

Communal Training of the Solitary Individual: A Nietzschean Puzzle Concerning Liberal Education

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When contemplating the state of contemporary liberal education, one rarely thinks to turn to Nietzsche for insight. This neglect is not necessarily a case of academic irresponsibility; rather, often it is due to one's hope to maintain sanity: Nietzsche's writings are full of switchbacks and contradictions. Some of his texts are lucid, others murky at best with the echoes of the author's laughter at the reader's frustrating (and often losing) battle wrestling aphorisms and verse. Additionally, the misappropriation of Nietzsche's work to support the agendas of Nazis and misogynists leaves many skittish at the thought of approaching it at all. Yet, within his various writings, education and the possibility of human greatness and autonomy is of utmost importance, as he regards individuals who actualize such greatness — exemplary creative geniuses — as ultimate ends providing value and meaning to the whole of culture (for example: SE 1, *et passim*; FEI; GM II, 2; EH, *The Untimely Ones*).¹

This concern for the flourishing of the individual resonates with ideals at the heart of liberal education, for, as I understand it, liberal education aims toward the actualization of a specific ideal of human flourishing; one that shapes animal into human. The Oakeshottean view of liberal education resonates here: being human essentially involves inhabiting a world the meaning of which one must learn to decipher and give shape. Consequently, freedom exists when one's actions in the world reflect one's understanding of that world. Inhabiting a world that becomes rich with intelligible meanings is what makes possible the freedom that is distinctively human.² Intimately linked to potential human flourishing and culture, the liberating education of the individual and the type of institutions appropriate for those who may actualize this potential are crucial for Nietzsche; no matter how buried in his corpus his thoughts on education are and meandering his path toward putting forth a coherent view is.

Textual puzzles aside, a riddle of a different sort emerges from engagement with Nietzsche's views on education. It is an interpretive puzzle implicit in his works, and is, perhaps, best expressed as a question: how is it that, according to Nietzsche, *culture* — which is essentially *communal* — is so tightly bound with a *self-knowledge* only gained through *solitary* investigation? In this essay I am particularly interested in working with a more specific derivative tension, pertinent to Nietzschean liberal education: the seeming dissonance between Nietzsche's call for great *solitary* individuals who exemplify human flourishing and the need for proper (communal) institutions to train them. By giving this tension its proper due by way of examining and resolving it, I demonstrate the relevance of Nietzsche's work to the discussion of liberal education, hold a mirror to our current state, and show how the paradox loses its contradictory mien.

THE PUZZLING TENSION

Consider the following from *Schopenhauer as Educator*: upon resolving to seek the “condition of intrepid self-knowledge” that is necessary, according to Nietzsche, to become a laudable “sovereign individual” one “places himself within the circle of *culture*; for culture is the child of each individual’s self-knowledge and dissatisfaction with himself” (SE 6). Nietzsche insists that specific *social* arrangements and interactions are essential to the emergence of exceptional *solitary* humans — humans capable of an independence and creativity that raises them above the “herd” of the general public. Describing such individuals, Nietzsche writes: “we discover that the ripest fruit is the *sovereign individual*, like only to himself, liberated again from morality of custom, autonomous and supramoral...” (GM II, 2).

The emergence of these individuals is the end of the Nietzschean project, as he sees them as endowing human existence with a redemption and justification. But he does not stop with the particular great individual as the sole recipient of the benefits that come from such a project. Rather, he continues to define such ends as ultimately being the source of enrichment for *cultural life*. It is clear that he is pushing for more than a culture that leaves these individuals alone to do as they please — if he were, then it would not be necessarily so that these men would have the direct impact upon the rest of the community that he vehemently wants.

Likewise, if the process of becoming such an individual is so thoroughly solitary, then what should we make of Nietzsche’s unrelenting call for proper educators and educational institutions (FEI, *et passim*; HH 224; SE, *et passim*; TI, *What the Germans Lack*; EH, Preface)? The amount of attention he gives to education and educators (himself, Schopenhauer, and his created Zarathustra, for example) is rather strange considering that the aim of “true” education (intrepid self-knowledge) is, seemingly, only attainable through solitary investigation. Yet, time and time again he stresses that the educational project and culture are inseparable: Nietzschean education must be supported by culture while culture necessitates an educational project. If one is diseased, the other will suffer comparably. Naturally, this wants further exploration, for how can it be that solitary persons are so tightly bound with publicly shared cultural life to the point that, Nietzsche argues, both can only exist symbiotically? How are these individuals at once “above the herd [community]” and “within the circle of culture?”

