

**SPINOZA'S CONATUS AND  
NIETZSCHE'S WILL TO POWER:  
SELF-PRESERVATION VS.  
INCREASE OF POWER?**

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**Abstract**

This paper presents Nietzsche's reception of Spinoza with regard to the concept of power. It aims to show that Nietzsche's indirect reception of Spinoza was most formative for his philosophy in the 1880s, where the concept of will to power is of crucial importance. Indeed, Nietzsche elaborates his conception of power through a critical interaction with Spinoza's principle of self-preservation given in the theory of *conatus*. He considers this to be a theorem characteristic of the modern metaphysical obsession with being; with his concept of will to power, he opposes to it a principle, not of *preservation*, but of *increase*, which aims to revalue the idea of radical becoming. The paper explores Nietzsche's strategy of interpretation with regard to Spinoza's theory of *conatus*, then analyses Nietzsche's own conception of power, and finally calls in question Nietzsche's claim for originality with regard to Spinoza.

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 – namely to make all 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 divergencies 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 make my blood rush out, is now at least a twosomeness. Strange!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Given here in Walter Kaufmann's translation (cf. Kaufmann Walter (ed.), *The portable Nietzsche*, New York, The Viking Penguin, 1982), this quotation reads, in Nietzsche's own words: "Ich bin

With these words, Nietzsche, in 1881, enthusiastically acknowledged Spinoza as his predecessor, after having discovered his philosophy in Kuno Fischer's account.<sup>2</sup> The strange "twosomeness" – "Zweisamkeit" – which Nietzsche identified after his discovery (or rather re-discovery) of Spinoza did not, however, make him become a Spinozist. Nietzsche's emphatic commitment to Spinoza gives way, after 1881, to a critical dialogue with his 'predecessor' – a dialogue that takes place only sporadically in Nietzsche's published writings, but is carried out with intensity in his unpublished notes.<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche's critique of Spinoza, then, arises from

ganz erstaunt, ganz entzückt! Ich habe einen Vorgänger und was für einen! Ich kannte Spinoza fast nicht: daß mich jetzt nach ihm verlangte, war eine „Instinkthandlung“. Nicht nur, daß seine Gesamttenenz gleich der meinen ist – die Erkenntniß zum mächtigsten Affekt zu machen – in fünf Hauptpunkten seiner Lehre finde ich mich wieder, dieser abnormste und einsamste Denker ist mir gerade in diesen Dingen am nächsten: er leugnet die Willensfreiheit –; die Zwecke –; die sittliche Weltordnung –; das Unegoistische –; das Böse –; wenn freilich auch die Verschiedenheiten ungeheuer sind, so liegen diese mehr in dem Unterschiede der Zeit, der Cultur, der Wissenschaft. In summa: meine Einsamkeit, die mir, wie auf ganz hohen Bergen, oft, oft Athemnoth machte und das Blut hervorströmen ließ, ist wenigstens jetzt eine Zweisamkeit. – Wunderlich!" (Nietzsche to Franz Overbeck, 30 July 1881, KSB (= Nietzsche Friedrich, *Sämtliche Briefe, Kritische Studienausgabe in 8 Bänden*, Colli Giorgio/Montinari Mazzino (eds.), Berlin/New York, de Gruyter, 2003), vol. VI, p. 111.)

