

A Metaphysics of Human Life, Towards a New Reading of Spinoza's Philosophy

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A free man thinks of nothing less than of death, and his wisdom is a meditation on life, not on death. (E4p67/G II 261, lines 1–2)

On a widespread view, Spinoza's metaphysics is a system of principles by means of which all truth about the essences and existence of all beings, including ourselves, is derived. This system, so it is supposed, is more-or-less complete: it represents the universe from the view-point of an omniscient intellect, to the effect that the remedy that the *Ethics* provides against the daily sorrows of human life is an invitation to adopt some kind of divine viewpoint. This is no small promise: once we manage to look at things, in particular our own lives, *sub specie aeternitatis*, we may find peace and quiet.

I must confess, the longer I work on Spinoza the more I find this approach unsatisfying. To be sure, the *Ethics* does contain a conceptual framework that makes this escape from the human perspective a vivid option, although we may materialize it only step by step. Moreover, it does so in a manner that attracts quite different-minded people. I also do not deny that this outlook is important when it comes to comprehending how Spinoza's metaphysics contributes to a better life. Yet I think there is more wisdom and subtlety in Spinoza's metaphysical thought which, however, only comes to the fore if we begin to pay attention to other aspects that are not tied up with the notion of a system offering cognitive escape from the human perspective. My contention is that Spinoza's metaphysics is also concerned with the many ways in which the human perspective shapes our lives. Spinoza gives us an understanding of human life as it may be derived from the notion of our having our very own viewpoint on the things and aims in our life. To appreciate the value of Spinoza's system, it is not sufficient to reconstruct it in terms of a few guiding principles; we must also show how it accounts for the reality of our human, irreducibly situated, historically embedded life.

My suggestion is that we can read Spinoza's metaphysics, including his metaethics, as a metaphysics of life, or rather as a metaphysics of humans. This implies that there is much of a descriptive metaphysics entailed in Spinoza's ontology. I will show this in some detail in the next section. Now one might rightly say that the focus on Spinoza's ideas of our embedded, finite, or *human* life is not new; it is also easily corroborated by textual evidence. Most significant in this regard is E4p67, where he writes that for the free man wisdom is a matter of reflecting on life (G II 261, lines 1–2). If this statement entails a description of his own philosophical aspiration, we may infer that far from being a subordinate concern, reflection on life—and specifically *human* life—is at the center of philosophical reflection for Spinoza.

This being said, to understand precisely how Spinoza's interest in human life is reflected in his philosophy, it is not sufficient to reconstruct his views on the psychological, social or political aspects of the human life form. In this case, we cannot restrict ourselves to a discussion of those parts of his philosophical system that are immediately about practical issues, such as his psychology, political theory, and moral philosophy. What is required instead is a closer inquiry into the ways in which Spinoza's system in general, as well as his metaphysics in particular, are concerned with human life; otherwise, it remains an unsolved problem how Spinoza's metaphysics contributes to the required "meditation of life".

In this article, I can only begin this inquiry, and I shall do so in three steps. In the first section, I discuss the relation of the assumed metaphysics of life to Spinoza's system of eternal truths. I will argue that an interpretation that seeks to vindicate a concern with human life in Spinoza's metaphysics needs not only to depart from the widespread reductionist picture of his system (according to which Spinoza reduced all things to items of one singular subject), but it must also go beyond the recent critiques of this picture. In the second section, I will give a few hints of how reality, as it is viewed from the human perspective, is accounted for in Spinoza's metaphysics. My point will be that human conceptions of real things are not so much overruled and replaced as they are acknowledged and corrected by assumed notions of eternal truths. In the third section, I conclude with a few reflections about the role of the human standpoint for Spinoza's philosophy.

1 Going Beyond the Critique of Spinoza's Reductionism

According to a common interpretation, the basic move of Spinoza's metaphysics is to claim that all the innumerable objects we encounter in ordinary life are merely properties or tropes of one singular entity. Following this monist account, Spinozism is often depicted as a radical departure from all descriptive metaphysical conceptual schemes underlying the practices and thoughts of our ordinary life: whereas in ordinary life, I see plenty of different things on my desk, such as a cup, pencils, sheets and notes, they are on Spinoza's view really nothing but modes of one singular subsistent being, which is referred to as God, nature, or substance.

