

MEANING BEYOND RELIGION

Examining Nietzsche's *Übermensch* in a Puritan Framework

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In his famous madman parable, Friedrich Nietzsche announces the death of God.¹ In the parable, a “madman” runs about mourning what he identifies as God’s death, incessantly asking haunting questions like, “How do we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?” and, “Are we not continually falling?” As the most godless man on earth, Nietzsche himself faced the threat of plummeting into nihilism while he grappled with the question: what meaning is there in a world without God?²

For nearly all of human history, organized religious practices have provided structured meaning with near ubiquitous assent. Rejecting such religious ideals, Nietzsche contended that religious meaning is a deceptive veil for those who are resentful of their weakness and of a low position in society.³ After deconstructing the cornerstones of his cultural heritage and “killing God,” however, Nietzsche was left with the difficult work of reconstruction. His reconstructive effort led him to propose a transcendent state of humanity as a solution, the *Übermensch*. Nietzsche believed meaning could be

self-created rather than adopted, where the *Übermensch* is one who has mastered this process of self-creation. To Nietzsche, religion is obviated by meaning that depends solely on the individual. When Nietzsche proclaims “The [*Übermensch*] shall be the meaning of the earth,” he envisions humanity empowered by creative freedom.⁴

Nietzsche identifies personal desire and individuality as critical contributors to achieving a purposeful and free life. However, Nietzsche’s appeal to self-created meaning falls short of actualizing freedom because self-creation is governed by pre-existing proclivities. Because Christianity acknowledges the contribution of personal desire while offering meaning that transcends both circumstance and the self, the Christian source of meaning supplies a genuine result more satisfying than what Nietzsche can provide. This is evident when comparing Nietzsche with the 18th-century theologian Jonathan Edwards. Considered the last Puritan, Edwards primarily found meaning in the glorification of God, far different from Nietzsche’s self-created meaning. This belief led Edwards to pursue conformity to a standard external to

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himself, motivated by his view that human desire is not always trustworthy in isolation. Nietzsche and Edwards both seek to find meaning in life, but Edwards wanted a way to account for personal error in identifying how to pursue that meaning. Nietzsche suggests that the Christian reliance on God is a foolish acceptance of bondage, but it is precisely this reliance on God that overcomes human shortsightedness to achieve substantive meaning.

NIETZSCHE AND THE *ÜBERMENSCH*

Writing in late 19th-century Germany, Friedrich Nietzsche was concerned with the moral trajectory of society at the time. He saw the prevailing “Christian virtues” as stultifying authentic human existence. To Nietzsche, Christian virtues like meekness restrict a person from being able to define a personal idea of goodness. In Nietzsche’s view, Christian obedience to a god is really a confession of the lack of power for anything other than submission.⁵ In such a state, the Christian has lost the creative freedom distinctive to humanity.

With his idea of self-created meaning, a person gains power through the process of determining meaning for themselves. This control, the “will to power,” satisfies what Nietzsche sees as a person’s most fundamental desire.⁶ For Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, the merits of pursuing an internally defined meaning are tangible because the *Übermensch* is empowered by creating it. For Nietzsche’s conception of the Christian, the shadowy merits of pursuing an externally defined meaning are only as tangible as the strength of one’s faith. Meaning for the *Übermensch* is, thus, something more real and more attainable than religion could offer.

Nietzsche’s idea of the *Übermensch* claims not only to be empowering but promises a freedom that religion cannot offer. This promise is embedded in the centrality of individuality to the Nietzschean idea of freedom. The significance of individuality in Nietzsche’s conception of freedom is evident when he rhetorically asks in *The Gay Science*, “What is the seal of having become free?,” and answers, “No longer to be ashamed before oneself.”⁷ While individuality is important, Nietzsche at the same time asserts “man is something that should be over-

come,” and believes that freedom does not mean a lack of limitations.⁸ This duality means Nietzsche advocates for a self-defined meaning beyond mere unregulated primal impulses. The balance between individuality and overcoming becomes clearer when recalling Nietzsche’s position that a need for power is the most fundamental human desire. A person gains power by controlling themselves in a way that serves this most fundamental longing. Even though some subordinate desires are controlled, individuality is preserved because the control is for a self-determined purpose and is relative to the individual.

