

THE PARTICIPATION OF PHILOSOPHY IN AN ETHICS AND POLITICS OF JOY

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Abstract

This paper finds its inspiration in the work of the seventeenth century philosopher Benedict de Spinoza. My objective is to briefly examine three crucial aspects of Spinoza's philosophy which are not only extremely useful to our understanding of philosophy for children but also inspirational as they challenge some of our ingrained modes of thinking and create space for new relations with knowledge, others and the self. Firstly, Spinoza's relational ontology allows us to perceive ourselves as moments in a process of integration. In his philosophy, the understanding of connectedness is crucial to the expansion of our powers or activity. I thus suggest that the collective practice of philosophy can contribute to the enhancement of rational systems of sociability in which the understanding of connectedness is crucial. Secondly, reason and affectivity are not separate in Spinoza's philosophy. Our power to think and affect is directly associated with our power to be affected or our openness to others. These first two aspects are also directly associated with his ethical and political project. Since, for Spinoza, joy is the passage from a lesser to a greater power to act, and virtue is equated with activity, I argue that the collective practice of philosophy can be understood in this perspective as essentially joyful, in a political and ethical sense: it increases one's powers through the increase of power also experienced by others.

Key-words: Spinoza; joy collective practice of philosophy;

Self and Other

In opposition to a long tradition according to which body and mind were considered distinct substances, Spinoza¹ asserts that "the mind and the body are one and the same individual, which is conceived now under the attribute of thought, now under the attribute of extension"². The mind does not cause the body to act or vice versa, but they function one in correspondence with the other. In fact, "the object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body"³, in other words, the mind is an idea of the body. By uniting body and mind, Spinoza breaks with

¹ The following abbreviated notation will be used when referring to Spinoza's *Ethics*: EI (II, III, IV, V) for *Ethics*, Part I (Roman numerals refer to the Parts of the *Ethics*); A for axiom; C for corollary; D for demonstration (or definition if followed by an Arabic numeral); L for lemma; Post. for postulate; P for proposition; Pref. for preface; S for scholium (Arabic numerals denote the lemma, proposition or scholium number); and, Ap for appendix. Citations from the *Ethics* and from Spinoza's correspondence are quoted from *The Ethics and other works. A Spinoza Reader*. Edited and translated by Edwin Curley; New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994.

² EII P21 S

³ EII P13



philosophy's historical negligence in relation to the body and with the still predominant understanding of the mind as the master of the body. Our corporal experiences are thus not only taken into consideration, but made central, understood as that which constitutes our very thinking.

Hence, if we conceptualise the mind as an idea of the body, it is worth asking what a body is. From a Spinozist perspective, the body can be basically understood in two ways: 1. as a ratio of motion and rest; and 2. as a power to affect and to be affected. In accordance with the physics of his epoch, Spinoza states that "bodies are distinguished from one another by reason of motion and rest, speed and slowness, and not by reason of substance"⁴. The body is thus defined as a ratio of movement and rest which distinguishes it from other bodies. This characteristic proportion or ratio is maintained by the way through which a great number of particles or individuals compose the bodies⁵.

Note that the body is neither defined by its organs, functions or ends nor it is defined as a substance. For Spinoza, bodies are finite modes or modifications of the absolute Substance or Nature. But what does it mean to be a mode? The concept of mode is different from that of substance as it is "that which is in another through which it is also conceived"⁶ – thus a mode is understood as existentially and conceptually dependent. By stating that a mode is finite, Spinoza means that it is limited by other modes of its kind (bodies limit bodies, and ideas limit ideas). The finitude of a mode denotes that it has no absolute self-sufficiency, that it can only be comprehended through its relation with substance and other modes. In short, the concept of mode indicates a constitutive opening: bodies (and minds) are not understood as enclosed or self-contained, but as constitutively relational.

