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

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Summary

This thesis 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. This involves comparative research into their emphatic appeal to the body 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. I argue that, in spite of tremendous differences, these two thinkers come close in their rejection of moral and metaphysical illusions they claim are characteristic of the philosophical tradition they respond to, and in their focus on self-knowledge understood as knowledge of the body's endogenous power to act. This leads them to formulate strikingly similar normative programs informed by their shared commitment to naturalism and immanence.

In the first chapter, I argue that Spinoza turns to the body in order to show the path towards empowerment and liberation. This task requires dispelling a number of key philosophical errors and promoting adequate knowledge of the body. In the first section the focus is on Spinoza's reaction to his philosophical and scientific context, with particular attention to how this context influences his philosophical physiology. First, I discuss Jewish Medieval views on matter and on the body, together with debates on key metaphysical notions: teleology, free will, the moral world order, the existence of evil, and altruism. This overview helps contextualise Spinoza's views and better understand his revaluation of the concept of 'substance'. This revaluation guarantees the autonomy of the physical, and denies the subordination of the body to the soul, or to any immaterial principle. Second, I investigate Spinoza's reaction to his contemporaries, most notably Descartes and Hobbes, and their scientifically-informed views on the body. This requires an

understanding of the changes in the philosophical and scientific outlook taking place in the 17th Century, particularly in the development of a mechanistic understanding of nature. While Spinoza is undoubtedly influenced by numerous elements characteristic of mechanism, he is also critical of the teleological implications of mechanistic doctrines, as well as of what he sees as unjustified claims to adequate knowledge on the part of the newly-developing natural philosophy. In the case of Descartes, I study the transition in his understanding of the body from the *Meditations* to the later *Passions of the Soul*. In the latter treatise, Descartes formulates a physio-psychological account of passions that serves as an important precursor to Spinoza’s doctrine of affects. In the case of Hobbes, I claim that in spite of major differences in their respective accounts of God and of ‘power’, he is doubly important as a precursor to Spinoza’s turn to the body because he strives for a naturalistic understanding of humans with emphasis placed on efficient causation, and because his interest in method opens up important avenues for investigating the constitution of the body politic.

The second section deals with Spinoza’s own account of the body and of the ways in which it can be known. Firstly, I highlight the importance of the turn to the body for Spinoza’s epistemology: we have inadequate knowledge because we misunderstand our body and, if we want adequate knowledge, we must have an adequate understanding of our body. A discussion of the physiological correlate of inadequate knowledge shows that our epistemic failures can be explained starting from the limits of our body’s power to act, form distinct images, and arrange its experiences according to reason. Nevertheless, the simplification inherent in inadequate knowledge is useful in the survival of individuals and is a theme that resonates strongly with Nietzsche’s critique of knowledge. Conversely, adequate knowledge starts from a naturalised, immanent account of the affections of the body that leads to knowledge of common notions and essences. While adequate self-knowledge can in principle be obtained either under the attribute of thought or of extension, the focus on the body provides important strategic advantages in allowing us to navigate around various moral and metaphysical illusions. Secondly, I argue that there are three ways Spinoza talks about the body (the object of the idea that constitutes the mind; cf. EIIp13) throughout the *Ethics*: 1)

In a manner close to mechanism, in the Physical Interlude, 2) As a multiplicity of affects, in books III, IV and the first half of book V and 3) as an essence, in the second half of book V. While all three give us important clues about how we should understand the body, I claim that the first method of knowing the body is inadequate, whereas the third does not do enough to illuminate the dynamic nature of Spinoza's notion of 'power'. It is to the second that we must turn if we want to better understand the complex, dynamic nature of the body and its endogenous power to act (the *conatus*), and also how Spinoza's turn to physiology provides the impetus for his practical philosophy.

In the second chapter, I argue that Nietzsche turns to the body in order to uncover a path towards empowerment and life-affirmation via a critique of metaphysics and morality and their manifestations in nihilism, *décadence*. His claim is that physiology, while not offering adequate knowledge of the body in Spinoza's sense, can serve as the guiding thread in the striving for empowerment and life-affirmation. We need to situate Nietzsche's turn to the body within the context of his overall philosophical project (from 1880 onwards) of overcoming nihilism and *décadence* and within the growing interest in the critique and revaluation of all values. This enables us to identify the key elements that motivate Nietzsche's project of naturalization and, consequently, his turn to the body: his critique of Christian-Platonic values and their deleterious effects.

