

The Teaching of Elitism: Reasoning and Emotional Seduction in Nietzsche

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Introduction

Nietzsche states that 'The Great human being (*der grosse Mensch*) is still invisible' (D., 548), and that there hardly exists a person who is even close to the nobility of the overman.¹ It is quite reasonable to assume, therefore, that most of Nietzsche's readers are of the mediocre type in Nietzsche's terminology. Among those who have read Nietzsche's Zarathustra, very few would admit to being mediocre, and most will, in fact, end up with a strong feeling of nobility. The greater number of readers, however, will not discard their humanistic-universal beliefs, while paradoxically holding onto their admiration of the overman.

Added to this paradox is another: while Nietzsche's texts are capable of arousing feelings of elitism, they are unable to offer a formal defence of an elitist position because Nietzsche denies the traditional meaning of truth altogether, and cannot, therefore, present one perspective as objectively superior to another.

These two stated paradoxes are not unrelated: the fact that most mediocre readers end up emotionally favouring elitism, serves Nietzsche well in seducing the reader into his elitist perspective, as will be shown below. In this article I will argue that Nietzsche's well reasoned anthropological dichotomy (between the mediocre man and the noble man), together with his method of emotionally attaching the reader to the elitist side of the dichotomy, are his way of rendering appealing that which seems to be beyond the domain of reasoning in Nietzsche's own terms. This method may have some interesting applications towards the use (and abuse) of philosophy in practice.

1. Rationality and the problem of adopting Nietzsche's standpoint regarding humanity

Nietzsche's discrimination between masters and slaves, between the last man and the overman, between the great free spirit and the mediocre, are among his most celebrated ideas. The noble man is so unique, self-sufficient and full of power and life. The mediocre, however, is common, dependent on others, a result of contingent powers that determine him, and lacks the power and the vitality needed to create oneself.

A closer look at Nietzsche's philosophy of elitism leaves little doubt about the ethical standpoint of the noble towards the human race as a whole: the 18th century ideals of universality and humanism² are replaced by what Nietzsche calls 'order of rank'. Nietzsche is by no means ambivalent in his shattering of the anthropological

category from within³ and reversing Kant's categorical imperative that implores us to treat every human being as an end and not instrumentally. Respectable relations existing among human beings are confined to the ranks of the great; the masses are significant only in as much as they are poor copies of the great,⁴ and as instruments to be used by the great to their own self-creation: 'Countless individuals sacrificed for the sake of a few, to make them possible' (WP, 679). The attitude of the noble towards the rest of humanity is a mix of indifference and cruelty.⁵ The entire human race is condemned time and again by Nietzsche, while the very few always justify the use and abuse of the masses: 'Not 'Mankind' but *overman* is the goal!' (WP, 1001).⁶

When we consider only the meaningful life of the noble and his greatness, as against the emptiness and pathetic life of the mediocre man, it is easy to understand the inclination of readers to admire the former and to despise the latter. As we have seen, however, this is only a part of the whole picture. As Nietzsche consciously pushes his reader to the corner, the latter feels obliged either to embrace the nobility that Nietzsche offers, and to reject the universal, humanistic and enlightened values that he or she espouses in every other context, or, to maintain a humanistic point of view and reject the elitist philosophy altogether. Although the rational reader would have long ago rejected such an ethics on a rational basis, in Nietzsche's case he feels an obligation towards the overman, which appears to him to be justified. Why? Is it only because of the overman's charm? A close investigation shows that deeper reasons underlie this inconsistency: this phenomena could be better understood by examining two major roles played by the concept of plenitude in Nietzsche's writings, as we shall soon see. First, however, it is necessary to describe a second, related tension.

2. Nietzsche's problem of substantiating his elitist standpoint

Nietzsche lacks a direct way of defending his own perspective, since he believes that there are no facts, only interpretations.⁷ While Nietzsche can rationally justify his aesthetic, metaphysical and anthropological dichotomies (e.g., by analysing genealogical and historical processes), he cannot rationally justify his favouring a particular side. An analysis of the grounds for Nietzsche's

3 See WP 898; 866. By anthropological category I imply the category of man *vis-à-vis* other creatures. Nietzsche does not deny such difference between man and nature, but indicates that it contains more than one type within. For Nietzsche, the noble and the common man cannot be considered as members of one and the same category.

