

Nietzsche's cultural elitism

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ABSTRACT

Elitist readers, such as John Rawls, see Nietzsche as concerned only with the flourishing of a few great contributors to culture; egalitarian readers, such as Stanley Cavell, see Nietzschean culture as a universal affair involving every individual's self-cultivation. This paper offers a compromise, reading Nietzsche as a 'cultural elitist' for whom culture demands that a few great individuals be supported in a voluntary, rather than state-mandated way. Rawls, it claims, is therefore misguided in worrying that Nietzsche's elitism is a threat to justice. The paper focuses on Nietzsche's *Schopenhauer as Educator*, the key text in the elitist-egalitarian debate.

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Nietzsche is among a handful of well-known philosophers taken to support some form of elitism. He is viewed by many as being concerned exclusively with the flourishing of a few great individuals, often at the expense of 'the herd'. This is Rawls's view in his seminal 1971 work, *A Theory of Justice*, which held Nietzsche up as an extreme example of elitism and what Rawls called 'cultural perfectionism' – the view that we ought to arrange institutions in order to maximise cultural achievement. In 1990, Stanley Cavell presented an alternative reading of Nietzsche based on the work of his then graduate student James Conant. Cavell claimed that a correct reading of Nietzsche yields an egalitarian view revolving around a certain conception of self-cultivation as universally mandated. Thus Nietzsche went from being a deplorable elitist to an acceptable, and even laudable, egalitarian. Rawls's view represents a still-common conception of Nietzsche outside of Nietzsche scholarship; Cavell and Conant's view, which was later published in a more detailed form by Conant (2001), has been influential within Nietzsche scholarship,¹ forming part of a general trend towards reading Nietzsche in a way acceptable to modern liberal values.

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This essay argues that both views are misguided. Rawls was right to think that Nietzsche is an elitist, but wrong to think of elitism as having anything to do with justice. Nietzsche subscribes to what can be called *cultural elitism*. The essay proceeds by criticising the egalitarian reading of the key text in this debate – *Schopenhauer as Educator (SE)*² – before presenting the alternative, elitist reading. Cultural elitism, as it is revealed in the essay, turns out to be not only present in modern society, but to be something in which many of us willingly engage. The essay offers a compromise between two equally undesirable poles: unjust political elitism and culturally unproductive egalitarianism. It also provides a much-needed update to our understanding of *SE*, setting the record straight with respect to Nietzsche's elitism therein.

Section 1 outlines the egalitarian reading of Nietzsche, which rests on a conception of genius as something universally distributed and waiting to be realised. Section 2 undertakes the conceptual work required to show (a) that such a notion of genius is untenable (and not Nietzsche's); and (b) that even adopting such a conception does not commit us to egalitarianism. Section 3 outlines the structure of cultural elitism, showing how culture only flourishes when kept apart from state control; inherent features of statehood preclude it from actively supporting culture. This distinguishes Nietzsche from Rawls, since state institutions, far from being arranged to benefit culture, must be quarantined from it. Finally, Section 4 examines the notion of 'productive uniqueness', which the egalitarians mistake for genius. Productive uniqueness is a feature possessed by everybody that paradoxically makes great culture both highly personal and allows it to resonate with humanity at large. The existence of such a feature, however, neither makes everybody capable of significant cultural production nor requires that everybody make that their aim.

1. The egalitarian reading: Cavell and Conant

The egalitarian reading that I discuss here is a reaction to an elitist reading put forward chiefly by Rawls. The elitist reading rests on the commitment to a certain kind of cultural perfectionism which holds that we ought to maximise the achievements of those who have the potential for the greatest contribution to culture. To understand the egalitarian reading, we need to know what commitments they attribute to the elitist and how they set themselves up in opposition. This section outlines the two positions as characterised by the egalitarian; the question of whether this is the right characterisation is answered in the next section. Here, and throughout the essay, when I refer to egalitarianism I have in mind the position put forward by Cavell and Conant. For brevity, when I refer to 'the egalitarian', I have in mind someone who agrees with Cavell and Conant, be it those thinkers themselves or otherwise.

The best illustration of how the egalitarian characterises elitism is the former's discussion of what Conant calls 'the focal passage'. This is the passage from *SE*

that Rawls originally cited as containing the controversial Nietzschean doctrine.³ The passage as quoted in Rawls runs as follows:

Mankind must work continually to produce individual great human beings – this and nothing else is the task.... [F]or the question is this, how can your life, the individual life, retain the highest value, the deepest significance? ... Only by your living for the good of the rarest and most valuable specimens. (Rawls 1971, 325, n. 51)

The final word, *specimens*, is a translation of the German *Exemplare*. The egalitarian claims that a better translation is *exemplars*. What looks on the surface to be a pedantic point of scholarship is adopted by the egalitarian as a means to revealing the misconceptions of elitist readings. The difference between *specimen* and *exemplar*, claims the egalitarian, is indicative of the central difference between elitism and egalitarianism. Two features of the term *specimen* are taken to be pertinent. First, it has biological connotations.⁴ This is taken to favour elitist readings presumably because it suggests innate rather than learned features – it attributes greatness to nature rather than nurture. The second feature has to do with the use of actual specimens. A specimen, the egalitarian claims, is something that is to be compared and contrasted with another specimen from a different genus. A specimen is basically a paradigm example of something that can be compared with other kinds of thing: one keeps a specimen of a raven in order that one might compare it with, say, a specimen of a hummingbird, thereby bringing into focus the essential properties of each bird. If we adopt this understanding of specimens, and we talk about human beings living for the most valuable specimens, then, Conant claims, ‘it becomes natural to assume that what the great human being is a specimen of is a genus to which we do not belong’ (Conant 2001, 194). So the specimen concept suggests a strong difference in kind between great and lowly individuals – an insurmountable barrier of potential achievement that condemns the majority to mediocrity and servitude. This, claims the egalitarian, is the root of elitism.

