



LOCATING NIETZSCHE’S GREAT INDIVIDUALS: BETWEEN A PHILOSOPHICAL BESTIARY AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

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ABSTRACT: Nietzsche’s prominent Christian interlocutors have not treated him as merely one more thinker along the way but rather as the most serious alternative to their own projects whereby he is presented as the rugged individualist for whom only the great individuals matter. This article argues that the individualist reading is in fact a misreading of Nietzsche, and it describes how Nietzsche scholars have recently redefined the role of Nietzsche’s great individuals in the context of culture and community. Ironically, having successfully recast Nietzsche as a deeply collective and therefore religious thinker, the same scholarship has put distance between Nietzsche and the New Testament at precisely the point where they would seem to converge most clearly. Working with individualistic and abstracted notions of “sin” and “salvation” and unaware when Nietzsche borrows metaphors for the collective life directly from the New Testament, the current scholarship has missed how Nietzsche reinscribes prominent features of the Christian narrative with regard to the notion of human nature.

KEYWORDS: Great individuals; New Testament; Nietzsche; Christianity; Culture

Introduction

Prominent Christian philosophers and theologians who have worked to incorporate elements of Nietzsche’s thinking into their own projects have not only discovered a new lexicon for understanding and articulating some aspect of their respective accounts of Christian faith, but they have allowed him to play for them the perfect foil, comprising one half of an either/or in a fateful choice presented to their readers.

Undoubtedly, Nietzsche – who lamented the modern world in which “even the most personal is sublimated back into an abstraction” and who extolled the Greeks for whom “the greatest abstraction kept running back into a person” (1873b, ch. 3, pp. 41-42) – would have appreciated how leaders in Christian thought keep running into him. For example, the radical orthodox John Milbank’s excavation of secular thought eventually leads readers to an ontological decision which must be taken between an ontology of peace on the one hand or of violent Nietzschean nihilism on the other (1990, xiv-xvi and pp. 278-376). Catholic philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, under the chapter heading “Nietzsche or Aristotle?” presents Nietzsche as the alternative to an Aristotelian virtue ethic, arguing that the perceived “teleological character” of ethics is now, thanks to Nietzsche, revealed to be “the ghost of conceptions of human nature” (2007, p. 111). And it is along this same fault line of what it means to be human that Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor thinks Nietzsche presents a “challenge on the deepest level” to his own ethical project, by calling into question our “continuing allegiance to standards of justice and benevolence”; therein, “the ethic of benevolence may indeed be indefensible” (1989, pp. 516-517). In each of these cases, Nietzsche is not treated as merely one more thinker along the way but rather as the most serious alternative to their own projects.

Moreover, Nietzsche’s Christian interlocutors have assumed the version of Nietzsche whereby he is presented as the rugged individualist for whom only the great individuals matter; thus, standing menacingly at the heart of the Nietzschean challenge to each of their projects is Nietzsche’s great individual. For instance, Protestant theologian Karl Barth contends that all ethical thinking that calls itself Christian must be founded upon a humanity defined in relation to fellow human beings, and he urges readers “to rule out the possibility of a humanity without the fellow man” (1985, p. 353). But notably, such a dangerous possibility appears in Barth’s writing not in abstract hypothetical terms, but in Nietzsche. “The new thing in Nietzsche,” Barth explains, “was the fact that the development of humanity without the fellow-man ... reached in him a much more advanced ... stage” (1985, p. 370).

Casting Nietzsche in a similar light, MacIntyre contends that “Nietzsche replaces the fictions of the Enlightenment individualism, of which he is so contemptuous, with a set of individualistic fictions of his own” (2007, p. 129). He goes on to condemn “the *Übermensch*” as an “absurd and dangerous fantasy” that “belong[s] to the pages of a philosophical bestiary rather than serious discussion” (2007, p. 22). Nietzsche’s great individual, he asserts, is a “fiction,” a “pseudo-concept” and a “frivolous solution” that cuts the individual off from “shared activity” of the community (2007, p. 258).

It is a similar understanding with which Taylor concludes that Nietzsche’s great individuals lead us to “quite a different ethic, one in which beneficence is no longer figured among the things [to which] my dignity calls me” (2007, p. 250). Because as Christian ethicist Michael Banner suggests, for Nietzsche, “there is no such thing as the common good; on the contrary, the good of society is just the sum of the good of individuals” (2009, p. 13). It is unsurprising then, when Milbank contends that warfare is the only universal ascribed by Nietzsche to human society which ultimately serves “the emergence of an *übermensch* or a post-humanist human creature” – to be found perhaps, in the illuminated text of MacIntyre’s suggested bestiary (1990, pp. 281-282).

Nevertheless, I am going to argue that the aforementioned Christian theologians and philosophers have misread Nietzsche, who, I will attempt to show, actually follows the contours of the New Testament narrative far more closely than has generally been appreciated.¹

Thus, far from regarding the great individual as a “pseudo concept” or a “frivolous solution” as MacIntyre puts it, we should in fact be able to recognise that Nietzsche’s thinking about the great individuals closely resembles, in significant ways, *Christian* thinking about “sin” and “salvation” found in the pages of the New Testament.

