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# Nietzsche as Optimistic Nutritionist: Reading *Ecce Homo* as a Practical Guide to a Spinozistic Ethics of Self-Preservation

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## ABSTRACT

In his *From Bondage to Freedom*, Michael LeBuffe argues that Spinoza's theory of ethics hinges on a figure that he calls the optimistic nutritionist. LeBuffe sets up the optimistic nutritionist as a thought experiment useful for illustrating how Spinoza's ethical theory can be put into practice. While LeBuffe offers some illuminating examples intended to illustrate how the optimistic nutritionist would function as a pedagogical guide of sorts, the practical aspects of this figure remain vague and underdeveloped. In this paper, the aim is to read Nietzsche's controversial autobiography *Ecce Homo* as an exemplification of how the optimistic nutritionist might be conceived in situ, in terms of a person applying a systematic form of selectivity to different things so as to determine whether or not they are useful for furthering their self-preservation and empowerment. This amounts to a practical guide to a form of Spinozistic ethics, where Nietzsche's optimistic nutritionist functions by setting up concrete guidelines for the selectivity of useful things, without succumbing to the hazards of moral universalism and abstract perfectionism.

*It is precisely here that one has to begin to learn anew. Those things which mankind has hitherto pondered seriously are not even realities, merely imaginings, more strictly speaking lies from the bad instincts of sick, in their profoundest sense injurious natures—all the concepts 'God,' 'soul,' 'virtue,' 'sin,' 'the Beyond,' 'truth,' 'eternal life' ... But the greatness of human nature, its 'divinity,' has been sought in them ... All questions of politics, the ordering of society, education have been falsified down to their foundations because the most injurious men have been taken for great men—because contempt has been taught for the 'little' things, which is to say for the fundamental affairs of life ...*

(EH "Clever" 10)<sup>1</sup>

## 1 | Introduction

In terms of their ethical theories, Spinoza and Nietzsche espouse perfectionist ideals (Nadler 2024; Rutherford 2018). As perfectionists, they both subscribe to the idea that perfection should be conceived in terms of a striving for individual empowerment. For Spinoza, empowerment translates into an increasing ability to understand oneself and one's connection to the whole of nature. As a supreme good, Spinoza proposes the intellectual love of God, representing an eternal good that all people (to varying degrees) can share in and that therefore people can benefit from other people attaining as well. While this is an intellectualist ideal, it encompasses and presupposes embodied empowerment as well. For Spinoza, individual bodies and ideas are all modes of substance, and as such they will strive to become more self-determined by latching onto and interacting with external

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forces that stand to empower rather than disempower them. For Nietzsche, perfectionism pertains to the ability of individuals to prescribe values for themselves that are life-affirming and that can contribute to an overall healthier life, which translates into a more empowered existence. What this entails, more specifically, we will explore in what follows. An obstacle perceived by both Spinoza and Nietzsche, however, is the tendency of most people to misjudge things that are disempowering for things that are empowering. This is where their respective perfectionist scheme requires a form of therapeutic intervention geared at correcting the interpretation of external bodies in line with what is actually empowering (and not just seemingly so), and to be able to separate this from what is actually disempowering (and so avoid it). This requires an astute understanding of how different bodies will respond to different encounters and how different encounters can translate into being either empowering in the short term or the long term, or into being disempowering in the short term or the long term. As each individual is going to be differently constituted (which is an assumption shared by both Spinoza and Nietzsche), finding out which is which requires both concrete experimentation and the guidance of someone who can reliably instruct in the art of identifying things that are empowering over things that are disempowering.

In his *From Bondage to Freedom* (2010), Michael LeBuffe argues that Spinoza's theory of ethics hinges on a figure that LeBuffe calls the 'optimistic nutritionist' (pp. 112–116). LeBuffe sets up the optimistic nutritionist as a thought experiment useful for illustrating how Spinoza's ethical theory can be put into practice. While LeBuffe offers some illuminating examples intended to illustrate how the optimistic nutritionist would function as a pedagogical guide of sorts, the practical aspects of this figure remain vague and underdeveloped. In this paper, the aim is to read Nietzsche's controversial<sup>2</sup> autobiography *Ecce Homo* as an exemplification of how the optimistic nutritionist might be conceived in situ, in terms of a person applying a systematic form of selectivity to different things so as to determine whether or not they are useful for furthering their self-preservation and empowerment. This amounts to a practical guide to a form of Spinozistic ethics, where Nietzsche's optimistic nutritionist functions by setting up concrete guidelines for the selectivity of useful things, without succumbing to the hazards of moral universalism and abstract perfectionism. LeBuffe's optimistic nutritionist is a metaphor intended to describe the kind of guidance needed when we desire to become empowered but are mistaken as to what is actually empowering for us. Much like a nutritionist could help someone identify the kinds of nutrients needed to make their clients stronger and healthier (based on their actual constitution), LeBuffe's optimistic nutritionist can help correct misconceptions about which things are going to be empowering and which are not. Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* makes for a journey alongside an optimistic nutritionist—optimistic because he is life-affirming—that illuminates how life can be lived from the point of view of someone who seeks empowerment and who knows what can help him attain it. At the same time, as it is quite clear that Nietzsche's personal examples are not meant to be imitated, one might legitimately wonder how Nietzsche's optimistic nutritionist can be made to function as an ethical guide for others?

I will begin this essay by offering a brief introduction to Spinoza's ethics of self-preservation, which I take to represent

a prominent interest in contemporary Spinoza studies, seeking to re-conceptualise Spinoza's mature philosophy in terms of a comprehensive ethical theory primarily geared at promoting empowerment and self-preservation (see, for example, LeBuffe 2010; Kisner 2011; Kisner and Youpa 2014; Youpa 2020). Having identified some of the broader strokes of Spinoza's ethical theory, I will spend some time unpacking LeBuffe's figure of the optimistic nutritionist as this is conceived as a practical way of gauging the metaphysical and epistemological stakes of Spinoza's moral psychology. Because the figure of the optimistic nutritionist, as developed by LeBuffe, remains rough in its outlines, I will propose that Nietzsche's autobiographical book *Ecce Homo* can provide us with further clues as to how Spinoza's experimental ethics could be conceived in a practical setting. I will suggest that for Nietzsche, selectivity and selfishness provide us with two important axioms for setting up the systematic experimentation entailed by an ethics of self-preservation. Next, I aim to argue that Nietzsche's self-portrait in *Ecce Homo* renders him an interesting candidate for illustrating how LeBuffe's optimistic nutritionist could be conceived in situ. To conclude this paper, I will then look at some underlying tensions between Spinoza's position as an unapologetic rationalist and Nietzsche's sometimes severely anti-rationalist tendencies, concluding that in spite of their philosophical differences, Nietzsche's self-portrait in *Ecce Homo* does in fact offer a productive model illustrating how the optimistic nutritionist would approach self-preservation as a sustained project of ethical self-transformation and empowerment in a way that is imaginatively appealing and emotionally engaging.

## 2 | Spinoza's Ethics of Self-Preservation

Spinoza's ethical starting point is the striving to persevere in being.<sup>3</sup> Whatever furthers this striving is good (E4D1<sup>4</sup>), and whatever inhibits it is bad (E4D2). Being able to distinguish, with some degree of accuracy, between the things that will help further one's striving to persevere and the things that will counter one's striving to persevere is the mark of an ethical (*qua* virtuous) person. To become ethical, for Spinoza, is therefore at the bottom a question of increasing one's knowledge of the world so as to be able to exploit this knowledge for the purposes of personal empowerment. While this may seem to render ethics into a thoroughly egoistic project of self-preservation, it should be noted that self-preservation, for Spinoza, is predicated by a strong sense of community, where people can (and to some extent must) help one another develop the knowledge necessary for persevering in existence. To the degree that people who are ethical, that is, who understand what is truly empowering and can distinguish this from what is disempowering, get together and help one another in their mutual striving, they will be more powerful than if they would do this in isolation. As such, an ethical person 'can wish for nothing more helpful than that all should so agree in all things that the minds and bodies of all would compose, as it were, one mind and one body; that all should strive together, as far as they can, to preserve their being; and that all, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage of all' (E4p18s). Spinoza's ethics thereby collapses egoism and altruism, making each concept nonsensical on its own. To be able to successfully preserve oneself, one needs to be sufficiently attuned to other people to benefit from their striving. Helping people strive for things that are beneficial for their self-preservation is

an act of egoism as much as it is an act of altruism, insofar as it is a way of promoting a community that can help further one's own striving to persevere (Nadler 2014). This also hints at the educational core of Spinoza's ethical theory, where becoming an ethical person is deeply connected with helping others develop in a similar manner (Dahlbeck 2017).

