

# Vital Strategy: Nietzschean Practices of Slowness and the Preservation of Fragile Life

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*increscunt animi, virescit volnere virtus*  
– Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*

Why has the pleasure of slowness disappeared?  
– Milan Kundera, *Slowness*

It is now trite to mention the reciprocal nature of affect, that it involves interactions between two or more bodies, that affectivity means precisely the capacity for acting and being acted upon, that feeling is a type of passion whose formation depends on the synthetic intensity of external forces. The Deleuzian celebration of Spinoza's relational body and the rhizomic or connective function of affect—though mostly true—may also have fostered a misunderstanding of affect as something intrinsically good, even addictive and narcotic, a view that ignores the dark side of affect that Spinoza keeps reminding us of in *Ethics* “[...] there is of good and evil in the affects” (Spinoza 114). For human beings, who are modes or finite *natura naturatas* in the Spinozian system, affects are necessary, but not necessarily joyful. Excessive and intensive affects block the process of the mind's formulating adequate ideas pertaining to true causes or even stifle the flourishing of life by forcibly decomposing the relations on which a composite body lives. How,

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then, would one deal with such a precarious state of life with its unbalanced thrusts of external forces? To tame the (destructive) power of affects—what Spinoza calls the “human bondage”—demands some practical means of proceeding that recognizes our vulnerability, especially in the initial and frail stage of life. My argument is that such a practical guide to taming destructive affects may be found in Nietzsche's autobiographical *Ecce Homo*, which recounts his lifelong endeavor to emancipate life from external and subjugating affects. Through a series of comments on both the first half of his life and his previous works, Nietzsche narrates the way he manages excessive affects from the external world, by *slowing down* his reactive affectivity, especially when he is troubled by sickness and hardships in life. Such a strategy aptly renders both the interactive and durational nature of affect as well as the dynamic processes of bodily interactions. To appreciate the Nietzschean art of slowness when facing seemingly unbearable affects, one needs to revisit the Spinozian theory of affect and Deleuze's further explications of that theory. I seek to demonstrate that for Nietzsche, the ability to alter and extend the duration of affect formation in the face of excessive external force is central to dealing with one's fatality and actively cultivating the will to power. The vital strategy of slowly reacting to destructive affects entails an implicit reevaluation of the value of slowness that would justify the Spinozian-Deleuzian theory of affect, which shows that affect works upon the relations between simple bodies and causes changes in speed. Slowness does not signify passivity and sickness but serves as a pragmatic methodology for cultivating one's *conatus* and preparing for the formation of common notions in order to generate actions. It already presupposes an overcoming of a naturalist tendency in the human psychology of *ressentiment* that drives one to reverse the master-slave power relation through ruse and revenge. Such slowness allows immersion in the Dionysian tragic spirit that resolutely affirms and celebrates life even with the awareness of its unavoidable hurdles and sufferings. As Nietzsche writes, “He reacts slowly to every kind of stimulus, with that slowness which a protracted caution and a willed pride have bred in him—he tests an approaching stimulus, he is far from going out to

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meet it” (*EH* “Wise” §2). The slow and contemplative reactions in advancing knowledge of the external world—with innate joyfulness and certainty in the self—help prevent instant destruction of the relational rhythm of the body and free one from conforming to the bondage of affective power. Nietzsche thus provides us with practical tactics to deal with seemingly unbearable external affects at the beginning of our affective lives, when passivity and the state of affairs of being affected occupy most of our experience.

In his early work of the 1960s, Deleuze discerned common philosophical themes in Nietzsche and Spinoza, centering on their understanding of the body as a vibrant composite of forces and relations; and their shared project of seeking ways of overcoming the natural passivity of human beings by improving their *conatus* or will to power. In their view, the process of actualizing such potentiality may be impeded by the natural inclination to succumb to passive and decadent affects, and subsequently to see one’s power of acting diminished. Nietzsche’s strategy of slowness seems to function as a hypothetical and educational solution: to ward off immediate reactions to the sudden arrival of multiple affects and instead slow down, to lengthen the time needed to form any actual feeling, in order to leave time for evaluating and reevaluating whether the external forces are agreeable or not. The strategy of slowing down one’s reception of external affects serves as a necessary condition for the individual cultivation of the active will to power.

### Spinoza and affective human bondage

As Deleuze points out in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Spinoza and Nietzsche share a common inquiry into the notions of the body and force or affect, as well as a rejection of the dominance of the mind over the body:

Spinoza suggested a new direction for the sciences and philosophy. He said that we do not even know what a body *can do*, we talk about consciousness and spirit and chatter on about it all, but we do not know what a body is capable of, what forces

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belong to it or what they are preparing for. Nietzsche knew that the hour had come [...] Like Freud, Nietzsche thinks that consciousness is the region of the ego affected by the external world (Deleuze: 1983, 39).

