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“Becoming Who One Is” in Spinoza and Nietzsche

I

The connection between Spinoza and Nietzsche has often been remarked upon in the literature on the two thinkers.¹ Not surprisingly, Nietzsche himself first noticed the similarity between his (earlier) thought and the thought of Spinoza, remarking to Overbeck in an oft-quoted postcard, “I have a *precursor*, and what a precursor!” He goes on to say, “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 in precisely 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.”² One aspect of his own thought that Nietzsche does not list here, however, is his “doctrine” of “becoming who one is.” Is this an example of a point at which Spinoza and Nietzsche’s views separate? In this paper, I should like to consider whether or not Spinoza could plausibly be understood to have had a similar view; that is, I should like to examine whether or not the process for Spinoza of achieving happiness and beatitude can be seen principally as an instance of “becoming who one is.”

There are, of course, some obvious and notorious difficulties in trying to understand what Nietzsche meant by the phrase “to become who one is.” After all, Nietzsche seems to deny both the existence of the self (as substance) and being in general, saying that there is only becoming. What, then, might this phrase mean? As this paper concerns principally the philosophy of Spinoza, I do not want to get too bogged down in the difficulties involved in interpreting Nietzsche; rather, I wish to follow without further argument the

1. See, for example, Edwin Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method: A Reading of Spinoza’s Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 126-35; Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Philosophie pratique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1970), trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988), 17-29; and Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, vol. 2 *The Adventures of Immanence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 104-35.

2. Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1954), 92; KGB III/1/111.

explication that seems to me to be the most successful – that of Alexander Nehamas in his book on Nietzsche. He writes, “To be who one is ... is to be engaged in a constantly continuing and continually broadening process of appropriation of one’s experiences and actions, of enlarging the capacity for assuming responsibility for oneself which Nietzsche calls ‘freedom’.”³ And so, again, my question: can we see something of this view in Spinoza’s *Ethics*? That is, while Nietzsche asks “What does your conscience say?” and responds, “You shall become the person you are,”⁴ does Spinoza conceive of his conscience as saying the same thing?

II

It should be noted that there are important commonalities between Nietzsche and Spinoza beyond those mentioned by Nietzsche himself and those not obviously included in the idea of “becoming who one is.” For example, as I mentioned immediately above, Nietzsche calls into question the idea of the self or ego as a separate substance. For his part, Spinoza, of course, holds that we are all modes of the one substance, God. Yet, there are individuals and selves in the world, and both Spinoza and Nietzsche will individuate the things of the world in similar terms and conceive of selfhood in similar ways.

So let us, then, first ask, what exactly is the ‘self’ for Spinoza? Does he conceive of a unitary self that can be the object of introspection as is typically taken to be the case in Descartes? We know that, for Spinoza, “the essence of man is constituted by certain modifications of God’s attributes.” (EIIp10c)⁵ That is, the essence of man that is constituted by certain modifications of God’s attributes might be some kind of unitary self. But I think that Spinoza must reject Descartes’s conception of the self in part as a consequence of his views of the relation of mind and body and of the nature of *conatus*, and, most interestingly, Spinoza does so in a way that adumbrates both Hume’s critique of the Cartesian self in the *Treatise*⁶ and Nietzsche’s idea of the self. First, consider two of Spinoza’s claims about the mind’s knowledge of itself and its body:

3. Alexander Nehamas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1985), 190-91.

4. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 219; KSA 3, 519.

5. All quotations from the *Ethics* will be from *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), vol. I; the standard abbreviations for propositions, definitions, and so on, will be used.

6. D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 252, 634.

EIIp19: The human Mind does not know the human Body itself, nor does it know that it exists, except through ideas of affections by which the Body is affected.

EIIp23: The Mind does not know itself, except insofar as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the Body.

Further, we know that, for Spinoza, the body is going to be affected in innumerable ways by its environment. Now, the subject of p23 is the mind's knowing itself, and we could interpret this to mean that there is a single self to be known; but it should be clear that Spinoza's "nisi quatenus" phrase limits this knowledge to ideas associated with the affections of the body. In other words, the mind *only* knows its particular ideas deriving from its relation to (or identity with) its body.

While in the *Meditations* Descartes famously concludes that he is essentially a thinking thing or a mind,⁷ Spinoza, equally famously, claims in the *Ethics* that the essence of anything is its *conatus*. Spinoza says, "The striving [*conatus*] by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing." (EIIIp7) On the one hand, each living thing has a *single conatus* to persevere in its being, and this might suggest that there is something of a unitary self, identifiable with this *conatus* or perhaps with the thing itself that is to be preserved. On the other hand, it also seems plausible to decompose this *conatus*, to say that, while there is an overarching *conatus* to persevere in being, this is actually reducible over time to multiple, particular *conatus*, each a particular way of preserving one's being.

