Spinoza's Yoga

Practice of Power and Experience of the Infinite

University of Groningen Press

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About the cover artwork:

Matteo Ciardini, *Studio di palude con pesce*. Tecnica mista su carta preparata. 25 x 18. 2023.

“This painting seeks to explore the boundary between dreamlike and gestural forms in a search for organic figuration—a subtle, almost nonexistent boundary where the nervous tension of a body seeks to free and transform itself.” (M.C.)

Andrea Sangiacomo

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Practice of Power and Experience of the Infinite

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This is the third volume of the *Dhammavicaya Trilogy*, which includes *The Tragedy of the Self: Lectures on Global Hermeneutics* (UGP 2023) as first volume, and *An Introduction to Friendliness (mettā): Emotional Intelligence and Freedom in the Pāli Discourses of the Buddha* (UGP 2022) as second volume.

One lucent corner windowing hidden things
Forced the world's blind immensity to sight.

Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*

Note on primary sources and abbreviations

Spinoza

Spinoza's works are quoted from the volume: Baruch Spinoza, *Tutte le Opere*, edited by Andrea Sangiacomo, Milan: Bompiani, 2010. English translations of Spinoza's works are adapted from this Italian version.

For the *Ethics*, the following abbreviations are used: 'E' for *Ethics*, followed by the number of the part; 'AD' for 'definitions of the affects' (in the appendix to part 3); 'app' for appendix'; 'a' for axiom; 'c' for corollary; 'dem' for demonstration; 'def' for definition; 'l' for lemma; 'p' for 'proposition'; and 's' for scholium. For example: 'E2p40s2' reads '*Ethics*, part 2, proposition 40, scholium 2'.

Buddhism

For the quotations from the Buddha's discourses preserved in the Pāli canon, the original texts can be found in the *Mahāsaṅgīti Tipiṭaka Buddhavasse 2500: World Tipiṭaka Edition in Roman Script*, edited and published by The M.L. Maniratana Bunnag Dhamma Society Fund, 2005, which can be viewed online at https://suttacentral.net/.

The Pāli canon is divided into four main collections: *Dīgha Nikāya*, Long Discourses (abbreviated DN); *Majjhima Nikāya*, Medium Discourses (abbreviated MN); *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, Linked Discourses (abbreviated SN); and *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, Numerical Discourses (abbreviated AN).

Discourses in DN and MN are identified only by their individual number (counting from the beginning). Discourses included in other collections are identified by first providing a reference to the number of the 'chapter' in which the discourse appears, and then to the number of the discourse itself in that chapter. For example, 'SN 56.11' should be read as '*Saṃyutta Nikāya*, chapter 56, discourse number 11'.

Classical Yoga

The canonical text of the *Yogasūtras* attributed to Patañjali has received countless editions and commentaries. A recent and helpful English edition (which includes a summary of the historical commentaries) is *The Yoga Sūtras of*

Patañjali. A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary by Edwin F. Bryant, New York: North Point Press, 2009 (which can be compared also with the annotated Italian edition: Patañjali, *Yogasūtra*, edited by Federico Squarcini, Turin: Einaudi, 2015). The text of the *Yogasūtra* is cited with the abbreviation 'YS' followed by the chapter number and *sutra* number.

Tantrism

The Sanskrit text of the *Vijñānabhairava Tantra* was edited and published for the first time by Mukunda Rāma Śāstrī for the Kashmir Series of Texts and Studies, where it appeared together with his main commentaries: *The Vijñānabhairava with commentary partly by Kṣemarāja and partly by Śivopādhyāya*, Srinagar: KSTS vol. 8, 1918. Among the commented and amended translations are the French one by Lilian Silburn, *Le Vijñāna Bhairava*, Paris: Publications de l'Institut de Civilisation Indienne, 1961; and the Italian one by Attilia Sironi, *Vijñānabhairava. La conoscenza del tremendo*. Milan: Adelphi, 1989. *Vijñānabhairava* is cited with the abbreviation 'VBT' followed by the verse number.

All translations are original unless otherwise indicated.

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Dedicatory letter

Chiavari, Summer 2023

My dear friend,

Here I am coming back to you again. I haven't been in touch for a long time, as if I had to imagine forgetting you to find myself again. As I write these lines, I have traces of our previous encounters around me. How long have we known each other? Perhaps we first met in high school, although it was only in the early years of university that I really got to know you. At first, I didn't want to; I wasn't interested in you at all. You seemed difficult, on your own, too much like me to risk opening up. But then you won me over with the story of your conversion to philosophy, your passion for the infinite, and your search for something that then seemed to me just a nice concept.

As always, it were the fortuitous circumstances of chance that made our acquaintance possible. You showed me your best and eternal part. I learned to listen to you in your language, in your way of expressing yourself, sometimes tortuous, sometimes elegant, often dry, always kind. It took time before I could consider you a friend. At first you fascinated me, but I felt I was in competition; I wanted to catch you at fault—as philosophers are wont to do with those they admire. Then, little by little, you taught me patience, listening. Thanks to you, I have made decisive encounters over the years and my life has taken the direction it has today.

You taught me to question what our true freedom consists of; you encouraged me to understand the ultimate foundations of reality as clearly as possible. With you I have also learnt to pay attention to the political dimensions of life, made up of vicissitudes, tragedies, but also demands and challenges that by

temperament I would have preferred to ignore, yet now see as inescapable. Following in your footsteps, I was able to meet many of your acquaintances—not to mention the countless reading recommendations! You have made me passionate about the rise of modern scientific thought—one of your interests—and how embodiment plays an essential role in our existence, even (perhaps especially) in its mental dimension. Together we explored paths suspended between skies and seas, climbing the mountains you pointed out to me, as if it were nothing. At a certain point, I put aside my initial resistance and convinced myself that you were right—if not about everything, about the essentials. I committed myself to even trying to reconstruct the secret processes that might have guided your growth, identifying myself as much as possible with your way of thinking. I tried to become you.

Something, however, was missing. Something still divided us. You were quietly hinting at a supreme experience that I was struggling to understand, and of which I found very few (if any) around me who could claim to have tasted its reality. I tried not to give it importance, and yet it was the most important thing for you. How to pretend nothing was happening? How to hide it from us? This silent misunderstanding kept us apart for a few years. Everyone still thought we were close friends; yet we no longer felt the same way. I felt awkward in front of you, suspended between lack and incomprehension, and you couldn't tell me (or I wasn't able to understand) how to come out of it.

Then, one day I decided to turn my back on you and move in the opposite direction. I took many of the ideas we had so vividly shared, and began to think the opposite. I threw to the sea the metaphysics you so loved, saw in eternity an illusion, tried to extinguish desire, silenced reason, tore off the robe of the philosopher. I decided you were wrong, that what you had sought all your life and suggested you had found was nothing but another mistake, or at least a mirage. Somehow, I was thus returning to my initial attitude towards you, not being able (not knowing how) to love you more loyally.

But life is surprising—even more so if it is a life devoted to research. Just when I seemed to have reached the furthest point from you, where the echoes of your thought were completely extinguished and denied—in the impersonal void, in the total detachment from the world—right there a spark ignited. At first, I did not understand it, yet it was clear. It was an underlying vibration, an

infinite sense of love, without form, without time, that held all the things that were generated from it. I felt a question vibrating in the sweetest, most absolute silence: ‘why do you resist me’? From there, it was downhill. I certainly had to make a good number of detours, deviations, changes of route. I didn’t even know what path I was following anymore; space had lost its coordinates. To outside observers I would certainly have seemed confused, if not drunk. Perhaps I was. But in the end, I was back. Not like before, not at all. Relieved of the weight of ignorance of what I could not experience, I finally understood what you were talking about—I realised you were right, especially about that.

My friend, here I am again. Thank you for giving me a hard time, thank you for waiting for me, thank you for not making me feel alone.

Yours,

A.

Introduction: Urgency and estrangement

The Problem

We live—mauled by the current of information, trembling amidst the continuous sensory stimulation, slaughtered by wars that are never far away, burnt by the collapse of the ecosystem, annihilated by anxiety and depression, lulled by the hypnotic pulse of advertisements, seduced by the noise of the sleepless streets. By now, even from within the colourful chrysalis of the media, in the heart of synthetic life made up of emotional reactions reduced to icons, one hears the alarm siren sounding. There is no more time, except to rely on the confident and presumptuous voice of the artificial intelligence that watches us from its orbits so perfectly empty, with the absolute and indifferent power of a complete lack of understanding.

Ultimately, it is knowledge that saves us. But what knowledge? With a thousand hands, mouths, eyes and ears, from all sides, like exploding waves in a storm, we hurl ourselves in search of new things—objects, ideas, sensations, images, experiences—to know. We try to quench our thirst by drinking seawater. Knowledge that saves does not save because it is knowledge of something special, but because it is a special *kind* of knowledge—an unusual yet natural kind, powerful yet innate, at hand yet ignored. Saying it this way, however, does little. Inertia and laziness—weaknesses of heart—make us turn away, towards what we feel we can understand, perhaps control, even if it never ultimately takes us away from the condition we are already in. But the siren continues to sound—insistent, disturbing, unconscious—and soon there will be no more time to question, reflect, or learn from our mistakes. We need not only a solution, but first of all the lucidity to understand what the Problem really is.

Reality as a whole is moved and pervaded by a power of acting—reality *is* this power. The sun that irradiates the atmosphere with light and heat, the air currents that stretch the clouds like brushstrokes across the sky or curl them into hurricanes, the tectonic movements that shape the earth and split the continents, not to mention the endless swarming of biological processes that feed, manipulate, and transform everything around them into something living. It is not difficult to think of the earth (but if we wish, we could widen the scale

of observation) as an integrated organism.[1] Until a few centuries ago, the distribution of power of acting was relatively diffuse on our planet and not concentrated in any particular inhabitant. Today, this is no longer the case. As a species, humans have found increasingly effective ways to channel, concentrate, and commandeer the power naturally dispersed throughout the rest of nature, putting it at the service of their own ends. With the exception of a few increasingly rare nature reserves, the planet's landscape has been transmuted: the soil is harnessed for cultivation, the subsoil plumbed for the extraction of energy resources, space shaped to facilitate movement, communication, and the settlement of human communities. Other forms of life are selected and classified from the perspective of their usefulness to us. These are transformations so obvious as to become invisible, yet so profound as to bring about a new geological era—the Anthropocene.[2]

The Problem, however, is not really this rapacious appropriation of natural resources by the human species. The Problem is the gap between the abundance of technical power that humanity (or a part of it) possesses, and the impotence of its capacity to know itself. However civilised and powerful the human animal may be, it is still largely driven by needs, instincts, and aspirations similar to those of the old extinct generations. The enormous exploitation of energy to which humans subject the rest of the earth is aimed at satisfying limited appetites, often decidedly narrow, and always anchored to the most basic forms of our experience: socialisation, food, security, sex, sensory gratification—sometimes ennobled by artistic ambitions. The problem stems from the fact that these appetites presuppose and reinforce a narrow view of human beings as individuals. The power of acting that is requisitioned from the rest of the earth-organism is used to satisfy the needs of only one part of it—the most conceited, arrogant, and insecure part. In the same way that global human society is characterised by a macroscopic imbalance between the mul-

1 The idea that the planet earth can be likened to an organism was put forward by, among others, James Lovelock, *Gaia. A New Look at Life on Earth*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1979. For a commentary on this hypothesis from a Spinozist perspective, see Beth Lord, 'We are Nature', *Aeon*, 28 April 2020 (https://aeon.co/essays/even-the-anthropocene-is-nature-at-work-transforming-itself).

2 For an overview of the notion of the *Anthropocene* and related debates, see: Erle C. Ellis, *Anthropocene. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

titude of those who have very little and a microscopic minority of those who are in control of almost everything, so at the level of the global ecosystem, human beings tend to position themselves as a limited biological elite for whose material enjoyment the power and interests of all the rest can and must be sacrificed.

The Problem, then, does not lie in having access to an unprecedented amount of power (power, in its totality, is always the same, whether dispersed among many or gathered in the hands of a few). Nor is the Problem so much the fact that acquiring such power implies an alteration of the surrounding environment (human beings can only transform resources, manipulate them, but not create them, so everything they do or become is nothing more than a permutation of natural possibilities, since they themselves are and remain natural agents bound by the laws of nature). The real Problem is the contradiction between the power that human beings have appropriated and the limited vision to which this power is put to service.

In a more subtle sense, the Problem also consists in understanding how it is possible to acquire such extensive power of acting (which requires today's immense technical and scientific development) without this corresponding to an equivalent power of thinking and knowing ourselves better (as individuals and as a species). To anticipate an answer, it may be suggested that the knowledge that forms the basis for the acquisition of power is not knowledge about each of us as individuals, but a general knowledge—a scientific knowledge of the common laws of nature, which allow for its manipulation. In itself, this knowledge does not imply a transformation of the way each individual *imagines* their own being as something relatively separate, finite, and independent, and, on this basis, seeks to protect and empower their fragile reality.

The issue arises from the fact that the technoscientific power that allows us to manipulate the world is put at the service of a fundamental impotence to adequately conceive of our role in the world, a myopia that renders us incapable of seeing beyond finite individuality, and an insensitivity that cuts us off from an authentic experience of unity and understanding of the whole. These are forms of powerlessness that technoscience, in itself, does not and cannot remedy. If this impotence were reversed, if even a sufficient minority could experience their own being as an expression of the totality, it would necessarily

follow that the enormous power we have at our disposal would be directed back towards the totality, shared with the rest of the ecosystem from which it was extracted, and put at the service of the global organism in which our individual lives are embedded and on which they constantly depend. The problem is, fundamentally, one of powerlessness—namely, our impotence to know who we are.

The solution, then, does not result in abdicating power, but instead in empowering that which has so far been abandoned or insufficiently empowered, namely our way of thinking, knowing, understanding, and experiencing our own nature. It is not a question of introducing another general knowledge (for through the general we could never know the particular), nor of habituating ourselves to old or new imaginations (for however seductive it can be, imagination merely fantasises, without really knowing the intimate reality of things). It is a matter of cultivating a new kind of knowledge—intuitive, immediate, powerful—that is capable of making us instantly feel our belonging to the whole and, on that basis, capable of showing us a new expression of our own power of acting.

The philosophy of Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) constitutes perhaps one of the most accurate, precise, and promising attempts not only to bring into focus the Problem that has just been sketched here, but above all to explore its solution. For this attempt to succeed, however, we must take Spinoza seriously—much more seriously than we have done so far. This means listening to what he has to teach us not as one would look at a rare and precious object imprisoned in its impenetrable museum case. We have to listen to him as one would listen to a friend, or perhaps a doctor, who has come to shake us out of our torpor, to urge us to clarify our condition, and then act accordingly. We must tear the veil of words that simultaneously shows us and separates us from the thing itself, make contact with it, touch it, make it our own.[3]

3 The association between Spinoza and environmentalist thought has been developed over many decades, starting with the now classic works of Arne Naess (1911-2009), who dedicated a volume to Spinoza, *Freedom, Emotion and Self-Subsistence: The Structure of a Central Part of Spinoza's Ethics* (first edition 1972, now in Arne Naess, *The Selected Works of Arne Naess, Volumes 1-10*, ed. by Harold Glasser, vol. 6, Heildenberg-Berlin: Springer, 2005). The 'deep ecology' founded by Naess draws inspiration from Eastern, especially Indian, thought, from which he retrieves the idea of 'self-realisation' as a process of a progressive expansion of the self or finite self until an expanded form of

Spinoza's work is well-known today to specialists in the history of Western philosophy, and familiarising oneself with its direct historical context is certainly helpful in understanding his thought. However, erudition has an instrumental value, and it incurs a marginal utility. In what follows, the intention will therefore not be to build a time machine (yet another) to visit Spinoza in his attic in The Hague in the 1670s.[4] What follows is more like a machine of the future, a tool to use Spinozian thought as fuel to refocus our fragmented attention, glimpsing what we have so far missed. Instead of just reading his main work, the *Ethics*, we must tear out its pages one by one, throw them into the oven of this machine, and use its combustion to attempt a new way of living in the world.[5]

What is needed to understand Spinoza is first of all a form of estrangement. We must shake off (and simultaneously liberate Spinoza from) the implicit presuppositions and habits of mind with which we are used to interpret the fun-

consciousness is achieved. Naess sees a connection between this orientation and Spinozian thought. Charged with 'mysticism', this reading has more recently been criticised by Murray Bookchin, 'Social Ecology versus Deep Ecology: A Challenge for the Ecology Movement', *Green Perspectives: Newsletter of the Green Program Project*, nos. 1-5, 1987; Id., *The philosophy of social ecology: essays on dialectical naturalism*, Montréal: Black Rose Books, 1996. The discussion in the following pages will attempt to show how there is in fact a fruitful way (from a hermeneutical, theoretical, and practical point of view) to think about Spinoza's closeness to (and distance from) Indian traditions and the form of 'mysticism' that is defended in the *Ethics*.

4 For an introductory overview of Spinoza's life and historical context, see Steven Nadler's rich biography, *Spinoza: A Life*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001; and Jonathan Israel, *Spinoza, Life and Legacy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. For an introduction more specifically focused on the philosophical aspects of Spinozian thought, see Lorenzo Vinciguerra, *Spinoza*, Rome: Carocci, 2015. For a guide to reading the *Ethics*, see Emanuela Scribano, *Guida alla lettura dell'Etica di Spinoza*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2008; Beth Lord, *Spinoza's Ethics: An Edinburgh Philosophical Guide*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

5 From the point of view of the secondary literature on Spinoza, the originality and contribution that this book hopes to make can be seen on three levels. Firstly, as an invitation to renew the debate on the kinds of knowledge, and especially on the intellectual love of God. Secondly, as an attempt to find a systematic and organic way of establishing an intercultural dialogue between Spinozian philosophy and Indian thought. Thirdly, by proposing the *Ethics* not only as a speculative text to be examined in a strictly intellectual manner, but also as a practical guide, aimed at the transformation of life, being, and the interpretation of the world, according to a method neither less rigorous nor less clear than those proposed (with all due variations) by the yoga traditions. However, the priority in the following exposition will not be to establish each of these points in detail by refuting their opposing views. Rather, the goal is to provide initial evidence (textual, philosophical, and experiential) in their support, leaving a fuller discussion to further critical debate. Indeed, the purpose of this discussion is not to defend a specific reading of Spinoza by a certain interpreter, but rather to present Spinozian philosophy in a form that can be put at use in effecting the powerful and profound existential transformation it promises and demands.

damental rules of that game we call 'philosophy'. Spinoza does not ask us to read, reformulate, permute semantic constructions or produce new ones. To understand Spinoza, it is not enough to merely cultivate a sense of familiarity with certain concepts and modes of expression. It is about analysing our lived experience, discerning its mechanisms from within, and learning to direct them otherwise. It is about expanding not only the content of our knowledge, but the ways or quality (the power) of our knowing. What we are lacking is not old or new words, but the consolidation and commoning of experiences that are rarely touched upon and have not yet become the stable heritage of our culture (above all, what Spinoza calls the experience of the intellectual love of God).[6]

To create this context of estrangement, these pages will present Spinoza's thought as a particular form of yoga. For a time that is difficult to calculate, but which spans millennia of human history and vicissitudes, the word 'yoga' has been used in India to denote both a state of salvation and the method or practice that leads to it. Over the centuries, of course, both state and method have received different formulations and sometimes have been completely transformed. Therefore, one should rather say that yoga is a map, an attempt to represent the geography of human potential to damn and save oneself. Spinoza, as we shall see, was aware of this map, or at least of some of its essential parts. Yet Spinoza's yoga is not concerned with describing or exploring the

6 A recent publication that comes closest to this idea is Clare Carlisle, *Spinoza's Religion,* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2021. The author defends a panentheist reading of Spinoza (as opposed to the dominant view that considers him a pantheist), contextualising it by reference to certain references that emerge in medieval scholasticism, and proposing a 'religious' reading of Spinozian thought—in which 'religious' does not mean adherence to a set of dogmas or beliefs, but a moral virtue and a way of seeing and inhabiting the world. Throughout, Carlisle gives ample space to the discussion of intuitive knowledge and intellectual love. On the one hand, she seems to suggest that intuitive knowledge consists of a kind of reflexive or metacognitive knowledge, in which the subject knows not only the object but also its capacity to know (Ch. 2, p. 42). This is a point that seems to echo a central aspect of Buddhist meditative practice, but one that does not find much support in the text of the *Ethics* (where the theory of reflexivity or the idea of the idea, E2p21s, does not seem to be directly linked to the definition of intuitive knowledge). On the other hand, the author suggests how the intellectual love of God that arises from intuition has to do with a 'nondual' realisation of being-in-God, analogous to that achieved through meditation (ch. 8, p. 151). This is a very interesting suggestion, but one that requires two essential clarifications: what kind of 'nondualism' we are talking about, and above all what, in concrete terms, the meditative practice that can give rise to such a realisation might be. As will be seen below, the form of nondualism most akin to Spinozian thought can be found in the works of the śaiva authors of medieval Kashmir. The third chapter is devoted to presenting in detail what a form of Spinozian meditation might consist of.

map in its entirety, nor with refining it in any particular way. Spinoza was not a cartographer, but a travelling salesman, who had no time for detours and sought rather to arrive at his destination in the most convenient and safe manner. His goal was to find and succeed in pointing out the shortest path between the heart of the Problem that grips us (which in its basic structure is not new) and its solution.

Certainly, one could say that Spinoza, like the Hellenistic philosophers (and the Stoics above all) proposed the idea of philosophy as a 'spiritual exercise'.[7] This is a useful suggestion, as it aims to unite the theoretical and practical aspects of philosophical work, while emphasising its underlying orientation aimed at producing a radical transformation in the individual who engages in it. In this sense, yoga too is naturally a vast and diverse reservoir of 'spiritual exercises.' What, however, does not seem so evident in the Western Hellenistic tradition of spiritual exercises is precisely the breadth of the spectrum of possible experiences that are explored and mapped. This breadth is essential in order to put into proper perspective what otherwise seem obvious features of ordinary experience, and which in the absence of other points of reference can be taken normatively as the totality of possible experience. Starting from the idea that there is more to human possibility than is suggested by the ordinary and common forms to which inertia has accustomed us, allows us from the outset to challenge our presuppositions and ask why we should limit ourselves to taking as the only way of experiencing reality that which in a broader context appears as one of the relatively less developed forms of consciousness.

7 The notion of 'spiritual exercises' that is used to reread Hellenistic philosophical practices was introduced by Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, (Engl. transl.) Oxford (UK) and Cambridge (US): Blackwell, 1995; an idea also dialectically taken up by Michel Foucault, *Hermenéutique du sujet. Course au Collège de France 1981-82* (edited by F. Gros), Paris: Gallimard and Seuil, 2001; Id. *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of Self. Lectures at Dartmouth College, 1980* (edited by H.-P. Fruchaud, and D. Lorenzini), Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016. The topic is also addressed, albeit with a different slant by Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire. Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994 (2nd ed. 2009). This interpretive scheme has so far been limited mainly to Western sources, although an attempt (not entirely successful) to extend it to ancient Buddhist thought has been advanced by Steven Collins, *Wisdom as a Way of Life. Theravāda Buddhism Reimagined* (edited by Justin McDaniel), New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. For some examples of how Spinoza's philosophy can be read and presented as a form of 'spiritual exercise' or life practice, see Maxime Rovere, *Exister. Méthodes de Spinoza*, Paris: CNRS éditions, 2010; Frédéric Lenoir, *Le miracle Spinoza. Une philosophie pour éclairer notre vie*, Paris: Editions Fayard, 2017.

As will become evident, placing Spinoza in the context of the yoga traditions has a twofold advantage. On the one hand, it allows us to problematise several central points common to much of these traditions, since Spinoza seems to share a certain diagnosis of the Problem but rejects its more classical solution. In agreement with the yoga traditions, Spinoza does not believe in the reduction of human experience to a materialist vision, in which everything is flattened on biological life, nor does he believe that the only possible intervention is a precarious therapy aimed at maintaining the biosocial functions of individuals. But contrary to many yoga traditions, neither does Spinoza believe that the acceptance of a dimension of transcendence (which he does not deny) must imply a renunciation of the power of acting and an aspiration to the dissolution of the finite in the void of the Absolute. On the contrary, his alternative is as radical as it is integral; he sees the Problem in powerlessness and the solution in empowerment. In this sense, pondering about Spinoza's yoga is a way of rethinking yoga as such.

Some yoga traditions propose to us a model of existence that seems radically different, distant, vaguely disturbing, compared to the ordinary way of living to which we are accustomed. Others, on the contrary, invite us to realise how the foundation of all problems is some form of illusion, an unreality from which we need only wake up as from a dream to make it vanish, without having to change anything else. Spinoza's proposal is a middle way between these two approaches, the highlighting of which is the second advantage of the hermeneutic perspective outlined here. In a nutshell, it is a matter of fully accepting our nature, but thoroughly understanding its workings and capacities, in order to enhance it as much as possible. This empowerment implies a qualitative transformation of the way we experience the world. There are quite a few illusions (or inadequate ideas, as Spinoza would say) to be recognised and corrected. In this process, however, what is revealed is not another world, but the truer, deeper, more radiant face of the one in which we are already live. Ultimately, the problem of empowerment is always and only a problem of insufficient integration. The more fragmented, limited, and closed within itself the power remains, the more ineffective its effect. Integrating power means recognising its cosmic root (sunk into the totality of nature, he would say), making

its individuality an organic vector for its germination, its development, and its expression.

With all this in mind, this book is not primarily aimed at convincing an audience of sceptics (sceptical about the practical and existential validity of Spinoza's philosophy, or sceptical about the yoga traditions, or sceptical about the possible link between the two), but rather at offering some useful indications and guidelines to those who already have an interest in the direction explored here but need points of reference and support to proceed with its deepening. Only the possibility of transforming initially sporadic and individual results into something replicable on a wider scale can in fact constitute the ultimate test of the validity of this attempt, and those who already have an interest in embarking on such a path (and have a sufficiently open mind not to be frightened by such a gamble) are therefore the audience to be addressed first.

We will see in the first chapter how Spinoza presents the diagnosis common to many yoga traditions, but also the reasons for his disagreement with the therapy usually prescribed. The second chapter will then explore in more detail the key to Spinoza's proposed solution, which is based on the experience of what he calls *amor Dei intellectualis* (intellectual love of God) and which stems from the power of the mind to achieve intuitive knowledge. In the third chapter we will explore the means necessary for the cultivation and realisation of this experience, which include not only the development of intuitive knowledge itself, but also of rational knowledge, the cultivation of an integrated and uniform physical condition of activation, and care for an appropriate socio-political context.

Although this seems to be the simplest sequence to expound the materials, the vision presented in these pages has been developed by proceeding in an inverse order, that is, starting from the experimentation with a kind of 'Spinozist meditation' and how it could be practised, looking for possible points of contact and mutual support between ideas and themes of Spinoza's thought and the methods of yogic contemplative practices. The rest of the interpretation presented here stems from an attempt to account for this practice, contextualise it in a certain historical framework, and show its philosophical plausibility. In other words, the 'Spinozist meditation' presented in chapter three is not the hermeneutic distillation of a purely intellectual reading of the texts, but

the experiential basis that guided the reading and interpretation developed around it.

Before proceeding, however, it will be appropriate to provide a general overview of the territory of the human condition and its potential, seen and interpreted from the perspective of the (diverse and sometimes contradictory) yoga traditions.

Yoga as exploration

Mapping a territory means not only, and not so much, creating an adequate representation of it, but first and foremost filtering and reducing the possible amount of information in order to express and highlight a particular aspect of the territory itself. A map, in this sense, is the necessary simplification of a reality, which deliberately impoverishes our understanding, allowing us to focus on what is most essential to the performance of a certain activity. If we want to clarify the political borders of a state, we can omit certain details of the natural orography, and if we want to map the metropolitan line of a city, we can do without an accurate representation of the maze of streets and public spaces in which the city consists.

Yoga is a map of the spectrum of experiences that are possible for a human being. The criterion behind this map is to identify the precise point at which these experiences become problematic, and how to escape, resolve, or reinterpret that problematicity in a way that eventually leads to a state of greater freedom, bliss, and salvation. In this sense, yoga is perhaps one of the most ambitious, visionary, and precious human monuments ever created. What follows is only an extreme simplification and generalisation of some central points that have emerged during its very long multicultural and trans-sectarian history. Such generalisations are insufficient to know the territory itself (i.e., human experience in its full spectrum of possibilities), but hopefully sufficient to indicate at least the main points of reference.[8]

8 For a historical overview, with extensive extracts from the original texts, see: Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition. Its History, Literature, Philosophy and Practice*, Chino Valley: Hohm Press, 2008 (3rd ed.). For an anthology of selected texts, see James Mallinson and Mark Singleton (ed. and transl.), *Roots of Yoga*, London: Penguin Books, 2017; David Gordon White (ed.), *Yoga in Practice*, Princeton:

At the centre of the map is the experience of being someone, a subject, a person who is able to refer to themselves and perceive themselves as a certain unity, relatively independent of others and the rest of the environment. Even identifying and defining what a subject is, in this sense, is a difficult task because everyone experiences their subjectivity in their own way. However, there are elements that are common enough and fundamental enough to be taken as a basis for reflection. Subjectivity implies a certain form of division and separation between 'me' and 'the other', which may be more or less marked, and may manifest itself in different aspects or domains of experience. One can live in a physical subjectivity, in which the skin of the body is the insurmountable boundary between me and the other. One can live in a psychological subjectivity, in which my self-representation of who I am determines my interpretation of what is mine and what is other. There is also an emotional subjectivity, related to the strength and weight that my emotions (and their intersection with the emotions of others) take on in other aspects of experience. There may be still other aspects of subjectivity, and usually all these aspects do not exclude each other, but combine with each other.[9]

The starting point of yogic exploration consists in the observation that ordinary subjectivity is something constructed, and can therefore be altered or deconstructed altogether. From the point of view of an ordinary subject accustomed to a certain way of life, subjectivity appears entirely natural, spontaneous, and not at all assembled. To think otherwise seems impossible. What could be simpler than my experience of being myself? Yoga aims to first deconstruct

Princeton University Press, 2012. For a broad overview of Indian worldviews see Jessica Frazier, *Hindu Worldviews. Theories of Self, Ritual and Divinity*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. For a more methodological reflection on comparative philosophy and religious studies, see Oliver Freiberger, *Considering comparison: a method for religious studies*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019; Jessica Frazier, ''The view from above': a theory of comparative philosophy', *Religious Studies* 56, special issue 1 (2020), 32-48.

9 For a cross-cultural examination of the theme of subjectivity or the self, see Andrea Sangiacomo, *The Tragedy of the Self. Lectures on Global Hermeneutics*, Groningen: Groningen University Press, 2023 (https://doi.org/10.21827/63cfc0e9db70); Jonardon Ganeri, *The Concealed Art of the Soul. Theories of Self and Practices of Truth in Indian Ethics and Epistemology*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. For a framing of the notion of subjectivity within Western philosophy, see: Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1989; Étienne Balibar, Barbara Cassin, Alain de Libera, 'Sujet', in *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies,* edited by Barbara Cassin, Paris: Seuil/Dictionnaires Le Robert, 2004, 1231-1254.

this apparent obviousness of the ordinary subject, shed light on the mechanisms by which it is constructed, and then explore what the possible alternatives are.[10]

The methods used are manifold. There is a virtuous circularity between yogic 'exercises' and the underlying vision that justifies them. On the one hand, a certain vision invites the pursuit of certain practices. For instance, observing how much mental activity is usually based on a reworking of sensory experiences, the idea of reducing sensory activity to reduce mental activity arises. On the other hand, the practices themselves may lead to otherwise unexpected alterations or developments in the theoretical framework on which they are based. By first beginning to manipulate the body and its postures to induce a state of stillness and patient tolerance, conducive to contemplation, one can also expand somatic exploration, making it a key to understanding the very phenomenon of being embodied, ultimately rethinking what its consequences might be for understanding mental life.

In some cases, the ritual use of certain psychotropic substances is considered as a possibility to induce altered states of consciousness, usually related to a magnification of sensitivity and imaginative capacity, and a relaxation of the perceived boundaries of one's subjectivity.[11] But it must be said that for a certain classical orthodoxy, transversal to different traditions, these means are considered inferior, as they imply an element of passivity on the part of the practitioner. The use of substances functions as a shortcut, capable of inducing an effect, but leaving the practitioner unable to understand how one can move

10 'Ordinary subjectivity' refers to the way of experiencing and understanding the sense of self as a practical subject, the character of a personal story intertwined with the events of the world, moved by passionate attitudes based on desire and aversion, and perceived as something finite, distinct, autonomous. All yoga traditions offer a critique of this type of subjectivity through a path of 'training' aimed at deconstructing it. But not all traditions agree on the interpretation of what results from this process of deconstruction. For Buddhism, for example, deconstruction aims solely at the negative goal of the abandonment of the sense of self (i.e., the realisation of 'non-self'). For the orthodox schools (including classical Yoga), the goal is the experience of the 'true Self', understood as an eternal, sometimes impersonal or trans-individual principle, comparable to pure consciousness.

11 For an examination of the neurophenomenological effects of certain psychotropic substances, see Katrin H. Preller and Franz X. Vollenweider, 'Phenomenology, Structure, and Dynamic of Psychedelic States', in Adam L. Halberstadt, Franz X. Vollenweider, David E. Nichols (eds.), *Behavioral Neurobiology of Psychedelic Drugs*, Berlin: Springer, 2018, 221-256. For an accessible and popular overview of contemporary developments, Michael Pollan, *How to Change Your Mind. The New Science of Psychedelics*, London: Penguin, 2019.

from an ordinary state of consciousness to an altered one. Just as someone travelling in a big city using only an underground line would have very little idea of the territory that connects the two stations between which they ascend and descend, so do psychotropic substances seem to cut off what is considered the most fundamental component of yogic practices, namely the understanding of how one gets from one point to another, and how one traverses the territory of consciousness, step by step.

In any case, the main aim of most of the methods tried out in yoga consists in relaxing, loosening, and possibly suspending those boundary lines that delimit and define the subject's ordinary experience. The multiplicity of levels on which these boundaries are drawn thus corresponds to a multiplicity of practices aimed at undermining them, wherever they may have taken root.

The first empirical result of this exploration is a kind of factual demonstration that the subject, as it is ordinarily experienced, is by no means a primitive or immediate phenomenon, but the result of a specific way of interpreting conscious experience. Since the subject is constructed, it can also be transformed and deconstructed.[12]

The deconstruction of the subject is followed by the opening of a new horizon of possibilities. Just as the boundaries of ordinary subjectivity function as barriers to impose a determined and finite form on the otherwise open field of consciousness, so the gradual deconstruction of those same walls reveals ever-widening, sometimes unusual landscapes, often immersed in a profound and silent beauty. There are various attempts to map these territories, and their mutual connection. The general principle remains, however, a methodical and deliberate emptying of experience itself of its contents.[13]

12 For a practical discussion of how this principle is implemented in the Buddhist context, see Rob Burbea, *Seeing that Frees. Meditations on Emptiness and Dependent Arising*, Hermes Amāra Publications, 2014.

13 In ancient Indian traditions, the state of dissolution of individual boundaries is associated with *samādhi* (literally 'putting together' or 'composing', hence also 'composure' or 'concentration'). The term can be used either to indicate the peak of intensity at which this experience of unification can arrive, or the set of states and stages that gradually lead to that peak. In the ancient Buddhist tradition, preserved in the discourses of the Buddha transmitted by the Pāli canon, eight stages of *samādhi* are usually distinguished (see, e.g., DN 9, MN 26, AN 9.41), sometimes followed by a ninth state of complete cessation of all experience (*nirodha*). In Patañjali's classical yoga tradition, the pattern is partially different (YS I.11-18), but probably developed in close dialogue with Buddhist practice (on this, see Pradeep P. Gokhale, *The Yogasūtra of Patañjali. A New Introduction to the Buddhist Roots of*

Ordinary experience is usually the experience of specific objects, which occupy the space of attention for a period of time and are embedded in a mechanism of emotional and cognitive reactions. Feeling the stimulus of hunger, I search for food. In the search, my attention focuses entirely on what can satisfy my hunger, and depending on circumstances, past experience, and my abilities, I will strive to find the food that can satisfy me most, and then move on to something else.

When the boundaries of subjectivity begin to be eroded, usually the contraction of attention around a particular object is the first to be released. In its place, a different way of being attentive takes over, one that is less focused on a particular object, but more open and paradoxically even more alert and lucid, not only with respect to what is present, but also with respect to the cognitive state itself that forms the background to the experience as a whole. Sometimes, it is precisely by using absolute concentration on a single object to the exclusion of all others that this state of openness can be induced. It is this latter state of openness, however, that is the primary goal of meditative practice, while the exclusive concentration on one point or object is only an intermediate (and not always necessary) instrumental step.

The relaxation of the concern for the *what* of the experience (for its object) is followed by a relaxation of the *how* (of its emotional tone). One discovers how the subject's boundaries are cemented by various forms of fear and anxiety, which create defensive walls and a desperate desire to control what one knows deep down that cannot be controlled. The relaxation of subjectivity thus corresponds to a contrary movement of all emotionality, which veers from the anxious tones of desire and aversion, fear and longing, towards the more serene expanses of a special joy. In fact, one of the fundamental discoveries of the yoga traditions is to have observed how ordinary subjectivity is based on unmotivated fear. The fortification of the ego and its incarceration within ever more marked and well-defended boundaries is based on the assumption that there is some form of danger or enemy to defend against. Like a child fearful of the

the Yoga System, London and New York: Routledge, 2020). For a comparativist study of the different *samādhi* states in Buddhism, classical Yoga, and Christian mystical sources, see Kenneth Rose, *Yoga, Meditation, and Mysticism: Contemplative Universals and Meditative Landmarks*, London: Bloomsbury, 2016.

dark who finally discovers that there is no monster lurking in the darkness ready to attack him, so generations and generations of yogis have discovered that beyond the impenetrable walls of the ego, there is nothing to fear but the indefinite expanse of a natural sense of ease, beauty, love, and profound joy, which vibrates in the mental space and makes the body its sounding board.

This in itself is a dimension of experience completely unknown to ordinary life, yet it constitutes a whole continent in the possibilities of consciousness. The further one proceeds and delves into this continent, the more the sense of joy becomes subtle, refined, until it veers towards a state of sublime balance and neutrality. For those who know nothing of the flavour of this state, it would be called a form of indifference—but only in the sense that it is an emotional condition of such balance that all nuances are equally taken into account, counterbalanced against each other, and none emerge to the detriment of others, so that finally their very oppositions can fade into a pure sense of quiet suspended awe.

Even this, however, is only a relative threshold. Those who have gone further have discovered that not only subjectivity as such is a construction, but experience itself is also a construction. Not only is it possible to release the contraction around the object of consciousness, and not only is it possible to release the affective contraction around the mode of consciousness, it is also possible to release any form of objective consciousness as such. What follows is the discovery that consciousness, per se, has no object, it is simply pure consciousness. This experience has sometimes been exemplified by comparing it to that of a dreamless sleep, interpreted as a moment of absolute suspension and cessation of all activity, yet sublime in its emptiness.[14]

14 Already in the earliest *Upaniṣads* one can find hints of a meditative state so introverted and internally absorbed as to be devoid of any object, analogous to what may occur in states of deep sleep (see, for example, the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, IV.3 and the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, VIII.11, English translations in *Upaniṣads. A New Translation by Patrick Olivelle*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 61 and 174, respectively). For a contemporary discussion of these experiences, from a neuroscientific perspective, see Alex Gamma, Thomas Metzinger, 'The Minimal Phenomenal Experience questionnaire (MPE—92M): Towards a Phenomenological Profile of "Pure Awareness" Experiences in Meditators', *PLoS ONE* 16, no. 7 (2021): e0253694 (https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0253694); Ruben E. Laukkonen et al., 'Cessations of Consciousness in Meditation: Advancing a Scientific Understanding of Nirodha Samāpatti', *Progress in Brain Research* 2023, https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.pbr.2022.12.007.

From a more philosophical point of view, the discovery of pure consciousness introduces a radical element into the understanding of experience and reality. If by experience we mean conscious experience (how else could there be experience if not within a field of consciousness?), then experience is to be understood as the synthesis of two aspects, inseparable in the concreteness of facts, but distinguishable to the attentive eye of the explorer. There is a pure consciousness, which is nothing other than the *fact that* there is experience. This pure consciousness is not an object, and it is not objectifiable. It is the foundation, the transcendental condition of possibility for any given form of experience. Within this field of consciousness arise the determinate contents, objects, events, and everything that can be encountered in the horizon of appearance, from the grossest to the most sublime. These contents are necessarily *in* consciousness (otherwise they could not appear), yet they are not consciousness, but a determination that emerges through it. Different schools disagree about the relationship between these two aspects—whether they should be understood as two aspects of the same reality or as two independent principles—but for the moment there is no need to enter into this debate.[15]

What is most important is to observe how the exploration of the spectrum of possibilities of conscious experience has led yoga traditions not only beyond the ordinary boundaries of subjectivity, but also to the discovery of an ultimate limit of experience itself, which consists in the complete cessation of all phenomena, in emptiness, in total suspension. This state of cessation is an insurmountable horizon because, by definition, every form of determination or specific content vanishes in it.

While emptiness or cessation defines the impassable bottom of experience, yogic exploration has also gone in the opposite direction, investigating the possible enhancement of ordinary structures and faculties. Thus, not only have methods of silencing the senses been explored, but also potential means of manipulating the natural physical body, and even of transmuting the body

15 In classical Indian philosophy, the Sāṃkhya and Yoga schools defend the dualistic view whereby pure consciousness stands as a passive and immutable principle, as opposed to another principle, *prakṛti* (nature), which expresses the totality of phenomenal activities and manifestations. See in this regard Mikel Burley, *Classical Sāṃkhya and Yoga. An Indian Metaphysics of Experience*, London and New York: Routledge, 2007. For the nondual view, see the references introduced below.

itself, abandoning it and finding it again. We are dealing here with the series of 'powers' (*siddhi* in Sanskrit) that various yogic traditions have deemed capable of cultivating.[16]

Perhaps this is the most difficult aspect to take seriously for contemporary Western sensibilities, which are so profoundly shaped by scientific rationality. It must be remembered, however, that even science, especially in its most advanced forms, is based on empirical experiences that are completely inaccessible in ordinary life and only possible through the use of highly sophisticated equipment, extremely powerful instruments, and procedures that are intelligible to a very small circle of specialists. This is only to say that even science, especially today, cannot be said to be 'empirical' in the sense of everyday, ordinary empiricism. For the purposes of our discussion, though, there is no reason to embark on a defence of even the possibility of the powers described by yoga traditions. Perhaps it is a region inaccessible to most. Perhaps it is a region so inaccessible that it is unclear how many have actually ventured into it, and how many have not merely made more or less fantastic accounts of it. For most of the classical traditions, however, unravelling this problem is not really essential, as these powers are often seen as a potential distraction, if not downright risky because of the way they can ignite a sense of egotism and lust for personal gain in those who think they possess them but are in fact possessed by them.

A similar difficulty may perhaps extend to another aspect shared by most yoga traditions, namely the eschatological view of life as a tendentially limitless path marked by the rhythm of deaths and rebirths, and directed by the inflexible and impersonal law of the moral quality of action (*karma* in Sanskrit) and its fruition. This, however, is a vision that emerges (albeit in different ways) in multiple cultures and traditions around the world, not all of which are necessarily concerned with yogic exploration.[17] Certainly, the more one identifies with the uniqueness and particularity of a certain biological existence, the more insurmountable the threshold of death seems to be. It is not a totally

16 See, for the ancient Buddhist tradition, DN 2, and for classical yoga YS 3.11-36.

17 See in this regard, Gananath Obeyesekere, *Imagining Karma. Ethical Transformation in Amerindian, Buddhist, and Greek Rebirth*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2002.

unexpected consequence that it is precisely the erosion of such identification (which as we have seen is the main aim of yoga) that leads one to understand the death of a certain organism not as an end, but as a simple passage. Again, however, these are aspects that we will leave aside here.

What is most important for our discussion is to have sketched in broad strokes the space explored by yoga. This is the very space of conscious experience, which moves between the limit of cessation—of vacuity, of the extinguishing of all activity—and that of empowerment, of transcendence, of the amplification of the fundamental constituents of experience itself. In the centre of this spectrum of possibilities lies ordinary subjectivity, tightly enclosed within its fragile confines.

Deconstructing the subject

The next point to consider is to ask why we want to deconstruct ordinary subjectivity. Pure curiosity? Spiritual tourism? Not at all. A fundamental point of yoga, and one of the oldest, is to recognize ordinary subjectivity as a problematic plexus. It is an observation that unifies most historical traditions and schools, from which arises the urgency for a way (or ways) to transcend subjectivity itself.

If subjectivity is based on a more or less effective and complete form of isolation from its surroundings (an essential division between 'me' and 'other'), its presupposition is therefore an awareness of one's own relative and originally open nature. To be a subject is to depend on that from which one seeks to distinguish and separate oneself. In ordinary experience, however, this essential relationality is denied, masked, or not fully understood. Although it is possible to feel intimately related to certain aspects of the surrounding reality (from one's fellow human beings, or at least some of them, to the whole environment), there necessarily remain domains and barriers that one is unwilling to cross. The natural instinct to defend the integrity and life of one's physical body, for example, is based on the assumption that this body is absolutely 'mine' and not only can I defend it from external agents that threaten to compromise its life, but I have a *right to* do so, because the body *belongs to me*. If the relationship with the body presents a relatively coarse case, identity needs (i.e.,

the way in which my 'being myself' is defined and acted upon in relation to my knowing myself to be part of a certain group, community, or set of others) function on a much more complex symbolic level, but ultimately follow the same logic. Nationality, creed, social function, economic power, pastimes, are all more or less innocuous forms of becoming someone to the exclusion of being someone else or becoming something else. To a certain extent, these identities are superimposable in the same subject, even though they can often conflict with each other, and even more often underlie conflicts between subjectivities that recognise themselves as different.

No matter how 'open' a subjectivity may consider itself and self-represent itself, it will always be defined, at one level or another, by a form of necessary exclusion and self-confinement. This, on its own, is still not the heart of the problem. The essential and fundamental flaw of ordinary subjectivity, as diagnosed by yoga, consists in *forgetting* or *ignoring* the inherent relationality of the subject, making it *as if* (at least in certain spheres, and at certain levels) such relationality were not there, and the subject were really that separate and self-confined entity it purports to be. In this sense, subjectivity is inhabited by a contradiction or, if you will, a form of schizophrenia between its removed reality and the claims of its surface practice. It is a subtle, yet crucial difference, the same difference that passes between playing a part on stage and completely forgetting that one is acting, or getting involved in a game and completely ignoring that one is only playing. In a way, the ultimate diagnosis that yoga poses on ordinary subjectivity is that it always lacks a sufficient sense of humour, which forces it to take itself intolerably seriously.