- <sup>2</sup> Nietzsche most probably read the second edition of Kuno Fischer's *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie*, published in 1865 (Fischer Kuno, *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie I, 2: Descartes' Schule. Geulinx. Malebranche. Baruch Spinoza*, Heidelberg, Verlagsbuchhandlung von Friedrich Bassermann, 1865). On the question as to which edition of Kuno Fischer's book Nietzsche read, cf. Scandella Maurizio, "Did Nietzsche Read Spinoza? Some Preliminary Notes on the Nietzsche–Spinoza Problem, Kuno Fischer and Other Sources", in *Nietzsche-Studien: Internationales Jahrbuch für die Nietzsche-Forschung*, Abel Günter/Stegmaier Werner (eds.), vol. XLI, 2012, pp. 308–332.
- <sup>3</sup> There has been some work on Nietzsche's reception of and relation to Spinoza so far. Cf.: Wurzer William S., *Nietzsche und Spinoza*, Meisenheim am Glan, Hain, 1975; Wiehl Reiner, "Nietzsches Anti-Platonismus", in Brague Rémi/Courtine Jean-François (eds.), *Herméneutique et ontologie: Mélanges en hommage à Pierre Aubenque*, Paris, P.U.F., 1990, pp. 275–299; Burger Rudolf, "Spinoza, Nietzsche und Sisyphos", in *Mercur: Deutsche Zeitschrift für europäisches Denken*, Bohrer Karl-Heinz/Scheel Kurt (eds.), vol. XLIX, n° 1, 1995, pp. 45–54; Schacht Richard, "The Nietzsche–Spinoza Problem", in Schacht R., *Making Sense of Nietzsche: Reflections Timely and Untimely*, Urbana/Chicago, Univ. of Illinois Press, 1995, pp. 167–186; Whitlock Greg, "Roger Boscovich, Benedict de Spinoza and Friedrich Nietzsche: The Untold Story", in *Nietzsche-Studien: Internationales Jahrbuch für die Nietzsche-Forschung*, op. cit., vol. XXV, 1996, pp. 200–220; Gawoll Hans-Jürgen, "Nietzsche und der Geist Spinozas: Die existentielle Umwandlung einer affirmativen Ontologie", in *Nietzsche-Studien: Internationales Jahrbuch für die Nietzsche-Forschung*, op. cit., vol. XXX, 2001, pp. 44–61; Stegmaier Werner, "'Philosophischer Idealismus' und die 'Musik des Lebens': Zu Nietzsches Umgang mit Paradoxien: Eine kontextuelle Interpretation des Aphorismus Nr. 372 der 'Fröhlichen Wissenschaft'", in *Nietzsche-Studien: Internationales Jahrbuch für die Nietzsche-Forschung*, op. cit., vol. XXXIII, 2004, pp. 90–128; Seggern Hans-Gerd von, "Die Spur von Spinozas Affektenlehre", in Seggern H.-G., *Nietzsche und die Weimarer Klassik*, Tübingen, Francke, 2005, pp. 127–147; Brojber Thomas H., *Nietzsche's Philosophical Context: An Intellectual Biography*, Urbana/Chicago, Univ. of Illinois Press, 2008, pp. 77–82; Sommer Andreas Urs, "Nietzsche's Readings on Spinoza: A Contextualist Study, Particularly on the Reception of Kuno Fischer", in *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, vol. XLIII, n° 2,

a complex reception: on the one hand, Nietzsche appropriates certain positions of Spinoza, while on the other hand, he elaborates his own positions in contrast to these and thereby tries to distance himself from his 'predecessor'. This interplay of appropriation and dissociation makes Spinoza become one of the most important interlocutors for Nietzsche in the 1880s. Despite the apparent fascination exerted on him by Spinoza's thought and person, Nietzsche, as so often, feels no need to read the original writings of his author, but contents himself with drawing an image of Spinoza based on secondary sources, the most important of which is Kuno Fischer's *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie*.<sup>4</sup>

Spinoza's philosophy is as much a model as a target of critique for Nietzsche. As the most important aspects of his reception of Spinoza's philosophy I have identified 1) the critique of morality, 2) an ethics of affirmation related to the concept of *amor Dei*<sup>5</sup>, 3) the conception of knowledge and 4) the concept of power. Nietzsche's opinions on Spinoza regarding these domains strongly differ depending on whether he is writing for an audience or not; it has therefore been suggested that we distinguish between an "exoteric" image of Spinoza in Nietzsche's published writings and an "esoteric" image in the unpublished writings.<sup>6</sup> While Nietzsche's references to Spinoza in the unpublished notes testify to affinity and appropriation, in the published writings Nietzsche mostly endeavours to dissociate himself from Spinoza. The only exception is the critique of morality, where Nietzsche acknowledges Spinoza as predecessor of his own philosophy 'beyond good and evil' as much in the writings as in the 'Nachlass', appreciating him as exceptional in the history of Christian-platonic thought. The difference between Nietzsche's exoteric and esoteric image of Spinoza can be explained by the fact that Nietzsche pursues different interests in the published writings and in the unpublished notes: while he avails himself of Spinoza's philosophy as a source of ideas in the 'Nachlass', he often stylises Spinoza's positions as an antithesis of his

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2012 (available at: [http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/journal\\_of\\_nietzsche\\_studies/v043/43.2.sommer.pdf](http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/journal_of_nietzsche_studies/v043/43.2.sommer.pdf)).

<sup>4</sup> On Kuno Fischer and various other sources of Nietzsche's knowledge of Spinoza cf. Wurzer W. S., *Nietzsche und Spinoza*, op. cit., and, most importantly, Brobjer Th. H., *Nietzsche's Philosophical Context: An Intellectual Biography*, op. cit., pp. 77–82.

