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Spinoza's Antidote to Death

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Abstract: The paper delves into Spinoza's perspective on death and how the acquisition of genuine knowledge ensures the mind's survival after the body's demise. Spinoza is well known for characterizing the human mind as the idea of the body, which therefore reflects all of the body's states and is fundamentally connected to its physical destiny, encompassing growth and development as well as eventual extinction. However, Spinoza also holds that the mind possesses the capacity to transcend its limited perspective and contemplate things from the vantage point of God, freeing itself from its mortal fate. The paper's goal is to dissect the intricacies of this cognitive liberation and evaluate its logical soundness.

Keywords: Baruch Spinoza; thinking; eternity; situatedness; selfhood

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1. Introduction

Spinoza's whole philosophical endeavor can be described as the attempt to solve the problem of death. The urge to resolve this issue in a way that is both rationally valid and favorable to human aspirations of perennial happiness is the main driving force behind his intellectual quest. Already in his early, unfinished work *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*,[1] Spinoza declares that the decision to devote himself to philosophical reflection was motivated by the experience of the emptiness and futility of all things and the desire to find a true good, the acquisition of which could bring him supreme and *eternal* joy.[2] This incentive becomes even more evident in subsequent works such as the *Short Treatise* (KV) and the *Ethics*, which culminate in the demonstration of the eternity of the mind. Although Spinoza explicitly states—in opposition to the regnant philosophical tradition—that philosophy is a meditation on life and not on death (E4p67), his theoretical edifice is nonetheless a magnificent meditatio mortis.

Despite its centrality, Spinoza's theory of the eternity of the mind is one of the most puzzling—even "embarrassing" (Matson 1990, p. 82; Parchment 2000, p. 349)—aspects of his thought. Not only is this theory notoriously obscure and fraught with ambiguities,[3] but the problem is also more serious: his general metaphysical outlook and the position it assigns to the human being in the order of nature is at first glance incompatible with any form of human imperishability. As is well known, the body and the mind are for Spinoza the same being, expressed in two different ways, which entails that all corporeal states have their correlate in the mental realm and vice versa. Add to this that human beings are part of nature, inevitably subordinated to external forces that limit their being and eventually destroy it. The dissolution of the human body—due to its situatedness within nature—thus seems to involve with unavoidable necessity the extinction of the human mind as well (see Matson 1990; Parchment 2000; Garrett 2009). However, Spinoza admits the former and rejects the latter, thus flagrantly violating a basic tenet of his own philosophy, i.e., the substantial *sameness* of the mental and the corporeal. In sum, it seems that human imperishability cannot be properly conceptualized in Spinozist terms. For all these reasons, his theory of immortality appears as little more than a conceptual inconsistency.

Numerous commentators have resisted this first impression and tried to discover the coherence of Spinoza's theory of human immortality with the rest of his thought

(Parchment 2000, p. 350). The ensuing reflections are part of this effort to read this aspect of his thought in a benevolent way. In broad strokes, the reading I propose can be characterized as follows. The difficulty of Spinoza's theory of immortality lies in the fact that it attempts to harmonize features proper to God—such as eternity and self-sufficiency—with the particularity and *situatedness* of the finite human mind. How can a being that is constitutively limited and extrinsically determined—hence condemned to destruction—transcend its limitation and free itself from all power contrary to itself? In other words: how can a human being cease to be part of nature? Indeed, in rigorously Spinozist terms, the human mind, understood as *the other of God*—i.e., as finite, particular, extrinsically determined, etc.—is inevitably mortal. Now, Spinoza's monism also compels us to acknowledge that the human mind is not simply the other of God, for stricto sensu there is no otherness with respect to God, except that which is contained in God himself, which therefore is not merely otherness, but also *sameness*. Thus, the human mind is *in a certain sense* God himself, and this identity is—as the following reflections will show—what preserves the human mind against destruction. But since what is real and positive in the human mind, i.e., the very substance of its being, is God himself, we can say that the human mind coincides with God precisely when it is itself, i.e., when it is autonomous and active, and follows exclusively the rules of its own nature. Thus, what ultimately frees the human mind from destruction is its *selfhood*, i.e., its containing in itself the source of its actions and states beyond all otherness. As we shall see, this selfhood accounts in turn for the human mind's capacity to adequately grasp reality. Thus, the solution to the problem of death coincides in Spinoza with the solution to the problem of knowledge, as well as with the solution to the problem of acting (cf. Koistinen 2009).

To substantiate these statements, I will proceed as follows. In the next section, I deal with the place of the human mind within the order of nature. After outlining the basic features of Spinoza's monism, I show that the human mind is part of the divine intellect and how this condition restricts its perceptual scope to a fragmentary apprehension of the human body and its affections. I then argue that the cognitive limitation of human beings, their impotence in the face of the affections, as well as their corruptibility unavoidably follow from this very fact. I also show that the human mind can be equally considered an "encompassing" being in virtue of its reason, which enables the mind to transcend the mere perception of its physical states and adequately grasp the general structure of nature. In the subsequent section, I elucidate how this encompassing capacity of the human mind holds the key to its postmortem subsistence. After making some remarks on the notion of eternity in Spinoza, I show that the human mind has the power—by virtue of reason—to transform its passions into actions emanating from its own essence, thus expanding its cognitive scope and the range of its selfhood. Finally, I explain how this rationalization of the passions enables the human mind to identify itself with divine self-contemplation and thus to remain "unharmed" after the destruction of the body.

