



Nietzsche's search for philosophy: on the middle writings

by Keith Ansell-Pearson, London, Bloomsbury, 2017, 200 pp., £23.74 (pb), ISBN: 978-1474254717

Robert Miner

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Taieb argues that, for Brentano, reference can be equated neither with intentionality, nor with causality. The first distinction is grounded on the comparison between a hallucinatory and a veridical act: both exhibit intentionality, but the object of the former does not exist. The author shows that this thesis has many friends in the history of philosophy: in *Met. Δ15* relations ‘with respect to number’ (i.e. referential relations) are distinguished from those which hold between the ‘measure’ and the ‘measurable’ (i.e. intentional relations); Alexander of Aphrodisias and the Neoplatonists (notably Philoponus) already held that acts directed towards non-existents are intentional; and Scotus’ ‘relation of termination’ and Suárez’s ‘transcendental relation’ are examples of non-referential intentionality. The only one who reads *Met. Δ15* in referential terms is Aquinas, according to whom intentionality itself is a relation of similarity.

The distinction between reference and causality is more delicate, but one hardly finds a direct motivation for it in Brentano’s works. Taieb points out that Brentano may resort to the Scholastic thought experiment of divine intervention. Another justification can be inferred from Brentano’s anti-realism about sensations: perception is caused by something or other, but not by the primary object, for this latter cannot exist in reality in the way in which it appears to us. Thus, what causes the act is not that which the act refers to.

Taieb’s book is erudite and insightful. As it wonderfully combines historical reconstruction with rational analysis, historians of philosophy and philosophers would benefit a great deal from studying it.

Andrea Marchesi

Department of Philosophy, University of Salzburg, Salzburg, Austria

 andrea.marchesi@sbg.ac.at  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0277-802X>

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This book is a contribution to efforts to focus more intensively on the works belonging to Nietzsche’s ‘middle period’, those he described as his ‘free-spirit’ works: *Human, All Too Human*, *Assorted Opinions and Maxims*, the *Wanderer and His Shadow* and *Daybreak*, along with Books I–IV of the *Gay Science*. Focusing on Nietzsche’s middle writings, Ansell-Pearson argues, will lead us away from sterile construals of Nietzsche as the ‘last metaphysician of the West’ and toward an appreciation of Nietzsche as an author with significant indebtedness to the French moralists, particularly Montaigne, Pascal and La Rochefoucauld. The middle Nietzsche, according to Anselm-Pearson, cares less about

metaphysical doctrines and more about discovering 'new modes of self-knowledge' as a response to 'philosophy's original vocation: the discovery of possibilities of life' (3).

As he notes, Ansell-Pearson is not the only commentator to have focused on the middle Nietzsche. (He dialogues with Abbey, Pippin, Franco, Ure, Anderson and Cristy, among others; his habit of generous engagement with fellow commentators is simply refreshing.) What distinguishes his book from other recent interpretations is the specific claim that 'an ethos of Epicurean enlightenment pervades Nietzsche's middle-period texts' (37). That such enlightenment does not mean Epicurean 'atomism' is clear enough, given the vehemence of the dismissal of atomism at *Human, All Too Human* 19. Rather, Nietzsche's Epicurus is the philosopher who displays a clear 'preference for individual therapy and self-cultivation over large-scale social transformation and political revolution' (43). Ansell-Pearson supports this reading with Nietzschean texts that link the spirit of revolution to a dangerous fanaticism that neglects truthfulness. In order to temper the impulses to fanaticism and sectarianism, Nietzsche enlists Voltaire against Rousseau. To that end, he uses a variety of tactics that might be considered aspects of a more general project, 'a therapeutic cooling down of the human mind'. Such therapy, Ansell-Pearson claims, is a healthy antidote to 'enthusiasm, sentimentality and self-intoxication' (61).

