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The Style Unto Death

Meditations on Untimely Late Style in Philosophy

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Abstract

The Style Unto Death: Meditations on Untimely Late Style in Philosophy

The thread of philosophical style I propose to write is *late style*—so-called for the assumed relationship to temporality and biography found in works written late in a philosopher's life. Late style implies a biographical motive for the creation and arrangement of formal elements in a text. Late style also assumes continuity within a philosopher's oeuvre, even if those links take the form of departures and transformations, such as, for instance, what we encounter in the relationship between Wittgenstein's early (*Tractatus*) and late (*Investigations*) work. Most importantly, late style weds two key assumptions: the first—that style is technically recognizable; the second—that a bond exists, if often implicit, between a philosopher's life and the presentation or expression of the philosophy.

The Style Unto Death: Meditations on Untimely Late Style in Philosophy

PART 1¹

It is one thing to assume a logical and causal affiliation between the thematic content of a philosophical work and its author's personal history; but suggesting that a philosopher's style has a direct filiation with biographical events seems a much thornier and more difficult claim. In various forms of art it appears self-evident that personality and individuality should express themselves through the stamp of style. But can we assume in good faith that philosophical writing expresses and therefore exposes an author's distinctively personal style? Is it even possible to isolate and highlight style in philosophy as something singular, which divulges the individuality of its writer? If indeed it is possible to reveal the structure of a philosophical style, it is surely a different matter to cogently explain the genesis and persistence of that style as rooted in the particular personality and life events of the philosopher. For instance, while the imaginative and writerly style of Søren Kierkegaard often begs biographical clarification, what part of Immanuel Kant's seemingly eventless biography informs his stylistic choices? Or, if we find much fodder for the interpretation of Wittgenstein's philosophical modes in his much researched biography, should we find equally illuminating connections between Quine's philosophical designs and his privileged Harvard life?

But perhaps we are already moving too quickly through this murky topic of style. Let's back up. Do we know philosophical style when we read it and hear it and see it? Is philosophical style a kind of formal structural pattern that organizes a philosophical text? If so, does an analysis of philosophical style function similarly to a genetic diagram, by explaining the possible combinations of exchange and synthesis between the author and philosophical thought expressed through the text? Or is true philosophical style merely an effect of an untouchable, invisible, unconscious, and essentially unknowable hidden kernel of human singularity – a kind of oblique

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¹ Some portions of Part 1 have been published, in a slightly different version, in: J.D. Mininger, "Lateness a Timely and Untimely: Towards a Taxonomy of Late Style," *Darbai ir Dienos* 50, (2009): 45-57.

expression of the soul? Formalist critics see style as related to poetics and the mechanical production of meaning. They seek to decode style as a set of discoverable patterns created using linguistic devices and rhetorical strategies. In a diametrically opposed approach, strict humanists and spiritualists assign a spiritual dimension to style, alleging that a philosopher's unique style breathes life into an otherwise sterile conceptual landscape. And let us not forget that there are surely some (many?) who would avoid philosophical style altogether, because, so the argument goes, any discussion of style is essentially an *Umweg*, a digression. So let us at least pause briefly – if perhaps somewhat too piously – to acknowledge at the start that by broaching the topic of philosophical style we may, like Theseus, be entering a labyrinth.

In order to make it out of the maze unscathed, I'll take a cue from Theseus and follow a thread. The thread of philosophical style I propose to speak of today is *late style*—so-called for the assumed relationship to temporality and biography found in works written late in a philosopher's life. Late style implies a biographical motive for the creation and arrangement of formal elements in a text. Late style also assumes continuity within a philosopher's oeuvre, even if those links take the form of departures and transformations, such as, for instance, what we encounter in the relationship between Wittgenstein's early (*Tractatus*) and late (*Investigations*) work. Most importantly, late style weds two key assumptions: the first—that style is technically recognizable; the second—that a bond exists, if often implicit, between a philosopher's life and the presentation or expression of the philosophy.

Based on the union of these assumptions, I propose two central categories through which to understand late style in philosophy: timely and untimely late style. *Timely late style* refers to examples of works composed late in life and which fulfill what one would typically think of when confronted with the term 'late style.' *Untimely late style* contains examples of philosophical late style characterized not by maturity in years or experience, but conditioned only by the thought of death. With the concept of untimely late style I mean to suggest that perhaps a philosopher need not be at the end of a career, advanced in age, or deathly ill in order to produce philosophy in a late style. Via this untimely category, I wish to apply pressure to the notion of late style with the intention of creatively rearticulating the relationship between its two key assumptions of 1) style's technical recognizability and 2) the link between subjectivity and philosophical thought.

