

Nietzsche's Search for Philosophy: On the Middle Writings

Keith Ansell-Pearson

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In *Nietzsche's Search for Philosophy – On the Middle Writings*, Keith Ansell-Pearson directs his interpretive gaze to the middle writings of Nietzsche's oeuvre, namely *Human, All Too Human (HAH)*, *Dawn* and *The Gay Science (GS)*. While at least in German Nietzsche scholarship, it is rather debatable whether or not the middle writings should have been considered "neglected" – with perhaps *Dawn* being a reasonable exception – it is important to read them as more than merely a detour from the "real Nietzsche" found in the *Birth of Tragedy* and then the late works. While Ansell-Pearson does not presume a homogeneous philosophical approach in the middle works, he characterizes the period as a whole and each work in itself as containing important aspects of Nietzsche's "search for philosophy", especially in consideration of Nietzsche's attempts to "unify thought and life" (4) in what is labelled a "philosophical life" (4).

In the introduction, the author explains the relevance of the middle works and pushes back against attempts to isolate Nietzsche's main philosophy in the early or late works – or even in posthumous fragments. The chapters

are structured as pairs, each consisting of one essay introducing the reader to the respective text and Nietzsche's model of philosophizing, followed by an additional "subsidiary chapter on a prominent theme, or set of themes that appear in each text" (6). The primary chapters begin with a brief summary of the main claims followed by precise and well-structured introductions to the respective work. Every chapter though is worthwhile exploring, as the readings provided by Ansell-Pearson present unique perspectives on Nietzsche's philosophical approaches and the reasoning and influences behind them. However, in contrast to what the author suggests, the book does not offer a cohesive interpretation of the middle works. This is because the "chapters" originate from sometimes multiple presentations or papers, resulting in some repetitions, abrupt changes of scope in lines of arguments and conclusions that do not always succeed in retrospectively unifying the arguments of the chapter.

The first chapter provides a precise introduction to *Human, All Too Human*. Ansell-Pearson's main claim concerns a development from the first to the second part of *HAH*. He states that while Nietzsche "negotiates the competing claims of the positivist goal of science and eudemonistic philosophy by aligning himself with the former, in *MOM* and *WS* he seeks to marry the project of naturalistic demystification with an ethical project of seeking 'spiritual-physical health and maturity' (*MOM* 184)" (18). The first part of this enterprise is achieved through a comprehensive and lucid discussion of "Nietzsche's dilemma" (31) referring to the potential incompatibility of knowledge and humanity's well-being. However, the discussion of the second part is rushed and after short remarks on Nietzsche's reconsideration of previously criticized thinkers of Ancient Greece, Ansell-Pearson turns towards the teachings of Epicurus, providing the reader with a valuable and detailed summary of the Greek thinker's philosophical framework. As for the application of this Epicurean framework on Nietzsche though, I must admit strong reservations on whether the "project of sobriety" (18) should really be considered Nietzsche's response to the modern condition he diagnoses. While this therapeutic-philosophical approach might be an option discussed by Ni-

etzsche in regard to the advancing devaluation of orienting frameworks of belief through science, the resulting humanity of cooler temperament presented in *HAH* 34 appears more of a scientifically disillusioned afterthought, foreshadowing the impossibility of a positivistic set of values, rather than an early conception of the free spirit. Applying this portrayal of wise humanity to the “free spirit” is thus problematic at best. To extract a comprehensive model of the free spirit in the middle works, it would have at least been important to also explore the later passages contrasting the bound spirit and the “free spirit” (*HAH* 225), thus passages in which the free spirit is referred to by concept. Even though Nietzsche uses the term “Freigeist”, which is often used in a polemic function, it is precisely this pairing of bound spirits and free spirits that Nietzsche refers to in the late Preface (3) when talking about becoming a free spirit himself. Still, Ansell-Pearson presents an original reading and makes this genuine position seem like an idea Nietzsche strongly considered, even if his claim that this therapeutic approach constitutes Nietzsche’s primary path in his search for philosophy is ultimately unconvincing. Ansell-Pearson provides valuable insights into an often neglected aspect of the middle works. The recurring passages on Nietzsche and Epicurus are illuminating concerning the Greek philosopher’s profound influence on Nietzsche, as well as the ways in which Nietzsche’s reading of Epicurus gives the tradition of thought a genuinely modern application.

