

## Chapter One

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# Levinas, Spinozism, Nietzsche, and the Body

Rejection of “Spinozism” means more than a rejection of the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza. It includes the philosophy of Spinoza, but it also comprises the thought of such apparently disparate figures as Hegel, Marx, Freud, Heidegger, and, as I shall argue, Nietzsche. What does Levinas mean by “Spinozism,” and what is his argument against it? How is Spinozism manifest in Nietzsche? These are the questions that guide the present inquiry.

### Levinas’s Rejection of Spinozism

Levinas’s opposition to Spinozism and his reasons for it are summed up in the final sentence of the concluding subsection, entitled “Separation and Absoluteness,” of the first of the four sections of *Totality and Infinity*: “Thought and freedom come to us from separation and from the consideration of the Other [*Autrui*]*—*this thesis is at the antipodes of Spinozism” (105). Separation, and the “consideration of the Other” that follows from such separation, stand opposed, radically opposed, to the absoluteness that determines all Spinozism. What does this mean?

The absolute of Spinozism works by denying the *transcendence* of thought and freedom because, *first* of all, it denies the “separation” or radical independence of the human subject. Rejecting transcendence—for reason, logic, *Geist*, power, existence, language—it is thus “monist” or “pantheist,” a philosophy of “immanence” and “totality.”

Ethics, in contrast, is based in separation, which is to say, the “autonomy” or independence of the subject, the free initiative that constitutes its agency. And owing to this independence of each subject it takes seriously from the start the otherness of one subject in relation to another.<sup>1</sup> For Levinas the irreducibility of each subject and, based on this, of the intersubjective, is a condition for the very “humanity of the human.” Spinozism, in contrast, denies the finality and hence the legitimacy of the independence of these dimensions of signification. It denies individual agency and social humanity in the name of a greater totality within which alone they are said to find their meaning. It is precisely this denial that also prevails in the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, though by embracing the body rather than the mind, it takes a new and distinctive form—closer to our contemporary sensibility—beyond the Spinozism of Spinoza.

*First*, by “separation” Levinas means the independence of the human subject, interiority distinct from both (1) the amorphous anonymity Levinas calls the “there is” (*il y a*), an *apeiron* of being that threatens the identity, however minimal, of all that is distinct with dissolution from below, as it were; and (2) the radical transcendence of the other person, which calls to and calls forth the subject from above, with the exigency of moral obligation. The initial inwardness of separation must not be understood as a self-positing, as self-consciousness, say, or as an act of representation or judgment, whether affirmative or negative. Instead, Levinas speaks of “created” being, not in the credulous religious sense of a miraculous existence posited *ex nihilo* but rather as being born as hypostatic embodiment, existence in and through a primitive “reflexivity” of self-sensing. The originary base of initiative, agency and free will, then, occurs beginning not with self-consciousness but from out of a circuit of sensing and sensations. It is in this self-satisfaction of the senses, in the instantaneousness of self-sensing, that subjectivity breaks from anonymous being. “For an existent is an existent,” Levinas writes in the paragraph prior to the one in which he announces his opposition to Spinozism, “only in the measure that it is free, that is, outside of any system, which implies

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1. Commentators have noted that ethical transcendence in Levinas means responsibility for the other person, while for Kant it is respect for the moral law, hence more exactly “autonomy” in the etymological sense of this term, assuming that the Greek *nomos* is best translated as “law.”

dependence" (TI, 104). The independence of separation, then, sets up an "unconditioned," an absolute, but not the absolute of a larger system within which it makes sense. Rather it is an absolute as independence from anonymity on the one side and any englobing context on the other. It is not the absolute of a well-provisioned fortress but, qua embodiment, of an exceptional vulnerability, sensibility as exposure itself. The embodied subject—if one remains faithful to its phenomenological appearance—is thus at once independent and dependent.

*Second*, by "consideration of the Other" Levinas turns from separation as the sensuousness of the self's independence from dissolution into anonymous being to separation as the nonsubstitutability or "election" of human responsiveness to another person in moral responsibility to and for that other person. If anonymous being is "below," then the other person is "above," in an orientation or verticality that is originally ethical rather than ontological. Here it is a matter of the transcendence of the other, but more specifically such transcendence qua moral imperative. It is not that the other person must articulate a request, such as "Feed me," or "Lend me some money," but that the alterity or transcendence of the other person appears as irreducibly other or transcendent only through its ineradicable morally obligating quality. The face of the other is already as such a moral command. Encounter with the other, always already a moral imperative, is thus singularizing and asymmetrical. Regardless of how you relate to me, with love or hate, peace or violence, I am always already disturbed by you, disrupted in my homeostasis, troubled out of my self-complacency, bothered in my being-at-home with myself and the world, because in your embodied alterity, your "face"—which is also always a vulnerability—you demand from me a moral responsibility, that in my very being I be for-you. It is important to keep in mind—and we will return again and again to this point—that this structure, despite our occasional reliance on the verb "to be" in discussing it, exceeds ontology. Because human being begins in the separation of embodiment, in flesh and blood, in sensibility, when I encounter the other person, who is thus always a concrete flesh-and-blood being, that other person arises always already as an imperative responsibility for me—a responsibility that cannot be reduced to either my being or the other's being. It is from the other's separation, from the other's independence, from anonymity and from me, that the other transcends my projections and representations and unavoidably disturbs my own self-circuits, from the deepest

constitutive layer of self-sensing all the way to higher levels of signification found in worldliness, labor, representation, and knowledge.