A brief detour through the contours of timely late style will help initially to explain why a contrapuntal, untimely category merits creation. The term ‘timely’ refers to critic Edward Said’s explanation in *On Late Style* that our aesthetic studies are typically buoyed by the assumption of a “general abiding timeliness” about the passage of human life.² Grounded in this “general abiding timeliness,” late style is possible because we assume that as an aging master approaches the end of a productive career and life, his or her style may be altered to reflect the new priorities and perspectives provoked by the advancing of that temporal horizon. To help define timely late style, I propose four central types, each of which is notable for its crucial relation to timeliness.

The first and surely most typical type of late style is found in works written late in life. These mature works include a summing up of what philosophers have learned from plying their intellectual trade.

The second type of late style enhances the first by summarizing what has been learned from experience. But this timely late style supplements the writer’s earlier career by crowning it like a capstone does its arch. In the literary canon, I would turn to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* as a fitting example. By most scholars’ educated guesses, *The Tempest* is a late work; but in particular the character of Prospero, and his magnanimous gestures of mercy and forgiveness of his enemies, especially renouncing the sources of his power represented in his magical staff and books, submit to a loose allegorical interpretation that understands Prospero as corresponding with the fulfilled career of the master poet himself. Drawing an example from the Western canon of philosophy, one could make a good case for Nietzsche’s *Also Sprach Zarathustra* as a late work that both summarizes and supplements his earlier ideas—a conceptual persona who collects the previously developed philosophical ideas and freshly embodies them.

The first two kinds of late style exhibit features informed by wisdom and skill distilled through a lifetime of experience; but a third, perhaps equally essential trait of timely late style, is urgency. What if the “late” of late style possesses the sense of exigency and risk, lest one’s work come *too late*? A fine example of this is Jacob Taubes’ brilliant *Die Politische Theologie des Paulus (The Political Theology of Paul)*. In February of 1987, with cancer eating away at him, Taubes traveled from Berlin, where he held the Chair in Hermeneutics at the Freie Universität, to

² Edward W. Said, *On Late Style*. London: Bloomsbury, 2006, 5.

Heidelberg, where he lectured for four days, with an intervening Wednesday spent in the intensive care unit. Taubes died just a few weeks after delivering these lectures. As the editors of the posthumously published volume indicate, Taubes regarded these lectures as his intellectual testament.³ With disarming forthrightness and exceptional good humor, Taubes's late work provokes Christians and Jews alike, conservatives and liberals alike, with his philosophical reading of Pauline texts (Romans in particular), which provides an alternate fate than totalitarianism for infamous German legal theorist Carl Schmitt's insights on sovereignty.

The fourth breed of late style possesses passion equal to the third, but it expresses that intensity through serenity, patience, and reflection. Western philosophy is replete with such texts, dating back at least as far as Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*. Perhaps the most notable recent example of this timely late style is the last co-authored work by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* (*What is Philosophy?*). In this work Deleuze and Guattari turn their creative philosophical vision on the shadow that accompanies all philosophy worthy of the name: the question of philosophy itself. The Introduction, titled "The Question Then..." warrants quoting at some length:

The question *what is philosophy?* can perhaps be posed only late in life, with the arrival of old age and the time for speaking concretely. In fact, the bibliography on the nature of philosophy is very limited. It is a question posed in a moment of quiet restlessness, at midnight, when there is no longer anything to ask. It was asked before; it was always being asked, but too indirectly or obliquely; the question was too artificial, too abstract. Instead of being seized by it, those who asked the question set it out and controlled it in passing. They were not sober enough. There was too much desire to *do* philosophy to wonder what it was, except as a stylistic exercise. That point of nonstyle where one can finally say, "What is it I have been doing all my life?" had not been reached. There are times when old age produces not eternal youth but a sovereign freedom, a pure necessity in which one enjoys a moment of grace between life and death,

³ Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, eds. Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann, in conjunction with Horst Folkers, Wolf-Daniel Harwich, and Christoph Schulte, trans. Dana Hollander. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, 115.

and in which all the parts of the machine come together to send into the future a feature that cuts across all ages....⁴

Deleuze and Guattari deny that their text achieves the “moment of grace” they describe, in contradistinction to Titian, Turner, Monet, Chateaubriand, and Kant, whom they cite as examples of artists and writers who produced late work in a moment of “sovereign freedom” occasioned by life’s twilight years. Their description of late style emphasizes the self-abdicating nature of some late works, which they here call a kind of “nonstyle,” in which style stops posing as an incessantly repeated pattern practiced in the ultimate interest of proficiency. They do not mean the absence of style, but rather a kind of surplus style in which, with nothing else left to ask, the author restlessly must turn her own work and interests inside out, where the work’s form and themes operate along their own edges and borders, articulate their own thresholds, are in themselves yet away from themselves in the way a paradox maneuvers within logic.

