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The Philosophy of the Superman

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Since the very beginning, man has been concerned with the purpose and meaning of his life. In this regard, a common philosophical discussion is that of the ideal man. From Aristotle, to Confucius to the modern day teachings of the Radhasoami Faith, the world has had many definitions of what a Superman, Chun Tzu or Übermensch is, based on physical, mental and spiritual characteristics.

In this paper, we explore the concepts of the Superman as defined by Aristotle, Confucius, Nietzsche and the Leaders of the Radhasoami Faith, who are the prominent thought leaders in this philosophy.

Aristotle

For Aristotle, man has a Telos, a built-in goal and type of excellence specific to man, which he will attain if given proper nurturing. Man is very much like a plant or animal, except given his rational nature, he needs education in addition to good food and exercise. Man is also a political animal and needs other people and even institutions to help him grow. With some careful observation of how people in different conditions grow, we can develop a science of education and apply it to produce individuals that, at least in most cases will have a maximum possibility of flourishing.

Commonly, philosophers have in mind a perfect human. It's not a matter of physical characteristics; rather it is content of the mind--a formula for happiness and maybe more importantly, a protection from unhappiness and failure. Aristotle is a middle-of-the-road philosopher in this sense, as he does not emphasize extremes. He suggests that extremes are self-defeating and we should practice moderation.

Some characteristics that Aristotle defined of his Superman (taken from Ethics, iv,3):

- 1) He does not expose himself needlessly to danger, since there are few things for which he cares sufficiently; but he is willing, in great crises, to give even his life, knowing that under certain conditions it is not worthwhile to live.
- 2) He is of a disposition to do men service, though he is ashamed to have a service done to him.
- 3) To confer a kindness is a mark of superiority; to receive one is a mark of subordination.
- 4) He does not take part in public displays. He is open in his dislikes and preferences; he talks and acts frankly, because of his contempt for men and things.
- 5) He is never fired with admiration, since there is nothing great in his eyes. He cannot live in complaisance with others, except it be a friend. Complaisance is the characteristic of a slave.
- 6) He never feels malice, and always forgets and passes over injuries.
- 7) He is not fond of talking. It is no concern of his that he should be praised, or that others should be blamed.
- 8) He does not speak evil of others, even of his enemies, unless it be to themselves.
- 9) His carriage is sedate, his voice deep, his speech measured; he is not given to hurry, for he is concerned only about a few things; he is never prone to vehemence, for he thinks nothing very important.
- 10) He bears the accidents of life with dignity and grace, making the best of his circumstances, like a skillful general who marshals his limited forces with all the strategy of war.
- 11) He is his own best friend, and takes delight in privacy whereas the man of no virtue or ability is his own worst enemy, and is afraid of solitude.

As we can glean from the above excerpt from Aristotle's writings, his concept of Superman is of a measured, moderate and thoughtful individual who lives a balanced life.

Aristotle considered these ethics to be a practical rather than theoretical study, where man should aim at *becoming* good and *doing* good, rather than simply knowing what is good for its own sake. Aristotle taught that virtue has to do with the proper function (ergon) of a thing. Like an eye is only as good an eye in so much as it can see (because the proper function of an eye is sight), similarly Aristotle reasoned that humans must have a function specific to humans, and that this function must be an activity of the psuchē or soul in accordance with reason (logos). Aristotle identified this optimum activity of the soul as eudaimonia, generally translated as "happiness" or sometimes "well being". To have the potential of being happy in this way necessarily requires a good character and moral virtue.

Aristotle taught that to achieve a virtuous and potentially happy character requires having the fortune to be habituated in such a way by teachers and experience, leading to a later stage in which one consciously chooses to do the best things. When the best people come to live life this way their practical wisdom (phronesis) and their intellect (nous) can develop with each other towards the highest possible human virtue, to develop the wisdom of an accomplished theoretical or speculative thinker. This is Aristotle's vision of a Superman.

Confucius

Like Aristotle, Confucius' concept of a Superior Man or Chun Tzu is based on his ethical doctrine, as described in *The Analects of Confucius*.

