

Sovereignty and the Self-Made Superman:
Deconstructing Nietzsche's Übermensch

By Jacqueline Tejada

The dates cannot be pinpointed exactly. China used to claim that their hold on Tibet could be traced back thousands of years; more recently, they assert a mere seven hundred years. However, Tibet tells a different story. Tibet claims that China's hold is far more recent, dating back to approximately sixty years ago. No matter the time frame, Tibet has never been considered an independent, sovereign state by any of the world's leaders. Naturally, the Tibetan people want their nation's sovereignty; like all nations, they, too, have a right to self-determination. As nations and as individuals, this idea of sovereignty governs us all. It is the essence of Mahatma Gandhi's argument for Home-Rule or Self-Rule, it is what Jean-Paul Sartre advocated when he asserted that humans could choose their own fate, and it is what Friedrich Nietzsche idealized in every individual. However, sovereignty is risky. It frees a nation, an individual, to determine its own affairs; but without limits, the boundary between freedom and danger becomes so very thin. Nietzsche's philosophy surrounding the sovereign individual in section two of his second essay "'Guilt,' 'Bad Conscience,' And The Like," is ridden with potentially dangerous misinterpretations of superiority, a lack of anguish, failure to love, and the absence of purpose due to its ambiguous nature, demonstrated through the contrasting lenses of Jean-Paul Sartre's "Existentialism," and Mahatma Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*.

What *is* the sovereign individual? It goes by many names, but for the purposes of this paper it is the idealized human, what a person *should* be. Nietzsche, Sartre, and Gandhi each identify this ideal individual by varying criteria. Nietzsche characterizes this individual as “liberated [...] from morality of custom, autonomous and supramoral,” a human with the “*right to make promises*,” “strong and reliable,” (Nietzsche 147-148). Somewhat akin to this model, Sartre also suggests that this individual has the power to create his own fate, but he goes further with the human ideal to include his despair, his anguish, and his forlornness. In this regard, both Nietzsche and Sartre recognize this individual’s distance from God and contend that he should employ this knowledge in his creative and decision-making processes. Contrastingly, Gandhi’s view of a person ready to undertake self-rule (for self-rule is comparable to sovereignty) is chaste, impoverished, a follower of truth, and one who cultivates fearlessness. These are but a mere three of the countless conceptualizations of this ideal human and no one can determine which is necessarily the best form. However, through Sartre and Gandhi’s contrasting lenses, the dangers of Nietzsche’s conceptualization of the sovereign individual become clearer.

Having “mastery over circumstances, over nature” (Nietzsche 148), any human would certainly feel a sense of superiority over others; Nietzsche even confirms that the sovereign individual *ought* to feel such a way. The benefits of this freedom seem limitless, as do the dangers. Individual with this strong sense of superiority, who only follow the rules that they set for themselves, run the risk of setting themselves above the law. According to Gandhi, “it is unmanly to obey laws that are unjust,” (92). Nietzsche’s sovereign individual would assuredly agree with this claim, although it is unclear whether he would act like a true passive resister as Gandhi envisioned and face the consequences

of disobeying the unjust law. In one person, this does not appear to be a threat. It is easy to imagine that the government could overpower one individual and force him to face the consequences of his actions. Yet, one must wonder what happens when many individuals—hundreds, thousands, millions, entire nations—are so inclined towards a sense of superiority that they believe they can live above the law. Law and order become futile; the ruling government ceases to exist. Gandhi's vision of the passive resister illustrates this danger of superiority in Nietzsche's philosophy.

Accompanied by a keen awareness of his strengths, Nietzsche's sovereign individual is also endowed with the right to make promises; he is a reliable maker of decisions. However, Sartre argues that people should be afflicted with anguish and despair over their decisions since they can never truly know whether they made the best choice. Following Nietzsche's ambiguous characterization, it is unconvincing that such an individual would be beset by the uncertainty of his choices. Nietzsche declares that the sovereign individual is "responsible" but remains vague in details. For this reason, this individual's character appears susceptible to a pride in his judgments that could cater to many dangers. While Nietzsche makes it clear that this individual follows his conscience alone, he also refers to it as the "dominating instinct" (148). However, not every instinct necessarily yields the best outcome. And even if it does, one could never know beyond a shadow of a doubt that any particular choice was in fact the best. Through Sartre's eyes, there is in Nietzsche's philosophy the peril of the individual failing to experience proper anguish and despair for the immense responsibility of choice he has to himself and every human. As Sartre contends, "in choosing myself, I choose man" (347). The extreme self-awareness this individual has of his strengths could dangerously cloud his senses with an

immense pride. The sovereign individual's excessive pride becomes dangerous when he believes that he can act without taking ample consideration for his decisions. Likewise, he runs the risk of obscuring his consideration for others with self-centeredness and arrogance such that he fails to discern how his actions affect others. From Sartre's perspective, the sovereign individual is at risk for lacking anguish and despair for his actions, and since Nietzsche's characterization of this individual is vague, it is unclear whether his notion of responsibility coincides with Sartre's.

