

The Bright Lights on Self Identity and Positive Reciprocity: Spinoza's Ethics of the Other Focusing on Competency, Sustainability and the Divine Love

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"C'est ici peut-être que Dieu a été vu de plus près",
E. Renan, *Chronicon Spinozozarum*, V (1927), p. XXVIII.

1. Introduction

To introduce what a philosopher could understand by identity and mutual recognition, we could first say that it make much of difference depending whether we focus on willing as much as the knowing self, in line with a Spinozist tradition keen in aligning rational grounds for ethics, or with Leibniz, Kant and Hegel to open the field of a subjective world of experience of the relation of ethical values, as given through our original trust in the world. In order to assess the importance of fine nuances in the overall sentiment of gratitude, we would like to present Spinoza's careful use of the term in his *Ethics*, in an optic different from Descartes' unconditional apology of the same. But, why to choose the early modern XVIIth Century Cartesian philosopher Baruch Spinoza to focus on moral sentiment ethics of mutual recognition?

There are certainly many ethical reasons to stop at Spinoza's Work: first we find here a pure demonstrative presentation on two cardinal ethical values: competency and sustainability. Second, we have an non anthropomorphic presentation of our relation to the earth, as englobing whole and godly emanation. Third, Spinoza presents the concept of positive reciprocity in such a convincing way, based on human affects and the alienation of passions through his realist constitution of values that we do the economy of idealism, without sacrificing on ethical values, but on the contrary focusing on the cognitive added benefit: the man is an ethical subject but also an intelligent agent, mirroring in enlightened decisions, the divine perfection.

We find inviting presentations of the value of Spinoza's ethics by important philosophers. We have certainly with Spinoza "the purest philosopher" "and the most effective moral code in the world" if we follow Nietzsche's commentary, who recommends him, on the ground of the apolitical character of what after Spinoza we could call rational moral agents as "free spirits"¹. Nietzsche opposes his ethics of a tragic-comic self-derision and laughter "ten times should you laugh in a day", and the Biblical image of the "laughing lion", to Spinoza's rigorous "vivisection of the affects", a very cautious control of the expression of affects, in an ethics of the "laughing-no-more" and "weeping-no-more" ("non ridere, non lugere, neque

¹ Nietzsche, F. *Human All too Human, A Book for Free Spirits* (Ein Buch für freie Geister), VIII, No 475. See also : Ottmann, Henning (2000): *Nietzsche Handbuch*, Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler Verlag, 102.

detestari sed intelligere”²). With Nietzsche we may add: where vivisection of the affects would make fully sense, there shouldn’t be any “harming of the affects”³. What does that mean to harm the affects?

E. von Hartmann, who nicely complements Nietzsche’s views on the meaning of affects for Spinoza, praises the precision and coherence of Spinoza’s views on ethics, but regret his extreme parsimony with regard to social affects based on moral principles other than reason based principles. Justification being that the focus on the social affect is extremely important for applied ethics, because it is grounding the very notion of equality of treatment, at the center of all philosophy of law, in the sentiment of a similar origin of shared social affects, and the negation of inequalities as center of the very notion of natural law with H. Grotius. One needs to add that neither Hartmann, nor Nietzsche refutes Spinoza’s formalism of the affects, they only observe the possibility, on the line developed by Leibniz, Kant and later Schopenhauer, to mark the limits of world of the subjective experience, what M. Scheler, E. Husserl would later develop as the phenomenological reduction of the first person experience. As example, the sentiment of repentance which is an important moral sentiment related to the experience of an inappropriate choice that could lead to wrongful consequences, is understood differently depending on whether we place the experience of the subject in the center of the picture or not.

Should repentance be considered as useful after a wrongdoing, considering that an amelioration and reconciliation is plausible based on the suffering related to the impossibility of undoing a wrong? Spinoza doubts the fundamental religious power of repentance, on the ground of his deterministic conception of our natural comprehension, contrary to Hartmann’s Christian emphasis on the importance of the process of free decision making, and of the careful distinguishing between natural inclination for repentance on one hand and ethical principle of repentance on the other, Spinoza delivers powerful arguments for prevailing against received authority, and yet, the starting proposition of his ethics, regarding the relation of man to God is fundamental:

“E1P15: Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God.” Dem.: Except for God, there neither is, nor can be conceived, any substance (by P14), i.e. (by D3), thing that is in itself and is conceived through itself. But modes (by D5) can neither be nor be conceived [30] without substance. So they can be in the divine nature alone, and can be conceived through it alone”.