Nietzsche provides an illustrative example of the power gained through relative self-control when he discusses chastity. He claims that chastity can be either a virtue or a vice depending on the person seeking to be chaste.⁹ Chastity is a virtue for those who may have some desire for the contrary but control this desire because they think being chaste is worthwhile. Importantly, the Nietzschean reason to be chaste is not because it is objectively right or generally accepted as appropriate but because these types of individuals choose to be chaste.¹⁰ Chastity is a vice for those who strive to be chaste, though they would like not to be. Their restraint only causes them to burn with passion and demonstrates that they live dishonestly with themselves.¹¹ As Nietzsche writes, “Those moralists who command man first and above all to gain control of himself thereby afflict him with a peculiar disease, namely, a constant irritability at all natural stirrings and inclinations . . .”¹² Therefore, it is not the exercise of self-control alone that gives a person power, but self-control for a purpose decided by the individual. Relatedly, it is not the expression of all desires which makes a person free, but the mastery of these desires for a higher self-defined meaning.

Nietzsche’s example of chastity is easily expanded to see his broader criticism of Christianity. Those who fail to create meaning governing their actions are like the group for whom chastity is a vice. In pursuing a standard they did not create for themselves, they lose the meaning that would be true for themselves and abandon the

power gained through self-creation. This is one of the errors Nietzsche sees in religion. Religious standards are all externally defined and necessarily sever adherents from their personal truth. Following his accusation that Christians are discontent with their position in society, Nietzsche even suggests that religion for some is but a deceitful way of elevating their relative social status.¹³ Imposing moral demands on a cultural level raises the supercilious above those who inevitably fail to fulfill the demands of “righteousness.” This leaves Nietzsche’s characterization of Christianity unfit as a moral system for the modern world.

The failures of religion that Nietzsche sees contribute to his proclamation, “God is dead,” with the *Übermensch* to take his place.¹⁴ Nietzsche argues that Christian morality is unreliable, causes a loss of freedom, and provides inauthentic meaning. The *Übermensch* is Nietzsche’s solution for the void left behind by the absence of a god. Without meaning provided by religion, he attempts to escape nihilism by transferring the ability to create meaning to the individual. To Nietzsche, if a person does not create meaning for themselves, they will be left without it.

EDWARDS AND MEANING

Because religion prevents personally true meaning, Nietzsche’s disdain for Christianity is especially apparent in those whom he calls “Preachers of Death.”¹⁵ These “Preachers of Death” are so focused on religious conformity that they devalue life by enslaving themselves and eagerly await death to end their misery. They suppress their true desires not for the purpose of obtaining a self-defined meaning, but because they are weighed down by religious dogma.¹⁶ When Nietzsche writes “they are hardly born before they begin to die and long for doctrines of weariness and renunciation,” he seems to have in mind people just like Jonathan Edwards, the so-called fire and brimstone preacher who grandfathered Aaron Burr.¹⁷

Although it would not improve Nietzsche’s opinion of him, Jonathan Edwards was more than a preacher of death. Regarded by some as America’s “greatest

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metaphysical genius,” Edwards had his own carefully thought-out source of meaning.¹⁸ Edwards thought of meaning in terms of end goals, believing “the end which [God] had ultimately in view [in creating the world], was that communication of himself which he intended through all eternity.”¹⁹ To Edwards, creation existed for the purpose of knowing God’s glory; meaning for mankind is to magnify and relish the glory of God. Crucially, “God in seeking his glory, therein seeks the good of his creatures: because the emanation of his glory ... implies the communicated excellency and happiness of his creature,” which means that Edwards saw the glory of God and the good of the creature as joined together as a single end.²⁰

Contrary to Nietzsche’s portrayal, Edwards would have viewed his abstemious lifestyle as full of joy, rather than a weary pursuit, because it was a way of participating in the communication of God’s glory and the accompanying happiness. In a sermon titled “The Pleasantness of Religion,” he claims “self-denial will also be reckoned amongst the troubles of the godly ... But whoever has tried self-denial can give in his testimony that they never experience greater pleasures and joys than after great acts of self-denial.”²¹ Edwards’s self-denial enabled him to taste the sweetness of God, as he would say, making it a way of life that was not burdensome.²² Nevertheless, Nietzsche’s criticism that this way of living is inauthentic seems to stand because Edwards’s self-denial implies a need to labor against natural desires.²³ Edwards would agree with Nietzsche’s critique in that he may be fighting desire, instead of only controlling it, but this is because he sees human desire as being in a naturally corrupted state and unable to lead to a profitable end.²⁴ But this does not mean that he is relegated only to war with himself. In striking contrast to Nietzsche, Edwards believed that the external God-wrought restoration of desire causes a person to delight in the things of God.²⁵ This belief means there is a fundamental change in desire. A person like Edwards is not always wearily waiting for death, as Nietzsche suggests they are, but is actively being transformed to enjoy a new set of desires that are fulfilled in magnifying God’s glory.