4 KSA, I: 319-320.

5 WP, 768.

6 See also: WP 132.

7 WP, 481.

1 Z., p. 117 (KSA, IV: 119).

2 WP, 132.

attacks against particular religions,⁸ people,⁹ and traditions,¹⁰ may shed light on his criteria of evaluation of perspectives,¹¹ including vitality, power, plenitude, fruitfulness, and innovation. This does not mean that Nietzsche can tolerate any other perspective. Quite the contrary: when Nietzsche argues in favour of his noble man, he never accepts a perspective that grants priority to the common man. However, as long as Nietzsche rejects the traditional concept of truth, he cannot but lure us into adopting his perspective. Nietzsche can rationally justify his anthropological dichotomy; he can also state his preference for the one side of this dichotomy. What he cannot do, however, is to rationally justify his perspective in a way which presents any contradictory preference to his as *false*.¹² How does Nietzsche gain the admiration of his overman without being able to rationally justify it? The key for the present question lies within the double role of 'plenitude' within Nietzsche's thought, already alluded to above.

3. The double role of plenitude within Nietzsche's thought

Undoubtedly, one of the major concepts in Nietzsche's philosophy is that of plenitude (*Fülle*). Plenitude is a feeling, an emotion that escorts the creator,¹³ but it is also the metaphysical state of the creator in Nietzsche's terms.¹⁴ The notion of plenitude plays a dual role in Nietzsche's writings: (1) as a concept that rationally supports his dichotomies of reality and (2) as an emotion he transfers from his heroes to his readers.

As for the first role, plenitude is a major concept in Nietzsche's philosophy. It serves as the basic reasoning for three dichotomies in three different domains: a) the aesthetics of self-creating; b) immanent metaphysics; c) elitist anthropology. The aesthetics of plenitude is the way of creating oneself out of that which accumulated within the creator—that which has become well ordered, meaningful, containing an inner necessity, as a result of an internal process. It also includes the overflowing of this plenitude into the world itself, which is indeterminate, chaotic, meaningless and contingent.¹⁵ The aesthetics of plenitude is presented as against the romantic aesthetics of longing for what is absent.¹⁶ The metaphysical significance of plenitude is an extreme

immanent approach to the world, where the world gains its meaning from that which is present within it, and not from a utopian or transcendent explanation of what is absent.¹⁷ Finally, plenitude is also the criterion of the anthropological dichotomy between people of rare quality, and the common quantity of the mass.¹⁸ The concept of plenitude (of power, spirit, physical state, inspiration, nobility, etc.) has therefore a key role in all three domains: a) the aesthetic reasoning of creating oneself; b) the metaphysical reasoning of an immanent world, and c) the anthropological reasoning of liquidating the category of man.

It seems that the difficulties in rejecting the elitist teaching of Nietzsche emerge from a tacit connection Nietzsche makes between the two roles of plenitude. Plenitude in Nietzsche's thought is not just a key concept, but a desired emotional result. At least some of Nietzsche's texts, *Zarathustra* in particular, are intended to arouse an emotion of plenitude within the reader. This is by no means an accidental result of Nietzsche's writings; it serves Nietzsche in influencing his readers to accept his perspective not only emotionally, but also intellectually.

The genealogical reasoning of Nietzsche's clearest distinctions – between masters and slaves, overman and last man, nobility and mediocrity, etc.-impresses the reader. His identification with the overman, though, is not purely argumentative: the plenitude of Zarathustra is quite overwhelming and conveyed through the texts.¹⁹ The mountain air, which the higher man breathes slowly, becomes the reader's atmosphere.²⁰ Without the reader's noticing, Zarathustra's point is pervasively conveyed by way of experience, almost a physical feeling. The extensive use of fables ('The adder's bite',²¹ 'The child with the mirror',²² 'The blissful islands'²³), metaphors ('Afterworldsmen',²⁴ 'Tree on the mountainside'²⁵), physical illustration ('Despisers of the body',²⁶ 'The pale criminal',²⁷ 'The convalescent',²⁸ 'The great longing',²⁹ 'The cry of distress'³⁰), and metamorphoses,³¹ stands out prominently in *Zarathustra*. Before the reader ever rationally considers the broad consequences of accepting such an elitist theory, the emotion of plenitude is already securely planted within him or her by romantic descriptions of the height of life,³² the thin air of the mountains,³³ the short route between mountain peaks, and the binding of life and laughter with the climber's feeling of plenitude.³⁴