This basic ignorance or forgetfulness (what is called *avidyā* in Sanskrit), however, is not just a lapse in style or a character problem. It is a structural flaw that inevitably transforms the experience of ordinary subjectivity into a path devoted to the frustration of one's own goals. By forgetting or ignoring the original relationality (and thus relativity) of subjectivity, it becomes necessary to cement and defend those boundaries that define the subject. This requires a desperate attempt to control the surrounding as well as the internal environment, usually based on the complementary mechanisms of desire or greed for the attainment of what seems to sustain the subject's existence, and aversion or fear for the opposite. Attraction and repulsion, in all their infinite nuances and

admixtures, become the fundamental forces that move the subject in its precarious search for stability, or in its defence of its right to be itself.

The contradiction (paradoxical and ironic at the same time) induced by this effort to control, consists in the fact that neither ignorance nor forgetfulness can in any way undermine the subject's constitutive relationality, and thus the more successful they are in isolating the subject within itself, the more they uproot it from its foundation, jeopardise its survival, and wither its experience. Ignorance and forgetfulness are therefore bad counsellors, insofar as by abandoning the subject, in its quest for security and control, to the delusion of absoluteness and independence, they end up exposing it to the most absolute risk and fragility. Many of the yogic traditions attempt to make this contradiction apparent by pointing the finger at the various forms of dissatisfaction, suffering, and existential anxiety that accompany the experience of ordinary subjectivity. It should not be forgotten, however, that the problem in focus is not merely psychological, and is not merely reducible to a calculation of what can lead to greater or lesser happiness. The problem is structural and remains so regardless of whether a subject may be more or less able, or even willing, to suffer for it.[18]

Having made this diagnosis, yoga usually offers a series of practices aimed at overcoming ignorance and forgetfulness. However, this is a relatively long-term goal. Ignorance and forgetfulness somehow run counter to the fundamental evidence of the subject's relationality. Therefore, they need constant work of confirming and reinterpreting facts in order to remain credible, or rather to remain hidden among the premises implicit in the ordinary view not to be questioned. This work is carried out by the mechanisms of desire and aversion, which operating on the premise of having to defend the boundaries of subjectivity (craving for what seems useful, and rejecting what seems harmful) create in their infinite iterations and variations a series of automatisms, habits, and conditioned reflexes. This becomes the cognitive and emotional scaffolding of the subject, its existential structure, and its most unbreakable cage. Since habit

18 For a reconstruction of how this issue emerges in ancient Buddhism, see Andrea Sangiacomo, *An Introduction to Friendliness (mettā). Emotional Intelligence and Freedom in the Pāli Discourses of the Buddha*, Groningen: Groningen University Press, 2022 (https://doi.org/10.21827/618a51bdd618).

and instinct allow for unreflective action, the more ingrained their mechanisms become, the less any suspicion can arise to question their premises.

Many yogic traditions are thus concerned, in the first instance, with providing tools to disabuse the subject of habitual patterns based on desire and aversion, thus indirectly but deliberately teaching it to deconstruct itself. Often this type of training starts from the level of social interactions—or from the realm of moral behaviour—and consists of instilling a strong resolution to avoid certain acts, while at the same time observing their occurrence and questioning their validity. Non-violence (*ahiṃsā* in Sanskrit, the opposite of aversion and fear) and non-lustfulness (*vairāgya* in Sanskrit, the opposite of desire) are two of the most important commitments in this context. At the same time, the reduction of the practitioner's subjection to the reactive mechanisms of desire and aversion allows for a greater sense of freedom, relaxation, and openness, which encourages the exploration of what lies beyond the boundaries of the self. This exploration, in turn, shows how, on the one hand, there is nothing to fear, but rather an unexplored continent of possibilities for pacification, satisfaction, and freedom. On the other hand, the deepening of these experiences increasingly reveals the constructed and relative nature of ordinary subjectivity, gradually but steadily cracking ignorance and forgetfulness—until it is no longer possible to ignore or forget.

As to what happens at this point, yogic traditions are divided. This division is based on different ways of understanding the very nature of subjectivity and its relationship to the remaining spectrum of conscious experience. Simplifying the complexity of the various positions, three main orientations can be identified.

If subjectivity is only a construction, which can be deconstructed, and if this deconstruction, when pushed to its limits, can produce an intransitive experience of complete cessation, then this cessation can be thought of as the supreme form of liberation. The complete dissolution of subjectivity is thus combined with an ascetic drive to return to that empty, indeterminate horizon that surrounds, embraces, and forms the backdrop to the totality of the phenomenal world. Pushing this 'transcendent' vision to its extreme consequences, one can then think of the entire spectrum of experience as nothing more than a middle ground, a space in which one is somehow stuck, a prisoner of igno-

rance and forgetfulness, but from which one must ultimately escape. True salvation therefore consists only in the complete transcendence of the plane of appearance, and in the extinguishing of everything in an Ineffable Ultimate, the One True Absolute. This position is developed, albeit in different ways, by both the classical yoga tradition of Patañjali and the Advaita Vedānta tradition of Śaṅkara.

A more agnostic and relatively sceptical approach (in which the ancient Buddhist tradition fits) would instead insist that even the experience of cessation is but one of the possible experiences. The goal is not to choose cessation in preference to ordinary subjectivity. When this happens, one would betray one last remnant of craving and aversion, one last form of ignorance still active, and thus one could not achieve a complete form of freedom. What needs to be done is simply to undo the structures based on ignorance and forgetfulness, without taking any further stand, and without trying to reach any other particular space or place. Everything becomes indifferent, equal, light, empty, uprooted from all constraints.

A third approach (somewhat anticipated in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, but fully developed in the nondual śaiva tantrism that flourished in Kashmir at the turn of the eighth and eleventh centuries of the Common Era) looks instead to the integration of subjective experience with transcendent experience. There is, after all, a wisdom, buried in the abysses of ignorance and forgetfulness, that stems from the understanding that if subjectivity exists, it requires a certain level of forgetfulness of its own roots in order to function—because the more the transcendent horizon is immediately present with its infinite emptiness, the less subjectivity will be able to appear as such, let alone act in the world. After all, if subjectivity appears in the world, and if the world of experience is nothing other than the world that emerges from pure consciousness (where else and from what else could it emerge?), then either one must admit that pure consciousness is constantly engaged in deceiving itself and creating aberrant existential contradictions, giving rise to finite subjectivities and their tragic vicissitudes, *or* one must admit that even finite subjectivity, with all its precariousness, must have a function to perform, must be something that does not arise at random or by mistake, but for a reason. The decisive question, then, is not so much what to choose and what to reject (subjectivity or transcendence?), but

how to overcome the apparent paradox of a harmonious reconciliation of elements that seem to deny each other.

This third approach is the one that provides the most immediate context for delving into Spinoza's yoga. Like the first, it recognises the presence of a transcendent foundation of reality, yet it does not reduce reality to that foundation, nor does it seek to silence the finite expressions (including subjectivity itself) that somehow emerge from that foundation. Like the second, it thus recognises an equal legitimacy and validity to the entire field of experience, yet without falling into the subtle illusion that indifference to all states of experience is not itself a special state of experience. Like the third approach, Spinoza owes us an in-depth explanation not only of *how* ordinary subjectivity emerges from the transcendent background of reality, but also of *why* it emerges and how it can rid itself of what for the yogic tradition appears to be its constitutive contradiction.

Chapter 1:
The Spinozian diagnosis: impotence of appetite

The foundation of emotional life

Spinoza worked throughout his philosophical career on what was to become his main masterpiece, the *Ethics Demonstrated in the Geometric Order*. Finished in 1675, he suspended plans to publish the final version so as not to irritate certain fringes of the public that were particularly sensitive to anything that might go against the religious and philosophical orthodoxy of the time.[1] The *Ethics* was not published until two years later, posthumously, together with other more or less unfinished writings.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza undertakes to set out the fundamental themes of his thought in the form of a deductive system. The chosen form has a mainly didactic justification. Knowing well that many of his theses could provoke strong dissent and condemnation, Spinoza believes that if it is possible to start from relatively acceptable premises and move step by step, according to a progressive, continuous, and linear logical order, then even the most recalcitrant spirit, provided it is willing to play the game of reason, will be forced to see how those apparently radical consequences are but the natural (and necessary) implications of the admitted starting premises.

The geometric order gives the *Ethics* a particular style. Spinoza's theses are presented as propositions, each of which is supported by a demonstration, which is intended to show how the truth of what is asserted depends on the truth of axioms, postulates or general definitions admitted at the outset as uncontroversial, or depends on other propositions previously demonstrated in the *Ethics* itself. Often one proposition implies several consequences, marked as corollaries. To help the reader not to lose the thread of the discussion, and sometimes to answer possible objections or difficulties, Spinoza introduces a good number of clarifications or scholia. The end result is not so much a book to be read from beginning to end, but rather a conceptual architecture in which each element is connected to the whole by a dense network of cross-references. Reading the *Ethics* is like moving through a building—a temple of truth, in its own way—where the geometry of space guides the visitor's steps and gaze to

1 See Spinoza's letter No. 68 to Henry Oldenburg.

encounter forms and perspectives designed to elicit particular answers, awaken questions, or offer glimpses into the depths of reality.

The *Ethics* is divided into five parts. The most important part is the fifth, devoted to the freedom of the mind and the form of salvation to which human beings can aspire. Here lies the heart of Spinoza's yoga. But as we shall soon see, this theory is based on the recognition that the opposite of salvation and freedom (i.e., slavery) is largely determined by the mass of affects, emotions, and reactions to which humans are subject by virtue of their nature. The third part therefore presents Spinoza's examination of the main affects, their origins, and their consequences, while the fourth part focuses on their moral value, and their possible use. However, all this would remain an unfounded discussion without clarifying the nature of the human subject, which for Spinoza consists of a psychosomatic identity, a unity of mind and body. The second part then focuses on the nature of the mind, with its limitations but also cognitive resources. To know the nature of the finite, however, it is necessary to understand how the finite is rooted in that infinite background that constitutes its foundation. Thus, the first part opens with what might be called Spinoza's ontology, namely, the discussion of the nature of reality in its most general traits, which must be understood at least in broad strokes in order to be able to delve into the more specific themes discussed later in the *Ethics*.[2]

Although the five parts of the *Ethics* are mutually interconnected, they also maintain their relative independence, somewhat like the organs of the same living body. For the purpose of our present discussion, we can start from the heart of the *Ethics*, from the third part, where Spinoza sets out to give a geometric deduction of human affective life, reducing its chaotic and kaleidoscopic appearance to the combination, permutation, and variation of the smallest number of elements. What Spinoza offers us is a descriptive psychology, powerful enough to account for those passions of the soul that many previous authors and his contemporaries considered disturbing elements, external

2 Although it presents itself as a deductive system, the *Ethics* does not constitute a complete system. On several occasions (E2pref, for example), Spinoza emphasises that his treatment does not aspire to be exhaustive, but only to indicate the essential points necessary for the construction of the specific soteriological discourse he aims to establish.

or extrinsic to the essence of human nature, which was identified with rationality (E3pref).

The foundation on which Spinozian psychology is based is the effort (*conatus* in Latin) by which everything, as far as it can, strives to persevere in its being (E3p6). This effort is not typical of human beings, nor even only of living beings. According to Spinoza, everything, by virtue of the fact that it is a thing (and not a mere random aggregate of disparate entities with no relation to one another), is endowed with a *conatus.* We shall see below what metaphysical reasons justify this thesis, but for now it is sufficient to note that the effort to persist in being is first and foremost something absolutely general, which is therefore instantiated and actualised by everything that is part of reality.[3]

The *conatus* theory is based on two fundamental assumptions. The first is that everything has an essence. This means that it is possible to clearly define a core in virtue of which that thing is just that and not another. In some cases, Spinoza seems to regard essences and definitions as synonymous, so much so that one can think of the essence of a thing as its definition, or that which tells us what the real nature of the thing is.[4] The essence of the thing thus defines what the thing strives to bring into being, its *conatus*. Since the essence or definition of a human being and that of a quartz crystal are different, both the human being and the quartz crystal will have their own *conatus* to come into being, but what this *conatus* will concretely strive to produce in each case will be radically different. In this sense, the *conatus* is the essence brought into being or enacted, or the way in which the essence expresses itself in actual existence—in other words, can only be an effort (*conatus*) to exist. Yet, the *conatus* (as a pure effort to be, that is) is not the essence as such of the thing (otherwise, all things would have the same essence, i.e., there would be no different things).

3 For a more in-depth examination of the sources and development of the Spinozian doctrine of *conatus*, see Andrea Sangiacomo, *L'essenza del corpo. Spinoza e la scienza delle composizioni*, Hildesheim: Olms, 2013.

4 See E1p8s2: 'no definition implies and expresses a determinate number of individuals since it expresses nothing other than the nature of the thing defined'. Considering that Spinoza tends to use 'nature' and 'essence' as synonyms, it can be said that the definition is merely the expression of the essence of the thing, which is distinguished from existence (at least in the case of finite modes, per E1p24).

The second assumption is that no essence can be contradictory in itself. This means that it cannot simultaneously imply the nature of the thing and its opposite (or that which denies the existence of that thing). For example, it follows from the definition or essence of a circle that all its radii will be equal, but this essence cannot at the same time imply that the circle also has four equal angles and is therefore also a square. The nature of the circle and that of the square are mutually exclusive, so there can be no such thing as a square circle, and if one tried to turn a circle into a square one could only do so by destroying the circle and replacing it with something else (a square).

The fact that things have an essence, and that this essence is not contradictory, implies in turn that the *conatus* or effort to persist in being is not an effort in itself indifferent to any condition or circumstance. Quite the contrary, as soon as the thing comes into contact with other things, endowed with different essences (and this happens constantly, as long as the thing itself exists, E1p28), it is to be expected that its nature will in some way be put under pressure by the otherness that it is surrounded by. For example, a human being has a certain physical body, which can only maintain itself under certain environmental conditions. However, these environmental conditions are not general entities, nor are they necessarily calibrated to sustain human life. The sun, on which the earth's temperature depends, emits its heat regardless of whether or not there are humans on earth. The earth's temperature itself depends on a complex equilibrium produced by the entire biosphere. This balance, however, does not necessarily have to adapt to human needs, and can fluctuate within parameters that can make the earth's climate inhospitable to humans. In this example, the *conatus* of a human being will try as far as possible to adapt to the conditions most favourable to it or counteract the unfavourable ones if possible. The *conatus* is thus an effort to keep away, as far as possible, all forms of contradiction, which means to neutralise those interactions with other entities that might in any way detract from, deny, or damage the essence's striving to persevere in its being. In this sense, the *conatus* is not neutral, but oriented: not everything is equal or indifferent; that which may damage the thing and its preservation is to be avoided (the effort becomes a resistance), and that which may instead

help or facilitate preservation is to be sought (the effort becomes a positive inclination).[5]

This directionality of the *conatus* allows Spinoza to deduce the first of the fundamental affects on which his psychology is based, namely *appetite* or *cupidity*. He writes:

> The mind, whether it has clear and distinct ideas or confused ideas, strives to persevere in its being for an indefinite duration, and is aware of this effort.
>
> Scholium: This striving, when it refers only to the mind, is called will; but, when it refers together to the mind and the body, it is called appetite [*appetitus*], which, therefore, is nothing other than the very essence of man, from whose nature necessarily follows that which serves his preservation; and therefore man is determined to do it. There is, then, no difference between appetite and cupidity [*cupiditas*], except that cupidity refers mostly to men insofar as they are conscious of their appetite. (E3p9s)

For Spinoza, mind and body are not distinct and independent realities, but two different expressions of the same reality, which manifests itself simultaneously at the mental level of thought, and at the physical level of extension. Thought and extension are like two different languages, endowed with their own seman-

5 Spinoza is famous for his denial (E1app) that final causes can be attributed to nature. By 'final cause' he means, according to the scholastic tradition contemporary with him, the representation of a certain goal in the intellect of an agent that directs its action (as an efficient cause) in order to realise that goal. Understood in these terms, attributing a form of teleology to nature is a way of projecting human mental mechanisms onto it and thus induces an undue form of anthropomorphism. This does not detract, however, from the fact that Spinoza does not deny that finite entities are oriented to produce their effects in a certain way and not in others, and not only by virtue of external causes, but also, and above all, by the internal drive of their *conatus* to preserve themselves in being. In this sense, if by teleology is meant this asymmetry in causal action (whereby not all modalities or determinations are equivalent, and a cause will naturally tend to produce effects in one way instead of others), then it can be said that there is teleology in Spinoza's system or, perhaps better, that there is a 'systemic' teleology that arises from the way each thing fits into the causal network of the whole. On this theme, see Andrea Sangiacomo, 'Teleology and agreement in nature', in A. Santos Campos (ed.), *Spinoza: Basic Concepts*, Exter: Imprint Academic, 2015, 51-70; Id., 'Aristotle, Heereboord and the polemical target of Spinoza's critique of final causes', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 54, no. 3 (2016), 391-420; Valtteri Viljanen, *Spinoza's Geometry of Power*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, chapter 5.

tics, but which share the same syntax and can express the same message in different and irreducible ways.[6]

The will is the purely mental expression of the *conatus,* while the appetite is that which takes into account the psychosomatic unity of mind and body. This appetite, however, can be a purely unconscious instinct, present and yet not known to the subject as a whole. Insofar as the consciousness of having it is also added to the appetite, Spinoza calls this affect *cupidity*.

In drawing up these seemingly innocuous definitions, Spinoza is confronting a number of philosophical problems of particular relevance. His thesis that the will is nothing other than the appetite itself insofar as it is considered only in its mental expression is the reverse of the thesis (argued and discussed in E2p41-49) that the will per se is not a faculty of the mind distinct from the intellect. This distinction between two faculties, whereby the intellect is responsible for forming ideas and judgements about things, and the will for orienting itself towards their attainment on the basis of the good they represent, is a classical (albeit variously articulated) theory of medieval scholastic philosophy, which can be traced back distantly to Aristotle himself.[7] Spinoza, for his part, denies that there are faculties in the mind (he regards intellect and will only as two generalisations based on particular instances of ideas and volitions, E2p48s), and denies that the cognitive and appetitive aspects are distinct. Every idea necessarily implies an affirmation or negation (hence a volition) of its object, and every affirmation or negation can only occur together with an idea of what is affirmed or negated.

The thesis that not all appetites are conscious is also full of implications, although Spinoza explores its possible consequences less. One way to clarify it is to recall that the mind knows the body by knowing its *affections*, i.e., the ways in which the body is modified by other bodies (E2p19). However, knowledge of affections is mostly inadequate imaginative knowledge, as we shall see

6 On this point, see the more thorough discussion in Martin Lin, *Being and Reason: An Essay on Spinoza's Metaphysics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, chapter 4.

7 This thesis was taken up, not without problematicity, by Descartes in his *Metaphysical Meditations*, and paraphrased by Spinoza himself, following the Cartesian approach, in *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy*, 1p15s; and in *Metaphysical Thoughts*, Part II, chapter 12. For a reconstruction of the historical debate coeval with Spinoza on these issues, see Emanuela Scribano, *Da Descartes a Spinoza. Percorsi nella teologia razionale del Seicento*, Milan: Franco Angeli, 1988.

shortly. Moreover, the body itself is not a monolithic unitary entity, but an extremely complex individual, composed of many different parts, many of which are themselves complex individuals (think of an organism composed of organs, made up of cells). Each of these parts is a thing and has its own *conatus.* But the mind can only be directly affected by these parts to the extent that they strive and coordinate together to form the individual body as a whole. Hence, there can be appetites of the parts of which the mind remains unaware (at least as long as that appetite does not generalise to the whole individual). In this sense, Spinoza admits an unconscious space that inhabits the body (i.e., appetites that do not emerge or manifest themselves at the level of consciousness proper to the mind as a whole).[8]

The nature of body and mind is certainly not to wait inertly for the stimulus of other external bodies to arrive. Mind and body are essentially defined by their striving, and so at every moment they are involved in the activity of moving as far as possible towards that which can contribute to the preservation of the individual, and away as far away as possible from that which can hinder it. However, how does one know what contributes to one outcome rather than the other?

Spinoza calls *affection* the way in which the human body is modified by another body as a result of a causal interaction (E2p13s, a1'). He also shows that the mind only knows the body through its affections (E2p19).[9] When the mind conceives the idea of the body as modified by a certain external body, the mind can be said to *imagine* the external body, i.e., to form an idea that represents the imprint of the external body on our body (E2p17). When I see a friend coming towards me, the visual image of my friend modifies my perceptual apparatus, imprinting on my body an affection, the nature of which is partly related to the nature of my friend's body (this is why I can distinguish

8 In Anglophone literature, whether or not the mind can have ideas of the affections of all its parts was first raised by Margaret Wilson ("Objects, Ideas, and 'Minds'" in Id. *The Philosophy of Baruch Spinoza,* edited by Richard Kennington, Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1980, 101-120) and was popularised under the name 'pancreas problem' by Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, London and New York: Routledge, 2008, pp. 101-118. For further discussion of this, see Don Garrett, *Necessity and Nature in Spinoza's Philosophy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, chapter 14.

9 In the rest of the following discussion, I will tend to use 'affection' in order to denote the actual causal interaction, while I will use 'affect' to denote the resulting emotional state of that interaction. In this sense, 'affects' are both passions and actions that result from affections.

my friend from my cat). I do not directly know the true nature or essence of my friend, per se, but I do know an *image of* him.[10] For Spinoza, imagination always functions in the present, in the sense that to have an image of a thing necessarily means to experience the thing as present, as if it were modifying the body at the very moment in which the image is perceived. Moreover, once the body has been affected in a certain way by another body, the image thus created leaves a trace, which can be reactivated, and this enables memory (E2p18).

It is only by virtue of the presence of *other* images (which somehow exclude the real presence of the body being imagined) that it is possible for the mind to judge how a certain affection is not really present, but past. In other words, imagination itself tends to make the mind live in an eternal present, even when the external bodies that cause the body's affections are no longer necessarily present. Potentially, the imagination tends towards a form of complete absorption in the world it represents, and this absorption can only be limited or counteracted by the multiplication of experiences that contradict (and thus remove or deny) the judgement that what is imagined is currently real.

Imagination is the first guide and resource of the *conatus*. Having experienced (having been affected by) something that has helped our *conatus*, we will strive to bring the image of that thing back to mind as much as possible, and thus enjoy the same enhancement. Imagining means making present, and when we make present an affection that has helped us, this same imagination becomes a supporting element for the *conatus* (and the same, with due variations, applies in the case of imagining harmful things).

Going a step further, Spinoza defines (E3p11s and AD1-3) as *joy* (*laetitia* in Latin) the affection we experience when our power of acting is increased (i.e., when the *conatus* is favoured and the appetite supported), and *sadness* (*tristitia* in Latin) the affection we experience when our power of acting is diminished (i.e., when the *conatus* is thwarted and the appetite frustrated). Joy and sadness are thus the two expressions of the current state of our effort to exist, and

10 It should be noted that Spinoza uses the term 'image' as a synonym for bodily affection, trace, sign or imprint and thus with a synaesthetic valence, whereby there can be images that affect, not just sight, but all the physical senses.

together with appetite they constitute the three fundamental affects from which Spinoza deduces the whole variety of other human affects.

For our purposes, it is particularly important to dwell on the fact that the mind's effort naturally tends to imagine what induces joy and to imagine things that exclude the presence of what induces sadness:

> The mind, as far as it can, strives to imagine what enhances or assists the body's power of acting. (E3p12)
>
> When the mind imagines what diminishes or hinders the body's power of acting, it strives, as far as it can, to remember things that exclude the existence of what it imagines. (E3p13)

Whereas joy and sadness are simple affects, based on the experience of variations in one's power of acting, as soon as one adds to these affects the idea of an external cause (i.e., the imagination of the external body that induces the affection of joy or sadness), these affects become love or hate (E3p13s). Love and hate are thus specifications of the affects of joy and sadness, the scope of which is extended so as to include in their experience also an idea of an external body as the cause of the variations in the power of acting perceived by the subject experiencing these affects.

The problem with these imaginative and affective tendencies is that the mind does not really know the nature of what it imagines. All it can know is the affect of joy or sadness that arises from a certain affection. But this does not at all imply that the interaction with the external body is really a cause of empowerment or disempowerment. A medicine may immediately be a cause of sadness or depotentiation because of an unpleasant taste or other minor side effects, but ultimately it may be a cause of enhancement or healing from certain pathological states. Likewise, a sweet can be an immediate cause of joy and empowerment because of the pleasurable affection it produces, but if consumed in excess it can damage the body. In other words, the natural tendency of the imaginative mind is that of a childish and narcissistic imagination, in which one always and as much as possible strives to call to mind which experiences have enhanced one's joy while avoiding or trying to deny anything that has produced an unpleasant affection.

Freedom and substantiality of the subject

For now, we have just outlined the foundations of Spinozian psychology. Our aim is not to explore in detail the theory of affects outlined in the third part of the *Ethics*, but to highlight some salient aspects of it that allow Spinoza to diagnose the structural problem of the human condition. To arrive at this diagnosis, however, it is important to observe certain systematic implications that arise from the structure of the fundamental affects.

One of the most interesting points in this regard is the centrality that the theme of similarity assumes. As we have seen, the mind naturally strives to imagine the presence of that which can increase its power of acting. These ideas are based on affections born of encounters with other entities. However, it is not necessary for the mind to always and necessarily be affected by the same object in order to experience the same affection. Affections (and the affects or emotions that derive from them) can equally be fostered by the repetition of encounters with entities that are ontologically and numerically different, yet sufficiently similar to each other to produce similar affections. For example, if I like chocolate ice cream, I do not need to eat only a single, unrepeatable bowl of ice cream produced by a single master ice-cream maker. Within certain limits, any form of chocolate ice cream, provided it is sufficiently similar, can induce the same joy in me (with some complications, which we will see below).

This similarity, however, is not an ontological trait (like those common notions on which reason is based, which we will discuss in the next chapter), but an imaginative construction. For instance, if the body is affected by two bodies simultaneously, when the mind imagines one of them, it will also remember the other (E2p18). Memory is based on associations, and in associating two affections, two aspects clearly come into play, one of similarity (in virtue of which the two bodies, although different in certain respects, are imagined as similar due to the fact that they present themselves together) and one of difference (in virtue of which the two bodies still produce relatively distinct affections). The relationship between similarity and difference is not fixed, but varies as the conditions (internal and external) that determine the affections themselves vary. Hence, for example, Spinoza theorises about the

possibility of having something in sympathy or antipathy (E3p15s) merely because we have usually experienced it in such a way as to associate it with something else that causes us joy or sadness—even if the very thing towards which we have sympathy or antipathy has caused us neither joy nor sadness directly.

Similarity is not an identity of nature, nor is it a common property. It is an imaginative construction, relatively vague and ambiguous, based on the associative capacity of the mind. This capacity can be enhanced by the multiplication of relatively similar affections (or similar effects), which prevent the mind (due to its weakness) from keeping individual affections distinct and rather lead it to create a common and more indistinct image of them as all similar to each other. This means that when the mind encounters an entity it has never encountered before and from which it has never previously been affected, provided there is some superficial resemblance to previous experiences, the mind can always imagine the nature of that entity on the basis of its memories, anticipating affections that will produce joy (or rather affections that will produce sadness). Even before the entity reveals itself in its unique individuality, the mind can set about creating an imaginative representation of it based on repetition of the past and striving for empowerment.

Finding similarities between things (affections) that are otherwise different is a synthetic character of the imagination, but one that has crucial repercussions on emotional life, since it allows the passions themselves (and the complex iterative mechanisms by which passions excite the appetite through producing other passionate responses) to propagate and as it were pervade the entire horizon of experience, covering everything with an intricate emotional web. The most important and original consequence of this view, however, lies in the principle of imitation: 'by the fact that we imagine that a thing similar to us, and towards which we felt no affection, feels some affection, by this very fact we feel a similar affection' (E3p27). Since human beings tend to live in societies, 'the thing similar to us' is often another human being (or a group, E3p46), and so each person tends to resonate with the emotions of others, reacting to them, and thus producing new ones, in a polyphony that tends towards cacophony. The passions of ambition (E3p29s) and glory (E3p30s) are two of the main

consequences of this mechanism, which for Spinoza explains much of the instability of human communities:

> [T]his endeavour to make everyone approve of what we ourselves love or hate is, in reality, ambition (see E3p29s); and therefore we see that everyone naturally desires others to live according to his own talent; and since everyone has this desire equally, everyone is equally a hindrance to one another; and since everyone wants to be praised or loved by everyone, everyone hates one another. (E3p31s)

As can be clearly seen, these observations allow Spinoza to explore the richness of human emotional life, following the red thread of the power of the imagination, of its effort to project itself in the outward world, but also to resonate with what is lurking within. The other is ultimately encountered first and foremost as a mask, a character created by anticipations, expectations, memories, and imaginative and affective echoes. Insofar as the other is a projection of my own appetite and its conditioning, moreover, the recognition of the other (or my imagination of the recognition of the other) is added as a further psychological dimension, in which my representation of how the other might see me becomes itself an ingredient that moves the already complex dynamics of appetite.[11]

For the purposes of this discussion, however, we can leave aside the subtleties into which Spinoza delves in the third part of the *Ethics*, and reflect instead on how his theory can explain the emergence of ordinary subjectivity. As anticipated in the introduction, ordinary subjectivity is meant as that sense (more or less articulated and expressed at various and different levels of our experience) of being something in itself concluded, given, finite, bounded, determined, independent. In Spinoza's philosophy, there are two central terms that can be used to capture this experience: freedom and substance. They both depend, in

11 This theme is explored, in its complex moral and political ramifications, by Laurent Bove, *La stratégie du conatus. Affirmation et résistance chez Spinoza*, Paris: Vrin, 1996, chapter 3. For a development in the sociological direction of these themes, see Frédéric Lordon, *L'intérêt souverain. Essai d'anthropologie économique spinoziste*, Paris: La Découverte, 2006.

different ways, on the mind's ability to imagine our nature as somehow different (and thus independent) from that of other things around us.

The common idea of freedom (or free will) is the belief that we are sufficiently independent of external causes to be able to decide for ourselves what to do or not to do. The idea of substance is ultimately nothing more than an ontological translation of the same image. To be a substance is to be something that can exist and be conceived without needing to refer to any other entity. Clearly, it rarely happens that someone considers themselves absolutely free (i.e., absolutely independent of external causes), and even more rarely that they consider themselves an absolute substance (i.e., something that can exist independently of the rest of the world). This does not detract, though, from the fact that the *imagination* of being free or of being a substance can play a fundamental role in shaping the dynamics of appetite.

It should be remembered that the imagination works by identity (similarity) and presence (seeing everything as currently present, unless evidence to the contrary), and that one image is maintained in the mind until disproved by others. Thus, our common relativisation of the idea of freedom or substantiality depends on the fact that the idea of being free is flanked by other ideas that make us recognise that we are determined by external causes. Since these ideas conflict with each other, we must admit that we are not totally free (the imagination of freedom is somewhat limited by the images of our being determined by external causes). But this does not detract from the fact that we still imagine that we are free and that this image is rooted in the appetitive structure of the mind.

Indeed, Spinoza himself shows that 'love and hatred towards a thing that we imagine as free must be both, given equal causes, greater than towards a necessary thing' (E3p49). This follows from the fact that insofar as a thing is imagined free it is imagined in itself and thus it completely affects the power of the imagination. A thing known as necessary, on the other hand, is necessarily seen in its relations to other things (because to be necessary is necessarily to be in relation to something else, E1p28), and thus its affective impact is distributed (so to speak) over several objects. Since we also know that 'cupidity, whether it arises from sadness or from joy, from hatred or from love, is all the greater the greater the affection' (E3p37), it follows that the stronger the love

or hatred provoked by a thing imagined as free, the stronger the appetitive reaction towards it will be (or more precisely towards the affection thus aroused).[12]

When we imagine someone committing a cold-blooded crime, without any particular motive, but out of sheer cruelty, we imagine the murderer as a free agent and are therefore moved by passions of hatred towards him, which in turn induce an appetite for revenge and indignation. If, however, we discover that the murderer was in some way compelled, by present or past circumstances, to execute, or that he was merely a means in a wider chain over which he had little to no control and from which he could not escape, those reactions against him will be dampened. Imagining therefore a thing (and often a person) as free has a powerful emotional impact and this is a factor that plays a decisive role in the attachment with which human beings, according to Spinoza, remain so hooked to the idea (however inadequate from a rational point of view) of being free.

Spinoza is famous for his critique of the notion of freedom.[13] He shows in the first part of the *Ethics* that every finite thing is necessarily determined to exist and operate by other finite things, and therefore no finite thing can be independent of external causes (E1p28). In the second part he again shows that the will is also determined like all finite things (E2p48 and p49 with their scholia). In the third part (E3p2s) he takes up this same critique from the point of view of the identity of mind and body, arguing on the basis of experience how mental determinations and physical determinations are in fact two expressions of the same phenomenon (and thus how the former cannot be independent of the latter). But for our purposes, it is more important to focus now on the con-

12 From an imaginative point of view, imagining something as free is the opposite of imagining it as similar to something else (the very idea of necessity, properly understood, is an eminently rational and non-imaginative idea, which therefore sees common features rather than differences, E2p44). Thus, imagining something as free is a form of wonder (*admiratio*), i.e., an affection in which the object is alone and isolated in the mind (E3p52s). Wonder, although not in itself a passion, can act as a leaven to almost all other passions, amplifying both those based on forms of sadness or hatred and those based on joy and love. Wonder can also take on a reflexive trait when someone strives to imagine their actions as unique in order to enjoy them more (E3p55s1).

13 For a more in-depth discussion of the Spinozian notion of freedom, see Matthew Kisner, *Spinoza on Human Freedom. Reason, Autonomy and the Good Life*, *Cambridge*: Cambridge University Press, 2011; Andrea Sangiacomo, *Spinoza on Reason, Passions, and the Supreme Good*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, chapter 5.

dition of possibility that allows the mind to imagine in the first instance that it is free (and all the more so, the less it is capable of understanding the rational arguments that refute this imagination).

In the *appendix* to the first part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza presents (provocatively) as a known fact what he will later repeat several times in the rest of his discussion, namely:

> [T]hat men believe that they are free because they are conscious of their own volitions and appetites, whereas the causes from which they are disposed to appetite and desire they do not even think about, because they are not conscious of them. (E1app)

Imagining oneself free is made possible by the limitations of consciousness, i.e., the gap between appetite and cupidity that we have mentioned. Appetite is the very effort of the individual to preserve itself in its being. This appetite, as such, is internal and consubstantial to the individual itself, and for this reason the individual can always be conscious of it. However, the way in which the appetite is determined (its specific declension, its orientation in one direction rather than another, towards one object rather than another) depends on how the individual fits into the complex causal (and affective) plexus in which it exists and operates. What we encounter in this plexus does not depend on us, nor can the strength with which we are affected by external causes be explained solely on the basis of our own strength and nature. Moreover, all affections of the body leave a trace in the memory and condition the mind to try to reproduce or avoid anything similar to what it has experienced in the past.

When we encounter an external object and experience joy, and thus want to possess that object, we are therefore conscious of this: that the affection we receive from the object causes us joy, and that in response we experience a cupidity (i.e., a conscious appetite) to possess that object. At this level, both the experience of joy and the experience of cupidity seem to arise from within, spontaneously, and therefore freely, as if we ourselves were arbitrarily deciding that we like that object and want to obtain it.

This understanding, however, is defective. Our representation here is based only on affections, that is, on the way our body is modified, and leaves the

nature of the objects that affect us in the dark. Of the object that causes us joy we only know imaginatively that we like it because it causes us joy, but we do not really know what that object is in itself; we do not know its essence. For this reason, we totally ignore the way in which the nature of the object influences our nature and determines in it (in this case) an increase in our power of acting, which we experience as joy.

To give an example, when I say that I like chocolate ice cream, I am giving voice to an imagination, based on an affection of joy produced by my encounter with chocolate ice cream. But I do not really know anything about ice cream, I do not know what it is, I do not know what it is made of, and I do not know why I feel joy eating it. All I know is that I feel joy, and since I have no other ideas about ice cream, I can well *imagine* that this joy arises freely in me, that I am its primary cause. In fact, the joy I feel depends on the way the nature of ice cream interacts with the nature of my body. With a little experience, I can learn that ice cream can produce initial joy when consumed in small doses, but can instead produce discomfort and even illness in the case of indigestion. If I then study the nature of ice cream, I can learn that its high sugar content is the cause why my taste experience is enhanced and therefore I experience joy in consuming it, but at the same time I can also learn how high amounts of sugar can be harmful to the body as a whole and, when excessive, cause more or less permanent damage. This knowledge not only moderates and somewhat counteracts the cupidity to consume ice cream, but also reveals that this same appetite was not something freely determined by my nature alone. I am no freer to feel joy in eating ice cream than I am free to feel a pleasant sensation when I place a grain of sugar on my tongue, for the whole plexus of affections and affects that follows from consuming ice cream is entirely determined, in a necessary way, by how my nature and that of the ice cream fit (or do not fit) each other.

Thus, the underlying condition that makes it possible for us to consider ourselves free is ultimately a lack of knowledge regarding the causes by which we are affected and determined. It is not just a lack of knowledge regarding the fact that we are affected by external causes, but rather a lack of knowledge about the specific nature of what affects us and by virtue of which nature a certain affection follows instead of another. We think we are free to choose what to feel and how

to react, but in reality our appetite is entirely determined by the nature of what affects us and the way it interacts with our nature. There is no more freedom in the way one body affects another than there is in the fact that 2 + 2 = 4.

In imagining ourselves free, we think of ourselves as unique and unattached to external causes, so we may even admire our power of acting more, cultivating glory, pride, ambition, and self-love. These are all passions that seem to assert our control over the world, when in fact they put us dangerously and inevitably in conflict with others, by whom (whether we like it or not) we are determined to act and operate. Ironically, not only is this imagination the result of the mind's *impotence* to know external causes, but Spinoza will show how it is precisely by knowing the necessary causal relations that bind us to our surroundings that we can keep affects at bay and escape their domination (E5p6). Continuing our examination of the imaginative construction of subjectivity, however, we can see how the idea of freedom is not only somehow necessitated by the structural ignorance that characterises affections, but also fits well with the mind's appetite to constantly seek out support and backing to sustain a self-image of power and control. The fact that this support, once found, is highly unstable and often dangerous, is something that the imagination, through its impotence, struggles to realise.

The idea of substantiality (being an entity that can exist and be conceived in itself and without depending on anything else) can be understood as the ontological equivalent of the idea of freedom. Just as in considering myself free to act I consider myself independent of external causes, so too in considering myself a substance I consider myself capable of existing without depending on anything else. From a rational point of view, the idea of the substantiality of the finite is even more implausible than the idea of freedom. For if we can discuss the extent to which our actions can be relatively independent of external causes, it seems clear that our existence cannot in fact be given or sustain itself without the constant input and contribution of our surroundings. And yet, precisely because the idea of freedom is intimately intertwined with the imaginative mechanism of appetite, and because this mechanism not only seeks to sustain the imagination of what we imagine to be increasing our power, but also to exclude the opposite, we can well see how imagining ourselves to be an independent substance can make its way into the mind and indeed install

itself as a fundamental character of who we are. By imagining ourselves ontologically independent, we can imagine ourselves capable of controlling events, evading threats, defending ourselves in the stronghold of ourselves, or at least denying our being at the mercy of external circumstances among which there are always those that are stronger and more powerful than our own forces.

From a philosophical point of view, the dependence of the body on other bodies is obvious and self-evident. Nonetheless, if we wish to defend the substantiality of our being, we need only consider the body as a substance different from the mind itself (by virtue of the fact that mind and body are explained according to attributes that are completely opposite and irreducible to each other), and then reflect on the fact that the mind, considered in itself, seems to be something absolutely individual, independent, and substantial. If, therefore, we can identify ourselves with this substantial mind and not identify ourselves entirely with the body, the game is played and we can believe ourselves substances. This, in a nutshell, is the path that can be ascribed to Descartes (1591-1650), who in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (published in 1641) proposes a philosophical argument to justify this kind of dualism.[14] The first part of Spinoza's *Ethics* is aimed precisely at deconstructing the ontological foundations of dualism, showing how the existence of a substance necessarily implies the fact that this substance must be infinite (E1p8), how this infinitude is compatible with the fact that the substance expresses itself according to different attributes (such as thought and extension, E1p10s), and how every finite thing can only and necessarily be a mode of the one infinite substance (E1p15). To remove any possible doubt, Spinoza will also add an explicit demonstration of the fact that the human being cannot have the attributes of a substance (E2p10). This is not the place to go into Spinoza's reasons against dualism. Suffice it to observe here how the idea that a human being is a substance (at least with regard to its mind) is indeed an absurdity from a purely rational point of view, but also a perfectly plausible (and entirely common) idea (or ideology) from the point of view of the imaginative logic of appetite.

14 On the relationship between Spinoza and Cartesian dualism see, among others, Cristina Santinelli, *Mente e corpo. Studi su Cartesio e Spinoza*, Urbino: Quattroventi, 2000; Emanuela Scribano, *Macchine con la mente. Fisiologia e metafisica tra Descartes e Spinoza*, Roma: Carocci, 2015.

The mind's effort to imagine its own power, combined with the inherent ignorance that characterises the incompleteness of imaginative knowledge, leads the mind to represent itself and its body as an individual free to act, and ontologically independent as a substance—that is, it leads the mind to represent itself as a subject. The genesis of this ordinary sense of subjectivity is thus the somewhat necessitated fruit of the imaginative nature of the appetite and its inherent limitations. However fallacious this imagination of a substantial and free subject may be, it could easily dominate the mind and all experience indefinitely, were it not that the very structure of the appetite also ultimately leads to a paradoxical contradiction of the *conatus*.

Living in contradiction

So far, we have seen how some characteristic aspects of human psychology can be explained, according to Spinoza, by investigating the nature of the imaginative appetite, intrinsic to the mind. We can then begin to show how, from this perspective, the *Ethics* also offers a diagnosis of the problematic nature of this condition.

To begin with, we need to introduce a third nuance (after appetite and cupidity) in the way the *conatus* is expressed in affective life, namely desire. Although in colloquial language the terms Spinoza uses can be said to be synonymous, in the systematic discourse of the *Ethics* they capture different nuances of the *conatus*. Desire (taken in the narrow sense) is a very specific affect, which Spinoza introduces thus:

> He who remembers a thing from which he once derived pleasure, desires [*cupit*] to possess it under the same circumstances in which he first derived pleasure from it.
>
> Demonstration: Everything that man has seen together with the thing that has brought him pleasure will by accident (per E3p15) be the cause of joy; and therefore (per E3p28) he will desire to possess the thing that has brought him pleasure, i.e. he will desire to possess the thing with all the same circumstances in which he first derived pleasure from it.

> Corollary: If, therefore, he has noticed that one of these circumstances is missing, the lover will be saddened.
>
> Scholium: This sadness, as it relates to the absence of what we love, is called desire [*desiderium*]. (E3p36)

Ordinarily, we think that desire is connected with the future. When I wish to eat ice cream, it is because in the present I have not yet opened the fridge, and I imagine a time (possibly soon) when I will go to the kitchen, open the fridge, and treat myself to a spoonful of ice cream. Desire thus seems to move from present absence to future fulfilment. However, Spinoza's analysis overturns this idea: desire moves from the memory of past joy to present sadness, and it is by virtue of this present sadness that I can have a cupidity to reactivate the past experience in the future, that is, to repeat it. Although there is an element of openness to the future in desire, its nature is rather that of looking back on past experiences that have caused joy, experiencing the present in which such affections are absent as a depowering of my being, which in turn triggers an appetitive mechanism aimed at repeating the past.

The originality of this conception consists in the fact that desire, understood in this way, is structurally doomed to introduce an element of sadness into the repetition of every pleasurable experience. The *desiderium* of which Spinoza speaks is not entirely reducible to a form of regret for a happy circumstance that we know to have passed (even if it somehow takes on a tinge of it). Desire, in fact, is compatible with the fact that the very thing from which we derived pleasure (or one sufficiently similar to it) may be present again, but sadness arises from the fact that some of the circumstances in which we first experienced it will not. Since by the associative mechanisms of the imagination those experiences were in some way welded to the affection of the thing that caused us joy, their absence in the present now induces sadness. If it is highly improbable that the same event will occur again under exactly the same circumstances, it is also highly probable that we may encounter a similar or the same cause of joy in different circumstances. When this happens, the present joy will, however, be mingled with the sadness of desire, which laments the absence of what it remembered being present the first time and would like to be there again. Or, in other words, the mechanics of desire inevitably mixes a note of sadness with the repetition of

every joy already known and experienced, punctuating the association between the passing of time and the impossibility of remaining in the eternal present that the imagination always yearns for. The melancholy that makes us weigh our ageing, the sense that life flees without returning, that things no longer taste the same as they once did, are all forms and nuances of this affective structure, which makes the experience of the passing of time (i.e., of difference) the very enemy of the imaginative appetite.

The phenomenon of desire thus described lays bare the dissonant ambiguity of the imaginative structure of similarity and difference. If we imagine one affection as similar to another, we will be inclined to extend this similarity to the affections that were associated with it when we first experienced it. If, however, in the present experience a similar affection is repeated in a certain sense, but under different circumstances, we will then be compelled to recognise in this experience a difference, and since the circumstances associated with the first affection were imagined to contribute to the joy produced by it, their absence will become a reason for sadness. Desire thus reveals the difficulties of the imagination in negotiating relations of identity and difference, since it can only conceive of them as mutually exclusive or rigidly opposed. Thus, an affection that implies both similarity and difference becomes a dissonant affection, a source of sadness.

When I met a loved one for the first time, that encounter was a source of joy for me, and thus both the external and internal circumstances that framed the encounter became engraved in my memory. Upon seeing the same person again the next day in an entirely different situation, the eagerness to reactivate the same affection of joy leads me to imagine that I am reliving a similar experience. The person I meet is indeed similar to themselves on the previous day, but the circumstances are now entirely different. I can try to ignore these circumstances (thus trying to reduce the experience to just meeting the loved one as such), or I can see this meeting as a new experience, entirely different from the one on the prior day (thus trying not to see the similarity). However, if I accept that I meet the same person under different circumstances (if I accept the similarity partially belied by the dissimilarity of the context), I cannot help but feel a jarring note, something missing, and so it becomes a desire to fill that void. This desire can express itself in many ways, sometimes obfuscating its real

nature and object (I may simply want to see the same person again as often as possible, thinking that repetition will cushion or dilute the gap, or blame the person I meet for having suddenly changed), but ultimately, if listened to well, it is always a desire to relive the past as it was offered to us the first time, and not have to face the fact that we have inexorably slipped away from it.

We are therefore at a crossroads. Either we sully with the sadness of longing the repetition of what has given us joy in the past, and which nevertheless no longer seems to have the same taste once those past circumstances have changed (so that the first kiss, the first love, the first boat trip, become something unrepeatable, and each new iteration never seems to live up to the previous ones), *or* we strive as much as possible to imagine and expect to relive past joy in conditions as similar as possible, becoming obsessed with the need to control and repeat the same actions under the same circumstances, or preventing ourselves from seeing the differences (agreeing to meet the lover only in a certain place, going out on a boat only at a certain time of year and in a certain stretch of sea). As it may be, the appetite to relive joy in order to be empowered by it gets bogged down in a series of difficulties that increase the sadness (tending in the long run to erase the joy itself) or make that joy increasingly unsustainable.

