

Power, Self, Freedom – The Philosophical Therapies of Spinoza and Nietzsche

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I, Albin J. van Latum, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

The Spinoza-Nietzsche connection is as intriguing as it is contested. By addressing the relation through the lens of philosophical therapy, new light is shed on significant interpretative issues. Reading Nietzsche's notes on Spinoza in this context provides a clearer understanding of Nietzsche's interest in Spinoza, in particular with regards to the notions of power and self. While the two thinkers are ultimately differentiated on metaphysical grounds, their shared practical commitment to philosophy as a way of life justifies a close comparison. Given the highly intricate nature of their relation, it is impossible to label Nietzsche a Spinozist. Nevertheless, the tension between their ideas puts both thinkers into focus, which in turn allows the reader to appreciate the unique therapeutic merit of Spinoza and Nietzsche's philosophy.

Impact Statement

This thesis offers a novel approach to the Spinoza-Nietzsche connection by shifting the focus towards their shared therapeutic aspirations. By reading Nietzsche and Spinoza as philosophical therapists, new perspectives emerge on the significance of their relation; key interpretative issues in the scholarship are consequently placed under a new light. While this work is of primarily theoretical nature, its eminently practical focus means that the reader may rely on it to glean insights of therapeutic value by orienting themselves amongst two of the most colossal figures in the history of philosophy.

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I am utterly amazed, utterly enchanted! I have a precursor, and what a precursor! I hardly knew Spinoza: that I should have turned to him just now, was inspired by “instinct.” Not only is his over-all tendency [*Gesamttenenz*] like mine—making knowledge the most powerful affect—but in five main points of his doctrine I recognize myself; this most unusual and loneliest thinker is closest to me precisely in these matters: he denies the freedom of the will, teleology, the moral world-order, the unegoistic, and evil. Even though the divergences are admittedly tremendous, they are due more to the difference in time, culture, and science. In summa: my lonesomeness [*Einsamkeit*], which, as on very high mountains, often made it hard for me to breathe and make my blood rush out, is now at least a twosomeness [*Zweisamkeit*]. Strange [*Wunderlich*].¹

The connection between Spinoza and Nietzsche is as intriguing as it is intricate. In some ways, the two thinkers could not be more different: Spinoza’s system is constructed with mathematical rigour and is a clear case of early modern rationalist metaphysics. Nietzsche, on the contrary, is notoriously unsystematic through his use of aphorisms and is one of the most ardent adversaries of metaphysics and reason. Yet, in other ways, Nietzsche and Spinoza are surprisingly similar: both challenge a transcendental notion of God and instead favour an immanent conception of nature. They furthermore take a particular interest in human psychology by considering the emotions and the nature of self to be of central philosophical concern. Crucially, both thinkers place power at the heart of their philosophies by regarding it as the main driving force behind human action and nature at large.

The famous letter that Nietzsche writes to his friend Overbeck, cited above, is often taken as evidence that Nietzsche was certainly fascinated by Spinoza, and rightly so. While it highlights important points of agreement, Nietzsche becomes increasingly critical of his ‘precursor’, including on some of these very topics. Indeed, Nietzsche defines some of his key doctrines in opposition to Spinoza: *amor dei* becomes *amor fati*, and *deus sive natura* becomes *chaos sive natura*. Equally Nietzsche’s own view of Spinoza, then, is by no means unequivocal.

¹ Nietzsche, KSB 6, nr. 135 (30.07.1881)

The ambiguous nature of the Spinoza-Nietzsche connection may lead one to believe that “perhaps no two philosophers are as akin, yet no two are as opposed.”² In the widest sense, this thesis is an attempt at untangling this relation. Rather than simply settling on a position as to whether Nietzsche and Spinoza are more similar or more different, the aim is to provide a detailed account. More narrowly, this thesis offers a reading of both thinkers that shifts the emphasis towards the therapeutic dimension of their work. Focusing on their points of tension within this context gives us a better understanding of Nietzsche’s reasons for engaging with Spinoza, as well as a clearer picture of their respective projects at large. Besides expanding on what is implied by the term ‘therapy’ in the final section, this introduction outlines the different approaches to the Spinoza-Nietzsche relation in the secondary literature and orients our own project accordingly. A brief historical overview of Nietzsche’s exposure to Spinoza’s ideas is subsequently provided, after which we chart the main argument and outline of this thesis.

Secondary Literature

In the secondary literature on the Spinoza-Nietzsche connection, there appear to be two different approaches, which can be identified, in broad terms, as historical and systematic. The systematic approach centres on a comparison between Nietzsche and Spinoza’s main ideas, with the goal to understand how their concepts relate. The historical approach, in turn, focuses on whether it is possible to ascertain any influence of Spinoza on Nietzsche. Systematically-inclined accounts typically rely on the main works, while the historically-oriented literature tends to delve into Nietzsche’s unpublished notes on Spinoza, as well as the secondary texts on Spinoza that Nietzsche may have read.

Evidently, these approaches are not mutually exclusive. In order to provide a pure systematic account, it is not strictly necessary to have an idea of what Nietzsche himself thought of Spinoza, as one can compare their ideas regardless. But it can certainly help to know what parts of Spinoza’s thought Nietzsche was most intrigued by. Similarly, a historical account can limit itself to analysing the evidence for any exposure Nietzsche had to Spinoza. Yet it would doubtless be more interesting if those historical insights were then brought to bear on their core ideas.

While it may seem reasonable to combine the two approaches, this is not always done. In particular, the historical basis has not always been relied on in order to ground systematic

² Yovel, *Spinoza and other Heretics*, 104

comparisons. As Wollenberg points out, “the approach taken by authors who have written on this relationship has overwhelmingly tended toward global comparisons of major doctrines.”³ This could be problematic because, as has been pointed out repeatedly, *Nietzsche never read Spinoza’s own writings*.⁴ Accordingly, Brobjer asserts, in his influential account, that

any discussion of Nietzsche’s views and interpretations of Spinoza cannot be based on an analysis of Nietzsche’s and Spinoza’s philosophy (as all studies have done so far) but needs to start from Kuno Fischer’s account, which is what Nietzsche read, responded to, and based his judgments and analyses upon. To discuss Nietzsche’s interpretations and misinterpretations of Spinoza in relation to Spinoza’s own writings is simply irrelevant.⁵

For Brobjer, then, any sound analysis of the Spinoza-Nietzsche connection should take Nietzsche’s actual familiarity with Spinoza’s thought as its starting point. Responding directly to Brobjer’s position, Ioan remarks that “[t]he validity of this claim depends on the purpose of the analysis.”⁶ Investigating what Nietzsche knew of Spinoza is a worthy pursuit, according to Ioan, but by no means

exhaust the task that the historian of philosophy can set herself. The themes important to Nietzsche, in his reception of Spinoza, can be used as a guide in building a dialogue between the two outside the limits of Nietzsche’s knowledge of Spinoza. A discussion of intrinsically interesting philosophical topics should be built on sound historical knowledge, but has the potential to go beyond it and depends on an analysis that does justice to Spinoza’s thinking.⁷

³ Wollenberg, *Nietzsche, Spinoza, and the Moral Affects*, 619. Two prominent examples are Schacht, *The Spinoza-Nietzsche Problem*, and Yovel, *Spinoza and other Heretics*. The latter claims that “Nietzsche makes innumerable direct references to Spinoza. Some of his remarks are important, others are marginal, and all are biased in style and content by Nietzsche’s current philosophical emphasis. Hence it will not serve our purpose to follow the line of “Nietzsche as reader of Spinoza.” Instead, I shall try to reconstruct their respective positions around certain key philosophical issues.” For Yovel, then, Nietzsche is too biased in his readings for his notes on Spinoza to be useful for a systematic comparison. While it is perhaps too radical to therefore rule them out entirely, Yovel does remind us that Nietzsche is not striving for scholarly accuracy, but is rather looking for opposition in order to articulate his own views, as we will see later on.

⁴ Brobjer, *Nietzsche’s Philosophical Context*, 77 ; Scandella, *Did Nietzsche Read Spinoza?* 309 ; Wollenberg, *Nietzsche, Spinoza, and the Moral Affects*, 623.

⁵ Brobjer, *Nietzsche’s Philosophical Context*, 77. This passage by Brobjer seems to mark a turning point in the literature: Wollenberg, Ioan, Scandella and Sommer all take note of it.

⁶ Ioan, *Nietzsche’s Diagnosis of Spinoza*, 3

⁷ Ibid.

It is worth noting that Brobjer does not deny the possibility of building a systematic account on a historical assessment – he is merely claiming that scrutinizing Nietzsche as if he had read Spinoza directly is misguided, which is doubtless true. Ioan expands on Brobjer by suggesting that an analysis of Nietzsche’s engagement with Spinoza can provide a bridge into a wider comparison between their philosophies. Such an account would draw on historical insights into what Nietzsche himself thought of Spinoza, but would not need to restrict itself to Nietzsche’s direct references. This approach appears to be the favoured one in the most recent scholarship, and this thesis is likewise committed to it.

Within the set of those following this approach, disagreement shows up mostly around two issues: how closely aligned can we say that Nietzsche and Spinoza actually are, and based on which notions is the comparison most fruitful? With regards to the former, some are inclined towards emphasizing the differences⁸, while others seem to recognize more similarities.⁹ Notwithstanding, both sides strive for nuance rather than simply trying to label Nietzsche a Spinozist or not. As for the latter, there are a number of different though related suggestions. Ioan focuses on power and the body¹⁰, Sommer addresses teleology and self-preservation¹¹, and Wollenberg thinks the most substantial influence is Spinoza’s “thinking about the affects.”¹² Yovel orients the discussion towards their variations of immanence¹³, while Schacht stresses their psychological inclination.¹⁴ From their own angle, each author then strives to shed light on key comparative issues.

This thesis aligns itself with this approach in a general sense, but differs insofar as the point of gravity, around which the comparison unfolds, is shifted. More specifically, the claim underlying this work is that the main theme that unites Nietzsche and Spinoza, and makes an investigation into their relation especially fruitful, is their shared commitment to developing a philosophical therapy. What is meant by this will be outlined shortly, immediately after a synopsis of Nietzsche’s historical exposure to Spinoza.

⁸ Eg Rehmann, *Disentangling the Conflation of Spinoza and Nietzsche*; Sommer, *Nietzsche’s Reading on Spinoza*.

⁹ Wollenberg, *Nietzsche, Spinoza, and the Moral Affects*. ; Ioan, *Nietzsche’s Diagnosis of Spinoza*.

¹⁰ Ioan, *Spinoza and Nietzsche on Freedom*, 1864

¹¹ Sommer, *Nietzsche’s Reading on Spinoza*, 159

¹² Wollenberg, *Nietzsche, Spinoza, and the Moral Affects*, 619

¹³ Yovel, *Spinoza and other Heretics*, 122

¹⁴ Schacht, *The Spinoza-Nietzsche Problem*, 213

Nietzsche's Engagement with Spinoza

The most comprehensive accounts on Nietzsche's exposure to Spinoza are those of Brobjer and Scandella.¹⁵ Other valuable historical insights come from Ioan, Sommer and Wollenberg. Since the scholarship on the question of influence is highly meticulous, there does not appear to be any need for revision. The following brief overview of Nietzsche's interaction with sources on Spinoza therefore relies heavily on the existing reports.

Prior to any documented engagement, it is conceivable that Nietzsche encountered Spinoza through Goethe, who wrote repeatedly on the Dutch thinker. The earliest textual evidence stems from 1865 and consists of a number of unpublished notes that Nietzsche made in Bonn during Karl Schaarschmidt's course on the history of philosophy.¹⁶ Nietzsche's comments are largely descriptive.¹⁷ In the decade from 1865 to 1875 Nietzsche reads a number of secondary sources on the history of philosophy containing references to Spinoza, varying in length and accuracy.¹⁸ Nietzsche also engages with Schopenhauer during this time, "who frequently referred to and discussed Spinoza with both positive and critical comments."¹⁹ None of these encounters seem to have sparked much interest in Nietzsche, however, as he only makes one general comment during this time,²⁰ likely based on Goethe.²¹

Remarkably, in 1875 Nietzsche has Spinoza's *Ethics* delivered from the bookstore but for unknown reasons decides to return it, apparently without having read it.²² From 1875 to 1881 there are a number of references to Spinoza which are uncharacteristically positive for Nietzsche. For instance, Nietzsche describes Spinoza as "genius"²³ and "the purest sage."²⁴ Then, in 1881, Nietzsche writes the famous letter to Overbeck cited above. The impetus for this letter is Nietzsche reading Fischer's account of Spinoza in *Geschichte der Neuern Philosophie*. Nietzsche had requested Overbeck to send this work to him earlier and was clearly intrigued by Fischer's rendering of Spinoza. The scholarly consensus is that Fischer's *Geschichte* is Nietzsche's most significant source on Spinoza's idea, and Nietzsche's most sustained engagement with Spinoza in his notes are in direct response to Fischer.²⁵ Indeed,

¹⁵ Brobjer, *Nietzsche's Philosophical Context* ; Scandella, *Did Nietzsche Read Spinoza?*

¹⁶ Brobjer, *Nietzsche's Philosophical Context*, 78

¹⁷ See Rotter, *Selbsterhaltung und Wille zur Macht*, 170-3 for a compilation of Nietzsche's lecture notes on Spinoza

¹⁸ Brobjer, *Nietzsche's Philosophical Context*, 79

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Nietzsche, NF-1872,19[47]

²¹ Brobjer, *Nietzsche's Philosophical Context*, 79

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Nietzsche, HH 157

²⁴ Nietzsche, HH 475

²⁵ Wollenberg, *Nietzsche, Spinoza, and the Moral Affects*, 625-629 ; Ioan, *Nietzsche's Diagnosis of Spinoza*, 6-9

Wollenberg goes so far as to state that “Nietzsche’s knowledge of Spinoza was mediated almost exclusively through Fischer.”²⁶ While others emphasize other sources as well, there is little disagreement on the “paramount importance”²⁷ of Fischer’s *Geschichte* for Nietzsche’s reception of Spinoza.

The exceptional praise Nietzsche expresses for Spinoza in his letter to Overbeck is not reflected in his subsequent writing. On this point, Brobjer speculates that “[i]t seems likely that Nietzsche’s enthusiasm for Spinoza was somewhat more limited when he had finished reading the book by Fischer than it was when he wrote the postcard to Overbeck but that he still accepted that they shared some fundamental similarities and therefore continued to mention him as a predecessor.”²⁸ From 1881 to 1886, Nietzsche’s engagement with (Fischer’s) Spinoza becomes relatively extensive, and his comments strike a mostly critical tone. Curiously, Nietzsche chooses to publish his most critical points (in *BGE* and *GS*) and leaves his more positive comments unpublished. Throughout this period, Nietzsche tackles topics such as Spinoza’s *amor dei*, his reliance on self-preservation and teleology, the role of reason in dealing with the affects, and his understanding of virtue, nature, and God. In 1887, Nietzsche rereads the chapter on Spinoza in Fischer’s *Geschichte* and revisits many of these themes, with an emphasis on Spinoza’s pantheism and his psychology.²⁹

Thesis and Outline

As mentioned earlier, this thesis structures the discussion of the Spinoza-Nietzsche connection around its therapeutic significance. The term ‘therapy’ is here understood as largely following the Hellenistic traditions. That is, therapy consists of the efforts to cure the ailments and anguish of the soul by steering it towards health and flourishing. As such, Nietzsche and Spinoza are placed squarely in the tradition of thinkers that treat philosophy as a way of life.³⁰ It is worth noting that both Nietzsche and Spinoza differ from the Hellenistic traditions in important ways. Most importantly, neither of our two thinkers maintains that flourishing requires transcending the passions in terms of *apatheia*. While they disagree on the role of the passions in human flourishing, they agree that *eudaimonia* requires a close engagement with the emotions as opposed to their eradication – which is as impossible as it is

²⁶ Wollenberg, *Nietzsche, Spinoza, and the Moral Affects*, 620

²⁷ Brobjer, *Nietzsche’s Philosophical Context*, 77

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 80

²⁹ Wollenberg, *Nietzsche, Spinoza, and the Moral Affects*, 625-629 ; Ioan, *Nietzsche’s Diagnosis of Spinoza*, 6-9.

³⁰ Hadot’s famous conception of Ancient philosophy as a way of life thereby includes our two thinkers, as Hadot himself hints at: Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 108 (for Nietzsche) ; 271 (for Spinoza).

undesirable. Moreover, both advocate an immanent affirmation of the necessity of nature, but disagree on the fundamental character of nature. In other words, the role of metaphysics in the therapy of the soul is contested. Nietzsche and Spinoza agree on the diagnosis that most of our suffering is due to reactivity to, and dependence on, external determinations. As such, they both assert that the aim of therapy will involve an increase of self-determination, which is understood as an increase of power and freedom.

The therapeutic dimension of Nietzsche and Spinoza's work in their own right has been pointed out frequently.³¹ Both thinkers are concerned with the question of what it means to live a good life: what can we aspire to, and what must we overcome? Barring one exception,³² the issue of therapy has never been treated as centrally important when it comes to comparing Nietzsche with Spinoza; this thesis strives to mend the gap by treating their work as an exercise in philosophical therapy. Their work is therapeutic insofar as it attempts to unveil the conditions for human flourishing; it is philosophical insofar as it stresses the importance of rethinking our naïve conceptions of key notions like power, self, the emotions, morality, and freedom.

The thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter one focuses on Nietzsche and Spinoza's respective notions of power. We start here for three reasons: power is crucial for understanding their philosophies in a general sense; Nietzsche criticizes Spinoza's notion of power perhaps more than anything else; the most fundamental practical precept, for both, is to maximize one's power. As such, the therapeutic project will unfold around the available methods and prevalent obstacles for increasing power as much as possible. The discussion in this chapter centres on the relation between Spinoza's *conatus* and Nietzsche's will to power, and strives to show that, although Nietzsche's critical remarks are often unwarranted, they nevertheless point at an important difference with respect to metaphysics and psychology.

Chapter two discusses the notion of self. Spinoza and Nietzsche's understanding of self is of central importance for our purposes, for the obvious reason that the therapy they envision targets the self. Moreover, the self provides an informative avenue of exploration into their relation, as both understand the self as a relational multiplicity, defined by a striving for power. The key difference is that Spinoza presents the self as modally dependent on substance, a move not available to Nietzsche. We will see that reading Nietzsche through

Commented [AvL1]: So can we conclude that philosophy and therapy, for N&S, are intertwined in such a way that rethinking power, self, etc, is itself therapeutic, or merely that proper therapy will rely on our having the proper notions of self, power, etc., in our minds?

³¹ For Nietzsche, see for instance Michael Ure and Keith Ansell-Pearson, as well as the volume *Nietzsche's Therapeutic Readings*, eds., Hutter and Friedland. For Spinoza, see Clare Carlisle and Amihud Gilead, as well as the volume *Spinoza as Psychologist*, ed. Yovel.

³² Armstrong, *Spinoza and Nietzsche contra the Stoics*.

Spinoza alleviates an important interpretative issue surrounding the Nietzschean self, and consider the therapeutic ramifications of understanding the self as a form of activity.

The third and final chapter outlines Nietzsche and Spinoza's key therapeutic notions. We build on Deleuze's influential account by discussing the implications of the shift from morality to ethics and we come to terms with how suffering plays an important role for Nietzsche in a manner that it does not for Spinoza. We present the notion of *ressentiment* as a central obstacle to flourishing, and consider the role of self-knowledge in overcoming it. As we will see, reactivity to external causes is the main obstacle towards expanding our power, and understanding our emotions is our primary method for overcoming it. As we loosen our dependence on fortuitous determinations, we gradually become more powerful, active, and free. In closing, then, we consider the significance of freedom in Nietzsche and Spinoza's therapeutic projects.

The core ambition of this work is twofold: to shed light on the question as to what motivated Nietzsche to engage with Spinoza, and to argue that a systematic comparison of the two is most revealing in the context of philosophical therapy. As such, this work is primarily a theoretical exercise. At the same time, given the manifestly practical focus, the reader might rely on this work to glean insights of therapeutic value by orienting themselves amongst two of the most colossal figures in the history of philosophy.