Deleuze and Guattari’s opening comments accentuate the crucial role in late style played by desire. What separates late style’s “moment of grace between life and death” from life itself is a serene detachment from desire—a kind of sobriety free from the desire-drunken haze through which one had pursued life’s work. This suspension of desire suggests a coin-toss between whether in late style the philosopher controls the concepts, or the concepts—the philosopher.

Whether in a late work the author shapes life into conceptual material or whether the very personal conditions of lateness—whether illness, age, fatigue, urgency, mastery, etc.—forcibly reshape the author, however, matters less than the one constant across the four kinds of timely late style: namely, the desire for the personal history of the author to coincide with the material of the work. We desire the lateness of a late work to be a timely lateness. Conventional—i.e. timely—late style longs for a coincidence of subject and object, here recognizable as the need for the philosopher’s subjectivity to be embodied in the substance of the work. Even in the late style described by Deleuze and Guattari in which the author’s marginalization of the life-defining desire to *do* takes the form of a kind of reflective writing *sub specie aeternitatis*, the real question of late style emerges in the insistence on a continuity between biographical temporality and its

⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, 1-2.

inherence in the substance of the work. Timely late style monumentalizes personal history by naturalizing it.

Conventional, timely late style perpetrates a deception. By blindly equating personal history with the substance of thought, the works appear appropriate to the time of their creation, to the biography of their creator, and they resonate with the “general abiding timeliness”⁵ that the reader typically expects. Both because of and in spite of displaying skilled mastery, wisdom, urgency, and serene self-reflection (or some combination thereof), timely late style may appear, above all, all too timely.

But not all philosophical works composed under conditions of timely lateness exhibit the sorts of noble features we have thus far assumed that late style enjoys. What do we do with late works that constitute a perplexing or obscure departure from previous work? In *On Late Style*, Edward Said considers a handful of examples of the sort of late style that appear less harmonious, less splendid, less accessible in comparison to earlier work, citing Beethoven, Mozart, Euripides, Thomas Mann, and Jean Genet, among others. Said’s point of departure for this study of late style in music and literature is a short study by Theodor Adorno entitled “Spätstil Beethovens” (“Late Style in Beethoven”). Beethoven’s late work serves as an exemplary touchstone for the study of late style largely because, as Adorno points out, “studies of the very late Beethoven seldom fail to make reference to biography and fate.”⁶ The tendency for such reference is understandable; after all, it is astonishing and extraordinary that Beethoven was nearly completely deaf at the time he composed his last symphony—the universally celebrated Ninth.

When late works of significant artists seem sour, difficult, even ravaged, this typically only further fuels the argument that the artists’ personalities uniquely inhabit the character, substance, and style of late works. As Adorno asserts, “the usual view explains...that [such difficult late works] are products of an uninhibited subjectivity...which breaks through the envelope of form to better express itself, transforming harmony into the dissonance of suffering, and disdaining sensual charms with the sovereign self-assurance of the spirit liberated. In this way, late works are relegated to the outer reaches of art, in the vicinity of the document.”⁷

⁵ Said, 5.

⁶ Theodor Adorno: “Late style in Beethoven,” trans. Susan H. Gillespie, in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, 564.

⁷ Adorno, 564.

Biographical interpretations of late works risk transforming them into nothing but a mere informational document—a simple mirror that directly and immediately reflects the transparent personality and life of the artist.

According to Adorno the formal law of Beethoven's late style cannot be discovered in any one particular characteristic; instead, it inheres in a structural feature: "the relationship of the conventions to subjectivity itself."⁸ The emphasis on subjectivity in late works would seem to belie any desire for conventions. But, as Richard Leppert explains, "In Beethoven's late-works' use of convention, Adorno finds exactly the opposite of what we might expect; not a rejection or refusal of conventions (for this would in fact be what is actually conventional in Beethoven) but a notable adherence to them. That is, it is the conventional in Beethoven's late work that (ironically, startlingly) estranges them, renders them enigmatical—and which at the same time renders inadequate psychoanalytical-subjectivist readings."⁹ Adorno's argument here takes the form of a negative dialectic: he argues that late works such as Beethoven's strive to excise subjectivity precisely where we most readily expect to discover it. By its surprising and radical absence, the evacuation of subjectivity calls attention to subjectivity. In this way subjectivity returns to the work, but as an allegorical relation. Seemingly abandoned of subjectivity, the objective material of the work splinters, and the instances of naked, clumsy, uninflected convention are left behind, void of strong significance. These expressionless fragmentary materials and exposed formulaic conventions allegorize the subject's relation to death—as allegories, late works are "witnesses to the finite powerlessness of the I confronted with Being."¹⁰ Rather than directly transmitting the author's "personality," the late work incorporates the impossibility of faithfully doing so into its style by way of its resistance to any reconciliation of subject and object.