¹ The central role that engagement with our human, irreducibly situated, and historically embedded life plays in Spinoza's philosophy is also pointed out in Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), chapter 8; and in Susan James, *Spinoza on Learning to Live Together* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), chapter 2.

Now, it is true that Spinoza's system does not provide much vocabulary to describe these things, and that in his system, all categorical distinctions reduce to the difference between substance and modes.² Moreover, when it comes to accounting for the relations between different things and events, there is just the term *affectio*, the meaning of which is never explicitly clarified in the *Ethics*. In contrast, consider how differentiated a picture we get if we employ Aristotle's categories to objects on my desk: they constitute substances having qualities and quantitative determinations (my pencil is red and about five inches long); they are related (or not) with each other (the notes I have written on a sheet of paper only exist as long as the sheet of paper exists); they are located in space and time and situated in particular ways (I sit on a chair in front of my computer, to my right is my cup and the sheet of paper with my notes from yesterday); finally, there are actions and passions going on which result in particular effects (I take the pencil to write a few words on the paper and thus correct my notes from yesterday).

Clearly, if we compare this detailed, Aristotelian description with Spinoza's framework, on which all these things are simply classified as modes, the latter looks pretty poor—too poor, one might say, to reflect the categorical distinctions underlying our handling of objects in daily life. But this does not preclude that particular things exist for Spinoza, nor does he deny that these are numerically different items of reality. On the contrary, this is a non-sequitur, as has rightly been pointed out by several recent interpreters of the *Ethics* who refuse to interpret Spinoza's metaphysics in terms of a Pantheist monism or an acosmism according to which there is only one singular thing.

Yitzhak Melamed, for example, criticizes both the Parmenidean reading underlying Bayle's and Leibniz's objections as well as Hegel's acosmist interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy, according to which "all determinate content is swallowed up as radically null and void". On Melamed's account, these monist and acosmist readings are both inaccurate and contradict several of Spinoza's assumptions, including parallelism, the definition of the third kind of knowledge, and the notion expressed in E1p16 that "[f]rom the necessity of divine nature [...] infinitely many modes [must follow] in infinitely many ways" (G II 60, lines 17–19). All these claims, Melamed points out, are at odds with the claim that singular things are illusionary. In a different manner, but also relying on E1p16, Samuel Newlands argues against Della Rocca's ontologically reductionist reading of Spinoza's rationalism. On Newlands' view, what Spinoza voices in Ep1p16 is the opposite of any ontological reduction: viz., that God is the source of "plenitude" or the existence of infinitely many things. Finally, Martin Lin rejects the notion that Spinoza reduced the metaphysical (that is, what

² See for this point Ursula Renz, *The Explainability of Experience. Realism and Subjectivity in Spinoza's Theory of the Human Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 43–45.

³ Yitzhak Y. Melamed, *Spinoza's Metaphysics: Substance and Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013),

⁴ Ibid., 79.

⁵ Michael Della Rocca, "A Rationalist Manifesto: Spinoza and the Principle of Sufficient Reason", *Philosophical Topics* 31, no. 1/2 (2003): 75–93. The radical rationalist reading is elaborated in detail in Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁶ Samuel Newlands, Reconceiving Spinoza (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 19.

there is) to the conceptual or epistemic; as well, he rejects the substitution of an idealist understanding of Spinoza's rationalism for a realistic one.⁷

Unfortunately, these approaches are mostly negative in spirit: they provide strong counterarguments to reductionist readings of the *Ethics* that push Spinoza either to the Parmenidean One or to the Hegelian abyss of nothingness, but they nonetheless stick with the inherited notion that Spinoza's metaphysical thought reduces to a revisionary system. As a consequence, they miss Spinoza's engagement with the conceptual schemes of our ordinary life, on which many entities come as singular and present things, and they thus continue to regard Spinoza's attitude towards the human life form as dismissive or deflationary. By contrast, I think there is also a positive story to be told about Spinoza's metaphysics of human life, and we may hope that it is this story that sets the agenda for future Spinoza research. But where shall we begin? To answer this question, I shall now take a closer look at a few points of Spinoza's philosophy where the concern with the metaphysical implications of human life become most visible.

