

# A (R)evaluation of Nietzsche’s Anti-democratic Pedagogy: The Overman, Perspectivism, and Self-overcoming

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**Abstract** In this paper, I argue that Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of self-overcoming has been largely misinterpreted in the philosophy of education journals. The misinterpretation partially stems from a misconstruction of Nietzsche’s perspectivism, and leads to a conception of self-overcoming that is inconsistent with Nietzsche’s educational ideals. To show this, I examine some of the prominent features of the so-called “debate” of the 1980s surrounding Nietzsche’s conception of self-overcoming. I then offer an alternative conception that is more consistent with Nietzsche’s thought, and provides a more nuanced understanding of Nietzsche’s “anti-democratic” pedagogy. Ultimately, I argue that while Nietzsche’s educational philosophy is not egalitarian, it can be effectively utilized in “democratic” classrooms, assuming his concept of self-overcoming is properly construed.

**Keywords** Nietzsche · Self-overcoming · Self-mastery · Perspectivism · Overman · Will to power · Education · Pedagogy

## Introduction

Fennell’s (2005) article “Nietzsche Contra ‘Self-reformulation,’” is one of the most important articles on Nietzsche’s educational philosophy to appear in the last 30 years. Fennell’s paper—which was a response to Bingham’s (2001) article—demonstrated the fundamental incoherence of the concept of “self-reformulation,” raised doubts about Nietzsche’s supposed relativism, and argued persuasively against the view that Nietzsche’s philosophy of education should be divided into an “early” and “late” period.<sup>1</sup> There are

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<sup>1</sup> Bingham wrote a short but spirited reply in which he defended not so much the *cogency* of his interpretation of Nietzsche but his *method* of expressing that interpretation. While he therefore did little to keep the dialogue between him and Fennell alive, he offered a moving portrait of two fellow educators—rooted in their own incommensurable traditions—doing their own part to share Nietzsche with their students and the world.

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two areas in which he could have gone further, however. The first is that while Fennell offers a powerful argument against the dogma of self-reformulation, he does not address the fact that Nietzsche repeatedly refers to the concept of “self-overcoming” in his works. The argument for self-reformulation has its roots in the concept of self-overcoming, and if one wants to completely rectify the confusion concerning self-reformulation, it is necessary to also rectify the confusion concerning self-overcoming—a confusion that has a significant history in the scholarship surrounding Nietzsche’s educational philosophy. The second point follows from the first. Because Fennell does not address the concept of self-overcoming, he misconstrues the “anti-democratic” nature of Nietzsche’s educational philosophy. Understood properly, Nietzsche’s philosophy of self-overcoming provides a powerful methodology for American-style democratic classrooms—a methodology based on the cultivation of self-mastery.<sup>2</sup>

The first half of this article will do what Fennell did not do: to identify the historical antecedents to self-reformulation and to provide an alternative to them. In doing this, I will leave Fennell’s argument temporarily and examine the arguments for self-overcoming made by Aharon Aviram, James Hillesheim, and Eliyahu Rosenow. I will argue that self-overcoming is not the recreating of selfhood, nor the radical rejection of one’s internalized moral convictions, but something much closer to the traditional sense of self-mastery.<sup>3</sup> In this I agree with Walter Kaufmann who asserts that the goal of self-overcoming is *not* self-realization or self-transcendence or self-reformulation—but self-mastery through sublimation: the act of restraining and overcoming our passions and desires so that the energy found therein can be channeled into more life-affirming activities. The ultimate form of life-affirmation is the ability not to be governed by our desires, nor to extirpate them, but to master them and use them in ways that promote further self-mastery.

After presenting my interpretation of self-overcoming, I will return to Fennell’s article arguing that if we consider Nietzsche’s self-overcoming in light of self-mastery, it is possible to employ a Nietzschean education in democratic classrooms, even if we cannot employ it for the entire educational system. If Nietzsche thinks that all individuals are motivated by the will to power (a premise I will argue for), and if he believes the will to power is most adequately expressed in self-mastery (another premise I will argue for), and if he believes that education can be structured in a way that promotes self-mastery of all students without the diminution of self-mastery of the masters (yet another premise I will argue for), then all individuals who experience such an education can, theoretically at least, develop increasing degrees of self-mastery. Thus, while Fennell is correct in his assessment of Nietzsche’s pessimism concerning the possibility that the masses as a whole can be educated to be geniuses, artists and saints, he is not correct in his belief that Nietzsche would not advocate an attempt by individual teachers to inculcate self-mastery in their classrooms. To demonstrate this, I will look carefully at Fennell’s argument for

<sup>2</sup> In making this claim I do not assert that the entire education system, or even entire schools, can utilize Nietzsche’s pedagogy. I agree with Johnston (1998), when he argues that “there are too many hurdles, too many philosophical, social, and political difficulties, for a systematic adoption of a “Nietzschean” education at the university, state, or national levels” (p. 68). I disagree, however, with Johnston when he goes on to claim that the production of the self-overcoming individual is antithetical to education (p. 82). As I will illustrate in my assessment of Fennell’s arguments concerning Nietzsche’s anti-democratic educational views, individual classroom teachers can help cultivate self-overcoming in their students.

<sup>3</sup> By “traditional” I mean the concept of self-mastery that refers to the moderation of one’s passions and desires by one’s rational faculty. Nietzsche’s concept is distinct from the traditional, but it shares more with it than the alternative notions of self-overcoming that I will examine.