Before moving on, we should acknowledge that Adorno applies his argument about late style here—clever as it may be—specifically to art, not to works of philosophy. Though the boundaries are porous, philosophy and art must not be blindly equated. While a timely, psycho-biographical interpretation of late style may tacitly define art as non-art, philosophy has many styles of propositional expression that do not by definition betray philosophy's ultimate task of

⁸ Adorno, 566.

⁹ Richard Leppert, "Composition, Composers, and Works: Commentary," in Adorno, *Essays on Music*, 516-7.

¹⁰ Adorno, 566.

approaching truth through concepts. However, in the service of theorizing late style in philosophy, at the very least we can fairly take one crucial cue from Adorno's study of Beethoven in answer to the fundamental question: what is *late* about late style?

Whether timely or untimely, late works hold a formal law in common; all late works are grounded in what Adorno identifies as "the thought of death."¹¹ Timely versions of late style see death's influence on subjectivity permeating the artwork, inhering literally in its substance. But, as Adorno clarifies, "Death is imposed only on created beings, not on works of art, and thus it has appeared in art only in a refracted mode, as allegory. The psychological interpretation misses this."¹² In late works the author's personal history is not missing or irrelevant, but neither is it transparently communicated or unveiled as the substance of the work. Instead, late style relates to biography allegorically (i.e. contingently, obliquely, at a distance), with the strange and perhaps wonderful result, unexplored by Adorno, that an artist or philosopher need not be at the end of a career, advanced in age, or deathly ill in order to produce work in a late style. Untimely late style simply requires the artistic or philosophical writing to consider or reflect the thought of death.

PART 2

Does philosophy have an untimely late style—a style conditioned not by the coordinates of later life, but instead produced uniquely by "the thought of death?" In positive response to this question, my task for the second part of this talk is to meditate upon an example of untimely late style in philosophy.

The topic of death in the Western tradition of philosophy has a rich, voluminous history, and I make no pretense to surveying that wealth of ideas. My purpose here is to illuminate the category of untimely late style in philosophy by responding to the following question(s): how does philosophy think death through style? Or, put differently, how does the thought of death manifest itself in a philosophical text via style?

When approaching any example of style, we are confronted by manifold approaches to the topic. This assortment of approaches to style includes, but is not limited to: 1) style as poetics

¹¹ Adorno 566.

¹² Adorno, 566.

(e.g. rhetoric, lexical study, figures of speech, repetitions, etc.); 2) style as structure, organization, or topic; 3) style as methodology; 4) style as a kind of staging of thought. This animation of philosophical concepts may be of the sort found in the images and philosophical worlds that both produce and are produced by a particular philosophy—e.g. Plato’s theory of forms; Augustine’s city of God and city of the world; Leibniz’s monadology; Deleuze and Guattari’s capitalism and schizophrenia project; additionally, the staging of thought may be understood in the form of conceptual personae—e.g. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra; the interlocutors of Plato’s dialogues; Kierkegaard’s many pseudonyms); and, 5) style as a calculus of language, i.e. an approach to philosophical style that focuses on how the truth of things and ideas may be most effectively communicated through the signifying process. Certainly with respect to the dangers of impoverishing philosophical truths through conformity of modes of philosophical style, Jon Stewart’s recent book *The Unity of Content and Form in Philosophical Writing* addresses, among its important claims, trends related to this language-based approach to philosophical style.¹³

Of course, this is hardly a complete list; and, if we accept the notion of the hermeneutic circle, then such a list of approaches to style may be necessarily incomplete. Additionally, we must admit that these understandings of style regularly overlap; they co-exist in various combinations in some if not every philosophical text. To a great degree they are simply angles of reading—i.e. hermeneutical frames.

I raise the point here about multiple approaches to philosophical style not only to salute the complexity of the topic, but especially to prepare the ground for thinking in terms of examples of untimely late style. Examples of untimely late style find common ground in their discontinuous and occasionally bewildering forms, as well as in their relationship to the thought of death. However, as the multifarious considerations of style suggest, examples of untimely late style can be approached from many obliquely related angles.