“E2P10⁴: *The being of substance does not pertain to the essence of man, or substance does not constitute the form of man.* [30] Dem.: For the being of substance involves necessary existence (by E1P7). Therefore, if the being of substance

² Works, Ed. and translated by Edwin Curley, Vol. II, Spinoza’s *Political Treatise*, Introduction, IV, Princeton: UP, 505.

³ Nietzsche, F. (1886/1966): *Beyond Good and Evil*, transl. by W. Kaufmann, New York: Random House, No 198, 108.

⁴ Curley’s translation from Works vol. 1 Ethics is used but abbreviations are adapted as follow: parts of Spinoza’s *Ethics* are referred to as: P(roposition), Sc.(holium), D(efinition) and the five parts of the *Ethics* are cited by Arabic numerals: thus E3P1 stands for the first proposition of the third part of the Ethics.

pertained to the essence of man, then substance being given, man would necessarily be given (by [II/93] D2), and consequently man would exist necessarily, which (by A1) is absurd, q.e.d. Schol.: This proposition is also demonstrated from E1P5, viz. that [5] there are not two substances of the same nature. Since a number of men can exist, what constitutes the form of man is not the being of substance. Further, this proposition is evident from the other properties of substance, viz. that substance is, by its nature, infinite, immutable, [10] indivisible, etc., as anyone can easily see. Cor.: From this it follows that the essence of man is constituted by certain modifications of God's attributes."

For (by E2P10) the being of substance does not belong to the essence of man. That essence therefore (by E1P15) is something which is in God, and which without God can neither be nor be conceived. Spinoza gives some examples concerning the method of exposition he uses.

In order to start thinking ethics as a system, one needs to bear in mind some basic principles, such as thinking particular essences such as the essence of spatiality is the exteriority of its parts, the essence of Man is to be a reasonable animal (or social, etc.) and then philosophers get confused because they then ask whether these essences are related to a first principle or independent to any first principle. Spinoza explains why these [mainly Cartesian] philosophers get puzzled when it comes to start thinking about ethics:

"[30] The cause of this, I believe, was that they did not observe the [proper] order of Philosophizing. For they believed that the divine nature, which they should have contemplated before all else (because it is prior both in knowledge and in nature) is last in the order of knowledge, and that the things that are called objects of the senses are prior [35] to all. That is why, when they contemplated natural things, they thought of nothing less than they did of the divine nature; and when afterwards [II/94] they directed their minds to contemplating the divine nature, they could think of nothing less than of their first fictions, on which they had built the knowledge of natural things, because these could not assist knowledge of the divine nature. So it is no wonder that they have generally contradicted themselves." (E2P10 Cor. Note).

Ethics starts by God or the divine, but it is also a purification of the understanding, meditation on the experience of joy as experience of the perfect character of love as it is related to competency, by opposition to weakness which leads to corruption and evil⁵.

(E3P11Schol.) "We see, then, that the Mind can undergo great changes, and pass now to a greater, now to a lesser perfection. These passions, [II/149] indeed, explain to us the affects of Joy and Sadness. By Joy, therefore, I shall understand in what follows that passion by which the Mind passes to a greater perfection."

Practically we don't need to worry about the metaphysical beginnings of ethics in God, to find in the third and fourth books of the *Ethics* most of the passions related to reciprocal recognition. Recognition is partly shared esteem but not

⁵ See Wickersham, Gordon Clement (1951): *Spinoza's concept of God's infinity*. Thesis (M.A.), Boston University, 97, see also: 77-81, <https://www.globethics.net/gel/6506745>

necessarily depending on others, it is “to imagine [oneself] to be praised by others” (E4P53), and passing from lesser to greater perfection, by “imagining” and “encouraging” its “power of acting”. In order to stay in this solitary and solipsist circle of generating joy for the self, one consequently needs to prevent the opposite: i. e. any sudden lack of positive identification. Saddening the imagination or limiting the self in such way as to encouraging oneself to imagine being blamed by others is the opposite of self-esteem:

(E3D26)“Exp.: Self-esteem is opposed to humility, insofar as we understand by it a Joy born of the fact that we consider our power of acting. But insofar as we also understand by it a Joy, accompanied by the idea of some deed which we believe we have done from a free decision of the [5] Mind, it is opposed to Repentance [...]”.