The pedagogical upshot of Spinoza's ethical theory is therefore that teaching someone to identify things that will benefit their striving to persevere and to avoid things that will be detrimental for them is not only a way of helping students develop ethical knowledge for themselves, but also a way for the teacher to increase in his or her own power to persevere in being. Because of the pronounced experiential aspect of Spinoza's scheme of ethical development, there are limitations to what a teacher can do for a student in this set-up. Coming to understand what is beneficial for one's perseverance is on the one hand an intellectual question of understanding the difference between short-term and long-term goods and evils,<sup>5</sup> and on the other hand, a practical question of being sufficiently attuned to how one responds to one's environment in situ. The intellectual aspects of ethical development can be taught (or at least strongly indicated<sup>6</sup>) in principle, but the experiential aspects cannot, as each experience will be unique given the particular constitution and combination of bodies and minds involved. The metaphysical backdrop lending support to this conclusion is that there are no such things as good or evil things in the abstract for Spinoza. The ethical value of a thing needs to be always gauged according to the situation at hand and according to the bodies and minds involved in that particular situation. Hence,

As far as good and evil are concerned, they also indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves, nor are they anything other than modes of thinking, or notions we form because we compare things to one another. For one and the same thing can, at the same time, be good, and bad, and also indifferent. For example, Music is good for one who is Melancholy, bad for one who is mourning, and neither good nor bad to one who is deaf.

(E4pref)

Still, Spinoza's ethical framework is not completely relativistic as self-preservation is an absolute in terms of it being the only foundation of virtue (E4p22c). When it comes to what furthers and what inhibits self-preservation, however, this is a largely relativistic matter. Still, it is a question of degree insofar as determining the ethical value of something relies on the power of understanding to grasp its causal makeup, which is a universal method for determining something's value in relation to the striving for self-preservation of a specific body/mind. Spinoza's ethical theory, then, always moves between the intellectual effort to understand something adequately and readjusting one's personal preferences according to the particular demands placed by various external forces impinging on one's body in any given situation. This dynamic relation is both predictable (in principle) and unpredictable (from the point of view of a limited individual) as intellectually grasping the universal regularities of nature is predictable by definition, while predicting the outcome of a specific

encounter between particular bodies is largely beyond the power of human imagination. Seeking to address this tension between predictability and unpredictability in a person's ethical striving, Michael LeBuffe introduces the figure of the optimistic nutritionist to help articulate the pedagogical challenge posed by Spinoza's ethical theory.

### 3 | LeBuffe's Optimistic Nutritionist

The problematic basis for LeBuffe's optimistic nutritionist is that while each person is determined by nature to strive to persevere in existence,<sup>7</sup> the means for furthering this striving is often obscured by the human inability to distinguish (with some degree of precision) between present and future goods and evils. The problem being that as cognitively limited beings, we often tend to gravitate toward a lesser present good simply because we take it (falsely) to be more real than a greater future good. Correspondingly, most people tend to avoid a lesser present evil, taking this to be more real than a greater future evil, thereby setting themselves up for future disaster by ignoring the warning signs of looming dangers beyond their immediate surroundings. In contrast, for Spinoza it is the mark of a rational person to 'select the best option available, even among distasteful or bad ones' (Jarrett 2002, p. 160).<sup>8</sup> And it is the difficult task of the optimistic nutritionist to help support this process of selecting the relatively good over the relatively evil in the less-than-rational person. The problem facing the optimistic nutritionist in this, of course, is that it is impossible to make these judgements for someone else in the abstract (other than in the broadest and most general sense). For the selection to be reliable, it needs to take account of the affective changes among the actual bodies/minds involved, and this is something that requires an experiential knowledge developed in situ. This means that optimistic nutritionists would need to take as a point of departure their own embodied experiences of interacting with external bodies, and it would follow from this that these experiences would not be directly translatable to those of others (unless they are sufficiently similar in affective constitution), posing a pedagogical problem of some magnitude.

The core of this pedagogical problem can be formulated as follows: helping someone to strive for ethical flourishing in an educational setting assumes that the one helping (the teacher) is more ethically (and intellectually) advanced than the one being helped (the student). This, in turn, assumes that they are sufficiently different by degree to not benefit from the exact same things. As such, helping someone identify things that would enable their flourishing (*qua* empowerment) is not a simple question of imitation as this would disregard the various differences in affective constitution. If both teacher and student were already similar enough for imitation to work (i.e., if they shared an affective constitution *qua ingenium*) they would not need to be engaged in a pedagogical relation to begin with.<sup>9</sup> This then raises the question of how people who are differently constituted can help one another develop and flourish so that they can come to strive together for the same thing.<sup>10</sup> Before getting ahead of ourselves, however, let us first look at how LeBuffe conceives of the figure of the optimistic nutritionist in a bit more detail. Having done so, we can then return to the question above in order to see how the figure of the optimistic nutritionist can help us address it.

LeBuffe's optimistic nutritionist is construed in direct response to propositions 9 and 28 of the third part ("Of the Affects") of the *Ethics*. E3p9 reads:

Both insofar as the mind has clear and distinct ideas, and insofar as it has confused ideas, it strives, for an indefinite duration, to persevere in its being and it is conscious of this striving it has.

E3p28 reads:

We strive to further the occurrence of whatever we imagine will lead to joy [*laetitia*], and to avert or destroy what we imagine is contrary to it, or will lead to sadness [*tristitia*].

(E3p28)

Bringing together these two propositions, LeBuffe asks the following question: 'How is it both that the mind strives, in its adequate and inadequate ideas, to persevere in being, and, at the same time, that it strives to promote whatever it imagines to be conducive to *laetitia* and to avert whatever is conducive to *tristitia*?' (LeBuffe 2010, p. 112). In response to this question, LeBuffe constructs two possible ways of answering it based on two different conceptions of the relation between our striving and our conscious desires. The first response assumes that striving and conscious desire for joy are one and the same thing. The problem with this response is that it makes it hard to see how we could explain unsuccessful attempts at striving for self-preservation. The second response, however, makes a difference between the two insofar as '[c]onscious desire itself [...] is not limited to a desire for perseverance or its means [...] but where 'I might, perhaps mistakenly, anticipate *laetitia* in other things and so desire them' (ibid.). The idea that we can consciously desire things that are not conducive to our striving to persevere in being hinges on the idea that we can come to confuse what we truly want by misinterpreting signs that usually (but not always) guide us in the right direction. With the second way of responding to the question in mind, LeBuffe makes an analogy between *laetitia* and sweetness and between perseverance and nutrition to help illustrate how this confusion would work, thereby setting the scene for the optimistic nutritionist:

Children always try to eat healthy foods, in a way, even though they don't know it. As we all know they hunt around for sweet things to eat, and try to avoid bitter ones. The sweetest things that one can eat continuously over a long period of time, though, like oranges and pecans, are really healthy. So, really, unbeknownst to them, they are hunting for healthy foods. We can help them by showing them which foods really are healthy and convincing them of what is true, that those really are the ones that bring a life full of sweetness. (LeBuffe 2010, p. 113)

This may seem straightforward enough,<sup>11</sup> but because there are plenty of sweet things that are not very nutritious, and that

will therefore not be conducive to a person's striving for self-preservation in the long run, it becomes a question of helping someone desire something that is inadequately perceived as less real over something else that is inadequately perceived as more real (c.f. E4p62s). On LeBuffe's account, this is a way of helping people escape a state of bondage insofar as bondage 'is a failure to attain perseverance and its means that is brought on, certainly, by an inability to attain these things but also by failure to recognize their value' (LeBuffe 2010, p. 113). The failure to recognize the value of a thing hinges on the fact that there are no good or evil things in the abstract for Spinoza. What brings joy for some, brings sadness for another, and a smaller present sadness can still be more valuable than a greater future sadness, much like a greater future joy is preferable to a more acutely felt, albeit smaller, present joy. The task facing the optimistic nutritionist, then, is not only to help guide people toward things that they may have overlooked on their quest for means for self-preservation, but to convince people that what they think they want is not what they really want. On this interpretation of the relation between striving and conscious desire, 'we may be badly mistaken in what we want, even in what we want most of all' and this is because '[w]hen our desires are badly formed, we lack an understanding of that basis and so do not know that perseverance in being is good for us' (p. 116). The task of the optimistic nutritionist, then, is not primarily to point out things in the world that we might otherwise have overlooked (or underestimated), but to help reform our desires so that we can begin to recognize what is truly good for us and to distinguish this from what is only seemingly good (and might even be detrimental for us in the long run).