2 Vindicating Spinoza's Descriptive Metaphysics (and Metaethics)

When Peter F. Strawson characterized in *Individuals* his approach as 'descriptive metaphysics', he relied on three basic assumptions. (1) Underlying the basic structures of our ordinary speech about objects are metaphysical commitments that are to be made explicit in metaphysics. Thus, what philosophers account for in metaphysical analysis is this implicit metaphysics of our ordinary life. (2) Metaphysics is, ideal-typically considered, a descriptive project: instead of producing revisionary images of the world, it reconstructs the "logics" underlying the conceptual schemes and distinctions we use to discern objects and persons in ordinary speech. (3) This is legitimate, because metaphysics thus describes the categories we successfully employ in daily life. There is no further need for justification than that in descriptive metaphysics, whereas any kind of revisionary metaphysics, which seeks to change our conceptual schemes, must be justified by the way it is of service to descriptive metaphysics.⁸

Strawson's approach makes a powerful case for the claim that there is much metaphysics underlying our ordinary thought, and he also assumes that this insight has been guiding metaphysicians at all times. Perhaps this was even the case in philosophies that provided rather revisionary outlooks on the world, to the effect that one may consider many revisionary systems as attempts not to substitute, but to correct, to simplify and—in this sense—to revise the metaphysics underlying our daily thought. This is, I contend, the case with Spinoza's philosophy: if his metaphysics turns into speculation, this is in the service of experience. In the following I shall point to different domains in which revisions of our implicit descriptive metaphysics may be observed.

⁷ Martin Lin, *Being and Reason. An Essay on Spinoza's Metaphysics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 182ff.

P. F. Strawson, *Individuals. An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Routledge, 1971), 9. See also Ursula Renz, "Der neue Spinozismus und das Verhältnis von deskriptiver und revisionärer Metaphysik", *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 63/3 (2015): 476–496, 478–481. doi: 10.1515/dzph-2015-0029, for a critical account of Strawson's approach.

a) Common sense realism and the simple grounds of being

It may be assumed that despite his seeming denial of finite beings, Spinoza embraces some sort of common-sense realism, i.e., he presupposes that the objects we perceive and deal with in our ordinary life by and large exist. This neither precludes that we err about their properties nor denies that we are subject to all sorts of illusions, but only affirms that we can rely on their existence and should not doubt it.

How can this interpretation be defended? Crucially, Spinoza often denotes the object of his considerations in the *Ethics* by the term res. ⁹ Consider, e.g., E1def2, where he introduces the notion of finite things: "That thing [res] is said to be finite in its own kind that can be limited by another of the same nature" (G II 45, lines 8-9). And consider E1def7, where he specifies his understanding of freedom by saying that "[t]hat thing [res] is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone" (G II 46, lines 8–9). The term res also shows up in several propositions of the first half of Part One of the *Ethics*, e.g., when, in E1p3, he claims, "If things [res] have nothing in common with one another, one of them cannot be the cause of the other" (G II 47, lines 15–6), or, in E1p9, where he writes, "The more reality or being each thing [unaquaeque res] has, the more attributes belong to it" (G II 51, lines 24–25). Taking this at face value, Spinoza does not simply introduce his substance monism by stipulation. Instead, he first refers to items of reality as res before pointing out how different res are related and how this relatedness of res is ontologically grounded. This indicates that, however revisionary Spinoza's ultimate picture of the world might look like, it is the objects of our daily metaphysics that constitute its point of departure: he takes seriously the supposition that the things we refer to as res truly exist, and it is only on the basis of this presumption that he discusses what it means for res to exist.