2. The Human Mind within the Order of Nature

2.1. Being as Activity

We will begin our analysis with a broad characterization of Spinoza's monistic framework and some of its defining features. The basis of this monism is, curiously enough, an irreducible dualism: the distinction between res extensa and res cogitans, which, as is well known, Spinoza takes from Descartes modifying it significantly, mainly *in two respects*. *First:* Spinoza eliminates the asymmetry between the corporeal and the mental, an asymmetry which consists of conceiving the former as an unlimited continuum—of which particular bodies would be mere portions—and the latter instead as a collection of discrete and unconnected thinking substances—i.e., souls (Sánchez de León Serrano 2023, pp. 84–85). Spinoza's elimination of this asymmetry means that, just as particular bodies are modifications of the same extended substance, minds or souls are nothing but modifications—fragments, parts, portions—of the same thinking substance (Sánchez de León Serrano 2023,

p. 85; PPD GI/132). Whereas a body is a province within an infinite physical universe, the human mind is a province or sub-region within an infinite mental universe.

Second: Spinoza "divinizes" or "deifies" both the infinite extended substance and the infinite thinking substance, yet not conceiving them as two numerically distinct divinities, but as different *attributes* of the same divine nature, or as the same divine nature expressed in two different ways (Sánchez de León Serrano 2023, p. 85). Thus, if God according to Spinoza is an *absolutely* infinite being (ens absolute infinitum)—i.e., infinite *in all respects*—extension and thought would be two kinds of infinity among the unlimited number of infinities that God encompasses (see E1D6). It is important not to confuse thought and extension with parts of God, for that would mean that they limit each other and that their heterogeneity is relative. Instead, each of them is God *entirely*, yet expressed in different ways. Following the *Short Treatise*, we can say that thought and extension are names of God that manifest his quiddity without veils of any kind (KV 1, III, a, G I/35). Among the many implications of this underlying substantial sameness, the following one is especially important for the subsequent reflections: since we are dealing with the same being—i.e., God—everything that happens in the corporeal sphere must have its correlate in the mental sphere and vice versa. There is thus no physical event without a corresponding thought that "records" and perceives it. As we shall see, in this strict correlation between heterogeneous realms lies the key—and the difficulty—of Spinoza's conception of the mind's eternity.

The theory just outlined may strike the reader as exotic and wildly opposed to common sense. In order to make it somehow more plausible, we can describe it as the consequent and extreme application of the notion of "creation". Indeed, that God creates the world means that the latter is deprived of ontological self-sufficiency and owes all its being to the former. The created has its origin and source in another—i.e., its maker or author—to whom it is subordinated and upon whom it is entirely dependent. Spinoza radicalizes this thought—common to all monotheisms—to its ultimate consequences. If the created is indeed deprived of ontological self-sufficiency, then it cannot have a being of its own, i.e., it cannot be a substance, for that would contradict its derivative and dependent character with respect to the creator. Consequently, what is created or produced *is in something else*, i.e., it is a part or an aspect of that which creates it, which thus constitutes the substance of its being. We can thus understand Spinoza's stress on the impossibility that a substance produces another substance (E1p6), since substantiality is equivalent to ontological self-sufficiency (E1D3), which excludes any relation of dependence and subordination to something else—such as the dependence of the created with respect to the creator. If nothing produced or "made" can be a substance, then everything produced must be contained in the substance that produces it, for if it were to subsist independently of it, it would be a substance. It follows therefore that outside of God—the only substance or producing principle that Spinoza admits—there can be nothing (E1p14, E1p15) and that all created beings are both parts and effects of God. They are parts of God understood as an all-encompassing whole and effects of God understood as a cause.

Thought and extension are therefore generating principles or infinite powers (cf. TIE §101, G II/37); particular minds and bodies are at the same time effects and parts of these productive principles. Thus, God, understood as infinite thinking substance, constitutes with his products *an indissoluble unity* (cf. KV I, 2nd Dialogue, G I/31); the same can be said of extension and particular bodies. It is important to note that God's productivity or "fecundity"—from which all things arise—is not, so to speak, an "optional" activity that God could omit or not exercise, as if the divine substantiality were a mere "latency", and its being distinct from its doing (see Jankélévitch 1953, p. 198; also Mignini 2000). According to Spinoza, productivity is the very essence of God (E1p34: "God's power is his essence itself"), so that if God ceased to produce, his would cease to be as well (E2p3s). Thus, the infinity of existing beings necessarily follows from God's "active essence" (essentia actuosa, expression coined by Spinoza in E2p3s), and all things are determined by the nature of God to exist and operate in a certain way (E1p26). Consequently, "things could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced"

(E1p33). The totality of what exists thus constitutes an immutable order governed by inviolable and all-encompassing laws. Since this order is not external or alien to God, to alter it—for example, through miracles—would imply altering the very nature of God, which is inconceivable (see TTP, chapter 6 "On miracles", G III/81-III/96).

This strict determinism—together with the fact that creatures are devoid of substantiality—might wrongly suggest the idea that Spinoza reduces created beings to passive puppets, with no activity of their own. But the aforementioned equation being = activity forbids this inference. Since the created is deprived of substantiality and is necessarily *in another*, its participation in the divine nature allots it a certain degree of power. If being is indeed equivalent to activity, everything that *is* necessarily acts and exerts some kind of efficiency (E1p36), for if it ceased to act it would cease to be (E2p3s). Finite beings are indeed subjected to an immutable order that determines their way of being and acting, but this determination can be extrinsic as well as intrinsic. Created beings—no matter how insubstantial they are—also have a nature of their own, an internal configuration or essence that makes them act in one way or another. This core of positive reality is precisely their portion of divinity, their degree of participation in the divine substance, by virtue of which they express God in their own particular way and constitute distinct sources of activity (E1p36d).[4] We can already infer from this that a finite being is all the more autonomous the more it participates in the divine substance, i.e., in God's essentia actuosa.

