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Concepts of Force in Spinoza's Psychology

By
SERGIO CREMASCHI (MILANO)

Book III of Spinoza's *Ethics* has received up to now comparatively little attention. In the author's mind, Book III is the key to the whole *Ethics*. To write an *Ethica more geometrico demonstrata* means – according to the statements to be found in “Praefatio” to *Ethics* III and in “Appendix” to *Ethics* I – to make a theoretical speech about the object of a practical speech. In this paper I will discuss the methodological program stated by Spinoza for the theory of “affections and the way of living of men” and I will try a comparison with his actual theoretical practice. I will argue that the signal of the conflict between methodological program and actual practice is the presence of concepts of force in the texture of the theory. I will label “concepts of force” the cluster of terms: *conatus, potentia, vis*¹.

I. I will first discuss Spinoza's statements on Method in general. *Mathesis* is to be considered a model for knowledge, as far as it is concerned not with “Ends” but rather with “Essences”. The “norma veritatis” provided by Mathematics is to be enforced in every field of learning. This criterion relies upon the postulate that nature as a whole is ruled by a set of necessary connexions according to the principle of efficient causation. We are able of knowing this kind of connexions with certainty in that they are the proper object of intellect, which is one and the same in everybody. Value-embedded concepts such as *bonum & malum, meritum & peccatum, ordo & confusio, pulchritudo & deformitas*, may not be used for any explanatory purpose as they are ideas of Imagination, which haven't a correspondent in reality. Imagination leads human beings to look at things as if these were in themselves means (as things in fact are when human beings use them in order to pursue utility) and to conceive a god pursuing his own ends by these means. Ideas of Good and Bad are a consequence of this picture which makes reality embrace final causes as something really existing. Ideas of Imagination are the

¹ The terms *Perfectio* and *Virtus* are sometimes equated to *Potentia* (E I App; E V P 40; E III P 40 Sc; E IV Def. 8).

source of uncertainty in knowledge because Imagination is rooted in the constitution of the body which is different in every individual (E I App).

Spinoza's statements on Method keep up the basic tenets of Descartes' *Regulae*: the distinction is primarily stressed between Intellect and Imagination. Ideas of Intellect only are – to a certain extent – clear and distinct, and therefore somehow grasp reality, while ideas of Imagination are not corresponding to anything real and therefore are not able of proper knowledge (TI, Gebhardt II, 32–33; E III P 14; E IV P I, Sc; EP 37). In Spinoza's works, Occult Qualities are often named as the top of scholastic nonsense. Occult Qualities are ranked together with *Species Intentionales* and *Formae Substantiales* as meaningless words. On one occasion Descartes' view of the unity between body and soul is labelled as meaningless as any Occult Quality (E V Praef; E III P 15 Sc; EP 56). This abuse of Occult Quality as an emblem of scholastic nonsense is a keynote between Cartesians.

In scholastic terminology Occult Quality – as contrasted with *Qualitas Manifesta* – is that kind of not directly perceivable power whose effects can be perceived. *Qualitas Manifesta* is the quality whose causes and nature can be clearly grasped². In the idea of Occult Quality nothing more unacceptable is implied, on a cartesian standard, than the concept of power. The word Occult Quality sounded so bad because of the way in which it was used rather than because of its theoretical status: under the head of this idea it was possible to multiply *ad hoc* principles like poppy's *virtus dormitiva*. The undoubtful unsoundness of this kind of explanations seemed to imply the absurdity of concepts used in explanation. I will show later how these hints to Occult Qualities are relevant to a discussion of Concepts of Force in Spinoza.