Ansell-Pearson continues his reading of the middle works in the second chapter discussing ‘Nietzsche on Enlightenment and Revolution’, illuminating Nietzsche’s scope in his critique of morality. He carefully follows Nietzsche’s disentanglement of the revolutionary French Enlightenment movement and the core ideals of Enlightenment, and carves out the distinction between an aspired perpetual social transformation through knowledge and the fanatic state of revolution claiming Enlightenment as its historical basis. Especially interesting is the author’s discussion of the “German hostility to the Enlightenment”, showing how the antiquarian nature of German thought results in the production of a critical historical science which lead to a more profound critique of social institutions, allowing for the analysis of

how “[e]verything that comes into existence [...] plants its own foundations of history” (52). Ansell-Pearson understands the moral critique in *Dawn* as part of an exploration of “mature morality” by Nietzsche, referring to an ethics of self-sufficiency he claims Nietzsche adopted from the teachings of Epictetus. Thus, Nietzsche’s project of sobriety is considered to be continued in *Dawn*, staging it in direct opposition to a heated contemporary fanaticism.

After an insightful introduction, Chapter 3 on ‘*Dawn* and the Passion of Knowledge’ does not hold up to the high compositional standard of other chapters. The scope of the main line of argument shifts several times and while the paper delivers insightful interpretations of both well-known passages and hidden gems within *Dawn*, no consistent theme derives from these interpretations. In part, this might result from the main topic, the “passion of knowledge” being confounded with “passion for knowledge”. This problematically aligns the individual philosopher’s emotional disposition towards knowledge, allowing for passionate affirmation of life in absence of metaphysical fulfilment with what is later labelled the “will to truth”, the unquestioned belief in the objective value of truth over any sort of affirmative narrative, two lines of thought that should be treated separately. While Ansell-Pearson’s interpretations of the aphorisms of *Dawn* are a valuable read, the third chapter cannot hold up to the high standard of argument as delivered in the other essays, especially not in light of the two other exemplary commentaries on *Dawn*, chapter 2 (which draws more on *Dawn* than on *HAH*) and chapter 4, which frame many of the quoted passages from this chapter in a more relevant perspective.

The fourth essay combines prior themes in a precise analysis of Nietzsche’s considerations of ethics in the middle writings culminating in a model of care of self, influenced by Stoic and Epicurean traditions but modified by Nietzsche to be applicable to the modern condition of humanity. Ansell-Pearson not only astutely follows Nietzsche’s critique of any morality affirming itself as exclusive, but also describes his considerations concerning other modes of morality or ethical codes as possible alternatives. He criticizes the modern equation of morality and compassion and turns towards

ancient Greek ideals of ethics, namely models of a healthy egoism and a positive connotation of care of self. The line of argument is concise and especially the provided Foucauldian perspective adds further depth to this reading of *Dawn*. The paper is a valuable read not only for readers acquainted with Foucault or the Greek teachings, but for anyone aspiring a better understanding of Nietzsche's ethical thinking in *Dawn* and the middle works in general.

The fifth chapter poses some riddles to a reader interested in the middle works of Nietzsche. Ansell-Pearson continues his analysis of Nietzsche's search for philosophy in *The Gay Science*, which has rightfully received much attention lately. He focuses on two things, probing the meaning of Nietzsche's cultivation of philosophical cheerfulness and contesting Pippin's claim that Nietzsche leaves the grounds of philosophy in doing so. He understands cheerfulness as an experience of joy by the convalescent thinker concerning the problematic nature of life and philosophy. This addresses what he considers a fundamental tension of the text, regarding the lightness in style and tone, and the seriousness and gravity of the ideas discussed in this manner. The general summary of the task of a gay science as practicing life as a means to knowledge and cultivating knowledge as the most powerful passion (119) is fruitfully supported by the idea that while the prior works of the middle period showed the destructive power of science and knowledge, the *Gay Science* is also an attempt to find out "whether science can now furnish and fashion goals of existence after it has demonstrated it can take away goals and annihilate them" (119). For a discussion concerning both the destructive potential of modern science and the search for new grounds for orientation, passages on the Death of God provide important material to interpret. However, Ansell-Pearson chooses to approach this interpretation mainly through the preface and the fifth book of the *Gay Science*, both late additions of the second edition from 1886. This choice should have been explained in the text, especially since the passages surrounding GS 125 offer fruitful material that could have been used – especially GS 143 contrasting polytheism and monotheism as well as passages on *amor fati* from the fourth book. It is unclear, why the focus has been laid on passages from the "late Nietzsche" and not the one in search of