Negative self-esteem is related to humility, which “exists when someone knows his own imperfections, without regard to [others’] disdain of him”. Humility is similar to “despondency”(E4P57), as far as both are the opposite of “pride: when someone attributes to himself a perfection that is not to be found in him”⁶. And they both “are born of humility”(E3D29), but despondency is “Sadness born of a man’s false opinion that he is below others”. Since the nature of man rooted in his capacity to produce himself completely, “humility and despondency are very rare”, “human nature, considered in itself, strains against them, as far as it can” (E3D29):

“So Humility, or the Sadness which arises from the fact that a man reflects on his own lack of power, does not arise from a true reflection, or reason, and is a passion, not a virtue q.e.d. [II/250] E3P54: Repentance is not a virtue, or does not arise from reason, instead, he who repents what he has done is twice wretched or lacking power.” (E3P55, S.P.B, n 58).

Humility, like repentance, remorse, etc. are depressing passions, which only tend to annihilate us. Overall Man’s lack of power to moderate and restrain the affects is called “bondage” by Spinoza, who describes in the fourth part of the Ethics, “how man who is subject to affects is under the control, not of [10] himself, but of fortune.”(E4 Preface).

It is slightly better to be content than sad: “A desire that arises from Joy is stronger, other things equal, than one that arises from Sadness” (E4P18); but “overestimation is thinking more highly of someone than is just, out of Love”. It differs from “scorn [which] is thinking less highly of someone than is just, out of Hate” (E3D21-22). But, “it happens that everyone is anxious to tell his own deeds, and show off his powers, both of body [5] and of mind—and that men, for this reason, are troublesome to one another” (E3P55, Sc.). We see that envy is intoxicating mutual recognition. Men are by nature envious or “glad of their equals’ weakness and saddened by their equals’ virtue” (Ibid.). Envy shows an important aspect of all passions: they are diversity by excellence of the nature of sentiments and the fluctuation of desires, in narrow and wide forms. The depression of the desire is melancholy its exaltation revives us⁷. Vices such as envy show the affected nature of the man as “mode” for Spinoza, in conformity with the idea that all modes, including

⁶ *Short Treatise on God, Man and His Well-Being*, Ch. VIII, On Esteem and Disdain. Collected Works, vol. 1, op. cite.

⁷ Millet, Louis (1970) : *Pour connaître la pensée de Spinoza*, Paris: Bordas, 83.

the man, are finite and limited expressions of the substance in the nature, except *the substance* or *causa sui*. A failure or incapacity to realize a competency is failure of the expression of the man, conceived as a capacity to develop, expansive power. In nature limited modes are stable and express always the same thing, man in comparison has a power of development that has much more elasticity, regenerated, elevated and amplified.

For Spinoza our identity is grounded on a universal egoistical anthropological assumption common in XVII century (as with Hobbes), also called a “possessive individualism”. By contrast to hedonism, it has not pleasure as aim but the affirmation and expansion of the individual self: “l’amour propre”, which become with the planning and calculation of the future will to power. Spinoza focuses on the desire, not to realize a transcendent value, but as sustainability of the individual in the existence and the accumulation of power on the world or *conatus*. But for Spinoza self-sustainability is not the assimilation with an instinct of conservation (as Hobbes derives it from vital and animal movement), it has to do with living “in suo esse”, in one’s being or essence, hence through the objectivation of values in a genealogical process related to passions. Opposed to the Hobbesian biological anthropology, which doesn’t lead to an objectivation of values, the genealogical definition of passions of Spinoza leads to a theory of the alienation of passions in an identification process. Passions have to do with a simple identification: we are glad to witness the conservation of an object which we love, and grieve its loss.