<sup>5</sup> On this aspect of Nietzsche's interaction with Spinoza cf.: Stambaugh Joan, "Amor dei and Amor fati: Spinoza and Nietzsche", in O'Flaherty James C./Sellner Timothy F./Helm Robert M. (eds.), *Studies in Nietzsche and the Judaeo-Christian Tradition*, Chapel Hill/London, 1985, pp. 130–142; Yovel Yirmiyahu, "Nietzsche and Spinoza: amor fati and amor dei", in Yovel Y. (ed.), *Nietzsche as Affirmative Thinker: Papers Presented at the Fifth Jerusalem Philosophical Encounter, April 1983*, Dordrecht/Boston, Nijhoff, 1986, pp. 183–203.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Gawoll H.-J., "Nietzsche und der Geist Spinozas: Die existentielle Umwandlung einer affirmativen Ontologie", art. cit.; this distinction, according to the author, is valid for the period after 1881.

own in the published writings, thus profiling his thinking and asserting its originality. In this way, Nietzsche betrays a tendency to radicalise the positions he has encountered in Spinoza, while this finally leads him to turn these positions against his 'predecessor'.

Nietzsche's indirect reception of Spinoza was most formative for Nietzsche's philosophy in the 1880s, where the concept of will to power is of crucial importance; indeed, the question of power is also at the centre of Nietzsche's critique of Spinoza. In what follows, I will examine Nietzsche's critical dialogue with Spinoza in respect of the concept of will to power. The main idea of Nietzsche's critique is that Spinoza conceives of power as a conservative force, as expressed by his principle of self-preservation. I aim to show that Nietzsche elaborates his conception of power through a critical interaction with Spinoza's principle of self-preservation given in the theory of *conatus*. Nietzsche considers this to be a theorem that is constitutive of modern metaphysical thought; with his concept of will to power, he opposes to it a principle, not of *preservation*, but of *increase*. Against the metaphysical obsession with being, which, in Nietzsche's view, is expressed by the principle of self-preservation, Nietzsche positions his conception of power as a means to revalue the idea of radical becoming. He thereby aims to define expressions of power not with regard to a subject that tries to preserve itself through them, but with regard to a self that perpetually transcends itself and, in this sense, has no stable identity.

### **Nietzsche's critique of Spinoza's 'striving for self-preservation'**

Nietzsche repeatedly attacked the modern principle of self-preservation, and not only in the context of his reception of Spinoza.<sup>7</sup> Yet Spinoza is the figure he stages as his most important opponent in this controversy, because Spinoza's metaphysical conception of the principle of self-preservation allows him to elaborate his own counter-position most incisively, that is, to position his will to power as an anti-metaphysical theorem.<sup>8</sup> The controversy is of significance for Nietzsche

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<sup>7</sup> On Nietzsche's critique of the principle of self-preservation, not only with regard to Spinoza, cf.: Abel Günter, "Nietzsche contra Selbsterhaltung: Steigerung der Macht und ewige Wiederkehr", in *Nietzsche-Studien: Internationales Jahrbuch für die Nietzsche-Forschung*, op. cit., vol. X/XI, 1981/82, pp. 367–384; Abel G., *Nietzsche: Die Dynamik der Willen zur Macht und die ewige Wiederkehr*, Berlin/New York, de Gruyter, 2019, pp. 39–81.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Gerhardt Volker, *Vom Willen zur Macht: Anthropologie und Metaphysik der Macht am exemplarischen Fall Friedrich Nietzsches*, Berlin/New York, de Gruyter, 1996, p. 193.

also inasmuch as he considers the modern tradition of self-preservation to be pursued in contemporary Darwinism.

Nietzsche's concept of will to power, which, in his published work, first appears in *Thus spoke Zarathustra*<sup>9</sup>, is not yet fully worked out, when Nietzsche reads Kuno Fischer's Spinoza-book in 1881. His reading about Spinoza will enable Nietzsche to clarify his concept of power and to profile it in contrast to Spinoza's theory of self-preservation as a principle of increase of power.<sup>10</sup> Yet, insofar as Nietzsche ascribes to Spinoza a striving for mere preservation, he gives a one-sided interpretation of Spinoza's *conatus*-theory and thereby also conceals the proximity of Spinoza's concept of power to his own.

