

The Aesthetic Turn/Den estetiska vändningen

Aesthetics and Critique of Culture

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There are several tendencies in “the postmodern situation” of the recent decades that have made some people say that an “aesthetic turn” is taking place. The increased concern with questions about “quality” would be one manifestation of such a tendency. But there is reason to be careful about these alleged signs of change. An important question is to what extent this tendency is a symptom of a genuine cultural change in our society and to what degree is it only an occasional trend of fashion?

I heard the expression “the aesthetic turn” for the first time from Thomas Hård av Segerstad, and I remember that in his explanation of the expression he connected it with the idea of *aesthetics as a first philosophy*, that is, aesthetics as a sort of ultimate foundation. This reminded me, subsequently, of Nietzsche’s thinking, even though that may not have been in line with what Thomas meant at all. The reason I came to think of Nietzsche is rather that Nietzsche’s philosophy is sometimes characterized, by some contemporary influential readers of Nietzsche, as an *aestheticism*. That is a characterisation of Nietzsche’s philosophy with which I have had great difficulties. It is problematic when “aestheticism” is taken to mean that aesthetic values have priority over other values. Nietzsche is often concerned with what one should value; with questions such as “How should I live?”, “How can I confer upon my life the greatest value?” “What do I admire?”, “What is great?”, “What is culture?”, “In what ways should I endeavour to change and improve myself?” Such questions are usually taken to be ethical, but Nietzsche seems to recommend forms of valuation according to which aesthetic values are given priority over ethical values. And this also appears to be one reason why several contemporary philosophers tend to reject Nietzsche’s message. He does not seem, to these philosophers, to be serious enough in moral and ethical concerns, because his concept of the “ideal life” does not seem to rule out the possibility of an individual who possesses aesthetic perfection but who is morally reprehensible.

Postmodern writers, on the contrary, tend to celebrate this alleged aestheticism. It is one of the features of Nietzsche’s philosophy that has inspired postmodern writers, but there are also reasons to suspect that such a reading of Nietzsche is not fair. It is clear, for instance, that when Nietzsche raises questions about how we should live, he is not concerned with lifestyles of middle-class intellectuals which is often a concern of postmodern writers, and when he raises the question of the “the good life” it is not a question of how to arrange our lives so as “to have a good time”. I think that Nietzsche was very sensitive to the difference I mentioned before between signs of a genuine cultural change and mere occasional trends of

fashion. He is very harsh towards those in his own time, who were engaged in promoting culture. He says, for instance: "culture is promoted by all those who are conscious of possessing an ugly or boring content and want to conceal the fact with a so-called beautiful form."¹

Among those who want to see Nietzsche's philosophy as an aestheticism, there are those who do it, as I said before, in order to express reservations against some of his ideas, or what they take to be his message. These readers of Nietzsche tend to emphasize what they take to be his *elitism*. When Nietzsche is concerned with questions of how we could improve ourselves and our lives by living, as he puts it, "for the good of the rarest and most valuable exemplars", they read him as if he wants to promote the interests of a certain class of privileged individuals, and that the interests of anyone who is not in the class is at best of only secondary interest to him. Richard Rorty says, for instance, that "Nietzsche . . . relegates the vast majority of humanity to the status of dying animals".² But as James Conant has pointed out, what Rorty and others seem to miss here is that according to Nietzsche, "if we are relegated to such a status, it is because we so relegate *ourselves*".³ Nietzsche is, explicitly, addressing *each* human being with his recommendations, but Rorty seems to take for granted that he can't possibly do that, as if it made no sense. Rorty seems to think as though Nietzsche is addressing only a privileged class of intellectuals or educated and strong people, and does not care about the vast majority of people *who cannot think for themselves* since they do not possess the required gifts and talents. But that elitist conception of "great human beings" is something that Nietzsche explicitly rejects in several places in his writings. So one might ask who is really being elitist here?

I am inclined to say that Rorty's attitude that Nietzsche cannot seriously be addressing each individual is a typical attitude or reaction of our times. To ask for the roots of this attitude is a good question to pose in a critique of contemporary culture. Why is it that we are inclined to understand Nietzsche's (and other thinkers') talk of genius, of human exemplars and great men according to the elitist conception, as if there were no other way of making sense of it? Is it because of the generally accepted democratic virtues of our times? As if *any* talk of the importance of great human beings was enough to reveal sympathy for militantly anti-democratic political ideals. Is our inclination towards the elitist reading due to our strongly felt solidarity towards the weak? Is it because we feel that the weak have the right to be weak? But are weak

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator", in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.L. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 166.

² Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 35.

³ James Conant, "Nietzsche's Perfectionism: A Reading of *Schopenhauer as Educator*", in Richard Shacht, ed., *Nietzsche's Postmoralism: Essays on Nietzsche's Prelude to Philosophy's Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 198.

human beings weak due to their lack of gifts and talents that certain great human beings are celebrated for having? Isn't that an almost undemocratic idea?