In contrast to specimens, exemplars are to be compared with other members of the same genus. An exemplar exemplifies certain features of the genus. Someone who has worked at becoming a great artist has done so by cultivating to a certain level features that are common to all. They can serve, therefore, as a role model for others to engage in similar projects of self-cultivation. Because exemplars belong to the same genus as normal people, lacking anything essential that separates them absolutely from those people, there is no basis for dividing an elite from the masses such that the latter only have value in their service to the perfection of the former. This paves the way for egalitarian readings on which perfection is an individual affair pursued by everyone, but assisted by great individuals that serve as role models. The differences between specimens and exemplars can be reduced to one question, namely the question of whether greatness is innate. *Specimen* suggests that greatness is innate; *exemplar* suggests that it is cultivated. The former closes the perfectionist door to normal people, the latter opens it. This idea forms the platform for the egalitarian discussion

of genius, the concept which serves as the linchpin for the egalitarian position. It is to this concept that we now turn.

The egalitarian views the elitist as arguing for the maximisation of genius. This rests on reading genius in line with great cultural achievement. Maximising genius then amounts to something like maximising that property of gifted individuals that allows them to create great works. To this end, normal people ought to sacrifice themselves to the cultivation of that gift in the few people who possess it. The egalitarian counters this position by providing an alternative reading of genius that precludes any such maximisation. Conant (2001, 225) writes:

'Genius' figures in Nietzsche's vocabulary as 'productive uniqueness' each of us harbors (SE, p. 143). Nietzsche does not seek to 'maximize' genius (in the way that Rawls and Hurka imagine) because the only species of genius that concerns him is one that is already perfectly distributed.

The egalitarian conception of genius connects with that of exemplar. Genius is already present in everyone, but is more highly cultivated in exemplary individuals. In other words, what is of value to Nietzsche is not something possessed by a small number of individuals, but something present in everyone. The mining and development of this resource requires that everyone perfect themselves. Greatness is the product of cultivational practice, not of an innate gift.

Conant presses home the egalitarian position by citing an aphorism from *Human, All Too Human* (HH) in which Nietzsche clearly opposes any conception of genius as a gift. The aphorism borrows heavily from "Wagner's 1851 essay" *A Communication to my Friends*, in which Wagner attacks a certain kind of worship of genius that manifested in the formation of cults around particular figures (Wagner [1851] 1895). Such cult formation was a common occurrence in the period known as the *Vormärz* (1815–1845).⁵ The HH aphorism in question – 162 – is entitled *Cult of the genius out of vanity*. It offers an analysis of the psychological motivations of those who form such cults, locating their actions ultimately in vanity. In brief, those who are faced with great cultural achievements explain them by postulating a rare property called *genius*. This property is taken to be a miraculous well from which the raw material of greatness flows in a manner that defies natural explanation. The motivation for positing such a property is that it allows those who, for whatever reason, are not prepared or willing to seek greatness to alleviate the burden of this responsibility. By denying that they possess the relevant trait, they cannot be expected – by others or by themselves – to pursue greatness.

Nietzsche opposes this way of conceiving of genius and, with it, rejects the notion that successful individuals were ever gifted. Their greatness actually arises from their decisions, influences on them, and education that they have received. In this he follows Wagner, for whom genius was once something universal: 'the thing we call Genius was unknown: no one man was a Genius, since all men were it' (Wagner [1851] 1895, 288). Wagner claims that in 1850s Germany

the education system failed to cultivate what he calls the *receptive faculty* – a notion not unlike Nietzsche's *productive uniqueness*. Thus, following Wagner (at this point in Wagner's thinking at least), Nietzsche rejects any notion of giftedness as explanatory of genius, favouring a view on which everyone has the potential to become great.

This does not exhaust the egalitarian argument. Conant in particular goes into great detail arguing for the egalitarian position. Much of his discussion is illuminating, particularly with regard to the relationship between Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, which is read as a paradigm case of what is actually an Emersonian notion of self-cultivation. The main points, however, are present and it is time to mount the elitist response. Before doing so, it should be noted that productive uniqueness is an important concept that will be fleshed out in Section 4. There it will become clear that although I reject the equation of genius with productive uniqueness, I do not reject the latter as central to *SE*, nor do I reject reading it in the way that the egalitarians do.

2. The elitist response

For the egalitarian reading, to go through it is not enough that Nietzsche uses *genius* to refer to a universally distributed productive uniqueness. He needs to use it that way exclusively or, at least, overwhelmingly. If not, then the possibility of maximising genius remains. Hence, Conant's strong claim that 'the *only* species of genius that concerns him is one that is already perfectly distributed' [my emphasis]. In the beginning of *SE*, where Nietzsche outlines productive uniqueness, he indeed uses *genius* as though it were universal. Everyone is unique, but their laziness prevents them from facing up to that uniqueness and living according to its prescriptions. Nietzsche goes on to say that he is repulsed by 'the man who has evaded his genius' (*SE* 1). It is legitimate on the part of the egalitarian to connect this, as Cavell does, with Emerson's use of *genius*. In his essay *Self-Reliance*, which is unquestionably the source of many of Nietzsche's key ideas in *SE* and elsewhere, Emerson writes: 'I shun father and mother and wife and brother, when my genius calls me' (Emerson [1841] 1995, 26).⁶ If Nietzsche adopts Emerson's view then it makes sense that he enjoins each of us to heed the call of genius.

