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## COLLOQUIA

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### **Can we educate a genius? Deliberations on the margins of the writings of Nietzsche**

#### **Summary**

The article deals with the issue of systemic education. The author asks a classic question of whether traditional education systems should concentrate on students with average abilities or maybe they should foster the most talented ones. Considerations on this subject are conducted with regard to the multi-layered thought of Nietzsche, whose position is so invaluable that in a possible polemic it is situated as an exceptionally radical. Writing down the natural history of mankind, Nietzsche formulates a thesis that the moment of the creation of the first human communities, the moment of the socialisation of man, was extremely unfavourable as far as man's strength, ability and creativity are concerned. He presents socialisation, which is part of the education process, as beneficial for the community and detrimental to the individual. This situation in the course of history remains the same, which – after the adoption of Nietzschean assumptions – gives cause to adopt a radical position of those who deem the education system unfit to foster outstanding individuals. Nietzsche's view, in comparison with other views, is so innovative that it considers the inability as *genealogically* founded. Although the educational system from the point of view of *the majority* contributes to the emergence of new content, ideas or values, it remains inefficient for individuals of genius.

**Key words:** a genius, education, Nietzsche, socialisation.

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The question of whether the system of education should primarily focus on the most skilled, brightest individuals or raise the level of the average ones appears regularly in the philosophical and pedagogical deliberations. Should we try to raise the level of those who are able to open an unknown perspective

for us, or rather concentrate on raising the general level of knowledge? These questions have already been widely discussed. Their derivative – which will be the subject of my analysis – is a problem which can be summed up in a simple question: can we educate a person to be a genius? If we decide to take care of the most talented (more than to take care of the average ones), do such efforts deliver us the expected results? And what are they? In this article I will try to present one of possible answers – the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche.

The question which this great philosopher focuses on concerns the possibility of renewal of culture in the situation of its gradual fall. A genius, an individual that becomes greater than his environment, appears as the one who can bring that renewal about. He plays the role of a revolutionary, secular redeemer, who is able to push culture to new tracks, take it out of stagnation. Why it is a good starting point for our deliberations?

Educational systems usually realise their programs, taking into account the average skills of pupils – trying to satisfy the demands of *everyone*. We can even say that this “everyone” is subject to those systems. Meanwhile, the genius of Nietzsche is characterised as an individual, the one who places himself above the crowd, the one who is said to be the inverted figure of *everyone*. The paradox that arises on the basis of these assumptions, is based on the contradiction of the definition of education as education through the acquired knowledge and the definition of genius as a creator of new values. The question is: can the knowledge – that comes from the past, given in a tradition of some kind – become useful for someone who tries to reach for new values, come up to the future? Is the educational system which tries to develop skills and abilities shared by everyone able to create conditions for the development of those who will be *different* in the systems?

Let us start our considerations on the mentioned subject from the portrait of an over-average individual who emerges from the writings of Nietzsche.

### **Nietzschean genius**

An image taken from the writings of Nietzsche, which will serve to determine the status of genius in the system of education is not unequivocal, not obvious. The content of his image appears in a number of notions which serve as a name of Nietzschean over-average individual, and which – to some degree – are not synonymous. He calls him a genius, but also as a higher man, a free spirit,

a philosopher of the future, or a super-man. The question is: what do all these names have in common?

One feature is quite obvious: it is strength. The creator of values which are the “building blocks” of the renewing culture is a strong person. Due to its target he is also a man of the future, but it does not mean, however, that he did not appear in the past as a “lever” for the culture in different times. He is the supreme creature of his time, a representative of the highest layers of humanity, its most successful representatives.

“He shall be greatest who can be loneliest, the most concealed, the most deviant, the human being beyond good and evil, the master of virtues, he that is overrich in will. Precisely this shall be called *greatness*: being capable of being as manifold as whole, as ample as full.” (Nietzsche 1989: 139)

There are geniuses among the people because, according to Nietzsche, people are not equal. A thinker reflects this with the main distinction between masters and slaves. This division applies to morality and is part of his reflections on the natural history of mankind. Let us try to summarise it briefly with regard to those moments that are important to our main subject.