Maybe our inclination towards the elitist reading is due to our "thirst for equality," which makes us consider great human beings as exceptions, something alien and very remote from us, almost like miracles? Nietzsche distinguishes two kinds of equality:

The thirst for equality can express itself either as a desire to draw everyone down to oneself (through diminishing them, spying on them, tripping them up) or to raise oneself and everyone else up (through recognizing their virtues, helping them, rejoicing in their success).⁴

Notice that Nietzsche says "raise oneself and *everyone else* up". An interesting question is which one of these expressions of the thirst for equality that has been the most active one in our Western liberal democracies, for instance, in the educational policies and the reforms of the educational systems in the last 50 years?

At the beginning of his essay "Schopenhauer as Educator" Nietzsche says:

The human being who does not wish to belong to the mass needs only to cease being comfortable with himself; let him follow his conscience, which calls to him: "Be yourself! All you are now doing, thinking, desiring is not you yourself."⁵

And Nietzsche seems to be aware of the most obvious objections to this ("we cannot all become great men, it requires gifts, innate talents that most of us don't have") when he says in *Human all too Human*:

Do not talk about giftedness, or inborn talents! One can name great men of all kinds who were very little gifted. They *acquired* greatness, became "geniuses" (as we put it), through qualities the lack of which no one who knew what they were would boast of: they all possessed the seriousness of the efficient workman.⁶

It is important to notice that Nietzsche rejects the elitist conception of the "genius" or the "great human being" according to which it is certain innate gifts or talents of the great man that makes him great; gifts and talents that most of us do not possess. Nietzsche's ideal conception is that each human being has the option of becoming more human, a better human being. If the individual does so he realizes his *humanity* and he thereby places himself, as Nietzsche puts it, "in the circle of culture".⁷ "[T]he goal of culture is to promote the production of true

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human all too Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 1986), § 300.

⁵ Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator", 127 (Amended transl. by James Conant).

⁶ Nietzsche, *Human all too Human*, § 163.

⁷ Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator", 162.

human beings and nothing else”.⁸ That seems to be the basic sense of Nietzsche’s conception of culture, which he distinguishes from merely decorative culture. He continues by saying: “culture is the child of each individual’s self-knowledge and dissatisfaction with himself”. Notice that he says “each individual”.⁹ His talk of “dissatisfaction” is related to, but not the same as, the *shame* that Kant talks about as arising from our failure to act on the moral law. That kind of dissatisfaction is also, says Nietzsche, something that most people sometimes in their lives have experienced as a distrust in what we are officially expected to respect and admire. Referring to such an individual, Nietzsche says:

His honesty, the strength and truthfulness of his character, must at some time or other rebel against a state of things in which he only repeats what he has heard, learns what is already known, imitates what already exists; he will then begin to grasp that culture can be something other than a *decoration of life*, that is to say at bottom no more than dissimulation and disguise; . . . Every increase in truthfulness must also assist to promote *true* culture: even though this truthfulness may sometimes seriously damage precisely the kind of cultivatedness now held in esteem, even though it may even be able to procure the downfall of an entire merely decorative culture.¹⁰

An important part of such an individual’s resolve is that he or she starts to develop his or her sensitivity, and not least in moral matters. That is, one might say, how aesthetics enters. For Nietzsche, aesthetic sensitivity *is* sensitivity in moral matters. It is not a question of priorities of categories in philosophical doctrines. Nietzsche means something very concrete, which should be clear by the way he expresses himself. One might even say: That should be clear from the aesthetics of his writing, which requires a kind of sensitivity which is hardly cultivated within academic institutions. In Nietzsche’s thinking values are not separated according to the patterns of academic disciplines. He sometimes speaks as though the question “What is beautiful?” and “What is culture?” were one and the same question, and then of course, his notion of the “beautiful” does not merely signify “what is decorative”, “what gives pleasure or enjoyment” etc. The sort of beauty with which Nietzsche is concerned is rather that of a “good soul” in a classical spirit.

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I think there is still something to be learned from Nietzsche, but I do not propose that we should uncritically adopt Nietzsche’s nineteenth-century ideas about “great men” and “good souls” and take his writings to heart as it stands and apply it to our own situation. My purpose

⁸ Nietzsche, “Schopenhauer as Educator”, 164.

⁹ According to the elitist reading, Nietzsche is read as if he were saying: “Culture is the child of *some* individual’s self-glorification and satisfaction with themselves”.

¹⁰ Nietzsche, “Schopenhauer as Educator”, 123.

with taking up Nietzsche is a different one, namely to suggest a specific example that connects the theme of “the aesthetic turn” to critical investigation of *contemporary* culture. A more careful and fair reading of Nietzsche would show us how it is possible to use knowledge about philosophical thinking in the past for critical purposes in our own period. There are many examples of the way in which contemporary concepts and approaches, which we are inclined to use, have impeded an understanding of ways of thinking in the past. Through a deeper and more truthful understanding of past ways of thinking, these conceptual impediments in the present can be made visible, and it becomes possible to take a stand on them.

