

# APE



## *Who Is Zarathustra's Ape?*

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The ideal “ape” could one day stand before humanity—as a goal.

*KSA 10:1[38] (July-August 1882)*<sup>1</sup>

Do you merely want to be the ape of your god?

*KSA 13:20[28] (Summer 1888)*

In *The Gay Science*, a book originally published only one year before the first part of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche presents an experimental naturalistic program that can be read as adumbrating the entirety of his philosophical activity. There, having proclaimed the death of God (GS 108, 125) he calls for the “de-deification” of nature, along with the “naturalization” of the human being (GS 109). The first part of this ambitious program requires us to expunge the residual “shadows of God” from our conceptions of nature, rooting out any vestiges of stability, immutability, and purpose—characteristics that Nietzsche sees as wishful “aesthetic anthropomorphisms” and resentful falsifications of the sovereignty of becoming (GS 109). The second part requires that humankind itself be “translate[d] . . . back into nature” (*BGE* 230), in both anthropological and axiological terms.<sup>2</sup> This involves, among other things, a more modest reconceptualization of the human being’s place within the aleatory flux of nature—particularly with regard to the “false order of rank” that we have mendaciously read into our relation to

other animals (GS 115).

Toward this end, Nietzsche generally seizes every opportunity to valorize non-human nature while deflating the self-serving myths of that sick, not-yet-fully-determined ascetic animal, the human being (*BGE* 62, GM 111:13 and 28). The following passage from the *Antichrist(ian)* summarizes this aspect of his naturalism most economically:

We have learned differently. We have become more modest in every way. We no longer derive the human being from “the spirit” or “the deity”; we have placed him back among the animals. We consider him the strongest animal because he is the most cunning: his spirituality is a consequence of this. On the other hand, we oppose the vanity that would raise its head again here too—as if the human being had been the great hidden purpose of the evolution of animals. The human being is by no means the crown of creation: every living being stands beside him on the same level of perfection. And even this is saying too much: relatively speaking, the human being is the most bungled of all the animals, the sickliest, and not one has strayed more dangerously from its instincts. But for all that, he is of course the most *interesting*. (A 14; cf. GM 111:25)

However, if we take Nietzsche’s ostensibly non-hierarchical naturalism at face value, there is at least one respect in which his own writings fall short of this radical vision of nature. For Nietzsche himself consistently and almost systematically disparages what might be seen as the most significant and symbol-laden animal in late nineteenth-century Europe’s psychological bestiary: the ape (*Affe*). This is particularly evident in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, a work dedicated to the affirmation and redemption of the earth, and appropriately, one in which animals are most plentiful and most celebrated. There, unlike the rest of Zarathustra’s myriad beasts (whom Nietzsche for the most part valorizes), the ape is presented alternately as an object of shame, loathing, and derision.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this is because, of all the beasts that appear in this book, the ape is most closely affiliated with the human being in both pre- and post-Darwinian taxonomy. Indeed, in the third part of *Zarathustra*, the figure dubbed “Zarathustra’s ape” turns out to be *human*.<sup>4</sup> But in order to understand the anomalous status of the ape in this book, it is necessary first to trace out the various characteristics and traits that Nietzsche associates with this “all-too-human” beast.

### **The Ape as Representative of the *Pudenda Origo* of the Human**

Nietzsche’s most well-known reference to the ape occurs in the prologue to *Zarathustra*, where his neophyte prophet first attempts to present the doctrine of the *Übermensch* to a less-than-appreciative audience in the town marketplace:

What is the ape to the human being? A laughingstock or a painful embarrassment.  
And the human being shall be that for the *Übermensch*: a laughingstock or a

painful embarrassment. You have made your way from worm to human being, and much in you is still worm. Once you were apes, and even now, too, the human being is more ape than any ape. (*Z*:1, “Prologue,” 3; cf *KSA* 10:4[181] and 10:5[1] 255)

First let us note an obvious fact that misled many of *Zarathustra*’s earliest readers: Nietzsche is in this passage exploiting Darwin’s popularly caricatured, but still scandalous, insight into the human being’s evolutionary descent from primates. Partly as a result of this, Nietzsche has been often been cast as a Darwinian thinker, a misunderstanding that has since for the most part been dispelled.<sup>5</sup> If anything, contemporary readers emphasize his *opposition* to Darwinian conceptions of life. But although Nietzsche attempted to distance himself from the famed English naturalist on a number of philosophical points—and indeed, could not countenance Darwinian interpretations of the *Übermensch* (*EH* “Books” 1)—he nonetheless gladly appropriated Darwin’s overall evolutionary model, along with its more radical implications. These are: (1) that biological nature has a history; (2) that the human being can no longer be understood as essentially other than nature (but rather as a product of chance and necessity, like any other natural organism); and (3) that the deeply entrenched prejudice of human superiority with regard to other species no longer has any legitimate purchase, at least as traditionally conceived.

