Nietzsche on Inequality, Education, and Human Flourishing

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Introduction

Are inequalities of talent and achievement necessarily bad for the least talented and lowest achievers? Judging by the tenor of recent policy debates concerning educational equality the answer is, 'Yes.' Harry Brighouse, for example, claims that "the diversion of resources away from children who are likely to do very well and towards students who are more marginal is to be welcomed from the egalitarian point of view" (2010, p. 63–64). He goes on to say that the "undermin[ing] of the productiveness of the higher-achieving children is not a serious worry" (p. 64). On the other hand, diverting resources from the lowest-achieving students would be "objectionable" (ibid). It is important to note that Brighouse's assessment is not extreme—it is moderate compared to the "radical conception of educational equality" proposed by more aggressive egalitarians (p. 33). What is implicit in Brighouse's view is the belief that the existence of higher achieving students has no bearing on the improvement of the lowest achieving students, or if it has a bearing, it is negative. It is assumed that the lowest achieving students need 'resources' in order to improve their achievement, not relationships with higher achieving students. But what if this assumption is wrong? What if lower achieving students need relationships with higher achieving students in order to succeed? If this were the case then it would be, *pace* Brighouse, unjustifiable to undermine the higher achieving students; indeed, it would not only be unjustifiable—it would be anti-egalitarian because it would also undermine the potential achievement of the lower achieving students. In other words, if the existence of higher achieving students would support the flourishing of lower-achieving students, then it is incumbent upon policy makers to do what they can to support higher achieving students. Failure to do so would hurt the very students they are supposedly trying to help.

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P. Smeyers (ed.), *International Handbook of Philosophy of Education*,
Springer International Handbooks of Education,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-72761-5_24

On first glance, the supposition that lower achieving students might actually be benefitted by relationships with higher achieving students seems doubtful. The assumption is that the lower achieving students would feel inferior and would lose motivation as they compared themselves to their higher achieving peers. But is this assumption justified? On one way of conceptualizing education—where education is seen as exclusively private, individual, and competitive—then it probably is justified. But what about on other conceptions of education? Is it possible to imagine an educational community that is communal and mutually supportive, where all students see their own flourishing as intimately connected with the flourishing of others? This chapter attempts to imagine such a community by looking to Friedrich Nietzsche's *Schopenhauer as Educator*. In *Schopenhauer as Educator*, Nietzsche describes an educational community in which not only are all members challenged to become their highest selves, they are similarly challenged to assist others in their pursuit of their highest selves. Counterintuitively, Nietzsche argues that the individuals most benefitted by this pursuit are the least talented and lowest-achievers—and the way these low-achievers go about their own improvement is to first seek the improvement of the most talented and highest achievers. This surprising suggestion has led to years of misinterpretation of *Schopenhauer as Educator* as radically elitist and anti-egalitarian. These interpretations argue that *Schopenhauer as Educator* only supports the well-being of the most talented and is indifferent at best, and hostile at worst, to the well-being of the masses. This is a misinterpretation of the text, however. In *Schopenhauer as Educator*, Nietzsche articulates a vision of community that supports the well-being of the most talented and least talented, and all individuals in between.[1]

[1] Most Anglo-American educational theorists contend that while Nietzsche's philosophy of education may be beneficial for personal flourishing, it is not effective for societal flourishing. From this stance, Nietzsche's philosophy could be relevant to the improvement of individuals but would be irrelevant to the improvement of society as a whole. Rosenow (1989) and Johnston (1998) focus on Nietzsche's radical individualism and Nietzsche's insistence that each individual separates him- or herself from the conventions that govern the public good. However, Jenkins (1982), Hillesheim (1986), Aviram (1991), and Fennell (2005) argue further that Nietzsche is not only individualistic but elitist by advocating for an educational system that consigns the greater whole of the populace to mediocrity, drudgery, and slavery, while enabling a few elite persons to become their masters. Among political theorists, Nietzsche's reputation does not fare much better. MacIntyre (1981), Rawls (1971), Detwiler (1990), Hurka (1992), and Theile (1990), for instance, maintain that Nietzsche's philosophy is contrary to the advancement of the public good. Some argue that Nietzsche supports a radical egoism that rejects any typical moral framework that discussion of the public good could be based upon (MacIntyre 1981; Theile 1990). Others still assert that Nietzsche's ideals are elitist in that they deny the public good by advocating for the unequal distribution of capital (Rawls 1971; Hurka 1992; Detwiler 1990). This said, the multitude of elitist readings among Nietzsche scholars does not mean that there have been no interpretations of Nietzsche that are more sympathetic to his capacity to aid the public good. While considerably fewer, some theorists argue that Nietzsche's philosophy—particularly as represented in his early and middle work—is less hostile to democracy and the public good than it might seem on its face (Jonas 2009; Hargis 2010). Beyond Jonas and Hargis, there are other interpretations of Nietzsche's philosophy that are also sympathetic to democratic ideals: Owen (1995), Connolly (1981), Warren (1988), Schrift (2000), Sassone (1996), and Bingham (2001).