What is more typical in Spinoza's program as contrasted with Descartes' program is the application of "mathematical method" not to Nature only but to Man as well. In this context "Man" means not just "bodily machine" but rather "locus of affections". Spinoza states in TI that he has been the first in conceiving "true idea in soul" as a spiritual automaton. This statement belongs to "theory of knowledge" rather than to "psychology" (TI, Gebhardt II, 32). The crucial locus is E III Praef, where Spinoza vindicates his priority in stating a program for a study of "Man" similar in its method to the study of every other "part of nature". What is labelled "Man" here is not the bodily machine of Descartes' *L'Homme* but rather "affections and way of living of men", i.e. what was discussed by the moral philosophers of the humanist and ancient tradition.

² Chauvin's Lexicon gives the following definition to "Occult Quality": "Qualitas occulta est potentia abscondita vel latens, qua res naturales aliquid agunt, vel patiuntur, cujus vero ratio a priori reddi nequit, utpote a forma substantiali inedita emanans. Vel dicitur: potentia sensibus haud exposita, quaeque effectibus tantum deprehenditur, ideoque proprio nomine designari nequit" (E. Chauvin, 1692).

Every previous contribution – Descartes' ones included – lacked in assuming that man is a peculiar region – when compared with other regions of nature – where order and laws that are supposed to be effective in nature should not be effective. As a result of this flaw the previous tradition inclined to state arbitrarily how man should be rather than to state how man is, and then to explain the gap between reality and the model by means of the concepts of error and fault. This kind of speech, instead of explaining reality, ultimately led to exhortations to conform ourselves to the model. Spinoza argues, first, that man is a part of nature as any other part, in conforming himself to the common order of nature, so that it is possible to plan a study of affections and passions of men according to the same theoretical interest which drives to study geometrical or physical reality. Second, that this study should aim at discovering laws and causal connexions in the object itself.

2. The propositions in E III try to develop a set of secondary affections starting from three primary affections. Explanation seems to be equated to reduction of complex to simple, i.e. of a number of affections to the three affections *laetitia*, *tristitia*, *cupiditas*.

The several affections are developed by association (a certain secondary affection is the sum of a primary affection plus a certain idea, either adequate or inadequate), but efficient causation is the principle which rules connexion and succession of affections.

Spinoza feels that the explanatory purpose has been attained when this kind of reduction of complex to simple has been carried out. This meaning of "explanation" is not contrasting with the principles of method as stated by Spinoza but is not stated as the goal of theorizing. The way in which E III pursues this aim is conforming to the stated methodological program: connexions rely upon efficient cause dispensing with other kinds of cause.

We can recognize a first set of aporias concerning the "observational" language of the theory. Spinoza seems to suppose that there is a *r e a l i t y* (Man, i.e. passions and the way of living of human beings) which has been improperly described by previous authors and which now is being described by Spinoza as it is in itself (E III Praef.). Spinoza seems to forget that he has already built a picture of reality as a whole according to which every determination of reality is to the same extent necessary, and every individual is in itself – and not considered as a member of a kind – endowed with his own *r a t i o*. Strictly speaking, there is no human kind but rather single individuals (E I App, E IV Praef.). Strictly speaking there is no individual mind but rather the flux of simple ideas. The individual mind is just an arbitrarily defined cluster of simple ideas (E I P 21). The "observational" language of the theory is not the "description" of the Attribute Thought according to Spinoza's Metaphysics, but rather the traditional "description" of affections. It is the description of something that strictly speaking doesn't exist.

The theoretical language of E III is aporetic for other reasons: the main terms of it should be the three primary affections. The other affections should be reduced to the three primary affections, i.e. the observable should be reduced to the unobservable (D. Bidney, 1942; H. Schüling, 1965). If Spinoza held an idea of explanation as reduction of complex to simple, these terms could be legitimated just as arbitrary principles chosen as useful in "saving the phenomena".

Apart from these, the flux of simple ideas is another term of the theoretical language. Both primary and secondary affections are eventually defined as built up by simple ideas. The theory is a kind of a "double puzzle": secondary affections should be reduced to primary affections and in the meantime to simple ideas. Besides that, there is a third explanatory principle: the distinction of affections into two sets, actions and passions³.