The reformation of one's desires, on Spinoza's account, is grounded in the degree of activity of the mind, and this in turn hinges on the degree of adequacy of ideas of the things that are encountered. In brief, having adequate ideas will result in a more reliable understanding of what to strive for and what to avoid in situ. This means that,

where a mind is active, it will understand what it is that correlates *laetitia* and the aversion of *tristitia*, namely perseverance and its means, so it will seek them. Such a mind, having adequate ideas, will understand its own nature as a thing that strives to persevere in being. Where a mind is passive, however, its consciousness of striving may not be veridical, so it may not associate *laetitia* with perseverance in being and may associate it with other things. (LeBuffe 2010, p. 122)

The way to cultivate ethically useful desires, then, is to focus on the connection between joy/*laetitia* and the striving to persevere in being. While *laetitia* might be misleading insofar as some things do bring joy (in the short term) without actually contributing to our overall striving to persevere, it is not that this connection is non-existent or that it is unimportant. There is, as we have seen, an important connection between sweetness and health, even if this connection can be misleading when we take it for granted (as when we assume that oranges and candy bars are equal in terms of nutrition just because they are both



sweet). The key is to appreciate that there is ‘an element in experience, *laetitia*, that corresponds to the attainment of the good, an increase in the power to persevere’ (p. 142). It is when we do not see the fundamental correlation between joy and the increase in the power to persevere that we are in trouble. This is so because ‘while we always seek ends that we associate with the experience of *laetitia*, we do not always consciously desire to persevere’ (ibid.). Here’s where the optimistic nutritionist needs to account for the fact that the problem may not be identifying things that are sweet *and* nutritious, but rather learning to desire only those things that are sweet *and* nutritious and to avoid things that are only sweet but not empowering (unless they are in fact the lesser of two evils).

If this was simply a question of learning to desire oranges instead of candy bars, which might be enough of a cognitive and pedagogical challenge, the optimistic nutritionist would not seem to play a decisive role in the reformation of desires. It would, it seems, be enough to inform someone of the correlation between nutrition and sweetness and to keep reminding of this whenever the striving for perseverance would get left behind. Instead, because the desire for self-preservation needs to navigate among a multitude of external things that are sometimes good for us and sometimes bad for us, the optimistic nutritionist needs to be always on guard, helping us select things that are empowering even if they seem to be disempowering, and helping us avoid things that are disempowering even if they appear to be empowering. How this would play out, in a more concrete sense, is never quite spelled out in LeBuffe’s treatment of the optimistic nutritionist, even if it is clear that his model can help set up a useful framework of human psychology to depart from when making sense of the many difficulties involved in aligning conscious desires with the striving to persevere in being. As Matthew Kisner has pointed out, the challenge facing us here is that ‘we should understand our striving as an open-ended desire for whatever increases our power, even though we may not—indeed, cannot—be aware of all that would do so’ (2011, p. 94). So, from the point of view of the optimistic nutritionist, the same challenge applies. What the optimistic nutritionist can offer is a very general direction for indicating things that can help us increase in the power to persevere. What the optimistic nutritionist cannot offer, however, is an exhaustive guide to all of the things that would help us do so in the different circumstances that we find ourselves in.

While the pedagogical challenge rendering imitation a problem clearly remains, the figure of the optimistic nutritionist stands to offer some general guidelines for ethical striving that are sufficiently dynamic (while still being general enough) to be translated into practical tools for taking on concrete situations from the point of view of different individuals with different affective constitutions (what Spinoza refers to as *ingenia*). These guidelines can be conceived in terms of axioms for striving, enabling the selection of things that promote empowerment while still accounting for natural variations in affectivity. In a language attuned to Nietzsche’s moral psychology, we might call these axioms *selectivity* and *selfishness*. Selectivity, in this sense, concerns the ability to identify (with some degree of precision) that which is empowering and to distinguish this from what one imagines to be empowering but which is really disempowering.

As such, from a first-person perspective, it entails being able to select things that agree with my constitution (*ingenium*), which may also involve selecting things that are considered bad or evil in the abstract sense, but that are to be considered lesser present evils in relation to greater future ones. This becomes a question of coming to know one’s affective constitution well enough to be able to predict which encounters will prove empowering and which will prove disempowering. This calls for a form of selectivity that is not based on abstract moral values, but one that is rather grounded in an adequate understanding of how embodied experience can allow for the evaluation of concrete encounters and their ability to either promote or hinder the striving to persevere in being.

Selfishness connects with the ability to distinguish lesser present goods and evils from greater ones so that the abstract aim of a greater common good is perceived as increasingly more real and so that lesser present goods that feed into dangerous (reactive) passions such as jealousy and hatred become less attractive and lose their grasp of the imagination. Developing a language for describing the affective changes that we undergo when we interact with different things in different circumstances appears to be key for this ability to take hold. Most conventional moral language is naturally other-directed (especially language with a utilitarian or deontological slant) and so does not really equip us for describing and diagnosing the affective changes that we undergo. Instead, it focuses on how other people can be imagined to perceive and respond to us and our actions. Addressing this bias or gap in conventional moral language calls for a particular form of selfishness that entails being able to understand and give expression to the needs we experience given an adequate diagnosis of our affective state. Selfishness, in this sense, is about affirming that which is truly good and joyful for me, that is, things that can be shared by others and that will increase the more people take part in it, as opposed to temporary goods that are typically in short supply and that will therefore likely end up leading me down an ever-increasing spiral of passivity and disempowerment. Importantly, however, this form of selfishness is also about rejecting things that are inimical to my striving to persevere in being. In this sense, both affirmation and rejection hinge on the ability to recognise things for what they really are (rather than for what they appear to be). In order to get a better sense of how the axioms of selectivity and selfishness can come to guide the process of self-preservation, let us now turn to Nietzsche’s autobiographical *Ecce Homo* as an illustrative case in point.

#### 4 | Nietzsche’s Guide to Living Well in *Ecce Homo*—Selectivity and Selfishness

Nietzsche’s *Ecce Homo* is an odd beast of a book written late in the philosopher’s relatively short (productive) life. In part autobiographical retrospective and in part a forward-looking manifesto for becoming what you truly are (thus reflecting what appears to be Nietzsche’s principal ethical dictum), *Ecce Homo* uses Nietzsche’s own life story to tell a more general tale of ethical striving and of personal empowerment as the ethical aim *par excellence*. Rather than describing empowerment in terms of the conquering of moral vices and ailments of the soul, however, it

approaches empowerment in terms of a never-ending quest for learning how to flourish despite, and often in the face of, the many external forces that are continuously working to break you down. This requires an acute sense of how to invent new habits that can be used to counter these destructive forces and the developing of strategies for identifying and embracing the things that agree with your constitution (however frail it is<sup>12</sup>) and for resolutely rejecting the things that do not. In keeping with Nietzsche's inverted ethical ideal, it is a story of the body and of monitoring digestion and nutrition rather than a story of defending lofty moral ideals.<sup>13</sup> The starting point, much like for Spinoza, is the attunement to one's affective constitution (Spinoza's *ingenium*) rather than the identification of transcendent values to guide one's striving for a higher plane of existence.<sup>14</sup> As such, Nietzsche is more concerned with questions of human psychology than with speculating about supposed higher realms located somewhere beyond the many restrictions of human perception.

Ethics, from a Nietzschean point of view, concerns practical experimentation geared at finding a reliable sense of guidance to one's ongoing process of individual empowerment. The traditional tools of morality—transcendent concepts such as 'God,' 'soul,' 'virtue,' 'sin,' 'the Beyond,' 'truth,' 'eternal life' (*EH* "Clever" 10)—are taken to be inimical to this purpose, and so the experimentation by which one can begin to select things that are beneficial for one's self-preservation needs to be attuned to the fact that herd morality, on Nietzsche's view, stands in opposition to a productive ethics of self-preservation. This, for Nietzsche, is '[t]he unmasking of Christian morality' (*EH* "Destiny" 8) and it entails the destruction of ideals that are unhelpful and the revaluation of values so that one's guiding values are aligned with what is *actually* beneficial for one's empowerment, and not bound up in the self-mutilation of empty idealism. This process of rejecting values that are inimical to self-preservation appears as an important step in the reformation of one's desires as discussed above with regards to the optimistic nutritionist.