The goal of this chapter is not merely to interpret Nietzsche correctly but to challenge the assumption that the best way to assist the lowest achieving students is to divert educational resources away from higher achieving students. The assumption may be the correct one, but it needs to be carefully interrogated in order to guard against a false egalitarianism that might unwittingly undermine a true egalitarianism. Nietzsche's ideas are too radical to implement wholesale, but they challenge us to think carefully about our assumptions about educational equality.

Before examining Nietzsche's ideas in *Schopenhauer as Educator*, it is important to note that many of Nietzsche's most famous and influential ideas are not found in the text. *Schopenhauer as Educator* was written in what commentators often refer to as the 'early period' of Nietzsche's development. The early period does not contain ideas like the *Overman*, the *Eternal Recurrence*, the *Will to Power*, the *revaluation of all values*, *perspectivism*, and so on. These ideas have been tremendously influential and merit serious consideration for the importance they might have for the philosophy of education. Unfortunately, a separate chapter (at least) would be needed to analyze these ideas and their relationship to the philosophy of education, and therefore I will not discuss them here. For readers who are interested in the ways philosophers of education have taken up some of these ideas, please see Yacek (2014a, b), Jonas (2009, 2013), Jonas and Nakazawa (2008), Fennell (2005), Ramaekers (2001), Smeyers (2001), Bingham (2001), Johnston (1998), Aviram (1991), Hillesheim (1986), and Rosenow (1989).

The Recieved View of Nietzsche's Political Philosophy

In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls summarizes the essence of the received view that Nietzsche is a 'perfectionist' of the elitist sort who believes that for a society to become great, the masses must sacrifice their happiness and well-being and work slavishly for the production of individual great men. For his interpretation, Rawls relies on a single passage from *Schopenhauer as Educator*: "Mankind must work continually to produce individual great human beings—this and nothing else is the task…for 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" (p. 325). Rawls summarizes this passage by claiming that Nietzsche argues that "We give value to our lives only by working for the good of the highest specimens" (p. 325). During the decades following *A Theory of Justice*, the passage Rawls quotes has been quoted time and again as an example of Nietzsche's disregard for the well-being of the masses in favor of the few.[2] Considering the received view's frequent reliance on the above passage to demonstrate Nietzsche's radical elitism, and considering that prima facie the passage

[2] The exact same passage is used in Ansell-Pearson (2001), Appel (1991), Thiele (1990), Fennel (2005), Detwiler (1990), and although he does not use the exact same passage, Conway (1997) uses nearby passages in *Schopenhauer as Educator* to make the same point.

seems clearly to support the interpretation, it may be helpful to begin with an analysis of the passage.

As mentioned, Rawls summarizes the passage by claiming that "we give value to our lives only by working for the good of the highest specimens" (p. 325). This summary is misleading, because it suggests that the average individual must work sacrificially, slavishly perhaps, for the good of the few. This is far from what Nietzsche intends. To see this, one need only read a few lines beyond the above passage where Nietzsche claims that living for the good of the few is accomplished when one has learned to "love" and has "attached his heart to some great man" (SE, 163). Attaching one's heart to a great man is a far cry from working slavishly for him. When one attaches his heart to another, the individual is devoted to the other, but the devotion is not necessarily self-sacrificial. It may be self-enriching. It is this sort of relationship that Nietzsche has in mind.

For Nietzsche, the average individual is inspired by his exemplar to find his highest self. "It is incontestable that we are all related and allied to the saint, just as we are to the philosopher and artist; there are moments and as it were bright sparks of the fire of love in whose light we cease to understand the word 'I', there lies something beyond our being which at these moments moves across into it, and we are thus possessed of a heartfelt longing for bridges between here and there" (SE, 161). The 'bridges' referred to here are the redemptive men. The individual *wants* to help produce great men, because these great men provide him with 'bright sparks' of inspiration. Thus, the individual is not acting self-sacrificially by working to produce the philosophers, artists, and saints, but in fact, working for his own elevation. The reason an individual's life "receives its highest value [and] deepest significance" from its participation in the production of great men is that the great men helped him "distinguish between those things that really promote human happiness and those that only appear to do so" (SE, 142).

