

spinoza's theory of thought

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I have always lived, *in parallel*, two lives. One is that of a character which a combination of hereditary elements has made me adopt, in a certain place and at a certain time. The other is that of a being without face, without name, without place and without a particular historical time: this is the life of substance itself and the breath of all life. Yet of these two consciousnesses, which are so different and nevertheless connected—one superficial and fleeting, the other durable and profound—the first, as if it were totally natural, concealed the second, during most of my childhood, my youth and even during my active and passionate life. It is only through a few sudden explosions that the other, subterranean, consciousness, succeeds in piercing the shell of everyday life and then it gushes like the hot spurt of an artesian well; only for a few seconds and then it is gone again, absorbed by the lips of the Earth.¹

With these words, Romain Rolland begins his text *The Flash of Spinoza* [*L'Éclair de Spinoza*] describing the lightning bolt that suddenly brings enlightenment. Rolland is among other things famous for his exchange of letters with Sigmund Freud, with whom he formed a strong friendship. Freud, in his text *The Future of an Illusion*, conducted a psychoanalytic critique of religion and Rolland contested this account—which in his view was an indeed unappreciative view of religious phenomena—with the concept of “oceanic feeling.” This feeling is known to all

people, according to Rolland, and leads toward a unity of mankind with reality as whole as a feeling of total accord and tranquility. The understanding of this “oceanic feeling” most certainly goes back to the intensive reading of Spinoza conducted by the young Rolland, the immersion in the *soleil blanc de la substance* [white sun of substance], as he calls it. Even though he describes this second consciousness as deep and lasting, the white sun of substance reveals itself to him in lightning-like momentary manifestations, as our pure being beneath everyday existence, which only occasionally, and then explosively, emerges, a spontaneous, unpredictable and both destructive and creative causality that traverses and renews the ordered paths of everyday causality—without face, without place, without name, without time—that is to say, the pure breath of life.

Is this the fundamental tension with which the Spinozist lives and that represents the actual source of his life? This second life is, according to Rolland, so completely formless that one has to ask whether it can be described at all, as Rolland does, as consciousness, *conscience*. Is it not, rather, an unconscious, so to speak purely energetic dimension of thought? Undoubtedly, Rolland unleashes a provocative dimension in Spinoza’s thinking here. Can we understand this provocation in Spinoza’s theory of thought more exactly and in a textually oriented manner? In fact, within this investigation, we will not only see that Spinoza rejects our everyday image of human thought and action, but also examine the conception of being which sustains this critique and understands thinking in a quite different manner from that of tradition.

Spinoza himself explicitly spoke of the unconscious. In our everyday reality, Spinoza argues, we set goals as the very core of our actions, which are in turn based on norms, and understand our effective activity in such a way that we realize the means for these ends. Through this image of an antecedence and dominance of consciousness over being, through goal-setting and volitional acts, however, says Spinoza, the true causes of our actions are hidden, *rerum causarum ignari* (*E I, Ap.*): we don’t know ourselves therefore. And yet how is this real being, which supposedly presents the actual truth and reality of mankind, to be understood and even found? This raises the problem of removing oneself from the everyday view. In fact, for Spinoza, the unconscious truth would have remained “hidden ... to eternity, if Mathematics, which is concerned not with ends, but only with the essences and properties of figures, had not shown men another standard of truth” (*E I, Ap.*).²

Thus, according to Spinoza, our everyday thinking, insofar as it is bound to conscious or supposedly consciously set goals and fulfillments thereof, prevents us from properly understanding reality, including our own mental processes. The illusion of final causes inhibits proper thinking—carried out by mathematics among other things—which consists in the consideration of essences and their properties. The dynamics of essences and properties are thereby to be understood exactly the other way round when compared to the fulfillment of aims. Essences that also include human individuals are explicative and express themselves through their properties.³ This can be illustrated through the example of the circle. A circle has the essence or genetic definition of a line drawn around a point at a constant distance. This results in the periphery of the circle. Only both taken together, center and periphery, result in the circle. From this essence, nonetheless, many other properties arise, such as triangles, which can be drawn by means of the radii. Even more properties are explicated when other figures, such as tangents or other circles, are allowed to “interact” with the first circle. This creates new figures or surfaces like the two circles that—the one drawn and moving within the other—allow an infinity to develop within a limited area.⁴ This gives rise to common properties [*notiones communes*] right up to the most general features common to all figures. The specific properties “lie in” the definition of the circle [*inesse*] or follow from it [*sequi*]. These relationships of *inesse* or *sequi* form the true relationships of being that we follow even if we don’t recognize them or even mistake them. While aims are always to a certain extent set against the prevailing reality, properties ensue automatically or spontaneously [*automaton* or *sponte*] from the unfolding [*explicatio*] of the essences. Hence Spinoza has a very accurate concept of what we call—often without giving it much thought—the free development, *explicatio* or *expressio*, of the personality.

One sees Spinoza’s image of life and mankind: actions, experiences and knowledge flow from us, from the stream of life, that we are and which carries us, such that we become “a spontaneously rolling wheel,” as Nietzsche put it.⁵ According to this view we are always already connected with the whole of reality, instead of having to prevail against an unfriendly world.⁶ In a society in which mechanisms of reflection are increasingly composed of grades, rankings, evaluations and optimization strategies, this is an alternative and in a sense even unrealistic position. Most of the time we hurry to meet appointments, agreements and requirements; seldom do we come to an autonomous rhythm of our own and admit we are free to wait and see what comes about.