The *relation* between I and Other, terms that remain separate yet in relation, the independent subject and the transcendent other, occurs precisely and only as a moral relation, for it is only as a moral relation that radically separate beings can both be respected in their alterity from one another and yet for all that also be in genuine proximity. It is a unique relation that philosophy traditionally misunderstood precisely and paradoxically because of philosophy's own commitment to knowledge. The moral relation *as moral* cannot be looked at from the outside, cannot be comprehended. It occurs in a relationality within which human subjects are always already implicated—commanded—in the first person singular. “I and you” is not reducible to “same and other”—though for knowledge these pairs must be indistinguishable. The peculiar conjunction or valence of morality and singularity is indeed the central “thesis” of Levinas's entire philosophy, though its centrality as its intelligibility comes not as theses, themes, propositions but as claims, impositions, provocations, imperatives. Philosophy insists that knowing must know only as “internal relations,” so that the moral relation can only appear to it as an impossible “external relation.” But between human beings, internal relation is already an externalization. “Here,” Levinas writes, “the relation connects not terms that complete one another and consequently are reciprocally lacking to one another, but terms that suffice to themselves” (TI, 103). As we shall see, this means that Levinas's opposition to Nietzsche is based not on some a priori idealist metaphysics, as one might at first sight imagine, or as a partisan of Nietzsche would certainly prefer to interpret it, but rather on a different conception of the nature and meaning of the human body and embodied sociality. Unlike Levinas's opposition to Spinoza's Spinozism, then, which is an opposition to abstract or intellectualist rationalism, Levinas's opposition to Nietzsche's Spinozism meets Nietzsche on his own grounds, on the terrain of the body.

Spinozism, in any case, constitutes itself by rejecting both elements: separation and transcendence. It does this in one fell swoop by affirming the primacy, indeed the totality, of context over terms, what in Spinoza's case is known as “pantheism.” In Spinoza's case, more specifically, the comprehensive totality is taken to be the systematic, universal, and necessary knowledge of modern science; and in Nietzsche's case it is the differential play of will to power. Therein resides the

meaning of Spinoza's famous refusal in his *Ethics* "to conceive man in nature as a kingdom within a kingdom" (III, Preface, 102). Spinoza treats humans exactly as he does all other entities: as objects subject to a strict "geometrical" logic. (To be sure, he cannot succeed in this treatment, but all slips and residues are denied, denounced, or hidden.) To deny that humanity is a kingdom within a kingdom, to deny that beyond its distinctness it is somehow special, Spinoza must and does at once deny the independence of the self and the transcendence of the other. Responding to the manner in which these two dimensions had previously been understood, taking this position translates for Spinoza into a denial—based in rational demonstration—of the reality of both free will and morality, with attendant polemics against the ignorance and illusions of those who would assert otherwise. Heir to the rationalist tradition of Western thought, Spinoza bases his denials on the root affirmation: "Will and intellect are one and the same thing" (E, II, Prop. 49, Cor., 96). For Nietzsche, as we know, the independence of the subject, its alleged freedom, is also an untruth, also an error, whose persuasiveness derives from a "seduction of language" (GM, I, 13; 45), a "grammatical error" mistaking the subject-predicate form of a proposition for the substance-attribute character of reality.<sup>2</sup>

How does Levinas respond to such thought? Commentators usually focus on Levinas's emphatic idea of the other person's transcendence, the imposition of the alterity or "face of the other." No doubt such a focus reflects how genuinely striking this idea is and how central it is to all of Levinas's thought. Nevertheless, at the same time we must always also recognize that such transcendence is never an abstract concept, never a "relation" whose sense can make sense independent of its own manifestation or nonmanifestation in the most concrete of all concrete relations, that is, in its ethical sense as *my moral obligation, my responsibility to and for the other person*. That is to say, the "terms" of this relation are two sensuous beings vulnerable to suffering and

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2. GM, I, 13: "Just as the common people distinguish lightning from the flash of light and takes the latter as *doing*, as the effect of a subject which is called lightning, just so popular morality distinguishes strength from expressions of strength, as if behind the strong individual there were an indifferent substratum which was at *liberty* to express or not to express strength. But no such substratum exists; there is no 'being' behind doing, acting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction imposed on the doing—the doing itself is everything."