Man – once a wild and strong animal humanises himself in the process of socialisation. When a community is created, an animal becomes a man. The process called socialisation is not without consequences for man. Being an animal he was strong, during the process of socialisation he becomes weaker. Like a domesticated animal he becomes a shadow of the past creature that he was when living in the nature. This is a loss, but not a total one.

Man as a living creature loses something while in captivity, but also gains something. A group – a society – consists of those who rule by force and those who are the subject to their violence. Living in a group, even under the dictates of others, an individual gains the security obtained in the herd. A kind of a new safety is created, the safety which demands something. Now – to survive – an individual has to be like others. One has to cling to the herd, become similar to all. As an individual he will not be safe anymore.

Describing the further fate of the socialised animal Nietzsche does not abandon the metaphor of weakness and strength.<sup>1</sup> And on its basis he builds

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<sup>1</sup> Reading Nietzsche we are presented with a metaphorical style of those writings. In the usage of metaphors there is a key for an understanding of his texts. They shouldn't be taken as a science. The told natural history is not necessarily true, but helps us understand ourselves. More like poetry – full of metaphors – does. (See: Kofman 1993)

a dichotomous vision of man, first ruler and slave, then higher and lower man. This first division is not simply followed by the second one. Human history is complicated, as the process in which so-called free spirits, geniuses emerge is rather complicated. Let us have a closer look at it.

For a human, like for every other living being, life is given under certain conditions. Nietzsche adopted the thought of Darwin here and also claims that when environment changes, the living creature also needs to change. He must fit it. Man, a socialised animal, tries to survive in the new conditions – a community which is different from the original circumstances. How does he manage? He develops a new organ which is called a morality or a soul.

Naming a morality or a soul an organ is a kind of extravagance, but it is done purposely. Nietzsche expresses in that way their non-trans-empirical character. Morality appears for earthly reasons. It acts as a regulator of a social life and not something that makes man noble. It gives a possibility of living together, so it serves the community. It is not conducive for an individual.

“Truly, men have given themselves all their good and evil. Truly, they did not take it, they did not find it, it did not descend to them as a voice from heaven.” (Nietzsche 2003: 85)

Moral perfection is traditionally regarded as the ideal to which an individual should aspire. When he does not, both the community and the individual lose. According to Nietzsche, it is not true: what is good for the individual is not good for the community and *vice versa*. This results directly from the fact that socialisation – the process of incorporating an individual into a group happens against him. It is a kind of an infringement. It takes his freedom and power away. But it enables life in the community. The individual is forced to behave in a manner which is harmful to himself, but at the same time it allows him to live with the others. (Nietzsche 1956: 190–191). Standards which are formed – later called moral standards – allow people to live together more or less peacefully without fratricidal struggle. They restrain people.

This makes morality a high-power means of control over an individual. And it becomes more effective when it takes the form of self-control. When the individual starts to believe that the moral norms are established for his own, individual wellness, he starts to control himself. Being promised to receive a heavenly reward, the individual behaves as he is told. The morality – as Michel Foucault noticed it later – is a diabolical invention. It keeps people in invisible hands or rather in their own hands under investigation. The humans-past-animals begin to see their natural but anti-social behaviour as a bad one.

“Man has looked for so long with an evil eye upon his natural inclinations that they have finally become inseparable from ‘bad conscience’. A converse effort can be imagined, but who has a strength for it? It would consist of associating all the *unnatural* inclination – the longing for what is unworldly, opposed to the senses, to instinct, to nature, to the animal in us, all the antibiological and earth-calumniating ideals – with bad conscience.” (Nietzsche 1956: 229)

Looking from the traditional perspective everything turns. Moral ideals – love of a neighbour, altruism, compassion, modesty – these are not the ideals for a strong individual.<sup>2</sup> They are just the tools for controlling people in a society. A group consisting of individuals striving to achieve those ideals is easily controlled. This group does not cause problems to the rulers. Man – in the course of the natural history – because of a process of socialisation, as Nietzsche says, is deprived of fangs and claws. The weakling is best as a social creature.

“To them, virtue is what makes modest and tame: within it they make wolf into dog and man himself into man’s best domestic animals.” (Nietzsche 2003: 190)

In this meta-political reflection the important thing to us is that a person educated in the society like that is the one who does not serve himself, who weakens himself. The system of education is *a priori* directed against the power of the individual, against what is individual in him, unique. The systems of education filling the social goals *must* make everybody equal. It must lead in the direction in which all goes.

