

Nietzsche, Spinoza, and the Ethological Conception of Ethics

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Abstract

This paper attempts a parallelism, through the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze's conception of a *practical philosophy*, between the thoughts of Friedrich Nietzsche (one of the most celebrated, if not, the most celebrated, appropriated, and abused philosophers of the past century) and Benedict de Spinoza (an almost unsung 18th Century Dutch thinker). Inspired by Nietzsche's image as a nomadic thinker, Deleuze presents us with a more convincing image of Spinoza: a man who is closer to LIFE. The specific aspect of the Nietzsche-Spinoza relation I want to discuss in what follows is the difference between "morality" and "ethics" — it will become clear that with Nietzsche and Spinoza, ethics has an "ethological" basis. It is hoped that the distinction between morality and ethics will illuminate what Deleuze sees in both Nietzsche and Spinoza as a basic notion of philosophical thinking — a way of thinking which is *beyond good and evil*, that is, beyond moralistic ontology.

"There is more wisdom in your body than in your deepest philosophy." – F. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*.

"Out of life's school of war. What does not destroy me, makes me stronger." – F. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*.

"I have striven not to laugh at human actions, not to weep at them, nor to hate them, but to understand them." – B. Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*.

Ethics amidst Nihilism

The most pressing question amidst Friedrich Nietzsche's prognosis of the cultural disease he calls "nihilism" is the question about the status of "morality" in our contemporary age (and for those who purport themselves to be trendy, the term 'postmodernity' seems to convey precisely the crisis of morality). It is not at all imprecise to note that the crisis of morality is a direct consequence of the crisis of rationality. Nietzsche illustrates the latter in his declaration of the "death of God" – a statement which has caused much controversy among both the initiated and uninitiated in Nietzsche's corpus. A levelheaded attempt at understanding Nietzsche's

philosophy presupposes a grasp of the context of the death of God. One totally misses the point if one simply interprets the statement as a disgruntled atheistic rant! Interpreting the death of God from a purely religious context undermines its *epistemological* and *ontological* implications – that the statement itself is a defiance of the dominance of Reason. This means that what has died is a principle of transcendence that unconditionally grounds the claims of classical epistemology and ontology. I am not, of course, denying the fact that the death of God is *also* a religious statement; but it is only religious inasmuch as religion (especially the Christian one) only makes sense by tacitly deploying the postulates of epistemology and metaphysics. In other words, the presuppositions of Christian religion are warranted through the signature of Reason.

Thus, ‘God’ is just another term for Reason or for a reified principle of transcendence considered as universal and unconditionally binding. Nietzsche violently beats the bell with a hammer in order to wake us up from our illusion of transcendence. This is the meaning, however metaphoric, of the death of God. It is in this basic metaphysical bias, the presence of *essences*, that traditional moral philosophical discourse is based. If classical moral philosophy is based on purported transcendent categories that are binding, then the uproar of Nietzsche’s madman is a critique of such essentialist thinking. Nietzsche’s philosophy is both a critique and an introduction of a counterculture, that of “nomadism” – a philosophy that does not seek to be bound to abrogated universal essences that are hostile to LIFE (thus, nihilistic), but rather seeks to create, enhance, and celebrate LIFE. The creation, enhancement, and celebration of

life, however, presuppose a shift of mindset. Nietzsche's detachment from essentialism perturbs the practice of grounding morality in universal principles.

Hence, the question of the very possibility of *still* grounding ethics in ontology and practice becomes pressing. I believe that the shift of mindset begins in a terminological shift: we have to make sense of the meaning of the concept "ethics" and how it relates to, and is differentiated from, the concept "morality." My paper will deal with precisely the nuance between morality and ethics.

A significant aspect of this present paper is an attempt at a parallelism, through Gilles Deleuze's (1925-1995) conception of a practical philosophy, between the thoughts of Nietzsche (one of the most celebrated, if not, the most celebrated, appropriated, and abused philosophers of the past century) and Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677, an almost unsung 18th Century Dutch thinker). Inspired by Nietzsche's image as a nomadic thinker, Deleuze presents us with a more convincing image of Spinoza: a man who is closer to LIFE. The specific aspect of the Nietzsche-Spinoza relation I want to discuss is the difference between "morality" and "ethics" – it will become clear later that with Nietzsche and Spinoza, ethics has an "ethological" basis. It is hoped that the distinction between morality and ethics will illuminate what Deleuze sees in both Nietzsche and Spinoza as a basic notion of philosophical thinking – a way of thinking which is *beyond good and evil*, that is, beyond moralistic ontology.

