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# Nietzschean Narratives of Hero and Herd in Walt Disney/Pixar's *The Incredibles*

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# HOMER SIMPSON PONDERS POLITICS

## *Popular Culture as Political Theory*

*Edited by*

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10. Kurt Vonnegut once summed it up this way: "To be is to do—Socrates. To do is to be—Sartre. Do Be Do Be Do—Sinatra."
11. Struik, 114–15.
12. The best discussion of the effects of alienating labor on society can be found in Josef Pieper's *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, trans. Alexander Dru (London: Faber and Faber, 1952). It has an introduction by T. S. Eliot.
13. Struik, 117–18. This is something to consider next time your boss promises you a raise. It is impossible, in this context, not to think of Kenny Dobbins, one of the people interviewed in Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005). Mr. Dobbins is a tragic example of how a "good employee" can be worked to death—and not notice until it's too late.
14. Struik, 109–10.
15. Marx's discussion of a revolution in consciousness and political culture goes beyond the scope of this chapter. See, in particular, Marx and Engels's *The Communist Manifesto*.
16. See Robert Heinlein's influential 1962 Hugo Award-winning novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (New York: Putnam, 1991) about a human raised by Martians.

## 8 NIETZSCHEAN NARRATIVES OF HERO AND HERD IN WALT DISNEY / PIXAR'S *THE INCREDIBLES*

C. Heike Schotten

BOB [to wide-eyed, expectant child]. Well, what are you waiting for?

CHILD. I don't know! Something amazing, I guess.

BOB [sighing]. Me, too, kid.

—*The Incredibles*

And to ask it once more: today—is greatness possible?

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §212

In the penultimate scene of Pixar / Walt Disney's animated film *The Incredibles*, ten-year-old superhero Dash Parr is about to run a sprint race in his elementary school's track meet. As the race begins, his parents buoyantly cheer him on. "Run, Dash, run!!" they yell excitedly—and, glancing up at them, young Dash propels himself within seconds to the front of the pack. Alarmed at their son's swift ascent into first place, however, his parents suddenly reverse course, yelling "Pull back! Pull back!" Following their cues, Dash drifts to the back of the pack of racers. This causes his parents to change directives yet again, his father yelling audibly, "Don't give up! Make it close!" Speeding up for the last time, Dash eventually finishes second in a race that, without his parents' interventions, he could easily have won. Flushed with

pleasure if not exertion, Dash turns wide-eyed to his family in the stands, smiles tentatively, and gives them the thumbs-up.<sup>1</sup>

As anyone who has seen *The Incredibles* knows, the reason for Dash's parents' mixed messages is not their failure to understand the point of a race, but rather their desire to limit their son's success to within a "normal" level of achievement. For running is Dash's superpower. Dash is not simply faster than a speeding bullet—he runs so fast he can escape video detection and, like Christ himself, can traverse water without sinking due to his astounding speed. Obviously, Dash is worlds beyond any elementary school track meet and could easily crush any competitor in any race, even an Olympic marathon. Indeed, were he truly to run as fast as he could, the race would be over before it even got started.

Dash's dilemma in this scene—and its compromise resolution enforced by his parents' mixed messages from the stands—can be read as an allegory of Nietzsche's critique of modern doctrines of equality. Dash is a kind of genius—he is an extraordinary boy, so extraordinary that he is, in fact, *superhuman*, and the superheroes of *The Incredibles* can be read as literalizations of Nietzsche's notion of greatness or superiority.<sup>2</sup> Like the higher man of Nietzsche's philosophy, Dash cannot be given free rein to express his greatness, because to do so would ruin things for everybody else. His incredible speed would ruin the track meet for other children, who could no longer look forward to competing, as well as for other parents, who could no longer nourish beliefs in their children's talents. Indeed, Dash's prowess would ruin the sport of competitive racing for every other runner in the world. Moreover, rather than celebrate his achievements, the school might deal with Dash's greatness through exclusionary limitations—by, for example, putting a ceiling on the number of wins allowed each runner or capping the maximum speed at which competitors can run. Such consequences, according to Nietzsche, are the predictable if undeserved fate of anyone who is truly exceptional. As he explains in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