Unfortunately for the egalitarian, this use of *genius* is the first and the last one in *SE* that can be easily read as Emersonian. *Genius* is used 33 times in the essay. Of those, 18 refer to a specific person – mostly rendered as 'the genius' or 'the philosophical genius'.⁷ The remaining uses of the term refer to a property of individuals, but give us no clue as to whether such a property belongs only to them or to everybody. The following passage is the closest Nietzsche gets to reintroducing Emersonian genius:

Every human being... as an intellectual being he harbours a profound desire for the genius in him. This is the root of all true culture; and if I understand by this the longing of man to be reborn as saint and genius, I know that one does not have to be a Buddhist to understand this myth. (*SE* 3)

The first half looks Emersonian, emphasising universality; but the second suggests that the individual is not in possession of genius, since it makes no sense to be reborn as something one already is. In sum, the use of the term *genius* in *SE* overwhelmingly suggests that genius is possessed by only a few individuals.

The egalitarian at this point might remind us of the evidence presented from *HH* 162, where Nietzsche opposes the idea that a special few individuals are gifted. But the context of this aphorism complicates things for the egalitarian in a couple of ways. The text of which the aphorism is a part, *HH*, is engaged in a drawn out battle with metaphysics, the key commitment of which is to the existence of binary opposites. This manifests in several central Nietzschean targets: good and evil, egoism and altruism, being and nonbeing. At times, Nietzsche's governing principle in pursuing these targets amounts to something like *do what it takes to undermine the distinction in question*. So, for example, he comes up with many separate objections to distinguishing egoistic from altruistic acts, none of which can be safely assumed to be his considered view. In addition to his attacking of binary oppositions, Nietzsche attacks the idea of essential properties. The idea that someone possesses a mystical property of goodness or evil that causes them to act in such-and-such a way is replaced with a sophisticated story about the relations of individuals' drives. Bearing this context in mind, Nietzsche's criticism of genius in *HH* 162 needs to be treated with caution. Genius as he attacks it there displays both of the features mentioned: it is a mystical essential property and it divides individuals into the opposing kinds of 'normal' and 'gifted'. It is hardly surprising that Nietzsche attacks this conception of genius. The question is: does this aphorism represent an instance of Nietzsche's attacking metaphysics wherever he finds it with whatever means he has? Or does it represent his considered position on the nature of genius?

Given *HH* as a whole, this is a difficult question. Subsequent aphorisms pursue the same idea. *HH* 164 attacks the view that great individuals 'acquire their knowledge by quite other means than the rest of mankind'. Notice again, however, that the target here is a difference of kind, grounded on a mystical kind of inner vision possessed by some people. What makes these aphorisms a challenge is the difficulty of disentangling the religious and metaphysical attack from the genuine positive theory. As he often does, Nietzsche could be overstating his case against the notion of genius. When, for example, he claims that becoming a great novelist requires only that someone put in a sufficient amount of the right kind of work (*HH* 163), are we to think that he really denies any notion of inherent differences? What is clear is that Nietzsche has good reasons to argue against a certain conception of genius very strongly: it is metaphysical, it leads people to avoid trying to achieve greatness, it leads to a sense

of entitlement in great individuals. These reasons count in favour of Nietzsche exaggerating his position.

The difficulty of deciding once and for all on *HH* 164 is compounded by the relentlessly contradictory nature of *HH*. While here Nietzsche opposes inborn gifts, elsewhere he talks about 'Men who are gifted but unscientific' (*HH* 264), 'men who possess a particular gift for friendship' (*HH* 368) and 'Talented people who are indolent' (*HH II: Wanderer and His Shadow* 311). At other times, Nietzsche claims that 'The strengths and weaknesses of spiritual productivity depend far less on inherited talent than they do on the *power of expansion* bestowed with it' (*HH* 272). Notice that in the same breath as denying talent, Nietzsche affirms another gift, power of expansion, to explain the greatness of certain people. *HH*, far from rejecting the notion of giftedness, employs it constantly. Adducing support from *HH* is risky. In this instance, it should be kept at arm's length from *SE*.

For the sake of argument, however, let us suppose that Nietzsche rejects giftedness in all its forms. Does that negate elitism? Even on the strongest reading of equality I think not. Suppose that there were no difference in ability between people such that everyone had an equal chance at greatness. Suppose, in addition, that our society were made up of 1 m people and had £1 m at its disposal. Would we produce more greatness by giving 10 people £100,000 each or everyone £1? If we believe the former, then we are on our way to elitism, even if that elite is totally arbitrary. Rawls's reading of Nietzsche describes him as holding the view that we should 'arrange institutions ... so as to maximize the achievement of excellence, in art, science, and culture.'⁸ This might well recommend the formation of an elite even if its members possess nothing innate that sets them apart from their peers. All that is required is a belief that excellence requires support of some kind and that such support consists of a more-than-equal share of communal resources.

The elitist argument can go through without any commitment to innate differences between people; however, it need not do so, since the egalitarian's anti-innatism is unfounded. That is to say, it does not find adequate support in *SE* and, as we have seen, it is contentious in *HH*. That is not to say, however, that Nietzsche endorses the kind of crude essentialism about genius presented in *HH* 162, or the idea of giftedness that accompanies it. There are perfectly naturalistic accounts of genius and of giftedness available to the elitist. Moreover, these are of the kind that most elitists should and do adopt; they are also those that Nietzsche adopts. Let us revisit the notion of genius to see how this is so.