pain, capable of being wounded, violated, ever hostage, as it were, to the slings and arrows of material existence. In other words, the separation of the self, its embodiment, its sensibility, is no less central to Levinas's thought than the ethical transcendence that such a way of existence calls forth. The self, whose origin as a separate being lies in self-sensing, is the condition that, in encountering the other person, is reconditioned, as it were, into the singularity of an asymmetrical moral responsibility to and for the other person. To make a distinction important to Levinas's thought, we can say that the self *originates* in self-sensing but *begins* in responsibility, the latter impossible and unnecessary without the former. Without embodiment there would be no suffering to remedy, and no way to provide remedies. Hands are not only ready or present, they can also beg, as they can also give. First question of ethics: How, without arbitrary fiat, without reducing it to an integral part of a whole, and without resorting to the theological fiction of a "soul," does Levinas defend the independence of the subject, a condition of moral singularity?

### Self-Sensing

That subjectivity emerges from anonymous being in and as self-sensing, in and as an embodied way of being both engaged and disengaged in elemental sensations, is perhaps the earliest theme—chronologically—of Levinas's own thought. It appears already in 1935 in an essay entitled "On Escape," when Levinas was fresh from his training in Husserlian phenomenology and saw—as had the whole philosophical world—the brilliant use to which Heidegger had made of it in *Being and Time* to explicate the most concrete, existential significations of worldly human being. In "On Escape" Levinas describes the deepest constitutive layer of the emergent existent in terms of embodiment, and embodiment in terms of the unity of a dual movement or restlessness, at once entrapment, enclosure, self-compression, freighted with its own materiality, backed up against its own being, on the one hand, and rebellion, desire to escape, urge to break from the circuit of its own immanence, on the other. Such an existence that originates in a self-circuit of sensations at the same time wants out. "The necessity of fleeing," he writes, "is put in check by the impossibility of fleeing oneself . . . precisely the fact of being riveted to oneself, the radical

impossibility of fleeing oneself to hide from oneself, the unalterably binding presence of the I to itself" (OE, 64). "In nausea," he continues (years before Sartre's novel of the same name), "—which amounts to an impossibility of being what one is—we are at the same time riveted to ourselves, enclosed in a tight circle that smothers" (66). Already, as a good phenomenological researcher, Levinas's account stands as a corrective to Heidegger's. In contrast to the Heideggerian analysis of *Dasein*, whose deepest significance or "authenticity" is to exist as the opening of an "ecstatic" subjectivity anxious before its own death, and as such already a form of self-understanding open to the revelation of being, for Levinas it is precisely the unbearable but inescapable self-compression, self-entrapment, self-sensing of sensuous embodiment that "*is the very experience of pure being*" (67).

Let it be noted, too, that this difference between Levinas and Heidegger—already clear in 1935—regarding the root sense of existence will make all the difference in separating their respective paths: Heidegger's, which has little to say about embodiment beyond the anxiety before death, single-mindedly pursuing the revelatory character of being, the "question of being" that is opened by *Dasein*'s ecstatic existence; and Levinas's alternative account, always sensitive to embodiment as sensuous existence, which leads, in Levinas's thought, to the centrality of one person responding morally to the mortal suffering and vulnerability undergone by another. Despite the apparent concreteness of Heidegger's analyses in *Being and Time*, it is as though in all his subsequent thinking while there is "mortality" there is no body, no body as locus of suffering, wounds, violence, no unsurpassable vulnerability, in a thought that—pursing philosophy's idealist inclinations—is given over to a hearkening to the "poetic thinking" of being. Already in 1935, in other words, by his attentiveness to the meaning of existence as self-sensing, one can see the grounds for Levinas's commitment to the primacy of ethics over ontology.

After the war, Levinas will again return to this theme, the separation or "solitude" of sensuous subjectivity, extending his earlier reflections in the phenomenological analyses found in *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*, his first two original philosophical books, both published in 1947. In *Existence and Existents* he speaks of self-sensing as "fatigue and indolence" (24). "There exists a weariness," he writes, "which is a weariness of everything and everyone, and above all a weariness of oneself" (24). "Indolence makes one prostrate, idleness weighs

us down, afflicts us with boredom” (28). Or employing more traditional philosophical language to describe the structure of this doubled-over sensibility: “There is a duality in existence, an essential lack of simplicity. The ego has a self, in which it is not only reflected, but with which it is involved like a companion or a partner; this relationship is what is called inwardness” (28). Regarding the second moment of separation, the desire for transcendence, *Existence and Existents* goes on to describe the efforts of such a self to escape itself into the world, being-in-the-world across the ecstatic time (projective and retentive), the “temporality” of labor, action, and representation, and finally, successfully, in the transcendent time of sociality. And there lies the segue to *Time and the Other*. *Time and the Other* covers the same ground as *Existence and Existents* and also ends in the liberation from the immanence of embodiment, worldliness and knowledge, via the only relation whose transcendence is genuinely able to break being’s adherence to itself, namely, the transcendence of the other person morally encountered. Time as temporality, as *ekstasis*, cannot make this break, but the time of the other person, what in his later thought Levinas will call “diachrony,” is able to accomplish this transcendence, whose ultimate meaning lies in morality and justice.

