident, as an exception, never as willed,” largely because of the domination of Christian anthropology, but also because of the entire Western philosophical tradition in its metaphysical appeal to truth apart from this world, this life.

As Nietzsche sees it, a successful transvaluation of all values would mean an ever-increasing space within which the Übermensch could thrive, advance and gain strength. But what are the characteristics of this Übermensch, and perhaps more importantly, is there an ethical ideal implicit in this anthropology, regardless of Nietzsche’s attempt to transcend such ideals? These questions are substantial enough to take each in turn.

First, to properly situate the characteristics of Nietzsche’s anthropologically ideal man, we must note that like Aristotle, Nietzsche too affirmed the idea of an ultimate good or happiness for humanity: “What is good? – All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself


AC, 3.

Ibid.

Notably, Nietzsche does not hold to a positivist view of humanity here. He holds the “progress” of humanity to be “a modern idea, that is to say a false idea.” Here he distinguishes between his own view and necessary advancement: “onward development is not by any means, by any necessity the same thing as elevation, advance, strengthening.” Ibid., 4.
in man…What is happiness? – The feeling that power *increases* – that a resistance is overcome.

All the characteristics of Nietzsche’s ideal man find their source here. Thus Nietzsche’s *Ubermensch* determines his own values; he is self-sufficient and indeed “creates values” by the sheer exercise of his own will to power. To this *Ubermensch* nothing is forbidden, unless it be a weakness, whether that be traditionally construed as either vice or virtue. At the core of his being is a “feeling of plentitude” marked by an overflowing abundance of power. Such a man knows when to speak and when to be silent, embraces harshness or severity for itself and enjoys inflicting it upon himself as one who is “hard.” Indeed one of Zarathustra’s chief exhortations to his fellow men was “O my brothers, become hard!” Paradoxically, this is a hardness marked by restraint, “toleration” and “reverence for oneself, not out of any moral obligations or weakness, but out of one’s own strength. However this is no resolute and passionless Stoic. Indeed, Nietzsche praises Goethe as the embodiment of this ideal, since “What he aspired to was totality; he strove against the separation of reason, sensuality, feeling, will. . . he disciplined himself to a whole, he *created* himself.” What is more, Nietzsche’s *Ubermensch* is marked by a Dionysian passion that holistically embraces life, including all of its chaos and deep suffering. Thus the *Ubermensch* is an emancipated, joyful and dynamic being who “no longer denies,” but is above all self-surpassing through ever outwardly-spiraling modes of creativity. In short, the *Ubermensch* is the man who embraces life as will to power, and thus orients his whole being around his own exercise of will to power.

Having sketched out the characteristic marks of Nietzsche’s anthropological ideal, we move to the question of human ethics. As the man who sought to take us “beyond good and evil,” does

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46 Ibid., 2.  
47 The use of “man” in place of “human being” is intentional here, as Nietzsche clearly envisions his ideal anthropological model in *male* terms, and thoroughly marginalizes women in his anthropology.  
48 *BGE*, 260.  
49 *TI*, 49.  
50 *Z*, III.56.  
51 *TI*, 49.  
52 Ibid.  
53 *BGE*, 225.  
54 *TI*, 49; *Z*, Prologue, 3.
Nietzsche in fact advocate *any* ethical standards at all? Many interpreters mistakenly say that he does not. *That* Nietzsche has a morality at all, is clear from numerous texts, and the following is Nietzsche’s starting point:

—I formulate a principle. All naturalism in morality, that is all healthy morality, is dominated by an instinct of life – some commandment of life is fulfilled through a certain canon of ‘shall’ and ‘shall not’, some hindrance and hostile element on life’s road is thereby removed. *Anti-natural* morality, that is virtually every morality that has hitherto been taught...turns on the contrary precisely against the instincts of life.\(^{55}\)

It is important to grasp that at the center of Nietzsche’s comments regarding “naturalism” and “instinct of life,” is a desire for full harmony with and affirmation of life as will to power. Thus he constantly speaks against any morality construed in terms of negation or prohibition:

> In the main all those moral systems are distasteful to me which say: ‘Do not do this! Renounce! Overcome thyself!’ On the other hand, I am in favour of those moral systems which stimulate me to do something, to do it again from morn till eve, and dream of it at night, and think of nothing else but how to do it well.... I do not like any of the negative virtues whose essence is negation and self-renunciation.\(^{56}\)

With these comments in hand, we move to our second consideration, and argue that Nietzsche does in fact have a constructive morality that lies at the heart of his anthropological vision. While many have misinterpreted Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* as one who glories in domination, suppression and exploitation of others, such is not the case. While Nietzsche does embrace these things, he embraces them only as they are, in his view, the inevitable *stuff* that arises from life as will to power. When it comes to Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, he certainly valorizes strength, severity and cunning; the use of power over others and for oneself is clearly in play, but this does not mean that Nietzsche advocates suppression of others. His emphasis is always on rising above “the herd,” not stomping those creatures underfoot.

\(^{55}\) *TI*, 4.

Consequently, Nietzsche persists in praising certain “virtues” that embody the will to power. Here there is perhaps a contradiction in Nietzsche’s thought, in that he clearly favors the “strong” virtues found in an aristocratic “master morality.”\textsuperscript{57} For this reason, he highly regards courage, nobility, strength, and as mentioned above, toleration, restraint and self-sufficiency. In this depiction of “noble” morality, what is unique is that everything is predicated on the will to power. With that proviso in hand, we may even recognize the character and place which Nietzsche provides for beneficence, pity and self-giving.

Contrary to constructs of traditional morality, for the \textit{Ubermensch}, these things do not spring from or issue in self-\textit{diminishment}, but are always linked to an overflowing abundance of power. Indeed it belongs to the very nature of will to power to be ever creative, self-surpassing and overflowing. Thus Nietzsche says that “In the foreground stands the feeling of plentitude, of power which seeks to overflow, the happiness of high tension, the consciousness of a wealth which would like to give away and bestow – the noble human being too aids the unfortunate but not, or almost not, from pity, but more from an urge begotten by superfluity of power.”\textsuperscript{58} Nietzsche sees this “highest virtue” of overflowing power as an abundance of \textit{love}, as Zarathustra says “Ye constrain all thing to flow towards you and into you, so that they shall flow back again out of your fountain as the gifts of your love.”\textsuperscript{59} Cameron argues that here, Nietzsche’s ideal man resembles Aristotle’s famous “great-souled man” who enjoys “conferring benefits” and refuses to “bear a grudge.”\textsuperscript{60} It is in this way that Nietzsche is able to affirm that “\textit{We immoralists…are ‘men of duty,’ we too!”}\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{57}\textit{BGE}, 260.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} In his vignette called “The Bestowing Virtue,” Nietzsche-Zarathustra speaks eloquently of the bestowing of gifts as “the highest virtue.” While speaking to his disciples, Zarathustra speaks this reality of his disciples, that they “thirst to become sacrifices and gifts yourselves” and “accumulate all riches in your souls.” Zarathustra continues, “Insatiably striveth your soul for treasures and jewels, because your virtue is insatiable in desiring to bestow. Ye constrain all things to flow towards you and into you, so that they shall flow back again out of your fountain as the gifts of your love.” Z, I.22.
\textsuperscript{60} “…‘gift-giving virtue’ (i.e. a sort of insatiable generosity owing to the overflowing nature of the bestower, rather than to the other’s needs) has been compared to the great-souled man’s fondness for ‘confering benefits’. Another necessary ingredient of greatness for Nietzsche is the avoidance of feelings of \textit{ressentiment}, and this, too, is reminiscent of the great-souled man’s reluctance to ‘bear a grudge.’” Frank C. Cameron, \textit{Nietzsche and the ‘Problem’ of Morality} (NY: Peter Lang, 2002) 151-52.
\textsuperscript{61} \textit{BGE}, 226.
All of this indicates that Nietzsche indeed does conceptualize a morality of sorts, but the important twofold distinction from its religious or ontological counterparts, is that it is firstly predicated on the embrace of power, and secondly on the duty or virtuous action which appeals to no external referent, religious, ontological, or otherwise. Rather, it is the *Ubermensch* himself, in his own self-sufficient will to power beyond good and evil, who decides and defines his own virtuous acts.\(^{62}\)