The highest and strongest drives, when they break out passionately and drive the individual far above the average and the flats of the herd conscience, wreck the self-confidence of the community, its faith in itself, and it is as if its spine snapped. Hence just these drives are branded and slandered most. High and independent spirituality, the will to stand alone, even a powerful reason are experienced as dangers; everything that elevates an individual above the herd

and intimidates the neighbor is henceforth called evil; and the fair, modest, submissive, conforming mentality, the *mediocrity* of desires attains moral designations and honors. (§201)

Were Dash truly to run the race as fast as he could, he would violate the norms and presuppositions of social life, which include, among others, notions of equality, fairness, inclusion, and "normal" ten-year-old behavior. According to Nietzsche, the good of the community and the enhancement of the higher type are at odds with each other. Given this conflict, society typically chooses its own self-preservation over recognition and honor of the exceptional person's greatness. The result? Mediocrity is rewarded and greatness demonized, punished, even sacrificed for the "common good." Nietzsche does not disguise his contempt for this decision calculus: "The general welfare' is no ideal, no goal, no remotely intelligible concept, but only an emetic." He continues, "What is fair for one *cannot* by any means for that reason alone be fair for others," and "the demand of one morality for all is detrimental for the higher men." This is the case because some people are just better than others; or, in his words, because "there is an order of rank between man and man" (*BGE*, §228).

Dash's dilemma is the basic plot premise of *The Incredibles*: faced with a caste of superpowerful heroes, society would rather eliminate them than honor their greatness. Nietzsche calls this sort of resentfulness *slave morality*. A slave morality is any ethical, religious, or political code that vilifies greatness. It is articulated in a tone of resentment, by and on behalf of the majority of people—in Nietzsche's view, the many, the mediocre, all those who are *not* great—and advocates the restriction, limitation, or diminution of the rare, powerful few. In subtly advocating for the rights of superheroes to live their lives as superior and exceptional beings, then, *The Incredibles* offers a Nietzschean critique of equality and takes a rather Nietzschean position with regard to greatness. In what follows, I discuss two versions of slave morality that arise in the film—the lawsuits against the supers and the villain Syndrome's evil plot—and conclude by arguing that *The Incredibles* ultimately falls prey to the slave morality it seems to critique.<sup>3</sup>

### Superheroism, Suburbia, and Slave Morality

The film opens by introducing us to Mr. Incredible and his troubles, which begin (not accidentally, as we'll see) on his wedding day.<sup>4</sup> On his way to the chapel, Mr. Incredible is alerted to the unfolding of a crime, which he nimbly

foils. However, yet more criminal activity is afoot elsewhere in the city, demanding Mr. Incredible's attention and threatening to prevent him from getting to the church on time. At this important moment of conflict, we meet Buddy, aka Incrediboy, Mr. Incredible's "biggest fan" (and soon to become his biggest enemy). Buddy's annoying, intrusive, tag-along presence as aspiring sidekick disrupts Mr. Incredible's heroics, allows villain Bomb Voyage to escape, and wreaks altogether new havoc for Mr. Incredible to salvage. Nevertheless, Mr. Incredible does indeed make it to the church just barely in time to pronounce his wedding vows. In these brief opening scenes, the greatness of Mr. Incredible is established (through his initial, successful crime-fighting activity) and the seeds are planted for what will emerge as the two major threats to his superheroism: the vengefulness of the weak, on the one hand, and the demands of marriage and family, on the other. As it turns out, many of the people Mr. Incredible saves on his wedding day later become litigants in lawsuits against him, while Buddy, burned by Mr. Incredible's rejection, begins nursing a resentful grudge that develops into a murderous revenge, ominously transforming him into Mr. Incredible's arch-nemesis, Syndrome. Meanwhile, complaining about his lateness, Mr. Incredible's fiancée (a superheroine herself) says to him, "I love you, but if we're gonna make this work, you've gotta be *more* than Mr. Incredible. You know that. Don't you?" His evasion of the question with an "I do" to the priest rather than to her makes it clear he is seeking to evade the conflict between heroism and family that his fiancée foresees. Regardless, the two threats to greatness have been established: the vengefulness of the weak and the enervating demands of married life.<sup>5</sup> Both are Nietzschean themes: the first is Nietzsche's critique of slave morality; the second, his critique of marriage and the great man's association with women.<sup>6</sup>