3. Let us consider now the function of the terms *conatus*, *potentia*, *vis* in the theory. I will discuss the possible status of these concepts if they are to conform to Spinoza's paradigm and cannot be considered just names for arbitrarily defined clusters of simple ideas. In fact it is impossible to eliminate these terms in the definition of primary affections, in many of the propositions of the theory, in the foundation of the twofold set of affections. Affections are divided into Passions and Actions. A passion makes the mind shift from more *potentia* to less *potentia*; the reverse is true for an action. Otherwise: action is the mind's *conatus* plus an idea, if *conatus* originates from mind's *potentia*, not from an external cause (E III P I). Primary affections are not defined as ultimate data. Spinoza tries alternatively two definitions: the first definition relies upon the idea of *conatus* (E III P 15). The second definition relies upon the idea of *transitio* to less or more *potentia* (E III Affectuum Definitiones). A primary affection is alternatively defined as *conatus* plus a certain idea or as the idea of mind's *transitio* to more or less *potentia* (D. Bidney, 1942, ch. 5).

As far as the propositions explaining the connexion between the several affections are concerned, only few of these link an idea (either adequate or inadequate) with another idea immediately by association, but most of them rely upon the *conatus* as *explans* of the succession of one affection to another. In the case of a purely associative connexion, an idea follows another idea just because of their "contiguity". In the other case, an idea follows another idea as a consequence of the response by the mind's *conatus* to the stimulus given by the idea itself⁴. If we are to accept propositions which rely on such

³ Affections are divided into Actions and Passions according to the distinction between adequate cause and inadequate cause: if we are the adequate cause of something which happens in ourselves, our power of acting grows because of what happens: E III Def. 2-3.

⁴ Propositions like E III P 14; E III P 27; E III P 45 state a kind of a purely associative connexion. Propositions like E III P 25; E III P 26 rely on *conatus* as on something which is supposed to account for the succession of ideas and affections.

concepts as “sound theory”, we would be able to find in E III an explanation sketch like the following: the several affections of the mind may be reduced to *laetitia* or *tristitia* plus a certain idea or imagination. *Laetitia* is caused by *conatus*. *Tristitia* is caused by an inadequate idea, one enough strong to hinder *conatus*. This explanation sketch is however far from being clearly stated.

Apart from any clear and explicit statement of the explanation sketch, Spinoza is not in a position to give a consistent foundation to such an explanation. On the one hand Spinoza is right in claiming that concepts of force don't necessarily mean final cause (we are able to conceive of a thing's *conatus* to persist in its own being which is not caused by God's *potentia*). However, these concepts rely upon the category of potentiality or of faculty. *Potentia*, *conatus*, *vis* of a thing are power of displaying efficient causal action on other things, which is not identical with the causal action presently displayed (S. Cremaschi, 1979, ch. 4).

Let's consider the origin of this kind of concepts, apart from their necessity in building up a theoretical frame. Spinoza holds a metatheory of the theory of passions: the theory of the Attribute Thought conceived as the series of simple ideas. A redescription of the secondary affections in terms of this metatheory would head eventually to an associationist psychology. The real status of these ideas – apart from Spinoza's consciousness – is the status of metaphors of three different kinds of concepts: the idea of God's power as it is defined in Spinoza's *Metaphysics*, the concepts of force of pre-newtonian natural philosophy, the idea of physical effort as it is described in “everyday language”. As far as the “observational” language is concerned, Spinoza cannot rely upon “observation” of affections, but is forced to rely on the normative speeches of the previous moral tradition. As far as the theoretical language is concerned, Spinoza relies on ideas picked up from other theories and speeches that he uses by analogy in a different context.

4. Historians of science have paid a certain amount of attention to concepts of force in Newton's natural philosophy (M. Hesse, 1961, M. Jammer, 1957). As far as I know, however, nobody has ever tried to compare in a systematic way concepts of force in Newton with the same concepts in Hobbes' and Spinoza's psychologies⁵. Of course the same word doesn't always mean the same concept. However, it is convenient to speak of concepts of force in Spinoza's and Hobbes' psychologies, as these words mean concepts implying the idea of faculty and of potentiality.

