

# The judgement of Nietzsche: philosophy, politics, modernity

DAVID OWEN

---

Keith Ansell-Pearson (ed.), *Nietzsche and Modern German Thought*. London: Routledge, 1991. £40.00, 314 pp.

Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Nietzsche contra Rousseau*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. £35.00, xvii + 284 pp.

---

When in 1892 an advertisement appeared for a new book on Nietzsche, it played on the idea that ‘the whole cultural world is stirred’ by his importance. ‘Naturally Nietzsche was discussed’, someone remarked about a meeting of a cultural society which he had just attended, for where ‘would one not now be talking about Nietzsche?’<sup>1</sup>

It is a measure of Nietzsche’s significance to contemporary culture that were a printing error to add a hundred years to the date cited in this report it would retain its validity (this despite the damage to Nietzsche’s reputation occasioned by the Nazi appropriation of his name). Today it would scarcely be overstating the case to suggest that Nietzsche has assumed a pre-eminent position in the philosophical *agon* (although Hegel, as ever, remains owl-eyed on the edges of the arena). Certainly, Nietzsche’s thought seems to demand confrontation and contemporary cultural critics have all too readily obliged, locating it as a moment in the internal unfolding of modernity’s crisis-consciousness (Strauss, MacIntyre), as an irrationalist rupture with the incomplete project of modernity (Habermas), as a postmodern space within which thinking can begin anew (Lyotard, Foucault), and as an ironic and playful deconstruction of metaphysics

(Rorty, Derrida), to name but a few. The question of Nietzsche's relationship to the tradition of modern thought, it seems, poses as many problems as the question of modernity itself; problems, moreover, which exhibit a certain isomorphic relationship in that the topic of Nietzsche's continuation of, or rupture with, modern thought parallels that of modernity as continuing, or breaking with, the Judeo-Christian tradition. In this context, the claims made with respect to Nietzsche's thought are inevitably also claims concerning the character of modernity and the legitimacy of modernity's consciousness of itself; to try to get clear about Nietzsche's position is always already to try to clarify our own modern or postmodern location. Both *Nietzsche and Modern German Thought* and *Nietzsche contra Rousseau* take up this quest of self-clarification attending to the philosophical and political dimensions of this task respectively.

### NIETZSCHE, KANT AND MODERN PHILOSOPHY

If it is Descartes' project of radical doubt which initiates the modern turn in philosophy, it is, perhaps, Kant's 'Copernican Revolution' which represents the triumphant moment of a self-assured sensibility fully conscious of its own modernity. The heart of this self-conscious modernity lies in Kant's claim to ground reason in itself, that is, to eschew any reliance on external supports such as nature, theology or metaphysics. In seeking to establish what one can know, what one should do, and what one can hope for, by reference to a self-determining subject, Kant rejects the authority of religion and tradition in favour of the reflexive authority of reason. Modernity as enlightenment, as maturity, proclaims itself in Kant's work as both a completion of the philosophical tradition and a rupture with this tradition in that it fulfils the theoretical tasks of reason (enlightenment) and, thereby, creates the space within which the practical realization of these tasks (maturity) becomes possible. Indeed, in this respect, Kant may be presented as initiating the paradigmatic genre of modern thought, namely, the end of philosophy thesis. It is, however, precisely in this moment of self-assurance that consciousness of our modernity also becomes characterized by the motif of 'crisis'.

The development of this crisis-consciousness may be located in the starting point of Kant's critical philosophy itself, namely, the antinomy of causality;<sup>2</sup> here Kant sets out two arguments concerning causality which appear to be equally grounded in reason. The thesis involves the contention that, in accordance with the principle of sufficient determination, the idea of causality itself requires the existence of a free causality (a first or final cause). The antithesis, however, embodies the claim that, in accordance with the principle of non-contradiction, the idea of a free causality undermines the idea of causality itself in which all causes are themselves already effects. The mutually exclusive positions expressed in this antinomy arise, for Kant, out of the tendency of

theoretical reason to transgress its limits, the boundaries of experience within which it holds sway. Kant's resolution of this dilemma involves the positing of two isomorphic realms of reason: the realm of theoretical reason defined as a phenomenal realm of appearances determined by the scientific laws of nature and the realm of practical reason identified as the noumenal realm of things-in-themselves governed by the moral law of freedom. But does this resolution really work? As one commentator has noted:

Kant solves the antinomy by demonstrating that the contradiction is not in the real world but in consciousness. But does this not make consciousness itself contradictory? The suspicion arises that Kant's solution is in fact only a deeper and more trenchant problem. He seems to have saved science and morality only by sacrificing man, to have preserved the unity of the world by giving up the unity of consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

This suspicion receives its confirmation when we consider what has been termed Kant's *historical antinomy*. The difficulty identified here is that while Kant's system requires the idea of a history of reason (and, indeed, gains its authority from a claim to complete this history), it also rules out the idea of a history of reason:

For reason to be a historical principle, it must be embodied in actual time. Yet time, according to Kant's *Transcendental Esthetics* is merely a 'form of intuition' that cannot apply to reason at all, only to empirical data categorized by the forms of understanding. Yet both theories are equally necessary to Kant's philosophy. They both stem from Kant's presuppositions, the denial of which would incur an intolerable price.<sup>4</sup>

Ironically, it appears that Kant's attempt to resolve the antinomy of causality ends by reproducing a formally isomorphic antinomy in which the principle of sufficient determination requires that reason have a history, while the principle of non-contradiction rules out such a history. The significance of this antinomy is not simply that it cannot be overcome by reference to a transcendental postulate, but also that it provides the impetus for Nietzsche's and Hegel's transformation of Kant's antinomy of causality into an *agonism* of freedom and determination and a *dialectic* of freedom and determination respectively. In both cases, the problem of the crisis of consciousness becomes a problem of historical consciousness, that is, a question of time in which Kantian dualism is transformed into philosophical monisms structured around the Nietzschean metaphor of *will to power* and the Hegelian metaphor of *Geist*.

One consequence of this transformation of the tasks of philosophy is simply this: post-Kantian thought must be capable of accounting for its own historical conditions of possibility. To put this more prosaically, Nietzsche and Hegel must specify the nature of their relationships to the philosophical tradition as an immanent task of their philosophical thoughts. In this context, to judge

Nietzsche's philosophy is at least in part to interrogate the coherence of his account of the tradition and his relationship to it.

It is this topic which John Walker addresses, through the staging of a confrontation between Nietzsche and Hegel, in his essay 'Nietzsche, Christianity, and the Legitimacy of Tradition'. The argument Walker develops operates a double-focus: on the one hand, he attempts to suggest that Nietzsche's own conceptualization of his relationship to the Christian tradition is profoundly flawed and, on the other hand, his question concerns how one should read Nietzsche's relationship to modern thought. The spur to arms which animates this argument is an underlying unhappiness with recent (and influential) French readings of Nietzsche which locate his texts as resisting 'dialectical integration into the history of philosophy'.<sup>5</sup> These readings, on Walker's account, find their legitimation in the rhetoric of rupture which pervades Nietzsche's texts; a rhetoric which proclaims the creation of a new philosophy, which is perhaps also a philosophy of the new. Yet, Walker claims, Nietzsche's attempt to overcome metaphysics – 'a form of thought divided against life'<sup>6</sup> – can only be understood in terms of the tradition of metaphysics, that is, the logic of Nietzsche's argument denies its rhetoric. To develop this claim, Walker attempts to illustrate, first, that Nietzsche mistakenly reads Kant's epistemological arguments as existential arguments and, second, that this misreading stems 'from a central contradiction in Nietzsche's very idea of what "metaphysics" means':

By metaphysics Nietzsche means both a body of philosophical doctrines and a mode of being: an existential attitude which we can choose to adopt or not to adopt in relation to our experience as a whole. Nietzsche's critique of all hitherto existing philosophy relies for its rhetorical force upon an attack on metaphysics in the second sense. But it relies for many of its arguments on Kant's critique of metaphysics in the first sense. The problem is that Nietzsche's arguments are at odds with his rhetoric, and his rhetoric is at odds with his argument.<sup>7</sup>

It is, moreover, precisely because 'Nietzsche's epistemological arguments against metaphysical doctrines . . . are utterly different in character from the existential arguments which he directs against the metaphysical conception of the activity of philosophy itself'<sup>8</sup> that a related problem emerges in the context of Nietzsche's understanding of the significance of Christianity for his own thought. In contrast to Hegel, whose arguments are both epistemological and existential on Walker's account, Nietzsche's thought cannot hold to the claim that it inaugurates a postmetaphysical philosophy and also say that the truth this philosophy expounds is disclosed by the history of Christianity without an immanent principle which would unify the epistemological and existential; this, however, is exactly what Nietzsche's philosophy lacks. It is, in the end, this incoherence in Nietzsche's argument which leads Walker to suggest that it is only by reading

Nietzsche *not* as breaking with the philosophical tradition but as initiating a crisis *within* this tradition that we can reclaim the pertinence of Nietzsche's critique of modernity while eschewing its antinomies.

