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The Practice of Self-Overcoming: Nietzschean Reflections on the Martial Arts

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I teach you the overman.
Man is something that shall be overcome.
What have you done to overcome him? (8: p. 12)

Throughout *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Friedrich Nietzsche offers an account of human value and meaning as "self-overcoming."¹ Rather than offering a clear and precise model or a set of universal principles, Nietzsche stresses growth, change, self-criticism, and self-improvement. Indeed, much of his critique of morality (and philosophy) is targeted at what he sees as its insistence on fixed and universal values, principles, and goals. The value of human endeavor, for him, lies not in strict adherence to some fixed standard or set of standards but rather in the constant transcendence of those standards. I submit that the study of the martial arts is, in many ways, very much in keeping with this aspect of Nietzsche's ethos and, thus, serves as an excellent vehicle for exploring and exemplifying Nietzschean self-overcoming. At the same time, taking seriously Nietzsche's account of self-overcoming can help illuminate the martial arts not only as an object of study but, most important, as an ongoing *practice* of self-overcoming. Drawing primarily (though not exclusively) from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,² this article will explore the relation between the practice of the martial arts and Nietzschean self-overcoming. Although my explicit focus will be on the martial arts, I will point toward ways in which Nietzschean insights are applicable to many different kinds of athletic endeavor.

Nietzsche and Self-Overcoming

Overcoming, and especially self-overcoming, is one of the central themes of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The meaning of the *Übermensch*, we are told, is that humanity is something that must be overcome (8: p. 12). Put more pithily, it is overcoming that puts the *über* in *Übermensch*. Life, as well, is "that which must always overcome itself" (8: p. 115). Overcoming conjures images of struggle (both physical and more "spiritual"), and this is surely crucial to understanding the concept. But it also has associations with success in general and resiliency in the face of hardship and, as directed toward oneself, connotes introspection (but not pointless navel-gazing), self-knowledge, and self-critique. All of these themes find their place both in *Zarathustra* the text and in the eponymous character himself.

Overcoming conjures images of conflict and struggle, as do the martial arts, so it makes sense to begin there. Nietzsche's account of self-overcoming has a healthy dose of struggle with oneself and with others. It entails struggle with oneself insofar as one seeks to transcend one's limitations (physical and mental) and move toward ever more sophisticated, expressive, beautiful, and potent modes of action and expression. Such "internal" conflicts with fear, insecurity, ignorance, and hubris are all part of the ongoing process of self-overcoming for Nietzsche. Ultimately, as we shall see, it is in struggling with and overcoming ourselves in this way that we live up to our full potential as (fully) human beings.

At the same time, struggle with others can often hone and facilitate this internal process, provided that those with whom we struggle are in a position to offer a genuine challenge and are not mere "pushovers."³ Thus, we are urged by Zarathustra to seek enemies with whom to struggle—enemies of whom we can be proud, such that the successes of our enemies are our own (8: pp. 47–48). In other words, we should not seek out those who can be easily overcome but, rather, those whose talents and abilities will offer the kind of challenge necessary to truly test our own capacities. It should be stressed that it is the challenge itself that is the point here, not merely the annihilation of enemies. Later in the same passage, while discussing our pride in our enemies, Nietzsche draws a distinction between "hating" (*Hassen*) and "despising" (*Verachten*) and urges us

to eschew the latter attitude for the former. What is crucial in this distinction for my purpose is that the original German makes clear the sense in which one can harbor respect and regard for what one hates, but to despise something is to see it as unworthy of regard or respect. This is an admittedly awkward distinction to make in English (and relies on what is effectively a Nietzschean term of art in German), and so one must bear in mind the sense in which hatred requires time, effort, and attention. One must, in other words, take the object of one's hatred seriously—hatred cannot entail indifference or disregard.⁴ Hatred in this context must be understood as divorced from despising in this sense and also as purged of resentment. Indeed, for Nietzsche, the line between genuine friends and our enemies is indistinct at best. Even our friends, he tells us, should present us with struggles: "In a friend one should have one's best enemy. You should be closest to him with your heart when you resist him" (8: p. 56). True friends and, thus, true expressions of love, therefore, are not blindly accepting and complacent but rather push the beloved to continuous self-improvement. Self-overcoming is indeed a kind of struggle with one's enemies, one's friends, and with oneself, though, as we shall see, all of these struggles are intimately bound together in practice. Furthermore, struggles with oneself and with others are likewise bound together, for in struggling with others I better, and thus overcome, myself, and in struggling with myself, I make myself a more worthy and valuable adversary.

