

# Beyond good and evil, Nietzsche is the atheist version of the Christian ascetic

ALINA ELENA TURCESCU 

*University of Bucharest, Romania*  
*E-mail: alinaturcescu1971@gmail.com*

## Abstract

Nietzsche is one of the most controversial and disputed philosophers, especially because of his association with Hitler and Nazism, but also through his upsetting philosophical decisions that deny the possibility of any morality centered on good and evil as absolute values in themselves. As for his association with Hitler, the sources prove that Nietzsche's philosophy has nothing to do with the justification or support of the nationalist-socialist dictatorship. In addition, any connoisseur of his work can easily see that Hitler does not fit at all with the description of the overman that Nietzsche conceptualizes and identifies with. As for morality, it seems to support a relativization of the values of good and evil until their dissolution, but a closer look can see that the morality of the masters accredited by Nietzsche is one of austerity, balance, respect, honor, dignity, of preferring loneliness to the amusement of the crowd. All these are values that even Christianity proposes. Lonely and incomprehensible, the master, Nietzsche lives a lifestyle similar to Christian ascetics. And just as the philosopher claims that the life of the masters should not be passed through the sieve of ordinary moral evaluations, who could judge in terms of "good" or "bad" the way the austere ones lived?

**Keywords:** Friedrich Nietzsche, Christian ascetic, overman, morality, values.

## Introduction

OVERMAN NIETZSCHE WITH DEEP INTUITIONS and psychological inclinations argues that everything we think, do, the values we adhere to, the philosophy we conceive are nothing but the expression of our inner springs, our desires and failures, our defects or qualities. He gives birth to a philosophy which is the expression of his own frustrations, sufferings, failures, disappointments. Sick and suffering from an illness that seems

to be inherited from his father, Nietzsche has had severe migraines since childhood. Over time, he develops psychiatric disorders from the registry of depression, cognitive decline with dementia and stroke. Despite the widespread opinion that syphilis caused his neurological disease, the conclusions of some contemporary specialists who studied the case are that Nietzsche suffered from cerebral autosomal dominant arteriopathy with subcortical infarcts and leukoencephalopathy (CADASIL).<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche is aware that he will suffer a stroke and is proud that he led an ascetic life during these years, so he no longer needs religion or art, as he confesses in a letter to Malwida von Meysenbug in 1880.<sup>2</sup>

He is so intellectually appreciated that he is appointed professor at the University of Basel at only 25 years old. In his private life, however, he experiences failure, being rejected by the woman he loved. Lonely and incomprehensible, enduring devastating physical suffering, loss of consciousness, paralysis so that he could no longer speak, manifestations of deep mental slippage towards the end of life, Nietzsche sees the world in terms of his own failures and sufferings, as a hostile one. His cerebral torment is long-term and so intense that he comes to think that thinking means suffering, and suffering is thinking.<sup>3</sup> That is why the only thing that can elevate humanity and give meaning to individual life is suffering. Only she is the one who can lead to extraordinary transformations and achievements and only small people run away from her. Through this statement, Nietzsche is closer to the Holy Fathers and Christian ascetics than he would have ever imagined and desired. John Chrysostom says that: "... he allowed the right to be ruled by suffering, so that you could see that even suffering he remained wise"<sup>4</sup>, and the Bible keeps telling us: "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life..." (James 1: 12) and "...the one who stands firm to the end will be saved." (Matthew 10: 22)

Concerned with what he feels and what others think, Nietzsche studies people and is so fascinated by his discoveries that he comes to believe that psychology should be recognized as the queen of science "...for whose service and equipment the other sciences exist."<sup>5</sup> His moral work is, rather than a philosophy, a psychological investigation of the man of genius, of the superman, of the self, for Nietzsche thinks of himself as a overman.

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<sup>1</sup> Dimitri Hemelsoet, Koenraad Hemelsoet, Daniel Devreese, "The neurological illness of Friedrich Nietzsche", in *Acta neurologica Belgica* (Bruxelles: Acta Medica Belgica, 2008, 108), 9–16.

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith (London: The Athlone Press, 1997), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, 24.