The force of Walker's case, however, depends crucially on the claim that Nietzsche's philosophy does not possess an immanent principle capable of playing the role of uniting the epistemological and the existential in the way that reason understood as 'the immanent form of experience itself'<sup>9</sup> does in Hegel's thought. This is, however, by no means transparently the case as the essay by George Stack illustrates. In 'Kant, Lange, Nietzsche: Critique of Knowledge', Stack presents a scholarly case for reading Nietzsche's critical relationship to Kant as mediated by Lange's *History of Materialism* in which a conventionalist account of knowledge is linked to the 'physico-psychological organisation' of the organic individual. Stack presents this argument as illustrating a path on the route to the idea of will-to-power and its correlate in a perspectival theory of affects. The implication of this reading, which locates Nietzsche's thought as a radicalization of the project of epistemology (and also, perhaps, as a closure of this project), is to suggest that the epistemological question concerning the conditions of possibility of knowledge is always already an existential question. For if Nietzsche, creatively completing Lange's argument, comes to regard Kant's constitutive ideas of reason as simply regulative principles, it follows that the epistemological question 'How are synthetic a priori judgements possible?' is necessarily transposed into the existential question 'Why are synthetic a priori judgements necessary?' This existential dimension is, moreover, inevitably the location of a historical philosophy insofar as the question must always be one of why (and how) it is that we have come to hold *these* (e.g. Kant's) synthetic a priori judgements.

This movement towards the suggestion that Nietzsche's philosophical arguments are both existential and epistemological receives further impetus through Nicholas Davey's 'Hermeneutics and Nietzsche's Early Thought'. In this essay, Davey convincingly locates Nietzsche's thought within the context of the hermeneutic tradition as concerned with the practical understanding of ourselves to be gained through an interpretative engagement with the past. Central to Davey's argument is a siting of Nietzsche's concept of *Lebenshorizonten* as the a priori judgements of a culture, that is, the structures of recognition through which understanding is articulated, and an acknowledgement that the cognitive frameworks which attend these structures are necessarily incommensurable with the actuality of Becoming. The implication of these two claims is that Nietzsche's position entails both the historical specificity of its own understanding and yet also recognizes that the incommensurability of the language of Being and the actuality of Becoming entails that 'the epistemological fracture between sense and reason and the accompanying existential dread it provokes is an *imminent possibility for all individuals regardless of culture or historical location*'.<sup>10</sup> The significance of this Schopenhauerian insight for

Nietzsche, on Davey's account, is that although 'two cultures may operate within different cognitive schemata with mutually exclusive presuppositions, both may share approximate forms of that existential anxiety which results from the realization that reality as conceived within either schema is not congruent with the actual'.<sup>11</sup> As Davey goes on to point out, it is on this foundation of a universal existential predicament that Nietzsche's hermeneutics, and in particular his overcoming of the problem of historical distance, rests. Again, however, we may note that this argument also entails the coincidence of the epistemological and the existential within Nietzsche's accounts insofar as it is the impossibility of the epistemological project of a universal and ahistorical understanding which defines our common existential predicament. Further, it is this existential position which informs us why synthetic a priori judgements are necessary in that it is these judgements which constitute the *Lebenshorizonten* within which existence is possible without existential dread. The historical question, thus, once again becomes 'Why *these* synthetic a priori judgements?'; it is in identifying, and accounting for, these judgements that Nietzsche's relationship to the tradition, and the adequacy of his thinking of this relationship, exhibits itself.

In analysing the development of Nietzsche's thought both Stack and Davey present a figure on the way to the idea of will-to-power as an immanent principle of critique, that is, as the principle through which Nietzsche's genealogical investigations are articulated. The character of this idea and the relationship to the tradition it engenders are exhibited in Keith Ansell-Pearson's essay 'Nietzsche and the Problem of the Will in Modernity' and Ian Forbes's 'Marx and Nietzsche: the Individual in History'. For both Ansell-Pearson and Forbes, the idea of will-to-power denotes a drive for freedom, that is, the ability to realize oneself as an autonomous agent in the world, which provides a mode of accounting for how we have become what we are without reference to a metaphysical notion of the subject. As Ansell-Pearson puts it:

By positing the unity of 'will' and 'power' in the formulation 'will-to-power' Nietzsche attempts to overcome the notion of the will found in the philosophical tradition in which the will is conceived metaphysically as a noumenal substratum lying behind all action, and which posits a metaphysical doer behind every deed.<sup>12</sup>

It is through this principle that Nietzsche attempts to generate an account of how it is that Kant's synthetic a priori judgements become thinkable. Consider first the mode of accounting Nietzsche is able to generate:

In *On the Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche employs the will to power as a principle of 'historical method' in order to disclose the misrecognised will to power of the weak and oppressed. Under certain historical circumstances the will to power assumes the form of a will to dominate, not on account of the largely instinctual and pre-reflective actions of the 'masters',

but via the slave revolt in morality which internalises the will to power. It is at this point in the social evolution of the human animal that intentions are ascribed to action and man develops a 'soul'.<sup>13</sup>

This internalization of the will-to-power is based, for Nietzsche, on the 'ressentiment' of the slave; that is, unable to realize themselves as autonomous agents in the world, the slaves engage in an imaginary revenge against the nobles through an inversion of the 'natural' order of values and to ground this revenge invent the idea of the subject to facilitate the ascription of guilt to the nobles and of merit to themselves.<sup>14</sup> The slave-revolt in morals, in other words, is the primary historical condition of possibility of Kant's epistemological project and, further, Kant's moral philosophy remains, for Nietzsche, complicit with this spirit of revenge against life. As this implies, existential and epistemological questions are unified under the principle of will-to-power. What then of Nietzsche's relationship to the tradition of modern thought?

Two interrelated points may be drawn from the discussion as bearing on this question. First, it is apparent that Nietzsche may be read as exhibiting a certain scepticism towards modern thought's consciousness of itself as a radical break with the Judeo-Christian tradition. Modern philosophy from Descartes to Kant is fundamentally structured as an epistemological project which derives its legitimacy from the Christian idea of the soul. At the same time, as Forbes notes,<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche does operate with an epochal concept of modernity as a rupture with this tradition, where modernity is presented as that uncanniest of all guests – nihilism. In other words, it is the death of God which defines the modern condition, that is, the collapse of the idea of the subject and of any foundations for values. Modernity's consciousness of itself, for Nietzsche, is not marked by the self-assured Kantian concepts of enlightenment and maturity, but by a radical dis-ease which undermines all grounds of assurance. The second point follows on from this insofar as Nietzsche's thought, while it can only be understood in relation to the tradition which makes it possible, seems to mark a break with 'modern' thought in abandoning the idea of the subject in terms of which he defines the tradition. Is Nietzsche then a 'postmodern' figure? We will return to this topic in the concluding section of this article; for the moment, however, we can approach this question of Nietzsche's relation to 'modern' thought via an alternative route, namely, his relation to modern political thought.

### NIETZSCHE, ROUSSEAU, AND MODERN POLITICAL THOUGHT

The question of Nietzsche's relationship to modern political thought is the central issue of *Nietzsche contra Rousseau*. In this passionate work, Keith Ansell-Pearson attempts to read Nietzsche's relation to politics and modernity through the staging of a confrontation between Nietzsche and Rousseau. The

appositeness of this strategy lies not merely in the fact that Nietzsche consciously opposes his thought to that expressed by Rousseau, but also in the argument that it is in Rousseau's texts that the antinomies of modern political thought find their clearest expression. If, as Ansell-Pearson argues in a scholarly opening chapter, 'Nietzsche is compelled to exaggerate and distort certain aspects of Rousseau's moral and political thought in order to highlight, in a rhetorical manner, his challenge to the Christian-moral tradition and its secular successors',<sup>16</sup> a more nuanced reading of their relationship may reveal insights into both the character of Nietzsche's political thought and its relationship to the tradition of modern political thought.

Nietzsche and Rousseau, Ansell-Pearson argues, may be read both as addressing the problem of civilization – its costs and quandaries – through the idea of history and as attempting to resolve this problem through the elaboration of a transfigurative politics. The readings of history they develop and the type of politics they present, however, are radically distinct. Rousseau is 'the political philosopher who "discovers" history to be the central problem of the modern experience of existence',<sup>17</sup> yet Rousseau's *moral* reading of history exhibits a 'terrible ambiguity':

Only in this world, the world that is the product of historical development, can man attain moral freedom, for such freedom requires a sense of rationality and self-discipline which is the result of the historical evolution of the social animal. And yet this same process of historical development leads to the destruction of man's simple, transparent, self-sufficient happiness.<sup>18</sup>