Chapter 1: Power & Self-Preservation

In his later notes on Spinoza, Nietzsche becomes increasingly critical of his thinking. In this chapter we address the following question: why did Nietzsche go to such lengths to distance himself from the very thinker who transformed his *Einsamkeit* into a *Zweisamkeit*? If they are indeed so close in their thinking on key issues, then why does Nietzsche come to insist on their differences? This question will be addressed in light of the contrast Nietzsche observes between his will to power and Spinoza's *conatus*. As we will see, Nietzsche thinks that *conatus*, formulated as a striving for self-preservation, is too static and reactive a notion to properly explain human action. Thus, two aims are pursued in tandem: the first is to account for Nietzsche's critical reception of Spinoza: what does Nietzsche want from Spinoza, and does he get Spinoza right? The second aim is to gain an understanding of how their notions of power relate, with special emphasis on their psychological significance.

We will start, in section 1, with Spinoza's notion of *conatus* and compare it to Nietzsche's will to power, after which we assess Nietzsche's critical remarks on Spinoza's reliance on self-preservation and teleology, as well as the crucial ways in which their notions of power overlap and diverge. Crucially, for both, power is the central notion for explaining human action. As we will see in section 2, Nietzsche repeatedly comments on Spinoza's weak physiological and psychological state. Contrary to scholarly consensus, the suggestion in the final section is that Nietzsche does not simply dismiss Spinoza based on his feeble nature due to being worried that their ideas were too similar. Rather, Nietzsche comes to his judgment after a sustained engagement with Spinoza's notion of power.

1.

Spinoza postulates that “[t]he human body can be affected in many ways by which its power of action is augmented or diminished.”³³ Further, nothing (including the human body) ceases to exist by itself – a thing can only be destroyed when something external possesses a stronger power.³⁴ Everything endeavours by itself “to persevere [*perseverare*] in its own being.”³⁵ This endeavour is Spinoza's central notion *conatus*, which he considers to be the essence of all things. That is to say, it lies within the essence of every single thing to strive towards its own perseverance.³⁶ Whether or not it succeeds at this depends on its own power

³³ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 3post.2

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 3p4

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 3p6

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 3p7

as well as the power of the things it comes into contact with – the more powerful a thing is, the higher are its odds at perseverance. *Conatus* can be related to the mind as well as the body: Spinoza writes that

when this endeavor [*conatus*] is related to the mind alone, it is called will [*voluntas*]. But when it is related to mind and body simultaneously, it is called appetite [*appetitus*], which accordingly is nothing but a human being's very essence, and things that serve his preservation [*conservatione*] necessarily follow from its nature, and therefore a person is determined to do those things. ... desire [*cupiditas*] is appetite together with consciousness of it.³⁷

This passage is revealing in two main ways. First of all, Spinoza asserts that what essentially defines humans is desire, the primary target of which is to persevere in being.³⁸ This desire, moreover, plays out both on the bodily as well as the mental level. Secondly, it should be noted that while in defining *conatus* Spinoza uses the word 'to persevere' [*perseverare*], in this passage he uses 'preservation' [*conservatione*]. While one may argue that these terms are not strictly synonymous, Spinoza does not appear to treat them as distinct. Rotter suggests the terms are used interchangeably; insofar as they are not, '*perseverare*' may emphasize a reflective awareness of the striving in a manner that '*conservare*' does not.³⁹ Similarly, Deleuze stresses that the seemingly differing definitions of *conatus* are brought together by understanding *conatus* simply as a degree of power.⁴⁰

The comparison between Spinoza's *conatus* and Nietzsche's will to power is an obvious one, and is predictably made by many.⁴¹ Both thinkers assign a central role to their respective notions and see power as the main driving force of life at large, not excluding humans. Nietzsche himself, nevertheless, is especially insistent on the differences between them, and he repeatedly attacks Spinoza's notion of self-preservation. Now, as we have seen, Nietzsche's acquaintance with Spinoza is based largely on Kuno Fischer's account, and Nietzsche never read Spinoza directly.⁴² Notably, however, Fischer does state that Spinoza's *conatus* implies a drive towards self-preservation *and* towards increasing one's power to act.

³⁷ Ibid., 3p9s

³⁸ Ibid., DOE 1

³⁹ Rotter, *Selbsterhaltung und Wille zur Macht*, 120

⁴⁰ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 101/2

⁴¹ Among others: Yovel, *Spinoza and other Heretics* ; Della Rocca, *Spinoza* ; Wollenberg, *Nietzsche on Spinoza* ; Ioan, *Nietzsche's Diagnosis of Spinoza*.

⁴² Scandella, *Did Nietzsche Read Spinoza?* ; Brobjer, *Nietzsche's Philosophical Context*.

Indeed, Nietzsche wrote down one of the very passages where Fischer points this out: “what we do, we do to preserve and increase our power.”⁴³ It should be stressed that the increase of power is not a description of the *conatus* that is particularly prominent in Spinoza’s own writing in an explicit sense. Although this certainly follows from his propositions, Spinoza does not reference this fact as explicitly as the drive towards self-preservation. Wollenberg thus rightly remarks that “Fischer, more than Spinoza himself in my opinion, emphasizes the *conatus* not just with self-preservation but with a thing’s striving for continual increase in power.”⁴⁴ Be that as it may, since Fischer does highlight this element, Nietzsche was certainly aware of it. And yet, this did not prevent him from repeatedly challenging Spinoza’s understanding of striving towards power by characterizing it exclusively as a drive towards self-preservation, which he considers a marked flaw in his thinking.

In BGE 13, Nietzsche writes: “Above all, a living thing wants to *discharge* its strength – life itself is will to power –: self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent *consequences* of this. – In short, here as elsewhere, watch out for *superfluous* teleological principles! – such as the drive for preservation (which we owe to Spinoza’s inconsistency –).”⁴⁵ Nietzsche considers self-preservation to be a secondary consequence of the will to power rather than a direct expression of power. He further thinks self-preservation is teleological, while (as we will see) for Nietzsche power should be understood as non-teleological. The drive towards self-preservation is nothing more than a “masked form of the will to power”⁴⁶ that only arises when an individual is of weak disposition, and thereby not able to adequately express its will to power:

The wish to preserve oneself is the symptom of a condition of distress, of a limitation of the really fundamental instinct of life which aims at *the expansion of power* and, wishing for that, frequently risks and even sacrifices self-preservation. It should be considered symptomatic when some philosophers - for example, Spinoza who was consumptive - considered the instinct of self-preservation decisive and *had* to see it that way; for they were individuals in conditions of distress.⁴⁷

⁴³ Nietzsche, KSA, NF-1886,7[4]; Wollenberg, *Power, Affect, Knowledge*, 76/7

⁴⁴ Wollenberg, *Nietzsche, Spinoza, and the Moral Affects*, 632

⁴⁵ Nietzsche, BGE 13

⁴⁶ Nietzsche, KSA, NF-1886,7[6]

⁴⁷ Nietzsche, GS 349

The drive towards expanding one's power, then, is the truly fundamental drive, and the drive towards preserving oneself is a sign of distress – when the need to preserve oneself is present, it means the will to power is weakened. Whoever flourishes does not have to struggle just to stay alive, but rather expands their power unremittingly. So when Spinoza embraces the drive towards self-preservation, Nietzsche suggests, Spinoza admits that he himself is in distress, since a strong thriving individual would never commend a drive so symptomatic of decay. According to Nietzsche, this distress is due to the fact that Spinoza was consumptive – that is, suffering from pulmonary tuberculosis. In Nietzsche's time, this illness was known to be infectious and to cause symptoms like physical exhaustion and pale complexion – in other words, degeneration and weakness.⁴⁸ Nietzsche thus considers Spinoza's physical and mental state to be his impetus for putting forth self-preservation as a primary drive. Spinoza's illness blinds him to the realization that power seeks to expand rather than merely strive to preserve the self.

2.

The majority of the recent secondary literature devotes attention to Nietzsche's treatment of Spinoza's reliance on self-preservation. For example, Sommer notes that Nietzsche fails to acknowledge the obvious similarities between Spinoza and himself on the matter of power, despite being aware of the fact that Spinoza's *conatus* involves self-preservation as well as an increase of power. In a rather unforgiving tone, Sommer states that “[b]y degrading Spinoza to a fainting theoretician of power preservation, Nietzsche wishes to gloss over Spinoza's dangerous proximity to his own ‘will to power,’ a concept he claims as his own original philosophical creation.”⁴⁹ Hence, according to Sommer, Nietzsche is cognizant of his proximity to Spinoza but deliberately ignores it – indeed, he intentionally misrepresents Spinoza to obscure the fact that they are in truth far more similar than Nietzsche is willing to admit. Granted, there are multiple cases where Nietzsche draws on others' ideas without due acknowledgement. Hence, given the discrepancy between Nietzsche's knowledge of Spinoza's notion of power through Fischer, and how he represents Spinoza, Sommer's conclusion is not untenable. It is, however, impossible to determine Nietzsche's motives – and so, allegations of deliberate misrepresentation are perhaps somewhat too strong.

Sommer is nevertheless not alone in his thinking; Schacht, too, thinks that Nietzsche's will to power is closer to Spinoza's *conatus* than the former seems willing to admit. In line

⁴⁸ Ioan, *A Case of Consumption*, 8

⁴⁹ Sommer, *Nietzsche's Readings on Spinoza*, 173

with Sommer, Schacht claims that Nietzsche's "critique of Spinoza on this point may well be owing to his recognition that the hypothesis he advances in place of Spinoza's is uncomfortably close to it in this respect."⁵⁰ Schacht and Sommer thus agree that Nietzsche was aware of his closeness to Spinoza – and yet decided to overlook it, in particular by attacking Spinoza based on his character. Schacht writes that Nietzsche

brings his 'psychology of philosophers' into play, in a manner intended to undermine Spinoza's doctrine... Nietzsche is in effect suggesting that an attraction to such a doctrine is just what one might expect of those for whom, by virtue *either* of ill-health *or* of an otherwise impoverished constitution, self-preservation is the limit of their aspiration and is their primary preoccupation.⁵¹

Schacht suggests that Nietzsche was of the opinion that, because of his illness, Spinoza was not capable of aspiring to a higher ideal than self-preservation – his physical condition simply did not allow him to aim for anything more than that. According to this view, Nietzsche submits Spinoza's philosophical arguments to a form of psychological reductionism, in which his standpoints are merely a consequence of his weak disposition. Based on the preceding citations, it does indeed seem to be the case that Nietzsche considers Spinoza's self-preservation to be a consequence of his distress. Both Schacht and Sommer furthermore suggest that *conatus* and will to power are expressions of activity, oriented towards growth rather than stasis. It appears that Sommer and Schacht are getting at some error on Nietzsche's part, although it is not immediately apparent this is a deliberate one, as they suggest. The following, then, aims to unpack what this error might be.

First off, we may note that Nietzsche's criticism of Spinoza allows for a more general observation, which is that Nietzsche sees a direct relation between a person's physiological state and their affective experience: bodies manifest drives that fit their particular disposition. Both a thriving body and a degenerating body will exhibit drives that lead to their furtherance of power, as all drives are fundamentally an expression of the will to power, but the degenerating body will only be able to express drives in accordance with its current state – which may happen to be no more than a drive towards its own preservation. Only someone in distress would express the drive towards self-preservation – which is not to say that someone in distress is incapable of improving in such a way as to express higher drives and increase

⁵⁰ Schacht, *The Spinoza-Nietzsche Problem* (in *Spinoza the Psychologist*, eds. Yovel), 221

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 221/2

their power. Importantly, Nietzsche stresses that striving towards self-preservation is simply not what power ultimately *does* – power is always seeking to expand itself, and so the notion of preservation is not only psychologically restrictive but a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of power and its relation to human drives.

The fact that Nietzsche challenges Spinoza based on his physical condition does not have to imply that he is trying to undermine him for being a weakling who can only come up with weak ideas – nor indeed that he feels threatened because Spinoza’s ideas are uncomfortably similar to his. On the contrary, Nietzsche could simply be faulting Spinoza for not thinking boldly enough about power; his point may be that Spinoza’s disposition does not excuse him from understanding the true nature of power. For while (Fischer’s) Spinoza does define *conatus* in terms of self-preservation *and* increase of power, the element of self-preservation is still retained. In addition, the fact that Nietzsche does not engage as explicitly with the similarities between him and Spinoza as he does with the differences does not make his criticisms invalid by default. Importantly, however, this does not yet mean that Nietzsche is accurate in his portrayal of Spinoza.

As we saw, one of the issues Nietzsche raises with the drive towards self-preservation is its teleological dimension. In his letter to Overbeck, Nietzsche lauds Spinoza for his denial of teleology. Conversely, he considers self-preservation to be a ‘superfluous teleological principle’. In recent literature, there is some focus on the question whether Spinoza’s *conatus* commits him to teleology. In an influential account, Bennett argues that Spinoza steers clear of goal-oriented thinking in some features of human action. The fact that he does not manage to do so consistently, however, is a serious problem for Bennett. Specifically, “Spinoza is clearly relying on a doctrine of self-interest that is openly teleological and predictive of behavior.”⁵² The suggestion is that, because *conatus* aims at the preservation of the self, one acts in order to bring about a certain end. This places the predicted outcome at the beginning of the causal chain, irrevocably making it teleological. Others have responded critically to Bennett, arguing that he misrepresents Spinoza’s psychology, and incorrectly accuses Spinoza for being inconsistent.⁵³ Nuancing Bennett’s position, Lin points out that “Spinoza’s rejection of teleology is confined exclusively to a rejection of divine providence... Spinoza’s moral psychology and ethical theory both assume that human action is goal-oriented.”⁵⁴

⁵² Bennett, *Teleology and Spinoza’s Conatus*, 153

⁵³ Lin, *Teleology and Human Action in Spinoza*; Jarrett, *Teleology and Spinoza’s Doctrine of Final Causes* (in *Spinoza the Psychologist*, eds. Yovel)

⁵⁴ Lin, *Teleology and Human Action in Spinoza*, 353

Still, the fact remains that both Bennett and Lin contend that human action, for Spinoza, is teleological because the *conatus* strives towards the preservation of the self. The correctness of this claim depends on two things: the meaning of preservation, and the meaning of self. We pointed out earlier that preservation does not have to imply ‘staying exactly the same’. Indeed, Spinoza uses preservation as synonymous with perseverance. While this allows for a more dynamic understanding of *conatus*, the question is still what is striven to be preserved – that is, what is the self? This question is the focal point of the next chapter and so will not be answered in detail here. Suffice it here to preface that the self, for Spinoza, just *is* a degree of power, activity, and striving. It follows that self-preservation strives towards the perseverance of power; as such, *conatus* is an activity that aims at its own continuation. In other words, *conatus* is its own *telos*. Understood in this self-contained way, it makes little sense to speak of teleology in Spinoza’s self-preservation. There may be other parts of Spinoza’s thought that are teleological, but *conatus* is not one of them.

How does this view of power relate to Nietzsche’s? Though it may be tempting to think of the sheer possession of power as the goal of the will to power, the contention here is that this would be to misconstrue the idea. Following Deleuze, Nietzsche’s will to power does not portray power as the object of will, but rather as the subject of the will.⁵⁵ That is to say, it is not that the will has power as its *telos*; rather, the will *is* power, and it is the nature of power to seek to expand and expend itself. This view, Schacht writes, “gives rise to power relationships everywhere, and to configurations that may have the *appearance* of exhibiting a teleology of power-as-control. But this appearance is actually only the expression of the play and interplay of power-as-assertion.”⁵⁶ This image of power is very close to what one gets from Spinoza.

In order to understand why Nietzsche nevertheless insists on the fact that his understanding of power is distinct from self-preservation, it is worthwhile to consider the following note:

NB NB. There is no instinct for self-preservation – rather, seeking the pleasant and avoiding the unpleasant explains everything that is ascribed to that drive. There is also no urge to want to persist as a species. All of this is mythology (as still in Spencer and Littré). Generation is a matter of pleasure: its consequence is reproduction; i.e. without reproduction this kind of pleasure and no kind of pleasure would have been preserved

⁵⁵ Deleuze, Recorded lecture on Spinoza, 1980

⁵⁶ Schacht, *The Spinoza-Nietzsche Problem*, 226

[sic]. Sexual desire has nothing to do with the reproduction of the species! The consumption of food has nothing to do with preservation!⁵⁷

The sentence ‘without reproduction ... been preserved’ appears to contain a writing error on Nietzsche’s part. In light of the rest of the passage, however, the intended meaning can still be discerned. Nietzsche is claiming that what drives us to reproduce is not a desire to preserve ourselves or the species – rather, what drives us is the pleasure that comes with the act of reproduction. Its consequence, preservation, is irrelevant; even if the act of reproduction did not actually lead to preservation we would still engage in it, since it is the pleasure rather than the outcome of the act that we seek. So too for food: we do not eat in order to stay alive but because eating gives us pleasure and hunger gives us displeasure. What this passage reveals is an evolutionary reading of the notion of self-preservation, indicated by the fact that Nietzsche mentions Spencer. For Spencer, as Moore points out, “[t]he ultimate end of all conduct is ... the preservation of the individual organism and the species to which it belongs.”⁵⁸ Even if we leave aside whether Spencer is indeed proposing a teleological form of self-preservation, Nietzsche surely seems to think so. Thus it may be the case that Nietzsche approaches Spinoza’s formulation of self-preservation through the same lens. We can subsequently see why Nietzsche might (misguidedly) charge Spinoza with the same criticisms that he directs at evolutionary thinking based on self-preservation.

Importantly, Nietzsche is not suggesting that we (should) act solely for the sake of pleasure – pleasure is not the final stop. Rather, “[p]leasure and displeasure are a mere consequence, a mere accompanying phenomenon – what man wants, what even the smallest parts of a living organism want, is an increase of power.”⁵⁹ We act to increase our power rather than to experience pleasure and avoid displeasure; “pleasure accompanies, pleasure does not move us.”⁶⁰ Furthermore, though increasing our power may cause pleasure, it is impossible to gain power without going through some displeasure as well. This is because every growth of power requires some resistance or obstacle to be overcome. These obstacles themselves may very well inhibit one’s power and cause displeasure momentarily. However, without them there would be nothing to assert oneself against, and so there would be no opportunity for power to grow: “every triumph, every feeling of pleasure... presupposes the

⁵⁷ Nietzsche, NF-1880,6[145]

⁵⁸ Moore, *Nietzsche, Biology, and Metaphor*, 64

⁵⁹ Nietzsche, NF-1888,14[174]

⁶⁰ Nietzsche, NF-1888,14[121]

overcoming of some resistance.”⁶¹ More pleasure therefore does not straightforwardly equal more power – rather, displeasure is a necessary condition for power to increase.⁶² Hence, our drives do not exist for the attainment of some other aim like pleasure, but only aim at their own expression. Every drive is a quantum of power that seeks nothing but its own fulfilment. Nietzschean power, then, exists and expends for its own sake, and has no particular *telos* in mind.⁶³

Interestingly, Nietzsche furthermore draws a parallel between power and the changing nature of reality: “It is a mere matter of experience that change does not cease... Spinoza's proposition about self-preservation ought actually to put a stop to change: but the proposition is false, the opposite is true. It is precisely in all living things that it can be shown most clearly that it does everything not to maintain itself, but to become more.”⁶⁴ In Nietzsche's view, if living things would solely strive to preserve themselves, then change would cease and stasis would follow – which is evidently not the case. Change is instead better explained by the fact that everything strives to always become more.

This last remark points to a more general dismay of Nietzsche when it comes to Spinoza's metaphysics. In some sense, Nietzsche seems to think, Spinoza's notion of self-preservation is simply a result of his antiquated metaphysical thinking. As Ioan writes, “[i]n trying to save becoming from being, Nietzsche sees and criticizes in Spinoza an understanding of reality in which there is no place for real development.”⁶⁵ Though his notion of substance surely commits Spinoza to a metaphysically grounded view of reality, the question is whether this necessarily entails a lack of dynamism and becoming. That is to say, the infinity and eternity of substance does not invalidate the finite and transitory nature of its modes. Indeed, in spite of its metaphysical basis, the picture that emerges from Spinoza's modes and their interactions is a rather dynamic one indeed.⁶⁶

Increasingly so throughout his engagement with Spinoza, Nietzsche comes to see him as the archetype metaphysician, which in turn means he stands accused of everything that Nietzsche generally accuses metaphysicians of. This observation allows us a better understanding of Nietzsche's interpretation of Spinoza's *conatus*. In the words of Ioan:

⁶¹ Nietzsche, NF-1888,14[174]

⁶² This point will be covered in more detail in the final chapter.