One last remark before concluding this brief summary of Spinoza's monism. We have seen that produced entities have no being of their own outside of their producing principle and that, consequently, they form an indissoluble unity with it. This explains why Spinoza identifies God with nature. Now, within nature, Spinoza distinguishes two poles, designated, respectively, by the present participle and the past participle of the Latin verb "naturare": natura naturans and natura naturata (see E1p29s; KV I, Ch. VIII-IX, G I/47-48). The first designates the active aspect of reality, that is, God's essentia actuosa; the second designates the products, effects, and creatures of this active principle. Now, on the side of natura naturata, Spinoza includes physical realities, which—unlike finite entities—are infinite, all-embracing, and eternal, but which—unlike God himself—are generated, produced, "made", etc. These are what Spinoza calls "infinite modes", which play an indispensable role in the emergence of finite entities. In God conceived as thought, the infinite mode that immediately arises from him is the idea Dei; in extension, it is the pair "motion and rest". It is obvious that these are neither finite nor primordial realities. Motion and rest presuppose extension and are the factor of its diversification—for extension considered in itself is *homogeneous*—thus giving rise to the physical universe in its multiplicity. The idea of God is logically the first product of an infinite thinking power, i.e., the reflective knowledge of himself and of everything contained in his substance. That is why Spinoza also calls it "infinite intellect": the intellective act that God as res cogitans engenders in an immediate way and in which, like a mirror, he contemplates himself. Therefore, if the human body is a *certain* combination of motion and rest—as all bodies are—the human mind is a particular idea within the infinite intellect of God.

2.2. The Human Mind as Encompassed: Passivity, Limitation, and Corruptibility

Let us be more specific about the situation of the human mind within this framework. As has been shown, extension and thought are the same being—Deus sive Natura—expressed in different ways, from which it follows that every event in the physical or corporeal realm has its correlate in the mental realm and vice versa. In other words: of everything that happens in God conceived as corporeal substance there is an idea or perception in God conceived as thinking substance. This fits well with the traditional idea of God as omniscient and knowing "how many hairs you have on your head" (Luke 12:7). As an infinite thinking power, God "perceives the whole of nature" (Ep. 32, GIV/174[a]), the whole—we might add—that God himself is. If the object of God as thought is God as extension, what follows from this with respect to human beings understood as a portion of thought and a portion of extension? Spinoza's answer is that the human mind is an idea

whose ideate or object is the human body. Just as cogitatio and extensio are the same *infinite* being expressed in different ways, the human mind and the human body are the same *finite* being considered from different perspectives. In more contemporary terms, we can perhaps say that the human mind is the awareness and perception of its own corporeality et nihil aliud (E2p12).

It may surprise that Spinoza reduces the scope of our perception to our own corporeality. This is less surprising if we consider that knowledge of what surrounds us is necessarily mediated by the traces that the external world leaves on our corporeality, as well as by our bodily constitution. Yet the restriction that Spinoza imposes on our perceptual reach is more serious: it is not that the human mind only knows the body *and nothing else*, but that—according to Spinoza—*the human mind does not even adequately know its own body*. Recall that the whole of reality constitutes a unitary and immutable order governed by inviolable laws, which determine each thing to exist and operate in a certain way (E1p33). No particular being within this order can be known in an isolated manner and without relation to others, precisely because its relation to the rest of things determines how it is and behaves (see Sánchez de León Serrano 2023, p. 86). Since the relations that our body entertains with the rest of things in the universe far exceed our apprehension, we can only have a very incomplete and fragmentary perception of our own corporeality, which is after all the only thing we perceive (and perceive badly). Thus, our partial condition seems to condemn us to a hopeless solipsism and to a distorted perception of the unlimited reality that comprises us (see Sánchez de León Serrano 2018, p. 12).

The cognitive limitation we have just described is an inevitable consequence of our *situatedness* within nature and our condition as *encompassed* beings.[5] This incomplete perception of ourselves is complete in the case of God, who—unlike ourselves—"knows how many hairs you have on your head", thanks to his complete knowledge of nature *as a whole*. Being a part of the divine intellect, the human mind perceives only a part of what God perceives. By the mere fact of being contained in God, our perspective is inevitably biased and fragmentary and cannot possibly coincide with God's all-encompassing grasp of things. As Spinoza puts it in TIE §73 (GII/28): "But if it is—as it seems at first—of the nature of a thinking being to form true, or adequate, thoughts, it is certain that inadequate ideas arise in us only from the fact that we are a part of a thinking being (quod pars sumus alicuius entis cogitantis), of which some thoughts wholly constitute our mind, while others do so only in part".

From this situatedness derives not only our cognitive limitation, but also the limitation of our power to act, as well as our limited durability (Walther 1971, p. 106). Being part of a greater reality, "our mind does certain things [acts] and undergoes other things" (E3p1). Human beings act simply because they *are* (being = activity), but suffer because their being is limited, hence partially denied. What happens in us—i.e., our mental states, the changes of our being, etc.—cannot be explained through us alone, i.e., it cannot be deduced exclusively from the laws of our nature, but requires for its explanation the consideration of other factors that are external to us: "We are acted on, insofar as we are a part of Nature, which cannot be conceived through itself, without the others" (E3p2). This and nothing else is what it means to suffer: to undergo, to be subject to the action of another, to be exposed to external influences, etc. At the same time, we act when what happens in us can be explained through and deduced from the laws of our nature alone. However, "it is impossible that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause" (E2p4). We are inevitably subject to external causes and changes dictated by the common order of nature, of which we are part and to which we try to accommodate ourselves. Hence the constant fluctuations of our state of mind: "[. . .] it is clear that we are driven about in many ways by external causes, and that, like waves on the sea, driven by contrary winds, we toss about, not knowing our outcome and fate" (E3p59s).