The rediscovery of the logic of bodily interactions mediated via physical affections and understood as mental affects is later adopted as perhaps the golden maxim of the rather young field of affect theory. In their collaborative efforts to lay out affect as an explicit subject of study, Melissa Gregg and Greg Seigworth recognize Spinoza as a foundational thinker in his systematic elaborations on affectivity as the essence of all modes and as a theoretical apparatus for decoding how power functions in nature: “In what undoubtedly has become one of the most oft-cited quotations concerning affect, Baruch Spinoza maintained ‘No one has yet determined what the body can do’” (Gregg and Seigworth 3). Since the publication of Gregg and Seigworth’s book, affect theory has taken more pragmatic and planetary directions concerning its practical applications to global political and cultural affairs (12). Spinoza’s perennial question is still largely left unresolved and underdeveloped, especially when one considers it in the context of its initial enunciation:

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 [...] the body itself, simply from the laws of its own nature, can do many things which its mind wonders at (Spinoza 71-72).

The radicalness of Spinoza’s claim intensifies exponentially once we move past the first sentence. To understand the mechanism of the body, Spinoza addresses the importance of attending to the body beyond the laws of Nature,

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which alone are incapable of uncovering the causal relation in the variations of the body, and treating it as a subsidiary and passive entity that functions merely within the reign of the mind guided by the mechanical natural laws. Further, Spinoza outlines the particular topics that one needs to consider when studying the body, “the laws of its own nature” that presumably at times operate on its own, and in ways that determine the functions of the body. In other words, the way a body works depends on its very relational composition alone, rather than the command of the mind. In the end, Spinoza speculates that what the body does may exceed the range of our rational understanding, or its actions could provide new sources for the accumulation of knowledge. We may thus arrive at the conclusion that for Spinoza the body is not merely subject to the directions of the mind; rather, its distinctive and independent capabilities of affections offer novel knowledge to the mind, and hence its degree of importance is *no less than* that of the mind. To comprehend the mechanism of bodily actions under the law of Nature at first is to think spatially and temporally, in terms of both the relational and physical structure of the body that constantly undergoes changes, and the processive formation of any affect that necessarily involves a temporal variation from a physical affection of the body to the mind’s understanding of it. The two categorical dimensions of time and space consequentially lead to an awareness that identifies affect as an effect rather than a cause and provides instructional directions for disentangling the way bodily interactions take place and develop. Nietzsche’s strategy of slowness for dealing with excessive affects, as I later show, results precisely from his insights into the mechanism of affect formation.

***a. The Spinozian parallelistic cosmos and the primacy of the body***

How, then, should we approach the structure of the body as well as the ordinal duration from affection to affect? The answers can be found in Spinoza’s *Ethics*. Though the geometrically constructed work encompasses a myriad of subjects of philosophical inquiry, one fundamental project resides in Spinoza’s

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attempt to free the captive human mind from passive affects by delineating the dynamic transition in the faculty of understanding from inadequate to adequate and tracing backward from emotional effects to their causes. That which is said to be free, according to Spinoza, “exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone” (2). Such a divine state of being, however, has yet to be taken as a rational end for humans, as they tend to lack the power to control and moderate external affects, so that, as Spinoza observes, “[...] men are commonly ignorant of the causes of their appetites [...] they are conscious of their actions and appetites, but not aware of the causes by which they are determined to want something” (115). The epistemological task Spinoza undertakes is thus to clarify the dynamic process through which the mind obtains adequate ideas and subsequently understands both the cause and effect of external affects so that the bodily individuals are capable of acting freely and concurrently knowing their actions. With respect to the organization and structure of the *Ethics*, however, we note that the Spinozian epistemology of affect is strictly situated within his univocal metaphysical system, such that the limited and modal power of affectivity develops only in analogous reference to the model of God, or absolutely infinite nature.

A structural triad constitutes the Spinozian system: a substance or god, attributes or the medium through which it generates essential expressions, and finite modes as its production. Such a system functions as an inclusive entirety where substance encloses all modes mediated via attributes in an immanent and indirect way, whose sustenance is perfect and independent of any external entity.<sup>1</sup> The infinite essence of the substance—as the power of affectivity—enables interaction and communication between elements in the system, which, because of God’s perfect qualities of acting and knowing, are immediately and absolutely understood and affirmed. As *natura naturans* (naturing nature), substance expresses God’s essence and produces its crea-

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<sup>1</sup>See “IP15: *Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God*” (Spinoza 10).

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tures, necessarily. Spinoza continues to demonstrate that the divine power of acting and suffering affect maintains an equilibrium—his capability of generating affects in the process of creating modes has the same valence as the capability of being affected. Though following the same affective dynamism, finite modes only share a limited portion of the essence and power of God. Therefore, lacking power<sup>2</sup>, modes are capable of exercising the power of acting and being acted upon, and they can actualize these capabilities in a great many ways. The affective capacity of each individual mode varies in accordance with the amount of reality or perfection it contains.