⁶³ As Rehmann points out, Nietzsche does employ other notions of power, particularly in his later works. See end of this chapter for an elaboration on this issue.

⁶⁴ Nietzsche, NF-1888,14[121]

⁶⁵ Ioan, *Nietzsche's Diagnosis of Spinoza*, 13

⁶⁶ This idea will be further developed in the next chapter.

The question of whether to interpret desire as self-preservation hinges on the meaning of the word being (*Sein*). While Spinoza understood being (*esse*) as a dynamic reality, there is no reason to believe that Nietzsche recognised this. If Nietzsche understood the concept of being in Spinoza to be part of the tradition of the metaphysics of substance that he criticised, then we can understand why he interpreted Spinoza's conatus doctrine as the expression of a homeostatic model of power, as the striving of each thing to remain in the same state.⁶⁷

Even if Nietzsche seems to overemphasize the metaphysical character over the dynamic nature of its modes, his dismay with Spinoza's metaphysical baggage does get at an important idea, which is that the self-preservation Spinoza envisions goes beyond mere maintenance of bodily health – it strives towards the preservation of (some part of) the mind after the death of the body.⁶⁸ According to Spinoza, the highest thing the mind can aspire to is intuitive knowledge,⁶⁹ which consists of knowledge of the formal essence of God through its attributes.⁷⁰ This type of cognition depends on and fosters the eternal aspect of the mind,⁷¹ and leads to intellectual love of God (*amor intellectualis dei*), which is tantamount to the highest state of blessedness and freedom.⁷² From this Spinoza concludes that “the greater the mind's clear and distinct cognition is, and the more the mind in consequence loves God, the less harmful death is.”⁷³ That is to say, intuitive knowledge does not simply aid us in preserving our bodily existence, it actually makes the death of the body relatively unimportant – what matters is the preservation of the eternal aspect of the mind through the intellectual love of God. Whether or not one thinks that Nietzsche is right in challenging this aspect of Spinoza's thought, Nietzsche is at the very least on point with his assessment of Spinoza, which up to this point did not seem to be the case.

From this perspective, Wollenberg's comment is right on the mark: “for Spinoza, the highest expression of this striving [for self-preservation] is in the mind's achievement of ideas *sub specie aeternitatis*. Understood in this light, ‘self-preservation’ re-emerges on a higher plane than the mere preservation of the corporeal self.”⁷⁴ To be sure, this will be hard to

⁶⁷ Ioan, *Nietzsche's Diagnosis of Spinoza*, 17

⁶⁸ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 5p23

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 5p25

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 2p40s2

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 5p21

⁷² *Ibid.*, 5p36s

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 5p38s

⁷⁴ Wollenberg, *Nietzsche on Spinoza*, 91

accept for Nietzsche: his suspicion of religious and metaphysical thinking doubtless includes the idea of the mind outliving the body. Nietzsche is therefore unsurprisingly critical of Spinoza's *amor intellectualis dei*:

Don't you have a sense of something profoundly enigmatic and uncanny? ... Don't you sense a long concealed vampire in the background who begins with the senses and in the end is left with, and leaves, mere bones, mere clatter? I mean categories, formulas, words (for, forgive me, what was left of Spinoza, *amor intellectualis dei*, is mere clatter and no more than that: What is *amor*, what *deus*, if there is not a drop of blood in them?).⁷⁵

According to Nietzsche, Spinoza's *amor intellectualis dei* is reminiscent of vampirism because it lacks any sense of vitality. The concept brings desensualization to bear on life, leaving nothing but lifeless, rigid metaphysical concepts. It is precisely this life-denying thinking that Nietzsche challenges so frequently and so fervently, and given Nietzsche's understanding of Spinoza as a metaphysician *pur sang*, he is not spared from reproach.

3.

As we have seen, Nietzsche uses his reading of Spinoza's ideas to prompt a psychological assessment of him. Nietzsche thinks that Spinoza comes up with such anaemic ideas because he was himself anaemic. Spinoza's formulas are thereby no more than facades constructed in order to conceal the weakness of the meek thinker hiding behind them. To see that this is the case, Nietzsche says, one need only consider "that hocus pocus of a mathematical form used by Spinoza to arm and outfit his philosophy ... and thus, from the very start, to strike terror into the heart of the attacker who would dare to cast a glance at the unconquerable maiden and Pallas Athena: – how much personal timidity and vulnerability this sick hermit's masquerade reveals!"⁷⁶ A strong courageous thinker (like Nietzsche himself, he seems to imply) would not feel compelled to veil their ideas in the way that Spinoza does.

Remarkably, the majority of commentators stumble over the same question: "What drives Nietzsche to apply a psychological, historical and ultimately a physiological analysis to

⁷⁵ Nietzsche, GS 372

⁷⁶ Nietzsche, BGE 5

Spinoza's work and, in an *ad hominem* argument, to Spinoza himself?"⁷⁷ The consensus seems to be that Nietzsche was more interested in the (condition of) the thinker behind the ideas rather than the ideas themselves. While it is true that Nietzsche reflects on Spinoza's disposition on a considerable amount of occasions, to brand this as an *ad hominem*, as Ioan does in the above quote, is not only inaccurate, but more importantly, it misses the point. We already noted Nietzsche's interest in the role that the will to power plays in the relation between the thinker and the kinds of ideas they articulate. To recognize such a relation, however, is not to suggest that ideas can *only* be judged on the basis of the character of their author. Put plainly, feeble ideas are not feeble just because whoever came up with them is feeble – the content of the idea matters. That does not mean that their personality cannot tell us something about why they came up with such ideas – or so Nietzsche suggests. By focusing on Spinoza's character, then, Nietzsche is not necessarily trying to undermine his 'precursor' because the proximity of their ideas makes him uncomfortable, as Sommer and Schacht claim. Speculating about Nietzsche's intentions in this manner is not only unhelpful, it also obscures the philosophical significance of Nietzsche's engagement with Spinoza.

For Nietzsche this ultimately comes down to Spinoza's thinking about self-preservation, which irrevocably reveals that he is not daring enough to come to see power as growth, and to embrace the necessary attitude that go along with it: a welcoming of change, wastefulness, displeasure, struggle, transience – and death.⁷⁸ This shows that what is at stake with Spinoza and Nietzsche's thinking on power, in a therapeutic sense, is our fundamental attitude towards existence.

While Nietzsche's understanding of Spinoza's self-preservation is partly mistaken, this does not undermine the fact that he touches upon a key philosophical difference, much more relevant than Nietzsche's comments on Spinoza himself: his comments "recognize that a metaphysical psychology underlies Spinoza's affect theory. Spinoza's psychology is grounded in his ontology."⁷⁹ That is to say, the drive towards self-preservation is entwined with Spinoza's metaphysics in a manner that makes it impossible for Nietzsche to accept.

Despite this key difference, there is a significant similarity between Nietzsche and Spinoza's concept of power, as much of the secondary literature underscores – despite Nietzsche's insistence on the contrary. Both understand power as activity and place it at the

⁷⁷ Ioan, *Nietzsches Diagnosis of Spinoza*, 13

⁷⁸ This difference is captured by the contrast between Spinoza's *amor dei* and Nietzsche's *amor fati* – see Wollenberg, *Power, Affect, Knowledge*, 92. More on this in the last chapter.

⁷⁹ Wollenberg, *Power, Affect, Knowledge*, 83

root of human action. Power strives for its own continuation and growth and is therefore non-teleological.

Rehmann is perhaps the most striking critic of what he calls the ‘continuity thesis’ of power. He stresses that the secondary literature is too eager to focus on the similarities between Nietzsche and Spinoza when it comes to power, whereby important differences are overlooked. According to Rehmann, the comparison is justified in terms of Nietzsche’s middle works, but is ultimately misleading because it obscures the fact that Nietzsche reformulates his notion of power in a politically precarious manner. In particular, “whereas Spinoza’s *potentia agendi* designates a collective and cooperative capacity oriented toward relations of synergy with others, Nietzsche’s “will to power” naturalizes the principle of oppression and domination.”⁸⁰ This is an important difference that Rehmann is right to stress. However, it is possible to respect this difference with regards to Nietzsche’s later works while still appreciating the distinct opportunities for comparison in relation to the middle works. Since focusing on the latter is much more fruitful for our purpose of comparing Nietzsche and Spinoza in light of their therapeutics, the emphasis is placed on the notion of power presented there. The intention, then, is not to gloss over the differences, but rather to focus on the aspects that are most informative for our aim. As such, power is understood, in both thinkers, as a kind of activity rather than a kind of domination. The meaning of activity and its relation to psychology and therapy will be discussed in the following chapter.

⁸⁰ Rehmann, *What Kind of Life Affirmation?*, 399

Chapter 2: Substance & Self

The role and meaning of the notion of self in both Nietzsche and Spinoza is highly contested and presents significant interpretative issues. Nietzsche repeatedly denies the existence of selves, subjects and substance, in favour of an ontology of activity and power; at the same time, some suggest that exactly such notions seem to be required to make sense of his ontology. Spinoza's case is different, although related. His metaphysics of immanence precludes the existence of selfhood besides the one substance; notwithstanding, he speaks of modes of substance as individual things and ascribes them essences. In Nietzsche's reading of Spinoza, the self plays a central role. Whether due to misunderstanding or deliberate misrepresentation, Nietzsche fails to grasp Spinoza's notion of self. In fact, despite his critical attitude towards Spinoza, Nietzsche is much closer to him than he realizes or admits to. As we will see, the main point of divergence is Spinoza's metaphysical commitment to substance, in opposition to Nietzsche's refusal to think in terms of substance.

In this chapter, then, we explore Nietzsche and Spinoza's view of self. Section one presents a central problem for the Nietzschean self, as identified by the secondary literature. In the second part, we investigate whether reading Nietzsche through Spinoza can alleviate some of the concerns raised in section one. Part three provides a discussion of Nietzsche's own reception of Spinoza, which will be shown to miss the mark. Nietzsche takes the Spinozist self to be static, while it is in fact a lot closer to the dynamic and relational understanding of self that Nietzsche himself champions. The final section will address the significance of the difference between the two thinkers in terms of substance, while emphasizing the distinct commonalities in terms of the self.

This chapter aspires to deepen our understanding of Spinoza and Nietzsche's mutual notion of self, as well as to demonstrate that reading Nietzsche through Spinoza can help us to challenge the idea that Nietzsche's view of self is inconsistent. Finally, the aim is to consider in what manner their revised notion of self is of therapeutic value.

1.

In this section, we present Bittner's case against Nietzsche's dismissal of subject and substance, in order to introduce a key issue with Nietzsche's view of self. Drawing on Wollenberg, we counter with the suggestion that seeing Nietzsche through Spinoza can help clarify some concerns Bittner raises around the Nietzschean self.

The *locus classicus* for Nietzsche's rejection of the subject is GM 1.13. In this famous passage, Nietzsche challenges the separation between doer and deed:

Commented [AvL2]: I don't deliver on this – I explain the notion of self and at the end say how it ties in into therapeutics. But I don't say anything about how the notion of self is therapeutic. How would thinking about the self in N&S' way have therapeutic value in and of itself?

And just as the common people separates lightning from its flash and takes the latter to be a deed, something performed by a subject, which is called lightning, popular morality separates strength from the manifestations of strength, as though there were an indifferent substratum behind the strong person which had the freedom to manifest strength or not. But there is no such substratum; there is no ‘being’ behind the deed, its effect and what becomes of it; ‘the doer’ is invented as an afterthought, – the doing is everything.⁸¹

For Nietzsche, the idea of a substantial subject is a fabrication to push the idea that “the strong are free to be weak”⁸², so as to frame expressions of strength as free acts of an agent. Conversely, Nietzsche insists that there is no agent possessing strength, no doer behind deeds – there is simply a doing, nothing but pure unmediated strength.

A number of commentators have raised issues regarding the consistency of this claim, particularly in relation to Nietzsche’s notion of will to power.⁸³ For instance, Bittner points out that “[i]f there is a story of one will to power getting the better of another, that will to power must be something re-identifiable, and it cannot be identified by its power over others, since that is what changes. So it *is* not power, it *has* power. That means it is substance.”⁸⁴ In other words, will to power presupposes substance: “For some event to be a subduing, some individual thing is needed to be a subduer, and some individual thing is needed to be subdued.”⁸⁵ In light of GM 1.13, this is problematic, since “[g]iven the denial of substance, ... there are no individual things; there are only actions. Hence, if the denial of substance is true, the doctrine of the will to power is not true, and conversely.”⁸⁶ That is, according to Bittner, Nietzsche cannot reject substance while also embracing the thesis of will to power, without being inconsistent.

Bittner explores one way of reconciling this contradiction, based on the idea that “[t]he doctrine of the will to power and the denial of substance are both part of the same project: a philosophical understanding of life and the living.”⁸⁷ Understanding life, in turn, is closely

⁸¹ Nietzsche, GM 1.13

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Bittner, *Masters without Substance*; Pippin, *Agent and Deed*. The following critical remarks are directed at Bittner in particular because he states his case more plainly. Our analysis nevertheless applies equally to Pippin.

⁸⁴ Bittner, *Masters without Substance*, 40

⁸⁵ Ibid., 37

⁸⁶ Ibid., 38

⁸⁷ Ibid., 41

tied to the notion of activity: “Understanding activity is not only crucial for understanding life. It *is* to understand life.”⁸⁸ In light of this more general project of understanding life, it makes sense for Nietzsche to reject substance as he does in GM 1.13, since “substance is an unnecessary duplication of activity.”⁸⁹ If activity is the fundamental character of life, then positing an actor behind activity needlessly complicates the picture. However, the value of will to power with regards to understanding life is less obvious to Bittner: “Will to power is meant to make sense of activity, which is the basic character of life. In fact, will to power does not make sense of activity. Will to power replaces the concept of activity with a narrower one.”⁹⁰ According to Bittner, will to power substitutes activity with creativity. The key difference between these terms is that the former can be causally conditioned, whereas the latter implies an undetermined (Cartesian, if you will) spontaneity. Drawing on GS 301, Bittner suggests that creativity can only belong to an agent who subdues the world to its own values and perspectives. This is contrasted with ‘so-called activity’, which is to say the opposite of genuine activity. According to Bittner’s reading, one is only genuinely active, i.e. creative, when one imposes one’s values onto the world, and those who are merely so-called active fail to do so.

This is problematic, Bittner thinks, because it confers to humans the divine power of creation out of nothing, whereas “creativity talk is difficult to understand in the case of anyone other than God.”⁹¹ Bittner accuses Nietzsche of incorrectly assuming that just because things are not valuable in themselves, they must be given value by humans. Even if things are not inherently valuable, “neither need value be thrust upon them if they are to have it at all. They may simply achieve it.”⁹² That is, the fact that something appears according to a certain value or perspective need not imply that we freely created it to be so. Instead, it may simply arise as such, without any free deliberation by an agent. Thus, Bittner argues that “the distinction of active and passive is out of place here. The colors, aspects, emphases emerge in the course of our lives. They grow on us.”⁹³ Because will to power’s commitment to creativity leaves no room for this way of understanding life as activity, Bittner thinks Nietzsche makes an important misstep. Hence, he concludes: “The myth of creativity, one of God’s longer shadows, [Nietzsche] never left behind.”⁹⁴

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 42

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 44

⁹³ Ibid., 45

⁹⁴ Ibid.

It is true that Nietzsche speaks of creating values in GS 301: “Whatever has *value* in our world now does not have value in itself, according to its nature – nature is always valueless, but has been *given* value at some time as a present – and it was we who gave and bestowed it.”⁹⁵ However, the question is whether this commits Nietzsche to substance and creativity in the way that Bittner thinks it does.

2.

This section presents the Spinozist self as mode of substance, essentially defined by an endeavour to persevere in being, i.e. *conatus*. This leads into a discussion of a key commonality between Nietzsche and Spinoza with respect to activity, passivity and freedom. Finally, with a deeper understanding of the Nietzschean self, we turn back to Bittner’s points on creativity and will to power as presented in the preceding section. We introduce a line of comparison that treats Nietzsche as, put simply, Spinoza minus substance, and consider the deeply relational character of power and self in Nietzsche’s thought. As such, an attempt at repudiating Bittner’s imputation of inconsistency is provided.

In order to understand how Nietzsche uses the notion of creativity, and how it relates to selfhood and substance, reading Nietzsche through Spinoza can be illuminating. In fact, there is good reason to think that Nietzsche was directly influenced by his reading of Fischer’s Spinoza in writing GM 1.13. Wollenberg makes a convincing case for this:

Fischer points out that for Spinoza, the essence of a thing is not its reason, but rather its power of acting. Fischer illustrates this idea with a meteorological metaphor nearly identical to the one Nietzsche used: a person acts according to the power of his nature exactly as the sun does when it shines (*leuchtet*). Our power (*Macht*) is not a potential capacity that we can use at will; rather who we are, our affective make-up, is simply the expression of the body’s determined power of acting, for our ‘affects are the power expressions of human nature.’”⁹⁶

Hence, Nietzsche’s illustration of the separation between lightning and flash is mirrored by Fischer’s analogy of the sun, which is used to make the exact same point: power is identical to its expression, and there is no subject possessing the power who freely chooses when to express it. Nietzsche commented on multiple passages from the chapter containing

⁹⁵ Nietzsche, GS 301

⁹⁶ Wollenberg, *Nietzsche, Spinoza, and the Moral Affects*, 631

this passage, which indicates that he is likely to have read it. In addition, Fischer later employs the image of lightning as well:

Just as Nietzsche claims in I.13 that strength necessarily desires to ‘overcome’ and ‘become master,’ Fischer writes that according to Spinoza we always strive to become more powerful... Hence, Fischer writes, we hate a man who has done us even a small injury, but not the lightning bolt that has destroyed our house. The bolt was not free to do otherwise... Nietzsche, it appears, conflated Fischer’s two related images, the sun’s necessary shining (*leuchten*) and the unaccountable lightning bolt, into his own single image of the lightning bolt’s necessary flash (*leuchten*) at GM I.13.⁹⁷

Whether or not Nietzsche *deliberately* relied so closely on Fischer’s Spinoza in writing GM I.13 is impossible to know. The fact that he was influenced by it, however, seems indisputable. Be that as it may, we now turn towards a more systematic assessment, aiming to shed light on Nietzsche’s understanding of self. In order to do so, we first introduce Spinoza’s notion of self.

As Jaquet points out, Spinoza’s metaphysics of immanence precludes any *substantial* sense of exteriority and otherness.⁹⁸ He refers to nature as one individual,⁹⁹ while also acknowledging a smaller sense of individuality, defined by a fixed ratio of motion and rest between its constitutive elements.¹⁰⁰ Humans are not substances but modes of substance; as such, while on the level of substance humans are fundamentally undifferentiated from nature, on the modal level humans exist within nature as individual modes among other modes with which they constantly clash and conjoin. Thus, as Spinoza’s commitment to immanence rules out the existence of fixed substantial selves, he instead speaks of modal selves inhering in the one substance.

For Spinoza, every mode involves an essence, which is the *conatus*: “Every single thing endeavors as far as it lies in itself [*quantum in se est*] to persevere in its own being.”¹⁰¹ The endeavour [*conatus*], then, is the essence of things.¹⁰² Importantly, this endeavour is not something that a mode possesses – *conatus* is not a property of an individual. Wollenberg

⁹⁷ Ibid., 631/2

⁹⁸ Jaquet, *Subject and Interiority in Spinoza*, 65

⁹⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 2lem7s

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 2lem2def

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 3p6

¹⁰² Ibid., 3p7

recognizes this: “The conatus must be understood not as a possession of an individual but rather as its very definition, its actual expression.”¹⁰³ This means that striving to persevere in being does not refer to what an individual *does*, but to what it *is*. Thus, while Spinoza thinks that modes, including human subjects, are not substances, he does assign them essences. However, it would be incorrect to say that subjects *have* essences, since the essence involves an activity as opposed to a state of being. What essentially defines subjects, then, is their striving, i.e. *conatus*.

