

NIETZSCHE'S SEARCH FOR PHILOSOPHY: ON THE MIDDLE WRITINGS

by Keith Ansell-Pearson

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This book by the well-known Nietzsche scholar Keith Ansell-Pearson deals with what the author claims are the neglected writings of Nietzsche's middle period, namely, *Human, All too Human*; *Daybreak or Dawn*; and *The Gay Science*, covering the years from 1876 to 1882. I am not sure that these middle period writings are neglected taken singly: indeed, the author mentions several eminent scholars who introduced or commented on these works, though, regrettably, he omits to mention, regarding *The Gay Science* for instance, Williams (2001), Babich (2009), and Janaway (2013). However, a comprehensive overview as to what these middle period works have in common with regard to style, content, and purpose was certainly lacking. Ansell-Pearson attempts such an overview with his book and does so with great learning and a sensitive awareness of the wider intellectual context within which these writings are embedded as well as being responsive to Nietzsche's particular situation and projects during that period of his life.

Note, first of all, the title of the book: *Nietzsche's Search for Philosophy*. It implies, correctly, that Nietzsche was still searching for philosophy, *his* philosophy, at the beginning of his middle period. While he certainly believed himself to have progressed from classical philology to philosophy prior to that time (in 1871 Nietzsche made an, alas unsuccessful, application to transfer from philology to philosophy at Basle), his early philosophical works, such as the *Untimely Meditations*, were still quite conventional regarding choice of topics and conventional also in their somewhat magisterial tone. They were also still deeply influenced by Schopenhauer and Wagner. All this changed dramatically with the first book of the middle period, *Human, All too Human*. Nietzsche now began to speak in his own voice: searching, examining, and articulating existential problems in a way we can readily recognize as authentically Nietzsche. Moreover, the Nietzsche of the middle period already shows signs of being intentionally provocative and subversive, alternatively offending and inspiring his readers. And many of the highly controversial, even idiosyncratic, problems and equally controversial and idiosyncratic proposed solutions characteristic of his later period are already, in bud as it were, present in the middle period: such as, amongst others, *The Death of God*, *Eternal Recurrence*, and *The Will to Power*. Yet the style of the middle period writings is in the main clear of the stridency and polemical hyperbole which dominates Nietzsche's later works.

Nietzsche's letters are a great help to our understanding of him during that period. One letter in particular highlights the difficulties, tensions, and conflicts he experienced in that time—this is his letter to Lou Salome of July 2, 1882. There, Nietzsche names the 6 years of 1876–1882 (for us his middle period) as “my free spirit period” (*meine Freigeisterei*), and he proceeds to describe them to Lou as a period of utter misery, even despair. Of this more below.

In his book, Keith Ansell-Pearson discusses each of the three works, *Human, All too Human*, *Dawn* and *The Gay Science* individually by emphasizing their unique themes as well as examining what they have in common so that they can, despite their uniqueness, nonetheless be seen to form a kind of unity. In addition to Nietzsche's own declared aim during that time to express and promote “free spirit,” Ansell-Pearson identifies three further features common to the middle period, namely, self-cultivation, modesty, and cheerfulness.

Self-cultivation can obviously only be practised on the base of sound self-knowledge and this is best attained, according to the Nietzsche of *Human All too Human*, by sober enquiry into the workings of the human mind at the individual and social level. Such an enquiry can, in turn, only succeed by freeing ourselves from irrational fears and the stifling conformity to “herd values” which has been our predicament throughout most of history. All this, however, is only preliminary to self-cultivation proper which must include, according to Ansell-Pearson, the therapy of self-care. He examines this aspect of Nietzsche's understanding of self-cultivation in Chapter One of his book, which has the title “Cooling down the Human Mind” where “cooling down” is claimed to be an integral part of the therapy of self-care. Ansell-Pearson argues that “Nietzsche's thinking aims for a new sobriety: it seeks to approach the world beyond both theology and the struggle against it. The world is neither good nor evil, neither the best nor the worst” (p. 33). His exposition here relies heavily on Nietzsche's not uncritical involvement with Epicurus, for Nietzsche appears to follow Epicurean teaching when discarding the search for “first and last things” and when treading a middle course between the kind of self-withdrawal and isolation necessary to the cultivation of self, while at the same time remaining open towards others. Ansell-Pearson writes:

Nietzsche is committed to an ethics of self-cultivation, in which one endeavours to fashion out of oneself something that the other can behold with pleasure, “a peaceful, self-enclosed garden ... with high walls to protect against the dangers and dust of the roadway, but with a hospitable gate as well.” (D 174; p. 44)

Nietzsche's metaphor in D 174 of a garden with a hospitable gate is referred to in Ansell-Pearson's book repeatedly and this with some justification. D 174 is a key text for Nietzsche's rejection of too great an involvement with others, especially by way of sympathy and pity, and his advice, somewhat guarded, to combine the need for self-examination and self-reliance, only achievable in the serenity of an enclosed garden, while yet having an open hospitable gate. Nietzsche explored again and again, and not just in his middle period, the difficulties of attaining and maintaining the self-contradictory goal of holding together exclusion and rejection with involvement and welcome of the other. Thus, he describes in a late notebook entry his life's artistry (*Kunststück*) to utilize much that was weak and poor and suffering in his life as helpful in the daunting magnitude of his task and, at the same time, to keep something of himself apart so as to leave room for “friendliness, philanthropy (*Menschenfreundlichkeit*), patience, and openness to all that is small and smallest” (1888: 22[26] my translation). Nietzsche's careful readers are of course aware that Nietzsche's general outlook on life approved and encouraged the difficulties and tensions inherent in such self-contradictory goals—according to Nietzsche, such difficulties and tensions are wholly beneficial even if also painful. It is clear, then, that self-cultivation is not an easy task: on the contrary, it is a continuous struggle to select, nurture, and control wayward yet pivotal drives.

Turning now to modesty. Modesty is not an attribute one straightforwardly associates with Nietzsche and one must therefore read attentively the many pages Ansell-Pearson devotes to what he obviously believes is an important aspect of Nietzsche's person and projects during this period. He introduces Chapter Four of his book, entitled “A Philosophy of Modesty: Ethics and the Search for a Care of Self” with

Two things of note ought to strike us about Nietzsche of the middle writings. First is the extent to which the philosophy is one of modesty: this is true of both the kind of work it sets out to do and the goals it sets for its readers as ethical subjects. Second ... he wants ethics, involving duties one has to oneself and to others, to be something pleasurable. (p. 87)

Signs of modesty are, for instance, Nietzsche's rejection of the search for “the first and last things” and his rejection also of the pretensions of morality to know with certainty final and universally binding values. Modesty is also found in rejecting the claims of the ego to self-determination and freedom of action. Ansell-Pearson holds that according to the Nietzsche of *Dawn* “the liberty we have at our disposal is a modest and limited one ... that of cultivating the drives, not some miraculous power of self-invention and self-creation ex nihilo” (p. 87). Connected with this, he observes that, compared with Kant, “Nietzsche is offering a modest conception of autonomy centred on the care of self” (p. 100), though we might want to add that, while both Kant and Nietzsche understand autonomy as self-legislation, Nietzsche utterly

rejects its foundation on reason. Clearly then, the putative modesty of Nietzsche's goal for philosophy is the first "thing of note" referred to above, while the second is the kind of self-cultivation based on self-care which, as discussed already, includes the task of controlling and cultivating those of one's drives and instincts which require withdrawal and isolation in such a way as to balance them with openness towards others in order to make of oneself a pleasurable and exemplary whole. So, according to Ansell-Pearson, part of the modesty of Nietzsche's middle period is to jettison the pretensions of philosophy's metaphysical and moral claims and to cultivate instead duties of self-care alongside duties to others and, further, to be content that this is all philosophy can and should set out to do. I will return to the topic of modesty again below; now I want to attend to the third feature Ansell-Pearson identifies as common to the middle period: cheerfulness.