Against the Cartesian dogma that the self should to be identified with the mind; both Spinoza (and later Schopenhauerian philosophy) will grounds the presupposition that the self is embodied and that it’s integration into reality at large is thus made possible. By contrast to Spinoza, later propositions as the phenomenological analysis proposed by E. v. Hartmann, shows that it may not be possible to ask only to the rational faculty to make to good choice; von Hartmann thinks that moral sentiments and the ethical principle of taste, which are only conceived negatively by Spinoza, have a proactive role to play in helping the man to constitute higher and higher ethical values⁸.

2. Spinoza’s gratitude as love based shared competencies vs. integrity

In his important study Matheron gives some additional indications on the logic of mutual recognition in Spinoza’s *Ethics* that could be called an egoistic mutual recognition. The key argument of Spinoza is that instead of autonomous choice based morals, we should concentrate on the knowledge of the virtues and their causes, and observation of rules, practice them, and direct most actions according to the

⁸ E. v. Hartmann (1879/2006): *Die Gefühlsmoral*, Edited by J.-C. Wolf, see in particular the section: Moralprinzip des Geselligkeitstriebe, Hamburg: F. Meiner Verl., 53, 59, 83. Read also further on similarities between Schopenhauer and Spinoza: Bunker, Jenny (2015): *Schopenhauer's Spinozism*, Thesis, Univ. Southampton, Sections on ethics: 99, and salvation 143.

command of reason⁹. What is Spinoza's understanding of mutual recognition or gratitude?

If there is a maxim for Spinoza as a rule of praxis it would be: "Hate is to be conquered by Love, or Nobility, not by repaying it with Hate in return" (E5P6), as presented in the fifth part of the Ethics "on the power of the intellect, or the human freedom". Inter-human relations can be assured by a system of obligation to give (E3P36), to take (E4P70) and to give back (E3P42). Gratitude tends to minimize in this process the joy that we first get from the surprise of receiving since the experience of the past service allows to better imagine future comportment of our partners and related benefits. From the point of view of Spinoza's definition of love, I necessarily love the merchant that gives me the object of my desire. This purely trade related sentiment of love is an interesting positive ethical optic and shows the valorization of trade¹⁰. If we take for granted that solidarity is interdependence, then the professional and economic sector of trade and business exchanges is given by the fact that each individual feels the interdependence and convergence of interests, each being in solidarity with all, individual prosperity depending on the prosperity of all with whom the trader is in professional relation, retailers, distributors, clients, funding partners, etc. But it is at this stage pure commercial interaction: "The thankfulness which men are led by blind Desire to [II/264] display toward one another is for the most part a business transaction or an entrapment, rather than thankfulness" (E4P71Sc.).

As we see in the economic understanding of gratitude as interplay of desires to possess and desires to give and sell objects of desires, human trade based interactions tend to develop a strong solidarity of interdependencies and converging interests, but with some limitations regarding gratitude. How does the immanent-realist constitution of value arise from this dense tissue of human transactions and expectations? Many gifts should not be accepted. On the contrary, "firmness of mind" is demonstrated by "who does not allow any gifts to corrupt him, to his or to the general ruin" (shared disgrace, lat.: *communem perniciem*). There is often a moment when the desire for glory intercedes on that of love, when Y doesn't feel obliged to X to pay his dues, to refer to a register of duties, to prevailing collective policies.

Mercatura seu aucupium, not that corruption belongs to the essence of trading, but all trading without clear policies and sanctions turns quickly to conflict of interest and abuses. When X acknowledges the ingratitude of Y: "He who has benefited someone—whether moved to do so by Love or by the hope of Esteem—will be saddened if he sees his benefit accepted in an ungrateful spirit." (E3P42). We fall back to negative reciprocity as finely analysed by Matheron (ibid, 206), but X and Y don't forget all of sudden the advantages resulting from their previous interactions, they stay for a while in a mixed feeling between love and hatred. "So from imagining himself to be hated by someone, he will be affected with Sadness, accompanied by the idea of the one who hates him [as a cause of the sadness] or (by the same

⁹ Matheron, Alexandre (1969/1988) : *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza*, Paris : Les Éditions de Minuit, 86, 204-5 ; "possessive individualism" as by Macpherson, C.B. (1962): *The political theory of possessive individualism*, Oxford.

