

# What are Nietzsche's key ideas? Can any of them be seen as having influenced Hitler, and would Nietzsche have accepted this influence?

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I will seek to outline what Nietzsche's key ideas were, before discussing their relationship with Hitler in World War II. Towards the end of the paper, I will seek to clarify that Nietzsche would not have accepted this influence. There will be discussion with reference to Nietzsche's own works, seeking to outline his ideas clearly and accurately, before looking into Nietzsche's influence on what Hitler did in World War II. This analysis will be conducted through two channels to see whether any influence on Hitler by Nietzsche can be found. I will highlight Nietzsche's main ideas and point out which of Hitler's actions were influenced by Nietzsche.

## 1. Introduction

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900), was a German philosopher and linguist. In this paper, I will begin by seeking to outline what Nietzsche's key ideas were. The first of these is the Übermensch, which is an idea that Nietzsche hoped could be used to provide a new path for humanity in the wake of the collapse of religion in the western world. The second of these relate to his ideas of Master and Slave morality. Nietzsche believed that slave morality belonged to the weak, whereas master morality is the morality of the strong, which encourages people to be aggressive, maverick, and contemptuous of weakness. Following this, there will be discussion of any potential influence of these ideas on Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) in World War II. Hitler was the head of the Nazi party and widely regarded as the initiator of World War II. Finally, there will be a discussion surrounding whether or not Nietzsche would have accepted these ideas. Ultimately, it will be concluded that Nietzsche's work, including his ideas of the Übermensch and Master and Slave morality, had some influence on Hitler. Additionally, it will be found that Nietzsche would be unlikely to have accepted this influence.

## 2. Nietzsche's Key ideas

Following the fall of religion in the western world, Nietzsche worried that Western Europe would descend into nihilism. The first of his ideas to combat this collapse of society is that of the Übermensch, which he first wrote about in his book "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" [9]. Through his idea of the Übermensch, Nietzsche called for the emergence of a kind of humanity: after famously writing "God is dead" [8], Nietzsche argues that there is the opportunity for humans to become their own master, with their own will to create, being able to constantly pursue the growth and completion of the force of life, before finally realizing their own value of life. Nietzsche's idea of the Übermensch is also often translated as "Superman" [9] In Nietzsche's view, "Superman" is the highest value that human beings can aim to reach, in addition to being the carrier of 'hero morality' [9] and the goal of human development. Simply put, the Übermensch is Nietzsche's goal for humanity in the wake of the fall of religion which he hopes will allow individuals to reach their full potential and be better.

Some think that it is a good aim for humanity because it can make people be stronger and help people to reach their potential. During the 14th century, a cultural movement called humanism began to gain momentum in Italy, it is the core idea of the Renaissance. Before it appeared, European thought was generally controlled by the Church. People believed in God, saw God as redemption, and sang about God in many art forms. People made statues of God, built buildings about God, and painted

God. But after the advent of humanism, people gradually transferred the worship of God to themselves, so in the fourteenth century, a large number of praises to humanity have emerged, most notably Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa, which is the most famous work and still preserved in the Louvre in Paris. In this, people like Leonardo da Vinci are superhumans in Nietzsche's eyes. The great men, represented by Leonardo da Vinci, did not fear threats from religion in the dark middle Ages and led man through the confines of thought. On the contrary, others argue that there are some people just want to lead a simple life, which does not appear to be possible within the concept of the *Übermensch*. However, this is a misinterpretation – if leading a simple life allows someone to reach their potential then it achieves their own personal idea of the *Übermensch*. Overall, it is a good aim, as it can lead people to become better.

In the first chapter of *Zur Genealogie der Moral* [10], Nietzsche puts forward two opposing values, "master morality" and "slave morality", in order to respond to the view of the previous moral genealogies generally associated with Christianity. Here, Nietzsche attempts to answer the same question as Christianity in that he attempts to explain the origin of the concepts of "good and bad" and "kind and evil" in moral ethics. Nietzsche believed that slave morality belonged to the weak, and that the surface content was compassion, kindness, humility, and equality. In essence, it is the weak who used slave morality to restrain the strong in order to hide their fear, jealousy and selfishness of them. On the contrary, Nietzsche's master morality is the morality of the strong, which encourages people to be aggressive, maverick, contemptuous of weakness, in pursuit of innovation, and in opposition of mediocrity; this represents the positive side of life.