In the first section, I argue that Nietzsche reacts to a crisis of the present, in the form of a diagnosis of nihilism. Nihilism is interpreted by Nietzsche as an expression of physiological degeneration. The structure of the great multiplicity of drives that constitutes the modern human can be disempowering and therefore decadent, according to Nietzsche, in two cases: either it is too loose and there is no organizing force, or it is too rigid and there is one drive that tyrannizes the pulsional economy in such a way that it inhibits the expression of other drives. I then go on to discuss a number of key metaphysical and moral illusions conducive to nihilism that are best understood in the context of Nietzsche's critique of substance metaphysics. Contrary to Spinoza, Nietzsche does not wish to offer a new understanding of substance, but to criticize and think against it from the standpoint of becoming and to diagnose its underlying assumptions as life-negating. In discussing each of

these illusions (teleology, free will, the moral world order, the existence of evil and altruism) in a way that prepares the comparison with Spinoza in chapter III, I focus on two strategies used by Nietzsche in his critique: 1) to argue that these illusory values are an absurdity resting on faulty assumptions, and 2) to expose their origins, together with the purpose for which they are used, and to argue that this shows how these life-negating values inhibit one’s power to act and create.

In the second section, I discuss the content of Nietzsche’s turn to the body. First, I analyse the richness of the conceptual structure of Nietzsche’s philosophical physiology. This requires a better understanding of what he means by ‘body’, and my thesis is that there are three ways in which Nietzsche uses this concept: interpretative (descriptive), diagnostic and normative. The key questions for Nietzsche are what kind of body has created various moralities and values, especially the nihilistic values that he tries to combat, and how to recreate oneself and one’s body in a way that maximizes one’s creative capacity. Through a comparison with Schopenhauer’s views on the body, I argue that in spite of important similarities Nietzsche problematizes our epistemic access to our body, but believes it enjoys methodological primacy in interpreting various phenomena. I then go on to discuss the way Nietzsche understands the nature of the discipline of philosophical physiology and argue that, while he sees important advantages for physiology as a continuously changing art of interpretation of the dynamic morphology of will to power, he rejects any claims that physiology can provide an explanation of reality. Next, I argue that we should understand various moralities as either symptoms or signs of physiological states, or within an order of causes in which various moralities are effects or consequences of physiological conditions, but that, in turn, can influence physiological structures. The section ends with a historically informed discussion of a number of key concepts crucial to Nietzsche’s philosophical physiology: type, force, action/reaction, hierarchy, struggle and affect. Second, I investigate the philosophical functions of physiology, a discipline that is in a privileged position to expose the most fundamental errors and undermine them. The attempt to overcome our most deeply rooted errors explains the attention Nietzsche pays to the concept of breeding (given that these errors are not responsive to traditional philosophical argumentation). Third, I

substantiate my claims on the role played by physiology through a study of its use by Nietzsche in his study of three key topics: art, morality and conscious thought.

In the third section, my thesis is that Nietzsche's physiology must be understood as a philosophical physiology and that the accusation that he abandons philosophy for natural science through his use of physiology does not hold. I use as my starting point Heidegger's discussion of 'biologism' and his claim that Nietzsche grounds his insights into life metaphysically, not biologically. I argue that we do not have to understand Nietzsche's philosophy as metaphysics in order to extricate him from the charge of biologism. What we need is to understand well the nature of philosophical physiology and its differences to natural science. According to Nietzsche, the success that natural science has is not the result of uncovering the hidden fabric of reality, but of its usefulness. He is critical of natural sciences, and of life sciences in particular, because he believes they are grounded in substance metaphysics and so fail to do justice to the dynamic character of reality. While acknowledging that Nietzsche appreciates many scientific insights, I outline his sharp critiques of mechanism (to which he opposes his doctrine of will to power) and of important scientific notions and assumptions of his day: causal determinism, atomism, teleology and progress. I then go on to argue that philosophical physiology avoids these illusions through the recognition that it is only a perspective, an interpretation, and not an explanation as scientific physiology claims to be. Philosophical physiology is one (albeit privileged) among many philosophical perspectives, and, through its commitment to immanence and naturalism, is an important tool in the hands of the philosopher who, as commander and legislator, has the task of creating new values. The chapter ends with an argument against the thesis (suggested by a few of Nietzsche's pronouncements) that he is a reductionist.