It is only after being prepared by these careful phenomenological studies that in his master work, *Totality and Infinity*, the transcendence of the other person receives its full articulation beyond the epistemological confines of phenomenology, as an *ethical* transcendence. Yet here too in *Totality and Infinity*, the entire second section, entitled “Interiority and Economy,” is again devoted to what are now even more careful, closer, and more precise phenomenological analyses of the self as embodied and of the embodied self’s futile—in the sense that they remain immanent—efforts to escape its self-enclosure, its immanence, through the world, through labor, activity, and representational consciousness. After once again having laid the groundwork of the independence and solitude of the embodied self, Levinas *then* turns to consider “Exteriority and the Face” (title of section 3), that is, the transcendence of the other person encountered as moral imperative, a transcendence that radically breaks with the circuits of immanence, radically breaks with being and non-being, the parameters of ontology, in a responsibility that rises to a higher, indeed to the highest, calling: to alleviate the suffering of others.

Levinas’s second major work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, also returns to the embodied self, but this time to examine and elabo-



rate its new way of being—shamed and responsible—responding to and suffering for the other. Thus the deepening or refinement of Levinas's thought follows the progression of the body or the progression of ethics, each in relation to the other: beginning in embodied solitude, elaborated through the pathways of worldliness, jolted by the face or transcendence of the other, and responding as an embodied responsibility for-the-other toward the other's vulnerability. These are not chronological movements, to be sure, but rather a matter of conditioned and conditioning, where the unconditioned solitary self is "reconditioned," or decommissioned, or deposed, by the "noncondition" of the alterity of the other person. Here too in the moral structure of being for-the-other, undergone in the first-person singular, the language and impact of embodiment remains: the self is traumatized, "turned inside out" by and for the other "as though its very skin were still a way to shelter itself in being, exposed to wounds and outrage, emptying itself in a no-grounds, to the point of substituting itself for the other, holding on to itself only as it were in the trace of its exile" (OBBE, 138). The passivity of the body is not surpassed or overcome in a pure freedom, but now as responsibility the self is a bodily agency responsive because "pierced" by the imperatives of the other, in a "suffering for the other" that holds a place higher than the self-initiated freedom of activity and reflection (Sartre) or the other-initiated freedom of being (Heidegger) or nature (Jonas).

Attentive to the body, to the concrete, not only as existence but as "transcendence" as well, to use the term Levinas borrows from Jean Wahl (TI, 35), such is the moral elevation Levinas calls the "humanity of the human," a life nobly lived, "loving the neighbor as oneself." The human is not defined by its being but by the better-than-being. Morality is not to be enacted as a disembodied spirituality but as a concrete giving, with hands to give, hands to receive, with words to speak, with food to provide, with mouths to feed, exposed skin to cover, and first of all simultaneous with the giving of things as a giving of oneself to the other. Humanity begins in kindness.

### The True and the Good: "Dangerous Life"

The true self therefore is not literally true, a function of knowing or self-reflection. Rather it is good. In this way Levinas joins and prolongs

the Socratic-Kantian tradition of philosophy whereby ethics rather than science is primary. By “good” Levinas does not mean an innate inclination, predilection, or disposition, or a grace bestowed, which certain philosophers and theologians have hypothesized but never proven and which the recurrent horrors of history, especially the vast and state-sanctioned murders perpetrated in the twentieth century, clearly belie. Rather the good arises through provocation, as response, as the self’s efforts to alleviate the suffering of others, as my moral responsibility. On its own, like any other entity, the self would simply continue, persist, and endure, worn down over time by external forces, preserving its forces by repair, or even aggrandizing its powers, depending on what sort of entity it is. As an entity like any other entity the forces of good and evil, justice and injustice, have no inner play. “No one,” Levinas has written twice, “is good voluntarily” (OBBE, 11, 138). The nobility of the self, its rising to a being-for-the-other before being-for-itself, comes from exteriority, from the other as command, as obligation on the self, as solicitation of my responsibility. The good is higher than one’s own being, better. At the same time, as we shall see, it is through this very goodness that there can be truth, the universal joining of myself and the other across knowledge. The issue of the relation of the good to the true is complex and all of its nuances cannot be presented here in this chapter, but because this matter is important in our understanding of Levinas’s critique of Spinozism generally and of Nietzsche’s reevaluation of the value of knowledge, the following brief remarks will here suffice to indicate the broad contours of the relation of the true and the good.