For example, we might begin with a philosophical treatment of death so as to see how that thought might be reflected in potentially unusual and illuminating ways through the form and style of the work. Or we could turn this procedure on its head—first, examine the dynamics of a text’s philosophical style in order that we may eventually discover the thought of death

¹³ See Jon Stewart, *The Unity of Content and Form in Philosophical Writing: The Perils of Conformity*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

through it. Or we might seek a further displacement by historicizing “the thought of death”: perhaps the “thought of death” is not everywhere and at every time the same common point of reference. What if the status of how we conceive of death itself has changed? If, as Michel Foucault has argued in some of his late work on the concept of biopolitics, modern forms of biopolitical power are “decreasingly the power of the right to take life, and increasingly the right to intervene to make live,”¹⁴ then perhaps we might fairly ask what style is appropriate to philosophizing about death under biopolitical conditions? Still further, what style captures the thought of death when the meaning of human life has been seemingly wholly appropriated by the neo-liberal approach to *homo economicus*: i.e. the human as capital?

Whatever the angle of approach, the category of untimely late style 1) reads naïve biographical interpretations against the grain; 2) exposes often unspoken assumptions that inform a text’s philosophical anthropology, in particular in relation to the thought of death; and 3) acknowledges style as an important bearer of philosophical content.

SPINOZA’S *ETHICS*

I would like to briefly consider now Spinoza’s magisterial *Ethics* as an example of untimely late style in philosophy.

Prior to claiming its untimely status, one could perhaps make the case that Spinoza’s *Ethics* constitutes an example of timely late style. After all, Spinoza specifically chose not to publish the *Ethics* during his lifetime, fearing the harm it might bring him. It was published posthumously, soon after his death in 1677. Spinoza’s ideas were so radical and unorthodox for his time as to drastically ostracize him from most social and intellectual circles, even in the 17th century Dutch republic, which was by most standards of the time a fairly liberal atmosphere. No doubt his biographical details are potentially relevant for interpreting his philosophy: for example, his excommunication and estrangement from the Jewish tradition; his trade as a lens grinder; his refusal to teach publicly, as exemplified by his turning down a professorship in Heidelberg. But Spinoza only lived to his mid-forties, and, though his *Political Treatise* was cut short by his death, the *Ethics* was written over a span of many years, and not in his few final

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*,” *Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey, New York: Picador, 2003, 248.

years. In 1665 he interrupted the writing of it in order to pen his *Theological-Political Treatise*, the publication that caused such offense and uproar that, despite its anonymous publication, the term “Spinozist” became a threat and insult synonymous with atheism.¹⁵ However, while the genesis of the *Ethics* may have a timely relation to biography, a more untimely thought of death leaves its mark in the style of the *Ethics*.

Famously, Spinoza’s *Ethics* is a work of philosophy written in the style of geometry: *more geometrico*. For many modern-day students who come to this text for the first time, the geometrical method is baffling. Rather than building an argument in a strict step-by-step manner that begins necessarily with point A and ends necessarily in point Z, the *Ethics* opens instead with the installation of a toolkit of definitions, axioms, and postulates. With these tools Spinoza proceeds to state propositions (what today we would more typically call theorems), and to prove the truth of these propositions by showing that they logically follow from certain definitions, axioms, and postulates. Across five parts, Spinoza strings out 259 propositions, each with a demonstration, many with corollaries, and some enhanced by alternative proofs. Spinoza expands the toolbox as he goes along, adding axioms, definitions, and even lemmas where appropriate. Through his textual labors he builds the case for an ontology of a single, eternal and infinite, self-causing and self-differentiating *substance*, which he names God.¹⁶ Articulated by and through this philosophy of substance, the text erects an epistemology of three types of knowledge: 1) imagination/inadequate ideas; 2) common notions/adequate ideas; 3) intuition/knowledge *sub specie aeternitatis* (i.e. without relation to duration). The final result is a kind of political anthropology in which, by understanding things (e.g. human passions) for what they are in their essence or nature, a person favors joy over sad passions, becomes more free by increasing the power (i.e. potential) to act, and lives harmoniously with others because such peace accords with a true understanding of essences and causes.

The arguments that Spinoza builds using the geometrical method spin a kind of invisible webbing through the text. The demonstrations and proofs collect, loop together, and connect the

¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988, 10.

¹⁶ On the point of equating the term substance with the signifier God, see (*inter alia*) Definition 6, Part One: “By God I understand an absolutely infinite entity, that is, a substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence.” Spinoza, *Ethics*, ed. and trans. G.H.R. Parkinson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 75.

definitions, axioms, and postulates in a dizzying web of references. When thought together and at once, this web of geometrically styled proofs forms an elaborate constellation—a structural unconscious of the text, which serves as the *Ethics*' absent cause immanent in its own effects.