However, we have yet to arrive at the most existentially taxing of all Nietzsche’s values, though everything noted thus far points to it. Nietzsche’s “new ethic” has a Dionysian foundation, predicated on the celebration and embrace of life, the joy of both the beauty and sorrow of the world as it is. Therefore, here we must speak of the most broad, universal, and difficult virtue of the *Ubermensch*, which Nietzsche calls *amor fati*, or “love of fate.” Throughout his writings Nietzsche warns that this is the most forbidding of all those things that the *Ubermensch* must face, as it is a fatalism not easily embraced. Here we speak of, as we have all along, the *full* embrace of life as it is, as will to power, without appeal to any reality outside or above life itself. This means a denial of linear, but affirmation of circular eternity. In other words, Nietzsche posits a universe of finite energy and matter, but infinite time, such that sooner or later all possible configurations of existence will be exhausted, and the process will repeat itself again. This is what Nietzsche calls his “doctrine of the eternal recurrence,” which is the idea that all things that can happen in existence, will happen *again* in an infinite number of cycles.\(^{63}\) For the *Ubermensch*, then, the *amor fati* is the task of soberly embracing life as it is, and this means a full acceptance of his own life to the point of embracing every moment of its passing to an infinite degree. The *Ubermensch* is the man who looks at his own life and wholeheartedly loves it, and wishes for its infinite repetition. This tremendous

\(^{62}\) This may help us to make some sense of Nietzsche’s comments which, after having rejected traditional moral constructs, indicate his alliance with a new basis of morality within man himself: “I should not, of course, deny—unless I were a fool—that many actions which are called immoral should be avoided and resisted; and, in the same way, that many which are called moral should be preferred and encouraged; but I hold that in both cases these actions should be performed from other motives than those which have prevailed to the present time.” *The Dawn of Day*, 103. Cited in Wolf, 105.

\(^{63}\) This “doctrine” is found in two of Zarathustra’s speeches: “The Vision and the Enigma” (III.46) and “The Convalescent” (III.57). It is also expounded in, among other places, in *The Joyful Wisdom* in a section tellingly entitled, “The Greatest Stress” (341).
infinitized affirmation of life is possible only for the passionate and strong Dionysian who does not, as would most others, wish for the recurrence of his life in an edited or improved version. Thus, against his despairing misanthrope mentor Schopenhauer, Nietzsche envisions his answer to the nihilism of both a dead God and Christianity:

…the ideal of the most exuberant, most living and most world-affirming man, who has not only learned to get on and treat with all that was and is but who wants to have it again *as it was and is* to all eternity, insatiably calling out *de capo* not only to himself but to the whole piece and play, and not only to a play but fundamentally to him who needs precisely this play -- and who makes it necessary: because he needs himself again and again -- and makes himself necessary -- What? And would this not be -- *circulus vitiosus deus*?64

IV. The Dionysian Dawn

We come back to the place where we started. There is certainly no way to avoid the predominance and polemical violence of Nietzsche’s negative attacks on Christianity and its “slave morality” predicated on resentment and pity, issuing in shriveled humanity. There is also no avoiding Nietzsche’s critique of the “ascetic ideal” and all modes of transcendent truth that is so central to both Christianity and the entire Western philosophical enterprise. Nonetheless, Nietzsche does have a constructive vision, which we hope to have demonstrated here. We have argued that Nietzsche does indeed have, at the very least, a central core of an anthropological ideal attainable by all *Übermenschen*, which entails a full Dionysian embrace of life for its own sake as will to power, embodied in those who open the gates of their own will to power through strength and self-interest, from which may issue an abundance of “gift-giving” and benevolence toward others. This is the vision of reality whereby, above all other motives, Nietzsche seeks to pull humanity from the brink of the nihilistic void and offer hope for a “new dawn”:

64 *BGE*, 56. Though the redemption of humanity is not our central focus here, I note here that for Nietzsche, this embrace of eternal recurrence is the sum total of human redemption: “To redeem those who lived in the past and to recreate all ‘it was’ into ‘thus I willed it’ --that alone I should call redemption...Willing liberates; but what is it that puts this liberator in fetters? ‘It was’ --that is the name of the will’s gnashing of teeth and most serious melancholy. Powerless against what has been done, it is an angry spectator of all that is past. The will cannot will backwards; and that it cannot break time and time’s covetousness, that is the will’s loneliest melancholy.” Z, II.42.
Indeed, we philosophers and ‘free spirits’ feel, when we hear the news that ‘the old god is dead’, as if a new dawn shone on us: our heart overflows with gratitude, amazement, premonitions, expectation. At long last the horizon appears free to us again, even if it should not be bright: at long last our ships may venture out again, venture out to face any danger; all the daring of the lover of knowledge is permitted again: the sea, our sea, lies open again; perhaps there has never yet been such an ‘open sea’.\textsuperscript{65}

**Part Two: Critical Response**

Having articulated a comprehensive overview of Nietzsche’s fundamental thoughts on humanity, it remains for us to engage in critical dialogue from a Christian anthropological perspective. Our necessarily reductionistic approach will be limited here to Nietzsche’s anthropology proper, its merits and demerits in relation to a Christian anthropology. While it was necessary to offer, in Part One, a broad overview of each major thread in Nietzsche’s thought in order to properly situate his anthropology, here we narrow the scope to address the merits and demerits of three things: 1) the will to power as anthropological principle, 2) the \textit{Ubermensch} as human ideal, and 3) the critique of “Christian” morality and the cross.

**I. The Will to Power**

We open our critique here with a reminder of two basic propositions forwarded by Nietzsche in response to the questions “what is wrong with humanity?” and “what is good?” Regarding the first question, we may recall, as stated towards the beginning of Part One, how Nietzsche defines “depravity”: “I call an animal, a species, an individual depraved when it loses its instincts, when it \textit{prefers} what is harmful to it. A history of the ‘higher feelings’, of the ‘ideals’ of mankind... would almost also constitute an explanation of \textit{why} man is so depraved.”\textsuperscript{66} Of course Nietzsche’s entire critique of both the metaphysical philosophical tradition and Christianity follow from this understanding of depravity, but even more from the non-depraved possibility implied

\textsuperscript{66} AC, 6.
here. We will return to this in a moment. Turning to the second question then, as stated above, Nietzsche defines “good” as “All that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man,” and “happiness” as “The feeling that power increases –that a resistance is overcome.”

In his answer to these questions, Nietzsche reveals that at bottom, his whole project of going back to uncover the origins of morality is in fact predicated on the need to replace morality with power. Unlike Emerson, from whom Nietzsche draws heavily, he is not merely redefining “good” and “bad” so as to incorporate and valorize the “natural” drives that had been marginalized by traditional morality, but rather he questions those valuations altogether and replaces them with instinct, impulse, power. As his comments above indicate, Nietzsche’s ideal state of being human appears to be that of animal instinct, of a pre-conscience, pre-moral existence in which response to impulse and power remains unadulterated. Helmut Thielicke argues that the result here is no mere reconfiguration of the connection between anthropology and ethics, but rather its erasure in evolutionary terms. If humanity’s fall is from “an instinctual life” of “pure nature,” then it follows, notes Thielicke, that “Truth in this case is merely an enhancement of the sense of power. Knowledge is a tool of force, and truth for its own sake is an empty phrase. The same applies to the good and the beautiful.”

