



**Universiteit  
Leiden**

Institute for Philosophy

**The One and the Many:  
the Practice of Perfection in Spinoza's *Ethics***

Alice Simionato

Supervised by  
Dr. Frank Chouraqui

Master's Degree in Philosophical Anthropology and Philosophy of Culture  
Institute for Philosophy, Leiden University  
The Netherlands

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*A mia madre.*

*To my mother.*

“We must fulfill our freedom of thought  
in the freedom of understanding.”

Maurice Merleau-Ponty,  
*Humanism and Terror*, 1947.

“To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the Palm of your Hand,  
And Eternity in an Hour.”

William Blake,  
*Auguries of Innocence*, 1863.

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## Introduction

The project of the *Ethics* is to provide guidance for human flourishing. According to Spinoza the human being is not an 'empire within an empire', but rather it is part of Nature and develops in and with Nature; for this reason, human beings are to be understood in terms of natural laws. In order for human beings to live a good life, then, it is fundamental to gain knowledge of these laws, which are at the foundation of everything that is; this is the reason why the *Ethics* begins with a metaphysics. In the first part Spinoza famously identifies Nature with God (*Deus sive Natura*), or, the one substance, which involves and explicates everything that is – particular beings and their dynamics. Spinoza then develops a theory of knowledge, in order to explain how we understand (or misunderstand) the world through our experience of it. It is crucial to remember that Spinoza is a rationalist who applies the principle of sufficient reason; in other words, he thinks that there are no brute facts - and this means that, according to him, human beings have the actual power of understanding everything. However, Spinoza is also a practical philosopher who recognizes the finitude of particular beings. Unlike the one substance we are not infinite, but we still have the power of making the most general sense of things by constantly attempting to understand the world and our place in it. According to Spinoza, such constant practice is the most fundamental principle of human flourishing, that is, freedom.

In this thesis I am particularly concerned with a specific statement in the *Ethics*, namely E2d6, in which Spinoza states: “By reality and perfection I understand the same.” The statement seems to be contradictory since it is problematic to understand how a notion which apparently accounts for unity (perfection) could possibly be identified with both the diversity of values and beliefs found in reality and the latter's perpetual flow of change. The statement is even more puzzling when considering that the terms 'reality',

'perfection', and 'power of action' often seem to be used interchangeably throughout the *Ethics*, so much so that scholars do not really differentiate them in a significant way.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the theme of becoming is not explicitly addressed by Spinoza and therefore, as a consequence, it has been taken for granted that his work has no place for it. The main problem for Spinoza scholars is that he goes too far in the direction of identity and therefore becomes unable to account for difference. In what follows I argue that this is only the case if one reads the identity of reality and perfection superficially. A more careful reading suggests that the statement is not a contradiction because Spinoza *does* elaborate a theory of becoming, with the notions of perfection and power of action as its core. In the light of this interpretation, my argument is that E2d6 is not contradictory because Spinoza's notions of perfection and reality are both identified with becoming.

The first chapter offers an overview of the metaphysics of the *Ethics* and emphasizes its most important aspects: firstly, I explain the three basic terms of Spinoza's world – substance, attributes, and modes; secondly, I explain the relation that binds these terms, namely, how the one substance is expressed in particular beings; thirdly, I elaborate on two fundamental laws resulting from the terms of Spinoza's world and which determine its metaphysics, namely, causality and necessity. These steps are necessary in order to understand how particular beings relate and interact on the basis of a common ground, or, the one substance. The dynamism of Spinoza's metaphysics, in turn, allows us to understand his establishment of a unified notion – perfection – which also accounts for the diversity and uniqueness of particular beings – reality.

The second chapter is devoted to Spinoza's theory of knowledge and his famous theory of *conatus*, with an overall focus on the dynamics through which modes interact. First, I provide an explanation of what is meant in the *Ethics* by 'adequate' and 'inadequate' ideas; this distinction, according to Spinoza, supports the difference between activity and passivity of the mind and the body. This theory of knowledge cannot be understood apart

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of this are found in Carriero (2011) and Newlands (2017).

from the notion of *conatus* – also explained in the *Ethics* as power of action; thus, I then explain what *conatus* is by discussing it in terms of relational power. In the concluding paragraph I take into account the role of experience with regard to particular beings, in order to argue that Spinoza's *conatus* and theory of knowledge are two aspects of a unified theory of becoming, which can better clarify his notion of the identity of reality and perfection.

In the third and last chapter I further elaborate what I consider as Spinoza's theory of becoming in two steps: first, I explain becoming *as* learning, since the interactions of modes represent a constant and situated discovery of a mode through other modes; then, I elaborate this notion of learning process *as* what Spinoza considers the highest principle of human flourishing, namely, freedom.

I conclude that for Spinoza, reality and perfection are one because they are both identified with becoming. In my opinion, not only does he offer a theory of becoming, but such theory seems to be the very core of his project in the *Ethics*. The main advantage of such interpretation goes beyond the possibility of making sense of Spinoza's identity of reality and perfection. It also helps us in clarifying his metaphysics, theory of knowledge, and notion of *conatus* as different aspects of a unified theory aimed at revealing the traits of a fundamental tension between unity and diversity. Importantly, it is not part of Spinoza's project to solve such tension; on the contrary, it has to be preserved in order to shed light on the beauty of the One *as* the Many.

## The Metaphysics of Perfection

### Introduction

It is no coincidence that Spinoza starts the *Ethics* by articulating a sophisticated metaphysics; rather, it is a functional and strategic choice. He wants to ground his practical philosophy - which is aimed at explaining how human beings can flourish in their lives - on “fixed rules” that can serve as the basis for a “right way of living”, which is the source of “the highest self-contentment”.<sup>2</sup> Those 'fixed rules' are not precepts or commandments that men and women should apply on the basis of blind trust on a higher power; rather, according to Spinoza, they are to be derived from a genuine understanding of the structure of reality. The latter, as he describes it, appears to be complex yet highly coherent and, as such, unified on the basis of a common 'ground' that he calls “substance”. Coherence of structure –the harmony in which all the pieces fit together and are reciprocally shaped - is a fundamental aspect in the *Ethics*, so much so that it is the subject of its opening book entitled “On God”. Even though, as Spinoza argues, we often “conceive the place of man in Nature as being like an empire within an empire”<sup>3</sup> we are actually part of such coherence, and therefore our constitution and activity, including our emotions, are to be understood within the same structural dynamics of the world we are part of.

In this chapter I briefly introduce the underlying metaphysics of the *Ethics* in order to explain how modes (particular beings) interact on the basis of a common 'ground', the substance (or God). First, I will discuss the triad of substance, attributes, and modes in order to understand the relation bounding these degrees of reality. I will then consider Deleuze's interpretation of the unclear yet fundamental notion of 'expression' as explaining

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<sup>2</sup> E5p10s

<sup>3</sup> E3 preface



how modes and substance stand in a relation of both ontological dependence and epistemic access. In conclusion I will consider two important concepts which characterize the dynamics of the Spinozistic world, namely, causality and necessity. These three points are essential to establish the metaphysical reasons according to which Spinoza states that by reality and perfection he understands the same.

### **1.1 Substance, attributes, modes.**

#### *Substance*

One of the opening definitions of the *Ethics* is that of substance: “By substance I understand that which is in itself and is conceived through itself; that is, that which does not need the concept of another thing from which concept it must be formed.”<sup>4</sup> Spinoza bases his notion of substance on a distinction that has deep roots in the history of philosophy and is derived from Aristotle, who uses the term in two ways. First, substance is that which depends on nothing else for its existence: in this sense, a substance is “an ultimate subject of predication”<sup>5</sup>, it is that something that has independent existence or that, as Aristotle has put it, is 'separable' (distinctly from color, for example: the color of a red cat cannot exist independently from the cat).<sup>6</sup> Second, substance is that which remains the same despite/through change. This notion is introduced by Aristotle when he states that 'it seems most distinctive of substance that what is numerically one and the same is able to receive contraries.' A useful example to understand this idea is given by Parkinson, who describes “a man who becomes hot at one time and cold at another”<sup>7</sup>: in this case, the same 'substance' (a man) is able to 'receive contraries' – it is in fact one *and* the same. In this case we can understand how sameness implies both unity and difference (the unity of

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<sup>4</sup> E1d3.

<sup>5</sup> Parkinson 2000, 16.

<sup>6</sup> As reported in Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Parkinson 2000, 16.

man, the difference of temperature).

Spinoza shares with Aristotle the view that substance has an independent existence, but while according to Aristotle there are very many substances (things such as an individual cat or an individual man), Spinoza holds that there can only be one substance, namely, God or Nature (*Deus sive Natura*): “Besides God no substance can exist or be conceived”.<sup>8</sup> We will further analyze the issue of existence and conceivability in terms of ontological dependence in the next section; for now we shall consider other fundamental characteristics of Spinoza's substance monism. Spinoza states that “It belongs to the nature of a substance to exist” (E1p7) and that “Every substance is necessarily infinite” (E1p8); the fundamental characteristics of Spinoza's substance (God) are later summed up in E1p11: “God – in other words a substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence – necessarily exists.” The necessary existence of God is based on Spinoza's metaphysical rationalism, according to which everything has a cause or, in other words, there can be no brute facts. In short, Spinoza understands God to be absolutely infinite and therefore absolutely perfect – if God was to be imperfect then something outside of it would be conceivable, but since Spinoza's substance contains and manifest everything that exists, God's imperfection would be absurd (“Whatever exists exists in God, and nothing can exist or be conceived without God.” E1p15). It is also absolutely free, since “God acts from the laws of his nature alone, and is compelled by no one.” (E1p17).<sup>9</sup> God is then an independent and infinite substance, which is said to consist “of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence.”<sup>10</sup> We will look at the notion of attributes in the following paragraph; for now I shall briefly consider the concepts of 'essence'. Parkinson explains it as follows: “Something, E, belongs to the essence of X if it belongs necessarily to X, and if E is such that, in knowing that it belongs

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<sup>8</sup> E1p14

<sup>9</sup> Spinoza defines a thing as 'free' “Which exists solely by the necessity of its own nature, and it is determined to action by itself alone. However, that thing is called necessary or rather compelled, which is determined by another to exist and to operate in a certain and determinate way.” (E1d7)

<sup>10</sup> E1d6

necessarily to X, we also know something that is of fundamental importance to an understanding of X.”<sup>11</sup> Even though the term 'essence' is used in various propositions of part I, it is only in part II that Spinoza defines it:

I say that there belongs to the essence of a thing that which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited, and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily negated; or that without which a thing can neither exist nor be conceived, and conversely that which can neither exist nor be conceived without the thing.<sup>12</sup>

With regard to the essence of a substance (namely, the essence of God) Spinoza states that “God's existence and his essence are one and the same” (E1p20). The notion of existence in the *Ethics* is coupled and even equated with that of eternity “in so far as [existence] is conceived to follow necessarily solely from the definition of an eternal thing.”<sup>13</sup> So God's existence is his essence, which is eternal. But in order to understand *how* (in what form) a substance is manifested, we shall look at the notion of attributes, and later at that of modes.