Equipped with only finite affectivity, modes at the initial stage maintain a passivity in both body and mind, being unable to understand external causes adequately. Hence, a temporal duration is required for the process of knowledge formation between the attribute of Thought and that of Extension.<sup>3</sup> Spinoza asserts that modes, initially, have only inadequate ideas that provide partial understanding of their experience and by no means explain the causes of affects, nor the ways to generate and maintain existence. Given his axiom that man thinks<sup>4</sup>, the transition from inadequate ideas to adequate ones must proceed through a series of affective encounters with external singular en-

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<sup>2</sup>For Spinoza, power, or the capacity for expressing and suffering affects, is understood as the actualized quality of essence. Consider the absolute case of God, “IP34: *God’s power is his essence itself*” (Spinoza 25). In the same vein, for modes with only a limited quality of essence, the overall quantity of their power is necessarily less and, not in the state of *causa sui*, their essential power needs to be actualized and developed.

<sup>3</sup>Unlike the Cartesian assertion in *Meditations* that only two attributes—Thought and Extension—exist, Spinoza regards such an assertion as a result of the limitations of human intellect. In *Ethics*, Spinoza defines the attribute in terms of essence: “ID4: *By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence*” (Spinoza 1). And since God’s essence is infinite (derived from “IP11: *God, or a substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence, necessarily exist*” (Spinoza 7), the quantity of attributes must be infinite too.

<sup>4</sup>In IIA2. This is the case even though, based on his note that “we know that we think” (Spinoza 32), it seems that the actualization of such an axiom presupposes a reflexive consciousness that addresses both the thought object and the activity of the self.

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ties as the sources of contemplation: “IIA5: *We neither feel nor perceive any singular things, except bodies and modes of thinking*” (5). We may deduce further that the two sources of affective understanding, for Spinoza, reside in both the body and the mind—the expressive mode under the attribute of Extension in constant movement or rest or an idea under the attribute of Thought as a result of knowing a body. In other words, the two sources for the transition from inadequate to adequate ideas are both related to the extensive and expressive body, the difference depending on whether such a relation is direct or indirect. It is from this perspective that we may approach Spinoza’s statement concerning the connection between body and mind: “[...] we understand not only that the human mind is united to the body, but also what should be understood by the union of the mind and body” (40). Spinoza then presents his seminal argument: “[...] no one will be able to understand it adequately, or distinctly, unless he first knows adequately the nature of our body” (40). The body, for Spinoza, is thus not only considered central to our process of knowledge formation, but also holds *primacy* in his epistemology, and by establishing such a ground, he liberates the body from the dominance of the mind over the body which has reigned throughout the history of philosophy. Borrowing a Leibnizian term, Deleuze characterizes the Spinozian system as a form of parallelism that stresses the mutual and equally potent influence between mind and body:

One of the most famous theoretical theses of Spinoza is known by the name of parallelism; it does not consist merely in denying any real causality between the mind and the body, it disallows any primacy of the one over the other. If Spinoza rejects any superiority of the mind over the body, this is not in order to establish a superiority of the body over the mind, which would be no more intelligible than the conversely it was said that when the body acted, the mind was acted upon in turn (the rule of the inverse relation, cf. Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, articles 1 and 2). According to the *Ethics*, on the contrary, what is an

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action in the mind is necessarily an action in the body as well, and what is a passion in the body is necessarily a passion in the mind. There is no primacy of one series over the other. (Deleuze 1988, 18)

The significance of Spinozian parallelism, Deleuze contends, lies in its modal correspondence, its isonomy of principles, and subsequently the equality of being for all modes. The series of modes of each attribute finds a corresponding sequence—in the form of idea or body—in the other perceptible attribute and depend mutually upon each other for their being, as Spinoza says: “IIP7: *The order of and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things*” (Spinoza 35). In addition, as Deleuze understands parallelism, it is implied in the notion that there is “an equality of principle between autonomous or independent series” (Deleuze 1990, 108). That the modes function under the same principle in different attributes, consequently, prevents the superiority of one form of modal being over the other, which underlines Spinoza’s effort to overturn the Leibnizian model that presupposes a preeminence of principles, namely, the mechanistic laws that determine the movement of modes. The immanence of substance in the Spinozian system -- meaning the cause of his existence is grounded only in himself -- establishes God as the univocal causality for all -- “the viewpoint of an immanent God and immanent causality” (109) -- and because of his concomitant acting and understanding, the modal sequence of all attributes necessarily unfolds in accordance with the substance’s principle. The first two formulations then lead to a third one, which demonstrates the identity of being: the univocal principle of causality of substance and the correspondence of modes ensure the equality of being of all modes, the only difference being the attributes to which they belong, and thus all modes are the affections of God’s expressions. The Spinozian parallelistic system allows the body to be the first order of inquiry into the mechanism of affect.