We can thus assume that *res*—and not *substantia* or 'God'—names the subject-matter of Spinoza's metaphysics, a proposal that Robert Schnepf already put forward a few decades ago. ¹⁰ This assumption introduces a change of focus in the reconstruction of Spinoza's metaphysics, since it suggests that Spinoza's point was not to claim the uniqueness of substance, but to reveal the substantiality and complete connectedness of all being. In all likelihood, therefore, Spinoza's ambition was not, in the first place, to *replace* the descriptive metaphysics of our ordinary thought by a perfect system, but to *make* its ontological implications *explicit*.

b) Dummy terms of daily speech and their limits

Among the most frequently employed notions of our descriptive metaphysics is certainly that of 'things' or, in more philosophical terminology, of 'particulars' and 'individuals'. Now, unlike *res*, which in Spinoza's time designated a transcendental term that was used to account for the ontological groundedness—the reality—of some object of thought, the contemporary expression 'thing' is a dummy term which we employ to refer to an item without qualifying it as being such and such. By naming an object 'thing', we indicate that there is a referring relation, but we do not specify its

 ⁹ Consider Robert Schnepf's succinct analysis of Spinoza's usage of the concept of *res* in the *Ethics*. Cf. Robert Schnepf, *Metaphysik im ersten Teil der Ethik Spinozas* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1996), 135–169.
10 Ibid., 164ff.

nature. There is one point, though, we take for granted: we presuppose that the object in question is a particular, i.e., it is or appears to be separated from other objects.

Given the overall outlook of his system, it may come as a surprise that Spinoza uses equivalents of this dummy term, viz., res singularis and res particularis, which show up in several places in the Ethics. In E2def7, Spinoza explicitly clarifies this terminology, when he declares that the term res singulares refers to "things that are finite and have a determined existence" (G II 85, lines 16–17). Thus, on the face of it, Spinoza accepts the existence of entities corresponding to our dummy term 'thing'. He continues, however, by adding a further sentence to this definition that relativizes the idea of the unity of singular things: "if a number of individuals so concur in one action that together they are all the cause of one effect, I consider them all, to that extent, as one singular thing." Thus, being one singular thing is a matter of producing one causal effect, however complex the internal constitution of the assumed cause may be. Whether or not we are confronted with a unified thing is therefore not due to its essential features, but to its causal relations with other things.

In the literature, this second sentence of E2def7 has attracted much more attention than the first. Given the widespread assumption of the revisionary character of Spinoza's metaphysics, this is a natural focus. Yet, taken as a whole, the point of this definition is not to undermine our ordinary talk of things, but to limit the conclusions that may be drawn from it. To refer to items of reality as 'singular things' is a legitimate move; we just have to resist the temptation to infer anything further regarding their causal properties. If these observations are right, then Spinoza denies that the idea of there being individuated points of reference provides us with a causal understanding of the world. Although this relativizes the explanatory value we suppose the term 'singular thing' to have, it does not question that describing the objects of our daily experience in this way plays a role in our dealing with them. And the same is likely to hold true of other terms of our descriptive metaphysics that crop up in Spinoza's thought, such as 'individual', 'subject of action' or the notion of a person's identity. However provisional these terms may turn out to be, if we consider them as accounts for the whole of reality, they properly account for how we experience and describe reality on a daily basis. There is thus a kind of metaphysical talk in Spinoza's philosophy that is less about the universe than about how things are experienced and conceived from within the human life.

c) Evaluations and the attempt of providing them with a rational framing

An important feature of our implicit philosophical language about the world is the presence of evaluative terms. We call some things 'good' and other things 'bad'; we consider some people as 'kind', 'clever' or 'wise' and others as 'idiots', 'evil' or 'mad'; we evaluate options in decisions about partners, professions or where to live based upon the question of whether or not they are apt to satisfy our desire for 'a good life' or make us 'happy'.

Spinoza addresses the issue of how to make sense of this evaluative talk in several key passages of the *Ethics*. Having argued in E1app that, considered against the backdrop of the world-view provided in Part One, evaluative judgments are merely prejudices arising from the false supposition that natural things act on account of ends and are made by God to serve man (G II 78, lines 2–12), Spinoza further addresses the issue of our evaluative terminology in the preface, definitions and several propositions of Part Four. It is on this basis that he also voices a couple of moral judgments, thereby establishing his own ethics.

