Wendelin Küpers

“True to the Earth”: Ansell-Pearson’s Nietzsche as Sage, Poet, and Fool.

Review of Keith Ansell-Pearson, *Nietzsche’s Earthbound Wisdom: The Philosopher, the Poet, and the Sage,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2025.

What would it mean to take Nietzsche seriously as a sage, not despite his folly, but through it? This is the animating question behind Keith Ansell-Pearson’s bold and erudite *Nietzsche’s Earthbound Wisdom*, a work that reframes Nietzsche not primarily as a diagnostician of nihilism but as an embodied philosopher of immanence, temporality, and transformation attuned to the fragile, affective textures of earthly life. Its central thesis is that Nietzsche’s quest for wisdom unfolds not as a doctrinal system or metaphysical project but as a creative, experimental *Lebenskunst*, a practice of living wisely within the fragility and flux of the earth.

Structured around a triadic constellation, the philosopher, the poet, and the sage, Ansell-Pearson reconstructs Nietzsche’s multifaceted ethos. These figures are not stable archetypes but shifting modes of attunement: ways of sensing, judging, and creating meaning. The book is notable for being not only exegetical but performative: it writes *with* Nietzsche, echoing his aphoristic, elliptical, ironic, and incantatory registers. This stylistic choice itself becomes a a methodological wager that the only adequate response to Nietzsche’s style is a style that risks itself in kind.

This stylistic daring aligns the work with a rare genre of philosophical scholarship that seeks to inhabit rather than merely represent its object. In doing so, it reframes Nietzsche as an “earthbound” thinker whose vision of wisdom resists every disembodied idealization and instrumental rationality, offering instead an ethos of affective attunement, stylistic self-cultivation, and transformative experimentation. This is timely: in an age of ecological collapse, existential disorientation, and epistemic fragmentation, Nietzsche is reclaimed here as a vital interlocutor for reimagining how to dwell, suffer, and create meaning on a fragile planet.

The Introduction (1–18) lays out the project’s core themes: heterodoxy, literary style, naturalism, and wisdom as a “hiding place.” It resists reducing Nietzsche to a doctrinal naturalist in the Spinozan or Santayanan mold, presenting his project instead as an aporetic and experimental effort to “translate man back into nature” understood not as reduction but as re-naturalization without erasing the dissonances and instabilities of that task. Ansell-Pearson draws out Nietzsche’s suspicion of the sage as a moralizing pose rooted in ressentiment and contrasts this with his counterfigure, Nietzsche’s “friend of folly”. Here, folly and laughter are recast as Dionysian conditions of wisdom, not deviations from it. Wisdom emerges as an embodied praxis rather than a possession of truths, an ongoing, risky experimentation with perspectives and styles of living. The Introduction highlights Nietzsche’s non-linear method: wandering, detours,

https://doi.org/10.1515/NIFO-2026-023

perspectival shifts, and ironic self-subversion are not incidental but constitutive of his thinking.

While the Introduction occasionally risks conflating Nietzsche's disillusioned naturalism with teleological hope, it convincingly reframes his ethos as intensifying existential exposure rather than synthesizing it. Ultimately, it casts Nietzschean wisdom as a practice of creative responsiveness within the flux of life, joyful in a tragic key sceptical yet passionately engaged, which sets the stage for the book's thematic chapters.

The first chapter (19–35) explores Nietzsche's strategic deployment of cheerfulness (*Heiterkeit*) as both method and ethos. Against readings that reduce it to naïve optimism, Ansell-Pearson shows it as a hard-won, therapeutic countercurrent to despair, intimately bound to Nietzsche's ethos of risk and hope. Drawing on Zarathustra's "cheerful wisdom" and Montaigne's free-spiritedness, Nietzsche is presented as an honest yet artful thinker who cultivates feigned cheerfulness as an ethical stance. This could be deepened by engaging the tragic-comic ambivalence in Nietzsche's gaiety that is his ideal of being "superficial out of profundity" (*GS* Preface 4), —one of Nietzsche's finest formulations of affirmative wisdom— which entwines joy with cruelty, irony, and suffering (*GS* 318).

This chapter successfully rescues Nietzschean cheerfulness from misreadings as emotional detachment, though a fuller account of Nietzsche's tragic philosophy and anti-systematic pedagogy would sharpen its contribution. The tragic undercurrent is precisely what makes the cheerfulness philosophically dangerous, and therefore interesting. One might also read this hard-won cheerfulness as anticipating Nietzsche's ideal of amor fati, where wisdom consists not in overcoming suffering but in affirming the entire texture of existence, joy and pain alike, as the very medium of self-transformation.

