

# Nietzsche - Heir to Spinoza

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August 3, 2019

## 1 Preamble

The bones of this essay were set in my mind while watching an old Kevin Spacey movie called K-PAX. In the final scene, Spacey's character (a delusional genius named prot) describes the [cyclic fate](#) of our universe:

*I want to tell you something, something you do not yet know, but we K-PAXians have been around long enough to have discovered. The universe will expand, then it will collapse back on itself, and then it will expand again. It will repeat this process forever. What you don't know is that when the universe expands again, everything will be as it is now. Whatever mistakes you make this time around, you will live through on your next pass. Every mistake you make... you will live through... again and again, forever. So my advice to you is to get it right this time around, because this time... is all you have.*

*(Prot, from the movie K-PAX)*

This is straight out of Nietzsche, in fact, it's one of his most beloved ideas - which he called Eternal Return. So while the credits rolled, I was swimming in memories of undergraduate life at Trinity College, where I had at one time flirted with the idea of majoring in philosophy... (gasps!). This was probably due to the fact that I was lucky enough to study with MacArthur Fellow [Rebecca Goldstein](#). I found that the powerful ideas of 17th century rationalism had particularly interesting connections to some of the modern philosophers. Hence, I've wanted to put together a condensed comparative analysis of this sort for some time.

## 2 Introduction

A postcard written by [Friedrich Nietzsche](#) to his friend Franz Overbeck in the summer of 1881 reads:

*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 overtendency 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 two-someness.*

*With affectionate love, Friedrich.*

Two thinkers beyond their time: one, an exiled priest of metaphysics and the other a sickly doctor of literary pathologies. Though set apart by time ( 168 years), they found one another through secret ladders of the mind, co-inventing many idiosyncratic yet powerful philosophical concepts. Friedrich Nietzsche and Benedict De Spinoza remain among the most popular of modern philosophers. Centuries after their deaths, both continue to affect the world. Friedrich preempted many later movements, including those of modernism, fascism, atheism, humanism, and sexual liberation. Spinoza's prescience of modern biology is remarkable in addition to foreshadowing ideas on ethics now taking shape due to modern neuroscience.

The critical question is *how are the thoughts of these great philosophical minds compatible, if at all?* As it happens, their ideas are much less divergent than a first glance would presume. However, before reading any philosopher you must have a biographical context, which reveals as much as their actual works.

### 3 Biographical Snapshots

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche was born in 1844 in a small town near Leipzig. He was named in honor of the 49th birthday of the Prussian Kaiser, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, by his father and the town's minister, Karl Ludwig Nietzsche (1813-1849). At the tender age of four, Karl died of a brain ailment, closely followed by the death of his two year-old brother Joseph, something that would affect Nietzsche thereafter. The fact that little Friedrich or "Fritz" (his nickname) descended from a long and illustrious line of Lutheran ministers was ironic as he would later launch some of the most biting incursions on Western religion ever written. In his teenage years, Nietzsche attended a first-rate boarding school after which he entered the University of Bonn as a student of theology and philology. However, his interests increasingly gravitated towards philology - a discipline which then centered upon the interpretation of classical and Biblical texts. At university, a small but momentous event for Nietzsche was his accidental discovery of Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. Nietzsche was taken in by Schopenhauer's atheistic and turbulent

visions of the world. Schopenhauer's ideas would continue to influence Nietzsche for the remainder of his life. In 1869, the University of Basel offered Nietzsche a teaching position in philology, but after only a few years, he retired due a variety of health difficulties, including diphtheria and dysentery. Nietzsche's ill health would continue to beset him for the remainder of his life. It was in these years of jobless solitude, drifting between various European cities, that he would compose his greatest works.