Of all his influences, Nietzsche most closely resembles Kant with respect to genius.⁹ Kant was viewed as an elitist by many cultural thinkers of the *Vormärz* (Garratt 2010, 14); indeed Wagner's idiosyncratic artistic socialism was part of a wider cultural reaction against this elitism. Genius for Kant is embedded in his aesthetics. The artist seeks to produce work that initiates in the audience a 'free play' of the cognitive faculties, as he puts it. But Kant was not advocating lawless expressivism or a stream-of-consciousness creative process, something more

suitably ascribed to the *Sturm und Drang* movement against which Kant's own account rallies (Bruno 2010, 6). Kant thought that the process by which an artist came to create work that solicited free play was, far from being lawless, tortuous and difficult, involving a great deal of training. Crucially, however, it required talent. Paul Bruno tells us that "For Kant genius is 'the talent that gives the rule to art'" (Kant 1987, 174). Talent is definitively a natural ability ...' (Bruno 2010, 111). There is a clear universality in Kant's view of genius: everyone is capable of making aesthetic judgements and of entering into free play. However, genius is only said to be present when someone possesses a natural ability to harness this free play in the production of great works. On top of this, that person needs to strictly manage their talent so as to fully realise it. The question now is: what is the relation of talent to genius?

The Kantian picture just painted is deeply invested in Kantian aesthetics. The requisite abilities that genius displays and the kind of art it produces are of an unmistakably Kantian kind. Nietzsche does not share this aesthetics. However, we can separate the specific activity of genius from the general view that great works arise from a combination of universal human features, natural ability to exploit those features and disciplined application of that ability. It is this, rather than the specifics of his aesthetic, that Nietzsche shares with Kant. Before arguing for this, one caveat needs to be added, which is that while Kant aligns genius and talent, Nietzsche does not. For Nietzsche, someone becomes a genius as the result of the proper stewardship of their talent.

Committing to talent does not require us to adopt an anti-naturalistic picture. Recall the distinction from the previous section between specimens and exemplars. If we think of great individuals as specimens, then we are supposed to assume that they possess different traits from normal people, chiefly the trait of genius or talent. Exemplars, on the other hand, merely display common traits, but to a greater degree than others, possibly as the result of self-cultivation. Elitists were presumed to adopt the commitments associated with thinking in terms of great specimens. But do they need to? Surely talent as we commonly think of it, and as Kant thought of it, simply refers to an exceptional ability in some area. When we describe a singer as talented, we simply mean to say that her natural singing ability is exceptional. The talented person is to be compared not with people who cannot sing, or even approximate singing, but with people whose singing falls short of talent – this includes people who sing perfectly well. Talented singers are exemplars, not specimens, insofar as they possess an exaggerated version of the common trait of singing ability.¹⁰ When Rawls talks of those who are capable of cultural excellence, he presumably has in mind talented people in this sense, as do most of us who talk about talent. Yet, we might still think of talent as innate: talent amounts to a natural disposition to develop common abilities to a higher level than is common. Such dispositions make no metaphysical commitments, nor commitments to strong distinctions of kind between those with them and those without. In other words, the elitist

should be comfortable with the egalitarian notion of exemplar, provided it does not oblige him to adopt egalitarianism itself. I can see no reason to think it contains such an obligation.

This is a Kantian – and arguably also common sense – understanding of talent; it is the one that sensible elitists ought to adopt; it is also Nietzsche's. Evidence for the more general Kantian reading of genius given above has already been discussed. We know that for Nietzsche, laziness with respect to self-cultivation is a failing of most people. We also know that Nietzsche uses *genius* in *SE* to refer to specific individuals more than he uses it to refer to anything universal. Often this is limited to discussions of the philosophical genius. The nature of philosophy here will be clarified in Section 4, but for now it suffices to point out that in *SE* 7, Nietzsche denies that philosophy is suitable for 'every ordinary son of earth' who 'would at once perish of his freedom and solitude'. The notion of ordinariness being used here does not necessarily point to any innate failing of those who cannot be philosophical geniuses. To secure *that* requires evidence that Nietzsche operates with a concept of talent, or giftedness, as we normally understand it. This evidence is most appropriately explored in a discussion of Nietzsche's wider cultural project. In the course of that discussion, two things become clear. First, Nietzsche understands genius both to refer to only some individuals and to that which makes them geniuses; this conflicts with a universal, Emersonian notion of genius. Talent plays a role in this division of individuals into genius and non-genius. Second, whatever we think about genius, Nietzsche's cultural plan is still most naturally read along elitist rather than egalitarian lines. I should take this opportunity to qualify my narrative: the alternative understanding of the concept of genius indeed supports an elitist reading of *SE*; but other reasons that *SE* gives us to read it as an elitist text also support adopting the alternative conception of genius. The evidence in this case works both ways. With the strategy in mind, it is time to uncover *SE*'s elitism, which is clearest in its discussion of cultural institutions.