philosophy that is generally referred to. While this choice is peculiar, it is not so much an argument against Ansell-Pearson's reading, but rather describes a missed opportunity for providing a more comprehensive understanding of the middle works in themselves. His conclusions provide a twofold understanding of cheerfulness. On the one hand, he describes cheerfulness as a philosophical disposition of the convalescent loving life not in spite of, but because of its problematic character (130). On the other hand he describes an instinctive fearlessness of the philosopher towards life and existence and towards potential dangers of knowledge he aspires to uncover. He can thus argue against Pippin with a Deleuzian interpretation that Nietzsche counteracts the development towards only "reactive forms of life and the accusatory forms of thought" (134), with a cheerful appreciative philosophy that enjoys the new problematic nature of life and reality.

In the final chapter, Ansell-Pearson returns to his approximation of Nietzsche's middle works to being deeply shaped in relation to the philosophy of Epicurus. He explores the idea of the "heroic-idyllic", with the Epicurean garden as its symbol. Again, the author provides the reader with many interesting insights into the Greek philosopher's frame of thought. The chapter leads through various aphorisms, trying to establish the Epicurean thinking as a major theme in *The Gay Science*, contrasting the late idea of Dionysian joy with the Epicurean "heroic-idyllic" in the middle works. One aspect that strikes me again as peculiar in the final chapters is the complete absence of references to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, even though at least in the time the *Gay Science* was written, the fictional philosopher was already present in Nietzsche's thinking – and as Brusotti illustrated, Zarathustra even appeared in early drafts of GS, namely in GS 125 proclaiming the Death of God.¹ There might be several good reasons to exclude *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* from this analysis, as it is a valid approach to interpret the middle writings without

¹See Brusotti, Marco: *Die Leidenschaft der Erkenntnis – Philosophie und ästhetische Lebensgestaltung bei Nietzsche von Morgenröthe bis Also sprach Zarathustra*. Berlin, 1997, p. 404-423 for a comprehensive study of the early stages of the aphorism.

this looming shadow. However, especially concerning the idea of the heroic-
idyllic, *Zarathustra* could have provided with an interesting transitional stage
between the two positions discussed in this chapter. Also, as the project of
sobriety plays such an important role in Ansell-Pearson's reading, it would
have been especially interesting to see how the idea of a "philosophy of mod-
esty" and the style of philosophizing portrayed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*
could fit together.

Another aspect that appears to be a missed opportunity concerning Ansell-
Pearson's book as a whole, is the lack of a clear hermeneutical or philological
position towards the late prefaces that were added to these works in 1886. As
no discussion of their status is made, their use seems arbitrary. In my opin-
ion it would both have been legitimate to either include the passages and talk
about a body of works that Nietzsche retrospectively stylized in a certain way
in 1886. As Ansell-Pearson's book concerns a chronological limitation to the
middle works, the use of these passages need justification. However, in some
arguments, the prefaces or the fifth book of the *Gay Science* are used to in-
terpret ideas concerning the middle works without further reflection on the
different status of the passages. In other chapters, the prefaces are excluded,
even though they could have provided a more comprehensive perspective or
at least a contrasting view allowing for a deeper understanding of the genuine
search for philosophy in the middle writings. As much as it appears reason-
able to not take Nietzsche at his word concerning the later evaluations of his
middle texts, a brief discussion as to how and why the author chose to re-
gard or disregard these passages – thus a clear hermeneutical or philological
position on these passages – would have provided for a more comprehensive
understanding of Nietzsche's "middle works".

A reading of Nietzsche as a philosopher trying to calm down the human
mind, aspiring to a therapeutically prepared humanity of mild temperament,
fighting against fanaticism for a new enlightenment by developing an ethical
model of care of self to provide for a cheerful attitude towards the prob-
lematic aspects of life, would be expected to provoke scepticism. However,
even though there are aspects of the reading that are questionable, this study

constitutes both a philosophically valuable and enjoyable read. While I have
some reservations concerning Ansell-Pearson's hermeneutical approach to
the middle writings, this should not distract from the fact that the book de-
livers insightful and original interpretations of a most interesting time in
Nietzsche's body of work. This book is recommended to every scholar in-
terested in working with the middle works, as well as to scholars interested
in a systematic study of Nietzsche's references to and employment of the
Stoic and Epicurean traditions.