Since, however, the natural effort of the appetite is to avoid sadness as far as possible, the natural tendency will also be to avoid the sadness of desire by somehow trying to deny its cause, i.e., the image of what is past as such. Hence, the mind's tendency to automatism and repetition of what has already been experienced, as far as possible, as if it were all locked into an eternal present (which is a typical trait of the imagination). In other words, the necessary transformation of cupidity into desire imposes a second-order effort on the mind's affective structure, which is aimed at avoiding that form of sadness that arises as a side effect of its own appetitive dynamic. Desire, in fact, arises from having experienced joy, hence from a relative success of the appetite. Yet this success, in a short time, becomes the occasion for a new source of sadness that is rooted precisely in the memory of that joy as *past*, that is, that has as its cause not an external object, but the becoming of the appetite itself. Although second-order the sadness remains sadness and necessarily imposes on the appetite a reaction to avoid it.

That an affection passes is something we can expect. An affection is the result of an interaction between the body and external bodies. It is easy to conceive how this affection has a limited duration in time and at some point, as other affections arise, it becomes somewhat impossible to represent the same affection as still being present. However sublime I find the taste of chocolate ice cream, at a certain point that affection vanishes, and not wanting to get indigestion by continuing to eat ice cream (which would no longer cause an affection of joy but of sadness), I am forced to admit that the affection of joy induced by the ice cream has passed. Since the affection of joy was imagined as something that enhanced my power of acting, its being past and no longer present is an idea that implies a depowering, and thus something that in turn provokes an appetite to counteract this present depowering. How? The easiest way is to simply try to reactivate the past affection—give yourself another serving of ice cream. Nonetheless, we have just seen that if the circumstances we associated with the first affection become too altered this change will somehow spoil our joy by introducing sadness.

There are other options. One can direct oneself towards other experiences and other affections. In fact, for Spinoza, emotional life is a constant swaying between different and often contrary affections: 'we are agitated in many ways by external causes, and like the waves of the sea moved by contrary winds, we are tossed here and there, unaware of our outcome and destiny' (E3p59s). Without giving a certain affection time to die out completely, we can immediately rush towards another, and then another. If means and circumstances permit, we can thus quickly find ourselves on the track of a marathon, consumed by the need to never stop lest we become trapped in sadness. This is, however, only a technique of distraction, an avoidance—an avoidance largely responsible for the concealment of the affective mechanism we are unearthing here. However much the object of interest and circumstances may change, the underlying mechanism remains the same. Whatever the affection pursued in order to enhance the mind, its cessation will give way to the sadness of desire and the appetite to overcome it through the exact repetition of the pattern already experienced, or the distraction towards a new object. The multiplication of objects of desire does nothing to change the underlying structure of desire itself.

However, Spinoza also admits a more radical option still, namely, the permanence of the mind in *fixation* on a particular affection. Perhaps the most common and simple case of this phenomenon is the action of an external cause. Since affections are caused by encounters with external objects, Spinoza can show that 'the force of a passion, or of an affect, can overcome man's other actions, that is, his power, so that the affect remains attached to man persistently' (E4p6). In other words, if we are constantly exposed to the power of a certain external cause, we will also be constantly affected by it, until the affection itself becomes imprinted in our imaginative structure and becomes part of it (as happens, for example, with the internalisation of social conditioning). But this is not the only cause of the emergence of a fixation.

Although the affection is caused by an external encounter, it is part of the power of the imagination to represent the object as present as long as other ideas do not exclude its presence. Moreover, every affection implies an emotional reaction which in turn excites the appetite and helps to fix that affection in memory, incorporating it into mechanisms, habits, automatisms, compulsions. If the mind's appetite is strong enough and circumstances permit, it can create a kind of imaginative parallel reality, a kind of daydream, in which the object of appetite remains constantly present to the mind, even though in reality it is not interacting with the individual or is not present in their sphere of action.[15]

Spinoza considers the latter scenario as a pathological form, and associates it with the excess that certain joyful passions, including love, can have:

> Although men are subject to several affections, and therefore we seldom find of them those who are fought over by one and the same affection, yet there is no lack of those to whom one and the same affection obstinately remains attached. For we see that men are sometimes affected by one object in such a way as to believe that they have it before them, even though it is not present; and when this happens to a man who is not asleep, we say that he is raving or mad. Nor, by being ridiculous, are those who burn with love, and night and day dream only of their mistress or their harlot, considered

15 Theme explored in detail by Pascal Sévérac, *Le devenir actif chez Spinoza*, Paris: Honoré Champion, 2005.

> less mad. But when the miser thinks of nothing else but gain and money, and the ambitious of glory, etc., these are not thought to be deluded, because they are considered a nuisance and worthy of hatred. But, in reality, avarice, ambition, lechery, etc., are species of delusion, although they are not numbered among the diseases. (E4p44s)

Fixation is analogous to what might be called a form of neurosis, in which all mental forces are completely absorbed in the spasmodic effort to sustain a single imaginative affection. Although this effort is motivated by the appetite to sustain the individual's power of acting, its execution is clearly to the detriment of that power: the power of mind and body is limited by the fixation, the individual becomes incapable of operating and acting in other circumstances or contexts that are not functional in sustaining its fixation on a single object, and ultimately its power to preserve itself is compromised.

As we shall see in the third chapter, Spinoza proposes a harmonic vision of the individual, which is not only a complex whole made up of complex parts, but its well-being and preservation equally depend on the ability of all these parts to tune into each other as much as possible, while avoiding that one exceeds and predominates over the others. From a biological point of view, one can think of tumour diseases as the emblematic case of a certain part of the organism that begins to untie itself and operate independently of the rest of the individual, eventually leading to its death. Thus, the imaginative fixation, by locking the mind onto a single affection and limiting all others, ends up drying up, weakening and potentially annihilating the power of mind and body.

If we put these scenarios together, we see that the dynamics of appetite move between two extremes. In the case where the affection that provoked joy ceases and is experienced as past, appetite becomes desire, and thus sadness. In the case where the affection that provoked joy turns into a fixation, the appetite reaches its opposite extreme, which also results in a depowering of the individual as a whole, and thus another form of sadness. Now, sadness is nothing other than the transition to an inferior power of acting, i.e., precisely the affection that the appetite strives to avoid as much as possible. Yet it follows from the logic of the appetite that its pursuit of joy must necessarily produce sadness.

Note that this is not just a psychological or emotional problem. That appetite structurally provokes sadness (i.e., that sadness necessarily follows from the way the logic of appetite is determined to operate) not only induces an existential state of tendential depression and disempowerment, but more radically shows how the unfolding of the *conatus* (which becomes appetite as it strives to persevere in its own being by seeking that which can help it to do so) inevitably leads to a contradiction of the *conatus* itself (i.e., by seeking more power, one obtains powerlessness).

Given the nature of the *conatus*, it is necessary for the mind to counteract sadness as far as possible. Passive resignation and the resulting state of depression are only the result of a defeat of the *conatus*, at least a momentary one. If and as long as it is possible, the appetite will try to counteract sadness (including the sadness produced as a side effect by the appetite's own mode of action). How to counteract it? By activating the same imaginative schemes that have driven the appetite so far. Ideological representations of the nature of the individual as free substance can be used to try to gain some distance from the sadness induced by the appetite's failure to produce lasting and sustainable empowerment. Thinking of myself as an independent individual, I can always imagine that the problem depends solely on external causes and how this sadness is something I could get rid of by seeking other objects and more favourable external conditions. By manipulating the environment, I can imagine keeping the sadness at bay, as I can delude myself that the sadness is not something that necessarily depends on my nature but is only an accidental product of the lack of something external.

Being an ideological justification, it is clear that this kind of argument is not rational (rationally, it is rather a pseudo-justification, a confabulation of the mind), but emotional. Thinking of myself as free and independent, I can always imagine myself getting out of the mechanism of sadness unscathed, projecting myself elsewhere, towards other objects and under other conditions, or at least thinking that if it were possible for me to do so, then every problem would be solved. The concrete effect of this ideology is thus that it covers up, disguises, conceals and renders unintelligible to the individual the way in which the logic of its own imaginative appetite necessarily contributes to the creation of sadness—and will always contribute to it, regardless of the particular objects

or external circumstances. But to admit this view would be to conceive of a mechanism that (at least apparently) decreases the power of the mind, and thus to see something that the mind has a positive appetite for not wanting to see and trying to ignore or forget.

Here, then, is how the imaginative life leads not only to the self-representation of the self as a free substance (irrational though this may be), but also to the ideological use of this representation to sustain the ignorance and forgetfulness necessary to fail to see and examine in detail the problematic nature inherent in the structure of the imaginative appetite. In this sense, the Spinozian diagnosis of the ordinary human condition (i.e., the circumstances in which we are mostly dominated by the imagination) is analogous to that of the yoga traditions: there is an underlying structural problem related to the appetitive component of human beings (and indeed of all living beings), which implies an element of nescience, ignorance, and forgetfulness, aimed at masking and keeping reflection away from this very problem. Based on ignorance, the logic of desire (and aversion) attempts to rescue the individual from the cage of sadness that the mechanism itself inevitably produces. Since this attempt is bound to fail repeatedly, the ordinary condition is doomed to remain immersed in a general tone of discomfort (*duḥkha* in Sanskrit).

Yoga, in its classical forms, points its finger at sensual desire (*kāma* in Sanskrit), craving, thirst (*taṇhā* to use another term from Pāli Buddhism), or what Spinoza would call the imaginative appetite. Since that is what creates the problem, that is also the element that must be silenced, suppressed, and possibly eradicated. On this last point, however, Spinoza disagrees. For his ontology shows that appetite cannot be suppressed, let alone silenced or inhibited, since it not only constitutes the very essence of the human being (E3 AD1), but is also the necessary expression of God's infinite power. Given the scope of this point and its implications, it is worth delving a little into the meanders of Spinozian ontology.

Divine power

The demonstration of proposition 6 of the third part of the *Ethics*—one of the fundamental places in the enunciation of the doctrine of the *conatus*—re-

fers directly to the metaphysical and ontological foundations of Spinoza's discussion outlined in part one. We read:

> Each thing, as far as it is in it, strives to persevere in its being.
>
> Demonstration: For individual things are modes by which the attributes of God are expressed in a certain and determinate manner (per E1p25c); that is, (per E1p34) they are things which express in a certain and determinate manner the power of God by which God is and acts; and no thing has anything in it by which it can be destroyed, or which takes away its existence (per E3p4); but, on the contrary, it opposes everything that can take away its existence (per E3p5); and therefore, as far as it can, and it lies in itself, it endeavours to persevere in its being. (E3p6)

The focus of this demonstration revolves around proposition 34 of the first part. If we go back to its enunciation, however, we discover that it is as laconic as it is colossal in its implications:

> The power of God is its very essence.
>
> Demonstration: For it follows from the mere necessity of God's essence that God is the cause of himself (per E1p11) and of all things (per E1p16 and c). Therefore, God's power by virtue of which he himself and all things are and act is his own essence. (E1p34)

Once again, the demonstration of this proposition takes the equation between God's essence and power as something that seems so self-evident as to need little explanation or justification. But what does it mean to say that for God its power is its very essence?

One must first bear in mind that the term 'God' is used in the *Ethics* in a technical sense, which only receives its full articulation in the first fifteen propositions of the first part. To summarise, Spinoza shows that in reality there can only be a single substance (i.e., there can only be a single principle that can truly be said to be ontologically independent and not in need of anything else, E1def3), that this single substance is necessarily infinite (E1p8), and that it therefore expresses itself in infinite attributes (including thought and extension,

E1p9), each of which, while being irreducible to the others, expresses in a complete way its eternal and necessary essence (E1p10s).[16] All finite things, such as minds and bodies, are thus nothing but modifications of the divine substance, expressed in each of the divine attributes simultaneously (thus the finite mind is but the infinite divine substance expressed as a finite mode under the attribute of thought, and the finite body is but the infinite divine substance expressed as a finite mode under the attribute of extension, E2def1, E2p10c and p11). The totality of this infinite substance and all its infinite modes expressed under infinite attributes is what Spinoza calls 'God', which he can therefore place in equivalence to 'Nature', conceived as the totality of the real (hence the famous equation '*Deus, seu natura*', E4pref).

This does not mean that God (so understood) is dissolved by being reduced exclusively to its finite modifications, as if God were nothing more than a redundant collective term useful only to indicate totality. On the contrary, God remains the immanent, yet also transcendent, foundation of the totality itself. God is immanent in the sense that God exists in its modes and the modes exist in God, since God is the only substance that exists and everything that exists is God or exists in God (E1p15). Nevertheless, God is also transcendent of its modes, since God's *nature* is that of being substance (i.e., absolute independence and freedom) and this nature does *not* belong to any of its modes (E2p10cs), which is why a modal distinction can be made between God and its modes (E1p29s). God and the modes cannot be given independently of each

16 In the Spinozian order of demonstration, the way in which the infinity of attributes is followed by the infinity of substance is taken for granted. E1p8 demonstrates that every substance (assuming that multiple substances can be given) is necessarily infinite, while E1p9 directly states that 'the more reality or being a thing possesses, the greater is the number of attributes it possesses', inferring this proposition directly and solely from the definition of attribute (E1def4). Spinoza conceives the infinite as an absolute positivity (as he says in E1p8s1: '*infinitum absoluta affirmatio existentiae alicujus naturae*', the infinite [is] the absolute affirmation of the existence of some nature) and to deny that the infinite can belong to anything that expresses something eternal and necessary (as is precisely the essence of substance) would be a contradiction (for the same reasons as in E1p11dem2). However, the logical step that remains implicit is why there must necessarily be a multiplicity of attributes since this multiplicity cannot be deduced from the nature of any attribute as such (since the nature of one attribute does not imply the nature of any other attribute). That a multiplicity of distinct attributes is *possible* is not preliminarily demonstrated. A posteriori, we can see that there are at least two different and irreducible attributes, thought and extension. However, Spinoza presents this as an axiomatic fact without further justification (E2ax5). He also seems to admit a genuine numerical multiplicity of attributes, although he concedes that 'for the moment I cannot explain this more clearly' (E2p7s).

other, yet the fact that they are given together does not reduce God to the modes or vice versa. God and modes define two distinct ontological orders of reality, inextricably linked yet irreducible. Or to use Spinoza's terminology, 'substance is by nature prior to its affections' (E1p1). In this sense, the view defended by Spinoza can be called a pan*en*theism ('everything is in God') rather than a pantheism ('everything is God').[17]

Now, why think that the essence of God is its power? What does it mean to pose this equation? If we put this question to Spinoza, the demonstration of proposition 34 refers us to proposition 11, in which Spinoza shows that it belongs to God's essence to exist necessarily. This last proposition is peculiar in the *Ethics* since it is accompanied by three distinct demonstrations. The first posits God's existence as a logically immediate and necessary consequence of the fact that it belongs to the nature of substance to exist (E1p7). The third rehashes an a posteriori argument based on the fact that the existence of finite things makes the existence of an absolute and infinite entity *a fortiori* necessary. But there is also another proof, which interests us more for now, in which Spinoza brings a different principle into play:

> Of everything one must assign the cause or reason [*causa*, *seu ratio*] for which it exists or for which it does not exist. For example, if a triangle exists, there must be a reason or cause for which it exists; and if it does not exist, there must also be a reason or cause that prevents it from existing or takes away its existence. [...] From which it follows that there necessarily exists that of which no reason or cause is given that prevents it from existing. If, therefore, no reason or cause can be given that prevents God from existing or takes away his existence, it must be concluded without doubt that he exists necessarily. (E1p11dem2)

The idea that both existence and nonexistence require a cause or reason can be understood as a formulation of what Leibniz would call the 'principle of sufficient reason'. In Leibniz's version, however, it is only existence that requires

17 See on this point Clare Carlisle, *Spinoza's Religion*, cit.; Giuseppe D'Anna, 'Considerations on Transcendence in Spinoza's Metaphysics', *Archivio di Storia della Cultura* 19 (2006), 181-204.

justification, not also nonexistence. In this sense, we can see how, in Spinoza, there is an enhanced version of this principle or an adherence to what has more recently been called 'the integral intelligibility of the real'.[18]

The Spinozian argument is quite stringent. If there were a reason why God should not exist, that reason would have to be either in God or outside God. If it were given outside of God (in another substance), it would be admitted that this substance is necessarily different (by virtue of what is shown in E1p5), and therefore it cannot really place any limit on God precisely by virtue of this diversity (E1p3). If, on the other hand, the reason for God's nonexistence were to be found in God itself, then we would fall into a contradiction. Spinoza mentions the fact that God's essence (like any essence) cannot be contradictory (i.e., cannot simultaneously posit and take away the things defined by the essence). One might also add that the same contradiction is encountered by admitting that in God there is a reason for its nonexistence since this would presuppose that God already exists. Thus, it is impossible for God not to exist because it is impossible to give a reason for its nonexistence.

Yet, why should this imply that God's essence is also equal to its own power? God's power can be understood as the necessity by virtue of which infinite things in infinite ways follow from the divine nature (E1p16). Spinoza clarifies that in the same sense in which God can be said to be the cause of itself, so it can also be said that, being the cause of itself, God is the cause of all things as well (E1p25s). In other words, power refers to the totality of concrete determinations that specify the divine nature. The divine nature is that of pure being, of free and independent substance, of being-in-itself, somehow separate and conceived independently of all further specification. Power refers to the fact that the divine nature is actualised in an infinity of determinate modifications, each of which expresses God in a certain way and in a certain respect. We can deduce a posteriori that finite things must be modifications of God by observ-

18 The latter expression was introduced by Alexandre Matheron in his seminal study *Individue et communauté chez Spinoza*, Paris: De Minuit, 1969. The emphasis on the principle of sufficient reason in Spinoza's work was put, in particular, by Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, op. cit., and from there it has set the standard in Anglophone literature. For a reconstruction of the equation between *causa* and *ratio* in the modern era, see Vincent Carraud, *Causa sive ratio. La raison de la cause, de Suarez à Leibniz*, Paris: Puf, 2002 (chapter 3 is devoted to Spinoza).

ing how finite things cannot be said to be substances, yet are something real and existent, and therefore necessarily refer to the existence of a substance to justify their very existence (since everything that is, is either substance or mode, and there is no third option, E1a1). In other words, if there are things, there must be the substance in which things are and exist.

Nonetheless, if we reason from a totally a priori perspective, why should there be finite things in the first place? Was it not enough for God to exist as pure indeterminate substance, without ever generating any determination? We touch here on one of the points on which Spinoza's metaphysics has sometimes been attacked as incapable of justifying the multiplicity of the real given the unity of substance. These are the accusations of parmenidism or acosmism to which we will return briefly in the conclusions. For now, it is enough for us to offer the positive response that the *Ethics* suggests to these objections (although Spinoza does not discuss them directly, perhaps not even considering them so cogent).

We apply the same principle of sufficient reason or integral intelligibility of reality to the problem of divine power. This means admitting that there is a cause or reason, in God or outside God, that excludes the existence of the infinite modifications and determinations that follow (or could follow—the argument does not change) from the divine nature. As we have seen, such a reason would be useless and insufficient if placed outside of God (since what is external to God could in no way modify or influence its nature). It is, therefore, all a question of whether it is contradictory to God's essence to have a reason that excludes its infinite articulation from itself.

At first sight, this does *not* seem contradictory since it is possible to conceive, as Parmenides did in his time, of a pure being totally empty of all determination. However, this conception is only falsely plausible. To conceive the exclusion of every possible determination, it is necessary to conceive the set of possible determinations to be excluded. If this set did not correspond to anything real, and the expression 'the set of possible determinations' was understood merely as a synonym for the word 'nothing', then nothing would be excluded from the divine nature, i.e., the reason for the exclusion would only exclude a meaningless term. If, on the other hand, as one must, one conceives of the set of possible determinations as something real and positive (and we

can at least have a posteriori, empirical proof of the reality of the determinations, since we ourselves and the entire phenomenal world are a set of determinations), then one must place in God a reason or cause for *excluding* something real and positive from God. However, since it is intrinsic to the essence of God (by definition, E1def7, and by demonstration E1p11-15) to be the totality of the real and the positive, to posit such a reason in God is to assert that God is the totality of the real and the positive and yet, nevertheless, removes and excludes something real and positive from itself. This boils down to a direct denial of God's absolutely positive and infinite nature, contradicting its essence. Therefore, it is impossible for any reason to be given in God that excludes from it the set of possible determinations, and, therefore, such a set is necessarily given in God.

Like all proofs by absurdity, this one too can establish *that* something is really posited (in this case, the reality of the set of determinations as determinations of the divine nature) without, however, clarifying *how* it is posited (i.e., how exactly it is possible that in God's infinite nature the infinitude of finite determinations finds a place). Let us therefore take a further step forward to better understand how the finite determinations are in God.

Since God, in itself considered, is substance, whereas determinations are modes, the totality of possible determinations cannot be given in God as substance except as a *power* to produce all these determinations, which then follow and manifest themselves as an infinity of different modes (E1p16). Spinoza himself glosses his thesis of the identity between power and divine essence by saying: 'the power of God is nothing other than the *actualizing essence of* God [*Dei actuosam essentiam*]; it is therefore just as impossible for us to conceive that God does not act as that God is not' (E2p3s). But 'actualizing' for God means nothing other than expressing—in the form of certain and determinate modifications—the infinite potentiality implied by its nature. God acts by being, that is, *by making* the cosmos or nature as a whole.[19]

19 Note that Spinoza does not understand the term 'power' in the sense of a potentiality that might not express itself (and thus in the sense of a contingency). On the contrary, this meaning is explicitly rejected in E1p33s2. Rather, the power of which Spinoza speaks is an infinite actuality, that is, a force to bring into being the infinite totality of the real. As he writes (E1p17c2s): 'the omnipotence of God has been in existence since eternity, and will remain for eternity in the same actuality.' In drawing

In other words, the notion of *power* is the middle term (so to speak) linking the absolute infinity of God and the infinity of its determinations. This is because, on the one hand, power can include within itself the totality of what it can be (and since God's essence is its very existence, for E1p7, God's essence is also identical with its power to exist, E1p34) while, on the other hand, the power to exist necessarily implies the totality of the determinate modes in which existence can be spelled out (since, as has been shown, this totality is something real and positive and, therefore, something that belongs to the domain of existence and not to that of pure nothingness). But there is more.

Substance implies in itself the totality of its possible modifications, whether or not they exist in action in a certain quadrant of spacetime (E2p8). These essences also exist in God as they are expressed differently under different attributes. Thus, under the attribute of extension, all essences are implied and expressed as the totality of possible ways of articulating extension, while under the attribute of thought, the same essences are implied and expressed as the totality of possible ways of articulating thought.[20] Since all essences necessarily exist in the same substance and are expressed under the same attributes, all essences must have a basic compatibility and cannot be totally contrary or opposed to one another. In other words, all essences (despite their differences) exist in the sense that they are understood or implied in the nature of God.

But why, then, is existence not reduced to this presence of all essences together and simultaneously in God? Why is a domain of actual existence given for each essence that differs from the domain in which the essence exists only in God (E5p29s)? The way in which finite essences exist in act is to bring into being a complex chain of causal relations in which each essence determines others and is determined by others—and this implies that the domain of actual existence coincides with what can be called the 'becoming' of the

this ontological framework, Spinoza rethinks and articulates in an original way an ancient intuition, which emerges from time to time in Western (as well as Eastern) thought, according to which being is action. This idea, which Plato presents in the *Sophist* (247e), at a crucial point in the 'patricide' performed towards Parmenides, resurfaces in Renaissance authors such as Cusanus and Bruno, and finds a new formulation in Spinoza.

20 Note that for Spinoza the term existence has two possible meanings (E2p8c, E2p45s, E5p29s), i.e., existence in the sense of being implied in the divine nature (but not necessarily instantiated in a certain quadrant of spacetime), or existence (in the more common sense) as an ongoing presence in a certain quadrant of spacetime or at a certain point in the infinite chain of finite modes (E1p28).

phenomenal world we witness. But why is there a becoming? What need (what reason) was there for it? Was God in its synchronic and eternal immutability not enough to exhaust the expression of the existence of essences? Justifying the connection between God's infinite nature and the totality of finite essences is still not enough, for it remains to be justified why these essences exist in act and appear as becoming in the world.

From a philosophical point of view, it is usually easier to justify the existence of the eternal than that of becoming. The eternal, after all, is the cause of itself (E1p7) and exists necessarily (E1p11). Nothing could be clearer or more logically straightforward. In this sense, eternity is a simple thing to explain.[21] But what about becoming? How can this constant succession of phenomena that arises and disappears be justified? Or rather, is it possible to discern a necessity as profound, immediate, and simple as that which posits the eternal?

Spinozian metaphysics (if not Spinoza himself) offers an elegant answer to these questions. Insofar as all essences that necessarily follow from the divine nature (E1p16) exist in God, they are given in relation to God. In other words, every essence is defined by its direct ('vertical' we might say) relation to the divine power from which it arises—every essence arises first and foremost as a determinate specification of that infinite power. However, precisely the giving of this infinite totality of finite essences in God also brings into being another reality, which is not a different essence, but the totality of all the essences that are given in God in their relationship to each other (in a 'horizontal' sense). The fact that all essences are expressions of the same substance in fact creates an ontological transitivity whereby all essences must also be in relation to each other. This relationship is no less real than the relationship with which essences exist and depend on God since it is nothing more than a different formulation of that same dependence—the horizontal projection of the vertical relationship that every essence has with its foundation, achieved by the fact that every essence is God itself insofar as it expresses itself in that determinate form.

21 For an in-depth study of the concept of eternity in Spinoza and its relation to the domain of temporality, see Chantal Jaquet, *Sub specie aeternitatis: Étude des concepts de temps, durée et éternité chez Spinoza*, Paris: Garnier, 2015.

Insofar as all essences relate to each other, they must necessarily form a network or a certain order (an 'order and connection', *ordo et connexio*, as Spinoza says in E2p7), i.e., they must structure themselves according to certain relationships in which not all essences are equally close, contiguous, or immediately connected to all others. Since each essence is different, it in fact requires different conditions to be determined as such, and in turn poses specific conditions that can determine certain other essences. For example, biological life as we know it is based on the element of carbon. If the element of carbon is not given, life cannot be conceived. But carbon, in turn, requires certain conditions to be in place (such as the fusion of three helium nuclei), which in turn requires other conditions.

The domain of the actual existence of essences is thus the space in which the totality of essences expresses itself as an order, a network of interconnected conditions and causes. This order, as a whole, represents the way in which all essences exist in God, not insofar as they relate to God conceived in itself (as an absolutely infinite substance), but insofar as they relate to every other essence (i.e., to God as expressed by every other essence). The relative proximity or distance of an essence from every other essence in this space is what determines its appearance and disappearance from a certain horizon of observation (like the constellations rising and setting in the sky depending on the relative position of the earth in relation to them). This appearing or disappearing is nothing other than what we call 'becoming' and the horizon of observation from which we observe it is our very essence (since everything is in God, E1p15, there is no point of observation on reality that can stand outside reality itself). Becoming, in this sense, has nothing to do with time as commonly understood (which for Spinoza is a means by which imagination represents substance, E2p44c1[22]), but might better be defined, as Plato puts it, as a moving image of eternity.[23]

22 On temporality as an imaginative structure, see also Spinoza's letter No. 12 to Meyer of 20 April 1663.

23 This reading is contrary to the materialist and radically immanentist reading defended among others by Vittorio Morfino, *Le Temps de la Multitude*, Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2010, according to which existence is more fundamental and precedes the essence of things. Nevertheless, Morfino has rightly emphasised the fact that in Spinoza existence is given according to a plural and non-synchron-

The articulation between the two domains of existence (in relation to God as infinite substance, and in relation to God as it expresses itself in other finite modes) can be related to the distinction mentioned by Spinoza (E1p21-23) between immediate infinite modes and mediate infinite modes.[24] In both cases we are dealing with modifications that derive immediately from the nature of the attributes themselves. The immediate infinite mode can be understood as the totality of essences conceived under a certain attribute as immediately expressing the power of God under that attribute. The mediate infinite mode, on the other hand, can be understood as the articulation (or order) of these essences with respect to one another, insofar as each essence expresses the same power of God in a determinate way. Both of these modes are infinite in the sense that their nature is eternal and necessary, hence immutable. All of these essences are as if welded into the unity of the power from which they emanate; in the case of the mediated infinite mode the same totality is expressed in an order, equally eternal and infinite, yet articulated.[25]

When we observe a certain finite determinate mode existing in act and, knowing it only imaginatively, we form an abstract and incomplete representation of it (namely, a representation that neither sees nor understands the way in which this mode is an expression of the infinite order of the mediate infinite mode), we can say that this mode arises at a certain point in time, lasts for a certain period, and then is destroyed or disappears at another time. This is the *imaginative* representation of becoming and multiplicity. If, however, we can understand how all modes exist first and foremost in the eternal and infinite

ic temporality of finite modes, which do not all exist at the same time, nor are they organised in a linear series.

24 On the subject, see: Emilia Giancotti, 'Sul problema dei modi infiniti', in Id. *Studi su Hobbes e Spinoza*, Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1995, 279-306; Federica De Felice, 'On Causation and Infinite Modes in Spinoza's Philosophical System', *International Philosophical Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (2015), 471-494; Kristin Primus, 'Spinoza's 'Infinite Modes' Reconsidered', *Journal of Modern Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (2019), 1-19.

25 Spinoza denies that anything finite and determinate can be derived immediately from the essence of God insofar as it is considered as infinite (E1p21 and E1p28dem). But it is totally compatible with the nature of an immediate infinite mode to be the infinite totality of all essences that can express themselves under that mode (per E1p16) and insofar as they are conceived only as the totality of possible articulations of the same divine power. The 'mystery' of how the manifold can arise from the One is only due to the prejudice of thinking the manifold as lacking unity and unity as lacking articulation. Spinoza rejects this idea and indeed admits a unity-in-difference.

space of the mediate infinite mode in which the overall order of God or nature is articulated, then we see that what we imagined to be an 'arising' or a 'lasting' or a 'vanishing' are nothing more than the ways in which the mutual relations of implication between different essences (in the infinite complexity of the natural order) appear from the point of view of that particular determinate essence that constitutes our own mind.

To illustrate this view with another example, one can imagine the totality of essences as they exist implicitly in the nature of the divine attributes (or in the immediate infinite mode) as the totality of discrete truths that can be deduced in a certain axiomatic system (such as Spinoza's *Ethics* itself). Although all of these truths exist implicitly in the axioms, postulates, and definitions underlying the system, their actual deduction must follow a certain order, in which only certain truths can be posited at a certain point and require other truths to be demonstrated in advance. This deductive order (the immediate infinite mode), in its entirety, is the expression and articulation of the truth-totality implicit in the system. What we call 'becoming' and what we understand in imaginative, temporal, incomplete terms is nothing but the expression of our 'reading' or proceeding through this order. Initially, we proceed like a wanderer lost in a forest, but progressively (to the extent that our power of knowing increases and consolidates) we become capable of grasping the totality of the system in its entirety and it is no longer something that is being formed step by step.

The central point for our analysis, however, is that the notion of power represents in Spinoza's metaphysics the true point of synthesis between all the dimensions of reality. Power is not only the essence of God, as we have seen, but also that which mediates the nature of God in itself, as infinite and eternal substance, and its articulation in the infinitude of finite essences (E1p16). Moreover, it is the same power that mediates between the totality of these essences as they are conceived in the divine attributes alone (immediate infinite mode), and as they exist in the actuality of the order formed by them (mediate infinite mode). Finally, within this order, each essence exists not only in relation to the others by which it is determined and which it in turn determines, but also as an effort (*conatus*) to express in action its own way of giving determinate form to the infinite divine power. Reversing the terms, one could therefore say

that the notions of substance, immediate infinite mode, mediate infinite mode, and finite mode are nothing more than different degrees of expression of the same power, depending on whether it is conceived of as more or less closed in itself or more or less articulated in its expressions.

It could be said that the being of substance, in itself considered, represents the contraction in itself of the totality of the real and expresses the foundation itself, in its naked freedom and independence. From the point of view of power, however, this represents only the most compact, inarticulate state of reality, which by nature (that is, by the very nature of power) necessarily tends towards its explication, articulation, and expression. In this sense, not only can the pure being of substance and its power not be conceived as truly distinct realities, but substance itself can be assimilated to the most condensed, concentrated, and inarticulate degree of power itself. Consider how we call the same element H_2O 'ice' when it is in the solid state, 'water' when it is in the liquid state, and 'vapour' when it is in the gaseous state. In the same way, substance is power in the solid state, infinite modes power in the liquid state, and finite modes power in the gaseous state.

In the context of ontological reflections developed in the context of yoga, the Spinozian proposal comes closest in this respect to the nondual Kashmiri tantric tradition.[26] Overcoming the opposition between an indeterminate absolute principle (mythologically represented as Śiva—the pure consciousness, absolute peace) and an active, generative, becoming principle (mythologically represented by his consort, Śakti—the pure potency, nature in its unfolding), nondual Tantrism first affirms that the two principles co-belong to each other without reducing one to the other. Śiva would be a pure corpse without the animating force of Śakti, and Śakti would be a demonic and destructive force without the space of emptiness, peace and grounding created by Śiva. Ulti-

26 For a historical overview of Tantrism, see André Padoux, *Comprendre le tantrisme. Les sources hindoues*, Paris: Albin Michel, 2010. For a discussion of philosophical themes in this tradition, see Mark Dyczkowski, *The Doctrine of Vibration. An Analysis of the Doctrines and Practices of Kashmir Shaivism*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987; Isabelle Ratié, *Le Soi et l'Autre. Identité, différence et altérité dans la philosophie de la Pratyabhijñā*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011. For an approach more oriented towards meditative practice, see Christopher Wallis, *Tantra Illuminated. The Philosophy, History, and Practice of a Timeless Tradition*, Boulder: Mattamayūra Press, 2012; David Dubois, *Les Quatre yogas. Manuel de vie intérieure inspiré par le shivaïsme du Cachemire*, Paris: Almora, 2020.

mately, though, this view leads one to recognise the wholeness of being as a progressive articulation of different degrees of reality (*tattva* in Sanskrit), moving from the absolute, indeterminate unity of pure consciousness to the more concrete, fragmented, and determined reality of the material elements. Reality—in its essence, and as a whole—is not reducible to any of these degrees taken in itself, but only to their complete and total integration. From this point of view, the ontology of the *Ethics* can be thought of as an alternative, but not necessarily conflicting articulation of the same basic intuition.

Let us, however, return to the problem from which we started. Since all finite things are but expressions of the divine nature, it follows that each finite thing is a finite expression of divine power. Divine power is not added from outside to the nature of the finite thing but constitutes it. In other words, to be a finite thing is to be the divine power itself in the act of determining and specifying itself as this or that finite thing. This specification of divine power in the finite thing is nothing other than the *conatus* of the thing, that is, the effort to persevere in the being of the thing, in actualising it and seeking its most powerful and effective expression.[27] The thing is nothing other than the actualisation of the *conatus*. Things, in short, are not inert objects, but processes directed towards the actualisation of an essence, where the essence itself is nothing other than that which directs the actualisation of certain specific effects that define the nature of one thing rather than another.[28] Thus, in the *conatus* of the finite resonates the power of the infinite—or rather, the finite is nothing other than this limited resonance of the infinite. If one were to remove the *conatus* of a thing, the thing would be destroyed and annihilated.

This is the extent of the problem. We have seen how the *conatus*, insofar as it expresses itself as imaginative appetite, necessarily falls into contradiction and becomes entangled in the mechanisms of sadness or fixation, seeking impossible relief in the (erroneous) ideology of a self-representation of the

27 In E1p24c Spinoza states that, to use scholastic terminology, one can call God the *causa essendi* of finite things, in the sense that it is the cause of their existence. He adds: 'God is not only the cause that things begin to exist; but also that they persevere in existence [*in existendo perseverent*]', which also linguistically recalls the formulation of *conatus* in E3p6 (*in suo esse perseverare conatur*).
28 See in this regard Francesca di Poppa, 'Spinoza and Process Ontology', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 48, no. 3 (2010), 271-294.

finite subject as free substance. However, in contrast to the classical yoga tradition (nondual tantra aside), Spinoza's ontology shows the impossibility of solving this problem by removing the *conatus* or its expressions, for the *conatus* is God itself insofar as it expresses itself in the finite, and it is reality itself insofar as it manifests as determinate reality. The power of Spinoza's philosophy is thus, first and foremost, not only to arrive at a diagnosis somewhat analogous to that which can be found in the yoga traditions, but to place this diagnosis on a different foundation, one that shows the impossibility, impracticality, and, ultimately, the futility of solving the problem by focusing on the extinguishing or cessation of the appetite. This is a barred path, which goes against the very nature of things, and cannot be reached except at the cost of suppressing the things themselves.

The beauty of philosophy is to put our backs to the wall, to block all escape routes, in order to force us to look the problem straight in the eye, as deeply as possible. Only if we expose ourselves to this sense of discomfort and constraint can we hope to truly find a solution that is equal to the problem—and to our hopes. This is what Spinoza invites us to do. Where, then, is the key to solving the paradox of our own nature? If we cannot get away from appetite, if we cannot suppress it unless we suppress reality as a whole, is it not precisely in appetite, in the *conatus*, that the answer we seek is also concealed?

Chapter 2:
The key to salvation:
Amor dei intellectualis

Kinds of knowledge

As we have seen, the appetite that expresses itself in the mind as imagination is oriented towards seeking that which can increase the individual's power of acting. Imagination is in itself a power of the mind, but it is also a kind of knowledge based on ideas that are inadequate, that is, ideas that express an impotence to think (E2p41). An adequate idea is complete, i.e., it entails a perfect and complete knowledge of its object. Spinoza prefers to speak of adequacy, rather than truth, because he considers that the ordinary notion of truth implies a comparison between the idea and an object external to it, whereas adequacy can be understood as an intrinsic characteristic of the true idea as such (E2def4).[1] For our purposes, it is sufficient to point out how the imagination can in its own way offer adequate ideas *of the affections* from which it arises.[2] However, the ideas of these affections, if not supplemented and corrected by other ideas, necessarily remain incomplete and therefore false.

For example (E2p17s, E2p35s), insofar as I observe the sun at sunset, I can form an image of the sun as I perceive it, i.e., as a sphere of light no larger than a few centimetres at a certain distance above the horizon. There is nothing inadequate in this imagination, as long as I consider it merely as a trace that records the way in which my body is affected by the sun. However, if I possess no other idea about the sun and its nature (which the affection produced by the sun cannot provide me with), then I will be led to judge that the sun is indeed a sphere of light no larger than a few centimetres. In short, inadequacy or falsehood does not arise from the imaginative idea taken in and of itself, but from the way in which it fits the network of ideas that form the mind. When this network is frayed, unable to correct and complete the imaginative ideas, these ideas take on an absolute value that they do not really have. Once again, we see here how the main problem with imagination lies not in its content, but

1 For an examination of the Spinozian theory of truth, see Marco Messeri, *L'epistemologia di Spinoza. Saggio sui corpi e le menti*, Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1990; Andrea Sangiacomo, 'Fixing Descartes: Ethical Intellectualism in Spinoza's Early Writings', *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 53, no. 3 (2015), 331-361.

2 Spinoza remarks (E2p49s): 'I grant that no one is deceived in so far as he perceives, i.e., I grant that the mind's imaginations, considered in themselves, do not include any error (see E2p17s).'

in the way it proceeds. The error is not in the image as such, but in taking the image seriously (at face value, as it were) without supplementing it further with other ideas.

The *conatus* of the mind tends towards knowledge because the mind is but a finite mode expressed under the attribute of thought, and thus the mind expresses in a finite way the very act through which God expresses itself as thought (E2p11c). Thought, for Spinoza, is nothing other than *knowing* something. Thinking and knowing, in this sense, are the same. Thus, the effort of the mind, as a finite form of thinking, is necessarily an effort towards an ever greater power of knowing. This presupposes that there can be different ways of knowing, which express different degrees of power.

Spinoza distinguishes three main kinds of knowledge (E2p40s2). The first is imagination, which includes naive experience (such as my observation that the sun is no bigger than a few centimetres), hearsay (in which what I know is in fact nothing more than the mediated affection of someone else's ideas), but also ordinary language as a whole falls into this kind of knowledge (knowing something only through a linguistic description is in fact a form of hearsay knowledge). Imagination thus expresses the mind's lowest degree of power of thinking.[3] It expresses the fact that the mind can at least know the affections of the body of which it itself is an idea. But this minimal knowledge does not at all guarantee that the mind can really know the nature of itself, the body, or external bodies (E2p29c) since, as mentioned above, affections only tell half the story (they speak of how I am affected, but do not give access to the nature of what I am affected by), and thus lead to a knowledge that is valid to the extent of its superficial immediateness, but limited to the extent that it is asked to reveal something more about the true nature of reality. As Spinoza says, 'these ideas of affections, insofar as they refer only to the human mind, are like consequences without premises, i.e., (as is known by itself) confused ideas' (E2p28dem).

Furthermore, imagination works on the basis of particulars. Each affection is the encounter between my individual body and a limited number of other

3 On the subject of language and its relation to truth, see Céline Hervet, *De l'imagination à l'entendement. La puissance du langage chez Spinoza*, Paris: Garnier, 2011.

bodies that my body may come into contact with at any given moment. I cannot be affected by all the bodies in the universe at the same time, but only by that handful of other bodies acting in my immediate vicinity at any given moment. Imagination has a remarkable vividness because it always starts from concrete representations of specific individualities. The problem is that, as the number of experiences increases, similar images can merge together (since imagination tends to work by similarity and affinity), giving rise to seemingly universal ideas, which are nothing more than the collapse of multiple particular images into a single vague image. For example, the first time I saw a monkey, it seemed to me an absolutely unique and exceptional creature, having never seen one previously. But by the hundredth monkey I encountered, the memories (traces) of all the monkey individuals I had seen before began to merge, giving rise to a vague but more general notion of 'monkey' that encompasses the common traits of the many specific affections from which such a general image arose.

Spinoza observes (E2p40s1) that many universal concepts used by philosophers (such as the concept of 'man' or 'animal') can well be understood as imaginative universals, produced by nothing more than this collapsing of individual images into more vague and general ideas. In some ways, these imaginative universals can be understood as the semantic basis of ordinary languages (and of their inherent vagueness and ambiguity), in which each word indicates certain common traits that allow the speakers of that language to roughly understand each other and identify in their surroundings more or less the same individuals endowed with more or less similar characteristics. This means that imagination can in fact give rise to a form of knowledge that *seems* rational, that mimics reason, that aspires to a higher form of cognition, without, however, really succeeding in rising to that level. There is thus a fictitious rationality, which is nothing more than an imaginative construction (usually with ideological intentions, i.e., aimed at justifying a certain praxis of life based on affective mechanisms), which remains *totally* different from true rationality. Spinoza suggests that entire philosophies can be considered as examples of this reasoning imagination, which never becomes more than a parody of what it seeks to be.

However, imagination is not the only kind of knowledge to which the mind has access. As already mentioned, according to Spinoza, reality consists of individual entities, each endowed with its own unique essence. Yet, since all individuals are nothing more than different expressions of a single substance, they also share a number of common aspects. More precisely, we can identify common properties that allow entities that are different in themselves to adapt to each other, producing mutually compatible effects and integrating as parts of a whole. These common properties may be shared by a more or less limited number of entities (E2p39), or they may be completely universal (E2p38). For example, the fact of occupying a certain quantity of space is a universal property of all bodies, without which it would be impossible to experience a body as such. Similarly, the fact of involving an activity of thought is a universal property of all minds and all ideas (for Spinoza, minds are nothing but ideas of individual bodies, E2p13). What Spinoza calls 'attributes' of the divine substance (thought and extension) are precisely these universal properties always presupposed and present to ever more particular experience.

Common properties have an epistemic clarity that images of affections do not possess. Since a common property is, by definition, equally present in all parts of the whole characterised by that property, it is not possible to form a partial (hence inadequate) idea of it. Whatever body I consider, whether it is only a part of a larger body, or a whole body, or an aggregate of bodies, I will always and necessarily encounter the same property of being extended. Although bodies are different, the fact that they are different ways of expressing extension remains unchanged. The universal common property of extension cannot be conceived in a partial way, but only in a complete way. Therefore, the idea of a common property (what Spinoza calls a 'common notion') is necessarily an adequate idea (E2p39c) from which other adequate ideas follow (E2p40). Insofar as the mind forms ideas of common properties, the mind is adequately acquainted with certain aspects of reality, and thus its power of thinking is enhanced compared to the level of power expressed by mere imagination.[4]

4 For a more detailed discussion of common notions and their ontological foundation, see Andrea Sangiacomo, *Spinoza on Reason, Passions, and the Supreme Good*, cit. chapter 4.

Knowledge that proceeds from and is based on common notions constitutes the second kind of knowledge, which Spinoza identifies with reason. To know according to reason is to know what things share with one another, and consequently to be able to know the laws, regularities, and more or less universal relations that bind their interactions. The laws of physics, for example, are a form of rational knowledge of nature, since they are based on properties common to all bodies. The laws of biology are another form of rational knowledge of nature, albeit limited only to those bodies that can be said to be alive. Even the laws of a state, in this sense, lay the basis for a form of rational knowledge, even more specific and limited in this case to how individuals in a certain group interact with each other and constitute a specific society. Spinoza's *Ethics* itself (like much of properly philosophical reflection) is an exercise and development of rational reflection, insofar as it explores common properties and laws of reality in general, of the human mind, of the affects, and of morality.

However, what reason gains in adequacy, it somehow loses in concreteness. By relying solely on common notions, we can certainly know something true and adequate that characterises the determinate reality before us, but we cannot really know what makes that reality a unique individual. In other words, reason does not allow for the knowledge of the individual essence of things (E2p37). Imagination puts us in contact with that individuality, but inadequately. Reason makes up for the inadequacy, but by taking us a step back from individuality. The contrast that can be drawn between the first two kinds of knowledge (imagination and reason) is thus that between an inadequate knowledge of the particular and an adequate knowledge of the common. There seems to be a hiatus between these poles, there is something missing, namely the possibility of adequate knowledge of the individual. This is no small gap, given that God expresses itself in the totality of reality by bringing into being an infinity of finite modes, each of which has an individual essence. Not being able to know that essence adequately means remaining in the dark about the most concrete expression of the whole of reality and divine power, including that specific expression that is each of us.[5]

5 A different reading is advanced by Francesco Toto, *L'Individualità dei corpi. Percorsi nell'Etica di Spinoza*, Milano: Mimesis, 2014, 401-412, in which the essence of an individual is read as the gen-

For Spinoza, however, the mind also naturally has access to a third kind of knowledge, which aims precisely at providing adequate knowledge of the individual essence of things. This is what he calls 'intuitive knowledge' (*scientia intuitiva* in Latin): 'this kind of knowledge proceeds from the adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things' (E2p40s2). Since imagination does not allow adequate knowledge of the essence of anything, and reason does not allow adequate knowledge of the essence of any single or individual thing, we can conclude that the essence made known by intuitive knowledge is the individual essence.