Further, EIIIp9 tells us that the mind strives for an indefinite duration and that it is conscious of the striving it has. And in the crucial scholium that follows Spinoza distinguishes between the will and appetite – the former relating only to the striving of the mind, the latter relating to the mind and body together – and goes on to claim the following: "This Appetite, therefore, is nothing but the very essence of man, from whose nature there necessarily follow those things that promote his preservation. And so man is determined to do those things. Between appetite and desire [*cupiditas*] there is no difference, except that desire is generally related to men insofar as they are conscious of their appetites [*quatenus sui appetitûs sunt consciî*]. So *desire* can be defined as *appetite together with consciousness of the appetite*." *Prima facie* it seems that Spinoza's reference to "appetites" supports the idea of the composite nature of human *conatus* that I am proposing. But, of course, the Latin suggests something else: that we are conscious of a singular or essential appetite. Nevertheless, I think that the fact that Spinoza wants to distinguish between appetites of which we are conscious, that is, desires, and appetites of

7. AT VII, 27.

which we are clearly not conscious suggests that Spinoza holds that human beings, and presumably all organisms, have complex sets of *conatus*. And this idea receives additional support when, in the Appendix to Part IV of the *Ethics*, Spinoza says, “All our strivings, or Desires, follow from the necessity of our nature in such a way that they can be understood either through it alone, as through their proximate cause, or insofar as we are a part of nature, which cannot be conceived adequately through itself without other individuals.”

If all this is the case, then, à la Hume, when I look into my Spinozistic self, I “see” a general tendency to preserve my being – my mind and my body – as well as a *history* of past *conatus*. ‘Who I am’ is, in other words, my general *conatus*, which can be seen as simply the sum of all past drives, each determined by where I was and how I was affected by other finite modes; some drives I am conscious of, others I am not. Thus, Spinoza here seems to express a sentiment with which Nietzsche could easily agree: one’s essence simply is the force or drive (for Nietzsche, will) by which one becomes what one is to become in the natural order of things. Indeed, compare this idea with Nietzsche’s concept of the uniqueness of the individual: “Each of us bears a productive uniqueness within him as the core of his being; and when he becomes aware of it, there appears around him a strange penumbra which is the mark of his singularity.”⁸ For both Spinoza and Nietzsche, the essence of the individual is determined by its striving or its productive uniqueness.⁹

While both have this similar view regarding the essence of the individual and its striving, it might seem to be the case that Spinoza does not so readily acknowledge one’s “*becoming* one’s self.” Consider for a moment his account of joy and sadness, action and passion, perfection and imperfection. According to Spinoza, joy is the “passion by which the Mind *passes* to a greater perfection”; and sadness, “the passion by which it *passes* to a lesser perfection.” (EIIIp11s, my emphasis) For Spinoza, however, the process involved with achieving joy *seems* never to be directed to an end point that is “one’s true self”; rather, because of Spinoza’s equation of perfection and power, joy is associated with the increase of one’s power and the consequent control of one’s negative affects. In other words, the Spinozistic injunction would here be: you shall become as powerful as possible – not necessarily the

8. Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator* in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, ed. D. Breazeale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 143; KSA 1, 359.

9. I do not wish to avoid one important difference between Spinoza and Nietzsche here. For Nietzsche, the “productive uniqueness” of the individual really is located in the self, whereas, for Spinoza, it is probably safer to say that that which is productive is in fact God, or nature – the uniqueness of the individual is merely manifested in the various drives that follow from the divine nature. Indeed, Nietzsche’s claim that “each of us bears a productive uniqueness within him” might be closer to Leibniz’s conception of the law of unfolding within each monad.

“person you are.” Yet, insofar as one increases one’s perfection or power, one is simply ensuring that one’s self cannot fall under the domination of external forces or, as Spinoza would put it, fall into bondage. And, correlatively, insofar as one does not fall under the sway of external forces, one is free. Perhaps we can say that one becomes free when one’s power has been increased to such a level that one cannot be subject to external forces. This freedom is, in turn, the ability to remain oneself and remain autonomous.¹⁰

I do not mean to suggest, however, that Spinoza’s *conatus* is the same as Nietzsche’s *Wille zur Macht*. As Yovel makes clear in his book, *conatus* is essentially directed towards self-preservation, whereas the *Wille zur Macht* is directed towards the constant increase in one’s power, towards “becoming more.”¹¹ Indeed, Nietzsche himself explicitly distinguishes his position from Spinoza’s, saying, “Spinoza’s law of ‘self-preservation’ ought really to put a stop to change: but this law is false, the opposite is true. It can be shown most clearly that every living thing does everything it can not to preserve itself but to become *more*.”¹² Be that as it may, for my purposes it is simply important to note that both *conatus* and the *Wille zur Macht* constitute the essence of any individual’s life and that both can be said to comprise subordinate drives or strivings.