From Transcendence to Immanence

Perhaps the best point of departure from which a notion of “ethical thinking” can follow through is a discussion of a critique of traditional ontology which Deleuze thinks is found in both Nietzsche and Spinoza. This results in a typology between two ontologies: that is, between the ontology of *transcendence* (commonly referred to as metaphysics) and the ontology of *immanence*. Later on, it will become clear that for both Spinoza and Nietzsche, the ontology of transcendence is tied to what may be referred to as “moral thinking.” Hence, the critique of metaphysics evinced by both philosophers is, in essence, a critique of moral thinking. Ultimately, for Spinoza, a view of the world can manifest itself as either moral or ethical. In relation to this, Deleuze comments: “The theory of power according to which actions and passions of the body accompany actions and passions of the soul amounts to an ethical vision of the world” (Deleuze 1990, p. 257). At first glance, the relation between *ontology* and *ethics* is not that conspicuous; nevertheless, this is precisely the fulcrum of Spinoza’s major work – a work on ontology which he interestingly named *Ethics*, and this title already arouses our curiosity. After all the hefty geometrical discussions on metaphysics, anthropology, and psychology, Spinoza claims that the theme that underlies his work is *ethical* in nature. This, Spinoza thinks, can only be accounted for after a comprehensive understanding of how singularities follow necessarily from one single substance. Ultimately, Spinoza’s synthetic method demonstrates how we can, through wisdom, attain happiness or the good life, that is, the ethical life. Moreover, the proper understanding of this ethical life is tethered to a type of ontology that can interpret the various aspects of normativity. Deleuze deems ontology to be

“ethological”; that is, it is primarily concerned with the material conditions of human life in both its natural and social contexts. In other words, ontology is concerned with *modes of being* or *singularities*. More specifically, he refers to ethology as “the study of the relations of speed and slowness, of the capacities of being affected that characterize each thing” (Deleuze 1988, p. 125). Metaphysics, on the other hand (the handmaiden of morality), is concerned with *essence* or something *beyond* what simply *is*. Metaphysics is concerned with transcendence, something *other* than, and purportedly higher than, *being*. For Deleuze, presupposing a *beyond* is not the proper task of ontology. He takes ontology in its most rudimentary sense, a discourse of what simply *is*. Following Deleuze, I am arguing that this ethological conception of ontology is the basis of Spinoza’s ethical worldview. This is what Deleuze sees as the genius of Spinoza’s *Ethics*: the substitution of ethics for morality; what the *Ethics* presents, therefore, is an anti-juridical ontology.

Spinoza’s critique of metaphysics begins with an inquisition into the ontological status of the “body” or of “bodies.” He writes in the third book of the *Ethics*:

For indeed, no one has yet determined what the body can do, that is, experience has not yet taught anyone what the body can do from the laws of Nature alone, insofar as Nature is only considered to be corporeal, and what the body can do only if it is determined by the mind. For no one has yet come to know the structure of the body so accurately that he could explain all its functions — not to mention that many things are observed in the lower animals which far surpass human ingenuity, and that sleepwalkers do a great many things in their sleep which they would not dare to awake. This shows well enough that the body itself, simply from the laws of its own nature, can do many things which its mind wonders at (Spinoza 1994, pp. 155-156).