For Rousseau, time manifests itself as the enemy of harmony and happiness in that the impossibility of going back to an age of innocence entails that our only hope of redemption lies in a future which historical development suggests can only further erode this hope: 'Rousseau thus confronts us with an antinomy, that of nature on the one hand, and of civil society, morality, reason, and history on the other.'<sup>19</sup> In contrast, Nietzsche's *extra-moral* reading of history, while it recognizes the costs of modern man's historical consciousness, poses the problem of civilization as a problem of time, of man's relationship with the past, which requires the overcoming of the *weight* of our historical consciousness (exhibited in Rousseau's all-too-human 'ressentiment' towards time) through a creative future willing which affirms time's 'it was'.

To explore this contrast further we can begin by focusing on Ansell-Pearson's reading of Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality of Mankind* and *Social Contract* as illuminating the antinomies of modern political thought. For Ansell-Pearson, the problem posed by Rousseau's secular account of the corruption of man is simply this:

History is only meaningful to the extent that it leads to a moral end: namely, man as an ethical, self-legislating and autonomous agent. But if



one loses one's faith in history, as Rousseau did, then one's construal of the problem of civilisation must culminate either in a paralysis of the will, or in an attempt to transcend the problem of history altogether.<sup>20</sup>

While Rousseau exhibits both these responses, the impossibility of returning to a state of natural goodness leads him towards the articulation of a conception of civic virtue elaborated in a politics which transcends the problem of history. In other words, Rousseau's 'ressentiment' towards time exhibits itself in the construal of a notion of the general will as beyond the vagaries of social and historical life.

We may note to begin with that while the idea of the general will represents a brilliant attempt to transcend the antinomies of modern political thought through a speculative reconciliation of individual and collective autonomy, the key question becomes that of how the individual is to be educated to the level of the general will. Rousseau's response is that it is through the law that this process occurs, but as he himself recognizes this does not resolve the difficulty:

The paradox can be enumerated as follows: If the law provides the means by which the individual elevates itself to the level of the general will – and by which it becomes *moral* – how is it possible for the will of every member to be brought into conformity with the general will? Would individuals not have to *be* moral before they *become* moral?<sup>21</sup>

Rousseau's resolution of this paradox lies in the figure of the legislator who 'must persuade without convincing and constrain without force'.<sup>22</sup> But is this not simply to displace the antinomies of political reason onto another level? Moreover, the impossible figure of the legislator, like the social contract which requires him, is located in an abstract normative space outside of historical time. As Ansell-Pearson argues, the *Social Contract* elides the problem of the movement from an unjust society to a just one by siting itself in an imaginary time in which 'Rousseau moves straight from the state of nature to the decision which establishes the primacy of the general will'.<sup>23</sup> While the strength of Rousseau's idea of the general will lies in illustrating that any adequate response to the modern problem of legitimation must involve a theory of democratic participation, its weakness lies in its avoidance of the problem of history. To put this starkly, having constructed the problem of modern man's existence as a problem of history, Rousseau's political solution to this problem is no solution at all but, rather, a denial of the problem of time facilitated through the construction of the idea of the general will within the space of an atemporal imaginary politics. The central antinomy of Rousseau's thought, on this account, concerns the relationship between time and morality, between history and politics, an antinomy which remains unresolved in his work. The question which arises out of this concerns the relationship of Nietzsche's thought to the problem of history and to the antinomies of political thought which Rousseau attempts to overcome.

Nietzsche's reading of history in *On the Genealogy of Morals* may be seen, at least in part, as inverting the reading offered in Rousseau's second discourse, for while Nietzsche is similarly concerned with presenting a teaching on how to live one's life in accordance with nature, 'nature' itself is presented not as moral but as extra-moral. In this context, Rousseau's ideas of 'natural' morality and natural law exhibit, for Nietzsche, the 'ressentiment' of slave-morality against life. That Rousseau's thought is finally trapped within the problem of time simply manifests the frustration and eventual impotence of this spirit of revenge. By contrast, for Nietzsche, history does not depend for its meaning on the achievement of a moral end, rather, time's 'it was' is redeemed through a creative future willing which is 'beyond good and evil'. In this respect, *On the Genealogy of Morals* plays a double role in Nietzsche's thought being both an account of how we have become what we are, namely, beings for whom the value of values has been called into question, and an exemplification of the redemption of history.