THE SOLITARY ENDEAVOR — THE GENIUS OF HIGHER MEN

Learning to “‘give style’ to one’s character” (GS 290) and “to become those we are, human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves” (GS 335) is the ultimate human achievement, the genius of “higher men” according to Nietzsche. This is the purpose of liberal education. In order to ascend toward this higher humanity the agent must be liberated, not only from the shackles of “timely” conventions, but also from his own opinions deriving from his “usual egotistic perception of self” (SE 1).

The individual who autonomously acts from his own principles accepts total responsibility for and completely endorses the drives and desires that motivate such actions. This is the full actualization of the Nietzschean moral psychology: genius

offers justification for the experiences constituting one's life, allowing the "glorious, creative human being...to answer the questions: "Do you affirm this existence in the depths of your heart? Is it sufficient for you? Would you be its advocate, its redeemer?" in the affirmative rather than recoiling in revulsion upon seeing existence in an "ugly shape" (SE 3). The attainment of satisfaction from all experiences — the good, the bad, and the ugly — is the "one thing [that] is needful" (GS 290) so the teeth-gnashing and suffering resulting from revenge "against time and its 'it was'" ceases to drain one's energy (Z, *On Redemption*).

Casting off the comfort provided by and the influence of tradition, custom, and a faulty dominant moral framework in order to live life *creatively* rather than *reactively*, human beings can develop their own standards for evaluating themselves and their world, establishing what is important and possible. The Nietzschean morality comes from considering oneself as an *individual* who generates his own customs to obey (DI, 9). This is derived only from the individual, honestly looking at the world (complete with its "hardness" of suffering) and creating self-determined motives for action (GM II, 2). Those who do not attempt critical reflection are not only far from (if not dead to) genius and human flourishing. They are minimally human, suffering senselessly like animals "hang[ing] on to life madly and blindly, with no hither aim than to hang on to it" for "not to know that or why one is being so heavily punished but, with the stupidity of a fearful desire, to thirst after precisely this punishment as though after happiness — that is what it means to be an animal" (SE 5).

Rare are such men — Nietzsche's philosophers, artists, and saints — who are able to affirm existence in its honest entirety without relying on the support of others and custom. They are solitary in a more significant way beyond having few peers: they are "untimely" in that they stand outside of whatever is externally impressed upon them, revealing the genius that is concealed under "time-bound" things. Those in the mire of timely concerns "know existence only in this ugly shape, and assess it accordingly, [doing] it a grave injustice" (SE 3). Shackled and stunted they are far from the flourishing of a self liberated.

LIFE TOGETHER: INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING AND CULTURE

Nietzsche's blueprint for the "pseudo-culture" that thwarts human flourishing is late-nineteenth century Germany, of which he asserts that it suffers from misguided cultural and educational aims. He attests that a "species of *misemployed and appropriated culture*" (SE 6) results from an unchallenged morality that "deprive[s] existence of its *great* character" (EH: IV, 4). It is not too far a stretch of the imagination to see our own society in his description: in pseudo-culture, "all education and care of health, marriage, cure of sickness, agriculture, war, speech and silence, traffic with one another and with the gods belonged within the domain of morality: they demanded one observe prescriptions *without thinking of oneself* as an individual" (DI, 9). Money, nationalism, delusions of power, and happiness are the focal points. Within this dominant morality such "forces" inhibit the appropriate culture needed to facilitate what he sees as proper education toward the emergence of human excellence. "If one spends oneself for power, for power politics, for

economics, world trade, parliamentarianism, and military interests — if one spends *this* direction the quantum of understanding, seriousness, will, and self-overcoming which one represents,” he explains, “then it will be lacking in the other direction” (TI, *What the Germans Lack*, 4).

Rather than provide the conditions for one to focus on expending one’s efforts toward patient formation of oneself *qua* oneself, pseudo-culture demands a hasty development of efficient and biddable citizens. The forces are geared toward upholding the contemporary culture, educating people for the economy, state, fashion, and “profitable truths” of the moment. One’s sense of self is determined by what role in the market/state/ephemeral fad one best fulfills. Under such conditions, those in positions of sovereignty are there by luck as it is based upon that market/nation/fashion/“truth” they happen to be groomed to fit. Take away their job, nation, or comforting traditions and, Nietzsche laments, there is nothing left to the individual (SE 6).

