

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).

Church contends that for Nietzsche, Wagner incorporated artistic forms into an “interdependent whole” that “mediates and conciliates” between seemingly “separate spheres” (220–21). The audience are “transported beyond ourselves” by Wagnerian musical drama, and engage in Schillerian “free play” within the Wagnerian artwork (221). The audience recognizes their human errors in the artwork, but those errors are redeemed through the artwork’s unity (218). Church claims that the Wagnerian artwork “expresses freedom as self-determination” for Nietzsche in that it is an “interdependent, self-sufficient whole”; the audience, playing freely within its expression of freedom, are freed from an understanding of themselves in fragmented terms, as mere products of an unhealthy modern society, and are freed to see themselves as sublime, meaningful, and whole (221). The Wagnerian artwork appears to the audience as a self-determined whole, in which the component parts relate to one another as if by necessary direction and purpose, rather than as created by Wagner himself (226–27).¹

This carries consequences for our understanding of democracy and freedom. Church claims that any reading of Nietzsche’s exemplars which treats them as manipulators of the masses for purely personal gain is inadequate (20). As a product of a free, self-determining exemplar, Wagnerian musical drama actively opens up space for free self-determination by other agents, and for Church this shows that Nietzsche’s “democratic sentiments run deep.” If audience members are not mere tools of an exemplar, and their agency is necessary to the exemplar and to his artwork, then audience members can be freely self-determining, rather than the “inanimate tools” of an exemplary master (219).

However, it is unclear how deep Nietzsche’s democratic sentiments really run in “Richard Wagner” or what Nietzsche’s supposed “democratic sentiments” really amount to here. Although the essay begins with attention to the people—Nietzsche remarks that a great event requires “the great sensibility of those who experience” it as well as “the great sensibility of those who create it” (RW, 259)—Nietzsche is critical of democracy, and of the corruption of culture by democracy. Church himself recognizes Nietzsche’s objection to the kind of democratic sentiment common in Germany in the later nineteenth century in his discussion of the philistine movement in “David Strauss the Confessor and the Writer” (35). There, Nietzsche claims that philistines object to the aristocratic nature of intellect legislating the standard for creative excellence in terms of the best; the philistine hates the person of genius because the genius is “rightly reputed to be able to perform miracles,” whereas the philistine cannot (DS, 43). Church notes the connection between this claim in the *Observations* and Nietzsche’s criticisms of democracy in *Beyond Good and Evil*.²

¹Cf. Aaron Ridley, “Nietzsche on Art and Freedom,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (2007): 204–24.

²BGE §202 complains about resistance to exceptional claims, rights, and privileges and objects to “herd animal morality” and its expression in democratic structures,

Moreover, Church's claim that human beings "participate in the freedom of [the exemplar's] personality" does not sufficiently support his claim for Nietzsche's democratic sentiments. In Church's initial description, the exemplar is the focus of agency, while human beings remain largely undifferentiated from one another (20). Later, Church clarifies that the exemplar "embod[ies] freedom as self-determination" and "legislat[es] a table of values for a people, thereby redeeming humanity" (236). Church contends that Nietzsche defined the exemplar as a legislator in "Schopenhauer as Educator."³ Yet these claims do not resolve the issue entirely. Since not everyone can develop legislative capacity through art making, as not all have the requisite "peculiar abilities" or "outstanding talent," it is still not fully clear how human beings who are not exemplars might develop legislative capacity (RW, 262–63). Even at the end of "Richard Wagner," which addresses itself to a vision of the future supposedly opened up by Wagnerian art, Wagner the exemplar remains the "interpreter and transfigurer of the past" of a "common people" (RW, 330–31).

I suggest that Nietzsche expresses human-developmental, not democratic, sentiments. Discussing why Wagner is "no utopian" about the future, Nietzsche asserts that since there are changeable and transitory qualities of humanity, "suprahuman goodness and justice" will not "stretch like an immobile rainbow over the fields of this future" (RW, 327). If the soul of the future generation were to speak it would "shake up and terrify" our soul; sounds from the future world include that "being honest, even where evil is concerned, is better than losing oneself in traditional morality; that the free human being can be both good and evil, but that the unfree human being is a disgrace to nature," and that such sounds are part of the "language of a nature restored even in its human aspect" (RW, 327–28). Treating human development as aligned to developing freedom from customary morality can be supported by attending to how the *Observations* prepare the way for Nietzsche's free spirit writings, and in particular, for his extensive campaign against customary morality in *Dawn*.⁴ That Church opens up a connection between the *Observations* and the free-spirit writings is laudable, but he could be clearer that Nietzsche treats humanity as a species that is capable

including what Nietzsche calls the "democratic movement" understood as "Christianity's heir" (cf. BGE §44). Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Marion Faber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

³Church notes that in an 1883 letter to Peter Gast, Nietzsche indicated that SE constituted a "commentary" to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and originates the concept of the *Übermensch* (149, 236). Nietzsche attributed legislative capability to exemplars of character type in BGE §211.

⁴Cf. Rebecca Bamford, "The Ethos of Inquiry: Nietzsche on Experience, Naturalism, and Experimentalism," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 47, no. 1 (2016): 9–29.

of development, not only humans as individuals—and that Nietzsche treats drive cultivation at social and species levels, not only at the individual level.⁵

Relatedly, Church treats the sovereign individual in *Genealogy of Morals* II.2 (236–37) as the “best illustration of freedom as self-determination in the exemplar” (237). This is not surprising given his strongly Kantian account of exemplarity (17–20). Yet this does not fit with Church’s reading of section 11 of “Richard Wagner,” where he acknowledges that for Nietzsche, (i) freedom is the key virtue of the exemplar, and (ii) freedom connects to the “transcendence of morality” that we find in Nietzsche’s later critique of morality as well as in his middle writings (229). As Lawrence Hatab shows, the sovereign individual’s characteristic of autonomy is the legacy of moralization, not freedom from moralization, and as Christa Davis Acampora points out, Nietzsche anticipates ongoing development for humanity and for individual human selves that reaches beyond the sovereign individual of *GM* II.2.⁶ Church’s reading of “Richard Wagner” would be more internally consistent if he treated Nietzschean exemplars as less Kantian and more focused on human type development. This would also fit with Nietzsche’s thinking on the natural in the *Observations*. For Church, Nietzsche’s exemplary individuals merely serve to liberate humanity from nature (20). Yet Nietzsche claims that “only what is natural, not what is unnatural, can ever experience true satisfactions or deliverance” and that “what is natural desires to be transformed through love” (RW, 328), placing exemplarity within the scope of the natural, and foreshadowing his thinking on translating humanity back into nature in *Dawn* and *Beyond Good and Evil*.

The Politics of the Exemplar

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Nietzsche’s project, it has often been said, is a *critical* one: he offers a profound critique of society, but no positive vision of what should come in its stead.

⁵See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Dawn: Thoughts on the Presumptions of Morality*, trans. Brittain Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), §560. Cf. Rebecca Bamford, “Health and Self-Cultivation in *Dawn*,” in *Nietzsche’s Free Spirit Philosophy*, ed. Rebecca Bamford (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2015), 85–109.

⁶Lawrence Hatab, *A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy: An Experiment in Postmodern Politics* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995). Christa Davis Acampora, “On Sovereignty and Overhumanity: Why It Matters How We Read Nietzsche’s *Genealogy* II:2,” in *Critical Essays on the Classics: Nietzsche’s “On the Genealogy of Morals,”* ed. Christa Davis Acampora (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 147–62.