The very same circumstance accounts for our mortality. Since being (=activity) is nothing but self-affirmation, nothing bad can happen to us that comes from ourselves. As

Spinoza puts it (E4app, Ch.6): "[. . .] nothing evil can happen to a man except by external causes, viz. insofar as he is a part of the whole of nature, whose laws human nature is compelled to obey, and to which it is forced to accommodate itself in ways nearly infinite". If all externality could be eliminated, so that everything that happens to human beings springs entirely from their nature, then human beings could never perish and would always exist (see E4p4d). In the scholium to E4p39, Spinoza offers a detailed explanation of what death consists in. If suffering consists in undergoing mutations caused by external factors, without affecting the persistence of our being, death consists in undergoing a radical mutation—i.e., a *metabasis eis allo genos*, to put it in Aristotelian terms (see Funkenstein 1986, p. 304)—that totally changes our nature. During our life, we undergo changes on a background of permanence—i.e., personal identity or *self*—so that the end of our life is nothing but the change that puts an end to our identity *as such*. Thus, to die for a human being is as much to morph into a horse as to change into a corpse; in both cases, there is a total change of nature (losing one's memory would be another example; see E4p39s). Such a radical mutation can in no case be due to ourselves, for the essence of each thing is to persevere in its being and to affirm itself. That which is contrary to our nature cannot possibly arise from our nature. Consequently, if someone inflicts upon himself his own death, that cannot stricto sensu be called "suicide", since death and destruction can only befall a being extrinsically. As Spinoza puts it (E4p20s): "No one, therefore, unless he is defeated by causes external, and contrary, to his nature, neglects to seek his own advantage, *or* to preserve his being". With this statement, Spinoza is not ignoring the evil that human beings can cause themselves, but simply locating the cause of that evil in the "situated" condition of the human being.[6]

We see therefore that our situatedness accounts for our cognitive deficiency and our subjection to the affects (*pathemata*), as well as for our mortality. If there is therefore a remedy to death, it must also be a remedy to the power of the affects over us and to our cognitive limitation. The remedy in question can only consist in transcending our situatedness and moving from being *encompassed* beings to being *encompassing* beings. Yet this ambition seems to be hopeless from the outset, since it is impossible for man not to be part of nature (E4p4). At least from the corporeal point of view, it is unfeasible for the human body to pass from being a particular body to being *the whole extension*. It might seem that the privilege of thought above corporeality consists in its capacity to transcend the here and now and contemplate things from a global point of view.[7] Yet how can the human mind possibly transcend its partiality if—by virtue of the substantial sameness of extension and thought—the human mind is the idea of the human body et nihil aliud? Let us look at this in more detail in the next section.

2.3. The Human Mind as Encompassing: Reason and Autonomy

The sameness of extension and thought seems to impose very strict limits on human knowledge. We have seen that the object of the human mind is the human body et nihil aliud (E2p13); otherwise, the strict isomorphism between the mental and the corporeal would be broken. An irremediable solipsism and a mutilated and distorted perception of the world in the human mind seem to follow unavoidably from this (Sánchez de León Serrano 2018, p. 12). It does not seem, therefore, that we can cease to be encompassed beings from the point of view of thought, let alone from the corporeal perspective.

However, this is only half of the story according to Spinoza, the half that corresponds to our passivity and impotence—i.e., "imagination" in epistemic terms. As already observed in Section 2.1, the extrinsic determination that our situatedness unavoidably entails does not reduce us to mere passive puppets, for being is equivalent to activity, and that which is absolutely passive simply *is not*. The mere fact of being *something* makes us participate in God's essentia actuosa, and that means—in epistemic terms—that we participate in God's cognitive power, at least to some extent. Certainly, we do not know the infinity of things encompassed by the ordo totius naturae, yet that does not prevent us from knowing this order in its basic outlines or general structure. Precisely because the general is by definition *present in many things*—i.e., ubiquitous, common to all, or as Spinoza puts it: "equal in the

part and in the whole" (aeque in parte ac in toto)—its apprehension by the human mind is not sullied by its finiteness and partiality.[8]

It is necessary here not to confuse the common and general with scholastic genres and species, which after all are nothing more than "mnemonic devices" (Hübner 2021, p. 210) generated by the imagination to organize its perceptual field, yet devoid of objective correlate. The *common principles* we are talking about are not the common features of various individuals that would allow us to group them into classes—such as "humanity", "horse-ness", or "stone-ness"—but that which pervades and connects all things, however diverse they may be, making of them *one single being*. *That is precisely what God is.* Since, moreover, God's essence is its very activity, the unifying principle that connects all things—the "cement of the universe", as Hume would say—is nothing but the activity that allows things to act upon one another and that each individual can de iure contemplate in itself, insofar as the inner essence of a thing is its activity. God's essentia actuosa is intimately present in each one of us: it is what gives us "ontological density" and makes us originary principles of action. Self-apprehension itself provides us cognitive access to the inner essence of God—i.e., the truly universal—thus transcending the narrow limits of our situatedness.