“Lacking external enemies and resistances, and confined within an oppressive narrowness and regularity, man began rending, persecuting, terrifying himself, like a wild beast hurling itself, against the bars of its cage.” (Nietzsche 1956: 218)

Does this mean that from the genius’s point of view education is nothing but an evil for him?

### The resistance

While man becomes moral he harms himself, weakens his strength. Nietzsche describes this situation using the above mentioned metaphor of a domesticated

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<sup>2</sup> According to Alexander Nehamas, Nietzsche conceives a morality entirely in terms of interpretation. Values are always a fruit of someone’s thinking. They are not to be just “discovered”. (Nehamas 2007)

animal that resides in a cage. This animal is not able to enjoy what it enjoyed when being in nature. As a wild animal it enjoyed the destruction of others, killing, raping, destroying. Now it tries to fit to the patterns that do not correspond with his animal nature (Nietzsche 1956: 199–200). Letting the rulers to lead, himself – being educated in accordance with the moral ideals – he destroys his own ego and his own ideals.

This fragment of Nietzschean views serves us as a key for our consideration: the thinker makes a division of perfection into perfection which is improper for the individual and one which is beneficial for the individual and helps to increase his strength. Where should we look for the latter one?

The strength, the power is originally a force which is needed for the animal to survive in nature.<sup>3</sup> An animal-not-yet-a-man is a creature that survives due to his resourcefulness, smartness, physical strength. What helps him is not morality but instincts. What are the instincts? They are a sort of life-energy and even when an animal becomes social – they do not disappear. They transform. Nietzsche writes about them as a never disappearing animal strength, which man always has in himself. Therefore asking about an increase in strength in man we ask about an increase in strength of man. So when does it happen? It grows when an animal overcomes resistance to his actions in natural surroundings. The measure of his strength is resistance.

“A change in values – that means a change in the creators. He who has to be creator always has to destroy.” (Nietzsche 2003: 85)

The power to destroy the enemies, overcoming obstacles while fighting, arises and manifests itself in animal life.<sup>4</sup> The change which occurs as a result of socialisation is – among others – the decrease of a resistance (which existed in nature). Man instead of facing the prevailing conditions – adapts to them. Then he loses the opportunity to resist and therefore becomes weak. As it was already said, he developed morality which allows him to live, but this life is a life of a pet. A moral life, a life of a weak is a life without resistance. So the remedy for the weakness is resistance to morality.

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<sup>3</sup> The power, as John Richardson comments on Nietzsche, is one of the most secret notion used by the philosopher. It has a lot of meanings, but the most general and important one is understanding a power as a growth in activity. (Richardson 2002: 21)

<sup>4</sup> A power is always a power to something. It was like that previously and after the transformation it must be the same. It cannot be in a form of readiness, it must be in motion. An interesting account on that subject is given by Linda Williams. (Williams 2001: 54–65)

“To expect that strength will not manifest itself as strength, as a desire to overcome, to appropriate, to have enemies, obstacles, and triumphs, is every bit as absurd as to expect that weakness will manifest itself as strength.” (Nietzsche 1956: 178)

Approval of the power of man is not associated with Nietzsche’s longing to return to the animal world. Man cannot get rid of his animal self, and he cannot get rid of himself as a human and return to the animal state. (No one would also want that). But it is a fact that as a creature trains in morality, he/she becomes weak. What restores his strength? If it is not goodness it must be evil.

For evil is man’s best strength.

“Man must grow better and more evil! – thus do I teach. The most evil is necessary for the Superman’s best.” (Nietzsche 1956: 299)

The evil of the *higher men* appears as a component of being good. According to Nietzsche, only those who are able to do great evil, are also able to do great good. This statement is one of the most enigmatic and threatening statements in the writings of Nietzsche. Its explanation is, however, less controversial than it seems to be. It does not mean, in fact, that to rise in their strength people should perform criminal actions. It also does not mean that evil should be treated as the means to achieve good (it is the way the Nazi propagandists interpreted Nietzsche’s thought). This statement is also not an apology of evil. If we accept the criticism of morality carried out by Nietzsche, this puzzling statement will tell us only that the higher man is the one who does what he considers good, without waiting for the opinion of others. Then he is free. Acting in accordance with one’s values is the simplest definition of freedom.<sup>5</sup> And only a free person is able to resist the public. When he does evil things – he does so only in the eyes of the society, not in his own.