Given Nietzsche’s evident reliance on Fischer’s Spinoza in composing GM 1.13, does an understanding of the Spinozist self shed light on its meaning? At the outset, it should be clear that there is a major difference between Nietzsche and Spinoza with regards to substance. Even if the former is ambiguous about his position, he is clearly sceptical of the concept. The latter, on the other hand, is not – he denies the Cartesian plurality of substances, in favour of a single substance.¹⁰⁴ How, then, might we reconcile the two thinkers on this matter? One compelling option is to conceive of Nietzsche’s stance as, put simply, Spinoza minus substance – that is to say, a view of nature composed of competing modes, without defining the whole as a substantial harmonious unity. Wollenberg hints at such a reading: “Does it make sense to speak of modes without substance? For Spinoza, certainly not. But perhaps something like this is what Nietzsche had in mind.”¹⁰⁵

To see whether this is a tenable interpretation of GM 1.13, we have to look more closely at its place in the text. A central concept in the surrounding passages is *ressentiment*. Elgat defines *ressentiment* as “an **affectively** charged **desire** for revenge that involves the **belief** that someone or other is responsible for the suffering that causes it.”¹⁰⁶ A key feature of *ressentiment* is its reactive nature: it only occurs in response to some outside event. As such, it requires “external stimuli in order to act at all, – its action is basically a reaction.”¹⁰⁷ Conversely, “[t]he opposite is the case with the noble method of valuation: this acts and grows spontaneously.”¹⁰⁸ There is, then, a contrast between nobility and activity on the one hand, and *ressentiment* and reactivity on the other hand. *Ressentiment*, moreover, is directly related to will to power, as Elgat observes: “ressentiment never arises by itself. It is thus, by

¹⁰³ Wollenberg, *Nietzsche, Spinoza, and the Moral Affects*, 632/3

¹⁰⁴ It is worth noting that this distinction is intertwined with another correspondence, which is that for neither Nietzsche nor Spinoza, the self is itself a substance – even if for Spinoza the self is a mode of substance.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 633

¹⁰⁶ Elgat, *The Psychology of Ressentiment*, 46

¹⁰⁷ Nietzsche, GM 1.13

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

definition, reactive. ... it never seeks power in a spontaneous fashion but has to be 'pushed' into doing so. It is thus a "defective" or "second rank" manifestation of the will to power."¹⁰⁹

In other words, both activity and reactivity are expressions of power. The difference is that an active expression of power arises from within and does not need to be occasioned by some external event, whereas a reactive expression of power cannot arise without an external event. This way of thinking of activity and reactivity in terms of affectivity and power clearly resonates with Spinoza: "by an emotion I mean an action if we can be the adequate cause of any of these affections; if not I mean a passion."¹¹⁰ Activity, then, follows directly from one's essence, and "[o]ur actions, i.e. those desires which are defined by the power or reason of a person, are always good."¹¹¹ By extension, "because everything of which a human being is the efficient cause is necessarily good, nothing bad can happen to a human being except from external causes."¹¹²

For both Nietzsche and Spinoza, then, one is active when one's affects follow from within – that is, from one's own proper power. Activity, moreover, is an expression of power that is necessarily good. Passivity, on the contrary, occurs only in reaction to some external cause and can limit our power. Importantly, Spinoza does not equate activity with creativity in the free, spontaneous sense: "God alone is a free cause. For God alone exists by the necessity of his own nature."¹¹³ As such, "everything is determined to exist and to operate in a specific way by the necessity of the divine nature."¹¹⁴ Spinozist activity is therefore not free in the sense of being undetermined – everything in nature has a cause. Crucially, however, this does not mean that activity is basically a form of passivity; *determinism is not synonymous with passivity*. Rather, given that humans are parts of nature, they are not merely *determined* but also *determining*. Humans express a modicum of power that can be cultivated. Activity, then, just is power, and is always a matter of degree.

In GM 1.13, as well as in its inspiration in Fischer's Spinoza, the dismissal of the free agent plays an important role. For Spinoza, "[a] thing is said to be free if it exists solely by the necessity of its own nature, and is determined to action by itself alone."¹¹⁵ It follows that God alone is absolutely free. Here too, we must speak of *degrees* of freedom, proportionate to one's degree of power and activity. As modes, it is impossible to escape the causal nexus of

¹⁰⁹ Elgat, *The Psychology of Ressentiment*, 40

¹¹⁰ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 3def3

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4app3

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 4app6

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 1p17c2

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1p29

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1def7

nature. However, one's power can grow. Since the *conatus* is our essence, what we are, according to Spinoza, is essentially this degree of power, activity and freedom.¹¹⁶

Can we understand Nietzsche along similar lines? To be sure, Nietzsche speaks of will to power as the sole force of life,¹¹⁷ equates it with the instinct for freedom,¹¹⁸ and we have already alluded to how he associates will to power with activity. Yet, it is this very link between will to power and activity that Bittner challenges, since he thinks that will to power entails creativity rather than activity. Drawing on Spinoza, we can respond to this criticism by distinguishing creativity and activity in the following revised manner. Creativity is self-caused and belongs only to God. Activity, on the other hand, exists within a causal network and is never absolutely free. Given that Nietzsche denies God and substance, it follows that he would deny creativity in this sense as well, which would leave activity as the interplay between forces. With respect to Bittner's usage of GS 301 and the apparent contrast between 'genuine' activity and 'so-called' activity, we could interpret activity to be synonymous with genuine activity and take so-called activity to signify passivity, misinterpreted as activity.¹¹⁹ Contrary to Bittner, then, there *is* a significant contrast between activity and passivity, and creativity in the unmediated sense has no place in Nietzsche's system. Moreover, as we will see shortly, the idea that Nietzsche is committed to unmediated creativity in the way that Bittner supposes depends on a false understanding of the Nietzschean self.

We now turn to Bittner's related point, which was that will to power weds Nietzsche to a substantial self, despite his attempt to rid himself of substance. Now, Spinoza can avoid such criticism because he conceives of selves as modes of substance rather than substances in themselves. Modes inhere in substance; they exist within it and depend on it. Thus, as expressions of substance, modes form an intermediary position between substance and pure activity. The fact that the essence of modes is an activity does not challenge the tenability of a modal self, because "God is the immanent and not the transitive cause of all things"¹²⁰, which is to say that all alterations to the self are caused by substance and remain within it. Hence, changes to the self are necessarily contained within substance, as a change in patterns and relations, whilst the *conatus* remains intact. Because Nietzsche dismisses substance, it is questionable whether the same move is available to him. On this point, then, it would seem, at first glance, that Bittner is on the mark.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., DOE1, 4def8. The notion of freedom will be treated more extensively in the next chapter.

¹¹⁷ Nietzsche, BGE 13, 36

¹¹⁸ Nietzsche, GM II.18

¹¹⁹ Nietzsche, NF-1885, 36[15] further supports this view.

¹²⁰ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1p18

Interestingly, Wollenberg disagrees with Bittner on this point by arguing that “[t]o define a thing by its action does not eliminate the possibility of speaking of a thing as such. A unified will to power can itself individuate, and, even if properly understood as action rather than as substance, still allow us to speak of an enduring identity through time.”¹²¹ But if the only thing unifying an individuated will to power is power itself, then it is difficult to see how anything like a self could persist over time. If the self is simply will to power, and power is affective, then the self would consist solely of the affects. Given that affects do not endure, neither could a self. For Anderson as for Bittner, this entails that “the minimal [Nietzschean] self must have its own separate, diachronic identity, which persists across changes of drives and affects.”¹²² An ontology of only power and activity fails to accommodate such an enduring identity.

This leaves Bittner’s point on creativity. According to him, Nietzschean creativity supposes that “we force values, emphases, and perspectives onto things. Thus, what we encounter we master; otherwise we would not be creative.... and creativity, if it is not God’s, requires subjecting things to alien valuations, emphases, perspectives, and the like. Hence, any genuine activity is a subduing.”¹²³ And, as we saw earlier, Bittner claims that “[f]or some event to be a subduing, some individual thing is needed to be a subducer.”¹²⁴ That is to say, for one force to subject another force to itself, there would have to be some fixed substantial subject to be doing the subduing.

However, it is precisely this type of thinking of an ‘I’ existing behind thoughts and actions as their cause that Nietzsche is set on challenging. We must ask, then, if it is possible to offer a more radical reading of the Nietzschean self by taking his dismissal of the separation between doer and deed seriously. While Bittner certainly has a point that Nietzsche’s notion of self seems counter to the folk understanding, this has no bearing on what Nietzsche is in fact proposing. Along these lines, we may be able to grant Bittner that our values and perspectives grow on us in the way he claims they do, as long as we let go of the idea that subduing presupposes a subducer. If the event of subduing is simply one will to power mastering another, one force overcoming another, then the ‘I’ never enters the picture. With regards to the reply that this view precludes the possibility of an enduring self, we may

¹²¹ Wollenberg, *Nietzsche, Spinoza, and the Moral Affects*, 633

¹²² Anderson, *Nietzsche, Naturalism, and Normativity*, 224

¹²³ Bittner, *Masters without Substance*, 44

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 37

simply have to bite the bullet. In fact, it seems that this is exactly what Nietzsche is asking us to do, as further evinced by the following passage:

What separates me most deeply from the metaphysicians is: I don't concede that the "I" is what thinks. Instead, I take the I itself to be a construction of thinking [*eine Konstruktion des Denkens*], of the same rank as "matter", "thing", "substance", "individual", "purpose", "number": in other words to be only a regulative fiction [*regulative Fiktion*] with the help of which a kind of constancy and thus "knowability" is inserted into, invented into, a world of becoming.¹²⁵

The point Nietzsche is trying to make, then, is that there is no enduring self.¹²⁶ There is only a quasi-enduring relation of forces, values, and perspectives – a fluid complex of power. And what is true of the self is true of things in general: "We have borrowed the concept of unity from our concept of "I" - our oldest article of faith. If we didn't think of ourselves as units, we would never have formed the term "thing"."¹²⁷ Thus, if we get rid of the concept of subject, "there are no things left, but dynamic quanta, in a tension relation to all other dynamic quanta: whose essence [*Wesen*] consists in their relation to all other quanta, in their "working" [*Wirken*] on them - the will to power is not a being, not a becoming, rather a pathos is the most elementary fact from which a becoming, an activity [*Wirken*] emerges."¹²⁸

In place of a substantial self, then, Nietzsche proposes a multiplicity of forces defined in their relation to other forces. Activity is not the result of a decision of an atomistic subject, but an expression of relations between interacting powers. Accordingly, we arrive at the view that, with Souladié, "[t]he will to power is essentially relational."¹²⁹ Nietzsche views things, including selves, as a dynamic relation of forces in a constant activity of reconfiguration. Bittner contends that positing a substantial self is required to "save Nietzsche's thesis from absurdity."¹³⁰ To the contrary, Nietzsche's aim is exactly to dissolve such a notion

¹²⁵ KGW VII-3.248

¹²⁶ For a comprehensive overview of passages where Nietzsche espouses a view of self as multiplicity, see Gardner, *Nietzsche, the Self, and the Disunity of Philosophical Reason*, 32. We should note that it is possible to find passages that suggest a different, more substantial, notion of self – Nietzsche's talk of the 'sovereign individual' in GM II.2 is often cited in this context. Whether or not Nietzsche is indeed inconsistent, the fact remains that a comparison with Spinoza is most informative when applied to the passages where the self is seen as insubstantial multiplicity.

¹²⁷ Nietzsche, NL 1888, 14[79]

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Souladié, *Desubjectification and Will to Power*, 403

¹³⁰ Bittner, *Masters without Substance*, 37

completely. Regardless of whether this means Nietzsche's view is absurd or not, this does seem to be his position.

Given the relational nature of will to power and Nietzsche's commitment to activity as opposed to creativity, the denial of substance on the one hand and the thesis of will to power on the other hand does not constitute an irreconcilable contradiction; rather, the two go hand in hand. If Nietzsche still adheres to any of God's shadows, this is not one of them.

The fact that the Spinozist self is essentially an activity, the prospering of which depends on relating to other powers in an active and determining manner, justifies a close comparison between the Nietzschean and Spinozist self, the main difference being the latter's modal dependence on substance. Granted, this difference interferes with the aim of identifying something like an enduring self in Nietzsche. However, since Nietzsche is clearly opposed to such an understanding of self, the aim itself is misguided in the first place. Finally, then, while understanding Nietzsche as Spinoza minus substance underscores rather than mitigates the lack of an enduring element in the Nietzschean self, comparing the two exposes a key commonality with regards to activity, freedom, and the relational nature of power and self.

3.

This section strives to deepen our understanding of self in Spinoza and Nietzsche by looking at Nietzsche's own interpretation of Spinoza's notion of self. Nietzsche thinks that Spinoza's reliance on reason and self-preservation commits him to a fixed, centralized self, and consequently uses Spinoza to provide contrast with his own conception of self. As a matter of fact, the two thinkers are much closer than Nietzsche appreciates. Specifically, both understand the self as a dynamic power relation, and conceive of the body as the locus of power, expressed affectively.

In Nietzsche's interpretation of Spinoza's notion of self, two concepts play a key role: reason and self-preservation. In light of the former, Nietzsche's main concern seems to be that reason falsely supposes a unified sense of self: "How Spinoza fantasizes about reason! A fundamental error is the belief in unity and the lack of struggle - that would be death!"¹³¹ For Nietzsche, Spinoza's belief in reason admits to a centralized self that can overcome struggle. Yet without struggle the will to power could never arise. Life depends on struggle, and so to overcome it would be akin to death. As such, Rotter notes that "Nietzsche rejects Spinoza's

¹³¹ Nietzsche, NF-1881, 11[132]

concept of reason in view of the fact that with ‘struggle’ and ‘suffering’ two essential elements of human vitality are expelled.”¹³² Spinozist reason, for Nietzsche, annihilates struggle, yet without struggle no will to power. Given Nietzsche’s commitment to the latter, he is dismissive of Spinoza. Furthermore, “[t]hat Spinoza, with his conception of reason, erases precisely these aspects [of struggle and suffering] from human reality is, from Nietzsche’s point of view, symptomatic of the fact that [Spinoza] relies on a conception of the human being as an essential unity.”¹³³

The centralization of the self, then, is a consequence of overestimating the power of reason. Thus, Nietzsche questions “[w]hether reason has so far generally preserved more than it has destroyed, with its imagination [*Einbildung*] that it understands everything, that it knows the body, that it “wants”? Centralization is by no means so perfect - and reason’s imagination that it is this centre is certainly the greatest deficiency of this perfection.”¹³⁴ According to Nietzsche, reason does not form the centre of the self. Nietzsche doubts reason’s ability to know the body, since such knowledge is affective in nature, as opposed to rational. Relatedly, Rotter points out that

According to Nietzsche, the self-preservation principle evokes a conception of humans as a determinate, self-contained, and essentially unchangeable unity. Spinoza’s principle of self-preservation and his conception of reason are, from Nietzsche’s point of view, related to one another in that they are both based on an ontology of the human which defines it as a unified subject that persists throughout all change.¹³⁵

Thus, in Nietzsche’s view, Spinoza’s reliance on reason and self-preservation is related to a false understanding of the self as fixed and stable. Self-preservation, for Nietzsche, is a reactive notion, borne from a fear of external threats and uncertainty. As such, this fear “is the reason why philosophers emphasize the preservation (of the ego or the species) so much and take it as a principle: while in fact we are constantly playing the lottery against this principle. All the propositions of Spinoza belong here.”¹³⁶ Nietzsche associates Spinoza with evolutionary thinking on the grounds that both react to a fear of destruction by striving to maintain the status quo rather than actively striving towards growth.

¹³² Rotter, *Selbsterhaltung und Wille zur Macht*, 75 (own translation)

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Nietzsche, NF-1881,11[132]

¹³⁵ Rotter, *Selbsterhaltung und Wille zur Macht*, 75

¹³⁶ Nietzsche, NF-1884,26[280]

How accurate is Nietzsche's understanding of Spinozist reason? In particular, is he justified in suggesting a link between reason and a static self? As LeBuffe notes, Spinoza employs the notion of reason in a variety of contexts, ranging from metaphysics and psychology to ethics and politics. "Across these areas Spinoza's use of 'reason' is not fully consistent,"¹³⁷ which makes it difficult to evaluate Nietzsche's critical remarks. What seems clear, however, is that Spinoza is committed to a connection between reason and self in a manner that Nietzsche is not. Indeed, in some passages "Spinoza describes human nature as reason."¹³⁸ Moreover, the necessary laws and relations that reason discerns is tantamount to the eternal necessity of God, suggesting a continuity between substance and (human) reason.¹³⁹ Thus, reason evidently has a metaphysical and psychological importance in Spinoza that Nietzsche does not accept. In that sense, then, Nietzsche's misgivings on Spinozist reason seem justified. Less clear, however, is the idea that reason would imply a static unitary sense of self. For Spinoza, reason does not appear to be a faculty, but rather a particular rendition of thoughts and affections into understanding. Put differently, reason is an expression of coherence within nature, and insofar as we grasp that coherence we are rational. In this sense, reason is an activity aimed at understanding the composite relations of nature and our place among them. This paints a dynamic rather than static picture of reason and its relation to self, contrary to Nietzsche's suggestion.

Nietzsche's motivation for his critical engagement with Spinoza is not so much a desire to do justice to Spinoza's thinking. Rather, Nietzsche seems to be using Spinoza primarily to create contrast with his own position: "In contrast to the view of the individual as an essential and stable unity that preserves itself, Nietzsche describes the unity of an individual as a changeable constellation of forces."¹⁴⁰ Given his motivation, it is perhaps not surprising that Nietzsche misrepresents Spinoza's stance. For, as we have seen, Spinoza's conception of self is by no means static. Granted, the essence of the Spinozist self, *conatus*, is the striving to persevere in being. However, the self that is being preserved is this very activity of striving; the self *is* activity. This striving, in turn, expresses itself as an inclination to increase power.

¹³⁷ LeBuffe, *Spinoza on Reason*, 178

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 179

¹³⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 2p44c

¹⁴⁰ Rotter, *Selbsterhaltung und Wille zur Macht*, 79

While there are ample passages in Fischer's Spinoza that could have led Nietzsche to recognize their kinship,¹⁴¹ Nietzsche's interpretation of Spinoza is by no means unique.¹⁴² Again, then, we should be careful not to accuse Nietzsche all too quickly of deliberate misrepresentation.¹⁴³ Regardless, what matters here is the fact that both Nietzsche and Spinoza embrace a view of self as a dynamic, relational striving for power.

Another key commonality that we have not yet touched upon is their thinking on the body. For both, the body forms the locus of power. The body is the stage upon which the affects appear,¹⁴⁴ as well as that which expresses the power to act.¹⁴⁵ Moreover, both formulate their conception of body in contrast with Cartesian dualism. Spinoza's issue with Cartesianism is evident in his dismissal of substantial selves in favour of modal selves. Contra Descartes, the Spinozist self is an expression of substance rather than substance in itself. Thus the apparent dualism between body and mind is overcome by treating them as parallel expressions of the same substance: "the mode of extension and the idea of that mode are one and the same thing but expressed in two different ways."¹⁴⁶ Similarly, Nietzsche seeks to "de-substantialise"¹⁴⁷ the self, so as to overcome Cartesian dualism: "Nietzsche replaced the opposition between the body and the mind, that is the physiological and the psychic dimensions construed by dualism as two static and monolithic entities, with the continuous interaction between different manifold activities, be they characterized as physiologic or psychical, bodily or mental, which takes place in one and the same body."¹⁴⁸

Here too, Nietzsche departs from Spinoza in his ambition to get rid of substance completely. Whereas Spinoza posits a substantial unity behind the apparent disjunction between body and mind, Nietzsche treats both bodily and mental activity as parts of the same ongoing organic process. Hence, Nietzsche does not reduce the mental to the physical or vice versa, nor does he posit an underlying unity behind body and mind: "It is important to correctly designate the unity in which thinking, wanting and feeling and all affects are combined: it is evident that the intellect is only a tool, but in whose hands? Certainly of the affects: and these are a multiplicity behind which it is not necessary to place a unity."¹⁴⁹ That

¹⁴¹ E.g. Fischer, *Geschichte der Neuern Philosophie*, 485

¹⁴² E.g. Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, 113

¹⁴³ E.g. Sommer, *Nietzsche's Reading on Spinoza*

¹⁴⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 3def3

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 3post1

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 2p7s

¹⁴⁷ Rosciglione, *Nietzsche on Body, Mind, and Consciousness*, 42/3

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 46

¹⁴⁹ Nietzsche, NF-1885,40[38]

is, Nietzsche only recognizes a multiplicity of affects, and there is no substrate that unites them.¹⁵⁰

4.