From this brief analysis we see that the passage Rawls and others offer to support Nietzsche's supposed disregard of the well-being of the many and obsession with the well-being of the few cannot be maintained. The question then becomes: does the rest of *Schopenhauer as Educator* bear out the reading of the above passage that I have offered here? The answer is yes. In fact, an examination of the rest of *Schopenhauer* strengthens the interpretation offered above.

Conformity, Genius and a Flourishing Culture

Nietzsche begins *Schopenhauer as Educator* by explaining the chief difficulty in educating individuals to overcome and transform their initial identities: their own *laziness*. When he condemns laziness in the masses, Nietzsche can easily be misinterpreted as elitist by claiming that members of the masses are fundamentally inferior and cannot rise above their laziness. In a rather dramatic sentence, he says: "When a great thinker despises mankind, he despises its laziness: for it is on account of their laziness that men seem like factory products, things of no consequence and

unworthy to be associated with or instructed" (SE, 127). From this statement it might seem as if Nietzsche considers himself one of the 'great thinkers' and despises the masses himself. But this is to take the passage out of context. Rather than despising the masses for their factory product-like status, Nietzsche despises the educational and political culture that created the masses. He refers to the greed of the state and how it "desires the greatest possible dissemination and universalization of [false] culture and…the dissemination of education among its citizens can only be to its advantage in its competition with other states" (SE, 165). Furthermore, when the masses *remain* lazy they perpetuate the cycle that made them lazy in the first place. According to Nietzsche, as laziness allows individuals to be turned into factory products, teachers in the schools are implicitly relieved of the responsibility of offering individuals an education that would teach them to overcome their laziness. If students are fundamentally factory products, there is no hope of giving them any other education than a factory-like version of mass education. Indeed, while teachers may decry laziness and pretend to fight against it, the system in which those teachers work finds the laziness useful because it produces conformity. For Nietzsche, this is exactly what the so-called democratic education of his time meant: a state-run institution that had no intention of elevating people through culture, but worked merely to continue the existence of the state:

> However loudly the state may proclaim its service to Culture it furthers Culture in order to further itself and cannot conceive of a goal higher than its own welfare and continued existence. What the money-makers really want when they ceaselessly demand instruction and education is in the last resort precisely money…. And this is why the conditions for the production of genius have *not improved* in modern times, and why antipathy for original men has increased to such an extent that Socrates could not have lived among us and would in any event not have attained seventy. (SE, 174)

Nietzsche wants to overthrow the state's educational project by illuminating its machinations and calling individuals to reject the factory product status which they have accepted. Nietzsche argues that every individual is unique and irreplaceable, not a factory product without individuality. "In his heart *every* man knows quite well that, being unique, he will be in the world only once and that no imaginable chance will for a second time gather together into a unity so strangely variegated as he is: he knows it but he hides it like a bad conscience" (SE, 127, italics added). If every individual knows deep within that they are unique, Nietzsche hopes that they might be inspired to discover a means by which to raise themselves above their factory-like status. But this will require "true educators" who can "serve as an examples," which leads to the need for the same individuals to work for "the production of the philosopher, the artists and the saints within [them] and without [them]" (SE, 160). For individuals to stop being factory products is to cease taking themselves easily. They know in their hearts that they are unique and they can, if they so choose, leave their factory product-like status behind, but to do that they must be willing to quell laziness and to work for the production of their 'true educators'—artists, geniuses, and saints who provide a vision of human cultural flourishing that educates as it also draws aloft.

The view that individuals can overcome their tendency to laziness and become their highest, truest self continues when Nietzsche says, for instance, that "*Every* human being is accustomed to discovering in himself some limitation, of his talent or his moral will, which fills him with melancholy and longing, and just as his feeling of sinfulness makes him long for the saint in him, so as an intellectual being he harbours a profound desire for the genius in him" (SE, 142, italics added). This longing is resident in the genius and the non-genius, for all people have an ideal that they are striving for but which can never be fully obtained. "Even the greatest of men cannot attain to his own ideal. That Schopenhauer can offer us a model is certain, all the scars and blemishes notwithstanding" (SE, 143). All individuals suffer the same kind of struggle, even if the ideas towards with people struggle are unique. With this in mind, let us examine the ways that Nietzsche employs Schopenhauer as a guidepost.