Nietzsche's "elitism" and offer an alternative reading of the very passages Fennell cites, as well as advance other passages which support my position.<sup>4</sup>

### Aviram's Misunderstanding Concerning the Overman, Perspectivism, and Self-identity

In his article "Nietzsche as Educator," Aviram (1991) weighed in on a "debate" about Nietzsche's educational philosophy throughout the 1980s. His goal was to illuminate the inconsistencies and contradictions in Nietzsche's various points of view and thereby reconcile the competing positions in the debate. His article was extremely ambitious and does identify some of the ambiguities in Nietzsche's philosophy, ambiguities that were fueling the debates. There is one point which requires further discussion: Nietzsche's concept of self-overcoming. While Aviram did a remarkable job of illustrating some of the tensions within the debate, his ultimate conclusion regarding self-overcoming—that it is the ability to reject one's own self-identity—is untenable. This misconception is important to understand because it is also forms the basis of the concept of self-reformulation which Fennell justly challenges. Self-reformulation and Aviram's understanding of self-overcoming are founded on a misconception of Nietzsche's concept of perspectivism and his repudiation of the transcendent self.

Aviram begins his analysis of self-overcoming by a general definition of what it means: "'Self-overcoming' suggests the subjection of one layer of the individual's personality to another" (p. 220). This notion of self-overcoming is vague and therefore Aviram offers further elaboration. His explanation leads to a very thorough, highly delineated explication of the various senses of the epistemological, ontological and psychological aspects of both *authenticity* and *self-overcoming*. Within each of these senses there are further subdivisions, qualifications and elaborations. In order to understand his analysis one has to keep track of a vast number of categories and definitions on the way to Aviram's ultimate formulation of self-overcoming. Fortunately, for the purposes of my argument, it is not necessary to outline all of these categories and definitions. Instead, I will focus on the final formulation of the two types of self-overcoming and illustrate the fundamental problem with them.

Aviram distinguishes between two types of self-overcoming. There is self-overcoming found in what he calls "overman (a)" and the self-overcoming found in what he calls "overman (b)".<sup>5</sup> While he offers two versions of the overman, he believes overman (b) to be the "real" overman (p. 224). Overman (b) is the individual who aspires "to eliminate his subjective ego" (p. 223) and who provides the "maximal expression of the...will to power...once...he surrenders his subjective shadow ego" (ibid.), and who is "capable of acknowledging that he has no particular identity" (p. 224). Aviram bases these claims on

<sup>4</sup> In highlighting some of the shortcomings of Fennell's article, I do not wish to be perceived as repudiating all of Fennell's arguments. On the contrary, I support the majority of his theses, and, in fact, find them to be an excellent corrective to some of the trends in the philosophy of education journals regarding Nietzsche's thought.

<sup>5</sup> This raises the first problem with Aviram's paper. Aviram uses "overman" to signify not an ideal that transcends man as he currently is, but as an achievable human ideal. He claims that he is justified in using "overman" in a very general sense, not as a superhuman individual who does not exist, but as a "higher" man, a human full of self-overcoming. Since Nietzsche clearly distinguishes between the higher men and the overmen, I think it is problematic to use the term "overman" for both. However, for the sake of the analysis of Aviram's argument I will continue to use the overman as if it were a realizable ideal.

what he considers to be one of Nietzsche's underlying metaphysical principles, namely the "universal principle of the eternal change of perspectives" (p. 225). According to Aviram, one of Nietzsche's central tenets is perspectivism, which posits the radical relativity of human perception (p. 223). All humans apprehend the world from their own perspective and have no basis by which to evaluate other perspectives. For Aviram's Nietzsche, any perspective is as good and as any other. The overmen are the ones who recognize this fact and live in a perpetual self-reformulation in which they favor one "arbitrary" (p. 224) perspective after the next, and in so doing repeatedly redefine who they are based on the continual and arbitrary change of perspectives. To become an overman of the highest type one must be able to utilize various perspectives to subject one layer of one's personality to another layer.

Aviram realizes, however, that this interpretation does not entirely square with what Nietzsche affirms about the overman. He recognizes that Nietzsche frequently offers images of the overman which are dominated by a particular perspective, rejecting all others. To rectify this problem he systematically explains what Nietzsche means by his other versions of the overman, thus creating a hierarchy of overmen, in which various versions are at different places along a continuum (pp. 224–226). The problem is that not only is his distinction dubious—a careful analysis, for instance, reveals that the priests would be considered overmen on Aviram's interpretation—but is completely unnecessary.

Aviram's misstep begins when he asserts: "On the epistemological level...there is the contradiction between Nietzsche's perspectivism, on the one hand and his positive and categorical presentation of the overman as the only human ideal worth striving towards, on the other" (p. 221). It is the former—perspectivism—that leads Aviram into his confusion. Aviram misconstrues perspectivism and therefore sees a contradiction between it and the overman. He sees Nietzsche as promoting the overman as the ideal being who embodies certain intellectual, moral and physical qualities that should be emulated, but then seeks to overcome this interpretation because it supposedly is inconsistent with perspectivism. This is not the case however; properly understood, perspectivism is not inconsistent with Nietzsche's concept of the overman but actually supports it.

The problem stems from the fact that Aviram gives the collection of Nietzsche's (1911/1968c) notes entitled *The Will to Power* equal status as Nietzsche's published works. The ideas expressed in *The Will to Power* can serve to illuminate concepts in the published works, but they should never define them.<sup>6</sup> They are, after all, jottings in Nietzsche's notebooks that may or may not have been intended for publication. If the ideas in *The Will to Power* conflict with the ideas in the published works, one must rely on the latter to define the readings of the former. Thus, when one comes to the concept of perspectivism and its relationship to the overman, one must rely primarily on the published works. This is something Aviram does not do. He uses the concept of the *overman* found in the published works, but uses the concept of *perspectivism* found in *The Will to Power*. In fact, every one of his references to perspectivism is from *The Will to Power*. This embroils him in the supposed contradiction between perspectivism and the ideal of the overman.

<sup>6</sup> This fact is echoed by Solomon and Higgins (2000) when they say: "A curious perversion in Nietzsche scholarship is that some commentators have preferred Nietzsche's scrambled notes to his masterful publications" (p. 83). Other authors who oppose the unrestricted use of Nietzsche's *Nachlass* include Magnus (1988), Clark (1990), Alderman (1977), and Leiter (1994).