All of this struggle and conflict is not an end in itself, however. Ultimately, the point of all this agonism (both with oneself and others) is not destruction for its own sake but rather the creation of something higher (8: p. 211; p. 214)—the transcendence of given standards of value and the creation of something new out of the ashes of the old. According to Nietzsche, humanity, both as individuals and as a whole, is "a bridge and no end," and so we must reflect on and overcome ourselves so as to redeem the present and the past through the creation of a new future (8: p. 198). We are most human when we are pushing the boundaries of human expression (aesthetic, moral, political, etc.). We must avoid preserving ourselves (8: p. 200) and become instead "procreators and cultivators and sowers of the future" (8: p. 203). Complacency, stasis, self-satisfaction, and the ossification of values are all symptoms of decadence. Self-overcoming (and the kinds of struggle that entails) is thus first and foremost the means

whereby we avoid decadence and manifest the highest forms of human flourishing.

The basic picture that emerges is this. In terms of morality and aesthetics, the highest form of value is no particular value as such (good will, eudemonia, pleasure, and the absence of pain) but rather the creation of new values. We are urged to smash the old "tablets of values" and inscribe new ones, all the while bearing in mind that these new tablets are themselves only provisional and must eventually be overcome, as well (8: pp. 205–206). In her important book *Beyond Nihilism: Nietzsche Without Masks*, Ofelia Schutte emphasizes Nietzsche's valorization of "becoming" over and against "being" (12: p. 6). Overcoming, creating, esteeming, growing, changing, maturing, struggling—all the recurring themes in Nietzsche's corpus emphasize processes of becoming rather than states of being. It is worth noting that Nietzsche never once refers to a particular individual as "an overman." The Overman is a concept; it is something toward which we strive—"a bridge and not an end" (8: p. 15). Self-overcoming, then, is not something that one accomplishes. It is not an end state to be achieved. At no point can one say "Now I have overcome myself, my work is done here." Instead, self-overcoming should be understood as a never-ending process of self-appraisal, self-critique, and self-improvement. The moment one gives up on this process or decides one has finished is the moment, for Nietzsche, when one ceases to be fully human in the most important sense—one has at this point abandoned the change and movement of becoming for the complacency, decadence, and ossification of being.

Self-Overcoming in the Martial Arts

At this point I would like to apply this account of self-overcoming to the martial arts. By way of establishing definitions and a common framework, let me say that, for rhetorical purposes, I am limiting my definition of "martial arts" to include only the styles and systems that can roughly be called "traditional" in that they emphasize internal training, respect for the (often ancient) roots of the techniques, and style or "art" as much as, if not more than, practicality and efficiency. Thus, the primary contrast would be between martial arts, in this admittedly narrow sense, and systems of self-defense (e.g., "street-fighting" techniques and military training) or sport (e.g.,

Olympic tae kwon do, Ultimate Fighting, kickboxing). To be sure, a properly Nietzschean genealogy of any martial art, as I am using the term, would reveal roots in these more practical pursuits, but in the contemporary context much of what we study in the martial arts (as I am using the term) is less than truly practical in the more mundane sense. By way of example, the styles and techniques that comprise the martial art I now study developed, even within the Buddhist traditions, out of the very "practical" goal of protecting the peoples of what is now the Korean peninsula from foreign conquerors, but my present study of feudal Korean sword techniques, or the empty-hand form (*Hyung*) structured around "breaking" the 108 torments of the Buddhist tradition, are not what one could call practical martial techniques in an age of conceal-and-carry (as my beginning students will inevitably point out).⁵ Over time, the martial arts have become more than a mere means to (an admittedly important) end, they have truly become an art.⁶ In short, martial arts function in the age of handguns in a way analogous to calligraphy in an age of e-mail.