III

The psychotherapeutic techniques as we find them expressed in *Ethics V*, I think, can ultimately be seen as consistent with the idea of one’s becoming one’s self. While Spinoza gives us six¹³ methods for controlling our affects, I wish to highlight the three methods that I take to be most central: (a) forming clear and distinct ideas of our affects, and thereby turning passions into actions (pp3-4); (b) reflecting on the necessity of the world (p6); and (c) reordering and connecting the affections of the body according to the order of the intellect (p10). The element common to these three strategies is, of course, our knowledge of ourselves and our place in the world. And Spinoza is clear that the better understanding we have of ourselves and our world the less we are subject to the negative affects. We are to recognize the determined nature of

10. Literally speaking, of course, we cannot be truly autonomous in Spinoza’s system. I shall say more about this below.

11. *op. cit.*, 110-13.

12. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1967), 367; KG VIII/3/93.

13. Cf. the list in EVp20s plus EVp6, which is missing from the list.

the world and our place within it; we are to recognize the origin of our passions and turn them into actions; and we are to use the power of the mind to reorder the bodily affections. When we do these things we attain release from the negative affects and freedom from “evil” in this world.

One difficulty for the interpretation I am proposing is that it seems to attribute to Spinoza the view that we can have adequate knowledge of all our strivings. Yet this would clearly contradict what Spinoza says in EII; namely, that human mind does not have adequate knowledge of the parts composing the human body and that the ideas of the affections of the human body are not clear and distinct. (pp24, 28) Clearly, then, we cannot have adequate knowledge of all our strivings, for many are related to our body and there are many of which we are not even conscious. But I would like to suggest that there is a two-fold strategy at work in Spinoza’s account of self-knowledge and blessedness. There are those strivings of which we are conscious and that we retain in memory, and these are to be understood as individually constituting who we are. There are also strivings of which we are unaware. Spinoza recognizes the difficulty in arriving at this knowledge and says, therefore, in EVp10s, “The best thing, then, that we can do, so long as we do not have perfect knowledge of our affects, is to conceive a correct principle of living, or sure maxims of life, to commit them to memory, and to apply them constantly to the particular cases frequently encountered in life.” Therefore, we have two possibilities: (a) insofar as we have knowledge, it is of ourselves and our place within the world, and (b) insofar as we lack knowledge, we are to conform ourselves to our principles of living. And how do these possibilities relate to Nietzsche’s idea of “becoming who one is”? I would put it this way: (a) deals with “knowing who or what one is,” (b) with “becoming who one wants to be.” In the end, it ought to be in the power of the sage to recognize that in general where we are now has been determined by innumerable forces, and this recognition is part and parcel of understanding the necessity of the world.

Ultimately, the ends towards which both Nietzsche and Spinoza strive are remarkably similar. As Spinoza puts it in the concluding passage of the *Ethics*, summarizing the benefits of the life of the sage: “...the wise man...is hardly troubled in spirit, but being, by a certain eternal necessity conscious of himself, and of God, and of things, he never ceases to be, but always possesses true peace of mind.” (EVp42s) Being conscious of oneself, God, and the rest of the world is also, however, being conscious of the fact that one is merely a part of nature. Compare this thought with Nietzsche’s words from *Schopenhauer as Educator*: “...nature at last needs the saint [Spinoza’s sage?], in whom the ego is completely melted away and whose life of suffering is no longer felt as his own life – or is hardly so felt – but as a profound feeling of oneness and

identity with all living things...”¹⁴ The characteristic feature of the outlook of the sage or the saint is, then, oneness with the rest of the world; through this, he gains peace of mind.