Intuitive knowledge does not proceed by abstraction from the particular to the universal, nor does it attempt to embody the universal in the particular.

eral essence (in the rational sense of being a common notion, such as the 'human' essence), and the actual essence as the result of the way in which this essence is determined by its interactions, which in the case of human beings are expressed as affects. In other words, the general essence is reducible to the *conatus* or desire in the generic sense that is proper to human beings, while the actual essence of each individual is given by the plexus of affects that determine this desire in each person, helping to constitute a particular character rather than another. In support of this reading, it can be added that since a finite essence does not imply existence (E1p24) and therefore does not imply the number of individuals that can instantiate that essence in actual existence (E1p8s2), there are in fact no individual essences, but only more or less common essences, and the individuals that exist in actual existence would be the fruit of the combination of these essences with the causes that determine their existence. However, the notions of 'common' and 'individual' are correlative and ultimately depend on the correlative notions of identity and difference. If common essences differ from one another and are not all the same essence, then (to that extent) they must possess aspects that are not common but singular. Conversely, insofar as a certain essence defines a singular and specific thing (which can count as a whole in itself—although only relatively, being a mode), that essence can be said to be individual and non-common. In other words, even the common essence of 'human being' must be considered singular in relation to the common essence of 'horse', since the two are different (hence, there are no absolutely common essences, but all essences entail a degree of singularity). If this is the case, then, we need a specific reason to claim that the same common essence of 'human being' can account for all human individuals (reducing their differences to a matter of different instantiations and constitutions of the same actual essence), rather than admitting a singular essence for each human individual. If we then consider that God's power tends to express itself in the greatest possible infinity of ways (E1p16), then it is clear that there is a greater scope for God's expression when a multiplicity of singular essences is posited (given that each singular essence expresses a mode of God's power that is irreducible to any other essence). This does not detract from the fact that (as Spinoza points out in E1p8s2) the *same* individual essence can be instantiated in existence more than once, if the external causes necessary to actualise it allow for it. But the individuality or singularity of an essence is a trait of that essence as such, and has nothing to do with its actualisation in existence. The affective constitution of the actual or determinate essence nicely emphasised by Toto can thus be understood as the way in which an individual essence expresses itself concretely given the plexus of its causal interactions (given that an affect is nothing more than an expression of the way in which the power of acting is affected by external causes). However, this does not detract from, and indeed implies, the fact that each thing strives to produce *certain* specific effects and not others, which are proper to and constitutive of its individual essence and not merely the traits it has in common with other essences of the same species.

Intuition does not proceed deductively, but immediately and synoptically. The foundation of intuition is the adequate knowledge of God and its attributes. Provocatively, Spinoza shows that we always have an adequate idea of God's essence (E2p45). However bold, this thesis is in fact an implication of the very nature of mind and reality. Whatever we encounter in experience, we cannot help but recognise it as a physical or mental object, i.e., as a body or as an idea (or mind). If we have an idea of any corporeal or mental object, we must necessarily have an idea of the attribute of extension or of the attribute of thought, since otherwise we could not conceive of that object as corporeal or mental (since it is by virtue of the idea of the attribute of extension, for instance, that we can think of a certain thing as extended in space, i.e., recognise it as a body). If, therefore, we have an idea of the attribute of extension or thought, and we pay attention to what this idea implies, we see that extension and thought (as such, abstracted from their determinations) are not finite modes, but infinite and indeterminate realities that express an eternal and necessary essence, i.e., the very essence of God (which is nothing but substance, pure being, therefore unlimited in every sense and absolutely positive).

Let us take the attribute of extension as an example. A certain physical body is undoubtedly limited and determined, but the very idea of extension or space in itself admits of no limit, nor can it be derived from something else. Extension is therefore not only spatially infinite, but also eternal or outside of time. Since it is something that cannot be created, but always exists, its existence is also necessary. But what exists eternally and necessarily is precisely substance, and so extension, if properly understood, is nothing more than an attribute expressing the very nature of substance, i.e., God. Hence, we necessarily have an adequate idea of the essence of God. Moreover, if we have an adequate idea of God, we must also recognise how God does not exist beyond and outside the world of finite manifestations, but is the foundation of it (after all, we have come to this idea of God from the idea of a finite body, without making any ontological leap). Then, we can also see how finite things are but finite expressions of divine power: 'although each thing is determined by another single thing to exist in a certain way, nevertheless, the force by which each persists in existence follows from the eternal necessity of God's nature' (E2p45s). Spinoza's ontology is thus all present in the simplest and seemingly

most trivial of experiences. The key to recovering this vision is to pay serious attention to the conditions of possibility that are implicitly operative in all finite and determinate experience.

Intuitive knowledge 'proceeds' (*procedit* writes Spinoza in E2p40s2) from adequate knowledge of the divine attributes to adequate knowledge of the essence of a singular thing. This 'proceeding' is not a deductive proceeding, but the ability to grasp at once or see at a glance the way in which the uniqueness of the finite arises as an expression from the power of the infinite. As mentioned at the end of chapter one, the notion of power is the bridge and common term that unites all degrees of reality. Intuitive knowledge is nothing other than the power with which the mind attunes itself (so to speak) to the power expressed in a finite thing, seeing in that expression the infinite background from which that power comes.[6]

The example that Spinoza uses to illustrate this procedure (E2p40s2) is that of how we can find a fourth proportional number, given the relation: 1:2=3:X. If we only use our imagination, we can identify the missing number by mechanically remembering the rule we learnt in school and the multiplication and division operation to be performed on the known numbers. If we use reason, we can find the same number by following the demonstration process that is exemplified by Euclid in his *Elements* of *Geometry*. If we use intuition,

6 Emanuela Scribano, *Angeli e beati. Modelli di conoscenza da Tommaso a Spinoza*, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2011, 281-283, suggests that intuitive knowledge implies a deductive aspect. In her broader historiographical reconstruction, Scribano also aims to show how a form of Platonic dualism remains in Spinoza, no longer between mind and body, but between the temporal imaginative domain and that of adequate and eternal knowledge (of reason and intuition). Scribano seems to be right that the adequate knowledge Spinoza is aiming for is not the empirical knowledge of the Aristotelian tradition, but a knowledge rooted in the eternal. If we concede, however, that Spinoza may have matured a form of nondualism (analogous to that of the śaiva tradition already mentioned), then it is possible not only to admit a distinction between temporal expression and eternity, but also to see how the one is an expression of the other, without the need for any break or antithesis between the two dimensions. Moreover, for those who make the attempt to conceive of an adequate conception of a divine attribute (by experiencing, for example, infinite extension, as described below in Chapter 3), they will see that it is not possible from such a conception to logically deduce the (discursive) definition of an individual essence, because that experience of the divine attribute is neither discursive nor determinate (therein lies its 'infinity'). Thus, individual essences known intuitively can (later) be expressed, articulated, and approximated by linguistic definitions and semantic structures, but are not known directly in this way. To know an individual essence is to see, immediately, in the infinite field of divine power the emergence of a wave, a vibration, unique to itself, and yet made of the same cloth as everything else, and for that very reason capable of expressing the whole in a unique way.

on the other hand, we can immediately grasp what the ratio is that binds 1:2, and apply the same ratio to 3:X, thus arriving at the solution for which X=6 at once.

This example is useful because it suggests that in order to practise intuitive knowledge about any singular essence of anything, we must first have an experience of what it means to intuitively know the relationship between God and singular essences in a case that is known (such as the 1:2 ratio). Such knowledge is made possible by reason (which, by shedding light on the ideas of the universal common notions of the divine attributes, makes it possible to see everything as an expression of God), but it is first realised as an intuitive knowledge of the eternal essence of our own body, of which the mind is an idea.[7]

The mind is an idea of the body, but the body itself exists in act insofar as it actualises a certain essence that determines its striving to persist in its being. The property of striving (the *conatus*), as such, is a property common to all

7 In E2p46 Spinoza suggests that every idea leads to adequate and perfect knowledge of God's essence, and the demonstration of this proposition connects this knowledge with knowledge of the common notions of attributes. E2p47s reinforces the point by asserting that 'the infinite essence of God and its eternity are known to all. And since, on the other hand, all things are in God and are conceived through God, it follows that from this knowledge we can deduce many things that we shall know adequately, and thus form that third kind of knowledge of which we have spoken.' All this suggests that the basis for the development of intuitive knowledge is the rational knowledge of divine attributes, which is implicit in all experience (and idea), so all rational knowledge is in itself knowledge that can lead to the development of knowledge of the third kind. This connection between the second and third kinds of knowledge is taken up in the fifth part, as we shall see, where Spinoza shows that the appetite for intuitive knowledge arises from reason (E5p28). However, for Spinoza to know adequately is to know under a kind of eternity (E2p44c2), i.e., to know that which is known not as contingent or immersed in duration, but as necessary and directly linked to the expression of divine power (E1p16). It has been said that insofar as the mind knows the body through its imaginative affections, it has only inadequate knowledge of the body and affections (E2p29c). Insofar as the mind instead knows the body and ideas according to reason, this knowledge is a necessary knowledge that expresses itself under a species of eternity. Since the mind is (and always remains) an idea of the body, insofar as the mind knows adequately it reveals itself not so much as an idea of the body insofar as it is subject to duration (i.e., as it is known through affections and the common order of nature, E2p29c), but insofar as the mind is an idea of the eternal essence of the body insofar as it is included in the divine attributes themselves. Therefore, the transition from reason to intuitive knowledge is mediated by the turning (so to speak) of the mind from the domain of duration to that of eternity, and thus by the conception of the mind itself not so much as the idea of a currently existing body, but rather as the idea of the eternal essence of that body as it exists in God itself, which is made possible by the rational idea of the divine attribute in which the mind is inscribed (E5p29dem). In this sense, the basis of intuitive knowledge (in general) is the (purely intuitive) knowledge of the eternal essence of the body since this knowledge is also the basis of all other ideas that the mind can develop (the mind always being an idea of the body or its essence).

things. But the specific declension of this striving is made unique by the individual essence that directs the *conatus* itself in a specific way. Everything we do is a result of this effort, so each of our actions is a way in which our individual essence is actualised. Now, we can have a different knowledge of this essence depending on the kind of knowledge we are able to access.

If we remain at the level of the imagination, we can articulate our individual essence as a certain story (or drama), based on the more or less fortuitous succession of our encounters, experiences, and the affections aroused by them. This narrative description of what we are implies our essence in a certain way (since this essence is the principle behind every action), but only indirectly and incompletely, since everything in this story is intermingled with the way our essence combines with the external causes from which it is affected and in relation to which it determines its effort.

If we move to the level of reason, we can find a number of common properties that our bodies (and our minds) share with other entities and use some of these properties to correct our imaginative representation of ourselves, to know better how we function as living beings, as animals, as human beings, as citizens, and as members of specific groups or aggregates. Yet, a purely rational representation of our actions will never give us access to adequate knowledge of the individual and unique essence that moves them, but only of how that essence can adapt and harmonise with other essences. Even if we knew our body's DNA by heart, we could only know that general map of relationships that allows the parts of our body to organise with each other and function, while sharing the same structure. Even this would remain only a rational knowledge of a common property.

If we understand, however, that an individual essence can be neither an image (or a story) nor a common property, and if we also bear in mind that this essence is what moves all our actions and efforts, we can see how the individual essence is nothing other than the very experience of God's power of acting, in its manifestation in an individualised and determined form. In other words, we should not expect the intuition of our essence to return us common images or notions (which are expressions of ways of knowing that belong to the other two kinds of knowledge). Intuitive knowledge is an immediate and not further articulated knowledge of that which necessarily lays the foundation of our being.

This foundation is nothing but a particularisation of divine power, and thus we can expect nothing more from this intuition of our essence than the immediate knowledge of this particularised form of power.

When we know the ratio of 1:2 we know the relationship between two things that are different in a certain sense but are also united by a relationship that unifies them. When we know God properly, we know that God is essentially power, and that this power is necessarily expressed in finite and determinate forms. When we know our essence, we know that at the ultimate bottom of everything there is a determinate power of acting. To know the relationship between God and our essence is to see this determinate power of acting as a declension of divine power and, conversely, to see how divine power expresses itself in us.

Since our being is known to us in the forms of mind and body, and since the mind is the idea of the body, the knowledge (idea) of our essence can be understood as the idea (knowledge) of the essence of the body. Intuitive knowledge of the essence of our body, however, is not expressed as *objective* knowledge in the sense that it does not offer us a representation *of what* the body is. Intuitive knowledge is actualised as an *identity*, a knowing that arises from *being* the body itself. The being of the body becomes thus totally transparent, by revealing divine power at its core. To intuitively know the essence of the body is to know that one is God insofar as God expresses itself in this finite form of power that manifests itself as this body.

We will return in the next chapter to the practice that can help or facilitate this knowledge. For now, let us only mention that once we have obtained this knowledge of our own essence, we may also know everything else in the same way, for we know what it means to see an individual essence as an expression of the divine nature, and we can then apply the same pattern or relationship to everything else (going from the ratio 1:2 to the ratio 3:X). In turn, the more things we can know in this way, the clearer our knowledge of our own nature will become since the more adept our mind will become at knowing everything through the same kind of knowledge, i.e., intuitively.[8]

8 Again, this extension of a paradigm (the 1:2 ratio, for example) to other, lesser-known cases, has nothing necessarily deductive about it, just as improvising or modulating in music *may* be canonised

In order to fully understand the scope of the Spinozian doctrine of the kinds of knowledge, however, we must keep one crucial aspect in mind: the three kinds of knowledge are not just three different types of ideas, like objects lined up on a more or less inaccessible shelf. The three kinds of knowledge define three different types of *experience of the world*. Each has its own specific quality, its own texture, its own flavour. Moving from one kind to another is like changing the atmosphere and the very kind of experience one is having (even if the object, in a sense, does not necessarily change).[9]

When the mind imagines, it not only comes to know reality primarily through bodily affections, but the lived quality of the experience as a whole takes on a special tone—woven together by the passionate textures evoked by the imagination, which are now partial, now confused, now extremely vivid, due to the mechanisms of appetite and memory. Imagination, then, is not just a particular way of knowing (or not), but is more fundamentally a way of encountering, experiencing, and interpreting the world. The same applies to reason, with its adequate knowledge, capable of accessing a kind of eternity and making the mind jump from the plane of duration to that of absolute necessity. Knowing according to reason, the mind not only finds and develops common notions, but sees the whole world as a structure of relationships (*rationes*), laws, connections that are more or less universal, yet all necessary, coherent, deductively tight.

To know intuitively is to introduce another level in the experience of the world, to immerse oneself in the infinite bubbling of divine power, to grasp its vibration in every wave, froth, drop that arises from it and to which it returns, without name—because names are but images made to capture the particular or confuse it with the general—and yet very real. To see the world with the eyes

according to certain rules, but in practice need not (if supported by sufficient talent) manifest itself as the application to a particular case of a preliminarily learned scheme. For further discussion of intuitive knowledge as a knowledge of individual essences, see Sanem Soyarslan, 'The Distinction between Reason and Intuitive Knowledge in Spinoza's *Ethics*', *European Journal of Philosophy* 24, no. 1 (2013), 27-54. For an expansion of Spinoza's discussion to everyday life applications and its possible relations to psychology, see Eva Wink, *Der Begriff der Intuition. Eine Spurensuche in der Philosophie Baruch de Spinozas und C.G. Jungs*, Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovač, 2024.

9 For a comparative look at Spinoza's doctrine of the three kinds of knowledge in relation to Buddhist thought, see Soraj Hongladarom, 'Buddhism and Spinoza on the three kinds of knowledge', *Asian Philosophy* 33, no. 2 (2023), 176-189.

of intuition is to see the spontaneous co-belonging of identity and difference, seeing both, together, without any contradiction, but as naturally complementary.

When it comes to traversing or moving between different kinds of knowledge, Spinoza invites us not just to make a mechanical transition (like shifting gears in a bicycle or a car), but rather to cultivate a mental agility, a flexibility, an openness that allows us to fully grasp the spectrum of possibilities we have access to in our ways of being in the world (or being an expression of infinite nature), depending on the degree of power we are able to access—that is, depending on the power we are able to express.

Much more could be said about the Spinozian theory of kinds of knowledge, and intuitive knowledge in particular.[10] For our purposes it is sufficient to limit ourselves to these brief hints and try to put them into practice in order to solve the problem we raised in the previous chapter. How, then, can intuitive knowledge resolve the contradiction of the appetite?

The supreme virtue of the mind

Appetite aims at empowerment, and insofar as appetite is also expressed at the level of the mind, empowerment implies an enhancement of the capacity to

10 It can be noted in passing how a correct understanding of the theory of the three kinds of knowledge can also provide a key to the solution of some apparently obscure points in Spinoza's metaphysics. For instance, there is a lively debate as to how the nature of the relation of 'inherence' between modes and substance (their being 'in' the substance, E1p15) should be understood. Readings vary from an Aristotelian interpretation (John Carriero, 'On the Relationship between Mode and Substance in Spinoza's Metaphysics', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 33, no. 2 (1995), 241-273), to a causal one (Della Rocca, *Spinoza*, cit, 61-68), passing through more refined proposals that interpret it as a 'conceptual dependence' (Samuel Newlands, 'Another Kind of Spinozistic Monism', *Noûs* 44, no. 3 (2010), 461-502), up to the suggestion that the relation of inherence in Spinoza should be understood as a *sui generis* relation (Yitzhak Melamed, 'Spinoza's Metaphysics of Substance', in Don Garrett (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, 2nd edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 61-112). What all these interpretations have in common is that they seek a rational conceptual scheme (a common notion) to articulate the way in which a multiplicity of entities is unified in their being in substance, without thereby losing their distinction, but also without gaining any ontological independence from the substance itself. As we shall see more fully below, the understanding of how identity and difference can merge is precisely the hallmark of intuitive knowledge. In other words, it is up to intuition to see how the many are in the one and the one is articulated in the many. Even if it is possible to grasp common properties of this co-belonging (and thus to articulate it rationally), it is only by accessing a kind of intuitive knowledge that it becomes possible to properly understand how it can manifest itself.

think adequately. The theory of the kinds of knowledge shows that imagination represents the most limited mode of thinking, and therefore expresses relatively less power than the other two kinds. In contrast, intuitive knowledge represents the highest thinking power of the mind, since it achieves adequate knowledge of individual essences (which is precluded, for different causes, to imagination and reason). Thus, appetite ultimately aims at intuitive knowledge, which implies and presupposes the mind's capacity to know itself as a finite expression of divine power.[11]

If we think back to the problem of appetite as outlined in the previous chapter, we see that the contradiction to which it gives rise is based on the limitations of imaginative knowledge. In other words, the problem is not the appetite as such, but the kind of knowledge on which the appetite relies, i.e., the fact that the appetite is unable to reach and express sufficient power of thinking. Spinoza's solution to the problem of the appetite is therefore not to depotentiate it or even extirpate it, but on the contrary to strengthen it to the utmost. His solution is not to accord what the imagination believes to be an enhancement—for this is only an inadequate knowledge of what could enhance our being—but to attain the kind of knowledge in which our mind experiences the maximum peak of its power of thinking (and which, as we shall see, is also expressed as a maximum power of acting of the body).

In the fourth part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza had already shown how the mind naturally tends towards knowledge (E4p26), and the first form of adequate knowledge, the most accessible from the level of imagination, is reason. Reason, in fact, stems from common properties that are necessarily implicit in all imaginative affections. We just need to pay attention to these common properties to acknowledge their presence. In the first twenty propositions of the fifth part, Spinoza develops this theme further, showing how rational knowledge can exercise relative (though never absolute) power over passions based on inadequate imaginative ideas, and also lead to a (rational) love for God (E5p14) understood as the universal foundation of reality (in the way God was pre-

11 As Spinoza says in E5p4s: 'all appetites, that is, all cupidities, are passions only insofar as they arise from inadequate ideas; and these same cupidities are considered virtues when they are excited or generated by adequate ideas.'

sented in the first part of the *Ethics*). But this is still not all. Reason, in fact, is but a basis for a further development of the appetite for knowledge, for a further empowerment, which tends to know every singular thing as an expression of God and thus God itself as immanently present in the totality of reality, in the most concrete and determinate way.

Thus, Spinoza demonstrates that

> The more we know about individual things, the more we know about God. (E5p24)
>
> The supreme effort of the mind and its supreme virtue is to know things through the third kind of knowledge. (E5p25)
>
> The more the mind is apt to know things by means of the third kind of knowledge, the greater its eagerness to know things by means of this same kind of knowledge. (E5p26)
>
> The striving, that is, the cupidity to know things with the third kind of knowledge, cannot arise from the first kind of knowledge, but rather from the second. (E5p28)

Intuitive knowledge expresses a qualitatively different way of experiencing reality, when compared to imagination, but this does not make it a strange and exotic (if not esoteric) kind of knowledge. It is not something to be learned through secret rituals or hoping for some miracle. In itself, the mind naturally tends to know all things intuitively, in the same way that it tends to preserve its being and empower itself. In fact, Spinoza shows that this is precisely what the mind naturally does as soon as it is left relatively quiet by external causes: 'as long as we are not fought by affections that are contrary to our nature, we have the power to order and concatenate the affections of the body according to the order corresponding to the intellect' (E5p10). This means that we can understand the relations of identity and difference, the causal relations, and the general structure that inform our experience by forming adequate (at least reason-based) ideas of it. The only necessary condition for the development of intuitive knowledge is a state of relative inner peace and tranquillity. We will see in the next chapter what helps facilitate this condition. For now, we can dwell on its consequences.

Having intuitive knowledge of ourselves necessarily implies knowing the mind as a finite expression of God as it expresses itself under the attribute of thought. Moreover, this knowledge of the mind represents an increase in its power of thinking over forms of knowledge based on imagination and reason. Thus, intuitive knowledge implies a form of joy (a transition to a higher power) united with the idea of a cause that is different from the mind as such—that cause being God itself, which, though it is the foundation of the mind, is not reduced to the finite mind as such, and therefore remains different from it, just as the whole remains different from the part. A joy united to an external cause is what for Spinoza constitutes the nature of love (E3 AD6). As a result, intuitive knowledge (of the mind itself, or of any finite thing) implies a love of the mind towards God. This is not, however, a passionate love caused by an object imagined as independent and external to us. Since God is the immanent foundation of all reality, love towards God is a *sui generis*, special love, which Spinoza therefore qualifies as *intellectual love*, in order to emphasise both its cognitive matrix (it is a love that arises from intellectual or intuitive knowledge, not from sensitive perception, imagination, or even reason) and its difference from ordinary love.[12]

12 The intellectual love of God is a theme that has received opposing assessments in the critical literature. Among the more negative ones is the reading of Ferdinand Alquié, *Le rationalisme de Spinoza*, Paris: Puf, 1981, chapter 21, who considers Spinoza's attempt to reconcile a number of dualisms, including that between knowledge and love, a failure. Jonathan Bennet, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1984, 361-375 is also very critical of this, concluding: 'it looks as though some passive affect—of fear or hope or excitement—clung stubbornly to the man [Spinoza] and overcame his reason' (*Ibid.*, p. 375). Lastly, Antonio Negri, *Spinoza*, Roma: Derive e Approdi, 1998 (first ed. 1981), emphasises the 'ascetic tension' that animates the fifth part, contrasting it with the opposite 'materialistic' tension that would inform the rest of Spinoza's ontology, and viewing the latter as the most authentic and promising in Spinozism (*Ibid.*, pp. 211-230). More positive readings emerge in Remo Bodei, *Geometria delle passioni. Paura, speranza, felicità: filosofia e uso politico*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 1991, 331-363, which contextualises intellectual love within early modern theorisations on the affects, and the various ramifications it weaves with other aspects of Spinoza's philosophy. Bernard Rousset, *La perspective finale de l'Éthique et le problème de la cohérence du Spinozisme. L'autonomie comme salut*, Paris: Vrin, 2005, 131-157, offers a systematic reconstruction and justification of the theory of intellectual love, interpreting it as 'a pure and simple conscious joy of oneself, in one's own activity, in virtue of one's own essence, and independently of any other reality' (translating from *Ibid.*, p. 144). Hasana Sharp, 'Love and Possession: Towards a Political Economy of Ethics 5', *NASS Monograph* 14 (2009), 1-19, offers a broader overview of the thematisation of love in its various forms in Spinoza's philosophy, suggesting a parabola of progressive loosening of fixations and possessiveness that passes through the state of *hilaritas* and culminates in intellectual love. On the topic see also Clare Carlisle, *Spinoza's Religion*, cit.; and Steven Nadler, 'The Intellectual Love of God' in Michael della Rocca (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, 291-313.

Insofar as the mind's appetite naturally tends to its empowerment, it therefore necessarily tends to experience this intellectual love of God, and the experience of such love constitutes the peak of the mind's life and potential. Moreover, such love does not exclude the body either. Not only is the mind an idea of the body, and every affection of the mind has a counterpart expressed at the level of the body (E2p13), but as mentioned above, intuitive knowledge is first and foremost based on a knowledge of our individual nature. The mind, in itself, is individual only insofar as it is the idea of an individual body, so intuitive knowledge of ourselves is based on knowledge of the individual essence of our body. Insofar as this intuitive knowledge of the essence of the body is realised, giving rise to the intellectual love of God, this affect is necessarily also expressed on the physical level, as a perception of the fact that the body itself is necessarily an expression of the divine power manifesting in the domain of extension, and this perception represents an enhancement of the body's own power of acting (insofar as the body is no longer perceived as a relatively isolated entity, but as a wave on the ocean of divine power). God's intellectual love, then, is not intellectual in the sense that it sets the body aside, but rather includes it as an integral part of its experience.[13]

Intellectual love of God dissolves the contradiction of the appetite by eliminating the elements of sadness necessarily associated with imaginative forms of fixation or desire. Fixation on a specific affection induces sadness to the extent that it compromises the functioning of the individual as a totality, privileging one part at the expense of the whole. Intellectual love of God can likewise become a fixation, in the sense that it can become a form of continuous affection. But since such love stems from nothing other than the knowledge of the foundational unity that binds the individual with the whole, to fixate on the intellectual love of God is to become permanently aware of the very nature

13 In E5p20s, Spinoza writes: 'it is therefore now time to move on to what refers to the duration of the mind, without relation to the body.' In the immediately following propositions (E5p21-23) Spinoza shows that the mind exists in God even before and regardless of the coming into being of the existence of the body (by virtue of the fact that in God there is eternally given an essence of the body of which the mind is an idea), and regardless of whether or not the mind can remember this existence 'before' its coming into being. This implies that the reference to the body in E5p20s means 'to the body *existing in act*'. In other words, Spinoza is not suggesting that there is a way of conceiving of the mind as completely independent of the body, but rather that it is necessary to posit the existence (and in this sense a form of duration) of the mind irrespective of the duration of the body existing in act.

of reality. This necessarily implies an awareness of the way in which all parts (whether in the microcosm of the individual or the macrocosm of the whole world) constitute a single totality. On this basis, it becomes impossible to pursue the unilateral and unbalanced empowerment of one part to the detriment of the others, since what one is constantly affected by is precisely the sense of the totality that unites the parts together and of which each is an expression. As we shall see, by attempting to establish the intellectual love of God as the basic condition and normal state of the individual, one does not undermine its functioning at all, but on the contrary reaches the apex of the power of acting. All this (note well), without denying the possibility of affective fixation, but simply by transforming the object of affection, or rather the quality and power of affection itself. Similarly, since intellectual love concerns our natural belonging to the whole, it is an affect that can occasionally be forgotten, from which the mind may be distracted at times, but which can never really fail (since that relation of identity-within-difference that binds the finite and the infinite is constitutive of the real, and therefore always present). Thus, intellectual love makes the affect of desire (in the technical sense discussed in the previous chapter) impossible, since it is a love that knows no past but lives in an eternal present.

The problem of appetite (as outlined in the previous chapter) consists in its tendency to become entangled in an apparently insoluble contradiction, whereby every effort to increase its power ultimately results in a depowering, in a form of sadness. This is true and necessary only if, and to the extent that, the appetite remains confined to the lowest level of its power, that is, to the extent that it is guided solely by the imagination. Being ruled by imagination, the appetite is unable to negotiate the co-belonging of identity and difference, and thus it is torn apart by the experience of becoming and its resistance against its outputs. The contradiction arises from the impotence with which the appetite strives to pursue its own empowerment, forcing itself to choose between striving to live in an eternal present and losing itself in a stream of constant pursuit of new experiences so as not to have to face their impermanence. This powerlessness to hold identity and difference together makes the attempt impossible to succeed, and thus causes the contradiction. Insofar as the appetite orients itself toward intuitive knowledge, instead, it finds therein the

means of attaining the maximum of its power, which from an affective point of view is expressed as an intellectual love of God, in which identity and difference, finite and infinite are experienced as essentially reconciled.

In the architecture of the *Ethics*, intellectual love is not so much a supreme summit as it is a core, a central point to which everything else in the edifice gives support, into which it reconnects, and to which it gives access. The condition for intellectual love is intuitive knowledge, and this is based on an adequate knowledge of the divine nature. Such knowledge can be obtained through the universal common notions of the divine attributes, thought and extension. These common notions are necessarily present, even if only implicitly, in every ordinary experience, and in every form of imagination. Thus, even when the mind seems only capable of imagination, it actually carries within itself the foundations of rational knowledge, which requires nothing more than sufficient development and deepening to lead, in turn, to the entry point of intuitive knowledge. In this sense, the intellectual love of God is not a sublime but distant affect, but rather a potentiality always immanent in every experience. It is all about recognising it, activating it, and cultivating it.

Spinoza shows how there is in fact nothing wrong or contradictory about the appetite itself. Naturally and spontaneously, left to its own intimate orientation, the appetite moves towards intuitive knowledge and intellectual love, i.e., the realisation of the unity between the finite and the infinite, and the special joy that accompanies this realisation. The more ordinary forms of the appetite, based on imagination, are but an incomplete and relatively powerless manifestation of this impulse. Limited by circumstances, and hindered by other opposing forces, the appetite falls back on the imagination, which tries as best it can to help, but with all the limitations and contradictions we have seen. The passionate and imaginative appetite, then, is but the depotentiated, deformed, and bewildered manifestation of the essential appetite that always tends towards God, love, joy, and bliss, even when it retains such an inadequate and partial knowledge of them that they become unrecognisable, and the search gets lost in the meanderings of random affections, images, daydreams, fixations, habits, and desires. Yet, even in this disempowered state, the appetite does not cease to aim at that experience of love that it now struggles to glimpse and can no longer comprehend—or at least, it continues to seek its natural

place, the infinite embrace of identity that shows the finite as an expression of the whole, and vice versa.

The highest and most ambitious goal conceived by yoga traditions is that of the integration of different states of experience. If it is possible to achieve in certain circumstances, and for a given time, even a sublime state of peace or understanding of reality, such a realisation is worth little, after all, if it remains episodic, disconnected from the rest of experience, and somehow contradicted by what precedes and what follows it. However, even if a single individual were able to sustain such a state of awakening more uniformly and continuously, what would that realisation be worth if the rest of the world remained completely unaffected and indifferent? The idea of individual salvation, regardless of the fates of the other beings with whom we share our existence, is itself something inevitably swept away by the realisation that follows the actual deconstruction of subjectivity. If the finite, egocentric self is set aside, it becomes obvious that the finite individual (while continuing to be operative) cannot be, nor conceive of itself as, something closed within itself (it is not a substance, but a mode, Spinoza would say). Therefore, it becomes equally obvious how there can really be no individual salvation at all that does not in some way carry with it and fit into a collective (transindividual, in a sense) movement of liberation of nature as a whole. Yet, this second interpersonal dimension of liberation is nothing more than the expansion and generalisation of the same problem mentioned earlier of integration, which the individual already encounters in its attempt to overcome the barriers and compartmentalisation of its own experience.[14]

14 From the individual point of view, yoga traditions agree in recognising the supreme realisation ('awakening' or 'liberation' in its ultimate and most accomplished form) as having a form of irreversibility. It is not an exceptional but transitory experience, but rather a permanent transformation of the way the world is experienced (a transformation that can also be cultivated and developed through more transitory but extraordinary experiences than the ordinary experience). Less obvious is the presence of a sensitivity to the collective and transindividual dimension of awakening. This can be explained by the fact that the yoga traditions arise, historically, from an ascetic movement of renunciation, which aims at the realisation of a liberation of the individual also understood as liberation 'from the world' (on this topic, see Patrick Olivelle, *The Āśrama System: The History and Hermeneutics of a Religious Institution*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993; Andrea Sangiacomo, *The Tragedy of the Self*, cit., lecture 6). However, in many traditions there is an interest in the social repercussions of an awakened life. In early Buddhism, for example, this is manifested in the creation of ideal coenobitic communities, governed by the values of the Buddha's teachings, but also highly integrated

The crux of this problem lies in the apparent irreconcilability of what it seeks to harmonise and unite—that is, in the contrast between the subjective experience of finitude (which tends to see in the finite a form of independence and substantiality, in order to claim direct power of acting, control and determine one's own existence) and the experience of transcendence (which by dissolving subjective barriers restores a pure contemplating, a pure experiencing, not necessarily localised, not necessarily embodied, not in need of any finite identity or identification, ineffable at its edges, sweetly silent at its heart). Transcendence seems to dissolve subjectivity in order to reveal itself, while subjectivity seems to have to obscure transcendence in order to function.

From a Spinozian perspective, this tension is resolved by rethinking it as a transition between different kinds of knowledge. Subjectivity is an imaginative construction, whereas transcendence (at least in its impersonal and universal form) is a form of rational knowledge. This may sound bizarre to those accustomed to conceiving of reason in limited terms (often confusing it with imagination, as mentioned above), yet reason (in its technical sense discussed in E2p31-p40s2) is precisely that adequate and necessary knowledge that sees all things under a species of eternity, conceiving of their common properties. The most common of all properties are the attributes, which necessarily express the eternal and infinite nature of the one substance and thus enable the mind to always have an adequate idea of God (E2p46). This is an impersonal and general knowledge since it does not conceive of God other than as the universal substratum of being of all that is and appears. Reason knows no individual essence (E2p37). Since, however, it is precisely the individual essences that express God's power, which is its very essence (E1p34), reason knows God adequately, but only abstractly, insofar as it remains blind to the concrete and specific declension of the divine nature in the infinite multiplicity of its unique

into the society on which they depend symbiotically. In later Buddhism, on the other hand, the ideal of the *bodhisattva*, the practitioner who vows to postpone their own personal liberation to ensure that countless other living beings can be liberated comes to the fore. It remains true, however, that a clear thematisation of the social dimension of awakening is more typical of developments at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Consider, for instance, in the Buddhist domain, the thought of B. R. Ambedkar (see Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), and in the neo-Vedanta tradition, the thought of Sri Aurobindo (see his *The Synthesis of Yoga*, Twin Lakes: Lotus Press, 1996).

and unrepeatable forms expressed by each of its finite modes.[15] Thus, even for Spinoza, reason (taken in an absolute sense) seems to deny imagination (which is all about the individual), just as the latter (when it totally dominates the mind) seems to oppose reason itself.

Harmonisation and reconciliation between these two ways of experiencing arise from the transition to intuitive knowledge, which starts from reason but leads to adequate knowledge of individual essences. Thanks to intuition, it is possible to see one and the same essence as unique, finite, determinate and yet an expression of the infinite divine power articulated in the totality of reality. The apparent contradiction that seemed to separate finite and infinite is thus resolved, not by discovering a particular object of knowledge, but by accessing a different way of knowing the same reality.

However, intellectual love is not just an individual attainment, a state of bliss that saves the fortunate individual who experiences it. It reveals within itself a cosmic dimension, one that concerns nature in its entirety, and gives us a key to delving into the implications of the relationship of identity and difference between the infinite and the finite, between God and modes, that Spinoza has helped us explore so far.

Love and glory

One of the earliest and most ancient discoveries of the yoga traditions concerns the possibility of transcending the seemingly natural and insurmountable boundaries of finite individuality, experiencing a sense of union with the totality of existence. Consciousness overcomes its habitual confinement, becoming unlimited, but at the same time without withdrawing from phenomenal appearance. This experience, which could be described as that of a 'cosmic consciousness', is rather the sense of being one with the totality of what appears and manifests. Cosmic consciousness is unity of the manifold (or unity

15 Yet, a reason that would limit God to its abstract form alone would betray an impotence to think. As Spinoza shows (E1p16), it is still reason that knows that from the infinitude of divine power infinite things must follow in infinite ways. Yet reason can only affirm *this*, without being able to see *how* this happens or materialises.

in the manifold), that is, the simultaneous co-presence and interpenetration of the One and the Many.

In one of the classic *Upaniṣad*, this experience is expressed in a few but intense verses:

> He who sees the Self [*ātman*] everywhere in all beings,
> and all beings in the Self, knows no aversion.
> For the discoverer of the being-Self in all beings,
> what ignorance or pain could there be?[16]

This insight is somewhat dramatised in another of the classical texts of yoga, the *Bhagavad Gītā*. It is an intense dialogue between the warrior prince Arjuna and his master Kṛṣṇa. Arjuna is on the verge of having to go into battle—the battle of all battles, the Mahābharata—but he hesitates for fear of the consequences his actions may have. Kṛṣṇa intervenes, seeking not only to spur Arjuna to action, but in doing so initiating him into the ultimate vision of things—in which Kṛṣṇa himself is revealed as a manifestation of the Absolute.[17]

In the dialogue between the two, Kṛṣṇa gradually explains to Arjuna various methods or forms of yoga, ultimately trying to overcome his resistance and make him come to the realisation that Arjuna himself is nothing but a finite manifestation of the infinite. Arjuna is Kṛṣṇa and Kṛṣṇa is Arjuna. In the teaching of the *Gītā*, this unified consciousness of finite and infinite is revealed from different perspectives. First as an invitation addressed to the finite to surrender, to give up its claims to control (which are nothing but claims to isolation, and hypostatization of that which is relative and non-substantial). Thus, Kṛṣṇa explains:

16 Iśa Upaniṣad, vv. 1-7: "yas tu sarvāṇi bhūtāny ātmany evānupaśyati | sarvabhūteṣu cātmānaṃ tato na vijugupsate || 6 || yasmin sarvāṇi bhūtāny ātmaivābhūd vijānataḥ | tatra ko mohaḥ kaḥ śoka ekatvam anupaśyataḥ || 7 ||" One can translate *ātman* as 'Self' meaning both the reflexive principle by which the individual becomes conscious of itself and its innermost heart, and at the same time sees in that heart the reflection of the universal consciousness (which in the Upaniṣadic view is sometimes expressed by the equation between *ātman* and *brahman*).

17 For an introduction to the work geared towards contemplative practice, see Richard Freeman and Mary Taylor, *When Love Comes to Light. Bringing Wisdom from the Bhagavad Gita into Modern Life*, Boulder: Shambala, 2020.

> All activities are produced by the activity of Nature's essential qualities.
>
> He who is led astray by the presumption that his ego is the agent, thinks: 'it is I who act!'
>
> But he who knows reality, and the connection between qualities and action, O Mighty Warrior, thinking 'it is only qualities acting on other qualities' remains detached.[18]

The *Gītā* also offers a complementary viewpoint, in which the absolute principle (Kṛṣṇa) is revealed as already present within every finite manifestation:

> Earth, water, fire, air, space, mind, intelligence, and I—this is the eightfold articulation of my Nature.
>
> This is my lower Nature. But you must know, O Mighty Warrior, also my other Nature, the individual essences, by which this world is held together.
>
> You must understand that this is the womb of all beings. I am the birth and also the dissolution of the whole world.
>
> There is absolutely nothing superior to me, O Winner of Riches. All that is, is bound to me, like precious gems to the thread of a diadem.
>
> I am the taste of water, O Son of Kuntī, I am the light of the moon and the sun. I am *Oṁ*, the sacred syllable in all the *Vedas*, the sacred sound of space, and the manhood of man.
>
> I am the sacred fragrance of the earth, the brilliant radiance of the sun, the individual life of all beings, and the ardour of the ascetics.
>
> Know me as the original and primeval seed of all beings, O Son of Pṛtha. I am the intelligence of that which is intelligent, and the radiance of that which is radiant.[19]

18 *Bhagavad Gītā*, III.21-28: "prakṛteḥ kriyamāṇāni guṇaiḥ karmāṇi sarvaśaḥ | ahaṃkāravimūḍhātmā kartāham iti manyate || tattvavit tu mahābāho guṇakarmavibhāgoyoḥ | guṇā guṇeṣu vartanta iti matvā na sajjate ||"

19 *Bhagavad Gītā*, VII.1-10: "bhūmir āpo 'nalo vāyuḥ khaṁ mano buddhir eva ca | ahaṁkāra itīyaṁ me bhinnā prakṛtir aṣṭadhā || apareyam itas tvanyāṁ prakṛtiṁ viddhi me parām | jīvabhūtaṁ mahābāho yayedaṁ dhāryate jagat || etadyonīni bhūtāni sarvāṇīty upadhāraya | ahaṃ kṛtsnasya jagataḥ prabhavaḥ pralayastathā || mattaḥ parataraṁ nānyat kiñcid asti dhanañjaya | mayi sarvam idaṁ protaṃ sūtre maṇigaṇā iva || raso 'ham apsu kaunteya prabhāsmi śaśisūryayoḥ | praṇavaḥ sarvavedeṣu śabdaḥ khe pauruṣaṁ nṛṣu || puṇiyo gandhaḥ pṛthivyāṁ ca tejaścāsmi vib-

This leads to the epiphany by which Kṛṣṇa reveals to Arjuna (in Chapter 11) his cosmic form, at once beautiful and terrifying, a coincidence of productive and destructive forces, contradictory and terrible for the finite mind still unable to comprehend this revelation, but sublime for the liberated one. Thus, the teaching of the *Gītā* converges towards the theme of *devotion* (*bhakti* in Sanskrit, which literally means 'sharing') by which Kṛṣṇa invites Arjuna (the finite) to surrender himself totally and identify with him, gathering every thought in him, and living every action in him (chapter 12, verses 1-16).

This theme will be taken up with innumerable variations in later developments by different schools, sometimes positing the identification between the individual principle (what might be called the soul, the *ātman* or *jīvātman*) and the universal one (*brahman*, or *paramātman*), sometimes rethinking this identity as a specification of the even more fundamental one between the ultimate indeterminate principle and its creative and expressive power, from which all individual forms also arise (which in the Tantric tradition takes the form of the identity between Śiva and Śakti).[20]

This sense of identity between the finite and the infinite is not unknown in the West either. For example, Dante, in the thirty-third canto of *Paradise* (verses 121-132), describes his vision of God thus:

> O eternal Light, who throne only within yourself,
> solely know yourself, and, known by yourself
> and knowing, love and smile:
> that circulation which seemed in you to be
> generated like reflected light, surveyed by my
> eyes somewhat,
> within itself, in its very own colour, seemed to

hāvasau | jīvanaṁ sarvabhūteṣu tapaścāsmi tapasviṣu || bījaṁ maṁ sarvabhūtānāṃ viddhi pārtha sanātanam | buddhir buddhimatām asmi tejas tejasvinām aham ||"

20 For a concise view of the theme of cosmic consciousness, see Sri Aruobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, cit., 401-425.

> me to be painted with our effigy, by which my
> sight was all absorbed.[21]

Here, the vision of the divine first evokes the already Aristotelian idea of the unmoved mover, pure actuality, which eternally thinks and knows only itself. But Dante adds a further note. Looking more closely at the divine light reflecting itself, he discerns in it the effigy of his own face. Reflecting itself, the infinite also reflects the finite within itself. It is not a matter here of the cosmic and panentheistic sense of identity between the divine and its expressions that emerges most powerfully in Indian (and Spinozian) thought, since the Christian theology to which Dante adheres tends, if anything, to mark the divine's transcendence and its separation from the world. And yet, it is remarkable how the first hint of that identity also surfaces in this context, as if it were such an essential feature of reality that it cannot really be ignored by anyone who plunges their gaze into its light.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza develops this idea of a mutual reflection of the infinite in the finite in his own way. He demonstrates:

> The mind's intellectual love for God is God's own love, with which God loves Himself—not insofar as He is infinite, but insofar as He can be explained through the essence of the human mind, considered under the species of eternity; that is, the mind's intellectual love for God is a part of the infinite love with which God loves Himself. (E5p36)

The mind is but God insofar as it expresses itself in one of its finite modes. God is not reducible to the mind of a single individual, just as the mind is not (cannot, nor must be) suppressed for God to appear. In this sense, the mind is God and God is the mind—and yet their mutual distinction remains preserved within their identity. Knowing this identity-within-difference is precisely the power of intuitive knowledge.

21 Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*. Vol. 3: Paradiso. Edited and translated by Robert M. Durling, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 667.

Insofar as the mind knows God and knows itself as an expression of the divine, the mind sees itself as necessarily inscribed in the totality. To know God, in Spinoza's view, is to know the substance of all that exists and the power from which all that is emanates. Thus, to know God is in fact to know the heart of the whole in its infinite articulation. This is not a form of omniscience, in the sense that it does not imply a knowledge of every single fact, detail, or finite essence, but it is still a cosmic knowledge, in that it embraces at once, or in a single intuitive glance (*uno intuito* says Spinoza, E2p40s2), the complete horizon of the real.

Moreover, when the mind knows God, it is actually God who knows itself as expressed by the mind (E2p11c). Since the foundation of the mind is thought, and thought is a divine attribute, Spinoza can say that it is not the mind that thinks, but God that thinks through the mind. As we have seen, it is contradictory and irrational for Spinoza to think that God can actually be an absolutely empty and indeterminate principle. We can modally distinguish God's indeterminate being from its power of acting, as two aspects of the same reality, but it is not possible to have one without the other. Thus, it is not possible for God to know itself adequately as a pure abstract principle, deprived of all determination. Since God's reality is that of necessarily expressing itself in the totality of what exists, God can only truly and concretely know itself as expressed in its infinite modifications. But none of these modifications allow in themselves a fully complete view of the totality of the other modifications (since the essence of each finite thing implies only the definition of that thing and not of everything else). Therefore, God can only know itself completely by knowing itself through each of its infinite finite determinations, i.e., through the totality of minds that modify the attribute of thought (and for Spinoza, every individual thing is endowed with a mind, E2p13s). The act by which the mind knows God is thus not merely an ascent (or descent, depending on one's preference) of the individual mind towards its foundation. It is at the same time the immanent revelation by which God knows itself in the only way this knowl-

edge is possible, that is, through its infinite refraction in the totality of infinitely many finite minds.[22]

Spinoza emphasises the necessarily transindividual dimension of intellectual love: 'God, insofar as it loves itself, loves human beings, and consequently, God's love for human beings and the mind's intellectual love for God are one and the same thing' (E5p36c). The love of the individual mind for God is not only God's way of knowing itself through the mind, but also an expression of the love God has for all human beings (or, one might gloss, for all beings whose minds are capable of this love). Human beings, however, are none other than God itself as it expresses itself in those finite ways that we call human beings. So, again, God's love for human beings is God's love for its finite expressions. Since God is the foundation of all these finite expressions, it even follows that intellectual love towards God (or of God towards human beings) implies by transitive property a love of human beings towards each other. Knowing God, it is impossible not to recognise every other finite being as its expression, and all the more so those beings we ordinarily judge to be the most similar to us in nature and capacity. Thus, intellectual love is at once cosmic (insofar as it opens up to the mind the horizon of totality in which the mind exists), reflexive (insofar as it consists in a mutual mirroring of the finite in the infinite), and transindividual (insofar as it transcends the individual in its movement, involving all finite modes, and fellow beings in particular).