<sup>4</sup> Saint John Chrysostom, *Comment on Job* [in Romanian], trans. Laura Enache (Iași: Doxologia, 2012), 50.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Planet PDF, online edition), 40.

The rest in his writings is art, literature, music. He is well known for his musical inclination, he composes *lieds*, pieces for piano, choir and orchestra, he is a very good philologist and connoisseur of great literary works, a very competent critic of literary and musical works. When you read his writings, in order to penetrate the thinking behind the words, you need a terrible effort to get over the countless metaphors, artistic flourishes, jester words and acid irony that abound in his philosophical works. In an opera such as *Thus Spoken Zarathustra* we find, like Michael Allen Gillespie said in the foreword of the book cited,<sup>6</sup>

...is a strenuous experience that requires a multitude of skills as well as great endurance. It is a book that contain philosophical speculation, poetic flights of fancy, prophetic utterance, wild satire, social commentary, and introspective self-examination.

But, above all, behind the mischievous and insulting words, you discover a Nietzsche with a soul so limp and large that it is deeply crushed by the desire to ensure that the world not only survives but progresses. With a terrible sense of history, Nietzsche leaves legacy his unshakable faith in man and humanity.

## Contents

The morality he proposes, beyond good and evil, is the attempt to overcome traditional morality, any form of ethics, denying things in themselves the fact of being good or bad. It is not the facts that carry value, but the people. That is why Nietzsche speaks of a morality of masters and a morality of slaves. It challenges ethics to establish rules, principles because they cannot be applied equally to all people. People are not the same and therefore cannot be judged by the same canons. That is why he implicitly challenges the democracy that had been established in Europe and that established equality between people, that wanted and saw people in a uniform way and that, above all, allowed the "crowd" to represent a decision-making force. Dissatisfied that elites are no longer a force, at least not a decisional one, he concludes that democracy is the one that destroys the chance of the human species to evolve, to progress. Those who through their spirit and capacity can bring innovation, progress are the intellectual elites, the true aristocracy that can draw humanity to the highest heights as a species. And, if the elite does not dictate the course of the world, it does not rule, then people have no choice towards evolution. Hence the terrible tirade of slanderous and passionate addresses to the democratic system. He accepts diversity,

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<sup>6</sup> Stanley Rosen, *The Mask of Enlightenment: Nietzsche's Zarathustra* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), vii.

knows it exists, but does not consent to equal treatment for unequal people. Extremist in approaches as a teenager, he completely rejects any form of government that would allow such situations and identifies in democracy the source of this evil. The guilt, however, does not belong to the individual who believes himself equal in all respects with the most spiritualized like him, because he cannot understand more being limited by his own ignorance. The culprit is the system and his morality that make such a society possible. Nietzsche considers slavery, for example, a normal, beneficial form because the plebeians, as he calls it, only have to obey in order not to be allowed to make harmful mistakes for the elites.

But the citadel ruled by the sages is a much older utopia of Plato, whom he sees as an aristocrat corrupted by the mediocre rationality of Socrates. He even suspects Plato's teacher that he is really harming young people, attracting the condemnation of the city and death. The accusation he brings against Plato is not related to the philosophical state, but to the statue of a Supreme Good and an intelligible world, beyond our world, as a kind of God. Convinced evolutionist, Nietzsche does not believe in the immortality of the soul and the existence of another world, nor does he believe in the existence of the soul, explicitly mentioning that spirit and aristocratic intelligence are inherited from ancestors, therefore genetically. You don't become an aristocrat, you are born one.

His audacity to challenge the existence of good and evil in itself is not doubled by the audacity to challenge the existence of good and evil. These moral poles have different valences depending on the person who commits them. Thus, some are allowed to do whatever they feel, and they think they should do, namely masters, and others have the right to do only what their masters allow them to do, namely slaves. But the deeds of the masters are not good in the utilitarian sense. Not because they bring good consequences for others, for themselves, for as many people as possible. It is not the consequences that decide what is a good thing, but even the inner constitution of the master and the good taste of the one who acts. On the other hand, Nietzsche considers good everything that is done for the progress and evolution of mankind, and aristocrats work towards this. Only they have this orientation. Therefore, to judge with the same measure, rule, one and the same deed performed by different people, belonging to different castes by their very origin, is considered by Nietzsche a nonsense.