My claim falls into three parts: first, I shall bring to the surface the tension that exists between the scholarship on the one hand – which presents Nietzsche as the rugged individualist – and the actual experience of reading Nietzsche on the other – whereby readers encounter his urgent and persistent concern for culture. Second, once we have a sense of how pervasive Nietzsche’s vision is for a collective life marked by trust and collaboration, I shall consider the work of Nietzsche scholar Andrew Huddleston as an example of the growing body of Nietzsche scholarship which has convincingly reconfigured the relationship of Nietzsche’s great individuals to the community. Finally, in light of this reappraisal of Nietzsche’s great individuals, I shall point to the striking similarities between the structure of Nietzsche’s thought regarding his great individuals and the New Testament conception of sin and salvation, similarities which have so far gone unnoticed.²

¹ Or perhaps they have simply assumed the individualist (mis)reading with little reference to the source material. For instance, it would be understating the case to say that both Barth’s and MacIntyre’s assessments of Nietzsche’s great individuals rely on highly selective and idiosyncratic readings of Nietzsche’s work. For example, recognising the polemical role which Barth assigns to Nietzsche, David Booth (1992, p. 294) points out that not only does Barth draw primarily from *Ecce Homo*, but he is narrowly focused upon the opening and closing italicised lines of the book. Nietzsche begins *Ecce Homo* with the words “Hear me! For I am such and such a person. Above all, do not mistake me for someone else” (1888, Preface 1, p. 217) and ends with “Am I understood? – *Dionysus against the Crucified*” (“Why I Am A Destiny” 9, p. 335). These phrases are partly reflective of the autobiographical nature of the work, but Barth uses them to characterise Nietzsche’s great individuals as the antithesis of the Christian conception of humanity. The problem with such emblematic readings – it will become clear below – is that they often turn out to be misleading caricatures. MacIntyre’s presentation of Nietzsche’s great individuals is even more restrictive than Barth’s. Daniel Conway summarises helpfully, “when MacIntyre presents his interpretation and criticism of the *Übermensch* (MacIntyre 2007, pp. 257–258) he relies entirely on a single note from *The Will to Power*. Since Nietzsche plays such a central role in *After Virtue*, one wonders why MacIntyre does not rely extensively on such important published works as *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, *Twilight of the Idols*, and *The Antichrist*” (1986, p. 223, fn. 7).

² In his intriguing work *Nietzsche und das Neue Testament*, New Testament scholar Hans Hübner provides the most deliberate and sustained attempt – of which I am aware – to expose the Christian structure of Nietzsche’s thought. As he explains, “Nietzsche nie wirklich von der Gottesfrage loskam” (2000, Vorwort VIII). And again, “aber dass Nietzsche nicht von Gott losgekommen ist” (2000, p. 221). Moreover, Hübner suggests that Nietzsche’s hostility toward Christianity sometimes masks a secret affinity, however deeply buried that might be: “der Philosoph von der *Grundstruktur christlichen Denkens* mehr mitbekommen hat, als ihm selbst klar war” (2000, p. 16). Also, “sich der an seinem Atheismus Leidende in seiner Denkstruktur näher beim theologischen Denken aufhielt, als er sich selbst erlaubt hatte” (2000, p. 269). And so Hübner asks the corollary question “Sind in seinem Atheismus Motive, Denkstrukturen und ein fundamentales Selbstverständnis verborgen, die es uns sogar ermöglichen, den

Nietzsche's Cultural Commentary

I begin here with an appeal to Nietzsche's readers who have become aware of the contradiction between the characterisation of Nietzsche as the rugged individualist and what appears to be his perennial concern for culture. For example, against the "cultural origins" theory – the dominant view in Nietzsche's day which assumed that the spirit of German culture gave rise to German nationhood – Nietzsche finds German culture so vacuous that he questions whether such a thing as German culture exists at all from which something like German nationhood could ever emerge.³

In his *Untimely Meditations*, for instance, Nietzsche refers to "so-called German culture" (1874b, p. 138), "the absence of a German culture" (1874c, p. 164), and the truth, "that the Germans have up to now possessed no culture" (1874d, p. 117). Moving between his early and later works, we find that Nietzsche continues to heap abuse upon his fellow Germans where in *Twilight of the Idols*, to choose an example almost at random, he states, "It is already known everywhere in what matters most – and that always remains culture – the Germans are no longer worthy of consideration" (1889a, "What the Germans Lack" §4, p. 509).

In light of this sort of polemical assessment of the collective life of the Germans, Nietzsche's readers would not be wrong to assume that he has an alternative, superior

eigenen christlichen Glauben besser zu verstehen und ihn glaubwürdiger in glaubensarmer Zeit zu vertreten?" (2000, Vorwort VIII-IX). Bringing to light those features of Nietzsche's philosophy which have their Christian complement in the New Testament, Hübner includes, among other things, the hermeneutical nature of Nietzsche's project (2000, pp. 17–22); Nietzsche's eschatological modes of thought (2000, pp. 19, 209, 216–217), and his conception of and response to nihilism (2000, pp. 263–268). Hübner's unique contribution to this way of understanding Nietzsche's relationship to Christianity leaves plenty of scope for expanding this approach. For instance, I have argued elsewhere that a closer look at Nietzsche's form and style (Cheung, 2024a), the significance of the last man, Nietzsche's understanding of the human relationship to the earth (Cheung, 2024b), and, as we shall see presently, how he conceives of the relationship between nobility and the collective – will serve to excavate the deep structure of Nietzsche's thought, revealing a shared philosophical grammar with the New Testament.