For Nietzsche, the way to escape our laziness and tendency to follow the herd is to discover exemplars who can guide all people—whether the few or the many—to their highest selves. "Then one finally asks oneself: where are we, scholars and unscholarly, high placed or low, to find the moral exemplars and models among our contemporaries, the visible epitome of morality for our time?" (SE, 132–133). Exemplars are individuals who have cultivated the harmony of their emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual selves. Nietzsche argues that only individuals of this kind can serve as guideposts to the ideal. "I profit from a philosopher only insofar as he can be an example….But this example must be supplied by his outward life and not merely in his books—in the way, that is, in which the philosophers of Greece taught, through their bearing, what they wore and ate, and their morals, rather than by what they said, let alone what they wrote" (SE, 136–137). The problem is that, as we have seen, Nietzsche believes that such examples are almost completely absent in contemporary culture. "Never have moral educators been more needed, and never has it seemed less likely they would be found" (SE, 133). What is to be done in this case? The answer is to find examples of redemptive men from the past. For Nietzsche, Schopenhauer is such an example. He goes on to explain the ways in which Schopenhauer demonstrates the ideal. Indeed, Nietzsche takes non-Greek examples like Schopenhauer to be distressingly rare in contemporary society; he even indicates that he considered it a 'miracle' that Schopenhauer had the strength to overcome the cultural decay that threatened him. "It is, however, nothing less than a miracle that [Schopenhauer] was able to become this human example: for he was pressed upon, from within and without, by the most tremendous dangers which would have crushed or shattered any weaker being" (SE, 137). It was only Schopenhauer's courageous self-command and "truly antique attitude towards philosophy" (SE, 139) that protected him from failure. What he can teach us is to "distinguish between those things that really promote human happiness and those that only appear to do so" (SE, 142). He can teach us these things by helping us to envision and approach our own ideal self.

Schopenhauer assists the geniuses as well as average individuals in becoming their highest selves. For the geniuses, he offers direction with respect to uncovering their own genius, which will have been obscured by the elements in themselves that

are products of their own age. This includes both an appreciation of the creative genius of their works and also the struggle they had to endure to achieve those works. Schopenhauer teaches the genius how to embrace the difficulties of living as a genius. Nietzsche illuminates the tribulations the geniuses will have to endure by outlining the tribulations of Schopenhauer. In the end, the geniuses are not given instruction on how to create culture-defining works but how to live in a way *that makes possible* the creation of culture-defining works.

Schopenhauer also serves as a guide to the non-geniuses. In the case of the average individual, Nietzsche uses Schopenhauer to reveal 'a new circle of duties.' Unlike the geniuses who discover their own genius, the masses learn to identify genius in others when it is lacking in themselves. Their new 'duty' is to strive for greatness within the pedagogy—which is exactly what the geniuses do—but when they discover in themselves limitations that separate them from the geniuses, they also discover their new goal: to promote the development of true culture. According to Nietzsche, the masses, like the geniuses, must strive "to acquire power so as to aid the evolution of the *physis* and to be for a while a corrector of its follies and ineptitudes. At first only for yourself, to be sure; but through yourself for everyone" (SE, 142). Both the genius and the average individual are meant to assist in the improvement of the world (*physis*) through the elevation of culture. The genius provides this by developing new artistic, ethical, physical, and intellectual expressions; the average individual does this by "a struggle on behalf of Culture and hostility towards those influences, habits, laws, institutions in which he fails to recognize his goal: which is the production of the genius" (SE, 163).

How does Schopenhauer teach the masses this new circle of duties? He does so in the same manner as with the geniuses. "But even the greatest of men cannot live up to their ideal. That Schopenhauer can offer us a model is certain, all these scars and blemishes notwithstanding. One might say, indeed, that in his nature which was imperfect and all too human brings us closer to him in a human sense, for it lets us see him as a fellow sufferer and not only in the remote heights of a genius" (SE, 143). This is an extremely important aspect of Nietzsche's conception of the redemptive men, the geniuses who are to be models for both the few and the many.

The geniuses contribute to the uplift of true culture in two ways. The first way is that they produce great works of art, philosophy, and morality that are awe-inspiring and ennobling. Agreeing with Goethe, Nietzsche claims that "nature's experiments are of value only when the artist finally comes to comprehend its stammerings, goes out to meet it halfway, and gives expression to what all these experiments are really about… 'that the *causa finalis* of the activities of men and the world is dramatic poetry'" (SE, 160). Nietzsche extends Goethe's assertions about poetry to the rest of art, as well as philosophy and morality. Thus, what makes the geniuses great is their artistic, philosophic, or ethical genius, which produces what he calls in *On the Future of our Educational Institutions* "great and lasting works" (FEI, 66). Importantly, these works are not meant to be mere self-expressions of the genius created without regard for others. On the contrary, Nietzsche is explicit that the ultimate goal of the great and lasting works is the elevation of the few *and* the many. He claims that "the artist creates his work according to the will of nature *for the*

good of other men" (SE, 178; emphasis added). That Nietzsche means to include the masses in this statement is clearly seen a few lines above when he claims under current cultural conditions the great and lasting works "strike home only at the few, while they ought to strike home at everybody" (SE, 178).