Given Nietzsche’s “Darwinism” with respect to these matters, it is worth noting in the above-quoted passage the vestigial anthropocentric conceit of human beings as *higher* animals than apes. A similar residual speciesism<sup>6</sup> can be found in other works, even where Nietzsche is obviously trying to naturalize the human being. A few examples will suffice. First, a note from the *Nachlass*, written between the spring and fall of 1881:

The age of the experiment! The assumptions of Darwin have to be tested—through the experiment! Likewise the genesis of higher organisms out of the lowest ones. Experiments must be performed for thousands of years! Apes must be brought up [*erziehen*] to be human beings! (*KSA* 9:11[177])

Note the “false order of rank” that Nietzsche seems to presuppose here: human beings are “higher” organisms, and apes, if not necessarily the “lowest,” are undoubtedly lower on the natural hierarchy. Now admittedly, Nietzsche’s naturalism by no means undermines the very possibility of rank-ordering altogether; indeed, if it were thoroughly non-hierarchical, even with regard to different human types, it would leave his own proclamations and evaluations bereft of any normative leverage whatsoever. However, it would appear to leave him without the conceptual resources necessary to draw a distinction between “higher” and “lower” animals—especially when that distinction is drawn in such a traditional, anthropocentric manner, i.e., between the human being and the ape.

When Nietzsche attempts to establish a general rank-ordering between higher and lower

types, he uses as his evaluative criteria power, health, and sometimes complexity.<sup>7</sup> Assuming that human beings would in most respects be at a disadvantage with regard to the first two criteria,<sup>8</sup> might the last one be used to salvage Platonic and Christian presumptions of human superiority? Even this seems dubious on Nietzschean grounds:

[T]he human being as a species does not represent any progress compared with any other animal. The whole animal and vegetable kingdom does not evolve from the lower to the higher—but all at the same time, in utter disorder, over and against each other. The richest and most complex forms—for the expression “higher types” means no more than this—perish more easily: only the lowest preserve an apparent indestructibility. The former are achieved only rarely and maintain their superiority with difficulty; the latter are favored by a compromising fruitfulness. (KSA 13:14[133]; WP 684)<sup>9</sup>

Note the ambiguity in this passage: even as Nietzsche rejects the notion of evolutionary progress and the possibility of establishing an interspecies hierarchy, he recasts the notion of the “higher type” in terms of complexity. Setting aside Nietzsche’s marked ambivalence about the advantages and disadvantages of complexity, this move appears to be something of a non sequitur. For why would it follow that a more complex organism is necessarily “higher”? Again, we are faced with the question of why Nietzsche reinscribes the false order of rank that he elsewhere so forcefully challenges.

This apparent inconsistency crops up with some frequency in Nietzsche’s published writings as well. Take for instance the following aphorism from the first volume of *Human, All Too Human* (1878):

*Circular orbit of humanity.*—Perhaps the whole of humanity is no more than a stage in the evolution of a certain species of animal of limited duration: so that the human being has emerged from the ape and will return to the ape, while there will be no one present to take any sort of interest in this strange comic conclusion. Just as, with the decline of Roman culture and its principle cause, the spread of Christianity, a general uglification of the human being prevailed within the Roman Empire, so an eventual decline of the general culture of the earth could also introduce a much greater uglification and in the end animalization of the human being to the point of apelikeness [*Affenhafte*].—Precisely because we are able to visualize this prospect we are perhaps in a position to prevent it from occurring. (HH 247)

This aphorism exhibits a dynamic similar to the previous two passages we have examined. Nietzsche begins by experimentally proffering a quasi-cyclical, anti-teleological model of

evolution (one that anticipates his later doctrine of the eternal return), thus undermining the notion of evolution as a kind of goal-driven, linear progression. However, having gestured toward a more modest vision of the human's place within nature, he quickly compromises the radicality of his own suggestion. For the "circular orbit of humanity" is framed in terms of the human being's possible "return" to the ape, a development that is associated with the "decline," "uglification," and "animalization" of the human being. The reversion to "apelikeness" represents a base and ignoble possible future that Nietzsche's language suggests ought to be prevented if at all possible.