Therefore, it can be seen that Nietzsche's key ideas include the ideas of the *Übermensch*, and master and slave morality. These were developed in order to deal with the collapse of western religion, and can be seen to be good aims for the future of humanity.

## **2.1 The potential influence of Nietzsche on Hitler**

In order to provide context for the discussion of potential influences of Nietzsche on Hitler, it is first useful to understand how Hitler developed his fascist views. Hitler was an Austrian-born German politician who was the *Führer* (leader) of Germany from 1933 to 1945. When he was young, he did not want to follow in his father's footsteps of becoming a civil servant. After his father died, he went to pursue his dream of being an artist, though he was rejected from Vienna's Academy of Fine Arts. After his mother died, Hitler moved to Vienna and became interested in politics, and developing many of the ideas that would shape Nazi ideology. In 1914 he join World War I, which Germany lost, and he began to believe that the country's devastating defeat should be attributed to the Allies, with it instead being the case that insufficiently patriotic "traitors" at home were at fault: this included the Jewish population. In late 1918, he joined the small German Workers' Party, where he quickly became the defacto leader, with the name changing to the Nazi Party in 1920. In 1923, Hitler was sentenced to five years in prison because of an attempted coup [3]. During this period, he began to dictate the book that would become "Mein Kampf". In this book, Hitler expanded on the nationalistic, anti-Semitic views he had begun to develop in Vienna in his early twenties, and laid out plans for the Germany—and the world—he sought to create when he came to power [5]. Prior to the start of World War II, Hitler began to persecute Jews: he established many concentration camps, in addition to overseeing forced labor and mass execution. They also exposed 3,000 child prisoners to disease, disfigurement and torture under the guise of medical research. 6 million of Jews were killed in German-occupied Europe by war's end.

Now that Hitler's ideological development has been outlined, it is possible to move on to the relation between Nietzsche and Hitler. It has been suggested that Adolf Hitler was a believer in the work of Nietzsche: he visited the Nietzsche Memorial several times, and gave Mussolini's book as a birthday present [11]. Evidence of Nietzsche's influence can be seen within some areas of Nazi Party doctrine, in particular, the Nietzschean ideas of *Übermensch* and master and slave morality.

Firstly, the idea of the *Übermensch* can be seen within Nazi literature being used to refer to the Aryan race. Hitler strongly believed in the importance of purity of race, and the Aryan race was the noblest race in his eyes. It is worth noting that Hitler himself did not have the ideal qualities of this

race. Considering that the Nietzschean concept of the Übermensch emphasized the importance of strength and independence, it may have appeared to be an attractive ideology to associate with the Aryan race for the Nazi Party. The idea of the strength of the Übermensch, and the fact that it is seen as a superior idea of man may have also been attractive to the Nazi Party, who also think themselves to be superhuman, and better than those who are simply ordinary people. Therefore, as they themselves to be superior, they were willing to use this superiority as an excuse to persecute many people, especially Jews. Nazi nationalism and racial superiority were similar to Superman's ability to criticize and transcend themselves. So it connect with Übermensch ---- Aryan race is the noblest race and it meet the standard of Übermensch that Nietzsche want to see: reject mediocrity, courage, strength, independence.

Secondly, the Nietzschean ideas of master and slave morality can also be seen within Nazi doctrine. Since master morality and slave morality are on opposite sides, in order to highlight the advantages of master morality, Nietzsche further applied the opposite of master morality and slave morality to the interpretation of history. Nietzsche believes that the most prominent symbol of this kind of battle in history is the war between the Romans and the Israelis. [7, 10] Nietzsche believed that the Romans had been strong and noble people, their morality was master morality, and the Israelis were a nation full of resentment, and their morality was the embodiment of slave moral values. In the end, however, slave morality gradually triumphed, making the whole of Europe more and more mediocre under the domination of slave morality, which Nietzsche could not accept, Hitler as well. The Romans and Israelis in Nietzsche's eyes were like the Aryans and Jews in Hitler's eyes. Also, he thought that Aryans have master morality and Jews have slave morality.

In summary, there are some of Nietzsche's ideas which can be seen as having influenced Hitler, including the ideas of the Übermensch, in addition to those of master and slave morality.