At a physical level, the fundamental relationality of modes can be demonstrated through the reciprocity between constancy and change. The constant change of extensive parts and the variation of motion and rest between particles of a body do not necessarily imply an alteration of the whole - the same characteristic proportion of motion and rest can continue to exist between the mode's great number of parts. In Spinoza's view, bodily coherence implies a dynamic equilibrium. It is important to note that the conservation of a body is not only compatible with

⁴ EII P13 A2 L1

⁵ EII P13 Post1

⁶ EI def D5



such continuous changes of its constituent parts and their partial motions, but is nothing but this very process. It is in this sense that Spinoza asserts that the preservation of a body is dependent on its regeneration, which is in turn dependent on the interactions with a great many other bodies⁷.

Hans Jonas⁸ notes that with Spinoza, for the first time in modern thought, the individual is defined not as a machine that functions as a closed system, but as a unified plurality sustained by a sequence of exchanges with the environment and whose form of union constitutes its only enduring feature: “substantial identity is thus replaced by formal identity”. A mode’s form is what distinguishes it from other modes, it is a determinate configuration that continues to exist throughout the interactions on which it depends and that is evidenced by its self-affirming effort, by its striving to persevere in existence, namely its *conatus*. Form, continuity, and relation are, according to Jonas⁹, the three characteristics that define a mode or body in Spinoza.

Since, on a physical level, a body’s relations are said to constitute it, if we recall that the mind is the idea of the body, we could argue that the mind also encompasses the body’s relations and, therefore, the individual, as a unity of body and mind, is always larger than its body-actual. Considering that for Spinoza “the idea of any mode in 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”¹⁰, the body to which an idea corresponds would thus encompass the external objects with which it relates as its own parts. This is why Andrew Collier¹¹ argues that “we must consider the body as extendible, in the sense that the more the body in the narrow sense interacts with the world about it, the more that world is to be counted as part of the person’s *inorganic body*”¹². Collier asserts that every day experiences attest to the expansiveness of our notion of body beyond the limits of our body-actual: to a certain degree, prosthetics, clothes, vehicles and tools are treated as part of us. Some of these objects largely increase our power to affect and be

⁷ EII P13 Post.4

⁸ Jonas, Hans “Spinoza and the Theory of Organism” In: M. Greene (ed) *Spinoza: A collection of critical essays*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973, p. 259-278. Quote from p. 269.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 265

¹⁰ EII P16

¹¹ Collier, Andrew “The Materiality of Morals: Mind, Body and Interests in Spinoza’s *Ethics*” In: Gideon Segal & Yirmiyahu Yovel (eds) *Spinoza*. Burlington: Ashgate, Dartmouth, 2002, p. 285-308.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 292



affected. In this sense, the configuration of the inorganic body depends on how essential its experienced interactions are.

When we think of us, human individuals, it could be said that the forms of integration which we always experience can be distinguished by the regimes of communication or understanding in which we participate. It is in this sense that Heidi Ravven asserts that the constituent relationality of human individuals in Spinoza allows us to conceive their expansiveness or non-atomic configuration through two distinct cases: 1. when there is only an immediate awareness of local interactions and 2. when the mind assimilates its causes or the genesis of its ideas and body modifications. In the first case, imagination is at work. As our bodies retain traces of the changes brought about by other bodies, the mind regards the other bodies as present even when they no longer exist¹³. Imagination consists in the mind regarding bodies in this way. According to Spinoza, this way of understanding the connectedness we experience is inadequate because of the confused perception that we have of other bodies and our own since our body is aware of the other bodies' effects on our body but not of their causes – it is as if we reached conclusions without premises.¹⁴ In social terms, imagination is fostered by processes of affective imitation and successive identifications (where one recognises the other from oneself and oneself from the other). In the second case, our individual boundaries are transformed as a result of reason. The understanding by an individual's mind of non-immediate causal connections constitutes an adequate kind of knowledge or reason.

The mind is here comprehended as ongoing thinking, which is reflective and expressive of its own body. Its activity (or the activity that it indeed is) corresponds to the bodily alterations as the body encounters other bodies which affect it and change it. The mind is not a substance, a self that thinks or a container for thoughts. The human individual, defined as body and mind, is therefore its extensive constitution, expressed as a certain ratio of motion and rest maintained through constant interactions with other bodies, and its awareness of each moment in that interactive process.