Zarathustra, for Nietzsche, is emblematic of the kind of person who rejects things so as to be able to affirm life (thus living out a paradox of sorts): 'The psychological problem in the type of Zarathustra is how he, who to an unheard-of degree says No, does No to everything which one has hitherto said Yes, can none the less be the opposite of a spirit of denial' (*EH* "Z" 6). In short, Zarathustra affirms himself by rejecting things that are detrimental to his constitution. Nietzsche refers his reader to Zarathustra specifically when proposing a core formula for the revaluation of values, enacted through the violent process of destroying the old so as to be able to create something entirely new. Nietzsche writes that '*he who wants to be a creator in good and evil has first to be a destroyer and break values*' (*EH* "Destiny" 2). It is interesting to note that the act of destroying something is not only a necessary evil insofar as it allows one to begin something new, but also an eminently useful way of gauging one's own power to exist and act. When Nietzsche claims that he knows 'joy in *destruction* to a degree corresponding to my *strength* for destruction' (*EH* "Destiny" 2) he is equating joy with power in a way that bears a striking resemblance to Spinoza's conception of joy/*laetitia* as a direct result of an increase in one's power to persevere in existence. To the extent that Spinoza equates power with virtue, he proposes a conception of joy understood in terms

of 'that *passion by which the mind passes to a greater perfection*' (*E3p11s*). According to Spinoza's affective scheme, '[a]n emotion affirms (indicates, expresses, signals) changes in the body's power similar to the way that a symptom carries information about the condition of the subject who exhibits the symptom' (Youpa 2020, p. 15). The emotion of joy, from this point of view, is a good indicator of an increase in power, and to the extent that both Nietzsche and Spinoza are proponents of an ethics of self-preservation, joy (and not self-sacrifice) is for them the true measure of a person's flourishing. In order to be able to know what brings lasting joy, however, one has to be well acquainted with the limits of one's particular constitution (as this will differ from person to person and from situation to situation). And so Nietzsche remarks that '[i]n order to assess what a type of man is worth one has to compute how much his preservation costs—one has to know the conditions of his existence' (*EH* "Destiny" 4). This, of course, requires first the cultivation of an acute sense of what is beneficial for, and what is harmful to, one's constitution, and it is therefore highly ironic that, traditionally, 'the evil principle is sought in that which is most profoundly necessary for prosperity, in *strict selfishness*' (*EH* "Destiny" 7).

For Nietzsche, the process of re-evaluating values or of inventing new values for oneself is in no small part a question of timing, meaning that there is a time for affirming and a time for denouncing. On the transition between working on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche notes: 'Now that the affirmative part of my task was done, it was the turn of the denying, the No-saying and *No-doing* part' (*EH* "BGE" 1). This, it seems, is an inevitably individual affair, as no one can decide with precision what will fit with the constitution of another. What is 'true' for one person, in terms of what will further that person's striving for empowerment and perseverance, is not necessarily 'true' for another. Accordingly, when Nietzsche remarks that 'Only I have the standard for "truths" in my hand, only I can decide' (*EH* "TI" 2), it may be read as a direct comment on the relativity of values, where what is good and bad for someone will always be relative to that person's particular constitution. This, of course, echoes Spinoza's ethical constructivism outlined above, saying that good and evil are simply labels that one can use to indicate whether or not something is beneficial for one's striving to persevere in existence. To illustrate this point of view, we can recall how in the preface to Part 4 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza notes that 'Music is good for one who is Melancholy, bad for one who is mourning, and neither good nor bad to one who is deaf' (*E4pref*). In order for this kind of ethical egoism to become the new starting point for the individual creation of values (what we in a slightly more Spinozistic language might call the reformation of desires), however, Nietzsche's contention is that the old idols (the supposedly universally applicable ideals) need first be smashed to pieces and thus firmly rejected.

The principle of selectivity is established at the onset of *Ecce Homo* as an axiom for ethical accomplishment. Of the ethical (or 'well-turned out') person, Nietzsche writes:

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 collects together *his* sum: he is a principle of selection, he rejects much.

(EH “Wise” 2)

Just so that we do not mistake this description of an ethical person for an abstract ethical ideal, Nietzsche hastens to add that, ‘I am the *opposite* of a *décadent*: for I have just described *myself*’ (EH “Wise” 2). As such, Nietzsche himself provides an interesting starting point for an investigation into the makings of an ethical person insofar as his sickly constitution seems far removed from the commonly held (albeit wrong-headed) image of the *Übermensch* as the physically strongest and healthiest human specimen. However, this is precisely what makes him an interesting example in terms of selectivity. It is not a person’s natural constitution that makes them powerful, but how well they can combine with external things so as to become more rather than less empowered given their constitution as it is. For Nietzsche, this would translate into an ethical scheme of selection where ‘in combating my sick conditions I always instinctively chose the *right* means: while the *décadent* as such always chooses the means harmful to him’ (EH “Wise” 2). While this description might give us a good sense of how selectivity functions as a guiding principle for a person ‘who has turned out well’ (EH “Wise” 2) it still does not allow us to see how Nietzsche would put this principle to work in his own life. For this, we need to look for clues as to how Nietzsche approaches life in terms of an optimistic nutritionist. Before doing so, however, let us first see how Nietzsche sets up the axiom of selfishness as another point of reference, always in relation to the axiom of selectivity.

The axiom of selfishness is already heavily implied and assumed through the principle of selectivity of course. The very basis for being able to make a good selection (in Nietzsche’s view) is that this selection is *good for the one who is selecting*. As such, the ‘well turned-out’ person ‘is always in *his* company, whether he traffics with books, people or landscapes’ and since ‘[h]e believes in neither “misfortune” nor in “guilt” [...] he is strong enough for everything to *have* to turn out for the best for him’ (EH “Wise” 2). This is the rationale for making good selections in the first place, that they are to serve one’s actual constitution as well as possible, given things as they are and things as they could be. Selfishness, for Nietzsche, thereby connects deeply with the refusal to live by abstract moral imperatives, and the acknowledgment that empowerment presupposes an open-ended continuous experimentation. As such, ‘even the *blunders* of life—the temporary sidepaths and wrong turnings, the delays, the “modesties”, the seriousness squandered on tasks which lie outside *the* task—have their own meaning and value’ (EH “Clever” 9). In contrast, ‘the grand words, the grand attitudes must be guarded against’ as they come to ‘represent a danger that the instinct will “understand itself” too early’ (EH “Clever” 9). Moral imperatives, then, are not primarily taken to function as heuristics enabling human flourishing, but rather as obstacles to the arduous process of forming a good understanding of oneself through bodily experimentation. In Nietzsche’s view, these imperatives prevent us from paying close attention to what actually happens when we experiment to find out what we are and what we benefit from. They lead us to preconceived

conclusions and they make us subordinate our self-cultivation to standards that are not ours to begin with. Selfishness, for Nietzsche, concerns directing one’s attention to ‘all these little things which according to traditional judgement are matters of indifference’ (EH “Clever” 10).<sup>15</sup> The reason being that ‘these little things—nutriment, place, climate, recreation, the whole casuistry of selfishness—are beyond all conception of greater importance than anything that has been considered of importance hitherto’ (EH “Clever” 10).<sup>16</sup> Again, this goes to reaffirm Nietzsche’s inverted ethics, where the seemingly unimportant and mundane things in life become the very starting point for, as well as the precondition of, human flourishing.<sup>17</sup> Becoming what one is by paying close attention to the mundane (and by not assuming that one already knows what one is looking for), is for Nietzsche a way of giving expression to ‘the masterpiece in the art of self-preservation—of *selfishness*’ (EH “Clever” 9).

In sum, Nietzsche’s ethics is far removed from the universalising ambitions of either deontology or utilitarianism. There is no sense in which what is good for one person is also automatically good for another. Ethics for Nietzsche is at bottom a thoroughly embodied affair, as the fluctuating constitution of the body indicates whether or not individual encounters are to be deemed good or bad. This means that ethics becomes a necessarily experimental endeavour, where finding out whether future encounters will come to further or impede one’s striving for empowerment cannot be predicted in the abstract. We can certainly learn what we ought to be striving for with an increasing sense of accuracy (grounded in our experiences), but we can never know for sure which encounters will prove empowering without having first experimented with them. Ethics is not simply a question of embodied experimentation, however. Importantly, it is about finding a reliable way of evaluating the results of these experiments against the framework of self-preservation. The instruments available for the furthering of this project are selectivity and selfishness, making sure that the selections made are not blurred by a confused understanding of ethics as an other-directed endeavour. The foundation for correcting the confused understanding of ethics is that ethics for Nietzsche is not primarily a question of good and evil (in the abstract), but about how everyday encounters with external bodies (often disregarded by moralists as unimportant or even portrayed as being morally corrupt) makes for the very foundation for determining how well we succeed in our ongoing striving for self-preservation and empowerment. These everyday encounters, in Nietzsche’s view, are the so-called ‘little’ things that, while generally overlooked, actually make for ‘the fundamental affairs of life’ (EH “Clever” 10). Grounding ethics in an experimental approach to the ‘little’ things in life lies at the heart of my conception of Nietzsche as an optimistic nutritionist. Let us now turn to some examples from *Ecce Homo* for an indication of how Nietzsche functions as an optimistic nutritionist in situ.