In *Beyond Good and Evil* 13 Nietzsche opposes his concept of life as will to power to Spinoza's striving for self-preservation:

Physiologists should bethink themselves before positioning the drive for self-preservation as the cardinal drive of an organic being. Above all, a living thing wants to *discharge* its strength – life itself is will to power – : self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent *consequences* of this. – In short, here as elsewhere, beware of *superfluous* teleological principles! – one of which is the drive for self-preservation (we owe it to Spinoza's inconsistency –). This is demanded by method, which must be essentially economy of principles.<sup>11</sup>

Nietzsche here criticizes the striving for self-preservation in respect of its content as well as with regard to methodology. He considers this striving to be

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Nietzsche F., *Also sprach Zarathustra: Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen II*, "Von der Selbst-Ueberwindung", KSA (= *Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, Colli Giorgio/Montinari Mazzino (eds.), Berlin/New York, de Gruyter, 2005), vol. IV, pp. 146–149.

<sup>10</sup> In the 1870s, Nietzsche had still been operating with the concept of "self-preservation" (cf. *Menschliches, Allzumenschliches I*, KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. II, n° 92, n° 102 and n° 104), while in *Dawn*, with the concept of "feeling of power", the idea of increase of power becomes prominent (cf. *Morgenröthe II*, KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. III, n° 112; *Morgenröthe III*, KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. III, n° 204; cf. also *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft I*, KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. III, n° 13). In order to emphasize the idea of increase of power, Nietzsche, in the context of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, focuses on the concept of "will to power" (cf. Nietzsche F., *Nachlass 1882/83*, KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. X, n° 5[1], p. 187; *Nachlass 1883/84*, KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. XI, n° 24[31], p. 662; *Nachlass 1884*, KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. XI, n° 25[450], p. 133; *ibid.*, n° 26[273], p. 221; *ibid.*, n° 26[275], p. 222); the idea of increase is already expressed by the internal structure of the concept (cf. Gerhardt V., *Vom Willen zur Macht: Anthropologie und Metaphysik der Macht am exemplarischen Fall Friedrich Nietzsches*, *op. cit.*, pp. 277 sq.).

<sup>11</sup> *Jenseits von Gut und Böse I*, KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. V, n° 13, pp. 27 sq.; I render the translation by Judith Norman with slight modifications (cf. Nietzsche F., *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, Horstmann Rolf-Peter/Norman Judith (eds.), translated by Judith Norman, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 15).

a superfluous principle, since it is directed towards a state that is already given, and therefore holds it to be inadequate as the fundamental determination of a living thing. Instead, Nietzsche subordinates this striving to the broader principle of will to power, which comprises the striving for self-preservation, while being characterised itself by increase of power. Thus, he conceives of self-preservation as a non-necessary implication of increase of power. Nietzsche, furthermore, accuses Spinoza of inconsistency, dismissing the striving for self-preservation as a teleological principle to which Spinoza, as an avowedly antiteleological thinker, cannot be entitled.<sup>12</sup> While Nietzsche emphatically welcomed Spinoza's critique of teleology in 1881 on the famous postcard to Overbeck<sup>13</sup>, he now turns this critique against its author, when he accuses Spinoza himself – seemingly in a Spinozistic spirit – of thinking teleologically.

Nietzsche pursues his critique of the striving for self-preservation in the fifth book of *The Gay Science*, in an aphorism with an anti-Darwinist line of attack: “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.”<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, here, stages Spinoza as the forefather of the Darwinian “struggle for existence”<sup>15</sup>, interpreting his theory of self-preservation as the symptom of a sickly constitution: “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.”<sup>16</sup> In contrast, Nietzsche contends that “the struggle for existence is only an *exception*, a temporary restriction of the will to life”, and declares that a tendency to increase one's power is the fundamental characteristic of life: “the great and small struggle

<sup>12</sup> On Spinoza's critique of teleology cf. Spinoza, *Ethics* I, appendix (in any edition). Kuno Fischer presents this critique on pp. 233–237 of his *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie I*, 2, *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the quotation of Nietzsche's postcard to Overbeck at the beginning of this article.

<sup>14</sup> *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* V, KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. III, n° 349, pp. 585 sq. I render the translation by Walter Kaufmann (cf. Nietzsche E., *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, translated, with commentary, by Walter Kaufmann, New York/Toronto, Random House, 1974, pp. 291 sq.).

<sup>15</sup> “That our modern natural sciences have become so thoroughly entangled in this Spinozistic dogma (most recently and worst of all, Darwinism with its incomprehensibly onesided doctrine of the ‘struggle for existence’) is probably due to the origins of most natural scientists: In this respect they belong to the ‘common people’; their ancestors were poor and undistinguished people who knew the difficulties of survival only too well at firsthand.” (*Ibid.*, p. 292)

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

always revolves around superiority, around growth and expansion, around power – in accordance with the will to power which is the will of life.<sup>17</sup>

By presenting Spinoza as the theorist of self-preservation, Nietzsche misses out the fact that Spinoza's theory of *conatus* comprises both preservation of power and increase of power – this is a fact that also emerges clearly from Kuno Fischer's Spinoza-book.<sup>18</sup> The excerpts on self-preservation that Nietzsche took from Fischer's monograph clearly show that the correlation of preservation and increase of power in Spinoza's concept of *conatus* was apparent to Nietzsche: "Whatever we do, we do it to preserve and to increase our power"<sup>19</sup> – thus Nietzsche quotes Fischer's study on Spinoza in his posthumous notes.