We next meet our protagonists fifteen years later. No longer Mr. Incredible, Bob now works for an insurance company; Helen, formerly Elastigirl, seems happy to care for their children and endlessly vacuum their sprawling suburban home. The Parrs have been relegated to this nostalgically 1950s existence because of a series of lawsuits against Mr. Incredible for saving people who "didn't want to be saved." Relayed to the viewer in newsreel form (harking back to an even earlier, prewar period in U.S. history), footage shows newspaper headlines and front-page photos of protesters holding signs saying "Hang Up the Cape," "Stop Hiding behind the Mask," and "Go Save Yourself." One photo shows an angry crowd burning Mr. Incredible in effigy. In response to this public protest, the government institutes a Superhero Relocation Program, providing "amnesty" to all supers in exchange for

their retirement into a life of anonymity.<sup>7</sup> As a politician says on television about the superheroes, "It is time for their *secret* identity [i.e., their nonsuper identity] to be their *only* identity. Time for them to join us, or go away."

The ludicrousness of these lawsuits is played for comedy, and the film's literalization of Nietzschean greatness as superheroic saving of the innocent is meant to highlight the absurdity of the many's resentment of greatness. After all, how could anyone *resent* being saved from death? But that is precisely what the litigants allege. Although the superheroes' exceptional powers seem to legitimate their intrusion into the daily lives of ordinary people, apparently these ordinary people don't want this intrusion and actively reject it. Moreover, many of the newspaper headlines invoke security, asking if the public would be safer without superheroic interventions, suggesting that the superheroes' greatness is a danger to public welfare. Finally, the relocation of the supers does not necessarily alleviate public fear. As the announcer says, "Where are they now? They are living among us. Average citizens, average heroes." Further bolstering the 1950s feel of this part of the film, McCarthyist anxieties echo in the newsreel reporter's words: like Communists and homosexuals, former superheroes walk among "average citizens" undetected, an invisible threat to the community at large.<sup>8</sup> In short, the superheroes' superiority threatens the safety of "average citizens" who no longer want or need their greatness. The government thus takes action to *disempower* the supers and render them just like everybody else. This is the film's depiction of what Nietzsche calls the "common war on all that is rare, strange, privileged, the higher man" (*BGE*, §212), waged by "the herd animal with its profound mediocrity, timidity, and boredom with itself" (*GS*, §352).

Meanwhile, dissatisfaction, conflict, and ennui pervade the Parrs' suburban idyll.<sup>9</sup> Bob must daily conform his enormously powerful, beefy body to the stifling contours of his now-normal life: he hunches over a disproportionately tiny desk at work and stuffs himself into the cramped space of his compact car twice daily for a mind-numbing commute.<sup>10</sup> He tries, ineffectively, to sublimate his superheroic penchant for saving people into helping policyholders successfully navigate his insurance company's bureaucracy, an activity for which he is ultimately fired. Meanwhile, Dash is getting into trouble at school because he has been forbidden to go out for sports. Promising to "slow up" and "only be the best by a *tiny* bit!" Dash complains:

DASH. You always say, "Do your best." But you don't really mean it. Why can't I do the best that I can do?

HELEN. Right now, honey, the world just wants us to fit in, and to fit in, we just gotta be like everybody else.

DASH. Dad always said our powers were nothing to be ashamed of.

Our powers made us special.

HELEN. *Everyone's* special, Dash.

DASH. Which is another way of saying no one is.

Dash's discontent indicates that he understands the driving force behind the lawsuits and forced retirements, even though all of it happened before he was born. He knows that being prevented from playing sports means quashing his superiority, prowess, and skill. It means sacrificing his individual achievements to shore up the mediocrity and self-pity of everyone else. And it means disguising that sacrifice with the saccharine platitude that *everybody* is "special." Like his father, however, Dash knows that special, in its true sense, means "better." As Bob complains regarding Dash's impending fourth-grade graduation ceremony, "It's psychotic! They keep creating new ways to celebrate mediocrity. But if someone is genuinely exceptional . . . Bob doesn't complete this sentence, but he and Dash know its conclusion: if someone is genuinely exceptional, he must be cut down to size and made mediocre in order to "fit in" and "be like everybody else."