The third chapter consists in a comparative study of Spinoza's and Nietzsche's respective turns to the body. Both Spinoza and Nietzsche are thinkers of immanence and for both the turn to the body, which is part of their projects of naturalisation, is motivated by theoretical and practical goals. The first two sections discuss Nietzsche's explicit and implicit reception of Spinoza and ask whether his critique is justified. After considering the most probable and influential sources for Nietzsche's knowledge of Spinoza I argue 1) that Nietzsche's focus is mainly

on the concepts of reason, (self-)knowledge, affects, conatus and egoism, while the metaphysical intricacies of Spinoza’s philosophy are not of great interest to him, and 2) that we must understand Nietzsche’s engagement with Spinoza as an attempt to uncover the hidden presuppositions behind Spinoza’s thinking, with the resulting diagnosis changing significantly with time. Nevertheless, against various claims presented in the literature, I hold that we can detect important continuities throughout Nietzsche’s engagement with Spinoza if we focus on his critique of Spinoza’s understanding of ‘power’. This offers an important clue as to the best way to pursue a systematic comparison of their philosophical physiologies.

The third section begins with an evaluation of the validity of Nietzsche’s criticisms of substance ontology when applied to Spinoza’s concept of ‘substance’. Spinoza’s understanding of ‘substance’ differs significantly from that found in most of the philosophical tradition in that he does not see it as a subject or a self-identical substratum that perdures. Instead, he thinks ‘substance’ as absolutely infinite productive power expressed through its modes. This leads to a view of ‘substance’ that entails the existence of genuine multiplicity, of the endogenous power of modes, and includes a relational account of power. Nevertheless, Spinoza does not fully escape Nietzsche’s critique because, considered under the third type of knowledge, the production of individual essences that are in agreement can only be explained if the activity of substance is governed by reason. I then go on to argue that a key difference between Spinoza and Nietzsche is the fact that Spinoza sees his project as dealing with eternal philosophical problems, while Nietzsche is reacting to a crisis of the present. Nietzsche places his philosophical discourse in the context of a historical and developmental account of individuals and societies that does not have a parallel in Spinoza’s philosophy. Both, however, believe that the turn to the body, with its emphasis on self-knowledge, is the best way to undermine metaphysical illusions and values that have enabled theologians and moralists to maintain their power and inhibit authentic self-transformation on both individual and societal levels. Next, I discuss Deleuze’s claim that the turn to the body in both Spinoza and Nietzsche amounts to the discovery of the unconscious. While this reveals much that is of importance for better clarifying the nature of their respective philosophical physiologies, I argue that it also ignores important

differences between their accounts of consciousness, their views on how we can know the body, and between the various practical implications of their claims.

Finally, I discuss to what extent Nietzsche's conceptualisation of the body is comparable to Spinoza's. Both argue that we do not have or possess a body, but that we are our body, and so focus on the notions of endogenous power and activity. The way they think power is remarkably similar and sets them apart from many of their predecessors. Both place great emphasis on discussing the multiplicity that constitutes the body, but differ when it comes to the value they assign to conflict in their physiologies and in their power ontologies more broadly.

The last section of the comparative chapter consists in an analysis of the similarities and differences between Spinoza's and Nietzsche's ethics and politics as they follow from their respective turns to the body. This task requires a discussion of how their normative commitments relate to their philosophical physiologies, and of what the salient features of their ethics and politics are with a view to showing how they fit in their overall philosophical thought.