Rewinding the clock about 200 years, on a cold night in Amsterdam in 1632, Baruch de Spinoza was born to a family of Portuguese Jews fleeing the Inquisition. During his youth, Spinoza's merchant father allowed him to pursue a thorough education in medieval philosophy: the works of Descartes, Hobbes, and their contemporaries. Spinoza's studies of Latin, particularly his readings of Cicero, Livy, and Terrence led him down a lonesome path. Baruch's outspoken nature had him expelled from his Sephardic synagogue for heretical practice in 1656, after which he latinized his name to Benedict. Alone and in his early twenties he decided to become a school teacher. Because he wished to remain independent from political situations, he doggedly refused a position at the University of Heidelberg, and instead taught children at a local school. In the meantime, his scientific interests led him to world class mastery in lens-crafting (Issac Newton was his loyal customer), and thus to economic independence. His burgeoning notoriety as a philosopher attracted the correspondence of many of the day's great thinkers, including Leibniz. Sadly, Spinoza only lived to see two of his works published: his systematic presentation of the philosophy of Descartes and *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, an examination of superficial popular religion and a vigorous critique of the Protestantism practiced by Holland's ruling House of Orange. Spinoza's pantheism was regarded as blasphemy so most of his writings were published after his death. In later years he fell victim to tuberculosis, apparently aggravated by inhaling glass dust from lens grinding. Unfortunately, his masterpiece *The Ethics* was published posthumously in 1677, the year of his death.

## 4 Epistemology

Some experts attribute all theories of truth to Nietzsche and some deny that he held any himself. It is a cryptic matter to sort out. Nietzsche so described truth:

*a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power; coins which have lost their pictures and now matter only as metal, no longer as coins. We still do not know where the urge for truth comes from; for as yet we have heard only of the obligation imposed by society that it should exist: to be truthful means using the customary metaphors - in moral terms, the obligation to lie according to fixed convention, to lie herd-like in a style obligatory for*

*all.*

*(an Excerpt from On Truth and lie in an extra-moral sense)*

According to Nietzsche, no point of view can comprehend absolute truth: there are only different perspectives from which one can see a matter. Nietzsche's position seems to amount to a denial that any human belief is or could be true. Plenty of evidence corroborates this, as in one excerpt he proclaims "there are no facts, only interpretations." Nietzsche isn't saying that every view is as good as any other; he is clearly not a relativist in this sense. But relativism has also been defined as stating that all views are relative to a particular framework, be it an outlook, culture, time or place. This version of relativism closely resembles Nietzsche's perspectivism. In some of his more outrageous pronouncements, he declares that there is no truth, but Nietzsche isn't being literal, rather he hyperbolizes to emphasize the fact that we can't get to truth without subjectivism, i.e. looking at it from our individual perspective. "The apparent world is the only truth, the 'true' one is merely added by a lie." His views on truth are rather subtle - where one asks "if addition is 'true' no matter what perspective one holds," he would ask "what is the nature of the will of a Mathematician?" Before truth, is the will to truth, and this is what occupies Nietzsche: why the world's lust for platonic forms and perfect truth? Is humanity's truth-questing nature as selfless and noble as we all think, or is it a façade? Moreover, Nietzsche is suspicious of any duality, not just Truth and Falsity:

*For it may be doubted, firstly, whether antitheses exist at all; and secondly, whether the popular valuations and antitheses of value upon which metaphysicians have set their seal, are not perhaps merely superficial estimates, merely provisional perspectives, besides being probably made from some corner, perhaps from below—"frog perspectives as it were, to borrow an expression current among painters. In spite of all the value which may belong to the true, the positive, and the unselfish, it might be possible that a higher and more fundamental value for life generally should be assigned to pretense, to the will to delusion, to selfishness, and cupidity. It might even be possible that what constitutes the value of those good and respected things, consists precisely in their being insidiously related, knotted, and crocheted to these evil and apparently opposed things—perhaps even in being essentially identical with them.*

*(Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil)*

On whether truths exist independently of cognition, Nietzsche writes

*It is true, there could be a metaphysical world; the absolute possibility of it is hardly to be disputed. We behold all things through the human head and cannot cut off this head; while the question nonetheless remains what of the world would still be there if one had cut it off.*

A general point he labors over is that truth-in-itself is irrelevant, lying in a world of forms beyond this one. The only truth of any real use to us is that which we understand through our perspective. For many years, Nietzsche wrestled with his suspicion that all received truths are illusory.