He classifies historical epochs according to their relation to morality, as proof that he is deeply concerned with understanding what has not worked and reconstructing it from the perspective of life:

It is from the perspective of life that Nietzsche weighs the uses and disadvantages of history in the untimely meditation of that title, for the sake of life that he reevaluates the value of truth

itself at the beginning of *Beyond Good and Evil*, and it is from this same perspective that Nietzsche determines the worth of competing moral systems in *On the Genealogy of Morals* and elsewhere.<sup>7</sup>

In prehistoric times, morality judged the value or non-value of an action by its consequences. This is in fact the pre-moral age of humanity. In the moral age, the value of an action is given by its causes, by its intentions, and thus the first step towards self-knowledge was made. Residing in intentions is, however, "...a prejudice, perhaps a prematureness or preliminariness..."<sup>8</sup> According to Nietzsche, the period in which he lives, 1844-1900, is on the threshold of an ultra-moral era in which "...the decisive value of an action lies precisely in that which is NOT INTENTIONAL..."<sup>9</sup>, in other words, in our unconscious contents which determine us and from which we cannot evade. Contemporary psychological research on the unconscious seems to seem to agree with him in the sense that our deep content determines our actions and choices more than we might think.

In this perspective, aristocrats do not intentionally make progress for others, but through their very existence they generate it implicitly, unconsciously. In addition, what determines the world in a valuable way is not the instinct of conservation, which is only a consequence, a second-hand causality specific to slaves, but the instinct of will to power. The causality of the will to power is the only reality, it is the world. Classical morality, especially Christian morality, believes in the moral opposition of values, in the existence of good and evil itself as opposite values. But these are inventions meant to justify our own smallness and weakness, just words to reassure us that we have a clear conscience, says Nietzsche. The reason why people in general are compassionate, for example, is not a virtue of the soul, it is only the expression of our inclination towards cruelty, an inclination that we satisfy by leaning on the suffering, misfortune of another. Simple people, slaves, do not make gestures of generosity from the spiritual abundance they possess, they do not even understand the meaning of their gesture, they just conform to established rules and satisfy their vanity.

...morality in Europe at present is herding-animal morality... dwarfing of man to an absolutely gregarious animal (or as they call it, to a man of 'free society'), this brutalizing of man into a pigmy with equal rights and claims, is undoubtedly possible!<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Frazer, "The compassion of Zarathustra: Nietzsche on sympathy and strength," *Review of Politics*, ed. Ruth M. (Cambridge University Press, 2006, 68, no. 1), 54.

<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 55.

<sup>9</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 55.

<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 139-144.

We can understand Nietzsche's panic at his own conclusions, and we can understand why he needed to believe in the possibility of an overman. The overman freed from the bondage of the tyranny of good and evil as values in themselves, as absolute and opposite values, can save humanity from its catastrophic decline. A misunderstood genius, unmatched by anyone else around him, Nietzsche was probably deeply marked by the attitudes of his contemporaries. And, because a genius accepts nothing below his value and condition, he prophesies the hope of an overman.

His fundamental belief is that society must be the foundation that allows the elite to rise to its mission, namely a higher existence. We do not have to take into account and care for most of them, but for the few, chosen ones, who can carry the many in history. The morality of slaves is that of people who look with suspicion and envy at the virtues of the powerful, who do not know respect. It is one of the utilities in which only those meant to make the burden of existence easier through compassion are valued, patience, modesty, kindness, solidarity. They allow slaves to benefit, but they also allow them to steal the natural strength and health from their masters.<sup>11</sup> Slaves see in the good one easy to fool, so a fool. And they need to fool their masters, to get their appreciation. But they forget who they really are, and that vanity determines them, that is why they come to believe that they really are good. This vanity is an atavism, in Nietzsche's opinion, it comes from ancestral genes, so it cannot be avoided.