Deleuze interprets the above passage as Spinoza's war cry (Deleuze 1990, p. 255). This initiates the *Ethics* into a criticism of the traditional conception of the body, that is, the body as being inferior and obedient to the commands of the mind. We find a very similar passage in Nietzsche's *Nachlaß*:

The human body, in which the most distant and most recent past of all organic development again becomes living and corporeal, through which and over and beyond which a tremendous inaudible stream seems to flow: the body is a more astonishing idea than the old "soul" (*WP III*, 659).¹

In his *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Deleuze takes note of Nietzsche's point of departure: "What is the body? ... Being composed of a plurality of irreducible forces the body is a multiple phenomenon, its unity is that of a multiple phenomenon, a 'unity of domination'" (Deleuze 1983, p. 40). The internal dynamism of the body is, therefore, Nietzsche's point of departure, as it is also the case for Spinoza. Furthermore, Deleuze writes, "In a body the superior or dominant forces are known as *active* and the inferior or dominated forces are known as *reactive*" (*Ibid.*). Later I will talk of the ethical import of *active* and *reactive* forces as manifestations of power and will relate them to Spinoza's notion of the *conatus*.

From a Spinozistic point of view, Deleuze attempts to show how Nietzsche puts to the fore a philosophy of immanence by seeing the body as the originary stratum of forces.² By giving the body this status, Nietzsche is able to move beyond the metaphysical or "essentialist" interpretation of forces. According to Deleuze, Nietzsche conceives of "Subtle relations of power and of evaluation between different

‘selves’ that conceal but also express other kinds of forces – forces of life, forces of thought ...” (Deleuze 2001, p. 59). Forces emanate from bodies which are assemblages of forces; the body is a unified multiplicity, an assemblage. By declaring the body as an assemblage of forces, the value given to a “transcendent subject” becomes nil. This is Nietzsche’s way of criticizing and overcoming the Modern adherence to an autonomous “subject.”

Spinoza’s war cry — a war cry against the ontology of transcendence — is made clear, in that he says, that “*The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body, or a certain mode of extension which actually exists, and nothing else*” (Spinoza 1994, p. 123). Moreover, “*An idea that excludes the existence of our body cannot be in our mind, but is contrary to it*” (Spinoza 1994, p. 160). On this note, the emphasis on *existence* is quite clear. The proper object of ontology is *existence*, and for Deleuze, existence is interpreted as a life of pure immanence. What ontology presupposes is a realm or what Deleuze calls a *field*: this field is what we call LIFE. Hence, in this context, Nietzsche and Spinoza present a unique strand of ontology — one which takes the *singularities* of bodies as point of departure. And since they break away from transcendent principles, they make it possible to interpret singularities from the purview of “power” (*puissance*), as opposed to “essence.” Bodies, moreover, are understood as “singularities” (each body/force is unique from other bodies), as opposed to belonging to a single “universal” category or genus.

It is this movement from *essences* to *singularities*, that is, from the *metaphysics of the soul* to the *ontology of the body*, which also marks the movement from *moralistic thinking* to *ethical thinking*, that is, from a discourse of the *molar* to a discourse of the *molecular*. This is what Deleuze refers to as the movement from the “dogmatic image of thought” to the “new image of thought” or a “thought without image,” that is, not a *binding image* in the traditional sense, but, rather, an *image* which does not restrict thinking to obsolete postulates and by being aware that thinking has the tendency to be bound to dogmatism (Cf. Deleuze 1994, pp. 129-167). Through this new image of thought, Deleuze makes sense of a counterculture which is a perspective that resists traditional or representational metaphysics and epistemology. Deleuze takes the Nietzschean reversal of Platonism or the transmutation of values as the point of departure. Interestingly enough, Deleuze also finds the same transvaluation of values in Spinoza. According to Deleuze, we have to abandon our old image of the world in order to free ourselves from the obscurantism of foundationalist or essentialist thinking. It is only through the transmutation of values that we can make sense of a life of pure immanence: an ethical life of singularities, of forces.

Force and Power or Bodies and Conatus

Deleuze argues that a body is a force, and that it could be anything: “an animal, a body of sounds, a mind or an idea; it can be a linguistic corpus, a social body, a collectivity” (Deleuze 1988, p. 127). Spinoza’s concept of the body, therefore, does not solely refer to human bodies, but instead to *forces* or *singularities*. As such, strictly speaking, there is no essential difference between the *noble* and the *base* aside from that of degrees of power. Bodies are not differentiated on the basis of formal

genera, but rather on *kinetic* and *dynamic* terms. This is what is meant by “relations of speed and slowness” and “the capacities of being affected.” Deleuze writes:

There is no difference between wise man and fool, reasonable and demented men, strong man and weak. They do of course differ in the kind of affections that determine their effort to preserve in existence. But each tries equally to preserve himself, and has as much right as he has power, given the affections that actually exercise his capacity to be affected (Deleuze 1990, p. 258).