¹⁰ Spinoza shows also that the more the predictability of this mutual recognition is given as in trade, more it is likely to find ignorance and the absence of free spirits. (See E4P71).

Scholium) he will hate the [15] other, q.e.d.” (E3P40). “Given a just cause for this hatred, he will be affected by Shame (by P30)”. “But (by hypothesis), he nevertheless loves him. So he will be tormented by Love and Hate together” (E3P40Sc.)

It is the principle aim of political ethics to stabilize the process in minimizing the fluctuations of affects, to create rules in order to sustain positive reciprocity. Contrary to Kantian future propositions, Spinoza doesn’t use the virtue of integrity, which depends on practical imperatives based on a subjective free choice, in contradiction with his affirmation of absolute determinism. As indicative ethics, stabilization of affects has nothing to do with morals, since good and bad are all necessary manifestations of God’s providence, and wrongdoing should not be considered blameworthy but subject of disdain (*contemptus*, *versmading*). Contrary to Hobbes disdain which concerns: “those things which we neither desire nor hate we said to condemn”, Spinoza follows Descartes usage as Edwin Curley shows well, “contemptus represents *mépris*” as opposed to *estime*, and is defined as an inclination to consider the baseness or smallness of what is *mépris*. So something closer to disesteem seems preferable¹¹.” Spinoza prefers to subjective autonomy based virtues such as integrity, virtues that are compatible with a limited role given to liberty and freedom as: honesty, trust, reliability and faithfulness, to describe the positive interplay of shared competencies (lat. *fides*, *fidelis*, *fidus*).

Gratitude is a tricky social virtue: how to deal with unexpected and sudden invitations, or with servile attitude such as loyalty in student-teacher interactions, or decisions on voluntary basis between church members and a church minister based to off-record expectations (where the intentions are not explicitly stated), or marks of employee-director deference. In some cases, familial language can treat individuals as social equals, although individuals may have several defined social responsibilities and limited freedom accepting new cooperation. In various situation where conflicts of interest is often a possible issue, socially constructed self-images of the individuals, interact in conflicting and potentially contradictory ways. Part of the ambiguity is specifically on the language or the form of communication. We can also feel gratitude for God, as when we pray and thank God for living a good life.

On the one hand, on the subjective side of the moral sentiments, gratitude and mutual recognition have to do with the expression of love, solidarity and brotherhood. But the difficulty with love is that it is not only a subjective attitude, a moral sentiment based ethical principle. As principle of religious unity of the highest metaphysical harmony and perfection of the creation, love is an objective telos of all living being, directed to an eternal temporality, distinguished from what is sustaining in time, as we find it for example in Spinoza’s both subjective and metaphysical *Ethics*.

As Kuno Fisher shows it well, Spinoza’s rationalism doesn’t suppose a process of development, it doesn’t focus on the method of knowledge of the world and of the values, in a radical way the formalism is opposed to the very notion of experience and of any epistemic limits: being is given by God, and error is due to human limited capacities, mainly due to the affects, to lack right understanding of the causal

¹¹ *Works*, vol. 1, Glossary-Index, English-Latin-Dutch, Disdain, op. cite.

grounding of virtues, and the suffering resulting from the consequences of that ignorance¹².

2.1 Biographical excursus: Spinoza's high standard of personal values

We know from the biographers that Spinoza was living in La Haye from 1670 to 1677¹³. In a letter of the 16th February 1673 from Louis Fabritius, Professor at the Academy of Heidelberg, Spinoza is invited to the post of Ordinary Professor at the Academy of La Haye on the behalf of the Elector of Palatine, where he could carry on his research in philosophy, without any particular constraint other than honoring a few hours of teaching to young students in philosophy¹⁴. Spinoza would receive the salary of any Professor, in similar situation. Surprisingly Spinoza refuses politely the offer, arguing that he would have to renounce partly to his research in order to teach, mentioning that *he has never had any desire to accept the responsibility of a university professor*.