Two years later, in the second volume of *Human, All Too Human* (1880), Nietzsche returns to the theme of humanity's place in nature relative to other creatures, again rather traditionally choosing the ape as his foil: "*The human being, the comedian of the world. . . . If a god created the world then he created human beings as the apes of god, so as always to have on hand something to cheer him up in his all-too-protracted eternities. The music of the spheres encompassing the earth would then no doubt be the mocking laughter of all other creatures encompassing humanity*" (WS 14). Once again, this aphorism picks up on the standard motifs of Nietzsche's naturalism, attacking the ideas that the human being stands over against nature (or even that we stand in a unique or particularly high order of rank within nature) and that evolution is a progressively linear and teleological process with the human being as its goal. If the God-hypothesis is experimentally retained (purely for comedic purposes, one assumes), humankind is nonetheless taken down a notch and subjected to the "mocking laughter" of other creatures. But once again, the demotion of the human being, and the demolition of its false order of rank, is predicated upon a residual speciesism. In short, if human beings are now to be reconceived as the "apes of god," then the beasts' mocking laughter is at least in one case self-directed: the joke is still on the ape.

But the question remains whether Nietzsche's own position is as myopic and inadequately thoroughgoing as these passages seem to suggest. In order to address this, I want to draw attention to one more passage. In an aphorism from *Daybreak* (1881), whose title underlines one of the crucial themes of Nietzsche's naturalism—"The new fundamental feeling: our conclusive transitoriness"—he writes:

Formerly one sought the feeling of grandeur of the human being by pointing to its divine *origin*: this has now become a forbidden way, for at its portal stands the ape, together with other gruesome beasts, grinning knowingly as if to say: no further in this direction! One therefore now tries the opposite direction: the way humankind is going shall serve as proof of our grandeur and kinship with god. Alas this, too, is vain! At the end of this way stands the funeral urn of the last human being and gravedigger (with the inscription '*nihil humani a me alienum puto*'). However high humankind may have evolved—and perhaps at the end it will stand even lower than at the beginning!—it cannot pass over into a higher order, as little as the ant and the earwig can at the end of its 'earthly course' rise up to kinship with God and eternal life. The becoming drags the has-been along

with it: why should an exception to this eternal spectacle be made on behalf of some little star or for any little species on it! Away with such sentimentalities!  
(D 49)

Here, as in the Prologue from *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche is more than happy to draw upon the striking Darwinian imagery still fresh in his readers' consciousness. Such a picture, with its unsentimental recognition of the human being's "*puđenda origo*" (D 42, 102) on the one hand, and our "conclusive transitoriness" on the other, is inimical to human pride and vanity. It forces us to abandon the false order of rank in relation to animals and nature that has for so long bestowed upon us a cheap, unearned dignity. No longer can humanity be seduced by the metaphysician's flattering conceit that "you are more, you are higher, you are of different origin!" (BGE 230). But once again, it would seem that this edifying insight is achieved only at the expense of the much-abused ape (now flanked by other beasts) who is relegated to the role of exemplifying our "shameful origins."

Now, having cited these various passages, one must ask whether Nietzsche really thinks that our animal origins are "shameful," and whether humans are really "higher" than the primates. For when we compare the probity and rigor (as well as the surprising cohesiveness) of Nietzsche's naturalism with his more traditional and anthropocentric remarks about apes, the latter seem conceptually insubstantial and incoherent. As we have seen, Nietzsche's naturalism questions the very speciesism that he himself occasionally falls back upon. But precisely because the tension between these two elements is so obvious and explicit, we should be careful not to draw hasty conclusions about the consistency of Nietzsche's thought. It seems unlikely that a thinker as nuanced—and as sensitive to the art of writing—as Nietzsche would have so quickly forgotten his own insights. Rather, when Nietzsche exhumes the traditional anthropocentric assumptions about primates, he is more probably exploiting his readers' popular prejudices for rhetorical effect, while at the same time retaining an ironic distance from such conceits.