But this lack of instrumental practicality, this lack of efficiency, is exactly where Nietzsche would begin to locate the value of the martial arts (as an aesthetic expression and as a practice of self-overcoming). It is in the indifference to practical efficiency that one creates room to turn the martial arts into an avenue for human creativity and self-expression. This is because efficiency must always be subservient to the demands of specific goals within specific technological contexts—the means are always subordinate to the ends. If efficiency (which is surely best achieved, if the goal is deadly force, by modern explosive and projectile weapons) is no longer the goal, then one can focus one's attention less on the end and more on the means, thus turning the refinement and improvement of a given practice (means) itself into an end. Thus, transformed from an instrument of violence and aggression, the study and practice of the martial arts become a thing of beauty in their own right, even if one has no expectation (or even desire) to ever use the martial arts for truly violent purposes.⁷

What is special about the martial arts, however, especially from the Nietzschean perspective, is that it must always be a practice and never a product. Like one of Nietzsche's own favorite metaphors, dance (8: pp. 107–110 and p. 195; 7: pp. 245–248), the "art" of the martial arts is only ever rendered through movement and is never a

static “artifact.” One’s own body becomes the medium for a kind of artistic expression that is always transient and ephemeral. It is kinetic rather than static, a process of becoming rather than a manifestation of being. Of particular importance is the fact that it is never perfected or completed. Each iteration of a form or a technique is a kind of practice, not only in the sense that it is a kind of bodily movement but also in the sense that it is never in itself a perfect terminus of that form or technique. The martial artist never expects to truly perfect his or her art; it is always and can only ever be an ongoing striving.

It is in its character as a process or striving that martial arts can be best understood as a kind of Nietzschean self-overcoming. Recall that, for Nietzsche, the true worth of humanity is proved through resistance to and overcoming of stasis, rigidity, and the ossification of beliefs, values, and “truths.” This he refers to metaphorically as “the spirit of gravity”—as a kind of inertia that we must constantly resist in order to manifest our highest potential (8: pp. 107–108 and pp. 191–195). Life itself, Nietzsche claims, is self-overcoming—it is power (will to power) expressed through the decay and destruction of the old and the creation of the new. When she first commits to training, the martial artist effectively sets out to undertake a rigorous regime of breaking down and ridding herself of old habits, both physical and mental. She works toward the shaping of new ones with an eye toward an ideal that is never completely grasped by the practitioner (as one improves, one is able to perceive with more subtlety and depth, reveal ever more layers of imperfection) and cannot ever be fully achieved.

Take, for example, the practice of forms (*Kata* in Japanese or *Hyung* in Korean). The improving of stance work, the speed and precision of the feet and hands, the clarity and focus of the mind, balance, strength, and coordination—these are never-ending tasks that are willingly taken up by each and every martial artist. The same holds true for the practice of joint-manipulation techniques, grappling techniques, and so on. One might say that training is simply repeating the same movement or set of movements over and over, but this is simply not the case. As one becomes more and more familiar and comfortable with the movements through repetition, one actually attains a better grasp of their function. This occurs on two levels. First, epistemically, as one practices the technique or form, one comes to understand better how and why it functions and how to improve it. All of us who have trained seriously for some time can recall moments

when, after the *n*th repetition of a form, some new “breakthrough” is made, and we come to see and understand the form in a new way, which in turn opens up new foci for future training. Second, physically, one’s body becomes increasingly better at executing the movements—a joint-locking technique, for example, can actually change from being at first a series of steps, grabs, and twists into one smooth movement. Most important, there is a reciprocal relationship between these two levels. As one’s physical competence increases, new insights are revealed on the more “epistemic” level, which in turn enhances physical performance.

But the perfection of these techniques or forms is never achieved. We could always use more practice, more training. There is always room for improvement. To entertain the idea that one has perfected some aspect of the martial arts is to miss one of its most basic, though clichéd, insights: The practice of martial arts is about the journey itself, not the destination. Or, as Nietzsche might prefer, it is about becoming, not being. Thus, the martial artist has dedicated herself to a never-ending process of self-improvement and self-critique. She has herself become a medium for an artistic process of self-expression. Through her training she is, in essence, recreating herself in an explicit and self-conscious way. This is, in large part, why the martial arts serve as such an excellent example of Nietzschean self-overcoming.