3. Cultural institutions

To ask the question of what cultural institutions Nietzsche advocates relies on first establishing that he is in favour of such institutions at all. Vanessa Lemm reads Cavell as claiming that 'Nietzsche's conception of culture in *SE* is inherently anti-institutional'; (Lemm 2007, 5) a claim that she agrees with. This is a reasonable reading of Cavell, who challenges Rawls's reading of Nietzsche as saying that we ought to 'arrange institutions... so as to maximise the achievement of excellence, in art, science, and culture' (Rawls 1971, 50). Cavell asks 'Then how shall we understand Emerson's and Nietzsche's disdain for the cultural institutions, or institutionalized culture, of the day[?]' (Cavell 1990, 48). Some readers of Cavell would, at this point, claim that his disagreement with Rawls amounts to a difference in focus: Rawls is concerned with justice as it figures in social

arrangements; Cavell sees the question of culture as pertaining to the personal sphere. As such, culture simply has no bearing on what social institutions we choose to adopt, even if culture is of great value. There is a legitimate point here. Nietzsche is, as we shall see, opposed to state institutions. However, he does not subscribe to the highly individualised, Emersonian notion of culture either. He is, contra-Lemm, in favour of institutions of some form.

In *SE*, Nietzsche talks at some length about the 'strange and different institutions' which will be needed in future. The discussion follows on from his 1872 lectures, *On the Future of our Educational Institutions (FEI)*. He begins by dividing society into two bands of people according to the path that they choose through life; from the higher band emerges the genius or geniuses. Thus society consists of three types: first band (the majority); second band (a minority); and genius (a handful of people within the second band). Nietzsche contrasts two kinds of cultural institution which line up with each band's conception of culture and its goal.¹¹ The first band takes a cultural institution to consist of 'the rules and arrangements by which it itself is brought to order and marches forward and through which all solitary and recalcitrant, all who are looking for higher and more remote goals, are excommunicated' (*SE* 6). Earlier in the essay, Nietzsche is clear that the majority of people live unreflective lives in pursuit of happiness, wealth, power and other common goals of those in large societies. Society is in turn supported by a sense of national pride, a sense of community and a common banner under which to rally; those who reject such things are treated with mistrust.

By contrast, the second band ...

... wants the protection of a firm organisation so as to prevent itself being washed away and dispersed by the tremendous crowd ... all who participate in the institution have, through continual purification and mutual support, to help prepare within themselves and around them for the birth of the genius and the ripening of his work. Not a few, including some second- and third-rate talents, are destined for the task of rendering assistance and only in subjugation to such a destiny do they come to feel they have a duty and that their lives possess significance and a goal.

There are a number of points here that count in favour of an elitist reading. Second- and third-rate talents here are incapable of themselves becoming geniuses; as such, their lives are significant by virtue of their service. The egalitarian reading of the focal passage sees meaning and significance in life as a matter of living for one's higher self. This reading sits uncomfortably with the above passage, which contains nothing in itself to license reading it metaphorically. The egalitarian might respond by pointing out that individuals prepare 'within themselves', suggesting some form of self-cultivation. There is a legitimate point to be made here about productive uniqueness's role in culture as a whole, as we will see in Section 4. However, it is only a few lines later that Nietzsche denies the possibility of 'every ordinary son of earth' engaging in the practices that lead to individual genius. The onus is on the egalitarian to show that *talented* and

ordinary are, for example, ways of talking about parts of the self, rather than genuine differences between types of individuals.

The notion of subjugation here – of ‘rendering assistance’ – is again something that the egalitarian must try to read in a way that differs from the obvious. In *FEI*, Nietzsche is clear that culture requires the commitment of resources to a few individuals, bemoaning modern education for its universalism. This universalism stems from the fact that educators ‘fear the aristocratic nature of true education and culture’ (*FEI* 3). A few lines earlier, Nietzsche had said that ‘Education for the masses cannot be our goal – only the cultivation of the chosen individual, equipped to produce great and lasting works’ (*FEI* 3). In both *SE* and *FEI*, Nietzsche is clear that those who care about culture recognise the need for sacrifice for the production of a few great individuals. This kind of talk is not easily dismissed as metaphorical by egalitarians.

This sacrifice on behalf of individuals does not yet give us an elitism of the kind that Rawls saw in Nietzsche. Notice that the sacrifice in question is compelled neither by a moral imperative nor by force. At work instead is the individual’s life significance. This highlights an important point to be made against those readings of Nietzsche that emphasise individual liberty. The idea that everyone ought to – or has the right to – strive first and foremost for their own flourishing is a thoroughly modern idea that Nietzsche does not share. Full justification for that claim is well beyond the scope of this essay, but limited to the context under discussion, some strong evidence can be adduced. For example, the individuals dedicated to genius are led astray precisely by the temptation to focus only on themselves. Thus, the tempting voice of the majority whispers ‘you are only servants, assistants, instruments, outshone by higher natures’ (*SE* 6). It promises that as part of the first band ‘you shall, as masters, enjoy your free personality, your talents may glitter by their own light’. Notice that the promise of the majority actually looks a lot like the kind of individualism that Nietzsche is sometimes taken to endorse *tout court*. This theme is continued in *HH*, where Nietzsche claims that one of the problems with the loss of metaphysical worldviews is that ‘the attention of the individual is too firmly fixed on his own brief span of life and receives no stronger impulse to work at the construction of enduring institutions intended to last for centuries’ (*HH* 22). Such enduring institutions are presumably those that Nietzsche has in mind when he talks above about the need for ‘firm organisation’ in a cultural institution. Egalitarian individualism of the strong kind put forward by Cavell and Conant sits uncomfortably with Nietzsche’s emphasis on cultural community.