Interestingly, in doing so, Spinoza again seeks both *to acknowledge and to correct* the descriptive metaphysics (or rather metaethics) underlying both the prudential advice or moral prescriptions of our daily life and our implicit judgments concerning the viability, usefulness, kindness, or even goodness of certain actions. In a first step, Spinoza vindicates the evaluative statements of our moral speech by attributing to them a merely relativist validity. Thereby, he does not deny them all legitimacy, but only adds an index that defines their domain and makes explicit what this indexation is grounded in: that we consider something an aim that is worthwhile pursuing, he claims in E4pref, is due to our human appetites and serves no further end (G II 206, lines 29f.). It is on this basis that, in a further step, he sets out to provide our evaluative statements with a more reliable justification that orients our desires towards more satisfactory and sustainable aims.

It would go beyond the scope of this paper to discuss how exactly this justification works.¹¹ Let me just mention that in this justification, he neither discards the notion that good is what is good for us nor does he deny that moral judgments are related to desires; it is merely our ideas of what satisfies these desires that are erroneous and in need of substitution. So, rather than dismissing our striving for happiness, he embraces and affirms it while providing it with a better justified, ontologically grounded, conception of goodness that allows for rational adjustment of ethical reflection.

d) Temporal existence, politics and the eternal truth about our life

When we attribute existence to a thing in our daily life, what we mean to say is that it exists in time. We do not, however, commit ourselves to the view that this is necessarily the case; on the contrary, we are entitled to assume that things could have turned out differently. According to our ordinary ontology, attributing existence to some object is a matter of affirming that it is temporally determined, but it involves no modal restriction.

How does Spinoza account for this aspect of our descriptive metaphysics? Notably, he affirms both views, viz., that objects exist in time and that temporal determination involves no modal restriction. Most explicitly, he does so in E2ax1, which denies necessary existence to particular human beings: "from the order of nature it can happen equally that this or that man does exist, or that he does not exist" (G II 85, lines 22–24). A similar point is made by E2def5, where Spinoza defines duration as being "an indefinite continuation of existing" (G II 85, line 10) and clarifies, "I say indefinite because it [the duration of continuing existence] cannot be determined at all through the very nature of the existing thing, nor even the efficient cause, which necessarily posits the existence of things, and does not take it away" (G II 85, lines 11–13). Taking this at face value, Spinoza does not merely accept the ordinary supposition that finite things have temporally limited and contingent existence, but he also corroborates this point by observing that for each finite thing and in each moment of its being, it is a contingent fact whether it continues to exist.

That Spinoza accepts these notions, as we also find them in our descriptive metaphysics, may look surprising, given the inherited picture of his metaphysics, but it is nonetheless key for his philosophy in general, and for his understanding of society, politics, and religion in particular. More

¹¹ But see my paper, Ursula Renz, "Spinoza on the Good Life for Humans", in *Human: A History*, ed. Karolina Hübner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 196–219.

than by his metaphysical conception of reality in terms of divine substance, Spinoza's thought in these domains is due to the insight that what drives politics, religion, and many aspects of our social life is the experience of uncertainty. This experience is already expressed in the passages from Part Two quoted above, but how much it shapes Spinoza's social philosophy comes to the fore in E4ax, where he declares that "[t]here is no singular thing in nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger [...] by which the first can be destroyed" (G II 210, lines 25–27). He thus ascribes to all finite things an ineliminable vulnerability to violent destruction, and this is no abstract claim, but a notion borrowed from our awareness of the uncertainty of our life as implicated in many of our emotional experiences.

That this notion of vulnerability is at the bottom of many of Spinoza's insights regarding people's social life is also indicated by the fact that in Part Four, it is voiced as an axiom, although it could be derived from previous assumptions. Considering moreover the preface of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza seems to assume that both religion and politics largely respond to this experience (G III 5, line 1ff.). We can thus surmise that he develops his political theory to provide a better understanding of this experience and thus to improve the communal handling of uncertainty. This all shows that, far from deriving his ideal of rational community-building and principles of good politics from the viewpoint of his necessitarian modal metaphysics, Spinoza accepts the modal terms of our descriptive metaphysics as an ineliminable feature of human reality.