There is also an important epistemic aspect of the martial arts in relation to Nietzschean self-overcoming, in the sense of knowing the material, as well as in the method by which one learns the material. First, consider the way in which one learns and studies the martial arts. To be sure, a good instructor can make a huge difference in the quality of one’s training, but in the end, the value of the instruction is contingent on the self-discipline, patience, and motivation of the student. Instructors can demonstrate, correct, cajole, chastise, and otherwise aid the student in learning and improving the material, but she cannot simply hand over a collection of propositions to be memorized and repeated.⁸ The student must on his own take up and practice what he has been taught, and it is only through this practice that we may say that he has truly learned the technique of form in question. Indeed, the best instructors are not always the ones with the most trophies or the most effective techniques or the prettiest forms, but rather the ones who are best able to motivate and guide their

students through what is ultimately an exercise in self-discipline. Martial arts, as self-overcoming, is, in this way, an internally directed effort, but insofar as the goal is physical/practical movement, it cannot be understood as completely solipsistic, or indeed individualistic (a point on which I shall elaborate later).

Consider further the best way to understand what it even means to know or to have learned a particular aspect of the martial arts. Take something relatively simple like beginning weapons training. When one first begins to learn sword or staff, for instance, one learns and practices the most basic kinds of manipulation of the weapon—a set of basic cuts, thrusts, and blocks with the sword and various kinds of spinning, striking, and blocking with the staff. One may later learn weapons forms of increasing complexity and sparring, but even at the most advanced levels of training significant time must be spent on those first, most basic exercises. So what does it mean to say that one *knows* a particular weapon or a particular joint-locking technique, or a form? Given the impossibility of perfection as an end goal, *that* cannot be our epistemic standard. At the same time, a basic grasp of the movements is not sufficient either. Years after I may have “learned” those basic cuts and thrusts with the sword, for example, I continue to improve on them and in so doing improve the whole of my sword technique. In that sense, I cannot say that I know them in the sense of having fully perfected or “mastered” them, since I continue to see room for improvement and refinement.

Here again, Nietzsche can be very helpful in addressing this problem, which is a matter of our understanding of the conditions of knowledge as such, especially within a specifically kinetic context. Once again, Nietzsche’s epistemic position is subject to several interpretations, much of which revolve around whether his “perspectivism” (see 4: pp. 12–21) amounts to relativism and, if so, of what kind. Regardless of the ultimate merit of such interpretations, however, it is at least clear that Nietzsche did not understand *himself* to be a relativist in this sense (see 11: pp. 52–117). He clearly thought that some ways of thinking and valuing were better than others. His epistemology allows for qualitative distinctions among knowledge claims based, in part, on certain kinds of epistemic virtues (some of which are agent centered, some of which are methodological) and a rather robustly naturalized empiricism. Thus, it is not the case that all knowledge claims are of equal merit, but this has far more to

do with the way in which we go about offering and supporting our knowledge claims than it does with their content on its own. That is, the standard as Nietzsche describes it (see 9: pp. 45–49) is focused more on process than product.

At the end of the day, Nietzsche can be understood as a fallibilist—he holds that all knowledge claims, no matter how good they may be, are always, as a matter of principle, provisional. There is, once again, quite a wide array of difference in the exact interpretation of Nietzsche's epistemology, but there is general agreement on the admittedly basic account I am offering here (see 3; 4; 10; 11). Thus, while the interpretation of Nietzsche remains at best an inexact science, there is strong textual support for the general claim that knowledge, for Nietzsche, is never a *fait accompli* but rather an ongoing process. It is, once again, a manifestation of becoming, rather than a state of being.

So, returning to the question of “knowing” a particular weapon or technique—the problem lies in thinking of the answer to the question as an all-or-nothing proposition. As a kind of feat, such knowledge is impossible. If at any point I think that I know a weapon in the sense that I have learned all there is to know about it and that my use of it is perfected, that can only be understood as either a deliberate self-deception or a manifestation of hubris. However, if by “knowing” I mean that I have begun to acquire and hone the techniques and skills associated with the use of that weapon, then my claim has merit. There are two important elements of taking this approach seriously. First is the fact that the continued validity of my knowledge claim is contingent on my continued practice with that weapon—my knowledge lies, in part, in my continued commitment to improvement. If I have stopped practicing, my knowledge claim is immediately suspect.⁹ Second, this understanding of knowledge clearly admits of degrees. I know the sword better than my students do, but my instructors know it far better than I. Nevertheless, it is importantly true that all of us (assuming our continued commitment to practice) can rightly claim to know the sword. The knowledge, therefore, lies in the overcoming (as an ongoing process) of ignorance and incompetence. I know the weapon if I am engaged in the process of improving my skills with it. The moment I begin to think of the knowledge as a manifestation of being instead of becoming, I have lost the real meaning of it.

