NIETZSCHE'S THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

Nietzsche's Theory of Knowledge, by Ruediger Hermann Grimm (*Monographien und Texte zur Nietzsche-Forschung*, Band 4 [Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1977]), is one of the very few books on Nietzsche's epistemology to have been published in English. The only other one known to this reviewer is John Wilcox's book on his metaethics (*Truth and Value in Nietzsche* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974]). It is a useful early step in satisfying a need that Nietzsche's Anglo-American readers must feel painfully at times. The books Nietzsche himself completed and published give the impression that his notions about truth and knowledge lie at the bottom of what he has to say, but they tell us little about what these notions are. Instead of a clearly stated theory, we are given vague and apparently contradictory hints. Professor Grimm helps to fill the resulting gap in our understanding of Nietzsche. He does so primarily by the simple—perhaps too simple—means of quoting or paraphrasing a large number of relevant passages from the *Nachlass* of the 1880s and commenting on the connections between them. What emerges is a body of doctrine that is surprisingly unified and elaborate.

As Grimm presents it, Nietzsche's theory of knowledge is a consequence of his ontology, the first principle of which states that the world consists entirely of "power." Power, for Nietzsche, is discontinuous; it is a collection of "power-quanta," each of which is nothing but a certain quantity of power. It is not anything distinct from what it does and therefore must be continually active as long as it exists. What power does is to overcome resistance, and the only source of resistance is other power-quanta. Thus a quantum of power is not anything distinct from its relations with many other quanta of power.

Nietzsche develops these ideas into a sort of nominalism: A center of power can have no definite nature or essence, because it has perpetually changing relations with a great many other centers of power and there can be no reason why any of these relations are intrinsically more important than the others. It has no hidden character, only masks, and the masks hide nothing. From all this, Nietzsche concludes that there is no such thing as truth, in the traditional sense in which a truth is an accurate representation of something. The reason for this is that there are no definite "somethings" to represent. An accurate representation of a center of power could only be an exhaustive list of its effects on other centers of power. Such a list could not possibly be drawn up, and the question "What is so-and-so?" consequently dissolves into "What is it for me?" This is the beginning of Nietzsche's "perspectivism." The rest of it derives from the consideration

Reason Papers No. 6 (Spring 1980) 93-95.

that the mind is also a center of power and has the same aim that the others have: exerting power. Assuming that true beliefs are what the mind seeks, they must simply be ones that express or enhance power. That is the only sort of truth there is.

Most of the above ideas are stated in the first three chapters of Grimm's book. The remaining six chapters, largely an elaboration of what has already been said, tend to be unnecessarily repetitive. They are also marred by some maladroit attempts to defend Nietzsche against criticisms, or what the author perceives as criticisms. For instance, he insists, thinking it is to Nietzsche's credit, that the ontology of power is not "a mechanistic world view," but the only reason he gives for this point, which seems to be important to him, is the fact that Nietzsche tends to use "inclusive and ambiguous" terminology (p. 174). Instantly, one wants to know why a mechanistic world view cannot be expressed vaguely and generally, like apparently any other idea. Grimm does not suggest an answer, nor does he say what he means by "a mechanistic world view."

Elsewhere he says, interestingly, that Nietzsche's conception of truth requires him to believe that contradictions can be true, because two contradictory beliefs can both express or enhance power (p. 115). He adds that some of Nietzsche's apparent contradictions are quite real and that Nietzsche means them. When he gives an example of such a real contradiction, however, and attempts to show that it makes sense, he inadvertently removes its contradictoriness. Nietzsche, he points out, often says things that entail that the will exists, while on the other hand he explicitly denies the existence of the will. Grimm explains that this makes sense because the will that he affirms and the will that he denies are two quite different things (p. 119). But this means that this Nietzschean paradox has the form of (P & -R), and not (P & -P), and is not a contradiction in the accepted sense of the term. If Grimm is using the word in some new sense, he gives the reader no clear idea of what it is.

Fortunately, the book is primarily exegetical and not polemical. Still, one can have certain reservations about the exegesis as well. The author makes no serious attempt to reconcile his interpretation with the passages in Nietzsche's writings, many of which are catalogued in chapters 2 and 3 of Wilcox's book, which seem to point to a very different and more commonsensical epistemology. Grimm seems to have correctly described one set of epistemological themes in Nietzsche, but even if it is the dominant set, it might not, in spite of all his quotations, be "Nietzsche's theory of knowledge." We cannot know that Nietzsche had a single theory on this subject, or any other, without coming to terms with the troublesome ambiguity of the text.

Nonetheless, the faults of this book should not provoke serious students of Nietzsche to ignore it. It assembles a large amount of material, much of it not easily available, and sheds light where before there was darkness. Because the author generally allows Nietzsche to speak for himself, we can

at least be sure that he is not being made to say what someone thinks he ought to have said. Certainly, anyone who wants to understand Nietzsche as a friend of common sense in epistemological matters should deal with Grimm's massive evidence to the contrary.

LESTER H. HUNT

The Johns Hopkins University