In the first essay of the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche attempts to illustrate how man becomes moralized through an account of the slave-revolt in morals. The genius of this revolt is expressed in the phenomenon of 'ressentiment' as the creative negation of that which exists outside of it: 'the slave morality is totally dependent on a hostile external world for its identity'.<sup>24</sup> What is involved here, for Nietzsche, is an anti-natural devaluation of the world of experience through the construction of an imaginary transcendent realm. Yet insofar as this revolt is itself a manifestation of nature as will-to-power, this anti-natural morality is itself natural, that is, it represents the paradoxical phenomenon of nature contra nature. Nietzsche accounts for this by describing morality as the means by which degenerating life preserves itself. Morality makes suffering meaningful and, thereby, provides a reason for living. However, as Ansell-Pearson notes, Nietzsche's thought confronts a dilemma here: 'If individuals have been taught to be "good" through a process of moralization, how can they now be taught to be "beyond good and evil"?'<sup>25</sup> To put this in the context of modernity as nihilism, we might say that while the death of God destroys grounds of morality, this does not abolish the desire to tell ourselves metaphysical lies, it only makes it impossible for us to believe in these lies, although it is precisely these lies which made life endurable. Here we can see the double role of the *Genealogy*: on the one hand, Nietzsche presents a critique of slave-morality as a denial of life which engenders the desire to believe in metaphysics, while, on the other hand, Nietzsche affirms the slave-morality as producing that capacity for intellectual honesty which finally makes it impossible for us to believe in metaphysics and, thus, opens up the possibility of a new thinking which affirms life.

This possibility, however, still requires that Nietzsche elaborate a teaching in terms of which man as Overman overcomes his 'ressentiment' towards the ever-changing world of experience, towards time's 'it was'. Ansell-Pearson examines this topic through a close analysis of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in which

the central issue raised is the possibility of teaching the Overman who can affirm time's 'it was'. On the account offered, Nietzsche rapidly runs into a problem which appears isomorphic with that of Rousseau's problem concerning the teaching of the general will:

As Zarathustra begins to learn the meaning of his *Untergang* he learns what Rousseau had identified as the chief problem of all lawgivers (the political genius who must also be a great artist or architect): that in trying to teach individuals through speaking the language of the over-human it is impossible that they will make themselves either heard or understood. But to speak the language of the human, all too human is to speak a language which has only served to cripple and constrain them.<sup>26</sup>

In the first two books of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Zarathustra attempts and fails to teach the Overman directly; his pedagogy being caught in precisely that aporia encountered by Rousseau's legislator. It is Nietzsche's recognition of this aporia that leads him to articulate the teaching of eternal recurrence as the experience which will transfigure man into Overman and to present Zarathustra's journey towards the affirmation of this thought as an exemplary prefiguration of the self-overcoming of humanity. What then is the nature of this thought of the eternal recurrence of the same? On Ansell-Pearson's account, this idea represents an imaginative thought experiment in which we are confronted with the 'abysmal thought' that to affirm one's life or, indeed, a single moment is to affirm all of time:

The affirmation of the moment leads to the affirmation of time itself, for no single moment is self-sufficient but is connected to all the other moments of one's life. This is why, for Nietzsche, affirming one single moment entails affirming all of existence, one's own included: we recognise that it took the eternity which we are to produce the one event, and thus in a single moment all eternity is redeemed, affirmed, and called 'good'.<sup>27</sup>

How does this experience transfigure Zarathustra? Fundamentally, this thought teaches a new will which does not simply will itself but also wills its own temporality:

It teaches the individual to creatively will that existence which hitherto it has willed only blindly and unknowingly. The only manner in which existence can be redeemed is through the recognition and test of its totality, which takes place through the eternity of the moment; hence the testing question of eternal return: does the will have the courage and strength to repeat its existence again and again in its entirety?<sup>28</sup>

Whereas Rousseau conceives of (moral) autonomy as the will willing the general will, Nietzsche presents (extra-moral) autonomy as the will willing the eternal recurrence of the will. However, at this moment in which Nietzsche's thought

presents an overcoming of the problem of history which fatally flawed Rousseau's political philosophy, the problem of the legislator re-emerges as the problem of how to get people to subject themselves to the thought of eternal recurrence, particularly given Nietzsche's suggestion that this thought will either transfigure or crush us. This problem remains open at the end of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in that this text closes just as Zarathustra prepares once more to go down amongst men; however, this question is central to the topic of Nietzsche's politics.

