

The will to be a great university, by Friedrich Nietzsche

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. In this paper, I present some advice in the style of Nietzsche for a university aspiring to move from being good to great, as a nearby university is.

Draft version: Version 1 (8th August 2022).

It feels like the nineteenth century still

When you imitate that will!

The University of Manchester has a plan of transforming from a good to a great university. Who knows about greatness, or at least appears to? Nietzsche does! (Perhaps they are actually hoping for advice directly from some people they hire, or once hired, but who are widely distrusted.) Below I present some advice in the style of Nietzsche to a university aspiring to greatness. It is based on distinguishing types, as Nietzsche often does (e.g. 1977: 42). It was just some fun, if that is permitted. (I recall reading that it is a bad idea to ape Nietzsche; I hope I am not about to find out why. One of my friends has a sketch involving such an effort: him first!)

We who desire to be great, and whosoever else may join us, must distinguish between the student who will bring glory to our institution and the false. And we must set aside once and for all that perpetual illusion that the results of examinations, ordinary examinations, will serve this end! Yes, for us higher examinations are needed, so that we may understand the student body, not just its many minds but its souls, its secret tremors and ancient vibrations. We must separate off those

who can help us in becoming great from the rest. And here we must use the most sensitive of antennae to detect signs of the following types.

The barometer of fame. We, we who are experts, know that fame is a mysterious enchantress indeed. Take any field you like: between one famous figure and another, whom all regard as lesser, lie various obscure figures. Why is this fellow famous and why this other fellow but the ones in-between not? Our student who is a barometer of fame is part of this shadowy phenomenon. Everything in-between they ignore, every philosopher, every artist, every free spirit. They are of no use for we who seek greatness, for some who are more famous must be set aside while others who labour under dim light must guide us forward.

Trophy students. They come when our goodness is shown, hoping that here all problems are solved, or almost all – there must be something left for them to do! A little routine work, a faint touch of sparkle, in the steadiest of environments. What tests they make of us! If we can pass, they will stand there as a symbol of our robustness under all weathers: a trophy no less. But they are of no use for we who are climbing mountains and find that the climate is so different as we move higher, so strange, that all our previous instincts fail us and we must rethink how to perform even the most basic of acts.

The early specialist. Specialize, specialize, we must all specialize. But when must we specialize? A novelist depicts a young poet and a janitor's son forming a team of brains and muscle – whoever heard of such a thing amongst schoolboys?!¹ Any village teacher can tell you:

¹ [The novel in question is Milan Kundera's *Life is Elsewhere* (1986: 23). I suppose the situation described can obtain if a poorer family is paid to provide services for a wealthier family and the child from the poor family gets to

schoolboys mix with schoolboys who share their interests. But a great university is no village school and certainly we in our university will encounter the early specialists.² A single good result on an examination and the student plants their flag upon that territory: this be my specialism. But life is long and they must fit into one project and then another, and we who are wise know that and must push and pull them here and there. But how they resist!

Kith and kin. How to send the message to this cut-above-the-rest that his family is the rest?! “Either we all get in or we all leave” is his motto, or hers. They are not getting in, or they are not going further on this journey with us! Nothing could impair our greatness more than becoming the university of the family: he belongs to that family and so everything is different from him!³

References

Kundera, M. 1986. *Life is Elsewhere*. London: Faber and Faber.

Nietzsche, F. (translated by R.J. Hollingdale). 1977. *A Nietzsche Reader*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Strathern, M. (with a foreword by A. Richards and an epilogue by F. Oxford). 1981. *Kinship at the core*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

go to the same prestigious school if they provide protection. Early on his father tells him, “Forget about your own poems – you protect this boy.”]

² [I read “Elmdon isn’t really a village at all, it’s just a commuting centre” (Oxford 1981: 209) and what I was initially hoping to do was a portrait of the reverse complaint – “This isn’t really a commuting centre at all, it’s a village” – but somehow it was easier to do this.]

³ [Perhaps there are whole families who strangely get in, like the Darwin family.]