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### ***b. Affect, or the unavoidable***

It is curious how Spinoza distinguishes the different ways of existence in substance and its productions (the modes), especially considering Spinoza’s reflections on the causal connections between essence and existence. Though free substance’s existence is already immanent in its essence (IP11, IP34, IP35) and the modes are described as affective effects of the substance’s actions of knowing and acting—or expressive productions—that participate necessarily in its essence, Spinoza refuses to simplistically grant the same substantial pattern of being to modes: “IIA1: The essence of man does not involve necessarily existence, that is, from the order of Nature it can happen equally that this or that man does not exist, or that he does not exist” (Spinoza 32). To be *causa sui* of one’s own existence, action and the understanding of that action need to come from the essence alone, without any dependence on external affections. That is, such action should be guided by adequate ideas that explicate both the causes and the effects, but such a state of perfection exists only in God, and the passage to acquiring this power is the rational end for man. For human beings, as one of the infinite number of finite modes in all-inclusive Nature, Spinoza remarks, passively suffering affections from external causes is unavoidable: “IVP2: *We are acted on, insofar as we are part of Nature, which cannot be conceived through itself, without the others*” (118). At the same time, such a process implies a chance to change, by potentially enabling the transition from inadequate ideas to adequate ones: “IVP4: *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*” (118). Spinoza refuses to consider human beings as exceptions in his parallelistic cosmos, and as Aurelia Armstrong aptly asserts, Spinoza’s insistence on the *causa sui* immanence within the individual and his view of the affective expansion of the body together engender an incompatibility that prevents the eventual arrival of absolutely freedom of man:

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While it is true that Spinoza envisages process in ethical perfection as a matter of gaining an understanding of ourselves as parts of a more encompassing whole and that he views the process as involving an expansion of the boundaries of atomic individuality, his affirmation of the strict immanence of human being in nature precludes the possibility of a total liberation from external determination and, therefore, from the passions (Armstrong 13).

Given the unavoidable condition of affect, how does a mode engender and maintain its existence? For Spinoza, the existence of any entity is linked to the intensive power of essence—or its affective capacity: “To be able not to exist is to lack power, and conversely, to be able to exist is to have power” (Spinoza 8). Additionally, as stated in the previous section, though in the Spinozian system, affective interactions operative parallelistically with respect to both the body and the mind, the body serves as the primary condition for the existence of any idea, including a reflexive one grounded by another idea. Central to our understanding of the variation in the degrees of power of existence of modes is the question of the mechanism of the compositional changes in the body while it undergoes external affections. As Deleuze clarifies, “[...] a mode’s essence is a determinate degree of intensity, an irreducible degree of power; a mode exists, if it actually possesses a very great number of extensive parts corresponding to its essence or degree of power” (Deleuze 1990, 202).

The keys to decoding the relation between variations of the body and the formation of affect can be deduced from Spinoza’s definition of affect: “D3: *By affect I understand 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 70). Despite the perhaps potentially confusing definition (i.e. affection and affect together denote the consequence of a body’s being acted upon), affect contains both a synchronic and a diachronic sense, the former entailing the reflexive and affirmative understanding of the inten-

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sity of the affective encounter; and the latter, the progressive and durational change of the structural and relational composition of the body. In other words, the concept of affect is understood by Spinoza (and later Nietzsche) as encompassing both the temporal and spatial domains, and the practice of taming and moderating affects can be rendered in these two directions.

Spinoza does not interpret the notion of the body from a physiological perspective; rather, he seeks the means by which one body is extrinsically distinguished from the other, and thus external relation—the result of similar or different speeds—serves as the essential criterion. All bodies are constantly in a state of either movement or rest, sustained or changed unavoidably by the affects from external bodies. An individual—for example, a human being—is composed of a collection of simple bodies and a set of relations, and such a composite of individual bodies would have its internal relational structure and state of movement and rest altered, depending on whether the extensive bodily affections agree with the existent relations. The number of simple bodies as well as the various relational construction within an existing individual together expresses the power of essence in its capacity of being affected in a great many ways. Such affective power pertaining to its very essence increases or decreases through interactions with extensive bodies, causing the feelings of joy or sadness respectively (IIP53, IIP55). Spinoza asserts that for every existing mode, there is inherently a striving for self-preservation stemming from one’s own essence (or *conatus*)—“The striving to preserve itself is the very essence of a thing” (127)—and the more agreeable external affects one experiences, the more the power of affectivity becomes actualized for longer durations of existence. Deleuze lucidly formulates the gradational trait of the *conatus* between different kinds of bodies:

A simple body’s *conatus* can only be the effort to preserve the state to which it has been determined; and a composite body’s *conatus* only the effort to preserve the relation of movement and rest that defines it, that is, to maintain constantly renewed parts in the relation that defines its existence (Deleuze 1990, 230).