Nietzsche's concept of perspectivism found in *The Will to Power* is, for the most part, more radical than the concept in the published works. Why is that? We can never know with certainty. All we know is that the generally weaker form found in the published works is what he wanted the public to see. This does not mean that the radical version cannot inform our understanding of the published version. But it can inform our understanding of the published version only if it does not undermine other aspects of the published works. Unfortunately, the relativistic perspectivism found in the *Will to Power* does undermine the published works, especially if one carefully reads *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Essay III, Section 12 (hereafter referred to as GM, III, 12),<sup>7</sup> where we find what is probably the most frequently quoted passage on perspectivism: "There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective 'knowing.'" At first glance, it appears that this passage supports the relativistic reading so often found in *The Will to Power*. However, upon closer inspection of the entire passage we find that contrary to leading to a radical "relativization" of truth, our multiple perspectives lead us back to the possibility that some things are truer than others.<sup>8</sup>

To understand this passage we must first recognize that the passage is an attack on the ascetic men. These individuals seek to reify the concept of "self" into an abstracted, ontologically independent entity that never changes. This is anathema to Nietzsche for at least two reasons. The first is that it denies the growth of power in the individual, the fundamental condition for human flourishing. The second is that it denigrates human reason and attempts to destroy the concept of self.

Suppose such an incarnate will to contradiction and antinaturalness [of the ascetic ideal] is induced to *philosophize*: upon what will it vent its innermost contrariness: Upon what is felt most certainly to be real and actual: it will look for error precisely where the instinct of life most unconditionally posits truth. It will, for example, like the ascetics of the Vedanta philosophy, downgrade physicality to an illusion; likewise pain, multiplicity, the entire conceptual antithesis "subject" and "object"—errors, nothing but errors! To renounce belief in one's ego, to deny one's own "reality"—what a triumph! Not merely over the senses, over appearance, but a much higher kind of triumph, a violation and a cruelty against *reason*—a voluptuous pleasure that reaches its height when the ascetic contempt and self-mockery of reason declares: "*there is* a realm of truth and being, but reason is *excluded* from it!" (GM, III, 12)

Nietzsche claims that it is the disembodied notion of reason that is so contemptible and false about this ascetic ideal. By attempting to seek a disembodied perspective the ascetic ideal acknowledges truth only when the fallibility of our human reason is transcended; but since we are always embodied, our human reason can never be transcended; thus, the ascetics have actually made knowledge an impossibility. For Nietzsche, knowledge comes not from escaping human reason but employing it, employing it in its manifold ways of apprehending the world. Reason is found not only in our ratiocination but also in our emotions, imagination, sensations, and so on (D, 109; GS, 2–3). Nietzsche

<sup>7</sup> References for all of Nietzsche's texts will be abbreviated according to the following: A (*The Antichrist*), BGE (*Beyond Good and Evil*), D (*Daybreak*), EH (*Ecce Homo*) FE (*On the Future of our Educational Institutions*), GM (*On the Genealogy of Morals*), GS (*The Gay Science*), HH (*Human, all too Human*), SE (*Schopenhauer as Educator*), TI (*Twilight of the Idols*). References for all passages will use section numbers rather than page numbers with the exception of SE and FE.

<sup>8</sup> For a thorough explication of this passage and its implications for perspectivism and Nietzsche's criteria for truth, see Clark (1990) and Leiter (1994).

illuminates this later in the passage when he argues that it takes “no small discipline and preparation of the intellect for its future ‘objectivity’—the latter understood not as a ‘contemplation without interest’ (which is a nonsensical absurdity), but as the ability to control one’s Pro and Con and to dispose of them, so that one knows how to employ a *variety* of perspectives and affective interpretations in the service of knowledge.” On first glance, this last section appears to corroborate Aviram’s (1991) formulation of perspectivism as “radical relativism” (p. 223). But closer analysis reveals that not all perspectives are of equal value. According to GM, III, 12, perspectives have to be managed carefully if they are to be used “in the service of knowledge.” We see this when we read on in GM, III, 12.

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”; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our “concept” of this thing, our “objectivity” be.

It is only because we have an affective component to our reason that we are able to continually refine our understanding our concepts. If our reason was disembodied our knowledge would be static and therefore our increase of power would be denied. The goal of having diverse perspectives is not to encourage the “arbitrary changing of socially defined life-styles” (p. 224) that Aviram (1991) recommends, but to choose perspectives that increase and refine our knowledge. As we shall see shortly, the service of knowledge is another way of saying “in the service of power”—the ultimate goal of the overman through self-overcoming.

To summarize, in spite of the relativity Nietzsche seems to advocate in “there is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective ‘knowing,’” he is actually a modified realist. His objection to the ascetic men is not that they think that there *is* an objective world that can be discovered, but that they *do not* think there is an objective world to be discovered. By believing that knowledge can only be obtained by escaping our senses, the ascetic men deny our access to it. Nietzsche wants to rectify this. He believes that embodied reason provides humans with the ability to view things from different points of view, which allows them to form more complete understanding of the objects. This further allows us to determine which perspectives better reflect that more complete understanding and which do not. Of course, as indicated previously, this does not mean that Nietzsche thinks a human being can ever have a perspective that is not possible to improve. Even the most sophisticated perspectives can potentially be refined an infinite number of times. The essential point is, however, that Nietzsche’s perspectivism is meant to deny our notion of “objective” knowledge (as a Gods-eye, perspective-neutral perception), not preclude knowledge and truth altogether.

Aviram’s misconception of perspectivism also leads him to believe that it necessitates the denial of the self, when the opposite is the case. In GM, III, 12, Nietzsche explicitly scoffs at those ascetics who would try to eliminate the ego, to “deny one’s reality.” There could hardly be a more clear statement of his rejection of the notion

that the self is illusory or unreal. Rather than arguing that perspectivism leads to the denial of a self, Nietzsche thinks that perspectivism is what prevents us from following the ascetics in saying that the ego is false, illusory, or unreliable. Perspectivism leads us back to the self by repudiating the notion of the transcendent self. Nietzsche believes in vital and evolving selves—not in the eternal, changeless and static selves of Descartes and Kant.

