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

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Conclusion

The fundamental difference in orientation between Spinoza's and Nietzsche's philosophies stems from that fact that Nietzsche is responding to what he diagnoses as a crisis of the present. The focus on nihilism and décadence as the result of historical processes has no parallel in Spinoza's philosophy, for whom ethical or political difficulties and puzzles are consequences of eternal, metaphysical problems.

The fact that Nietzsche understands nihilism as a symptom of declining life, i.e. he understands it physiologically as the expression of a form or type of life turning against itself, leads him to think about normative questions using a category that does not occur in Spinoza, namely affirmation. For Spinoza, the structure of his ethics runs along the following lines: the objective is to transform passive affects into active or joyful ones, i.e. to move from lesser to greater power. For Nietzsche the story is complicated by the fact that he considers cases in which genuine power, while affirming or expressing itself, could still be cases of life-negation (i.e. the priest or the slave in certain cases). Nietzsche must take into account not only empowerment, but also its quality. This difference is consistent with a number of contrasts outlined in section III of this chapter. First, Spinoza understands power as always positive or affirmative. Genuine power, for the Dutch thinker, always involves the guarantee of its beneficial expression for the mode manifesting it and its full cooperation with other essences. His account, which excludes ambivalence from the nature of power, does not open up the possibility of asking the question of the quality of empowerment: more is always better. Nietzsche's notion of power, which includes conflict as ontologically constitutive, is well suited to help him ask the question of whether a given value serves the interests of specific life forms. Second, the diagnosis of life-negation is possible only due to the existence

of inner conflict. Spinoza excludes the possibility of inner conflict within a subject while this is the norm for Nietzsche.

The analysis of the notion of (inner) conflict points us towards another fundamental difference between the two. While both acknowledge the existence of conflict, Nietzsche argues both that it cannot be eliminated, and that we should not strive to do so: conflict can serve a positive role insofar as it can be a stimulus for empowerment and can lead to life affirmation. Resistance, insofar as it serves as a stimulus, is highly valued by Nietzsche, as we have seen in the case of 'war'. Due to his commitment to a rationally ordered universe in which essences are in agreement in spite of chance encounters in the order of nature, Spinoza sets up the elimination of conflict through agreement as the objective of both his ethics and politics.

We are now better able to understand a pivotal passage, in the Lenzer Heide note, in which Nietzsche criticizes what he takes to be Spinoza's affirmative stance:

> Spinoza attained an affirmative stance, insofar as every moment has a *logical* necessity: and with his fundamental instinct for logic he felt a sense of triumph about the world's being constituted *thus*[700]. (5[71] 12.217)

Sommer sees this rejection of Spinoza's affirmative stance in the Lenzer Heide note as weak, because it amounts to saying only that "sein Fall ist nur ein Einzel-Fall" (Sommer 2012, p. 167). Stegmaier (2012, p. 531) also emphasizes this point and writes that it is not clear why Nietzsche objects and that the problem is unsolved in the note. Nabais argues that Nietzsche rejects it because Spinoza's response is too particular and too artificial: it supposes an "immense conceptual machinery" (Nabais 2006, pp. 151-2) If, however, we consider this critique in the broader context of Nietzsche's analysis of the specific 'sickness'[701] that Spinoza's thinking is symptomatic of, we can begin to appreciate its very deep origins in Nietzsche's diagnosis of the crisis of the present. There is no obvious reason

700 "Spinoza gewann eine solche bejahende Stellung, insofern jeder Moment eine logische Nothwendigkeit hat: und er triumphirte mit seinem logischen Grundinstinkte über eine solche Weltbeschaffenheit.".

701 Consumption, see pp. 171-2.

why the simplicity of "conceptual machinery" should be valued and count as the guiding principle for Nietzsche in this matter.

My conjecture is that the key to interpreting this passage is to recognize the kind of 'logic' that Nietzsche criticizes Spinoza for employing. This is the logic of Spinoza's power dynamic in which a conatus cannot turn against itself. Nietzsche agrees with Spinoza that power is primarily an active process of expenditure and growth and that it cannot be understood retroactively according to what it lacks, a telos, but differs insofar as he explores the dimensions of accumulation and discharge of power, and of affirmation. Spinoza affirmed this world view without contemplating the possibility of 'affirming' (qualitatively good) or 'negating' (qualitatively bad) manifestations of power. Spinoza's 'sickness' is rooted in his lack of awareness of the possibility of power turning against itself and inhibiting one's power of acting: Spinoza was 'consumptive' because he failed to see this problem and so strive for a 'great health' that incorporates sickness. In other words, Nietzsche's critique is that Spinoza did not do enough in the pursuit of (self-) knowledge.