For Spinoza, the turn to the body shows that all human beings (in fact all finite modes or things) strive for empowerment or freedom. The striving for an increase in power is not a goal that humans can set themselves, it is inevitable. The difference between human beings lies in the various ways in which they understand empowerment (adequately or not) and in the methods they employ in striving for empowerment. Spinoza's practical philosophy is animated by the struggle against the oppression of theologians and secular authorities who are driven by a desire to dominate through the perpetuation of moral and metaphysical illusions. The goal of ethics and politics is the virtuous pursuit of self-interest, aimed at maximizing our freedom and specific power of acting, i.e. empowering the specific constitution of our bodies without destroying the ratio of motion and rest. This empowerment can be obtained either by following a number of maxims or dictates of reason that do not require the possession of adequate knowledge or by arranging the affections of the body according to the order of the intellect. The second path does require adequate knowledge. Any practical program must be formulated according to the realist insight that all human are, to some extent, guided by passions and they

necessarily differ and are in conflict with regard to their passions. Spinoza values the proliferation of “agreement”, but this does not mean uniformity (conformism). He views agreement as the cooperation between fundamentally different beings (each with its own specific structure) that increases each human being’s specific capacity to act without erasing the differences. A well-ordered society provides the means to preserve the body so that it can act and be acted on in a great number of ways. It also enables us to experience and gain knowledge of many things, as well as alter them to our advantage. In a well-order society (guided by reason) humans compose a power greater than that of any single individual.

The fundamental question for Nietzsche’s normative thinking is: how can a philosophy steeped in immanence produce norms or values and how can it justify them? I argue that, similarly to Spinoza, Nietzsche believes that we are life-forms already always engaged in the process of empowerment, but that we constantly run the risk of going astray in the attempt at self-empowerment. We can understand his philosophy as an attempt to provide the impetus for the revaluation of all values in the face of the harmful errors promoted by priests and moralists, but without the promise of identifying “true” or “absolute” values that various moralities postulate. Philosophical physiology provides a number of clues as to the best way to evaluate various normative ‘ideals’ or values. In order to better understand the nature and status of normativity in Nietzsche’s thinking I first discuss the way he thinks “thoughtful egoism” in his 1881 notes. This is particularly important because Nietzsche engages with a number of Spinoza’s claims here. Next, I turn to Nietzsche’s critique of free will and his advocacy of necessity, and discuss the differences but also the remarkable similarities with Spinoza’s thinking. Against much of the philosophical tradition, Spinoza and Nietzsche defend an understanding of freedom opposed to free will and formulated as an ethical ideal consisting in a transition from a smaller to a greater power of acting. Starting from a shared commitment to necessity and radical immanence, they present freedom as a passage to a greater power of self-determination and self-expression of the body. Nevertheless, the continuities between their power ontologies and their respective commitments to a life of knowledge break down in their discussion of the various possible manifestations of power. I argue that Nietzsche’s distinctive formulation

of power as struggle between wills to power enables him to formulate the question of the qualitative dimension of empowerment in a way that is foreign to Spinoza's rational determinism. While acknowledging the profound similarities, I claim that we must see Nietzsche's discussion of affirmation as the culmination of his disagreement with his predecessor on the topic of freedom and empowerment.

While Nietzsche never articulates a systematic account of his political philosophy, he does offer us a number of insights that connect to the turn to the body. The question of politics is one of knowing whether a community or a body politic stimulates or creates favourable conditions for the development, within society, of the higher type. I argue that the role of physiology, and especially its interest in the "nearest things", is twofold. It must first evaluate peoples and individuals and, in accordance with these findings, it must show us how to *breed* or cultivate humankind as a whole. Furthermore, I argue that physiology plays a privileged role in Nietzsche's analysis of institutions, and the beneficial or harmful role they can play in promoting growth and diversity.

In the conclusion, I argue that we can best understand the similarities and differences between their respective philosophical physiologies, and their broader philosophical positions, starting from their shared interest in power ontologies and their commitment to immanence and naturalism. Unlike Nietzsche, however, Spinoza did not consider the existence of manifestations of power that are potentially disempowering for the agent. Both understand the importance of affirming 'evil' passions or affects for the enhancement of life, and think authentic flourishing possible only within a community. Nietzsche, however, stresses the importance of conflict and distinctions of rank in a way not found in Spinoza. According to Nietzsche, because Spinoza does not recognise the complex, historical fate of the differences between humans, differences that do not obey a rational principle, he is not aware of the dangers of democracy and of the focus on the common good.