But there is a second way in which the geniuses contribute to a flourishing culture, which does not depend on their singular genius. As we see in the quotation above, the importance of exemplars like Schopenhauer is not only that they produce great and lasting works, but that they provide *spiritual* (*geistig*) inspiration to *all* individuals who are seeking to become their highest selves. While second- and third-rate talents who are striving to be their highest selves are separated from the geniuses by a massive gulf with respect to their artistic, philosophical, or ethical abilities, and as such are their inferiors, they are their equals with respect to their shared struggle 'live up to their own ideal.' In other words, if third-rate talents, for example, attempt to overcome their "scars and blemishes" in an effort to achieve their highest self, they become, in an important sense, an equal to the genius insofar as they are fellow sufferers with him, trying to attain an ideal that is forever out of reach because it is "immeasurably high" (SE, 129) above their respective selves. It is true that the ideal to which they strive is different insofar as the genius' is a more lofty ideal on an absolute scale, but their desire to achieve their respective ideals, and their willingness to strive to overcome their personal shortcomings that prevent them from that idea, is the same. When figures like Schopenhauer provide such an inspiration to the second- and third-rate talents, culture is elevated as the second- and third-rate talents can then become similar inspirations to lesser talents. According to Nietzsche, when all people in a society are all seeking to elevate themselves by pursuing the production of the 'philosophers, artists, and saints,' the culture will necessarily achieve the highest level possible. When culture reaches this level even more redemptive men will be developed which will further inspire average individuals to pursue their highest selves, and thus a continual cycle of elevation exists where all are working "at first only for [themselves], to be sure; but through [themselves] for everyone" (SE, 142).

Democracy, Equality and the Maximization of Student Potential

Having established Nietzsche's cultural vision, we can now return to the question at hand: how can contemporary democracies reconcile the goals of equality with giving all individuals the opportunity to maximize their talents? Obviously, implementing the entirety of Nietzsche's vision will not work but nevertheless there are aspects of Nietzsche's model that are applicable to contemporary democracies. Nietzsche's philosophy illuminates how egalitarianism can backfire on both an individual and societal level. First, to totally eliminate indicators of achievement undercuts a

primary source of inspiration for individuals. Allowing inequality in achievement ought to be desirable for its capacity to inspire others to their own, separate greatness. As inspiration springs, the goal is not to best the person that inspired us but to simply improve our own selves, which is demonstrably beneficial for democracy.

Second, society itself also suffers because (1) intellectual, artistic, or moral achievements will be less common as individuals are less likely to strive for their highest selves, and (2) individuals will not see inequalities of talent and achievement as a personal and cultural benefit. In the case of (2), it is possible that individuals will feel envious or resentful because they have been made to believe they were as potentially talented as everyone else, when in truth they were not. In these cases, the identity of the individual will be founded on the false belief that they are equal in respect to talent and achievement rather than an accurate identity based on wanting to pursue one's highest self and encouraging others to improve their highest self.

The issue is whether it is possible that individuals can learn to be inspired by others who are more talented than they are. If the ability to be inspired by others who are superior seems natural, isn't it possible that something more could be achieved if individuals could be encouraged to appreciate and celebrate the fact that some people possess unique talents and achievements? If individuals learned to appreciate excellence in their peers, they might be inspired to improve themselves. If this were their aim, they would start to become, according to Nietzsche, equals in a vastly more important respect—they would all be seeking their highest selves, refusing to settle for their lower selves. If he is right we should seek ways of facilitating this reality in our classrooms as a means of personal and societal flourishing.

Conclusion

According to Nietzsche, every individual *must* be given the opportunity to affect cultural change, but each individual's particular role will be different. It is true that Nietzsche believes that the cultural role of the many is to make possible the existence and flourishing of the few. But this does not mean that the many are to be sacrificed on the altar of the few. On the contrary, talk of sacrifice makes no sense here. Nietzsche does not ask the many to live for the good of the few and to sacrifice their interests but to fulfill them. According to Nietzsche, when they live for the good of the few, they are living for their own good. The few inspire the many to pursue "those things that really promote human happiness and those that only appear to do so" (SE, 142). When the many seek to improve the few, they are simultaneously and irreducibly seeking to improve themselves. Nietzsche does not believe it is possible to separate the good of the many from the good of the few—they are both necessary for a culture to flourish and for each individual to be maximally happy.

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