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“No one has yet determined what the body can do” : the turn to the body in Spinoza and Nietzsche

Ioan, R.; Ioan R.

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Cover Page



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Introduction

“Some men give more clear light and knowledge
by the bare distinct stating of a question about
something than others do by talking about it [...]
for whole hours together”

(John Locke, *The Conduct of the Understanding*, 39)

On an almost daily basis we read about advances in neurophysiology, brain science and biology and we hear claims about their impact on how we must understand ourselves. How are we to respond to these scientific advances? What claims do *advances in the scientific understanding of human life make on us*? How do they impact on our self-understanding as moral and political beings? Within contemporary philosophy neurophysiology, brain-science and empirical psychology are having a tremendous impact on ethics. This thesis will offer a historical frame of reference and clues to these increasingly prominent philosophical appeals to empirical science. These appeals are often made without any historical awareness of the way in which the recourse to modern science has shaped philosophy from the Enlightenment on. The subject of this research is the turn to physiology in two prominent figures in the history of modern philosophy: Spinoza and Nietzsche. It involves comparative research into their emphatic appeal to physiology as the key to solving fundamental philosophical problems. While the groundwork for comparative research has already been laid in studies of a number of key concepts, a comparative study of Spinoza and Nietzsche focused on physiology has not yet been conducted.

It is customary to begin any comparative analysis of their philosophies with Nietzsche's famous postcard to Franz Overbeck:

I am utterly amazed, utterly delighted! 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 overall tendency similar to mine – to make 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 differences are admittedly immense, they are due more to the differences in time, culture, and science.¹ (KGB III/1, 135)

My thesis is that under “knowledge” they both understand knowledge of one’s own body. In systematic terms the guiding hypothesis is that the philosophers reach many similar conclusions in response to similar philosophical problems and pressures. Both problematize the illusory character of Cartesian self-consciousness as well as teleological thinking while redirecting our attention to pre-conscious physiological intelligence as the key to self-knowledge. Both reject withdrawal from the world as the path to self-knowledge and emphasize the interconnectedness of the body with its environment by showing that we are never “a dominion within a dominion” (EIIIpref). However, their motivations are not purely epistemological; they are primarily ethical and political in nature. Against the moral ‘illusions’ of free-will, the moral world-order and altruism or compassion, both philosophers seek to de-moralise and naturalize our understanding of human agency. For both, physiology translates the moral condemnation of human actions and passions onto the plane of immanence in an a-moral language of “lines, planes, and bodies” (EIIIpref) or the “underlying text of homo natura” (JGB 230 5.169). For both, physiology is also the key to an authentic freedom that surpasses the illusion of free-will, and both draw political consequences from physiology. For Nietzsche, the politics of the future or “great politics” involves a “spiritual war”

1 “Ich bin ganz erstaunt, ganz entzückt! Ich habe einen Vorgänger und was für einen! Ich kannte Spinoza fast nicht: daß mich jetzt nach ihm verlangte, war eine „Instinkthandlung“. Nicht nur, daß seine Gesamttenenz gleich der meinen ist – die Erkenntniß zum mächtigsten Affekt zu machen – in fünf Hauptpunkten seiner Lehre finde ich mich wieder, dieser abnormste und einsamste Denker ist mir gerade in diesen Dingen am nächsten: er leugnet die Willensfreiheit –; die Zwecke –; die sittliche Weltordnung –; das Unegoistische –; das Böse –; wenn freilich auch die Verschiedenheiten ungeheuer sind, so liegen diese mehr in dem Unterschiede der Zeit, der Cultur, der Wissenschaft.”.

against Christianity, in which physiology will play a key part as the “mistress of all the other questions” (25[1] 13.638; cf. JGB 23 5.38f). For Spinoza physiology is a privileged way to understand political organisation and, instead of writing a satire of human faults as many have done before, create a view that is best in agreement with practice (TP I 4).