Nietzsche does reject the notion of an ontologically independent “self” behind our actions. He asserts for instance in a much quoted passage: “But there is no such substratum; there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything” (GM, I, 13). While this seems like an overt statement of the non-identity of the self, it is actually only a refutation of a neutral, independent, unembodied, unemotional entity that can objectively choose between a variety of actions. In other words, Nietzsche is repudiating a Cartesian notion of the self. This is seen if we read a few lines immediately preceding the previously quoted passage. “For just as the popular mind separates the lightning from its flash and takes the latter for an *action*, for the operation of a subject called lightning, so popular morality also separates strength from expressions of strength, as if there were a neutral substratum behind the strong man, which was free to express strength or not to do so” (ibid.). The operative word is *neutral*. There is no neutral, unbiased and ontologically independent entity behind our actions. There is, however—and this is extremely important—a *self* behind our actions, but it is a self that is, as we shall see, dominated by the will to power. The self cannot be abstracted from power because the self *is* power. But does this not prove that there is no self-identity? On the contrary, if there is no self, there is no power; if there is no power there is no self. Thus, the notion that individuals can simply try on different selves as if they were masks is repudiated. The strong individual self—if she is truly strong—will not try to abdicate her self-identity as if it were a mask, but will find ways to make her self-identity stronger. Contrary to what is implied by Aviram's (1991) position, an individual does not reach the status of the overman once he is “psychologically capable of acknowledging that he has no particular identity” (p. 224). As I will argue in subsequent sections, he approaches the status of the overman when he consistently chooses activities which expand the power of his self.

From this analysis we see that the Aviram's supposed contradiction between Nietzsche's perspectivism and the ideal of the overman is misconstrued. There *is* no contradiction. Perspectivism, properly understood, is consistent with the overman because the overman is the ideal being who, through the ability to take different perspectives, always chooses activities that make her more powerful. Perspectivism is not the foundation for the belief that there is no self but rather that there *is* a self: a self that can either be strengthened or diminished—and only perspectivism will best achieve this end.

Having arrived at the end of my analysis of Aviram's misconstruction of self-overcoming, and before I offer an alternative conception of self-overcoming, it will be helpful to briefly examine the debate to which Aviram was responding. The debate is important because it reveals the other pole of interpretation concerning self-overcoming. While Aviram holds that self-overcoming entails the non-identity of the self, Rosenow and Hillesheim argue that self-overcoming necessitates a radical break with all of one's personal and cultural values. Rosenow and Hillesheim understand that Nietzsche does not advocate the loss of self-identity; however, they partially misconstrue Nietzsche's “revaluation” of the traditional concept of self-mastery.

### The Misconstruction of Self-overcoming in Hillesheim and Rosenow

In writing his article, Aviram was hoping to resolve the debate in the educational journals concerning self-overcoming. Two of the principal factions within the debate were James Hillesheim and Eliyahu Rosenow. Hillesheim and Rosenow traded articles over a 4-year period in which they attempted to explain Nietzsche's position regarding self-overcoming. Hillesheim (1986), in the article entitled "Suffering and Self-cultivation: The Case of Nietzsche," argued that Nietzsche's concept of self-overcoming could be appropriated in the classroom. Hillesheim's argument rested on the belief that self-overcoming (Hillesheim actually used the translation 'self-surpassing') could be used as the "universal principle of individual creativity" (p. 173). He claimed that "with the doctrine of man as something 'unfinished,' as a being with the potential to be forever transcending itself, Nietzsche has provided us with the one essential ingredient of a philosophy of education—a vision of "what man can become" (ibid.). "What man can become" is a forever self-realizing and self-transcending being whose main goal is perpetual creativity and self-creativity.

Rosenow (1989) responded to Hillesheim in a paper published 3 years later called "Nietzsche's Educational Dynamite." In that paper, Rosenow argued that Hillesheim was incorrect to translate *Selbstüberwindung* and *Selbstaufhebung* as 'self-surpassing' because it failed to take into account the fact that Nietzsche did not want to improve the self through self-creation but deconstruct the self through "overcoming and annihilating the self" (p. 308). Rosenow's main argument rests on his conviction that "Nietzsche's self-overcoming is a rendering—or, to use his terms, a revision and "revaluation"—of the traditional concept of self-mastery or self-control" (pp. 308–309). For Rosenow, self-mastery is the ability to use reason to overcome one's passions in support of morality and social conventions.

The traditional concept of self-mastery was based on the dualistic notion of the self, where our desires and passions were in a constant struggle with our rationality and reason. Traditionally, reason was seen as the highest and most important component of a human being. A being was human to the degree that he or she was reasonable. On the other hand, the bodily passions and desires of the human were seen to be unruly and animalistic. To be human, reason must subjugate the passions. To give into the desires of the body was to be enslaved; to be free meant that reason must master the passions. Education was seen as the social institution which trained students in the use of their reason so that they could learn to overcome their "evil" instincts, thereby becoming human and a full-fledged member of society.

Rosenow asserts that this traditional picture of self-mastery is denied by Nietzsche. Self-overcoming is nearly the opposite of self-mastery, claims Rosenow. He argues that Nietzsche opposes this sense of self mastery and instead advocates the throwing off of the rational strictures that limit the expression of our animalistic selves. Ultimately, Rosenow argues that self-overcoming (as opposed to self-mastery) is therefore dangerous: "[O]vercoming morality, reason, and the conventions of cultural tradition is a dangerous enterprise. Nietzsche, who repeatedly refers to himself as a psychologist who is familiar with human nature, is well aware of this. If authenticity can be gained by giving up reason and by surpassing morality, then man may throw off all restraints and set free his most sinister impulses" (p. 311). Thus, unlike Hillesheim, Rosenow thinks that self-overcoming is not something that should be haphazardly introduced into education.