The reality Edwards sees in enjoying God is evident from what he calls religious affections. What he considers an affection can be thought of as similar to emotion, where a person is inclined toward a certain response when perceiving something because of their internal disposition.²⁶ When writing on the affection that a person should

have toward God, Edwards reasons, “[it] is unreasonable to think otherwise, than that the first foundation of a true love to God, is that whereby he is in himself lovely, or worthy to be loved, or the supreme loveliness of his

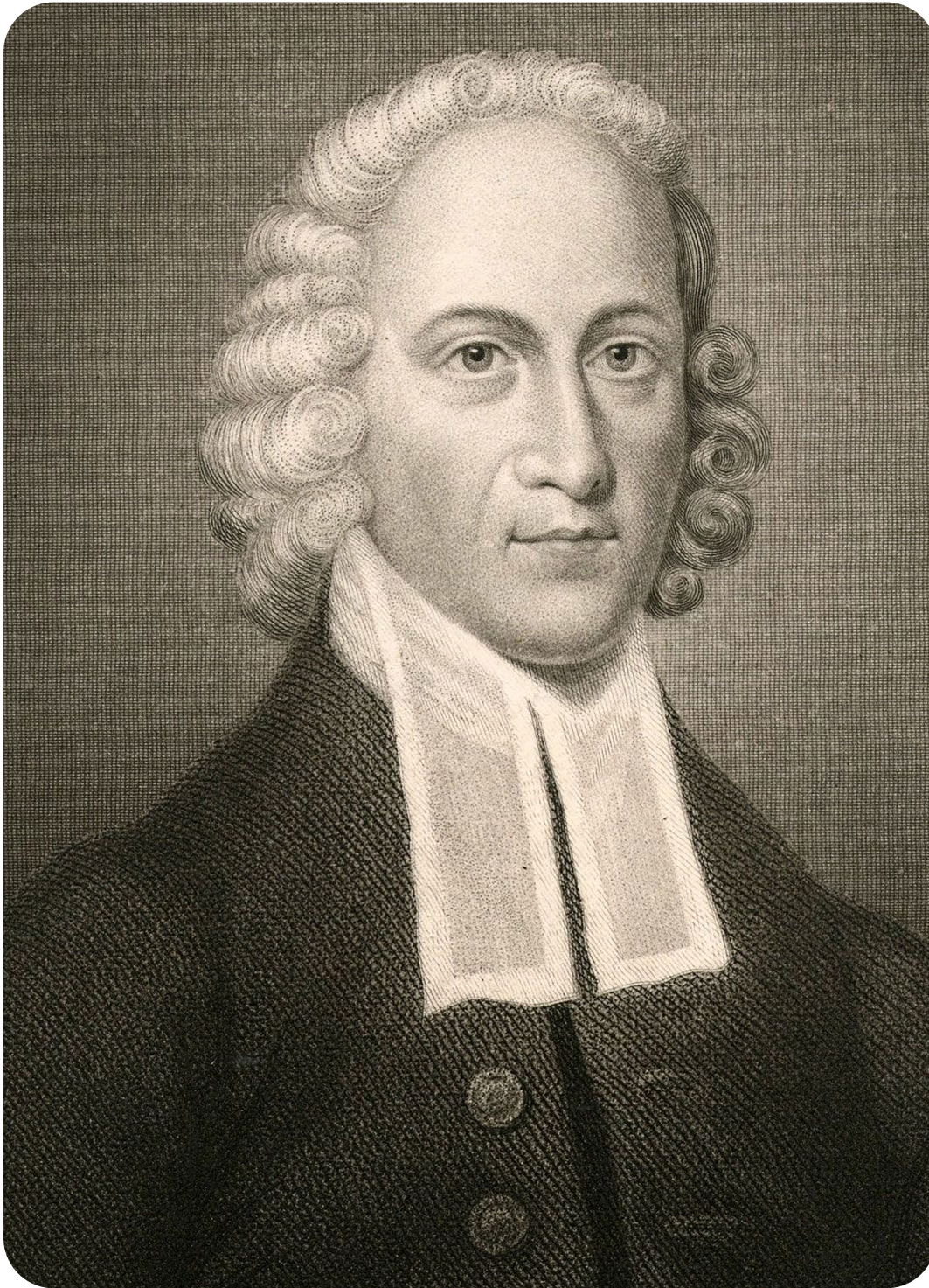
live as a Puritan was not an arduous and inauthentic task, but was the manifestation of his greatest desire. Unlike Nietzsche’s claim that Christians make themselves suffer while awaiting a reward that will not come, the Christian