As Kuno Fischer shows well, Spinoza was subject of much criticism in particular after his political work on the freedom of thinking and expression received a very critical exposure, during his life, and before the posthumous edition of the *Ethics* in 1677. Spinoza's adaptation of the Cartesian methodic skeptical reduction to religious matters, in particular revelation and prophetic insights has been much commented since Popkin's work¹⁵. Since personal identity is a grounding part of the question of how a philosopher understands social ethics, and since seventeenth century philosophers are used to ground human capacities on God or Nature, the question of the nature of God is an important grounding block of how ethical values are constructed, either on anthropological aspects such as human qualities (theism), or on a non-anthropological substance (deism).

Instead of "standing as judge over us", which can have only "deleterious effects on human freedom and activity, insofar as it fosters a life enslaved to hope and fear and the superstitions to which such emotions give rise", Spinoza is grounding all social ethics on the healthy ground of a philosophical faith. Of course this deep tendency of his work, which gave him the reputation of being an early modern Skeptical and materialist philosopher, was not without consequences for his life. As early as July 27 1656, Spinoza was issued a harsh ban or excommunication

¹² Kuno, Fisher (1898): *Geschichte der neueren Philosophie, Immanuel Kant und seine Lehre*, Spinozas Monismus, Bd. IV, 1. Theil, Heidelberg: C. Winter, p. 25.

¹³ *Spinoza's Short Treatise on God, Man, His Well-Being*, Transl. and ed. by A. Wolf, London: A. C. Black, 1910, lxxxi.

¹⁴ Correspondance, XLVII, Fabritius to Spinoza, 16th February 1673, XLVIII, The answer of Spinoza to Fabritius, the 30th March 1673. OPC, p. 1283-84.

¹⁵ Popkin, Richard H. (1979): *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, Berkeley: University of California Press. Spinoza is among others, accused of not recognizing the distinction between "moral motives" and "physical efficientes", latest being derived from self-motion, the former from a motive related to the activity of the understanding. See already: Samuel Clarke (1705/1738): *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*, Vol. 2, 553. Also: *Short Treatise*, On the Immortality of the Soul, Ch. XXIII; on God and the creation as nature: Ch. VIII and IX.

pronounced by the Sephardic community of Amsterdam, for unclear reasons¹⁶. Leaving a comfortable professional situation in the family business and the security of his religious community, Spinoza's main intention is to come back to the radical principles philosophy.

2.2. Ethics of sustainability: an immanent onto-metaphysical foundation

Spinoza shows his deep understanding of sustaining values that are not only related to ethics, but part of a coherent system explaining the metaphysical hierarchy between what exist necessarily, by its proper nature "whereby the essence envelops the existence", and the being for which "essence envelops only a possible existence". This latter is divided in "substance" and "mode", as for example movement is the mode of the body, having a real being without which we cannot conceive a body, but not of the triangle to which movement is only an accident, as Spinoza famously demonstrates. It is from this metaphysical abstract structure that Spinoza derives further relations between what has eternal temporality, distinguished from what is *sustaining in time*: The existence and the sustaining character of objects are only "a distinction of reason", meaning not metaphysically distinct, but distinct as a mode of thinking that serves to recollect, to explain or imagine things that have been understood¹⁷.

From religious and metaphysical point of view the mind being related not only to the body which is the "foundation of our love" but also "to God who is inalterable, and thus remains inalterable", it would be more precise to call Spinoza's view panpsychist or pantheist than materialist (a kind of early non-reductive materialism), with two attributes of the material world and the spiritual and metaphysical world. God being the infinite, necessarily existing (that is, uncaused), unique substance of the universe, there is only one substance in the universe; it is God; and everything else that is, is in God. On the one hand *the natura naturata* understood by Spinoza as "movement in the matter" or "the sciences of nature" and on the other hand there is an understanding as thinking reality, but not as two different "substances". There is only one substance, a being that doesn't need anything other than his sole existence, God, or Spinoza's *natura naturans*. This is the key argument to ground sustainability on a divine love. With the project of his *Ethics*, what Spinoza intends to demonstrate (in the strongest sense of that word) is the truth about God, nature and especially ourselves.

¹⁶ Coherent with Spinoza's definition of the nature or God (but not its attributes or modes), divine providence means only the second essential attribute of God, after being *causa sui* (and as perfect being cause of all things): being the effort the self-sustaining character of God's being, as "universal providence" the self-sustaining of all things, as part of the whole nature. The third attribute being the predestination of God, who cannot avoid doing what he is doing, having created all things so perfect that he cannot amend them and do them better. Cf. also: Nadler, Steven, "Baruch Spinoza", *ibid*.