However, as we shall see, Nietzsche has other reasons for strategically belittling the ape, the most obvious of which is its behavioral proximity to the human being. In particular, Nietzsche is concerned with the phenomenon of *mimēsis*, which, interestingly, he sees as one of the chief characteristics of both the human and the simian. But in order to examine this dimension of the function of the ape in Nietzsche's texts, we will have to turn our attention to a speech from the third book of *Zarathustra*, which revolves around the figure called "Zarathustra's ape."

### **The Ape as Representative of Superficial Mimicry and Imitation**

We began our inquiry into the status of the ape in Nietzsche's naturalism by looking at Zarathustra's first speech on the *Übermensch*. So far, we have focused only on his characterization of the ape as a "laughingstock or painful embarrassment," something indicative of the "shameful origins" of the human being. But Zarathustra's oration continues with the following observation, which we have not yet examined: "Once you were apes, and



even now, too, the human being is more ape than any ape” (Z:1 “Prologue” 3; cf. KSA 10:3[1]403). Yes, in a manner of speaking, once we were apes, but in what respect is the human being “more ape than any ape”? In order to answer this question, we will need to look at a later speech of Zarathustra’s in book 3 entitled “On Passing By.”

In the third part of the book, as Zarathustra begins winding his way home to his mountain cave, he comes to the gate of an unnamed metropolis known only as “the *great city*.”<sup>10</sup> Here he is confronted by an overzealous disciple who has modeled his activities on Zarathustra, albeit in a course and unflattering way: “[A] foaming fool jumped toward him with outspread hands and barred his way. This, however, was the same fool whom the people called “Zarathustra’s ape”: for he had gathered something of his phrasing and cadences and also liked to borrow from the treasures of his wisdom” (Z: 3, “On Passing By”). Now, if there is one constant in the four books of *Zarathustra*, it is the incapacity of those audiences to whom Zarathustra addresses himself to apprehend fully the radical import of his gradually developing doctrines. Zarathustra’s (presumably human) “ape,” however, represents perhaps the most striking example of the ways in which these doctrines can be misinterpreted and misrepresented. The lengthy and repetitive speech in which he warns Zarathustra to “spit on the city and turn back” is a simplistic caricature of Zarathustra’s political teaching, borrowing decontextualized fragments from some of his earlier speeches, but with a mode of expression that is vulgar and embarrassingly heavy-handed. Without attempting to reconstruct it in its entirety here, we can note that the ape’s speech is marked by two vices: (1) it exemplifies superficial imitation without understanding; and (2) it is motivated by base and ignoble resentment rather than a great love and longing.<sup>11</sup> Zarathustra finally interrupts the ape’s tedious harangue by putting a hand over his mouth. His counter-speech, in which he expresses his own disgust at the ape’s disgust with the city (“I despise your despising,” he retorts), is similarly coarse but nonetheless contains two important insights. First, having identified the desire for revenge at work in his ape’s disparagement of the great city, he ruminates: “But your fool’s words injure me, even where you are right. And even if Zarathustra’s words *were* a thousand times right, still *you* would always *do* wrong with my words” (Z:3 “On Passing By”). Zarathustra’s point here seems quite similar to Kierkegaard’s identification of truth with subjectivity. There are “true” propositions that in the mouths of certain people become untrue, inasmuch as truth is something that must be *lived*. The ape’s words are indeed “right” in two respects: (1) they are in many cases cribbed from Zarathustra’s previous speeches; and (2) the great city *is* as terrible as Zarathustra’s ape claims: Zarathustra himself admits to being nauseated by it. Nonetheless, in existential terms, the ape *does* wrong with Zarathustra’s words. Although superficially similar, the ape’s speech is an expression of resentment rather than great love and longing. Thus, because of the sort of person Zarathustra is, because of his history, because of his inner experience, because of his actions and their motives, his evaluation of the great city is true. Because of the sort of person Zarathustra’s *ape* is, because of *his* history, because of *his* inner experience, because of *his* actions and their motives, the same evaluation is false. This realization—that the existential truth value of a doctrine is contingent upon who expresses it—leads to the second key insight of Zarathustra’s speech, which he offers to his ape as a “parting gift”: “where one can no longer love, there one should *pass by*” (Z:3 “On Passing By”).