### **The correlation of self-preservation and increase of power in Spinoza's concept of conatus**

Spinoza's concept of *conatus in suo esse perseverandi*, which, according to him, determines the nature of every particular thing,<sup>20</sup> is in fact a dynamic principle of self-preservation that comprehends a tendency to increase of power. Insofar as every thing, for Spinoza, is a particular power, which realizes itself only through its effects and does not exist as something apart from this, the essence of every thing is an activity, that is to say an affirmation of power. Because every particular thing is defined by an outside, it has to assert itself against other things: as a thing it acts against other things, which means that it strives to preserve itself against them. The power of a particular thing therefore necessarily takes the form of a striving, which thus constitutes the essence of the thing. If the being of a particular thing is nothing but an affirmation of power in relation to other things – that is to say: a striving – then a thing has no fixed identity; in preserving itself it does not aim to preserve a stable, inalterable 'self', but to affirm itself as a power capable of producing new effects over and over. To preserve oneself therefore does not mean,

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> There are at least 25 references to the correlation of preservation and increase of power in Spinoza in Fischer's *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie I, 2, op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> "Was wir thun, thun wir, um unsere Macht zu erhalten und zu vermehren [...]" (*Nachlass 1886/87, KSA, op. cit.*, vol. XII, n° 7[4], p. 261). The translation is mine; the quotation is to be found in Fischer's *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie I, 2, op. cit.*, p. 484.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Spinoza, *Ethics* III, proposition 6: "Unaqueque res, quantum in se est, in suo esse perseverare conatur"; *ibid.*, pr. 7: "Conatus, quo unaqueque res in suo esse perseverare conatur, nihil est praeter ipsius rei actualementiam."

according to Spinoza, to secure the status quo of an existing power, but rather to *preserve the striving* itself, that is to say to affirm oneself as a changing power.

In virtue of the *conatus*, a thing will not only affirm its power, but – insofar as it is conscious of its power – it will also affirm whatever serves its self-affirmation. A self-conscious *conatus* will strive for the means that secure its striving; and if it is capable of anticipating future threats and of remembering past threats to its existence, it will understand that its self-preservation is best secured if it strives to increase its power. The striving for increase of power is thus a natural implication of the striving for self-preservation of a thing which is conscious of its striving – such as, for example, a human being. Human beings and, potentially, other self-conscious beings too, therefore naturally tend to increase their power; this tendency is involved in their very affirmation of power. In this respect, Spinoza’s theory of *conatus* turns out to bear a remarkable affinity to Nietzsche’s concept of will to power, which Nietzsche, however, turns polemically against Spinoza in *Beyond Good and Evil*.

The question I would like to turn to, now, is whether one is justified to object to Spinoza, as Nietzsche does, that his principle of self-preservation is teleological and therefore threatens to undermine his system. Spinoza conceived of the *conatus* as an antiteleological concept – this is uncontested among scholars. However, it has often been objected to Spinoza that he conceives of self-preservation as an end to which certain means, such as increase of power, are subordinated. The *conatus* would therefore reveal itself, after all, as possessing a teleological structure. This critique would be justified, if self-preservation was an aim that was not yet attained by the mere fact of striving. Yet, for Spinoza, self-preservation is not an aim distinct from the striving, or from the effective power of a thing; rather, self-preservation is simply a particular thing’s mode of being. As such, the principle of *conatus* can account for teleological structures, for example in human behaviour, but it is not in itself a teleological principle.<sup>21,22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Spinoza B., *Ethics* III, prop. 6, dem.: “[...] neque ulla res aliquid in se habet, a quo possit destrui, sive quod ejus existentiam tollat [...]; sed contra ei omni, quod ejusdem existentiam potest tollere, opponitur[...]”. Cf. also *Ethics* III, prop. 4.