Hillesheim (1990) responded to Rosenow the following year in "Nietzschean Images of Self-overcoming: Response to Rosenow." In his response, Hillesheim agrees that



“traditional educational thought has made much of the concept of ‘self-mastery’ or ‘self control’ and that it is this doctrine that Nietzsche challenges” (p. 212). Hillesheim also agrees that self-overcoming entails the negation or discarding of the self. Hillesheim thinks, however, that there is a way of mitigating some of the consequences that Rosenow fears.

If one is to embark on this dangerous journey of self-overcoming, or if one wishes to guide others, there is something that one can do to minimize the risks by providing direction and encouragement. This can be done, Nietzsche argues, through the use of example, through images of people who have created selves worthy of attention and possible emulation—that is people, real or imaginary, who are worthy of being our educators. (p. 213)

The point in bringing up this debate between Rosenow and Hillesheim is that they explicitly and clearly lay out the recurrent conception of self-overcoming found in the philosophy of education literature, a conception that I will challenge.<sup>9</sup> The belief that Nietzsche regards self-overcoming as the mere recreation of the self in any manner is problematic. For Nietzsche, self-overcoming is, contrary to Hillesheim and Rosenow, much closer to the traditional notion of self-mastery. We see this explicitly in the following: “A lack of self-mastery in small things brings about a crumbling of the capacity for it in great ones. Every day is ill employed, and a danger for the next day, in which one has not denied oneself some small thing at least once: this gymnastic is indispensable if one wants to preserve in oneself the joy of being one’s own master” (HH, “The Wanderer and his Shadow,” 305). The notions of self-creation, self-surpassing, self-realization, self-transcendence, or self-reformulation (all words used to describe self-overcoming in the philosophy of education journals) misses the true import of Nietzsche’s conception: power.<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that self-overcoming *is* the traditional concept of self-mastery. Rather, it is a modification: it replaces the old foundations of Judeo-Christian morality, decadent cultural mores, and herd docility, with the new foundations of the will to power, self-governance, and the master morality of personal excellence. “What is good? Everything that heightens the feeling of power in man, the will to power, power itself. What is bad? Everything that is born of weakness. What is happiness? The feeling that power is *growing*, that resistance is overcome. Not contentedness but more power; not peace but war; not virtue but fitness (Renaissance virtue, *virtu*, virtue that is moraline-free)” (A, 2). Nietzsche’s conception of self-overcoming is similar to the traditional notion of self-mastery in that it promotes the moderation of one’s desires and passions; however, it diverges from the traditional notion in that the reason for self-overcoming is to increase power in the individual rather than increase social responsibility. As Nietzsche asserts: “It goes without saying that I do not deny—unless I am a fool—that many actions called immoral ought to be avoided and resisted, or that many called moral ought to be done and encouraged—but I think the one should be encouraged and the other avoided *for other reasons than hitherto*” (D, 103).

<sup>9</sup> Other philosophers of education whose conception of self-overcoming at least partially shares in Hillesheim’s and Rosenow’s include, to name a few, Aloni (1989), Sassone (1996), and Bingham (2001).

<sup>10</sup> As my analysis of self-overcoming will illustrate, power should not be construed as power over others, political power or economic power; these forms of power are inferior and even a form of weakness. For Nietzsche, the ultimate form of power is power over one’s self—the ability to love life in all its vicissitudes and difficulty; the ability to say Yes to fate and to encourage the affirmation of life in others.

## Self-overcoming as Self-mastery

My thesis concerning self-overcoming is not original. Its first American proponent was the eminent Nietzsche scholar, Walter Kaufmann.<sup>11</sup> In his book *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, Kaufmann (1982) argues that the will to power is the ultimate governing principle of human nature (pp. 178–206). For Nietzsche, the will to power is the final, irreducible motive for all human behavior. “A living thing seeks above all to *discharge* its strength—life itself is *will to power*; self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent *results*” (BGE, 13).<sup>12</sup> Humans, as humans, crave power above all else, even more than pleasure. But not only is power the driving force behind all our actions, it is also the glory of life (A, 2, quoted above). Nietzsche admired, revered and extolled those individuals who expressed their wills to power most powerfully. But how does one demonstrate power most powerfully? Not by mastering others (an inferior form of power in Nietzsche’s mind), but by mastering one’s self, that is to say one’s desires and impulses. “This is the apotheosis of power, and there can be no question but that Nietzsche agreed with that ancient tradition...that the man who conquers himself shows greater power than he who conquers others” (Kaufmann 1982, p. 252).

At first glance, this appears to contradict Nietzsche’s laudatory recommendation of passions. As we saw earlier, Nietzsche rejects any attempt to rid oneself of passions and desires in favor of supposed disinterested decision making.<sup>13</sup> As Solomon (2003) points out: “Nietzsche is one of the few philosophers to attempt an unrestrained defense of the passions” (p. 70). Nevertheless, while the passions are in themselves expressions of power, they are not the ultimate expressions. It is in fact the sublimation of the passions that leads to the higher men, the precursors to the overmen.