### *Attributes*

As mentioned earlier, Spinoza's substance consists of infinite attributes; it is therefore of fundamental importance to understand what attributes are. The definition is

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<sup>11</sup> Parkinson 2000, 320. He continues: “So, for example, it belongs to the essence of a man that he is a mode of God; but the fact that he is, for example, a rational animal does not belong to his essence.”

<sup>12</sup> E2d2

<sup>13</sup> E1d8

found in E1d4: “By attribute I understand that which intellect perceives of substance, as constituting its essence.” According to Parkinson, intellect is presented throughout the *Ethics* as “that which provides us with genuine understanding”; on the basis of this, it is possible to reformulate the definition of attributes as that which provide us with genuine understanding of the constitution of substance.<sup>14</sup> Commentators are still unsure about why Spinoza introduces the notion of intellect in his definition of attributes. A viable hypothesis is that, according to him, the relation between substance and attributes does not designate a relation between separate entities. In a way, attributes *are* substance since a substance *consists* of infinite attributes, “each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence.”<sup>15</sup> We could think of the distinction between substance and attributes as a functional distinction – a distinction that serves the function of the intellect in understanding the structure of reality and, on a higher level, the unity of substance. When I say that attributes are functional I do not mean that they are fictional; rather, because of the fact that they are both individuated and infinite, they seem to represent the bridge between finitude (in the sense of individuation) and infinity, and therefore of unity and sameness. It is through this bridge that the intellect is able to grasp a genuine understanding of substance. In Ip10 Spinoza states that “Each attribute of one substance must be conceived through itself”; in order to better explain how different attributes are to be understood independently (which means that they do not depend on one another for their existence) he appeals to E1d3 and E1d4; since an attribute is perceived by the intellect as constituting the essence of a substance – and not as, for example, constituting another attribute – it is to be understood through itself. Considering this, it makes sense to think of each attribute as expressing the essence of God in a particular and unique way. As Deveaux has noticed “the essence of God can be conceived in different ways precisely because the essence of God is expressed in particular ways or kinds.”<sup>16</sup> As mentioned earlier, however, attributes are not to be

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<sup>14</sup> Parkinson 2000, 322.

<sup>15</sup> E1d6

<sup>16</sup> As reported in Crane and Sandler 2005, 193.

understood as separate entities from the substance they express. In order to better clarify Spinoza's view on distinctions we should consider Descartes' articulation of the same notion in his *Principles of Philosophy*. Here, a “real distinction” denotes a distinction between two entities which are capable of separate existence- two substances, such as thinking substance and extended substance.<sup>17</sup> If, according to Descartes, real distinction is employed with substances, how can modes be conceived as distinct? Descartes would say: by means of conceptual distinction (*distinctio rationis*) which is perceived when two things cannot be distinctly and clearly understood apart from one another. According to this differentiation, modes are then perceived as distinct only as result of a real distinction between substances. Thus, as Crane and Sandler have noted, “A substance and its attribute cannot exist independently of the other, nor can they be conceived separately. For example, a thinking substance cannot be clearly and distinctly understood apart from the attribute of thought, nor can this attribute be understood apart from a substance that thinks.”<sup>18</sup> That is to say, the distinction between substance and attribute is merely a conceptual distinction rather than a real distinction:

For example, we can have separate thoughts of extension, divisibility and duration, but none is clearly and distinctly perceived apart from the others – one can – not conceive of extension without divisibility or duration – and therefore they cannot exist independently from each other. Only real distinction is a metaphysical distinction, that is, a numerical distinction between things capable of separate existence.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> We have already seen how Cartesian dualism does not apply in Spinoza's metaphysics, which is based on substance monism. As we will see later in the section, Spinoza sees thought and extension as attributes rather than substances.

<sup>18</sup> Crane and Sandler, 196.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

I agree with Crane and Sandler in considering plausible that Spinoza shares the aspect of Descartes' view discussed above, and that he considers conceptual distinction as not a distinction at all; in fact, Spinoza's denial of the view that conceptual independence implies metaphysical distinction is clearly discussed in the *scholium* of E1p10<sup>20</sup>, which is useful to report here in length:

From this it is evident that, although two attributes are conceived as *really distinct* – that is, one without the help of the other – we cannot infer from this that they constitute two entities, or, two different substances. For it is of the nature of substance that each of its attributes is conceived through , since all the attributes that it has were always in it at the same time and one could not be produced by another, but each one expresses the reality, or, the being of substance. It is therefore far from absurd to ascribe several attributes to one substance. On the contrary, nothing in Nature is more clear than that each entity must be conceived under some attribute, and that the more reality or being it has, the more attributes it has which express both necessity (or eternity) and infinity. Consequently, nothing is clearer than that an absolute infinite being is necessarily to be defined (as we stated in Def. 6) as an entity which consists of infinite attributes, each of which expresses a certain eternal and infinite essence.

Even though God is a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, and is therefore expressed in an infinite number of ways, Spinoza maintains that the human mind can in fact conceive only two: thought and extension, so that God is conceived as a “thinking

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<sup>20</sup> “Each attribute of one substance must be conceived through itself.”

thing” and an “extended thing”<sup>21</sup>. Thus, as we will discuss later, modes are conceived as affections of these attributes. It is important to remember, however, that the reference to the attributes of thought and extension is telling of a restriction of the human comprehension rather than explicative of the metaphysical structure of Spinoza's world. Again, since the substance is infinite, it is expressed in infinite attributes.<sup>22</sup> These, in turn, are expressed in particular things and beings: modes.

### *Modes*

Generally speaking, by 'modes' Spinoza means particular beings. In E1d6 it is said that “By mode” he understands “the affections of substance, or, that which is in something else, through which it is also conceived.” Individual beings are therefore affections (*affectio*) of the substance, which can be thought of as finite and unique modifications of the substance. Deleuze, in his *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, makes an interesting differentiation between *affectio* – the modes themselves – and *affectus*, affections (or feelings) that “designate that which happens to the mode, the modifications of the mode, the effects of other modes on it”, so that “The *affectio* refers to a state of the affected body and implies the presence of the affecting body, whereas the *affectus* refers to the passage from one state to another.”<sup>23</sup> Here, by 'affected body' Deleuze means modes, and the modes

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<sup>21</sup> E2p1: “Thought is an attribute of God, or, God is a thinking thing.”; and I1p2: “Extension is an attribute of God, or, God is an extended thing.” In the case of attributes, our understanding mirrors our constitution: since human beings are made of thought and extension, those are the attributes we are able to clearly perceive.

<sup>22</sup> Newlands gives an instructive insights regarding the maximal (infinite) number of 'expressive attributes': “Given God's maximal power (Ip17s) and being (Ip10s), God will possess the maximum number of expressive attributes. The fullness of expression is crystallized in Ip14: “God is an absolutely infinite being, of whom no attributes which expresses an essence of substance can be denied.” [...] If, by reductio, there were some other attribute *a* which did not express an essence of the one and only substance, what principled reason could there be for its exclusion from being among that substance's attributes? As we saw, the best answer Spinoza could provide to such a question would be to appeal to the fact that the maximal set of attributes excluded *a*. But according to Spinoza, there are no entailment relations, conceptual or otherwise, between the attributes (Ip10). Thus there could be no such ground for the exclusion of *a*, since no other attribute could bear a relation to *a* in virtue of which it might exclude *a*. Therefore, by Spinoza's version of the PSR [Principle of Sufficient Reason], the lack alone of any excluding relations provides a sufficient reason for including *a* among substance's attributes. Thus substance will possess all possible attributes, which is just to say that substance is such that all possible ways of expressing an essence of substance do, in fact, genuinely express such an essence. From the PSR and the conceptual barrier between attributes, Spinoza's system guarantees the expressive plentitude of attributes.” Newland 2006, 8

<sup>23</sup> Deleuze (1970), Glossary p.48-49

in turn imply the 'affecting body'; the latter, I suggest, should always be considered on two levels: 1) modes are conceived through something else (the substance or God), therefore their first 'affecting body' (first cause) is God; 2) modes interact with and are affected by other modes, therefore their affections (the passage from one state to another) imply the affecting modes.<sup>24</sup>

An important statement regarding the doctrines of modes is E1p25c:

Particular things are nothing other than the affections, i.e. the modes, of the attributes of God, by which the attributes of God are expressed in a certain and determinate way.

We should recall now that attributes are “that which intellect perceives of substance, as constituting its essence.”<sup>25</sup> Attributes are then functional as epistemic access for modes to grasp the constitution of substance, and therefore of substance itself, as suggested in E1p10s:

Although two attributes are conceived as really distinct – that is, one without the help of the other – we cannot infer from this that they constitute two entities, or, two different substances. For it is of the nature of substance that each of its attributes is conceived through itself, since all the attributes that it has were always in it and at the same time and one could not be produced by another, *but each one expresses the reality, or, the being of substance.*<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> With regard to the relationship of substance and modes, Deleuze further explains: “One of the essential points of Spinozism is in its identification of the ontological relationship of substances and modes with the epistemological relationship of essences and properties and the physical relationship of cause and effect. The cause and effect relationship is inseparable from the immanence through which the cause remains in itself in order to produce. Conversely, the relationship between essences and properties is inseparable from a dynamism through which properties exist as infinities, are not inferred by the intellect *explaining* substance without being produced by substance *explaining itself* or expressing itself in the intellect, and, finally, enjoy an essence through which they are inferred. The two aspects coincide in that the modes differ from substance in existence and in essence, and yet are produced in those same attributes that constitute the essence of substance.” p.91

<sup>25</sup> E1d4

<sup>26</sup> Emphasis mine.