Consider the following passage (E2p1s): "So since we can conceive an infinite Being by attending to thought alone, Thought is necessarily one of God's infinite attributes, as we maintained". By mere self-apprehension, the human mind can—in a sort of cogito—grasp the universal nature of thought in itself. Since this self-apprehension does not make us contemplate *this* or *that* particular thought—as does the action of external causes upon us—but thought simpliciter, what the mind thereby conceives is the attribute of thought, hence God. We see therefore that the situatedness and partiality of the human mind does not prevent it from adequately grasping God's infinite essence (E2p47), precisely because the "eternal and infinite essence of God is common to all, and is equally in the part and in the whole" (E2p46d). Against Calvin's famous dictum "finitum non capax infiniti" ("the finite cannot contain the infinite"), Spinoza can boldly affirm the opposite (see Sánchez de León Serrano 2023, p. 84). Spinoza calls this capacity "reason", and it is by virtue of it that the human mind is active, a center of action, or a *self*, in spite of the external conditionings that limit it. That which the human mind knows through reason, it knows by virtue of its own cognitive power—just as God knows it (E2p43s). In this respect, we can say that the human mind is both encompassing and encompassed.

Which common features of nature does the human mind grasp through reason, besides the divine nature itself? Here, we can include the infinite modes belonging to natura naturata and immediately derived from natura naturans: the idea Dei in the attribute of thought and the pair "motion and rest" in the attribute of extension. Other "universal and eternal aspects of the world" (Nadler 2001, p. 99) can be: physical laws, laws governing human behavior, etc. Spinoza's philosophy itself—or at least the most general part of it, as he himself implies in E5p36s—as presented in the *Ethics* would be the work of rational thinking. Spinoza, however, affirms the existence of a still higher degree of cognitive power, which is the one that presumably affords immortality to the human mind. I will discuss this point in more detail in the next section.

Although the human mind can, unlike the body, transcend its situatedness, Spinoza does not thereby violate the mind–body isomorphism. As has been shown, the mind apprehends God's quiddity by apprehending itself; thus, it does not need to go beyond itself in order to understand the structure of the whole (Sánchez de León Serrano 2018, pp. 12–13). Moreover, Spinoza makes it very clear that the cognitive capacity of the human mind is connected to the corporeal capacity to do many things (E5p39), so that, although the body never ceases to be a part of extended nature, it can attain a certain degree of autonomy in its operations in accordance with the autonomy of the mind. This is, for example, what happens in the passage from childhood to adulthood: the child's dependence and incapacity to act have their mental correlate in its lesser consciousness of itself and of God, while the greater bodily autonomy of the adult expresses itself in a greater self-consciousness and consciousness of God (E53p39s). Yet the immortality of

the mind that Spinoza will defend does seem to violate prima facie the sameness of both orders, insofar as it implies the mind's independence with respect to the mortal destiny of the body. A possible solution to this problem lies in the notion of eternity and Spinoza's understanding of it, as I show in the next section.

3. Eternity and Selfhood

3.1. Absolute and Relative Existence

If the human mind can indeed remain unharmed after the destruction of the body, that would unavoidably imply that the attribute of thought has properties or characteristics that are absent in the attribute of extension, despite their substantial *sameness* and the isomorphism of their respective orders. The difficulty here is not as insurmountable as it might seem, especially if one assumes—as most scholars do—that the difference between attributes is real (not illusory or subjective) and that therefore each of them has specific features that the others lack (see Matheron 1972, p. 373). What sense would it otherwise make to distinguish thought and extension? Now, that which thought has and extension has *not* is precisely the capacity to think, i.e., to perceive itself and the other of itself (for God under the attribute of thought grasps himself and extension). It has been shown that the human mind, despite being fundamentally the idea of the body and nihil aliud, can in a certain way intellectually encompass the whole that comprises it and grasp in a non-fragmentary manner the general structure of nature. The mind can accomplish this without any reference to the spatio-temporal location of its body, and *this is something the body can in no way accomplish*. As Rousset fittingly points out in order to clarify this difference (Rousset 1968, p. 83): a marble statue excludes the marble block from which it has arisen, but *the idea of* the marble statue necessarily includes it as its premise, for otherwise it would not grasp it adequately. If the existence of the body excludes the existence of that which *it is not*, the existence of the mind includes itself *and its other*, and therein lies its privilege (see Walther 1971, p. 81). In this difference lies the key to the eternity of the mind.

Let us note that Spinoza speaks of the eternity of the mind rather than of its immortality.[9] Although in his early work, the *Short Treatise*, he speaks of immortality, in the *Ethics* he practically abandons this terminology in favor of eternity (with one exception, E5p41s; see Robinson 1932, p. 461). What is the reason for this shift? The literature on this issue is fairly abundant and we cannot review it here.[10] Suffice it to give the following indications. As is well known, Spinoza insists on several occasions that eternity has nothing to do with time and therefore cannot be defined in terms of time. Notions such as "sempiternity" and "indefinite perdurability" would therefore be erroneous and deforming characterizations of eternity; hence, the rejection of the word "immortality" (as E5p34s suggests). However, Spinoza usually speaks of eternity *as opposed to* the temporal and transitory, thus suggesting an effective relationship between the two (for opposition entails some sort of relatedness) and that the former consists in surpassing the limits that affect the latter (see Rousset 1968, pp. 72–73). The mere fact that Spinoza opposes the eternity of the mind to its mortality seems to support this "temporalized" reading of eternity, for it suggests that the mind's eternity consists in its duration *after* death. How then should we understand the *lack of relation* to time that Spinoza attributes to eternity?