It is also the original and unifying reality of the free stream of life instead of strained and isolating aim-fulfillments that produces the truth of the so-called common notions [*notiones communes*], the interactive formation of which we have already elucidated using the example of geometric figures. In human as well as social life, such common concepts arise from the social as such, and form the social as such—an orchestra, a working group, an army create common notions. Ultimately, certain concepts apply to all people—for example that of thought or affect, the common notions from which Spinoza's *Ethics* proceeds and which we can relate to our own lives. However, Spinoza is surely not only concerned with the lightning flashes of true being in everyday life, as Rolland holds, but also with a continuous practice, in which body and mind manifest themselves as forms of expression of a self-identical essence. Being manifests itself, to be sure, as body on the one hand and mind on the other, but does not divide these into a commander, the mind, and the commanded, the body, as Descartes understood it, nor—in a reversed manner—as a spontaneity, the body, and a minute taker, the mind, as Jacobi understood Spinoza maintaining.⁷ But this must also be positively and coherently formulated on the theoretical level.

Spinoza's *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, dedicated to the goal of a rational way of life, already shows how the explicated relation in thought, or rather in the true idea, is to be understood.⁸

A true idea [*idea vera*] (for we have a true idea [*habemus enim ideam veram*]) is something different from its object [*est diversum a suo ideato*]. For a circle is one thing and an idea of the circle another—the idea of the circle is not something which has a circumference and a center, as a circle does. Nor is an idea of the body the body itself. And since it is something different from its object [*diversum a suo ideato*], it will also be something intelligible through itself; that is, the idea, as far as its formal essence [*essentia formalis*] is concerned, can be the object of another objective essence [*objectum alterius essentiae objectivæ*], and this other objective essence in turn will also be, considered in itself, something real and intelligible [*reale, et intelligibile*], and so on, indefinitely.
(*TIE* §33)

The idea is different from its object; the idea of the body is not the body. This seemingly self-evident distinction makes another issue clear: as the idea of the body is not the body itself, it must have—as the body itself also has—an indepen-

dent status; it must be something real and, in addition, intelligible [*aliquid reale et intelligibile*]. As such an intelligible “something,” it is the object of another idea, through which obviously this first idea is recognized (however which, in turn, is itself something independent).

This relation can evidently be repeated and continued into the infinite, indefinitely, as Spinoza says. But one must understand the nature of this *progressus in infinitum* correctly. For if the essence of Peter is something different to the idea of Peter, as well as the idea of the idea of Peter, then it is clear that “to understand the essence of Peter, it is not necessary to understand an idea of Peter, much less an idea of an idea of Peter” (TIE §34). What is therefore necessary in order to understand the essence of Peter? Spinoza’s lapidary answer: one must merely understand the essence of Peter, “for to know that I know, I must first know” (TIE §34). This sounds like a very direct form of realism, which would remain unclear if one considered the interaction of thought and extension to be impossible. One can then hardly believe that Spinoza refers here to the direct physical and sensory experiences of Peter. In fact, the matter is more complex here than it may at first seem, as Spinoza continues: “From this it is clear that certainty is nothing but the objective essence itself, i.e., the mode by which we are aware of the formal essence is certainty itself [*quod certitudo nihil sit præter ipsam essentiam objectivam; id est, modus, quo sentimus essentiam formalem, est ipsa certitudo*]” (TIE §35). Obviously, here we are in the field of thought or ideas. Here, certainty—that is, the effect of evidence or truth—is understood as the relation of the objective essence to the formal essence. This relationship with the formal essence manifests itself in a sensation [*sentire*]; so we feel the formal essence or the being of the idea and this feeling is certainty. If we are in the field of thought here, then it can only concern the formal essence *of* an idea or *in* an idea and not the corresponding body. According to the Cartesian terminology that Spinoza follows here, the formal essence determines the idea as reality, as an event of the real world, and the objective essence determines the idea as an image or representation of reality. Spinoza, like Descartes, places the formal essence itself in the field of thought. If certainty, then, is the feeling of unity of the formal essence and the objective essence, then is truth merely the accordance of the formal and objective qualities of the ideas?

Let us see what role the differentiation of the formal and objective essence of the idea plays in Descartes’ work! Descartes grounded his doubt on the truth of the ideas in the sense of representations of external objects by stating that

these ideas must proceed from objects outside me, since they do not depend on my will, I do not find ... convincing ... [because] perhaps there is in me some faculty fitted to produce these ideas without the assistance of any external things, even though it is not yet known by me; just as, apparently, they have hitherto always been found in me during sleep without the aid of any external objects.⁹

The general substantiation of the doubt therefore comes from the status of ideas as products of my own—understood as causally efficient or productive—activity. We are concerned here, then, with the formal essence of the ideas, their ontological status as products of the human mind. The problematic involved in this activity or production is exemplified in the difference between dreaming and waking states. Obviously, we produce the dream images ourselves while regarding “real” images as externally influenced ones. But since this difference cannot be determined in terms of content, any representation of an external object can actually have the nature of a dream image. The ideas of external objects, therefore, can be deceiving if their reality [*realitas*] can be understood as emanating from the human subject itself in the sense of a productive power. The *realitas* refers, therefore, not only to the objective essence, the content of the represented, but also determines the degree of being or the formal essence of the idea. The more *realitas* there is, the more essence.¹⁰ Thus, as products of the human mind, ideas can always be explicative projections of subjectively implicit structures of only apparently external objects and nothing else.