With regard to E1p25c, Newlands has rightly stated that “without answering the vexing question of whether modes for Spinoza are ultimately properties or tropes or *propria* or parts or concepts, etc., we can glean the following *functional* account of finite modes from 1p25c: a finite mode is that which expresses an attribute in a limited manner.”<sup>27</sup> A mode is indeed a finite and determinate expression of an attribute, and therefore of the substance. For this reason, if human beings are considered under the attribute of extension they are body, while if they are considered under the attribute of thought they are minds. Spinoza's monism allows him to go beyond Descartes' incommensurability of substances, as the substance is the ground of a parallelism (of attributes) according to which “The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things”.<sup>28</sup> We can reformulate the same proposition as follows: the order and connection of (the attribute of) thought is the same as the order and connection of (the attribute of) extension. Thus, according to Spinoza the order and connection of ideas mirrors that of things, and this is possible precisely because both orders are expressions of the same substance. Spinoza's theory of parallelism is already suggested in the first six definitions of part one – the ones formulating Spinoza's metaphysical framework; in d2 (preceding the definition of substance, d3) Spinoza states:

That thing is called finite *in its own kind* which cannot be limited by another of the same nature. For example, a body is called finite because we can always conceive another which is greater. In the same way, a thought is limited by another thought. But a body is not limited by a thought, nor a thought by a body.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Newlands (2006), 9.

<sup>28</sup> E2p7

<sup>29</sup> Emphasis mine.

Here we understand that 'finite in its own kind' can be thought of as finite and conceived through a certain attribute; so even though a mode of extension cannot be limited by a mode of thought and vice versa, a particular being's finitude is in fact understood as conceived under different attributes- manifested as finite in their own kind - that are coherently mirrored and organized on the basis of a common ground (substance).<sup>30</sup> This same idea shows that the tension between finitude and infinity (or, also, unity and particularity) is of fundamental centrality in the *Ethics* and, more importantly, it suggests how this tension is not a contradictory dichotomy.<sup>31</sup> In this sense, modes are the finite expression of the infinite substance.

It is now for us of crucial importance to ask what 'expression' means in the context of Spinoza's metaphysics.

## 1.2 Expressionism

In E1p25c Spinoza states that “Particular things are nothing other than the affections, i.e. the modes, of the attributes of God, by which the attributes of God are expressed [*exprimuntur*] in a certain and determinate way.” From this passage we know that modes are, as already mentioned, determinate expressions of God or substance. The same expressive character is found in relation to the attributes, “each of which expresses eternal

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<sup>30</sup> In discussing the substance/modes relationship, Nadler states that “...for Spinoza things are in God or substance in the sense of being properties or states or qualities of God. They inhere in God as in a subject or substratum.” To relate this conception to Spinoza's parallelism, we can understand that “just as my particular thought at this moment is a property or state of my mind, so my mind is a property or state of God (in another of God's infinite attributes, Thought). The moving body and my mind just *are* God's nature (or, more precisely, God's natures) existing or expressing itself in one way (mode) or another.” p.55.

<sup>31</sup> Parkinson's glossary of Spinoza's *Ethics* defines modes as “the opposite of substance. To be a mode is to be in something else, and to be conceived through that something else.” He agrees in considering finite modes “what would normally be called 'particular things'. So, for example, Socrates is not a substance, but a finite mode of both thought and extension.” (Parkinson 2000, 322). Even though finite modes are the most common reference in Spinoza's metaphysics, it should be noted that there are also infinite modes, what scholars generally call 'immediate infinite modes' – motion and rest; “These are described in very abstract and obscure terms in E1p21. Put informally, Spinoza's position is that motion and rest are of great importance to the physicist. They are not absolutely basic, since to talk of motion and rest is to talk of something extended that moves or is at rest. They are therefore modes of the attribute of extension; but they are *infinite* modes, as it is the infinite attribute of extension that either moves or is at rest. They are also 'immediate', as they require nothing but the attribute of extension in order to exist.” (Parkinson 2000, 21).

and infinite essence”.<sup>32</sup> Considering this, expression seems to be a fundamental notion characterizing the metaphysics of the *Ethics*.

Deleuze has extensively discussed this idea in his *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (1968) and offered useful insights for our current discussion of the matter. In his work, he distinguishes two levels of expression: the first pertaining to attributes, the second pertaining to modes. The first level of expression “must be understood as the very constitution, a genealogy almost, of the essence of substance”<sup>33</sup>, while the second is “the very production of particular things”, therefore “expression as production is grounded on a prior expression”.<sup>34</sup> The importance of the notion of expression lies in the fact that its implications are both ontological and epistemological. While looking at the terminology related to 'expression' in Spinoza's works, Deleuze writes:

The word “express” has various synonyms. The Dutch text of the *Short Treatise* does employ *uytdrukken* and *uytbeelden* (to express), but shows a preference for *vertoon* (at once to manifest and to demonstrate): a thinking being *expresses* itself in an infinity of ideas corresponding to an infinity of objects; but the idea of the body directly *manifests* God; and attributes *manifest themselves* in themselves. In the *Correction of the Understanding* attributes manifest (*ostendunt*) God's essence. But such synonyms are less significant than the correlates that accompany and further specify the idea of expression: *explicare* and *involvere*. Thus definition is said not only to express the nature of what is defined, but to *involve* and *explicate* it. Attributes not only express the essence of substance : here they explicate it, there they involve it. Modes involve the concept of God as well as expressing it, so the ideas that correspond to them involve, in their turn, God's eternal essence.

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<sup>32</sup> E1d6 and E1p11

<sup>33</sup> We should recall that, as Deleuze puts it, “The existence of attributes does not differ from their essence” (Deleuze 1968, 41) and their essence, in turn, is that of substance, namely, existence.

<sup>34</sup> Deleuze 1968, 8.

To explicate is to evolve, to involve is to implicate. Yet the two terms are not opposites: they simply mark two aspects of expression. Expression is on the one hand an explication, an unfolding of what expresses itself, the One manifesting itself in the Many (substance manifesting itself in its attributes, and these attributes manifesting themselves in their modes). Its multiple expression, on the other hand, involves Unity. The One remains involved in what expresses it, imprinted in what unfolds it, immanent in whatever manifests it: expression is in this respect an involvement.<sup>35</sup>

This extensive account of expression help us understanding why, according to Spinoza, “Whatever exists exists in God”.<sup>36</sup> The ontological and epistemological value of expression in his metaphysics is, in fact, the ground of both unity and multiplicity in explication and implication; expression, we can say, provides an account of both ontological dependence (of modes in the substance and of substance manifested in its modes) and epistemological access (for modes to substance through attributes). It is important to remember that in this relational metaphysics, attributes play a functional role<sup>37</sup>: they are what the intellect perceives of substance, therefore they *are* substance. This is clearly stated in the demonstration of E1p15, where Spinoza states that “nothing exists beside substances and modes (by Ax. 1).”<sup>38</sup> The functional aspect of attributes is rightly explained by Deleuze as follows:

Attributes are like points of view on substance; but in the absolute limit these points of view are no longer external, and substance contains within itself the infinity of its points of view upon itself. Its modes are deduced from substance

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<sup>35</sup> Deleuze 1968, 15-16.

<sup>36</sup> E1p15

<sup>37</sup> Deleuze highlights this idea by reporting some passages from the *Short Treatise* where attributes are said to exist 'formally' and 'in act' (Deleuze 1968, 41-42).

<sup>38</sup> According to Axiom 1 “Each thing that exists exists either in itself [substance] or in something else [modes]”.

as properties are deduced from a thing's definition; but in the absolute limit, these properties take on an infinite collective being. It is no longer a matter of finite understanding deducing properties singly, reflecting on its object and explicating it by relating it to other objects. It is now the object that expresses itself, the thing itself that explicates itself. All its properties then jointly 'fall within an infinite understanding'. So there is no question of deducing Expression: rather it is expression that embeds deduction in the Absolute, renders proof the *direct manifestation* of absolutely infinite substance.<sup>39</sup>

Ultimately, we can therefore state that modes are unique and determinate expressions of the substance, and their existence and interaction is possible precisely on the ground of such expressionism.

### **1.3 Causality and Necessity**

There are two more aspects that cannot be overlooked when considering Spinoza's metaphysics, namely, causality and necessity. Importantly, the very first definition of book one in the *Ethics* is that of cause of itself (*causa sui*): “By cause of itself I understand that whose essence involves existence, or, that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing.” This is better understood in relation to E1p18, where Spinoza states that “God is the immanent but not the transitive cause of all things.” As explained by Nadler, an immanent cause is generally understood as a cause whose effects are part of or belong to itself, while a transitive cause produces effects which are “ontologically distinct from itself”.<sup>40</sup> A fundamental feature of immanent causation, therefore, is the inseparability of cause and effect; this means that existence of the effect implies the existence of its cause, or, as Nadler puts it, “Without the continued existence and *operation* of the cause, the

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<sup>39</sup> Deleuze 1968, 22.

<sup>40</sup> Nadler 2008, 61.

effect would cease to exist.”<sup>41</sup> Considering this, in the context of Spinoza's metaphysics, the cause of itself (as immanent cause) should not be understood as some sort of transcendental notion out of space and time; God as cause is rather a dynamic immanent principle which is implied in all of its infinite effects (that are, in turn, transitive causes) as existence itself.<sup>42</sup> This is why in E1p24c Spinoza states that “God is not only the cause of things' beginning to exist, but is also the cause of their persevering in existence; or, to use Scholastic terminology, God is the cause of the being (*causa essendi*) of things.”<sup>43</sup> Since transitive causation as such, on the other hand, does not imply activity or existence (of both itself and its effects), we can make sense of E1p28:

Every particular thing, or, any thing which is finite and has a determinate existence, cannot exist or be determined to operate unless it is determined to existence and operation by another cause, which is also finite and has a determinate existence; and again, the latter cause also cannot exist and be determined to operation unless it is determined to existence and operation by another cause, which is also finite and has a determinate existence, and so on to infinity.

