
Individual Genius and Common Culture

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Church's book is a clear and bold interpretation of a difficult and often inscrutable text. While remaining attentive to subtle details, Church never loses sight of his central purpose: to find and defend the fundamental normative standard at work in the *Observations*. Readers thus have the pleasure of finding in Church a frank interlocutor who states his position up front and is unrelenting in its defense. Church argues that Nietzsche's fundamental standard of human excellence is self-determination; that this excellence is embodied in individual, exemplary geniuses; and that all humans are called to contribute to culture, the purpose of which is the production of self-determining geniuses. Any reader of Nietzsche's works can profit immensely by wrestling with Church's argument.

Church's chapter on "Schopenhauer as Educator" is of special importance for his interpretation. "Schopenhauer as Educator" is, according to Church, the first of the essays where Nietzsche lays out his positive argument (9). Unlike in the previous essays, Nietzsche is no longer simply attacking contemporary society for its lack of culture, but rather demonstrating why we should work to bring about culture. Church has argued in the previous chapters that Nietzsche demonstrates that one's humanity can be redeemed from meaningless animality only through self-determination. He now shows why Nietzsche thinks that each of us ought to work toward establishing and maintaining a culture that nurtures self-determining, exemplary individuals. "Schopenhauer as Educator" is where Nietzsche tells me how *my* humanity can be redeemed by the self-determination of exemplary geniuses who are not me.

Church rejects two alternative accounts of how Nietzsche views the relation between exemplary geniuses and everyone else. Some commentators argue that the genius produces myths that give us the closed horizons necessary for a life-giving culture. Church rejects this view on the ground that Nietzsche is not as pro-myth and anti-science in his early period as many suppose (55–56). Others argue that we are merely the stones out of which geniuses hammer and carve cultural creations for their own benefit. Church rejects this view on the ground that, since Nietzsche says all people can be self-determining agents, we cannot view them simply as passive material for the use of superior individuals. In this vein, Church rejects aristocratic readings of Nietzsche: Nietzsche is "meritocratic," for all lives can be

redeemed or fully human lives, and so the relation between exemplary geniuses and the rest of us ought to be mutually beneficial (136).

Church points out that section 1 of "Schopenhauer as Educator" begins with a surprisingly egalitarian argument. We are all unique miracles, and each of us has a conscience that cries "Be yourself!" Although laziness prevents us from doing so, we ought to reflect on our past to see what has "drawn [our] soul aloft," so that "perhaps" we will thereby find a "law," or ideal self, that we must strive to attain. But in sections 5 and 6, Nietzsche talks not about finding one's ideal self but about consecrating oneself to the establishment of culture. The injunction to become one's ideal self appears to be in some tension with this injunction to work towards a common culture. Church offers a few suggestions on how to square these two injunctions, of which the most important appears to be the following. Since modern German so-called culture inhibits the flourishing of geniuses, we must work to remove the obstacles that impede both our common culture and our individual self-determination. We are unlikely to see the fruits of our labor by realizing our own self-determined ideal, if only because the establishment of a true culture will take a long time. But we can nevertheless participate in the self-determination of future exemplars by contributing to the culture that will form them—before they go on to transform and overcome that culture, as Nietzsche insists they also must do. Since the determinative self of the genius is socially constructed, those who participate in fostering the culture of a genius are also, in some way, self-determining through that genius's self-determination (181).

I see two possible objections to this interpretation. Church sometimes asserts that living in a culture is necessary even for geniuses (170, 176–77, 183). But Nietzsche states that it is necessary only for most potential geniuses: some, like Kleist, were thwarted by "so-called German culture," but Goethe was not. So any reader who considers himself a potential genius (and Nietzsche does occasionally encourage his readers to think of themselves this way) must wonder why he should work toward a common culture when he might well be able to achieve autonomy even within the existing nonculture. The injunction to be oneself and the injunction to work for the establishment of culture remain incompatible—unless every person's inner law just happens to demand precisely what is necessary for the establishment of culture in his own time and place, including the necessary preparatory work that Nietzsche describes later in the essay. Second, even for readers who do not consider themselves potential geniuses, there remains the problem that "participating" in a future genius's autonomy by contributing to the establishment of genuine culture—a culture that, moreover, the future genius will in some way negate or overcome—is simply not the same as being autonomous oneself.

There is, however, an alternative way of harmonizing the different sections of "Schopenhauer as Educator." In section 5, Nietzsche says that the duty to work toward the establishment of culture follows, not from the general imperative to be self-determining, but from the specifically

“Schopenhauerean ideal.” Indeed, it appears that the struggle to establish culture requires precisely the traits modeled by “the man of Schopenhauer” as Nietzsche describes him: heroic self-sacrifice, care for humanity, and critical, destructive truth-telling. The other two modern types Nietzsche describes here (“the man of Rousseau” and “the man of Goethe”), with the ideals they embody, are apparently not as useful for the task at hand.