¹⁷ Appendice Containing the Metaphysical Thoughts, Part I, Ch. I. "On the Real Being, the Being of Fiction and the Being of Reason." In French: OPC, p. 301.

3. Spinoza's realistic principle of an ethics of competency and sustainability: reflecting on the real formal causes

The most central notion of Spinoza's ethics regarding sustainability is the *conatus* understood not simply as a survival instinct with Hobbes but as the fundamental drive of any being, on a perfectionist path of empowerment. Other regarding attitudes such as love and care are derived from it, but since we focus on the pole of the ego, we need to explain socio-cognitive decentration, social virtues and generally speaking altruistic attitudes. First Spinoza presents dispositions related to love such as gratitude, defined as mutual love, but he adds in a provocative manner that these need to be accompanied by "a just cause for the love" for Spinoza, by contrast to the situation when a person would believe he/she is loved by another but believes that no cause for the love has been given.

Of course, one could imagine to love someone in return without a reflective attitude on the causes of love, as consequence of the fact that human body can move and dispose a great number of external bodies in a multitude of ways (as outlined in E2Post.6, E2P16). But to ground mutual recognition or gratefulness, human beings are looking for good reasons, or a subjective-objective constitutional ground, not only for psychologically agreeable sentiments. One could answer to love by love on the basis of a reflex as the child, but in order to answer gratitude we need an additional causal condition that needs clarification:

"[15] P41: If someone imagines that someone loves him, and does not believe he has given any cause for this, he will love [that person] in return. [20] Dem.: This Proposition is demonstrated in the same way as the preceding one. See also its scholium. Schol.: But if he believes that he has given just cause for this Love, he will exult at being esteemed (by P30 and P30S). This, indeed, [25] happens rather frequently (by P25) and is the opposite of what we said happens when someone imagines that someone hates him (see P40S). Next, this reciprocal Love, and consequent (by P39) striving to benefit one who loves us, and strives (by the same P39) to benefit us, is called Thankfulness, [30] or Gratitude." (E3P41)

Ethical resistance against unjustified gratitude is one thing: we already gave some examples of conflicting affects occurring in this situation. But could we really think ourselves as free from desires if the goal of removing desire is itself a desire among many appetites which need to be concretely satisfied? We have desires of fulfillment and blessedness, understood as essential components of leaving a good life, just to name some important desires. We can easily think about a point in our existence that lacks a complete development and that generates a degree of suffering and frustration, regarding to these important goals, and therefor needing a religious or *philosophical consolation/purification* of the spirit with Spinoza.

Competency is therefore part of what grounds sustainability: that is a reflection on what is subject of change in the world and the proposed idea of a temporality that could be seen as not transient, not subject of becoming other than what he/she is. In Spinoza's vocabulary mode (*Modus, wijze*) is the unsustainable property of things, as opposed to *attributum*, which designates essential, enduring properties of things. Modus is usually not used in the trivial sense of way or manner.

Spinoza introduces a principle of identity in a Godly being and says we should love our fellow-man for the sake of God only in his earliest work of the *Short Treatise*:

“For whenever we do not love that object which alone is worthy of being loved, i.e. (as we have already said), God, but love those things which through their own kind and nature are corruptible, there follow necessarily from that hate, sadness, etc., according to the changes in the object loved [30] (because the object is subject to many accidents, indeed to destruction itself). Hate: when someone takes the thing he loves away from him. Sadness: when he loses it. Love of Esteem: when he depends on love of himself. Favor and Gratitude: when he does not love his fellow man for the sake of God” (Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being, Part. II, Ch. XIV)

Spinoza shows in the first part of his *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy Demonstrated in the Geometric Manner* how the notion of “existence is necessary in the concept of God” (Axiom VI), which is a sovereignly perfect being, existence being only “possible” in a limited being. We find in his introduction to the philosophical method *Treatise on the Reform of Understanding* (1677), more explanations on the “purification of the mind”, that brings the metaphysical level of understanding, in a booklet devoted on the methodological layer, that will be achieved in a complete whole in Spinoza’s monumental but posthumous *Ethics*.