“What serves the higher type of man as nourishment or delectation must almost be poison for a very different and inferior type.” (Nietzsche 1989: 42)

Being evil, therefore, means being in the opposition to others, speaking one’s own voice, being independent. Evil means here something positive – it is a means of growth and manifestation of the strength of the individual. A genius recovers and gets his strength as the one who can say *no* while the others say

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<sup>5</sup> As Ariela Tubert states in her article a notion of freedom is in the line with the notion of self-creation. Constructing this notion Nietzsche is similar to existentialists like Kierkegaard and Sartre. (Tubert 2015: 409–410)

yes. A strong man, the higher man is a rebel, someone other than everyone else. And now there is a question: can an “evil” man like that become the purpose of education? Is not such man rather the aim of rehabilitation, *re-education*?

### An education as a re-education

“Books for all the world are always foul-smelling books: the smell of small people clings to them. Where the people eat and drink, even where they venerate, it usually stinks. (Nietzsche 1989: 43)

Education, on the basis of the writings of Nietzsche, involves socialisation – sharing the ideals of the community. It is the act that implements an individual into the aims, objectives of the group whose members are educated within the same ideals. An education then is a process of unification, making everybody equal. It is therefore a care of everybody with a cost of what is distinct in an individual. If someone is different, he stands out. And that is why socialisation to people like that can only take a form of re-socialisation, education – re-education. Why?

According to Nietzsche, educational systems cannot go beyond what they are for. They are for *everybody*, against an individual (at least, against the one who wants to stand out above average). Such a system prepares for conformity, implementation into the group, into its objectives and priorities, and cannot work differently! This means that there is no educational system that would involve training of a genius, because ... it wouldn't be educational. And, as we see, it is not a matter of malice. A genius must break out of the existing standards, and education – as we learn from Nietzsche's writings – cannot help in that; he/she learns to adapt to them.

This would mean, therefore, that an education and a genius are mutually exclusive concepts. Is it really so? In many passages Nietzsche uses the phrase “preparation” or “breed” in the context of a possible emergence of “the coming” artists, geniuses etc. That is why it is difficult to unequivocally reject the opportunity to support their appearances. It would be difficult to imagine that the society behaves completely passively towards geniuses.

“You are only bridges: may higher man than you step across upon you! You are steps: so do not be angry with whom who climbs over you into *his* height!” (Nietzsche 2003: 293)

Nietzschean considerations show us that the educational system is not able to shape a genius, neither is it able to develop his skills. But that does not mean that it is completely useless. If it cannot fulfil the role of shaping, it can provide an opportunity for resistance, which is, as it was said, important in the formation of the higher men. This resistance is not, of course, any form of physical or mental repression against those individuals. It is the resistance to a tradition against which the will of the genius can manifest itself. The kernel of this resistance is the knowledge that an individual must be provided in order to fulfil the role of a negative springboard. If you want to say *no*, you have to know what you are saying. Only then does the new spirit have a chance to manifest itself. In other words, the genius should be raised, but without influencing the results.

“The new is always an *evil*, as that which wants to conquer, to overthrow the old boundary stones and the old pietas, and only the old is the good. The good men of every age are those who dig the old ideas deep down and bear fruits with them, the husbandmen of the spirit. But all land is finally exhausted, and the plow of evil must always return.” (Nietzsche 1994: 93)

The question is: if the school system cannot raise a genius, does this mean that a genius can and has to grow outside it? This issue suggests an existing form of education which is for example – very popular now – a home education. Can such form of teaching meet the challenge which regular school cannot?

This issue is important because the number of pupils taught “outside” regular school – at home – is growing in Poland. And in spite of the fact that there are no accessible, accurate statistics on this issue – the education office is of no help joining healthy pupils educated outside school with sick ones, and with the ones who are taught individually. Nevertheless this collective data are pointing at the fact that this number is increasing. In the course of the year 2015 it doubled. What is the source of this fact? Where does an interest in this form of education come from?