Nietzsche's description of the sovereign individual is also deficient in explaining this individual's relationships to others. Nietzsche asserts that the sovereign individual deserves trust, fear, and reverence *from* others but disregards how this individual treats his fellow men. Simply stating that this individual maintains "the right to make promises" does not offer any insight into his feelings concerning his interactions with others. This ambiguity leaves many doors open to the dangers of pride overpowering feelings of love and affection and begs the question: can such a prideful individual love? In relations with others, Gandhi advocated the "love-force" and a constant, selfless pity. Without the details of the sovereign human's interactions with others, yet an extensive description of his self-awareness and pride, it seems that he could fall victim to losing touch with the love-force. Gandhi also strongly believed that "we reap exactly what we sow" (81). Therefore, from Gandhi's perspective, if this sovereign individual cannot love, he will not receive love either. Some may argue that the dangers of this are minimal for a person of this kind, but from Gandhi's point of view, "the universe would disappear without the existence of that [love] force" (89). In other words, humans—even the sovereign ones—would cease to exist without love governing some aspect of their life.

Like Nietzsche, Sartre also fails to acknowledge human behavior in intimate relationships. It is widely known that the two share a similar philosophy of individuals creating their own fate, themselves, and something to be remembered for. However, under a close reading of section two of Nietzsche's essay, it becomes apparent that he fails to acknowledge the importance of the sovereign individual's creation of himself beyond the grave—how he makes a name for himself in his life. This disregard for detail, Sartre would contend, would ultimately mean that the sovereign individual's life is void of meaning. This danger is massive. The meaning of life has so long been searched for that it has almost become cliché; yet, omitting it from a philosophy of an ideal human's life grips the reader with the anticipation of the answer. What does the sovereign individual do with his life? Gandhi already illustrated that he may be incapable of love, thus he will unlikely spend it loving his family and friends. Likewise, Sartre believes that the meaning of life is "the ensemble of [man's] acts" (355), but Nietzsche's sovereign individual appears so preoccupied with being an "emancipated individual" that by the end of his life he will have no ensemble to invoke for meaning.

This is the gravest danger of all: the ideal human without any meaning to his life. *Maybe there is no meaning*, some might respond. Yet this is precisely the danger, for Nietzsche clearly structured the sovereign individual around creativity. He gave him autonomy, a conscience, the right to make promises, free will, the list goes on—and if not for a purpose, then his philosophy would not have even made it onto the paper. If Nietzsche truly meant to imply that the sovereign individual has no purpose in life—which is extremely doubtful considering Nietzsche's reputable philosophy of individuals creating their own fate—then he would have clearly argued so. Given that section two is

left vague and ill defined in other respects as well, this omission of detail only adds to the ambiguous nature of his philosophy that leaves room for such dangerous misinterpretations.

Although a more detailed account of his philosophy in section two would be helpful in clearing up many of the possible misinterpretations, the fault does not lie entirely with Nietzsche. Sovereignty is dangerous in and of itself. The issue surrounding Tibet illustrates how problems with sovereignty do not always present obvious solutions. Furthermore, instances in which the United States has imposed itself as a sovereign state upon others displays some of the more common problems with sovereignty. Sovereignty permits a nation or an individual to determine its own affairs and, by extension, that sovereign entity can freely choose how to interact with other nations or individuals. For example, the war in Iraq demonstrates how a sovereign state, such as the United States, can dangerously misuse its sovereignty. The U.S. perpetuated its affairs in Iraq long after discovering that the decision to engage in war was based on “‘flawed’ information” (BBC). Problems with sovereignty on this national level clearly illustrate that sovereignty is not easily managed and can give rise to an array of dangers. Therefore, it is likely that no matter how thorough Nietzsche had been in his description of his ideal individual, just by calling him “sovereign,” he led the way to dangerous misinterpretations. Yet, after exploring these dangers from Sartre and Gandhi’s eyes, the sovereign individuals does not even come close to measuring up to an “ideal.” Thus, if any sovereign men and women currently exist in the world, we can only hope that they did not fall victim to these dangerous misinterpretations.

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