Truth in contrast to opinion is justified knowledge, propositions supported by appropriate and sufficient evidence. Beyond the legitimate claims of coherence and correspondence theories of truth, that is, that true statements must indeed correspond with that about which they make their claims, and that they must not contradict one another, propositions which are candidates for truth must also be independently validated by an intersubjective community of truth seekers. That I say something is so, that I have seen the evidence that it is so, is not sufficient for a proposition’s truth validation until others too have seen the same evidence and confirmed the same correspondence of claim and reality, and claim and claim. To be sure, the truth of the claim has its own independence, or, more precisely, regarding so-called objective claims, the case to which the truth refers is the case independent of

observation and articulation (more distinctly in Newtonian or macro-cases and less distinctly in Heisenbergian or micro-cases), but such independence as a *truth claim* depends in both instances, as in all cases, on supplementary intersubjective confirmation. Regarding “subjective,” humanistic, or hermeneutic claims, the necessary interplay between proposition and proposer is even more tightly woven, because such claims directly apply to the one who makes them as a person rather than an object. One might say, then, that with regard to all truth claims, whether naturalistic or humanistic, there is an *inner dialectical interplay* between truth and truth seekers, between truth and human beings we can say more broadly.

Levinas draws our attention to something else, but it is intimately related to the dialectic of truth. It is to the fact that statements, proposition, theses, hypotheses, and the like, neither come out of the sky nor are hidden within “minds.” Whether they are proposed as truths or intended for different purposes, statements, including potential truth claims, are first of all *enunciations*, significations said by persons to other persons. Statements may not all be Austin’s “performatives,” but they are all sooner or later intimately bound to illocutionary acts. There is a *saying* that underlies and charges the *said*. It is to the ineradicable ethical character of this more than linguistic operation—saying—that Levinas calls attention. Enunciation or saying, the discursive character of speech as communication—what Levinas calls its “accusative” dimension—is the source of all that is said, proposed, stated, even if it does not appear within propositions, theses, or themes, that is to say, within what is said. The inaccessibility of saying, which always transcends and yet brings forth the said, functions therefore as a sort of “paralogism,” to use Kant’s term, except that its orientation is not logical or epistemological but moral, a matter of ethics, of the other’s elevation and the self’s ennoblement, the good above being. That the “saying” that exceeds the “said” is not and cannot become a theme is certainly a difficulty for philosophical reflection attached to epistemology and perhaps explains its neglect in the philosophical tradition, but this difficulty nowise justifies the exclusion or occlusion of the primacy of saying, qua moral orientation, in the upsurge of meaning.

Communication is not simply a matter of making private thoughts public, as if everything is already accomplished within the confines of something certain philosophers designate “mind,” and then empirically brought out of this private domain to be made public to others.

Enunciation is elicited. Why speak at all, what could possibly motivate speech, if everything is really said and done within one's own mind? Speaking would be the ruin of truth not its confirmation. And let us note here, no doubt prematurely, but in anticipation, that for Spinoza "an idea, being a mode of thinking, consists neither in the image of a thing nor in words" (E, II, Prop. 49, Scholium, 97). In contrast to Spinoza's Platonic idealism, communication—saying—is not simply added to truth owing to human imperfection. I cite Levinas at some length regarding this point because it is both subtle and crucial if we are to properly understand how ethics is "first philosophy" and the source of truth.

Those who wish to found on dialogue and on an original *we* the upsurge of egos, refer to an original communication behind the *de facto* communication (but without giving this original communication any sense other than the empirical sense of a dialogue or a *manifestation* of one to the other—which is to presuppose that *we* that is to be founded), and reduce the problem of communication to the problem of its certainty. In opposition to that, we suppose that there is in the transcendence involved in language a relationship that is not an empirical speech, but responsibility. . . . Communication with the other can be transcendence only as a dangerous life, a fine risk to be run. . . . Here there is proximity and not truth about proximity, not certainty about the presence of the other, but responsibility for him without deliberation, and without the compulsion of truths in which commitments arise, without certainty. . . . The trace in which a face is ordered is not reducible to a sign. . . . To thematize this relation is already to lose it, to leave the absolute passivity of the self. (TI, 119, 120, 121)

The other person as other, the imposition of an alterity beyond what is said but through what is said, signifies prior to empirical speech, solicits our response, which is also beyond what is said, in a communication that leaps, as it were, "as a dangerous life," to use Levinas's formula (one that frontally challenges Nietzsche's "live dangerously"), from one interiority to another, a communication in which one responds to another prior to the certainties of truth, responds

to the other as other, that is to say, takes responsibility for the other first, before all self-interest, before true or false. It is in the risk of this moral responsibility—solicitation and response, the “saying of the said”—wherein lies the source of signification, including the rigorously controlled significations that constitute truth, which is required by the larger project of human justice.