But is cool Epicurean serenity the salient characteristic of the middle Nietzsche? Ansell-Pearson anticipates this question and answers it by sketching a picture of Nietzsche's development *within* the middle period that has room for both serenity and passion. Though both volumes of *Human, All Too Human* are dominated by the cooling theme, *Daybreak* inaugurates a turn to the 'passion for knowledge'. (Here Ansell-Pearson acknowledges his debt to Marco Brusotti.) Though political enthusiasm remains questionable as ever, we should not hesitate to embrace the prospect of becoming fearless knowers. It is not that moderation is no longer necessary. Those in a hurry will need to be slowed down (*Daybreak* 547); those who uncritically esteem truth over other powers will need a strong 'warning concerning our devotion to knowledge through experimentation' (*Daybreak* 507).

The transition from the cold skepticism of *Human, All Too Human* to the warm passion of *Daybreak* and *Gay Science* seems to confirm Ansell-Pearson's thesis that the middle Nietzsche seeks to bring about his own version of the Epicurean garden – the site of a 'new *vita contemplativa* to be cultivated in the midst of the speed and rapidity of modern life' (141). Despite his famous 'immoralism', Nietzsche does not consider life in such a garden to constitute an alternative to ethics. On the contrary, it has its own form of ethics as something pleasurable, complete with 'duties one has to oneself and to others' (87). Such an ethics is not for everyone – Nietzsche denies that there is a 'single moral-making morality', as Ansell-Pearson observes (92) – but it will appeal to those who value 'a pleasure and care of self that strives for independence and self-sufficiency' (96). Ansell-Pearson's readings of texts central to Nietzsche's ethical thinking are among the most valuable parts of the book. They effectively contest the perennial

tendency to foist a crude egoism onto Nietzsche, and they suggest under-explored connections between Nietzsche and Foucault.

Rounding out of the portrait of the middle Nietzsche as an Epicurean are the book's final two chapters, taking the *Gay Science* as their primary text. Chapter 5 gives a useful introduction to the background of *GS*, particularly helpful for readers new to Nietzsche, though more experienced interpreters will benefit from its handling of the relevant correspondence and notes (mostly untranslated into English). The last chapter explores the possibility that Nietzsche ultimately prefers 'joy' over 'pleasure', and that this preference further aligns him with the deep spirit of Epicurus.

How far does the middle Nietzsche's Epicurean bent survive into his later works? Noting that Nietzsche becomes more ambivalent about Epicurus in the later works, Ansell-Pearson proposes that Nietzsche leaves us with a contrast between 'Epicurean delight' and 'Dionysian joy'. We should not take for granted the superiority of the late Nietzsche. Instead, we should seriously consider the possibility that 'there are weaknesses in Nietzsche's later appreciation of Epicurus' – indeed, that his imputation of nihilism to Epicurus was 'misguided and unfair' (150). Here Ansell-Pearson has plausibility on his side, since much in the late Nietzsche is misguided and unfair. (One thinks, for example, of the flippant and sexist dismissal of George Eliot in *Twilight of the Idols*.)

Not every reader will be persuaded that Epicurus, above all others, provides the thread that links the free-spiriting works of Nietzsche's middle period. I am not myself fully persuaded. Epicurus appears within one of four pairs of judges that Nietzsche explicitly names in the final aphorism of *Assorted Maxims and Opinions*. It is not clear that priority should be given to Epicurus over the other member of the pair to whom he belongs (Montaigne). And much remains to be said about the significance of the other three pairs – Plato and Rousseau, Goethe and Spinoza, Pascal and Schopenhauer – for a deeper interpretation of the middle-period works.

Are more commentaries on Nietzsche necessary? Why not simply read and re-read Nietzsche himself? A footnote (152n16) observes that Peter Sloterdijk has raised these questions. Ansell-Pearson answers directly: 'we need commentaries that encourage this practice of reading'. *Nietzsche's Search for Philosophy: On the Middle Writings* is just such a commentary, one that will intrigue and enlighten its readers.

Robert Miner
Baylor University

 Robert_Miner@baylor.edu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5321-1993>

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