8 WP, 30.

9 As the three dangers Schopenhauer was facing KSA, I: 350-363.

10 WP, 298; KSA, V: 221.

11 Many of Nietzsche's scholars have denoted various techniques used by Nietzsche in order to continually remind the reader that what Nietzsche himself says is only one possible perspective among many (see: Nehamas, 1985; Seigfried, 1975; Stack, 1981). The present problem, however, is not how Nietzsche argues for P and reminds the reader that P is only a perspective, but rather how to reason the argument P while maintaining a perspectival theory of truth.

12 Nietzsche therefore exposes himself to a criticism similar to Nagel's critique of the subjectivist, namely, either the subjectivist ask us to accept his words objectively, or else he is arguing nothing at all (Nagel, 1997). Nagel's assertion is not directed against Nietzsche, but is a more general assertion. As for Nietzsche's case, however, Babich had already replied to such criticism before Nagel published this book (Babich, 1994, i.e. 53-56).

13 E.g.: 'Satttheit und Fülle' (KSA, III: 539); 'aus seiner eignen Fülle' (KSA, VI: 116).

14 KSA I: 42, III: 636-637, VI: 116-117.

15 KSA, III: 621; WP 1009;

16 WP, 845, 1021; KSA III: 621;

17 KSA, III: 636-637, VI: 116-117.

18 WP, 1009.

19 KSA, III: 331; IV: 100-101;

20 KSA, IV: 48.

21 Z., p. 93 (KSA, IV: 87).

22 Z., p. 107 (KSA, IV: 103).

23 Z., p. 109 (KSA, IV: 105).

24 Z., p. 58 (KSA, IV: 35).

25 Z., p. 69 (KSA, IV: 51).

26 Z., p. 61 (KSA, IV: 39).

27 Z., p. 65 (KSA, IV: 45).

28 Z., p. 232 (KSA, IV: 270).

29 Z., p. 238 (KSA, IV: 278).

30 Z., p. 254 (KSA, IV: 295).

31 Z., p. 54 (KSA, IV: 29).

32 Z., p. 125 (KSA, IV: 130).

33 Z., p. 67 (KSA, IV: 48).

34 Z., p. 67-68 (KSA, IV: 48-49).

4. Plenitude as emotional reasoning

If the reader ultimately acknowledges the ethical implications of Nietzsche's elitist philosophy, they will face two options, either to relinquish their elitism or to relinquish some of their most profound ethical beliefs.

In the first case, the reader relinquishes elitism altogether, while retaining their universal, humanistic ethics. Having done this, Nietzsche's well-reasoned dichotomy could make the miserable reader place themselves in the worthless, condemned and empty category of the mediocre man. They can of course reject Nietzsche's dichotomy altogether, in order to avoid seeing themselves within the gloomy losing category. But in such a case, they would still have to somehow interpret their own feeling of plenitude: will the reader condemn their feeling of overflow as a perverted feeling that must be overcome? Rejecting Nietzsche's elitism, the reader either sees themselves on the defamed side of the dichotomy, or sees their own feeling as an ethical perversion.

The reader, however, is offered yet another approach to elitism: to embrace elitism, reconsidering and altering some of their most profound attitudes towards humanity. In this latter case the reader is able to interpret their emotion of plenitude as if they are themselves noble. The overflowing planted in them by the text encourages them to believe that they are about to create themselves. By arousing in his readers an emotion of plenitude, Nietzsche tempts them into interpreting themselves in accordance with his philosophical framework, which consists of the three interrelated components of vital and immanent metaphysics, elitist anthropology and the aesthetics of plenitude. Although rationally, this latter choice should lead the reader to re-evaluate his profound ethical perspectives, in many cases he does not, repressing the inevitable clash between universal humanism and elitism.