Finally, I would like to stress that thinking of martial arts as a manifestation of self-overcoming does not commit one to an understanding of the practice of the martial arts as solipsistic or radically individualistic. To be sure, it is importantly self-directed, but there is also a strong sense in which this is a fundamentally social endeavor. I need instructors, fellow students, training partners, sparring partners, and exemplars in order to get the most out of my training. There is certainly an element of training that is individualistic. I need to take the time to go over, repeat, rehearse—in short, to train—on my own. But if I do not open myself up to the scrutiny and critique of others, if I do not have real people with whom to practice, if I do not have real (and “worthy”) partners against whom to test myself, my training becomes far less effective and will ultimately stagnate. Indeed, opponents of this sort are fundamental to my own efforts toward self-improvement. By way of illustration, we find that *Zarathustra* is constantly going away to his mountain to be with himself, then coming back down to share and test what he has earned, and then returning to the mountain, only to come back down again later. The point again is to reject all-or-nothing dualisms. I cannot accomplish much completely on my own, but I cannot hide behind or lose myself among others, either (like the person whose training is driven solely by the need to best all opponents). Ultimately, both of these maneuvers can be understood as ways of hiding from oneself. The people who spend all of their training time hiding alone in their backyards cannot test themselves against others and learn from their observations and insights, and those who seek only to best their opponents are focused solely on the weaknesses and strengths of others (their opponents) and come to grasp their own capacities only in light of those others’ strengths and weaknesses. Self-overcoming, therefore, is about not becoming complacent, either in solitude or in company.

Objections and Responses

At this point, an important objection needs to be raised. All of this is well and good, one might point out, but there is an obvious tension, if not outright contradiction, between the emphasis I am placing on traditional martial arts and Nietzsche’s valorization of value creation, which seems to demand a dedicated disrespect for tradition.

Such antitraditionalism must surely be at odds with the practice of the martial arts I am here describing. How can one smash old tablets of values when one is dedicating vast amounts of time and effort to refining and honing techniques that are often centuries old? This is a very serious challenge to the view I am offering but not, I submit, an insurmountable one.

First, it should be noted that Nietzsche cannot be rejecting traditional practices simply because they are old (his respect for Hellenic art and culture attest to that). Neither does his ethic of value creation demand that this creation emerge *ex nihilo*, so it is not simply because there is a prior set of practices and techniques. Rather, the threat that certain kinds of and approaches to tradition pose for Nietzsche is their tendency to close off critique and revision. Traditions, in this sense, cease to be changing, growing, and living phenomena and become, instead, manifestations of decadence. This is the kind of tradition that demands blind adherence and rules out *a priori* anything that is inconsistent with the tradition. So the real question is whether the martial arts are necessarily traditional in this pernicious sense. To be sure, the practice of martial arts requires consistency of training and a great deal of habituation, both mental and physical. It also demands a respect for the history and tradition of the art itself. But the cultivation of habit, up to a point (the habits must not become ends in themselves), is something Nietzsche explicitly praises (7: pp. 167–168). As for consistency, it is a virtue in the pursuit of excellence but a liability if it becomes mere obstinacy. Finally, as for respect, we have already seen that Nietzsche understands true respect to be not only tolerant of critique but also demanding of critical engagement with the object of our respect. What emerges, in keeping with Nietzsche's roots in philology, is an appeal to a roughly Aristotelian mean (2: Book II). The practice of martial arts does require a respect for tradition, but respect does not necessarily entail blind conformity. Indeed, just as true friendship, for Nietzsche (8: pp. 55–57) and for Aristotle (2: Book VIII), demands a willingness to challenge the friend in an effort to help her realize her full potential, genuine respect brings with it a willingness to question and critique in the pursuit of excellence. Respect for tradition, in this sense, demands, on the one hand, that one confront the tradition on its own terms and seek to live up to its expectations but also, on the other hand, that one views that tradition in a larger context of many traditions and

practices and, when warranted, critically appraise and revise that tradition.