How can we create human beings capable of willingly and successfully subjecting themselves to the thought of eternal recurrence? For Ansell-Pearson, this is the question Nietzsche poses in his directly political writings (and, it must be said, there is a great deal of textual evidence to this effect). Nietzsche's answer to this question, on Ansell-Pearson's account, is that we can breed this type of human being through an aristocratic politics which is prepared to reduce untold human beings to the order of instruments in order that they may serve as a foundation upon which a higher human type may emerge. Nietzsche's great politics, which is characterized by the rule of artist-tyrants, philosopher-legislators, is a matter of force and violence. The echoes of the figure of Machiavelli's Prince are all too apparent, while the question of legitimacy and right which characterizes Rousseau's thinking on politics is dismissed as the language of the impotent. Here, however, Nietzsche's thought displays its own 'ressentiment' towards history:

For it too does not allow becoming to become, but seeks to take control of the gruesome accident, which constitutes history, in order to bend the bow of history and shoot it in another direction. . . . In his thinking on the political, Nietzsche shares the delusion which has served to inspire the politics of the modern age, namely, the belief that it is possible to gain control of the historical process and to subject it to the mastery of the human will.<sup>29</sup>

In this thinking of politics, Nietzsche undermines his resolution of the problem of history, just as Rousseau's thinking of history undermined his resolution of the problem of politics.

What are the implications of this close textual reading for the question of Nietzsche's relationship to the tradition of modern political thought? Perplexing, I think. On the one hand, Nietzsche may be read as addressing the central modern theme of autonomy. On the other hand, he abandons the modern relation of autonomy and morality by presenting the Overman as extra-moral. Again, Nietzsche's politics exhibits the modern desire to control time, while his ethical teaching in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* eschews any such desire. One may add to this Nietzsche's dismissal of the modern political language of legitimacy and rights in favour of a conception of politics as force and violence. While Ansell-Pearson does not rule out the possibility of generating a Nietzschean

politics which avoids the dilemmas he locates in Nietzsche's own political writings (perhaps through a mediation with Rousseau), it is one of the merits of the approach taken in this book that it renders visible the tensions within Nietzsche's thought. What then of Nietzsche's relation to modern thought? Is it perhaps that Nietzsche combines a postmodern conception of philosophy with a pre-modern conception of politics? To take up these questions and to raise the question of this mode of questioning, we can conclude this article by staging a confrontation between two distinct styles of reading Nietzsche and by examining the relationship of modernism and postmodernism to the idea of tradition.

### NIETZSCHE – MODERNIST OR POSTMODERNIST?

The two essays to be considered here are Jay Bernstein's 'Autonomy and Solitude' which presents a reading of Nietzsche's thinking of autonomy as representative of the aporetic character of modern thought and Howard Caygill's 'Affirmation and Eternal Return in the Free-Spirit Trilogy' which locates Nietzsche's thought of eternal return as beyond the metaphysics of judgement. In the former of these pieces, Bernstein presents a tightly argued case for reading the relationship of will-to-power and eternal recurrence as isomorphic with the relationship of freedom (*Willkür*) and the moral law (*Wille*) in Kant's thinking of autonomy. Nietzsche's thought of eternal return exhibits the aporia of autonomy in which modernity attains its limit and refutation, Bernstein argues, simply because while Nietzsche correctly recognizes that the death of God entails the abandonment of a conception of autonomy as the universality of the will that wills itself, his thinking of autonomy through the doctrine of eternal return as an extra-moral autonomy, thereby, takes the formal character of the idea of autonomy beyond even Kant's position. This empty ideal, as a perpetual refusal of community and mediation, 'terminates in the worldless, death-in-life solitude of the philosopher-legislator'.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, Caygill reads the thought of eternal return against the thought of will-to-power in the context of the crisis of judgement engendered by the death of God. Whereas the principle of will-to-power presents itself as a measure of life, as a judgement of the ascending or descending character of life, the doctrine of eternal return is both a penance for and a liberation from judgement. This emerges, on Caygill's account, when we consider the following:

[The thought of eternal return] becomes overwhelming, able to transform and destroy, when it is made into a question: 'Do you desire this once more again and innumerable times more?' or, in other words, 'Do you want to judge?'. The question is itself a judgement on whoever is asked it, since it

shows that the yes and no of wanting *this* rests on a yes and amen before every yes and no. To want this yes is to want a singularity which cannot be generalised, cannot be named, and which exceeds the limits of judgement.<sup>31</sup>

For Caygill, it appears, while the idea of will-to-power remains within the domain of metaphysical opposition, the thought of eternal return exceeds metaphysics.