Having defined a special kind of love—*intellectual* love—Spinoza can then present a special kind of glory. According to Spinoza, in ordinary life psychology, glory is 'a joy accompanied by the idea of an action of ours which we imagine to be praised by others' (E3AD 30). Glory is a form of love, the external cause of which is a special affection, i.e., the image of someone else praising our actions. Since praising one of our actions presupposes in the person praising us an affection of joy or love towards us, and imagining that the person praising us is relatively similar to us, we can conclude that glory triggers an external mechanism of imitation of positive affections towards us. Due to the

22 The Latin expression *amor dei intellectualis* captures these two dimensions together in the dual valence (objective and subjective) of the genitive *dei*: it is the intellectual love that has God as its object, but at the same time the intellectual love with which God, as subject, loves itself and in loving itself loves the totality of existence.

praise of others, we assume an attitude of satisfaction towards ourselves, which leads us to see ourselves as powerful and capable, which in turn satisfies our appetite for empowerment. Indeed, as Spinoza points out, the lust for glory is one of the most common passions and potentially capable of creating the greatest harm to peaceful coexistence among human beings (E3p30s). Although there can be a glory of a rational kind, based on an actual recognition of our own merit (E4p58), that which Spinoza links to the intellectual love of God is a glory of an even more special kind, in that it arises from the direct experience of our own power, which is simultaneously refracted in us, in others, and in the whole (intellectual love being based precisely on the intuition of the identity-within-difference relationship between these levels). Instead of craving for the praise from another human being, we see how every being, every mode that constitutes nature, is an expression of the one infinite power of which we too are an expression, so everything becomes a hymn to power, which is ours and divine at the same time.

As Spinoza explains:

> Whether this love refers to God or to the mind, it can rightly be called contentment [*acquiescentia*], and this contentment (for E3 AD25 and AD30) is not really distinguished from glory. For insofar as it refers to God, it (per E5p35) is a joy—let me use this word again—accompanied by the idea of oneself, just as it is also a joy insofar as it refers to the mind (per E5p27). Furthermore, since the essence of our mind consists only in knowledge, the principle and foundation of which is God (per E1p15 and E2p47s), from this it becomes evident to us in what way and for what reason our mind follows from the divine nature for its essence and existence, and is continually dependent on God. (E5p36s)

Like intellectual love, glory has both a subjective and objective dimension (reflecting the use of the genitive). The subjective dimension of God's glory is the appearance of every finite thing as an expression of God. In this sense, divine glory is the transindividual expression of God's intellectual love, just as that love is the individual core of glory. In its objective dimension, however, the glory of God consists in the fact that by seeing everything as an expression of

God, we feel that we are supported, embraced, and completely accepted by everything around us, and by the whole world. Everything is God, everything is love, everything supports and loves us, reminding us that what we are—our nature, our essence—is the same divine power that vibrates, resonates, expands and dances in everything else. We thus achieve the most complete and profound contentment with being what we are (*acquiescentia in se ipso*).[23] These are observations that only take their full meaning from the perspective of direct experience, and so we will return to them briefly in chapter three.

There is, however, an even deeper dimension to the intellectual love of God. Just as the attainment of such an experience follows from the development of the full power of the appetite (for it is towards the development of intellectual love that the mind spontaneously tends), so too God itself, with the same necessity that moves its power to express itself in an infinite manifoldness of finite modes, likewise strives through the appetite that animates these modes to attain its own self-knowledge (which precisely manifests itself in intellectual love). We have seen that God cannot know itself adequately apart from knowing itself through its finite modes, since a God who knew itself in abstraction from these modes would know itself in abstraction from its power (or at least from an essential dimension of that power), which is identical with its essence, and would therefore know itself incompletely (i.e., inadequately). Although God's power, like its essence, must be understood as eternal and immutable, it is nevertheless conceivable (for the sake of argument) that if divine power were not expressed in finite modes it would remain limited, and thus its expression in modes represents the full unfolding of power. There is never a moment when power is unexpressed, followed by a moment of expression, so there can be no real transition between different degrees of power in God, as there is in finite entities. Yet, in the logical order of the structure of reality, one can rec-

23 For further discussion, see Bernard Rousset, *La perspective finale de l'Éthique*, cit., 141-157. For a discussion of how the notion of *acquiescentia in se ipso* can be used to sketch the nature of the self and personal transformation in Spinoza, see Samuel Newlands, 'Spinozistic Selves', *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 6, no. 1 (2020), 11-35. For an interesting discussion of Spinoza's account of intuitive science, see Kristin Primus, 'Finding Oneself in God: Scientia Intuitiva as a Metaphysically Self-Locating Thought', in D. Garber et al (eds.), *Spinoza: Reason, Religion, Politics. The relation between the Ethics and the Theological-Political Treatise*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2024, 354-388. Primus contrasts Spinoza's account with that of Descartes and shows how the former includes an element of first-person understanding of oneself as part of a monistic structure.

ognise how the determinate and finite expression of power as a whole represents the fulfilment and actualisation of divine power, as opposed to its merely contracted, potential, or reduced to a purely indistinct and unexpressed form.

The expression of divine power in the totality of its spectrum of manifestation—from substance to finite modes—is thus not only a mechanical necessity but must also be understood as a (special and *sui generis*) form of absolute joy, the joy proper to God itself and its being. This joy could not be experienced if God existed solely as an indeterminate void, separate and transcendent from its finite modifications. Instead, the joy proper to divine being is manifested in the determinate modifications in which divine power expresses itself, to the extent that these modifications become capable of experiencing God's intellectual love with which God loves and knows itself—loving and knowing itself in the infinitely many finite expressions in which its infinite power is realised.

We saw in the previous chapter how Spinoza uses his radical version of the principle of sufficient reason (or of the integral intelligibility of reality) to prove negatively (by absurdity) that God, being the cause of itself, necessarily exists, from which it follows that its power is identical with its essence. If we follow this same principle and go a step further, we can also find a *positive* reason for this equation between being and power. Being, in itself considered, is pure positivity; indeed, it is the heart of all possible positivity. Infinitude, eternity, freedom, independence, are just ways of expressing this absolute positivity. This positivity is so complete that it is necessarily articulated in infinite attributes, each of which expresses it in a different respect. These attributes include thought and extension. Since thought therefore belongs to being (or to God—the terms are equivalent), by the same act through which substance posits itself, it necessarily posits itself also as thinking substance. However, since there is no other substance outside the one infinite substance, the thinking substance can only think of itself and its own absolute positivity. To think this absolute positivity, though, is to think the infinitely many determinate ways in which this positivity is articulated and expressed, and with them to think the divine joy that follows from this movement of expansion and articulation. Thus, power is the very essence of God because it is essential to the nature of being, as absolute positivity, to know itself—and to know itself adequately, being must necessarily know itself

as articulated in the infinite many ways that express being and knowing. In this expression, being (or God) not only becomes wholly conscious of itself, but also enjoys the infinite joy of its own being, in the infinite vastness of its cosmic expression, in the infinitude of the unfolding of its infinite power to infinity.

In many (though not all) currents of yoga, the ultimate principle is identified by three essential attributes, which are only modally distinct: being or reality (*sat*), consciousness or knowledge (*cit*), and ecstasy or divine joy (*ānanda*). In a certain sense, however, it can be said that the ultimate reason that drives the principle of being to express itself in the world (rather than remaining locked in an empty indeterminate form) is precisely joy.[24] Being and consciousness are joy, but if these principles were to remain frozen in an absolutely inarticulate, unexpressed form, empty of all determination, their own joy would remain unexpressed—and an unexpressed joy is limited, incomplete, or imperfect in comparison to a fully expressed joy, so that it is impossible for the unlimited and perfect nature of being to be content to be joy without expressing it (since it would be like saying that the absolute positivity of being deprives itself of some form of being). Divine joy thus operates as a ferment or yeast capable of opening being and consciousness to its own infinite manifestation and expression in the world, in a movement that has no other end than that of knowing the world in order to recognise itself and fully enjoy the joy of its own nature. A not-too-different view also emerges in the *Ethics,* in which substance (the equivalent of *sat*), thought (the equivalent of *cit*), and divine love (the equivalent of *ānanda*) are indissolubly, recursively, and reflexively intertwined. Is there not a risk, however, of attributing an anthropomorphic purpose and quality to the Spinozian God in this way?

Many yogic lineages distinguish between a concrete personified form of the divine (*saguṇa brahman*, the divine endowed with form) and an absolutely impersonal, ineffable, unrepresentable form (*nirguṇa brahman*, the divine devoid of form).[25] Sometimes these two conceptions are opposed to each other,

24 For a more extensive discussion, see Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 2006, Part I, ch. 11-12, 91-119.

25 See, for example, Swami Maheshananda (ed.), *Vasiṣṭha Saṃhitā. Yoga Kānṇḍa* (revised Edition), Lonavala: Kaivalyadhama Institute, 2005, ch. 4, vv. 11-58; A. G. Mohan and Ganesh Mohan (transl.), *Yoga Yājñavalkya*, Svastha Yoga, 2013, ch. 9; see also the extracts from various sources in

disputing which one is superior or more adequate. Sometimes the personal view of the divine is presented as an intermediate (and in this sense inferior) form on the path of ascent to the absolute. In other cases, the absolute and impersonal form is rejected as an abstraction, a useless corpse without the life-giving expression of a form that can move the heart to love and devotion, establishing a direct and intimate relationship between the finite and the infinite.

Spinoza, for his part, not only resists but explicitly opposes any temptation to personify the divine. This is because any personification seems to fall within the more general human tendency to imagine God as a kind of human being endowed with boundless power, but fundamentally similar in nature to humans. This is the way in which the imagination, in its inadequacy, tries to represent the relationship of identity-within-difference that binds God to human beings (unable, however, not to flatten this relationship on a similarity of nature, having excluded difference, since for the imagination identity and difference are posited as categorical and rigid concepts, which the imagination itself does not really know how to integrate). For Spinoza, this relationship can only be properly understood if one first cleanses oneself of all imaginative anthropomorphic projection, and thus if one follows a kind of methodological depersonalisation of the divine, aimed at inhibiting the intrusions of the imagination.[26] In this sense, Spinoza also rejects the idea that God, like human beings,

James Mallinson and Mark Singleton (eds.), *Roots of Yoga*, Penguin, cit., 311-322. For a more philosophical discussion of the relationship between the two conceptions, see Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, cit., 571-586.

26 A recurring theme in the *Ethics,* and especially in the first part, is precisely that of highlighting and refuting the various ways in which anthropomorphic prejudices colour the conception of the divine and condition the understanding of reality. See, for example, E1p8s2 (in which the anthropomorphic prejudice makes it difficult to understand E1p7, i.e., the fact that God's essence belongs to existence), E1p15s (on the prejudices that preclude attributing an extended nature to God), E1p17c2s (on the prejudice that attributing a free will to God assumes that it is possible for God not to create things that necessarily follow from his nature), E1p33s2 (which continues a similar critique of the idea that God possesses absolute freedom and can therefore create an order other than the present one), E2p3s (in which he recalls the need *not* to imagine divine power on the anthropomorphic model of the power of a king). It all culminates in the appendix to the first part of the *Ethics*, in which Spinoza offers a genealogical reconstruction of the reasons for these prejudices, adding a scathing critique of the idea that God can act with a view towards particular ends (in the manner of men who act with a view towards their own profit). Usually (e.g., in E1p15s, E1app), Spinoza ascribes this series of prejudices to the failure to distinguish between imagination and intellect (here understood as a faculty capable of adequate knowledge and including both the second and third kinds of knowledge).

can act to realise certain ends, as if it could lack something it wanted to achieve through a certain series of determined actions. It would therefore also not be consistent, for Spinoza, to say that God expresses itself in the world *in order to* enjoy its own knowledge and self-love.

However, the Spinozian conception of the divine, no matter how much it insists on its non-anthropomorphic aspect, cannot be reduced to that absolutely transcendent and impersonal vision (*nirguṇa brahman*) that in yogic traditions is more or less contrasted with the personal form. We have already discussed how God, in Spinoza's view, is not reducible to its finite manifestations, but neither is it isolable from them. If Spinoza's God is not a sovereign with human features, neither is it an absolute and indeterminate Void. In this sense, the *Ethics* seems to offer a kind of middle path between these two extremes. Anti-anthropomorphism can be understood as a precautionary measure against the imaginative degeneration to which human beings are inevitably prone. If it were possible for the mind to reach a sufficient level of power to understand how consciousness is the foundation of all personality, then there would be no problem in thinking of God-as-substance as a person (since substance is both being and thought). But since for the imaginative mind, thought is always spelled out in finite ways (becoming the being of something that thinks it is someone, or the being of someone who thinks something), the idea of personality is inextricably linked to associations with the ordinary affections through which we encounter other individuals. To project a personality onto God would therefore be to facilitate the imaginative process of reduction (and thus confusion) by which God is imagined, rather than known. All this is to say that ultimately it is only the level of power of the mind that determines whether or not God can be thought of as a person. Spinoza, following the geometric order of the *Ethics*, and responding to its pedagogical demands, was probably right to try to wipe out, in the first instance, any anthropomorphic and personalistic conceptions since his aim was to point out a way beyond the powerless conceptions of the divine created by the imagination.

Returning to what we mentioned earlier—the fact that the expression of divine power is moved internally by the joy (*ānanda*) of its own self-knowledge—it can be added that this expressive process is not to be understood teleologically, in the psychological sense whereby a human individual may act in

order to achieve a certain goal. Rather, it is a matter of a *sufficient reason* (a *ratio*, in the sense of E1p11dim), a logical-systematic reason that reveals a sweet necessity at the heart of things, by virtue of which the divine being—naturally, spontaneously, and freely—opens up and blossoms into the world because it is in its nature to know itself and to fully enjoy itself, and only insofar as God expresses itself in the world is the divine nature truly realised in its fullness. Indeed, one might add that, from a Spinozian perspective, this dynamic is something even deeper than the gap between the personal and the impersonal, irreducible to both and perhaps capable of reconciling them.

This does not detract from the fact that, from a systematic point of view and subject to an adequate understanding of the terms, it is also possible for a mind powerful enough to sustain intuitive knowledge to know God itself as an infinite person. In the fifth part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza seems to demonstrate two contradictory propositions, namely: 'God, properly speaking, neither loves nor hates anyone' (E5p17c) but then, he adds, 'God loves itself with an infinite intellectual love' (E5p35). The distance between these two views is the same as that separating reason and intuition (the two kinds of knowledge on which they are respectively based). According to reason, God is an infinite entity devoid of any anthropomorphic character and of infinite perfection, so that the common notion of 'love' that Spinoza deduced in part three certainly cannot apply to its case. According to intuition, however, God is the actuality of infinite power, or the infinitude of power. Since in the *Ethics* the notions of reality and perfection are taken as synonyms (E2def6), God can be said to have infinite perfection. But since this perfection is nothing other than divine reality, which is power, divine perfection is the perfection of infinite actualized power constantly in the act of its unfolding, deepening, and expressing. Therefore, Spinoza can demonstrate that:

> God's nature enjoys infinite perfection [*Dei natura gaudet infinita perfectione*], and this (forE2p3) with the accompaniment of the idea of itself, that is (for E1p11 and for E1def1) the idea of its own cause; and this is what we said in E5p32c to be intellectual love. (E5p35dem)

Intuition, then, can see how God (infinite power) enjoys itself—as the infinite joy of its own self-consciousness, *ānanda*. After all, the finite recalls the infinite and vice versa, and just as Dante could see his own effigy in the vision of God, so God can express itself in finite personalities because the very principle of personality (i.e., being-conscious) is inherent in its power. Intuitively understood, the personal aspect of God is nothing other than the personal aspect of the finite mind in its self-knowledge (reflexive and recursive) as an expression of the infinite. Thus, we return to the idea of identity-within-difference that binds the finite and infinite together.

Spinoza converted to philosophy when he was about twenty-four years old. Dissatisfied with the common way of life, aimed at the pursuit of sensual pleasure, honour and wealth, he set out in search of an eternal and *sui communicabile* good (as he writes in the first paragraph of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*), which can be translated as 'capable of communicating itself', or more simply 'immediately accessible and sharable'—an eternal good without barriers, without doors, and without divisions. The opening pages of the *Treatise on the Emendation* bring together the existential drama that Spinoza experienced in those years, the uncertainties he had to face, and the slow emergence of his resolution, despite everything, not to give up and pursue to the end his search for this supreme good, at first so strange and seemingly difficult to achieve.

In those pages, the theme of desire or appetite (then still understood as synonyms) also emerged, and how the real problem lay in the object towards which these affections were directed. But is not the desire for eternal joy another paradox? Is not joy itself, like all affections, a process, something limited, and therefore without room in the eternal? Should Spinoza not have recognised, like so many others before him (yogis and non-yogis), that the problem is precisely desire, and it is that which must be abandoned?[27]

We saw in chapter one why the *Ethics* shows that desire cannot in fact be abandoned. We then discussed here why the appetite, if indeed capable of

27 For an ampler discussion of this issue and some interesting suggestions about how to solve it, see María Jimena Solé, 'Being a Spinozist Today. Some Considerations on Eternity, Happiness, and Philosophy', *InCircolo* 10 (2020), 381-390, https://www.incircolorivistafilosofica.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/InCircolo-n.10-20-Sole.pdf.

developing its full power, moves spontaneously towards the intellectual love of God, which represents not only the highest form of power to think and act that an individual can attain, but also the realisation of a direct and intuitive link with the ultimate and eternal foundation of reality. We have even suggested how this bond between the finite and the infinite is not just a mechanical act but a way for the infinite itself to fully enjoy the delight of its own power. But can we say that this affection is truly *eternal*? Is not the mind, at some point, destined to fade away in the sleep of death? To answer this, we must take one last step into Spinoza's metaphysics and reflect more deeply on what is called in the *Ethics* the eternal part of the mind.

The expansion of eternity

The eternal part of the mind (E5p22 and p23dim) is nothing other than the adequate and intuitive idea that the mind possesses of the essence of its own body. The idea of this essence implies in itself, *in nuce*, the necessary development of the mind towards the intellectual love of God. For this reason, the eternal part of the mind includes all adequate ideas (intuitive and rational, E5p38dim). Rational knowledge is indeed the basis of intuitive knowledge, and knowledge of the essence of the body the paradigmatic application of intuition. Moreover, we now know how it is part of the nature of the mind to tend to develop its power in the direction of intellectual love (a tendency that is none other than the tendency with which God expresses itself in the mind in order to know and rejoice in its own nature). Intellectual love is thus inscribed in the essence of the body and in the eternal part of the mind that is the idea of that essence.[28]

Spinoza's discussion of the eternal part of the mind can be understood as a reconceptualisation, with appropriate corrections, of the more traditional notion of the *soul*. Unlike Descartes (and much of Western theology before him), for instance, Spinoza denies that the mind (or soul) is a separate and independent substance. This does not mean that the soul does not exist. If the

28 For a refined and thorough discussion of these propositions in the fifth part of the *Ethics*, see Pierre-François Moreau, *Spinoza. L'expérience et l'éternité*, Paris: Puf, 1994, 481-549.

soul is meant precisely as that element which is both capable of defining the essence of the individual (and above all of its conscious life) and capable of surviving the physical dissolution of the body at the moment of death, then the eternal part of the mind conceived by Spinoza can perform the same functions, without giving in to the temptation to make it a substance in itself.[29]

The eternal part of the mind is clearly the core of individual being, as it is the idea of the essence of the body. The mind existing in act is the idea of the body existing in act, so the idea of the essence of the body is the core idea of the mind existing in act. This means that there is a gap in the experience of actual life between the mind as a whole and its eternal part. Insofar as the body exists in act, and not just as essence, the body is not just a definition, but a concrete effort to act, which interacts with and is constantly affected by external causes, which modify and determine it in innumerable, often extremely complex ways. The mind of the individual (insofar as it exists in act) is thus a complex structure of ideas, many of which are ideas of the affections born of the body's encounters and contrasts with the causes that determine it. In this broader context, therefore, the eternal part of the mind is only one *part*, one element among others (and many of these other elements are imaginative, rather than intuitive ideas, thus potentially inadequate).

If we identify the essence of the individual with its history (i.e., with the imaginative representation born of the series of its affections), then it is clear that the eternal part of the mind has relatively little to do with this personal identity. Memories, hopes, and habit are but images, that is, traces of more or less recurrent affections, more or less deeply rooted in the mind as a whole. All these traces depend, as much on their coming into being as on their maintenance, on the current existence of the body. Thus, when the body dissolves with death, these traces cannot be expected to be preserved, nor can the imaginative identity based on them be expected to continue to exist.

29 Steven Nadler, *Spinoza's Heresy. Immortality and the Jewish Mind,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2002 argued the rather widespread thesis that the eternal part of the mind would not imply any form of personal identity, which would be lost with the disintegration of the body at death and the loss of memory. This reading is discussed and rejected by Emanuela Scribano, 'Spinoza muore', *Rivista di storia della filosofia* 67, no. 1 (2012), 101-130.

However, we have already seen how it is only intuition that provides adequate knowledge of the essence of the individual, and thus of its identity. This identity does not consist in a story, or in a more or less dramatic representation of the individual's life, but in grasping directly and at a glance the divine power that expresses itself in a finite way in this particular individual body. The idea of this essence is the eternal part of the mind, which adequately expresses the true core and definition of the individual (even if it is a definition expressed in a non-linguistic, non-imaginative manner). What is more, since the essence of the body, like all individual essences, is eternally inscribed in the divine power and its attributes (E2p8), regardless of whether the body exists or not, the essence of the body is eternal, and therefore eternal is its mind.[30]

The eternal part of the mind not only defines the unique essence of the individual but is also the only aspect of the individual that is genuinely eternal and independent of the ongoing existence of the body. The eternal part of the mind pre-exists the actualisation of the body in a certain space and time, and survives it, because its nature is independent of any temporal co-ordinates. In itself, the eternal part of the mind is not affected or even changed by the actualisation or non-actualisation of the body.

There is, however, an even more surprising aspect of Spinoza's theory, which is not usually part of the more traditional ideas about the soul. Spinoza emphasises that the eternal part of the mind is precisely a *part of* the mind. This has a specific technical meaning. To be a part means to be able to fit in with other entities, by virtue of certain common properties, in order to be able to form a common whole. Not only is the individual body a complex totality of parts, but also the mind of the existing individual is a complex totality of ideas. The eternal part of the mind is one of these ideas, but not isolated in itself or hidden away. As a part, its presence is necessarily implied and connected to the other ideas that constitute the mind. Understanding why is not difficult: the idea of the eternal part of the mind being the idea of the essence of the body, and this essence being the presupposition of everything that hap-

30 See E1p8s2: 'we can have true ideas of non-existent modifications; for although they do not exist in act outside the intellect, nevertheless their essence is comprehended in another thing so that they can be conceived through this thing.' Theme taken up in E2p8s.

pens in the mind and body, the idea of the essence of the body is necessarily involved, even if only implicitly, in the totality of psychophysical life.

The peculiarity of Spinoza's view, however, lies in the thesis that the eternal part of the mind is not reducible to the idea of the essence of the body taken in itself, but can in fact be expanded. He demonstrates:

> He who possesses a body apt to do many things is combated as little as possible by affections that are evil (per 4p38), that is, (per 4p30) by affections that are contrary to our nature; and therefore (per 5p10) he has the power to order and concatenate the affections of the body according to the corresponding order of the intellect, and thus to cause (per 5p14) all the affections of the body to refer to the idea of God; whence it will happen (by 5p15) that he is affected by a love of God, which (by 5p16) must occupy or constitute the major part of the mind, and therefore (by 5p33) he possesses a mind whose major part is eternal. (E5p40dem)

Insofar as the idea of the essence of the body adapts and enters into relation with other ideas, it not only corrects and modifies them so that they can better harmonise with one another, but it follows that the other ideas also bind themselves to the eternal part of the mind. We have mentioned how every experience can ultimately be an occasion for the emergence of intuitive knowledge and intellectual love of God. To the extent that by analysing otherwise ordinary experiences (i.e., other mostly imaginative ideas), the mind is able to make them a basis for the arising of intuitive knowledge and intellectual love, the essence of those experiences binds deductively to the eternal essence of the body that is the premise of intuition and intellectual love, thus becoming part of the eternal part of the mind, which thus grows and expands. Since the expansion of something joyful is an increase in joy, that expansion is in itself joyful. And since this expansion is in principle infinite in scope, this joy can rightly be considered eternal. This enlargement in the horizon of the eternal ultimately justifies and satisfies the young Spinoza's hope of finding and being able to enjoy eternal joy, however contradictory this idea might seem.

Intellectual love is an eternal joy not only because it is linked to the eternal part of the mind (and based, moreover, on intuitive knowledge, which sees

everything under a species of eternity), but also because this love operates like a yeast or ferment, actively capable of transforming the imaginative, affective and, one might say, existential composition of the individual who experiences it, expanding its horizon towards eternity. In this process, imagination and its affections are not eliminated or suppressed, but what may be lacking in them is supplemented and completed by the infinite background that shows their ultimate meaning and root. This expansion is also a form of joy, but based not on random external affections but on the natural flowing of individual experience into the infinite cosmic consciousness. In the *Ethics*, we find an attempt to offer a rational explanation of the possibility of this experience.

As Pierre-François Moreau acutely observed in his interpretation of the experience of eternity discussed by Spinoza (E5p23s), 'in its very limitation, finitude thus plays an intensely positive role: it draws the traits of the necessary and induces one to assume it as eternal. [...] The feeling of finitude [is] the vector of aspiration towards eternity.'[31] The discussion of the eternal part of the mind does not aim to induce an internal split in individual experience, decreeing what is to be abandoned (the finite, the imaginary) in order to achieve a higher good (the eternal). Rather, what Spinoza focuses on is an integral experience of eternity, which, starting from an ever-present fundamental kernel, can expand, encompassing and harmonising in itself (potentially) all the other dimensions of finite existence, since the finite itself is ultimately nothing but an expression of the infinite, and nothing that belongs to the finite is extraneous to the infinite (which is its only substance).[32] As Moreau concludes:

31 Translated from Pierre-François Moreau, *Spinoza,* cit. p. 544.

32 This is also the idea of liberation in life that emerges in the nondual Tantric tradition. In the *Śiva-sūtra*, one of the fundamental texts of this school, the metaphor of sesame oil is used (III.20): if one distinguishes between the states of waking (extrovert experience of definite objects), dreaming (introvert experience of definite objects), deep sleep (introvert experience without objects), and 'the fourth' (extrovert experience without objects, i.e., absorption in the ultimate principle), then liberation consists in 'pouring as sesame oil' this fourth state into the other three, so as to pervade the totality of possible experience with the same sense of ecstatic appreciation and savouring of the beauty of the very fact of experiencing (which is the intrinsic quality of the liberated consciousness, which enjoys its being because it feels being as beauty and delight, *ānanda*). See Vasugupta, *Gli aforismi di Śiva. Con il commento di Kṣemarāja*, edited by Raffaele Torella, Milano: Adelphi, 2013, 221-230.

> [T]he feeling of eternity is felt. It does not prove anything. Only the geometric order can do so. But experience plays another role: although it does not prove, it incites. By experiencing that we are eternal, that is, that the necessity we discover is our stake, it makes us aspire to live it from within. It also provokes us to set out in search of this eternity at once promised and given, that is, to embark on the path that will lead us to knowledge and bliss.[33]

It is hard to believe that Spinoza could have conceived this movement without having first—intuitively—tasted its pleasure.

Not only by exercising intellectual love, but by expanding the capacity to intuitively know as many things as possible, the mind can expand its own eternity, integrating the experience of divine love into ever larger areas of its existence and potentially into the totality of life. In this way, although essence and existence are conceptually different, Spinoza allows for the prospect of an eternalisation of existence itself, or a deification of ordinary life. It is now all about *how* we can facilitate as much as possible the spontaneous movement of the mind towards intuitive knowledge and intellectual love.

33 Translated from Pierre-François Moreau, *Spinoza,* cit., 549.

Chapter 3:
The ways of empowerment: mind, body, and society

Spinoza's meditation

We have seen in the previous chapter how the experience of the intellectual love of God is not only the solution that Spinoza offers to the problem of the contradiction of the appetite, but also a natural point of attraction for the mind's search for its empowerment. Just like intuitive knowledge, the intellectual love that follows from it is not something distant or exotic, a mysterious state to be made our own with effort. On the contrary, it is the natural and spontaneous state to which the mind always tends and to which it finally arrives insofar as it is not too much hindered or diverted by external circumstances.

Starting from this observation, we can reconstruct, on the basis of the suggestions offered in the *Ethics*, what could be called a Spinozian practice of power—that is, a set of means useful for the attainment, in the most direct way possible, of our greatest empowerment. In expounding this practice, we will start from the experience of the intellectual love of God as such, and we will progressively broaden the horizon of observation to the conditions (internal and external) for this experience to arise and mature. We will first show the stages of a Spinozian 'meditation' (analogous to the formal meditation practices of yogic traditions), and then explore the role of rational knowledge, a certain physical practice, and the cultivation of appropriate moral and socio-political conditions. The apparent linearity of this order is functional to the exposition. Anyone who tries to engage directly in such a practice will notice how the different aspects presented here in series actually function synchronously, like the buttresses that together help hold up a single architecture.

This type of meditation can be assimilated to a deep reflection on the background conditions and layers of one's present experience. It does not necessarily proceed by focusing attention on a given object[1], nor by monitoring and

1 The *Ethics* suggests that a method of exclusive concentration on a single object could create a powerful, but ultimately partial and therefore harmful affection. Spinoza connects the mind's ability to think with the body's ability to be affected: 'the mind is not always equally apt to think about the same object but, insofar as the body is more apt to arouse in itself the image of this or that object, the mind is also more apt to consider this or that object' (E3p2s). As will be discussed below, the nature of body and mind is extremely complex and made up of many different parts. The power of acting of mind and body therefore depends on the ability to keep both of them capable of being affected in many ways at once. In this sense, an exclusive concentration can be harmful: 'the affection by which the mind is determined to consider several objects together is less harmful than an equally strong af-

discriminating about the states or phenomena that emerge and move through the field of attention. Instead, following Spinoza's scheme of the three kinds of knowledge, it begins (at least initially) with a direct albeit imaginative experience of the body, and proceeds further by excavating its foundations—first by uncovering the rational experience of the attributes and then moving to the realm of intuitive knowledge.[2]

As will soon become clear, this practice is not intended to bring those who engage in it to an exceptional state in which they seek to remain forever or to which they can return as soon as possible when the inevitable burdens of life should intrude and interrupt the experience. Rather, its function is to 'tune' mind and body, as one would a musical instrument, syntonizing them to a certain background frequency (that of God's intellectual love) that is already present beneath the existential noise of everyday life, but all too often ignored because of it. Just as a tuning is not an end in itself, but only a preparatory step to a good musical performance, so too this practice is in itself only a means to make the unity of mind and body able to perform their functions in the best way possible—that is, to respond with agility and intelligence to whatever call arises from the divine power that seeks expression through them.

Having said this, we can articulate Spinozian meditation in five main steps.[3]

fection that keeps the mind in the sole consideration of a single object or a smaller number of objects so that it cannot think of others' (E5p9dim). The meditative procedure described in these pages is based on the possibility of a progressive widening of the planes or background of experience, without abandoning any of them, and thus in fact being able to contemplate several things at the same time (although not all with the same intensity).

2 Bear in mind, however, that the following is not intended to be a meditation manual, nor a support for self-taught meditators (although it may perhaps offer some guidance in this regard). Since each individual lives in a unique combination of circumstances, factors, potentials and limitations, any meditative practice, to be effective, must be adapted to the individual who engages in it. To do so, the function of a teacher or guide of some kind is traditionally seen as necessary. Just as a code of civil laws describes only in general outlines the operating structures that govern a certain society, but must then be interpreted by judges who are informed about the specific facts and circumstances in order to be able to assess how to apply those laws to any particular case—so too what is indicated here is but a broad outline, in itself somewhat eccentric with respect to any individual situation, yet hopefully capable of making clear the general direction in which to proceed, but also illustrating the underlying inspiration of Spinozian meditation. Nothing more than the plans for a project that is still disembodied, but which (with the right combination of circumstances, commitment, skill, and support) can be made one's own, adapted, and lived out in one's actuality.

3 It is not excluded that all or some of the experiences described here can also be realised following other methods, or even spontaneously without any training. Spontaneous meditative experiences—common to all cultures—often have such a vividness and cogency for those who experience them that

The first step is to bring to the mind an idea of the body. The mind knows the body by virtue of its affections. But the body is extremely sensitive and so its affections may be more or less subtle. To begin with, however, it is sufficient to allow the mind to immerse itself in the natural perception (proprioception) of the body, however it manifests itself. When some parts of the body are more stimulated than others, the mind naturally tends to focus more on them. It can then be helpful to try, as far as possible, to assume a position that is relaxed enough to allow the body to open and become comfortable, but at the same time maintain a state of equilibrium in which no particular affection predominates, allowing the mind to cultivate a sense of clarity and liveliness, without sinking into torpor. If there are parts of the body that are particularly tense or contracted, it may be helpful to invite a gentle form of relaxation, or perhaps even just take note of it, without interfering further.

This first step is common to many meditative approaches. In the Buddhist tradition, for example, awareness of the body or its parts is the basis for all other forms of contemplation. In the classical yoga of Patañjali, the ability to assume a stable and pleasant posture is considered the prerequisite for any further contemplative deepening.[4] The main difference between this kind of practice and ordinary experience is that the body is usually seen either merely as an instrument of action to achieve some external result, or as a living entity to be provided for (by feeding it, resting it, caring for it), or as the external

they seem sufficient. In part, and in some respects, they can be. However, there are two limits to which spontaneous experiences are subject. The first is communicative: since they are experiences that are neither sought nor cultivated directly by the experiencer, it will be difficult not only to understand how to reproduce them and explore their implications at will, but also to separate them from the individual, particular, and unique circumstances of the practitioner themselves, which are not necessarily or immediately common or even intelligible to others. The second limitation has to do with the fact that such experiences can sometimes seemingly do without a certain degree of preparation and preparatory exercises that are common to deliberate contemplative methods, but only at the cost of depending on special external circumstances. As a matter of fact, the preparatory and propaedeutic aspect (which ultimately consists in finding an effective way to abandon ordinary identification with the imaginative ego and superficial subjectivity) can never really be avoided, but can take place in different ways. In spontaneous experiences this is facilitated by special dispositions, situations, or conditions external to the practitioner, whereas with deliberate methods this preliminary work is systematically internalised and made independent of external conditions. To use Spinozian terminology, one could say that spontaneous experiences are passive (i.e., dependent on external elements), whereas deliberate experiences are active (i.e., dependent on the practitioner's power to act and know alone).

4 On Buddhist practice, see Andrea Sangiacomo, *An Introduction to Friendliness*, cit., §1. On Patañjali, see YS 2.41-48.

chrysalis of an imaginative identity we have built around ourselves, of which the body is a part (if not the centre). These are all ways of using the body or relating to it as if it were somehow an external reality to us, an object to be manipulated and used, cared for and perfected in order to achieve something. When practising body awareness, on the other hand, attention becomes immersed in the body itself, like a hand going into a warm glove, or as when we dive underwater in a lake. On the one hand, there is nothing to do, nothing to worry about, and no external goal to achieve. On the other hand, the body can manifest itself as it is, in its own nature, without having to respond to any particular stimuli or demands.

Three methods can be useful when beginning to cultivate this first step (and can be combined).[5] The first consists in relaxing the imagination (with its emotional tensions and physical contractures) by invoking a gesture of openness, listening, surrendering, placing oneself in the hands of something superior and larger, letting oneself go back to the ground of being—*Deus seu natura*—or simply listening to one's deepest aspiration. Reciting some poetic verse that one finds particularly appropriate or touching to one's constitution or performing a small ritual can be a useful gesture to invite this psychophysical relaxation, preventing the first step of meditation from becoming nothing more than an effort to apply to the observation of the body the same attitude of control that is so often exercised in ordinary life. In a medieval collection of meditative practices associated with the nondual Kashmiri Tantric tradition, the *Vijñāṇa Bhairava Tantra*, the intoning of the syllable *oṃ* (or another seed-syllable), is also indicated as a powerful method (VBT, 39). The resonance of the syllable is produced initially in the belly area and progressively conducted upwards,

5 Once one becomes familiar with this Spinozian meditation (including the subsequent steps, which leads to developing intuitive knowledge), it will be possible to take as a starting point no longer the imagination of the body, but its very essence, i.e., it will be possible to start directly from the awareness of the eternal part from the mind, or (to put it otherwise) from immersion in the soul, or what Sri Aurobindo calls 'the psychic being'. Since this essence is known as nothing more than a point of potency (vibration, energy, *ānanda*), this same element of potency will also become more prominent in the following steps and will act as a more pronounced thread to the whole meditation. For example, in the second step, instead of perceiving extension as unlimited space, it will be easier to perceive extension itself as unlimited power to extend infinitely. In this way, Spinozian meditation becomes a meditation on power, which is nothing other than the essence of life, and thus it can be said of the practitioner of this contemplation that '[their] wisdom is a meditation of life [*vitae meditatio*]' (E4p67dim).

then nasalised until one rests, observing its silence left after the extinguishing of its last audible reverberation. This practice can be used to immerse attention in the focal points of the physical structure of the body (the pelvic floor, the central chest area, the centre of the skull, and the silent space above it), fostering the sense of embodiment of experience and at the same time of openness to the infinity of which the body is a manifestation.

The second method derives from a special observation of the breath. The breath is a theme around which all yoga traditions have developed countless practices, as it represents not only a vital physical structure, but also an embodiment of a more subtle and vast energetic dimension (as we will discuss later). The *Vijñāṇa Bhairava Tantra* proposes a particularly useful exercise, divided into two phases (VBT, 21-26). The first consists in following the natural breath, paying attention to the descending movement of the inhalation, as if it were descending from a point just above the head (traditionally, twelve fingers above the skull) and reaching the heart area, and to the ascending movement of the exhalation, as if it were ascending from the centre of the heart area, passing through the barrier of the skull and getting lost in a point (twelve fingers) above. The inhalation is thus experienced as a moment of incarnation in which the body is vivified by the internalisation of a power diffused outwards. The exhalation, on the other hand, is the opposite movement of release, a surrendering and letting go of the internal force and returning it to the universal principle from which it came. We are thus reborn with each inhalation and with each exhalation we dissolve. At the beginning of the inhalation and the beginning of the exhalation there is a natural pause, but one that can be extended intentionally, simply by paying attention to the quality of the experience at that moment, listening deeply to its taste and texture. The second phase of this contemplation naturally takes place when the two movements spontaneously merge, the breath tends to slow down and become more subtle and everything comes to converge in the centre of the heart (a point in the centre of the sternum, not necessarily in the centre of the cardiac organ). There, attention coagulates into pure luminosity and presence, in which one can immerse oneself and remain at will. That sense of presence is also the sense of immediate presence of the mind in relation to the body—or of mental experience as an idea of the body.

The third method is a simplification of the previous two and will come naturally when the others are sufficiently consolidated. It consists simply in listening to the silence that is already present in the heart centre. Listening to this silence is like listening to a special vibration, with the same attitude with which one might listen to a musical note in order to intone it in turn. It could be said that this living resonance of silence in the heart is nothing other than the pure form of the power of the *conatus*, in its self-expression, undisturbed or unprovoked by external stimuli. By listening to the silence of the heart, the mind tunes in and attunes itself to that silence, naturally bringing thoughts and the discursive level of the imagination to quiet. This process can then be extended to the more subtle affections and emotions that animate the unity of mind and body. They, too, can be tuned into silence through simple listening, and this listening in itself is sufficient to soothe and dissipate them. Finally, one can descend to an even more subtle level, which is that of bodily presence, of the body itself as a set of processes, activities, affections, and perceptions that define its presence in space (and proprioception). When the body as such also listens to the silence of the heart, the body itself becomes silent, transparent, and finally opens, dissolving. This is the ideal point to take the second step.[6]

One is ready for the second step when the awareness of the body is sufficiently vivid and clear, when the mind is able to rest in it without being disturbed by internal or external stimuli, and without even falling into torpor or drowsiness. In this state of relative clarity and calm, we can simply step back from perceiving the body as a finite mode of extension and perceive (or direct attention to) the extension and space of which the body is a mode. Attention relaxes, embracing the background of physical experience, and simply taking note of the continuity between the body's determinate form and the infinite space in which the body is immersed and from which it is constituted. In this sense, the

6 This technique of deep listening, when developed with sufficient power, can become a straightforward, simple, and spontaneous method for carrying out all the other steps described here. The simpler a technique is, however, the more it requires advanced development of the practitioner's skills. The following steps will therefore be described by trying to integrate a variety of approaches to make them more accessible. Those who dedicate themselves to it with perseverance will find that over a period of time, as the practice deepens, the approach can be simplified, ultimately reduced to an increasingly refined, sensitive, powerful, and simple form of listening.

practice is not about creating an image of the space the body is in, but simply expanding the horizon of attention to include what is already in the background of our experience of the body. The body is already immersed in space, and we can grasp this space simply by widening and relaxing our mental gaze. This is not a conceptual representation of space, nor is it a semantic construction, nor is it a matter of mentally reciting a definition: it is a psychophysical experience of dissolving the body's perception of discreteness in relation to its surroundings and immersing itself in the infinity of the space in which we are and that we are. In Spinoza's view, the idea of extension is always implicitly present in any experience we have of any body, since without the possibility of conceiving extension we could not recognise something as a body. At this point, it is just a matter of bringing that idea from the background to the foreground.

Different schools suggest different ways to cultivate this contemplation. In the Buddha's discourses, for example, we encounter the practice of alternating the observation of the space inside the body with the observation of outer space, until it becomes clear how both inside and outside are the same space and the perception of 'space' becomes the background of the whole experience (MN 10 and 62). In the *Vijñāṇa Bhairava Tantra* we find some variations on this theme (VBT 41-47): perceiving the whole body as emptiness, the skin as a kind of membrane containing this inner emptiness, then perceiving at once the totality of the world, inside and outside, as pervaded by space. Wanting to continue the method of listening to the silence mentioned earlier, the transition between the first and second step becomes even more spontaneous. By listening to the silence of the body, the boundaries of the body naturally vanish and we are immediately in direct contact with an infinite and limitless extension, dissolved like a drop of water in the sea of space.

What matters from the Spinozian perspective, however, is not only to perceive a generic external space, but rather to perceive the infinite extension of which the body is a mode. This means that the perception aimed at is not so much that of another determined portion of space (the room we are in, for example), but the perception of the quality of spatiality itself, in its intrinsic infinitude. In the Buddhist tradition, which is perhaps a practice common to even earlier traditions, this type of contemplation, in its most advanced forms,

is called 'the formless domain of indefinite space'.[7] It is a 'domain' in the sense that it is a dimension of experience, and it is 'formless' because it has no determination or limitation whatsoever (and in this sense, it does not consist of an image but of a common notion, to use Spinoza's terminology). The instruction provided by Buddhist texts (MN 121, for example) for accessing this domain is to simply pay no attention to any perception of resistance (i.e., all those perceptions on which we base our sense of distinction and difference in space since bodies are impenetrable and resist one another).[8]

This is not an easy step for the imaginative mind. Already this second step requires us to leap beyond imagination, knowing the body according to reason (i.e., according to the universal common notion of extension). This requires a remarkable level of calm, clarity, and mental lucidity, combined with the absence of disturbing elements, internal or external. But in itself there is nothing difficult or strange about taking this second step, which consists in rediscovering and making explicit for the mind what it necessarily already knows but does not ordinarily pay attention to.

The third step asks us to take a step to the side, so to speak, realising that the experience of infinite extension is only accessible to us insofar as we have an idea of it. Spinoza is not an idealist philosopher in the strict sense of the term, meaning he does not reduce the totality of being solely to mental constructions; nor does he deny that material reality has an autonomy of its own with respect to pure thought (extension and thought are for him two different and irreducible attributes). However, Spinoza is an idealist in the broad, phenomenological or experiential sense that one might give to this term, namely, insofar as one must admit that it is only possible to have experience of something if one has

7 For a more in-depth historiographical discussion, see Alexander Wynne, *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007.

8 One can compare on this point the indications offered by some contemporary masters: Shaila Catherine, *Focused and Fearless. A Meditator's Guide to States of Deep Joy, Calm, and Clarity*, Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2008, ch. 19; Leigh Brasington, *Right Concentration. A Practical Guide to the Jhānas*, Boston and London: Shambala, 2015, ch. 9.

some form of consciousness of it; only by thinking something (having an idea of it) can we encounter that thing.[9]

It should be noted that 'thought' (*cogitatio* in Latin) for Spinoza is not reducible to the constant discursive and verbalised activity that in contemporary cognitive sciences passes as 'inner chatter'. Rather, the essential activity of thought is intelligence (*intellectus* in Latin), that is, the ability to make things appear and know their nature. Although Spinoza uses the term loosely, it would be better to say that what he calls 'thought' can be equated with what we broadly call 'consciousness' (the capacity to know *that* one is having an experience, in addition to knowing *what* one is experiencing).[10] Therefore, even when we experience infinite extension, we can only have this experience to the extent that infinite extension is in fact the object of an idea. The third step in Spinozian meditation consists in moving from the seemingly immediate encounter with infinite extension to the realisation that this encounter is in fact mediated by an idea.[11]

9 At some points, Spinoza suggests a certain at least phenomenological or experiential priority of the intellect (understood as the distinctive activity of attribute thinking). The famous definition of attributes (E1def4) links them to the ability of the intellect to perceive what constitutes the essence of substance. In E1p17c2s, after remarking that one cannot attribute an intellect to God except by admitting a complete equivocity of the term with respect to the type of intellect usually attributed to human beings, Spinoza remarks: 'the intellect of God, therefore, insofar as it is conceived as constituting the essence of God, is really the cause of things, both of their essence and of their existence; this seems also to have been seen by those who affirmed that God's intellect, will and power are one and the same thing' (this last assertion also applies, albeit without Spinoza's knowledge, to the nondual Tantric tradition). In E1p31s, Spinoza adds 'wishing to avoid all confusion, I wished to speak only of the thing perceived by us in the clearest way, that is, of the act of intellection [*intellectione*], which is perceived more clearly than anything else. For we cannot comprehend anything that does not lead to a more perfect knowledge than intellection.' Commenting on the ontological identity between thought and extension, Spinoza demonstrates that 'God's power of thinking is equal to his actual power of acting' (E2p7c) and also concedes (perhaps harking back to a certain Kabbalistic tradition): 'which some Jews seem to have seen nebulously in that they assert, namely, that God, God's intellect, and the things known by him are one and the same reality' (E2p7s).