Whether or not Nietzsche is successful in giving a convincing account of affirmation, his arguments have the merit of showing how, when we pursue a radically de-deified understanding of reality, we are faced with questions about the nature of power and freedom to which Spinoza's philosophy is not attuned. In conclusion, it is worth stressing that focusing on the analyses of 'war' or conflict in the study of the normative thought of these two philosophers, coupled with the emphasis on physiology, puts us in a better position to see important implications of defining freedom as an exercise in embodied power.

These fundamental differences should not blind us to a number of profound similarities in their normative stances. First, both develop normative claims within the horizon of immanence and must, as a consequence of their respective critiques of metaphysics, discuss ethics and politics against the background of their projects of naturalisation. Both argue that we find ourselves in a position in which we are faced with the task of searching for ways to ground normativity in immanence and that we cannot appeal to a transcendent source of justification for our ethical

or political claims. Second, this starting point leads both to formulate an account of freedom compatible with necessity. In spite of the differences in the ways they understand necessity, they both position their concepts of freedom against the doctrine of free will. This compatibilist view means that they understand freedom as self-determination and that the focus is on what it means to increase or amplify our freedom. Rather than considering human autonomy as a starting point, they are interested in understanding how autonomy can be gained and what it means to speak of degrees of freedom. Third, as we have seen at various junctures throughout this chapter, the orientation of their ethical projects is surprisingly similar.

The empowerment of the individual in Spinoza cannot be conceived outside the community. The enjoyment of freedom by other rational agents in society is indispensible to and constitutive of my own liberation. That is why a human is always freer in a well-ordered state than in isolation: the sovereign good belongs to all and consists in the rational pursuit of agreement on the basis of shared affects. Among the various configurations the body politic can have, Spinoza privileges democracy and democratic institutions because they offer the best chance to pursue what is fundamentally a communal endeavour.

Nietzsche agrees with the stress placed on the importance of individual flourishing and acknowledges the radical openness and vulnerability of any life-form in the face of its environment. Nevertheless, this does not lead him to draw the same conclusions about the importance of communal life and the benefits of democracy and cooperation. We have seen the example of Zarathustra, who shuns interactions with the people. In later texts Nietzsche revisits the topic and rethinks the status of the free, self-determining individual within the broader context of the community. The relation between the (community of) free individuals and the people is conceived as one of proximity, in which distance and tension are never annulled. Empowerment and affirmation can be pursued only within the community, but in a way that emphasizes difference and distinction of rank rather than agreement. The analysis of Nietzsche's ambivalent views on institutions has shown how he rejects 'anti-natural', democratic institutions without ignoring the value of 'natural' institutions for the enhancement of the human. The precise nature of the

institutional framework suited to the body politic, and more specifically to the community of free spirits, remains unclear, but it must be guided by the imperative to create a strong enough will across generations.

The common impetus to deal with political matters in a way that affirms individual difference and 'evil' passions, rather than ignoring or trying to exorcize them, is counterbalanced by their radical opposition on the means best suited to cultivate difference. This stems from their opposing views on the origin and nature of difference. Spinoza understands diversity as the product of a rationally-structured reality. While conflict and struggle exist in the order of nature, all the different essences are ultimately compatible and in agreement. Nietzsche understands diversity in a historical context, as the result of a process leading away from the demands of communal life. Individuals and individual drives develop against the background of the relative weakening of the demands of social drives that keep the social organism together. The tension and opposition between social instincts and individual drives within individuals risks being decided in favour of uniformity and at the expense of the future due to the harmful influence of Christianity and its political heir, democracy. The greatest threat that the democratic movement and the morality of compassion pose is the levelling of humans in the name of transcendent, nihilistic values that promote agreement. We are now in a position to consider the sharpest formulation of Nietzsche's criticism of Spinoza: Because he does not recognise the complex, historical fate of the differences between humans, differences that do not obey a rational principle, Spinoza is not aware of the dangers of democracy and the focus on the common good.