By contrast, the aristocratic morality of the masters despises cowards, fearfals, the petty who care only about strict utility, those who humble themselves, flatter and lie. Moral qualifications must be applied to people, then to deeds. The aristocrat respects the strong man, master of himself, who knows how to endure suffering and who is harsh with himself. Proud and self-confident, hostile to altruism, the overman knows how to carry his cross, detests mercy and vanity that belong only to slaves. The one who knows his value does not need confirmations, praises, the tumult of the crowd. The overman is lonely because he is different from others, he is isolated, and the deep suffering that resides in understanding the world and things is what ennobles him. Elites, being chosen and lonely people, are rarely perpetuated by their descendants. The loss, the failure of superior people in aspects related to everyday pragmatism is a rule because the preoccupation of the overman is beyond the direct utility specific to many. Just as the man who comes out of Plato's cave and sees the sunlight loses the tests in competition with those bound in the cave. Those who did not come to the surface are wrong about the shadows on the wall but are more skilled and experienced in handling them even if the shadows are a mistake. To explain who the aristocrats are, Nietzsche, a philologist, finds the origin of the word "noble" connected with Greek εσθλος (esthlos) used by the Megarian poet

<sup>11</sup> Frazer, "The compassion of Zarathustra," 65.

Theognis, and that meant “the one that is exists,” “the real one,” “the one who is the truth,” “the one that is truthful,” “the good one.” But the term was originally attributed, says Nietzsche, to blond-haired conquerors. If the aristocrats are the good ones, it is clear that the plebeians, the slaves are the bad ones. In order to etymologically justify this aspect, he says that “malus” in Latin, which means evil, was a term attributed, in fact, to the pre-Aryans, those with black hair, the aborigines who lived in Italy before the Aryans conquerors with blond hair. Hence the association of the noble, good, pure with the blond Aryans who conquer, which the Hitlerite later speculates.<sup>12</sup>

Nietzsche himself refers to the holiness of aristocrats:

The highest instinct for purity places him who is affected with it in the most extraordinary and dangerous isolation, as a saint: for it is just holiness—the highest spiritualization of the instinct in question... The pity of the saint is pity for the FILTH of the human, all-too-human.<sup>13</sup>

True compassion, behold, belongs to the highest spirits.<sup>14</sup> But, the aristocrat does not come to aid the unfortunates because of pity. Mercy is the practice of the slave who wants to obtain the appreciation of others. It comes from the power that flows from his spirit, from the consciousness of an abundance of power that he wants to give himself. Aristocrats are selfish because he who aspires to high goals sees in others either means or brakes. But they are authentic, they recognize the value when they see it and respect it. And, if they manage to reach the top, they can show their kindness to others. Until then, he plays a comedy in front of others in order to resist. In fact, the origin of the term “good” does not even lie in the altruism of the common people, says Nietzsche, they are only those who have been shown goodness. The origin of good is in those who felt that they were doing well what they were doing and that they were good, namely the powerful, the aristocrats, the enlightened minds. The three hundred faces which Nietzsche advises the aristocrats to wear for deceive, mimicking the virtue of the crowd, are meant to enable them to endure the suffering of this world alone. In Christian asceticism, we encounter a similar advice addressed to Christian ascetics by Evagrius Ponticus: “Sometimes it is necessary to pretend that you do not know, because those who spy on you are not able to understand you.”<sup>15</sup> But the true virtues to which Nietzsche urges them to be part of are: boldness, understanding, affection, loneliness.

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<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The genealogy of morals*, trans. by Horace B. Samuel (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1887), 8–9.

<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 280-281.

<sup>14</sup> Frazer, “The compassion of Zarathustra”, 64.