What does all this have to do with Zarathustra's prior claim that "the human being is more ape than any ape"? In this speech, we have an example of an individual human being characterized as an ape—presumably because he "apes," or crudely mimics, Zarathustra's teaching instead of creating his own truth, and even worse, imitates it without understanding it either intellectually or emotionally.<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere, Nietzsche similarly characterizes general *types* of people as apes. Actors, for instance, are in Nietzsche's estimation "ideal apes":

*Psychology of actors.*—Great actors have the happy delusion that the historical personages they play really felt as they do when they play them—but they are strongly in error: their power of imitation and divination, which they would dearly love to pretend is a capacity for clairvoyance, penetrates only sufficiently far to understand gestures, tones of voice, facial expressions and the superficial in general; that is to say, they catch the shadow of the soul of a great hero, statesman, warrior, man of ambition, jealousy or despair, they press close to the soul but not into the spirit of their object. . . . [L]et us never forget that the actor is no more than an ideal ape, and so much of an ape that he is incapable of believing in 'essence' or the 'essential': with him everything becomes play, word, gesture, stage, scenery and public. (D 324)

This is an odd passage that plays with residual metaphysical distinctions of appearance and reality, interiority and exteriority, the essential and the accidental. The main point of interest to us, however, is that the actor—like the ape—can only imitate superficial expressions, at most capturing the "shadow" of another's soul [*Seele*], but never the spirit [*Geist*].<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche similarly characterizes various other groups of human beings as apes. Children, for example, are "born apes" who imitate adults' inclinations and aversions and later try to justify their acquired affects (D 34). The French are "apes and mimes" of the English (BGE 253) and the Germans want to be apes like the French, although their "wonderful talent" (i.e., their "peculiar natural inclination for seriousness and profundity [*Schwer- und Tiefsinn*]" ) all too often gets in the way (KSA 7:35[12]).<sup>14</sup> Thus, certain types of human beings, inasmuch as they have a penchant for superficial mimicry, are "apelike." But this is a quality that Nietzsche will at times find in *all* human beings. In a *Nachlass* note from 1880, for instance, he observes, "Imitation, the 'apish' [*das Affische*], is the actual and oldest human quality—to the extent that we eat only the food that tastes good to others. No animal is as much ape as the human being. Perhaps human pity belongs here also, insofar as it is an instinctive, inner imitation" (KSA 9:3[34]).<sup>15</sup> Following the thread of remarks associating apes and imitation, we thus encounter a variant of Zarathustra's earlier observation that the human being is more ape than any ape: "No animal is as much ape as the human being." This *Nachlass* note can, I think, be taken as a kind of missing link between Zarathustra's remark in Z:1 "Prologue" 3 and the significance of Zarathustra's ape in Z:3 "On Passing By": the human being is more ape than any ape because so much of what it is and does is rooted in superficial imitation. But as we shall see, this may not be an altogether bad thing.



## On Nietzschean Ideals: Apes, Camels, Lions, and Children

An examination of the earliest ape references in Nietzsche's writings suggests that his use of this figure was initially drawn from classical Greek sources.<sup>16</sup> For instance, in one of Nietzsche's unpublished notebooks from 1873, we find the following entry: "The wisest human being is an ape in the face of god' Heraclitus" (KSA 7:26[2]).<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche seems to have been quite fond of this fragment. Several entries later, it appears again, this time reformulated in a slightly more Nietzschean spirit: "According to Heraclitus: the cleverest philistine (human being) is an ape in the face of genius (God)" (KSA 7:27[67]; cf. Z:2 "On the Pitying"). Apart from the Heraclitus fragment, Nietzsche occasionally gestures in his early philological writings toward a figure he calls "Heracles' ape." Presumably, Nietzsche was thinking of the *cercôpes*, dwarflike mythical trickster figures famous for their cunning deceit and thievery. In earlier Greek myths, the *cercôpes* are twin brothers (sons of Oceanus and Theia) who attempt to steal Heracles' arms while he sleeps. Heracles awakes and captures them, with the intent of doing them harm, but ultimately lets them go because they amuse him with their clever jokes. In subsequent myths, however, the *cercôpes* (now cast as an entire race rather than two brothers) do not fare so well: they anger Zeus with their trickery and deceit, and he accordingly transforms them into monkeys (see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XIV.88–100; cf. Z:3 "On Passing By"). Most probably, the tale of this metamorphosis, and the figures' popular depiction' as monkeys, grows out of their original name—*cercôpes* means "tailed ones"—which according to most accounts is a function of their cunning and thievery. There is some reason to believe that Zarathustra's ape is at least in part modeled on these mythic figures. However, in Nietzsche's writings, Heracles' "ape"—he uses the singular, for some reason—is associated not so much with cunning and deceit as with thievery and superficial mimicry. He becomes a symbol of those who, instead of creating new works and values, merely imitate the great achievements of the past (or plunder them) without ever really understanding them. Heracles' ape, as Nietzsche describes him, "merely knew how to deck himself out in the ancient pomp" (BT 10; cf. KSA 1:549).