The male half of the Parr family is miserable in its mediocrity; both Dash and his father feel (rightly, in Nietzsche's view) punished by the restrictions on their activity. By contrast, the female half of the family either longs for normality—teenage Violet wails, "We act normal, mom. I wanna be normal!"—or else rigorously enforces it: it is Helen who forbids Dash to play sports, while she reprimands Bob for reprising the glory days when he returns late from "bowling," spotting rubble on his coat lapel as if it were lipstick on his collar. Helen's anxious disapproval makes clear that Bob's antics—just like his son's—have the potential to give them all away. For the men of the family, superheroics are the only viable outlet for their super powers. For the women of the family, however, superheroics pose a threat to the happiness, normality, and long-term stability of the family unit.<sup>11</sup>

### Syndrome, Slavishness, and the Will to Power

While the bland social conformism of the herd dictates that the Incredibles live their lives in hiding, as "normal" people, the bitter and vengeful Buddy seeks not simply to normalize Mr. Incredible but to *punish* and eventually

displace him. This, too, is in keeping with Nietzsche's critique of slave morality, which also has a *psychological* dimension: Nietzsche finds the longing for equality to be resentful, dishonest, and vengeful. Slave moralities, he claims, are formulated by weak people who punish strength in order to compensate for their own weakness, which they reinterpret as a kind of virtue. Strength and greatness, by contrast, they interpret as injury, attack, and injustice—as wrongs that must be redressed. Slave morality, then, effects a fundamental reversal of natural hierarchy the only way it can—through deceit. The weak triumph over the strong by lying—by reinterpreting strength as *harm*.

Syndrome exemplifies these psychological dysfunctions. His transformation from the awkward, copycat, unsuper kid Buddy into the vengeful, fully-grown, arch-nemesis Syndrome is instigated by Mr. Incredible's rejection of young Buddy's proffered crime-fighting companionship. Buddy refuses to accept the fact that he is *not* super; he experiences Mr. Incredible's rebuff as an unforgivable personal rejection (rather than, say, as a necessity of the very greatness and independence that he so admires in his hero).<sup>12</sup> Buddy thus proceeds to produce *himself* as a superhero named Syndrome by constructing machines that function as superpowers.<sup>13</sup> Although Buddy does not lie his weakness into merit (as Nietzsche argues slavish types do [GM, 1:14]), choosing instead to *imitate* his hero ("I'll give them heroics. I'll give them the most spectacular heroics anyone's ever seen!") to the point at which he will surpass him (as he says to Mr. Incredible, "I'll be a bigger hero than you ever were!"). Nevertheless, the point of carrying out his vendetta against Mr. Incredible is the same as that of the slave: to *reverse* the relationship between them so that he, Buddy, is the strong and powerful one and Mr. Incredible is the weakling begging for favors. And Buddy accomplishes this reversal through lies—by blaming Mr. Incredible for his own inadequacy, manufacturing fake superpowers, and secretly assassinating all the other superheroes so that he, Syndrome, can claim to be the world's *only* hero.<sup>14</sup> Mr. Incredible's incredulous response to this plan is eminently Nietzschean: "You killed off *real* heroes so that you could . . . pretend to be one?!" This is precisely Syndrome's revenge.

Unfazed, however, Syndrome insists: "Oh I'm real. Real enough to defeat you! And I did it without your *precious* gifts, your oh-so-special powers." In other words, Syndrome is saying that he has changed the rules of the game. Greatness is no longer inborn, as the supers may believe (as Helen tells Vi, "You have more power than you realize. . . . It's in your blood"), but rather manufacturable and possible to mandate. This belief that anyone can do

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anything is, Nietzsche thinks, a hallmark of democratic and egalitarian ages that do not recognize natural distinctions or orders of rank. "The individual becomes convinced that he can do just about everything and *can manage almost any role*, and everybody experiments with himself, improvises, makes new experiments, enjoys his experiments; and all nature ceases and becomes art" (GS, §356). This tampering with nature is one more effect of the generalized disregard for greatness that Nietzsche believes characterizes modern egalitarianisms. Syndrome's plan, then, is actually strangely democratic insofar as it seeks to dismantle, through his own initiative and artifice, the natural schema according to which some people are super and others are not. Its "evil" is precisely its *refusal* of natural superiority; in Nietzsche's words: "Today nobody has the courage any longer for privileges, for masters' rights, for a sense of respect for oneself and one's peers—for a *pathos of distance*. Our politics is sick from this lack of courage. The aristocratic outlook was undermined from the deepest underworld through the lie of the equality of souls" (A, §43).