We may profitably debate the precise historical influences that led Spinoza to choose his geometrical approach,¹⁷ and we might debate the historical and philosophical factors leading Spinoza to choose mathematics over Aristotelian-style syllogisms, or over medieval scholasticism with its dialectics and disputations. However, the foremost reason why he chose to present this work *more geometrico* seems – similar to the desired outcome of the method itself – self-evident: Spinoza wants to provide rigorous, exacting, unbreakable proof of the truth of his philosophy. By virtue of its emphasis on essences and properties rather than on ends, and the seeming neutrality and objectivity attendant to demonstrations and proofs, Euclidian geometrical style offers the type of proof Spinoza believes best convinces readers. This style has the benefit of not only revealing truth, but being convincing about that truth in the process.¹⁸

For further illumination of the case in favor the geometrical method, we can turn to Spinoza's own remarks about mathematics in the Appendix to Part One of *Ethics*. There Spinoza suggests that most human beings become convinced of the supposed truth of something not by virtue of reason, but on the basis of their current character and temperament: “they imagine things rather than understand them. For if they understood things, then those things (as mathematics bears witness) would at any rate convince them, even if they did not attract them.”¹⁹ The statement implies that a mathematical approach to understanding banishes mere opinionated preference from the process of comprehending truth. At another place in the same appendix, Spinoza gratefully praises mathematics' contribution to humanity's historical development. Like Prometheus with fire, mathematics stole access to truth away from the judgments of gods. These gods would “have been sufficient to cause truth to be hidden from the human race for eternity, had not mathematics, which is concerned not with ends but solely with the essences and properties of figures, shown to human beings another standard of truth.”²⁰ However, Spinoza

¹⁷ For example: Galileo? Almost certainly Descartes, but the question is of degree and how, and why?

¹⁸ G.H.R. Parkinson, “Editor's Introduction,” in Spinoza, *Ethics*, ed. and trans. G.H.R. Parkinson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 14.

¹⁹ Spinoza, 111.

²⁰ Spinoza, 108.

crucially adds one further comment to this: “Besides mathematics one could state other causes (which it is superfluous to list here) which could have brought it about that men took note of these common prejudices, and were led to the true knowledge of things.”²¹ Right at the very same moment that he amplifies support for his geometrical method, Spinoza points out that, despite being a legitimate and excellent way, mathematics is not the only valid path to true knowledge of things. While Spinoza eschews providing a list of these alternate routes, the *Ethics* contains an important example of one of these “other causes.” This brings us to the strange textual and stylistic underbelly of the *Ethics*—the scholia—which play the role of rebellious teenage sister to the well-behaved brother, geometrical method.

The textual landscape of the *Ethics* is marked in its style by apparent geometrical systematicity: crisply and economically worded propositions supported by focused and illuminating axioms and definitions; lucid, confident demonstrations made internally coherent and symmetrical by the procedure of ending QED (quod erat demonstrandum); corollaries that carefully supplement the demonstrations; alternate proofs that neatly amplify the proof by doubling it; and so forth. But scattered throughout this seemingly orderly landscape are scholia. In contrast to the placid, measured tone of the axioms, definitions, propositions, and demonstrations, the scholia of the *Ethics* are disruptive and irregular, even, in the words of Gilles Deleuze, volcanic: “the *Ethics* of the scholia is a subterranean book of fire.”²² The scholia are freely composed prose passages that defy the ordered nature of the geometrical style. The scholia embrace prolix explanation; they develop Spinoza’s narratorial voice by predominantly being penned in first-person; they make no overt announcements as to their rhetorical strategies; their language is dipped in imagery, coating the examples in rich tropes of simile and metaphor; they indulge in vitriolic polemics; and, they provide multiple examples drawn from practical and common experience to which the reader can easily relate, such as the sun looking much closer to us than its actual distance admits.

In fact, the term scholium does not belong properly to the Euclidian vocabulary and geometrical method; scholia are found originally in classical and medieval scholarship in the form of glosses placed literally in the margins of text—a second stream of text alongside the

²¹ Spinoza, 108.

²² Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 151.

‘main’ stream. Spinoza’s scholia are attached to propositions, and they play a kind of janitorial role in the demonstrative chain by mopping up any leftover hesitations or skepticism left on the part of the reader following a disciplined demonstration. But these scholia overflow their clean-up role. One way they do this is by offering some of the most incisive thoughts in the book. For example, the oft-quoted formula for immanent causality—“truth is the standard both of itself and of falsity”²³—is found in the scholium to proposition 43 in Part 2. In this way the scholia provide proofs independently of the demonstrations. The scholia also exceed the demonstrative chain by connecting thematically to one another in unexpected ways. Deleuze chronicles some of these connections for us:

The Scholium to I.8, for example, forms such a line together with those to I.15, I.17, I.33, II.3, and II.10: these deal with the different kinds of disfigurement to which God is subjected by man. Similarly, the Scholium to II.13, which set up the model of the body, jumps to that at III.2, and ends up in the Preface to Part Five. A broken line of scholia, similarly, forms a kind of hymn to joy, constantly, interrupted, in which those who live on sadness, those whose interest lies in our sadness, and those who need human sadness to secure their power are violently denounced: IV.45s2, IV.50s, IV.63s and V.10s.²⁴

And the list goes on. By subversively associating with one another in this way, the scholia approximate the marginalia that is their namesake.

