

Thus Dunks Zarathustra

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It didn't take long for the backlash against last summer's enthralling ESPN Michael Jordan documentary *The Last Dance* to arrive. Before it was even over, Scottie Pippen—Jordan's ever-present wingman and a superb player in his own right—was apparently 'livid' to be described as 'selfish' by his former teammate. Another teammate, Horace Grant, part of the Chicago Bulls team that won the first three-peat (three-in-a-row) NBA championships, described the series, in part produced by Jordan's media company, as a 'lie, lie, lie', and a number of former players and journalists later joined the chorus. Jordan didn't exclude Isaiah Thomas from the 1992 Olympic 'Dream Team': lie. Jordan was poisoned by a pizza during the 1997 finals in Utah: lie. The Bulls would have stayed together for another year to try to win a seventh championship: lie.

The series ran during last year's coronavirus-postponed NBA finals, in which current star LeBron James shone. It was Jordan's way of weighing in on the ongoing GOAT debate: who is the Greatest Of All Time. As it stands, thanks to his six championship wins, Jordan is still number one (versus four for James), and the documentary underlined his ultra-competitive nature. But it may have backfired too, with a number of players coming out to say they didn't like him, and numerous commentators starting to wonder whether the more team-oriented and socially conscious James was in fact a better role model than the highly individualist and capitalist Jordan. Jordan once famously declared that 'Republicans wear sneakers too'—although more recently he did come out strongly in favour of the George Floyd protests.

In the documentary itself many of his former teammates described Jordan as a 'jerk' or an 'asshole', and the series didn't shy away from Jordan's confrontational and bullying leadership style, especially towards team manager Jerry Krause. With everyone rounding on Jordan, however, one might wonder whether this was a case of sour grapes, or indeed of *ressentiment* towards one of the most successful sports stars of all time. A reader of Nietzsche would have asked if it was an example of *herd morality*.

In his classic *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche divided the world into two moralities: 'master morality', which values strength, beauty, courage, and success; and 'slave' or 'herd' morality, which values kindness, empathy, and sympathy. The former he associated with the ancient Homeric Greeks, the latter with early Christianity:

indeed, his whole point was that there had been a 'slave revolt' in morality during the Roman Empire that led to 'slave', rather than 'master', morality being celebrated.

So is Jordan an example of master morality, selfishly driving those around him so that he can succeed, against which others are now revolting by saying he was mean, only interested in himself and his own success? Is he even an example of the enigmatic *Übermensch*, the superman Nietzsche announced in his philosophical-poetic masterpiece *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*? Is 'Air Jordan' the 'dancing star' who will literally jump over modern man and the morality of the day (*über* is German for 'over')? Is the 'Black Jesus', as Jordan once called himself, the *Antichrist* Nietzsche called upon in his last book before going mad? The analogy is worth pursuing, not least because basketball, which is played so high in the sky, lends itself particularly well to Nietzsche's metaphors. (If the epithet of the 'beautiful game' is already taken, then perhaps basketball can be the most elegant.)

Jordan is in one sense clearly not the *Übermensch*. We learn of the continuous personal slights and grudges (a form of *ressentiment*) he held against players to fuel his game. But in another he is, at least in terms of the game itself. He is described in the last episode of the series as being essentially 'present', as not letting the failures of the past get in the way of future success. In this he seems to have achieved what Nietzsche was getting at with his idea of the 'eternal return': the challenge of living in the moment by accepting to relive every instant of your life an infinite number of times, exactly as it was, so as to free yourself from past regrets. Nietzsche describes Napoleon as a mixture of *Übermensch* and *Unmensch* (brute)—a sort of 'beauty and the beast'—and perhaps that's the right figure to compare Jordan with.

The most poignant moment of the series came at the end of episode seven (out of ten). An emotional Jordan explained why he was so tyrannical with his teammates (he once punched his smaller teammate Steve Kerr in the face during practice), cutting off the sequence with a 'break'. That this sequence came 45 minutes into his first filmed interview shows how much Jordan has been keeping in for such a long time. In fact, Jordan seems to have internalised much during his playing career, not least the murder of his father, building a protective carapace around himself from which emotion would only spill out uncontrollably upon the achievement of

success. Witness the unforgettable scene of him crying on the floor of the changing rooms on Father's Day 1996 having won his fourth championship. Since retiring, Jordan has become infamous for crying at public events, so much so it has become a meme. But here Jordan is being true (truthfulness is a characteristic of master morality): true to himself, true to who he was and how he had to be to win.

Thus Spoke Zarathustra is composed of four parts, but the last part Nietzsche kept to himself, only distributing certain copies amongst his friends. One can read it as a warning about the pitfalls 'higher men' may fall into on their path towards the *Übermensch*. Jordan is aware of the things he had to do to himself in order to succeed, things he has to live with for the rest of his life. That drive, as the closing scene of *The Last Dance* portrays, leaves him alone, smoking his cigar on a bench looking out at the sea. Only he can tell if he's happy.

Basketball is my sport. I grew up watching recorded tapes of the nineties finals: that Jordan should make it all the way to Dublin, hardly a hotbed of budding ballers, is itself testament to his reach. The apex for me came in captaining the Cambridge Blues Basketball team. We lost to Oxford—I will never know that feeling of being on top of the world—and the only thing worth remembering from that game is a phrase uttered by an onlooking professor who knew my affection for Nietzsche: 'Thus Dunks Zarathustra'.

Jordan needs no defenders. Not everyone can—or indeed wants to—'be like Mike'. But that someone like Michael Jordan should be able to exist, if not be celebrated, in today's world still seems of the utmost importance.