This section focuses on the pivotal passage BGE 36, with the intent to explicate the affective basis of the will to power, along with Nietzsche's ambition to provide a fully horizontal account of reality – the world understood 'from the inside'. We subsequently present Nietzsche's thought as an inversion of Spinozist metaphysics: while the latter takes the totality of substance as his starting point, subsequently accommodating affective experience, the former grounds his understanding of reality in the affects.

To come to terms with Nietzsche's disunified understanding of the self, the intriguing passage BGE 36 is of value:

Assuming that our world of desires and passions is the only thing 'given' as real, that we cannot get down or up to any 'reality' except the reality of our drives (since thinking is only a relation between these drives) – aren't we allowed to make the attempt and pose the question as to whether something like this 'given' isn't enough to render the so-called mechanistic (and thus material) world comprehensible as well?¹⁵¹

BGE 36 seems to be testing out the idea whether the will to power is more than just a psychological thesis, and might also be a metaphysical notion. First of all, we should notice the exploratory tone in which it is written – it is riddled with question marks and conditional statements. It is clear that Nietzsche is not presenting a finished thesis, but is rather trying out an unpolished idea. Second of all, he seems to be suggesting that a metaphysical understanding of will to power would follow from a psychological conception of will to power, and not vice versa.

It is telling that Nietzsche starts from the assumption that "our world of desires and passions is the only thing 'given' as real, that we cannot go down or up to any 'reality' except the reality of our drives."¹⁵² Our affective lives must form the starting point since it is the only thing we know intimately. Nietzsche thinks that it is our psychological familiarity with the

¹⁵⁰ In response to those who claim that Nietzsche aims at a 'new unity' through the organization of the affects, we can say that this arrangement can be an emergent property of the affects themselves, and so is not necessarily suggestive of a self beyond the affects. See Gemes, *Postmodernism's Use and Abuse of Nietzsche*.

¹⁵¹ Nietzsche, BGE 36

¹⁵² Ibid.

will which presses us to postulate a more general thesis, so as to avoid presenting the ‘inner’ world of drives and the ‘outer’ world of matter in a disjunctive manner: “Multiple varieties of causation should not be postulated until the attempt to make do with a single one has been taken as far as it will go.”¹⁵³ This might, then, “allow us to understand the mechanistic world as belonging to the same plane of reality as our affects themselves.”¹⁵⁴

Importantly, Nietzsche notes that “‘Will’ can naturally have effects only on ‘will’ – and not on ‘matter’.”¹⁵⁵ It may be tempting to interpret this as a commitment to some form of idealism, in which the material world is reduced to ‘mere appearance’, but Nietzsche stresses this is not what he has in mind. Thus the will to power as metaphysical thesis does not entail a denial of the material world; instead, it posits that whatever is causally efficacious – for the human psyche as much as for nature at large – is the will to power, thereby going against a merely mechanistic account of causality. The view that emerges is distinctly horizontal – there is no ‘doubling’ of reality, as the same principle of will to power accounts for both human affectivity and causality in nature. It is, as Nietzsche puts it, “[t]he world seen from inside.”¹⁵⁶ For Nietzsche, then, we only know the world ‘from the inside’, that is, as our desires and passions. Rather than posit that the external world abides by different rules, Nietzsche suggests we stay close to what is given – our affects – and attempt to explain the whole of reality on the basis of that which accounts for our affective world: the will to power.¹⁵⁷

It should be mentioned that, in other passages, Nietzsche appears more willing to commit to a more general metaphysical variation of will to power.¹⁵⁸ However, as Soll remarks, “while the truth of the more general thesis depends on the truth of the psychological thesis, the truth or plausibility of the psychological thesis does not depend on the truth of the general thesis.”¹⁵⁹ Regardless of the textual support for a more general thesis, then, the point is that the psychological one necessarily precedes the metaphysical one. We experience the world affectively; we cannot know anything about the world except through how our desires and passions relate to it. Hence, whatever metaphysical notions we posit must be built upon our affective experience. This underscores Nietzsche’s commitment to the affective basis of

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Nietzsche, WTP 688. Deleuze echoes this by distinguishing between force in an external and mechanistic, and will to power in an interior and affective sense – Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 51

¹⁵⁸ Nietzsche, WTP 635, 658

¹⁵⁹ Soll, *Nietzsche’s Will to Power as a Psychological Thesis*, 120

knowledge and the distinct importance of psychology for his philosophical project at large.

Just how thoroughly horizontal Nietzsche's approach to psychology is, can be glimpsed from the claim that "thinking is only a relation between drives."¹⁶⁰ Just like thinking, willing is, in the words of Whitmire, "a complex combination of a plurality of affects, which *folk psychology glosses over with the notion of a unitary conscious self* that is issuing orders."¹⁶¹ In opposition to this unitary conscious self, "[w]hat is really happening on Nietzsche's reading, is that our (conscious) affect of command becomes attached to that drive or desire that wins out in the struggle for supremacy within our organism."¹⁶² Thus, there is a multiplicity of competing largely unconscious drives, the strongest and most efficacious of which is misidentified as a unitary will. One can find a comparable idea in Spinoza: "human beings believe they are free because they are conscious of their own volitions and their own appetite, and never think, even in their dreams, about the causes which dispose them to want and to will, because they are ignorant of them."¹⁶³ Spinoza and Nietzsche posit a multiplicity of affects as cause of our will; the complex of affects derives its seeming unity from the fact that the strongest affect takes centre stage.

As we saw, the stage in this story is the body, as for both, the self is partly constituted by the body. For Spinoza, both body and mind express power due to their parallel modal dependence on substance. As such, *conatus* is expressed through both body and mind. Nietzsche, on the contrary, treats both the bodily and the mental as expressions of power, thus overcoming dualism without positing a substantial unity. BGE 36 offers an attempt to replace a distinction between matter and mind with a unitary concept – will to power.¹⁶⁴ Further, as BGE 36 indicates, insofar as Nietzsche is willing to commit to any metaphysical notions, this can only be done *bottom-up*, as it were: we must start with our intimate experience, and whenever possible extrapolate from there. Spinoza, on the other hand, champions a *top-down* approach, by building his psychological conclusions on his metaphysical framework. Put differently, while Spinoza's analysis of the affects may take as its starting point the *a posteriori* imagination, adequate knowledge is only attained insofar as the affects are understood in terms of *a priori* general truths. The bondage induced by the passions can only

¹⁶⁰ Nietzsche, BGE 36

¹⁶¹ Whitmire, *The Many and the One*, 10 (italics are mine). See also BGE 19

¹⁶² Ibid. See also AC 14

¹⁶³ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1app

¹⁶⁴ Again we should stress the tentative character of Nietzsche's writing in BGE 36. As such, the passage does not indicate a full-blown commitment to a metaphysical thesis of will to power, but merely shows that *if* such a thesis were to be proposed, it would have to be built upon a psychological thesis of will to power, i.e. the latter is a condition for the former.

be ultimately absolved through a love of “an unchangeable and eternal thing.”¹⁶⁵ Hence, while both Nietzsche and Spinoza are concerned with understanding the affects, they disagree on what form this understanding must take.

Another way of construing this crucial difference between Nietzsche and Spinoza is as a fundamental inversion. Whitlock does exactly this by claiming that Nietzsche, drawing on Boscovich, “completely inverts the metaphysics of Spinoza.”¹⁶⁶ The central shift here is from infinity to finitude: whereas Spinoza assigns God infinite power,¹⁶⁷ Nietzsche rejects this in favour of a finite power regime.¹⁶⁸ As Whitlock points out, “Nietzsche's universe, being finite in force, contains a closed set of centers of force, events and their combinations.”¹⁶⁹ This, then, explains the interpretative, perspectival nature of power: “the will to power interprets,”¹⁷⁰ and as such “every centre of force adopts a perspective towards the entire remainder.”¹⁷¹ Whereas for Spinoza, finite forces and perspectives are but an expression of an infinitely powerful totality and the all-knowing mind of God, for Nietzsche the perspectives and centres of force are all there are.

We discussed earlier how Spinoza’s reliance on substance makes the notion of an enduring self less problematic than in Nietzsche’s case. Given Nietzsche’s commitment to an account of the world grounded in interior experience, which avoids a doubling of reality and the need for bold metaphysical assertions, one can see that Nietzsche’s understanding of self is a necessary consequence rather than a counterintuitive thesis. We experience affects, drives, thinking and willing, and so we suppose the existence of an underlying experiencer, without ever experiencing this experiencer itself. Nietzsche’s point is that the notion of a substantial self only arises from a top-down approach that starts from a metaphysical system. Furthermore, *if* there is any room for metaphysical theses, they must be built upon our inner experience. The following passage further attests to this:

The successful term “power”, with which our physicists removed God from the world, needs an addition: an inner world must be assigned to it, which I call “will to power”, i.e. an insatiable desire to display power, or to use or exercise of power as a creative

¹⁶⁵ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 5p20s

¹⁶⁶ Whitlock, *Boscovich, Spinoza and Nietzsche*, 207

¹⁶⁷ As Spinoza stresses in e.g. 1p33 & 1schol2, infinite power does not mean that God could have done otherwise. Rather, everything follows the necessity of divine nature. However, Spinoza does rely on a notion of infinity, apparent from the very definition of God (1def6).

¹⁶⁸ Whitlock, *Boscovich, Spinoza and Nietzsche*, 210

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 218

¹⁷⁰ Nietzsche, KSA 12, 2 [148]

¹⁷¹ Nietzsche, KSA XIII, p. 371

drive, etc. ... One must understand all movements, all "appearances", all "laws" only as symptoms of an internal process and use human analogy to the end.¹⁷²

Thus, Nietzsche seeks to understand power, not in a mechanistic sense, but in an affective sense. We should extrapolate from our inner world, and use the same principles we find there to understand the world at large. Power, then, comes to be seen as the *will to power*, presenting it as something deeply human yet universal. As such, we can no longer think of nature in terms of laws, for the simple reason that we do not experience laws in our inner world. Human experience is organic rather than mechanistic, and so we should understand the world as a whole in organic terms.

Spinoza's *conatus* evokes a similar image of an internal striving that renders the world according to its own relation to it.¹⁷³ By contrast, Spinoza thinks this state produces inadequate knowledge, and we can only become joyous and free insofar as we overcome this state by understanding our experience according to the universal laws of nature:

The laws and rules of nature by which all things happen and change from one form to another are always and everywhere the same, and therefore there must also be one and the same method of reasoning for understanding the nature of anything whatsoever... therefore the emotions of hate, anger, envy, etc., considered in themselves, follow the same necessity and virtue of nature as do other particular things.¹⁷⁴

Hence, while for Nietzsche we must start from internal experience and shape our conception of the world accordingly, for Spinoza we must start with the laws that govern the world in its entirety and duly adjust our understanding of ourselves. In a sense, then, both aspire to a form of ontological horizontality, albeit doing so from diametrically opposite angles. The obvious issue with Spinoza's position is that there is yet a *prima facie* incongruity between interior experience and the lawful universe. There remains in Spinoza a tension between the organic and the mechanistic, which seems to commit him to a degree of internal verticality after all. There is no obvious reason to think this is a problem for Spinoza, but one can see why Nietzsche may consider it to be. In fact, in a number of notes, Nietzsche seems to be criticizing Spinoza for this very point, by accusing him of "destruction of the affects

¹⁷² Nietzsche, NF-1885, 36[31]

¹⁷³ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 2p16

¹⁷⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 3pref

through analysis and vivisection.”¹⁷⁵ In doing so, Spinoza “generalizes what should not be generalized”¹⁷⁶ by trying to find universality and lawfulness in the dynamic chaos of our affective lives. The mathematical form Spinoza relies on to understand the affects is nothing but “hocus pocus”, employed to masquerade the “timidity and vulnerability of this sick hermit.”¹⁷⁷

In a particularly insightful note that will be analysed in detail in the next chapter, Nietzsche engages with Spinoza’s ambition to find an unwavering source of joy, which he considers to be central to Spinoza’s method for dealing with passivity. Suffering is said to stem from being dependent on the transitory for the experience of joy, and so the question arises “whether something could be found whose possession would forever grant me the enjoyment of a lasting and supreme joy.”¹⁷⁸

This leads into a discussion of Spinoza’s metaphysics and its psychological tenability. Nietzsche claims that even if we suppose some form of ultimate unity between us and an infinite substance, it does not follow that this notion will function as an unyielding source of joy. For Nietzsche, the desire for “knowledge of the unity of our spirit with the universe”¹⁷⁹ is nothing more than a desire. And, crucially, Spinoza’s motivation for positing substance is also nothing more than a desire. Spinoza’s metaphysical certainty, for Nietzsche, is simply an attempt to cope with the inherently transient and chaotic nature of existence. As such, Nietzsche comes to explain even the very origin of the idea of God in affective terms. Consequently, everything that Spinoza ascribes to God – infinity, eternity, lawfulness, and so on – is equally grounded in misunderstanding a particular affect as an indication of an overarching metaphysical reality.

5.

The seemingly irreconcilable metaphysical gap between Nietzsche and Spinoza complicates a straightforward comparison in terms of their thinking on the self. The intricate nature of their relation on this issue demands a nuanced account that does not lapse into a characterization of simple uniformity or disagreement, which is what this chapter has aimed at providing.

Both conceive of the self as an activity characterized by a striving for power. As an

¹⁷⁵ Nietzsche, BGE 198

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Nietzsche, BGE 5

¹⁷⁸ Nietzsche, NF-1886,7[4]

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

expression of power, the self exists among other quanta of force that either assist or restrain its activity. Since the aim is to become as active as possible, thereby effectively extending the self into the world, the outward direction of force is recognized as sole normative principle by both thinkers. The description of the self as activity, then, involves a prescription, which is to expand power in spite of opposing forces, thus overcoming reactivity to external causes.

Another key commonality between Nietzsche and Spinoza is their treatment of the body as the locus of power. As such, the body is a constitutive element of the self. This congruity, furthermore, accounts for the centrality of the affects for both thinkers. Through the body, power is expressed affectively. The affects, then, involve the relation between our body and other bodies, thereby disclosing the fundamental relationality and permeability of the self. Interiority comes to be seen as a dynamic notion, defined by the accord and discord between our proper power and the forces that surround us.

As for Nietzsche's own reception of Spinoza, it appears that many of the discussed similarities are sadly not acknowledged by Nietzsche himself. It does seem, therefore, that Nietzsche does himself as well as his readers a disservice by insisting chiefly on the distance between him and Spinoza. We have suggested that the reason for this is that Nietzsche employs Spinoza in large part to provide contrast with his own position, which centres on a radical attempt to rid himself entirely of thinking in terms of substance. Doubtless, Nietzsche's dismissal of substance is a clear point of departure from Spinozist metaphysics; however, as we have seen, there is much that unites them as well.

Besides explicating Nietzsche and Spinoza's shared understanding of self, the aim of this chapter has been to challenge the idea that Nietzsche's notion of self is inconsistent for the mere fact that it lacks an enduring foundation. Indeed, Nietzsche's interaction with Spinoza indicates that his aim was above all to avoid thinking in such terms. Moreover, relating the two thinkers with respect to activity and passivity alleviates the worry that Bittner raises concerning Nietzsche's use of creativity. Thus, reading Nietzsche through Spinoza not only reveals their intriguing view of the self in terms of power, affect and activity – it also saves Nietzsche from the accusation of inconsistency. The therapeutic significance of their reconceptualization of self should be evident at this point: the self is a modicum of power, a striving or activity, constituted by affective experience situated in the body. The affects reveal the self's relations to its surroundings, and so understanding the affects is key to getting the self to flourish. A flourishing self, in turn, is one that expresses its power fully.

As we will see in the next chapter, Nietzsche and Spinoza's understanding of self has major ramifications in other areas of their thinking on therapy – particularly with regards to

freedom, the role of struggle, and their respective notions of self-overcoming and self-contentment.

3. Therapy

In the preceding chapters, we have seen how key ideas in Nietzsche and Spinoza's respective philosophies relate. Having laid the groundwork by discussing their views on power and self, we are now equipped, in this final chapter, to turn to what presents itself as an overarching theme that invites a close comparison between their projects. This common theme, a defining element of both their philosophical efforts, is of distinctly practical nature and centres on developing a philosophical therapy. As such, this chapter aims to explore the therapies presented in Nietzsche and Spinoza's philosophy. What is meant by the term therapy is dealt with more extensively in the introduction, but the core suggestion is that Nietzsche and Spinoza are both fundamentally concerned with human flourishing. As we saw in the last chapter, for both Spinoza and Nietzsche this will involve an increase of power and activity; indeed, we take this to be the cornerstone of both their practical philosophies.

In the secondary literature, there are some that treat the practical dimension of Nietzsche and Spinoza's thought as an important unifying element.¹⁸⁰ Perhaps the most notable case in point is Deleuze. We will, accordingly, rely on Deleuze's work on the Spinoza-Nietzsche connection as a starting point for our discussion in section 1. This is a meaningful place of departure as it allows us to address the negative aspect of their affirmative therapeutic projects: we must, first of all, overcome the traditional moral values imposed on us, before we can attain a properly affirmative stance. We will see that while there is much to be learned from Deleuze's account, it does not address an important disagreement with regards to the role of struggle, which forms a key contrast between Nietzsche and Spinoza's therapeutics. In section 2 we then turn to *ressentiment* and the role of knowledge in overcoming passivity. We furthermore address the notions of self-overcoming and self-contentment and the sense in which way they form the end of therapy in Nietzsche and Spinoza's work, respectively. Section 3 focuses on Nietzsche's understanding of Spinoza's method for overcoming passivity and we consider the crucial role and meaning of freedom in the therapeutic endeavours of both thinkers. Section 4 concludes by reviewing the therapeutic insights gained from our discussion.

1.

This section addresses the three practical theses that Deleuze attributes to Spinoza and Nietzsche, which will allow us to chart core features of the therapeutic process. We will

¹⁸⁰ See Ioan, *Nietzsche's Diagnosis of Spinoza* ; Armstrong, *Spinoza and Nietzsche contra the Stoics* ; Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy* .

discuss the limited yet distinct control Nietzsche and Spinoza believe we have over our fates, and the significance that the shift from morality to ethics plays in both their work. While we are largely sympathetic with Deleuze's account, it glosses over a major difference with respect to the role of struggle and passivity, that ultimately places our thinkers at odds.

One of the main aspects of Spinoza's thought that Deleuze stresses is its practical side. To understand why Spinoza has been such a controversial historical figure, Deleuze suggests, it is not enough to consider his speculative theses – “[w]e must start rather from the practical theses that made Spinozism an object of scandal.”¹⁸¹ Indeed, Deleuze writes:

The great theories of the Ethics - the oneness of substance, the univocity of the attributes, immanence, universal necessity, parallelism, etc. – cannot be treated apart from the three practical theses concerning consciousness, values, and the sad passions. The Ethics is a book written twice simultaneously: once in the continuous stream of definitions, propositions, demonstrations, and corollaries, which develop the great speculative themes with all the rigors of the mind; another time in the broken chain of scholia, a discontinuous volcanic line, a second version underneath the first, expressing all the angers of the heart and setting forth the practical theses of denunciation and liberation.¹⁸²

Importantly, it is the three practical theses that Deleuze mentions, denouncing consciousness, values and the sad passions, which he considers to be Spinoza's “three major resemblances with Nietzsche.”¹⁸³ Before addressing these three terms, it is worth noting the negative language being used – the practical project is first of all one of denial and denunciation of entrenched ideas that stand in the way of our practical aspiration of affirmation. This is true in Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche and Spinoza, as well as of the two thinkers themselves. Book one of the *Ethics*, for instance, targets the Christian God and freedom of the will. Similarly, book one of the *Genealogy* takes as its task the reevaluation of values, thereby taking the established Christian morality as negative starting point. Nietzsche's own admission of proximity to Spinoza likewise rests on denunciation: “He denies the freedom of the will, teleology, the moral world-order, the unegoistic, and evil.”¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 17

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 28/9

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 17

¹⁸⁴ KSB 6, nr. 135 (30.07.1881)

This suggests that the first step in the therapeutic process will involve adopting a critical attitude towards inherited ways of thinking, in particular with regards to freedom and value.