³ It is worth noting the contrarian nature of Nietzsche's view in the context of the "cultural origins" theory which was later codified by Friedrich Meinecke (1908). Under the pervasive influence of Meinecke, most attempts to understand the emergence of German national consciousness continued to make a sharp distinction between the development of other nationalisms and the uniqueness of German nationalism. Unlike other nationalisms which were politically self-determined, Germany's nationalism was allegedly culturally pre-determined following a sort of teleological path which was demanded by the common language, thought and culture of a people, shaped "through the quiet workings of the national spirit" (p. 66). Thus, in Germany's case, political unification did not precede the national consciousness and the state did not precede the nation. Remarkably, it was only toward the end of the twentieth century that this view was met with any serious challenge in the work of historian Robert Berdahl (1972). Berdahl argued for a decidedly less romantic view wherein "nationality was ... determined by the dictates of utility, by nationalists and politicians for whom nationalism was a functional concept" (p. 71). One wonders what sort of historical work might have been done had historians of German nationalism been reading Nietzsche and had followed his withering valuation of German culture. I imagine the "cultural origins" thesis would have been called into question long before Berdahl's relatively late attempt to do so in an essay which perhaps now seems ironically titled "New Thoughts on German Nationalism."

culture in mind. For placed alongside Nietzsche's scathing assessment of German culture is his fairly consistent admiration for French culture, which in his view, was in fact the source of anything that might even pass for culture in Germany.

Take for instance Nietzsche's engagement with David Strauss's wildly popular book *The Old Faith and the New* – published in 1872 – in which Strauss confirmed enthusiastic public opinion that Germany's military victory over France was also in fact a German *cultural* victory. Nietzsche, however, stood outside this society of mutual admiration so that the same circumstances were experienced and conceptualised by him as a *cultural crisis*. Responding to Strauss as an emblem of all that was wrong with the popular German point of view, Nietzsche says, "there can be no question, in our case, of the victory of German culture; and for the simple reason, that French culture continues to exist as heretofore, and we are dependent upon it as heretofore" (1873a, §1, p. 3).⁴ And once again, readers can follow the arc of this sentiment from Nietzsche's early publications all the way to his final works of 1888 where there is no discernible change in his cultural assessments. For example, in *Ecce Homo*, confirming his earlier prejudices, he says: "I believe only in French culture and consider everything else in Europe today that calls itself 'culture' a misunderstanding – not to speak of German culture" (1888, "Why I Am So Clever," §3, p. 243).

The relational and collaborative character of Nietzsche's cultural concerns and the seriousness with which he held them can be discerned in a telling association he makes between his admiration for French culture and his desire to recapture the hallowed moments when he was a guest in the Wagners' home in Tribschen. In order to return to those sacred "days of trust, of cheerfulness, of sublime accidents, of *profound* moments," he says, "I return once more to France" because "as an artist one has no

⁴ And again, "one cannot overcome enemies, least of all those who, like the French, actually possess a real and productive culture... and from whom we have hitherto copied everything, though usually with little skill". (1874a, section 1, p. 6). Nietzsche, in *Human, All Too Human*, points out that not only do educated German and European readers lack any psychological insight of their own, but as products of their culture, they are rendered incapable of reading "the great masters of the psychological maxim" such as the French aphorist François de La Rochefoucauld (1878 and 1879-1880a, §35, p. 31) and "other French masters of psychical examination ... skillful marksmen who again and again hit the bullseye" (§36, p. 32). We know from Isabelle von der Pahlen's own recollections of her first meeting with Nietzsche that he was reading La Rochefoucauld's *Maxims* on the night train from Geneva to Genoa, one leg of his journey to Sorrento where Nietzsche would also begin work on *Human, All Too Human*, in which he not only mentions French aphorists by name but his own aphoristic style is itself a tribute to these writers – wherever imitation is the highest form of flattery (D'Iorio, 2016, pp. 12-14). In the "The Wanderer and His Shadow," in *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche says that in Montaigne, La Rochefoucauld, La Bruyère, Fontenelle, Vauvenargues, and Chamfort: "We are closer to antiquity than in the case of any other group of six authors of any other nation. Through these six *the spirit of the final* centuries of the *old* era has risen again – together they constitute an important link to the great, still continuing chain of the renaissance ... If they had written in Greek, the Greeks would have understood them ... What clarity and precision those French men possess" (1878 and 1879-1880a, §214, pp. 362-363). And these conduits of ancient culture and of the renaissance have both *arisen in* and *produced* a particular culture. Recognising an aesthetic unity that makes a culture a culture, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche says, "European noblesse – of feeling, of taste, of manners, taking the word, in short, in every higher sense – is the work and invention of France; European vulgarity, the plebeianism of modern ideas, that of England" (1886, §253, p. 192). And again, "Even now France is still the seat of the most spiritual and sophisticated culture in Europe and the foremost school of taste" (1886, §254, p. 192).

other home in Europe, except Paris" (1888, "Why I Am So Clever," §5, pp. 247-248). The shared cultural project with Wagner may have terminated in what for Nietzsche was the terrible disappointment of the Bayreuth festival, but this did not prevent Nietzsche yearning for relationships marked by trust and collaboration with the potential to constitute a culture. For it is a public and collaborative spirit in service of the collective good that Nietzsche wants to recover from the individualism engendered by what he takes to be the "Christian" notion of the salvation of the individual soul. If we put our hope in "the beyond" and "'immortality' granted to every Peter and Paul" (1895b, §43, p. 168), then Nietzsche wonders (it should be noted, in his final year of productive life):

Why be public-spirited? Why take any pride in descent and forefathers? Why labour together, trust one another, or concern one's self about the common welfare, and try to serve it?... Merely so many "temptations," so many strayings from the "straight path." ... The "salvation of the soul" – in plain English: "the world revolves around *me*." (1895a, §43, pp. 122-123).

