

Specialization and the imitation of Nietzsche in *The New Freewoman*

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Abstract. In this paper, I propose a counterexample to the proposed advantage of specialization in research. My counterexample is developed after assessing the claim that the early twentieth century essayist and editor Dora Marsden imitated Nietzsche in one of her periodicals: *The New Freewoman*.

An advantage of specialization has been known for centuries. One person specializes in one small task, another specializes in a second, a third specializes in a third, and so forth, and shared goals are thereby more efficiently achieved. Adam Smith recommends this even for philosophy:

Like every other employment too, it is subdivided into a great number of different branches, each of which affords occupation to a particular tribe or class of philosophers; and this subdivision of employment in philosophy, as well as in every other business, improves dexterity, and saves time. Each individual becomes more expert in his own peculiar branch, more work is done upon the whole, and the quantity of science is considerably increased by it. (Bk. 1, Ch. 1)

But is specialization always an advantage in this field or related ones? Below I wish to present a counterexample, but there will be some scene setting first.

Let us imagine that you visit the bookshop and you find some books on Nietzsche. You like Nietzsche and you would like to read more Nietzsche. But Nietzsche is dead. However, Nietzsche is read around the world. Are there not a number of writers who have thought, "I shall

write a few aphorisms like those by Nietzsche”? Surely there are or have been such writers. What would be nice then is a collection of Nietzsche imitations, for the reader who has enjoyed Nietzsche and would like more Nietzschean material.

I think I have come across a Nietzsche imitation. This is a quotation from 1913, from the editor of a periodical entitled *The New Freewoman*, namely Dora Marsden:

Thinking, invaluable as it is in the service of Being, is, essentially, a very intermittent process. It works only between whiles. In the nadir and zenith of men’s experience it plays no part, when they are stupid and when they are passionate. Descartes’ maxim “Cogito ergo sum,” carried the weight it did and does merely because the longfelt influence of ideas had taken the virtue out of men’s souls. Stronger men would have met it, not with an argument, but a laugh. It is philosophy turned turtle. The genesis of knowledge is not in thinking but in being. (1913: 82)

When I read that, it sounded to me like one of Nietzsche’s aphorisms, or remarks if “aphorism” is reserved for a brief and memorable saying. Here is a dialogue which gives some justification for my impression.

Polish inquisitor: Why did it sound like Nietzsche to you?

Me: I don’t know, it just did.

Polish inquisitor: Can you be more specific at all?

Me: Well, the nature of thinking, more specifically its durations and its rhythms and the times it is not occurring, is the sort of thing Nietzsche would write about. As if thinking were a physiological process, like digestion. I have the impression that Nietzsche is very concerned with the stomach, by the way.

Polish inquisitor: Anything else?

Me: The historical conditions for the acceptance of Descartes' famous proposition: that sounds like the sort of thing Nietzsche would write about. The conditions for the acceptance of Socrates amongst the Greeks – does he not have an aphorism about that somewhere? Of course, just because he would write about the conditions for the historical acceptance of Socrates, doesn't mean that he would write about "The conditions for the historical acceptance of X," where X is any proposition whatsoever or even restricted to any famous proposition uttered by a famous figure in Western history. Perhaps about some such figures, Nietzsche would say, "I would never write about them." But I cannot see any reason for thinking this about Descartes and his famous proposition.

Polish inquisitor: Anything else?

Me: Marsden talks about the source of knowledge. "The genesis of knowledge is not in thinking but in being." Nietzsche often seems to take some general thing we talk about, like knowledge or belief or action or intention. And then he takes what is plausibly a common preconception about the source of that thing – about what causes it to come into being – and then says that the source is something else.

Polish inquisitor: Anything else?

Me: "It is philosophy turned turtle": that is the sort of image that Nietzsche might well use to make a criticism. And probably he would use it in a way closer to that wording, rather than "Philosophy has unfortunately become turtle-like," for example.

Polish inquisitor: Anything else?

Me: "Stronger men would have met it, not with an argument, but a laugh": Marsden is saying that you are weaker if you go in for this Cartesian philosophy, and also the strong, or the

stronger, do what is good for their strength. If laughing is better for their strength, rather than explaining, “Not arguing against you is better for my strength,” then they simply laugh. That is a theme that preoccupies Nietzsche: what is better for being strong.

Polish inquisitor: Anything else?

Me: Do you know any people who imitate Nietzsche?

Polish inquisitor: From Poland?

Me: From wherever.

The Polish inquisitor is silent.

I found an aphorism by Nietzsche which, after its title, begins with “Whence did logic come into existence in the human head?” (1977: 60) and I think it gives support to some of the similarities drawn attention to in the dialogue.

Perhaps some readers think, “You should not write on Nietzsche and the imitation of him unless you are a Nietzsche expert,” but do the experts even know about this particular case of Nietzsche imitation and, while not wishing to overload them, how can they know if I do not write? I assume there are imitations scattered all over the literary and philosophical world, and it would not be surprising if the experts don’t read *The New Freewoman*.

This long journey leads me to my counterexample. I wonder whether the experts would not actually be better at making a compilation of Nietzsche imitations, versus some widely browsing amateur. It sounds like a task for a specialist, doesn’t it – making a compilation of Nietzsche imitations? But I am not convinced owing to the scattered nature of the material: this Nietzsche imitation is over here, that one is over there.¹ Also I worry that to begin with,

¹ They are scattered in variety of ways. Most or all of the efforts do not conveniently appear under the title Nietzsche Imitation or even any Nietzsche title, rather they are scattered across a variety of titles. They are scattered across “genres”: some imitations are within fictions, some within literary criticism, some within philosophy papers, some

specialization was recommended to improve efficiency, but now if a task is not more suitable for specialists, people do not accept it as legitimate research: specialization has become an end in itself.

References

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within syphilis research, etc. They are scattered across languages. This one is by a Russian and so is that one, a third one is by a Pakistani, etc.