As we know, this argument will fail solely and exclusively because of the idea of God, which as an idea of a truly infinite substance cannot be within me, “if it had not proceeded from some substance which was veritably infinite.”¹¹ Infinity, however, exceeds the reality [*realitas*] of mankind, and its concept must be accepted as an external influence. Epistemology is therefore discussed within the paradigm of causality or production. It is only there, where the subject can no longer understand his idea as an effect or product of himself, that an external reality can and must be accepted as the cause. Hence the conclusion about the existence of God.

One must also consider an additional complication to properly assess the relationship between Descartes and Spinoza. In Descartes’ *Meditations* we find two proofs of God. Only the second proof in the fifth meditation is set out as an ontological proof of God, as Spinoza does at the beginning of his *Ethics*. There, the existence of God follows analytically from the concept of God as the most perfect

being, just as the idea of the valley follows from the idea of the mountain, whereby it is clear that the existence of the mountain does not follow from the idea of the mountain. The conclusion on existence is only possible in the case of God, the absolute being.¹² In the third meditation, by contrast, Descartes had taken the already described inference from the causality of ideas by means of the *lumen naturale*, as he says. There it is stated that the idea of the highest and absolutely perfect being cannot occur within us as an effect without this effect really coming from the outside. The objective reality in the idea of infinity cannot be traced back to our formal reality as human beings.¹³ Only through this reasoning from effect to cause can doubt be overcome. This proof of God therefore remains thoroughly problematic in terms of validity. As such, there arises a light suspension in the whole train of thought. The conclusion, to a certain degree, assumes the character of an investment and an act of trust which we make explicit. This corresponds to the fact that the *nervus probandi* of this conclusion lies in the goodness of God. An almighty being, says Descartes, does not find it necessary to deceive and therefore it would not do this. This moral coloring of the proof imagines God to some extent as a moral being. Only the associated truthfulness of God, *veracitas*, guarantees the truth. One sees how Descartes, in his basic intuitions, differs from Spinoza, whose God manifests itself as a substance that explicates itself with internal necessity in the conceptual demonstrations of the *Ethics*, which begins directly with the ontological proof of God as its point of departure. Therefore, a further word is necessary on the relationship between both proofs of God in this reading of Descartes', which opens onto his fundamental problem.¹⁴

While the first proof of God in the third meditation builds upon the *lumen naturale* and asks for a certain moral investment, one can see in the second proof of God in the fifth meditation the classical ontological proof of God, which proceeds from concepts. Obviously, in the understanding of Descartes, the concepts or, as one would say in the seventeenth century, the innate tools of thought, are only now available—on the basis of the *veracitas* of God—for argumentative purposes. According to Descartes, concepts can be deceptive—even where they seem to be right to us—and this possibility must first be fended off in order to be able to use conceptual processes in a legitimate and reliable manner. As Descartes realizes at the start of the third meditation: “accordingly it seems to me that already I can establish as a general rule [*videor pro regula generali posse statuere*] that all things which I perceive very clearly and very distinctly are true.”¹⁵ It only seems [*video*] that one can apply this rule generally; this is turned around into its opposite however by the fiction of the deceiving God: namely, that one cannot even trust the

knowledge which we intuit—or believe to—with the utmost certainty.¹⁶ Against the massiveness of the problem of deception, only the goodness of God can be mobilized. One can see in the analytic train of thought of the first three meditations of Descartes a form of transcendental philosophical thought—both *avant la lettre* and decidedly pointed—the fundamental motto of which is to always include the observer’s point of view.

Spinoza will not be able to accept—as we have already seen—that one can deny the validity of notions that are self-evident. This can also be seen in the continuation of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, where he clarifies the benefits he sees in his conception of truth: “And from this, again, it is clear that, for the certainty of the truth, no other sign is needed than having a true idea. For as we have shown, in order for me to know, it is not necessary to know that I know” (*TIE* §35). The primary relation to a reality which Spinoza obviously sees in this relation of objective and formal essences is supposed to release us from the nightmare of a reflection on truth and knowledge which triggers a *progressus in infinitum* and makes truth as such impossible.

Plainly, Spinoza is here taking aim at the Cartesian reflection on truth in the movements of doubt in the meditations. When, according to Descartes, we fundamentally question the relation of our ideas to reality, as occurs in the universal equation of dreams and reality, and consequently look for a sign of truth in reflection, we can always repeat this movement and thus never arrive at the truth. Spinoza confirms this controversial view further on when he states: “if, by some fate [*fato*], someone had proceeded in this way in investigating Nature, i.e., by acquiring other ideas in the proper order, according to the standard of the given true idea, he would never have doubted the truth he possessed (for as we have shown, the truth makes itself manifest)” (*TIE* §44).