Something must be said about what could count as “warrant” in this context before this response can be taken seriously, however. If the definition is too narrow, then the martial arts do seem to be tradition bound in a way that is inconsistent with Nietzschean self-overcoming. There is, on the one hand, the more straightforward technical sense. “Warrant” here might mean an alteration as a result of some new insight from medicine or kinesiology. If it becomes clear that some movement or technique does damage to one’s knees, for instance, it might be time to revisit the traditional movement or technique with an eye toward eliminating that danger. Of course, the technical kind of warrant is not the only cause we might find to challenge tradition. There are the more ideological aspects of tradition—concepts of honor, relations between teacher and student, attitudes toward women, and so on, that might prove inconsistent with self-overcoming generally (not just for a specific practitioner) and thus warrant revision or rejection. Overtly sexist or racist traditions should be rejected not only because they inhibit the self-overcoming of their targets but also because they manifest an other-focused sense of value in the racist or sexist and thus inhibit self-overcoming for him, as well.¹⁰ A relation of complete and total submission on the part of students would likewise be inconsistent with self-overcoming insofar as there needs to be an openness to critique on the part of all participants. Revising or eliminating these traditions does not necessarily entail a complete break with traditional martial arts, for such ideologies are in no way central to the traditional identity of the martial arts.¹¹ Nor does revision or elimination mean a disrespect for tradition generally, since the insistence of warrant—that there be a compelling reason—demonstrates a respect for tradition as such (as opposed to a blind adherence).

Once again, what is important is not that one follows a tradition or practices an ancient art form but rather how one approaches that tradition or art form. One should approach the traditional aspects of the martial arts in a way that is respectful, yet open to critique and revision. This is quite consistent with my view that the martial arts can be understood as a manifestation of self-overcoming. They are a means to an end, though that end can never be reached and is only ever made manifest in the striving after it. In some ways, it is

precisely because of the more traditional aspects of the martial arts that they are such fertile ground for self-overcoming. The tradition can offer a rich resource and framework for challenging oneself insofar as it serves as a context in which to strive for a kind of aesthetic perfection (again, this should be understood only as an ideal approached asymptotically). The tradition is not, in other words, a set and fixed standard to which one must adhere but is rather an ideal that is constantly re-forming itself as one becomes more and more familiar with it. It is not tradition for tradition's sake, which Nietzsche would surely reject, but rather tradition for the sake of self-overcoming. Just as creative endeavors like music require some form and structure within which to find one's voice (figuratively or literally), the traditional forms and structures of the martial arts provide a context for genuinely creative self-expression that is, nevertheless, respectful of tradition. With this in mind, one can see that the respect for tradition characteristic of the martial arts need not be antithetical to Nietzsche's valorization of creativity.

A related concern with my account would be to point toward what appear to be significant differences between Nietzsche and the Buddhist tradition that informs many of the traditional martial arts. Buddhism's emphasis on humility, on life as suffering, and the illusory status of the self, for instance, seem inconsistent with much of Nietzsche's own views. Indeed, Nietzsche explicitly takes Buddhism to task in *Beyond Good and Evil* (6: p. 68, pp. 72–74, and pp. 115–117), for example. Thus, it would seem that there is a serious tension between Nietzsche and any practice informed by or even sympathetic to Buddhist philosophy.

If one understands Buddhist contemplative practice to be directed toward a specific goal, such as *Satori*, *Nirvana*, or enlightenment, and that those goals can be properly understood as an end state, then there is a clear conflict. If one understands the Buddhist emphasis on humility to require a complete self-mortification akin to asceticism, then again there is conflict. This is not the only way to understand these Buddhist concepts, however. If one emphasizes the relation between *Nirvana* and contemplative practice, one can understand the concept as antithetical to an end-state and exactly the sort of process, the sort of Becoming, that is central to self-overcoming. If one understands humility to be an awareness of fallibility and openness to critique, and if one emphasizes the middle

way between hedonism and asceticism, then there is reason to believe that Nietzsche and the martial arts are quite compatible. Indeed, there has been a great deal of interest in the relation between Nietzsche and Buddhism generally, and there are those who suggest that they are far more compatible than Nietzsche himself realized. Robert G. Morrison, for example, has argued that Nietzsche's criticisms of Buddhism were based on misunderstanding and that there is ultimately quite a bit that is Buddhist about Nietzsche and vice versa (5).