Let us for the moment set aside the ape figure itself, with all its troublesome connotations, and examine the phenomenon that Nietzsche is desecrating here. For surely there is nothing wrong with appreciating the insights and great cultural achievements of the past, or even appropriating them—indeed, Nietzsche himself (qua philologist) was something of a connoisseur in this respect. Nor can one become a creator in the robust Nietzschean sense without first subordinating oneself to the discipline of tradition, i.e., the greatest works of previous creators. Zarathustra himself makes this point quite powerfully in a speech, discussed in numerous other contributions to this volume, entitled "On the Three Metamorphoses," which describes the processes through which "the spirit becomes a camel; and the camel a lion; and the lion, finally a child" (Z:1). Typically, the last two transformations in this allegory—those of the destructive lion and the creative child—are valorized, often at the expense of the rather prosaic camel stage. But seemingly mundane as it may be, this first metamorphosis of the spirit is indispensable to the realization of Zarathustra's ideal: for neither the destruction nor the creation of values is possible without the camel's reverent spirit and initial subordination to the discipline of tradition. The notion, for instance, that a creative genius simply picks up a

musical instrument, bypasses all received conventions, and effortlessly creates the possibility of an entirely novel aesthetic experience is empirically dubious at best. It is only through the tedious and sometimes painful acquisition of pre-existing bodies of knowledge (both intellectual and somatic) that one can ever move beyond them to genuine innovation. And much of this initial ascetic drudgery—what might be characterized as the “prehistory” of aesthetic creativity—is necessarily mechanical and imitative. Our entry into any discipline always involves a good deal of habituation, repetition, and superficial mimicry—not to mention theft—which can perhaps be understood as a sublimated version of the cruelty and stupidity at the bottom of all good things (cf. *BGE* 229 and *GM* II:3). Nietzsche never tired of emphasizing the productive, creative capacities of such subordination; it is only through subjecting oneself for a long time to artificial, “unnatural,” and frustrating constraints that one achieves genuine spontaneity and creative freedom.<sup>18</sup> Such are the “shameful origins” of our highest achievements. Mimicry—understood now as the lowly but necessary origin of all great cultural creativity—is thus not as base and ignoble as Nietzsche/Zarathustra’s rhetoric might lead us to expect.

The problem is not imitation per se, but the inability to move beyond mere imitation. In a *Nachlass* note from the end of 1880, Nietzsche quotes an anonymous Spaniard: “At 40 years man is a camel; at 70 an ape” (*KSA* 9:7[4]). What might Nietzsche have found illuminating about this obscure remark? To make any sense of it we must bear in mind what it is to be a camel in the Nietzschean sense. To be a camel is to be a beast of burden: strong, reverent, willing to take on difficult tasks, willing to subordinate oneself to values and bodies of knowledge created by others, indeed, to incorporate and internalize them, to allow these heteronomous elements to shape and mold oneself. As I have suggested here, this is good—or at least necessary—but it is only the first stage in the productive transfiguration of the human spirit. Unless one pushes beyond this stage, unless one becomes a lion, and then a child, one eventually “devolves” into an ape, thoughtlessly imitating (or stealing from) the great creations of the past, “decking oneself out in the ancient pomp,” incapable of any new creation or even of genuine understanding. As suggested by the figure of Heracles’ ape, there is something frivolous, and perhaps even base, about this. The heritage of great aesthetic and cultural innovations is reduced to a fund of “arts and manners through which life is made pretty,” rather than something “through which life is transfigured and illuminated” (*KSA* 7:35[12]).<sup>19</sup> The trick, then, is to subordinate oneself provisionally to past cultural achievements without remaining forever at the level of slavish imitation or parasitic appropriation. Indeed, Nietzsche seems to suggest that only through further creative innovation (which necessarily involves a destructive overcoming) can we understand and appreciate those achievements in the first place. “To have joy in originality without becoming the ape of it,” he observes, “will be perhaps one day be the sign of a new culture” (*KSA* 9:3[151]).