Nietzsche mocks such conceit – which manages to wrap the providence of God tightly around the individual – and he concludes in the *Anti-Christ* §52 that this form of individualism, expressed in what he considers to be "absurd" theological terms, is not so much an objection to God, as it is, once more, "an objection to the Germans" (1895b, p. 182).⁵

This brief perusal of Nietzsche's cultural commentary, a characteristic feature of his early writings and unambiguously carried forward into his final works, is sufficient to call into question Nietzsche's great individuals as they are reflexively rendered or unreflectively adopted by the Christian theologians and philosophers under discussion. Nietzsche's concerns for the collective life of a people – expressed frequently and often vehemently – are difficult to reconcile with the Nietzsche who according to Barth is promoting "humanity without the fellow man" or who according to Milbank considers warfare to be society's only universal. What does it matter what Nietzsche has to say about German and French culture if collective life is in the final analysis of no great account? On this reading, Nietzsche's cultural critique simply does not have any teeth.

Nevertheless, it is precisely this tension that the current Nietzsche scholarship has helped to resolve by relocating Nietzsche's great individuals in the context of culture

⁵ In *The Anti-Christ* §52, Nietzsche's target appears at first to be theological. Nietzsche begins by mocking the God who is "so absurd a God he would have to be abolished even if he existed. A God as a domestic servant, as a postman, as an almanac-maker – at bottom a word for the stupidest kind of accidental occurrence" (1895b, §52, p. 182). But having dispensed with such an absurd character with comical effect, Nietzsche does not imagine himself to have dispensed with divine providence – still at work conceptually deep within the Western psyche; rather, it turns out, Nietzsche's real target is once more German culture. Nietzsche continues: "'Divine providence', as it is still believed in today by almost every third person in 'cultured Germany', would be a stronger objection to God than any other that could possibly be thought of. And in any case it is an objection to the Germans!" (1895b, §52, p. 182).

and community. In his seminal 2006 work, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion*, Julian Young developed the novel picture of Nietzsche's *communally situated* great individuals. Responding to Young's innovation, leading Nietzsche scholars have since been expanding and refining this reading strategy by reconsidering the individualist strain of Nietzsche's thought in light of Nietzsche's collective concerns – which have been otherwise obscured or ignored by the standard interpretation. In the remainder of this section, to illustrate the scholarly project underway, I shall pay attention to three features of Nietzsche's texts that might be considered emblematic of an individualist reading and yet are being carefully reevaluated.

Firstly, it must be noted that Nietzsche's writings often describe the collective in negative terms. For instance, while Kathleen Higgins wants to disclose Nietzsche's communal thinking, she has to begin with the acknowledgment that the collective in Nietzsche's writing often has the bearing of "an anonymous, even inanimate force" which opposes and punishes individuality (2014, p. 78). In Walter Kaufmann's words, "society is censured [by Nietzsche] insofar as it insists on conformity and impedes" the "development" of the individual (1950, p. 314). In the 1950s, Kaufmann inaugurated a new era in Nietzsche scholarship, not only winning Nietzsche a new audience in the Anglosphere after the Second World War, but through his translations and commentary, he also determined how Nietzsche would be read by an English-speaking audience, establishing, among other things, Nietzsche's negative views of the collective for the next few decades. Along these lines, Leslie Thiele has argued that "it is the herd animal, whose expedience and cunning far surpasses that of any noble spirit, that is likely to flourish and be the bane of great men" (1990, p. 20, fn 6). Concerning the "herd animal," Higgins is well aware that Nietzsche speaks derisively about the "herd" as "an aggregate of weak individuals" (2014, p. 79) (expedience and cunning notwithstanding) who huddle together to be organised by the ascetic priest (1886, §44, §202; 1887, I:9, I:13; 1895b, §3), to say nothing of Nietzsche's distaste for the even more unsavoury and defective "rabble" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 1883-1885, II:6 "The Rabble"). Nevertheless, Higgins cautions against the hasty conclusion that therefore, "human groups are inherently at odds with the kind of individuals he [Nietzsche] admires" (2014, p. 80). And, in what I take to be an elaboration on Young's earlier suggestion – that when Nietzsche speaks of the "Volk" (*the people*), it never carries the negative connotations of the "herd" and the "rabble" (2006, pp. 4-6, 111-114) – Higgins supplies several positive descriptions of an albeit sometimes idealised community, drawn not only from Nietzsche's early works but also from his mature and later writing (2014, pp. 80-87).

Similarly, it should not be denied that Nietzsche frequently derides selflessness as a vice (1887, II:18; 1886, "We Scholars" §207 and §210) and elevates egoism as a virtue which "belongs to the essence of the noble soul" (1886, "What is Noble" §265). In this light, the only "philanthropy" Nietzsche condones is that of "eliminating the weak" – as Bernard Reginster maintains (Reginster, 2006, p. 262). However, following Young, who notices Nietzsche's distinction in the *Gay Science* between the first and second rank free spirits (2006, 94-98), Christine Swanton draws out a similar distinction made by Nietzsche in *Human, All Too Human*, between the mature and immature egoist (2014, p. 179). Whereas the immature egoist serves only themselves and possesses an

“immature, undeveloped, crude” understanding of their advantage, the mature – what Nietzsche terms as “the collective-individual” (1878 and 1879-1880a, I:94, p. 50) – is able to integrate working “for our fellow men” (1878 and 1879-1880a, I:95, p. 51) while at the same time discovering “our own highest advantage” (1878 and 1879-1880a, I:95, p. 51).