Consciousness

The philosophical achievement that Deleuze presents as “a devaluation of consciousness”¹⁸⁵ is characterized as “the reversal of the traditional principle on which Morality was founded as an enterprise of domination of the passions by consciousness.”¹⁸⁶ What is being inverted, then, is the notion that passions pertain exclusively to the body and that it is the noble task of the mind to keep them at bay. Importantly, what replaces it is not simply an appreciation of the body over the mind, but rather Spinoza’s parallelism – the idea that neither mind nor body is primary to the other, and no causal interaction exists between them. Instead, both body and mind are expressions of the same substance. When we loosen our identification with our conscious minds and stop treating affects as distractions, we can instead come to see both body and mind as constitutive of the self.

Indeed, as soon as the mind is no longer seen as subduer of the body, both body and mind become adequate avenues of exploration, for “[t]here are no fewer things in the mind that exceed our consciousness than there are things in the body that exceed our knowledge.”¹⁸⁷ That is to say, as both body and mind are immanent expressions of substance, both can teach us about self and world. Consciousness, according to Deleuze, “registers effects, but it knows nothing of causes.”¹⁸⁸ The effects, here, are simply the affects, and the causes are the interactions between bodies and ideas that lead to an increase or decrease of power. Thus, by ascribing consciousness a central role we overlook the fact that, in Nietzsche’s words, “[b]y far the greatest part of our spirit’s activity remains unconscious.”¹⁸⁹

While there is no apparent justification for associating Nietzsche with Spinozist parallelism, they certainly make very similar points with respect to consciousness and causality.¹⁹⁰ In fact, Deleuze lists three illusions of consciousness in Spinoza that, as Schrift points out, neatly map onto Nietzsche’s ‘Four Great Errors’ in *Twilight of the Idols*.¹⁹¹ The

¹⁸⁵ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 17

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 18

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 18

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 19

¹⁸⁹ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 333

¹⁹⁰ It is worth noting that neither Nietzsche nor Spinoza has a straightforward account of consciousness. Spinoza’s notion of consciousness is contested, but here Nadler’s persuasive interpretation is adopted (Nadler, *Spinoza and Consciousness*). As for Nietzsche, suffice it to say that even if Nietzsche does not provide a comprehensive definition of consciousness, he is less ambiguous about his reasons for challenging it, as outlined here.

¹⁹¹ Schrift, *Thinking about Ethics*, 208

three illusions are the illusion of final cause – or confusing effects (like consciousness) for causes; the illusion of free decrees – or the idea that consciousness can freely control the body and its action; and the theological illusion – or the tendency to take God as first cause when doing so for consciousness fails.¹⁹² Freeing ourselves of these illusions involves coming to terms with the fact that we lack complete awareness of, and control over, the causes of our affects.

“We do not know even what a body can do”¹⁹³ – or so Deleuze paraphrases Spinoza.¹⁹⁴ Yet, our practical aspirations are grounded in the assumption that we can learn more about the body. Spinoza and Nietzsche suggest that we cannot do this by trying to control the affects through consciousness, but rather by treating consciousness as merely the top of the iceberg, so to speak, where below the surface lie the interactions with other bodies and minds, defined by an increase or decrease of power.¹⁹⁵ By understanding the affects as expressions of a power differential following our interaction with our surroundings, we enable ourselves to act in accordance with the knowledge that the affects convey, as opposed to trying to tame the affects themselves through futile conscious efforts. What this knowledge looks like, and what role is left for freedom in this picture, will be covered later on in this chapter.

Value

Deleuze’s chief interest in Spinoza with respect to value is captured by how he contrasts morality with ethics; here too we can see a clear resemblance with Nietzsche. Morality, for Deleuze, deals with transcendental values. Accordingly, values are imposed on nature in lawlike manner, thereby ignoring whether they are in fact conducive to life. The currency of morality, then, is Good and Evil in the Nietzschean sense.¹⁹⁶ Ethics, conversely, relies on immanent values, captured by the terms good and bad. These terms “have a primary, objective meaning, but one that is relative and partial: that which agrees with our nature or does not agree with it.”¹⁹⁷ The good, in other words, is simply that which assists us in our striving for power – Spinoza defines the good as “that which we certainly know to be useful to us”¹⁹⁸ – and the bad is that which impedes it. Hence, ethics is objective insofar as it has a

¹⁹² Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 20

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 17/8

¹⁹⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 3p2s

¹⁹⁵ See Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 674

¹⁹⁶ See in particular: GM 1.10/1

¹⁹⁷ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 22

¹⁹⁸ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 4def1

universal standard – that is, whether it agrees with us or not. But ethics is also relative because whether something is agreeable or not is a function of who is interacting with it.¹⁹⁹ Walnuts are a good source of nutrition for one, for the other they mean certain death.

This move from morality to ethics, promoted by both Nietzsche and Spinoza, takes the focus away from religious and traditional values imposed on life that strive to make life fit a desired mould, and turns the attention towards life itself. Values are judged solely on the basis of whether they serve life or not. Accordingly, Nietzsche invites us to reflect: “under what conditions did man invent the value judgments good and evil? And what value do they themselves have? Have they up to now obstructed or promoted human flourishing? Are they a sign of distress, poverty and the degeneration of life? Or, on the contrary, do they reveal the fullness, strength and will of life, its courage, its confidence, its future?”²⁰⁰ Insofar as values do not promote human flourishing, they should be discarded. In lieu of transcendental values, we must discover our personal immanent values, the ones that help us thrive.

Along these lines, Deleuze remarks that “existence is a test. But it is a physical or chemical test, an experimentation, the contrary of a Judgment.”²⁰¹ The test of existence is not one that is predetermined by existent standards, success being measured by how well one lives up to them. Rather, the test is an open one, in which the task is to explore what best suits one’s nature – as Nietzsche writes, “We are experiments: let us also want to be such!”²⁰² Value, therefore, is as much created as it is discovered: although we cannot decide ourselves what is valuable *ex nihilo* (as this depends on our nature and the nature of our surroundings, neither of which we control), it is nevertheless the case that value does not emerge until we interact with something. Thus, while we do not freely create value, out of our interactions value is created.

The idea that life invites us, as it were, to discover for ourselves what is valuable for us, is at heart an invitation to engage with life. To find value in life, we must immerse ourselves in it and actively seek out various ways of living to unearth what resonates with us. Conversely, those transcendental values that keep us from doing so must be rejected. Accordingly, Deleuze notes that there is “a philosophy of ‘life’ in Spinoza; it consists precisely in *denouncing all that separates us from life*, all these transcendent values that are turned against life.”²⁰³ Here Deleuze draws a parallel with the Nietzschean affirmation of life

¹⁹⁹ See Spinoza, *Emendation of the Intellect*, 12, 2

²⁰⁰ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 1.3

²⁰¹ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 40

²⁰² Nietzsche, *Dawn*, 453

²⁰³ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 26 (my italics)

– though as we have seen, Nietzsche himself thought Spinoza did not go far enough in that regard.

Notably, this practical aim of reaching into the world in search of value links up with our discussion of the self: if the self is a power relation, then the ethical task is to expand this relation so as to include as many elements conducive to flourishing, without thereby becoming passively dependent – that is, the ethical task is one of self-growth.

Sad Passions

Deleuze’s understanding of the Spinozist self aligns with the one defended in the previous chapter. An individual, he writes, is “first of all a singular essence, which is to say a degree of power.”²⁰⁴ Furthermore, “a certain capacity for being affected corresponds to this degree of power.”²⁰⁵ Passions, in turn, “fill our capacity for being affected while separating us from our power of acting.”²⁰⁶ In other words, passions signify a restriction of our ability to interact with the world, by limiting our power to act and to be acted upon. Thus, passions are bad because they mean our power cannot expand. Deleuze rightly stresses that there is a distinction between sad and joyful passions in Spinoza. While the former involve nothing but impotence and alienation, the latter at least imply an increase of power. This joy, however, “is still a passion, since it has an external cause; we still remain separated from our power of acting, possessing it only in a formal sense.”²⁰⁷ Thus passions, even if joyful, are reactive, and opposed to actual activity and growth of power.

According to Deleuze, Spinoza identifies three personages that depend on passions: the slave, who has sad passions; the tyrant, who depends on the slaves for his power; and the priest, “saddened by the human condition and the human passions in general.”²⁰⁸ Significantly, Deleuze claims that what unites these three types governed by passions is “their hatred of life, their resentment against life.”²⁰⁹ Relating this to our earlier discussion of *ressentiment* in the previous chapter, where we saw that *ressentiment* is a reactive affect that requires an external cause to arise, we may add that *ressentiment* is a sad passion. As such, *ressentiment* severs us from our power to act. The resentful person takes the cause of their

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 27

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 28

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 25

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

affective state to lie outside of themselves, and thereby fails to take responsibility for their own condition.

This is a central theme in Spinoza's as well as Nietzsche's practical thought that will be further developed later on in this chapter. But first we must note a general issue with Deleuze's analysis of the Spinoza-Nietzsche connection, pertaining specifically to the topic of the passions: Deleuze never discusses any differences between the two thinkers. The merit of this approach is obvious – it lets the commonalities stand out. However, treated as a scholarly work, this must be seen as a shortcoming, as the account thereby inevitably lacks nuance. Granted, Deleuze makes no secret of the fact that his intention is much less scholarly accuracy than drawing on a range of sources in order to develop his own philosophy. Nevertheless, important differences between Nietzsche and Spinoza are thereby overlooked.

A key one, in this respect, relates to the role of the passions in their respective philosophies, and specifically the importance of struggle. In an unpublished note, Nietzsche draws on Fischer's Spinoza in writing the following: "Spinoza: we are only guided by our desires and our emotions in our actions. Understanding must be emotion to be a motive.—I say: it must be passion, to be a motive."²¹⁰ Nietzsche thus seems to agree with Spinoza's idea that desire guides action.²¹¹ He disagrees, however, that understanding being emotion is enough of a motive. Hence, here Nietzsche seems to nuance his remark in the letter to Overbeck on their *Gesamttendenz* of "making knowledge the most powerful affect"²¹² by adding that it is not sufficient for knowledge to be an affect – it has to be a passion. While more could be said on this line, the point here is merely that Nietzsche appears to be suggesting that something particular occurs with passions.

Later on in the same note, Nietzsche hints at what this might be. After summarizing some of Fischer's comments on the place of reason and agreement in Spinoza's thought, Nietzsche strikes a more critical tone: "there is no reason of the sort, and without conflict and passion everything becomes weak, man and society."²¹³ That is to say, Nietzsche thinks Spinoza relies on reason for overcoming the passions. For Nietzsche, however, reason as a separate faculty from the passions does not exist.²¹⁴ Moreover, while Nietzsche and Spinoza agree that lingering in passive states is not conducive to flourishing, Nietzsche here seems to point at a potential disagreement, based on his assessment that Spinoza wants to get rid of

²¹⁰ Nietzsche, KSA 9:11[193]

²¹¹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 3p6-9

²¹² KSB 6, nr. 135 (30.07.1881)

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ See for instance WTP 387.

passion and conflict altogether, leaving nothing but agreement and harmony. Nietzsche himself favours struggle over harmony, and thinks that Spinoza is wrong to do the opposite.

The question is whether this is a fair assessment of Spinoza. Although it is true that Spinoza never seems to praise struggle in the way that Nietzsche does, one may argue that passions are still a necessary part of Spinoza's system. Lloyd argues along these lines: Spinoza "thinks that the ideas of sensation and imagination are inadequate, in contrast to the adequacy of the ideas of reason. But the direct awareness of body that they involve, while it is a source of error, is also the precondition and basis for reason and intuition — the higher forms of knowledge. The possibility of reason and the possibility of error have a common base in the powers of the human body."²¹⁵ That is to say, while the passions inadvertently lead us into error, they are also the condition of possibility for adequate knowledge, and hence power and joy. Without the initial passivity, then, activity could not arise.

When discussing some of the traditional virtues like pity and humility, Spinoza is largely dismissive: pity "is a sadness, and accordingly it is bad in itself."²¹⁶ Humility, too, is a sadness, "arising from a person's thinking of his own lack of power."²¹⁷ Since Spinoza defines virtue as power,²¹⁸ and both pity and humility imply a lack of power, neither can be understood as virtues in the Spinozist sense. Being passions, not following from the dictates of reason, they are useless. Notwithstanding, as Soyarslan points out, "Spinoza does not think that these passions should be categorically avoided."²¹⁹ In fact, Spinoza remarks that "[b]ecause human beings rarely live by the dictates of reason", these passive virtues "are more useful than detrimental."²²⁰ That is, since Spinoza thinks that humans living in accordance with true reason and virtue are so uncommon, it is better for them to be guided by passive virtues than to be guided by nothing at all, if only temporarily. The idea is that these virtues assure that humans are "united and kept in check"²²¹ and may thereby ultimately lead to actual virtue.

Given what we have learned so far about Spinoza's understanding of power and activity, this claim is surprising. As we saw, there is an important distinction between sad and joyful passions, which Spinoza seems to have ignored in this instance. If pity and humility are indeed sad passions, they involve nothing but a deprivation of power; if there is nothing

²¹⁵ Lloyd, *Part of Nature*, 44. See also Deleuze, *Expressionism*, 158

²¹⁶ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 4p50

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4p53

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4def8

²¹⁹ Soyarslan, *From Humility to Envy*, 34

²²⁰ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 4p54

²²¹ *Ibid.*

joyful about them, they can hardly be thought to eventually lead to an increase of power. In this vein, Soyarslan rightly asserts that with his discussion of these traditional virtues “Spinoza ascribes to sad passions a role that they cannot reasonably be expected to fulfill.”²²² Granted, the role that Spinoza ascribes these virtues is but a small one, but his approving tone still sits awkwardly within the rest of his system.

The larger point to make here, then, is that there is little room for the sad passions in Spinoza’s practical philosophy. Passivity is the necessary basis for eventual activity, and passive virtues can be a temporary placeholder for genuine virtue, but other than that sad passions have no worth and should be left behind whenever possible. Passions can help us forward initially, but only insofar as they are joyous and hence increase our power.

How does this square with Nietzsche’s view of the passions? First off, he seems to agree with Spinoza that they must be overcome.²²³ Passions only become impediments when we allow them to grow. Through a neglect of self-observation, “it is you yourself who first allowed the passions to develop into such monsters that you are overcome by fear at the word ‘passion’!”²²⁴ Accordingly, it is up to us “to *take from* the passions their terrible character and thus prevent their becoming devastating torrents. One should not inflate one’s oversights into eternal fatalities; let us rather work honestly together on the task of transforming the passions [*Leidenschaften*] of mankind one and all into joys [*Freudenschaften*].”²²⁵ In congruence with Spinoza, then, Nietzsche claims we should transform passions into joys through self-reflection. Nietzsche adds that while “[t]he man who has overcome his passions has entered into possession of the most fertile ground”, the overcoming itself “is only a *means*, not a goal.”²²⁶ In this “soil of the subdued passions”, one must then “sow the seeds of good spiritual work.”²²⁷ What this means exactly is unclear from this passage, but presumably it is related to cultivating values conducive to power and joy.

Despite this agreement, Nietzsche insists on his difference from Spinoza – as we have by now come to expect of him. A key note in this respect is one in which Nietzsche writes: “How Spinoza fantasizes about reason! A basic error is the belief in harmony and the lack of

²²² Soyarslan, *From Humility to Envy*, 34

²²³ We should note that ‘overcoming’ here means active engagement and transformation rather than dismissiveness, as discussed in the preceding section on consciousness. WTP 384 is enlightening here: “Overcoming of the affects? – No, if what is implied is their weakening and extirpation. But putting them into service: which may also mean subjecting them to a protracted tyranny.”

²²⁴ Nietzsche, *The Wanderer and his Shadow*, 37

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 53

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

struggle - this would be death!”²²⁸ Nietzsche thus seems to think Spinoza is wrong to think reason can provide harmony, and insists that struggle is key to life. To this we can now reply that Spinoza seems to be focused more on an overcoming of struggle than a lack of it. It is hard to imagine the fully blessed and rational Spinozist sage being entangled in passivity and struggle, but, as Spinoza reminds us, this final state is “extremely arduous” to achieve and it is “so rarely found.”²²⁹ It is therefore reasonable to assume most people will have to deal with some discord in their lives. Nietzsche’s claim is consequently not entirely fair.

There is, however, an important difference that Nietzsche gets at, which rests on how we *relate* to struggle. In essence, Nietzsche does not merely consider struggle to be necessary – he thinks we should want it and seek it out. This pertains to the will to power and the role resistance plays in its constant overcoming: “How is freedom measured in individuals and in peoples? It is measured by the resistance that needs to be overcome, by the effort that it costs to stay on top.”²³⁰ As Pippin points out, this is an unending process: “whatever the resistance that has to be overcome, there results no settled state.”²³¹ It follows that resistance must be constantly sought, in order for the will to power to have enough to push off against. Reginster captures this idea succinctly: “The will to power, insofar as it is a will to the overcoming of resistance, must necessarily also will the resistance to overcome. Since suffering is defined in terms of resistance, then the will to power indeed ‘desires displeasure’.”²³²

To sum up: power, for Nietzsche, requires struggle and opposition to grow in a manner that it does not for Spinoza. Thus, while Nietzsche’s criticism of Spinoza is perhaps somewhat overstated, it does mark a significant contrast. Actively seeking resistance, struggle, and suffering is doubtless distinct from temporarily tolerating passivity. Interestingly, this seems to suggest that for Nietzsche, as strength requires struggle, activity *implies* passivity, and sadness is needed for joy. As Armstrong puts it: for Nietzsche, “the reduction of our capacity for suffering also reduces our capacity for joy.”²³³ Not so for Spinoza. By suggesting that Nietzsche and Spinoza are in agreement when it comes to the passions, Deleuze glosses over this difference.

That being said, Deleuze does expose an important pattern of thought that Spinoza and Nietzsche share. Both observe an issue with traditional values insofar as they fail to help us

²²⁸ NF-1881,11[132]

²²⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 5p42s

²³⁰ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 38. See also D 174

²³¹ Pippin, *How to Overcome Oneself*, 76

²³² Reginster, *Nietzsche on Overcoming Nihilism*, 133

²³³ Armstrong, *Spinoza and Nietzsche contra the Stoics*, 18. Armstrong is likely drawing on GS 12

flourish and do not accommodate individual variance. Value, they suggest, is simply determined by how useful something is to us – that is, to what extent it meets our drive towards more power and activity. Nietzsche and Spinoza agree that this error of value rests in part on confusing cause with effect. Consciousness of our affects does not determine how we come to value them; awareness is effect as opposed to cause of valuation. Put differently, how we judge something does not make it good or bad, but rather whether something is good or bad for us determines how we judge it. Things that make us suffer do not do so because they are evil; instead we consider them evil because they make us suffer.

The problem with transcendental values, then, is that they rely on the false assumption that it is possible to declare what is good and bad for us *a priori* – that is, before even having lived at all. As such, relying on fixed inherited values blocks us from a path of discovery by getting to know ourselves, how we actually relate to the world, and what we value in it, in the most immanent sense possible. Those invested in healing the self must therefore put their inherited values to the test to see if they help them flourish or not, and adopt values most conducive to growth of power.

2.

This section continues our investigation into the therapeutic aspects of Spinoza and Nietzsche's work. In this light, we begin by briefly returning to the notion of *ressentiment*, in order to emphasize its central role in the practical projects of both Nietzsche and Spinoza. This will subsequently allow us to discuss the importance of knowledge in overcoming reactivity and *ressentiment*. After this, we turn to the crucial notions of self-overcoming and self-contentment in Nietzsche and Spinoza's respective philosophies, as we discuss their relation to the concept of freedom and its role and meaning in the practical projects of our two thinkers.