As we have seen in the course of this chapter, Nietzsche primarily associates the figure of the ape with shameful origins and superficial mimicry. However, as I have argued, the ape, understood as an ineliminable moment in our natural history (our collective “becoming”), and imitation, understood as a necessary formative stage in our individual becoming, turn out to be considerably more important to Nietzsche’s own thought than his rhetoric might initially

suggest. A truly thoroughgoing naturalism of the kind Nietzsche envisioned would need to affirm these things just as much as what might arise out of them. Of course, within the allegory of the “Three Metamorphoses,” the telos of Zarathustra’s nomothetic legislation is the child, a figure typically identified with the *Übermensch*: “The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a wheel rolling out of itself, a first movement, a sacred ‘Yes’” (Z:1 “On the Three Metamorphoses”). One could argue that this passage constitutes a kind of thumbnail sketch, not only of the Zarathustrian ideal of the *Übermensch* (in relation to which the human being stands as the ape stands to the human being) but also the more modest and realistic “ideals” one finds scattered throughout Nietzsche’s other writings: e.g., the genius, the sovereign individual, the great human being.<sup>20</sup> Such creatures, on Nietzsche’s quasi-Heraclitean account, seem as far from the ordinary human being as a god is from an ape.<sup>21</sup> They are, in a manner of speaking, this-worldly “gods” in Nietzsche’s new de-deified nature: like Heraclitus’s image of *aiôn* as a “playing child,” they represent a “sacred ‘Yes’” in the “game of creation.”<sup>22</sup> But although Nietzsche’s later works retain vestiges of such a nomothetic telos (e.g., *TI* “Skirmishes” 44, 48 and 49; and *A* 3–4), he seems to grow increasingly suspicious of the abuse and misrepresentation to which such ideals are invariably subject. Will the human being ever overcome its own “apishness”?<sup>23</sup> Or does “the becoming drag the has-been along with it” (*D* 49), as Nietzsche once suggested? As his productive career drew to a close, amid all the cheerful and immodest hyperbole of the 1888 works, one can nonetheless detect a note of resignation: “The disappointed one speaks. I searched for great human beings; I always found only the apes of their ideals” (*TI* “Maxims” 39).<sup>24</sup>

## Notes

- 1 With the exception of occasional emendations in favor of greater literalness, I rely chiefly on Walter Kaufmann’s translations for Viking Press/Random House and R.J. Hollingdale’s translations for Cambridge University Press. Translations from *KSA* are my own.
- 2 To get a sense of what this entails, see *BGE* 9, 188, and 230, and the introduction to this volume.
- 3 One other exception is noteworthy here: the tarantula (Z:2 “On the Tarantulas”).
- 4 The only other exception is the leech [*Blutegel*], from the satirical and deliberately unpublished fourth part of *Zarathustra* (Z:4 “The Leech”).
- 5 For an excellent discussion of Nietzsche’s proximity and opposition to Darwin, see Keith Ansell-Pearson, “Nietzsche contra Darwin,” in *Nietzsche: Critical Assessments*, ed. Daniel W. Conway with Peter S. Groff (London: Routledge, 1998), 4:7–31.
- 6 I rely here upon Richard Ryder’s awkward, but nonetheless useful, coinage. See his seminal essay “Experiments on Animals,” in *Animals, Men and Morals*, ed. Stanley and Roslind Godlovitch and John Harris (New York: Taplinger Pub. Co., 1972), 81, as well as his book *Victims of Science* (London: Davis-Poynter, 1975), 16.

7 See e.g., *KSA* 12:7[9]/*WP* 644, *KSA* 12:2[76]/*WP* 660, and *KSA* 13:14[133]/*WP* 684. Compare *SE* 6 and *TI* “Skirmishes” 14.

8 But compare *A* 14 for another perspective.

9 The passage continues, with a focus on the human: “Among human beings, too, the higher types, the lucky strokes of evolution, perish most easily as fortunes change. They are exposed to every kind of decadence: they are extreme, and that almost means decadent. . . . This is not due to any special fatality or malevolence of nature, but simply to the concept ‘higher type’: the higher type represents an incomparably greater complexity—a greater sum of coordinated elements: so its disintegration is also incomparably more likely. The ‘genius’ is the sublimest machine there is—consequently the most fragile.”

10 The “great city” is *not* Zarathustra’s beloved town, “The Motley Cow,” a detail that is made clear in the subsequent section (*Z*:3 “On Apostates”).