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External bodily and intellectual affects act directly upon various modes of a composite body under different attributes, but both cause variations in the essential power and relational speed of the *conatus*. Recall that Spinoza's observation that most men—equipped only with inadequate ideas—are not capable of executing their intellect and thinking backwards from effects to the causes, and thus live constrained by passions—the human bondage of affects. To emancipate oneself and act freely in accordance only with reason, Spinoza states, the ideas that one explores for one's understanding need to be adequate, which means that such ideas must contain both the effects and the causes of external affects and at the same time serve as the sole guidance for their active actions. Continuous external affects agreeable to the *conatus* and relational structure would foster the generation of common notions, which indicate to the affected mode the common features of the external affecting entity with respect to the composition of the individual or the organization of relations and are by nature universal and adequate. Continuous external affects that are agreeable to the *conatus* and relational structure of a body may foster the generation of common notions. Such common notions indicate to the affected mode those features of the external affecting entity that are common to the composition of the individual or the organization of relations of the individual, and these common notions are by nature universal and adequate. Common notions trigger the faculty of understanding in that they enable individuals to perceive extensive affections with adequate ideas that reveal both their causes and their effects and, perhaps more importantly, allow them to act in accordance with reason and produce joyful actions rather than passions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>For a comprehensive analysis of the process of the transition from passive joy to active joy, see Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, 273-288.

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## Nietzsche: in the middle of affective life

The affective transformation Spinoza depicts, from passion to action through the cultivation of common notions, stresses primarily the beginning and the end of the course of the formation of reason. Singular individuals consisting of multiple simple modes start with a lacuna filled with inadequate ideas that are incapable of determining the causes of external affects; they may subsequently—in a great many ways—gain freedom in the practice of actions conditioned solely in themselves under the direction of reason. Much more needs to be said, however, about the affective life during the process, especially considering Spinoza's warning of the destructive potential of external affections: "IIP4: *No thing can be destroyed except through an external cause*" (Spinoza 75). Relational structures constantly encounter agreeable or disagreeable affects of various degrees of intensity, and have essential power increased or diminished as a consequence of the change in their compositional form. However, the preservation of the state of movement conditioned by our *conatus* seems always to fail when receiving excessive and destructive affects that would immediately break down the relations and terminate the vitality of the individual. How then do we practically live an affective life and minimize the precariousness of the process? Nietzsche's autobiographical work *Ecce Homo*—in which he recounts his journey of managing excessive affects and regaining control over his fatality—may serve as a set of invaluable strategies for addressing the Spinozian problematic. Together they comprise a relay of tactics for living—theoretically and practically—an affective life, and as Armstrong rightly argues, though Spinoza and Nietzsche are profoundly influenced by the Stoic therapy of desire (that unrealistically advocates complete detachments from passions), they choose to meet the Stoics only half way. That is, they contemplate how to live a fateful life of inexorable affect as such with joy and affirmation: "[...] although both philosophers follow the Stoics in conceiving of ethics as a therapeutic enterprise that aims at human freedom and flourishing, they part company with Stoicism in refusing to identify flourishing with freedom from passions" (Armstrong 6).

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Any postulation or tracing of an absolute beginning or end already suggests a temporal difference—a present that differs from the contracted past that already is. The Spinozian conception of affective lives for modes as the productions of God is preceded by the formation of the entirety of Nature: “IP1: *A substance is prior in nature to its affections*” (Spinoza 2). The beginning of a new modal life necessarily takes place within a network of infinite modes; hence we arrive at Deleuze’s famous reflection on the spirit of empiricism, “Things do not begin to live except in the middle” (Deleuze and Parnet 55). At the age of forty-five, a time Nietzsche deems to be fully ripe to look back on his bygone past, he designates the term “fatality” to denote precisely such a middle state at the beginning of his life, situated between his dead father and a living mother:

The fortunateness of my existence, its uniqueness perhaps, lies in its fatality: to express it in the form of a riddle, as my father I have already died, as my mother I still live and grow old. This twofold origin, as it were from the highest and the lowest rung of the ladder of life, at once *décadent* and *beginning* – this if anything explains that neutrality, that freedom from party in relation to the total problem of life which perhaps distinguishes me (*EH* “Wise” §1).

Fatality—one central theme of this book indicated in the title “How One Becomes What One Is”—contains such a twofold form of existence that is in the middle of a life, embodying and also prone to the tendencies of life and death: one becomes immediately subject to the two poles of life or death after being born, a necessary consequence of living as one mode amongst an infinity of other modes. Fatality is a given that disobeys the rule of non-contradiction because of the middle. As Derrida explicates it: “[...] my fatality derives from my very genealogy, from my father and mother, from the fact that I decline, in the form of a riddle, as my parents’ identity [...] I am between the two: this lot has fallen to me, it is a ‘chance,’ a throw of the dice” (Derrida 15). The Nietzschean project of reflecting upon and glorifying his