### Nietzsche’s Spinozism

It is profoundly revealing that, how and to what extent, Nietzsche, despite his undeviating and fundamental criticisms of Spinoza’s rationalism, enthusiastically embraced Spinoza as his “precursor.” To be sure, Nietzsche embraced Spinoza not because he learned Spinozism from Spinoza. As a young man Nietzsche had studied the classics and philology; he encountered other philosophers later and haphazardly. His exuberant embrace of Spinoza, as we shall see in a moment, expresses rather more Nietzsche’s belated perception that Spinozism was agreeable to his own thought, indeed a mirror of it, than any labor of Nietzsche in discipleship to Spinoza. In any event, Nietzsche’s self-declared genealogical homage to Spinoza finds its clearest and fullest articulation in a postcard of July 30, 1881, to his close friend and former colleague at Basel, Professor Franz Overbeck. Here is the postcard in full:

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 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, which, as on very high mountains, often made it hard for me to breathe and made my blood rush out, is now at least a twosomeness. Strange. (Kaufmann, 92)

The five points Nietzsche names in this postcard can be summed up in one basic principle of agreement: denial of the metaphysical underpinnings of morality. It is morality, of course, that requires a human will or agency subject to judgment, that is to say, a will or decision-making process in some significant sense *free*, unconditioned, un-compelled; and it is morality too that affirms purposiveness, the aim or goal of doing good rather than evil, opposing evil, promoting goodness and justice; toward this end it is morality also that declaims and exhorts the superiority of selflessness to selfishness. Nietzsche is also certainly right about his alliance with Spinoza. In his *Ethics*, Spinoza had clearly argued for the falseness, indeed the illusoriness, of all the metaphysical notions upon which morality is based. All moral notions, hence all ethics in the traditional sense, are but products of deluded imagination, ignorance, not reason. They are unscientific, subjective rather than objective, and only hold sway for the ignorant masses driven by their passions, their bodily desires. Moral notions and their ethical underpinning have no truth-value, as is known by the few, the scientists and philosophers who know better, who, driven by their intellects (*amor intellectualis*), know scientifically (*ratio* and *scientia intuitiva*) the truth that the universe unfolds by strict and unbreakable necessity. A decade and many books later than his postcard, in *Twilight of the Idols* (published just weeks after his own mental breakdown in early January 1889), in one of his last and most unrestrained and extravagant books, Nietzsche again formulates, but in his own name and as his own, Spinoza's position as follows:

One knows my demand of philosophers that they place themselves *beyond* good and evil—that they have the illusion of moral judgment *beneath* them. This demand follows from an insight first formulated by me: *that there are no moral facts whatever*. Moral judgment has this in common with religious judgment that it believes in realities which do not exist. Morality is only an interpretation of certain phenomena, more precisely a *mis*interpretation. Moral judgment belongs, as does religious judgment, to a level of ignorance at which even the concept of the real, the distinction between the real and the imaginary, is lacking: that at such a level “truth” denotes nothing but things which we today call “imaginings.” (55)

Certainly the insight that good and evil are but the illusory products of ignorance was not “first formulated” by Nietzsche, except per-

haps in the most literal sense, or perhaps as of a piece with Nietzsche's entire outlook. On this score Spinoza preceded him, to be sure, as did Julien Offray de La Mettrie and the Marquis de Sade. But what matters attribution! While still agreeing with Spinoza's perspective on morality of more than two centuries earlier, Nietzsche has here conveniently forgotten his name. Of course, in a few days in his letter to Jacob Burckhardt of January 6, 1889, Nietzsche will also forget his own name, or rather, famously, he will embrace "every name in history" (Kaufmann, 684).

### Nietzsche's Differences from Spinoza

Keeping in mind their fundamental agreement regarding the ignorance and illusion, indeed the nonexistence of morality except as a lie (useful or otherwise), let us look more closely at the divergences separating Nietzsche's Spinozism from Spinoza's. We are guided by Nietzsche's postcard: "Even though the divergences are admittedly tremendous, they are due more to the difference in time, culture, and science." Though there are several divergences, I want first to mention the shift from a theological to a secular world, and second to mention the shift from eternity in Spinoza to historical consciousness in Nietzsche, in order to turn to a third most decisive difference, namely, a shift from Spinoza's logicist or mechanistic paradigm to Nietzsche's vitalist one. While Spinoza is most concerned with scientific truth, Nietzsche is most concerned with healthy and strong life. Indeed, Nietzsche's much-vaunted nineteenth-century appreciation for historical consciousness is itself thoroughly oriented by this third difference, as we find broadcast already in the title and content of one of his earliest writings, his "untimely" meditation on history in *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*. History, like everything else that is of value to Nietzsche, is of value to the extent that it serves *life*.

#### *From Mechanism to Vitalism*

Charles Darwin's groundbreaking study *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* was published in 1859. His *The Descent of Man* appeared in 1871. The world-changing influence of these books, not simply their specific scientific theses regarding the origin of humanity and the development of species (Nietzsche never accepted Darwin's

doctrine of natural selection, which he considered slavish for being merely quantitative), but their general outlook, their biological rather than mechanistic perspective, had the profoundest influence on the spiritual life of Europe in general and on Nietzsche's thought in particular. Despite his particular grievances with Darwin, there is no question that it is biology—not logic, not mechanics—and even more specifically physiology that is the dominant medium of Nietzsche's thought.