What I want to say is that *the current standard readings of Nietzsche’s writings is impeded by various attitudes and ways of thinking in the present*; attitudes and ways of thinking that most of us have not chosen and are hardly aware of having. To work out the effects of such impediments in current readings of Nietzsche will at the same time be a critical investigation of ways of thinking in the present, because these mistaken readings, such as the reading of Nietzsche’s philosophy as an elitism or aestheticism, are a function of prevailing attitudes, prejudices and forms of political correctness of our own period.

Fortunately, very good work in that direction has already started. I am thinking of the article by James Conant I have already referred to. I have already drawn a lot on Conant’s paper in what I have said so far, and I think that his article is significant for the theme of “the aesthetic turn” in many respects. Conant displays several doubtful points in the standard readings of Nietzsche that we find in the writings of John Rawls, Philippa Foot, Alexander Nehamas, Richard Rorty, and others. And it seems clear to me that their ways of misunderstanding Nietzsche depend on attitudes and prejudices that these philosophers share with most intellectuals of our own time.

My only complaint with Conant’s paper is that he does not develop this point but rather presents his results as a contribution to Nietzsche scholarship, as if it were only of interest and significance to professional readers of Nietzsche. But it is implicitly a critique of contemporary culture. This is perhaps not so much a criticism of Conant’s paper as a suggestion for how his results could be used and developed further. The purpose of this paper is only to give some hints in that direction.

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If by “culture” is meant that through which the spiritual aspirations of a people are expressed and articulated, then we must admit — reluctantly perhaps — that the contemporary, official sense of culture is what Nietzsche calls “decorative culture”, “culture as a mere decoration of life”, and thereby also of aesthetic value as having a mere decorative and ornamental sense.

The elitist conception of the great human beings is clearly in line with this conception of culture and aesthetic value. Great men (the great philosophers, for instance) are alien exceptions to be put on pedestal, or are made objects of study rather than taken as our exemplars. It would not be difficult to find examples in our own time (in discussions of culture policies, for instance) of those who are conscious of possessing an ugly or boring content and who want to conceal the fact with a "beautiful form".

Culture as decorative culture also seems to be the prevailing, official sense of the word in the academies, even in the humanities, the sciences of culture, where the concept has been adapted to the increasing specialisation and professionalisation of academic life during the 20th century. Culture no longer means a spirit or an ideal that ultimately addresses itself to the individual human being, it rather signifies a category of objects of study that are detached from the more urgent realities of our lives. Great amounts of academic knowledge about cultures and cultural phenomena have been accumulated, but that knowledge is hardly ever used in dealing with the problems of our times.

One manifestation of this development is an obliteration of the difference between two senses of the word "education". In one sense "education" is used in a way more related to the German notion of *Bildung*, which involves not only training and the acquisition of formal knowledge but also personal development and concern with questions of value. In the other sense, "education" means training with the aim to give some sort of special knowledge or formal competence for fulfilling some professional or other (already well-defined) function in society.

The latter sense of education has come to dominate over the former. All education tends to be conceived as some sort of training, even education in the sense of *Bildung*. The increasing regulation and "rule-governedness" of academic research and education is of course connected with this, as is also the increasing importance of political and technological ways of thinking. And since success of training is something that must be possible to assess in terms external requirements or formal criteria, this development has unfortunately strengthened a superficial and formal notion of humanistic education. To be educated tends to mean to have acquired certain kinds of formal knowledge, for instance, of certain central facts in the history of culture, art, philosophy and science; it is to have read certain classical books, to know classical music and to be familiar with certain famous works of art, etc.

It has been said that education, in the sense of *Bildung*, differs from mere training by being addressed to the "human being as a whole". What has become of this idea under the dominance of the conception of education as training is, it seems to me, of crucial importance for understanding the current inclination to understand Nietzsche's message as an elitism and aestheticism. The idea of a training that addresses itself to the human being as a whole, if it

makes sense at all, will have to be understood as having the creation of *a type of human being* as its aim, a *kind* of human being, a social class whose members possess not only the required kinds of formal knowledge but also the social status, “social competence”, the fine manners of speaking and behaving that is considered appropriate to cultivated people. It is clear that the elitist reading of Nietzsche is natural for someone who is comfortable with conceiving the aims of education in this way. Understanding Nietzsche against that background means that his ideal conception of genuine culture, that concerns primarily the individual lives of persons, is conceived as though it were a kind of *political* goal or program; a program that prescribes in advance certain impersonal forms of behaviour, actions and ends, that some people, but not others, have talents for acquiring. In such a program there is no place for aesthetic value in Nietzsche’s sense but only as something different from moral value and as something that concerns the “decoration of life”. On this view Nietzsche’s seriousness in aesthetic and moral issues is misunderstood as the aestheticism of someone who goes to the extreme in “decorating his life”, someone who wants to “make a work of art of his life”, which is a quite common way of summarising Nietzsche’s aim with his philosophy.

If there is an “aesthetic turn” taking place in our times, let us hope that it is not just a movement towards an aestheticism of the kind that is wrongly attributed to Nietzsche.