The state also promotes the idea of community, so we might expect Nietzsche to recommend it as a cultural enforcer. But the state’s idea of community excludes anyone living outside of the prescribed norms, which includes original personalities. Nietzsche seeks to create a strong cultural community based around such people. His wariness of the state in this regard leads him to oppose state institutions in general, an opposition that Lemm and possibly

Cavell misconstrue as opposition to all institutions. Nietzsche's opposition to state institutions is clearest in his discussion of Plato's *Republic*. Plato recognises the demands of culture, but wrongly entrusts them to the state. Regarding the former, Nietzsche tells us that to understand philosophy Platonically is to take it 'as seriously and honestly as though its highest objective were to produce new Platos' (SE 7). Unfortunately, installing philosophers as rulers is 'the last thing the modern state wants to do'. This raises two important questions. First, why can the state not be trusted with cultural tasks? Second, is Nietzsche in principle opposed to state-mandated culture?

Nietzsche does not make explicit his reasons for opposing the state's involvement in culture, but the following suggestion makes, I think, the most sense of his comments. States are only successful when they are able to stay strong, both internally and relative to their neighbours. This strength is conditional on a great many state tasks being effectively handled, which in turn requires a great many highly trained individuals. As such, the state has a vested interest in educating people to fill those roles that strengthen it. Another way to put this is to say that only those states that strengthen in this way prosper, leading to a kind of selection process. The strength of the state puts it in a position to compel or strongly encourage individuals to make sacrifices in the name of cultural ends. Notice the conflict: that very strength to produce culture is conditional on pursuing ends that are opposed to culture. The state is only strong because it chooses the best individuals to serve its ends, which are always tied to the vicissitudes of the political environment. If this is right, it would explain why Nietzsche, in his middle period, gives up any hope that states might aim for anything other than their own survival. In *HH* 224, Nietzsche quotes approvingly Machiavelli's claim that the state ought to aim only for duration. Only then, he claims, is 'a steady evolution and ennobling inoculation at all possible'. Later he claims that the democratisation of Europe provides 'secure foundations' that make it 'impossible for the fruitful fields of culture again to be destroyed overnight' (*HH* 275). In other words, culture can only take place within a secure state, but then only as a victim of the state's unwitting undermining of culture.¹²

This answer to the first question suggests an answer to the second. We now see that Nietzsche is opposed to state institutions for practical reasons, and probably not on principle. State institutions fail to deliver cultural flourishing in the form of a few great individuals. This is consistent, however, with Nietzsche's being in favour of state institutions in principle. If the states really were able to compel individuals to serve culture, then perhaps Nietzsche would endorse such compulsion. There is nothing to suggest that he sees it as each individual's right or responsibility to cultivate themselves. His later works tend to favour an enforced elitism, perhaps because he comes to believe such force can be usefully employed.¹³ At this stage, however, there is an elite, grounded not in compulsion but in the significance that people derive from servitude to genius. Nietzsche's vision is a cultural analogue to the *Republic*. It consists of three strata

of individuals each smaller than the one below. To say it is cultural rather than social is to say (a) that the structure is not held in place by political force; and (b) that its aim is the production of genius, the stated aim of culture. The two highest strata are held in place by a shared conception of culture; however, the middle stratum consists of those who recognise themselves to be merely supportive of the genius. The lowest stratum is unaware of its part in the whole and its role is unclear in *SE*. Nietzsche seems merely to accept that such a body of people exist and is concerned mostly that they do not hinder culture; in *HH*, they become the preserves of the social order that is the condition of culture.¹⁴

We are now in a position to connect elitism with perfectionism. We began with a comparison of two positions, elitism and egalitarianism. We can now see that Nietzsche is an elitist in the sense that he advocates the maintenance of an elite composed of great individuals, where maintenance entails other members of society making sacrifices to help maximise the achievements of the elite. He is not, however, what we might call a political elitist. The elite are part of a structure whose servants are willing participants. It is not the case that the elite's interests are placed above those of their servants, since it is in the latter's interest that the former succeed.¹⁵ For this arrangement I propose the term *cultural elitism*. So what of perfectionism? Elitists and egalitarians agree that Nietzsche is a perfectionist, but egalitarians see perfectionism as a universal, individual affair, whereas elitists see it as concentrated on those few who already excel. I think it is pretty clear, given the structure of cultural elitism, that Nietzsche is the second kind of perfectionist. Those who serve culture derive their significance from the perfection of the genius, whose greatness is the justification of their own lives. As we know, this is not a political or a moral position: individuals are not compelled to forgo their own perfection, nor do they feel it a moral duty to do so. So Nietzsche is both an elitist and a perfectionist of the kind roughly synonymous with Rawls's reading. Rawls's concerns with social justice and the arrangement of social institutions are, however, misplaced in the context of *SE*, not because Nietzsche too is after a just society, but because he simply does not trust the socio-political sphere with the task of culture. Nor is it clear that Nietzsche's vision, at least at this stage, would entail any systematic injustice.

This section was set-up with the claim that an understanding of cultural institutions helps secure the elitist reading of the concept of genius. We can now see how this works. Clearly, Nietzsche employs the notion of talent as a means of dividing individuals into types: those suited for genius and those suited to serve genius. This strongly suggests that he is working with some idea of giftedness. Furthermore, it is clear from *FEI* that Nietzsche is in favour of limiting our energies to a few individuals because doing so serves culture, and culture is the production of genius. If genius is already present in everyone and cannot be maximised, why concentrate such resources in its production and improvement? The whole structure of cultural elitism – its aim of producing genius and its willingness to 'sacrifice' less talented individuals to that goal

– rests on understanding genius in the elitist way. Furthermore, the evidence for cultural elitism is strongly independent of the direct evidence for the elitist conception of genius; cultural elitism sits comfortably in tandem with the elitist conception of genius.