who possesses Edwards’s religious affections finds delight in the present life.

Edwards preserves his personal identity and authenticity even in pursuing external meaning because it is internally agreeable to him, but Nietzsche might say Edwards is still not free. Because Edwards is not creating anything for himself, Nietzsche might argue that Edwards is still bound. To Nietzsche, it is not merely the expression of desire that makes one free, but the self-created meaning governing those desires. The Edwardsean ethic questions how significant self-created meaning is, however. Edwards observes that when it comes to acting on a desire, a person cannot act, or will, in opposition to their greatest desire at the time.²⁸ Since creating meaning for oneself is still an act of the will, it is still subject to preexisting desire. If creating meaning is contingent on underlying desires, the creative power is lost as this process is, at best, a reordering of desire rather than a development of something transcendent.

nature.”²⁷ Here, Edwards demonstrates his view that true religion must arise from genuine apprehension of God as desirable. To Edwards, one should not force religion upon themselves; they should rather pursue it because God is truly lovely when perceived correctly. For Edwards, to

The dependance of the will on a shifting strongest motive is why Edwards defines freedom as the natural ability to pursue desire.²⁹ He does not see freedom as self-autonomy. Nietzsche appears to acknowledge the need to create meaning within some confines with his concept of *amor*



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fati, the love of fate. When Nietzsche confesses “I want to learn more and more how to see what is necessary in things as what is beautiful in them—thus I will be one of those who makes things beautiful,” he recognizes a need to create only out of what already is.³⁰ In this way, Nietzsche’s self-creation is virtually contained within his circumstances, and represents an attempt to discover meaning more than it represents actual creation. While the immediate reference for Nietzsche is himself, when he looks for meaning in life, the meaning he finds is still externally adopted.

Nietzsche traps the individual in a hopeless self-descent of creating meaning that can never satisfy if circumstance will not allow, while Edwards seeks fulfillment of the most innate desires where circumstance cannot hinder him. It is Edwards, not Nietzsche, who holds the liberating viewpoint. Nietzsche’s self-created meaning is confined by a person’s existing desire and constrained by available resources. He is left with merely an unguided palimpsest of desire. Instead of trying to make things beautiful, Edwards sees something beautiful and is transformed to obtain it. Although Edwards would ultimately attribute the work to God, Edwards disciplines himself to find ever greater pleasure in God despite initial natural limitations. Rather than continually recreating meaning out of transient circumstances and hoping the choice produces agreeable results, Edwards has a lasting meaning that both promises a desirable end and sweetens present pleasures.³¹ The value in pursuing a meaning that Nietzsche might create can only be as good as the initial circumstances and desires that serve as the creation materials will allow. Even then, there is no way to distinguish what the meaning with the highest value is. Because of the religious affections associated with Edwards’s meaning, he actively enjoys his pursuit knowing he aims at the highest possible value.

Curiously, it appears that Nietzsche criticizes Christians for following his advice more effectively than he does himself. He suggests that a person create meaning out of their present state to empower themselves. When

considering the genesis of Christian morality, though, Nietzsche chastises Christians for devising a system that improves an inherited low societal position.³² Nietzsche judges this act of creation as condemnable

but preaches that the *Übermensch* should do this very thing. In reality, Edwards had no need to craft a better societal position for himself, but his reliance on God for meaning was cause for his joy. Edwards’s love for his God was sustained through his dying moments while all of the meaning Nietzsche thought he could create ultimately crumbled as he descended into insanity.³³