Thus, the activity of whatever is finite has to be grounded on an immanent cause implying (infinite) existence.<sup>44</sup>

Considering the notion of God as *causa sui*, it is not surprising that Spinoza, in his explanation, also makes use of the notion of necessity; God necessarily exist – it is actually existence itself (E1p11), and “There must follow, from the necessity of the divine nature,

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<sup>41</sup> Nadler 2008, 62, emphasis mine.

<sup>42</sup> This is why, according to Spinoza, God cause can also be thought of as God as reason (*causa seu ratio* – E1p11, first Alternative Proof).

<sup>43</sup> E1p24: the essence of things produced by God does not involve existence.”

<sup>44</sup> With regard to E1p28, Parkinson has rightly noticed that “Spinoza does not regard such a chain of causes as terminating in a God who is outside the chain; rather, all this causal activity takes place in God.” (Parkinson 2000, 29).

infinite things in infinite ways.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, reality follows from the necessity of existence, which is the essence of God (by E1p20). This notion of necessity explains Spinoza's idea of God as Nature (*Deus sive Natura*, where *sive* – 'or' - designates identification), which rectifies the illusion of final causes (according to which “men commonly suppose that all natural things act on account of an end as they themselves do”<sup>46</sup>) and the theological illusion (according to which “gods arrange everything for the use of men, in order that they might bind men to them and be held by them in the highest honour”<sup>47</sup>). God necessarily exists and does not act on account of an end, therefore to pray to Spinoza's God would be as useless as praying to gravity:

I do not need many words in order to show now that Nature has no end which is pre-established for it, and that all final causes are nothing but human inventions. [...] All natural things proceed with a certain eternal necessity and with supreme perfection.<sup>48</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Spinoza's metaphysics is a metaphysics of perfection. As discussed above, the fact that everything that is is a unique and determinate expression of the one eternal and infinite substance, makes it easier to understand why he identifies reality as perfection. The latter, then, is not an external paradigm to which beings should aspire – since beings are perfect, as they involve and explicate the substance. Importantly, the uniqueness of modes and the unity of substance maintain a tension between the One and the Many (and

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<sup>45</sup> E1p16.

<sup>46</sup> E1Appendix

<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> Ibid

between finitude and infinity) which has puzzled many philosophers and scholars.<sup>49</sup> However, I think Spinoza's intention in building his metaphysics was not to solve this tension: on the contrary, he tried to uncover and highlight it as the grounding principle of reality and Nature, which in turn (by Spinoza's naturalism) is grounding principle of human existence.

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<sup>49</sup> First and foremost Hegel. More contemporary examples include Carriero (2011, 2017), Lin (2006), and Parkinson (2000).



## **Persevering in Perfection: A Theory of Becoming**

### **Introduction**

In the first chapter we have seen how, according to the metaphysics elaborated in the *Ethics*, modes (particular beings) are finite modifications and expressions of the one substance. In this chapter, I will argue that Spinoza's theory of knowledge, together with his theory of *conatus*, can be understood as a unified theory of becoming. The advantage of this reading is that it makes sense of the identity of reality and perfection by taking into account change and – more generally – the dynamics of everything that is. In other words, the notion of becoming is fundamental in understanding how things “*proceed with supreme perfection*”.<sup>50</sup>

As previously mentioned, the project of Spinoza's work is aimed at providing guidance for human flourishing, hence a great part of the *Ethics* is devoted to understanding and explaining how modes – and in particular human beings – are structured and how they relate to and in the world, or, to use Spinoza's terminology, how they persevere in their being. In order to do so he develops a theory of knowledge based on 'adequate' and 'inadequate' ideas. Adequate and inadequate cognition is what leads the mind, and consequently the body, to be active or passive. In the first section of this chapter we will look at Spinoza's theory of adequate and inadequate ideas. The latter, however, cannot be understood apart from Spinoza's famous theory of *conatus*, according to which “Each thing, in so far as it is in itself, endeavours to persevere in its being.”<sup>51</sup> The second

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<sup>50</sup> E1 Appendix.

<sup>51</sup> E3p6.

section will briefly explain this theory in order to discuss *conatus* as power of action and, in particular, as relational power. Finally, the third section will take into account the role that experience plays in both Spinoza's theory of knowledge and theory of *conatus*, in order to ultimately argue that these represent two aspects of a unified theory of becoming.

## **2.1 Spinoza's Theory of Adequate and Inadequate Knowledge**

The way in which we form ideas plays a fundamental role in Spinoza's system, and the second book of the Ethics entitled 'On the Nature and Origin of the Mind' is devoted precisely to this topic. Before discussing what Spinoza means by 'adequate' and 'inadequate' ideas it is fundamental to understand how and why we should not consider this differentiation as equal to that of 'true' and 'false'. In E2p32 it is said that "All ideas, in so far as they are related to God, are true." In the demonstration of the same proposition Spinoza explains that this is the case because "All ideas which are in God agree entirely with those things of which they are the ideas, and so they are all true." From these statements we might wonder, then, what is conceived as 'false', and the short answer would be: nothing. In the following proposition it is said: "There is nothing positive in ideas on account of which they are called false."<sup>52</sup> Its demonstration is also important:

If you deny this, then conceive (if this can be done) a positive mode of thinking which constitutes the form of error, i.e. of falsity. This mode of thinking cannot be in God (by the preceding Proposition); but it can neither exist nor be conceived outside God (by Prop 15, Part I).<sup>53</sup> So nothing positive can exist in ideas, on account of which they are called false. QED.

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<sup>52</sup> E2p32.

<sup>53</sup> "Whatever exists exists in God, and nothing can exist or be conceived without God." (E1p15.)

It is unclear what Spinoza means here by 'positive', but it is plausible to understand this as 'existing'. In other words, according to him nothing that exists in God can be false; however, since nothing can exist or be conceived outside God, then everything exists. Having established this, Spinoza then provides a definition of falsity, which consists in the privation of knowledge which inadequate, i.e. mutilated and confused ideas, involve.”<sup>54</sup> He seems to use two different registers, one involving adequate and inadequate ideas, and one involving true ideas – but not strictly false ones; this is why adequate ideas are true ideas, but we cannot really understand inadequate ideas as false, since they actually consist in privation of knowledge. The latter consists in confused ideas (in which causes and effects are misinterpreted as reversed) and mutilated ones (in which the cause of the idea is missing). It seems that inadequate ideas are about misinterpretation of causal relations, and the problem with misinterpretations is that they are as real as everything else, and therefore we act upon them. In the Demonstration of E2p35 Spinoza states:

Falsity cannot consist in absolute privation (for minds, not bodies, are said to err and to be deceived); nor again can it consist in absolute ignorance, for to be ignorant and to err are different. So it consists in the privation of knowledge which the inadequate knowledge of things, or, inadequate and confused ideas, involve.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> E2p35.

<sup>55</sup> In the following Scholium Spinoza provides some useful examples: “Men are deceived that they think themselves free, an opinion which consists simply in the fact that they are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which those actions are determined. This, therefore, is their idea of liberty: that they know no cause of their actions. For when they assert that human actions depend on the will, these are just words, of which they have no idea. They are all ignorant of what the will is and how it moves the body, and those who boast otherwise and invent dwelling places and habitations for the soul tend to evoke laughter or disgust. So also, when we see the sun, we imagine it to be about two hundred feet distant from us; an error which consists, not in this imagination alone, but in the fact that whilst we imagine the sun in this way we are ignorant of its true distance and of the cause of this imagination. For even after we get to know that the sun is distant from us by over six hundred diameters of the earth we shall still imagine it to be close at hand. For we imagine the sun to be close, not because we are ignorant of its true distance, but because an affection of our body involves the essence of the sun in so far as the body is affected by the sun.”

To summarize, everything in Nature is true, but the way we relate to it (meaning the way we understand it and behave in it, at the same time) can be adequate or inadequate. At the beginning of the second part, Spinoza introduces his discussion by saying:

I pass now to an explanation of those things that necessarily had to follow from the essence of God, or, an external and infinite entity. Not, however, all of them; for we demonstrated in Prop. 16 Part I, that from that essence there must follow infinite things in infinite ways. I shall explain only those things that can lead us, as it were by the hand, to a knowledge of the human mind and of its supreme blessedness.

Spinoza is being very practical here: he cannot explain all those things that necessarily follow from God, since they are infinite and he – as finite – does not know all of them.<sup>56</sup> He therefore explains that he will discuss in particular those things by means of which we can understand how the mind works and, at the same time, how such understanding can lead us to live a good life in terms of *praxis*.

It should be noted that even if the second part of the *Ethics* is entitled 'On the Nature and Origin of the Mind' (and therefore seems to promise a discussion on the Mind alone<sup>57</sup>) the first of its Definitions is that of Body.<sup>58</sup> This is because, according to Spinoza, mind and body proceed in parallel: they are determinate expressions of the attribute of thought and the attribute of extension, and even though – as we have seen in chapter one – they are necessarily conceived separately, they nevertheless express the one substance, and therefore operate on a common ground.<sup>59</sup> This is why in E3p12 and E3p13 Spinoza states

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<sup>56</sup> It should be remembered that, as noted in chapter one, not only are particular modes infinite – are also expressed in infinite attributes, of which we perceive only two: thought and extension. This is already a hint to understand that knowledge, according to Spinoza, cannot possibly make something finite into something infinite. In other words, we cannot know everything *from the standpoint of infinity*, not even by means of cognition.

<sup>57</sup> Nothing in Spinoza, apart from God, exists 'in itself'.

<sup>58</sup> E2d1: "By body I understand a mode which expresses in a certain and determinate way the essence of God, in so far as he is considered as an extended thing."