Ressentiment

As we saw, Elgat helpfully defines *ressentiment* as “an **affectively** charged **desire** for revenge that involves the **belief** that someone or other is responsible for the suffering that causes it.”²³⁴ In addition, we noted that *ressentiment* is inherently reactive and should be considered a sad passion. Given the central importance of understanding the self as activity in Nietzsche and Spinoza, and the concomitant practical aim of expanding power and activity, it

²³⁴ Elgat, *The Psychology of Ressentiment*, 46

is clear why *ressentiment* is a central psychological concern.²³⁵ *Ressentiment's* reactive quality means it severs us from our power to act, thus keeping us from self-growth. As it forms one of the main obstacles to increasing our power, addressing how Nietzsche and Spinoza think we can overcome *ressentiment* will be an apt springboard for laying out their respective methods for therapy of the self.

At the outset, one may object that this approach overemphasizes the role of *ressentiment* – it is, according to some, no more than a subspecies of revenge,²³⁶ itself only one of the many passions that hinder our striving for power. In opposition to this interpretation, the suggestion here is that *ressentiment* should be understood in a rather broad sense. This is achieved by ascribing *ressentiment* to every reactive emotional disposition in which we blame an external cause for our sadness. As such, *ressentiment* is not limited to a desire for revenge, but rather describes all the passions – including fear, hatred, contempt, and so on – in which we attribute full responsibility for our state to whatever occasioned it. Hence, *ressentiment* is taken to refer to every affective experience to which we respond with the thought ‘if it weren’t for cause x, I would not have felt passion y.’ Or, in Deleuze’s words, the resentful human “makes the object responsible for his own powerlessness” and as such “blames the object in order to compensate for its own inability to escape from the traces of the corresponding excitation.”²³⁷

The issue that both Nietzsche and Spinoza will take with this attitude towards the affects is that it overlooks the fact that every passion is defined both by an external cause as well as what we bring to the table – be it *conatus* in the case of Spinoza, or will to power in Nietzsche. The more active we are, the less external causes will be able to induce passions. Thus, by holding external causes fully accountable for our affects we effectively rob ourselves of the only power we have of dealing with passions. In other words, *ressentiment* makes us passively suffer what happens to us and categorically keeps us away from our power to act.

How, then, can we overcome *ressentiment* and stop blaming the external world for our passive state? Spinoza and Nietzsche agree that this process will involve cultivating knowledge; in particular knowledge of the affects. The key proposition for Spinoza in this regard is 5p2: “An emotion which is a passion ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it.”²³⁸ That is to say, by coming to understand a passion we can

²³⁵ Of course, Spinoza does not use the term *ressentiment*, but does describe the same phenomenon – see for instance 3p55.

²³⁶ As Huddleston appears to be suggesting (Huddleston, *Ressentiment*, 671)

²³⁷ Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 116

²³⁸ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 5p2

subvert its disempowering effect on us. In fact, forming adequate ideas of the emotions is the only power we have over them.²³⁹ Douglas' rendering of this notion is clarifying: "When we form a clear and distinct idea of an affect, and make it therefore our action, what this means is: we understand the affect to be predicated of us, belong to us – to really be ours. It's an idea that takes ownership of the affect – that recognizes the affect as our own."²⁴⁰ Hence, by gaining knowledge of an affect, we stop blaming an external cause for our emotional state, and empower ourselves to "fit it into the fabric of our life. We can think: why am I angry? How has this happened? How might I reasonably respond to this anger? But when you feel your anger as a force in nature, compelling you, then you have none of these options."²⁴¹

As Elgat points out, for Nietzsche too "[k]nowledge can quell the fire of *ressentiment*."²⁴² Nietzsche writes that "psychological observation" is able to "alleviate the burden of living."²⁴³ There is, however, an important difference between Nietzsche and Spinoza with respect to the relation between knowledge and joy, that corresponds to our earlier discussion of the sad passions. While for Spinoza knowledge of the affects leads us from sadness to joy, Nietzsche maintains that gaining knowledge, however valuable in overcoming passivity and powerlessness, is by no means guaranteed to be a pleasant affair. Thus Yovel is right to stress this difference: "In Spinoza, the immediate affective tone of knowledge is joy, the sensation of the enhanced power of life; Nietzsche, on the contrary, incessantly stresses the painful nature of knowledge and measures the power (and worth) of a person by how much truth he can bear."²⁴⁴

Hence, while Nietzsche and Spinoza agree that knowledge is key to psychological growth, they disagree on how this growth is experienced. As Nietzsche laments: "People have warbled on to me about the serene happiness of knowledge — but I have not found it, indeed, I despise it, now I know the bliss of unhappiness of knowledge."²⁴⁵ In this light, Ansell-Pearson and Bamford's comment is insightful: "For Nietzsche, the pursuit of knowledge in his new enlightenment must have its hazards and dangers — it cannot be a secure, risk-free, enterprise and still meet its purpose of assisting us in the countering existing values."²⁴⁶ If we

²³⁹ Ibid., 3p3, 5p4s

²⁴⁰ Douglas, *How to Make the Passions Active*, 242

²⁴¹ Ibid., 244/5

²⁴² Elgat, *The Psychology of Ressentiment*, 34

²⁴³ Nietzsche, *Human all too Human*, 35

²⁴⁴ Yovel, *Spinoza and other Heretics*, 106

²⁴⁵ KSA 9, 7 [165]. See also HH 571

²⁴⁶ Ansell-Pearson & Bamford, *Nietzsche's Dawn*, 136

want to truly uproot the values and ways of living that we have inherited, the suffering that accompanies it should be embraced.

One justification Nietzsche offers for his insistent encouragement to “carry heroism into the search for knowledge”²⁴⁷ and to “live dangerously”²⁴⁸ follows from his assessment of how immensely tenacious the “fog of opinions and habituations”²⁴⁹ that clouds people’s minds really is.²⁵⁰ The set of entrenched ways of thinking and living “grows and lives almost independently of the people it envelops”²⁵¹, making it extremely difficult to move beyond – “One’s own evaluation: that means gauging a thing in relation to the degree to which it gives precisely us and no one else pleasure or displeasure - something exceedingly rare!”²⁵²

Self-overcoming & Self-contentment

The term that Nietzsche employs to describe this arduous task is self-overcoming, and as Pippin points out it is related to the cultivation of knowledge: “For Nietzsche too there is a kind of knowledge that will set one free, but it is not knowledge of the human good and not, or at least not wholly, the Spinozist knowledge of necessity. It appears to be a psychological realization of the ineliminable need for self-overcoming.”²⁵³ While a distinctly Nietzschean notion, Yovel claims that self-overcoming is fundamental to the ethical project of Spinoza as well as Nietzsche: “The very notion of moral obligation (or moral duty) has no sense in a strictly immanent system, and must, in both Spinoza and Nietzsche, make way for self-overcoming as the key ethical concept.”²⁵⁴ Yovel continues by stating that self-overcoming “does not impose external constraints upon life and the emotions, but lets life reshape and sublimate itself, with one strain of emotions working on and giving shape to another. Not reason versus life, but life molding itself and enhancing its own power, generates self-overcoming in both these philosophers of immanence.”²⁵⁵

Competing accounts on the role and meaning of self-overcoming in Nietzsche’s work exist.²⁵⁶ Without delving too deeply into this debate, we can bring our previously discussed understanding of the self to bear on the notion of self-overcoming. If the self is understood as

²⁴⁷ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 283

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁹ Nietzsche, *Dawn*, 105

²⁵⁰ See also HH 491

²⁵¹ Nietzsche, *Dawn*, 105

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 104

²⁵³ Pippin, *How to Overcome Oneself*, 116

²⁵⁴ Yovel, *Spinoza and other Heretics*, 113

²⁵⁵ Yovel, *Spinoza and other Heretics*, 114

²⁵⁶ Mitchell’s *Nietzschean Self-overcoming* provides a comprehensive overview of the different readings

something fixed and stable, it is difficult to make sense of the notion of self-overcoming. However, when conceptualized as a dynamic power relation with a striving towards expansion, it becomes rather straightforward indeed. The entrenched relations constitutive of the self that are not conducive to growth must be overcome. This furthermore elucidates in which sense Spinoza can be said to ascribe to a notion of self-overcoming: for Spinoza as much as for Nietzsche, the ethical task is founded on overcoming those relations that hinder power and activity. Self-overcoming, then, is an activity of revaluation, wherein those values that do not serve our striving for power are to be left behind.²⁵⁷

Despite self-overcoming being applicable to Spinoza, it is nevertheless not evident that it is the ‘key ethical concept’ in his system. Taking Spinoza for his word, “self-contentment [*acquiescentia in se ipso*] is truly the highest thing that we can hope for.”²⁵⁸ Following Carlisle’s compelling account, self-contentment²⁵⁹ “can be based on any of the three kinds of cognition that Spinoza identifies in the Ethics: imagination, reason, and intuitive knowledge,”²⁶⁰ the latter, of course, being the highest form. Carlisle asserts that self-contentment should be understood in a twofold sense as stillness and obedience. The former refers to a sense of equanimity in the face of a turbulent world, while the latter indicates “an affirmative obedience to oneself, understood as following the laws of one’s own nature.”²⁶¹ Obedience, then, does not imply passivity – “[o]n the contrary, [self-contentment] is active as opposed to passive, and self-expressive as opposed to self-restricting.”²⁶² Crucially, Carlisle relates self-contentment to Spinoza’s understanding of human freedom:

The concept of *acquiescentia*, taken in this twofold meaning, indicates the distinctive character of the freedom, virtue and blessedness that Spinoza opposes to an unfree, illusory kind of existence (and particularly to an unfree, illusory kind of religion). More precisely, *acquiescentia* conveys the affective, experiential dimension of this highest human good, what we might call its feeling-quality.²⁶³

²⁵⁷ A dimension of self-overcoming particular to Nietzsche is its continual nature: there is no end to the process of seeking affective relations better suited for flourishing; what is good and bad for us in this moment may be different in the future. See TSZ *On Self-overcoming*; Mitchell, *Nietzschean Self-overcoming*, 336-344.

²⁵⁸ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 4p52s

²⁵⁹ As Carlisle notes, there are issues with this translation, as with other common ones like ‘self-esteem’. In particular, contentment suggest a sense of passivity whereas *acquiescentia* is distinctly active. Keeping in mind this limitation, we nevertheless stick with this translation.

²⁶⁰ Carlisle, *Spinoza’s Acquiescentia*, 210

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 223

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 225

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

Self-contentment, then, is the affective experience of the highest human good, a distinctly liberating achievement of knowledge. This opens up an interesting line of comparison between Spinoza's self-contentment and Nietzsche's self-overcoming as they pertain to freedom. Indeed, Pippin suggests that

we should follow Nietzsche's lead in considering the 'problem of freedom' to be a 'psychological' problem in his sense of the term. That is, Nietzsche clearly considers freedom to consist in some sort of affirmative psychological relation to one's own deeds, a relation of identification, finding oneself in one's deeds, experiencing them as genuinely one's own.²⁶⁴

First of all, we can note the similarity between Pippin's description of Nietzsche and Douglas' earlier account of Spinoza – owning up to our acts and affects is a key means for transmuting passivity into activity. Furthermore, both Nietzsche and Spinoza think of freedom, not as an innate human faculty, but as a distinct achievement.²⁶⁵ Indeed, freedom is achieved through an affirmative self-relation. That is to say, our freedom is not a capacity to have done otherwise, but rather an attitude of not resisting what is, and instead fully embracing it.²⁶⁶

This might strike one as an odd notion of freedom. If being free does not involve the ability to choose how to act, spontaneously and immediately, then is it really deserving of the name? The point, however, is precisely that such freedom is *impossible*, and it is only when we come to terms with the illusory nature of this conception of freedom that we are able to encounter *real* freedom. Freedom, Nietzsche and Spinoza tell us, is simply a measure of how we relate to our determined fate. If this sounds like passive submission, remember our earlier suggestion that determinism is not synonymous to passivity. The necessity of nature does not rule out agency, even if that agency is limited to attaining an affirmative relation to one's lot.

It should be noted that Spinoza does expressly deny the ability to affirm or negate as a faculty of the mind.²⁶⁷ Instead, volition "is something universal predicated of all ideas, and ... signifies merely what is common to all ideas, namely affirmation."²⁶⁸ That is, the increase or decrease of power an affect involves is mentally reflected as an idea defined by an affirmative

²⁶⁴ Pippin, *How to Overcome Oneself*, 119

²⁶⁵ Richardson, *Nietzsche's Freedoms*, 130 ; Kisner, *Spinoza on Human Freedom*, 44

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 148 ; Spinoza, *Ethics*, 4app32

²⁶⁷ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 2p48/9

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 2p49

or negatory attitude. As such, what affects us determines what we affirm, and a free faculty of will does not exist. Notwithstanding, affirmation in the Nietzschean sense does play a role in Spinoza's thought, and it follows directly from knowledge, for "insofar as we understand, we cannot want anything but what is necessary."²⁶⁹ Indeed, the deeper our understanding of the fact that everything has a cause, and follows the universal laws of nature, the more our affective tendency to resist external causes is relaxed. If we thoroughly grasp the necessity of nature, an affirmative stance follows by itself, as we come to see that desiring the world to be any other way than it is, is absolutely futile.

A point of disagreement is revealed when we ask what it is, exactly, that is being affirmed. Whereas Spinoza's *amor dei* entails an affirmation of the universal rational laws of an infinite nature, Nietzsche's *amor fati* involves an appreciation of chance and finitude.²⁷⁰ This is echoed by Yovel, as for him both thinkers champion some form of love of necessity, but

the crucial question is how to interpret this necessity, whether as a self-justifying system of rational laws or as opaque and indeterminate fatum which nothing can justify or capture by rational categories, causes, or laws. This question is the watershed at which, upon the common ground of immanence, Nietzsche and Spinoza stand in conflict and each argues, indeed, pleads and seduces, toward a totally different experience of immanence.²⁷¹

In other words, while Nietzsche and Spinoza agree that we must love the necessity of nature in order to overcome *ressentiment* and reactivity, they disagree on the fundamental character of nature that we must learn to love. Nietzsche encapsulates this contrast by modifying Spinoza's *Deus sive Natura* into his own version: *Chaos sive Natura*.²⁷² By replacing God with chaos Nietzsche seems to be making a double move of both embracing Spinoza's totalizing immanent view of nature as well as criticizing his avowal of its divine and rational qualities. All is nature, but all is not orderly – instead, nature is fundamentally chaotic. It is consequently unsurprising that Nietzsche's *amor fati* centres on coming to terms with unpredictability, uncertainty, transience, and so on, in a manner that Spinoza does not.²⁷³

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 4app32

²⁷⁰ Babich, *Chaos sive Natura*, 239

²⁷¹ Yovel, *Spinoza and other Heretics*, 107

²⁷² Nietzsche, NF-1881,11[197]

²⁷³ Nietzsche, NF-1887,9[160]

Again Yovel hits the mark when commenting that “amor fati thus differs from Spinoza’s amor dei not only in content and mood but also in its mental structure. Spinoza’s amor dei expresses a harmonious agreement with the universe, whereas amor fati involves an inner rupture and distance, bridged by an act of defiant affirmation.”²⁷⁴ This theme of contrast between Nietzsche and Spinoza with respect to the character of nature and how that expresses itself in human existence keeps resurfacing, which is a testament to its significance.

At the same time, a yet deeper level of agreement can be observed here, perfectly captured by Deleuze’s penetrating remark: “Ethical joy is the correlate of speculative affirmation.”²⁷⁵ That is to say, for both Nietzsche and Spinoza there is a sense in which the theoretical and the practical aspects of their philosophy are so interwoven that they cannot properly be separated. More precisely, any metaphysical or epistemological concerns seem to be worthy of consideration only insofar as they pertain to the central ethical issue of increasing power and activity. This is, of course, not to suggest that their theoretical philosophy is entirely reducible to its practical counterpart – nevertheless, if one strives to come to terms with their theoretical thought without keeping in mind the deeply practical nature of their projects one surely misses the point. The reverse, however, is also true: their practical thought is infused with their theoretical considerations, and cannot be understood without them. Put in different terms, while their philosophy is intended to be deeply therapeutic, given the centrality of individual flourishing, their therapy is also deeply philosophical, given how they rethink notions like power, joy, freedom, and self. In both Nietzsche and Spinoza, the distinction between ontology and ethics collapses.

3.

In this section, Nietzsche’s reception of Spinoza’s psychology in an unpublished note is discussed.²⁷⁶ We address what Nietzsche thinks is Spinoza’s main method for overcoming passivity and to what extent Nietzsche’s assessment is correct. Subsequently, we consider freedom as the end of our practical efforts by relating it to the central notions of power, self, and activity.

In what appears to be part paraphrase, part critical reflection, Nietzsche engages with some of the key topics in Spinozist psychology. Nietzsche identifies two fundamental points of view in Spinoza’s psychology. The first one is the ‘natural-egoistic point of view’,

²⁷⁴ Yovel, *Spinoza and other Heretics*, 127

²⁷⁵ Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 29

²⁷⁶ Nietzsche, NF-1886,7[4]. This note is also briefly discussed at the end of chapter 2.

encapsulated by the claim that “virtue and power are identical.”²⁷⁷ By extension, “what promotes our power is good: evil is the opposite.”²⁷⁸ True virtue, then, “fights for rather than against nature”²⁷⁹ and satisfies our strongest affect, i.e. the striving for power. The second point of view is the ‘hedonistic point of view’. According to Nietzsche, Spinoza is not content with just any source of joy, since generally these sources come and go, and so dependence on them will come at a cost when they do disappear. As such, we require a more stable and permanent source of joy, which Spinoza purports to find in God. Nietzsche writes: “As long as joy relates to something particular, it is limited and ephemeral; it becomes perfect when it no longer changes with things but rests in the changeless connection; it is eternal when I transform the universe into my property, *omnia in mea*.”²⁸⁰

In other words, Nietzsche thinks Spinoza relies on his pantheism to find an unwavering source of joy. Our relations to the objects of joy (as well as sadness) constantly change, but the all-encompassing totality, of which we are a part, does not waver. Thus if we shift our love from the former to the latter, we escape the vicissitudes of the particular, and find our joy in the universal and eternal. Along these lines, Nietzsche quotes Spinoza in saying that “the highest good is the knowledge of the unity of our spirit with the universe.”²⁸¹ This indicates that Nietzsche is aware of the sense in which Spinoza’s stable source of joy, God or nature, is not an external cause – as Spinoza puts it, “God is the immanent and not the transitive cause of all things.”²⁸² It follows that Spinoza’s amor dei, the human’s love for God, is ultimately indistinguishable from the love of God for humans – which is, in fact, God’s love for himself.²⁸³

Nietzsche’s descriptive tone then turns more critical, when he writes that “the specific ‘thinker’ gives himself away. Knowledge becomes master over all other affects; it is stronger. Our true activity consists in thinking nature, in rational contemplation. The desire for activity = the desire to live according to reason.”²⁸⁴ Thus while Nietzsche has no issues with Spinoza’s equation of power with virtue, he is less receptive of the idea that true activity should be equated with rational thought. As we saw, for Nietzsche, reason is merely one among the affects and plays no special role in overcoming passivity.²⁸⁵ Whether or not one

²⁷⁷ Nietzsche, NF-1886,7[4]

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

²⁸² Spinoza, *Ethics*, 1p18

²⁸³ Ibid., 5p36

²⁸⁴ Nietzsche, NF-1886,7[4]

²⁸⁵ Nietzsche, GS 333

agrees with Nietzsche's assessment of the role of reason itself, his portrayal of Spinoza tying power and activity to reason is correct regardless.²⁸⁶

In a further criticism that targets both of the points of view mentioned, Nietzsche accuses Spinoza of a "[p]sychological fallacy: as if the permanence of a thing guaranteed the permanence of the affection I have for it! (complete absence of the "artist") The highest and most comical pedantry of a logician who idolizes his instincts."²⁸⁷ That is, Nietzsche points out that the fact that God is permanent does not imply that one will be permanently affected by it – the permanence of a cause and the permanence of its effect on us are not synonymous. The self and its constituent relations, for Nietzsche, are constantly changing, and so it is mistaken to assume that the same cause will always inspire the same affect.