## 5 | Nietzsche as Optimistic Nutritionist

Striving for self-preservation and empowerment, for Nietzsche, is not a question of seeking out comfort. It is rather a question of finding out precisely where the limits of your tolerance are. Living well, for Nietzsche, is therefore a question of testing



your limits so that you can learn to exist at the very border of your capabilities. Only then do we truly flourish, he believes. A flourishing person, on Nietzsche's account, is a person who 'has a taste only for what is beneficial to him; his pleasure, his joy ceases where the measure of what is beneficial is overstepped' (*EH* "Wise" 2). This makes the exploration of the limits of your capabilities into a philosophical endeavour for Nietzsche. Insofar as this quest ultimately aims at human flourishing *qua* self-empowerment, it is a philosopher's task to take the lead, making philosophy, for Nietzsche, into a necessarily practical and always embodied affair. As such, Nietzsche proposes the following life for the philosopher who strives for self-preservation: 'Philosophy, as I have hitherto understood and lived it, is a voluntary living in ice and high mountains—a seeking after everything strange and questionable in existence, all that has hitherto been excommunicated by morality' (*EH* "Foreword" 3).<sup>18</sup> Philosophers, on this understanding, are not conceived as celebrated architects of eternal values, but as solitary adventurers who know that they need to sacrifice their own comfort in order to find the stuff that will prove both sweet *and* nutritious for them. The task of the philosopher, for Nietzsche, is therefore closely related to that of the optimistic nutritionist.

What Nietzsche illustrates throughout *Ecce Homo* is that as an optimistic nutritionist, he can only ever act as a reliable guide to himself. To the extent that this inspires others to venture into the life of the philosopher, in the search for 'everything strange and questionable in existence' (*EH* "Foreword" 3), this is, of course, an ethical accomplishment in itself, but it cannot be taken as a step-by-step guide to this life. This is why, in the end, Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* is conceived as a retelling of the philosopher's life *to himself*. For us, the readers, it tells us to dare go look for what is strange and questionable in our own times and in our own culture, as this is what will ultimately serve as the only reliable yardstick for our continued experimental striving for self-preservation and empowerment. There is a sense in which Nietzsche presents himself as a model for this, but it is not in the sense of placing himself as an exemplar to be emulated by his readers. As Brian Domino argues, it is rather in a weaker sense, where 'he presents himself as one against whom we might usefully compare our lives to see to what extent our lives are analogous to Nietzsche's and, if they are sufficiently similar, to engage in some of the experiments he performed on the "little things" of his life' (Domino 2002, p. 55). As an optimistic nutritionist, Nietzsche acknowledges his limitations insofar as his ability to provide others with reliable nutritional guidance is severely restricted. Nevertheless, he is quite clear about the fact that he is 'interested in quite a different way in a question upon which the "salvation of mankind" depends far more than it does upon any kind of quaint curiosity of the theologians: the question of *nutriment*' (*EH* "Clever" 1). Simply by helping us refocus our attention from the otherworldly to the mundane and the embodied, Nietzsche allows for an ethical process of experimentation to commence *in situ*.

While as an optimistic nutritionist Nietzsche cannot provide us with a blueprint for what to seek out and what to avoid (any more than LeBuffe's model can get us beyond the abstract guideline of the alignment of sweetness and nutrition), he can at least offer us a detailed and vivid description of what this process has been like for him. Specifically, he can give us a sense of how

one would begin to measure the value of an encounter—as either empowering or disempowering. This, to Nietzsche, is the real merit of his teachings.<sup>19</sup> Assuming that most people would not share Nietzsche's particular constitution (his *ingenium*), the examples he offers are not valid as paradigmatic instances to imitate. Instead, what they stand to offer is a case study of what the conscious striving for self-preservation and empowerment can look like. As an optimistic nutritionist, it is not Nietzsche's task to tell us (in detail) what to eat and what to avoid, but to encourage us to pay close attention to how we respond to different things and to remind us of the difference between things that empower us and things that disempower us. Insofar as individual bodies are differently constituted, empowerment is also always an individualised (and relational) affair. Still, there is a sense in which, as an optimistic nutritionist, Nietzsche can help us pay attention to things that we might otherwise easily miss; things that while they appear to be unimportant (as they are typically small), are actually crucial for our self-cultivation and empowerment. Insofar as Nietzschean self-cultivation entails a striving for freedom, it is not to be interpreted as in any sense connected to the freedom of the will. Instead, it can be interpreted as a desire to overcome the forces that constantly threaten to overpower you, so that in this collision of forces, the result can be empowerment rather than disempowerment. As an optimistic nutritionist, Nietzsche can help us judge which kinds of obstacles will be worth taking on and which obstacles will be detrimental for our striving to persevere. Because, as Ioan points out, '[a]bolishing obstacles is detrimental to the exercise of freedom' (2017, p. 1872), helping to identify the obstacles that can best promote the exercise of freedom (*qua* the expression of our nature) becomes a central task for the optimistic nutritionist.

As a case study, Nietzsche's approach to the 'little' things in *his* life can still make for something to be inspired by and to borrow from as we see fit in the experimentation with the 'little' things of our own lives. Drawing attention to the seemingly mundane, Nietzsche helps us to focus on things that (1) are inevitably present in all of our lives, and (2) are susceptible to our bodily experimentation. Having also offered the axioms of selectivity and selfishness, we know that whatever it is we are engaging with (whether it is the habit of drinking coffee or of reading books), we must be constantly attuned to how we are affectively impacted by it. Nietzsche can then proceed to tell us stories of how he came to revalue the seemingly mundane things in his own life (whether it concerns his locality, his habits of eating and drinking, or his choice in music and literature) to begin to recalibrate these interactions in a way that would serve to empower rather than disempower him. This amounts to the basis for an educational diary akin to that of an optimistic nutritionist.

It may seem paradoxical that the starting point for Nietzsche as an optimistic nutritionist is to render himself sufficiently unprepared.<sup>20</sup> 'I have to be unprepared to be master of myself' (*EH* "Wise" 4), Nietzsche muses. What this alludes to is that being able to diagnose one's condition is not an intellectualist affair. Neither is it a question of abstract morality. It is not a question of comparing one's current state with an imagined ideal to strive for, but of being sufficiently open to accepting one's actual condition so that one can make the most of the encounters ahead. For this to be possible, old habits need to be unlearned and new habits invented. Inventing new habits thereby becomes a way for



Nietzsche to connect his nutritionist endeavour with his ethical inversion. Nietzsche tells us how he was forced to reconstitute himself by inventing new habits: ‘Until my very maturest years I did in fact eat *badly*—in the language of morals “impersonally”, “selflessly”, “altruistically”, for the salvation of cooks and other fellow Christians’ (EH “Clever” 1). In order to figure out what is needed, a sufficient openness toward oneself is required. Rather than assuming that what one needs is what other people would need, or what other people would expect one to need, a starting point for Nietzsche is that one first allows one’s constitution (rather than abstract reason or commonsense morality) to determine one’s needs: ‘One has to *know* the size of one’s stomach’ (EH “Clever” 1). And while he does offer some general guidelines—‘No eating between meals, no coffee’ and ‘*Tea* beneficial only in the morning’—it is important to note that ‘[e]ach has here his own degree, often between the narrowest and most delicate limits’ (EH “Clever” 1).

After having dedicated some space to the importance of monitoring and revising one’s habits of eating and drinking, Nietzsche moves on to examine the impact of climate and place. Again, while these aspects might seem incidental, for Nietzsche they make up the starting point of a well-lived life: ‘The influence of climate on the *metabolism*, its slowing down, its speeding up, extends so far that a blunder in regards to place and climate can not only estrange anyone from his task but withhold it from him altogether’ (EH “Clever” 2). And much as with the habit of eating and drinking well, while Nietzsche can offer some general advice—‘genius is *conditioned* by dry air’—he highlights the importance of personal experimentation for being able to identify one’s proper climate and for revising one’s habits accordingly:

Now, when from long practice I read climatic and meteorological effects off from myself as from a very delicate and reliable instrument and even on a short journey, from Turin to Milan for instance, verify on myself physiologically the change in degrees in humidity, I recall with horror the *uncanny* fact that my life up to the last ten years, the years when my life was in danger, was spent nowhere but in wrong places downright *forbidden* to me.