Parallel to the question of Nietzsche’s egoism is the question of the instrumental value that a great individual or community might possess. Kaufmann states that “the overman does not have instrumental value for the maintenance of society: he is valuable in himself because he embodies the state of being that has the only ultimate value there is” (1950, p. 313). Thus, devoid of egalitarian sentiment, Brian Leiter concludes that for Nietzsche “what matters are *great* human beings, not the ‘herd’” (2015, p. 232). Nonetheless, in pursuit of his own project, Young reverses the equation, making the individual valuable only for his instrumentality to the community (2006, p. 135).

Adjudicating between these two positions, Maudemarie Clark and Monique Wonderly question whether this subordination of the individual to the service of the community is not in fact an overcorrection on Young’s part. It may be true, as Young points out, that Nietzsche assigns communal responsibilities to the great individual, whose burden it is to innovate on behalf of the community to prevent a people’s calcification and enable them to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances. In this respect, the great individual is responsible for establishing a register of values that will orient a community to the world (2006, 94-98). Nevertheless, Clark and Wonderly counter this with potentially challenging passages for Young, such as *Beyond Good and Evil* §258, where the higher types consider themselves to be the “*meaning and highest justification*” of the community (1886, p. 202), and *Untimely Meditations* III:5 where communal life is construed by Nietzsche as an extension of senseless animality – which most of us rarely transcend – but from which the great individuals have emerged and acquired their status because they have “raised his eyes above the horizon of the animal” (1874b, p. 157). Taking these passages to indicate the intrinsic value of the great individual, Clark and Wonderly assume a mediating position arguing that we can only appreciate the *total* value assigned by Nietzsche to both parties through their integration with each other, so that the exceptional individuals constitute “*both ends in themselves and means to the redemption of the community*” (2014, p. 126). (Italics theirs)

Clearly, Nietzsche’s contempt for the “herd” and the “rabble,” his elevation of egoism over selflessness, and the intrinsic value of the exceptional individuals, are some of the prominent features of Nietzsche’s philosophy which inform an individualist reading. Nevertheless, without skirting these particulars, we can also acknowledge that there is ample textual evidence – continuing into Nietzsche’s mature and later works – that he has an interest in the collective life that is not easily reduced to the singular interest of the individual. Rather than assuming that this is one of Nietzsche’s “celebrated contradictions” (2006, p. 94), but distinguishing instead between the Volk and the herd, discriminating between mature and immature egoism, and recognising both the intrinsic and the instrumental value of the exceptional

individuals, Young and those responding to him are reconciling what may have appeared at first to be Nietzsche's irreconcilable and competing interests.

I would contend that without reconfiguring the relationship between the individual and community in the manner that we have been observing above, Nietzsche's great individuals – oddly isolated from human culture – become pale figures unable to fulfil the role of “man who justifies *man*” and become drained of their world-historic significance (1887, I:12, p. 44). I would also contend that this reappraisal has not only furnished us with a more accurate understanding of Nietzsche's thinking concerning the relationship between the collective and the great individuals but in so doing it also exposes what I take to be the *Christian* scaffold around which his thinking is constructed.

Deliver Us...From Cultural Decadence

Among those working to redefine the way in which Nietzsche's great individuals relate to the broader community, Andrew Huddleston has emerged as a prominent voice, successfully recasting Nietzsche as a deeply collective thinker.⁶ This section will outline a few salient features of Huddleston's argument from which I shall then be able to draw fairly straight lines between Nietzsche's thinking about the great individuals and the way in which the New Testament conceptualises “sin” and “salvation.”

In *Nietzsche on the Decadence and Flourishing of Culture*, Huddleston argues that the excellence of great individuals in Nietzsche's understanding is not only for themselves (as if only they mattered although they may well view themselves this way), nor is it only for their instrumental value in advancing a culture (even though there may be any number of benefits that filter down) (2019, p. 40). Instead, Huddleston identifies the role of the great individual in Nietzsche's soteriological scheme as the saviour from the mediocrity of humanity; therefore, he argues that the great individual's excellence lies in his “redemptive function for humanity more generally” (2019, p. 41) and again “redemption of the human species is up to them” (2019, p. 122). For example, Nietzsche requests in *On the Genealogy of Morals*:

Grant me the sight, but *one* glance ... of a man who justifies *man*, of a complimentary and redeeming lucky hit on the part of man for the sake of which one may still *believe in man*! ... The sight of man now makes us weary – what is nihilism today if it is not *that*? – We are weary of *man*. (1887, I:12, p. 44)

Reflecting on this section Huddleston contends:

Nietzsche is not concerned narrowly with the personal interests of the great individuals and their ilk. He is also concerned with the good of

⁶ See, for example, Huddleston (2019) and Young (2006).

humankind as a whole. He simply disagrees with his more socialistic opponents about what this good for humankind consists in, and how it is to be secured (2019, p. 42).