Syndrome's nefarious plan culminates in an unexpected twist that is nevertheless in keeping with his denaturing of greatness and the film's overall critique of egalitarianism: "And when I'm old and I've had my fun, I'll sell my inventions so that everyone can be a superhero. *Everyone* can be super! And when everyone's super . . . no one will be [evil laughter]." In a clear echo of Dash's earlier lament, Syndrome makes explicit the ominous threat to greatness lurking behind the democratic imperative and reveals that even the aspiration to equality is itself a longing for domination or, as Nietzsche would say, a *will to power*. As Syndrome's dreams of becoming the world's only superhero make clear, the desire to denature and democratize greatness is actually a drive toward mastery and domination. Syndrome's mantra is that only *he* will be super, and after him nobody will be. Nietzsche's point is that this is the aspiration of all slave moralities, even those that pretend to argue for the common good. Syndrome's plot is the culmination and logical consequence of civil society's legalized resentment and containment of the supers; his will to power is the ugly underside of the more banal containment of herd morality. In determining who can and cannot be super, Syndrome (or the law or society or the common man) determines that it or *he* shall rule.<sup>15</sup>

Ultimately, Syndrome's plot fails and ends up resuscitating the superheroes to their former greatness. This proves that the weak are essentially so and cannot do otherwise. When they attempt to assume the guises and behavior of the strong, they can only imitate, never *be* authentically. Ironi-

cally, this is also what puts the citizenry back on the side of the supers. Far from successfully conquering the world, Syndrome's artifice is foiled by the natural forthrightness of the supers' true superiority.

### **The Incredibles' Concession to the Herd**

These concluding scenes reveal *The Incredibles'* unwitting investment in normality, however—an investment that is far from Nietzschean. Caving to conventionality, the film retreats from its critique of equality and refuses to follow Nietzsche's views to their conclusion, instead taking refuge in the familiar comforts of care and community. For, however great the Incredible family is, they remain committed to using their greatness to preserve the "common good" and "public safety" that threatened their very existence in the first place. They remain, in other words, superheroes in the conventional sense: their powers serve the common good (rather than their own) and aim at preserving the human race (rather than leaving it to destroy itself if it must). In Nietzschean terms, we might say that the Incredibles' superpowers are hyperbolizations of herd instinct.<sup>16</sup> The "greatness" they represent is not really the greatness of which Nietzsche speaks, a greatness he believes to be at odds with the common good because it is and must be, effectively, self-serving.<sup>17</sup> *The Incredibles* simply ignores these difficulties by reconciling individual greatness with the welfare of all in the figure of the superhero who uses his or her greatness to serve humanity.

The film also departs from Nietzsche's teachings in its reconciliation of superiority and domesticity. Confronted with the possible death of his wife and children, Bob confesses what he has failed to understand up to this point; namely, "I've been a lousy father. Blind to what I have. So obsessed with being undervalued that I undervalued all of you." Bemoaning his desire for a superheroic life as a selfishness that detracted from what is truly important, Bob tells Helen and the kids: "You are my greatest adventure. And I almost missed it." In other words, the man who used to revel in a solitary life of superheroic activity now understands the daily travails of homework and housekeeping to be his "greatest adventure." Dash, too, is returned to the familial fold: after they escape from Syndrome's clutches (an adventure Dash calls "the greatest vacation ever"), he concludes with the heartwarming admission, "I love our family." The restraints that formerly chafed both father and son and made them miserable are now perceived lovingly and as essential to their happiness (perhaps in part because their recent crime-

fighting adventure fulfilled long-repressed superheroic desires). It remains to be seen, however, how long this contentment can last.

Ultimately, although *The Incredibles* seems initially to defend the existence and prerogative of superior types, by the end of the film we discover that these are permissible only to the degree to which they are reconcilable with the demands of the weak, the many, the neighbor, the herd—and the household. This seeming contradiction evidences a crucial question that goes both unasked and unanswered throughout the film: why do the supers mix with humanity (or women)—much less care about their welfare—at all?<sup>18</sup> For reasons unknown, the supers care what humanity thinks about them and long for their acceptance. From a Nietzschean perspective, such a need for recognition from one's inferiors is incomprehensible and suggests that *The Incredibles* is actually a snapshot of the nobility's overall decline.<sup>19</sup> While Mr. Incredible's insistence that he works alone is an entirely appropriate and necessary characterization of his activity, throughout the film we see this resolve crumble in the face of an adoring and bratty child fan, an ungrateful civil society, a nagging wife, and demanding children. That Bob should have pity for human vulnerability or that Dash might be excited to come in second at his elementary school's track meet, however, otherwise defy comprehension. *The Incredibles* ignores this unlikely reconciliation of greatness with herd morality, playing to its audience's own longings for normality and a neat narrative conclusion without conflict. Rolling the family, community, and superheroics into one big happy ending, *The Incredibles* ultimately teaches a very un-Nietzschean lesson: that the purpose of greatness is to serve the weak and the many rather than the happiness and enhancement of the superior few.