Nietzsche presents himself as one who shares the Schopenhauerean ideal. Encountering “Schopenhauer the man” was, for the younger Nietzsche, an instance of his own soul being drawn aloft. In this essay he is reflecting on the origins of his own duty to foster culture and suggesting that the same duty is incumbent upon anyone for whom Schopenhauer can be a true educator—that is, an educator who liberates, who assists students in finding their ideal self, who can “bring a lofty goal . . . near to us.” Nietzsche is calling forward Schopenhauerean types like himself. They are what Germany most needs because self-determination can redeem humanity, because self-determining individuals almost always need to live within a culture, and because many obstacles need to be removed before German culture can be reestablished. This reading thus leads to conclusions that overlap with Church’s to a large extent: for Schopenhauerean types, working toward the establishment of culture is indeed consistent with the goal of self-determination.

Nevertheless, these passages within “Schopenhauer as Educator” raise further difficulties for a “meritocratic” interpretation of the *Observations*. Church’s elision of the distinction between all and most geniuses is in keeping with his general tendency to downplay Nietzsche’s claims about human inequality. But Nietzsche clearly distinguishes independent “natures of iron” like Goethe from lesser natures like Kleist. He likewise distinguishes the uniqueness of every individual from the rarer ability to give meaning to that uniqueness by finding within oneself an “inner law” (136).

The difficulties with Church’s argument about the injunction to labor for the sake of culture also highlight a one-sidedness in the book’s overall argument. For although one of its most striking and helpful aspects is its recurrent emphasis on Nietzsche’s debt to Kant, Church ends up giving short shrift to the major divergences between the two thinkers. If Church is correct that Nietzsche transforms Kantian autonomy by replacing the moral law with the ideals exemplified by geniuses (18, 170), then Nietzsche cannot follow Kant in deriving specific duties—such as the duty to establish culture—from the principle of autonomy as such.

Finally, because Nietzschean moral norms must rest ultimately on ideals exemplified by various geniuses, and because all or most moral ideals imply metaphysical presuppositions that Nietzsche would describe as mythical, Nietzsche cannot be as anti-myth as Church claims. Church points out that in section 5 of the essay, Nietzsche adopts a “metaphysical dogmatism . . . redolent of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics,” which is incompatible with Nietzsche’s earlier commitments (172–73). Nietzsche is not making up literal new gods, but he does temporarily adopt certain unfounded metaphysical presuppositions in

a text designed to appeal to the “Schopenhauerean ideal.” If (as Church argues) Nietzsche regards nature as inherently meaningless, and if it is instead the self-determination of geniuses that gives life meaning, then we should not be surprised that Nietzsche’s own appeal to the ideal embodied by the genius Schopenhauer requires him to engage in this form of myth making.

Wagner as Nietzsche’s Exemplar: Freedom and Democracy

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I focus my discussion on some key claims from Church’s important analysis of “Richard Wagner in Bayreuth,” before raising some critical questions. While Church’s account of exemplarity in Nietzsche is valuable, I am less convinced by his account of Nietzsche as a democrat.

Church claims that for a Nietzschean exemplar such as Wagner, “human beings do not serve as tools . . . so much as participate in the freedom of his personality” (20). A Nietzschean exemplar displays a unity of character that is normatively valuable since unity of character expresses the exemplar’s “free self-determination” (203). Hence according to Church, even though Wagner was initially produced by an unhealthy modern culture, he became an exemplar because he forged his own unity of character to become free (203). As Nietzsche claims, “in the case of people of outstanding talent life must not only become, as is true for everyone, the reflection of their character, but also above all the reflection of their intellect and their own peculiar abilities” (RW, 262–63). Church discusses how Nietzsche’s analysis of Wagner becoming free is grounded in the unity of Wagner’s life and artwork: Wagner’s talent as a musical dramatist was expressed in and through his own life; his life, *as* drama, involved Wagner being torn between two drives. The first is tyranny, which Nietzsche describes as “a violent will . . . that desires power” (RW, 264), while the second drive is a creative, selfless love. Nietzsche thought that Wagner reconciled these two drives to achieve a unity of character by “tyrannizing himself,” developing control over his inner world through dramatic sublimation (204–5). Wagner’s sublimation of the tyrannical drive is reflected in the dramatic characters he created, which illustrates the strength of Wagner’s unity of character and his free self-determination (205).