So that, when Nietzsche says that the great individual becomes the goal of humanity, he does not simply mean that humanity's sole end is to produce these great individuals, but the great individuals can become humanity's goal in the sense that the broader mass of humanity can be shaped around them and their respective projects. Thus, culture is not "simply an instrumental precondition to promote the rise of *independent* great individuals" (italics Huddleston) (2019, p. 53). Rather, Huddleston argues that Nietzsche believes human lives "have their highest worth and dignity when they are consecrated to culture" (2019, p. 105). Huddleston clarifies: this does not mean each individual is being called to "*tender their own good* on the altar of culture. It is rather that *in devoting their lives to the collective project of culture, they truly come to live the best life for them*" (italics Huddleston) (2019, p. 105). And culture in Nietzsche's understanding is not about *individuals* consuming "the best that has been thought and said, to be digested in mouldy tomes" (2019, p. 46), nor is it simply about "conventionally artistic expressions of a people" that need to be stylistically unified⁷ – but it is to do with "*all the life expressions of a people [allen Lebensäusserungen eines Volkes]* UM I: 1" (2019, p. 47) encompassing "the whole way of life, and its characteristic attitudes, practices, modes of comportment, and so on" (2019, p. 48). And so, Huddleston reminds his readers, that for Nietzsche, our lives together have the potential to be "a massive piece of collectively embodied art" (2019, p. 48).

Curiously, it is here, where, to me at least, it seems that Nietzschean and Christian salvation narratives converge most clearly, that Huddleston puts distance between them and draws the following dividing lines:

First, he contends that contrary to the Christian view that sees human dignity as innate and possessed in equal measure by each individual and the Enlightenment equation of human dignity with individual freedom and autonomy, Nietzsche believes instead that any serious conception of human dignity requires that we recognise *inequality* amongst people for at least two reasons: first, because dignity is something that must be earned and will inevitably be earned in different measures (Huddleston explains that in Nietzsche's view, "Dignity is something we can gain or lose based on how we lead our lives" (2019, p. 110)); and second, because that dignity can only be earned by becoming attached to a great individual and their project (Huddleston quotes Nietzsche, "Only he who has attached his heart to some great man receives thereby the *first consecration* to culture" (1874b, section 6, p. 163).

Second, Huddleston points out that while sometimes Nietzsche indulges in fantasies of wiping out the decaying races, it is also true that at other times Nietzsche wants to repurpose the lower types through the subjugation of their wills to the will of the

⁷ Nietzsche's concern is not purely aesthetic but also ethical. For example, Huddleston notes that Nietzsche's aesthetic critique of Wagner's operas is "closely intertwined with broadly ethical ideas about the health and vitality of the body, whose constitution Nietzsche sees Wagner's music as threatening" when it gives way to Schopenhauerian asceticism (2019, p. 47).

higher types. So that “a person must work to promote a flourishing culture, especially of the sort carried forward by a few great individuals who serve as exemplars to everyone else” (2019, p. 118). Also, the “last man’s” desire for comfort and ease is not good for him or humanity; and while he does not know what is good for him, the ignorant decadent must be met with the characteristic hardness of the great individual (2019, p. 41). Thus, Huddleston thinks that, against Christian and Enlightenment instincts, Nietzsche believes that human dignity is necessarily connected to what he describes as “slavery in some sense or other” (2019, p. 107).

Third, Huddleston puts distance between Nietzsche and the Christian narrative by pointing out that Nietzsche envisages that “such a great individual is a ‘saviour’ of sorts, yet a saviour not from sin, but from the pervasiveness of human decadence and mediocrity” (2019, p. 41).

There is a double irony here: Christian thinkers reading Nietzsche as the individualist have missed how Nietzsche actually provides greater definition to their own interpretations of the New Testament, not antipodally but rather as someone who bears a striking family resemblance. But seemingly unaware when Nietzsche borrows metaphors for the collective life directly from the New Testament, Huddleston misses how Nietzsche is in fact reinscribing prominent features of the Christian narrative so that just as he begins to describe Nietzsche in recognisably New Testament terms, Huddleston puts distance between Nietzsche and the concepts of sin and salvation in the New Testament (2019, p. 41).

Nobility, Slavery, and the Justification of Humanity

To repeat, Huddleston argues that for Nietzsche the “great individual is a ‘saviour’ of sorts, yet a saviour not from sin, but from the pervasiveness of human decadence and mediocrity” (2019, p. 41). But in order to counterpose these ideas, Huddleston has to work with an oddly abstracted notion of sin which perhaps envisages sin as an object that attaches itself to people or just as arbitrarily, as the breaking of a set of rules. But many Judeo-Christian traditions – Ignatian, Augustinian, Thomistic, Barthian – interpret the notion of sin in more explicit terms where sin is understood as the failure to reflect the image of God.⁸

Conversely, the Apostle Paul’s assertion in his epistle to the Colossians that “Christ is the image of the invisible God, the first-born over all creation” (Colossians 1:15) is not, as it is often assumed to be, a comment on Christ’s deity, but on his humanity – because, drawing on his Jewish theological framework, Paul understood that to be

⁸ Huddleston offers a helpful discussion addressing the notion of human equality arising out of the Judeo-Christian proposition that human beings are bearers of God’s image (see, for example, 2019, pp. 106-107). However, he does not connect this to the notion – also found in the New Testament – that people have in fact failed to reflect God’s image and therefore failed at the task of being human. Disconnected from a discussion of this sort which connects image-bearing to human nature, sin remains an abstract notion; additionally, egalitarianism is conceived in such a way as to automatically bracket out the significant differences between people. However, this view is not easily attributable to Paul, for instance, whose writings, as I shall argue below, offer several significant lines of dissent.

human is to reflect the image of God. However, Paul is not simply saying that Jesus is human just like us; he is making a more radical claim. He is announcing Jesus as the first fully fledged human being and that from here on out he will define what it means to be human, and the invitation to follow Jesus is the invitation to have the image of God restored to us or, to be clear, to have our *humanity* restored to us. Thus, for Paul, being human or bearing God's image is not merely an ontologically static claim but something that also lies in potential that needs to be fulfilled.