Given Nietzsche's failure to offer sufficient reasons for his esoteric anthropology, and given the hardly acceptable ethical consequences of this philosophy, the efficacy of the result is quite amazing. By planting the feeling of overflowing, Nietzsche creates a tacit agreement with his reader, giving him a secret key with which he can secure himself safely with the 'good guys' in the story. The reader, in return, supports not only Nietzsche's dichotomy of people, but also upholds the superiority of the noble people as defined by Nietzsche. In this way Nietzsche often succeeds in tempting modern, rational and bourgeois readers into willingly accepting a whole package of new beliefs fundamentally contrary to their former beliefs. They are tempted to place themselves within the elitist camp, and thus to accept an elitist position which otherwise would have been outrageous for them. Nietzsche does so not through rational or practical reasoning - a strategy he cannot use within his perspectival standpoint that rejects the notion of objective truth. Rather, he offers a Trojan horse, namely, the aesthetic component of his philosophy, which is by now deeply rooted in the reader's mind, and which at the same time is also the basic notion of Nietzsche's unique perspective.

5. Results and Applications

In summary, the following elements enable Nietzsche to convince the reader to favour his perspective:

- One.** The concept 'plenitude' is well-planted in Nietzsche's elitist perspective.
- Two.** Plenitude is also a feeling that is deftly conveyed from the hero of the book to the reader.
- Three.** 'Plenitude' offers some benefit to whoever adopts Nietzsche's elitist perspective.
- Four.** The reader who feels plenitude is therefore lured into interpreting his feeling of 'plenitude' as identified with the concept 'plenitude' within Nietzsche's elitist perspective.
- Five.** The reader is therefore tempted to accept Nietzsche's elitist perspective.

The point made here with regards to Nietzsche's elitist philosophy can be seen as a paradigmatic one. The combination of a double-faced elitist item, that is, an emotion conveyed through a teaching or a text, and as a concept within the content of the same teaching or text, may constitute a kind of seduction where formal reasoning is not relevant. Though such techniques cannot be formalised, we can try and make the point made by Nietzsche again, this time in a more general way, so that we could recognise it and apply it in other contexts:

- One.** A concept 'C' is well-planted in a perspective 'P'.
- Two.** C is also a feeling that is conveyed from the hero of the book to the reader.
- Three.** 'C' offers some benefit to whoever adopts perspective 'P'.
- Four.** The reader who feels C is therefore tempted to interpret the feeling C as identified with the concept 'C' within perspective 'P'.
- Five.** The reader is therefore tempted to accept perspective 'P'.

Having this general structure at hand, various applications can be demonstrated within two broader realms: one is the teaching of elitist theory in general. The other concerns conveying a theory that has both a non-argumentative pole together with a system of arguments, in fields as diverse as religion, art, literature, education, life experience, etc. It is now time for a practical illustration.

6. A Case Study

Joan, who comes to ask for the counsellor's aid, has just celebrated her 40th anniversary. Arriving to her age with no thrilling accomplishments, she now believes there is no reason to expect any more excitement in life. Her request from the counsellor is quite simple: to help her find a way to adjust to her routine life. Yet after their first appointment the counsellor has a strong intuition that Joan's real problem is that she feels she has lost faith in her ability to make any significant change in her life. Moreover, she suspects Joan has also lost the spark needed to start such processes of change. Joan has therefore convinced herself that the best thing to do would be to adjust to a static form of life.

Having so concluded, the counsellor is looking for a way

to motivate Joan to look for the energy to change things in her life, and at the same time help her find a way to believe in her ability to do so. The counsellor tries to discuss with her cases of people her age who managed to make some changes in their lives. However, the fact that she feels so remote from such people makes these discussions irrelevant for her. In one case, she has expressed some real emotional identification with the case's subject, but that discussion, too, reached a dead-end, and this time she even stated that she did not see why such an effort was worthwhile in the first place.

The counsellor concludes that what is needed here is both a conceptual framework within which a change in life gains its importance, and an emotional spark that would light the passion to change again.