Ultimately, these forces combined result in inhospitable conditions for the “production of genius,” an environment so hostile to “original men” that “Socrates could not have lived among us and would in any event not have attained seventy” (SE 6). The consequential educational system, grounded in “wholly other foundations” of the market, morality, and the state, is unconcerned with the individual’s edification. Consequently, two tendencies that can only give rise to an impoverished culture result — the “highest possible extension of education” through democratization and “the diminution and the weakening of the same” (FEI, I).

The result is the creation of a curriculum that is easily consumed by all citizens. Increased access to higher education necessitates the opening of more schools and the need for more teachers even if the talent pool is sapped. The effect is devastating to the quality of university education:

There exists now almost all over such an exaggeratedly great number of higher educational institutions that incessantly, endlessly many more teachers are needed for the same than the nature of a people, even with rich aptitudes, is able to beget; and thus an excess of the unfit comes into these institutions, but who gradually, through their overwhelming head count...determine the spirit of those institutions. (FEI III)

Universities morph into bastions of mediocrity, housing scholars and students alike in goals reflecting the misguided aims of the reigning pseudo-culture. What is promoted — “the most general education” — is no better than “barbarism” (FEI I; also TI, *What the Germans Lack*, 5).

The pseudo-culture is a “journalistic” one, pervading the schools and society, reducing knowledge to easily digestible sound-bytes and slogans (SE 4; FEI I). This pseudo-culture leaves students unable to make sense of their world and positively embrace the entirety (suffering and all) of their lives. Unable to engage in critical self-reflection, having never been asked to turn inward, they are misshapen, dishonest, thinking they are something they are not — namely, learned individuals. The books of scholars are, at best, reflections of the broken and discarded spirit of humanity: “every scholarly book also mirrors a soul that has become crooked; every craft makes crooked” (GS 366; TI, *What the Germans Lack*, 3). Overcoming this

requires a wholly different type of education, one that can only exist in a wholly different culture.

Nietzsche's most detailed account of a "healthy society" is found in §57 of *The Antichrist*: counter to the morality founded on the authority of tradition and blind acceptance to the norms ruling pseudo-culture (for example, that happiness is always good, and hardship can never be productive or valuable), culture based on the "manner of Manu" (stripped of any overtones of the divine) embraces "experimentation, a continuation of the fluid state of values, testing, choosing, criticizing values *in infinitum*." Such a culture encourages those who have the strength and desire to search for certainty (rather than desiring to follow pre-described convictions) to do so without punishment or becoming ostracized (HH 635). The call for burgeoning great individuals "to become master, to become perfect — to aspire to the highest art of life" (A 57) is to be of highest concern in true culture, and is nowhere to be found in pseudo-culture.

The attack on pseudo-culture is certainly vitriolic, yet Nietzsche does not wholly reject the necessity for people to take part in the more mundane aspects life, as long as such concerns occupy their appropriate subordinate place in culture. Nor does he eschew the need for workers and scholars. Technical learning is certainly necessary for important practical preservation and life within a world of markets and nations. However, his fear is that, if the aforementioned forces *dictate* the overall culture and value-system, then nascent creative geniuses will come to adopt the norms of the resulting moral system and fail to realize their potential for human greatness. With *no* institutions supporting the development of the metaphysical man the potential for genius is aborted and culture remains in a "pseudo" state.

Allowing for the "higher men" to emerge while also preserving the practical necessities of a society requires a hierarchical structure to culture. This view, coupled with his distaste for increased access to institutions, leads Nietzsche to advocate an illiberal liberal education that leaves the achievement of human flourishing up to those few who are capable in motivation and ability to undertake the endeavor. Merely being a human being doesn't guarantee actualizing one's potential. The continued commitment at each step to the arduous task is what allows one the opportunity to ascend toward flourishing. Lack of commitment and ability will knock a student off the path and out of the running.

Gone is the possibility of luck (of fashion, the market, etc.) determining who is in power. He explains:

In every healthy society there are three types which condition each other and gravitate differently physiologically; each has its own hygiene, its own field of work, its own sense of perfection and mastery. Nature, not Manu, distinguishes the pre-eminently spiritual ones, those who are pre-eminently strong in muscle and temperament, and those, the third type, who excel neither in one respect nor in the other, the mediocre ones — the last as the great majority, the first as the elite. (A 57)

Surely such talk leaves a bitter taste in the mouths of most liberal-minded contemporary scholars, but there is a valuable point here. The autonomous individual is of the sovereign caste because of his solitary accomplishments leading to a more honest

humanity, not because he desires to rule or was thrust into that position by luck of popular fashion: “they rule not because they want to but because they *are*; they are not free to be second” (A 57). Those who are able to gain and properly handle truths concerning themselves and their world, those who achieve the ideals of liberal education, indeed do have the upper hand existing in the world.