At the beginning of the *Ethics*, Spinoza defines eternity as "existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of the eternal thing" (E1D6). In the explanation accompanying this definition, Spinoza states that such existence, insofar as it is an eternal truth, cannot be explained by time and duration. Indeed—as the *Metaphysical Thoughts* point out (GI/250)—duration admits of more and less, as, for example, the lifespan of a person does. We can say that Methuselah's existence surpassed that of his contemporaries, even that of the rest of human beings, but no one would think of saying that the essence of the triangle—by virtue of its eternity—surpasses Methuselah in longevity. It only makes sense to attribute duration to those things whose existence differs from their essence, that is, to created things, which enjoy existence by virtue of something else. Eternity, therefore, designates nothing but actual existence or reality itself, *when this is*

not relative, derived from or dependent on something else. Eternity in this sense is equivalent to absolute existence, i.e., to the mode of existence proper to a self-sufficient and autonomous being, free from any relation of dependence on something else. It is for this reason that Spinoza denies eternity any relation to temporality and duration, insofar as these are the mark of the relative, dependent on another and extrinsically determined. *Eternity differs from time as the absolute differs from the relative*. We cannot explain the absolute by means of the relative, which is what we would do if we were to say that God is longer-lived than Methuselah. Yet eternity can indeed account for time, for everything that lasts—i.e., that which is created and dependent on another—ultimately owes its existence to the absolute and self-sufficient.

How, then, is it to be understood that Spinoza attributes eternity to the human mind instead of immortality? To attribute the latter would imply attributing to it indefinite longevity and therefore trying to understand the mind on the basis of the relative and dependent. This is the common understanding of the mind's imperishability, to wit: mere indefinite extension of a relative and dependent existence, hence perdurability of memories and transient experiences, which Spinoza clearly rejects (see E5p34s). But the absolute, as has just been shown, cannot be explained by means of the relative, just as infinity cannot be obtained by mere addition of finite quantities. Therefore, Spinoza's attribution of eternity to the human mind means that there is in the mind *something absolute*, not derivative, independent of external factors, which for this very reason shelters the mind from destruction. We have seen that the human mind, in spite of its partiality, can somehow encompass the whole that comprises it and grasp the general structure of nature, and it is in virtue of this capacity that the mind is a center of action and *a self*. We have seen further that this capacity enables the human mind to grasp reality (or at least an aspect of it) as the divine intellect itself does. The eternity of the human mind is therefore *its identity with God*, an identity that—as has been shown in Section 2.1—is present in all beings by the mere fact of being and acting, but which in the case of the human mind—because of the specific features of the mental noted above—is significantly greater, making its survival of bodily extinction possible.

3.2. Ordering of the Affects "Sub Specie Aeternitatis"

Yet if eternity, unlike duration, does not admit of more and less, and therefore of neither increase nor decrease, how is it possible that the human mind increases its knowledge, and therefore that its eternity goes from less to more? Here again it is necessary to turn to the difference between essence and existence, a difference that is alien to the divine nature—insofar as to exist is its very essence—and proper to created beings, which enjoy a received existence, not a self-generated one. The essences of things—i.e., their quid or definition—are eternal or alien to time; not so their existence, which in finite entities is the consequence of factors external to their being. When Spinoza affirms the eternity of the human mind—or of a part of it (E5p23 and E5p39)—he is not affirming the eternity of our essence abstracted from its existence, but the eternity of our actualized, realized, "existentialized" essence. In this realization, a plus or a minus is possible. Human beings can indeed unfold all the potentialities contained in their essence (i.e., in the definition of their being), or—due to external circumstances contrary to their being—fail to develop them and bring them to fruition. In this sense, the human mind can by its own efforts attain eternity, or—if unsuccessful—perish along with the destruction of the body.

As repeatedly stated, the human mind is fundamentally the idea of an actually existing body. In most cases, this idea is no more than a confused and mutilated perception of one's own corporeal and extrinsically determined states. This is, according to Spinoza, the state of mind of the ignorant, which lacks consciousness of himself and of God, and who ceases to be when he ceases to suffer (E5p42), thus being deprived of autonomy. Now, in the essence of the human mind also resides the capacity to apprehend by its own power the general structure of nature in a non-fragmentary way. We have called this capacity "reason" and its defining feature according to Spinoza is to grasp things "under a species of eternity"

(sub specie aeternitatis, E5p29). Eternity means absolute existence, derived from one's own essence, i.e., that which is proper to God as opposed to creatures. Thus, to grasp things sub specie aeternitatis is nothing but to understand them through God, as contained in the divine nature and necessarily following from it (E5p29s). It is in this way and in no other that we understand things adequately or *as they are in themselves*. In any case, to understand things in this way is a capacity inherent to our essence that we can develop and perfect in our actual existence, as long as factors external to our being do not prevent us from doing it.

To understand, to grasp the truth, to be conscious of ourselves and of God—these are traits proper to our essence as thinking beings which we can develop and perfect. Since these properties follow from our own nature, to exercise and develop them is to strengthen our autonomy and independence with respect to external factors. The government of the passions, of the *pathemata* that subjugate us, depends therefore on the cultivation and perfection of this capacity. At this point, Spinoza distinguishes between our reason and a still higher kind of knowledge, to which the constant cultivation and perfection of reason can lead us: the scientia intuitiva or third kind of knowledge. Without entering the innumerable debates surrounding this question,[11] we can limit ourselves to the following observation: whereas by means of reason the mind rises to the general features of nature and thereby to the knowledge of God, the scientia intuitiva starts from God and—in a top-down trajectory—enables us to understand our particularity through the divine nature. For this reason, the former is general and impersonal, whereas the latter concerns our own being and enables us to "see" ourselves *in God*.[12] Since we can form adequate ideas of all our affections (E5p4)—for everything is subject to constant and immutable laws that are rationally accessible—the third kind of knowledge enables us to rationalize our passions and thus neutralize their subjugating power over us. Thus, the human mind has "the power of ordering and connecting the affections of the Body according to the order of the intellect" (E5p10). In other words: we can remove from them the character of passion—i.e., of something suffered and passively endured—and turn them into *actions*, into acts of our intelligence, which therefore follow from our essence, not from an external *otherness*.[13]