In this sense, therefore, power is a matter of degree and that power springs forth from nature itself. Power, according to Nietzsche, is a “primitive form of affect, that all other affects are only developments of it” (*WP III*, 688). We need to pay heed to the value he accorded the conception of the will to power itself: “But *what is life?* Here we need a new, more definite formulation of the concept ‘life.’ My formula for it is: Life is will to power” (*WP II*, 254). We can also read in *Beyond Good and Evil*: “The world viewed from inside, the world defined and determined according to its ‘intelligible character’ – it would be ‘will to power’ and nothing else” (*BGE II*, 36). The value of the will to power is itself the value accorded to life – the only undeniable ontological fact. Deleuze offers us a more convincing interpretation of the will to power: “power” is explained as the principle of affirmative and negative evaluations. Since it is the most primitive form of affect, and thus unnoticed, other more conspicuous affects (forces) are merely developments or manifestations of it. For Deleuze the will to power is both the quantitative and qualitative element of bodies. He is clear and emphatic: power “doesn’t mean (or at least doesn’t primarily mean) that the will *wants* power or *wishes* to dominate” (Deleuze 2001, p. 73). Power

animates the will; power thus is never separated from willing. Every willing entails a manifestation of power. This means that there is no willing without power, for in the first place it is power which determines whether the moment of willing itself is either affirmative or negative. Deleuze provides a formula which explains the relation of will to power and its symptoms (forces): “Force is what can, will to power is what wills” (Deleuze 1983, p. 50). Forces are the external manifestations of the will to power; all symptoms proceed from this genealogical element. The interaction between forces presupposes the element of encounter. This encounter between bodies is agonistic—it entails that a force struggles to win over or conquer other forces. The struggle between forces ensues from their very capacity to be affected in a relation of forces.

The above conception of power is not the principle of ethical difference, inasmuch as all singularities strive to preserve their own being or, in other words, strive to express their power and the difference between two expressions is only one of degree. Deleuze argues that the ethical difference between bodies (e.g., between two men) “relates to the kind of affections that determine our conatus” (Deleuze 1990, p. 261). Spinoza writes in the *Ethics*, “Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being” (Spinoza 1994, p. 159). This means that power is the genealogical element of forces, of expressions; and since, at the natural standpoint, all things are driven by the principle of power – ethologically this is how bodies, in general, behave. But since the perseverance of bodies implies that they have to encounter other bodies, and a body acts differently depending on the type of body it

encounters, power is also affected by the power that comes from the outside. Spinoza defines an affect as “affections of the body by which the body’s power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, and at the same time, the ideas of these affections” (Spinoza 1994, p. 154). Hence, the encounter between bodies entails either an “active” or “reactive” response from a body. An “adequate cause of any of these affections,” according to Spinoza, is “an action” and an inadequate cause is “a passion” (*Ibid.*). I reckon that this is the point where the ethical *difference* between the noble and the base, the strong and the weak, manifests.

This is also the point where the resemblance between Nietzsche and Spinoza is most striking. All phenomena or expressions are to be treated as if treating symptoms of *health* or *sickness*. Nietzsche discriminates between active and reactive forces as symptoms of health and sickness — more precisely, between *healthy* and *sick* ways of appraising life — between healthy and unhealthy lifestyles. This genealogical difference calls for the prognosis of *who*, in the first place, is interpreting life: “One may ask: ‘who then interprets?’ for the interpretation itself is a form of the will to power ...” (*WP III*, 556). Meanwhile, Spinoza, for his part, thinks that the possession of adequate ideas allows one to actively express his power; on the other hand, the weak only possesses inadequate ideas and, as a result, does not fully express the potentialities of his power, thus succumbs to passion. *Joy*, which results from the active manifestation of the conatus, already speaks of a symptom of health, and *sadness*, which is a product of the infiltration of outside forces (where these forces act as poisons), is a symptom of sickness. For Spinoza, this is the typology between *good*

and *bad*: On the one hand, “The individual,” writes Deleuze, “will be called *good* who strives ... to organize his encounters, to join with whatever agrees with his nature,” (Deleuze 1988, pp. 22-23) and, on the other hand, one is *bad* when he “lives haphazardly, who is content to undergo the effects of his encounters, but wails and accuses every time the effect undergone does not agree with him and reveals his impotence” (Deleuze 1988, p. 23).