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earlier life—in the middle of his own life and with no one else but himself as the intended audience—“And I tell myself my own life” (*EH* “epigraphy”)—begins from a beginning that is already in the middle, and hence an exact temporal locus is impossible to assign.<sup>6</sup> For Derrida, the deliberate inclusion of a signature and omission of the date signify Nietzsche’s awareness of the double and constantly-shifting middle-ness of autobiographical writing and its supposed beginning: “This difficulty crops up wherever one seeks to make a *determination*: in order to date an event, of course, but also in order to identify the beginning of a text, the origin of life, or the first movement of a signature. These are all problems of the borderline” (Derrida 13). A fixed temporality regarding the narration of a particular life is therefore impossible, which further illustrates the Nietzschean notion of fatality: a seemingly decided trajectory that is uncertain in itself, a time-insensitive flux of becoming that refuses to be cut and enclosed by any static border. The parental figures that manifest in the text do not refer to concrete individuals, but have been deconstructed into states of a-personal pure vitality and refluxed back into the plurality of floating forces. *Ecce Homo* thus needs to be read as a sketch of the everlasting fatality of becoming, with no traceable absolute origin or predictable futurity, and the Nietzschean strategies aimed at processing excessive affects for the preservation of an ongoing life hence serve to ameliorate the overly idealistic tone of Spinoza’s *Ethics*. According to Babette Babich, such an obscure and seemingly self-effacing narrative style exerted in Nietzsche’s autobiography—the double attempt of both disclosing and dissolving his *persona*—evinces his esoteric approach to an enigmatic life of uncertainty: “For Nietzsche, a life in the ‘grand style’ expresses a life at one with the knowledge of the essential dissimulation at the core of life, the basic illusion of existence, and the artist’s resolve to continue his or her part in the

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<sup>6</sup>Sarah Kofman delves into Nietzsche’s correspondences and argues—based on his usage of a metaphor “high noon”—that for Nietzsche, the age of forty-five means not simply the median but the exact mean point of his life: “*Ecce homo* was not intended to be Nietzsche’s last book. The correspondence of the period presents it as a threshold book, a ‘high noon,’ facing two ways: it closes one door and opens another” (Kofman 51).



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illusion” (Babich 108). On his solitary road to reevaluating and overcoming the bestiality and decadence of humanity, Nietzsche refuses naïve optimism but shares a continual vigilance and circumspection towards the corporeal and representational world of unpredictable and imminent precariousness.

In addition to the untimely understanding of the body in terms of relation and affect that binds Spinoza and Nietzsche together, another line of thought connects them, namely that affect constitutes an irreducible and collateral aspect of our very life. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche offers his definition of life as an assemblage of various forces:

What we call ‘life’ is an assemblage of forces sharing a nutritive process. Essential to this nutritive process are all so-called sensations, ideas and thoughts, i.e. (1) a resistance to external forces, (2) an arrangement of internal forces according to forms and rhythms and (3) an estimation of what to absorb and what to excrete” (WP §641).

Not only do we formulate an awareness of Nietzsche’s vision of life as a process of encountering and controlling the multiplicity of forces; the quoted aphorism also displays the rudimentary principle by which Nietzsche approaches external forces and adjusts the organism within to interact with, absorb, or resist the disagreeable affects, through a series of cautious ruminations. A living individual—in line with its Spinozian conception—incorporates a capacity for being affected in a great many ways, and an affect as such in the Nietzschean context could denote either physical affections (sensations) or mental affects (ideas and thoughts). Life becomes preserved or diminished through the continuous affective exchanges and variations of power valences between external and internal forces. As Alexander Nehamas observes: “[...] Nietzsche in effect claimed that nothing in the world has any intrinsic features of its own and that each thing is constituted solely through its interrelations with, and differences from everything else” (Nehamas 82).

The attempt to deconstruct truth as the result of interactions between forces that are constantly changing, conditions Nietzsche’s skeptical point

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of view on the notion of fact and objectivity—our understanding depends on the perspective in which a given thing is evaluated in accordance with the forces. He invents the term perspectivism—as opposed to scientism or positivism—to address the never-ending process of knowledge formation as a result of the impacts of plural affects: “It [the world] may however be interpreted differently; it has no meaning hidden behind it, but rather innumerable meanings which can be assigned to it. Hence ‘perspectivism’” (WP §481). The practice of perspectivism, thus, is tied closely to epistemological efforts to make sense of the world, and stresses not the objective givenness of appearance but rather the subject’s interpretative reactions to appearance. It liberates the passive condition of the human senses and emphasizes the seminal function of human agency in the construction of knowledge. As Nehamas states, “Perspectivism implies that in order to engage in any activity we must necessarily occupy ourselves with a selection of material and exclude much from our consideration [...] What is seen is simply the world itself from that perspective” (Nehamas 50).

Perspectivism, thus, expresses the functions of the human capabilities of sensing, selecting sensory input, and adjusting one’s own internal forces in the process of affective interactions. Similar to the Spinozian endeavor to cultivate external agreeable affects to promote and nourish our understanding through the formations of common notions, Nietzsche does not offer a completely negative evaluation of affect, but also recognizes the potentially positive role that affect may play. He declares that the affected subject should be able to discern the various types of external affects—rather than immerse themselves in the cluster of plural passions—and choose the right strategies for guiding their reaction: “*Blindly yielding* to a passion, without regard to whether it be a generous, compassionate or hostile one, is the cause of the greatest evils” (WP §928). But the kind of affects that are agreeable or beneficial to us are not necessarily the most pleasurable or indulgent ones. In *Ecce Homo*, by recounting his experience in the early years of dealing with sickness, Nietzsche—again in line with his belief in perspectivism—says that passive affects do not necessarily foster negative and detrimental

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consequences; rather, they may generate positive results and help increase vitality, as long as one possesses the will to life and health:

A being who is typically morbid cannot become healthy, still less can he make himself healthy; conversely, for one who is typically healthy being sick can even be an *energetic stimulant* to life, to more life. Thus in fact does that long period of sickness seem to me *now*: I discovered life as it were anew, myself included, I tasted all good and even petty things in a way that others could not easily taste them—I made out of my will to health, to *life*, my philosophy (*EH* “Wise” §2).