10 There is, however, a lively debate on how Spinoza understands the nature of consciousness. For an initial framing of the discussion, see Oberto Marrama, 'Consciousness, ideas of ideas and animation in Spinoza's *Ethics*', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 25, no. 3 (2017), 501-525, https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2017.1322038; Henk Keizer, 'Spinoza's Idea of Idea Doctrine: A Theory of Consciousness', *Rivista di Storia della Filosofia* 4 (2019), 571-599.

11 In E2p21-21 Spinoza develops the theory of the reflexivity of ideas (or the possibility of ideas of ideas). This is presented as a typical characteristic of thought itself, to which it belongs not only to know an object but also to know itself knowing the object. This second-degree or reflexive knowledge is presented by Spinoza as something that can be distinguished in its own way, but which ultimately remains a single undivided act (the idea of the idea is not something really different and distinct from

This is an important step in appreciating the typical quality that characterises the experience of having an idea. Since all experience is mediated by thought, the typical quality of thinking is so common that it becomes invisible or totally transparent, like water to the fish that swims and lives in it. To appreciate the quality of thought as thought is to savour what the experience of thinking consists of and how it differs from the experiences of the objects of thought. For example, infinite space implies a sense of extension in all directions, but the experience of thinking does not imply any directionality as such. Space as an object of thought appears in a third position, as something placed before us to be contemplated. Thought, on the other hand, is characterised by an absolute immediacy, as something that is never entirely objectifiable and indeed constitutes the ultimate horizon of our experience. We can make an idea the object of another idea, but we cannot really think thought as such as a pure object, since we can only think it through thought itself, which is therefore never external to itself.

A partial yogic parallel for this third step can be found again in the *Viñjāṇa Bhairava Tantra*, which includes among its meditations that of contemplating each part of the body as pervaded by consciousness (VBT 62). This implies appreciating how every aspect of physical experience ultimately reduces to our experience of how that aspect appears in consciousness. Experience is reduced in this sense to pure appearance, like a thin protective film on which the lights and qualities of all phenomena are reflected, but wrapped around the void, with no further substantiality or reality beyond what appears. If we dwell on the quality of this experience (on the taste, so to speak, that an idea has as an idea), we discover that this consists in a form of absolute and delicate lightness, like an intrinsic weightlessness. The more our attention is absorbed by the object of the idea, the more the experience seems concrete, rooted, endowed with its own weight of reality. Conversely, the more each object is seen only as the object of an idea, and therefore only as a content of consciousness that can only be experienced within the horizon of consciousness, with no other corre-

the idea of which it is an idea). This theory can be used to explain the character of reflexivity and self-knowledge that is typically attributed to conscious experience, but it can also be used to explain the possibility for thought to contemplate not only different objects in themselves, but its own thinking activity (as is brought to bear in this third passage).

late outside of it, the more light and weightless the experience becomes. In some yogic traditions, this weightlessness is interpreted in a deflationary sense, disqualifying the contents as illusory and less real than the consciousness in which they appear, as if they were nothing more than dreams. In the most radical version of this interpretation (the spiritualist monism developed by Ādi Śaṅkara and his Advaita-Vedānta lineage), the totality of the phenomenal world is merely a dream (*māyā*, illusion) that temporarily superimposes itself on the total vacuity, indeterminacy, and intransitivity of pure absolute consciousness (*Brahman*).

However, this is not the interpretation that emerges from Spinozism. Like other forms of nondual yogic thought (such as that which emerges in the aforementioned nondual Tantric traditions, for example), even in the Spinozian approach the fact that everything is manifested in thought does not deny the reality of what is manifested (extension is no less real or less irreducible as a divine attribute due to the fact that one can only experience extension through thought). Following the principle of identity-within-difference, one must simultaneously admit that the contents of experience do not exist otherwise or elsewhere than as contents of thought (in that sense, *they are* thought), yet remain qualitatively different from the nature of thought as such (in that sense, *they are not* thought). The capacity of thought to manifest in itself the totality of its other is thus not an illusion, but a *power*, a creative capacity (another and older meaning of the same Sanskrit term *māyā*). The very metaphor of illusion can be rethought in a positive sense, like the illusionist's ability to create a magic show or the artist's ability to create another world (VBT, 100).[12] There is a sophisticated beauty in surrendering oneself to this kind of illusion, savouring its contents to the full, but at the same time remaining aware of how they are but reflections on the empty screen of consciousness, without any further depth or root—without any reality other than their appearance.[13]

12 The *Śiva-sūtra* deliberately use the metaphor of dance and theatre to illustrate the state of liberation, a theme developed by Kṣemarāja in his commentary on them. See Vasugupta, *Gli aforismi di Śiva*, cit., 211-232. On the subject, see also Raniero Gnoli, *L'estetica indiana. La scuola di Abhinavagupta*, Roma: Carocci, 2023.

13 At a more advanced stage of contemplation, this third step can take the form not only of a reduction of phenomenal experience to the quality of appearance (without any further ontological weight or reference to a reality external to appearance itself), but also a subtle shift of the centre of

What matters most, for this third step of the Spinozian meditation, is to hold together these two seemingly conflicting aspects—that is, the reality of the *content of* the idea and the impossibility for that content to exist or be experienced outside of the idea or thought itself. The result is a lightening of the way in which one experiences things, as if a subtle sense of emptiness pervades the depths of things or as if by magic the force of gravity ceases to exert itself on things, leaving their mass intact, but discovering them weightless—naked.

The fourth step is similar to the second and again involves taking a step back from the *idea of* infinite extension to focus on the infinite attribute of thought. As just said, this is not possible by objectivising thought or by conceiving the image of an infinite thought. The infinite, by its very nature, cannot really be imagined, although it can be known. We must therefore exercise (and at an even more subtle level) that power of the mind to know and experience without necessarily resorting to imagination of which Spinoza speaks on several occasions. It is a peripheral perception, cultivated from within the very idea of something (e.g. the idea of extension), through which we experience in an immediate, direct, intuitive way the fact that this idea (as an idea, i.e., in its quality of being an act of thought, regardless of its content or conception) emerges against an infinite thinking background—or else, that this idea is but the limited determination of a field of thought or consciousness that we immediately and intuitively perceive as naturally infinite (and we perceive it so because, in a sense, we *are* that infinite field of thought, just as we perceive the position of the body immediately because we are the body). That lightness and subtle emptiness that form the backdrop to the experience in the third step can now be deepened, as if we allow ourselves to follow it like a trail or sink into it from behind as if into a calm, deep lake of vibrant waters.

experience, or an expansion of the sense of embodiment. Just as the mind normally identifies with the finite body in which it sees the seat of its experience, this same sense of embodiment can expand or shift outside the finite body, encompassing the totality of appearing, and thus giving rise to the emergence of an initial experience of what was called 'cosmic consciousness' in the previous chapter. This happens because once one takes appearance as such as the point of reference for experience, it becomes clear that identification with a finite centre of experience and embodiment in a finite body are nothing more than *contents of* appearing itself, but do not define or limit its nature as such. My belief in this finite body thus appears as another content in the scene of appearing, which, as such, turns out to transcend that content (and every other content), placing its centre everywhere and nowhere.

There are various parts of our body that we cannot directly observe (such as our back or face). Yet, being parts of our body, we can perceive their presence and nature and also act upon them. The perception of thought (from within thought itself) is analogous: we always see this or that manifestation of thought (this or that idea), but we cannot see thought in its totality in the same way (except that we form an imaginative representation of it, which will, however, be inadequate). What we are aiming at here, rather, is to perceive how the distinctive quality of thought or consciousness (that quality we have already tasted and focused on in step three) does not in itself imply any limit, any barrier, any determination. To perceive the infinitude of thought as such is to perceive the lack of any inherent limitation that accompanies the flavour of thought itself; which is a quality we encounter in each of its manifestations (ideas).

In the ancient Buddhist tradition (AN 9.41, for example) the formless domain of indefinite space is usually followed by the formless domain of indefinite consciousness. Leaving aside the content of the experience of indefinite space, the meditator can turn their attention to the conscious background in which that experience manifested itself, ascending as it were to a more abstract and empty level. This ascension will in fact proceed further towards two other formless domains (that of 'no-thing' and the even more subtle one of 'neither-perception-nor-non-perception'), in which every residual quality will be removed, until the total cessation of all experience (as we briefly mentioned in the introduction) is reached. The purpose of this ascent, in Buddhism, is to show how each experience is built up in layers, and none of these layers is ultimately unsurpassable since it is possible to remove them all and bring about the cessation of experience. Cultivating this progression, Buddhist texts invite practitioners to develop a form of detachment and dispassion towards experience and its dramas in order to realise its fundamentally neutral, contingent, and impersonal nature (AN 9.36). In the Tantric texts, on the other hand, infinite or indefinite consciousness—and its revelation as absolutely empty and at rest—is seen as an abstract representation of the ultimate principle (Śiva) as the marvellous vacant abyss from which all things arise (rather like the *Kaos*

that opens Hesiod's *Theogony*), from which all things emerge, and to which all may at any moment return (VBT 11-17).[14]

From the Spinozian perspective, coming into contact with thought as such (in its quality of infinite, unlimited and timeless consciousness) brings us to a similar crossroads. If we deepen our contemplation of thought as such, we immerse ourselves in its total indeterminacy, indivision, inarticulation, and lack of any determinate content. Ideas articulate thought but thought as such is neither articulated nor made up of ideas (just as extension, in itself considered, is not divided into parts, E1p15s). Pure thought or thought experienced in its 'absolute' nature (as Spinoza often repeats in the *Ethics* when he wants to indicate the attribute as such), has no finite determination; it is pure infinitude. In this, it is something that transcends imagination altogether and can be experienced only by reason or intuitively.

Even for Spinoza, however, we can access a deeper and more paradoxical dimension of this experience. Substance, in fact, cannot be conceived except through some attribute (thought or extension, for example). Yet, substance in itself is not reducible to any specific attribute since substance is absolutely infinite, whereas each attribute is only infinite in its kind (E1def2). There is thus in substance a margin of infinite transcendence with respect to the nature of any attribute, a fullness of being that remains inexpressible for an attribute and yet is totally real. This is a paradox because substance, at the same time, is expressed in its essence by every attribute, but no attribute can completely express the reality of substance as substance (otherwise, there would be no need for substance to express itself in infinitely many attributes, contrary to E1p9). It could be said that each attribute intensively expresses the totality of substance, but extensively expresses only one aspect of it, i.e., it expresses the totality of its potency, but only insofar as that potency is articulated according to the attribute's own quality. All this is to say that the emptiness described in other traditions as an ultimate silent background, in which all determination dissolves, is not necessarily absent in Spinozian thought, but can be reconsid-

14 A theme that emerges in esoteric texts, such as the *Vātūlanātha-sūtra*, as well as in more philosophical ones, for instance, Kṣemarāja, *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, §§13 and 19 (in modern and annotated edition, Christopher Wallis, *The Recognition Sūtras. Illuminating a 1,001-year-old Spiritual Masterpiece*, Boulder, Mattamayūra Press, 2017).

ered as the inevitable transcendence that substance maintains with respect to any of its expressions.[15] The fact that we can only experience substance insofar as it expresses itself through a certain attribute implies that if we were to draw on the experience of substance per se, we would reach an emptiness of experience, or vice versa that the emptiness of experience is a coming into contact with substance per se. To draw on this dimension of transcendence is to reach the limits of appearing or experiencing as such.

From a Spinozian perspective, however, emptiness is not so much an objective absence of content (achieved through the suspension or suppression of the mind's affections), nor a complete interruption of experience in its totality (as in the case of the complete cessation of all mental, perceptual, and affective activities). Rather, emptiness appears as the immense, unspeakable, inexpressible background that is present at the core of every possible experience. Usually, this background is inaccessible to the mind ordinarily tossed about by the flow of imaginative affections. However, having reached this fourth stage of Spinozian meditation, those affections have already been in some way silenced and transcended, placed themselves in the background to bring the true background into the foreground. At the level of infinite thought, there remains only one last, very thin veil separating this experience from that of the void. This is not the veil constituted by some determinate object since at this point the determinate objects have already been set aside. It is the more general structure of thought itself, the one that usually unifies its contents, creating the subjective perspective (the point of view from which thought observes, experiences, sees, and identifies with experience) that is typical of all thought. In other words, there remains what in yoga traditions is usually identified with the subtlest and most abstract form of the 'I'—no longer the empirical, biographical 'I' that is thought to be this or that person, but what might be called a transcendental 'I', a structure that allows the representability of the world as such (VBT, 91-96).

15 Filippo Mignini has defended the idea that the notion of substance in Spinoza can fit into a broader tradition of thinkers (including Giordano Bruno and Niccolò Cusano) who conceptualised the ultimate principle as 'indeterminate'. See, in this regard, Filippo Mignini, 'Spinoza and Bruno' in Daniela Bostrenghi and Cristina Santinelli (eds.), *Spinoza: Research and Perspectives. Per una storia dello spinozismo in Italia*, Napoli: Bibliopolis, 2007, 211-271; Id., 'Il Dio di Spinoza', *Historia Philosophica* 6 (2008), 1-19.

Yet even this is only a veil over the void. Insofar as that 'I' is not the void itself, it has its own subtle vibration, which is different from the even deeper and quieter vibration of the void itself.

When that subtle vibration of the transcendental 'I' aligns, syntonizes, tunes in perfectly, and finally dissolves into the background vibration of emptiness, then emptiness emerges in its paradoxical fullness. The background is in the foreground, everything else is in the background. It is an epiphany because that emptiness appears at the same time as infinite, infinitely free, and of such absolute beauty that it cannot be contained in any concrete reality, which can only translate a fragment of it at most. It is a very subtle yet extremely clear, infinitely powerful vibration. A vibration of unspeakable unexpressed joy, almost compressed in the dark, formless, boundless vastness that is the fertile womb from which worlds arise; a whisper of immense freedom, boundless compassion, cosmic love. We thus perceive the root of the divine power (*ānanda*) that inhabits the void and animates it from within, remaining consubstantial with it, and making it explode in the infinite manifestation of the phenomenal world.

We stand here on a decisive threshold. An untraced threshold, devoid of indications, yet poised between thought and pure substance (which is nothing other than the unobjectifiable horizon of being as such). This threshold confronts us with a choice. Not only is it possible to lose oneself in the void, attempting to vanish completely into it (a move that many ascetic traditions have often indicated as the supreme goal), but it is possible to abandon oneself totally to its underlying vibration. Then, like the upward thrust that accompanies those who have plunged down to the secret bottom of the waters, that mute and most powerful Beauty brings us back to the surface of experience, causing us to find ourselves and the world again, but in their truest light—it brings us back to the experience of the finite mind, seen now, however, immediately, as a wave of that infinite bottom.[16]

16 Taking the early Buddhist tradition as an example of a more ascetic approach, MN 121, for example, shows how the progression into 'emptiness' leads to a form of complete dispassion and detachment from the whole world of experience, having shown the practitioner that all states and objects (even the most abstract, refined and subtle) are constructed and therefore uncertain and subject to cessation. The Spinozian meditation presented here shares with the Buddhist progression into

In one of his posthumous sonnets, composed between 1927 and 1947, Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1871-1950) described (echoing the Tantric mythology symbols of Śiva and Śakti) the distinction and reunion of these two poles of experience—emptiness and power:

On the white summit of eternity
A single Soul of bare infinities,
Guarded he keeps by a fire-screen of peace
His mystic loneliness of nude ecstasy.
But, touched by an immense delight to be,
He looks across unending depths and sees
Musing amid the inconscient silences
The Mighty Mother's dumb felicity.

Half now awake she rises to his glance;
Then, moved to circling by her heart-beats' will,
The rhythmic worlds describe that passion-dance.
Life springs in her and Mind is born; her face
She lifts to Him who is Herself, until
The Spirit leaps into the Spirit's embrace.[17]

emptiness some of its fundamental turning points (moving from the experience of the finite body to increasingly subtle, refined and empty contents of experience). Why do they diverge so radically in their outcome (dispassion in one, intellectual love of God in the other)? If we wish to emphasise the differences between the two approaches, the opposite result can be linked to the opposite initial intention and attitude with which the practice is taken up (more than to the actual steps through which it passes). In the Buddhist case, the goal is to establish the practitioner in 'ultimate emptiness' as an escape from the suffering (*dukkha*) associated with all states of experience (see e.g. MN 13). In Spinoza's case, the goal is to reach the deepest level of understanding available to the mind, which is to understand the rootedness of the finite in its infinite substance. But we can also see how the two approaches can be reconciled. Buddhist meditation on emptiness can indeed be used as a tool (and thus have instrumental value) to correct the misleading imaginative ideas and perceptions that one normally has about experience, by revealing that ordinary appetites and desires to grasp and hold onto a particular (finite, determinate) state are unwarranted. The simple removal and correction of the imaginative understanding of experience would then of itself reveal the nature of reality as it is explicitly and deliberately cultivated in the Spinozian approach. By contrast, the latter approach may not be strong enough to counter the imaginative understanding of things if the practitioner is not able to use emptiness contemplation to subvert the ordinary appetitive system of craving.

17 In Sri Aurobindo, *Collected Poems*, vol. 2, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 2009, 609.

The fifth step consists once again in a slight lateral shift: by recovering the sense of our own presence against the background of infinite thought (since in the power of that thought our nature is not denied, but already included, we only need to glimpse it), we can suddenly see the identity of that background with the finite idea that constitutes our mind. It is the immediate intuition of a relationship that is already present, something that is presupposed in our experience and that we only have to make explicit from within. Although thought is infinite, it is in this infinite thought that all our ideas arise, including our mind (understood as the integrated totality of our ideas). For the purposes of this contemplation, there is no point in trying to reduce the mind to a precise representation (not least because such a representation can only be imaginative or rational). We can, however, have an immediate intuition of our thinking being (since we are thinking), and we can also through this intuition grasp the fact that our thinking, insofar as it is ours, is not infinite, but finite and determined (which is the characteristic of all the ideas we form of objects, even when we think of infinite objects). And yet, we can in the same intuition also grasp how this finite and determined act of thought that we call our mind, does not exist elsewhere, but can indeed only emerge against that infinite background of thought that we have brought to light in the previous passage.

Seeing then the synchronic overlapping and intimate relationship of dependence and identity between these two planes (finite and infinite), we can immediately know how the mind is but a finite expression of the infinite. In this way, we 'sense and experience that we are eternal' (E5p23s), as we are but a manifestation, an expression, an explication of the eternal. To directly experience the mind in this way is to experience oneself in God (in Spinoza's sense), and vice versa to experience God in oneself. No limitations or determinations that make us what we are are removed, but all the imaginative superstructures that the impotence of our appetite has built over those determinations are negated, at least momentarily, allowing us to sink in the sweet sea of unlimited joy and love towards this relationship of identity-within-difference between the finite and the infinite. We thus access the threshold of the intellectual love of God that Spinoza has shown us to be the heart and summit to which our being has always, however confusedly, tended, and which God itself has always, however tortuously or covertly, enjoyed.

Another of Sri Aurobindo's posthumous sonnets may be useful in giving a poetic expression to this kind of experience:

All Nature is taught in radiant ways to move,
All beings are in myself embraced.
O fiery boundless Heart of joy and love,
How art thou beating in a mortal's breast!

It is Thy rapture flaming through my nerves
And all my cells and atoms thrill with Thee;
My body Thy vessel is and only serves
As a living wine-cup of Thy ecstasy.

I am a centre of Thy golden light
And I its vast and vague circumference;
Thou art my soul great, luminous and white
And Thine my mind and will and glowing sense.

Thy spirit's infinite breath I feel in me;
My life is a throb of Thy eternity.[18]

Once we have gained access to this type of experience and feeling, we can devote ourselves to its consolidation and extension. On the one hand, we can observe how all the appetites that arise in the mind, however inadequate their expression may seem, are but different ways of tending towards this same experience. In reality, we only ever have the same experience of the infinite expressing itself in its forms in order to savour the pleasure of its own appearance. Any difference between contemplative and ordinary experience fades, everything is contemplation, and contemplation becomes ordinary, uninterrupted, all-encompassing. Likewise, we can see the entire cosmos as a swarming of different endeavours, yet all to some extent oriented towards the same point, driven by the same quest, like sighs trying to express the same love. We

18 Sri Aurobindo, *Collected Poems,* cit., 601.

can thus not only expand our intuitive experience and the eternal part of the mind, progressively integrating the imaginative manifestations of our being into it, but also extend our intuitive knowledge of the totality of reality, recognising in everything the resonance of the same note, the resonance of the same underlying vibration; intellectual love is united with divine glory.

The experience of glory is a natural expansion of the sense of embodiment and identification that binds us to the body. We immediately feel that we are in our body, but this perception is usually characterised by a sense of limitation, insofar as we perceive our body as finite. On the wave of empowerment created by intellectual love, however, we can set aside this sense of finitude, discovering how the original source and fundamental dimension of the perception of embodiment has no limitation in itself. We thus perceive the totality of reality as our own body. This requires no effort or exertion, as we instead discover that it is the perception of limiting embodiment to a certain finite body that requires an effort of confinement. The experience of universal embodiment does not consist in an identification with any specific being (just as our habitual sense of being embodied in the body does not consist in the distinct perception of any specific body part) and yet it includes direct, immediate, intuitive consciousness of the fullness, richness and density of the totality of the real, with its swarming of an infinitude of determinate modes. Just as in perceiving a musical chord, we do not perceive any of the notes of the chord in isolation, but rather perceive them in their forming a unified yet diverse harmony, so in immersing ourselves in this experience of universal embodiment we perceive the totality of being in infinite articulation while remaining one unity. In that unity there is also this finite body that we ordinarily call our own, and this mind of ours that expresses and manifests its existence in the space of thought—but everything is welded together as a harmonic vibration, if not a unison, in which the perception of the finite and that of the totality of the rest of infinite reality merge until they become indiscernible.

For Spinoza, love is joy associated with an external cause, but when joy is associated with an internal cause it becomes a 'contentment of oneself' (*acquiescentia in se ipso*, E3p30s). Usually, this contentment is induced by wrong reasons based on imaginative illusions (E3p55s), thus becoming harmful to oneself and others. But there is a form of contentment that can arise from reason

(E4p52) as we know how our true empowerment effort is directed towards knowledge. The development of intellectual love is thus the most mature form of this genuine contentment. Glory, for its part, is ordinarily a self-contentment induced by an external cause, usually a judgement received from others (E3p30s). Ordinarily, that is, we need others to praise us in order to discover some virtue and power in us or to imagine ourselves capable and powerful. In this sense, glory is a passive tool (insofar as it is based not only on external causes, but on inadequate imaginative affections) that scaffolds and props up our contentment, but also makes it precarious, if not dangerous. When we fully develop the intellectual love of God, extending our experience of it to the sense of global incarnation just described, the contentment that arises from the immediate and intuitive knowledge of our own power of acting becomes indistinguishable from the way the totality of reality reflects its and our own power in us. We thus feel that we are expressions of an infinite love that through our being takes this determined form in order to experience its potential. Our being becomes identical with this same love from which it emanates; it dissolves into a sense of infinite acceptance, an unconditional surrender that is, however, also a support, an impetus, an encouragement to be totally ourselves—living our essence. The interplay of identity and otherness are welded here into a continuum, making contentment and glory one with God's love for itself, the love of the whole for God, and the love of ourselves for God and the whole.

However much divine love and glory may be experienced in a range of intensities (from a vague sense in the background, to a fiery intensity by which one can be totally enraptured), they never deny the presence of our finite power, and thus never pose the (false) dilemma of having to choose between diving into the absolute and dissolving into it or rather remaining bound by the chains of finitude and its pains. The only reason for wanting to systematically cultivate the most intense, clear, and distinct experience of these states arises only—beyond the purely aesthetic taste for exploring and enjoying the beauty that characterises them—from the possibility of imprinting these experiences in the imaginative and affective fabric of mind and body, thus enabling that expansion of the eternal part of the mind mentioned above, while at the same time creating a (most solid as possible) dam against the passionate impulses to which all finite things are by nature necessarily subject (E4p4c). In lingering for

some time in the pure experience of divine love and glory, we do not remove ourselves from the world, but rather make ourselves ready and able to serve the world in its deepest aspirations: true empowerment, unity, love. In this capacity to serve lies the meaning of true freedom: 'by this we know clearly in what our salvation, that is, our bliss or freedom, consists; that is, in the constant and eternal love of God, that is, in God's love for mankind' (E5p36s).[19]

The instrumental function of reason

The meditative path just described may begin with an imaginative knowledge of the body, and progress to a rational knowledge of the attributes of extension and thought (conceived as universal common properties), but it culminates in a purely intuitive knowledge, in which reason and imagination are transcended—for the intellectual love of God does not in itself consist in either an imaginative affection or a common notion. Are we therefore to conclude that imagination and reason are kinds of knowledge to be left behind and abandoned as soon as possible?

Reason is often regarded with scepticism in some contemplative traditions. This is partly due to the fact that 'reason' is often understood to be its imaginative parody, i.e., the set of justifications and stories (if not ideologies) created to give a posteriori support to habits and compulsions. In a more radical sense, reason can also be seen as an obstacle because its functioning is inevitably based on concepts, deductions, and mental constructions, abandoning the totality of which can be seen in certain traditions as the ultimate goal of practice. If the goal of meditation is to reach a state of complete cessation, or something similar, it is clear that rational constructions will also have to cease, and thus that the domain of reason per se will have to be abandoned at some point.

19 On this point, it is interesting to note how a tendentially anti-metaphysical approach such as that of ancient Buddhism arrives at results that are not too dissimilar, at least in the area of the 'divine abodes' (*brahma vihārā*). See in this regard A. Sangiacomo, *An Introduction to Friendliness* (*mettā*), cit.; Bhikkhu Anālayo, *Compassion and Emptiness in Early Buddhist Meditation*, Cambridge: Windhorse Publication, 2015.

For Spinoza reason (properly understood) represents an intermediate kind of knowledge, which expresses an equally intermediate degree of the mind's power of thinking. The realisation of the intellectual love of God is not a rational realisation, but an intuitive one, yet reason constitutes the fundamental and necessary premise for its arising. Intuitive knowledge not only surpasses reason, but somehow encompasses reason within itself, without leaving it behind. More specifically, however, reason for Spinoza can play an important instrumental role in counteracting the distortions introduced by the imaginative appetite and restoring to the mind the sufficient condition of calm and tranquillity necessary for intuition to arise spontaneously (or as Spinoza would say, to allow the mind to order its ideas according to the order of the intellect, E5p10).

In thinking about this instrumental role of reason, Spinoza takes a position that had been equally defended by one of India's greatest philosophers and mystics, Abhinava Gupta (ca. 951-1016 Common Era). A systematiser of the Kashmiri nondual śaiva tantrism, Abhinava Gupta was equally confronted with the apparent paradox of a system in which ultimate realisation was presented as a transcendence of all forms of conceptuality. Yet, this realisation was defended, supported and argued for with sophisticated rational constructions. In the fourth chapter of his *Essence of Tantra* (*Tantrasāra*), the most concise summary of his thought, Abhinava addresses this issue by pointing out precisely that the function of correct argumentation (*tarka* in Sanskrit) is to remove the inadequate ideas that prevent the practitioner from bringing forth the spontaneous intuition of the ultimate principle.[20] That principle, in the nondual śaiva system, is infinite consciousness in its immanent expression as the totality of the phenomenal world. The supreme realisation is the realisation, on the part of the individual being, of being identical with that consciousness in its being-conscious. The consciousness with which I am aware of things around me is the absolute consciousness itself ('I am Śiva'), and the particularity I attribute to myself is nothing more than one of the expressions with which that absolute consciousness manifests itself in the world. This is an intuitive and

20 See Abhinava Gupta, *Essence of the Tantras.* Preface, translation and commentary by Raniero Gnoli, Milano: Bur, 1990, 91-103.

immediate realisation, which cannot be the object of demonstration since any demonstration presupposes (phenomenologically) the givenness of consciousness itself as its premise.[21]

However, Abhinava shows how it is possible to remove a number of misconceptions and prejudices that, by obscuring intuitive knowledge, hide the evidence of the identity between the finite and the infinite. The ignorance that other yoga traditions speak of is reduced in this sense to nothing more than a form of playful, free concealment (because in the Tantric view, ignorance is also an act of Śiva), which can be 'discovered' and thus removed by dropping the set of beliefs that make it plausible. Like the unmasking of a character pretending to be someone else in order to mock us, so reason unmasks absolute consciousness as it pretends to be finite for the pleasure of rediscovering itself.

In the *Ethics*, we can observe how rational knowledge operates in a similar way, not only by acting as a premise for intuitive knowledge (through the recognition of the common universal notions of extension and thought on which the meditation we have just explored is based), but more extensively by counterbalancing, disproving, and correcting the distortions introduced by the imaginative mind. The characteristics of the imagination are the individuality of affections or traces (in the first instance, we are always affected by individual causes and therefore always imagine concrete individuals), and its apparent sempiternity (the imagination, as far as possible, lives in a constant present; the past can only be recognised as such to the extent that it disproves what the imagination affirms to be present).

The characteristics of rational knowledge are opposite. As mentioned above, reason knows by common notions, and therefore does not see particular individuals in their uniqueness, but only what many individuals have in common with each other. Whereas imagination can only confuse the perception of the manifold, reducing it to an abstract and vague universal, reason sees the common trait that unites different things, without losing the sense of their diversity. Moreover, since common notions are always present in the part and

21 Theme explored philosophically in the nondual Tantric school of recognition. See in this regard David Peter Lawrence, *Rediscovering God with Transcendental Argument. A Contemporary Interpretation of Monistic Kashmiri Śaiva Philosophy*, Albany: State of New York Press, 1999, chapter 5.

in the whole, they are truly independent of time (at least in relation to the duration of the totality under consideration). An imaginative affect can be believed to be always present only insofar as it is not contradicted, whereas a common notion is always present by definition. If it is difficult for the imaginative mind to grasp this difference, it nevertheless plays a decisive role in practice. Chapter one showed how the instability of affections leads the imaginative mind towards fixation or desire. That which is based on reason, on the other hand, is immune to these extremes since it is not really affected by changing circumstances.

At the beginning of the fifth part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza summarises the advantages that rational knowledge has over imaginative knowledge, and the ways in which it can help us keep imagination and the affects that arise from it at bay (E5p20s). Imagination, however, is not just a hotbed of more or less unconnected passions and affects. As mentioned in chapter one, it also produces general or ideological worldviews, which seek to cement, sustain, and enhance, if possible, imaginative mechanisms. This is not a perverse or corrupted intentionality of the imagination, but rather a compensatory movement. When something in our body malfunctions, usually other parts intervene to try to compensate for the deficiency, even though this in the long run may aggravate the situation, introduce deformations, or create other damage. Given the mind's impotence to know reality more adequately, and seeking nevertheless a form of empowerment, the appetite appeals to what it finds best, including erroneous views and prejudices.

The most significant imaginative biases concern, as mentioned above, free will, the substantiality of the human being, and the transcendence and anthropomorphism of God. God's transcendence arises from imagining God as something entirely different from the world and as a separate substance in and of itself. Anthropomorphism arises from a projection onto God of human traits and characteristics, which somehow make God conceivable to the imagination. Transcendence and anthropomorphism are clearly contradictory from a rational point of view since one should exclude the other. But the imagination is not sensitive to these contradictions because its concepts can remain sufficiently vague and confused to hide their contrasts under the mist of the unknown.

The trait common to all these prejudices, however, is a tendency to separate and distinguish: to separate the human being as a free agent, to separate them as a substantial entity, and to separate the world from God in the name of the latter's transcendence. This element of distinction results once again from the nature of the affections on which the imagination is based, which in the first instance always concern something concrete and determined, the causes of which, however, are unknown. We are affected by external bodies without knowing the causal mechanism that underlies this interaction and regulates the natures of our body and the external body. As a result, we form an image of the external body as it immediately imprints itself on our body, without being able to know anything about the networks of relations that condition and shape this impact. In other words, the imaginative affections necessarily appear to us as at once extremely vivid, concrete, determined, and yet completely uprooted, unconnected, fortuitous, and unfounded.[22] These apparently contradictory aspects depend on the nature of the affections, which only allow us to see the surface of the things with which we come into contact, entirely masking the background of relationships that determines everything else.

In this way, we imagine ourselves free because we are conscious of our appetite—but not of the causes that determine it. We imagine ourselves to be substances because we are conscious of our existence—but not of the causes on which we depend to exist. We imagine God to be a transcendent substance because we can imagine an infinitely powerful being (usually imagining an enhanced version of a human being)—but we do not understand its possible relationship to the rest of the world, except as a relationship of extrinsic domination and control (such as those we attribute to ourselves towards other things or to an earthly ruler to whom we are subservient).

Imagination is thus a factory of dualist prejudices, which (for lack of a better alternative) provide us with a foothold to pursue our imaginative appetites, until such prejudices become so deeply integrated into the whole of our

22 Only later, as experiences add up and repeat themselves, and in search of some form of order that can help cope with the power of external causes, do the imaginative traces begin to blur, moving from distinction to similarity, which in turn evokes the dynamics of imitation discussed in chapter one. Similarity and difference are thus two opposite directions in which imaginative life moves, without ever really realising (let alone being able to reconcile) their tension.

affectivity, identity, and even our society that they themselves become untouchable—because to question them would be perceived as a depowering of our very being. Thus, imagination gives birth, in due time and given the right circumstances, to superstition—religious and otherwise.

Let us be clear: it is not a question here of putting imagination on trial and condemning it. Imagination is still a power of the mind and provides us with the basis for the higher kinds of knowledge. Spinoza scholars, especially in the last thirty years, have repeatedly emphasised, on several occasions and in various fields, the importance and positive role that imagination can play in human life and society. Yet, it is not imagination that ultimately saves us, nor can it save itself from its limitations. Appreciating the positive function it can play is only half the story. The other half consists in understanding and keeping in mind its limits. For Spinoza, imagination can only play a role if, and to the extent that, it is held in check, supplemented, guided, and directed by more powerful forms of knowledge (reason and intuition). In a society such as ours, which is dominated by forms of imagination that are extremely powerful in their own way, but also debilitating for the individuals who suffer them, the Spinozian critique of imagination is a useful tool for unhinging and sabotaging the mechanisms of domination by which we gently allow ourselves to be subjugated.

Imagination has no positive force per se to resist refutation. Two contrary properties cannot coexist within the same idea. When an imaginative idea is contradicted, the idea must change and be revised (E5Ax1). This seems to be precisely the function of reason and, in particular, one of the motivations that prompted Spinoza to write the *Ethics*—in which it is shown that human beings are neither absolutely free agents nor finite substances, but that there is only one infinite substance, God, who is neither absolutely transcendent nor conceivable according to anthropomorphic criteria. The *Ethics* is a systematic antidote to imaginative ideology and its inherent dualism based on ignorance and impotence to think deeper and bigger. This is achieved by putting reason and its common notions to work, discovering the real aspects of identity and continuity through differences, without denying them but also without isolating them from each other.

One can observe here how the rational critique and deconstruction of prejudices related to free will, substantiality and anthropomorphism constitute the Spinozian expression of that critique of subjectivity that is common to all yoga traditions. Of these, Buddhism is perhaps the one that has been (and is) most identified with the doctrine of 'non-self' (*anātman* in Sanskrit), that is, with the negation of ordinary subjectivity. In the earliest texts, such as the Buddha's discourses preserved in the Pāli canon, the critique of subjectivity emerges above all in practical terms as a demolition of the presumption by which the ordinary person claims to be in control of the fundamental constituents of experience.[23] The 'self' (*attā* in Pāli or *ātman* in Sanskrit) criticised in ancient Buddhism is that implicit sense of ownership or appropriation towards the body, perceptions, emotions, intentions, and consciousness itself, by which we claim that all this is something we can control.[24] The Buddha explicitly uses the metaphor of the power of a king who has full control over his kingdom to denounce the absurdity of this claim (MN 35), since no one has or has ever had control over the body or anything that depends on it—death being an ever imminent possibility that no one can escape at any time.[25] It is, as we can see, a pragmatic reflection based on the seemingly most obvious, yet most ignored, aspects of ordinary experience.

On the one hand, the Buddhist discourses on this theme tend to proceed in the form of a back-and-forth, i.e., a dialogical and rational reflection aimed at highlighting that aspect of reality that the imaginative appetite (to use a Spinozian gloss) refuses to see, since acknowledging it would undermine the image of power that the individual has of themselves and the rest of the world. On the other hand, the Spinozian counterpart to this reflection consists in the recurring theme of the absurdity of free will, which resurfaces in all parts of the *Ethics*. By considering themselves free, human beings believe themselves to be independent, unattached, and thus in control of themselves and the world,

23 A reading defended, for instance, by Ajahn Ṭhānissaro. *Selves & Not-Selves. The Buddhist Teaching on Anattā.* Valley Center (CA, USA): Mettā Forest Monastery, 2011.

24 SN 22.59. For a more extensive discussion of this point, see Andrea Sangiacomo, *The Tragedy of the Self,* cit., Lecture 12.

25 For further discussion, see Andrea Sangiacomo, *An Introduction to Friendliness*, cit., §4; Id., 'The Meaning of Existence (*Bhava*) in the Pāli Discourses of the Buddha', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 30, no. 6 (2022), 931-952, https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2022.2107998

just like little sovereigns. But reason shows, according to Spinoza, the puerility and danger (to themselves and others) of such prejudices.

The later Buddhist tradition, however, spells out the argument about 'non-self' in more ontological terms, beginning to insist on the nonexistence of a specific entity (the self, the soul or the ontological heart of the individual) or at least on the impossibility of finding any trace of it in our experience.[26] Without entering into the debate about the (dis)continuity among these developments within Buddhism, one can simply note how the Spinozian critique of the substantiality of the finite (the demonstration that man is not a substance, E2p10) captures this ontological aspect, but articulates it in the terms of a middle ground between absolute existence and nonexistence. Spinoza denies that a finite human being (or their mind, soul, or essence) has the nature of substance, i.e., is something eternal, independent, and conceivable in and of itself (i.e., has what the Buddhist tradition calls in Sanskrit *svabhava*, 'its own being'). Nevertheless, Spinoza neither asserts that finite things are a nothingness. Instead, they are to be considered as *modes*, namely certain and determinate expressions of the only substance, which also exist and are conceived in relation to that substance.

The point of these remarks is not to flatten Buddhist discussions onto Spinozian ones, but only to point out the way in which a classic theme of yogic debates (the critique of the ordinary self) emerges in the *Ethics*, admittedly transfigured and in a peculiar form, but also clearly recognisable when observed in the right context.[27] For Spinoza, deconstructing prejudices about subjectivity is one of the functions of reason. However, even in a tradition that tends to be anti-metaphysical like the Buddhist one, these discussions are usually linked to reflections of a rational order in a dialogical and then internalised form—thus showing a certain constancy in the way reason is mobilised to shed light on the prejudices of subjectivity.

26 For a discussion relating this discussion to contemporary Western philosophy, see Jay Garfield, *Engaging Buddhism. Why it Matters to Philosophy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, chapter 4; Id., *Losing Ourselves. Learning to Live without a Self*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022.
27 For a recent discussion of the (non)substantiality of the self in Spinoza and its possible echoes in the Buddhist view, see Sanja Särman, 'Spinoza's Evanescent Self', *Journal of Modern Philosophy* 4 (2022), https://doi.org/10.32881/jomp.122.

Looking at contemporary contemplative practices, a recurring theme, formulated in multiple ways, is that of distancing oneself from the 'critical' activity internalised in the individual mind (what Freud would have catalogued as the 'superego'). The voice that rebukes and usually points out what is wrong, the faults, and the shortcomings, making us feel the weight of our constant failure. Perhaps more developed in Western civilisations today than ever before, this little tyrant that inhabits our souls is itself an imaginative product. Spinoza does not speak of it directly but outlines the more general structure in which this phenomenon can be inscribed. Imagination is capable both of being affected by what (appears) present, but also of representing what *could* be, creating models, ideals, and exemplars that kindle the appetite and direct the *conatus*. These imaginative models may be nothing more than particular images to which one has attached exceptional importance, arising from individual experience or imposed by the external social environment. They may be projections of possibilities that the individual glimpses but does not yet know how to realise; they may be cemented by admiration and wonder, but they may also be mingled and fomented with affections of glory or pride. Whatever their origin, imaginative ideals are the basis of the ordinary critical attitude of judging a certain present reality as imperfect, lacking, and wrong compared to the very model one takes as a paradigm. This is also the basis of the ordinary axiological judgements that lead us to see certain things as good and others as bad, and thus of much of traditional morality.

The element of truth that lurks in this imaginative structure is the perception, however confused, of the gap that exists between the present and the potential. That is, the imagination perceives in its own way that what is present does not exhaust the totality of what could be, i.e., that the power of being (the power of God) extends infinitely beyond the concrete forms in which it is actualised in this or that determinate form. The partiality (and therefore the falsehood) of this imagination consists in taking another determinate form as a model (without seeing that every determinate form, as such, is infinitely surpassed by the infinite power of God), thus reinforcing the idea of a genuine difference between what is actual and what is possible, and thereby obfuscating and forgetting that both the actual and the possible are in fact nothing but expressions of the same power. In other words, the fundamental error of imag-

inative axiology is to separate and contrast the actual and the possible, without being able to recognise in both the different gradations of the same infinite power. This ignorance is the deepest source of all profound suffering, which is nothing other than the torment of seeing at once what could be and one's own impotence to pursue it. In this gap between the real and the possible plays out the indefinitely variable spectrum of all existential dramas.

One of the first ideas to take shape in Spinoza's philosophy is precisely the demolition of this judgmental imaginative structure. Perhaps Spinoza's first insight was precisely that things in themselves are neither good nor bad, except in relation to the way they affect the mind (TIE §1), and thus:

> Good and evil are said only in a relative sense, so that one and the same thing can be called good or evil according to different points of view, and the same applies to perfect and imperfect. For nothing, considered in its nature, will be said to be perfect or imperfect, especially after we know that everything that happens, happens according to an eternal order and according to certain laws of Nature. (TIE §12)

Rational knowledge is precisely that knowledge of the necessity of Nature's laws (knowledge of the very structure of reality in its most universal foundations), which enables us to recognise how everything that is real is perfect as such, when considered in its own nature (E2def6), and not in relation to an imaginative model imposed by passions of glory, pride, or abjection.[28]

In this sense, Spinoza shares the call so often repeated by contemporary contemplative traditions to unmask and depower 'the inner tyrant' that constantly urges us to judge ourselves, often against wholly unrealistic and unattainable models of perfection, for the sole purpose of making us suffer for our supposed shortcomings. This Spinozian approach, however, would also extend to more transindividual considerations, pointing out that any judgement of perfection or imperfection, right or wrong, with respect to what or how one

28 Theme also developed by Spinoza in his correspondence with Willem van Bijenbergh: see Letter 21 from Spinoza to van Blijenbergh.

should be 'human' that we make both towards ourselves and towards others, ultimately remains an unfounded imaginative prejudice.

However, unlike so often today, Spinoza does not see reason (properly understood) as the cause of this judgmental tyranny, but rather as the solution. It is thanks to reason, in fact, that we can unmask the groundlessness of this mechanism, see all the narrowness of the models that one purports to use to determine what is good and what is bad, and finally realise that the supposed difference between what is real and what is potential does not arise except within a single spectrum of reality, within a single substance. By understanding how everything, in its actuality, is the expression of the power of the one substance, and seeing at the same time how every further potentiality is also the expression of the power of the same substance that is already expressed in what is actual, the gulf between actual and potential is contradicted, refuted, and challenged. Thus, we do not have to implore the coming of an Other or the possibility of becoming other in order to be perfect, but we can open ourselves to the recognition that we are already the Other—and we are perfect, like every other expression of infinite power.

Another trait common to many contemporary contemplative practices is the emphasis they place on embodiment. Denouncing the disembodied life, absorbed entirely in mental and symbolic representations, practices as diverse as seated meditation with eyes closed, and ecstatic dance share the urge to bring us back to a more direct, immediate, and intimate contact with the physical reality of the body.[29] This is a very important point, which Spinoza undoubtedly shares in general terms, but which he can also help us to formulate more clearly. When one speaks of disembodied life, one usually refers to the ordinary habit of moving, living and spending one's time in a stream of inner chatting, stories, mental films, and daydreaming, in which the body is

29 Empirical studies found that a somatic component underlies the majority of contemporary meditative practices: see Karing Matko and Peter Sedlmeier, 'What is Meditation? Proposing and Empirically Derived Classification System', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10 (2019), article 2276, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02276. A similar theme arises in the very different context of ecstatic improvisational dance, as described by Gabrielle Roth, *Maps to Ecstasy. Teachings of an Urban Shaman*, Glasgow: Thorsons, 1990. On the topic see also: Karen Barbour, 'Beyond "Somatophobia": Phenomenology and Movement Research in Dance.' *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue*, no. 4 (2005) https://junctures.org/index.php/junctures/article/view/140.

only an object represented on the screen of the imagination. Returning to the body and regaining the experience of embodiment would therefore mean jumping beyond this screen, reconnecting with something deeper and more original.

If we remain on the surface of this diagnosis, one might think that mental life *could* exist somehow as detached from the body itself. In other words, the discourse on contemporary (dis)embodiment easily runs the risk of taking dualistic tones (ironically inverted with respect to the axiology of Platonic dualism), whereby the separation of the mind from the body is the evil to be cured by their reunification. Sometimes, verging in the opposite direction, this can lead to the claim that we are really *just* the body. It is precisely here that the critical function of Spinozian reason can help us discern the absurd prejudice that assumes the possibility for mental activity to flow independently of the body, as if the two were not two distinct expressions of the same thing (E2p7). From a Spinozian point of view, life entirely mental and 'in the head' is nothing more than a form of imagination, which like every form of imagination is the mental expression of a physical state. In other words, it is not the mind that withdraws itself from the body, but the body itself that, through certain imaginative affections, represents itself as distinct from the mind, or that induces the mind to see the body as nothing more than a somehow external object to be manipulated according to certain patterns. The alienation of mind and body, therefore, is not an alienation of two distinct entities that must be reunited, but the inadequate understanding of the unity that they nevertheless and necessarily constitute.[30]

This has profound implications for the way we approach the problem of embodiment and its practices. Instead of suggesting a 'return to the body' (which may well consist in replacing a certain representation of the body with another, perhaps changing the flavour, but in no way changing the structure of

30 Antonino Pennisi, *Cosa ne sarà dei corpi? Spinoza e i misteri della cognizione incarnata*, Bologna: il Mulino, 2021, broadens this discussion by problematizing the philosophical-scientific paradigm of *embodied cognition* that has become dominant in recent decades. Embodied cognition would remain anchored to a vision of the body as it is subjectively experienced, as opposed to the reality of the body as a biological substratum and constraint to cognitive processes, which in Pennisi's reading receives more structural highlighting in Spinoza's approach.

the experience), Spinoza suggests enhancing knowledge of the body, making it ascend from the imaginative plane in which it is usually confined to the intuitive one, passing through the rational critique of dualist prejudice and the proper understanding of body and mind based on common notions of attributes. As we have seen, in arriving at intuitive knowledge, not only does the mind know itself as a finite expression of the infinite divine power, but it can also base this knowledge on the direct experience of the body as a finite expression in the infinite continuum of extension, an attribute of the one substance. Yet, it is reason that mediates and makes possible this increase in the power of thinking. Moreover, since the mind's power of thinking and the body's power of acting are two different expressions of the same power, the integration of mind and body can be approached from both the mental and physical sides (or rather, it is necessarily cultivated on both fronts).