IV

Still, there might seem to be a difference between Spinoza and Nietzsche on one fundamental level: Spinoza is an essentialist regarding human nature, while Nietzsche combines essentialist and existentialist elements in his thinking about human nature.¹⁵ After all, for Nietzsche, it is not just that we are to understand who we are and how we became who we are, nor that we should wish to take responsibility for this “becoming of who we are,” it is that we need to choose for ourselves the selves we wish to be. According to Nietzsche, “we ... want to become those we are – human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves.”¹⁶ Now, Nehamas’s gloss on the idea creating the self is that it “is the development of the ability, or the willingness, to accept responsibility for everything that we have done and to admit what is in any case true: that everything that we have done actually constitutes who each one of us is.”¹⁷ The idea of being able to create oneself and to give oneself laws would seem to be incomprehensible in Spinoza’s world. It assumes a kind of freedom that Spinoza expressly denies. But is this really so? According to Nietzsche, freedom is really only the “will to self-responsibility.”¹⁸ For Spinoza, freedom is simply the freedom of suffering from the passions, and this freedom arises from the psychotherapy we perform on ourselves as discussed in Part V of the *Ethics*. But can we not understand this notion of freedom in Nietzsche’s way as well? If the will to self-responsibility is simply the choice to recognize all one’s past drives as constituting who one presently is, then this kind of freedom would seem to be present in Spinoza – it amounts to having an adequate understanding of oneself and one’s place in the world. Moreover, Spinoza’s claim that we can reorder and connect the affections of the body according to the order of the intellect implies that we are to be active, in some

14. *Schopenhauer as Educator*, 160-61; KSA 1, 382.

15. Cf. Daniel Breazeale, “Becoming Who One Is: Notes on *Schopenhauer as Educator*”, *New Nietzsche Studies* 2, no. 3 & 4 (1998), 13-17.

16. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 266; KSA 3, 563.

17. *op. cit.*, 188.

18. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Penguin, 1968), 92; KSA 6, 139

sense, with respect to our essence – we have the power to determine, at least to the degree that we can choose to reorder our bodily affects, who we are.

V

Recall that Nietzsche claimed in his postcard to Overbeck that both he and Spinoza denied the freedom of the will. Both, however, obviously allowed for a kind of freedom, and this freedom overlaps with the notion of “becoming who one is.” For example, for Nietzsche, we are to take responsibility for ourselves in part as a response to the eternal recurrence of the same; we are to recognize that we are who we are and that we could not have been otherwise. Similarly, for Spinoza, we are to recognize ourselves and our strivings within the determined universe; we are to acknowledge too that things could not have been otherwise; and, in doing so, we are to achieve happiness.

While I believe that it makes sense to read the Nietzschean idea of “becoming who one is” into Spinoza’s philosophy, there is a difference between the thinkers here that should not go unnoticed. This concerns the centrality of knowledge of one’s self as one is as well as a kind of prudential knowledge of who or what one wants to become. For Spinoza, the “goal” of human life – or, better, our happy passage through this life – is inextricably linked with *knowledge* of the world and one’s place in the causal structure of the world. Curiously, then, we see that Spinoza’s thought contains what Nietzsche claimed it did – a primacy of knowledge of the affects (though not knowledge *as* an affect). On the other hand, this aspect, I believe, is slightly less prominent in Nietzsche, for whom, one might say, willing takes primacy over knowing. Indeed, given the fact that Spinoza denies that there is a distinction between the intellect and the will (EIIp49c) and that Nietzsche affirms this distinction, this difference between the two on this point should not be surprising. Thus, for Spinoza we are to know who we are, while for Nietzsche we are to will to take responsibility for who we are, that is, we are to “create” ourselves. And of the features listed by Nietzsche as common to both their philosophies, Nietzsche seems to have overplayed the similarity between the two on the nature of knowledge of the affects and to have overlooked any similarity between the two on the core issue of “becoming who one is.”

There is, I should here like to suggest, a further commonality between Spinoza and Nietzsche that bears on the issue of “becoming who one is” and that has not been acknowledged in the literature. In his discussion of Spinoza and Nietzsche, Yovel points to the ideas of *amor fati* and *amor dei intellectualis*, claiming that the differences between Spinoza and Nietzsche are

here manifest: *amor fati* showing the “fundamental dissonance” between the individual and the world, and *amor dei* their “consonant agreement and semimystical identification.”¹⁹ But, on the contrary, I hold these two forms of love to be similar in both thinkers and to support the general idea of “becoming who one is” that I am arguing for in this paper. Consider what Nietzsche says 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. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it – all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary – but *love* it.”²⁰ If it is the case that “becoming who one is” is the ability and willingness to take responsibility for who one has become, then presumably one would not want to have anything different; one should want to change nothing in the past or present. Moreover, while there is certainly a distinction of the sort suggested by Yovel, I should like to suggest that the *amor dei intellectualis* is a result of *amor fati*, of a recognition of a kind of dissonance between individual and world. In EIVp4 Spinoza claims, “It is impossible that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause.” How does the claim that man is essentially part of nature relate to the idea that there is a dissonance between individual and world? Spinoza’s claim is simply that *because* man is part of nature, he cannot but be affected sometimes by things of which he is not the adequate cause, by things that are, as it were, outside of him. In Part V, we come to see that blessedness is the knowledge of *how* one is part of nature and how who one is has been determined by things of which one was not the adequate cause.²¹ In short, for Spinoza we come to love God in part because we recognize our place within the world and our determined nature within this world. And ultimately, *amor fati* is a consequence of Nietzsche’s belief in eternal return, just as *amor dei intellectualis* is a consequence of Spinoza’s belief that we are simply part of nature.