## Notes

1. Brad Bird, director, *The Incredibles*, 2004, scene 30. All quotations from *The Incredibles* are taken from the complete script published online at the Internet Movie Script Database, [www.imsdb.com/scripts/Incredibles](http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Incredibles).-The.html. No emphases are specified in the script; however, I have added them when I believe they reflect the delivery of the character and help specify the lines' meaning (thus I have italicized "up" in this quotation because I believe it accurately reflects Craig T. Nelson's delivery of this line in the film and helps clarify Bob Parr's investment in his child's success). Works by Nietzsche will be cited in text in parentheses by work and aphorism, according to the following abbreviations: GS for *The Gay Science*; La gaya scienza, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974); BGE for *Beyond Good and Evil*; *Prelude to a*

*Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966); GM for *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967); A for *Antichrist(ian)*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1968).

2. Nietzsche sometimes even talks about a kind of "super" man (*Übermensch* in German—the prefix *über* meaning "over" or "beyond" or, in some translations, "super"; and *Mensch* meaning "man" or "human"). This *Übermensch* is a sketchy figure whom Nietzsche discusses primarily in his most literary text, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. While some commentators see the *Übermensch* as a crucial figure in Nietzsche's overall philosophy, they disagree about who this person is and what exactly he signifies (as witnessed in part by the different choices of translation; e.g., "overman" versus "superman"). For the purposes of this chapter, I am leaving the controversies surrounding Nietzsche's notion of the *Übermensch* aside and restricting my discussion to a more generalized notion of "greatness" or "superiority," a notion that may or may not (exclusively) characterize the *Übermensch*.

3. But first, a few caveats: (1) It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what Nietzsche means by greatness—both because he is evasive about the details and because scholars have different plausible interpretations of his writings. Some view Nietzschean greatness as an individualized ethic of self-mastery (e.g., artistic creativity, cultivation of one's own virtues, or a psychological self-overcoming), while others view it as a more political orientation toward mastery over others (e.g., the Nietzschean great man as lawgiver and/or destroyer of the existing order). All of these interpretations are credible and none is definitive (they may even be harmonious to some extent). (2) Another question is how far to take Nietzsche's statements about the "order of rank" between man and man. Sometimes he seems to suggest that there are essentially two basic types of human beings: the few strong, masterful ones and the many weak, slavish ones. There is ample textual evidence to suggest Nietzsche believes this and, particularly in the *Antichrist(ian)*, one of his very last books, he explicitly advocates an aristocratic social hierarchy as the only healthy political arrangement because it is sensitive to this natural hierarchy (§57)—although here he specifies that there are three types of human beings, ranked nevertheless). Commentators, however, have many different views about the kind of politics Nietzsche ultimately endorsed (or can be interpreted to endorse today); they also disagree about whether Nietzsche believes the designations "strong and weak" or "master and slave" are intractable essences or designations that are subject to change. Luckily, we don't have to take decisive positions on either of these issues for the purposes of understanding Nietzsche's critique of slave morality or its allegorization in *The Incredibles*. The important, more general, and largely uncontroversial points here are these: (1) Nietzsche is no believer in natural equality when it comes to human beings; (2) he generally celebrates the "higher man" and his greatness; and (3) he believes this type to be rare and laments the generalized underappreciation of greatness that he believed rampant in the Europe of his day.

4. Although the film's very opening scene introduces us to *three* protagonist superheroes—Mr. Incredible, Elastigirl, and Frozone—all of whom are being interviewed about their superheroic lives, the most time is devoted to Mr. Incredible, who is established here and in the very next scene as the truly main character of the film, a primariness reflected in the film's title and family patronym, which subsumes each family member's individual powers into an undifferentiated Incredible-ness and clearly establishes Frozone as a sidekick or supporting character.

5. That Mr. Incredible recognizes these impending threats, however unconsciously, is attested to by the fact that he rebuffs the help of both Buddy and his fiancée in these opening scenes with the same words: "I work alone."