To formulate a discourse of life and health, to perceive and appreciate the organism as the condition for self-formation and preservation, the experience of what-is-not or the contrary is indispensable. The regained health after illness entails an epistemological difference from the previous healthy state in the triggered consciousness of the constitution of the body; as Rodolphe Gasché interprets the beneficial role of illness, “Now, this morbid state, one of extreme weakness, a state which also corresponds to an aberration of the instincts, is, according to Nietzsche, a preparation for a refining of the organs, in as much as the illness is at once the culmination of decadence and an interruption of that decadence” (Gasché 9). We should not, in Nietzsche’s view, ascribe any arbitrary and fixated values to the affect of sickness; on the contrary, underneath the manifest exhaustion of the corpus conceals a latent impetus for recovery, flourishing, and more life. Since his first monograph, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche had already endorsed the Schopenhauerian view on the interpretation of life as suffering and pain. This idea remains consistent throughout his philosophical life; for example, in *The Gay Science* Nietzsche considers life a reductive process that sifts endlessly those who are weak and lacking will to power: “What is life? –Life – that is: continually shedding something that wants to die; Life – that is: being cruel and inexorable against anything that is growing weak and old in us” (GS “Book One”

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§26). What separates Nietzsche and his teacher years later are their contrasting views of how one should react to the world and life after realizing one’s undesirable condition. Nietzsche fiercely rejects the reactive tendency (influenced by the psychology of bad conscience) to seek external justifications by positing certain higher forms of being, a method manifest in Schopenhauer’s doctrine and Christian beliefs. As Deleuze puts it, “[...] suffering was used as a way of proving the *injustice* of existence, but at the same time as a way of finding a higher and divine *justification* for it” (Deleuze 1985, 19). The problem resides in the attempt to negate the will to power, the natural capacity of being affected in order to grow and develop oneself. For Nietzsche, along with the natural inclination of humans to indulge ourselves in pleasure, there is also a potential courage to explore and control our own fatality; he notes in *The Antichrist*, “Better to live among ice than among modern virtues and other south winds!...We were brave enough, we spared neither ourselves nor others: but for long we did not know where to apply our courage [...] We thirst for lightning and action, of all things we kept ourselves furthest from the happiness of the weaklings, from ‘resignation’” (A §1).

To live an active life and advance our will to power, Nietzsche affirms, the sources of judgment and action need to be solely grounded by the subjective self, and the art of slowness when managing excessive and harmful affects thus becomes crucial in achieving the goal of self-dependence. In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche ascribes positive and vital value to his strategic technique of stretching the duration *between* the moments of being acted upon and reacting through the organizations of internal forces, in order to extend and save time for ruminations and judgments with respect to the quantitative and qualitative nature of the incoming affects. He states,

He has a taste only for what is beneficial to him; his pleasure, his joy ceases where the measure of what is beneficial is overstepped. He divines cures for injuries, he employs ill chances to his own advantage; what does not kill him makes him stronger. Out of everything he sees, hears, experiences he instinctively

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collects together *his* sum: he is a principle of selection, he rejects much. He is always in *his* company, whether he traffics with books, people or landscapes: he does honour when he *chooses*, when he *admits*, when he *trusts*. He reacts slowly to every kind of stimulus, with that slowness which a protracted caution and a willed pride have bred in him—he tests an approaching stimulus, he is far from going out to meet it. (EH “Wise” §2).

With the clichéd but nonetheless truthful line “what does not kill him makes him stronger” included, this passage provides a set of practical maxims that function as a sufficient instruction manual for managing external affects. Indicating Nietzsche’s subjective stance on life that one should joyfully control one’s own fatality, the passage unveils his understanding of the nature of affect: it is neither good nor bad in itself, and its effects—agreeable or not—depend on the choice or selection by the subject. Therefore, Nietzsche argues that a reflexive judgment is required to function alongside sensory experiences and examine if the affect would bring joy, that is, an increase in the Will to power. To accurately exercise such a reflexive judgment and use it to advance our choice-making, Nietzsche continues, the duration in a reciprocal affective process needs to be extended, to conduct a thorough and cautious evaluation and avoid the potential to be destroyed. Such a strategy echoes the abovementioned notion of the nutritive process in an affective interaction, which involves initial resistance, adjustment of one’s own speed of reaction, and at last selective reception of positive and useful affects.