## **2.2 Evaluation of the accuracy of this interpretation of Nietzsche**

In order to fulfil Hitler's desire for Germany to rule the world, the Nazi Party launched World War II. Many Nazi officers try to reach their potential---invade other countries. In addition to requiring people reach their potential, Nietzsche's Übermensch is also idealized; it is seen as the hope of mankind, with this Übermensch leading mankind to improve through generations [9]. Therefore, I don't think Nietzsche true ideas about the Übermensch would permit taking human life without a very good reason. It is for this reason that Nazi officials actually don't meet the criteria for Übermensch. Nietzsche require them to be creative, powerful and unremitting, by contrast, they are just simply following Hitler, and aren't being independent and strong as the Übermensch demands. And that lead to that they are not reaching their full potential.

In reality, the only person who is actually able to get close to their own personal Übermensch is Hitler himself. Although Adolf Hitler killed many innocent people, it is reasonable to suggest that Nietzsche would have recognized the fact that Hitler was a great leader. At one of the most chaotic times in Germany's history, Hitler came forward and used his excellent speaking skills to attract many people to follow him into Nazi fascism. The word "fascism" comes from the Italian "fascio," meaning a bundle or group, and is considered a term for a militant brotherhood. It symbolizes power, violence, terror, foreign aggression and plunder, is the capitalist country's extreme form of dictatorship. There are few concerns from a Nietzschean perspective about Hitler's starting point, where he simply aims to bring a better life to his people and help his country gain global influence, in which respect he is Nietzsche's Übermensch. However, his later actions, especially the cruel treatment of Jews, were seriously incompatible with Nietzsche's Übermensch, and his purpose changed from ultimately protecting Germany to invading and occupying other countries. A true superman should be one who can make everyone reach his potential, not Hitler alone.

As we have now established that Hitler was indeed the superman Nietzsche wanted to see when it came to protecting his country and nation. This includes his attempts to help the people of Germany to reach their potential, even if this involves occupying other countries. Even though in his early stages, Hitler embodied the idea of the superman that Nietzsche wrote about, Hitler killed many innocent people and attempted to occupy the world, which is unlikely to be what Nietzsche wanted to see;

Nietzsche envisioned the superman as someone who could lead civilization forward, not the demon that destroyed it. Hitler's interpretation of *Übermensch* killed many people, hence preventing them from realizing their potential, in addition to the fact that his interpretation of Nietzsche contained many racist ideas, which Nietzsche would have not accepted.

As for master and slave morality, some people think that Nietzsche's view will lead to the result of culling the weak, [The history of western philosophy, Bertrand Arthur William Russell, 1945] hence, after the Nazi Party came into contact with Nietzsche's ideas, they recognized that the idea of 'master morality' was something which they felt they embodied, in contrast with the Jews who they were persecuting, who were in possession of 'slave morality'. On the other hand, everyone but Adolf Hitler would have slave morality, including the Nazis. As I mentioned, because they would all surrender to Hitler, they just follow Hitler's command instead of be creative and productive, they are not suit the standard of master morality which require them to be aggressive, maverick. On the contrary, Hitler would have master morality because he led the Nazi Party to help it become stronger and opposite mediocrity, and leading the Nazis in innovation.

Of course, there are some reasons why Nietzsche's ideas have been misunderstood. The first reason was that after Nietzsche's death, his sister who is a very strongly nationalist, added a lot of racist content to Nietzsche's work, which led to Nietzsche's ideas being used by the Nazi Party. Another reason is that the complexity and unordered nature of Nietzsche's work makes it difficult to understand. For example, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [9], Nietzsche expands on his perception of the *Übermensch* in the form of the story of Zarathustra that requires careful thinking by the reader in order to interpret these ideas.

### 3. Conclusion

This essay has argued that Nietzsche's key ideas include the concept of the *Übermensch*, in addition to those of master and slave moralities. Furthermore, these ideas can be found in Nazi ideology, however, it is highly unlikely Nietzsche would have accepted this influence, due to everyone but Hitler within the Nazi party failing to reach the concepts of the *Übermensch* and of master morality. In addition, Nietzsche would have been horrified by Hitler's persecution of large sections of society.

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