3.1 The monistic notion of identity related mutual recognition vs. the transformative model

The Commentary to the Short Treatise shows that Spinoza here opposes the view of Descartes, who (De Pass. An. III. 194) considered gratitude “always virtuous as one of the chief bonds of human society.”¹⁸ It is only if start to think more widely and develop the subjective level of embeddedness of the self, after Descartes with Kant and Schopenhauer, in a transcendental and empirical framework (also called later the phenomenal world), that we find transformative models of ethical values. Instead of the rationalistic realism of Spinoza, we can further think of Hegelian and Schopenhauerian terms the transformative process underlining the cultural, communicational and social ethical level of subjectively constructed interactions, adding metaphysical flesh to the formal bones of Spinoza’s ethical system.

If we would want to understand ethics as transformative, we would need to go beyond the very notion of metaphysical identity as Spinoza grounded it, not necessarily by changing the single monistic description of the axiology of values as E. von Hartmann shows it well, but by thinking more in detail the characteristics of the self-sustaining nature of the being, through the principle of ethical and natural development, in a dialectical, evolutionary, transformative framework. If Spinoza introduces self-fulfillment within determinism, as Bunker shows well, transcendental metaphysics is necessary to introduce an ethics of compassion, which is also a pluralistic model of motivation opening to alterity, multiplicity and transformative change ¹⁹. Arbib shows finally that Spinoza could be reconciled with the philosophy of alterity Levinas, both having proposed an ethics: “Spinoza as the fulfillment of the

¹⁸ Commentary, p. 218-19.

¹⁹ Bunker, pp. 17,114, *ibid*.

essence by the love of the substance, Levinas as the assignment to our neighbor as the first philosophy²⁰”.

3.2 Enlargement of Spinoza’s realistic reciprocal interactions: the politeness theory

In order to develop positive reciprocal interaction, as not only affectively grounded on desire but also on a refined psychological typology of what has been called politeness attitudes, we could take in consideration two symmetrical groups of attitudes the first based on love as positive politeness the second on the mixed emotions, where love and hate are both part of the overall *Stimmung* of a mixed reciprocal interaction, in negative politeness: *Positive Politeness*: would entail such attitudes as noticing, attending to the other, exaggerate (interest, approval), use in-group markers, avoid disagreement, assert common good, presuppose knowledge of the other, offer, optimism, reciprocal inclusion, assume reciprocity, cooperation emphasis through gifts. On the contrary, *Negative Politeness*: would entail to be conventionally indirect, to question, be pessimistic, minimize the face threatening impositions, give deference, apologize, impersonalize the self and the other, nominalize, refer to on-record as incurring debt of the other²¹. Spinoza’s reference to the debt as part of the negative reciprocal degradation of trust and love echoes such set of attitudes very well.

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²⁰ Arbib, Dan « Les deux voies de Spinoza : l’interprétation levinassienne de l’Éthique et du Traité théologico-politique », *Revue de l’histoire des religions*, 1 [our translation].

²¹ We borrow the typology to Brown, Penelope and Stephen C. Levinson, *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*, *ibid.* This list of negative and positive politeness linguistic markers can be found in a very clear transposition of the politeness theory to the Ancient Testament by Edward J. Bridge in: The ‘Slave’ Is the ‘Master’: Jacob’s Servile Language to Esau in Genesis 33.1-17, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 268-9.

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Abstract:

There are certainly many ethical reasons to stop at Spinoza's Work: first we find here a pure demonstrative presentation on two cardinal ethical values: competency and sustainability. Second, we have an non anthropomorphic presentation of our relation to the earth, as englobing whole and godly emanation. Third, Spinoza presents the concept of positive reciprocity in such a convincing way, based on human affects and the alienation of passions through his realist constitution of values that we do the economy of idealism, without sacrificing on ethical values, but on the contrary focusing on the cognitive added benefit: the man is an ethical subject but also an intelligent agent, mirroring in enlightened decisions, the divine perfection.

Keywords:

Spinoza, philosophical ethics, competency, sustainability, love, XVIIth Century philosophy.