This remains very much a live debate in any event. Indeed, there are tensions not only between Nietzsche and Buddhist thought but also between the ethos of the martial arts themselves and at least some varieties of Buddhism. Shaolin kung fu traces its origin to Buddhist monks on the one hand, while on the other hand Theravada and Tibetan Buddhism espouse nonviolence or pacifism.¹² Exploring the various interpretations of central Buddhist tenets, assessing the accuracy of Nietzsche's critique of Buddhism, and exploring the tensions with various martial arts simply cannot be undertaken in this essay, however. It will have to suffice to allow that there are reasonable interpretations of both Nietzsche and Buddhism that allow for compatibility between them, as well as the martial arts, and so the conflict between them is far from obvious and inevitable.

Beyond the Martial Arts

Another significant concern with my view might be that some roughly similar account could be applied to any athletic endeavor and that there is nothing peculiar about the martial arts, as such, in this regard. Training to play soccer could very well be approached in the same way, and so striving toward the unattainable perfection of one's skills as a goalie could become a kind of self-overcoming. This is surely true. If one were to approach any athletic endeavor in a similar spirit, it would seem to meet the criteria for self-overcoming that I have sketched here. One would surely find that a significant number of the very best athletes in any sport view their training in roughly the way I have been describing. I do not hold that there is something unique or necessary about martial arts in this regard. Being a martial artist, in other words, is not a necessary condition for understanding one's training as self-overcoming.

What does set the martial arts apart is the extent to which they are particularly conducive to the kind of approach I have been describing here and often explicitly endorse it. It is part of the very ethos of the martial arts themselves that one approach one's study in the manner I am describing. Thus, my argument is not that it is only through martial arts that these self-overcoming aspects are realized, but only that the martial arts are particularly well suited to this understanding. In fact, most athletes in competitive sports (distance runners, I submit, might be an exception here) use their training in exactly the way that I have suggested genuine martial arts (in the sense, at least, that I have been using the term) rule out. There is a definite and external goal to training and honing one's abilities, and that is victory.¹³ One does not train for the sake of self-expression and self-overcoming. Rather, one trains to win. In the martial arts, what explicit competition there tends to be is subservient to training, rather than the other way around. That is, one's competition with others just is a kind of training. One competes in order to train, one does not train in order to compete, and this is a highly significant difference between the martial arts and most other forms of athletic pursuit.¹⁴

Sparring, for example, is foremost a kind of training, and through its competitive aspects one comes to a better realization of one's own weaknesses so that one can further improve one's training. Tournaments, when they work well,¹⁵ perform the same function. The competition at the tournament is not the goal but rather a means to celebrate and further explore one's own progress. For Nietzsche, it is in competition (good friends and good enemies) that we come best to know our own strengths and weaknesses, so that we can overcome them. The same holds true for the martial arts. In publicly demonstrating one's abilities to others and competing against others one opens oneself up to the critical scrutiny of those others, which can clearly be an extremely useful tool for self-overcoming. Again, not every tournament, or every competition, will manifest this kind of ethos. There are always tournaments (and individual participants) in which the central goal is the humiliation of the opponent—where the victory is the goal, not the training. This is why martial artists should follow Nietzsche's advice to choose wisely with whom they train and compete so that they can be challenged in a way that will best improve their training. The end goal of the martial arts is always the training itself and, ultimately, more and better training. The goal is self-

perfection as a manifestation of becoming, not being, and that is something peculiar to the martial arts shared by very few other athletic pursuits.

Conclusion

The practice of the martial arts, I have argued, can be fruitfully understood as a kind of manifestation of Nietzschean self-overcoming. The martial arts serves as a helpful example of this Nietzschean concept, and thinking about the martial arts through the lens of self-overcoming illuminates important aspects of the methodology and ethos of martial arts training and practice. Every professional Kuk Sool Won school (which is the art I practice) has the maxim "We Need More Practice" displayed prominently in the *do jahng* (training facility or school). This is in many ways a perfect summary of martial arts as self-overcoming—it is about testing oneself, working through failure, and always, to use an important Nietzschean concept, "*becoming what we are*" (8: p. 239). One cannot *be* a martial artist in the static sense of having some property or possessing some status; one is a martial artist only to the extent that one is always striving to *become* a better martial artist.