At the same time, however, Spinoza sticks to the notion that, at the end of the day, even the temporal and contingent features of our actual existence may be captured in terms of eternal and necessary truths. Gaining a complete grasp of these truths may not be possible during our lives, but we may get a better understanding of them and thus come closer to epistemic perfection and wisdom. In this sense, the meditation of life practiced by free human beings, according to E4p67, is no negation or annihilation of the contingencies of each human's life. Rather, it embraces them as necessarily belonging to our existence, thus making room for a consideration of our life as an instance of nature's eternal being.

3 Understanding Humanity as an Entrance Ticket to Spinoza's Metaphysics of Life

Spinoza's metaphysics is often interpreted in anti-anthropomorphic as well as in anti-humanist terms. ¹² Following an anti-anthropomorphic reading, Spinoza criticizes any thought that takes humanity as the measure of things; according to the anti-humanist view, his metaphysics is meant to deprive humanity of its alleged special status in the universe. Although different in focus, these readings point in the same general direction: the first takes Spinoza to criticize the specifically human way of conceiving things; the second has him reject, more specifically, a typically human conception of humans' place in the world. And they are both corroborated by a reconstruction of Spinoza's epistemology in terms of a critique of our inborn tendency to consider nature in anthropomorphic

¹² See for these tendencies also Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza*, 4, and Yitzhak Y. Melamed, "Spinoza's Anti-Humanism: An Outline", in *The Rationalists: Between Tradition and Innovation*, eds. Carlos Fraenkel, Dario Perinetti, and Justin E. H. Smith (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 149.

terms.¹³ As a result, they both frame Spinoza's metaphysics as a combination of a theocentric notion of the relation between God and humanity with a naturalist account of all things.

This framing has several merits. It is indeed crucial for any understanding of Spinoza's philosophy to see how anti-anthropomorphism shapes many aspects of his thought, and it is also an important lesson of Spinoza's naturalism that we have no special status whatsoever. And yet, it gives us only half the story; we get lost, quite literally, if we mistake it for the whole. As I have argued in this paper, Spinoza attributes reality to objects viewed from the human perspective, and far from simply denying the constitutive nature of our perspective, his philosophy is meant to *respond* to the worries created by our inclination to anthropomorphize nature. Furthermore, part of his response to these worries is derived from a perspective that is situated within, rather than without, the reality of human life. Although Spinoza recommends a therapy of looking at things *sub specie aeternitatis*, so that we let go many of our human impulses and expectations, this is no protection against all sadness and distress. The point of his therapy is therefore rather that we come to see and affirm our situation as inevitable, given how we are. Moreover, some problems, such as those deriving from political dysfunctionalities, may only be addressed if we understand how they are tied up with the anthropomorphic tendencies of people's thought.

Hence, although Spinoza considers humans as entities that are fully determined by nature, he also views the adoption of a finite, human viewpoint as a structural prerequisite for an ontology and metaethics that are to help people lead a better life. This suggests that he does not want to propose his theocentric naturalism as a *substitute* for our inborn anthropomorphism, but rather as a framework enabling us to *amend* our views from within. He does so by different means and with different attitudes, but he does not aim to overrule our ordinary ways of looking at things, but rather to accommodate and modify them.

I think there is much wisdom in this approach. If philosophy has a role to play in the prospects of people learning to live better, it will do so by capturing the essence of human life from within the human perspective. If asked, therefore, in which direction I would hope for Spinoza research to develop in the near future, I would point to the task of revisiting Spinoza's philosophy with an interest in the constitutive role of the human viewpoint. Comprehension of humanity—not the voice of God—is the entrance ticket to Spinoza's metaphysics of life. ¹⁴

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¹³ See Sharp, *Spinoza*, 58f; and Yitzhak Y. Melamed, "The Causes of Free Will: Spinoza on Necessary, 'Innate', yet False Cognition", in *Spinoza's Ethics: A Critical Guide*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 121–141; for critical discussion see Ursula Renz, "Spinozism as a Radical Anti-Nihilism. Spinoza on Being and the Valuableness of Being", *InCircolo* 10, (2020): 391–406, https://www.incircolorivistafilosofica.it/spinozism-as-a-radical-anti-nihilism/.

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