What this amounts to, then, is a critique of Nietzsche’s own appeal to the “noble” virtues, including his supposition that, in a return to the embrace of life as will to power, the Ubermensch creates his own values and goodness merely by virtue of his embrace of power. We noted above that Nietzsche does not actively advocate the pursuit of domination and exploitation for their own sake; he focuses rather on the ever self-surpassing creativity and strength which the embrace of power engenders. Nonetheless, when “will to power” is the sole criterion of the “good,” it is hard to imagine how any moral valuations can necessarily be said to belong to such a will. As Nietzsche himself admits, exploitation, dominance, suppression, and the like all belong to life as the interplay

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67 Ibid., 2.
of conflicting forces; it is naïve to imagine otherwise. From here it is a small and logical step for human beings who embrace such power, to *actively pursue* these things as a natural consequence of embodying the human ideal. And, though Nietzsche tries to *privilege* certain “noble” traits, and imagine that benevolence or “gift-giving” will naturally overflow to those around the *Übermensch*, it is clear that he cannot consistently hold that this must be the case. If he is right, that “will to power” is the “good,” then he cannot predict the human outcome of its embrace. Not everyone will have the left-over value-system of Judeo-Christianity that Nietzsche betrays when he appeals to what is noble, true, self-affirming, and the like. It is no surprise, then, that portions of Nietzsche’s thought are taken up to be the philosophical underpinnings of the Nazi regime, explicitly employed in legitimating their death-camps. Nietzsche expressed profound horror over the prospect of impending nihilism, but his embrace of life as will to power may leave us in exactly the same void.

If what we argue here is the fundamental inadequacy of “will to power” as a desirable anthropological basis, this is not the same as refuting its veracity. Here we must turn to another inconsistency in Nietzsche’s thought, wherein, against his own most vehement opposition, rationality is irreducibly bound up with will to power. It is clear that in *every* depiction he offers of his *Übermensch*, this man is a *thinking* being. This of course is why the “overman” is able to make judgments and determine his own moral constructs, think about and reject slavish values, and see that the will to power is indeed superior. One need only read the abundant internal dialogue of Zarathustra to get the point. Granted, Nietzsche does allow a subordinate place for the “will to truth” in his anthropological schema, sublimating it to the will to power. Nonetheless, it is evident that Nietzsche may unwittingly presuppose the Cartesian subject, the thinking individual who does not merely operate with, but is defined by and dependent upon rational thinking. The point of this observation, coupled with the one over residual values of aristocratic nobility, is merely that Nietzsche seems unable to account for or depict humanity *solely* in terms of will to power. He cannot quite escape either rationality or moral constructs. This of course begs the question of whether this construal of human being even possible? Nietzsche leaves this question unanswered,
and this may call both the desirability and the veracity of his anthropology into question. Indeed even if his anthropology were possible, the very nihilism he abhorred beckons.

II. The Ubermensch

If we take these inconsistencies for granted, how might we evaluate Nietzsche’s view of his ideal man, the Ubermensch? As is clear from our survey of his thought, Nietzsche favors a highly stratified construal of human being. Some, notably the aristocratic classes, are naturally those who might rise above the “herd” of mediocrity. Here we argue that Nietzsche’s critiques of socialism and democracy are well-advised, as he recognizes the depths to which humanity might sink when there is systematic and ideological appeal to the lowest common denominator. This vein of Nietzsche’s thinking aligns quite well with, for example, Alexis de Tocqueville’s prophetic critique of American democracy; in its earliest stages he saw the pitiful version of humanity that would follow from the deification of economic utilitarianism and pragmatism. Indeed, much of what Nietzsche decries may indeed strike many Christian themselves as deplorable. Anyone who shrinks back from embracing life, who wallows in the murk of mediocrity, whose morality is entirely construed in negative or self-deprecati

However, we must keep in mind that in this “herd,” Nietzsche also includes the sick, suffering and physically weak and arguably, those whose genetic inheritance is less than desirable. If the will to power is the highest good, then clear lines of demarcation bracket out those who can align with and embrace it, and those who cannot, and are therefore expendable. Though Nietzsche himself would have been sickened by the Fascist and Nazi applications of his thinking here, there is no mistaking a clear inclination toward eugenics in his philosophy.