A Spinozist reply to this criticism could draw on the idea that God is not an external cause, so that the joy that arises from it is not a form of dependence on something that lies outside of ourselves, but rather an expression of the understanding that we humans are but a mode of an all-encompassing totality. As such, the affect of joy arising from the human's love of God can be unwavering in the sense that ultimately it is identical to the love of God for himself, which requires no external determination to arise since God is fully self-caused and all affections are internal to it. Carlisle's distinction between love and self-contentment is insightful here:

The affects of acquiescentia and love are distinguishable insofar as the former is a **joy accompanied by the idea of an internal cause** (i.e. the idea of oneself), while the latter is a joy accompanied by the idea of an external cause (i.e. the idea of another). But (...) in the third kind of cognition **this distinction between internal and external causes is unsettled**. In place of two distinct ideas—an idea of oneself, and an idea of God—intuitive knowledge offers a single idea: of oneself as "in" God, or (to put it another way) of God's nature as containing and expressing this singular existing being.²⁸⁸

That is, while one can speak of some sense of externality in love and the lower forms of self-contentment, the highest expression of self-contentment is *antagonistic to externality by principle*. Although Nietzsche does seem to be aware of this – given that he describes

²⁸⁶ For a thorough account on the role and meaning of reason in Spinoza's work, see LeBuffe, *Spinoza on Reason*

²⁸⁷ Nietzsche, NF-1886,7[4]

²⁸⁸ Carlisle, *Spinoza's Acquiescentia*, 228 (bold is mine).

Spinoza as seeking the ‘unity of our spirit with the universe’ thus achieving the pantheistic ‘omnia in mea’ – he nevertheless resists the idea that such an immanent cause could constitute an unwavering source of joy. It is important to keep in mind, however, that Nietzsche’s criticism is not one of primarily metaphysical nature. Even though Nietzsche is clearly concerned with the role of God in Spinoza’s thinking, his main concern seems to be of psychological nature. More specifically, Nietzsche considers the question of how Spinoza thinks we can overcome the passions, find unwavering joy, and maximize our power and activity.

As to the question of how to overcome the passions, Nietzsche presents Spinoza’s method as follows: “Where do all the upsets, sadness, fear, hatred, envy come from? From one source: from our love for ephemeral things. With this love, the whole group of those desires also disappears.”²⁸⁹ In other words, if we stop depending on transient things to experience joy, and instead rely on the permanent, then all sadness and passivity, which inadvertently accompanies attachment to the ephemeral, is eradicated. Desiring wavering things leads to wavering emotions. Hence the maxim: stop loving the transient and love only that which endures – the only infinitely enduring thing being God.

Does Nietzsche manage to accurately capture Spinoza here? Only partially, it seems. Granted, Spinoza observes that a lot of misery arises “from the fact that happiness or unhappiness is made wholly dependent on the quality of the object which we love.”²⁹⁰ It is, then, “the love of what is perishable”²⁹¹ that leads to the passions. Hence Spinoza asks “whether, in fact, there might be anything of which the discovery and attainment would enable me to enjoy continuous, supreme, and unending happiness.”²⁹² The kind of love that enables this enduring joy is the love of something enduring, as “love towards a thing eternal and infinite feeds the mind wholly with joy.”²⁹³

Nevertheless, Spinoza’s search for a lasting source of joy is not equivalent to a denunciation of the ephemeral. Spinoza writes that “[w]e conceive things as actual in two ways: either insofar as we conceive them to exist in relation to a certain time and place, or insofar as we conceive them to be contained in God and to follow from the necessity of the divine nature.”²⁹⁴ While the latter perspective, “from the vantage of eternity”²⁹⁵, corresponds

²⁸⁹ Nietzsche, NF-1886,7[4]

²⁹⁰ Spinoza, *Emendation of the Intellect*, 9, 1 (in *Complete Works*)

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 9,3

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 1, 1

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 10,1

²⁹⁴ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 5p29s

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

to the third and highest form of knowledge, the former perspective can still provide adequate knowledge that is, moreover, essential for the development of intuitive knowledge.²⁹⁶ As we saw earlier, Nietzsche criticizes Spinoza's reliance on rigid metaphysical concepts as a way to shy away from the inherent transience of existence. But given the centrality of dealing with the affects in Spinoza's thought, the continuity of the 2nd and 3rd kind of knowledge, and his immanent conception of nature, such criticism is not entirely justified.

Not *entirely* justified, for be that as it may, it is still true that Spinoza recognizes *two* ways of conceiving something as actual (or true or real).²⁹⁷ Given the immanence in Spinoza's system, these two perspectives are ultimately views on the same singular nature, and so 'the vantage of eternity' does not refer to some transcendental 'beyond'. However, tying back to the conclusion of the previous chapter, Spinoza does set up a contrast between our given experience of nature as transient and the achievable eternal perspective of God. Put in another way, that which for Spinoza is the truly comprehensive immanent perspective – the most adequate understanding of reality, from the vantage of eternity – for Nietzsche carries transcendental undertones. As such, even if Nietzsche's assessment of Spinoza lacks some nuance, it does get at an important difference. Both thinkers inspire a love and affirmation of life, but Spinoza sees the highest form of this love as one that transcends time and place – something that for Nietzsche is indicative of metaphysical remnants that are yet to be uprooted. What for Spinoza is the ultimate form of embracing life, for Nietzsche reveals a fear of life – especially in its less joyous moments.

Freedom & passivity

Returning to Spinoza's method for overcoming passivity, it should be stressed that his method is by no means limited to finding an eternal source of joy in God, as one might be inclined to conclude from Nietzsche's comments. While the Spinozist sage may have come to conceive everything 'in' or 'through' God, this is a very rare achievement. Most of the journey from passivity to activity will therefore consist in forming adequate ideas of our affections.²⁹⁸ This will gradually lead us to more adequate knowledge and joy, in a steady process from passivity to activity. The more active we become, the less we are determined by external causes, and so the more self-determining we become. The degree to which our

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 5p15

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 5p29s

²⁹⁸ As we saw, 5p2 is key here

striving for power is unfettered from external determinations is equivalent to the degree of freedom we possess.

This is the sense in which passivity – acting according to one’s passions – is akin to servitude, and activity akin to freedom. As long as all our action is reaction to external causes, our own proper self never comes to fruition. Only when the direction of causality is inverted, from being determined to determining, can we speak of freedom. A free self, then, is a relation of affects structured in such a way as to be conducive to a growth of power and activity, in which not succumbing to external determinations plays a central role. Freedom, in other words, is an indication of the relative directionality of power in the network of relations that constitute the self.

While this much is true of both Nietzsche and Spinoza, the two differ in that the latter maintains the (at least theoretical) possibility of an ultimate resolution into eternal freedom, as it were. Spinoza’s second cognition relies on an analysis of affects existing in causal relation; as such, it is a process. The third cognition, on the contrary, is immediate: “although this intuitive kind of thinking is certainly an activity, it is not a process. It sees what ‘follows’ from God not as a sequence of effects, but as a simple yet fully intelligible inherence or manifestation.”²⁹⁹ This being-in-God, *sub specie aeternitatis*, subsumes simple causal relations into an infinite nexus of forces, in which our affects inhere. And so, it becomes clear that what is at play here is a peculiar “kind of autonomy, combining fidelity to one’s own finite power with the understanding that this is a dependent part, and an expression, of an infinite power.”³⁰⁰ In considering the mind “without relation to the body”³⁰¹, Spinoza stresses that our mind “with respect to both essence and existence, follows from the divine nature and constantly depends on God.” The human mind, considered from the vantage of eternity, can in principle achieve “a constant and eternal love for God”³⁰², which is precisely “what our salvation *or* blessedness *or* freedom consists in.”³⁰³ Once attained, this freedom as eternal love of God is indeed incorruptible, since “there is nothing in nature which is contrary to this intellectual love or which can take it away.”³⁰⁴

Nietzschean freedom, according to Richardson, consist of a process of continual cultivation that is closely tied to increasing our power and becoming a self.³⁰⁵ Freedom,

²⁹⁹ Carlisle, *Spinoza’s Acquiescentia*, 230

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 231

³⁰¹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 5p20s

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 5p36s

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 5p37

³⁰⁵ Richardson, *Nietzsche’s Freedoms*, 129

moreover, is a function of the organization of our drives, and as such does not transcend the affects but stands among them.³⁰⁶ Nietzsche sets himself and his readers the task of naturalizing and de-moralizing freedom: freedom should not be seen as a faculty but as an expression of agency within nature, and freedom should not serve pre-set moral ends, but only the end of growing power.³⁰⁷ While Nietzsche and Spinoza agree that freedom is a contingent and immanent expression of a limited power, they take this insight into diametrically opposing directions. As noted, Spinoza thinks our inherently finite freedom can be resolved, as it were, through a love of the infinite totality of nature. For Nietzsche, on the contrary, freedom is a becoming, and the project of becoming free is distinctly genealogical. Freedom depends first of all on coming to understand the history of our values, after which we can ask whether they serve our striving for power or not. There is, in other words, no final state of freedom on the horizon; there is only the process of becoming *more* free – which is tantamount to the cultivation of power and self, and underscores the continual nature of self-overcoming.

Concerns pertinent for both thinkers about the inconsistency of understanding freedom as a form of dependence are alleviated by keeping in mind the necessity of nature. If freedom would mean full autonomy over one's disposition, then it would require one to be separate from nature, which in an immanent conception of nature is nothing but absurd. If, however, freedom means expressing nature as fully as possible, then all that stands in the way of freedom is resistance to the course of nature. Freedom, then, is a form of self-relation defined by openness to, and affirmation of, affective experience, as opposed to an attitude of antagonism to life, characteristic of enslavement.

At this point one would be right to ask: if everything is included in nature, how could one be anything other than *fully* nature? The short answer is that the practical task of becoming *more* nature does not imply that failing this task means being anything *other than* nature. The flower that withers because it stands in the shadows of the flower that blooms is still fully a flower – but it is certainly less of a flower than it could have been. The relative weakness of its own proper power in relation to the surrounding forces simply meant it could not reach its capacity. In the same way, the freer one becomes, the more one expresses one's nature; to the degree that one fails to become free, one is subject to overpowering external determinations that keep one from blossoming.

³⁰⁶ Nietzsche, TI IX 41

³⁰⁷ Richardson, *Nietzsche's Freedoms*, 131

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The practical task set by Nietzsche and Spinoza focusses first of all on removing the obstacles that stand in the way of growing power and freedom. These obstacles are the traditional values, virtues, and moral laws that we have internalized as drives that guide our conduct. The issue at play here is captured succinctly by Richardson: “Our agency has been trained to hostility against the drives: it fights them as forces foreign and alien to itself—from the ‘self’ it claims to be. But agency has failed to recognize the way it itself is an ‘agent for’ foreign forces; it executes a control of the organism by those forces.”³⁰⁸ That is, morality hijacks our power to act, rendering us ignorant passive instruments of forces counter to our own interests. The negative starting point of therapy consequently consists of becoming aware of the entrenched values we inherit, and ridding ourselves of those that do not serve us.

The method for this process rests on a new understanding of virtue as power. In other words, those affects that limit our power and render us passive are no longer virtuous; instead, it is the active joyous affects that increase our power which are the properly virtuous ones. Passivity is tantamount to servitude, and activity akin to freedom. The key realization is that although external forces can make us less free and powerful by inducing passions, it is yet within our power loosen their hold on us. We do this, first and foremost, through the cultivation of knowledge of our affects. By understanding where our affections originate and why they inspire joy or sadness in us, external forces are less able to puppeteer us, and our own power can come to fruition. A primary obstacle in this respect is *ressentiment*. As long as we blame external causes for our passivity, we keep ourselves from understanding how we really relate to the world, and thereby make it impossible to promote activity and freedom.

We must, then, take responsibility for our affects by no longer treating ourselves as victims of circumstance and instead focussing on what lies within our agency. The tool Spinoza offers in this context comes down to severing an emotion from the thought of an external cause.³⁰⁹ This allows us to understand the emotion in itself and how it affects us, rather than being ensnared by the external cause that occasioned it. Albeit less elaborately, Nietzsche hints at a similar idea: “In the end, we love our desires and not the thing desired.”³¹⁰ Psychotherapist Yalom relies on this idea in his practice by analysing emotions separate from the cause that triggers them. This enables a clearer understanding of the emotion itself,

³⁰⁸ Richardson, *Nietzsche's Freedoms*, 146

³⁰⁹ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 5p2 ; 5p20s

³¹⁰ Nietzsche, BGE 175. See also HH 501 and WS 23

as focusing on the cause distracts from the affective significance of the experience.³¹¹ The suggestion, then, is to prefer an internal analysis of the affects over grappling with their fortuitous cause. By extension, the type of knowledge that is deemed therapeutic is the kind that helps us overcome our tendency to resent and blame external objects for our affective states, and instead understands what our affects entail for our internal striving for power. The degree to which we achieve this is tantamount to the degree of freedom we possess. Nietzsche and Spinoza agree this is a gradual process. Notwithstanding, the former stresses the continual need of self-overcoming by relentlessly examining our affective relations, whereas the latter recognizes the possibility of self-contentment, in which no fortuitous determinations can any longer cause emotional tumult, since an internal source of joy has been found and external dependence has been overcome.

It may come as a surprise that the unmistakable therapeutic dimension of Nietzsche and Spinoza's respective philosophies is expressed in rather general terms. If Hadot is right in considering them as belonging to the tradition of thinkers that treat philosophy as a way of life,³¹² then the lack of concrete practical guidelines may be met with discontent. The absence of detailed precepts, however, is not to be seen as a failure, but as an intentional achievement. The invitation is to break down our inherited ways of thinking, and rethink how we live in the world on the basis of what works for us. Since this will be different for everyone, it is impossible to provide a universal set of practical tenets. In fact, following pre-given moral precepts is precisely what we are urged not to do, so to replace the defunct rules with new ones would be to fight fire with fire.

Instead, what we are left with is a general framework consisting of the different elements that must be taken into consideration if one is to embark on the project of self-growth through increasing power, activity, and freedom. The insights discussed in this chapter on morality, knowledge, virtue, freedom, and so on, fit into that framework and help to provide direction, but are not equivalent to a set of practical guidelines for living the good life. This is a testament to the philosophical nature of the therapy at play in Nietzsche and Spinoza's thought. What is being offered is much more than a collection of rules for life: we are being invited to rethink our most basic psychological notions such as power, self, value, emotion, and freedom. Spinoza is aware of how "extremely arduous" this task is, but insists, famously, that "all noble things are as difficult as they are rare."³¹³ In a similar vein,

³¹¹ Yalom, *The Gift of Therapy*, 203

³¹² Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 108 for Nietzsche, 271 for Spinoza

³¹³ Spinoza, *Ethics*, 5p42s

Nietzsche writes: “Alas, much boredom has to be overcome, much sweat expended, before we discover our own colours, our own brush, our own canvas! - And even then we are far from being a master of our own art of living - but at least we are master in our own workshop.”³¹⁴

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, we have covered many important themes in Nietzsche and Spinoza’s work. The intricacy of their relation suggests that the question as to whether Nietzsche is a Spinozist or not is too simplistic. This does not mean that the comparison is not worthwhile – on the contrary, the ways in which the similarities and differences link up has allowed us to put key issues, like the notion of power, into focus. Furthermore, by treating Nietzsche as reader of (Fischer’s) Spinoza, we have been able to shed light on tensions in Nietzsche’s work, as well as trace some lines of influence, in particular with regards to the nature of self. While Nietzsche’s understanding of Spinoza often turns out to be unrefined at best, this does not undermine the many insights gained from placing the thinkers side by side.

The suggestion has been that comparing Nietzsche and Spinoza in light of their therapeutics is the most fruitful approach. This is because it helps to explain the centrality of psychology in both their work, but also places metaphysical concerns into perspective. Indeed, if we are justified in agreeing with Deleuze’s observation that in both thinkers ontology and ethics collapse into one, then treating Nietzsche and Spinoza as philosophical therapists is immensely illuminating. While the metaphysical differences between the two are obvious to any reader, they become meaningful when we understand what role they play in their practical projects.

Spinoza’s pantheistic system of immanence is of therapeutic value insofar as it provides a rigid framework on which to build our remedial efforts. By understanding human action according to the same universal laws and principles as nature at large, we can bring rational reflection to bear on our affective experiences. If everything follows the lawful necessity of nature, then it is possible to acquire lasting general insights into our seemingly incomprehensible emotional lives. The ramifications of Spinoza’s metaphysics on his practical thinking are perhaps most clearly reflected in his notion that the mind can come to outlive the body. Indeed, Spinoza’s view of self as modally dependent on substance means the self’s essence inheres in substance and can assume some of its properties, most notably that of eternity. Nietzsche does not present us with a similarly rigorous groundwork for his therapy.

³¹⁴ Nietzsche, WS 266

As such, while Nietzsche's scepticism of metaphysics means he cannot make the same promise of ultimate absolution, the fact that his practical philosophy is more ontologically parsimonious also means it is more likely to be embraced by a modern reader.

We have referred to this difference between Spinoza and Nietzsche as coming down to a general contrast of method. Spinoza strives to fit his understanding of human psychology into his metaphysical framework, thereby championing a top-down approach. Nietzsche, on the contrary, starts from our affective lives and builds his understanding of the world from the top-down. The significance of this distinction with regards to therapy rests on the contrast between harmony and chaos. That is to say, when the affects are treated as situated within a rationally organized whole, emotive perturbations can never truly interrupt the overarching harmony of substance. On the contrary, when we take our affects as the origin of knowledge, the tumult of emotion becomes explicative of reality as such. Thus, by submitting to diametrically opposed views of nature, Nietzsche and Spinoza inevitably disagree on what is attainable and desirable with regards to therapy: while the latter may hope for equanimity, the former must welcome the turbulence and suffering of existence.

This pertains directly to the practice of affirmation: whereas Nietzsche invites us to affirm finitude, transience, suffering, and so on, as necessary parts of the human condition, Spinoza believes that these can be consolidated, as it were, by affirming the eternal necessity of God. It should be noted that Spinoza's therapeutic method is not limited to this rare final stage of union with God – understanding the emotions is an integral part of the process which has merit in and of itself. This also relates to affirmation: by seeing the emotions as a necessary expression of nature, the need to lament and resist experience falls away. Hence, while Nietzschean affirmation is perhaps more radical, affirmation still constitutes a shared therapeutic tool which can be put into practice by loosening one's resistance to experience by embracing it as necessary.

Both thinkers agree that the type of knowledge that will be helpful here is not an intellectual form of knowledge, but rather the practical knowledge of the body and the emotions. Affects reveal how we relate to our surroundings, and so understanding them is a condition for acting adequately. After the shift from morality to ethics, Spinoza leaves us with a clarifying yet deceptively simple scheme that allows us to determine which affects are conducive to flourishing: the joyous ones are good, and the sad ones are bad. The passions can become active by understanding them; thus, there is in Spinoza a linear connection between knowledge and joy. The question is whether knowledge really suffices in making passions active, and indeed whether this view is perhaps too simple. Nietzsche seems to be

more attuned to the nonlinear messy character of the therapeutic process, where more self-knowledge does not automatically entail more joy. Confronting trauma, for instance, can conceivably be so overwhelming that it does more harm than good. Nietzsche, of course, would still encourage us to pursue such knowledge, but is unquestionably more attentive to the fact that there is only so much knowledge – and suffering – one can bear.

In closing. The self is a degree of power, and the ethical task is to maximize this power. The main obstacle hereto is the effect of other forces upon us insofar as they induce passions. The core question of therapy, then, is how to stop external forces from determining how we feel, think, and act. Nietzsche and Spinoza agree that the answer rests on knowing the affects. Importantly, knowledge is itself affective. If the self is seen as an affectively constituted relational multiplicity, then the affective nature of knowledge means knowledge can effectively change the composition of self, in such a way that a previously passive relation can be made active. Thus, passivity is subverted by incorporating the affective relation into the self through understanding. The root of the issue, then, is externality. Evil never comes from within; therapy is only needed due to our ignorance of, and dependence on, external causes. The end of therapy, therefore, is to incorporate and interiorize the external so as to pre-empt passivity from arising. One can see how Spinoza's pantheism is uniquely suited for this task – union with God is the ultimate form of conceiving of everything as essentially interior. Despite its theoretical suitability and consistency, Spinoza's philosophical therapy is not sufficiently attuned to the vicissitudes of life and its inherent qualities of transience and suffering. The reverse is true of Nietzsche: his therapy is eminently sensitive to the chaotic unpredictability of the human condition, but ultimately lacks the systematic rigour one would expect from a fully comprehensive and practicable philosophical therapy.

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