

ETHICS OF THE IMAGINATION: RETHINKING SPINOZA'S RATIONALITY

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This paper introduces a reading of Spinoza that intends to situate his theory of imagination as the locus of his ethics. That, in order to arrive at reason that sees the essence and nature of things, human beings should first cultivate a space where imaginings flourish at the level of contingency and inadequacy. Here, I argue that Spinoza's philosophy initially functions as a (1) metaphysics of individuation, leading to an (2) ethics of the imagination in order to formulate (3) a politics of hope. In this manner, I hope to show that this contributes to Spinoza's understanding of rationality, which he broadly calls substance.

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INTRODUCTION: SPINOZA'S PHILOSOPHICAL ENTERPRISE

One might be surprised upon opening a book called *Ethics* by Spinoza. It is by no means a traditional book on ethics that one might be familiar with. It does not provide the virtues one should have, the maxim, or the utility of our actions, in the usual sense. Instead, you will be greeted with definitions, propositions, axioms, demonstrations, and scholia – precisely by utilizing the geometric method – in understanding the world. Here, Spinoza operates at the level at which he introduces, rather disturbingly, a different way of conceiving things that we usually take for granted in the initial and final analysis. Hence, the idea of ‘ethics’ as the central theme of Spinoza’s posthumous work takes our ideation of the good life on a deeper level: that in understanding the relations between ideas and bodies as expressions of substance, ethics is a means of cognizing and recognizing, organizing and reorganizing, various modes of existence as they interact with one another. In this sense, Spinoza understands the role that senses, imagination, and reason have.

This paper introduces a reading of Spinoza that intends to situate his theory of imagination as the locus of his ethics. As the human individual was never at the center of Spinoza’s ontology of relations, its emphasis would be counterintuitive since everything that exists apart from the substance is a mode seen in the attributes of thought and extension. Such a notion is best characterized by Deleuze when he says that in Spinoza, things are always in between and never in isolation (Deleuze 1988, 122). This is due to his philosophy adhering to a logic of immanence, which

synonymizes God with nature, where the ‘in between’ aspect is fundamentally relational, which gives life to Spinoza’s metaphysics and ethics (Spinoza 2020, 226). Initially appearing as a metaphysics of substance, Spinoza’s geometric exposition on exploring human emotions, actions, towards its individual’s capability of attaining liberty, nonetheless operates this process through a logic of relations.

The intellectual undercurrent in which Spinoza responds to is the Cartesian philosophical doctrine that gives priority to the mind over the body. The tendency towards this kind of ‘rationalism’ entails a totally separate domain of reality – which Spinoza ultimately repudiates (Della Rocca 2008, 3). As a result, he transformed familiar concepts such as *substance*, *attributes*, and *modes* to incorporate them in his metaphysical view of an immanent reality. As a philosopher of immanence, Spinoza sought to explain nature as it is bound by laws of necessity within it. Maintaining the idea of substance as a being conceived in and through itself, he nonetheless forms the entire basis of his metaphysics upon this notion, while also maintaining that there could only be one substance (Spinoza 2020, 83). The implications that follow from this reasoning are that there will be no other causal explanation of things except for being caused by the only substance, which appears as its modifications, or the “affections of substance, or that which exists in something else, through which it is [also] conceived” (Spinoza 2020, 73). Seen at the attribute of either thought or extension, ideas and bodies are expressions of the same reality, seen in two different ways (Spinoza 2020, 118).

By beginning with such concepts, Spinoza was treated as a rationalist in the canon of Western intellectual history by virtue of these concepts and the metaphysical framework in which he operates in. Although warranted, this categorization short-changes the philosopher’s work – particularly the notion of rationality itself. According to Genevieve Lloyd, the simplistic polarization of the rationalist-empiricist debate stands as a philosophical stereotype – in which Spinoza becomes the epitome of rationalist thought (Lloyd 2020, 198). Thus, this nuance in understanding Spinoza not only helps us have a conceptual clarity on what we mean by his “rationalism,” it also helps us understand, in a rather Spinozan sense, the kind of role imagination plays in ethics – particularly its dynamism with reason, in their constant tension in attempting to understand nature.

In this paper, I argue that in order to bring forth Spinoza’s ethics in light of his rationality, imagination must first be organized in such a way that it conforms to an ethical relation that sees politics as a powerful tool and then rationalize various perceptions on what reality is and ought to be, allowing hope to be the guide of human reason in its optimistic imaginaries. Cumulatively, this reading highlights some aspects of Spinoza’s *Ethics* as a (1) metaphysics of individuation that leads to an (2) ethics of the imagination in formulating (3) a politics of hope as a way of (4) manufacturing rationality.

METAPHYSICS OF INDIVIDUATION

Along with Spinoza’s immanent ontology as the bedrock of his philosophy is his contention that human beings do not possess a privileged position in the order of things. As he says, “[to] regard man in nature as an *imperium in imperio* – a state within

a state [would be to] believe that man rather disturbs than follows the order of nature, that he has absolute power over his actions and that he is determined by nothing besides himself" (Spinoza 2020, 161). By treating the human individual in a geometrical manner as if it were like any other modes that exists in reality, Spinoza effectively situates the power of human beings in its affective capacities in a wider ontology of relations. Keeping this in mind, I attempt to begin with and dissect the individual, having Spinoza's idea of it as the foundation. I argue in this section that in the initial parts of his *Ethics*, his philosophy functions as a metaphysics of individuation, where each mode of the substance seen in the attributes of thought and extension have their own individuating principle – which Spinoza denotes as *conatus* or striving for existence.