After illustrating the central significance of the will to power, Kaufmann explains that all drives are expressions of power. How then do we distinguish between those drives which are most powerful? Rosenow, Hillesheim and Aviram, offer no tenable criteria to distinguish between these expressions of power.<sup>14</sup> And this is what concerns Rosenow so

<sup>11</sup> There is a tendency in contemporary scholarship to treat Kaufmann as a historically important, but ultimately unreliable reader of Nietzsche. This is troublesome because I have read very few arguments repudiating his reading of Nietzsche—one noteworthy example is Robert Solomon who frequently engages Kaufmann’s “mistakes.” Generally, however, Kaufmann is discounted by off hand comments often related to the belief that his reading of Nietzsche is “too humanistic.” Undoubtedly, there have been more sustained and rigorously argued repudiations of his interpretation; the problem is that no one, in my experience at least, is referencing those repudiations. It almost seems that Kaufmann is ignored or dismissed primarily because he is considered outmoded. Indeed, as one anonymous reviewer of this article suggested “Many contemporary students of Nietzsche, especially those in Education and opinion-makers upon which philosophers of education are apt to rely, consider Kaufmann old-fashioned and superseded. This judgment regarding Kaufmann, while no doubt flawed, is widely and unreflectively held.” This is not to say that Kaufmann’s interpretation is not without its flaws. But it behooves readers of Nietzsche, especially educators, to offer him a fair hearing. Does his interpretation square with what Nietzsche affirms or does it not? That is the question that must be asked. It must be asked because Kaufmann’s interpretation may help to protect us from allowing our culturally embedded biases pre-determine our reading of Nietzsche. Kaufmann’s ideas may have been expressed decades ago, but that is precisely why they may afford important insights into Nietzsche’s writings and our own cultural biases.

<sup>12</sup> See also GM, II, 12, where Nietzsche claims “that in all events *the will to power* is happening,” and that “the essence of life [is] its *will to power*.”

<sup>13</sup> See also TI, “Morality as Anti-nature,” 1–2.

<sup>14</sup> As we have seen Aviram does try to distinguish between the forms of power but because his conception is based on a fundamental flaw, his distinction between the forms of power loses its force.

deeply: if all activities are equally viable in Nietzsche's thinking, how do we avoid moral and aesthetic anarchy?

The answer is that Nietzsche believes there are certain types of expressions of power that lead to greater power. The goal of the higher men is not merely to discharge their will to power in haphazard and impulse driven ways, but to moderate, control, and direct them thoughtfully, even rationally. As Nietzsche claims:

All passions have a phase when they are merely disastrous, when they drag down their victim with the weight of stupidity.... Formerly, in view of the element of stupidity in passion, war was declared on passion itself, its destruction was plotted.... *Destroying* the passions and cravings, merely as a preventive measure against their stupidity and the unpleasant consequences of this stupidity—today this strikes us as merely another acute form of stupidity.... The same means in the fight against a craving—castration, extirpation—is instinctively chosen by those who are too weak-willed, too degenerate, to be able to impose moderation on themselves. (TI, "Morality as Anti-nature," 1–2)

The image that Rosenow conjures up of the individual who uses Nietzsche as an excuse to "throw off all restraints and set free his most sinister impulses" is an image that Nietzsche would abhor. "A man who is not willing to become master over his wrath, his gall and vengefulness, and his lust, and who tries to become a master in anything else, is as stupid as the farmer who lays out his field beside a torrential stream without protecting himself" (HH, "The Wanderer and his Shadow," 65). This individual is not masterful, but rather, "stupid", as stupid as the individual who tries to extirpate his passions. These passions may be expressions of the will to power, but they are inferior and even dangerous versions.

What Nietzsche envisions is someone who harnesses the tremendous psychical energy of these impulses and channels them into less "stupid" expressions. His goal is not to eliminate the passions but "spiritualize" them (A, 57; TI, "Morality as Anti-nature," 3). As this "sublimation" occurs, a radical change in the individual's conception of power simultaneously occurs. Whereas before the individual felt powerful only when she was overcoming some external obstacle, now the individual realizes that the greatest obstacle to the most powerful expressions is not external, but is rather internal: the obstacles of the desires within herself.

Reason or rationality (used as synonyms here) is the instrument through which this sublimation occurs. To reiterate: this does not mean that the individual should overcome herself by eliminating all passions, thus becoming coldly rational, as if reason was not a passion of the will to power as well. To think of reason as outside of the realm of the passions is to revert back to the traditional, decadent conception of self-mastery, a conception Nietzsche wants to overthrow. For Nietzsche, reason is a type of passion; but, it is a passion that has the strongest rational element and is therefore able to order and govern all the other passions, govern them in ways that heighten our expressions and feelings of power. As Kaufmann (1982) indicates:

While Nietzsche thus comes to the conclusion that reason is man's highest faculty, his view is not based on any other principle than the power standard. Reason is extolled not because it is the faculty that abstracts from the given, forms universal concepts, and draws inferences, but because these skills enable it to develop foresight and to give consideration to all the impulses, to organize their chaos, to integrate them into a harmony—and thus to give man power: power over himself and nature. (p. 230)

In this we see the second repudiation of the belief (inherent in the radical relativistic version of perspectivism) that Nietzsche wants to overthrow reason; on the contrary, he wants it more pronounced than ever before! It is essential to note, however, that reason for Nietzsche is not the cold, dispassionate rationality of the Cartesian, Kantian or logical positivist. On the contrary—reason itself is a passion. It is the false opposition between reason and emotion that Nietzsche attempts to repudiate. Nietzsche asserts the inseparable connection between reason and our passions as seen in the following.

But what are goodheartedness, refinement, and genius to me when the person possessing these virtues tolerates slack feelings in his believing and judging and when he does not consider *the desire for certainty* to be his inmost craving and deepest need—as that which separates the higher human beings from the lower! I discovered in certain pious people a hatred of reason and I was well disposed towards them for that: at least this betrayed their bad intellectual conscience! (GS, 2)

This passage illustrates Nietzsche's conception of reason as a type of passion.<sup>15</sup> This fact becomes even more pronounced if we keep reading into the next section of *The Gay Science* where Nietzsche distinguishes between the reason of the higher individuals from the lower. The lower men cannot understand the reason of the higher men because they are, according to Nietzsche, moral and aesthetic philistines who “cannot comprehend how anyone could, for example, risk health and honor for the sake of a passion for knowledge” (GS, 3) To the lower types, reason should be used only to obtain everyday practical goods: money, safety or honor; the higher types on the other hand use reason to make themselves more powerful. Their reason looks unreasonable to the lower types but that is only because the lower types do not understand the goals of the higher.