These tendencies notwithstanding, is Nietzsche’s Ubermensch a desirable alternative to anemic human being, or more importantly, is it possible? Hans Kung asks whether Nietzsche’s
extreme polar opposite to human weakness is the desirable answer: “Can weakness be overcome only by hardness? Are there no intermediate hues, no gradations, no mean? Are compassion, goodness, mercy, indulgence, fellowship, love, something that can be denounced only as weakness?”70 These are compelling questions, yet as we demonstrated in our survey above, Nietzsche does indeed allow for these things, as he locates their valid expression in the overflowing of power. Thus unwittingly, in his appeal for an alternative to Nietzsche’s Übermensch, Kung describes Nietzsche’s ideal to a tee: “Is there not also a mercy that comes from strength, a compassion from fullness, a goodness from the greatness of man? Indeed, is not this perhaps the very goal that men should seek today, precisely as Christians, precisely in light of belief in God?”71 This indeed seems precisely, aside from the reference to God, what Nietzsche endorses in his Übermensch who is able to bequeath goodness to others from an abundance of power.

However, here we must recall again the critique formerly raised, that Nietzsche’s predication of all things on will to power in no way guarantees these “good” things will issue from the overman’s embrace of will to power. He may equally embrace domination, oppression, exploitation, and chaos, as these too are fundaments of a will to power that cannot claim a necessary link to any morally “desirable” posture. Thus it may be that G. K. Chesterton’s critique is more appropriate, and equally possible when it comes to the life of the Übermensch: “Nietzsche's Superman is cold and friendless…And when Nietzsche says, ‘A new commandment I give to you, be hard,’ he is really saying, ‘A new commandment I give to you, be dead.’”72 A lifeless frigidity—ironically antithetical to Nietzsche’s ideal of a warm, Dionysian embrace of life—may indeed characterize the human embodiment of will to power. Barth adds to this view, underscoring that at bottom, the Übermensch is one whose existence and life is defined precisely without reference to or concern for the “fellow man.”73

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71 Ibid.
72 G. K. Chesterton, Heretics (Champaign, IL: Project Gutenberg, electronic version, ID 1077600), 22.
73 Barth, 370.
III. Nietzsche, Morality, and the Cross

We turn now to briefly address Nietzsche’s critique of Christian morality as a “slave morality” fixated on pity and fueled by ressentiment. To begin with, we must point out that Nietzsche makes a number of enduring contributions to anthropology in general. First, his analysis of ressentiment as a subconscious motivating force, especially with regard to the way it issues in the conscious endorsement of moral valuations, is an insight that has proven invaluable for the modern human sciences, especially the discipline of psychology. Indeed, Freud would advance much of what Nietzsche begins here in his attempt to understand how subterranean motivating forces define and shape visible, conscious, behavior. No less valuable is Nietzsche’s emphasis on the way that class conflicts and societal power struggles shape human beings and what they value.

When we turn to his explicit critique of Christian morality, additional positive contributions abound. Nietzsche’s exposition of the nihilism inherent in negative and anti-humanistic forms of morality is crucially important for those who seek to formulate and embody an authentically Christian ethic. On this point, Charles Taylor offers important insight:

…there is something morally corrupting, even dangerous, in sustaining the [moral] demand simply on the feeling of undischarged obligation, on guilt, or its obverse, self-satisfaction. Hypocrisy is not the only negative consequence. Morality as benevolence on demand breeds self-condemnation for those who fall short and a depreciation of the impulses to self-fulfillment.74

Taylor continues to affirm Nietzsche’s “deep insight” that a morality that can “only be powered negatively” is, in essence, the utter demise of the true Christian benevolence toward human being:

If morality can only be powered negatively, where there can be no such thing as beneficence powered by an affirmation of the recipient as a being of value, then pity is destructive to the giver and degrading to the receiver, and the ethic of benevolence may indeed be indefensible. Nietzsche’s challenge is on the deepest level, because he is looking precisely for what can release such an affirmation of being.75

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75 Ibid.
These positive contributions notwithstanding, Nietzsche’s assumption that Christianity is dependent on a morality of pity and ascetic negation—precisely because of such morality is sacralized in a crucified God—is thoroughly reductionistic. With regard to the fullness of Christian morality and its relation to the cross of Christ, Nietzsche oftentimes appears to be shadow-boxing. He misses the crucial fact that the cross of Christ offers not only an infinite negation of human striving and possibility, but also an enduring affirmation of humanity. Here is the classic Christian notion of the interplay between the road of pilgrimage and the mount of beatific vision, between mortification and vivification, between negation and affirmation. Here we may only speculate how Nietzsche’s thought may have differed had he focused on the more straightforward moment of affirmation that is embodied in the incarnation. He may have seen that the person of Christ, not only in his sacrificial death, but also in his incarnation and ministry, serves as the persistent touchstone of all “Christian humanism,” providing an enduring foundation for the infinite worth of humanity as such.

Nonetheless, given Nietzsche’s conception of life as will to power and the correlative ideal of its embrace, it is no surprise that he recognized the immeasurable threat that the cross posed to his entire anthropology. Whenever we are tempted to charge him with choosing the easy targets of aberrant and insipid morality, Nietzsche’s frontal assault on the cross proves us wrong. And yet, as Barth notes, this may have also become his undoing:

And the true danger in Christianity, which he alone saw at the climax of that tradition, and on account of which he had to attack it with unprecedented resolution and passion… was that Christianity—what he called Christian morality—confronts real man, the superman, this necessary, supreme, and mature fruit of the whole development of true humanity, with a form of man which necessarily questions and disturbs and destroys and kills him at the very root. That is to say, it confronts him with the figure of suffering man. It demands that he should see this man, that he should accept this presence, that he should not be man without him but with him, that he must drink with him at the same source. Christianity places before superman the Crucified, Jesus, as the Neighbor, and in the person of Jesus a whole host of others who are wholly and utterly ignoble and despised in the eyes of the world (of the

world of Zarathustra, the true world of men), the hungry and thirsty and naked and sick and captive, a whole ocean of human meanness and painfulness. Nor does it merely place the Crucified and His host before his eyes. It does not merely will that he see Him and them. It wills that he should recognize in them his neighbors and himself. It aims to bring him down from his height, to put him in the ranks which begin with the Crucified, in the midst of His host.  

IV. Conclusion  

Charles Taylor notes that, with all his attacks against Christianity, Nietzsche continues to exhibit a paradoxical affinity with it. The point of agreement lies in precisely that fulcrum of his thinking stressed so thoroughly in our treatment here. It is Nietzsche’s indefatigable drive to say “Yes to life,” to affirm all of existence “even in its strangest and hardest problems,” and in doing so to raise the standard of life’s goodness against the oncoming tides of nihilism. In doing so he exhibits a fundamental ethic of benevolence toward creation, and in the most extreme of possible ways, marks it out, with Yahweh, as “good.” But Nietzsche places an exorbitant price tag on his “Yes” to life as will to power. As Taylor says, “Nietzsche wins through to his total yea-saying precisely by jettisoning the ethic of benevolence, which is inextricably linked in his view with self-negating morality. He presents us a cruel dilemma. Is it one we have to face?” If nothing else, we have Nietzsche to thank for presenting Christianity with just such a “cruel dilemma,” for it perpetually challenges us to articulate an anthropology that is faithful to and predicated on God’s final “Yes” to the world in Jesus Christ.

77 Barth, 371. Interestingly, with all of his opposition to Christianity, Nietzsche was far more respectful of Christ himself. Thus he says, “there was only one Christian, and he died on the cross.” AC, 39.
78 TI, 10.6. Taylor, 455.
79 Taylor, 455.
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