<sup>59</sup> This is emphasized in E2p13: "The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body, or, a certain actually existing mode of extension, and nothing else."

that “The mind endeavours, as far as it can, to imagine those things which increase or help the body's power of acting”, and that “When the mind imagines things that diminish or hinder the body's power of acting, it endeavours, as far as it can, to recollect that which excludes the existence of these things.” We will discuss in the next section what Spinoza means by 'power of acting'; for the purpose of our current discussion it is important to keep in mind that the way in which we form adequate and inadequate ideas affects both the mind *and* the body.

Let us go back to the differentiation of adequate and inadequate ideas. For purpose of clarity, it is important to know that according to Spinoza ideas are not abstract entities, but rather actions, in the specific sense of acts of judgment. In Parkinson's words, they are judgments in the sense of “thinking of something as being of a certain nature.”<sup>60</sup> In E3d3, Spinoza states:

By an idea I understand a conception [*conceptus*] of the mind, which the mind forms on account of the fact that it is a thinking thing.

*Explanation.* I say 'conception' rather than 'perception' because the word 'perception' seems to indicate that the mind is in a passive relation to an object; but 'conception' seems to express an action of the mind.<sup>61</sup>

The fact that ideas are actions also clarifies why, according to Spinoza, there are no false ideas (it would be odd, in fact, to talk about 'false actions'). In E2d4 Spinoza states that by an adequate idea he understands “An idea which, in so far as it is considered in itself without relation to its object, has all the properties, or, the intrinsic denominations, of a

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<sup>60</sup> Parkinson 200: 321.

<sup>61</sup> According to Parkinson “It later becomes clear (E2p49 and s) that the action in question is that of affirmation or denial. To have an idea of X is to think of X, in the sense of affirming or denying something of it.” (Parkinson 2000: 330.) In E2p49 Spinoza states that: “There is in the mind no volition, or, no affirmation and negation, apart from that which an idea involves in so far as it is an idea.” We can therefore understand why, in the corollary of the same proposition, he states that “Will an intellect are one and the same.”

true idea.” So adequate ideas are true ideas: they are clear, distinct, and related to God, but they do not require a 'true' relation to their object in order to be adequate. It seems that Spinoza is establishing here a guarantee of epistemic access which is not solely dependent on a strict subject-object correspondence in terms of representation. I think this is because a strict separation of subject-object in terms of representation would undermine Spinoza's concern with the active part of the subject in *understanding* the world and making it meaningful – and, in turn, making it coherent too (as a world that make sense). Considering this, the way in which a subject makes the world meaningful in terms of adequate and inadequate ideas has to take into account her predispositions or, in Spinoza's terms, her essence. This will be discussed further in the next section. For now let us look at adequate ideas considered in themselves, or 'without relation to their objects'. In E2p37, Spinoza says: “That which is common to all things and which is equally in the part and in the whole constitutes the essence of no particular thing”, and in the following proposition he continues: “Those things which are common to all things, and are equally in the part and in the whole, can only be conceived adequately.”<sup>62</sup> According to the first proposition there is something which is “common to all things” and yet cannot be identified with any particular essence;<sup>63</sup> at the same time, though, since it is found *equally* in the part and in the whole, this something has an important relational aspect to it. In addition to this, Spinoza says that the latter can only be conceived adequately: in other words, these “common notions” - as he calls them in E2p40s2 – are necessarily true, and cannot possibly be inadequate. Importantly, because of the parallelism of mind and body, common notions are both a relation (in the sense of agreement) of ideas and a relation of bodies. Deleuze importantly emphasizes that common notions “are not at all *abstract* ideas but *general* ideas”<sup>64</sup>, and he explains them as follows:

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<sup>62</sup> E2p38.

<sup>63</sup> By 'essence' of a thing Spinoza understands “that which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited, and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily negated; or that without which a thing can neither exist nor be conceived without the thing.” (E2d2.)

<sup>64</sup> Deleuze 1988: 54.

The common notions are generalities in the sense that they are only concerned with the existing modes without constituting any part of the latter's singular essence. But they are not at all fictitious or abstract; they represent the composition of real relations between existing modes or individuals. Whereas geometry only captured relations *in abstracto*, the common notions enable us to apprehend them as they are, that is, as they are necessarily embodied in living beings, with the variable and concrete terms between which they are established. In this sense, the common notions are more biological than mathematical, forming a natural geometry that allows us to comprehend the unity of composition of all of Nature and the modes of variation of that unity.<sup>65</sup>

The relation of part and whole represented by common notions is also called by Spinoza as “knowledge of the second kind”<sup>66</sup>, which is identified with Reason.<sup>67</sup>

To summarize, according to Spinoza ideas are act of judgments which can be adequate or inadequate. This differentiation does not depend on a one-sided subject-object representation, but is rather the product of a subject-object *relation*. The latter is crucial, since for Spinoza, understanding is the means through which we establish our relation to the world, our place in the world, and our world as a whole. It is, then, the way in which we relate to reality *as* perfection. In the next section I shall discuss the fundamental terms of such relation, with particular reference to Spinoza's theory of *conatus*. I suggest that the way in which things persevere in their being – or the way in which “everything proceed

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<sup>65</sup> Deleuze 1988: 57.

<sup>66</sup> E2p40s2.

<sup>67</sup> According to Spinoza there are three kinds of knowledge: imagination, reason, and intuitive knowledge. Among these, as stated in E2p41 and E2p42, imagination is the only kind of knowledge through which we form inadequate ideas, while both reason and intuitive knowledge guarantee access to adequate ideas (as they are clear and distinct, and they grasp the part-whole relation). The difference between second and third type of knowledge, according to Spinoza, is that through reason we grasp the part-whole relation moving from the part to the whole, while through intuitive knowledge we move from an understanding of the whole to an understanding of the parts.

with absolute perfection”<sup>68</sup> - considered in the context of the metaphysics and theory of knowledge articulated in the *Ethics*, should be considered comprehensively as a theory of becoming, with *conatus* as its core.

## 2.2 *Conatus* as Relational Power

The active part of the subject in making the world meaningful depends on its essence. The first definition of 'essence' is provided at the beginning of Part Two:

I say that there belongs to the essence of a thing that which, being given, the thing is necessarily posited, and which, being taken away, the thing is necessarily negated; or that without which a thing can neither exist nor be conceived, and conversely that which can neither exist nor be conceived without the thing.<sup>69</sup>

Later on, in Part Three ('On the Origin and Nature of Emotions') he further elaborates this ideas in terms of *conatus* in two Propositions: a) “Each thing, in so far as it is in itself [*quantum in se est*], endeavours [*conatur*]<sup>70</sup> to persevere in its being [*in suo esse perseverare*].”<sup>71</sup>; b) “The endeavour by which each thing endeavours to persevere in its being is nothing other than the actual essence of the thing.”<sup>72</sup> The essence of a thing, then, is what posit the thing as such; it is a certain uniqueness without which a thing would not exist. Such uniqueness not only is what posits a thing as what it is, but also shapes the terms of relation of that thing to the world – in this sense, it can be considered a source of

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<sup>68</sup> E1 Appendix.

<sup>69</sup> E2d2.

<sup>70</sup> From the Latin verb *cōner*, 'to try' or 'to attempt'.

<sup>71</sup> E3p6.

<sup>72</sup> E3p7.



meaning-making. Carriero has argued that “A natural thought, common to both Spinoza and the Aristotelian tradition, is that there is an intimate connection between what you are – your essence – and what it is for you to flourish.”<sup>73</sup> I believe he is right, and that this 'intimate connection' is fundamental to the project of the *Ethics*. In the case of Spinoza's theory of *conatus*, however, each thing's endeavour to persevere in its being is very much dependent on its relation to other essences. This is already evident from what we have discussed so far: nothing can be conceived as existing 'in itself' (since every particular being is a determinate modification of God and part of causal relations), and everything cannot but be considered in its existence, *in medias res*. I think this is very important with regard to Spinoza's idea of *conatus*: it depends on the fundamental intuition that, as long as we exist, we cannot really stop doing so. We always find ourselves in the world, establishing relations with other beings which, in one way or another, affect us and hence constantly inform and reshape our being in the world.

In a sense, the very perception and conception of ourselves is already relational: in E2p11 Spinoza says that “The first thing that constitutes the actual being of the human mind is simply the idea of some particular thing that actually exists”, namely, the body.<sup>74</sup> With regard to particular things, we should also be reminded that:

The idea of a particular thing that actually exists has God for a cause, not in so far as he is infinite, but in so far as he is considered as affected by another idea of a particular thing that actually exists, of which God is also the cause in so far as he is considered as affected by another, third idea, and so on to infinity.<sup>75</sup>

Particular beings necessarily follow from God; at the same time, Spinoza also states that “The being of substance does not belong to the essence of man; or, substance does not

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<sup>73</sup> Carriero 2017: 142.

<sup>74</sup> “The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body, or, a certain actually existing mode of extension, and nothing else.” (E2p13.)

<sup>75</sup> E2p9.

constitute the form of man”<sup>76</sup> - and this is why he then affirms that “The essence of man is constituted by certain modifications of the attributes of God.”<sup>77</sup> It would be possible to consider these 'certain modifications' which make up the essence of man (later defined as *conatus*) as man's mind and body; according to my interpretation, however, mind and body as modifications constituting man's essence need to be considered together with their own affections or, in other words, the relations with other beings in which man enters and the effects these relations have on him. Several passages of Part Two seem to support this interpretation: when discussing his theory of bodies, Spinoza explains that “A body which is in motion or at rest must have been determined to motion or rest by another body, which was also determined to motion or rest by another, and that again by another, and so on to infinity.”<sup>78</sup> Importantly, when discussing how a mode perceives other modes as affecting it, Spinoza says: “The idea of any mode, by which the human body is affected by external bodies, must involve the nature of the human body and *at the same time* the nature of the external body.”<sup>79</sup> In the first Corollary of the same proposition he also adds that “From this it follows that the human mind perceives the nature of very many bodies *together* with the nature of its own body.”<sup>80</sup> So our knowledge and perception is always compositional. The ways in which a mode relates to or is affected by other modes is central to the discussion of *conatus* in Part Three. This theory is a core concept in the overall project of the *Ethics*, since it summarizes and formalizes several tensions which have been established in Part One and Two. In particular, the notion of *conatus* embodies the tension between the One and the Many on two levels: 1) the tension between substance and modes; 2) the tension between a mode and other modes.