What does it Mean to Think Ethically?

Thinking ethically entails, for Deleuze, a radicalization of our conception of philosophy as a whole. To be specific, it entails a movement from the ontology of transcendence to the ontology of immanence. And because ethics inheres in ontology, this radical philosophy also entails a movement from moralistic thinking to ethical thinking, that is, ethological thinking. Deleuze summarizes this radical movement:

Ethics, which is to say, a typology of immanent modes of existence, replaces Morality, which always refers existence to transcendent values. Morality is the judgment of God, the *system of Judgment*. But Ethics overthrows the system of judgment. The opposition of values (Good-Evil) is supplanted by the qualitative difference of modes of existence (good-bad) (Deleuze 1988, p. 23).

Ethics, in the above sense, could also refer to Deleuze’s distinction between the “good life” (ethics [Stoicism]) and the “moral law” (morality [Kantianism]). Deleuze actually takes the lead of Foucault on “subjectification,” wherein subjectification is opposed to the moral conception of the subject.³ In place of morality, we have an ethical and aesthetic conception of the subject, that is, a subject who partakes of

knowledge and power as an assemblage of forces (Cf. Deleuze 1995, p. 114). This image of the subject — as opposed to a transcendent subjectivity — ensues from an immanent view of the world; and the ethical subject becomes *who/what* he is by encountering forces which are the very conditions of his existence. In one of his commendable essays, Yirmiyahu Yovel writes about the affinities between Spinoza and Nietzsche. According to Yovel, “If Spinoza has started the modern philosophy of immanence and underlies it throughout, then Nietzsche brings it to its most radical conclusion” (Yovel 1986, p. 183-203). Further, “Both declare the ‘death’ of the transcendent God, and see life within immanence as all there is” (*Ibid.*). Yovel argues that Nietzsche’s conception of the eternal return (referring to *The Gay Science* 341) “is the utmost affirmation of immanence,” that the “eternal recurrence dramatizes the inescapability of immanence ...” (*Ibid.*).

This paper is by no means an exhaustive appraisal of the Nietzsche-Spinoza relation. What I have done is merely to scratch the surface of this enterprise by amplifying some elective affinities that Deleuze himself has already put forward in some of his writings. Deleuze thinks *with* Nietzsche and Spinoza by underscoring the *drama* of their thoughts. At the margin of a Nietzschean and Spinozist critique of metaphysics, a metaphysics which they deem inimical to life, we are offered a fresh sensibility to life – a de-deified world, a world translated back to nature, a vast plane of immanence which has *within* it a multiplicity of forces; it has a *within*, but it has no *beyond*.

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NOTES

¹ Nietzsche's works are cited in abbreviated titles (*WP* for *The Will to Power* and *BGE* for *Beyond Good and Evil*), followed by the book number, then passage number.

² Deleuze discusses his conception of immanence in Spinoza in the following: *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, pp.155-186 and *What is Philosophy?*, pp. 35-60. Deleuze also relates immanence to the "plane of consistency": "consistency concretely ties together heterogeneous, disparate, elements as such: it assures the consolidation of fuzzy aggregates, in other words, multiplicities of the rhizome type. In effect, consistency, proceeding by consolidation, acts necessarily in the middle, by the middle, and stands opposed to all planes of principle or finality. Spinoza, Hölderlin, Kleist, Nietzsche are the surveyors of such a plane of consistency. Never unifications, never totalizations, but rather consistencies or consolidations." *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p.507. This also explains Nietzsche's take on the body.

³ See Smith 1998, pp. 251-252 and Smith 2007, pp.66-78.

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