6. Nietzsche's views about women—if they are taken into consideration at all (many readers dismiss them as inconsequential or too ridiculous to take seriously)—are a source of much controversy among scholars. I myself believe they are worth taking seriously (especially since he says so very much about women, gender, sexuality, and marriage in so many of his books), that they are consistent with one another, and, most importantly, that they are essential to his overall philosophical project. More of my views about these matters may be found in my book, *Nietzsche's Revolution: Decadence, Politics, and Sexuality* (New York: Palgrave, 2009). For now, a few quotes from Nietzsche will suffice—and should serve to remind us that if Nietzsche considers women to be obstacles to greatness, the consequence is that only men can be great. Regarding marriage—for any man, not just a higher one, Nietzsche says it is "a hindrance and calamity on his path to the optimum" (*GM*, 3:7). Regarding association with women, Nietzsche says in *The Gay Science*, §59, in 1885: "When a man stands in the midst of his own noise, in the midst of his own surf of plans and projects, then he is apt also to see quiet, magical beings gliding past him and to long for their happiness and seclusion: *women*. He almost thinks that this better self dwells there among the women, and that in these quiet regions even the loudest surf turns into deathly quiet, and life itself into a dream about life. Yet! Noble enthusiast, even on the most beautiful sailboat there is a lot of noise, and unfortunately much small and petty noise. The magic and most powerful effect of women is, in philosophical language, action at a distance, *actio in distans*; but this requires first of all and above all—*distance*."

In 1888, in Nietzsche's very last work, *The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), he says: "Translated into reality: the danger for artists, for geniuses—and who else is the 'Wandering Jew'?—is woman: adoring women confront them with corruption. Hardly any of them have character enough not to be corrupted—or 'redeemed'—when they find themselves treated like gods: soon they condescend to the level of the women.—Man is a coward, confronted with the Eternal-Feminine—and the females know it.—In many cases of feminine love, perhaps including the most famous ones above all, love is merely a more refined form of parasitism, a form of nestling down in another soul, sometimes even in the flesh of another—alas, always decidedly at the expense of 'the host!'" (§3).

7. The front-page photo illustrating this new amnesty policy shows construction workers taking down a large public statue of three superheroes, a possible allusion to the removal of the statue of Saddam Hussein by U.S. troops in Baghdad in 2003 (*The Incredibles* was released in theaters in 2004). As the headlines surrounding this image suggest, the people will be "safer without" the supers and the "public" will be "safe again," just as, it was argued, the Iraqi people—and the United States—would be safer without Hussein in power.

8. Indeed, the Parrs' relocation to suburbia and their faithful reproduction of the 2.5 child ideal not only mirror the actual historical movement of white American families to the suburbs and the dramatic rise of U.S. birthrates in this era, but also underscore the fact that the Parrs' superness is, indeed, a real threat to the social order, a threat that must be normalized.

9. Given the nostalgic chronology of the film's allusions, "fifteen years later" would situate the Parrs in the middle to late 1960s, a time of increasing dissatisfaction with the American Dream and widespread social rebellion against its white, middle-class, patriarchal norms. So it is no surprise that the Parrs are unhappy.

10. Bob's size literalizes his superness, and the dramatic physical disjuncture between his body and his surroundings symbolizes his discomfort and dissatisfaction with life as an "average citizen." As his very body makes clear, Bob is *not*, in fact, average: his overwhelming strength is impossible to ignore; it is extremely difficult to hide (he damages his car merely by gripping it too tightly and saws through Dash's plate at dinner by cutting a piece of meat); and it is a fact about him that is not going to change, regardless of social outcry.

11. These familiarly gendered roles reveal the latent sexism of the film and resonate with Nietzsche's overt sexism, revealing how little has changed in the more than one hundred years since his death. Although *The Incredibles* was billed as a feminist film and received accolades for the ostensible equality between the two married partners, the film nevertheless presents women as naturally inclined toward love, marriage, children, and domesticity. Although she may have once been Elastigirl, fiercely unwilling to "settle down" and "leave the saving of the world to the men," Helen nevertheless seems to experience no conflict whatsoever in having exchanged superheroism for vacuuming, changing diapers, and picking up the kids from school. Moreover, the familiar tropes of woman as guardian of hearth and home who must reignite her husband's wandering interest and boredom with the humdrum reality of domesticity show that "superness" is not only a literalization of Nietzschean greatness but also a stand-in for heterosexual male infidelity and midlife crisis behavior. The film only uneasily resolves these by threatening Bob with the death of his wife and children—more on this in the conclusion.