Whereas at first glance the style of the *Ethics* appears to be a well-ordered, well-oiled geometrical method machine, a closer reading lures the reader into the more stylistically unruly, boisterous passages of the scholia that exist alongside and inside the demonstrative chain. Deleuze suggests that, with respect to this matter of style, form, and tone, the *Ethics* is a kind of twice-authored tale:

There are thus as it were two *Ethics* existing side by side, one constituted by the continuous line or tide of propositions, proofs, and corollaries, and the other, discontinuous, constituted by the broken line or volcanic chain of the scholia. The first, in

²³ Spinoza, 150.

²⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin, New York: Zone Books, 1992, 344.

its implacable rigor, amounts to a sort of terrorism of the head, progressing from one proposition to the next without worrying about their practical consequences, elaborating its *rules* without worrying about individual *cases*. The other assembles the indignation and the joys of the heart, presenting practical joy, setting out the practical struggle against sadness, expressing itself at each point by saying ‘such is the case.’ The *Ethics* is in this sense a double book.²⁵

With the two contrasting styles overlapping and intertwining with one another, the scholia appear equally to support the ostensive proof-building process and to fracture the soundness and authority of the geometrical method, implying by their presence that the geometrical style is insufficient in itself. The *Ethics* appears self-contradictory in this respect. Spinoza’s esteem for the geometrical method is clear; but nowhere does he suggest or imply that the scholia are inferior to it. So, how are we to account for what seems to be the untimely nature of the text’s stylistic unity? How are we to understand the Janus-like faces of the *Ethics*?

In significant works of philosophy, when the style becomes discontinuous, rife with inconsistency, atrophied, or, as the case seems to be here, punctured by striking contradiction, rather than assuming the presence of a defect, we may call on the category of untimely style to address this with the question: what (un-) thought does this style paradoxically articulate?

While the following answer hardly exhausts the wealth of possibilities generated by the poignant stylistic contrasts in the *Ethics*, it does place the matter of style at the very heart of the book’s philosophical content. The problem of philosophical style in the *Ethics* allegorizes death’s relationship to life as understood in Spinoza’s philosophy. Just as Spinoza will explain that a person’s fear of death is a byproduct of a misunderstanding, so too shall we say that to understand the common presence of the geometrical method and essayistic scholia solely as a contradiction is to misperceive (or underestimate) the potential of their relation.

In Spinoza’s philosophy death is not the opposite of life; death belongs to the common project of life—that is, death is immanent to life. Death is simply a moment of crossing one threshold among the many that bodies are always traversing, since bodies are always dynamically ‘becoming’ in some way through the composition and decomposition of smaller

²⁵ Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, 345. Emphasis in the original.

bodies that constitute the composite human body. A body's 'death' occurs, explains Spinoza, "when its parts are so disposed that they maintain a different ratio of motion and rest to one another."²⁶

Let us consider a short but instructive example of another philosophy in which death plays a role not precisely opposite to life. In Heidegger's *Being and Time*, existence is meaningful for Dasein by virtue of a relation to non-being—i.e. death. Dasein is being-towards-Death, and in this way death is not the opposite of life but rather taken up in life, albeit as an 'other', a constitutive outside, a productive limit-value by which Dasein understands its existence. For Heidegger, death's future echo is heard by Dasein when held out in the abyss of nothingness as experienced in anxiety, so as to then dialectically assign meaning to life and make possible what Heidegger calls authentic existence—that is, "authentic Being-toward Death."²⁷

For Spinoza the thought of death is not a constitutive outside that lends meaning to life by virtue of oppositional meaning—there is only life, only substance in its infinite and eternal transformations and self-differentiations. Like for Heidegger, for Spinoza death is not the opposite of life; however, in distinct contrast to Heidegger, in Spinoza's philosophy death is unimportant to life. In so far as a human body inheres immanently in the one substance, there is no sense of time as duration; therefore Spinoza can speak of eternity without duration, which we (in so far as we are substance) share even beyond the threshold of death, albeit without memory or imagination. In so far as we are finite modes, we transition through compositions and decompositions. But in so far as we are also and equally substance, we are eternal.