The counsellor recommends to Joan that she reads Jose Saramago's 'The History of the Siege of Lisbon.' This story is about a fifty year old bachelor proof-reader who decides one day to put the word 'no' where the original text states a 'yes', in the most critical sentence concerning the history of Lisbon. What starts as an unconscious urge to express himself (after years of self-discipline and of serving others) soon becomes a critical point of change in his monotonous life. The book's editor decides to nominate a woman to supervise him, so that he will not make any more of these 'mistakes'. That woman, fascinated by his courage, asks the proof-reader to rewrite and reconstruct the history of Lisbon consistently with the 'No' he has put. From that moment on, in the autumn of his life, the bachelor finds not only a new and fascinating obsession to cope with, but finally also his true love - his new supervisor.

The counsellor chooses this book over all others, since it has just the double characteristics needed. The proof-reader faces two possibilities: remaining a 'yea-sayer' and pedantically doing his duty for the rest of his boring life, or putting a dramatic 'no' and thereby changing both his nation's history and his own biography. On a conceptual level, Saramago says that the latter is the preferred choice, which carries with it the benefit of a fascinating life. On the emotional level, the reader senses a feeling of revival and renewal from every single description of the hero's revitalised life, renewing thought, youth and passion. In short, from the moment the 'no' was posited, each page of the book is overflowing with freshness and novelty.

It is the combination of these two aspects that does the work: the attitude one adopts towards making a change in one's life is positive and thereby urges the reader to interpret his emotion in the conceptual context of the book. Joan not only feels this spark, she is also tempted to interpret it as if she can now change so much in her life with so little effort. To put it in our present context:

- One. The concept of making a change as a desired action is well-planted in Saramago's perspective.
- Two. The positive attitude towards making a change is also a feeling that is conveyed from the hero of the book to the reader.
- Three. Making a change offers some benefit to whoever adopts Saramago's perspective.
- Four. The reader who feels the positive attitude towards making a change in life is therefore tempted to

interpret this feeling as identified with the concept of making a change within Saramago's perspective.

- Five. The reader is therefore tempted to accept Saramago's conceptual positive perspective towards making a change in one's life.

The counsellor's next step is discussing with Joan that feeling, her attitude to the hero's life, and, finally, what all that has to do with her conception of her own future.

7. The Use and Abuse of Emotional Reasoning

Having generalised and illustrated Nietzsche's technique, one wonders whether such a teaching as Nietzsche's elitism contains something beyond a kind of emotional manipulation. How can we distinguish a qualitative teaching using a unique method from the mere abuse of emotional reaction that is so common in religion, educational systems, political organisations, etc.?

The present technique, like any other, can be used to convey all kinds of systems and teachings, and the content one chooses to convey, as with any other framework, is a matter of one's ethical judgement. Nietzsche employs precisely the technique which religions and other doctrines have been using for thousands of years, and which are still in use today, that is, emotions are enlarged and re-interpreted within the conceptual framework at hand. Does then not Nietzsche commit the exact perversion that he was fighting against? Is he so different from the Christian priest manipulating his herd?

Here one needs to consider very carefully the context in which Nietzsche develops his emotional seduction. Like in other cases in *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche uses some well-known Christian techniques in order to reverse them altogether. Many parts of *Zarathustra* are constructed as if they were another Gospel or an authentic part of the New Testament, but with precisely contradictory meaning. The priests are manipulating their believers in order to lock their minds within the doctrines they advocate. Nietzsche, by contrast, uses his technique in order to liberate his reader from any doctrine. The feeling of plenitude makes the reader independent. The essence of nobility regards taking nothing for granted, becoming oneself a legislator of values. In Nietzsche's case, paradoxically, the very few who rise to this challenge will no longer be adherents of Nietzsche.

In Nietzsche's case, then, the emotional manipulation of the mediocre could no doubt be viewed as abusive. After all, Nietzsche states clearly that the mediocre man is meant to be used by others. If, however, the duck appears to be a swan who has discovered his beauty through Nietzsche's book, the technique has been properly applied. In order to send his pupils to their own original way, Nietzsche has to manipulate them to an extent, as described above. And this way is worthwhile for any teacher of elitism. After all, this is what teaching elitism is all about: teaching the subtle the very few. In fact, only in the case of those few would we say that the technique was well used. In all other 'successful' cases, were people are becoming blind followers of a system/teacher, we would conclude that the technique was abused.

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