Spinoza argues fervently for the necessity of understanding the human body before any other knowledge can be obtained and writes famously of our ignorance of the body: we “do not even know what a body can do” (EIIIp2s); without understanding the amazing power the body has of acting, all attempts to understand ourselves and the world around us are futile. For Nietzsche the body is “the far richer phenomenon” (40[15] 11.634; 2[91] 12.106; 5[56] 12.205), the seat of “great Reason” over and against the “small Reason” of conscious thought (Za I Verächtern 4.39), so that philosophical knowledge must proceed using “the body as the guiding thread”. Moreover, both Spinoza and Nietzsche conceptualise the body as a genuine multiplicity, which, through intelligent processes of self-regulation, constitutes a derivative and relative unity in intense and complex interchange with its environment.

In order to deal with such a complex issue it is necessary to break it down into sub-problems that are easier to tackle individually. In the first two chapters, I will ask about Spinoza and Nietzsche respectively:

- 1) What drives their turns to the body? What are the philosophical problems they tackle and the moral and metaphysical illusions they seek to undermine?
- 2) In what scientific contexts do Spinoza and Nietzsche formulate their accounts of physiology, and how best to understand the relation between their philosophies and the sciences on which they draw? Does the recourse to physiology imply abandoning philosophy for science? How do the different scientific contexts and theories make their own accounts diverge?
- 3) What is the nature of their turn to the body? How do they understand the body and how does it interact with its environment? How should we

understand the methodological primacy of physiology and the relation between conscious and pre-conscious thought?

In the comparative study, I will ask:

1) What are Nietzsche’s explicit criticisms of Spinoza? Are they justified? How can we use Nietzsche’s pronouncements on Spinoza in order to articulate a systematic comparison of their philosophical physiologies?

2) What are the most salient philosophical problems on which Spinoza and Nietzsche agree and disagree? How do their physiologies address these problems, and how do they come to differ on key issues, such as conflict vs. agreement, growth vs. preservation and the power of reason?

3) What consequences do Spinoza and Nietzsche draw from their physiologies for ethics and politics? How can we account for the differences and underlying similarities between these consequences?

Their philosophical physiologies reveal, on the one hand, the crucial similarities in the way they think the fundamental ontological category of their philosophies, namely power, in contradistinction to much of western thinking running from Plato to Hobbes and Schopenhauer, and, on the other hand, how they problematize our epistemic access to the body – whereas in, for instance Schopenhauer, we have immediate, privileged knowledge of it. For both Spinoza and Nietzsche we do not have a body, we are a body. The essence of the body is its power and the question guiding the quest for self-knowledge is: what can a body do? The affirmation of the irreducible specificity of each body as the ground of the self-knowledge necessary for the project of liberation through cultivation of the body’s power stands in direct contrast to the condemnation of the body as the prison of the soul (Phaedo 82e), a wild beast (Enneads I 1 10) that hinders thought and fills the soul with pleasures, desires and grief (Enneads IV 8 8), and which must be disciplined and made our slave (I Corinthians 9:27).

In thinking about the turn to the body, Spinoza and Nietzsche engage in two projects of paramount importance for the practice of philosophy. First, they think

about the nearest things, they bring to light what is closest to us. They reveal the problematic character of what seems self-understood but is in fact poorly understood and move from the implicit to the explicit. Second, they articulate the results of their turns to the body by creating a new conceptual vocabulary. They formulate a novel philosophical language suited to their philosophical physiologies.

This project is a comparative study in the History of Modern Philosophy focused on the recourse to physiology on the part of two key figures, Spinoza and Nietzsche. Nevertheless, its significance extends well beyond these two historical figures and their texts. The historical research will in effect provide two case-studies of the turn to physiology in philosophy that will shed light on other significant figures and tendencies in modern and contemporary philosophy. It will help to understand better the importance given to the study of affects in the phenomenological tradition, where Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty have, in different ways, used Nietzsche's legacy to develop their own philosophy, but also outside phenomenology for thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze, who has built a large part of his original philosophy on a detailed study of both Spinoza and Nietzsche. At the same time, this project will offer an historical frame of reference and 'genealogical' clues to the increasingly prominent appeals to empirical psychology, cognitive science and neuroscience in contemporary analytic ethics; appeals that are often made without any sense of the historicity of the philosophical recourse to physiology. References to Spinoza and/or Nietzsche are present in scientific literature in the works of researcher and Collège de France professor Jean-Pierre Changeux (1998) and neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (2003). The latter finds Spinoza to be the most relevant philosopher for his research and uses his insights for attempting an account of emotions that was not possible before. However, their remarks remain unelaborated.