Let us go back to Spinoza's discussion of *conatus*. In the Demonstration of E3p7, he

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<sup>76</sup> E2p10. The relation between 'essence' and 'form' is mentioned again in the last paragraph of the Preface to Part Four, where the two notions seem to be equivalent: “For it must be specially noted that when I say that someone passes from a lesser to a greater perfection, and conversely, I do not understand that he is changed from one essence, i.e. one form, into another.”

<sup>77</sup> E2p10c.

<sup>78</sup> E2l3.

<sup>79</sup> E2p16 (emphasis mine).

<sup>80</sup> E2p16c1 (emphasis mine).

connects this endeavour with power:

From the given essence of each thing, certain things necessarily follow (by Prop. 36, Part I), nor can things do anything other than that which necessarily follows from their determinate nature (by Prop. 29, Part I). So the power, i.e. the endeavour, of each thing by which, either alone or with others, it either acts or endeavours to act – that is (by Prop. 6, Part 3) the power, i.e. the endeavour, by which it strives to persevere in its being – is nothing other than the given, i.e. the actual, essence of the thing. QED.<sup>81</sup>

So the essence of a thing, its *conatus*, consists in its power – in the sense of a determinate tendency to persevere in its being. Now, a being's power can be augmented and diminished depending on both the ways in which it is affected by other beings and the ways in which it affects them in return; in other words, a being's power is relational. When Spinoza says that something perseveres 'in its being' according to its 'determinate nature', I think he is referring to both the fact that modes are finite (and therefore have limited power in limited terms) and that – as determinate modifications of substance – they are unique, or, the terms of their power are unique.

We have previously mentioned that ideas are acts of judgments, or acts of understanding, which posit the relation of a mode to other modes. In E3p1, Spinoza further elaborates his theory of knowledge by saying that “Our mind sometimes acts, but sometimes is passive; namely in so far as it has adequate ideas, so far it necessarily acts, and in so far as it has inadequate ideas, so far it is necessarily passive.” In the previous section I have discussed what Spinoza means by adequate and inadequate ideas; in Part Three, he further elaborates this distinction by relating it to the emotions (*affectus*).<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> E3p7d.

<sup>82</sup> Deleuze provides a clear explanation of the difference between *affectus* and *affectio*: “It has been remarked that as a general rule that affection (*affectio*) is said directly of the body, while the affect (*affectus*) refers to the mind. But the real difference does not reside there. It is between the body's affection and idea, which involves the nature of the

Considering Spinoza's aim of establishing practical guidelines for human flourishing, he could not avoid to discuss the role of the emotions at length. He introduces the topic by providing the following definition:

By emotion I understand the affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, helped or hindered, and at the same time the ideas of these affections. If, therefore, we can be adequate cause<sup>83</sup> of one of these affections, then I understand by the emotion an action; otherwise, I understand it to be a passion.<sup>84</sup>

Emotions are a fundamental indicator of transition from one state to another and, again, they simultaneously relate to both mind and body (“Whatever increases or diminishes, helps or hinders, our body's power of acting, the idea of that same thing increases or diminishes, helps or hinders, our mind's power of acting.”<sup>85</sup>). In the Scholium of E3p11, Spinoza links changes in power to changes in perfection by saying that “The mind can undergo great changes, and pass now to a greater and now to a lesser perfection.” We have seen that, in E2d6, Spinoza says that by reality and perfection he understands the same; this identity of reality and perfection is discussed again later in the Preface to Part Four , with regard to the model of human nature:

Then we shall say that men are more or less perfect as they approach this exemplar more or less. For it must be especially noted that when I say that someone passes from a lesser to a greater perfection, and conversely, I do not

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external body, and the affect, which involves an increase or decrease of the power of acting, for the body and the mind alike. The *affectio* refers to a state of the affected body and implies the presence of the affecting body, whereas the *affectus* refers to the passage from one state to another.” (Deleuze 1988: 49.)

<sup>83</sup> “I call an adequate cause whose effect can be clearly and distinctly perceived through itself. I call that an inadequate, or, a partial, cause whose effect cannot be understood through itself.” (E3d1.)

<sup>84</sup> E3d3.

<sup>85</sup> E3p11.

understand that he is changed from one essence, i.e. one form, into another. (For a horse, for example, is as much destroyed if it is changed into a man as if it is changed into an insect.) Rather, we conceive someone's power of acting to be increased or diminished in so far as this is understood through his own nature. Finally, by perfection in general I shall, as I have said, understand reality; that is, the essence of each thing in so far as it exists and operates in a certain way, no attention being paid to its duration.

Spinoza here attacks what he considers a very misleading notion of perfection as something external to the structure of Nature and particular beings, something other than what already *is*. According to him, this conception results from prejudice rather than “genuine knowledge”.<sup>86</sup> Contrary to this, he considers reality *as* perfection not only because every particular being necessarily follows from the one substance, but also because we are finite and determinate beings, and negating this principle would be the same as negating reality as a whole. In other words, aspiring to artificial models which are alien to Nature -and to human nature - is not only nonsense: it is actually a betrayal of our own essence.

I previously mentioned that the emotions are an important indicator of transitions from one state to another; we can now understand that the transition specifically refers to the passage from a greater to a lesser perfection, or from a lesser to a greater perfection, and since perfection and reality are one and the same, the transition refers to degrees of reality. The more perfect a being is, the more real it is. So according to Spinoza, pleasure is “man's transition from a lesser to a greater perfection”<sup>87</sup>, while pain is “man's transition from a greater to a lesser perfection.”<sup>88</sup> Importantly, states of perfection cannot be considered in themselves, but rather in the context of existence and its duration. This is

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<sup>86</sup> E4Preface.

<sup>87</sup> E3DOE2.

<sup>88</sup> E3DOE3.

mainly for two reasons: first, a transition from one state of perfection to another implies a previous state of perfection to which the transition is compared (and from which it derives); second, nothing that is can be considered independently from causal relations. So perfection is always a matter of change *in* context and it is always relational. In this sense the notion of perfection is related to that of becoming.

For purpose of clarity we could now wonder: perfection *is* reality, but is this also the same as power? It is undeniable that Spinoza often seems to use these three terms – perfection, power, and reality - as synonyms, and in fact the short answer to this question, I think, would be yes. Scholars such as Carriero, for example, usually do not make important significant differentiations between these terms: “In many contexts, power of acting and perfection are interchangeable, as are perfection and reality. So I am not going to be very fussy about what differences there might be between power of acting, perfection, and reality.”<sup>89</sup> This position would be supported by the Demonstration of E4p4, which states that “The power by which particular things, and consequently a man, preserve their being is the power of God, i.e. of Nature (by Prop. 24, Coroll, Part I); not in so far as it is infinite, but in so far as it can be explained by actual human essence (by Prop. 7, Part 3).” On the other hand, a closer reading of this passage would impose an important differentiation between reality as perfection and power (as *conatus*). Now, reality relates to everything that is as following from the nature of God as infinite, eternal, and perfect – so reality is perfect. There is a sense (as stated in the quote) in which the power of God and the power of man are the same, and this is because the power of man – his *conatus* – is a determinate expression of the power of God. So as Spinoza explains, power of man and power of God should not be understood as related because they are both infinite, on the contrary, this would be impossible; rather, *conatus* as dynamic and organizing principle of existence operates in finitude and determination. In these terms, *conatus* transforms finitude and determination into the greatest advantage and virtue<sup>90</sup> of human beings, since

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<sup>89</sup> Carriero 2011: 71.

<sup>90</sup> E4d8: “By virtue and power I understand the same.”

these traits are that through which they can form relations of composition and consequently maximize their reality.

Above I have explained *conatus* as power and, more importantly, I have argued that, even though it necessarily refers to the unique and determinate essence of modes, it also has a fundamental relational connotation to it. Admittedly, sometimes in the *Ethics* Spinoza seems to use a language that can be understood as undermining such relational aspect. For example, when defining adequate ideas and adequate causes he says that they are adequate in themselves and when understood through themselves; and again, when defining *conatus*, he explains it as being such in so far as a being is in itself. Nevertheless, if we consider this language in the context of Spinoza's metaphysics and theory of knowledge, we understand that the relational aspect of both substance/modes and mode/modes is never undermined; rather, it is actually constantly reaffirmed by the irreducible tension between unity and multiplicity. Persevering in our own being, then, means understanding our mode of existence *as* it relates to other modes, how these affect us, when and how it is the case that we maximize our power through relations of composition and, conversely, when we diminish our power by forming relations of decomposition; as Deleuze has argued, "The order of causes is therefore an order of decomposition and composition of relations, which infinitely affects all of nature."<sup>91</sup> I therefore disagree with Carrero, since we should be fussy about a differentiation between power, reality, and perfection; while on the one hand, considering Spinoza's metaphysics and in particular the notion of substance, the identity of reality and perfection is a given, but on the other hand degrees of reality as perfection are not. Degrees of perfection are a matter of power, and therefore of relations of composition and decomposition.

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<sup>91</sup> Deleuze 1988: 19.

### 2.3 Knowledge in Experience: A Theory of Becoming

Spinoza's theory of knowledge as differentiating adequate and inadequate ideas, how we form them and how we act upon them, plays a central role in the *Ethics*. This theory, however, is also informed by sense-experience, and this is especially true in the case of modes – since we cannot know the essence of a mode from its definition. In the Corollary of E2p13<sup>92</sup> it is said that “Man consists of mind and body, and the human body exists as we sense it.” Here Spinoza does not mean that we can have adequate knowledge of the human body by means of perception, on the contrary, he later states that “The human mind does not know the human body, nor does it know that it exists, except through the ideas of the affections by which the body is affected.”<sup>93</sup> What Spinoza means is that the only way in which we know that we have a body which is ours is by perceiving it (in his terms, by having ideas of it being perceived).<sup>94</sup> In general, in order to know modes we need to experience them by means of affection, or, by means of relation – and it is by means of these relations that we understand (through adequate or inadequate ideas) what agrees with our *conatus*, what maximizes it, and what hinders it. Because of Spinoza's mind/body parallelism, it would be plausible to hold that sense-perception plays a role as fundamental as cognition, but the latter is admittedly discussed at more length throughout the *Ethics*.<sup>95</sup>

It is true that *conatus* is the essence of a thing, but through knowledge *and* experience such essence is constantly informed (in the form of composition or decomposition of power) by its relation to other essences, its context, and its history.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>92</sup> “The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body, or, a certain actually existing mode of extension.”