We are all related to the philosopher, saint, and artist via our shared humanness, but the majority of people will not actualize their potential for greatness. The challenge to confront nature is voiced by every man’s conscience — but most, upon hearing the call, do not have the strength and health of spirit to accept the dare of recognizing the dissatisfaction that comes with existing (SE 1). Nietzsche finds this to be a practical fact that, when incorporated correctly within culture, the “mediocre” majority — those who do not achieve genius — winds up fulfilling an important role nevertheless. Much needs to be done within and by a society — “handicraft, trade, agriculture, *science*...the whole quintessence of *professional* activity” — but these things do not confer value upon human existence (A 57). Here the aims generated by the forces of the market, politics, and science — no longer the highest goals of culture but, rather, instrumental to the unfettered pursuit of truth by higher men — find a home.

Within this true culture, true education aims to facilitate the process toward this more honest, higher kind of being, beyond mere animal-like survival and ephemeral happiness provided by wealth or avoidance of the pain and disappointment that comes from existing in the world. Merely surviving is not *flourishing*; education for survival is not to be confused with education toward culture (FEI, IV). Nietzschean “true” education aims to make possible the elevation of aspirations and rouse us to new possibilities of living separate from the influence of custom and tradition. Such possibilities demand that one must strive to reach and exert great efforts (often to excruciating degrees), overcoming the comfortable laziness afforded by convention (SE 1; D I, 9).

Institutions of higher education, separate from professional schools, are charged with the task of providing opportunity for the cultivation of abilities to draw out genius. His call is for a new order of schools, the consecrated home of all higher and nobler culture where the dedicated few could prepare within themselves and around them for the birth of the genius. If the continuation of new higher men is to emerge in any non-accidental way it is only through an education and culture mutually supportive of each other. Note, however, even with the emergence of a radically different culture, the actual endeavor of the higher man is to be strictly solitary. Within his talk of culture and institutions, Nietzsche stresses that the content of self-knowledge and value creation *cannot* be taught (BGE 213), only suggested. At the same time, the exemplars (the philosophers, saints, and artists; the creative geniuses) are called upon to be the “supreme tribunal of the schools” in the “preparation of the genius” (Breazeale, 175). The puzzle still haunts.

EASING THE TENSION

Recall that no one can teach you what it is to be valued and who you are to become. Confronting the challenge of transforming one’s despair and sickness of

succumbing to “the terror and horror of existence” (BT 3) into a healthy humanity, creative and vital enough to justify life in a world full of suffering without meaning is a purely solitary endeavor. Those striving to become higher men “must become the best learners and discoverers of everything that is lawful and necessary in the world” (GS 335). How does this finally fit with the communal institutions Nietzsche so desperately wants? It is clear that Nietzsche is not advocating that the aim of teaching in “true” education is to provide students with specific data or facts about the world. Rather,

the young person should be taught to regard himself as a failed work of nature but at the same time *as a witness* to the grandiose and marvelous intentions of the artist: nature has done badly, he should say to himself; but I will honour its great intentions by serving it so that one day it may do better. (SE 6, emphasis added)

What Nietzsche has in mind is that the right kind of institutions will point students in the direction of paradigmatic educators and the right kind of culture will allow for these educators/bearers of intrepid self-knowledge to exist *within the circle of culture* rather than outside it in the metaphorical mountains. Embraced by culture, the geniuses are no longer pushed out of view. Students, in turn, bear witness to human excellence via an unobstructed view. Witnessing exemplars may *motivate* burgeoning minds toward undertaking the arduous task of self-creation.