4. Productive uniqueness

If Nietzsche is only in favour of cultivating a few great individuals, why does he stress the universality of productive uniqueness? This is the final thorn in the side of elitist. Before proceeding, a brief outline of productive uniqueness is required. Productive uniqueness denotes the unique combination of inherited traits and environmental influences that form every individual. Even a newborn baby, as a unique combination of physical and mental traits, differs from any other human being. These then interact with the environment. The possible permutations in such a complex and ongoing interaction guarantee that each individual is unique. The productive aspect of productive uniqueness derives from the fact that my unique being has the potential to prescribe to me a distinctive way of life. That life – its goals, achievements, narrative – is, in those who cultivate themselves in certain ways, the product of the inner self's particular structure.

Productive uniqueness is an important concept in *SE*, but it is not the same as genius. I propose instead that genius results from a relation that some individuals have to their productive uniqueness: they are able to convert it into greatness. Just because productive uniqueness is universal, it does not follow (a) that everyone is capable of working with it to the point of genius or (b) that they ought to try. Consider the following claim: everyone's life would make a great novel if they knew how to write it. This is intuitively plausible, since we all have a unique perspective on the world: we have all witnessed complex and interesting social interactions or natural phenomena, we have all probably experienced the sublime, and so on. But only a few people are capable of capturing and communicating these experiences in a way that resonates. Those talented individuals that do so exceptionally well often become celebrated artists.¹⁶ I propose that something like this is what Nietzsche means by genius. Suppose that one were not able to effectively exploit one's productive uniqueness in this way; that one simply lacked the talent required to write a great novel. It does not follow that one ought simply to ignore one's productive uniqueness. One might still seek to improve one's writing, for example. But suppose that what one values most is great literature – it does not follow that one need to write it oneself. One might be better off serving talented writers in other ways: teaching, guiding, financing and promoting – even engaging in intellectual or artistic projects that pave the way for great work.¹⁷ Such cultural service is, I take it, a frequent occurrence and, in fact, Nietzsche's own life is instructive here. At one point, he was ready to serve Wagner as an opera house designer (See Young 2010, 108). Later, Nietzsche himself gratefully accepted the services

of his dedicated friend, Heinrich Köselitz (a.k.a. Peter Gast), who took dictation for *HH* when Nietzsche was too sick to write.¹⁸

This gives us some clue as to why Nietzsche might stress the universality of productive uniqueness. In *SE*, genius is related to philosophy understood in a particular way. There is not enough space to outline fully what is meant by philosophy at this time, but roughly it amounts to a reflective enterprise in which the individual relates to their own productive uniqueness and, in doing so, serves also as a mirror of their age and of the human condition in general.¹⁹ This reflective capacity is described by Nietzsche as having a redemptive role, which seems to consist in rendering life meaningful. This is the redemption in which servants of culture share when in the presence of (the) genius. It does not follow from this that they are themselves geniuses. However, what is important is that their recognition of genius relies upon their own productive uniqueness. Just as one can only truly appreciate a great chess player when one plays chess oneself, so one can only truly appreciate a great philosopher when one has some relation to one's productive uniqueness.²⁰ Philosophy as Nietzsche conceives of it, namely as the attempt to maximally implant meaning in life, is something that anyone can in principle appreciate, since everyone implants meaning in the world. But only a select few do this to the level of genius and it is in their success that culturally sensitive individuals invest.

I want to close this short section by pointing to an assumption that lies at the heart of the egalitarian reading and which clouds the issue of productive uniqueness somewhat. It is the assumption that the relationship of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche as hinted at by *SE* is the blueprint for that between geniuses and everyone else. Schopenhauer is clearly Nietzsche's exemplar in the egalitarian sense of that word. Schopenhauer inspired Nietzsche to become a genius. But if this were the relation of Schopenhauer to everyone, then cultural elitism, for which there is a lot of evidence, would look shaky. One way to avoid this is to concede the importance of the Schopenhauer-Nietzsche relation, but to deny its universality. Geniuses serve chiefly as exemplars in the production of future geniuses, but chiefly as redemptive for those without the talent to become geniuses. Still, Nietzsche needs a decent number of people to at least initially strive to become geniuses; otherwise a great deal of talent is likely to go undiscovered. One way to bring this about would be to stress the universality of productive uniqueness. If everyone believes themselves unique, half the battle is won, since the basic resource that is exploited by the genius is taken to be universal. The other half is won when great talent (and perhaps the right circumstances) is also present. So stressing universal productive uniqueness is a good tactic for producing a few great geniuses, with the remainder of people able to appreciate them. The production of those geniuses will no doubt involve the following of exemplars. In short, stressing the universality of productive uniqueness might well represent Nietzsche casting a wide net. This might even involve widespread, minimal education – a kind of scouting for talent similar

to that found in the *Republic*. In this slim sense, there may be some hint of egalitarianism in Nietzsche. But this is not principled, it is instrumental, and its outcome would still be cultural elitism.

5. Conclusion

In *SE*, Nietzsche is an elitist, but of a cultural kind. Nobody is compelled to sacrifice their own perfection to ensure the perfection of a few great individuals, but many do so as part of a cultural arrangement wherein their sacrifice lends meaning and significance to their lives. It is an arrangement in which everyone can see themselves as contributors to the highest human activities, activities that impose meaning on an otherwise meaningless existence. If this sounds familiar, it is because modern culture shares many features of this account. Scores of individuals serve culture with dedication in ways other than artistic creation or philosophical reflection; these individuals make those things possible. To say that culture is elitist is, minimally understood, only to say that its defining achievements are the product of a handful of great individuals in each generation. The narrative of great culture connects those few bright stars in history to form a constellation that inspires future generations.