<sup>15</sup> Evagrius Ponticus, *The practical treaty. The Gnostic* [in Romanian], trans. Cristian Bădiliță, Polirom, Iași, 2003

## Conclusion

Despite the fact that Nietzsche says about the meaning of the ascetic ideal for saints that it is a pretext for hibernation, their peace in nothingness and forms of madness, sees in asceticism the great conservative and affirmative forces of life. But not in the asceticism of priests, but in that of elites. The words that define the ascetic ideal are: poverty, humility, chastity, and philosophy, says Nietzsche, would have been impossible in a world without an ascetic cloak. But philosophy, adhering to the ascetic ideal, makes the same mistake as religion: it considers the Truth as a kind of God. For Nietzsche, the truth is only that kind of error without which the human species could not live. The contradiction, however, is not between true and false, but between the “abbreviations of signs” (words) and the “signs” themselves.<sup>16</sup>

In the world in which Nietzsche lived, as he experienced it every day, depression was, in his opinion, a frequent and natural consequence. Which seems to be the case today. And the methods derived from the asceticism of priests, in the author’s opinion, were intended to diminishing depression, unhappiness, and emotional excesses: stoically enduring suffering, guilt, hope for a better world and a good reward for good deeds, compassion, mutual help, love of the other one, diligence as occupational therapy etc.<sup>17</sup> But, Nietzsche denies that these mechanisms work, believing that instead of healing them, they made them even worse. Moreover, these are an illusion, an error, because there is no God and no other world. Therefore, the asceticism of priests does not achieve its goal. But neither is it necessary because, in Nietzsche’s opinion, elites do not flee from unhappiness and suffering, but are perfected by them. Suffering ennobles, does not heal. Hence the accusation in slanderous terms brought against Christianity of having destroyed for centuries the chance of mankind to evolve, to spiritual exaltation and inventiveness, to have destroyed the health of the soul. Christianity has created the illusion that we must feel guilty and must heal, when in fact we must accept our unhappiness as our only chance for a better, evolving future. True creation is born from suffering, it requires sacrifice. As for guilt, the elites have nothing to justify to anyone. They know their way is right.

Nietzsche, however, makes an incredible confession in this regard: the ascetic ideal was embraced by all, either by religion or by philosophy, because it gave meaning to human existence. Everyone’s despair comes from the fact that, when questioned, they could not find a purpose in life. The ascetic ideal filled this void. That way, each of us could want something, no matter what. The will is thus saved. It is better to want nothingness than to want nothing. Why is the will so important that Nietzsche accepts the

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<sup>16</sup> Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, 44.

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, *The genealogy of morals*, 94–178.

ascetic ideal, with all its errors, only because it is the only means by which the will is saved? Because the will is fundamental to human existence, and the will of power is the supreme value of life. The chosen spirits have a great Will of power, and this will is the one that ensures the evolution of the human species. He embraces the ascetic ideal only because it protects the will and, through it, our chance for progress. We see how the author, striving to put aside what he thinks is wrong, but keeping what he considers to be correct, concludes that the life of the authentic people, of the aristocrats, must be lived with asceticism: with the assumption of own suffering, with its acceptance, in poverty because the overman does not care about the worldly things, in isolation because the crowd cannot understand you and the noise of the crowd disturbs you from high goals. In all his deeply psychological explanations and interpretations, it is clear that he relates to himself and justifies himself to himself. He, Nietzsche, is an aristocrat, a genius misunderstood by many, innocent and innovative, aware of his own truth, who does not need to account to the crowd, which accepts and values his suffering, depression.

In the context of this discussion, however, it is less important why Nietzsche adheres to ascetic values. Through the philosophy he developed and the way he lived, he gets closer to Christian ascetics more than he would have liked. His association with Christian ascetics would have been vehemently rejected by the author. But his will does not disturb our perception. Even his separation from God when he declares that the God is dead is only an effect of his complex philosophy. We, living, experimenting, learning, are no longer identical with the one I was yesterday. Likewise, the statement that "God is dead" only opens the soul to its multiple identities, being only a disposition that refers to a certain moment. Died that identity of mine that perceived God in a certain way to make place for another face of the multiple identities we can have. The eternal return makes it possible for everyone to be anyone from the past.<sup>18</sup> Maybe that's why he identified himself with Christ before he died. Although disappointed by people as he knew them, Nietzsche loves the human species so much that he seeks, through his philosophy, a way to ensure his survival, his progress. Christian ascetics nurture the same love but manifest it through prayer. I will make a short description of the master, of the one with the Will to Power, of Nietzsche's aristocrat in order to be able to notice who else we can identify in these words.