(EH “Clever” 2)

Importantly, what Nietzsche was lacking was not a general compass (moral or otherwise) to guide him in search of good habits, but rather a view unobstructed by abstract ideals and assumed considerations for others. Being able to determine one’s proper place and climate is wholly dependent upon the degree to which one is guided by the dual axioms of selectivity and selfishness, it seems. Nietzsche comments: ‘Any more subtle selfishness, any *protection* by a commanding instinct was lacking, it was an equating of oneself with everyone else, a piece of “selflessness”, a forgetting of one’s distance—something I shall never forgive myself’ (EH “Clever” 2). Without a view to what will benefit my particular constitution, how can I ever be expected to select good things for myself, Nietzsche encourages us to wonder.

Insofar as the selectivity construed above seems to imply a freedom of choice on the part of the agent, this would seem to fly in

the face of Nietzsche’s (and Spinoza’s) resolute denial of the existence of free will. However, as pointed out by Rutherford (2011), Ioan (2017) and Yonover (2021a), Nietzsche does wish to retain a central role for freedom even if his general outlook is necessitarian.<sup>21</sup> This means that Nietzsche’s notion of freedom is both naturalised and de-moralised ‘and so radically different from metaphysical freedom’ (Ioan 2017, p. 1871). Against this background, I would propose that we think of Nietzsche’s selectivity as a form of affirmation of necessity, acknowledging that to affirm something is not tantamount to causing it. Affirming something as empowering would be to select it without having laid any claim on being the originator of a choice. It is rather to affirm an encounter that from the point of view of a moralised will seem either meaningless, inconsequential or immoral, but that from Nietzsche’s naturalised perspective becomes crucial as it can help indicate the state of a body’s flourishing in relation to the impact of other bodies. As Ioan puts it: ‘To be affirmative means [...] to be able to understand, detect and later to employ the degree of power or force present in [...] the drives and passions deemed “evil” by the moralists’ and so it becomes ‘the criterion we need to use in order to distinguish between good and bad (self-undermining) expressions of power’ (2017, p. 1877). To affirm something on Nietzsche’s account is therefore a truly demanding task, as it requires us to break out of the ‘cognitive laziness’ that the belief in free will encourages (as it offers a simple *but false* explanation to things that are otherwise exceedingly difficult to explain causally) (Yonover 2021a, p. 465). This also helps us circle in on the optimistic aspect of the optimistic nutritionist. Nietzsche’s nutritionist is optimistic in the sense that he remains affirmative, seeking to always affirm the forces that can help bolster empowerment.

An image of Nietzsche as an optimistic nutritionist, guided by selectivity and selfishness, is now beginning to take form. In this, he moves from detailing his forming of habits of eating and drinking to his habits of picking the right places to dwell and the right climate to enjoy, and finally he discusses his habits of recreation. ‘Selectivity in nutriment, selectivity in climate and place;—the third thing in which one may at no cost commit a blunder is selectivity in one’s *kind of recreation*’ (EH “Clever” 3). Recreation, for Nietzsche, is not simply a question of selecting the right kinds of recreational tools befitting of one’s constitution—such as books or pieces of music—but also of keeping things at bay. Protecting oneself from haphazard external influences (to the degree that this is possible) becomes an important part of one’s recreation. Much like with nutriment and climate, it is at the bottom a question of forming good habits. For Nietzsche, this means identifying the books, music and companionship that would agree best with his constitution and to make use of these as tools for his striving for self-preservation and empowerment. As Nietzsche tells it, this means that he ‘take[s] flight almost always to the same books, really a small number, those books which have *proved* themselves precisely to [him]’ (EH “Clever” 3).<sup>22</sup> The instruments of recreation are also weapons to use in defence against greater harm, however. In the same sense that Spinoza’s optimistic nutritionist (as described by LeBuffe) needs to always pay attention to degrees of harm when seeking to opt for a lesser present evil in preference to a greater future one, Nietzsche’s instruments of recreation are not deontological entities valuable in and of themselves: they are weapons to use in the combatting of greater harm. Commenting on his

relationship with Wagner, Nietzsche remarks that ‘Wagner is the counter-poison to everything German *par excellence*—still poison, I do not dispute it ...’ (EH “Clever” 6). While Nietzsche needed Wagner, his need was predicated on a need for a weapon to use against German culture and not on an abstract longing for companionship in general.

The ability to make good selections, with regard to nutriment, place, climate and recreation, is at the bottom a question of having ‘an instinct of self-preservation’ (EH “Clever” 8) for Nietzsche. Insofar as this instinct can be cultivated, it hinges on an increasing readiness to defend oneself against various disempowering forces. This cultivation of an instinct for self-defence, Nietzsche calls *taste*. To cultivate a taste that is aligned with one’s actual constitution is what would allow a person to make selections geared toward empowerment. While this requires denying the things that are disempowering, it is important for Nietzsche that it does not lead to a life of perpetual naysaying. On taste and its pivotal role for the optimistic nutritionist, Nietzsche says: ‘Its imperative commands, not only to say No when Yes would be a piece of “selflessness”, but also to say *No as little as possible*. To separate oneself, to depart from that to which No would be required again and again’ (EH “Clever” 8). The aim of Nietzsche’s optimistic nutritionist, then, is to be able to say Yes as much as possible. For this to be possible, however, one first needs to remove oneself from a form of ‘selfless’ idealism which would otherwise render every form of selection a selection made from the viewpoint of someone else. For Nietzsche, this does not mean that you need to isolate yourself from the world in order to flourish. Instead, it goes back to selectivity and to make changes with regard to the ‘little’ things in life. He offers an example: ‘Suppose I were to step out of my house and discover, instead of calm and aristocratic Turin, the German provincial town: my instinct would have to blockade itself so as to push back all that pressed upon it from this flat and cowardly world’ (EH “Clever” 8). By learning to anticipate affective changes in relation to changes in the ‘little’ things (food, drink, place, climate, recreation, etc.), Nietzsche suggests that one can learn to become increasingly active rather than reactive. This involves ‘withdrawing from situations and relationships in which one would be condemned as it were to suspend one’s “freedom”, one’s initiative, and become a mere reagent’ (EH “Clever” 8), and to actively seek out encounters that have proven to be empowering, even if these encounters may seem inconsequential and negligible from the point of view of traditional morality. These ‘matters of indifference’ (EH “Clever” 10) are in actuality the only means through which Nietzsche’s form of self-cultivation can be reliably measured and influenced. Much like for LeBuffe’s optimistic nutritionist, they are ‘the fundamental affairs of life’ (EH “Clever” 10), and in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche gives us a small taste of what it is like to navigate among them in situ while being guided by the axioms of selectivity and selfishness.

## 6 | Tensions

While Nietzsche famously acknowledged Spinoza as an important precursor in private correspondence with Franz Overbeck (Nietzsche 1954, p. 92), his own philosophical method differs rather markedly from Spinoza’s. As Nietzsche himself points out in his correspondence with Overbeck, and as commentators have continued to explore since (Ioan 2017; Yonover 2021b; Della

Rocca 2008, pp. 292–303), there are both parallels and tensions between the two philosophers.<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche identifies an affinity with Spinoza with regard to the rejection of free will, the objective reality of good and evil, and of teleology in nature (believing these ideas to be deep-rooted anthropomorphic prejudices rather than sound philosophical axioms [E1app]). While Spinoza denies the currency of these ideas as a direct consequence of his thoroughgoing rationalism (leading him to embrace determinism [E1p16c1] and necessitarianism [E1p33] both), Nietzsche, however, is deeply averse to rationalism in the sense that he is highly suspicious of the modern faith in Reason with a capital R as well as in the promise of the aims and methods of first philosophy in general.<sup>24</sup> It may be argued, then, that while Nietzsche and Spinoza end up rejecting much the same philosophical conclusions, they do so on very different grounds.<sup>25</sup>

The practical consequence of this tension would seem to be that Spinoza takes more stock in what he calls dictates of reason [*recta ratio vivendi*] than Nietzsche ever would, who appears to deny anything beyond the subjective evaluation of affective encounters from the point of view of embodied experience. For Spinoza, while particular encounters must necessarily be evaluated as unique compositions of different bodies/minds (with different *ingenia*), there is still a sense in which reason can guide us in a more general sense (here, arguably, Nietzsche can be understood to be a ‘much more historical thinker’ [Ansell-Pearson 2022, p. 260] insofar as he seeks to avoid the generalizability that would be part and parcel of Spinoza’s rationalism). The trick for Spinoza is to allow reason to govern the imagination so that it does not end up seeking out and desiring things that are inhibiting the power to persevere even though they may provide temporary pleasures and joy. As argued above, this is a balancing act, where reforming one’s desires is an intellectual endeavour, even though desiring at bottom is a thoroughly embodied affair. While, for Nietzsche, the axioms of selectivity and selfishness are not conceived as dictates of reason, it could very well be argued that as overarching principles for successful self-preservation, they actually function in a way that is very similar to Spinoza’s practical dictates.<sup>26</sup> It may be, then, that what at first seems to be a foundational tension between the two philosophers is rather a surface-level tension in the language used to describe a process that is strikingly similar at bottom.