Now it is not my concern to judge the merits of these two essays, rather, I want to raise, in slightly exaggerated fashion, the question of the strategies of reading they deploy. We can begin by noting that both Bernstein and Caygill present Nietzsche as an aporetic thinker; however, while Bernstein presents the aporia of autonomy in Nietzsche's thought of eternal return as a *closure* of philosophical space, Caygill presents Nietzsche's thinking of eternal return as presenting the aporia of judgement as an *opening* of philosophical space. Attending this difference is a further distinction, namely, that Bernstein's presents an *epochal* reading of Nietzsche in terms of the idea of modernity and the idea of the tradition of modern thought, while Caygill offers a reading of Nietzsche which both eludes an epochal thinking of modernity and in locating Nietzsche's thought as both within and without of the tradition of modern thought puts into question the idea of tradition. We can conclude this article by briefly exploring the implications of these strategies of reading as representative of modernist and postmodernist styles of thinking respectively.

Modernism, I suggest, is structured as an epochal thinking in which the spectre of modernity haunts modern thought. It is precisely because modernism thinks modernity as an epochal concept that the idea of tradition is paradoxically central to modern thought, for it is through their constructions of the metaphysical tradition that modernist thinkers have been able to legitimate both the idea of modernity as an epochal concept and their thinking as a completion of, and rupture with, the tradition. This strategy of legitimation defines the genre of modernism as that of the end of philosophy thesis. It is, thus, perhaps unsurprising that the idea of crisis manifests itself as the central motif of this form of thought. By contrast, postmodernism (as its paradoxical name suggests) may be seen as a critique of epochal thinking in which modernity is taken not as an epoch but as an *ethos*,<sup>32</sup> a certain way of thinking our relationship to ourselves and time. Within this mode of thought, the very idea of tradition is located as a strategy of legitimation, of mastery. What then of Nietzsche – modernist or postmodernist? On the one hand, Nietzsche's thinking appears to exhibit an epochal style. On the other hand, though, Nietzsche's perspectival account of knowledge would appear to undercut the legitimation which modernist thought affords itself. Perhaps, in the end and in the beginning, we are simply left with the difficulty of Nietzsche's identity – and our own.

*University of London*

## NOTES

- 1 R. Hinton Thomas (1983) *Nietzsche in Modern German Politics and Society 1890–1918*, p. 2. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- 2 Kant locates the antinomy of causality as his impetus towards philosophy in a letter to Garve cited in M. A. Gillespie (1984) *Hegel, Heidegger and the Ground of History*, pp. 30 and 183, fn. 14. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 33.
- 4 Y. Yovel (1980) *Kant and the Philosophy of History*, pp. 21–2. Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- 5 Walker is referring specifically to the readings offered by Deleuze, Foucault and Derrida, *Nietzsche and Modern German Thought*, p. 11. For examples of these ‘French’ approaches, see the Deleuzian essay ‘Art as Insurrection: the Question of Aesthetics in Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche’ by Nick Land and the Derrida-inspired piece ‘Reading the Future of Genealogy: Kant, Nietzsche, Plato’ by Michael Newman, both in this collection.
- 6 *ibid.*, p. 12.
- 7 *ibid.*, p. 17.
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 23.
- 9 *ibid.*
- 10 *ibid.*, p. 104.
- 11 *ibid.*, p. 106.
- 12 *ibid.*, p. 179.
- 13 *ibid.*, p. 175.
- 14 cf. Nietzsche’s comments in section 13 of the first essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*.
- 15 *Nietzsche and Modern German Thought*, p. 155.
- 16 *Nietzsche contra Rousseau*, p. 49.
- 17 *ibid.*, p. 4.
- 18 *ibid.*, p. 5.
- 19 *ibid.*, p. 6.
- 20 *ibid.*, p. 77.
- 21 *ibid.*, p. 96.
- 22 *ibid.*, p. 98.
- 23 *ibid.*, p. 99.
- 24 *ibid.*, p. 129.
- 25 *ibid.*, pp. 147–8.
- 26 *ibid.*, p. 156.
- 27 *ibid.*, p. 179.
- 28 *ibid.*, p. 184.
- 29 *ibid.*, pp. 222–3.
- 30 *Nietzsche and Modern German Thought*, pp. 213–14.
- 31 *ibid.*, p. 236.
- 32 Foucault comments on thinking modernity as ethos in his essay ‘What Is Enlightenment?’ in P. Rabinow, ed. (1984) *The Foucault Reader*, pp. 32–50. Harmondsworth, Mx: Penguin.