What does all of this mean regarding human dignity? First of all, Paul assumes that everyone is operating at a subhuman level; no one has a fully realised humanity. And secondly, by the logic of Paul's argument, if our humanity is being restored to us by wrapping our humanity around Christ and participating in his humanity shaping project, then it stands to reason that some people are in fact more human than others. This may sound offensive to liberal humanist ears, and yet "dehumanization" and "inhumanity" are terms regularly used to describe, for instance, an atrocity, in which we assess the perpetrators as not only having treated others as, but having themselves become – something less than human.

It appears then, that Paul thinks our humanity and thus human dignity comes from wrapping our lives around a great individual. In Paul's view, it is Jesus who is – in Nietzschean terms – "the man who justifies *man*." Moreover, human dignity is in one sense not possessed in equal measure by everyone because we are all on different stages on a journey to becoming more, or as the case may be, less human. Applying terms to Paul that Huddleston applies to Nietzsche, we might say once again that "dignity is something we can gain or lose based on how we lead our lives."

Furthermore, the collective nature of this humanity shaping project is made clear when Paul, for instance, talks about our collective lives together having an aesthetic unity as if we were all members of the same body with Christ as the head (1 Corinthians 12:27 and Colossians 1:18). Nietzsche then, is reflecting (because he is riffing on) the New Testament vision for human culture that proposes that our lives, when considered collectively, have the potential to possess an aesthetic unity oriented around a great individual. For instance, Huddleston points to Nietzsche's belief that "man has value and meaning only insofar as he is a 'stone' in a great edifice" (Nietzsche, 1882b, §356, p. 303). Huddleston refers to this as among "Nietzsche's pregnant architectural images" (2019, p. 123), but surely this is not *Nietzsche's* pregnant architectural imagery but is in fact the architectural imagery of the New Testament where both the Apostles Peter and Paul appeal to the aesthetics of the recently refurbished massive Temple complex in Jerusalem – describing the new humanity shaped around Jesus as stones being built into a great temple with Christ as the chief cornerstone (2 Peter 1:21, Ephesians 2:21). Read this way, the Judeo-Christian narrative at one level actually affirms Nietzsche's belief that *human* dignity – and in fact our *humanity* – is connected to "slavery in some sense or other" (Nietzsche, 1886, §257, p. 201). And in this vein, Paul declares that "we are slaves of Christ" (Romans 6:20-22, Ephesians 6:6).

Both Nietzsche and the New Testament, then, connect nobility and slavery – "in some sense or other" (Nietzsche, 1886, §257, p. 201) – with the task of shaping and justifying humanity around a great individual. And in both cases, to be rescued from

“sin” is to be rescued, collectively, from “human mediocrity” or subhuman forms of life. Of course, Nietzsche and the New Testament authors are working with divergent views of what counts as mediocrity so that what Nietzsche wants to save humanity “from” is what Christianity promises to save people “to”. In other words, Nietzsche’s definition of mediocrity or subhuman are the ascetic values being offered by Christianity.⁹

Finally, all of this provides the crucial context in which to understand the New Testament claim that “Jesus is Lord” or as Nietzsche puts it in *Human, All Too Human* §475, Jesus is “the noblest human” (1878 and 1879-1880a). Most translations of Nietzsche’s work correctly translate “Edelsten” as “noblest.”¹⁰ However, in her 1909 translation of *Human, All Too Human*, Helen Zimmern either ignores or is unaware of the central role that the concept of nobility as a *social class* plays in Nietzsche’s work as a whole and the manner in which he was evoking a certain *class* or *type* in the context of the immediate discussion in that section (1878 and 1879-1880b). But taking “noble” instead to refer to an *admirable personal quality*, Zimmern projects the personal quality she admires most onto Jesus and translates “Edelsten” as “loving,” rendering it “the most loving of men (Christ).” This is an interesting moment in Nietzsche’s reception where Zimmern’s translation illustrates (albeit unintentionally) Nietzsche’s point that an increasingly large swathe of humanity has in fact been shaped around Christ’s nobility, and how the long shadow of this Christian God would stretch out, as Nietzsche predicted, across his own reception history in which he has all too often either been demonised because he is being judged by Christian values or sanitised because he is being made to fit within a Christian register of values; values often presenting under the guise of a liberal humanist academy.

But appearing as it does in the context of Nietzsche’s reflection upon the suffering and social standing of the Jewish people in Europe and the potential Jewish contribution to the creation of a new sort of European, Nietzsche uses “Edelsten” in *Human, All Too Human* §475 (1878 and 1879-1880a) not to talk about an admirable personal quality but Christ’s standing as nobility. And the distinguishing mark of Christ’s nobility is his capacity to wrap humanity around himself and make good on the promise “I will draw all people unto me” (John 12:32).