CONCLUSION

If Edwards genuinely found satisfaction in God, it cannot be said that his austerity was inauthentic even though his meaning was externally defined. If this is the case for a stringent Puritan, it is also true for Christianity at large. If Edwards was able to find for himself a way of more deeply experiencing satisfaction by adhering to religion, it cannot be said that he did not possess freedom. This pursuit of the greatest possible joy in God is common among Christians and it challenges Nietzsche’s intimations that religion is bondage. Furthermore, the use of externally defined meaning enables Christians to extend meaning above what is possible for those who depend on themselves. This enablement introduces the possibility that Christians have access to a meaning far superior to anything that could be self-created. Christian meaning is one in which God redeems both desires and circumstances out of the chaos of life through the atoning work of

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Christ to prepare an imperishable inheritance. When Edwards affirms that “glorifying God and enjoying [God] make one chief end of man,” he shares in the hope of satisfaction that self-creation cannot offer.³⁴ ✠

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 120.
2. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 120; “I am Zarathustra the Godless, who says ‘Who is more Godless than I’...” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 2003), 191.
3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Michael A. Scarpitti (New York: Penguin, 2013), 32–4.
4. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 42.
5. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 22.
6. “Only where life is, there is also will: not will to life, but—so I teach you—will to power!” Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 138.
7. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 275.
8. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 41; “Do you call yourself free? I want to hear your ruling idea, and not that you have escaped from a yoke.” Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 89.9. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 81.
10. “Is chastity not folly? But this folly came to us and not we to it.” Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 82.
11. “Those to whom chastity is difficult should be dissuaded from it, lest it become the way to Hell—this is, to filth and lust of the soul.” Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 81.
12. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 305.
13. “They want to scratch out the eyes of their enemies with their virtue; and they raise themselves only in order to lower others.” “Their knees are always worshiping and their hands are glorifications of virtue, but their heart knows nothing of it.” Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 119.
14. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 41.
15. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 71.
16. Compare the words of the Puritan John Owen, “be killing sin or it will be killing you,” with Nietzsche’s own words: “[Preachers of Death] have no choice except lusts or self-mortification. And even their lusts are self-mortification.” John Owen, Kelly M. Kopic, Justin Taylor, and John Piper, “Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers,” in *Overcoming Sin and Temptation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 50; Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 72.
17. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 72; Leslie Odom Jr., vocalist, “Wait for It,” by Lin-Manuel Miranda, recorded August 2015, track 13 on *Hamilton (Original Broadway Cast Recording)*, Atlantic, compact disc.
18. Perry Miller, “Jonathan Edwards on the Sense of the Heart,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 41, no. 2 (1948): 123–45.
19. Jonathan Edwards, “The End for which God Created the World,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Vol. 8: Ethical Writings*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 443.
20. Edwards, *Ethical Writings*, 459.
21. Jonathan Edwards, “Sermons and Discourses 1723-1729,” *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Vol. 14*, ed. Kenneth P. Minkema (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 106.
22. Jonathan Edwards, “Religious Affections,” *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Vol. 2*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 278.
23. Jonathan Edwards, “Letters and Personal Writings,” *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Vol. 16*, ed. George S. Claghorn (New Haven: Yale University Press), 757.
24. “[Natural appetite] without the government of superior divine principles, will certainly be followed with corruption, yea, and total corruption of the heart, without occasion for any positive influence at all.” Jonathan Edwards, “Original Sin,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Vol 3*, ed. Clyde A Holbrook (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 381.
25. Edwards, *Sermons and Discourses 1723-1729*, 80.
26. For more discussion on Edwards’s definition of an affection, see Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 14.
27. Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 242.
28. Jonathan Edwards, “Freedom of the Will,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Vol. 1*, ed. Paul Ramsay (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 144; Although their viewpoints certainly differ, Nietzsche also seems to reject libertarian free will. “The *causa sui* is the best internal contradiction ever devised . . . but because of man’s excessive pride we have come to be deeply and terribly entangled with this particular

- nonsense. The yearning for ‘freedom of will’ in the superlative metaphysical sense . . . is really nothing less than being that same *causa sui* . . .” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Marion Faber (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 20.
29. Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, 156–62.
 30. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 157.
 31. Edwards, *Sermons and Discourses 1723-1729*, 103.
 32. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 24.
 33. R. Lanier Anderson, “Friedrich Nietzsche,” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Stanford University, May 19, 2022), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche/#LifeWork>.
 34. Jonathan Edwards, “Sermons and Discourses 1743-1758”, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Vol. 25*, ed. Wilson H. Kinnach (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 116–17.