After forsaking his major in theology, he wrote to his sister saying, “although it would be easy to continue believing in the comforting tales of their youth, the truth is not necessarily in league with the beautiful and the good.” On the contrary, the truth can be detestable and ugly in the extreme. Thus he breaks with the Socratic equation that truth equals virtue, which in turn equals happiness. Instead, he affirms vitalism and accepts the purposes toward which a given agent strives as relevant to whether that agent should accept any particular interpretation of truth, meaning that its value for life is ultimately decisive and we should believe what enables us to flourish. A simple summation of Nietzsche’s perspectivism: all evaluations are interpretations, any subject matter can be interpreted in different ways; and no interpretation need be accepted by everyone.

## 5 Format & Style

Nietzsche’s views on truth reveal him as a ruthlessly honest pragmatist. I don’t regret that Nietzsche never left an explicit theory of knowledge, since no doubt this was his intention. He railed against any attempt to systematize philosophy, which he thought betrayed a lack of integrity. But what he lacked in system he more than redeemed in style: a stormy and brilliant style. Instead of book-length arguments, he left us wisdom in lightning-bolt form, a blitzkrieg of insightful aphorisms, poetry, and metaphor. With each carefully constructed witticism he aimed to manipulate our very consciousness, working from within us to achieve a shift in perspective and understanding.

Diametric to Nietzsche’s method, Spinoza tried to be unshakably precise with his ‘logical’ expositions. However, when Nietzsche discovered Spinoza’s works he was awestruck, describing Spinoza as the purest sage, “a genius who’s work is a passionate history of a soul written in a simple and sublime manner.” Nietzsche was not a coherent philosopher and did not set out to create a solid philosophical system, but Spinoza struggled to find a rational way to present his pantheism, convinced that we all one with the universe. Spinoza’s reverential respect for deduction led him to express his philosophy in a geometrical form patterned on Euclid’s Elements. Delineating style from meaning is critical, and although Nietzsche clearly agreed with Spinoza on many facets of his philosophy and saw great clarity in Spinoza’s perspective, he harshly criticized his geometers’ penchant in *Beyond Good and Evil*, calling it

*hocus-pocus in mathematical form, by means of which Spinoza has, as it were, clad his philosophy in mail and mask—in fact, the "love of HIS wisdom," to translate the term fairly and squarely—in order thereby to strike terror at once into the heart of the assailant who should dare to cast a glance on that invincible maiden, that Pallas Athene:—how much of personal timidity and vulnerability does this masquerade of a*

*sickly recluse betray!*

Though Nietzsche declared Spinoza in his academic family tree (as one of his four favorite predecessors), Nietzsche did not leave spare him criticism.

Spinoza gave the clearest definition of truth in his Ethics: a true idea must agree with that of which it is an idea. Spinoza definition of truth was highly convoluted. Spinoza deploys his own glossary of terms, pontificating that “truth and falsity are not contradictory, all ideas are true, since all agree with their ideata, but any idea can be false if it is correlated with anything other than its ideatum.”

I think it is a pity that Spinoza thought deductive argument was the pedagogically optimal explanatory mechanism. Spinoza, ever steadfast, never abandoned his belief that we can know anything with perfect certainty. But his writings were not without Nietzschean sparks of brilliance. The key justification of Spinoza’s affirmation of universal certainty lies in his delineation between images and ideas. By Spinoza’s definitions, “ideas are modifications of thought, produced by the intellect, but images are modifications of extension, products of physical and physiological processes.” Since images depend on “physical relations with other bodies”, the information they provide is fragmentary. We can see for example only one side of a body at a time; we can never have the entire object present at one time.” We never hold every perspective at once, this much he concedes to Nietzsche. But Spinoza takes this one step further and clarifies: People with different brains will have different images (perspectives) of the same thing. But ideas are not subject to this limitation. Ideas as he defines them, are rooted in the perspective of the intellect (logic) and if people used their understanding they would be in agreement “If men understood things, they would, as mathematics prove, at least convince all, if they did not attract them all”