If Descartes, therefore, if only by chance, had always thought correctly, he would never have fallen into doubt—a characterization he directly rejects in the third meditation. Looking back on the movement of doubt in the second meditation, which had called into doubt something seemingly certain, namely the perception of external objects, Descartes writes: “And it was in this that I erred, or, if perchance my judgment was correct, this was not due to any knowledge arising from my perception.”¹⁷ Descartes thus excludes the use of accidentally found truths in his method. So fundamental is doubt to his thinking.

For Spinoza, however, doubt is only a problem of—supposedly—a lack of truth, to the degree that we always already have true ideas to a certain extent. If we really had no true ideas, as Descartes at least assumes at times in the meditations, then the idea of truth, according to Spinoza, would be entirely illusory. Therefore, the whole problem for Spinoza is to find a true idea or proper concept of a particular object. But if we have found this, then we can use this as a guide to seek out other true ideas. The fact that we have a true idea, however, becomes known to us from the immediate relation to the formal, that is to say actually existing, essence of this idea. Therefore, a particular idea is clearly discernible:

Next, from what we have just said, that an idea must agree completely with its formal essence [*cum sua essentia formali*], it is evident that for our mind to reproduce completely the likeness of Nature [*quod ut mens nostra omnino referat Naturæ exemplar*], it must bring all of its ideas forth [*debeat omnes suas ideas producere*] from that idea which represents the source and origin of the whole of Nature, so that that idea is also the source of the other ideas.

(*TIE* §42)

The idea of God is supposed to form the source of all ideas, so that we have to first develop it in order for it to form the basis of all other ones. But in the idea of God, the existence of its formal essence is immediately revealed. Not only does God exist necessarily, his idea does as well. To put it another way: because we perceive the formal essence in the idea of God itself, such that this idea is evident, we can conclude that God necessarily exists. In the execution of this derivation, this *producere ideas*, the mind shows itself as *Exemplar Naturæ*, which originally meant “copy,” i.e., a transcription of nature, therefore, which depicts the reality entirely and in general, *omnino referat*. One sees how the train of thought of the *Ethics* is indicated in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. But what does the connection between formal essence and objective essence look like in the structure of parallelism? Even if he proceeds from an absolute trust in concepts, Spinoza will grant them a further dimension—different from that of our uses—in order to legitimate their truth. This, namely, is their formal essence. We will now examine further how this is to be understood on the basis of a reading of the *Ethics*.

The topic of the second part of the *Ethics* is the nature and origin of the mind, *De Natura, et Origine Mentis*. Evidently, the human mind must itself now be construed. There is no conceptual or principle change when compared to the *Treatise*

on the *Emendation of the Intellect* as the mind, *mens humana*, or human consciousness are—to the astonishment of some readers—themselves set as ideas.¹⁸ “For of each thing there is necessarily an idea in God, of which God is the cause in the same way as he is of the idea of the human Body” (*E II*, P13S). The human mind is the idea God has of a particular body. Thus, the human mind is a part of the divine, infinite intellect, that is, the idea God forms from himself as a comprehensive reality in the attribute of thought. Yet in terms of method, there is a new orientation compared with the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, because the idea, which is the human mind, can obviously not be found in the method of the *Treatise*. In the *Ethics*, the train of thought, which was at least sketched out in the *Treatise*, proceeds from the source and cause of the whole of nature in order to derive effects and properties. Thereby, one proceeds always from the cause to the effects, and from the essence to the properties. The stream of life thus translates into the concatenation of demonstrations and constructions and gives the *mos geometricus* its sense and its meaning as a continuous and self-increasing formation and formulation of this flow of life. The theory of the mind, therefore, starts from the attribute structure of thought and from this develops the operation of thinking as such: the formation of ideas. This operation now leads to the infinite intellect, i.e., the idea that substance or God forms of itself in the attribute of thought as *idea Dei*. Individual consciousnesses have, therefore, not only ideas, but also, for Spinoza, these are primarily ideas in the infinite intellect and exist then in the original and continuous context of an intelligible nature. Thereby, the idea, the *mens* or *anima* itself “is,” is the origin and cause of the ideas that the *mens* or *anima* “has” and through which it represents the external world. Here too, the properties follow from the essence. The *automaton spirituale* is named after this circumstance. From the individuality of the body and its consciousness as the idea of the body, *idea corporis*, grasped in the “field” of the attributes, follows the complete mental structure of the human. In this conception of an absolute connectivity of consciousnesses with each other, as well as with the attribute, the *Ethics* realizes Spinoza’s anti-Cartesian and anti-subjectivist tendencies, which—as we saw—already shaped the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. The thesis that the finite intellect is part of an infinite and unified intellect leads the whole train of thought.

One can then see straight away how and why Spinoza avoids Descartes’ analytical approach to the theory of the ideas. For if our consciousnesses are ideas in the mind of God, i.e., the effects of God, or of the attribute of thought respectively, then it is absolutely unnecessary to fundamentally doubt the effects, that is to

say, our representations. Instead, the capacity for truth of our ideas, in a principal sense, is thereby ensured. And yet what does this construction look like in detail? How does the truth of our ideas come about?