On this analysis, self-overcoming is not the abnegation or destruction of one's self in favor of a new, entirely original self—something that Fennell demonstrated to be incoherent on its own grounds—but the ability to choose to overcome aspects of the self (certain passions, desires, emotions, thoughts, etc.) that do not maximize our power—the aspects of our selves that passionately cry out to be expressed. The self-overcoming individual is the person who has enough self-discipline to master those aspects and sublimate them into greater expressions of power. This person is the higher individual, the spiritualized individual who no longer has to extirpate his passions, nor give free reign to them. “Rationality...gives man mastery over himself; and as the will to power is essentially the ‘*instinct of freedom*’ (GM, II, 18), it can find fulfillment only through rationality. Reason is the ‘highest’ manifestation of the will to power, in the distinct sense that through rationality it can realize its objective most fully...a strong spirit need not make war on the impulses: it masters them fully and is—to Nietzsche's mind—the acme of human power” (Kaufmann 1982, pp. 230–233).

Having provided an alternative to Aviram's, Rosenow and Hillesheim's interpretation of self-overcoming, I will, finally, return to Fennell's argument. I will argue that my conception provides a way of conceiving education that supports Nietzsche's ideals without sacrificing a democratic framework. While Fennell is right that Nietzsche distinguishes between those of superior artistic predominance and those who are average, this distinction does not acknowledge the fact that the average have—by virtue of being human and thus motivated by the will to power—the capacity to learn self-mastery and develop into higher individuals, even if they will never become one of the few and rare “unfathomable ones.”

<sup>15</sup> For another analysis of reason as a type of passion, see Nietzsche (D, 109).

## Self-mastery and the Love of Life—A Response to Fennell

Although I argue that Nietzsche's philosophy can be reconciled with democratic education, it should be said that, generally speaking, Nietzsche has great antipathy for democratic, egalitarian schooling. Take for instance his dramatic censure of German democratic education in the *Twilight of the Idols*. "In present-day Germany no one is any longer free to give his children a noble education: our "higher schools" are all set up for the most ambiguous mediocrity, with their teachers, curricula, and teaching aims" (TI, What the Germans Lack, 5). Furthermore, in places he appears to assert that there must be different types of schooling for different types of individuals. The spiritual elite need a pedagogy that will ultimately liberate them from the decline of the herd and their decadent, nihilistic values. The herd on the other hand ought to be acculturated in ways that promote social and economic stability. It is this thesis which Fennell puts forward.

In support of this thesis, Fennell (2005) argues from the following passage from Nietzsche's "early" works. To make my case I will quote at length.

Nietzsche's idealism regarding the possibility of overcoming nihilism is accompanied by the harshest and most authoritative judgments regarding how seldom this will be possible. Not only does it require the best of luck to encounter the teachers and conditions that make self-creation (true education) possible, such a process depends on an intelligence and qualities of character that exist in only very few individuals.... Everyone has a role in the grand drama, however:

[T]he deepest question is this: how can your life, the individual life, receive its highest value, the deepest significance? How can it be least squandered? Certainly only by your living for the good of the rarest, and most valuable exemplars, and not for the good of the majority, that is to say those who, taken individually, are the least valuable exemplars. And the young person should be taught to regard himself as a failed work of nature but at the same time as a witness to the grandiose and marvelous intentions of the artist ["those great redemptive men"]: nature has done badly, he should say to himself; but I will honour its great intentions by serving it so that one day it may do better. (p. 162)

There is in this vision an education befitting every role. For the majority, the most important thing is to provide the stability and prosperity needed for the discovery and proper development of those that are higher. This, after all, is the highest thing possible for us; it is the very source of our significance. (pp. 88–89)

On the surface, the passage that Fennell cites appears to support his argument that the "majority" should be denied an education that aims at anything other than social and economic stability, which is to say, mediocrity. We see, for instance, that "taken individually" members of the majority "are the least valuable exemplars;" and that the majority ought to live "for the good of the rarest, and most valuable exemplars." In this way, Fennell creates a dichotomy between the "artists", "those that are higher", "those great redemptive men," on the one hand, and the masses, the herd, the lower types, on the other. *Prima facie* this appears to radically separate those who can become higher individuals from those who cannot. This is a misinterpretation, however. But first we must look at what is exactly required of these so-called masses. As it turns out, while the "artists" and "the redemptive men" are in a separate class, and the masses are in a separate class, the higher man can be found, and should be developed, in both classes.

In my preceding analysis of self-overcoming, I illustrated that men and women become higher individuals not by their ability to recreate their selves, but by their ability to

sublimate their desires, impulses and passions and use them in more powerful ways. For Nietzsche, every desire, every emotion and every thought is an expression of the will to power. “A living thing seeks above all to *discharge* its strength—life itself is *will to power*; self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent *results*” (BGE, 13).<sup>16</sup> But this does not mean that all expressions are equally desirable; some expressions are conducive to more power; some are conducive to less. To use an above example: the farmer who plants a field by a stream is indeed exercising his will to power by planting his field, but if his goal is to harvest a crop, then he has exercised his power inefficiently, as the field will be washed away. This is where Nietzsche’s concept of sublimation comes into play. For Nietzsche, sublimation is the ability to master one’s emotions, passions, and thoughts—cognitive expressions of the will to power—and use the psychical energy (experienced as a euphoric sense of power) found within that sublimation to achieve greater expressions of power. This is not to say, however, that one should never express her power. On the contrary, to express power is the ultimate goal; but one should use one’s reason to determine which expressions of power will lead to greater power, and which will lead to a diminution of power. The priests are, according to Nietzsche, an excellent example of those individuals who neglected reason to such a degree that they lost the ability to express their power in beautiful and more powerful ways. Instead, they became resentful and vengeful, and developed a hatred of life that was so pronounced that they “poisoned” the world, making it ugly. We see this in *Twilight of the Idols*:

To be fair, it should be admitted, however, that on the ground out of which Christianity grew, the concept of the “*spiritualization of passion*” could never have been formed. After all the first church, as is well known, fought *against* the “intelligent” in favor of the “poor in spirit”...the church fights passion with excision in every sense: its practice, its “cure,” is *castratism*. It never asks: “How can one spiritualize, beautify, deify a craving?” It has at all times laid the stress of discipline on extirpation (of sensuality, of pride, the lust to rule, of avarice, of vengefulness). But an attack on the roots of passion means an attack on the roots of life: the practice of the church is *hostile to life*. (TI, “Morality as Anti-nature,” 3)

Nietzsche wants to counter this trend by changing our aesthetic and moral principles. The goal is to “say yes” to life, to love and revere life-affirming expressions of power. Nietzsche uses the concepts of loving one’s fate—“*amor fati*”—and also the “eternal recurrence.” In both these concepts Nietzsche’s goal is to encourage those who would be higher ones not to lament their shortcomings, or wish they were someone else, or wish they had a better life, but to sublimate these feelings of self-pity, resentment, and envy, and thereby develop self-mastery. The higher ones emerge not by producing higher culture, but by overcoming their resentment, apathy, and no-saying tendencies. The higher ones are those that can look with pleasure on the rarest individuals, the artists, the culture makers with the joy of power, the joy of life. In other words, the higher ones are those who have mastered their passions and thus are free to “honor [nature’s] great intentions by serving it so that one day it may do better.”

The implications of this analysis are significant. If we look at the passage Fennell uses we see that Nietzsche emphatically does *not* think the majority should be taught to be “average,” or decadent, or to accept their internal nihilism; rather they should be taught to be self-overcomers who know how to admire power and beauty. They are to be self-masters who overcome their urge to resent nature, and the artists, and life itself for being as

<sup>16</sup> See also (BGE, 36 and GM, II, 12).

it is. They should instead be taught through self-overcoming to revel that they can be witnesses “to the grandiose and marvelous intentions of the artist,” and that they can, as self-masters, further help nature to produce even greater artists, and in that way become agents of cultural change as well.

That Nietzsche thinks the masses ought to be self-overcomers becomes even more apparent if we continue to read immediately following the Nietzsche passage Fennell offers:

By coming to this resolve [“the young person”] places himself within the circle of *culture*; for culture is the child of each individual's self-knowledge and dissatisfaction with himself [his resentment, envy, decadence]. Anyone who believes in culture is thereby saying: ‘I see above me something higher and more human than I am; let everyone help me to attain it, as I will help everyone who knows and suffers as I do...’ the individual has to employ his own wrestling and longing as the alphabet by means of which he can now read off the aspirations of mankind as a whole [the production of the artist, geniuses and saints]. But he may not halt even here; from this stage he has to climb up to a higher one...that is to say a struggle on behalf of the culture and hostility towards those influences, habits, laws, institutions in which he fails to recognize his goal: which is the production of genius. (SE, pp. 162–163)

Again, we find that Nietzsche expects the masses to learn to strive against their personal weaknesses and against their culture's weaknesses. This is a nearly perfect example of self-overcoming. They must climb up to “higher stages.” Far from being a thoughtless band of nihilists, they must be higher men. The goal, in other words, of Nietzsche's educational philosophy is to produce higher individuals, self-overcoming individuals who work to increase their wills to power so that the culture can be transformed. He wants to encourage this educational value among us so “that the men we live among resemble a field over which is scattered the most precious fragments of sculpture where everything calls to us: come, assist, complete, bring together what belongs together, we have an immeasurable longing to become whole” (SE, p. 163).

It could be argued that Nietzsche's insistence on the self-overcoming of the masses is essentially a call for them to be ashamed at their failure to attain the level of genius. Their only consolation is that they can labor to bring forth and support the artists, saints, and geniuses. On the one hand, it is true that Nietzsche advocates shame in this way. As we saw before, Nietzsche recommends the “young person should be taught to regard himself as a failed work of nature.” However, while this appears the essence of shame, Nietzsche goes on to say that though one experiences shame at her “own narrowness and shrivelled [sic] nature” she does so “without any accompanying feeling of distress” (ibid.). The shame Nietzsche advocates ends up being a type of love; rather than hating herself, the self-overcomer learns, for the first time, to love herself enough to attempt greatness—the greatness of the higher individuals. The hatred one feels is ultimately not directed at the self but only the weakness found in the false self. The true self, the higher self, becomes the hope and the promise that one can become strong, whether one is a genius or the common individual.<sup>17</sup> Thus, for Nietzsche, the type of shame he advocates is not a negative feeling at all—it is a type of self-love.

<sup>17</sup> For an important analysis of this reading see Conant's (2001) article “Nietzsche's Perfectionism: A Reading of Schopenhauer as Educator.”

## Conclusion

Fennell has demonstrated that the understanding of Nietzsche as a great democratic liberator whose main goal is to foster self-reformulation is false. I have argued that not only does this interpretation misrepresent Nietzsche, but so does any interpretation of self-overcoming that rejects the centrality of self-mastery and sublimation. Furthermore, to conclude that Nietzsche's philosophy is incompatible with an educational system that believes that all students can achieve the status of higher individuals is to misconstrue Nietzsche's philosophy of education. Nietzsche denies that *all* students will become self-masters, or that they will become so at equal levels. Nevertheless, he insists on the cultivation of self-overcoming in schools. Nietzsche wants self-overcoming to be inculcated broadly in the hopes that as many as possible will be transformed—the *few* into “artists” and “redemptive men,” and the *many* into self-masters. In sum, Nietzsche sees education as the key to elevating culture by the corporate elevation of each and every individual and in this way should be considered democratic.

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