<sup>93</sup> E2p19.

<sup>94</sup> Spinoza does mention adequate perception: in E2p39 he states that “There will be an adequate idea in the mind of that which is common to, and a property of, the human body and certain external bodies by which the human mind is often affected, and which is equally in the part and in the whole of any of these.” And then he continues in the Corollary: “From this it follows that the human body is the more capable of perceiving several things adequately, the more things its body has in common with other bodies.”

<sup>95</sup> Parkinson explains that the word 'perception' is used ambiguously here, since it is also used in reference to the mind: “Spinoza sometimes distinguishes perception from conception, saying that the former indicates that the mind is passive, whereas the latter indicates that it is active. But he also says, when defining an attribute, that the intellect 'perceives' certain things of substance; in this sense, 'perceive' seems to indicate any activity of the mind by which it 'sees' something.” (Parkinson 2000: 323.) It is ironic here that Parkinson, in order to explain how the mind perceives, actually uses a sensory faculty.

<sup>96</sup> “The human body can undergo many changes, and yet retain the impressions, i.e. the traces, of objects, and



According to Carriero “Spinoza is providing a theory of finite real beings.”<sup>97</sup>; I believe that he is doing something more precise than that. As I previously mentioned, Spinoza grounded his project on the fundamental and practical intuition that, as long as we exist, we cannot not exist. Hence, I believe that Spinoza, through his theory of knowledge and his theory of *conatus* – both based on his metaphysics – is providing a theory of becoming, in order to provide guidelines on the ways in which human beings can conduct an ever flourishing existence.

### **Conclusion**

Above I have argued that in his *Ethics*, by building a metaphysics and developing a theory of knowledge based on a core relational element – *conatus* – Spinoza offers a theory of becoming. The concept of becoming is not articulated in the *Ethics*, nor has it been theorized by Spinoza scholars. However, the advantage of this position is that it helps us to make sense of both the tension between the One and the Many highlighted in his metaphysics and the dynamic character of his theory of knowledge. Furthermore, becoming represents the missing (perhaps implied) bridge in the identity of reality/perfection and the degrees of reality/perfection of particular beings.

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consequently the same images of things.” (E3post2.)

<sup>97</sup> Carriero 2017: 152.

## Becoming the One and the Many

### Introduction

In the previous section I have argued that, in the *Ethics*, Spinoza is providing a theory of becoming. This reading can help us in making sense of the reason why, in order to build an ethical system, Spinoza starts from a substance metaphysics. In this chapter I suggest that this theory of becoming has the ultimate purpose of providing Spinoza's famous "method, i.e. the way, which leads to freedom."<sup>98</sup> According to him, as previously mentioned, human beings are (as everything else) part of Nature or God – *Deus sive Natura* – therefore human existence needs to be understood in terms of laws of Nature, which he describes in his metaphysics. It later becomes clear that, throughout the *Ethics*, Spinoza's main concern is to explain in what way can we have genuine knowledge of Nature and of our constitution *as* part of it. This knowledge, which informs our praxis as it 'perceives' the world, can lead us to the highest self-contentment, that is "pleasure which has arisen from the fact that a man thinks of himself and of his power of acting."<sup>99</sup> So Spinoza's commitment throughout the *Ethics* is to provide a method for understanding the dynamics of change leading from a lesser to a greater perfection, in order for human beings to be masters of such change throughout their existence.

In the following chapter I further elaborate Spinoza's theory of becoming in two ways: in the first section I explain becoming *as* learning, since the experience of particular beings and the encounter of an essence with other essences represents a always on-going discovery of an essence *in* the world. In the second section, I argue that it is becoming *as*

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<sup>98</sup> E5Preface.

<sup>99</sup> E3DoE25.

learning which constitutes the most important concern for Spinoza in his project, that is, freedom – a topic to which he devotes the Fifth Part of the *Ethics*. I maintain that, in his view, man is not born free, but rather he learns how to become so by learning to commit his endeavour to the One *as* the Many.

### **3.1 Becoming *as* Learning**

In the previous chapter we have seen how man, according to Spinoza, is in constant transition from one state to another. This transition can lead, throughout the duration of existence, to a lesser or a greater perfection. With his metaphysics, theory of knowledge, and theory of *conatus*, Spinoza is providing us with an explanation of how change comes about: in this context, understanding the dynamics of change in beings (the dynamics of becoming) is, in fact, a matter of learning. I say this because transition, or becoming, constantly implies possibilities of becoming, namely, range of ways in which becoming can be actualized – and we do not know about those possibilities until we actually experience them and we learn about them. This is why, according to Spinoza, to act in accordance with our power (our virtue) “is simply to act, live, and preserve one's being (these three mean the same)”<sup>100</sup> As we have seen with adequate and inadequate ideas, in the case we are lead towards a lesser state of perfection our power is diminished and decomposed, and therefore it gets harder to act, live, and preserve our being. But even in this case, if we understand how we are affected in the context of causal relations, the mind has the power to turn passions (inadequate ideas) into actions (adequate ideas).

We have seen that in the *Ethics* emotions play a fundamental role: they mark transitions from a state of perfection (of reality) to another. We experience pain when transitioning from a greater to a lesser state of perfection, in which our *conatus* – our

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<sup>100</sup> E4p24.

power of action – is hindered, and we experience pleasure when we move from a lesser to a greater state of perfection, by forming relation with other essences that agree with our own and therefore becoming more powerful. As previously mentioned, the fundamental way in which we constantly maximize our power of action is by forming adequate ideas, which in turn consists in understanding the causal relations of Nature and our place within those. Indeed, emotions are an important part of these causal relations. In the preface to Part Three, Spinoza attacks the common understanding of emotions as being “contrary to reason, empty, absurd, and horrible.”, by stating that:

Nothing happens in Nature which can be ascribed to a defect in it. For Nature is always the same and everywhere is one, and its virtue and power of acting is the same. That is, the laws of Nature and the rules in accordance with which all things happen and are changed from one form into another are everywhere and always the same; and therefore there must also be one and the same way of understanding the nature of things of any kind – namely, by the universal laws and rules of Nature. Therefore, the emotions of hatred, anger, envy, etc., considered in themselves, follow from the same necessity and virtue of Nature as do all other particular things.<sup>101</sup>

So according to Spinoza, the way in which we can know about 'how things happen' and how they change is to know the laws of Nature. With regard to emotions, it is important to note that when Spinoza explains that, by having adequate understanding of our emotions we “suffer less from them”<sup>102</sup>, he does not mean that we should suppress emotions or that emotions in general are contrary to Nature. What he means is that by understanding emotions we can explain them by means of our essence, and therefore they do not hinder our power of acting. The laws of Nature are, in fact, the laws of becoming. Within these

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<sup>101</sup> E3Preface.

<sup>102</sup> E5p6.

laws, the greatest power of man consists in forming adequate ideas, or, in understanding. Spinoza recognizes that throughout our existence we always have both clear and confused ideas; sometimes we act, sometimes we are acted upon, sometimes we are powerful and sometimes we are not.<sup>103</sup> Again, he recognizes that we are in constant transition, that we are in becoming; so we always enter in relations with other beings, which can agree or not agree with our essence, and so on and so forth. Now, we know from the previous chapter that emotions are affections, i.e. modifications, of the body (and therefore, by the parallelism of attributes, also of the mind); depending on how we relate to those modifications, we actualize certain possibilities of becoming.

In E5p4, Spinoza states that “There is no affection of the body of which we cannot form some clear and distinct conception.” He also says, in the previous proposition, that “An emotion which is a passion [confused, inadequate] ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it.”<sup>104</sup> So among the possibilities implied in becoming, human beings have the *actual* power of acquiring genuine understanding of everything they experience. Again, according to Spinoza, understanding is the highest power of the mind.<sup>105</sup> It is important to note that, throughout the *Ethics*, understanding is not conceived as merely intellectual activity detached from one's practice, since, as we have discussed, in Spinoza there is no detachment between knowledge and praxis. In his terms, understanding is a practice which appears to have the same characteristics of the activity of learning. This activity is a perpetual discovery of a given, the *conatus*, which takes place by means of relation to other essences, and therefore in becoming. Let me explain. We know from the previous chapter that the essence of man is to persevere in its being, and this *conatus* not only is the common essence of all particular beings (not just man), but it is also a determinate manifestation of the power of God. Indeed, as we have seen in E4p4d, the power of particular beings and the power of God are the same in so far as it is

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<sup>103</sup> Both adequate and inadequate ideas necessarily follow from the nature of God. See E2p36.

<sup>104</sup> E5p3.

<sup>105</sup> E4p28d.

explained by the essence of particular beings. In this sense, *conatus* (or 'power', or 'virtue') seems to be the most irreducible common notion, since all beings persevere in their existence as long as they exist. On the other hand, *conatus* as dynamic and organizing principle is also a marker of difference, since each mode is a determinate and unique expression of substance, and the tendency of persevering in being and organizing power in a way that allows modes to do so in the best way possible *also* depends on such uniqueness. Importantly, it is in experience that we *learn* about such uniqueness. As Spinoza states in an early letter, we need experience in the case of things which “cannot be inferred from the definition of a thing, as, for example, the existence of modes.”<sup>106</sup> Again, *conatus* embodies a crucial tension, since it is both a fundamental common notion (everything exists as far as it can) but it is also a marker of difference at the same time (each beings have specific terms of existing in the best way possible). In a way, *conatus* is a given, in Spinoza's words, “No virtue can be conceived as prior to this- namely, the endeavour to preserve oneself.”<sup>107</sup> However, our understanding of it is not at all a given: we learn about it by relating to other essences – other *conatus* – through which we experience pain and pleasure, transitions through which it is possible to define the possibilities of our becoming. This is why we need experience in the case of modes, because in their definitions we are missing their uniqueness.