The operation of the formation of ideas is initially an operation of the substance itself that modifies and represents itself in the attribute of thought: “In God there is necessarily an idea, both of his essence and of everything that necessarily follows from his essence” (E II, P3). This idea that God forms himself arises only because “God acts with the same necessity by which he understands himself, i.e., just as it follows from the necessity of the divine nature ... that God understands himself [*ut Deus seipsum intelligat*], with the same necessity it also follows that God does [*agat*] infinitely many things in infinitely many modes” (E II, P3S). God acts, *agat*, therefore with the very necessity with which he recognizes himself, *seipsum intelligit*, and he recognizes himself with the same necessity with which he acts. How is the relationship between action and knowledge with respect to God to be understood? Firstly, as in the Appendix to the first part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza is concerned here with differentiating his conception from the traditional image of a God who realizes certain possibilities and not others through his free will. But what takes its place? The inner necessity with which God both acts and knows at the same time. One might be tempted to divide both forms of expression, acting and knowing, between the attributes of extension and thought. But the situation is more complex. Spinoza himself gives an interpretation of the facts, as well as his theorem, a few lines later. After this it follows “that God can form the idea of his essence, and of all the things that follow necessarily from it, solely from the fact that God is a thinking thing, and not from the fact that he is the object of his own idea”(E II, P5Pr).

The fact that God acts with the same necessity with which he knows, and vice versa, hence implies that God does not have himself in advance as an object that he can subsequently know. Rather, it is self-knowledge as such, independent of any previously given object. Knowledge as an act is based solely on the fact that God is a thinking being and that he realizes his power of thought. In the process, the formal essence, *essentia formalis*, that we are here still trying to understand, plays a decisive role. This is so as the

formal being of ideas [*esse formale idearum*] admits God as a cause only insofar as he is considered as a thinking thing, and not insofar as he is explained by any other attribute. I.e., ideas, both of God’s attributes and of

singular things, admit not the objects themselves [*non ipsa ideata*], or the things perceived, as their efficient cause, but God himself, insofar as he is a thinking thing.
(E II, P5)

Ideas, then, are not formed according to models that depict them, but from the absolute spontaneity of the substance that manifests itself in the attribute of thought completely autonomously and independent of all other attributes. We find this spontaneity in every attribute independent of all others. The ideas in the attribute of thought are therefore also formed as spontaneously, simultaneously with the bodies in the attribute of extension, without this involving an interaction. And the ideas in the attribute of thought explicate exactly the same reality, *realitas*, as the bodies in the attribute of extension. Hence the idea of so-called parallelism, as Leibniz called it, of ideas and things, which Spinoza formulated as the central proposition of his epistemology.¹⁹ “The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things” (E II, P7). Every body or thing, *res*, is as such designated an idea in the divine mind that has this body as its object; that is to say, this body, and everything which happens to it, takes place mentally. This object relation therefore represents a factual identity: what happens in the body and in the idea of that body is the same. Thus, as Spinoza says, body and mind are but two views or forms of expression of one and the same thing that is expressed in two ways [*duobis modis expressa*] (E II, P7S).

However, these two views are not reducible to one another: a circumstance giving Spinoza, in the age of post-physicalism, a certain relevance. One is very often content with the presentation of this parallelism of ideas and bodies in order to show the solution to the body/soul problem in Spinoza as well as evoke its superiority over Descartes’ dualism of the mental and bodily.²⁰ In actuality, one realizes the complete theoretical scope of the parallelism of ideas and things first when one recognizes the ideas as things, as the things or the *esse formale* in the attribute of thought. This second, but *de jure* primary, dimension of parallelism is to be found in the corollary to Proposition 7:

From this it follows that God’s power of thinking [*cogitandi potentia*] is equal to his actual power of acting [*agendi potentia*]. I.e., whatever follows formally [*sequitur formaliter*] from God’s infinite nature follows objectively in God [*sequitur in Deo objective*] from his idea in the same order and with the same connection.

(E II, P7Cor)

In this manner we can answer our question on how the relation between the formal and objective essence of the ideas is shaped, in the context of the parallelism of the *Ethics*. Let us remember the terminological specifications of the Cartesians. The formal nature of something is its being as such; the objective nature of a thing is its (re)presentational content, the ideate. Even the ideas have a formal being, *esse formale*, which, although possessing a certain degree of *realitas*, of reality, must not be equated with the ideate, i.e., is not to be understood in the sense of an objectification. Thus, the idea of a circle has the reality of a circle formally, not as a representation: it is, in a sense, the circle as thought-thing or thing-of-thinking in the attribute of thought.

Thus, the idea of God as *esse formale* has an absolutely infinite reality that as such differs from the reality in its ideationality. Every idea has as its formal being to some extent the character of a pure thing in the attribute of thought. The ideas repeat therefore, as effect of the active or productive power of God, the bodies as things of thinking in the attribute of thought. This quality of the ideas as things, as Spinoza writes, comes from God's active power, *Dei potentia agendi*.²¹ The corollary to E II, P7 concludes that the order that formally follows from the active power of God, *Dei potentia agendi*, is the same as the order that follows objectively from the thinking power of God, *Dei potentia cogitandi*. The latter refers to the objective being of the ideas, the ideate or representation contents. In this parallel sense, God thinks what he does and does what he thinks.

Wherein does the idea's character, as thing, or the formal being, *esse formale*, lie? This thingly character is generally determined, through the attribute, to be dynamic. The attributes are as a whole, as well as in their parts, explications or expressions of the essence of God. The formal being of ideas plays a role within this expressive or dynamic nature as an active power, as *causa efficiens* or *explicatio*. In fact, this is also the core of the Spinozist concept of ethics. This connects with the causal aspect of the theory of consciousness, as freedom means to liberate one's own essence or essentiality. This is the essence of explication, which is to be understood as a causally efficient process and which constitutes self-determination at both the level of substance and the level of the modes.