The second chapter (36–54) situates intellectual honesty (*Redlichkeit*) and the passion of knowledge at the heart of Nietzsche's middle writings. Ansell-Pearson highlights Nietzsche's departure from epistemic objectivity toward a passionate fidelity to inquiry that implicates the knower and demands risk. Honesty here entails solitude, disillusionment, and endurance. It marks the philosopher as a "physician of culture," diagnosing inherited errors rather than merely deconstructing them. This is a valuable corrective to caricatures of Nietzsche as irrational or relativistic, though honesty's proximity to ascetic ideals and its risk what Nietzsche elsewhere calls the subtle forms of 'spiritual revenge', deserves fuller critique. By framing knowledge as active, embodied, and skeptical, the chapter shows wisdom as arising from self-transforming inquiry that dismantles dogmas and fosters authenticity. It compellingly links Nietzsche's 'intellectual conscience' to an embodied vigilance against self-deception, though it could further explore the tension between diagnostic honesty and performative masking that marks Nietzsche's style.

The third pivotal chapter (55–80) portrays Nietzschean wisdom as a wandering rather than rooted stance that is an open-ended, de-anthropocentric mode of seeking. The sage becomes a nomad who befriends shadows, embraces solitude, and relinquishes fantasies of egoic sovereignty. Ansell-Pearson emphasizes Nietzsche's call to "perceive cosmically" (11[7], KSA 9, 443) and critiques anthropocentric thinking as pathological, requiring healing through attunement to more-than-human realities. Wisdom acquires

an ecological orientation: emerging not despite darkness but through it, in vulnerability and relational becoming. This reading is compelling, presenting Nietzsche as a philosopher of situated humility rather than heroic domination. It reframes solitude as preparation for responsiveness, though it might further address how this wandering wisdom can engage collective or democratic concerns without collapsing into aesthetic privilege.

In the subsequent chapter four (81–101), Nietzsche's affirmation of passions is contrasted with Christian, Stoic, and Spinozist repression. Ansell-Pearson shows Nietzsche advocating sublimation as non-repressive transformation, elevating affects into joy through risk and experimentation. The chapter frames wisdom as self-governance through the transformation of passions *with* passions, not mastery *over* them, aiming at an artful reordering of affective life. It convincingly links this to virtues like generosity and risk-taking, though it could more fully integrate ethical responsiveness to others' suffering and address how such individualist cultivation might respond to collective trauma or systemic injustice.

The fifth chapter (102–128) foregrounds Nietzsche's sustained engagement with poets and poetry as a vital dimension of his philosophical project. Ansell-Pearson contrasts Schopenhauer's static "mirror of humanity" with Nietzsche's poet as a visionary creator of worlds. Particularly insightful is the discussion of Zarathustra as poet-philosopher whose utterances invite readers to dance with concepts rather than grasp them. Nietzsche's suspicion of poetry's metaphysical impulses is traced alongside his embrace of its imaginative power. A rich contrast is drawn between Nietzsche's aesthetic ethos and Stifter's Biedermeier ideal of harmony and moral cultivation. Stifter exemplifies art as quiet ethical influence, while Nietzsche embraces art as confrontation with chaos and vehicle of self-overcoming. This comparison fruitfully illuminates competing ideals of *Bildung* as harmonious cultivation versus transformative becoming. Ansell-Pearson ultimately portrays Nietzsche's mature aesthetics as "earthbound" and as such rejecting escapism and championing art as disciplined world-shaping that affirms transience, multiplicity, and embodied vitality.

The long and ambitious sixth chapter (129–162) explores Zarathustra's paradoxical unity of wisdom and folly. Zarathustra embodies both poet and fool, exposing poetry as vanity yet redeeming it as the only medium for life-affirming vision. The analysis of the sublime, masking, and the tension between poetic deception and philosophical rigor is nuanced and compelling. Zarathustra's use of metaphor and parable is shown to exemplify Nietzsche's epistemology of creative multiplicity, resisting singular truth. The treatment of the Übermensch is especially strong as Ansell-Pearson rejects metaphysical or utopian readings, portraying it as an open-ended process of self-overcoming, forged through suffering, creativity, and earthly affirmation. A careful contrast with Dostoevsky's Kirillov underscores Nietzsche's refusal of self-sacrificial transcendence, framing the Übermensch as immanent value-creation. Overall, this chapter subtly maps Nietzsche's tensions between wisdom, folly, and solitude, while suggesting that a more relational understanding of earthbound wisdom especially as responsive to democratic and ecological commons, might complement its solitary figure of the visionary. This

vision also resonates with Nietzsche's ideal of die große Gesundheit (GS 382), where wisdom becomes an embodied practice of affirming suffering, experimentation, and continual self-overcoming as integral to a flourishing life.y.

The final chapter and coda (163–196) examine Nietzsche's late conception of philosophy as vision or *geistiger Blick*, rejecting objectivity and positivist detachment. Ansell-Pearson contrasts Nietzsche's perspectival vitality with Flaubert's lifeless 'objectivity' Zola's brutalism, and Baudelaire's decadent "hashish world". Nietzsche perceives in their aestheticism symptoms of self-contempt and cultural exhaustion, while advocating art as active affirmation that is a blissful shaping of life. The nuanced reading of Baudelaire is notable: Nietzsche admires his insight into modern alienation yet critiques his "satanic" aesthetics as still Christian-reactive, fetishizing suffering rather than affirming life. Zarathustra is cast as a counter-decadent poet, walking not in spleen but in solar affirmation. Taken together this chapter incisively links Nietzsche's aesthetics to ethics, showing his demand that art embody vitality rather than escape reality. This performative identification is the book's greatest strength and its most productive risk. Where it succeeds, the prose achieves genuine philosophical resonance; where it occasionally falters, the boundary between inhabiting and reproducing Nietzsche's voice becomes difficult to locate and with it, the critical distance the reader needs.