There is no simple answer, because this phenomenon has more than one source. Some children learn at home because of different problems of psychological nature: dissociative problems, inability to cooperate in a large group, antisocial behaviours, etc. Some children aren’t able to grasp the knowledge in a group of pupils, they require an individual approach, they have got a need for direct contact with the teacher. There are also children – and on account of our subject we are most interested in this group – who have got greater abilities than average which a standard system of education – for different reasons

– does not develop. Is being outside the regular educational system and carrying out the learning at home a *panacea* for the deficiencies of school systems?

The existence of a home educational system seems to confirm the above presented thesis that school systems are suitable for pupils with average abilities, with no creative power. However the question is whether gifted children studying “outside” the school system develop their skills. In order to answer this question it is necessary to realise the difference between the forms of education mentioned. The specific character of home education consists in the fact that the child is independent. He/she organises working hours for himself/herself. Learning a child follows his/her own interests: stops where he/she wants, and goes as deep as he/she desires. In this way a pupil develops his/her skills and abilities simultaneously. Guided individually, he/she reacts and responds less schematically than an average pupil at school. He/she strengthens the habit of independent thinking.

The above mentioned features of home education are certainly beneficial for building capacity of pupils. Such kind of learning, however, has got also its bad sides. First of all, poor socialisation of children must be mentioned. Because though the parents – aware of this kind of danger – provide the child with the company of other children, they do it on the basis of a circle of people who are their friends, and so belonging to one and the same environment. In this way a child is, so to speak, fed on a one-sided diet. Children are not in contact – as it is in the natural environment of school – with those who have got different social backgrounds and therefore do not learn to deal with their otherness. Lack of training in certain habits in this regard – to some extent – impairs children. It makes or – as often happens in the case of talented pupils – strengthens their environmental isolation.

The idea of home education is accompanied by a disappointment with the school system as unfit for gifted individuals, which – as has been said – seems to confirm the thesis saying that we cannot raise a genius. But to base it on the issue of home education – raises serious problems. The question which has to be put is if this kind of education is a form of learning which can be called non-systemic. The scope of the educational content and the requirements are for both forms the same. The difference is the way in which this content is absorbed, so in the dependence and independence of learning. In the case of gifted students the self-reliance is very important. But does it guarantee being outside the system?

The answer to this question cannot be positive. A child while learning at home remains in the school system in all of the key aspects of regular

education. The fact that many parents choose home education as a way to educate their children does not mean that the problem of the deficiency of that system has been solved. It is rather a signal that there exists a problem within a regular educational system. But does it mean that it is necessary for the genius to be educated “outside” the school system? Reading Nietzsche, we – contrary to popular opinion – must say that this thesis is incorrect. From his point of view we have to consider that home education is neither a step toward the (proper) education of genius, nor that such a step – in the search for non-standard (non-systemic) methods of training – is necessary.

Genius should not be outside the education system, but that does not mean that the system can remain sensitive to that genius. In a positive sense, it cannot see him, or – what is the same thing – seeing him must recognise this individual as similar to all. And even if it does not, as a system whose main task is socialisation, it will try to restrict him. In doing so, however – under the assumptions of Nietzsche – it is going to do him, although it sounds paradoxical, a favour.

The presented view seems to be a kind of exaggeration. And certainly it is. The public generally supports outstanding individuals in a far richer way than just familiarising them with the tradition, which is then, in the creative process, modified, or rejected. In many educational systems, there are both: a financial and educational ways to support above-average individuals (for example through a system of awards and honours, or courses, internships abroad and others).

Nietzsche, living in the nineteenth-century Europe, had to be aware of this. And certainly he would not have been ignoring such elements in the existing systems. He himself was a recipient of a long-term support from the university, which he had left early in his life for health reasons. However, from his philosophy, which puts the matters very radically, flows a given teaching. Through his philosophy he highlighted the essential feature of the emergence of what, in a given culture, was new, not yet known, but important for its future development. This feature can be called non-inducement, impossibility to bring about. The emergence of what is new cannot be guided. So we can encourage those who bring the *new* about, but we cannot influence the *matter* of this *new*. In this respect – so in a very narrow sense – an educational system remains powerless.

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