The dynamics of this release are grounded, thereby, in the formal essence of the idea that we are. Deleuze described this by saying that Spinoza thinks conscious-

ness according to the model of the body.²² In this expressive logic, self-consciousness and self-determination are formed simultaneously and to the extent that the human being expresses or explicates his essence. The individual essence is indeed itself an expression of God and thus cannot be wrong. Spontaneity becomes the measure of theoretical truth and practical correctness. One sees that thinking is an entirely independent form and experience of activity, which is not an image of the body.²³

An idea, A, thus generates the idea B, which in turn generates idea C, and so forth, thus creating the order and connection of ideas, *ordo et connexio idearum*, as things, *rerum*. This causal link first takes place independently of the ideate or representation. It is only in an—explicatively logical—second step that the ideas of the ideas as objective essences come about, which objectifies the formal essences and transcribe their content. One must now accurately distinguish these two levels of explication, or else it will lose its value for the whole conception. Let us follow Gueroult, one of the most important interpreters who explains the matter to us in the following way:

In itself, the connection of ideas does not depend on the reflection of the ideas, that is to say the ideas of ideas, for the ideas are in themselves produced according to the order of causes within thought, without the ideas of ideas intervening at all, i.e., reflection. But the knowledge of this connection, according to the causes, is conditioned through the reflection of the ideas, through knowledge of them as reasons or causes. One sees, thereby, that the intra-cogitative parallelism within its second form is for the mind the condition of the concatenation of its ideas according to the order of the causes in thought, i.e., it is the condition of the intra-cogitative parallelism in its first form.²⁴

One sees, as such, that the causal linkage of the ideas constitutes the actual dynamic of the attribute of thought as a whole as well as of individuals. This causal chain itself now experiences an objectification in the ideas of ideas, or reflection. The objective aspect of the idea thus has the character of an idea of the formal aspect of the idea, or an idea of the idea. In fact, we can only speak of explicit or conscious consciousness by means of this objectification. The formal aspect of the idea, the being of the idea as such, is unconscious, i.e., thinking in the form of the in-itself. The objective aspect of the idea is the only conscious part, i.e., thinking in the form of the for-itself. This configuration basically supports the line of

argument and construction of the second part of the *Ethics*. One sees this clearly in P23: “The mind does not know itself, except insofar as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the Body [*nisi quatenus Corporis affectionum ideas percipit*].” So it is not that we perceive through ideas or in ideas. The instrumental character is not addressed here. Ideas that are the object of ideas themselves become objects of perception. The ideas of the affects must therefore be initially noticed so that they become conscious. This concerns that type of reflection—the formation of the objective essence of the primary formal essence of the ideas—that first generates representation. This is a process that takes place solely within the attribute of thought.²⁵ In fact, it cannot be any different in Spinoza’s parallelist conception as we cannot actually perceive bodies at all.

The reflexive figure of the idea of the idea as a precondition for awareness applies naturally for both inadequate and adequate ideas equally. “The idea of the idea of any affection of the human Body [*Idea ideæ cujuscunque affectionis Corporis*] does not involve adequate knowledge of the human Mind,” as stated in Proposition 29. Certainty is produced in the true ideas by the idea of the idea, as we already saw in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* and is treated in the *Ethics*, Part II, Proposition 43: “He who has a true idea [*Qui veram ideam habet*] at the same time knows that he has a true idea [*simul scit se veram ideam habere*], and cannot doubt the truth of the thing [*nec de rei veritate potest dubitare*].” It can be seen that the reflexive conditions prevail equally for true and false ideas. The ideas that we are consciously aware of can only be true because they relate—so to speak completely and bindingly—to their formal being and we can recognize this relationship ourselves.²⁶

Why is the reference to the being of the idea so important in this conception of spontaneity? Precisely as it gains a connection to being or secures it. Even if this being only lies within thinking, it is indeed, *qua* the nature of the attribute of thought, authentic being, so to speak. Only through this relation to the being of the idea as an immediate explication of God in the attribute of thought—Spinoza speaks of the infinite intellect as the first immediate mode in the attribute of thought—only by virtue of this relation can one reject the necessity of Cartesian doubt. Descartes had indeed determined the formal status of the idea, its *esse formale*, as the mere product of a subject. Precisely because of this the Cartesian movement of doubt is set in motion: if our representations are solely our own productions, the immediate question arises as to why they can be true as such. Spinoza “secures” the truth of the content of our conceptions not through the

relation to bodily correlates but by reference to the formal essence of the ideas themselves, their purely causal and pre-subjective linkage. And yet this raises a crucial question that, among other things, appears, according to Gueroult, as a question of seeing. Who sees what here, or who can see something here? As a matter of fact, the observer position formulated here should recognize the correspondence of the order of causes, i.e., a prereflexive and non-representational sequence of things and a reflexive, conscious and representational order of ideas. That both series, which should be in agreement here, are found within the attribute of thought does not mean that insights are compared but instead it means that the thing-aspect, in which an “abstraction” is made “from every sequence of the ideate,” is considered “only according to the linkage of causes in thought which leads to the setting of the causal series of ideas themselves.”²⁷