11 Various commentators have drawn attention to the fact that the ape’s vulgarization is a bit too close for comfort. See, for example, Laurence Lampert, *Nietzsche’s Teaching: An Interpretation of Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986), 165. Stanley Rosen takes a more critical stance in his *The Mask of Enlightenment: Nietzsche’s Zarathustra* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 191–192.

12 Michel Foucault links Zarathustra’s ape to the “shameful origins” motif examined earlier in his “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 143.

13 Although Nietzsche sometimes characterizes consciousness [*Bewusstsein*] as a “surface,” he generally associates spirit [*Geist*] with depth [*Tiefe*] and interiority.

14 Not surprisingly, Richard Wagner (that most Germanic of composers) has his own “clever apes” (*CW*, Second Afterword). Numerous peripheral remarks reinforce this connection between imitation and apelikeness in Nietzsche’s writings, e.g., *KSA* 11:26[460].

15 For the sake of economy, I eschew discussion of Nietzsche’s suggestive hypothesis, casually introduced at the end of this *Nachlass* note, that the ostensibly deep, interior experience of pity or compassion [*Mitleiden*, literally “suffering with”] is itself a kind of “instinctive, inner imitation.” Those wishing to pursue the topic might consult *BGE* 222, *HH* 247, and *Z*:3 “On Passing By.” Considering the link between pity and imitation, it is no surprise that Nietzsche disparagingly characterizes the ape as a herd animal (*KSA* 9:11[130]). Ironically, he even suggests that apes “anticipate the human being” in their penchant for cruel and pleasurable penal practices in *GM* II:6.

16 The first four references to the ape in Nietzsche’s corpus are to be found in the unpublished

lecture from 1870 entitled “Socrates and Tragedy,” *The Birth of Tragedy* 10, and two entries in the *Nachlass*, circa 1873, *KSA* 7:26[2] and 27[67]. All draw upon classical sources, i.e., a Heraclitus fragment and a myth of Heracles.

17 Cf. H. Diels and W Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Berlin, 1952), 22B fragments 82–83 and Charles Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 173–174. It should be noted, however, that *kallistos* can also be translated as “noble,” and *aischros* as “base,” a resonance that Nietzsche certainly would have been attuned to. It is unclear whether this gnomic pronouncement is attributable to Heraclitus: the fragment is questionable, in part because it is culled from Plato, *Hippias Major* 289a, a dialogue the authenticity of which is disputed.

18 For some passages where Nietzsche emphasizes the importance of subjecting oneself to constraint as a means of achieving a higher naturalness, spontaneity, or freedom, see *KSA* 7:29[118 and 119], *KSA* 8:23[7], *HH* 221 and 278, *Z*:1 “On the Thousand and One Goals,” *GS* 341 and 377, and *BGE* 188 and 225.

19 Compare *HL* 10, where Nietzsche claims that “culture can be something other than the decoration of life.” As opposed to the Roman notion of culture as ornamentation and concealment (“mere dissimulation and disguise”), he appropriates the classical Greek conception of culture as “transfigured *physis*” (*SE* 3) and even a “new and improved *physis*” (*HL* 10).

20 For a good treatment of the difference between Zarathustra’s “ideal” and ideals articulated in Nietzsche’s other books, see Daniel W Conway, “The Genius as Squanderer: Some Remarks on the *Übermensch* and Higher Humanity,” *International Studies in Philosophy* 30, no. 3 (1998): 81–96.

21 Some human beings are awkwardly situated between god and ape, for example, Paganini, Liszt, and Wagner, whom Nietzsche characterizes as “dubiously placed in the middle between ‘god’ and ‘ape’ . . . determined equally for ‘imitation’ as for invention, for creation in the art of imitation” (*KSA* 11:41[2]).

22 Compare *PTA* 6; *KSA* 12:2[130]/*WP* 797; and *Z*:3 “Before Sunrise.” Also see Diels and Krantz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 22B, fragment 52.

23 The answer to this question depends in part upon how we understand “overcoming” and “self-overcoming” in Nietzsche’s texts. Nietzsche himself uses two different terms to express this idea: *Selbstüberwindung* and *Selbstaufhebung*, the second of which has more pronounced Hegelian connotations. I take this as suggesting that the self-overcoming of the human entails not only destruction but also at the same time a preservation and lifting up of what is most important.

24 I would like to thank my colleagues Jeff Turner and Mark Padilla, as well as my research

assistant, Kelly Rhoads, whose helpful input during the writing of this chapter is greatly appreciated.