The Nietzschean educator is charged with aiding in the revelation and liberation of the true self and, thus, the preservation of humanity. He urges students to unshackle themselves from conventionality, to no longer be lazy and hide from nature. As creators of value, philosophers are “to be the lawgivers as to the measure, stamp and weight of things” (SE 3); always becoming, honoring the past while looking toward the future, thus untimely and beyond concerns of currency (BGE 212). They establish a “new image of man” — and as long as this image is on display it may educate others through experience and example, not rote and rhetoric. The real achievement of the educator lays precisely in the *example* he provides to others of “the courageous visibility of the philosophical life” (SE 3). “What a philosopher is, that is hard to learn because it cannot be taught: one must ‘know’ it from experience” (BGE 213). Transfiguring your disposition so that “life has not disappointed” involves learning to understand life as “an experiment of the seeker for knowledge...and knowledge itself...is a world of dangers and victories” (GS 324). Schopenhauer, Nietzsche’s paradigmatic educator, is never ascribed any intentionality in his educative role. Rather, through bearing witness to the life he led, constructed on his own terms, the educative function is determined by the student who accepts the challenge of his conscience upon recognizing the standard set by such an exemplar.

Nietzsche himself demonstrates modes of teaching toward the ascension to genius (and unabashedly admits this). In order to prevent his own teaching from being taken as gospel, he infuses his works with sarcasm, irony, caricatures, and deliberately confusing prose to purposefully generate confusion in the student. When all is said and done, those discomfiting literary puzzles are pedagogical tools. The solitary aspect of the endeavor is preserved because the student, not the

teacher, bears the burden of education, wading through the obstacles and deciphering his own conclusions. And this rings melodic when one turns to the founding missions of our contemporary liberal education institutions. Besides turning students' heads toward the glory of the higher men for inspiration, a crucial responsibility of a true educator is to reject a following of uncritical students. Nietzsche explains to his students, the readers of his autobiographical *Ecce Homo*:

Go away from me and resist Zarathustra! And even better: be ashamed of him! Perhaps he deceived you. The man of knowledge must not only love his enemies, he must also be able to hate his friends. One repays a teacher badly if one always remains nothing but a pupil.... You revere me; but what if your reverence *tumbles* one day? Beware lest a statue slay you... you had not yet sought yourselves; and you found me.... Now I bid you lose me and find yourselves; and only *when you have all denied me* will I return to you. (EH 4)

Because of the constant re-examination of values (harking back to the manner of Manu in *The Antichrist*) a student fails if he accepts even the higher men's views as unquestionable gospel. This failure is akin to the vacant sense of self created by the force of the market in pseudo-culture — when a system of thought or framework of values is proven to be obsolete, so is the person who wholly defined himself as a follower of such a system.

If the pseudo-culture persists, the flourishing of the individual that liberal education presumes to foster is replaced with the training of picky consumers reacting within the socio-economic and political realm. The individuals educated in pseudo-culture — both in our twenty-first century and Nietzsche's nineteenth century — are but shells of individuals, with shackles still affixed tightly, even if hard to see. Through displaying the self-determined manner by which they live their lives, the rare men have the potential to wake the rest out of their slumber. In true culture without repercussion they ask the difficult questions openly — “what have you truly loved up to now, what has drawn your soul aloft?” — and by doing so they are “true educators and formative teachers... [revealing] the true, original meaning and basic stuff of your nature is something completely incapable of being educated or formed and is in any case something difficult to access” (SE 1). Living within true culture, people have access to witnessing the philosophers, seeing how they live their lives, for these men, forever solitary in formation and thought, will be communal, no longer needing to hide far away. But culture's function is limited — it ensures that societal conditions are hospitable to the existence of human flourishing and the right educational institutions are dedicated to its achievement by those who are able and willing. What it cannot do is *create* a liberally educated individual. That is up to the individual himself.

1. Nietzsche citations are identified by the initials of the English titles of the works from which they are taken and the part and/or section number of the cited passage, in the editions/translations listed here: BT (*The Birth of Tragedy*), BGE (*Beyond Good and Evil*), and GM (*On the Genealogy of Morals*) in *The Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1992); D (*Daybreak*) trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982); EH (*Ecce Homo*) trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967); FEI (*On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*) trans. Michael W. Grenke (Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2004); GS (*The Gay Science*), trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974); HH (*Human, All-Too-Human*) trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 1986); SE (*Schopenhauer as Educator*) in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); A (*The Antichrist*), TI (*Twilight of the Idols*) and Z (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Penguin, 1968); WP (*The Will to Power*) trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967).

Exception: citations of Nietzsche's notes, taken from D. Breazeale, ed. and trans., *Philosophy and Truth* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1979).

2. Michael Oakeshott, "Education: The Engagement and Its Frustration," in *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 93.