Nietzsche insists repeatedly that in contrast to the deathless abstract ideas of previous philosophers his own thought is a "philosophy of life." In *The Gay Science*, for instance, he writes the following against Spinoza:

These old philosophers were heartless; philosophizing was always a kind of vampirism. Looking at these figures, even Spinoza, don't you have a sense of something profoundly enigmatic and uncanny . . . 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 is *deus*, if there is not a drop of blood in them?). (333)

Spinozism as dry bones, empty words, deathless, lifeless, "vampirism." Nietzsche's thought, in contrast, is from the start and throughout always and self-consciously meant as a philosophy of *life*, an incitement to health, vigor, strength, and growth, an attack on sickness, exhaustion, weakness, and decline. For Nietzsche these are not metaphors. His is a philosophy of the body, not of the mind. Body liberated from the cobwebs, skeletons, "categories, formulas, *words*," and all ascetic abstractions of the mind.

To be sure, Spinoza and Nietzsche are both elitists who divide humanity between the approved-of few and the disparaged many. Yet their few as well as their many, as their principles of discrimination, are quite different. Given his commitment to science, for Spinoza the few are those for whom the mind is primary, hence those who are intellectually active, knowers of the truth, scientists and philosophers, while the many are those for whom the body is primary, hence are passive, driven by their emotions and faulty imaginations, swayed by falsehood and moved by illusions. Nietzsche will both reverse this priority, valuing body above mind, and alter the meaning of both, seeing



the mind as essentially sick, ill equipped for successful terrestrial life, and the body as a vital multiplicity of forces in contention. Following from this Nietzsche's most decisive evaluation of humanity is biological, a strengthening of "life," life understood as a contest between strength and weakness, health and sickness, growth and decline, vigor and exhaustion: "Everywhere," he writes, "the struggle of the sick against the healthy" (GM, 123).

While he often characterized himself as a *psychologist* to distance himself from what he took to be the ersatz objectivity of previous philosophers, his thought is more profoundly—and Nietzsche explicitly recognized this—that of a *physiologist*. His criticism of Christianity, for instance, is that its cures for ill health and weakness are only "affect medicines," treating only symptoms but not the body. And its greatest cure, which is to interpret suffering as "sin," to add "guilt" to suffering, actually makes humans sicker! To be genuinely cured, so Nietzsche would teach, better to jog by the cathedral on Sunday morning than to sit in its pews. This reversal and reevaluation of the mind-body relation accounts for Nietzsche's high-spirited style, his dashes, his exclamation points, his ego, his brio, his tempo—all that Nietzsche calls "dancing." Like Walt Whitman, he wants the body to speak, to sing, to dance. It is no accident, then, that while for Spinoza, with his mechanistic model, the basic character of all things is *conatus essendi*, perseverance in being, *inertia*, for Nietzsche the basic character of all things is *will to power*, a dynamic *aggrandizing* play of forces. It is on this basis, making the will primary and interpreting the will as aggrandizing power, that Nietzsche criticizes Spinoza (and Darwin). In *The Gay Science* he writes:

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.

That our modern natural sciences have become so thoroughly entangled in this Spinozistic dogma (most recently and worst of all, Darwinism with its incomprehensible one-sided doctrine of the "struggle for existence"), is probably

due to the origins of most natural scientists. . . . The struggle for existence is only an *exception*, a temporary restriction of the will to life. The great and small struggle always revolves around superiority, around growth and expansion, around power—in accordance with the will to power which is the will to life. (292)

We see in these citations the grounding of Nietzsche's thought in life, life interpreted as will to power, as will to expansion, growth, expenditure, always greater power, and its contrast to both Darwin's "survival of the fittest" meaning only progeny and Spinoza's *conatus essendi* meaning perseverance, both of which Nietzsche critically reinterprets accordingly as expressions of will to power, namely, as expressions of a physiology in distress and decline, weak and sick.

Will for Nietzsche is the universal character of all things, organic and inorganic. And this is why Nietzsche remains, no doubt despite himself, a metaphysician. He claims to know and evaluate the whole, even if at the same time he denies the very possibility of such judgments. Everything—each thing and all things—is made up of a struggle. Whatever is represents a temporary holding pattern of striving forces. Not a ratio of motion and rest, perseverance in being until disrupted, but forces held in contention, each force seeking ascendancy, more power, great dominion. It is Nietzsche's idea of a biological image, an image of "life." How Nietzsche knows what *everything* is he cannot say, but he nonetheless and repeatedly says it—or rather proclaims it. Spinoza, too, could not say how he knows that all things are ultimately one substance, or that each thing aims only to persist in its being. Such truths are simply self-evident, unquestionable. "A true idea involves absolute certainty," Spinoza explains; "Truth is its own standard" (E, II, Prop. 43, Scholium, 91, 92). Yet quite clearly Nietzsche's unquestioned truth, that everything is will to power, is not Spinoza's unquestioned truth, that all is one substance.