The kind of aporetic state of affairs of Newton's Natural Philosophy may be equated with the aporetic theoretical state of affairs of Spinoza's Moral Philosophy. Newton – according to the Cartesians – was guilty of reintroducing in Philosophy the Occult Qualities. It is well known that the Newtonians used to

⁵ The comparison has been suggested by M. Jammer (1961) without being worked out.

reply by showing the usefulness of concepts of force as enabling to build a theoretical frame that accounted for phenomena better than the cartesian Physics. The Newtonians however were aware of the puzzling character of these concepts⁶. The search for a foundation for the successful newtonian Natural Philosophy contributed to the fall of the cartesian program and to the rise of the lockean-encyclopedistic program, whose tenets were renouncement to unity of science and reception of analogy, metaphor, *similitudo*.

It is useful to compare this trend in post-newtonian epistemology with what happens in Spinoza's works. As it has been shown by De Deugd (1966) a strictly cartesian methodological program is followed by tentative settlements in the actual practice which eventually head for an implicit acknowledgement of the Second Kind of Knowledge as the really important one, and of ideas of Imagination as *auxilia* the Intellect cannot dispense with. As far as the theory of mind and passions is concerned, the impossibility to eliminate ideas of Imagination first means the impossibility to eliminate *notiones communes* like the idea of man in general, as Spinoza acknowledges in E IV Praef. Second, in the theoretical language, it means the impossibility to eliminate metaphors of ideas from Metaphysics or from theories of a different kind. These metaphors seem to play an essential explanatory and constitutive function. Without Spinoza being conscious of that, his theory of mind and passions seems to be a system connecting elements which cannot be reduced to adequate ideas, but are rather ideas of Imagination.

Newton's *Principia* rose a vehement discussion about the foundations of Natural Philosophy. Spinoza's *Ethics* caused no discussion at all about the foundation of Moral Philosophy. The reason was that the discussion, focused on Spinoza's metaphysical immanentism, prevented the central topic from being discussed, and furthermore that Spinoza's immanentism was understood in the easy way of a materialism which empties Thought and pours it off into Extension. However, something very similar happened to both Spinoza and Newton: both systems met with materialist interpretations. According to these, both newtonian *vis attractiva* and spinozean *conatus* were supposed to be thin fluids which pervade the world and are able to convey motions⁷.

To sum up: 1) Even if there has been no discussion of the point, because of interest in the theory being overwhelmed by interest in the metaphysical thesis tied up with the theory, in Spinoza's Psychology there is a theoretical state of affairs similar to the one in Newton's Physics. It is possible to argue that the use of concepts of force and of dynamical models in 19th century psychology is not

⁶ As it is recognized in the well known R. Cotes' "Praefatio" (1723)

⁷ Newton himself suggests a "materialist" interpretation of his theory, just as an "hypothesis". This interpretation is held by Euler (1768). A materialist interpretation of Spinoza is to be found in *Traité des Trois Imposteurs* (1700). Evidence about that is to be found in P. Vernière (1954).

mainly produced by an influence from Physics as it is commonly held (R. Lowry, 1969) but has its origin in 17th century Moral Philosophy.

2) Even in the most radical thinker of the rationalistic trend, there is a gap between program and actual practice. This gap is caused by the impossibility to dispense with Imagination. The 17th and 18th century philosophers – both Empiricists and Rationalists – used to do one and the same thing, notwithstanding the different pictures of science that sometimes were hindering and sometimes were enabling the actual practice. They used to build systems of propositions, “adequate” in their connexions but “inadequate” in their semantical contents. They were bound to be unaware of this kind of practice on which the present century’s post-empiricist account of science is able to cast a light.

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