Even if there are tensions that clearly go beyond surface-level—such as the tension between Spinoza’s striving for rational agreement and Nietzsche’s striving for empowering conflicts—there is still a sense in which both accounts amount to an ethics that demand a high level of sensitivity in terms of appreciating and accounting for the psychological, affective and physiological constitution of the individual and for the impact of colliding forces. Put differently, while ‘Spinoza sees the increase in freedom as an increase in rational agreement’ and ‘Nietzsche believes it consists in sharpening the type of conflict that can, under certain circumstances, be conducive to empowerment’ (Ioan 2017, p. 1873), both strategies require an accurate conception of the power-relations between different bodies to take effect. Empowerment is their common aim, and while they conceive of the road to empowerment in different ways—through agreement or through productive collisions—the role of the optimistic nutritionist (as the one diagnosing the bodies involved) remains strikingly similar.

Perhaps this tension (regardless of how foundational we take it to be) is precisely the reason why Nietzsche can help bring LeBuffe's figure of the optimistic nutritionist to life in our imagination, however. To the extent that true ideas have a limited power to affect us, Nietzsche's attention to the 'little' things, as 'the fundamental affairs of life' (*EH* "Clever" 10), can help us focus on the things that do in fact stand to impact the imagination forcefully versus the things that are far less likely to do so (as may be the case with LeBuffe's attention to the more general outlines of the optimistic nutritionist as a rationalist ideal of sorts). When it comes to outlining an ethics as a practical theory of living well, we may align ourselves with Eugene Garver's Spinozistic contention that '[k]nowing the truth is impractical; it produces no imperatives' (Garver 2010, p. 845). This claim hinges on Spinoza's propositions suggesting that (1) an 'affect cannot be restrained or taken away except by an affect opposite to, and stronger than, the affect to be restrained' (E4p7) and, (2) that an affect is therefore not restrained 'by the true knowledge of good and evil insofar as it is true but only insofar as it is considered as an affect' (E4p14), which means that the workings of human imagination always need to be accounted for in terms of its influential role for shaping desires. In this sense, Nietzsche's endeavour to find a style of writing that successfully communicates an affective state, 'an inner tension of pathos through signs' (*EH* "Books" 4), can be interpreted as a strategy for finding attuned ways of addressing the general problem of self-preservation. As such, Nietzsche concludes that: 'Every style is good which actually communicates an inner state, which makes no mistake as to the signs, the tempo of the signs, the *gestures*—all rules of phrasing are art of gesture' (*EH* "Books" 3). Even in terms of finding one's voice as an optimistic nutritionist, then, it appears that attending to the details of the seemingly 'little' things in life is key for its efficacy.

In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche allows us to accompany him through a very dramatically narrated process of selecting things that are taken to be empowering for him without having this process being overshadowed by the abstract ideal of intellectual empowerment as a universal dictate of reason. This makes his examples of striving for empowerment imaginatively appealing and emotionally engaging in a way that LeBuffe's treatment never really is, as it is carefully accommodated to the rationalist framework of Spinoza's metaphysics. While LeBuffe's figure of the optimistic nutritionist certainly succeeds in bringing to the fore the practical core of Spinoza's ethical theory of striving for persevering in being, it benefits greatly from being complemented by Nietzsche's personal examples of the 'little' things that are meant to be inspiring and thought-provoking rather than merely descriptive. Put differently, I hope to have shown in this essay how Nietzsche can help us breathe life into the ethical ideal of the optimistic nutritionist, and by doing so, illustrate how selectivity and selfishness can come to function as crucial axioms for a well-lived life.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> References to Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* (1992) are given by abbreviated chapter titles and section numbers. Example: *EH* "Clever" 10 = *Ecce Homo*, "Why I Am So Clever," section 10.
- <sup>2</sup> The controversial status of *Ecce Homo* is often attributed, at least in part, to the fact that Nietzsche was descending into severe (and eventually to prove fatal) mental illness while still working on the text (Acampora 2013). In addition, some controversy also surrounds the legitimacy of different versions of the published text. For a comment on this, see R. J. Hollingdale's introductory note on his translation (Nietzsche 1992, pp. xviii–xiv).
- <sup>3</sup> In E4p22c Spinoza writes: 'The striving to preserve oneself is the first and only foundation of virtue.'
- <sup>4</sup> References to Spinoza's *Ethics* (1985) are abbreviated according to the following standard method: *Ethics* (E), appendix (app), axiom (a), corollary (c), definition (D), demonstration (d), lemma (L), proposition (p), postulate (post), preface (pref), scholium (s), explanation (exp). Example: E2p7s = *Ethics*, part 2, proposition 7, scholium.
- <sup>5</sup> This may be conceived in terms of strengthening the guidance of reason, where the basic ethical lesson is that '[f]rom the guidance of reason we want a greater future good in preference to a lesser present one, and a lesser present evil in preference to a greater future one' (E4p66).
- <sup>6</sup> To this end, Justin Steinberg (2014) has argued that while Spinoza's dictates of reason can be relied on as general (prescriptive) pedagogical principles for ethical flourishing, actually figuring out 'what constitutes the good in situ requires input from the imagination, since one cannot have rational knowledge of concrete particulars' (p. 183).
- <sup>7</sup> The essence of any finite thing, on Spinoza's account, is its striving to persevere in existence (E3p7).
- <sup>8</sup> This follows from E4p65c where Spinoza explains that: 'From the guidance of reason, we shall follow a lesser evil as a greater good, and pass over a lesser good which is the cause of a greater evil. For the evil which is here called lesser is really good, and the good which is here called lesser, on the other hand, is evil.' As is evident from the quote, however, this assumes that people are already guided by reason, which for Spinoza is a rare thing indeed. In the *Theological-Political Treatise* (henceforth TTP), Spinoza relates this natural cognitive limitation to the need for external laws and social mores and regulations: 'It's true that everyone seeks his own advantage—but people want things and judge them useful, not by the dictate of sound reason, but for the most part only from immoderate desire and because they are carried away by affects of the mind which take no account of the future or of other things. That's why no society can continue in existence without authority and force, and hence, laws which moderate and restrain men's immoderate desires and unchecked impulses' (TTP 5[21–22]). References to the TTP are to chapter and section of Spinoza (2016). The inability to perceive a greater future good as equally real as a lesser present good is due to an inadequate understanding of how things exist in duration. In E4p62s Spinoza unpacks his reasoning as follows: 'If we could have adequate knowledge of the duration of things, and determine by reason their time of existing, we would regard future things with the same affect as present ones, and the mind would want the good it conceives as future just as it wants the good it conceives as present. Hence, it would necessarily neglect a lesser present good for a greater future one, and that would be good in the present, but the cause of some future ill, it would not want at all, as we shall soon demonstrate.'
- <sup>9</sup> This rests on the assumption that a pedagogical relation is fundamentally based on an asymmetry that the involved parties then seek to level out over time. Once this asymmetry is gone, the pedagogical relation itself is rendered redundant. For an influential theory of pedagogical relations substantiating this assumption, see Nohl (2022).