We understand things “by forming concepts which present the essence of what they are.” Hence ideas do not vary for different people and they give the full being of the thing. Spinoza agrees with Nietzsche in that maybe some or all of our ideas maybe incomplete, and there may be some things of which we cannot form complete ideas, but we could have complete ideas. To summarize, Spinoza contended that there was a single scheme of explanation, and secondly that everything can be explained. In Spinoza’s world, there are no a priori limits to knowledge,” which we now know to be false, e.g. incomputability.

We can say that Spinoza was a pure metaphysician, but once again Nietzsche is not so easy to put a finger on. Heidegger’s enormously influential interpretation dubbed Nietzsche the ‘last metaphysician’ of the West - finding him to be battling all of metaphysics only to be trapped within metaphysics itself. Nietzsche is as doubtful of metaphysics as he is mistrustful of truth as the following paragraph illustrates

*If living without truth demanded strength, then the demand for truth has made man weak. “It is more comfortable to obey than to examine,” Nietzsche laments Metaphysics*

*is an emotional crutch, supporting the fragile modern psyche.*

*(Nietzsche 1968, §452)*

At heart, Nietzsche charges that human nature and metaphysics are at odds,

*It seemed that one was unable to live with [truth]: our organism was prepared for the opposite; all its higher functions, sense perception and every kind of sensation worked with those basic errors which had been incorporated since time immemorial (Nietzsche 1974, §110).*

Yes, that's classic Nietzsche - always coming at us from different angles.

## 6 Morality

Because of their keen insights into the nature of life, Nietzsche and Spinoza both reject disinterestedness, admitting self-interest as the primary drive in a creature. Nietzsche's most basic and misunderstood doctrine is that of "will to power." Succinctly, the will is the essence of life, and this he extends to the whole of the universe. Claiming fervently, "This world is the will to power — and nothing besides! And you yourselves are also this will to power — and nothing besides!" Spinoza also isolates the fundamental drives of things in proposition 6 of the Ethics- "Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being." Both are concerned with the central theme of power, and Spinoza's reasoning at times running with Nietzschean overtones,

*Particular things, subjects, are expressions of power, since they are modes of God's attributes (Ip25) and God's attributes constitute God's essence (ID4) and God's essence is his power (Ip34). It is self-evident that nothing can be destroyed except through an external cause (IIIp4), so an apparent particular thing which is self-destructive is in fact at least two (IIIp5). The power a genuine particular thing expresses, then, must therefore be directed toward its own perseverance in being (IIIp6)*

But there is a distinct difference between Spinoza's concept of conatus and will-to-power. Nietzsche by no means implies that the will-to-power is the self-preservation instinct. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, he states

*Physiologists should think before putting down the instinct of self-preservation as the cardinal instinct of an organic being. A living thing seeks above all to discharge its strength — life itself is will to power; self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent results.*

*Darwin is wrong: animals rarely struggle for mere existence. We struggle for power. And this struggle does not lead to improvements. The weak outnumber the strong and so prevail, using cunning if necessary.*

Nietzsche was hasty here, the will-to-power and conatus are two expressions of the same thing. Spinoza implied that conatus never stops at self preservation but implies a self-furthering, a growing of power.

