

the review of
metaphysics

a philosophical quarterly

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Nietzsche contra Rousseau by Keith Ansell-Pearson

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Source: *The Review of Metaphysics*, Sep., 1993, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Sep., 1993), pp. 133-134

Published by: Philosophy Education Society Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20129456>

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BOOKS RECEIVED

SUMMARIES AND COMMENTS*

IAN BELL AND STAFF

ANSELL-PEARSON, Keith. *Nietzsche contra Rousseau*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. xvii + 284 pp. \$49.95—In this important book, Keith Ansell-Pearson undertakes an ambitious study of Nietzsche's moral and political thought. The focus of this investigation is Nietzsche's complicated account of the crisis of modern political life. In order to secure a point of entry into this forbidding dimension of Nietzsche's thought, Ansell-Pearson deploys a novel—and highly successful—interpretative strategy. He proposes that the strengths and weaknesses of Nietzsche's critique of modernity are crystallized in Nietzsche's *Auseinandersetzung* with the philosopher whom he takes to be emblematic of modernity, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. "Nietzsche contra Rousseau" thus furnishes a synecdochical distillation of "Nietzsche contra modernity."

Ansell-Pearson persuasively demonstrates not only that Nietzsche misunderstood Rousseau, but also that many of the criticisms Nietzsche levels against Rousseau would be more accurately addressed to Nietzsche himself. Ansell-Pearson thus locates in Nietzsche's enmity for Rousseau the resentment of modernity that ultimately compromises the philosophical value of Nietzsche's otherwise perspicacious critique of modernity. Although Nietzsche was loathe to admit it, the tension between the ethical and political aspects of his own thought mirrors a similar tension that he detects in the thought of Rousseau.

Nietzsche's prescriptions for political reform, which evince the romanticism and resentment he attributes to Rousseau, eventually betray the promise of his critique of modernity. Nietzsche's experiment with "great politics" simply fails to address the political alienation that Ansell-Pearson identifies as "the major cause of the metaphysics of resentment" (p. 223). Ansell-Pearson figures Nietzsche as a misguided champion of the will whose romanticism blinded him to the peculiar political conditions of modernity: "In his thinking on the nature of 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" (p. 223). Thus deluded, Nietzsche entrusts the redemption of modernity to

* Books received are acknowledged in this section by a brief resume, report, or criticism. Such acknowledgement does not preclude a more detailed examination in a subsequent Critical Study. From time to time, technical books dealing with such fields as mathematics, physics, anthropology, and the social sciences will be reviewed in this section, if it is thought that they might be of special interest to philosophers.

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the enigmatic *Übermensch*, who, by sheer dint of a strength of will unrivaled in late modernity, will forcibly transform the sagging political institutions of Western Europe. This political teaching of violence and force stands in direct opposition, Ansell-Pearson claims, to the nonviolent ethical teaching developed in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: “In the story of Zarathustra’s downgoing the emphasis is on the ethics of courage and commitment; in the conception of great politics, however, the emphasis is on force and belief” (p. 224). Ansell-Pearson concludes that Nietzsche’s ethical vision of a polity beyond nihilism and resentment would be best ensured by something like Rousseau’s concern with justice—hence the fundamental irony of Nietzsche’s critique of Rousseau.

Ansell-Pearson’s thesis is both provocative and promising, for Nietzsche’s critique of modernity would certainly seem to disallow any of the recuperative schemes that are popularly attributed to him, including those rehearsed by Ansell-Pearson. Yet the “ethical” and “political” Nietzsches juxtaposed in this book—as well as the constitutive tension that binds them—remain somewhat elusive. The “deluded” champion of the will, who reactively turns to “great politics,” is certainly not the Nietzsche who wrote, for example, *Twilight of the Idols*, which advances his most trenchant critique of the political institutions of modernity as well as his classic debunking of voluntarism. Nor is the Nietzsche who preaches an ethic of tolerance and commitment immediately discernible in the dark pages of *Zarathustra*. These critical observations are not intended, however, to detract from the formidable accomplishments of Ansell-Pearson’s book. *Nietzsche contra Rousseau* represents an important contribution to political theory, for it sheds considerable light on Nietzsche’s oft-misunderstood critique of modernity. Ansell-Pearson admirably demonstrates the bounties to be harvested from a serious consideration of Nietzsche as a political theorist.—Daniel W. Conway, *The Pennsylvania State University*.

BEINER, Ronald. *What’s the Matter With Liberalism?* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. viii + 197 pp. \$28.00—Despite its nonscholarly sounding title, this work is a trenchant reinterpretation of certain crucial aspects of Aristotle’s thought for the contemporary age, and an excellent survey of the “liberal-communitarian” debate today. The author seeks to restore the philosophical language and concerns of classical moral theory, which he sees as having perennial importance, as against the “thinness” of contemporary liberal theorizing. The work has a prefatory note, including Václav Havel’s warning about Western smugness, and a short Index. Footnotes, often substantial, are placed at the bottom of the page. The author’s consciously chosen strategy is to raise problematic issues, and questions for further study, rather than to try to establish an unassailable theoretical structure.

In the Prologue Beiner advances the idea of “the theorist as storyteller,” to restore and extend the possible purview of political philosophy. Just as great literature is meant ultimately to offer some basis on