- <sup>10</sup> For a helpful discussion on how people who are differently constituted can help one another flourish from the point of view of Spinoza's metaphysics (and on some of the challenges that come with this), see Soyarslan (2023).
- <sup>11</sup> Although, we might, along with an anonymous reviewer of this paper, take issue with LeBuffe's description of pecans as being sweet. For this comparison to make sense, I believe that we need to dial down our expectations of what would constitute sweet foods. It is true that no foods found growing in nature would probably be anywhere near as sweet as the candy we would buy in the store. In comparison, however, pecans are sweeter than bitter fruits or nuts and so this is, I believe, enough to set up the kind of spectrum between sweet and bitter that LeBuffe is going for here. Part of the problem, of course, is that since sweetness in foods can be artificially manipulated, our natural sense of the relation between sweetness and nutrition is easily disrupted and so this imbalance would be why we would need to enlist the services of an optimistic nutritionist to begin with (to help reset the scales as it were).
- <sup>12</sup> While Nietzsche's health was poor for most of his life, he makes a distinction between this and being sick in a pathological sense where one clings to otherworldly ideals and seek out things that are disempowering (what Nietzsche refers to as morbidity). This distinction hinges on the assumption that his instincts are basically healthy, and he explains that '[e]very morbid trait is lacking in me; even in periods of severe illness I did not become morbid; a trait of fanaticism will be sought in vain in my nature' (EH "Clever" 10). In contrast with the dominant understanding of human flourishing, this means that for Nietzsche, 'it is possible to flourish, to live a healthy life in the broadest sense of the term, while physically sick' (Domino 2002, p. 59).
- <sup>13</sup> Nietzsche's ethics is inverted in the sense that it moves in the opposite direction of the traditions of moral philosophy where abstract ideals make for the starting point for a form of striving that necessarily begins in the particular and the situated (or even animalistic and instinctual) but which seeks to reach a universal standpoint untainted by embodied desires and needs. In the opening of *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche comments on this inversion: 'The *lie* of the ideal has hitherto been the curse on reality, through it mankind itself has become mendacious and false down to its deepest instincts—to the point of worshipping the *inverse* values to those which alone could guarantee it prosperity, future, the exalted *right* to a future' (EH "Foreword" 2).
- <sup>14</sup> As pointed out by Ioan, Spinoza and Nietzsche share a fundamental 'commitment to the crucial importance of knowing the body and its endogenous power to act' (2017, p. 1863).
- <sup>15</sup> On Acampora's reading, attending to the small things in life is not just a way of finding out what is empowering in situ but also a way of building up one's defences against the many threats of abstract moralism. As such: 'Looking after these "basic concerns of life" turns out to be important because we otherwise find ourselves expending immense amounts of energy fighting off harmful conditions, and any ruling thought that distracted our attention from such concerns, denigrated them as unimportant or inconsequential, would have potentially quite harmful effects. Thus, an important dimension of how one becomes what one is is by preserving oneself, conserving oneself from counterproductive resistance' (Acampora 2013, p. 372). For Nietzsche, the denial of the value of the 'little' things in life stems from a form of denial of life itself, ironically enforced by the self-proclaimed defenders of abstract moralism. No wonder then, muses Nietzsche, that 'contempt has been taught for the primary instincts of life; that a "soul", a "spirit" has been *lyingly invented* in order to destroy the body; that one teaches that there is something unclean in the preconditions of life, sexuality; that the evil principle is sought in that which is most profoundly necessary for prosperity, in *strict selfishness*' (EH "Destiny" 7). Similarly, Ansell-Pearson notes that Nietzsche, in his middle period, begins developing his psychologically astute method of cultivating and mastering passions by proposing 'an attention to the detail of things, including nuances and subtleties; and, second, the practice of honest self-observation' (Ansell-Pearson 2022, p. 249).
- <sup>16</sup> Commenting on Nietzsche's use of the term 'casuistry' here, Brian Domino argues that Nietzsche employs a reinvention of an old Catholic method intended 'to assist priests in dealing with novel situations brought to them in the confessional' (Domino 2002, p. 52). Rather than moving from an abstract principle or a maxim to a practical application, the method is designed to help decide 'ethical matters on a case-by-case basis' (p. 53). On Domino's reading, this helps illustrate how for Nietzsche 'ethics is more akin to medicine—where one must act without the safety net of certainty—than to mathematics' (ibid.). Nietzsche's preferred reader is therefore one who will guess rather than calculate (EH "Books" 3). Ultimately, Domino argues that by moving case-by-case and by focusing our attention on bodily habits and the 'little' things, Nietzsche encourages his readers to effect changes at a level where this is possible, and to then allow these changes to reverberate from the personal to the political. The argument being that, '[a]ny improvement at this level [i.e., of bodily habits], no matter how small, is apt to reap large savings because of the frequency of repetition of such actions' (Domino 2002, p. 61).
- <sup>17</sup> There is even a sense in which this inverted ethical ideal can be said to allow Nietzsche to frame *Ecce Homo* as an anti-*Bildungsroman* insofar as his stated purpose is to offer a self-portrait of himself as being of 'an antithetical nature to the species of man hitherto honoured as virtuous' (EH "Foreword" 2). In stark opposition to Wilhelm von Humboldt's ambition to have the theory of *Bildung* describe a unified striving for 'the development of mankind' (Humboldt 2000, p. 58), Nietzsche instead asserts that '[t]he last thing I would promise would be to "improve" mankind' (EH "Foreword" 2). The refusal to frame *Ecce Homo* in terms of an attempt to improve mankind appears to be perfectly aligned with the axioms of selectivity and selfishness as an ethical locus of navigation completely dependent upon the embodied experimentation of the one who is striving for self-empowerment. The resulting inversion, admittedly curious for a book on ethics and human flourishing, is encapsulated by Nietzsche's last sentence of the epigraph to first chapter of *Ecce Homo*: 'And so I tell myself my life.'
- <sup>18</sup> It is important to note here that seeking out the questionable is not a form of self-serving indulgence or a reactive expression of rebellion for Nietzsche, but a way of becoming more empowered through open-ended experimentation. As such, Nietzsche suggests that he is 'strong enough to turn even the most questionable and most perilous things to [his] own advantage and thus to become stronger' (EH "Clever" 6).
- <sup>19</sup> Accordingly, Nietzsche opens the first chapter of *Ecce Homo* by proposing that: 'I have a subtler sense for signs of ascent and descent than any man has ever had, I am the teacher *par excellence* in this matter' (EH "Wise" 1).
- <sup>20</sup> There is, I think, a sense in which because empowerment is always bound up with various external forces that are not predictable, experimenting with these requires an ability to allow oneself to be moved by them willingly rather than to attempt, in vain, to thwart them. This may be taken on a very foundational level, in terms of accepting and embracing one's fate (*amor fati*), but it can also be interpreted as a guiding principle in terms of the selection of 'little' things—'for whatever marks an epoch in my life has been brought to me by accident, never by a recommendation' (EH "Clever" 3). Paradoxically, to not rely on advice becomes the premier advice of Nietzsche's optimistic nutritionist.
- <sup>21</sup> For a fleshed-out account of Nietzsche's positive account of freedom in relation to his denial of free will (and in relation to Spinoza's views on the matter), see Rutherford (2011). As Rutherford sees it, Nietzsche's conception of freedom is 'in conjunction with a view of natural events as causally necessitated' (2011, p. 514).
- <sup>22</sup> Here, Nietzsche sets up a relation between having experienced things and being able to enjoy reading that he returns to later in the same book. Commenting on his own writing, Nietzsche says that '[u]ltimately, no one can extract from things, books included, more than he already knows. What one has no access to through experience one has no ear for' (EH "Books" 1). This asserted relation between concrete experience and attunement is what leads Nietzsche to argue

for the necessity of beginning with embodied experimentation rather than the presupposition of abstract values in ethics.

- <sup>23</sup> Nietzsche himself focuses on the parallels and ascribes the tensions mainly to contextual circumstances such as historical, cultural and scientific differences in his correspondence with Overbeck.
- <sup>24</sup> Nietzsche presents his critique of free will as one of the ‘four great errors’ connected with sustained prejudices in Western philosophy in the *Twilight of the Idols* (Nietzsche 1990). In the same text, Nietzsche levels a scathing critique of the way philosophers have traditionally assigned reason a superior role in terms of its supposed privileged access to reliable knowledge (unavailable to the senses). While Spinoza shares Nietzsche’s conclusion that free will is an error largely kept alive through flawed philosophy, he is less inclined to dismiss reason as a reliable way of accessing truth. For an informed study of Spinoza’s different uses of the concept of reason, see LeBuffe (2018).
- <sup>25</sup> This connects with the aforementioned method of casuistry (see note 16) insofar as Nietzsche’s lack of confidence in the methods of reason precludes him from presenting ‘an argument with the logical necessity of Descartes’s *cogito*’ (Domino 2002, pp. 54–55). Instead, Nietzsche ‘follows the traditional casuistic technique of amassing evidence’ (p. 55).
- <sup>26</sup> As Ansell-Pearson has pointed out, it is possible to construe Nietzsche as proposing ‘a much more affirmative philosophy of the passions’ (Ansell-Pearson 2022, p. 259) than Spinoza, insofar as Spinoza’s *summum bonum* translates into the intellectual love of God, where the passions have been successfully transformed into active affects. Nietzsche, on the other hand, does not seem to put much stock in this ideal and so proposes instead that passions be discharged ‘in culturally healthy ways’ (ibid.). While this difference in the conception of the highest good is certainly real, I am not convinced that it plays out so differently in a practical setting, where Spinoza is equally concerned with finding ways of endorsing passions that are comparatively more conducive to ethical flourishing than other (more detrimental) passions. For a detailed treatment of how Spinoza conceives of the relative benefit of passions, see Youpa (2020). For a similar treatment of Spinoza’s virtuous passions, where passions are understood to be indefeasibly bad only ‘to the extent that they frustrate our striving, decreasing our activity and power’, see Kisner (2008, p. 759).

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