Nietzsche's Earthbound Wisdom is a masterful, poetic, and philosophically provocative contribution to contemporary Nietzsche studies. It succeeds in repositioning Nietzsche as a thinker deeply relevant to contemporary ecological and existential crises, without diluting the radicality, intensity, or disquieting force of his thought. Ultimately, what emerges is a Nietzsche for whom wisdom is neither a possession nor a doctrine, but an ongoing practice of self-transformation inseparable from style, embodiment, and fidelity to the earth. Yet precisely because of its intellectual ambition and stylistic brilliance, the book calls for equally rigorous critical engagement. The very figures Ansell-Pearson champions, the wandering sage, the visionary poet, the self-overcoming philosopher all remain marked by forms of solitude that may also carry traces of aristocratic distance, gendered exclusions, colonial imaginaries, and an uneasy relation to democratic life, gendered exclusions, and colonial imaginaries and ambivalent relation to democratic values that shadow Nietzsche's genealogies. While Ansell-Pearson is aware of this and has elsewhere engaged with feminist and postcolonial critiques, including his 1994 study on Nietzsche as a political thinker[1] and his co-authored *Nietzsche's Dawn* (2021)[2] this book largely suspends rather than confronts or only indirectly addresses questions of gender, race, or imperialism. It would have been valuable to see how his reading might respond to concerns about Nietzsche's treatment of marginalised groups, women, colonialism, and the racializing of cultures.

1 Keith Ansell-Pearson, *An Introduction to Nietzsche as a Political Thinker,* Cambridge 1994.

2 Keith Ansell-Pearson, Rebecca Bamford, *Nietzsche's Dawn: Philosophy, Ethics, and the Passion of Knowledge*. Oxford 2021.

Ansell-Pearson does not offer a domesticated Nietzsche. He offers something rarer and more demanding: a figure to be wrestled with, a philosopher whose earthbound wisdom may teach us to dwell and suffer differently and to create other-wise on a fragile planet. The book's unresolved tensions are not failures but invitations. For readers willing to sit with Nietzsche's provocations without reaching for easy reconciliation, *Nietzsche's Earthbound Wisdom* is both a challenge and a gift as it is. It is the kind of philosophical work that does not end when the reading does. With this it not a book to be consumed quickly, but one to be revisited, slowly, attentively, and with full awareness of its philosophical and ethical weight.

The book's deliberate *untimeliness, i*ts refusal to instrumentalize Nietzsche for contemporary moral-political agendas is also what grants it philosophical depth. Ansell-Pearson aims not to reconcile Nietzsche with present norms but to let him remain disruptive thus remaining an untimely figure whose thought resists closure. This stance carries risk as it leaves unresolved how Nietzsche's earthbound wisdom might be reinterpreted as relational, plural, or justice-oriented. Yet it also offers opportunity which is that by reconstructing Nietzsche through the figures of the philosopher, the poet, and the sage, the book creates space for renewed conversations on how wisdom might be reimagined today and for a tomorrow to come.

What our time arguably needs is precisely such a work as one that reflects on and invites engagement with Nietzsche's philosophy as interwoven with wisdom and poetry. This is a mature book, written by a scholar who has spent decades thinking *with* and *about* Nietzsche. As such it offers both seasoned scholars and newcomers a compelling model of how philosophical engagement with wisdom can proceed amid the increasing specialization and fragmentation of academic life.

Although it cannot and does not resolve the many tensions within Nietzsche's corpus, it offers a powerful framework for grappling with them and for reflecting on their implications for contemporary philosophical, cultural, and ethical practice. The book's erudition, stylistic finesse, and imaginative courage make it a significant contribution to Nietzsche scholarship and a thoughtful meditation on the possibility of living wisely and responsively in the twenty-first century.

Considering the planetary fragility and the entangled crises of our time, the earthly wisdom explored here gestures toward much-needed modes of feeling, thinking, valuing and acting wisely in a genuinely transformative sense[3]. For readers willing to confront Nietzsche's more provocations without seeking easy reconciliation, *Nietzsche's Earthbound Wisdom* offers both a challenge and a gift as it is an invitation to inhabit the paradoxical sphere where wisdom becomes folly and folly wisdom, critique becomes creation, and philosophy becomes an art of living true to the earth.

3 Wendelin Küpers, *Integrating Embodied Practice, Action in Praxis and Transformational Wisdom for Sustainable Organization and Leadership,* London 2025.