However, since this integration is necessarily based on an adequate knowledge of the ontological structure of reality (and thus of the finite as an expression of the infinite), it becomes impossible to have adequate knowledge of the identity of mind and body without recognising both as finite modes of the infinite substance. In other words, embodiment cannot be an experience in which a finite subject feels itself as totally identified with a finite body (this is nothing more than another imaginative representation), but only as a breaking through of the imaginative wall that encloses the finite within itself and a recognition of the identity-within-difference of finite and infinite. That is, the fully embodied experience is not that of a reductionist and materialist flattening on physical experience, but the (re)discovery of how mental and physical experience act as a sounding board for each other, and how both are rooted in an infinite depth.

We are seeing this right here: rational reflection uncovers the dualistic assumption of the common ordinary view of (dis)embodiment, denouncing its prejudice and correcting it with a more adequate idea of the identity-within-difference of mind and body; at the same time, this reflection makes it possible to think of physical practices that, by limiting the imaginative dispersion, can favour the natural emergence of the profound experience of corporeity as such, by making us listen to the very essence of the body (which is a finite mode of the infinite divine power)—thus creating a new context for the unfolding of

imaginative affections. It is precisely this possibility that we will now attempt to explore.

Hilaritas and physical integration

Spinoza has a dynamic and mereological conception of bodies. A dynamic conception in the sense that the nature of bodies, as of all things, is to produce effects (E1p36). We have already seen how this idea underlies the *conatus* doctrine. We can now add that for Spinoza any *one* thing counts as a thing (rather than as an incoherent aggregate of different things) in virtue of its ability to produce a unique effect. If several different things come together to produce a determined effect, those different things are no longer unconnected, but become parts of a whole (E2def2). This leads to the mereological view of the body (but the same could be said of the mind) as an integrated system of parts.[31]

Spinoza admits the existence of what he calls the 'very simple bodies', i.e., bodies that have no distinct parts in themselves (E2p13s, a2'). These are bodies that are divisible in theory, but whose division does not alter their nature, as when we divide a quantity of water into two parts, without changing the nature of the water. What really matters for Spinoza are what he calls 'individuals' or complex bodies, which are bodies composed of parts. His definition of an individual reads:

> [W]hen several bodies of the same or different sizes are pressed together by the others in such a way that they adhere to each other or in such a way that, if they move with the same or different degrees of speed, they reciprocally communicate their movements according to a certain proportion [*ratio*], we will then say that these bodies are united together and that they all together make up a single body, i.e., an individual, which is distinguished from the others by that union of bodies. (E2p13s, def).

31 Point well developed by Francesco Toto, *L'individualità dei corpi*, cit.

This definition suggests two ways in which an individual body can be created, depending on whether the union of its parts relies on external circumstances (and is therefore passive, heterodetermined) or on an internal effort (and is therefore active, autonomous). For example, when we imagine a group of particles in space that begin to coagulate with each other under the pressure of the force of gravity, we can identify the resulting compound body as a body of the first type. In this example, the force of gravity is the external or environmental agent that induces the particles to stick together, which without such an external push could very well have remained isolated and scattered. Bodies of this type are thus bodies that depend essentially on some sort of environmental pressure and derive their cohesion from this.

When, on the other hand, otherwise different bodies manage to find a principle of cohesion in their whole through their interactions, the resulting individual has a higher and more sophisticated level of unity and integration. We may think that this second type of individual actually describes living bodies—at least if we follow Francisco Varela's definition of life as a 'autopoietic' phenomenon.[32] That is, life can be understood as the capacity to bring into being a relatively independent and self-referential unit, which, while always remaining dependent on its environment, manages to maintain its relative autonomy within it. The creation of a cell membrane and the establishment of homeostasis processes up to the most complex forms of sensorimotor activity in animals are all instances of the increasing complexity of autopoietic processes.

The Spinozian criteria for deciding what an individual is (and especially what kind of individual it is) are relatively general and open to empirical investigation. The central point is that different types of individuals can in turn combine, and in fact all individuals ultimately combine in the entire system of the cosmos, since everything that exists in nature is inevitably part (at one level or another) of the totality of existence (E2p13s, l7s). Looking at the microcosm

32 See, in this regard, Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind. Cognitive Science and Human Experience*. Revised Edition, Cambridge (Mass) and London (UK): MIT Press, 2016; Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind*, Cambridge (Mass): Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007. For an organicist reading of individuality in Spinoza, see Hans Jonas, "Spinoza and the Theory of Organism," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (1965), 41-57.

of the human body, we can also see here how there is a multiplicity of different parts, constituting individuals of different types (from cells to organs, from mineral constituents to microbiota flora), more or less autonomous, and more or less independent of the others.

The central aspect of Spinoza's mereology is that the distinction between part and whole depends on the ability to adapt in nature and interact together, producing common effects.[33] To the extent that different bodies harmonise, adapt, and produce common effects, they become parts of a whole. To the extent that bodies remain relatively independent of each other, in conflict or disagreement, and produce mutually exclusive or contrary effects, they remain self-contained wholes. Both the life of our bodies and the constitution of the totality of nature depend on the subtle integration of these two mereological constructs, which are nothing but a different expression of the principle of identity-within-difference. This is a relatively precarious balance, especially in limited bodies such as the human body.

Since the nature of the human body is in fact a mereological composition (i.e., a relative integration of parts or individuals of different natures and complexities), we can deduce that the preservation in being to which the individual *conatus* tends is expressed as a preservation of the conditions that allow for the most stable and effective level of integration. This does not necessarily imply that all parts must have the same function, the same importance, or the same power. The more complex the nature of the whole (i.e., the more varied its composition), the more necessary it is for each part to play a role appropriate to its nature and at the same time to the nature of the whole it composes. If each part were to assert its individual preservation at the expense of the others, the whole would be compromised, just as if the whole were to assert its preservation at the expense of some of its parts. The balance between the capacity of the whole to serve the preservation of the parts and the capacity of the parts to serve the preservation of the whole is what preserves the whole.

33 This point is made more clearly in Spinoza's letter No. 32 to Henri Oldenburg in 1665. See, in this regard, Andrea Sangiacomo, *Spinoza on Reason*, cit., chapter 4; on Spinozian use of the notion of 'aptitude' (*aptitudo*), see Vincent Legeay, *"Être apte" chez Spinoza. Histoire et significations*, Paris: Garnier, 2020.

This equilibrium implies a certain complex relationship (a *ratio*, in the sense of 'proportion' as Spinoza put it, using a technical term from the geometry and science of his time), which inevitably implies asymmetries of importance, power, and influence, but always inscribed and in turn limited by a need for mutual adaptation and relative enhancement of each constituent element. If we again take the human organism as an example, we see that not all its parts (from subatomic components to organic macrostructures) have the same importance, play the same role, or impose their demands in the same way. Yet, they all participate in the formation and maintenance of the same complex individual, the same human body.

This kind of vision leads Spinoza to insist on one of his most interesting and innovative ideas: since our individual bodies are highly complex and articulated, we need to cultivate, and if possible enhance, our aptitude to act in as many ways as possible.[34] This means giving each part of our being the right nourishment, the necessary attention, and creating space for it to express itself in harmony with others. At the physical level, for example, we see how our body is a sensorimotor system made to move and act in the environment in tune with the stimuli it receives. We therefore need to cultivate our ability to perceive as varied a quantity of stimuli as possible, to be able to also cultivate our ability to move and act in as varied a manner as possible. This is not so much for the sake of novelty as for the need to remain fully capable of existing in the full spectrum of our potential, cultivating our power to the full and thus preserving our being to the fullest.

It is, in other words, to develop the opposite of what we saw in chapter one as the nature of fixation. When we fixate on a certain affection, the totality of our being must adapt to a limited range of options, which may suit certain parts, but certainly make others uncomfortable or inhibit them. In the long

34 In E2p14 Spinoza shows that 'the human mind is apt to perceive many things, and the more apt it is, the more numerous are the ways in which its body can be disposed.' Since the mind perceives itself and the body through its affections, the more varied the affections, the wider the spectrum of perception of which the mind is capable. These perceptions are not in themselves adequate knowledge. However, Spinoza also shows (E2p39c) that the more varied a body is and the more it is capable of acting and interacting with other bodies in different ways, the greater the possibilities for its mind to form common notions and thus develop adequate knowledge. In E4p38 he then goes so far as to define usefulness as that 'which disposes the body to be affected in more ways than one, or which makes it capable of modifying external bodies in more ways than one.'

run, fixation thus depletes our overall power of acting, even jeopardising our survival. Like an overly restrictive diet or an excessively sedentary (or dynamic) lifestyle, fixation depletes the variety of our attitudes, thereby breaking down the cement that holds our individualities together (which is none other than the very capacity of all our different parts to express themselves in their own way and to their own extent, in the totality they form together). What makes the aggregate of parts and materials that we are a whole is not some special glue, but only the possibility for all these parts to express their power of acting in a harmonious, coordinated, and mutually adapted manner. When this is possible for us, we blossom and grow, but when such integration is inhibited or diverted to a partial, local, limited expression, we collapse in ourselves, disintegrate, and ultimately die.

For Spinoza, the mind is nothing other than the expression under the attribute of thought of that same mode that under the attribute extension manifests itself as body. Hence, the mind too is a dynamic and mereological reality. Just as the physical body is a complex individual made up of other bodies, so the mind is a complex idea made up of other ideas. Just as the body has a constant need to develop its multiple capacities for action, so too the mind has a constant need to develop its multiple capacities for thought:

> [W]e can never bring it about that we do not need anything outside us to preserve our being and that we live without any commerce with things that are outside us; and if, on the other hand, we consider our mind, no doubt our intellect would be more imperfect if the mind were alone and knew nothing beyond itself. There are, therefore, many things outside ourselves that are useful to us and thus to be sought. (E4p18s)

Thus, just as fixation around a specific affection weakens the body, so too fixation around a specific idea weakens the mind and its power to think.

Therein lies the main limitation of the affects that Spinoza calls passive, which (by virtue of the force with which the external cause that gives rise to them imposes itself on our appetite) tend to privilege a certain part, a certain affection, fixing mind and body in a certain reaction. The most obvious example is that of sensory arousal. The more one of our five senses is affected by a

body that creates a pleasurable affect of joy, the more our appetite spontaneously turns towards anything that can sustain, continue, and reproduce that affection. But apart from falling into the oscillation between fixation and desire that we described in chapter one, we can also observe how the excessive arousal of any one of the senses leads to a depotentiation of our being as a whole. Those who are slaves to gluttony will end up compromising their health just as much as those who are slaves to music, or develop a form of addiction to sexual pleasure, or any other tendency to exclusively and obsessively pursue a certain type of affection. Note that none of these, in and of themselves, are necessarily harmful since all these affections are after all but expressions of our power of acting and interacting. However, the way the joy produced by these affections, by exciting the imaginative appetite, leads to fixation, derails the balance of our *conatus*, compromising the integration of our parts and proliferating instead like a kind of emotional cancer.

Once again, then, the problem is not so much the single pleasurable affection of any one of our parts, nor even the appetite as such to pursue our empowerment. The error lies only in *imagining* that the indefinite pursuit of a specific, local pleasurable affection can genuinely contribute to the empowerment of our being as a whole. This error is based on ignorance of our nature as dynamic and mereological individuals, whose being is not reducible to the being of any of its component parts, but only to their harmonious integration. Once again, imagination deludes us because of the incompleteness of the knowledge it produces (in this case, the incompleteness of the knowledge of our own nature as complex individuals), that is, because of its relative impotence to think adequately. The direct means of countering this error, then, is to put in place the conditions for a timely and systemic refutation of the partiality of imagination. If we were always aware of the integral nature of our being, we would also know that no partial affection, considered in itself, can lead us to empowerment if it is not supplemented by all the other affections and does not remain subordinate to the harmonic development of the whole.

Spinoza theorises precisely the possibility of such awareness, which is based on a specific affection, which he calls *hilaritas*. It is a kind of joy (hence empowerment) that arises from the fact that the totality of our being (i.e., the totality of its parts in their mutual integration) is empowered (E3p11s). Such empow-

erment can arise from the simple fact that all the parts come to fulfil their function in the whole they make up, according to their nature and to the extent appropriate to them in order to achieve the most harmonious result (both for the parts themselves and for the whole).[35]

Being a form of joy, *hilaritas* also affects the appetite and induces in it a positive effort to sustain its experience and reproduce it to the extent possible. But unlike the partial affections to which we are otherwise subject, in the experience of *hilaritas* we immediately know that all our parts are simultaneously enhanced in the right measure, and thus we derive joy from the overall integration of our being, not from the over-stimulation of one specific part to the detriment of the rest. Therefore, Spinoza shows that *hilaritas* 'cannot have an excess, but is always good' (E4p42), and thus the appetite that arises from it is indeed useful, as opposed to appetites cultivated on the basis of partial joys or sadness (E4p60).

In turn, *hilaritas* arouses an appetite to sustain and persevere in this affection, and such an appetite not only directly and positively develops our power of acting in its inherent multiplicity of forms and levels, but also creates a positive resistance to the excessive fixation of any affection that might weaken and depower this state of joyful integration of our individual being. By striving to experience, sustain, and cultivate a state of *hilaritas*, our appetite thus naturally becomes the guardian against the forms of fixation that we have seen to be the main obstacle to our development—which directly and affectively understands how fixation leads to a depotentiation of being.

From the mental point of view, we now know that the problem with imaginative affections is precisely that they are limited, so to speak, to the surface of experience (i.e., to the way in which the body is affected without, however, knowing either the nature of the body or that of what affects it). But insofar as we are affected by *hilaritas*, we are necessarily affected in the entirety of our body, in all its parts, and according to the right relations that allow these parts

35 In this sense, *hilaritas* could be translated into English as 'delight' understood as a special form of holistic joy (translating the Latin *laetitia* as 'joy'). The opposite of *hilaritas* is pleasurable excitement (*titillatio*) in which one part of the body is affected by joy more than the others, while the opposite is melancholia or depression (*melancholiam*), i.e., an affection of sadness that affects all parts of the body together. On the subject, see also Laurent Bove, *La stratégie du conatus*, cit., chapter 4.

to form a coherent whole. It should be noted, in fact, that *hilaritas* remains a type of affection and therefore a type of imagination, albeit in a somewhat special way because in it the element of partiality typical of imaginative affections seems to disappear. Thus, *hilaritas* is not only an affection that frees us from the partiality of other imaginative affections, but also shows the mind the common nature of the body. *Hilaritas* empowers us and thus enhances the mind's ability to think, which is expressed in the mind's ability to know the body rationally, according to those common properties specific to the body and its structure. *Hilaritas* is thus the psychophysical affection that acts as a bridge between ordinary imaginative life and rational life, or that can best enable imaginative life to be integrated and subsumed within a rational horizon. If reason can often be disempowered by external causes (E4p14-15), the development of *hilaritas* appears to be the most powerful and effective remedy for sustaining reason from within—and thus ultimately fostering the emergence of intuitive knowledge and intellectual love of God.

However, Spinoza admits that his discovery of *hilaritas* seems more theoretical than practical:

> The *hilaritas,* which I have said is good, is more easily conceived than observed. The affections, in fact, by which we are daily afflicted, mostly refer to some part of the body that is affected more than the others; and, therefore, the affections have for the most part an excess, and they so hold the mind in the consideration of one object that it cannot think of other objects. (E4p44s)

In ordinary life, experiences of *hilaritas* may be spontaneous, if not entirely accidental, but they remain largely unconnected, and the mind may lack the power of understanding what is necessary to discover how to make it a permanent ingredient of emotional life.

Support in this direction comes from relatively recent developments in yoga traditions. For millennia, yoga has primarily been a mental discipline aimed at silencing the activities of the senses in order to explore the territory of transindividual consciousness and (often) ascend to the horizon of a transcendent, intransitive, empty principle. Throughout this long journey, it has been

observed how all of human experience is embodied and therefore how it is impossible to proceed along this path without defining what is to be done with the body. The earliest classical approach tends to neutralise the body, allowing it to become comfortable, so that it can remain still, quiet, as if it were not there, that is, so as not to introduce the usual forms of disturbance and stimulation for which the body is typically the source and vehicle. The revolution of medieval Tantric yoga consisted in observing that if everything is a manifestation of divine consciousness, the body and its vicissitudes must also be a form of the divine. The body thus began to be seen not necessarily as a hindrance to be put in a corner and transcended as soon as possible, but as an instrument, and then even as an expression of the divine itself, which does not need to be abandoned or silenced, but unveiled and understood.[36]

Medieval Tantrism sees the physical body only as the outermost coarsest layer of a 'subtle' body composed of pure energies of action and consciousness, and it is on the manipulation of this subtle body, on shaping it, exploring it, and remaking it that many Tantric practices (visualisations, mantras, and other ritual forms) are based.[37] Over the following centuries, the deepening and hybridisation of this Tantric approach with other, more classical forms of yoga has led to the observation that even action on the outer physical body, however much it consists of the grossest layer of experience, can have an impact on the subtle body. This propelled the investigation of the functions that different postures (*āsana* in Sanskrit) can have from an energetic point of view, and how holding the body for a certain time in a certain position can support the internal energy or constitute different 'seals' (*mudrā* in Sanskrit) that influence its flow and articulation.[38]

Out of these yogic explorations came the practice that is most immediately associated in the West today with the term 'yoga', namely the practice of physical postures. Yoga—understood as a contemporary global phenomenon—is

36 For a historical overview of this evolution, see Daniel Simpson, *The Truth of Yoga. A Comprehensive Guide to Yoga's History, Texts, Philosophy, and Practices*, New York: North Point Press, 2021; see also Georg Feurstein, *The Yoga Tradition*, cit., chapters 11-18.

37 For a more in-depth discussion, see Christopher Wallis, *Tantra Illuminated,* cit., 301-320, 381-405.

38 On this subject, see Mikel Burley, *Haṭa-Yoga. Its Context, Theory and Practice*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2000.

the recent fruit of an ancient tree. It derives to a large extent from the rediscovery and reinvention of earlier practices and traditions by Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1881-1989) in the first half of the 20th century, then from the systematisation and dissemination of his main students (B. K. S. Iyengar and K. Pattabhi Jois)—each of which led to the development of a different method—and finally by the way in which the spread of these approaches in the West and their refinement by both Indian and new generations of Western masters contributed to their further evolution.[39]

The practice of postures can be developed and contextualised in many ways. It can be understood as an athletic or gymnastic discipline or as a form of therapeutics. It can be linked to more classical and ancient disciplines aimed at quieting mental activities, or it can be seen as an orthopraxis that allows one to join a special group of individuals or a cult. Like all things, the yogic practice of postures is polysemous, and each one can choose how to interpret its most relevant meaning for the practitioner depending on circumstances and context.

For our purposes, however, we can see in this very practice a means of cultivating that affection of *hilaritas* that Spinoza theorises while admitting that he does not quite know how to pursue it methodically. In the classical yogic scheme, the practice of postures presupposes three levels: mental, vital or energetic, and physical. The mental aspect is considered the most fundamental and consists of sensory restraint, withdrawal of attention from the scattering caused by constant reactivity to external stimuli, and thus the cultivation of concentration and composure. The vital or energetic aspect (*prāṇa* in Sanskrit) concerns the intuitive, subtle, yet immediate perception of the life force that directs and expresses itself in both physical processes (such as breath) and mental processes (such as attention). Like the electric current that activates and operates a circuit, so the life force flows through the individual being (while transcending it) allowing it to articulate and perform its various functions, yet with-

39 For a reconstruction of the historical context from which the modern conception of yoga (resulting from a synthesis of indigenous Indian elements and Western influences) emerged, see Elizabeth De Michelis, *A History of Modern Yoga. Patañjali and Western Esotericism*, London: Continuum, 2004. For a particularly discontinuist reading between contemporary postural yoga and classical Indian traditions, see Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

out immediately identifying with any of them. The physical aspect is the somewhat more superficial, external, and gross. It consists of the consolidation into fixed stable forms of mental and vital processes—as it is common in yoga traditions to think of the body as an expression or crystallisation of the subtler dimensions, rather than vice versa.

Spinoza uses a different conceptual vocabulary and his description of the human being does not seem to coincide immediately with the yogic one. Looking more closely, however, we note how the philosophy of the *Ethics* is powerfully focused on showing the correlation between mental and physical levels (mind and body being two different expressions of the same reality). The intermediate level of life force can thus find an equivalent in the force of *conatus* itself, not as expressed and concretised in certain acts, movements, or appetites, but in its primal form as a finite individual expression of God's own power. This is a power of acting and operating that is concretised in both physical and mental structures—and is as susceptible to articulation in opposing and apparently disconnected forms as it is to unification in an integrated form.

The practice of postures is based, in its essence, on the idea of using the physical body and the mental attitude as a dam to collect the life force and make it stable, harmonious, and balanced. The real action therefore takes place at the intermediate level, while the mental and physical levels function as the tools to create this balancing effect. This requires two complementary movements. On the one hand, the mental folds into the physical: in ordinary common life, mental activity is constantly projected outwards (so to speak), caught up in the constant flow of sensory stimulations, which drag an equal flow of physical reactions. Seeing an object, I want to move closer to contemplate it better, and recognising it as an edible fruit, I reach out a hand to pick it and bring it to my mouth. The movement of the body follows and articulates on the physical plane the flow (order and connection, Spinoza would say, E2p7) of mental affections based on objects external to the body itself.

With the practice of postures, this flow is momentarily interrupted. The senses are adjusted to the perception of the body itself (listening to the sound of the breath, the relaxed gaze directed at precise points linked to the posture, taste and smell suspended, and enteroception brought to the fore), and the mental functions place themselves at the service of the posture (not only

remembering its external form and guiding its enaction, but also monitoring the internal state so that effort and relaxation remain in balance, alignment is not compromised, and the posture remains as a whole stable and pleasant, as Patañjali would say, YS 2.46). In the practice of postures, the mind does not function like a commander who dominates, but like a conductor who facilitates the natural integration of the musicians in the performance of a symphony.

On the other hand, the physical folds into the mental. If we take ordinary life as a point of comparison again, we can see how constantly being engaged in sensorimotor reactions to the environment makes our limbs (arms and legs) the focus of our activity. As we move through space, we drag the rest of our trunk with us. Or, in more recent times, being forced to stare at a screen for countless hours a day, we tend to fold and collapse in ourselves like sacks of potatoes. Instead, by suspending this constant involvement with external stimuli, postural practice takes its start from a somatic reflection on the nature of the body, first discovering the centrality of the trunk and its main scaffolding, the spine. In this structure we discover two main centres: one at the base of the column and one in the middle of the thoracic region. The centre at the base of the column (which includes the bony structures of the pelvis and the muscular structures of the pelvic floor) forms the basis of the trunk and its stability. The centre in the thoracic region (in the heart area) resonates the two fundamental movements of life: breathing and heartbeat.[40]

The fundamental posture can be identified with the upright posture (called the balance pose, *samasthiti*) in which these two centres—base and heart—are not only aligned but integrated, and the other limbs help to support this integration. When the body stands upright, it must counteract the force of gravity that would tend to crush it to the ground. The upright posture is in fact something that the human species has learned and made distinctive of its wandering through the world, but it requires and reveals in itself a particular balance between stillness and movement, solidity and openness. If we look at the natural curvatures of the human spine (the kyphotic curve of the thorax and the

40 A third centre can be identified in the middle of the skull and can be integrated into the discussion that follows as a point of balancing the trunk and extending outwards. In order not to overcomplicate these quick hints, which are intended to be merely illustrative in any case, it will be omitted from the rest of the discussion.

lordotic curve at the base), we can see how they respond and resist the vertical pressure of gravity, like a spring capable of compressing and relaxing.

In the balance pose, the centre of the base is toned while that of the thorax is kept open. The pressure of gravity would naturally tend to accentuate the lordotic curve, rotating the pelvis anteriorly and unbalancing the trunk backwards. In order to counteract this pressure, a subtle but deliberate resistance is therefore offered by keeping the pelvis neutral or slightly rotated posteriorly (as if the tailbone were moving downwards), which consequently requires an activation of the pelvic floor, the leg muscles, and a complete and even unloading of the body weight onto the feet. But the pressure of gravity would also tend to make the torso collapse, accentuating the kyphotic curve, resulting in the shoulders bending forward and down. To counteract this movement, the upper chest is instead kept open and relaxed, while leaving the central part of the spine neutral, without expanding the lower ribs outwards. This requires a natural lowering and relaxation of the shoulders and neck muscles and an alignment of the head on the rest of the trunk.

The centre of the base is a complex structure that seals the body like the firm bottom of a sack. This provides not only a necessary passive support for the vital organs enclosed in the torso, but also a tonic and active element of resistance on which the movements of the individual as a whole can rest and gain momentum (think of the difference between jumping on a solid and hard floor as opposed to a stretch of sand; in the former case one can gain momentum, in the latter one tends to sink). Potentially, both gravity (from a passive point of view) and almost any other movement of the body (from an active point of view) can tend to open, relax, or in some cases weaken this base seal. In the balance pose, though, the rest of the body and its posture help to preserve its integrity.

The centre of the thorax is another complex structure, linked anatomically and energetically to the two basic systems of human life: heart and lungs. It is a structure with its own rigidity (we speak of a thoracic 'cage'), but it can only function properly if it maintains a constant elasticity, openness, and mobility. When the centre of the thorax closes, the chest sinks, a distinct feeling of oppression and depression is perceived—so much so that these emotional states are usually expressed precisely by a sinking of the thoracic centre and shoul-

ders, a tightening of the muscles of the torso and neck, and an alteration of the breathing pattern, which becomes more superficial and sometimes more difficult. In contrast to all the occasions and internal or external forces that would tend to produce these effects, the balance pose induces instead a deliberate, sustainable, and continuous state of openness in the thoracic centre, pervaded by a subtle sense of alertness and euphoria.

By harmoniously combining these two instances (the toning up of the base, which must remain stable but tends to be destabilised, and the opening of the thorax, which must remain outspread but tends to close), the balance pose represents a somatic and embodied expression of a holistic activation of all the physical macrostructures of the individual (bony, muscular, and organic), in which each is brought into play according to its nature and the most useful way in which it can integrate into the whole, to the benefit of every other part—inducing a form of *hilaritas*.

This is a folding of the physical on the mental in the sense that the position of the body is no longer determined by the immediate contingencies of sensorimotor reactions, but by the deliberate search of the physical correlate of a mental state of perfect balance, equilibrium, equanimity. The postures do not arise from an attempt to impose extrinsic forms on the body, but from the expression on a somatic, physical, and postural level of an internal intuition of perfect harmony. To use a technical term from classical yoga, the balance pose is the physical expression of the mental state of *samādhi* (absorption, concentration, composure).

If the balance pose responds to an external resistance (that of gravity), the exploration of some of the many postures developed by modern yoga can be used to internalise the same principle. The simplest, most direct, and immediate way to do this is to link the movements of the breath to the two physical structures of the base and the chest. The breathing rhythm is divided into inhalations and exhalations, and each of these movements has different psychophysical characteristics. The inhalation tends to be more dynamic and usually requires muscular activation, while the exhalation tends to be calmer in character and can be performed passively by muscle relaxation. With its expansive movement, the inhalation naturally tends to open the centre of the thorax, but can also unbalance that of the base. With its contracting movement, on the

other hand, the exhalation tends to close the centre of the base but also that of the thorax. With deliberate action, however, it is possible to cultivate an inhalation that rests in its expansion on a tonic stabilization of the centre of the base and an exhalation that relaxes without collapsing the centre of the thorax. In this way, the dynamic structure of the balance pose (with the toning of the base and the opening of the thorax) creates a dyke to reshape the rhythm of breathing (and in turn, the rhythm of breathing, once understood in these terms, can allow an even more subtle internalisation of the structure of the balance pose).[41]

This is only a first step: by using the alteration of the position of the body (and especially the limbs) to create internal sources of resistance, it is possible to explore the very dynamics of balance in a potentially infinite wealth of variations, subtleties, and insights, no longer reacting directly only to external pressures (such as gravity), but somehow creating internal sources of resistance within the individual in order to develop, again from within, the capacity to compensate that same resistance.

This somatic investigation responds to the discovery that body parts ordinarily tend to activate sequentially, and always following the law of least possible activation. Only under the stimulus of a certain resistance will a greater or more widespread activation be made possible. Yogic postures, on the other hand, can transform the habitual sequential activation into a synchronous activation of all parts of the body. To make this activation as complete as possible, a progressively greater level of resistance is introduced into the postures.

Since all individual bodies are different, this exploration must necessarily be adapted and customised, possibly with the help of expert guidance. For those naturally endowed with more flexibility, more advanced postures are necessary to achieve the same level of activation and resistance. For those who are endowed with less flexibility, confronting simpler but otherwise unusual postures also allows them to open certain body parts that usually remain ignored or blocked. In any case (at least in the vision presented here), the aim is not so

41 For an in-depth look at this practice, see Richard Freeman, *The Mirror of Yoga. Awakening the Intelligence of Body and Mind*, Boulder: Shambala, 2012, chapter 3; Richard Freeman and Mary Taylor, *The Art of Vinyasa. Awakening Body and Mind through the Practice of Ashtanga Yoga*, Boulder: Shambala, 2016, 11-16.

much to cultivate physical flexibility as an end in itself but to explore which are the most appropriate keys, depending on the individuals and their circumstances, to open up to awareness those parts of the physical structure that usually remain inaccessible.

Of course, these are just basic principles, but we can already see from these quick hints how the underlying inspiration of such a practice naturally leads to the cultivation of that sense of *hilaritas* mentioned by Spinoza. At the energetic level, the assumption of a yogic posture implies an equal distribution and integration of vital energy in the totality of the body or an equal affection of all parts simultaneously, i.e., it induces the force of *conatus* to distribute itself equally throughout the entire individual structure. This activation, in turn, expresses itself on the mental plane as a fully embodied awareness of the mind, which can perceive the body as a whole, remaining fully immersed in it, and, if necessary, counteracting (or healing) the prior and habitual tendencies of a certain part to dominate or of another to remain aloof or underdeveloped. In this sense, postural practice can offer a systematic method to actualise the theorem that Spinoza enunciates: 'he who has a body capable of a great many things, possesses a mind the greater part of which is eternal' (E5p39).

Insofar as the physical activation induced by the practice of postures contributes to the overall balance of the individual body, it also expresses the natural power of the body and thus creates an affection of global empowerment, the trace and memory of which can guide the appetite to counteract partial fixations and free itself from the desires of the past—fully enjoying the present power and its prospects. Likewise, this global empowerment results in mental empowerment, which naturally flows into intellectual love of God.

Political commitment

Hilaritas may be the internal key that allows the psychophysical identity of mind and body to equip itself against the potentially disruptive and subjugating influence of external causes, but just as an individual is an integrated union of parts, so too do human individuals exist in more or less integrated unions that we call societies. The problem of society (and politics) is thus inescapable,

and indeed constitutes the macroscopic side of the very issue we have discussed so far.

On this point, both Spinoza in the course of his philosophical career and the yogic traditions in the course of their multimillennial history have shown different attitudes. The young Spinoza seemed to recognise the importance of living in a relatively well-ordered society that was not hostile to the practice of philosophy. Living in a rational society could certainly be seen as an advantage, but it was not intimately connected to the attainment of the supreme good, which remained in itself an individual achievement. In the deepening of his reflection, however, Spinoza challenged this assumption. In the *Ethics* (and in the unfinished *Political Treatise*, which Spinoza worked on after finishing the *Ethics* and which is in some sense a sixth part of it), it becomes evident how there is no real possibility for the individual to attain the supreme good (the intellectual love of God) if the socio-political conditions are not in some way favourable.[42] After all, the intellectual love of God and divine glory are but an expression of the unity of all things, and in particular of all human beings as expressions of the one substance. No one can realise the intellectual love by continuing to perceive themselves as an individual isolated and independent of others, but neither is this entirely sustainable if the salvation of one is consummated against the backdrop of the suffering and perdition of most. There can be no true salvation for the individual if this salvation is not somehow extended to the collective. This is clearly a relationship of double implication, a reflexive movement: a certain quality of the community enables the realisation of the individual, and this individual realisation enhances the freedom and realisation of the community.

Classical yoga traditions have a marked ascetic character and transcendent orientation. Asceticism consists in the idea of engaging in a constant, deliberate and methodical effort (*tapas* in Sanskrit) aimed at the transformation of the ordinary condition, but this effort is oriented first to the discovery and then to the dissolution in an ultimate and transcendent principle, beyond all phenomenal appearances (what in Spinozian terms could be translated as the being-in-itself of substance, untied and independent of its potency and modal expres-

42 Theme developed in Andrea Sangiacomo, *Spinoza on Reason, Passions, and the Supreme Good*, cit.

sion). From this perspective, the realisation of the individual is not only pursued independently of the salvation of the community, but somehow presupposes the emancipation of the individual from the community. The community, in other words, is part of that phenomenal world that must be transcended and allowed to fade into the margins of the Supreme Void.

The inadequacy of the transcendent ascetic model is not an inadequacy of a socio-political or historical order. It would be an ultimately weak and extemporaneous critique to simply oppose the values of the ordinary world to those of asceticism, or to emotionally claim the need for collective salvation. Truth does not necessarily have to be pleasant, popular, or democratic. If it were true that absolute transcendence were the one and only ultimate salvation, we would then have to take note that the world is a burning station to be abandoned as soon and as effectively as possible, whether we like it or not.

But it is false that transcendence is the ultimate salvation. Or rather, this is only a partial truth. There is a transcendence, in the sense that one can experience that empty unsurpassable domain discovered by yogis, and one can theorise how that horizon grasps an aspect of the foundation of reality in its pure undifferentiated being. However, as discussed in the first chapter, Spinoza shows in his own way that pure being could not really pose itself if it is deprived of its power of infinite actualisation in the infinity of modal reality. Indeed, we can see a positive reason (*ratio*) for this actualisation in the spontaneous force towards self-consciousness and self-enjoyment that animates the divine. In the yogic tradition, a similar reflection is articulated by the nondual Tantric schools, which, starting from the inseparable identity-within-difference of transcendence and immanence, emptiness and power, come to see in the world not an error to be overcome but the horizon of expression, playful concealment, and surprising rediscovery of the divine itself. The validity of this response (both Tantric and Spinozist) does not lie in opposing the ideal of transcendence with its opposite, but rather in recomposing the ideal of transcendence in an ideal that is more complex, richer, deeper and therefore truer.

If we agree to set aside the ascetic-transcendentalist objective, we must therefore necessarily come to terms with the socio-political problem, which represents both the external condition of the maturing of individual power towards the salvation of intellectual love, and the context or environment in

which that salvation must be able to effect a transformation for the better. Yet, what we have discussed above should make it clear how the socio-political problem is analogous to the individual problem, only placed on a different scale. Just as the individual must find the power necessary to free themselves from the play of imaginative fixations in order to develop *hilaritas*, reason, and intuitive knowledge, so society as a whole must be made capable of bringing these states to life in its individuals and benefit from them as a collective.

From the point of view of individual conduct, Spinoza defends a moderate form of hedonism, based on the idea that a balanced life should rightly make use of different ways of nourishing the many different parts that make up the totality of the individual. We have already seen how all forms of excessive and excessively partial excitement are in fact harmful and to be resisted, but this does not detract from the fact that extreme forms of asceticism and renunciation too are useless if not potentially harmful. Somewhat like the Buddha, who in his first public discourse (SN 56.11) presented the path of liberation he taught as a middle way between the excess of sensory indulgence and the excess of self-mortification, Spinoza also, in his own way, recommends a balancing act in his *Ethics:*

> Laughter, in fact, like joking, is a simple joy; and therefore, as long as it is not excessive, it is good in itself (per E4p41). Nothing, indeed, but a grim and sad superstition forbids taking delight. For why is it better to quench hunger and thirst than to banish melancholy? This is my rule [*ratio*], and thus I have disposed my soul. No deity, or anyone else, who is not envious, takes pleasure in my impotence and discomfort, nor does he regard our tears, sobs, fear, and other such things, which are signs of an impotent soul, as anything that leads to virtue; but on the contrary, the greater the joy with which we are affected, the greater is the perfection to which we pass, that is, the more necessary it is for us to participate in the divine nature. Therefore, it is proper for the wise man to make use of things and to take pleasure in them as far as he can (certainly not to the point of nausea, for that does not mean to delight). It is proper to the wise man, I say, to refresh and strengthen himself with moderate and pleasant food and drink, as well as with aromas, with the beauty of natural landscapes [*plantarum virentium amae-*

> *nitate*], with ornaments, with music, with physical exercises [*ludis exercitatoriis*], with theatre, and with other such things of which everyone can make use without any harm to others. For the human body is made up of many parts of different natures, which continually need new and varied nourishment so that the whole body is equally apt to everything that can follow from its own nature, and consequently the mind is equally apt to comprehend many things at once. This way of living [*vivendi institutum*] accords as well with our principles as with ordinary practice; therefore, this way of living is the best, if there is one, and should be recommended in every way, nor is there any need to discuss it more clearly or at greater length. (E4p45s)

This serene ability to enjoy innocent pleasures, to enhance one's *hilaritas* and thus progress to higher levels of perfection clearly requires the ability to live with others, to inhabit a social and moral space, without being submerged or disturbed by the winds of passions that inevitably pervade it. The ability to cultivate a happy life is therefore not a given, but an acquired and cultivated skill, always potentially under threat of being compromised by stronger external causes or the individual's own downfalls. The scope of this training in happiness is precisely that of moral refinement, which for Spinoza consists of nothing more than discerning the harmful passions as such and learning to curb them, while at the same time understanding what the potentially useful passions might be and developing them—hence, the 'right effort' (*sammā vāyāma*, to use an expression from Pāli Buddhism) on which both Spinoza's moral discipline and that cultivated in the classical yoga traditions are usually based.

However, Spinoza goes so far as to overturn the gradualist discourse of many yoga traditions, in which one usually starts from the bottom (so to speak), that is, from the imperfect and passionate reality in which human beings normally find themselves. At the beginning of part four of the *Ethics*, he takes as an axiom the fact that the human power of acting is always exceeded by the power of acting of some other thing (E4A), from which it follows that human beings are always subject to some passion (E4p4c). Nonetheless, the fifth part introduces an important qualification: this axiom refers only 'to individual things as they are considered in relation to a determinate time and place'

(E5p37f), namely, to the domain of duration. Since the intellectual love of God moves in the domain of the eternal, it escapes this principle and thus Spinoza can conclude that 'nothing is given in nature that is contrary to this intellectual love, that is, that can destroy it' (E5p37). In this sense, intellectual love is the most powerful affection available to the mind, and since its power is incoercible, it also becomes the main tool, once acquired, for curbing and minimising the impact of the passions.

In Spinoza's view, the sage (the realised, one would say in yoga) is not someone who (as long as their body exists in duration) is devoid of passions (since this would not really be possible), but is instead someone who, despite their inevitable exposure to the passions induced by external causes, remains minimally affected by them, or not shaken at all, and always able to regard contingent imaginative affections as of no importance (*nullius momenti*, E5p38s). In contrast, precisely by possessing this supreme peak of virtue, the wise Spinozist can use that virtue to naturally restrain passive affections and appetites: 'bliss is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself; and we do not enjoy it because we repress our cravings [*libidines*]; but, conversely, because we enjoy it, we can repress our cravings' (E5p42). In Spinozist practice, instead of gradually ascending to the peak of perfection and remaining there, one seeks to reach the peak of power as quickly and directly as possible, and from there descend towards the circumstances of life with the confidence and strength necessary to direct them in the most appropriate way and take care of them with the necessary serenity, seeing the best and knowing how to follow it.

In his reformulation of this area of moral education, Spinoza also imparts a distinct and explicit socio-political note to it, which further differentiates it from most classical yogic traditions. Since these traditions see appetite (and its derivatives) as the main problem, they usually begin their practice precisely with the cultivation of moral virtues designed to counter the degeneration of appetite. Non-violence is a way to cultivate non-aversion and friendliness, renunciation a way to cultivate non-sensuality and contentment. Both Buddhist precepts (the domain of *sīla*, or morality) and the self-restraints of classical orthodox yoga (the *yamas* and *niyamas* of Patañjali's eightfold path, YS 2.31-45) are ways of spelling out this same idea. Although such precepts are usually presented as rules of life that an individual undertakes to adopt, they clearly

have a social and even political dimension, as they affect the entire field of interpersonal relations. Occasionally—especially in traditions such as the Buddhist one, which immediately gave rise to the development of a cenobitic monastic community of practitioners—the moral dimension has also been translated into more explicitly political experiments and directives, aimed at clarifying the guidelines of more or less ideal communities centred on the respect and practice of the same moral values.[43]

The interest of classical yogic traditions in the socio-political dimension remains, however, mostly occasional, contingent, and ultimately marginal, especially in cases where an orientation towards pure transcendence predominates. Only in the more recent traditions arising at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (the Buddhism of B. R. Ambedkar, for example, or the socio-political thought of Sri Aurobindo, later partly concretised in the Auroville community[44]), the ideal of 'liberation' pursued by the classical traditions is systematically rethought in collective terms, insisting on the fact that the liberation of the individual is not sufficient if it is not accompanied by and integrated with the liberation of society as a whole (understood in the widest possible sense).

The *Ethics* shows from the very title the sense in which the path of individual improvement and that of socio-political growth must necessarily intertwine. Particularly in the fourth part, Spinoza discusses not only how the passions (i.e., the imposition of imaginative affections supported by external causes) constitute the most general obstacle to the progress towards intellectual love, but also how the creation of a human community, hopefully based as much as possible on rational (i.e. shared) values and principles, is one of the most powerful and necessary means to overcome this obstacle (E4p40). Whereas the classical yogic approach often starts from an individual's adherence to moral values, supports

43 A central theme of the Buddha's early discourses is a critique of the social structure of the time, which was based on birth-rights and origin. On several occasions (see, for example, MN 93), the Buddha vehemently asserts that a person's worth does not depend on his birth or family, but on his own moral conduct, for which everyone is directly and individually responsible. For further discussion of this point, see Richard Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought*, Sheffield and Bristol: Equinox, 2013[2].
44 For a recent discussion of the nature and perspectives of the Auroville community, see Suryamai Aswini Clarence-Smith, *Prefiguring Utopia. The Auroville Experiment*, Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2023.

their internalisation, and then explores their interpersonal and social implications, Spinoza's approach tends to see moral virtue as inherently and already social (since all individuals, as long as they exist and operate, necessarily do so within a world of social relations, paraphrasing E1p28). Not only do most passions involve other beings as their object (think of love or hate, for example), but as mentioned in chapter one, Spinoza delves into the imitative aspect of affective life and thus the way in which the presence of the other, their (more or less imagined) judgement, and their reactions constitute the entire affective web in which all individuals move and operate. Therefore, rather than a preceptualism such as the classical yogic one, Spinoza tends rather to think of ways in which different passions can be used to balance and counteract each other (E4p7).

However, counterweighting individual passions will always remain an *ad hoc* solution for certain special circumstances. In his unfinished *Political Treatise*, Spinoza theorises how the very constitution of the political form in which a given society is organised must be conceived a priori in such a way as to anticipate the passionate stresses to which its members will be most exposed and create structures capable of compensating and balancing them. This is an ambitious ideal, and yet one that is in line, for instance, with the now commonly accepted and almost taken for granted principles of the need for the separation of powers (legislative, juridical, and executive, for example, not counting the religious) and their mutual control. It is also an open project, yet to be developed, especially in a globalised and trans-nationalised world such as the one we live in today.

This is not the place to delve into these perspectives, which, moreover, have already been at the centre of the revival of interest in Spinozian thought for more than half a century. For our purposes, it is sufficient to insist on the fact that the aspect of moral perfectionism typical of yogic traditions is rethought by Spinoza as a movement inseparable from the perfecting of society as a whole, which implies a rationalisation of its values and procedures, and a constant effort to balance the passions that the political structure is destined to give rise to.

However, in order not to leave this aspect too much in the abstract, it is still possible to indicate two central points that might appear on a Spinozian man-

ifesto of socio-political renewal. The first concerns the perception of identity and difference within the socio-political community. If just as an individual body, so too a social body is born from the union of individuals who are different in themselves, then it will be all the more necessary to respect and balance together these elements of identity and difference. Remaining stuck at the level of pure imagination, identity and difference either oppose each other (according to the logic of wonder) or mingle (according to the logic of similarity), but without any real integration. They oppose each other as the radicalisation of different affects, which refer to different causes (poorly known in their nature, yet vividly imagined) and tend towards fixations. The integration offered by the imagination is that of the more or less casual association of superficial similarities between imaginative affections, which add up to the point of collapsing into the creation of generic universals, useful perhaps for communication (or propaganda), but useless to the mind's power to think properly. The political extremisms and populist simplifications of our times are an example of the divisive tendency of the imagination. The tendency towards the creation of generic and inadequate universals is instead exemplified by the agglutination of preferences and appetites. Today this process is powerfully driven by the algorithms of artificial intelligence and its pervasive and invasive dominance in everyone's life through the technological network on which our existence seems to depend.

A form of socio-political *hilaritas* is what would be needed to rein in both of these imaginative tendencies, direct them insofar as they can express useful powers, and contain them in their harmful tendencies. In this sense, a political yoga is needed. But since there is no way to contain imaginative appetites except by counteracting them on the one hand and balancing them on the other with an alternative, such an ideal cannot be achieved except by the spreading, multiplying, and taking root of other ways of acting, knowing, and feeling. It is not a matter of discovering anything unheard of or new. As we have already stated, the intellectual love of God itself is not something exotic and secret, but the natural tendency of the appetite when it fully understands its own nature. What is necessary, then, is nothing more than the ability to reflect on what we really need—and to pursue it. This capacity, however, cannot be expressed randomly, disjointedly, and accidentally. To be effective, it

must become a systemic capacity of political society as a whole. Therefore (and here is the second programmatic point), the capacity to reflect on the nature of the appetite and cultivate its truly useful and empowering aspirations for the highest good must become an integral part of socio-political *education.*

Any society can only be constituted to the extent that it creates a network of shared intentional structures, in which different individuals can enrol, assume roles, understand how to coordinate their strengths, and at the same time contribute to the community while also pursuing their own wellbeing and personal fulfilment (E4p18s). To do this, there is no possible society that does not have to set up more or less formalised, more or less ramified educational systems. Public and formal education is only the institutional precipitate of the pedagogical nature of any human society (although it is no less essential and important for that). Over the past millennia, we have learnt to share the knowledge necessary for hunting, gathering, and then agriculture, animal husbandry, the construction of tools and buildings, travelling, warfare, the study of nature, mathematics and geometry, not to mention the language that makes it all possible. In every age, one can observe how knowledge that initially arose in a small circle, often kept secret at first, is then progressively disseminated, normalised, made part of the common system of education on which society as a whole is based, enabling its advancement. Today, we need to add new aspects to our education: *hilaritas*, intuitive knowledge, intellectual love of God. To succeed in this is to guarantee us salvation from the imaginative fixation with which our species is disintegrating its own survival conditions, moving towards extinction due to its impotence to know better. In reality we do not lack knowledge—so much Spinoza, as the yoga traditions testify. What is lacking, however, is effective coordination in the dissemination of this knowledge.