But is there a position that can see both series and relate them to each other? This question is made specific and complicated by the fact that to a certain extent what is concerned here is the origin of knowledge and consciousness in general, i.e., observation itself. The attribute of thought does not produce actual consciousness in the formal essences of the ideas but only through their reflexive doubling—precisely as an idea of itself. The idea of the first degree—the pure being of the idea or, as we can also say, the pure operation of thinking—is unconscious or preconscious but at the same time constitutes the primary activity of thinking. In principle, the crucial point is thinking about the participation of the human mind in the general intellect or mind of God. Therefore, this mind must participate, in a general sense, in being, in a binding manner. God, in the *Idea Dei, genitivus subjectivus* and *objectivus*—that is, in his idea of himself, which he himself forms—objectifies the attribute of thought and is as such conscious of all being. Insofar as this idea of the idea agrees with the being of the attribute of thought, as idea of the first order, then it is true. Within this idea of everything, we individuals participate as parts of the infinite intellect, which is precisely this idea of the idea. Only in this manner does it become understandable that Spinoza himself follows his highest commandment: do not allow any interaction of thought and extension.

Truth, and true knowledge, are alone formed through a relation within thought. That is why there are two forms of ideas: the first as a form of being in the attribute of thought as simple ideas or idea-things, so to speak, and the second as reflected consciousness of these primary ideas—as ideas of the ideas. In order to preserve the existential or in-itself character of the idea of the first order, and thereby its legitimating function for truth, one must subtract its reflexive and rep-

representational character to a certain degree. The first-order idea does not know, it simply “is”: a thinking, without anything being thought of, i.e., the pure dynamic concatenation of ideas as dynamic entities. Consciousness arises only in the idea of the idea: reflexivity generates the representation, the ideate. So here it is not a matter of objectifying and observing something but of the genesis of both observation and objectification as such. The fundamental correctness of observation itself is traced back to a pure order of being from which it ought to now emerge. We cannot, however, proceed in any other way as we begin with our consciousness and the contents found within. Yet this means that we can only start with the effect of conscious consciousness. Thereby we always begin with the reflection in the idea of the idea as the effect of the first-order idea. We hence reason from a position in which there is an observer, on a state in which there is as yet no observer and which now also is supposed to be the condition of the position from which one observes. Obviously, one cannot conclude on the origin of the consciousness. For either the—conscious—consciousness is not yet there, and then there is no speaker or observer who could see anything, or the consciousness is there and then the transition from unconscious to conscious, from thought-in-itself to thought-for-itself, has already happened and will no longer allow itself to be observed as such. One sees the circle of reasoning here. A pure abstraction from the observer or consciousness would not at all allow, on the other hand, one to make the assumptions about attributes, explications, etc., which are made here. Abstraction is, indeed, not Spinoza’s method.

In fact, Spinoza comes here to a situation in which the cause must be deduced from the effect: a status that he himself rejects. For he proves the parallelism of Proposition 7 with the axiom according to which the knowledge of the cause includes the knowledge of the effect, the latter depending on the former, “*Effectus cognitio a cognitione causæ dependet, et eandem involvit*” (E I, A4). Spinoza assumes then that we recognize the effect on the basis of the cause here. According to the train of thought of the *Ethics*, we infer the nature of the idea from the nature of the attribute of thought, and the attribute of thought, in turn, from the concept of God. Thereby, Spinoza believes that he can theoretically develop the formal essence such that he can proceed from it to find the objective essence and fundamentally come to the effect from the cause. In fact, however, we have knowledge of the idea only from the idea of the idea, i.e., from the self-doubling effect of the first-order idea. It is also not possible to annul this principal situation of the knower through or within the concept of God. There also we depart from the content of the idea. Now that the existence of God should have been proven, we

see—with Spinoza—how this God explicates in the—for us unconscious—formal essences of the attribute of thinking, on which, in turn, the truth of our conceptions as representations of this formal essences should be based. Because of this, a larger circle is also relevant. For Spinoza proves the actuality of God in the first part of the *Ethics* from our idea of God and in the second part deduces the truthfulness of our ideas from their status as divine products. This circle could only be suspended through the determination of the ideas as godly products.

Yet even if the formal essences of the ideas were, directly or indirectly, the product of God, we could not verify them on the basis of the objective essences, the ideate. Instead, in and for the proof of God, one already stakes a claim for the specific explicatory structure of God and proves this subsequently through the concept of God and the logic of essence and properties. One therefore believes in always being able to deduce the formal essence from the objective. The formal essence, then, offers the justification for passing from the concept, via the being of the concept, to being. In closing the circle, one then proves from the concept of God exactly this explicatory structure, which first makes it possible: the objective essence of the idea is grasped as the explication of the formal essence. Thereby, one assumes in advance the evidential mechanism for the proof of God that one first has to deduce from the concept of God, in order to derive from it in turn the proof mechanism. The proof of God and the dynamics of essence and properties as such do not close the gap between the being of the idea and the idea of being but are themselves put into question. However, this does not necessarily mean that the Spinozan vision of life and his conception of ethics are thereby overturned.