Since rationalizing our passions amounts to understanding them sub specie aeternitatis or following from God, this rationalizing operation entails that the human mind is less absorbed in its corporeal states and *pathemata* and more focused on the source of its being. From being the mutilated perception of our corporeal states, we thus become the idea, not of our body in its relative existence, *but of our body as contained in God*. In God there is already an idea of our body, a knowledge sub specie aeternitatis of ourselves and our position in the order of nature; this idea in God is obviously eternal, in the aforementioned sense of the word. But it is not a question here of God having this knowledge, *but of our acquiring it*. If during our existence—i.e., the unfolding of our essence—we develop the capacity inherent in the essence of our mind to grasp itself and our body in God, then our existence becomes the full realization of our essence. This realization owes nothing to external factors: it is the work of our power and the laws of our nature. It is therefore an unconditioned and absolute act, not derivable from factors external to our being, and in this precise sense "eternal". Since furthermore our being is defined by its activity, and our activity is a particularization of God's essentia actuosa, our *being fully ourselves* is tantamount to coinciding with God and vice versa (E5p36). Spinoza's antidote to death is the realization of our selfhood.[14]

3.3. Self-Contemplation and "Idea Dei"

It would still remain to be clarified how the human mind can acquire eternity, if the human mind is a product of God's essentia actuosa. Recall that eternity is reserved to the being whose essence and existence coincide and according to E1p24 "the essence of things produced by God does not involve existence". Let us begin by observing that, while eternity designates the very existence of an absolute and self-sufficient being, Spinoza concedes that something can be eternal by virtue of its cause, not of itself. Essences are eternal and God is the cause both of the essences of things and of their existence (E1p25). In

2.1, we also saw that God considered under the attribute of thought immediately generates an idea of himself, which Spinoza sometimes calls "God's idea" (Curley's translation of idea Dei; E2p3-4) and sometimes "infinite intellect" (KV I, VIII-IX, G I/48). In any case, this idea is something "made", generated, derived, and yet eternal, for its existence—though not identical with its essence—is not explainable through duration, nor does it admit of a plus or a minus. In this idea, God contemplates and knows himself as in a mirror. Through the same act of self-apprehension, God also knows everything that derives from his nature, i.e., infinite things in infinite ways. This sort of double directionality explains why Spinoza designates this immediately generated knowledge both idea Dei and infinite intellect.

As was already shown, the human mind is one particular idea among infinitely many in God's infinite intellect. Every idea in God is adequate, perfect, and eternal, inasmuch as God comprehends everything and no idea in God is fragmentary or incomplete. Yet that the human mind *is* that idea with respect to God does not mean that it *has* that idea (see Matheron 1972, p. 376). We have already indicated the way that allows the mind to transcend its situatedness and pass from being encompassed to being encompassing. The mind thus freed from its partiality is contemplation of itself in God and therefore an integral part of the idea of himself—i.e., idea Dei—which God immediately generates (E5p40s).[15] Since what God immediately generates—i.e., idea Dei in the attribute of thought and the pair "motion and rest" in extension—is equally infinite and eternal, and since its existence is not defined by duration, the human mind as an integral part of the idea Dei is eternal and exists apart from duration and temporality.

4. Concluding Remarks

As is to be expected, the reflections presented here have left numerous questions regarding Spinoza's conception of the eternity of the human mind largely unexplained, such as: what exactly is the state of beatitude of a mind definitely divorced from the body? How can we speak of individuality when all references to temporality and personal memories disappear?[16] A proper and rigorous approach to these questions would require purifying them of their imaginative aspects, related to our situatedness as encompassed beings. As has been shown, if postmortem persistence is at all conceivable in Spinozist terms, it can only consist in the liberation of the human mind from its partial and situated condition. This situatedness permeates and shapes our concepts, mental habits, and language, as the mere use of the notion of "immortality"—with its durational undertones—clearly shows. Perhaps the great merit of Spinoza's conception of the eternity of the mind—beyond its flaws and inconsistencies—consists in having pointed out this inadequacy of our concepts and language and in having tried to remedy it, successfully or unsuccessfully.

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Notes

[1] I follow Curley's translations of Spinoza's ([1985] 2016) works. References are from Gebhardt's edition *Spinoza Opera* (Spinoza 1925). I have used the following usual abbreviations to refer to Spinoza's writings: TIE, *Treatise of the Emendation of the Intellect* [*Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*]; KV, *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being* [*Korte verhandeling van God, de mensch en deszelvs Welstand*]; PPD, Descartes' "Principles of Philosophy" [*Renati Descartes Principia philosophiae*]; CM, *Appendix Containing Metaphysical Thoughts* [*Appendix continens Cogitata Metaphysica*]; Ep., *Letters*; TTP, *Theological Political Treatise* [*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*]. When referring to the *Ethics* I have used the following abbreviations: a = axiom, c = corollary, D = definition, d = demonstration, p = proposition, s = scholium, app = appendix, l = lemma. Therefore, E1p10 refers to proposition 10 of part 1 of the *Ethics* and E2p40s2 to the scholium 2 of the proposition 40 of part 2.

[2] TIE, §1 (G II/5): "After experience had taught me that all the things which regularly occur in ordinary life are empty and futile, [. . .], I resolved at last to try to find out whether there was anything which would be the true good, capable of communicating itself, and which alone would affect the mind, all others being rejected—whether there was something which, once found and acquired, would continuously give me the greatest joy, to eternity (*continua ac summa in aeternum fruerer laetitia*)".