Now consider Spinoza's concept of causality, the claim that everything can be explained constitutes Spinoza's determinism. Since everything has an explanation, everything has a cause, and thus no event is uncaused. Nietzsche however was not a believer of causality in its common notion. He would agree with Spinoza that all events are necessary, but warned of erroneous and oversimplified conceptions of causality:

*Cause and effect: such a duality probably never exists; in truth we are confronted by a continuum out of which we isolate a couple of pieces, just as we perceive motion only as isolated points and then infer it without ever actually seeing it. The suddenness with which many effects stand out misleads us; actually, it is sudden only for us. In this moment of suddenness there are an infinite number of processes which elude us. An intellect that could see cause and effect as a continuum and a flux and not, as we do, in terms of an arbitrary division and dismemberment, would repudiate the concept of cause and effect and deny all conditionality.*

The natural extension of these ideas to humans gives rise to complicated questions about moral responsibility. Any logical interpretation of the Ethics will agree in that Spinoza doesn't simply propose another morality, he does not say you must change yourself. Spinoza would not deem his Ethics an argument in the combative sense, but merely a true depiction. He doesn't command one to change, but the man who understands the Ethics will change.

Nietzsche claims himself to be an 'immoralist' in two ways: his opposition to any imposed external morality, e.g. Christianity, and his opposition the commonly held idea that the supreme type of man is the good, the benevolent. That is, he doesn't think being a good person amounts to trying to have beneficial effects on other people. Many of Nietzsche's negative comments on morality have to do with judgments expressed as oughts. Spinoza too stayed away from using this seemingly harmless word in the Ethics, and speaks in terms of rationality. This is one of the reasons why he so struck Nietzsche, Spinoza is his immoralist brother:

*Spinoza doesn't make up a morality, for a very simple reason: he never asks what we must do, he always asks what we are capable of, what's in our power, ethics is a problem of power, never a problem of duty. In this sense, Spinoza is profoundly immoral. Regarding the moral problem, good and evil, he has a happy nature because he doesn't even comprehend what this means. What he comprehends are good encounters, bad encounters, increases and diminutions of power. Thus he makes an ethics and not at all a morality.*

In the twilight of the idols, Nietzsche approaches the "do not judge" doctrine and makes the

following declaration,

*Let us finally consider how naive it is altogether to say: 'Man ought to be such and such!' Reality shows us an enchanting wealth of types. . . and some wretched prig of a moralist comments: "No! Man ought to be different."*

In advancing his platitudinous form of hard determinism, he says just what Spinoza would say, that this is the way it had to be, and that it is naive to wish it were other. Nietzsche's Buddhist idea of the universe as perfect interrelatedness, everything fluxing in relation to every other thing eternally, concords with his hatred of 'ought' judgment. He remarks, "to say 'change yourself!' is to demand that everything be changed, even retroactively." He beautifully elucidates this in the famous lines,

*Did you ever say yes to a pleasure?*

*Oh my friends, then you also said yes to all pain.*

*All things are linked, entwined, in love with one another.*

So what of moral responsibility? Well, the motivation for responsibility is always one of fear and the threat of punishment: "if you fail, then . . .". Responsibility takes a negative perspective on the world, under its reign it impels us by negativity. An "eye for an eye" and every other moral law as such is born of enmity and resentment. Nietzsche argues that Kantian universality and universal rules in general distract us from concrete questions of character. Abstraction in moral code provides a respectable facade for faulty character but an offensive weapon for resentment. Spinoza and Nietzsche want us to give up our theories of evil so that we overcome childish tendencies to think in terms of Manichean opposite values, the good and evil, but this does not require the abandonment of good and bad.

For both men, there is a good life and a bad life, and it is not a question of responsibility, it is a question of love. It is the love of life and reality that needs to be fostered. But the fact that neither Nietzsche nor Spinoza subscribe to the notion of moral obligation, leads to another difference. Nietzsche jumps to the conclusion "there is not objective difference between good and evil," and that a society of supermen would and should come crashing down. With Spinoza this is not the case, "people seek to preserve their own being, but it turns out that can be best done in a society where citizens behave humanely, yet still there is no obligation to behave humanly."