12. Says Nietzsche: "Every sufferer instinctively seeks a cause for his suffering—in short, some living thing upon which he can, on some pretext or other, vent his affects, actually or in effigy: for the venting of his affects represents the greatest attempt on the part of the suffering to win relief, *anaesthesia*—the narcotic he cannot help desiring to

deadened pain of any kind. This alone, I surmise, constitutes the actually physiological cause of *resentiment* [resentment], vengefulness, and the like: a desire to *deadened pain by means of affects*. . . . Someone or other must be to blame for my feeling ill!—this kind of reasoning is common to all the sick, and is indeed held the more firmly the more the real cause of their feeling ill, the physiological cause, remains hidden” (GM, 3:15).

13. Buddy is engaged in this project from the very beginning—when we first meet him, he is showing off his new rocket boots to Mr. Incredible, who is unimpressed and, once again, tries to shake Buddy off. Recoiling from this rejection, adamant about his own greatness, and subtly denigrating Mr. Incredible even while hoping for praise and recognition from him, Buddy wails, “This is because I don’t have powers, isn’t it? Well not every superhero has powers, you know. You *can* be super without them. I invented these. I can fly. Can *you* fly?” As Nietzsche says, “The slave’s eye is not favorable to the virtues of the powerful: he is skeptical and suspicious, *subtly* suspicious, of all the ‘good’ that is honored there—he would like to persuade himself that even their happiness is not genuine” (BGE, §260).

14. In Nietzsche’s terms, “the man of *resentiment* [resentment] is neither upright nor naïve nor honest and straightforward with himself. His soul *squirts*; his spirit loves hiding places, secret paths and back doors, everything covert entices him as *his* world, *his* security, *his* refreshment; he understands how to keep silent, how not to forget, how to wait” (GM, 1:10).

15. As Nietzsche says about Christians: “These weak people—some day or other *they* too intend to be the strong, there is no doubt of that, some day *their* ‘kingdom’ too shall come—they term it ‘the kingdom of God’” (GM, 1:15). For Nietzsche, Christianity is the slave morality par excellence, and its will to power is manifest in its longing for the day when wrongdoers will be punished and the virtuous rewarded. On this day, as the saying goes, the last shall be first and the first shall be last. In Nietzschean terms, this means that the great shall be enslaved and the slaves shall rule. Notably, Nietzsche argues that Christianity’s triumphant overturning of natural hierarchy has been secularized in the movements for democracy and equality (“the *democratic* movement is the heir of the Christian movement” [BGE, §202]) and declares, “To us the democratic movement is not only a form of the decay of political organization but a form of the decay, namely the diminution, of man, making him mediocre and lowering his value” (BGE, §203).

16. Nietzsche says: “Whether I contemplate men with benevolence or with an evil eye, I always find them concerned with a single task, all of them and every one of them in particular: to do what is good for the preservation of the human race. . . . this instinct constitutes *the essence* of our species, our herd” (GS, §1).

17. Indeed, Nietzsche cites approvingly the “egoism” of the higher man and consistently argues that condemnation of selfishness is yet one more way in which the herd limits and forbids greatness. For example: “At the risk of displeasing innocent ears I propose: egoism belongs to the nature of a noble soul—I mean that unshakable faith that to a being such as ‘we are’ other beings must be subordinate by nature and have to

sacrifice themselves. The noble soul accepts this fact of its egoism without any question mark, also without any feeling that it might contain hardness, constraint, or caprice, rather as something that may be founded in the primordial law of things: if it sought a name for this fact it would say, ‘it is justice itself’” (BGE, §265; cf. GS, §328, GM, 1:2).

18. Mr. Incredible, at least, professes ambivalence about his role as humanity’s savior. In his television interview at the beginning of the film, he laments with some irritation, “No matter how many times you save the world, it always manages to get back in jeopardy again. Sometimes I just want it to *stay saved*, you know? For a little bit. I feel like the maid. ‘I just cleaned up this mess. Can we keep it clean for ten minutes?’”

19. I owe this insight to Dan Conway, who generously suggested the line of analysis offered in this paragraph. Evidence of this decline is Mr. Incredible’s admission, after his complaint about humanity’s penchant for getting itself into trouble: “Sometimes I think I’d just like the simple life, you know? Relax a little and raise a family.”