It seems that such a strategy of slowness has its limitation, in that it presupposes a range of intensity such that the external affect that is mild and bearable in nature. What is one to do when the affect is violent and sudden and does not permit any practice of slow caution? By naming the technique “Russian fatalism,” Nietzsche explores the experiment by a Russian soldier on slowing himself down thoroughly to avoid incoming excessive affects. Such a strategy does not bear any sense of reactive nihilism that turns against the

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meaning of life; rather, it is executed for the protection and preservation of life:

I call it *Russian Fatalism*, that fatalism without rebellion with which a Russian soldier for whom the campaign has become too much at last lies down in the snow. No longer to take anything at all, to receive anything, to take anything *into* oneself—no longer to react at all... The great rationality of this fatalism, which is not always the courage to die but can be life-preservative under conditions highly dangerous to life, is reduction of the metabolism, making it slow down a kind of will to hibernation [...] Because one would use oneself up too quickly if one reacted at all, one no longer reacts: this is the logic. And nothing burns one up quicker than the affects of *ressentiment* [...] That ‘Russian fatalism’ of which I spoke came forward in my case in the form of clinging tenaciously for years on end to almost intolerable situations, places, residences, company, once chance had placed me in them—it was better than changing them, than *feeling* them as capable of being changed—than rebelling against them (EH “Wise” §6).

To completely shut oneself off from the world and make oneself thoroughly insulated against all external affects by slowing down the speed of affective reaction to zero is thus Nietzsche’s most intense vital strategy. The mechanism of Russian fatalism still follows the three-step generic procedure for managing affects explained earlier, but its didactic message—almost as a command—is to be inoperative at all and save one’s remaining vitality. By no means does Russian fatalism, however, refer to such reactive psychologies as *ressentiment*, bad conscience, or the ascetic ideal; rather, it is indicative of the independent and psychic strength of the will that insists on grasping and grounding one’s fatality within oneself and refusing to be sifted out by life. Though designed and intended for helping one endure the most “intolerable situations, places, residences, company,” the mechanism of Russian fatalism

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still follows the strategy of slowness and begins with an evaluation of the intensity of the incoming affect, and then moves on to making a choice in the way of reaction and at last affirming and trusting one's own choice. The inoperability of Russian fatalism does not entail any resignation of agency or initiation of vengeful reaction; on the contrary, it is the result of the subject's own choice, out of the existential freedom to hold onto one's own fatality.

The strategy of Russian fatalism suggests a capacity for being incapable of reacting to the external affects in order to preserve and prepare the body for future affects to come. In Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Giorgio Agamben discovers an interesting term, *adynamia*—translated roughly as impotentiality—that does not mean the privation of potentiality but a choice of suspending the actualization of its counterpart, which may facilitate our understanding of the inoperability of Russian fatalism. As Agamben explicates,

*Adynamia*, “impotentiality,” does not mean here the absence of any potentiality, but the potentiality-not-to (pass to the act), *dynamis me energein*. That is to say, this thesis defines the specific ambivalence of every human potentiality, which, in its original structure, always maintains a relation with its own privation and is always—and with reference to the same thing—the potentiality to be and not to be, to do and not to do. [...] we can then say that man is the living being that exists eminently in the dimension of potentiality, of the power-to and the power-not-to [*dimensione della potenza, del potere e del poter-non*]. Every human potentiality is co-originally impotentiality; every power-to-be or -do is, for man, constitutively in relation with its own privation (Agamben 39-40).

The Nietzschean strategy of Russian fatalism, thus, rests precisely upon the deliberate choice of impotentiality that, by slowing down the speed of reactive affectivity to zero, takes up the responsibility for not letting oneself blindly be subject to detrimental external affects. One chooses to launch such a vital strategy, not as a reckless and hasty bet, but rather as a sequence of

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thoughtful and brave judgments upon kinetic and dynamic bodies, causes and effects, motion and rest. Such a choice is grounded by an utmost self-affirmation and a love of the affective fatality of both pain and joy, sickness and health, passion and action.

### *In sum*

“[...] I have asked myself often enough whether, on a grand scale, philosophy has been no more than an interpretation of the body and a *misunderstanding of the body*,” Nietzsche writes in the second preface to *The Gay Science*. “All those bold lunacies of metaphysics, especially answers to the question about the *value* of existence, may always be considered first of all as symptoms of certain *bodies*” (GS “Preface” §2). What connects Spinoza and Nietzsche, perhaps, is not only their theoretical and strategic investigations of the mechanism of the body as the ordinally primary condition for affective interactions and the formation of rationality, but also, and more importantly, their coincidental efforts to include the inquiries of the body as an essential subject of philosophy. I have tried to move beyond a simplistic comparison and contrast of two versions of affect theory; instead, I have treated the two philosophical accounts of affect as complementary to each other: whereas Spinoza provides an epistemological sketch of the course of the affective transition from inadequate to adequate ideas; Nietzsche's autobiographical work offers some practical strategies of slowness for actually living subjects to live by. My account presents a holistic understanding of affect that does not involve any discriminatory value judgment. It is connective in nature, Spinoza and Nietzsche, theory and practice.

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