The master is wise, isolated, suffers deeply, does not mix with the people, has a supreme goal, has respect, a kind of piety in the face of value and self-imposed things, is one who understands, who has feelings and affection in the human sense, he knows how to be patient, he has purity of soul, spirituality, he does not act utilitarian and in the sense of his own

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<sup>18</sup> Klossowski, *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle*, 57.

advantage, he is harsh in the sense of sober and serious, he is not inclined towards fun, knows fear, but vanquishes it, sees the abyss, but with pride, with eagle's eyes, does not leave personal responsibilities on the shoulders of others, so he has a sense of responsibility and, through this, courage, but not the courage in front of witnesses, but the hermit and eagle courage, is strong spiritually because he carries on his shoulders the whole human universe, but soft, emotionally fragile, open heart, he knows when to be silent and when to speak, is honest, does not expect glory or praise from anyone, is modest, does not claim merits, is selfish, but in the sense that he only takes into account personal values, he has kindness, has noble, supreme goals. We can recognize in this brief description a way of life specific to Christian ascetics.

Christian asceticism is the process of purification and enlightenment, through the action of divine grace and personal spiritual efforts. Asceticism, as a way of life, presupposes austerity and abstinence from whatever is worldly. But in the literature, it is pointed out that profane asceticism, without the purpose of perfection in God, can lead to self-deification, to the pride of the Self, to isolation and depression. Nietzsche lives this phenomenon. In fact, he is an ascetic who has lost his God and, in his absence, deifies himself and, through himself, the Man. Asceticism is not, however, a practice specific only to Christian monks or philosophers. It was an ideal and a practice of life in all the great religions of all times, but also for emperors. A telling example from the 4th century is the pagan emperor Julian, a fierce persecutor of Christians. About him, Ammianus Marcellinus tells that he slept on the ground only spreading a bedding, and sometimes he did not sleep at all, he had a strict sexual abstinence regime:

...he imposed on himself a rigid temperance, and maintained it as if he had been living under the obligation of the sumptuary laws...Julian now forbade pheasants, or sausages, or even sow's udder to be served up to him, contenting himself with the cheap and ordinary food of the common soldiers.<sup>19</sup>

Ammianus noted that he followed the example of Alexander, who strove not to be weakened by passions,

...having placed a brazen shell on the ground beneath him, used to hold a silver ball in his hand, which he kept stretched outside his bed, so that when sleep pervading his whole body had relaxed the rigour of his muscles, the rattling of the ball falling might banish slumber from his eyes.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *Roman History*, ed. by Henry G. Bohn, online ed. (London: 1862), 88–89.

<sup>20</sup> Marcellinus, *Roman History*, 89.

Evagrius Ponticus says:

A soul has acquired to be free of passions when it is not tempted by passion, not only in the face of things, but remains indifferent even in the face of their remembrance... The one who is accomplished do not restrains himself and the one without passions do not endure because the endure (is needed) to the one who have passions and the restraint to the one who is troubled... The one who has built up the virtues in himself and is soaked in them no longer remembers the law, nor the commandments, nor the punishment, but says and acts them all as his perfect condition dictates him.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, the one who has reached such a spiritual level has no law, no constraint or self-constraint, is not accountable and is not punished because, internalizing the virtues and the law to such an extent that he identifies himself with them, he becomes the law, becomes the virtue. We recognize in this way of being the Nietzsche's master. The virtues of which Evagrius speaks are wisdom, temperance, love, restraint, manhood (courage), patience, and, above all, justice. We met them above in the description that Nietzsche's philosophy gives to the overman.

The aspect that kept Nietzsche alive, conscious and intellectually active, was his will. In these conditions, how somebody cannot think that the source of life is the will? And because the Will to power did not fit into the same book with God, Nietzsche chose to be original, innovative. Beyond that, however, the man he values and glorifies follows the beaten path of asceticism.

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<sup>21</sup> Evagrius Ponticus, *The practical treaty. The Gnostic*, 26.

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