Nietzsche's cheerfulness, his effort and aim to be cheerful in face of the many difficulties regarding his health, relationships, and the lack of recognition for his philosophy, is described well and with much insight by the author. We learn that Nietzsche's cheerfulness is not due to good luck or good fortune. It is also not due to naturally given light-heartedness but is the outcome of an often heroic struggle against gloom and despair and thus more akin to serenity than happiness. In fact, Nietzsche's cheerfulness is deep, serious, fearless, playful as well as painful, even full of foreboding as told by Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* 343 to which the author refers repeatedly (it needs pointing out, though, that GS 343 is in Book Five of that work, written in 1887, and thus no longer part of Nietzsche's middle period). Still, GS 343 makes it clear that Nietzsche's complex kind of cheerfulness can never be taken for granted but needs to be validated, refashioned, and re-conquered continuously.

Ansell-Pearson's describes the unique characteristics of Nietzsche's middle period with great learning and illuminating subtle expositions of key texts. He also calls on thinkers and philosophers, old and new, to bear witness to his findings. When going back now to Nietzsche's letter to Lou Salome of July 2, 1882, mentioned above, we can see that Nietzsche too agrees with Ansell-Pearson's description—at least in part. In this letter, Nietzsche looks back on aspects of his life during what we call his "middle years" before looking ahead to exciting new horizons (which, alas, never materialised). He writes to Lou:

... I have just finished the very last part of the manuscript [of The Gay Science] and therewith the work of six years (1876–82), my entire Freigeisterei. O what years! What tortures of every kind, what solitudes and weariness with life! And against all that, as it were against death and life, I have brewed this medicine of mine, these thoughts with their small strip of unclouded sky overhead. O dear friend, whenever I think of it, I am thrilled and touched (erschüttert and gerührt) and do not know how I could have succeeded in doing it—I am filled with self-compassion and the sense of victory. For it is a victory, and a complete one—. (Middleton, 1996, p. 185, Nietzsche's italics)

Note the complexity: the exaltation of victory together with compassion for tortures endured; the necessity to relentlessly pursue self-knowledge in order to be capable to "brew" just the right kind of medicine for the right kind of self-care; and, in particular, the "small strip of unclouded sky"—that precious but quite fragile moment of cheerfulness continuously hedged in and threatened by clouds. So Nietzsche's brief self-disclosure confirms two aspects attributed to him in their avowed complexity by Ansell-Pearson: self-care and cheerfulness. But where is modesty?

The emphasis placed by Ansell-Pearson on Nietzsche's modesty in his middle period is the one aspect of his book which deeply troubles me. While the author gives us a gentle warning that "the middle Nietzsche can be hard in his own way" (p. 1), the Nietzsche that actually emerges in his book does not bear that out. While most ordinary persons would find the pursuit of self- and other-therapy with the aim of achieving a serene kind of cheerfulness a sufficiently challenging goal for one's life, this is not the case with Nietzsche. Nietzsche was not modest, nor was he a great therapist. He was a great innovator with big aims even in his middle period. Aims such as tempting readers away from their comfortable, well-worn morality, "cooling them down" only in order to heat them up again for bigger tasks and bigger horizons, permitting only rare moments of serene relaxation in their enclosed gardens because continuously challenging them to press further. These are hardly modest works or modest goals! Hence, I fear that the Nietzsche described by Ansell-Pearson is altogether too gentle, too serene, indeed much too harmless, to be still

recognisably Nietzsche. Outbursts of deep dissatisfactions, an impatient eagerness for new goals, fierce visions of liberating upheavals and of destructions necessary for creation are already there, more or less clearly, in the middle period. They burst out with full force in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, published in 1883, just one year after the publication of the middle period work *The Gay Science*. And Zarathustra, without a trace of modesty and alternating between contempt and ridicule, chastises the pursuit of introspective self-care and the cultivation of our merely human qualities, urging us instead to leave all this behind in order to prepare for and hasten the arrival of the *Übermensch*.

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