I say that *conatus* is a given because according to Spinoza “In Nature there exists nothing contingent, but all things have been determined by necessity of the divine nature to exist and operate in a certain way.”<sup>108</sup> The real importance of understanding, then, lies in recognizing this necessity, and therefore in having clear and distinct ideas of causal relations. In this sense, the practice of understanding seems to be a matter constant attunement between different *conatus*, in terms of both unity and difference. What I mean by this is that each *conatus* has a character of both commonality (in terms of tendency)

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<sup>106</sup> As reported in Parkinson 2000: 33.

<sup>107</sup> E4p22.

<sup>108</sup> E1p29.

and uniqueness (in terms of the terms of such tendency), and therefore the attunement of different *conatus* in the constant process of forming relations always involve unity and difference. These two are to be considered on two levels: first, there is the unity of a particular essence as unique and, at the same time, the commonality it shares with other essences in existence; second, it is the unity of substance manifested in particular beings, all of them unique and, at the same time, deriving from one source (God.) Becoming as learning, it seems, has a circular character: the process of attunement, through which we learn to understand things as necessary, involves both an understanding of common notions and an infinite discovery of the uniqueness of essences. This is why, according to Spinoza, “The more we understand particular things, the more we understand God.”<sup>109</sup>

### **3.2 Learning Freedom**

It is possible to argue that the first four parts of the *Ethics* are the structure in which Spinoza, later in the Fifth Book, can finally discuss his dearest concern, namely, freedom. I already mentioned that, according to Spinoza, all things in Nature are determined by necessity, rather than contingency: everything follows from the essence of the one substance, God or Nature. In E1d7, Spinoza states: “That thing is called free which exists solely by the necessity of its own nature, and is determined to action by itself alone. However, that thing is called necessary, or rather compelled, which is determined by another to exist and to operate in a certain way.” For Spinoza, then, the only free being is God, while everything which is *in* God is necessary, since the infinity of causal relations has God as first cause. In other words, necessity is the modality of existence of everything that is, and in this picture free will does not find a place. More than that, according to Spinoza, free will is an illusion resulting from a misunderstanding of the necessary character of

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<sup>109</sup> E5p24.

reality; the belief in free will is actually privation of knowledge. In E2p35s it is said:

Men are deceived in that they think themselves as free, an *opinion* which consists simply in the fact that they are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which those actions are determined. This, therefore, is their idea of liberty: that they know no cause of their actions. For when they assert that human actions depend on the will, these are just words, of which they have no idea.

In Spinoza's view, we cannot think of ourselves as determined to action by free will because we are determined to action by other causes in the infinity of causal relations. We cannot be the absolute cause of our actions (since the only absolute cause – *causa sui* – is God), but we can be the adequate of them in the moment we act according to the necessity of our nature. As explained by Deleuze, free will is “A fundamental illusion of consciousness, to the extent that the latter is blind to causes, imagines possibilities and contingencies, and believes in the willful action of the mind on the body.”<sup>110</sup> How do we reveal such illusion? According to Spinoza, we do so by understanding the necessary nature of reality through both common notions and the specificity of our own nature at the same time. We can do this by means of reason, which regards things “not as contingent, but as necessary.”<sup>111</sup> Reason is the type of knowledge through which we can understand things as they are, without imposing arbitrary and misleading interpretations (opinions) on the laws of Nature – to which opinions or arbitrary interpretations clearly do not apply. It is important to note that it would be mistaken to think that, since according to Spinoza nothing is contingent and everything is necessary, human beings have then no choice and, in turn, no responsibility over their existence; our choice and responsibility lies in our

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<sup>110</sup> Deleuze 1988: 70.

<sup>111</sup> E2p44. “From this it follows that it depends solely on the imagination that we regard things, in respect of both the past and the future, as contingent.” (E2p44c1.)



understanding.

Since everything is necessary, common notions (as much as *conatus*) are a given; they are generalities, not abstractions, and they pertain the existing modes without constituting any particular essence among them.<sup>112</sup> For this, common notions, in my opinion, are generalities in the sense that they *are* relations; in the same way any relations implies a certain degree of reciprocity, so do common notions, with the difference that they are relations among particular beings *as* expressions of the one substance. This is why Spinoza states that “The mind can bring it about that all affections of the body, i.e., the images of things, are related to the idea of God.”<sup>113</sup> Hence, we can understand – by means of reason – that the necessary nature of reality is the same as the necessity implied in the nature of God. Again, we learn how to do this in becoming, by means of *practice*, the same practice through which we learn to form adequate ideas. Such practice, again, implies perpetual discovery of each term of a relation, and the emotions have a leading role in guiding the movement of reciprocity implied in each being's existence. With regard to this, Deleuze has offered important insights:

For when we encounter a body that agrees with ours, we experience an affect or feeling of joy-passion, although we do not yet adequately know what it has in common with us. Sadness, which arises from our encounter with a body that does not agree with ours, never induces us to form a common notions; but joy passion, as an increase of the power of acting and of comprehending, does bring this about: it is an occasional cause of the common notion. This is why Reason is defined in two ways, which show that man is not *born* rational but also how he becomes rational. Reason is: 1. an effort to select and organize good encounters, that is, encounters of modes that enter into composition with ours and inspire us with joyful passion (feelings that *agree* with reason); 2. the perception and

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<sup>112</sup> By E2p37.

<sup>113</sup> E5p44.

comprehension of the common notions, that is, of the relations that enter into this composition, from which one deduces other relations (reasoning) and on the basis of which one experiences new feelings, active ones this time (feelings that are *born* of reason).<sup>114</sup>

It seems to me that in learning the practice of understanding there are two moments: one that concerns apprehension of what agrees with our nature, and one that organize – in a sense, create – what agrees with our nature. Both moments imply a perpetual discovery of the One and the Many *as* the One and the Many. This type of discovery, in Spinoza's terms, leads to a perpetual transition to a greater perfection in accordance with one's own *conatus*; in other words, when a person's becoming is understood and actualized through the laws of Nature, then she becomes (and keeps on becoming) a free human being. This is why Spinoza states that “The highest good of the mind is the knowledge of God, and the highest virtue of the mind is to know God.”<sup>115</sup>

For Spinoza, then, man is not born free: he becomes free, or, more precisely, he learns throughout his existence what freedom is. The latter lies in what I have previously called 'practice of attunement' between the One and the Many on two levels: 1) the attunement between one's unique essence with other unique essences, which leads to the perpetual actualization of one's becoming in plentitude; 2) the attunement, through common notions, between the unity and diversity of modes, which leads to a clear understanding of the one substance as the necessary source of everything that is necessarily. Learning freedom, then, is about committing our endeavour to the One *as* the Many and also to the Many *as* the One at the same time, or, to conceive our becoming as a perpetual becoming the One and the Many:

If the way that I have shown to lead to this seems to be very arduous, yet it can

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<sup>114</sup> Deleuze 1988: 55-56.

<sup>115</sup> E4p28.

be discovered. And indeed it must be arduous, since it is found so rarely. For how could it happen that, if salvation were ready at hand and could be found without great labour, it is neglected by almost all? But all excellent things are as difficult as they are rare.<sup>116</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Considering the above, we could say that freedom in Spinoza is learning, in the sense of a process which involves the constant discovery of both uniqueness of particular beings and their commonalities; freedom is actualized within the spectrum of becoming. Admittedly, considering Spinoza's metaphysics – and, in particular, the prominent role of causal relations – the problem seems to be that freedom lies in knowing there is no freedom, since what is cannot possibly otherwise. This reading undeniably finds support in the text of the *Ethics*, and represents the most concise summary of Spinoza's critique of the notion of free will. However, I think that there is more to Spinoza's view: he is concerned with establishing guidelines for human flourishing, and therefore he needs to take into account some basic principles which cannot be overlooked in developing such project, namely, the fact that human beings are finite, uniquely determined, and always contextualized in networks of reciprocal relations. In this context, free will could only take place in a vacuum in which we are taken away from both the human context and human constitution. Spinoza is a practical philosopher because he recognizes that the highest power of man is understanding his constitution in the world, in order to master becoming through practice in experience; ultimately such mastery itself is a kind of becoming.

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<sup>116</sup> E5p42s.

## Conclusion

I stated several times throughout this work that the *Ethics* is a project aimed at providing guidelines for human flourishing. The latter necessarily takes place in the world and through our experience of it and interactions with it, and this is why Spinoza starts his work by elaborating a metaphysics; he wants to identify and make sense of these dynamics so that they can be understood. Everything, according to Spinoza, happens within the laws of Nature (God, or the one substance) and nothing can be considered apart from these – not perfection, not emotions, not freedom. It is true that the theme of becoming is not explicitly addressed in the *Ethics*, and perhaps as a consequence of this no scholars have considered it as present in Spinoza's work. In my opinion, however, the fact that the theme is not explicitly addressed is not enough to not plausibly consider it as part of Spinoza's project. Furthermore, considering the practical character of the latter, and considering what discussed in the *Ethics*, it would indeed seem absurd if Spinoza overlooked that which appears to be the most undeniable and irreducible aspect of reality. I have attempted to show that becoming plays a fundamental role in Spinoza's project: by elaborating a metaphysics, he sets its foundation and dynamics; by explaining his theory of knowledge, he clarifies how these dynamics practically affect our development and power of action; and by his theory of *conatus* Spinoza shows how the coherence of these dynamics and the uniqueness of particular beings necessarily coexist. The knowledge – informing our *praxis* – of such coexistence constitutes what in the *Ethics* is considered as the highest principle of human flourishing: freedom. We can therefore understand how Spinoza could identify reality as perfection: it is only through the perpetual coexistence of

the One *and* the Many that harmony can exist. If there was only unity there would we could not make sense of difference, while if there was only difference we could not have experience of the world, nor of ourselves. It is only within the tension of unity and diversity that harmony takes place. In trying to establish the guidelines of human flourishing, it seems to me that Spinoza acknowledged our undeniable finitude as uniqueness, but also that the latter depends on other finitudes for both its constitution and our knowledge of it. It is through the infinite relation of finitudes that everything becomes, and it is only through the experience of finitude that we learn unity. I think this is precisely what, according to Spinoza, freedom is: a perpetual discovery of the One *as* the Many.

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