This view was secured in the following way. First, we saw the egalitarians distinguish themselves from the elitists through a distinction between the concept of an exemplar and that of a specimen. Exemplars are highly developed instances of the human being; specimens are instances of human beings possessing an innate trait that sets them apart from everyone else. This transferred into the discussion of genius, wherein the egalitarian viewed the elitist as relying on a notion of genius that made great individuals fundamentally different in kind to normal people. It was then argued that this mischaracterises elitist commitments regarding the nature of genius. Furthermore, the egalitarian reading of genius was revealed to receive little textual justification. The text actually points to a conception of genius that supports an elitist position. This was strengthened by an elucidation of Nietzsche's envisioned cultural institutions, where not only was labour divided into geniuses and servants, but the division was explicated in terms that the egalitarian rejects, namely in terms of talent. Finally, the idea of productive uniqueness, which the egalitarian takes to be equivalent to genius, was shown not to be. Its relation to genius was outlined and, rather than being irreducibly egalitarian, it was seen to fit comfortably into the elitist model.

Prospects for an egalitarian reading only get weaker as we approach Nietzsche's mature works. The first major text on that journey, *HH*, is highly conflicted, but, in its chapter on culture, alludes to several structures that resemble the elitism argued for here. As Thomas Hurka has convincingly argued, the later works are deeply committed to the kind of perfectionism that is here taken to support Nietzsche's elitism (Hurka 2007). In short, then, despite providing strong evidence for elitist readings, *SE* represents the best chance the egalitarian has to

argue for an egalitarian Nietzsche. When that text falls, there are few safe havens for egalitarian readings. The argument presented here does more than secure a certain reading of a single text – it weakens key support for an egalitarian understanding of Nietzsche as a whole.

Notes

1. For example, Owen (2002, 118) describes Conant's paper as the 'best account of Nietzsche's perfectionism'. Ridley (2007, 222, n. 37) describes the paper as an 'excellent discussion' of Nietzsche's perfectionism. See also (Fossen 2008; Church 2011, 235, n. 45).
2. References use section/aphorism numbers, not page numbers. For texts used, see bibliography for Nietzsche's works used (Nietzsche [1876] 1996; [1874] 1997; [1886] 2002; [1872] 2016).
3. Conant (2001, 188/9) shows that this passage is lifted directly from Rawls by several other perfectionists, showing how influential Rawls's reading was.
4. Thomas Hurka (2007, 19) has pointed out that Nietzsche actually draws the biological connection himself in the very same section from which the focal passage is taken.
5. For a detailed account of the cult of the genius phenomenon see Garratt (2010, 89ff.).
6. As an anonymous reviewer helpfully pointed out, this conception of genius was actually widespread at the time.
7. In *UM* as a whole, this pattern is repeated. The essays offer few passages in support of an Emersonian conception of genius.
8. This is Rawls's (1971) characterisation of perfectionism, of which Nietzsche is proffered as an extreme example.
9. Thanks is owed to James Pearson for his valuable feedback on the positive account of genius about to be put forward.
10. I don't deny that such an ability might be labelled as genius or talent and that doing so can be said to pick out a property. In this sense, talent or genius would be an additional property of the individual. But then exemplars as the egalitarian talks about them would become specimens. That is, developing a trait to a higher level would be enough to constitute a difference of kind between those with that developed trait and others. This would undermine the egalitarian argument.
11. For a more detailed account of the two bands see *FEI* 4.
12. Nietzsche's relationship with statehood and democracy is ambivalent and complex. For a good account see Keith Ansell-Pearson (1994, 78, 212).
13. In *BGE* 257, Nietzsche goes as far as to advocate slavery. Huddleston (2014) gives an account of this slavery and its relation to culture. This account shares with mine the idea of servitude to greatness as the best option for many people (whether they know it or not), the difference being that it is an enforced servitude.
14. There are readings on which the masses uphold culture by virtue of upholding customs, language use and so on, rather than merely social order. That is, to incorporate something into culture is precisely to make it part of the way of life of the majority. I exclude such a reading only for the sake of space.
15. Huddleston (2010) has made a similar point to this in much greater detail. He argues that the achievement of individual greatness is beneficial to humanity as a whole, since great individuals serve a redemptive role. If anything, he claims,

the whole takes precedent over the great individuals. It is the overall success of a culture, manifested in the greatness of its individuals, that is Nietzsche's chief value. In my view, as will become clear, *SE* supports Huddleston's views.

16. I am not suggesting that this exhausts the nature of art. Indeed, this might not even be a necessary or sufficient condition of being a great artist.
17. I add this last qualification because we should not think of all service to genius and culture as merely administrative. Great philosophy, for example, might well require many individuals to do conceptual work.
18. Köselitz, whom Nietzsche affectionately called 'Peter Gast', also helped Nietzsche in various other administrative capacities, including trying to protect his legacy from Elisabeth Förster Nietzsche.
19. This is a complex relationship that seems in tension. Productive uniqueness is uniquely individual, so how can it reflect an age or humanity as such? One possibility is that productive uniqueness in everyone is partly determined by the age they live in, since this determines so much of their individual experience. Furthermore, every individual is also a human being. Hence, someone like Goethe can be both a great individual and a great German figure and a great human being.
20. Later, Nietzsche will retract this idea, claiming that great individuals are always misunderstood, but affect culture nonetheless (e.g. *HH* 126). In *SE* 7, there is the germ of this idea when Nietzsche talks about the difficulty of great individuals actually communicating. However, all that is required for cultural flourishing as I have outlined it is that they are taken to be communicating *something* of significance even if it is not what they intended.

Notes on contributor

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