This essay would be incomplete without a discussion of Amor Fati, the famous cornerstone of Nietzsche's doctrine. In spite of being a violent critic and quite judgmental in his writings, so many of his moral injunctions were not to be judgmental. His most beloved of ideas was "the love of Fate," or in Latin, Amor Fati. At first glance, one could interpret this as a carefree approach to life, yet it runs deeper than that. In a less combative mood Nietzsche once said, "I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not want to accuse those who accuse. Looking away shall be my only negation." This acceptance of life mirrors Spinoza's deep

acquiescence and peace of mind gleaned from the high of believing one understands life. Indeed, the love of fate is rather the love of necessity, and Nietzsche had a keen eye for essences. In a passage he defines his expression: “one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely to bear what is necessary but to love it.” He asks a difficult task, and while Spinoza attempts to give us all the keys to understanding the world and thereby teaches how to love it, Nietzsche doesn’t explicitly. Nevertheless, this pep-talk of his was his formula for greatness in a human being. How can one adhere to such a maxim when life is a suffering mess? Nietzsche might answer, “it is life itself, not the pleasures and the successes enjoyed in life, that gives life its ultimate meaning.”

There is another powerful proposition that Nietzsche first reveals at the end of the *Gay Science*, “This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable time more, and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything utterably small or great in your life will have to return to you.”

Eternal return is the idea of an hourglass of existence continually overturning itself; talk about extreme karma. But was this idea intended only to measure one’s attitude, one’s evaluation of life, or is it an instrument for changing one’s life? I think eternal return wasn’t a theory of temporality, but another thought-weapon in his arsenal intended to assist one’s affirmation of life. His favorite slogan, borrowed from the Greek poet Pindar read *become who you are* which we may take to mean *realize your potential!*

Also interesting is a comparison of their differing concepts of freedom. For Spinoza, that which is truly free is the entire universe. There are also actions of the human mind which are free-ish, specifically, “a free action is the grasping of a true idea, hence to understand is to be free.” Every instance of genuine understanding, every act of the intellect, is an assertion of freedom. This is one way of interpreting the final proposition in *The Ethics*: “Blessedness is not the reward of virtue but virtue itself.” Be happy and you will be good. He goes on to say, confusingly, that an intellect constituted in significant proportion of ideas of ideas, will be largely immortal: “the mind can imagine nothing nor can it recollect anything that is past, except while the body exists.” Part of what occurs in Spinoza’s view of immortality is that we forget ourselves as finite individuals, and we are completely absorbed by self-sufficient truth. On the other hand, Nietzsche believed that life is ultimately redeemed by the aesthetic and that art is the work of our salvation. In creating, the artist has forgotten himself and is overtaken by the beauty of conducting higher powers. Both creativity and meditation on truth are ways of short-circuiting the finite ego and connecting to the universe.

## 7 Conclusion

Perhaps the greatest similarity between the philosophers lies in the abstract religion they both embraced: pantheism, the belief that everything is perfect, divine, and eternal.

*Now that we have made ethics impossible, is such a pantheistic affirmation of all things also made impossible? No: in principle, only an ethical god is overthrown. Is there any sense in imagining a god beyond good and evil? Would a pantheism of this kind be possible? Can we remove the idea of purpose from the process, and yet still affirm the process? That would be the case, if something were achieved within that process and at every moment of it - and always the same. Every basic trait underlying each and every event, expressing itself in every event - if it were experienced by an individual as his own basic trait - would force that person triumphally to endorse every instant of everyday existence.*

*(Nietzsche, Werke, III, 853.)*

Spinoza and Nietzsche celebrated a love of fate and a repudiation of pity, which illegitimizes guilt and moral condemnation. But in the end, Nietzsche never forgave Spinoza for his platonic *amor intellectualis dei*, making peace with god. This struck Nietzsche as too abstract in tenor to do justice to living experience and he considered it philosophical vampirism, stating what remains of Spinoza is mere clatter and no more. "What is amor, what is dei," he wrote, "if there is not a drop of blood in them?"