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NOTES

1. This essay is dedicated to Manfred Walther for his 80th birthday
Romain Rolland, *L'Éclair de Spinoza*. Paris: Editions du Sablier, 1931, 107-08
2. All references to Spinoza's *Ethics* are to the translation by Edwin Curley, *Collected Works of Spinoza*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985, 408-617.
3. This concept is known to have influenced Deleuze's interpretation of Spinoza. As I discuss this elsewhere, I will not explicitly deal with Deleuze here. See Thomas Kisser, "Wie kann man ein Bild des Denkens geben? Immanenzebene, Begriffe und Begriffspersonen bei Deleuze, Spinoza und Descartes." *Spinozismus als Modell. Deleuze und Spinoza*. Eds. Thomas Kisser and Katrin Wille. Paderborn: Fink, 2019. However, I will not deny his influence on my interpretation.
4. See, on Ep. 12 (Baruch de Spinoza, *Opera*. Ed. Carl Gebhard. Heidelberg: C. Winters, 1925, 52-62; 59), Simon Duffy, "The Differential Point of View of the Infinitesimal Calculus in Spinoza, Leibniz and Deleuze." *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 37:3 (2006, 286-307).
5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*. Trans. Thomas Common. Part 1, Section 20. <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/n/nietzsche/friedrich/n67a/chapter20.html>
6. The relevance of this position is shown in the following quote by Freya Mathews: "Our own immediate experience cannot reveal to us who the real subject of our subjectivity is, whether this is a global or a finite individual subject. ... For suppose an alternative metaphysical presupposition is adopted—suppose that we do regard ostensibly individual minds as points of reflexivity in a wider field of 'mind,' a field which is manifest to us, externally, so to speak, as the manifold of physical reality; physical reality is thus seen as a continuum that is possessed of a mental as well as a physical dimension. In this case there would be no discrete individuals in the world, and no categorically or metaphysically distinct substances, so mind-body-dualism would dissolve, and with it the 'problem of knowledge,' in the sense of the problem, how mind, once severed from world, can reestablish contact with that world." (Freya Mathews, *For Love of Matter: A Contemporary Panpsychism*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2003, 37).
7. See the first few paragraphs of "The Passions of the Soul" in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Vol. 1. Trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911, 329-427.
8. Spinoza, *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* in *Collected Works of Spinoza*. Ed. and trans. Edwin Curley. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1985, 7-45.
9. René Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy." *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, Vol. 1. Trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911, 161.
10. A general principle of Cartesian philosophers. On this term taken in the broadest sense see *E I*, P9. See also the collected edition *Intensität und Realität*. Eds Thomas Kisser and Thomas Leinkauf. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016.
11. Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," 166.
12. Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," 180-185.
13. Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," 162-171.
14. On this, see Thomas Kisser, "Zweifel am Cogito? Die Begründung des Wissens bei Descartes und das Problem der Subjektivität" *Metaphysik und Methode. Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz im Vergleich. Studia Leibnitiana Sonderheft Nr. 39*. Ed. Thomas Kisser. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2010, 13-44.
15. Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," 158.
16. Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," 158.

17. Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy,” 158.
18. Kant wonders that “Spinozism speaks of thoughts which themselves think, and thus of an accident that simultaneously exists for itself as a subject.” See “What Does it Mean to Orient One-self in Thinking?” *Religion and Rational Theology (The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant)*. Eds Allen Wood, George Di Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 15.
19. See for instance Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, “Considérations sur la doctrine d’un Esprit Universel Unique” *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. Vol. VI*. Ed. Carl Gerhardt. Berlin: Weidmann, 1885, 529–538; 533. On the topic generally, see Mogens Lærke, *Leibniz lecteur de Spinoza. La genèse d’une opposition complexe*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008.
20. See for example Carol Collier, *Recovering the Body. A Philosophical Study*. Ottawa: Ottawa UP, 2013, 170 ff.
21. On this, see Chapter 7 (The Two Powers and the Idea of God) of Deleuze’s *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*. Trans. Martin Joughin. New York: Zone Books, 1990, 113. This text must be understood—insofar as the current author has an overview of the literature—as the first clear interpretation of E II, P7C.
22. Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. Trans. Robert Hurley. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988, 17 f.
23. This major topic of French research, the *devenir-actif* in thought, is most recently discussed by Marcos Gleizer in *Verité et Certitude chez Spinoza*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2017, 27 ff.
24. Martial Gueroult, *Spinoza II. L’Âme (Ethique, II)*. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1974, 72. Following Deleuze, who was the first to set out the complexity of parallelism in his minor thesis *Spinoza et le problème de l’expression dans la philosophie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1968), Gueroult, in 1972 (the first appearance of the cited text), developed in detail, in this commentary on the second part of the *Ethics*, the *parallelisme extra-cogitativ* as well as *parallelisme intra-cogitativ*. See also, *ibid.* 66 ff. We tendentially combine and unify the two interpretations here, which obviously have found no further extension—as Mogens Lærke, *ibid.*, 401 ff. makes clear—and do not concern ourselves with the relationship between the two interpretations, which would require more extensive reading and reflection.
25. See, among other places, also E II, P29 and E II, P43.
26. Manfred Walther made clear, in his interpretation of Spinoza (*Metaphysik als Anti-Theologie*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1981), how essential the conception of the idea of the idea is for the whole structure of Spinozan philosophy.
27. Gueroult, *Spinoza II. L’Âme (Ethique, II)*, 67.