It thus becomes clear that the socio-political and embodied dimensions of the process of cultivating the intellectual love of God are not merely preparatory tools or steps. They may appear so in a summary and linear presentation such as we have made of them here (and they may indeed *also* perform this preparatory function). However, these same steps must also be understood as the outlet points and the more extensive domains to which the realisation of intellectual love returns. After all, the goal of empowerment is nothing other than the overcoming of apparent fractures and isolations in the experience of

reality. Impotence is always an inability to see the unity of the whole in its absolute concreteness and infinite diversity. Therefore, any realisation of this unity that remains purely individual and localised will necessarily be at least incomplete, that is, relatively powerless. The full realisation of unity can only be a collective, trans-individual, global realisation. The creation of an experience of *hilaritas* in the individual body is but the imprint of a paradigm that demands to be inflected in ever wider dimensions, ever more pervasive of the entirety of nature and its manifestations, tending (as necessary) to embrace the whole. How to put it into practice on a large scale remains an open question. But what is certain is that this is today's challenge that can change our tomorrow.

Conclusion: Missed receptions and possible developments

Atheism, acosmism, mysticism, revolution

From a strictly historical, or rather historiographical, point of view, the comparison between Spinoza and the yoga traditions cannot but arouse some suspicion. Would it not be more appropriate to investigate those sources and traditions that have more direct contact with his thought, of which Spinoza himself may have been aware, or which may have influenced him in some way? A legitimate but otiose question.

The perspective that we have sought to open in these pages (and we have done no more than open a small window on an immense and largely unexplored landscape) is not intended as an alternative to traditional historico-critical and academic investigations, which have abounded and proliferated for at least a century. Thinking about Spinoza's yoga is not a way to isolate Spinoza from his time, but to create a bridge across time and geo-cultural distances. It is to create a sense of deliberate estrangement, to observe the familiar with new eyes, and to find the commonalities in what superficially might appear as alien. How to do this, exactly, no one knows. We must try and experiment, until we find one or more methods that work and then refine them on the hermeneutic grindstone of reflection, meditation, and practice.

Investigating Spinoza's yoga is also a way of testing the efficacy of a thought that, despite a certain amount of circulation, has never been taken entirely seriously until now, or at least taken with the seriousness to which it can aspire: that is, not just as a series of ideas on which to speculate intellectually and discuss in words, but as a recipe to be put into practice to transform one's way of living and experiencing reality. This is a light yet profound seriousness, strong enough to overturn the meaning of the world without moving it a step. To understand the historical importance of this provocation and its necessity, we can briefly review the main historical receptions of Spinoza's thought within modern Europe (which is only one part of the global philosophical scene, yet that part which from Spinoza's time until the last century imposed its unsolicited dominance on the rest of the world—another affective fixation, but on a geopolitical scale this time). A few general remarks will suffice here.

For his direct contemporaries, Spinoza was basically an atheist—no matter what sect or church one considers. Already in 1656, when he was but twen-

ty-four years old and had not yet published anything, the Jewish community in Amsterdam sensed that behind his bright and peaceful eyes lay a saboteur, and so they excommunicated him. Despite his friendships with small groups of heterodox Christians, neither Catholics nor Protestants remained convinced of the validity of his thought. Spinoza clearly denies the transcendence of God in the name of immanence, denounces all forms of anthropomorphism as an archaic and deleterious superstition, defends the absolute necessity of all things against the idea of free will, and even denies the literal interpretation of Christ's resurrection in the name of an allegorical reading.[1]

No matter how sharp his thought might seem, it had to be a blunder, contrived by an evil genius to fool unsuspecting souls. In the late seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth century, being a Spinozist and being an atheist were therefore considered synonymous. Spinoza's atheism was not identified in a crude denial of the existence of God, but in the denial of those aspects of the Divine that were seen as essential to the maintenance of faith, the authority of religious groups, and moral duty. Little does it matter if Spinoza tried to show how such aspects were nothing but harmful superstitions, useful to no one but preachers hungry for power. It may be easy in today's secularised world to see the limits of the early modern objections to Spinoza, but we must not forget that secularisation, atheism, or even the nihilism that Nietzsche would speak of a few centuries later in no way imply that we have taken a step forward to really understand what Spinoza intended to propose as an alternative.[2]

Apparently, a first positive reappraisal of Spinoza's thought arises in the German debate of the early nineteenth century. The great idealist authors (Schelling, Hegel) and others (Schopenhauer) all have something to say about

1 A point that emerges in Spinoza's letter no. 75 to Henry Oldenburg.

2 For a historical reconstruction of the immediate reception of Spinoza's theological-political theses, see Steven Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell. Spinoza's scandalous "Treatise" and the Birth of the Secular Age*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013. Nadler tends to develop a secularising reading of Spinoza and his thought. Against the idea of Spinoza's atheism, see Yitzhak Melamed, 'Spinoza's 'Atheism' in the *Ethics* and the *TTP*' in Dan Garber, Mogens Laerke, Pina Totaro (eds.), *Spinoza: Reason, Religion, Politics: The Relation Between the Ethics and the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 81-118, New York: Oxford University Press. For a historical framing of the question of atheism, see Pierre-François Moreau, 'Spinoza et la question de l'athéisme' in Lorenzo Vinciguerra (ed.), *Quel avenir pour Spinoza? Enquête sur les spinozismes à venir*, Paris: Kimé, 2001, 37-51.

Spinoza, something to appreciate and integrate into their systems, but only to place a censure mark on the foundations of Spinozism.[3] The best-known criticism (taken up countless times) is that of Hegel, for whom Spinoza would fail in his attempt to mediate between the infinite and the finite, the one and the many. Spinoza would be an 'acosmist' a thinker who denies (like Parmenides) the reality of the phenomenal world, which cannot be said to be real given the granitic and immutable foundation of the one substance. According to Hegel, the tool that Spinoza lacks is dialectics, i.e., that movement within the Spirit that allows the synthesis of contraries and the overcoming of their contradiction. For Hegel everything is dialectic. For Spinoza, however, the dialectic would only be a rationalised form of the imagination, an illustrated history of philosophy, but not its proper idea. In the Hegelian view, the *Ethics* is indeed to be studied, but as one studies prehistory: in order to better appreciate the advantages and progress of the contemporary over the past.

Alongside idealist readings, especially between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth century, there are also mystical readings of Spinoza. The intellectual love of God, intuitive knowledge, and divine immanentism itself suggest that Spinoza's goal was not to construct a rationalist system, but to ultimately transcend reason. Depending on how one interprets mysticism, this may seem good or bad.[4]

The problem with mystical interpretations stems from the framework in which mysticism is usually understood (especially in the West, where the revolutionary proposal of nondual tantrism seems to find few equivalents). In a

3 For an overview, see the essays in Eckart Föster and Yitzhak Melamed (eds.), *Spinoza and German Idealism*, *Cambridge*: Cambridge University Press, 2012; Jimena Solé, 'Spinoza in German Idealism: Rethinking Reception and Creation in Philosophy', *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, 2021, 21-33, https://doi.org/10.1080/17570638.2021.1897181.

4 Among the 'mystical' readings of Spinoza see, for example, Teodorico Moretti-Costanzi, *Spinoza*, Roma: Armando editore, 2000; Maria Zambrano, *La salvezza dell'individuo in Spinoza*, (It. transl.) Roma: Castelvecchi, 2021. Steven Nadler, 'Spinoza and Philo: The Alleged Mysticism in the Ethics', in Jon Miller and Brad Inwood (eds.), *Hellenistic and Early Modern Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 231-250, offers a refutation of the mystical interpretation of Spinoza, based mainly on the irreconcilability of rationalism and mysticism, and relying on the contrast between Spinoza's thought and that of Philo of Alexandria. Although the term 'mysticism' invites misunderstanding, it should be clear at this point that Spinoza's rationalism (willing to admit it) is in no way contrary to the possibility of a higher-order, nondual, intuitive knowledge, in which the unity of finite and infinite emerges in direct experience, and which at the same time remains inexpressible in strictly rational terms (precisely because of their narrowness).

landscape dominated by the transcendentalist and ascetic assumption that the ultimate principle must necessarily be an indeterminate Void, the mystical movement is seen as necessarily aiming to culminate in the dissolution of the finite into the infinite.[5] From this perspective, however, either one must concede to Hegel that Spinoza is therefore really an acosmist and his system denies the world (going against the letter and spirit of the *Ethics*), or one must conclude that Spinozian mysticism (which as we have seen finds its culmination in love and glory, rather than in the void) does not really reach the peak of the union-dissolution of the finite in the infinite. Alternatively, if a personalistic vision and a more devotional approach based on *divine love* prevails (what in the Indian tradition goes by the name of *bhakti*), Spinoza's mysticism will be seen as at least arid, if not incomplete or even bankrupt, because of its tight criticism of anthropomorphism and its attempt to depersonalise the divine. In all cases, it seems inevitable to see in Spinoza a failed or mediocre mystic, since he would lack the one or the other aspect that the more traditional forms of mysticism consider essential.

Finally, the revival of Spinoza studies since the 1960s seems to have been largely driven by a markedly moral and socio-political interest. The specifically Marxist interests that initially moved this strand of studies have gradually faded in recent decades into a reappraisal of Spinoza's proposal appreciated in his own terms. At first, the political Spinoza, the theorist of absolute democracy, of the power of the multitude, the Spinoza who can perhaps help the revolutionary game in a phase of rethinking the theoretical infrastructure of classical Marxism, came to the fore. Spinoza became a materialist author.[6] On the wave

5 Judgment that seems to emerge from the discussion presented, for example, in William James' classic study, *The Varieties of Religious Experience. A Study in Human nature* (1902), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. See also Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism. A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (1930), New York: Dover Publication, 2002.

6 Marxist and materialist readings of Spinoza developed mainly in France and Italy, and then spread more internationally. In France, a thinker of particular influence in this regard was Louis Althusser (1911-1990), who although he never focused thematically on Spinoza was a teacher of some of the leading French Spinozists. See in this regard Vittorio Morfino, 'Althusser's Spinozism: A Philosophy for the Future?', *Journal of Spinoza Studies* 1, no. 1 (2022), 81-91, https://doi.org/10.21827/jss.1.1.38522. For an idea of this materialist reading see, for example, André Tosel, *Du materialisme de Spinoza*, Paris: Kimé, 1994. As far as the Italian panorama is concerned, Emilia Giancotti, 'Sulla questione del materialismo in Spinoza', in Id., *Studi su Hobbes e Spinoza*, cit., 91-120; and Toni Negri, *Spinoza*, cit. An important text from the point of view of the circulation of these readings in the An-

of this renaissance, the psychologist and moral philosopher Spinoza is thus rediscovered: the theorist of the imagination, the classifier of the affections, the unmasker of intellectualist prejudices, the philologist theorist of the historical-critical method of interpreting the Bible, but also the apologist of secularism.[7] A Spinoza in whom metaphysics is a passage to be traversed fairly quickly and with long strides, glossing over certain uncomfortable legacies, certain limitations due to the era and context in which Spinoza operated—such as the residue of transcendence that still characterises the Spinozian God, or seeing in intellectual love the culmination of virtue. These new readings have often accepted, as a positive characteristic, the atheism that was imputed to Spinoza by his contemporaries, without substantially changing the reasons for the judgement.

There is much to be learned from these waves of scholarly interpretations of Spinoza—especially those that have flooded academic journals and publishing houses around the world in recent decades. They have certainly helped to make him one of the most canonical and popular Western thinkers. Yet there may still be something missing or unheard.

The common trait of these receptions consists in the resistance to take seriously the panentheistic way of salvation proposed by Spinoza. The inability to escape from the dichotomy (still fully present in Nietzsche) between a transcendent God or a nonexistent God has for centuries prevented us from hearing what Spinoza was really trying to say and what his thought was striving to indicate. Thinking about Spinoza's yoga means reading Spinoza in a context in which his proposals can be framed in an at least already mapped area of the spectrum of theoretical possibilities. In this sense, Spinoza is a panentheist (he shows that God is in all things, and all things are in God, but God is not

glophone world is the collection edited by Warren Montag and Ted Stolze (eds.), *The New Spinoza*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

7 See, among others, Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics, Volume 1: The Marrano of Reason*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989; Marilena Chaui, *Nervura do real: Imanência e liberdade em Espinosa*, São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1999; Lorenzo Vinciguerra, *Spinoza et le signe: la genèse de l'imagination*, Paris: Vrin, 2005; Frédéric Lordon, *La société des affects. Pour un structuralisme des passions*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2013; Justin Steinberg, *Spinoza's Political Psychology. The Taming of Fortune and Fear*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020; Susan James, *Spinoza on Learning to Live Together*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020; Steven Nadler, *Think Least of Death. Spinoza on How to Live and How to Die*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020.

reduced to things, nor things to God). He denies the dialectic, but only because he believes that the most adequate knowledge must proceed *sub specie aeternitatis*, grasping all at once the complexity of the real, without any need for a 'movement' that connects the different moments, and without thereby giving rise to any contradiction. He is a mystic, and yet sees reason as a tool for cultivating an even more powerful form of intuitive knowledge. He does not think that reason is to be abandoned, nor does the form of salvation he proposes aim at a dissolution of the many in the One, but on the contrary in the recognition of the One in the many and vice versa. He speaks about a love for God, but a God that does not need (and must not) be understood anthropomorphically (although it remains a principle that *includes* consciousness and thought, and thus can be said to be personal in the most abstract sense of the term). As a political thinker, Spinoza undoubtedly places at the centre of the discussion how society plays an essential role in the intellectual development of individuals and the multitude, but he does not believe that such development can be satisfied with purely imaginative forms. Spinoza denies that imagination offers the fulfilment of human potential. Imagination is the starting point, the basis from which we all take our first steps, but only in order to be able to discover behind its mask something more, infinitely broader and deeper, that not even reason itself can exhaust.

To think of Spinoza's yoga, however, is not to think that Spinoza aligns himself with the older classical tradition of Indian yoga. In fact, Spinoza shares with that tradition a similar diagnosis of the human condition (in which ignorance and appetite are the primary causes of the structural suffering that characterises existence). Moreover, a certain familiarity with the methods and practices of Indian yoga makes it possible to recognise *how* Spinoza's seemingly more abstract and metaphysical theses (the infinite nature of extension and thought, the intuition of the divine essence, the relationship with the body) can actually be put into practice very concretely in a contemplative context, suggesting how Spinoza's philosophy can well be said to be the result of his direct meditation and experiential vision. Yet, Spinoza rejects the classical yogic solution to the problem of human suffering (the abolition of appetite and escape from the world), proposing an alternative (the intellectual love of God, understood as the mutual reflection of the finite in the infinite). Spinoza thus under-

mines the soteriological scaffolding on which many of the classical yogic traditions are based, replacing the ideal of renunciation, separation and evasion with that of absolute empowerment. In this sense, Spinoza's closest allies on the Indian scene are the thinkers of śaiva nondual Tantrism, with whom Spinoza can share panentheism and his own soteriological vision based on the identity of salvation, bliss and freedom (E5p36s),[8] and their more recent epigones—among whom towers Sri Aurobindo, perhaps the most innovative, syncretist, and visionary of the masters of modern, trans-cultural yoga.[9]

However, it would be a mistake (as well as a simplification) to think of the yoga traditions as a past historical event. Just as Spinozism is still perhaps only a gesture towards a future development of thought, so too yoga has not ceased to evolve, deepen, and explore new territories. The modern practice of postures, which has become eponymous with yoga on a global level, is the most striking example of this. Sometimes, this dynamism is obscured by a certain traditionalist and conservative attitude aimed at justifying the legitimacy of each new development by showing it as nothing more than a new expression or articulation of what had already been said in the past—possibly in the remotest past. However, the antiquity of something does not necessarily make it truer or better than its novelty might.[10] What is more, if a truth from the past was indeed effective, it necessarily had to transform the conditions under which it developed, imprint a change on those who accepted it and made it their own, thus determining new circumstances and requiring further development. A truth that is true is an effective truth, and an effective truth is always necessar-

8 A historiographical and theoretical comparison between Spinoza and Kashmiri Tantric nondualism has been proposed, albeit only in unpublished manuscript form, by James H. Cumming, *The nondual mind. Vedānta, Kashmiri Pratyabhijñā Shaivism, and Spinoza*, 2023 (manuscript in the public domain), https://philpapers.org/archive/CUMROS.pdf.

9 There is a short letter (dated 6 October 1935) in which Sri Aurobindo is confronted with a (second-hand) account of Spinoza as a substance monist and why he could not solve the problem of evil. Sri Aurobindo replies, without directly mentioning Spinoza, that Western immanentism tends to be pantheistic while Indian Vedantic thought is panentheistic. (see Sri Aurobindo, *Letters on Himself and the Ashram*, Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 2011, 122-123). But as discussed above, there are good reasons to read Spinoza as a panentheist. For a speculative dialogue between Spinoza and Sri Aurobindo, see Jean-Michel Terdjman, *Erreur, ignorance et illusion: d'après Spinoza et Sri Aurobindo*, Paris: Deux Oceans, 1994.

10 Spinoza sharply criticises the principle of trying to justify a tradition on the basis of its antiquity and unaltered transmission, see Spinoza's Letter No. 76 to Albert Burgh.

ily on the way—that is, it is something from which some new effect always follows (E1p36).

To give a more precise configuration to this suggestion, however, we can briefly indicate two points that may serve as a trigger for future explorations yet to be assayed. The first point concerns an internal tension within the practices of yoga—if not a true paradox—transversal to its traditions and specific declensions, connected to the antithesis between transformation and acceptance. Here, Spinoza's reflection may be useful in dissolving the difficulty and reconciling the apparently antithetical movements it implies. The second point, on the other hand, concerns the ideal of liberation itself, traditionally mostly conceived of as an ultimate and unsurpassable state, but which in the Spinozian perspective (or once one accepts its way of dissolving the paradox just mentioned) must be understood as a process of potentially unlimited expansion. And yet, even in this process it is always possible to find a fixed point, a sort of existential watershed, on the threshold of which a solution is found to the one true element that constitutes the source of all possible problematicity—the constitutive partiality of the finite mind. What in other perspectives would appear as an ultimate result, reveals itself in the Spinozian view only as the first step on an infinite path of empowerment. Nonetheless, taking that first step is perhaps the most important, most decisive, most necessary, most revolutionary gesture, against which the rest is but a development.

The paradox of yoga

A paradox typical of yogic practices concerns the tension between the drive for transformation of the ordinary and the attitude of complete acceptance and surrender of any resistance or need to change anything. In the yoga traditions, different schools, lineages, or groups (or sometimes the same tradition at different times) have more emblematically represented one or the other tendency. In ancient Buddhism, for example, as in many later ascetic traditions, there is a strong insistence on the need to unmask the limitations of ordinary life and radically transform it. The ideal of liberation or awakening indicates a moment of rupture between a before and an after, a radical and irreversible discontinuity. At the same time, it is a point of arrival, a final culmination at which the

practitioner's progress can come to a definitive halt.[11] Considering the eschatological assumptions in which these practices move (linked to the idea of rebirth and liberation from the cycle of rebirths), reaching this goal transcends the individual psychological plane and takes on a cosmic significance. Nonetheless, there are also voices pointing in the opposite direction. In the Buddhist tradition itself, there is no shortage of authorities that seem to emphasise a subtle fallacy linked to the idea of having to abandon a certain state in order to conquer another. For example, Nāgārjuna, one of the noble fathers of Mahāyāna Buddhism that arose in the first centuries of the common era proclaimed that *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* are in fact the same thing, that any conceptualisation aimed at separating the state of freedom and the state of conditioning is but a mental construction, with only conventional value.[12]

Sometimes, these two principles are found united in a single system, as in Patañjali's classical yoga, which theorises the attainment of awakening through the union of assiduous practice (*abhyāsa*, an equivalent of *tapas*, ascetic ardour) and dispassion or letting go (*vairāgya*, YS 1.12). The juxtaposition of opposing attitudes, though, poses perhaps even more of a problem to their reconciliation than it does a solution.

Generalising, it can be said that the more explicit the nondualist orientation of a certain yoga tradition becomes, the less insistent it is on the idea of transformation. The most pronounced example is found in certain devotional traditions, which openly criticise the ideal of liberation and subordinate it to that of complete devotion to the Divine, whose expression is immanent in the totality of reality, so much so as to deify every aspect of ordinary life. Thus, in the tenth book of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (which collects the legends about the life of Kṛṣna), for example, we have the exclamation: 'those who have attained the

11 In the Pāli discourses of the Buddha, the formula used to indicate complete awakening is categorical (e.g., in MN 37): 'birth is destroyed, the training has been completed, what should be done has been done, there is nothing more to this end' (*khīṇā jāti, vusitaṁ brahmacariyaṁ, kataṁ karaṇīyaṁ, nāparaṁ itthattāyā*). Another recurring formula presents the Buddha in the act of declaring that his realisation and awakening are absolute and have reached the pinnacle of what could be achieved (SN 56.11): 'I have announced my limitless, correct, supreme awakening as the one who is supremely Awakened [*anuttaraṁ sammāsambodhiṁ abhisambuddho*], in this world with its deities, its demons, its supreme deities, and its progeny of renunciates and Brahmins, men and celestials.'

12 See Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura (eds.), *Nāgārjuna's Middle Way. Mūlamadhyamakārikā,* Wisdom, Somerville, 2013, chapter 25, 281-305.

dust of your feet do not desire the highest heaven, nor sovereignty over the earth, nor the highest situation [of Brahmā], nor lordship over the lower worlds, nor the mystic powers of *yoga*, nor freedom from rebirth.'[13]

The most refined philosophical version of this view emerges with nondual Kashmiri Tantrism, in which ignorance and forgetfulness (the matrix of all problems, according to the yogic diagnosis) are themselves acts by which the Divine limits itself, in order to be able to freely rediscover itself.[14] There can therefore be nothing really bad or wrong in the world, nothing to change, and nowhere else to reach. Everything is already present, here and now. As Abhinava Gupta says: 'that which transcends, from earth to Śiva, all limited principles, consisting of a single limitless consciousness, this is the supreme reality, the place where all things are contained, the life force of the whole, whereby the whole breathes, and this is none other than I, whereby I transcend the whole and am made from the whole.'[15] Or as Utpaladeva sings: 'My wish is to be neither an ascetic indifferent to the world, nor a manipulator of supernatural powers, nor even a worshipper craving liberation—but only to become drunk with the abundant wine of devotion.'[16]

The paradox implied by these two alternatives is that each seems to refute itself. If one takes the idea of the need for radical transformation seriously, one must assume an attitude of complete dispassion, depersonalisation, and equanimity (the opposite of the forces of ignorance, appropriation, and desire that one wants to eradicate). From this new perspective, though, it should make no difference to be liberated or not, to have achieved awakening or not. On the other hand, if one takes the idea of radical acceptance seriously, one must admit that every form of ignorance and obscuration is itself something to be accepted as it is, which would imply that knowledge of the truth should lead to its natural obfuscation, to a spontaneous return to a form of illusion in order

13 *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* X.16.37. English translation edited by Edwin Bryan, *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God*, London: Penguin, 2003, 86.

14 See, for instance, Kṣemarāja, *Pratyabhijñāhṛdayam*, §9 (in Christopher Wallis, *The Recognition Sūtras*, cit., 201-214).

15 Translated from Abhinava Gupta, *Tantrasāra*, chapter 4., (It. transl.) *Essenza dei Tantra*, cit., 98-99.

16 English translation by Rhodes Bailly (ed.), *Meditations on Shiva. The Shivastrotravali of Utpaladeva*, Albany: State of New York Press, 1995, 96.

not to disturb the divine expression that takes shape in that illusion.[17] Therefore, insofar as acceptance is based on the unveiling of the divine, it also leads to the re-obfuscation of truth itself.

Spinoza, too, is faced with this dilemma. On the one hand, we have discussed the limits of the imaginative appetite, the contradictions to which it leads, and the means to overcome them, thus pointing to a way of transformation, which in turn implies a form of dualism between an ordinary state to be abandoned and a state of salvation to be achieved. This tension towards transformation is present throughout all of Spinoza's works, from the incipit of his youthful *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, in which he recounted the difficult conversion from ordinary life to a profoundly different philosophical life, to the famous close of the *Ethics*, which insists on the difficulty of attaining the salvation offered by intellectual love (E5p42s), thus acknowledging the gap between this state and the ordinary state of most. Yet, at the heart of this process of transformation lies the discovery of the necessity of all things. Spinoza repeatedly demonstrates how every possible causal, logical, or conceptual relationship follows necessary laws. To know God is in itself to know an eternal and necessary essence, and since the world is but an expression of divine power, the world itself cannot be less necessary than God. To know according to necessity is not only to know *sub specie aeternitatis* (hence, adequately, E2p44), but also to introduce a radical personal, moral, psychic transformation into the experience of reality:

> [H]e who truly knows that everything follows from the necessity of divine nature and happens according to the eternal laws and rules of nature, he will undoubtedly find nothing worthy of hatred, laughter, or contempt, nor will he have pity on anyone; but, as far as human virtue permits, he will strive to act well, as they say, and to be happy. (E4p50s)

17 In the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, this principle takes the name of *yogamāyā*, that is, the power by which Kṛṣna makes those around him forget his true divine nature, so that they can fully enjoy the human experience. One of the most famous and illustrative episodes in this regard (X.8.31-44) is the incident in which the adoptive mother of the infant Kṛṣna looks into the child's mouth and sees in it the totality of the universe, whereupon Kṛṣna makes the woman lose her memory of the event so that he can continue to enjoy her maternal care. See the translation in Edwin Bryan, *Krishna: The Beautiful Legend of God*, cit., 41-44.

Necessity is another way to express the nondual attitude of radical acceptance, to desist from the pretence of changing things to our liking (deluding ourselves that we have free will and are substances). However, if everything is necessary, is not our powerlessness, the weaknesses of our appetite, our ignorance of God, the world, and ourselves also necessary? Is not even the idea of changing anything in any way vain?

That Spinoza is confronted with this problem is just another way to observe his closeness to the yoga traditions. But can he offer a solution? Yes, and we have already encountered it in these pages. The *Ethics* introduces a working distinction between what might be called categorical elements and intensive elements. Categorical elements are the building blocks of the conceptual structure, which reflect the main components of experience and reality. A categorical element is an element that cannot admit a plus or a minus. The *conatus*, for example, is a categorical element because all things, since they exist, have a *conatus*. Knowledge is another categorical element since all things, insofar as they express themselves as finite modes under the attribute of thought, have a mind whose activity consists in knowing. The essences of things, conceived in themselves (i.e., as finite and determinate expressions of the divine essence and power) offer another example. Intensive elements, on the other hand, express the degree, the *how much* of a certain categorical reality. The power of acting of the *conatus*, for example, is a certain intensity that varies according to time and circumstance. The perfection with which an essence exists varies over time, depending on whether it can express itself more or less actively or passively, depending on its interactions with external causes. The adequacy of the mind's ideas is also intensive since ideas can be more or less adequate, depending on the kind of knowledge on which they are based.

The nondualism that pervades Spinoza's philosophy implies a radical acceptance of the categorical structure of reality. We have seen this with the appetite, which as an expression of divine power cannot really be eliminated. We saw it with the discussion of divine glory, whereby God expresses itself in the totality of the real in order to know itself. Even imagination, though the source of inadequate ideas, remains a power of the mind to be directed, but not to be suppressed or sought to be eradicated. The tendency to transformation, on the other hand, is expressed on the intensive level. Intellectual love of

God and imagination belong to different kinds of knowledge, which are nevertheless to be placed on an underlying scale of increasing power of thinking. The hiatus that apparently separates these two ways of knowing can ultimately be reduced to a gap between different degrees of power. A certain degree of power is still there, but this power can be increased or decreased, aided or hindered. These variations in no way affect the categorical structure of reality, leaving it intact (thus in line with the idea of its necessity and the radical acceptance that follows). Yet these variations radically transform the way the structure itself appears. While imagination can only offer an often distorted and always incomplete glimpse of the real aspiration of the *conatus*, the intellectual love of God gives it complete fulfilment and expression. The *conatus* remains the same, but by increasing the intensity of its power, its expression changes not only quantitatively but also qualitatively.

This is a point on which Spinoza himself explicitly insists since the idea that an essence can pass through different degrees of power of acting is a central feature of his philosophy, on which he anticipates the possible confusion of his audience:

> When I say that one passes from a lesser perfection to a greater, and vice versa, I do not mean that he mutates from one essence or form into another (since the horse, for example, is destroyed as much if it mutates into a man as if it mutates into an insect); but I do mean that we think that the power of acting of such an individual, as it is understood to be his nature, increases or decreases. (E4pref)

Spinoza can thus hold together the two tendencies that usually seem to create a tension, if not a paradox, in yogic approaches, giving each a different function and scope. The nondual element of radical acceptance is necessary to come to terms with reality in its entirety and concreteness, without excluding anything, regardless of the value judgements (not to say personal preferences, or prejudices) one may have. That human beings are appetitive animals may or may not be liked, but it remains a fact that must be accepted and not escaped from. The dual and transformative element, on the other hand, plays its role in defining the *mode* or *degree of* expression of reality, recognising how the same

element can actualise, appear, and express itself in relatively different ways, i.e., more or less accomplished, more or less profound, and more or less powerful. A certain degree of power is always there (since power is the essence of God, and God is the substance of reality). Expressing a certain degree of power rather than another is not indifferent, indeed, it makes all the difference in the world. It makes the difference between imaginative ignorance and intellectual love, between pathological fixation and salvation.

But should not this degree of power also be subsumed under the necessitarian logic defended by Spinoza? Or should not this logic be somehow weakened to admit a certain contingency in the game of empowerment or disempowerment? In short, does not the same paradox as before still re-emerge, despite these distinctions? Not at all, because the Spinozian necessitarian logic admits *all* gradations of power (since everything that can be, must be), while at the same time admitting the tendency (the *conatus*) towards empowerment (as far as possible, and considering the concrete circumstances in which things operate). This progression does not imply any form of contingency, since it does not consist in choosing or deciding to realise one degree of power instead of another—it rather consists in the capacity to progress from lower to higher levels of power, following the necessary drive of the appetite towards its highest possible enhancement.[18]

If we were to summarise in just one sentence the advice Spinoza seems to give us from the pages of the *Ethics* to better understand our Problem and move towards its Solution, it would have to be something that sounds like this: *cultivate your power by putting it at the complete service of Divine power and its full expression!*

Like the yoga of action (*karmayoga*) taught by Kṛṣṇa in the *Gītā*, and like the integral yoga of Sri Aurobindo, who drew much of his inspiration from that teaching, Spinoza too saw as the first benefit and ultimate goal of philo-

18 To those who object as to whether this tendency towards empowerment does not reintroduce a form of finalism, it will be answered that the Spinozian anti-finalism is not a dogma of faith, but a consequence of the fact that nature does not operate like finite human minds, proposing to realise a certain specific goal by employing certain means (E4pref). When one says that the *conatus itself tends towards* its (greater) power one is in fact asserting a tautology, since one is saying that power tends towards power itself.

sophical research the possibility of reuniting and unifying individual effort with its universal matrix:

> [W]e act by God's command alone and are partakers of the divine nature, and this the more perfect the actions we do and the more we know God. This doctrine, therefore, not only provides a complete peace of mind, but has also the advantage of teaching us in what our supreme happiness or our beatitude consists, that is, in the knowledge of God alone, by which we are induced to do only those actions that love and morality advise. Whence we clearly understand how far from the true esteem of virtue are those who, almost in exchange for the hardest servitude, expect to be honoured by God with the highest rewards for their virtue and best actions, as if virtue and the service of God were not happiness itself and supreme freedom. (E2p49s)

Epiphanies

The Problem from which we started is not something that can be contemplated as an object in front of us, or something given, like a picture hanging on a wall whose meaning we try to decipher. The Problem is something in which we are immersed, in which we live and move, which penetrates us in every fibre of our being—of which we are woven. Observing ourselves and observing the Problem are the same thing, even though we are not necessarily the Problem; nor are we reducible to it, nor is it something that must necessarily besiege us. Nonetheless, we know that the Problem is a problem, and not just the only possible reality, precisely because we can see that reality admits of alternatives, virtualities, and further possibilities. We can get in touch with this in different ways—imaginative, rational, intuitive—but it is by accessing this further space that we realise that what is present cannot and must not absolutely define what we are, what we can.

Yet, because we are immersed in the Problem, to articulate it and make it clear, we must necessarily focus on it in a special way. Like an implicit horizon in which we move, a discordant note that pervades the atmosphere, a crooked colour from which we cannot free ourselves. For millennia, yoga traditions have grappled with the meta-problem of making the presence of the Problem clear,

of bringing it out from within ordinary experience, devising ways and disciplines of attention that make it immediately comprehensible. One of the most widespread and ancient methods (and the central method, for example, in the Buddhist tradition) is to reflect on the element of discomfort, uneasiness, dissatisfaction (all approximate translations of the Sanskrit *duḥkha*) that permeates living—and to ask the reason for it. Since it is a widespread discomfort, without a definite or constant object, we are led to reflect on the conditions of possibility for this subtle horizon of pain that seems to follow us whatever we do. By asking for a reason, we can discover that it has its cause not in a specific event or entity, in a wrong condition, in a definite pathogenic agent, but in what could be called an existentially incorrect posture. The way we walk, move, and breathe inevitably clashes with the geometry of life, demands what it cannot, and does not deal with what it could. In ancient Buddhism, this incorrect posture is identified with attitudes of appropriation, covetousness, and control, which we exercise towards the world, pretending to make it ours, without realising that the world does not accommodate us so that we can control it, like a toy given as a gift to a capricious and bored child.

From the point of view of the analysis of the Problem, taking this step—moving from the confused perception of a transcendental discomfort (i.e., so wide and subtle that it envelops every condition of experience) to the diagnosis of an existential attitude that determines it—is what allows us to face the Problem itself, to see it for the first time and to begin to no longer merely be its victim. The Buddhist approach draws attention to a way of *feeling* (a form of discomfort, uneasiness, and annoyance) because as human beings we are extremely sensitive to our emotions and hedonic perceptions, and pain in particular (in all its nuances) usually serves as a guide to orient us in the world. It is a pragmatic, intuitive, simple, elegant and, in its own way, quite effective approach.

The Spinozian analysis of the Problem, as we have seen, goes a step further back, descending to a structural level, which subtends the emotional and affective level to touch upon the very architecture of being. Spinoza agrees with Buddhism (and the yoga traditions in general) that, at a certain level of observation, the Problem is a chronic dissatisfaction, or rather an inability to find satisfaction, an apparently inherent discomfort, and yet (on closer examination)

entirely acquired and from which we can free ourselves. The contradiction of the appetite discussed in chapter one expresses this kind of diagnosis. But if philosophizing lies in the act of not tiring of asking what are the conditions of possibility of a given phenomenon, Spinoza does not stop at the most external (emotional, passionate) plane on which the Problem manifests itself, seeking instead its epistemic, ontological, metaphysical roots. These roots are wrapped around an absence, sunk in a relative void, suspended in something that is not yet there. The roots of the Problem, as we saw in chapter two, lie not in a categorical aspect of being, but in its intensive aspect: a relative lack of power. The contradiction of the appetite only stems from the fact that the appetite, ordinarily, cannot find the power necessary to conceive what it really tends towards, and so it must scramble as best it can with the surrogates offered by the imagination—all clues, fragments, dreamlike symbols of truth, which appears in them but as disfigured, unrecognisable, enigmatic.

If we now want to summarise even more succinctly what the fundamental ontological structure of the Problem is then, we could say that this is none other than our *being a part*. The powerlessness experienced by mind and body is in fact nothing other than the necessary result of their not being an absolute totality, but of their being part of the one absolute totality. Being part necessarily implies not being the whole, and not being the whole necessarily implies lacking complete power. The finitude that characterises us as modes of the one substance is nothing other than our not being independent substances, but dependent parts of the one substance, therefore subject to the sea of interactions and relations that blow over our lives from everywhere like winds with no apparent logic, pushing and pulling us, which we often do not know how to resist, and from which we can never entirely free ourselves. Everything we have seen so far can therefore be summed up in this thought—a very simple, clear, and distinct idea: the Problem is our *being-part*.

The elegance and beauty of Spinoza's philosophy lies, however, in the way he also helps us to see the Solution—the Solution is our being-part. Precisely that categorical aspect of our finite reality that exposes us (intensively) to powerlessness, is also the very aspect on which our ability to save ourselves, empower ourselves, and liberate ourselves is based. Precisely because we are parts of a whole (and if we reflect on the nature of the whole, we see that the

whole can only be one and infinite), we discover in the navel of our pain the point of strength to be reborn into the world and life. The Spinozian meditation we have attempted to sketch in chapter three is a way (one of the possible ways, not the only one, but not negligible either) to overturn what sounded like a condemnation, read it in a radically different context, and finally understand in those very same words, without having changed anything in them, our blessing.

Being-part, when correctly understood, becomes the key to thinking of ourselves as expressions of an infinite reality, whose essence is the infinite power of acting that animates the immense and wide-open reality in which we are and move. Being-part, when lived in the light of adequate knowledge, becomes our strength, our freedom, our actual essence. Thus, from a Spinozian perspective, the whole problem lies only in how we view the very categorical structure of our being-part: if we look at it in one way (inadequate, incomplete, powerless), we are slaves, condemned to contradiction, prisoners of an appetite that will never find satisfaction or relief, but if we look at it from a slightly (just slightly) different angle, then we are free, finite expressions of an infinite power that in us and through us seeks to enjoy its eternal and unspeakable bliss of being. A very subtle threshold, a tiny vibration, a breath, and the meaning of all existence is reversed.

Seeking control over the world, the mind encloses itself in its own partiality. Imagining itself as a free substance, it wraps itself in its own contradiction. In the arrogance of defending its fake freedom, it fails to realise that what it confusingly calls freedom is nothing but slavery, that true freedom lies beyond. The world of the imagination is indeed an upside-down world of symbols and metaphors, which only an access to the adequate truth of rational knowledge, and ultimately of intuitive knowledge, can dissolve, showing how freedom is not to pull oneself out of the world—as those who, believing themselves to be the absolute arbiter of one's own actions, claim to be independent of everything else do—but to put oneself at the service of the world, making oneself 'slaves of God'—as Spinoza says with Calvinist echoes. Only if we are capable of renouncing the sham and precarious power of which we imagine ourselves the sole possessors, can we truly open ourselves up to the true, infinite, effective power of which we are by vocation the mediators, the vehicles, the expressions.

Only by admitting the impotence of our lying fantasies, their falsity, and not being frightened by the small disappointment, by the bit of embarrassment and shame that such an admission may require, can we jump out of the vicious circle of impotence in which we are otherwise destined to remain indefinitely imprisoned—turning, turning and turning around the inability to rise above our failures, as in the *saṃsāra* of which the yoga traditions speak.

Control is our instinctive reaction to the first abrupt recognition of our impotence and fragility. Lacking the ground under our feet, sinking into the quicksand of the world, we yearn for something we can make stable, grab the first fistful of sand that comes along and force it to be ours. Control is nothing more than a grasping of just a fistful of truth, thus a part—which leaves us with a fistful of falsehood, because any part of truth taken in itself without the whole to which it belongs is precisely a falsehood. We take a fistful of sand and separate it from the rest—thus we turn truth into falsehood, power into powerlessness. But if, on the other hand, we grasp the sand, taste it, see it run through our fingers, listen to what it tells us without the need for words, we see that we are the sand, and that the sand, even in its granularity, has no boundaries. Then we can let go, sink, and discover how quicksand is not an abyss that wants to suffocate us, but a wave that supports us, guides us, in which to flow, in which to lose ourselves and find ourselves again.

Therefore, nothing is needed to solve the Problem. The Solution, in fact, is already before our eyes, right there where we see the Problem. The Solution is nothing other than the Problem understood fully—instead of partially. How could it be otherwise? All that is needed is to get used to seeing, listening, and understanding. Again, these are not faculties that we categorically lack, but only capacities to be developed, to be given space and ease to grow in intensity. If there is a practice that requires some development, constancy, tenacity and ardour, it is only this: to create space, time, circumstances, and opportunities, so that what wants to grow and develop can do so at its best, in the greatest security, with the greatest confidence and trust.

For Spinoza—as for most yoga traditions—the starting point of this path—a path that leads nowhere, but allows one to fully understand where one has always been—is at the very point where one discerns the centre of the Problem, and thus can see that its Solution is in the body. Corporeality is not only

the basis of our mind, but the most immediate dimension in which we experience our being-part, and therefore the first in which we must discover the full and proper meaning of this partiality that opens us up to the whole. Impotence, however, means having an inadequate, incomplete, limited idea of the body. The body seen as a more or less attractive dress to seek recognition and arouse admiration in others. The body as an instrument of imposition and domination and oppression and violence. The body understood as a machine of flesh programmed to grow, consume, reproduce, perhaps enjoy, and always die too soon.

The moss that grows on the stone is really no other than stone—all those ideas about stone being dead matter, moss a form of life, are of no use; they are inadequate images. The moss growing on the stone is the stone itself—that inert, dead, insentient matter—in its intuition that there is light. The stone—physically and symbolically—comes from the light that is the trace, the memory, the power in which the elements are constituted. The stone is part of light, it could not conceive itself or be without light. Yet, as a part, the stone is obscure; it finds in itself nothing left of the light from which it comes. The stone *thinks that it is* dark, that its being part is no longer being together with its source. But this is the stone's inadequate thinking, its powerlessness, its ignorance. To the extent that the stone discovers the path to a more adequate knowledge—what a fantastic and terrible story this discovery must be for the stone, the colossal effort it requires, the timeless ardour, the blind dedication, unimaginable for us stones of flesh—to the extent that the stone *intuits that there is* light—that the stone is light, that the light is in the stone, shining on it, around it—then the stone lights up with life, becomes covered with moss. That moss is an intuition in its nascent state, which immediately leaps forward into the great oak tree next to it, which acts as a baroque column to the silences of the sky and the piercings of the sun—it is still that same intuition, clinging to the bowels of the earth with a brain of woody, strong roots, sweetest, most sensitive to its every darkest grain of nescience, invisible fingers like fibres of nothingness that yet touch every atom of matter to put it in direct contact, at once, in one breath, with the light all around, like magic eyes that see by immediate immersion in being. No sooner does the oak tree articulate this discovery

in its language of twisted branches and serrated leaves, than it immediately becomes a swarm of fragments of living matter, with legs instead of roots, animated with a life of its own—like animals that dart around in all shapes and sizes, fly, camp between the roots, climb the trunk, run around, in that noise that animal life brings, tragic in its fragile dependence on everything, and which makes it so much more sensitive to its being part of the whole. This is an even greater and more beautiful intuition of the totality of that whole, of its depth, of its richness. It is no longer only the intuition of light for the stone, or of the direct bridge between earth and sun for the oak, but embraces in the same leap a living environment, an organism made up of organisms. These all tense, receptive, and open, like antennae of life towards their reciprocal synchronisation, since life is knowing that one only lives if and to the extent that one knows how to realise this dance of the whole with the whole.

If a human asleep in this scenario could for a moment rediscover within themselves the intuition of the moss-covered stone, they would discover that they too are matter that becomes sensitive to light. If they could rise from that intuition to the woody strength of the oak's intuition, they would know that they are a bridge between earth and sky that is crossed in one step. If they lived their animal nature to the full, they would know that that is a dance step—the dance with which life celebrates its being a system, an integration of parts, a network of minds cast upon reality to gather in the silent sea the secret pearls of the joy of existing. But if, by a miracle as rare as it is natural, that human being were to notice how much wider their world extends than the one that appears at each instant—a world that is imagined in time, in the past that is gone, in the future that is divined; a world that reason sees extending in the infinite applicability of its laws and their explanatory power; but a world that intuition sees directly as rooted in an unlimited sea of essences that are not now, but necessarily were and will be, elsewhere, at the appropriate time and juncture, inexhaustible expression of the inexhaustible power of which they are the expression—then, that instant would suddenly become infinite, breath-taking. It would be as if one's eyes were opened wide to the totality so completely empty of that which is not present here, which does not seem to exist, and yet fills with its vacant presence the immense spaces of the present, unhinging on all sides every pretended boundary, suppressing every limitation,

revealing the totality of an inexhaustible, unstoppable infinitude precisely because it is always capable of including everything that is—and at the same time everything that in its own way is but does not appear. Thus, that which in the matter of the stone was nescience is discovered in the human being as an emptiness, which is not a lack of something, but fullness of being in its revelation of the transcendent vault that covers from its height the absolute freedom of consciousness, and in this human consciousness—so small, often limited, almost always petty, yet from time to time a little divine—discovers the truest (its most sincere) face of the whole: to be everything because not only is everything included in it, but also because the whole includes in itself everything that, from whatever point, in that whole still does not appear, does not seem to be there, would seem to be missing. This is the glory of the body that in a heartbeat of intuition is known as stone, moss, oak, animal, human, being, infinity, substance, power, silence, light, unity, beauty, joy, ardour, pain, life—love.

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Humanity today holds unprecedented power over nature, but this achievement has led to crises — from extreme inequality to climate disaster — that seem beyond our control. Baruch Spinoza's philosophy offers a profound perspective on this paradox and points to a possible solution. Spinoza suggests that real empowerment comes from enhancing the kind of knowledge we possess, revealing a limitless source of vitality in understanding ourselves as part of a greater whole. But to fully grasp and apply Spinoza's ideas, we must see him not just as a philosopher, but as a practitioner of a discipline akin to the "yoga" of India. Unlike most Indian yogic traditions, however, Spinoza's approach emphasizes not renouncing desire but intensifying it. This fresh view makes Spinoza's philosophy a practical guide for transforming how we live in the world, while also offering new insights into the relevance and application of Indian yogic traditions.

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> Nothing, indeed, but a grim and sad superstition forbids taking delight. For why is it better to quench hunger and thirst than to banish melancholy? This is my rule, and thus I have disposed my soul. No deity, or anyone else, who is not envious, takes pleasure in my impotence and discomfort, nor does he regard our tears, sobs, fear, and other such things, which are signs of an impotent soul, as anything that leads to virtue; but on the contrary, the greater the joy with which we are affected, the greater is the perfection to which we pass, that is, the more necessary it is for us to participate in the divine nature.
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> B. Spinoza, *Ethics*, part 4, proposition 45, scholium

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