Since the body, of which the mind is an idea, is continuously affecting and being affected by other bodies, the mind is the idea not only of the body to which it corresponds, but also of the ongoing relation between the body and its immediate environment. And considering that the

¹³ EII P17 D, C

¹⁴ EII P28 D



mind is not a substance or a container but the very activity of thinking, as that relation is made present in its thinking it actually is that relation. The mind, therefore, is not an isolated unit, but an ever encompassing process.

Etienne Balibar¹⁵ suggests that both imagination (or knowledge of immediacy) and reason (as the understanding of more complex causal connections) are not conceived in Spinoza as faculties of the mind, but as transindividual systems in which different minds are mutually implicated. Imagination and reason as such are processes and the individuals involved correspond to moments in these processes, indicating determinate levels of integration. In imaginative systems, individuals are dominated by inadequate or confused ideas which oscillate between contrasting illusions: individuals regard each other as either identical or incompatible. In rational systems, individuals identify each other as different but also acknowledge that they share much in common; they are irreducible to one another, each having what Spinoza calls a specific *ingenium*, while being reciprocally useful or *convenientes*. In both cases, there is relationality or transindividuality, but one form being opposed to the other.

At this point, I would like to introduce a first suggestion: that we think of our philosophical practice with children as a process through which more rational transindividual systems or communicative regimes are engendered. There seem to be nothing new in that. The important element to remember here is that reason is to be considered in this perspective the understanding of our position in a world where everything is connected; it is the understanding of associative patterns which cause us to think in a certain way; it is the understanding of more intricate and less immediate determinations. Reason is always active. It transforms ideas and corporal responses that are passively acquired into action. I believe that through the collective examination of thinking patterns and ideas established through convention, philosophy with children, when it is indeed *philosophical* (open to dissent, to the thorough inspection of our preconceived ideas, and to the creation of new thoughts), can contribute to our understanding of how we connect with other things in the world and subsequently to the increase of our powers to act.

Collectivity and understanding

¹⁵ Balibar, Etienne *Spinoza: From individuality to transindividuality*. Eburon: Delft, 1997.



I now invite you to continue our investigation of Spinoza's concept of the body and its relation with the mind. I first presented some ideas on the body as a determinate proportion of motion and rest, characterised by its form or effort to persist in existence, its continuity and exchanges. We saw how relations define a body and how the human body can participate in and be constituted by distinct systems of understanding: imaginary – when it responds to the immediate environment without grasping the broader connections and causality; and rational – when it comprehends the associative paths and patterns which cause it to behave and think in the way it does. Now it is time to explore Spinoza's theory of affects. Since a body is in constant contact with other bodies, affecting and being affected by them, Spinoza considers these affections as a power which also defines bodies.

I suggest that we think of bodies as always experiencing encounters. A logic of agreements and disagreements is then delineated¹⁶. There is agreement or convenience when two bodies that meet are characterised by relations which will agree, hence contributing to maintain their relations or composing a more complex body “twice as powerful as each one”¹⁷. There is disagreement when there is no composition between the relations and one of the bodies leads to the destruction of the other's constitutive relation.

Passions or extrinsic determinations frequently participate in our bodies' encounters. Passions are passive affects, in other words, they are affections of the body which increase or diminish, aid or restrain, a body's power to act, and of which we are partial, insufficient or inadequate causes¹⁸. In Spinoza's words: “An affect which is called a passion of the mind is a confused idea, by which the mind affirms of its body, or of some part of it, a greater or lesser force of existing than before, which, when it is given, determines the mind to think of this rather than that”¹⁹.

In the two cases of encounters previously described different passions interfere. Firstly, let us explore the case of joyful passions. There is agreement or convenience between the relations of bodies when a body produces in the other affections which agree with its nature. This affection is passive because it is explained by an exterior body, and the idea of this affection is a joyful

¹⁶ Gilles, Deleuze *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1968.

¹⁷ EIV P18 S

¹⁸ EIII Def.3

¹⁹ EIII gen. def. affects



passion because it is produced by the idea of an object which agrees with the affected body's nature. Despite being exteriorly determined, a joyful passion increases or aids the body's power of acting²⁰.