<sup>22</sup> This is how Kuno Fischer sees things, too; he reports and then dismisses the critique of Adolf Trendelenburg, according to which Spinoza’s system fails to realise its antiteleological claim (cf. Fischer K., *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie* I, 2, *op. cit.*, pp. 564–569). As A. Rupschus and W. Stegmaier have shown, Nietzsche ignores Fischer’s objections to Trendelenburg – although he himself did not appreciate Trendelenburg very much – and obliviously uses Trendelenburg’s critique in order to construe his antithesis to Spinoza in *Beyond Good and Evil* 13. (Cf. Rupschus Andreas/Stegmaier Werner: “„Inconsequenz Spinoza’s”? Adolf Trendelenburg als Quelle von Nietzsches Spinoza-Kritik in Jenseits von Gut und Böse 13”, in *Nietzsche-Studien: Internationales Jahrbuch für die Nietzsche-Forschung*, *op. cit.*, vol. XXXVIII, 2009, pp. 299–308.)



## Nietzsche's strategy of interpretation

Nietzsche was aware that for Spinoza, as a theorist of power, self-preservation and increase of power are interrelated. But instead of acknowledging him as his predecessor in this regard, Nietzsche denied Spinoza a theory of increase of power and appropriated this aspect for his own concept of the will to power. By assigning a principle of mere self-preservation to Spinoza and, moreover, denouncing it as inconsistent, Nietzsche passes over important aspects of Kuno Fischer's study of Spinoza. Was it his concern with originality that motivated him to do so? It would surely be an oversimplification to explain Nietzsche's interpretation by such a psychological motive only. I suggest that Nietzsche also had philosophical reasons for drawing his one-sided picture of Spinoza.

On the one hand, he neglects Spinoza's theory of power, especially the aspect of increase of power, because it disturbs him that for Spinoza the greatest power consists in the exercise of reason.<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche notes down from Kuno Fischer that only the power of reason is able to overcome the passions and to bring about the harmony of the self with itself and with others. Nietzsche counters to this: "– **ego**: – this is all **prejudice**. No reason of this kind *exists*, and without struggle and passion everything becomes weak, man as much as society."<sup>24</sup> Insofar as Nietzsche reduces all exercise of reason to affects and drives, he declares reason to be an epiphenomenon of an antagonism of powers, which can only superficially and ephemerally pacify the underlying struggle. He aims to determine his concept of power by "struggle" and "passion" and therefore tries to exclude every possibility of bringing together Spinoza's rationalist theory of power and his own.

On the other hand, Nietzsche repudiates the essentialism of Spinoza's theory of power. For Spinoza, indeed, every finite thing has an eternal essence, in virtue of which it takes part in the divine substance, as its mode. The eternal essence is the power of acting (*potentia agendi*) of the substance, which in the finite thing has become modified into a *conatus*.<sup>25</sup> In Nietzsche's view, to conceive of the power of a thing as its essence means to understand the thing as a unitary self with a fixed

<sup>23</sup> "Our reason is our greatest power", Nietzsche notes down in the excerpt from Kuno Fischer where he tackles the Spinozian striving for self-preservation (*Nachlass 1881*, KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. IX, n° 11 [193], p. 517; cf. Spinoza B., *Ethics* V, praefatio). In explaining Nietzsche's denial of Spinoza's theory of power by his refusal of rationalism, I hereby refer to the interpretation of: Abel G., *Nietzsche: Die Dynamik der Willen zur Macht und die ewige Wiederkehr*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>24</sup> "– **ego**: das Alles ist **Vorurtheil**. Es giebt gar keine Vernunft der Art, und ohne Kampf und Leidenschaft wird alles schwach, Mensch und Gesellschaft." (*Nachlass 1881*, KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. IX, n° 11 [193], p. 517.)

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Bartuschat Wolfgang, *Spinozas Theorie des Menschen*, Hamburg, Meiner, 1992, pp. 137 sq.

identity. The *conatus*, then, would be the tendency of a thing's essence to preserve itself as what it is. With his theory of *conatus*, Spinoza, in Nietzsche's view, conceives of power as a fundamentally conservative force. In an unpublished note, Nietzsche writes: "Spinoza's statement on self-preservation should, if it were true, bring all change to an end: but the statement is wrong, the *opposite* is true. Precisely with regard to a living thing one can show most clearly that it does everything, not to preserve itself, but to become more..."<sup>26</sup> Nietzsche, in contrast, wants to emphasize the aspect of becoming, of self-transcendence and of finiteness in power. Power, according to him, has an essentially expansive dynamic, which undermines the very idea of a self-preservative identity.

These divergences might be the reason why Nietzsche stresses the contrast between Spinoza and himself and blocks out of his image of Spinoza the aspect that became constitutive of his own thinking: *increase of power*.