[3] There is, for example, no consensus as to whether the immortality advocated by Spinoza is of a personal type or not; see (Nadler 2001, p. 105).

[4] See E1p36d: "Whatever exists expresses (*exprimit)* the nature, *or* essence of God in a certain and determinate way [. . .], i.e., [. . .] whatever exists expresses in a certain and determinate way the power of God (*Dei potentiam*), which is the cause of all things. So [. . .] some effect must follow". Regarding finite modes as "centers of action", see Viljanen (2007).

[5] I borrow the conceptual pair "encompassed"/"encompassing" from Jankélévitch (1977, pp. 621–26), who uses the terms "conscience englobant" and "conscience englobée".

[6] Although suicide is for Spinoza incompatible with our (rational) impulse for self-preservation, there is no unanimity among scholars as to whether Spinoza would in certain cases accept suicide as a "rational" act or not. Regarding this issue, see Waller (2009); Nadler (2016); Grey (2017).

[7] See for instance Pascal (1960, p. 164): "Ce n'est point de l'espace que je dois chercher ma dignité, mais c'est du règlement de ma pensée. Je n'aurai point advantage en possédant des terres: par l'espace, l'univers me comprend et m'engloutit comme une point; par la pensée, je le comprends". Pascal's vivid description of the human being as isolated in an infinite universe that encompasses it and eludes its comprehension presents striking similarities with Spinoza's. In this regard, both Pascal and Spinoza foreshadow insights and themes that will later be developed by existentialism. These include attention to human suffering and the emotions arising from our existential "thrownness" into the world, emphasis on our situatedness and the human condition, perception of philosophy as a quest for liberation and a meaningful life, a critical stance toward societal norms and conventions, and engagement with religious and philosophical notions of the divine.

[8] Regarding the *omnibus communia* in Spinoza and their role in the acquisition of adequate knowledge, see Walther (1971); Marshall (2013); Hübner (2021).

[9] Among the abundant literature on this issue, see Rousset (1968); Matheron (1972); Steinberg (1981); Matson (1990); Allison (1990); Moreau (1994); Parchment (2000); Nadler (2001); Garrett (2009); Koistinen (2009); Grey (2014).

[10] See Rousset (1968); Donagan (1973); Steinberg (1981); Nadler (2006).

[11] See, e.g., Gueroult (1974); Nadler (2006); Soyarslan (2013).

[12] See E5p36s, where Spinoza characterizes reason as "general cognition"; see also (Specht 1972, pp. 174–75).

[13] On this issue, see Matheron (1972); Marshall (2012).

[14] For a similar view, see Koistinen (2009), who also interprets selfhood in Spinoza as the identity of the human mind with God (see Koistinen 2009, p. 159). We can therefore say that salvation according to Spinoza consists in the realization of our selfhood. This view is corroborated by Spinoza's famous identification of salvation with beatitude and with freedom (see E5p36s: "*salus, seu beatitudo, seu libertas*"). The philosophical salvation that Spinoza proposes has therefore a twofold sense: it is an intellectual salvation from the affections and *pathemata* that subjugate us—i.e., freedom—resulting in salvation from death and temporality (close to the traditional *beatitudo*). Regarding the complex relationship between the philosophical salvation proposed by Spinoza and the notion of salvation in religious terms, see Rousset (1968).

[15] This "reflexivity" of the divine intellect, together with the fact that the immortality of the human mind consists for Spinoza in its participation in this reflexivity, presents clear Aristotelian echoes. In particular, one can recognize here several points of contact between Spinoza and the Aristotelian-inspired doctrines of the immortality of the soul developed by medieval Jewish thinkers such as Maimonides and Gersonides, with which Spinoza was well acquainted. For these thinkers, the immortality of the human mind consists in its union with the agent intellect, which governs the sublunar world and is the same in all rational beings. Steven Nadler has compellingly argued (Nadler 2001) that Spinoza's conception of the human mind's eternity is a radicalization of these Arisotelian "intellectualist" doctrines. Nevertheless, despite the importance of these affiliations, it is equally important to recognize the differences between Spinoza and these doctrines. To begin with, the Aristotelian conceptual apparatus—which includes notions such as matter and form, potency and act, sublunar world, etc.—is virtually absent in Spinoza and is even explicitly rejected by him. Moreover, the notion of agent intellect can in no way be identified with Spinoza's infinite intellect: whereas the former is an "intermediate being" between God and the human mind (see Robinson 1928, p. 207), the latter is—as has been shown here—an infinite mode of the one infinite substance of which the human mind is a part (see in this respect Robinson 1928, p. 207). Finally—although this point would require a more detailed inquiry—, it is not clear that the "intellectualist" and "impersonalist" understanding of immortality is the same in these thinkers and in Spinoza. It can indeed be argued that for all these thinkers what remains after death is nothing more than a "collection of ideas". Yet in the case of Spinoza it is necessary to specify that the eternal part of the mind is precisely its selfhood and its self-apprehension in God, which does not quite fit with the idea of impersonal eternity.

[16] Since intuitive science, as has been interpreted here, concerns our very particularity and enables us to "see" ourselves in God, the postmortem existence attained through it cannot possibly consist in the dissolution of our individuality into the undifferentiated oneness of the divine nature. However, it is still difficult to make sense of the individual persistence of a mind without memories

of any kind. A possible way to overcome this difficulty—without in any way pretending to exhaust this issue—is to distinguish between our personal memories and the adequate intellectual grasp of our particular experiences and affections. Whereas the former do not involve the formation of adequate concepts and are hence doomed to perish with the body, the latter—which are clearly linked to our individuality—belong to our stock of adequate ideas and therefore persist after death.

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