As the *conatus* is defined as the striving to persevere in its being²¹, it can also be defined as the search for that which is good (that which "agrees with our nature", EIV P31) or useful (that which increases the body's capacity to affect and to be affected, EIV P38). The *conatus* can be identified with the body's degree of power to act. When it is determined by a good or useful affection (a joyful passion), such power is increased. However, the fact that the body's power is enhanced by a joyful passion does not place it out of its passivity or in total connection with its power to act. A passive joy is still a passion, which means that it cannot be explained by the body's own power to act although it encompasses a higher degree of that power²². Hence a joyful passion does not augment or aid a body's power to act to the extent and in a manner which will enable it to be truly active.

The second case of encounters refers to sad passions. A body encounters another body with which its relation does not agree. The encountered body does not convene with the nature of the first body or is contrary to it. A passive affection which does not agree with the body's nature is produced. The idea of such affection is a sad affect or a sad passion, which is defined by the decrease of power to act that it produces in the affected body. Considering that "there is no singular thing in Nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger" and that by being more powerful and stronger a body can destroy another²³, it could be inferred that in such a type of encounter a body with a higher degree of power can decompose the other body's relation, in other words, destroy it. However, if we now recall that reason as a form of understanding promotes a form of integration which allows us to think of ourselves as expanded, we could argue that the sharing of powers within a community (and thus the existence of a transindividual or collective self) stands as stronger than other individual powers which could cause a body to be annihilated. This is why the formation of collectivities in which understanding is shared as a

²⁰ EIV P41 D

²¹ EIII P6

²² "Joy (...) is not a passion except insofar as the man's power of acting is not increased to the point where he conceives himself and his actions adequately" (EIV P59 D).

²³ EIV A1



bases for mutual empowerment is crucial for our self-flourishing, may the self be understood as organic or broadly social.

I note, however, that the shared understanding which is here presented as a condition for collective empowerment does not preclude dissent. In reality, exposing divergent ideas and thinking about them is necessary to understanding. What form of understanding is then shared? The understanding that through thinking together and being open to different ideas we are less passive. Since reason can only be produced as a result of affects, in other words, since reason is always affective, our openness to being affected by others is a necessary condition for self/communal empowerment.

An Ethics and Politics of Joy

Spinoza conceives ethics as a passage from a lesser to a greater power to act. Activity can only be engendered by the use of reason or through the understanding of how we have come to be what we are in an integrated or ever connected world. The type of understanding which is defined as active depends on the encounters we experience and their corresponding affects. This is why the socio-political context in which we participate is also crucial in configuring our regimes of knowledge and communication, and subsequently our ethical experience. If, with Spinoza, we name the increase of our powers to act 'joy', it is perfectly arguable that the collective exercise of philosophy with children constitutes a joyful experience as it promotes shared understanding through our openness to affecting and being affected.

Having set the basis for such a positive ethical image of our philosophical activities with children, and despite the constraints posed by time in the context of this presentation, I strongly suspect that this initiated exploration is far from ending. I would thus like to conclude with a few open questions which point to more critical directions.

We can now say that, according to this perspective, practices which do not enhance our powers to think - in other words, processes which engender passive modes of engagement with the world - are non-ethical. I imagine that most people here would not find it difficult to indicate how philosophy with children promotes active thinking. However, in order to further understand our involvement with this practice, it is also important that we critically examine its limitations



and those aspects which challenge its development. I would thus like to conclude by indicating two (among many) areas to which I believe less thinking has been dedicated - in doing that I hope to generate some discussion. Firstly, I invite you to reflect upon the role played by obedience and social/moral rules established in the context of our groups of philosophy in schools. I ask whether thinking can also be engendered where non-examined forms of subjection prevail? Are the tacit social norms to which we abide conditions or obstacles to empowerment? If both, when do they prevent and when do they allow our thinking to happen or even promote it? Lastly, if we consider that thinking is always affective and that therefore our openness to being affected by others is an important condition for the enhancement of our thinking, it is worth inquiring about our emotional patterns which imprison others in pre-conceived images and prevent us from experiencing transformative encounters. I thus ask: How can we teachers unlearn to see in our students what they ought to be? How can we children and adults, women and men, black and white, poor and rich, Arabs and Jews dismantle our plans, our prejudice, our fear, our anger, our weapons and shields in order to experience otherness and, who knows, finally think together?