### **Nietzsche's concept of power against the background of his interpretation of Spinoza**

By opposing his concept of will to power to the modern principle of self-preservation, Nietzsche mainly targets the ideas of unity and of identity that are determinant of this principle. He directs the concept of will to power against the notion of a subject wanting to preserve itself as a unity with a stable identity; as opposed to this, he maintains the idea of, firstly, an internal conflictuality that forms every individual; secondly, a perpetual "self-overcoming"<sup>27</sup> that calls in question the identity of the individual and that even allows for its possible destruction. Hereby, Nietzsche wants to position the will to power as an alternative concept to a thinking that, with self-preservation, contends a "principle of universal stasis"<sup>28</sup>.

Yirmiyahu Yovel has suggested that Nietzsche, compared with Spinoza, inverts the relation between self-preservation and increase of power: While Spinoza stresses the striving for self-preservation and sees the increase of power as a consequence of this striving, Nietzsche regards the striving for increase as primary, subordinating self-preservation to it and allowing for preservation to be sacrificed for the sake of increase of power.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *Nachlass 1888*, KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. XIII, n° 14[121], p. 301.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *Also sprach Zarathustra II*, "Von der Selbst-Ueberwindung", KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. IV, pp. 146–149.

<sup>28</sup> "[...] ein Prinzip universellen Stillstands [...]" (Gerhardt V., *Vom Willen zur Macht: Anthropologie und Metaphysik der Macht am exemplarischen Fall Friedrich Nietzsches*, *op. cit.*, p. 193).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Yovel Y., "Nietzsche and Spinoza: *amor fati* and *amor dei*", *art. cit.*, p. 192.

With regard to Nietzsche's late writings, however, it is far from clear that self-preservation can be subordinated to increase of power as clearly as this. Sure enough, from *Thus spoke Zarathustra* to the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche had constantly been attacking the principle of self-preservation. But, contrary to what he had programmatically announced there, he combines the two concepts again in his late writings: Thus, in *Twilight of the Idols*, he speaks of "self-preservation and self-extension";<sup>30</sup> again, in *The Antichrist*, he writes about the "deepest laws of preservation and increase"<sup>31</sup> of life, and in his posthumous fragments, he even relates the concept of will to power to the "viewpoint of conditions of preservation and increase with regard to complex entities of relative length of life within becoming"<sup>32</sup>.

What, then, is it that distinguishes the Nietzschean concept of self-preservation from Spinoza's *conservatio sui*? I want to suggest that Nietzsche gives a paradoxical interpretation of the idea of preservation, by directing the striving for preservation towards "struggle" and "self-overcoming": What wants to preserve itself, thus, is not a stable identity, but a will to power that perpetually conquers itself, that wants to increase its power and therefore does not remain identical to itself. The point of this concept of preservation is to be found in Nietzsche's statements that "not a being, but the struggle itself wants to preserve itself, wants to increase and to become aware of itself"<sup>33</sup>; that – to quote another posthumous note – "[...] not a subject" strives to preserve itself, "but a struggle [...]"<sup>34</sup>. These quotations show that Nietzsche endeavours to free the concept of preservation from the context of a metaphysics of substance supposedly focussed on self-identity, and to place it, instead, into the service of an inwardly antagonistic self-overcoming. In a way, Nietzsche hereby turns the idea of preservation against the concept of self-preservation, which he interprets as the symptom of a weak will – and which he accordingly ascribes to Spinoza. According to Nietzsche, such a weak will tries "to

<sup>30</sup> "[...] Selbsterhaltung und Selbsterweiterung [...]" (*Götzen-Dämmerung*, "Streifzüge eines Unzeitgemässen 19", KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. VI, p. 123). Cf. *Nachlass 1886*, KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. XII, n° 2[165], p. 149; *Nachlass 1887*, *ibid.*, n° 9[38], p. 352. The quotation of this unpublished note, as well as the two following ones, is taken from Rupschus A./Stegmaier W., "„Inconsequenz Spinoza's"? Adolf Trendelenburg als Quelle von Nietzsches Spinoza-Kritik in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* 13", *art. cit.*

<sup>31</sup> "[...] tiefsten Erhaltungs- und Wachstums-Gesetzen [...]" (*Der Antichrist* 11, KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. VI, p. 177).

<sup>32</sup> "[...] Gesichtspunkt von Erhaltungs-Steigerungs-Bedingungen in Hinsicht auf komplexe Gebilde von relativer Dauer des Lebens innerhalb des Werdens [...]" (*Nachlass 1887/88*, KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. XIII, n° 11[73], p. 36).

<sup>33</sup> "[...] sich nicht ein Wesen, sondern der Kampf selber erhalten will, wachsen will und sich bewußt sein will [...]" (*Nachlass 1885/86*, KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. XII, n° 1[124], p. 40).