This becomes all the more clear when we read Nietzsche’s claim that Christ is the “noblest human” in *Human, All Too Human* §475 (1878 and 1879-1880a), alongside Nietzsche’s hope for what he calls the “heir of all nobility,” “the first of a future nobility,” and the “noblest of nobility” which he describes in the *Gay Science* §337 (1882b). Here, in Nietzsche’s psychological accounts of the greatest nobility, not only is the “rugged individual” of Barth, Taylor, et al., conspicuously missing, but in both

⁹ In this regard, Hübner makes the important point that elucidating the theological structures of Nietzsche’s thought, “Es geht nicht um die Verharmlosung der ungeheuren antichristlichen Dynamik seiner Philosophie” (2000, p. 22). This also goes for my own attempts to engage with the theological in Nietzsche: I am not interested in sanitising Nietzsche (as has so often been done), turning him into a sort of secularised Christian saint. The structural similarities are there, but so is the different register of values that undergirds his project.

¹⁰ See, for example, the translations by Marion Faber (1984), R. J. Hollingdale (1996), and Gary Handwerk (2012).

passages, Nietzsche connects a history of human suffering to the emergence of nobility and nobility to the constitution of our collective lives and the emergence of a "*European man*" or a "*Future Humanity*" (1878 and 1879-1880a, p. 174, and 1882a, p. 264, respectively).

In the *Gay Science* §337, Nietzsche's great individual is not oddly and coldly abstracted from culture and thus devoid of world-historic significance, but rather he must be able to bear an "immense sum of grief of all kinds" (1882a, §337, p. 264) and "take all this upon his soul, the oldest, the newest, the losses, hopes, conquests, and victories of mankind" (1882a, §337, p. 265). Nietzsche's great individuals – properly construed – actually rule out "the possibility of humanity without the fellow man," precisely because it is incumbent upon them to cultivate within themselves a greater consciousness of the entire human experience. Hence, for Nietzsche, an individual only emerges "(as the noblest) of all the old nobles" (1882a, §337, p. 265) once he has "the horizon of centuries before and behind him" (1882a, §337, p. 264). Thus, having gathered up the collective past within himself and taking responsibility for the future shape of humanity, Nietzsche contends that the happiness and dignity of the great individual is contingent upon – and perhaps only fully realised – when he is able to give to others of his own "inexhaustible riches" whereby his own abundant life spills over to benefit and enrich even the poorest fisherman – as Nietzsche emblematically puts it in the following passage:

Future "Humanity." – ... He who knows how to regard the history of man in its entirety as *his own history*, feels in the immense generalisation all the grief of the invalid who thinks of health, of the old man who thinks of the dream of his youth, of the lover who is robbed of his beloved, of the martyr whose ideal is destroyed, of the hero on the evening of the indecisive battle which has brought him wounds and the loss of a friend. But to bear this immense sum of grief of all kinds, to be able to bear it, and yet still be the hero who at the commencement of a second day of battle greets the dawn and his happiness, as one who has an horizon of centuries before and behind him, as the heir of all nobility, of all past intellect, and the obligatory heir (as the noblest) of all the old nobles; while at the same time the first of a new nobility, the equal of which has never been seen nor even dreamt of: to take all this upon his soul, the oldest, the newest, the losses, hopes, conquests, and victories of mankind: to have all this at last in one soul, and to comprise it in one feeling: – this would necessarily furnish a happiness which man has not hitherto known, – a God's happiness, full of power and love, full of tears and laughter, a happiness which, like the sun in the evening, continually gives of its inexhaustible riches and empties into the sea, – and like the sun, too, feels itself richest when even the poorest fisherman rows with golden oars! This divine feeling might then be called – humanity! (1882a, §337, pp. 264-265).

Conclusion

Having taken for granted the individualist reading of Nietzsche, his Christian interlocutors have presented him as the final alternative to their own projects. Nevertheless, by reflecting on the actual experience of reading Nietzsche, I have attempted to draw attention to the growing unease experienced by any reader who would attempt to reconcile the portrayal of Nietzsche as the rugged individualist on the one hand, with Nietzsche the consummate cultural critic on the other. In other words, if Nietzsche is merely interested in producing the great individuals who exist only for their own sake, what are we to make of the depth of Nietzsche's concern for culture which as late as 1888 he continues to insist "always remains" what "matters most"? (1889b, "Germans" 4).

In light of the persistent, not to mention elevated, place that Nietzsche himself ascribes to his own collective and cultural concerns, I have argued that the individualist reading is in fact a misreading of Nietzsche and I have employed Huddleston's work as an example of how Nietzsche scholars have successfully relocated and redefined the role of Nietzsche's great individuals in the context of culture and community. However, because he is working with individualised notions of sin and salvation, Huddleston's attempts to distinguish Nietzschean and Christian thought from each other only serve to expose the structural similarities between them, wherein the interdependent relationship between nobility and slavery are intertwined with the justification and future shape of humanity.

I suggest that instead of perceiving the great individuals as opening up a vast chasm between Nietzsche and themselves, theologians and Christian philosophers attempting to outflank secular modes of thought would do well to recognise the telling configuration between the great individual and culture in Nietzsche's thinking. For it is here that Nietzsche, already outflanked by the Christian narrative, could only reinscribe – on another register – familiar modes of Christian thinking into his own philosophy.

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