VI

One of Nehamas’s central claims regarding Nietzsche is that Nietzsche saw the process of becoming one’s self, of living an authentic life, as similar to the creation of a work of art. Nehamas highlights a passage from *Remembrance of*

19. *op. cit.*, 108; cf. also, 127-28.

20. *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), 258; KSA 6, 297.

21. It is in this way that self-understanding leads to love of God. (EVp15)

Things Past, in which the narrator comes to the conclusion “that in fashioning a work of art we are by no means free, that we do not choose how we shall make it but that it pre-exists us and therefore we are obliged, since it is both necessary and hidden to do what we should have to do if were a law of nature, that is to say to discover it.”²² And the process of narration in *Remembrance of Things Past*, the journey of the narrator through time, is what allows the narrator and the reader to understand the self of the opening books. In a similar way, perhaps, the development of Spinoza’s *Ethics* is such that, *only* by the end of Part V can we truly come to know ourselves as the finite modes of God discussed at the opening of Part I. Not only do we understand ourselves by Part V as the finite modes we are said to be in Part I, but the truths of Part V seem to confirm or support the propositions of the opening books.²³ And in coming to the intellectual love of God and the acceptance of our lives as they, we have become who we are.

VII

We might still wonder if there is something that we can learn from Spinoza and Nietzsche here. I think so. Both have a notion of happiness that is tightly bound up with becoming oneself, with creating a self no longer vulnerable to external forces, and with accepting and understanding oneself. Yet, the Pindaric²⁴ maxim “Become Who You Are” should not, in the case of Spinoza and Nietzsche, be seen merely as reducible to the Delphic maxim “Know Thyself.” There are two elements crucial to the thought of Spinoza and Nietzsche that make this so. First, one does not know a self qua substance, rather one knows merely the assembled drives, strivings or wills that constitute the essence of the self. And, second, one is to know a self in the context of a determined world – a world in which “I” could not have been otherwise, a world that eternally recurs in the same way. For both Spinoza and Nietzsche, it does not matter how “bad” that self is, so long as we are able and willing to recognize the numerous drives that belong to it, so long as we are able and willing to place this self in the context of the rest of the world. In doing so, we cannot be open to suffering any kind of negative affect; we cannot, for

22. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Random House, 1981), III, 915.

23. This comparison with Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* also supports Jonathan Bennett’s claim that the *Ethics* should be seen as exhibiting a hypothetico-deductive method. See, J. Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1984), 20-23.

24. Cf. Pythian Ode II, 72: “γένοι’ οἶος εἶσι.” *Pindari Carmina cum fragmentis*, ed. C.M. Bowra (Oxford: Clarendon, 1935).

example, lose ourselves in feelings of regret or remorse. While it is true that Spinoza holds repentance, regret and remorse for passions that produce even greater suffering,²⁵ I think that, if what I have said about the character of our becoming who we are is true, we can see why it is that repentance does not and in fact cannot arise from reason: the dictate of reason leads us to become who we are, to accept our history as *our* history, and as such as a part of nature. Indeed, we must remember one of the crucial epistemological mistakes, according to Spinoza, is considering things as contingent. Contingency is simply a product of the imagination, not of reason. (EIIp44 and corollaries) Hence, it is not simply that regret and remorse make us feel bad and hence should be avoided; rather, it is an error to imagine how things might have been and feel a particular way based on this image. The Spinozistic sage must consider himself, like all other things, under a certain species of eternity. To wish that things had been otherwise is to wish for a different self, or for a different set of drives; to accept who one is is to become who one is. And while Nietzsche would never describe it in this way, Spinoza would have no problem in calling this “blessedness.”²⁶

25. See EIVp54: “Repentance is not a virtue, *or* does not arise from reason; instead, he who repents what he has done is twice wretched, *or* lacking power.”

26. I would like to thank those attending my session at the Spinoza by 2000 conference in Jerusalem in June 1999. This paper was greatly improved as a result of the questions and comments that I received there.