The main idea of Confucius' teachings is that every normal human being has the aspiration to become a superior man—superior to his fellows, if possible, but surely superior to his own past and present self. Confucius thus does not teach a perfectionist doctrine, rather the goal of man was to continuously improve himself to attain a near-as-possible perfect virtue.

In various sayings Confucius, presents the attributes of the Chun Tzu, whom the sage advises his disciples to "admire without ceasing, to emulate without turning, and to imitate without let or hindrance".

These are some of them, presented as aphorisms in *The Analects of Confucius*, which are easy to understand and contain pithy observations:

- 1) Purpose: "The superior man learns in order to attain to the utmost of his principles."
- 2) Poise: "The superior man in his thought does not go out of his place."
- 3) Self-sufficiency: "What the superior man seeks, is in himself; what the ordinary man seeks, is in others."
- 4) Earnestness: "The superior man in everything puts forth his utmost endeavours."
- 5) Thoroughness: "The superior man bends his attention to what is radical. That being established, all practical courses naturally grow up."
- 6) Sincerity: "The superior man must make his thoughts sincere.", "Is it not his absolute sincerity which distinguishes a superior man?"
- 7) Truthfulness: "What the superior man requires is that in what he says there may be nothing inaccurate."

- 8) Purity of thought and action: "The superior man must be watchful over himself when alone."
- 9) Love of truth: "The object of the superior man is truth." "The superior man is anxious lest he should not get truth; he is not anxious lest poverty come upon him."
- 10) Mental hospitality: "The superior man is catholic and not partisan; the ordinary man is partisan and not catholic." "The superior man in the world does not set his mind either for anything or against anything; what is right, he will follow."
- 11) Rectitude: "The superior man thinks of virtue; the ordinary man thinks of comfort." "The mind of the superior man is conversant with righteousness; the mind of the ordinary man is conversant with gain."
- 12) Prudence: "The superior man wishes to be slow in his words and earnest in his conduct."
- 13) Composure: "The superior man is satisfied and composed; the ordinary man is always full of distress." "The superior man may indeed have to endure want; but the ordinary man, when he is in want, gives way to unbridled license."
- 14) Fearlessness: "The superior man has neither anxiety nor fear." "When internal examination discovers nothing wrong, what is there to be anxious about, what is there to fear?"
- 15) Firmness: "Refusing to surrender their wills or to submit to any taint to their persons." ("The superior man is correctly firm and not merely firm.")
- 16) Avoidance of sycophancy: "I have heard that the superior man helps the distressed, but he does not add to the wealth of the rich."
- 17) Growth: "The progress of the superior man is upward, the progress of the ordinary man is downward."
- 18) Benevolence: "The superior man seeks to develop the admirable qualities of men and does not seek to develop their evil qualities. The ordinary man does the opposite of this."
- 19) Moderation: "The superior man conforms with the path of the mean."
- 20) The Golden Rule: "When one cultivates to the utmost the capabilities of his nature and exercises them on the principle of reciprocity, he is not far from the path. What you do not want done to yourself, do not do unto others."
- 21) The Art of Living: "The practice of right-living is deemed the highest, the practice of any other art lower. Complete virtue takes first place; the doing of anything else whatsoever is subordinate."

As we can see, Confucius also stresses the moderate, path of the mean, for a Chun Tzu, similar to Aristotle. His philosophy was mainly concerned about the practical way of life, in which each individual can continuously develop his virtues and detach from the vices of the world in order to be the building block of better social order and just governance.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Another significant contribution to the philosophy of the Superman is from Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche describes such a man as an *Übermensch* - the ideal superior man of the future who could rise above conventional social morality to create and impose his own value system. The *Übermensch*, as originally described by Nietzsche in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, is the one who is willing to risk all for the sake of enhancement of humanity. This stands in contrast to the ordinary man, whose sole desire is his own comfort and who is incapable of creating anything beyond himself and only acts on herd instinct. This means an *Übermensch* can affect and influence the lives of others, through the imposition of his own set of values, and independent of others.