The reward of seeing death thusly, claims Spinoza, is the freedom of acting on the basis of life, not death: "A free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation, not on death, but on life."²⁸ Practically speaking, a free man, thusly defined, cannot and will not be blackmailed by exploitative powers that threaten death—this makes the person powerful, i.e. rich in potential productivity. For Spinoza, allaying the fear of death has socially and politically significant results: it makes a person powerful, perhaps even dangerous, because

²⁶ Spinoza, 256. Scholium to Proposition 39, Part Four.

²⁷ See Paragraph 53, "Existential Project of an Authentic Being-toward-Death," in Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996, 240-246.

²⁸ Spinoza, 276. Proposition 67, Part Four.

it absolutely increases a person's creative potential. Cesare Casarino explains this phenomenon as follows: "in Spinoza, absence of the fear of death is at once absolute freedom and untrammelled productivity, namely, the expression of the most creative potentials, the zenith of creativity; or, more precisely, in Spinoza that moment of absolute freedom which is the absence of the fear of death constitutes the indispensable condition of possibility for such an exponential leap in expression, production, creation (without, perhaps, guaranteeing it necessarily)."²⁹ Casarino is careful to note, parenthetically at the end of his statement, that such potential makes no guarantee of the benefits or particular results of that productive creativity; there is no particular or guaranteed telos—only that creative potential exists as potential for transforming existing conditions.

The creative potential generated by the non-contradiction of the two stylistic streams of the *Ethics* is Spinoza's untimely late style, because it constitutes the unique thought of 'death' proper to Spinoza's philosophy—that is, a thought of life, freedom, and creative potential. Spinoza's untimely late style allegorizes the relation between life understood as substance and death as simply one more point of transition in a body's state of becoming. The geometrical method correlates with the logic of substance, understood through adequate ideas, and perhaps even known *sub specie aeternitatis*: the precision, the non-contradiction, the freedom that comes from understanding essences and properties unshackled from determination by ends and goals. The imaginative, essayistic style of the scholia recalls the human as a complex composite body of finite modes in constant negotiation and transition: the anthropomorphic first-person perspective, the passionate claims and appeals, the metaphors and seemingly spontaneous, improvised examples. Yet the two styles abide immanently with one another. Each opens a discrete but valid path to true ideas about essences and properties. Each style amplifies the other's potential to empower knowledge in the process—for mathematical reason still demands imagination en route to its truth, and passionate, narrative-driven demonstrations borne from the power of imagination still require reason and common notions to sharpen their persuasive truth as creative potential. The philosophical style of the *Ethics* is late in that it allegorizes the life/death relation, and untimely because the two contrasting styles are not synthesized, despite (or, perhaps, precisely because of) their immanent relation. The philosophical truth articulated by

²⁹ Cesare Casarino and Antonio Negri, *In Praise of the Common: A Conversation on Philosophy and Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 155-6.

the untimely late style of the *Ethics* is its irreducible double articulation: the two-headed style doubles the dual-aspect concept of infinite substance expressed through its affections in the form of modes.³⁰

In tune with Adorno's reading of Beethoven's late style, in which Adorno sees subjectivity allegorically indicated *ex negativo* by virtue of its apparent evacuation from the work, the *Ethics* also claims such a moment. We expect Spinoza—as subjectivity, as person, as will—to intercede in the text by making a decision about the hierarchy of styles, or at the very least explicitly explaining their simultaneous and overlapping presence; but a judgment fails to appear. And this failure is precisely the text's success. Contrary to the positive interjections of subjectivity that effervescently rise up in the scholia, subjectivity is signaled allegorically in the text by the refusal to avert or explain the supposed stylistic catastrophe.

Genevieve Lloyd explains that “[The *Ethics*] has often been read as a poignantly deluded exaltation of the efficacy and supremacy of reason. But that is to ignore Spinoza's subtle engagement with complex unities of reason, imagination, and affect. Beyond the fantasies of both rationalism and romanticism, Spinoza's *Ethics* challenges ideals of reason epitomized in modern philosophy. It confronts us with a way of thinking which is both rational and emotional, both philosophical and imaginative, both speculative and wise.”³¹ Because the traditional sense of moral judgment is evacuated from Spinoza's understanding of the term ‘ethics,’ perhaps in our context here we can suggest that Spinoza's untimely late style expresses the *ethical* posture of his philosophy. By expressing philosophy through style, content through form, the *Ethics* stages the freedom and creative potential that both empowers and is empowered by the stylistic double articulation of Spinoza's philosophy of single substance.



³⁰ See Definition 5, Part One: “By mode I understand the affections of substance, or, that which is in something else, through which it is also conceived.” Spinoza, 75.

³¹ Genevieve Lloyd, *Spinoza and the Ethics*. London: Routledge, 1996, 143.