Notes

1. It should be noted that Nietzsche's corpus, and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in particular, are difficult works to interpret, and there is no settled common interpretation among scholars of Nietzsche's work. The interpretation I am offering here is supported by the text, but given the style and content of Nietzsche's writing, such support cannot be conclusive, and I acknowledge that there are compelling alternative interpretations of Nietzsche's work.
2. My focus on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is motivated, in part, by the fact that this text is particularly focused on these more "positive" aspects of Nietzsche's ethical thought and by the desire to offer the novice a more coherent picture of a single Nietzschean text. Although a more wide-ranging exegesis would doubtless be worthwhile in principle, it would overly encumber the present text. My more narrow focus may not be ideal, but I believe it is sufficient, given my more modest exegetical goals.
3. For Nietzsche, the lover of "orders of rank," this is the difference between those who operate on our own level (or better) and those who are "beneath" us.

4. Again, this does not mesh nicely with the standard use of the term "hatred," but Nietzsche does seem to be taking pains to draw a distinction between hating and despising here. It may perhaps be best to consider this a technical term for Nietzsche in this context—he is using *Hassen* here in a particular way, even if that is not exactly how the term is typically employed.
5. Of course, there are "practical" effects of these examples: flexibility, strength, balance, mental focus, stamina, and so on. The point is not that there are no practical benefits at all, but rather that these practices transcend the purely practical in very important ways. There are much more direct and efficient ways to gain these benefits, just as there are more direct and efficient ways to protect oneself.
6. I want to stress again that at present I am making this distinction between martial arts and more directly "practical" systems of fighting or sport for purely rhetorical reasons. I am not saying that these latter kinds of study and practice are less important or less valuable or even less authentic than what I am calling martial arts. I am only saying that there are important differences and that these are relevant differences within the context of the present conceptual framework.
7. The efficiency to which I am referring here is purely in terms of violence as an end goal. That is, efficiency in this sense would refer to the way to do the most harm with the least effort (making handguns, for example, always more efficient). Efficiency of movement, ways to avoid "wasted" energy, and so on are all concerns of the martial arts but not in relation to achieving a practical goal. Thus, the martial arts are not indifferent to efficiency in all of its forms, but they are indifferent to this highly instrumentalized "practical" efficiency.
8. This is often why people who claim to have "taught themselves" martial arts from books or videos are held in such low regard by practicing martial artists. Not out of some sense of elitism (though this may be so in some cases), but precisely because the practicing martial artist is aware of, even if unable to articulate, precisely this epistemic point.
9. This is true for all aspects of martial arts training and even, I would argue, for the appellation of "martial artist" itself. One who trained for and earned a black belt 10 years ago but hasn't trained at all for the last 3 years cannot rightly be considered a martial artist any longer, since what it means to "be" a martial artist is continued practice and training. If this person should resume training regularly, then the appellation will be appropriate again, just as it is appropriate for the neophyte who has been training for a matter of months.
10. Two important points should be made here. First, I am focusing on the notion of self-overcoming, not Nietzsche's explicit views on race and gender, which clearly clash with the view I am espousing here.

Although I cannot undertake a full defense of my interpretation here, I believe that his stated views on these topics were ultimately inconsistent with his larger ethical goals. Second, one of the central aspects of self-overcoming is that one's values and sense of worth do not become ossified or static, nor reliant on others for their status. Thus, racism and sexism can be understood to be inconsistent with self-overcoming, even for the racist or sexist person. This does not mean that the harm done by racism and sexism is the same for both the perpetrator and the victim, merely that a commitment to sexist or racist ideology is inconsistent with a commitment to self-overcoming, even for the sexist or racist.

11. This is particularly clear in the case of sexism, since women have historically been not only practitioners but even founders of traditional martial arts, especially in China (the legendary female masters Ng Mui and Yim Wing-Chun, for instance).
12. It should be noted that the exact nature and requirements of the pacifist tenets within both of these traditions is still very much contested.
13. Indeed, a recent article in *The New York Times* described the extent to which young athletes tend to stop exercise once that "external" goal of victory is removed. See (1).
14. Again, this is only true within the context of the martial arts as I have explicitly defined them. To be sure, professional kickboxers train so that they can compete at the highest levels and thus earn greater prize money, and members of the Olympic tae kwon do team train in order to win medals. This is why the more general (and broad) understanding of martial arts, which would include both the kickboxer and the Olympian, is inadequate for my purpose, which is to hone in on the artistic aspect of the martial arts.
15. There are plenty of counterexamples of martial arts tournaments. Some of the largest "open" tournaments even have teams with commercial sponsorship. And to the extent that victory in the tournament has become the explicit end of the participant, I would argue that we have left the realm of the martial arts and entered the realm of martial sports.

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