Nietzsche, being an atheist, especially demarcated that the goal of human life was to live in the here and now, and he condemned the overly strong focus on the afterlife or life beyond death of the prevalent Christian philosophic standards of his time. According to him, an Übermensch is someone who lives each day taking pleasure and happiness in the present, but also with the purpose for humanity.

Nietzsche believed that all religions were false and that by recognizing that society was built upon such fallacies and myths, mankind could then reinvent itself with new morals based upon a godless reality. The Übermensch would be the leader of such a society with his unique moral code.

In comparison to Aristotle and Confucius, we can see that although Nietzsche also framed his definition of a Superman around ethical and moral principles, he gave the Übermensch more of a leadership role in society – that of someone who aggressively brings about change in thought and action at a social level and leaves a lasting impression for the ages. In addition, the Übermensch, maintains an attitude of perpetually overcoming life-denying ways of thinking/values (as Nietzsche characterized Christian values) – he is engaged in a continuous battle for his own values against a powerful competing ideology. He's free-spirited, welcomes challenges and adventure with indomitable confidence, he doesn't hold grudges or let set-backs trouble him, puts all of himself into whatever he's doing with conviction and without getting bogged down in serious-mindedness.

Like Aristotle and Confucius, Nietzsche also emphasizes the improvement of self and of internal reflection as a quality of the Superman. While lesser beings have their will-to-power directed purely outward in gaining mastery over others, the overman directs his inward in order to master himself.

Radhasoami Faith

Sir Sahabji Maharaj, the fifth Revered Leader of the Radhasoami Faith, while explaining the evolution of the physical body, also explained how the two entities- mind and the spirit-, which are distinct from the physical body, too have been evolving gradually and are the prime forces which sustain the entire universe. These prime forces are evolving and becoming purer, according to the laws of natural selection, eventually leading to the future race of Superman or complete man – an evolved man with higher intellect, higher sense of discrimination and spiritual development.

Humanity is thus steadily evolving towards a form of life that will be rich in knowledge, that will comprehend, control and appreciate its surroundings better, and that will not rest until it has realized the Ultimate Reality.

Such a complete man, or Superman will have qualities and chivalries of all four *varnas* of the traditionally defined Hindu society, viz.

- i) Brahmin – one who is familiar with Brahma Vidya (Knowledge of God), makes an effort for His Darshan and imparts that knowledge to all seekers without recompense.
- ii) Kshatriya – one who is strong in body, brave at heart and is ready to sacrifice himself for protecting others.
- iii) Vaishya – one who develops industry and handicrafts to acquire wealth and uses that money for the public good.
- iv) Shudra – one who embodies the spirit of selfless service and knows the dignity of labour.

The community of such people would be known as a 'Spiritual Aristocracy', which will lead the society and form a New World Order in which the ideal of Fatherhood of God and Brotherhood of Man will be the motto – promoting the physical, mental and spiritual salvation of all mankind.

Conclusions

Through the above exposition, we can see that although Aristotle, Confucius, Nietzsche and Leaders of the Radhasoami Faith start with slightly differing views on ethical doctrine and the definition of what constitutes a Superman, they do converge around some key points.

- 1) The Superman philosophy directly relates to man knowing and achieving the summum bonum of his life. Aristotle describes it as eudaimonia, Confucius' Chun Tzu achieves Hsien (Heaven), Nietzsche's Übermensch seeks to master himself, and the Superman of the Radhasoami Faith achieves salvation and communion with the Supreme Being.
- 2) The Superman is constantly perfecting himself - achieving balance, equanimity (Aristotle), Jen or human heartedness and compassion (Confucius), mastering himself (Nietzsche), and living the ideal of better worldliness (Radhasoami Faith).
- 3) The Superman is the leader of society. Chun Tzu is the basic unit of a well governed and socially ordered society, while Nietzsche's Übermensch is that man who challenges herd mentality to bring about change and progress. The Supermen of Radhasoami Faith are described as spiritual aristocrats, who can bring about a New World Order, under the ideal of Fatherhood of God and Brotherhood of Man. The Superman is incomplete without having performed service to humanity in some form.

Thus we can see that the philosophy of the Superman is key to man's understanding of the purpose of his life, and even for an a-religious man, can help him on his journey to his apotheosis.

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