Given his commitment to life and hence to genealogy, Nietzsche does not ask *what* morality, politics, religion, or philosophy are but rather *who* believes or espouses this or that. The strong believe one thing, the weak another. One set of behaviors and ideas works for the healthy, another for the sick. Nietzsche's well-commented upon "perspectivalism," then, must be understood not simply as the claim that truth is the expression of a finite point of view, a claim made by many philosophers before and after Nietzsche, but also, more profoundly

and more Nietzschean, the claim that perspective follows physiology, that perspective is the conscious expression of a certain biological state of health or sickness, strength or weakness. Nietzsche's attacks against Christianity, science, morality, and so much else in high European culture, are at bottom the expression of his rebellion against the asceticism that protects and preserves an "*impoverishment of life*" (GM, III, 25, 154). For Nietzsche the old ideals—truth, eternity, goodness, justice, piety—are just mental expressions of life turned against itself, expressions, in other words, of ill health. In contrast to such asceticism, Nietzsche demands greatness: "*great health*" in individuals and "grand politics" for nations. Nietzsche's positive philosophy, therefore, which rejects truth in the Spinozist sense and goodness in the Levinasian sense, because they are life-denying, products of sick bodies, embraces the lie, imagination, the body, the aesthetic, especially in the spirit of ancient Greek paganism, the spirit of Homer: celebration of victory, superiority, mastery, in war, in politics, in sport, in love, in all things—agon, splendor, and hegemony as greatness.

And this is why Nietzsche supports *art*, the artistic life, with its "will to lie," against religion, morality, and science. As early as 1872, in an unpublished work entitled "The Philosopher: Reflections on the Struggle between Art and Knowledge," pertinent to his differences with Spinoza, he had written: "History and the natural sciences were necessary to combat the middle ages: knowledge versus faith. We now oppose knowledge with *art*; return to life" (PT, 14). The artistic life, the willful lie, display, spectacle, is closest to the will to power, and this is why Nietzsche affirms it. And this is why, despite his agreements with Spinoza, Nietzsche sees in Spinoza, as in all rationalists and theologians, the vampire.

A question arises: affirming the artistic life, does not Nietzsche also affirm freedom of will? If this is so, would it not conflict with his fundamental agreement with Spinoza that there is no free will, and that free will is but the illusion suitable to the ignorant or the sick? It is a tricky question but a revealing one too. It perhaps has no fully satisfactory answer because both Nietzsche and Spinoza are caught in a bind when they deny free will and yet *recommend* that others *should* deny it also. In what, after all, lies the superiority of Spinoza's scientists over the ignorant masses? All one can say, perhaps, is that knowing is *less painful* than ignorance. The same necessary world unfolds for both scientist and ignoramus. Neither chooses anything really that has not already been determined for each. Spinoza promises "beatitude" to

the man of science. Nietzsche resorts to the same sort of justification, holding out prospects of health and strength. But to discover that all is will to power, that consciousness itself is simply an aftereffect of will to power, its symptom, is to discover the necessity of the universe, even if that necessity is no longer the causal or deductive necessity of Spinoza's rationalism. Such a discovery, so Nietzsche asserts repeatedly, is "joyful." But is not such joy as determined as sadness and pain? Is this not why in other moments Nietzsche affirms *amor fati*, love of fate, and embraces the eternal return of the *same* as the truest joy?

Nietzsche thus ends up mimicking Spinoza's outlook and recommendation regarding causality, deduction, and beatitude: one should conform to necessity. Freedom lies in conformity. Freedom is necessity. It is philosophy's oldest conceit. For Nietzsche too to discover will to power is to embrace necessity. To embrace the eternal recurrence of all, this too is predetermined or not. Nietzsche writes in *Ecce Homo*, "My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity" (258). Again Spinoza: eternity, but now the eternity of the ephemeral! Again, too, the promise of happiness, joy, beatitude. Here is Nietzsche's highest desire and highest joy: "to will eternity." "Joy," his Zarathustra declares, "does not want heirs, or children—joy wants itself, wants eternity, wants recurrence, wants everything eternally the same" (Z, IV, 434).

A life of complete conformity to will to power, without judgment, without regret, willing all and everything to the point that one would will it to recur eternally, such is the life of the overman, "beyond good and evil," beyond the history of ascetic humanity and its anti-natural ideals. "Joy wants the eternity of *all* things, *wants deep, wants deep eternity*" (Z, IV, 436). In contrast to the conformity recommended by Spinoza's Spinozism of the mind and intellect, grounded upon and bound within the intellection of substantial being, Nietzsche's brand of Spinozism demands a conformity of the body to body, aesthetics, and hence exalts imagination, more closely aligned with body than rationality, "liberated" to the nonprinciple of multiplicity, forces in ever-shifting alliances, bottomless production of masks of masks of masks without end.<sup>3</sup>

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3. The first to underscore the bottomless protean character of Nietzsche's thought and life (the two cannot be separated) was Lou Andreas Salome in her Nietzsche book of 1894. Was it perhaps this same quality that made Nietzsche unsuitable for marriage?