<sup>34</sup> "[...] nicht ein Subjekt [...] sondern ein Kampf [...]" (*ibid.*).

preserve a world of what *is*, what remains, what is equivalent”<sup>35</sup>, whilst the strength of the will manifests itself in the capacity to direct the ‘striving for preservation’ towards transformation and becoming. This is what “the highest *will to power*” does according to Nietzsche, when it affirms the idea of eternal recurrence of the same: it “stamps the character of being onto becoming [...]”<sup>36</sup>, which means that it does not want to preserve anything other than what is continually changing. In this sense, Nietzsche brings the idea of preservation into the service of the Pindarian thought: “become who you are!”<sup>37</sup>.

Against the background of the interpretation of Spinoza’s principle of self-preservation given here, it becomes clear that Nietzsche’s endeavour to renew the concept of *conservatio sui* draws him much nearer to Spinoza than Nietzsche himself would have admitted. Nietzsche’s attempts to distance himself from Spinoza, as I have shown here with respect to the concept of power, are aimed at convicting his ‘predecessor’ of being inconsistent with regard to his own positions. With regard to Spinoza, one could say, with A. Rupschus and W. Stegmaier, that Nietzsche himself became inconsistent.<sup>38</sup>

It seems that, what is most important for Nietzsche, is to stress the differences between Spinoza and himself. The more apparent the similarities are, the more he reacts by dissociating himself from Spinoza. There are various reasons for this dissociation, as I have tried to show in this paper. As to the psychological reasons, they might have been most lucidly described by Nietzsche himself in the following little dialogue: “A: ‘The way in which he misunderstands me publicly, proves to me that he has understood me all too well.’ B: ‘Take it positively! His respect for you has greatly increased, since he already believes it to be necessary to defame you.’”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> “[...] eine Welt des Seienden zu erhalten, des Verharrenden, Gleichwerthigen [...]” (*Nachlass 1886/87*, KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. XII, n° 7[54], 312).

<sup>36</sup> “Dem Werden den Charakter des Seins aufzuprägen – das ist der höchste Wille zur Macht” (*Ibid.*)

<sup>37</sup> „Werde, der du bist!“ (*Also sprach Zarathustra* IV, “Das Honig-Opfer”, KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. IV, p. 297). Cf. Pindar, *Pythian Odes* II, 72 (in any edition), as well as Nietzsche F, *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* III, KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. III, n° 270, p. 519; *Also sprach Zarathustra* III, “Der Genesende” 2, KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. IV, p. 275 and the subtitle of *Ecce Homo: Wie man wird, was man ist*, KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. VI, p. 255.

<sup>38</sup> This is indeed the conclusion that Rupschus and Stegmaier draw from their study of the relation between Spinoza’s *conatus* and Nietzsche’s will to power (cf. Rupschus A./Stegmaier W., “Inconsequenz Spinoza’s?” Adolf Trendelenburg als Quelle von Nietzsches Spinoza-Kritik in *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* 13”, *art. cit.*, p. 308).

<sup>39</sup> This is my translation of the unpublished note in: *Nachlass 1881/82*, KSA, *op. cit.*, vol. IX, n° 16[17], p. 663: “A: „Die Art, wie er mich öffentlich mißversteht, beweist mir, daß er mich nur gar zu gut verstanden hat.“ – B: „Nimm es von der besten Seite! Du bist bei ihm gewaltig in der Achtung gestiegen; er hält es bereits nöthig, dich zu verleumden.“

In reconstructing Nietzsche's critical dialogue with Spinoza, I aimed to show that he elaborates his conception of will to power through a critical interaction with Spinoza's principle of self-preservation. Nietzsche's conception of power, one of the most influential aspects of his philosophy, indeed owes its specific form to the indirect reception of Spinoza's *conatus* theory. Yet, Nietzsche stylizes the will to power as an antithesis to Spinoza's *conatus* and to the whole tradition of self-preservation, opposing dynamic self-transcendence and self-expansion to an alleged self-preservative immobility. As I have shown, Nietzsche gains this antithesis by obliterating the fact that Spinoza himself conceived of power as a dynamic principle including a tendency to increase. In this respect, Spinoza's theory of power anticipated Nietzsche's own concept of the will to power. Instead of being a radical restart in the history of philosophy, as Nietzsche claims, his theory of power takes up the 'metaphysical' tradition represented by Spinoza. It thus seems that Spinoza is Nietzsche's "predecessor" not only with regard to the aspects Nietzsche himself hailed on his famous postcard to Overbeck.