For Spinoza, "particular things are nothing but affections of the attributes of God" in which these particular things are modes "expressed in a certain and determinate manner" (Spinoza 2020, 95). Here, modes appear as expressions of the substance since they are characterized by their own essences or nature. Moreso, Spinoza synonymizes this essence of an individual thing by its *conatus* or the way in which an individual strives to exist: "every thing, as far as in it lies, strives to persevere in its existence" (Spinoza 2020, 169). Highlighting this aspect of Spinoza's characterization of a thing's striving is important in his philosophy as a metaphysics of individuation. It functions as a way of identifying individuals in order to see their essences as particular things and how they accordingly participate in the grand scheme of reality, or simply put – nature. The matter between the individual thing and a human individual in their *conatus* is that in the latter, the principle becomes consciously translated as desire: "desire generally applies to men considered as conscious of their appetites" or simply "desire is an appetite attended with consciousness" (Spinoza 2020, 171). In retrospect, desire is nothing more than a certain teleological principle that is elected by the mind to where it is currently oriented. In the appendix of *Ethics I*, Spinoza identifies the illusion that may arise from desire: the idea that human individuals are free due to their actions fulfilling their desires as ends (Spinoza 2020, 110).

Spinoza's *conatus* principle working against the backdrop of human beings translated in conscious terms as desire proposes an idea that the mind and body can be affected in many ways. This is where they are identified as individuals, having their own essences which individuate them as their *conatus* in order to persevere in their existence, by constantly affecting and becoming affected by other individuals as well. At this level of Spinoza's ontology seen as a metaphysics of individuation, Spinoza's account of the individual can be justified as promoting individualism to some degree. Steven Barbone sees in Spinoza's distinction of an individual to a thing as the former is composed of various bodies which maintain an equilibrium in relation with each other (Spinoza 2020, 114; Barbone 2002, 89). His line of argument emphasizes the necessary components for the concept of an individual found in Spinoza's arguments. The philosopher considers the individual as composed of mind and body perceived in the attributes of thought and extension – in Spinoza's words, "a mode of extension and the idea of that mode is one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways" (Spinoza 2020, 118). In this manner, an individual can be considered as a subset of things that operate under certain laws determined by nature. Therefore, a thing can be called an

individual since it contains a singular essence that can be quantified mathematically through its pattern of movement, velocity, and rest (Spinoza 2020, 125).

Barbone claims that when Spinoza talks about individuals and things, it would be erratic to equivocate them in thought. Through Spinoza's doctrine of the *conatus*, he contends that only an individual has a unifying principle by which it strives to persevere and exist. By means of an individual's endeavor to keep itself, the endeavor itself becomes its essence, and that its power to act is an individual's "aptitude to do that which follows only from the laws of its nature" (Barbone 2002, 96). Henceforth, he concludes with his distinction between individuals and quasi-individuals: the latter is characterized when a collection of things gathers to give an impression of being an individual. However, it does not fully translate to becoming one, since there is no *conatus* by which it strives to maintain itself in existence and operation. Along the lines of Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* that nations are clearly contrasted with individuals, Barbone maintains that this interpretation gives justice to understanding Spinoza with faithfulness to the text, and that it would be difficult to deny that Spinoza's philosophy is individualistic and egoistic (Barbone 2002, 106).

By looking at the microscopic difference to appear faithful to the text, Barbone commits to a reading of Spinoza that ignores the overarching theme the philosopher endeavored in his philosophical project by overtly stating that his philosophy is individualistic and egoistic. This is the aspect Juliana Merçon has noticed by invoking what Barbone has set aside: the relational nature of Spinoza's ontology. Having Spinoza's theory of imagination and reason which gives the status of an idea to be inadequate or adequate, Merçon introduces Spinoza's ethics as the education of the imagination and desire. In this manner, it appeals more to the philosopher's initial aim, as he himself sought to abandon "the ordinary objects of pursuit" and take upon the quest by which he himself becomes more aware of the certainty of the good (Spinoza 1985, 7). This is where Spinoza's *conatus* is translated in human terms as desire. However, as Spinoza's philosophy does not put any privilege on human beings, the striving that is concerned by which all modes of the substance have is a manifestation of nature as a whole in its continuous expression of itself. Merçon contrasts Barbone's analysis of Spinoza's text by what he means by an individual. She contends that viewing Spinoza's philosophy as individualistic and egoistic contradicts the philosopher's aim. This is due to the nature of Spinoza's immanent ontology as an ontology of relations.

Merçon claims that ethics goes hand in hand with epistemology, and metaphysics. In this way, Merçon argues that to conceive of Spinoza's ethics, one must be aware of the relational process of the complexity and multiplicity of individuals that strive for their self-determination. (Merçon 2007, 51). Furthermore, through understanding Spinoza's ethics placed alongside his ontology of relations, she maintains an individual's constitutive aspect. An individual as a mode indicates an opening: it is not self-contained, but relational. *Conatus*, as the driving force among individuals to constitute a singularity. It denotes the phenomena in nature among different modes of being. In terms of interaction and reciprocal activity of beings, ethics is now viewed as a means of sociability. Here, the driving force of individuals and particular things are not seen as something opposed to each other, but also constitutive as they are relational in nature: "men are most accordant in their nature when they live

according to the guidance of reason. Therefore men will be most useful to each other when each most seeks his own good" (Spinoza 2020, 250). This is in direct contrast to Barbone's argument that *conatus* is a force inside each individual, and a social group can only be specified as quasi-individual rather than an authentic one.

Merçon echoes Heidi Ravven's argument that social entities, unlike how Barbone considers them, are neither strictly metaphorical nor are they natural individuals (Ravven 1998). Social entities are real yet limited to be considered as an immediate extension of the body and mind of an individual in the strict sense of the term. Here, Ravven's point is by presenting the angle of the relational aspect in Spinoza's abovementioned arguments. Merçon argues that Barbone seemed to overlook Spinoza's account of imagination, as well as adequate and inadequate ideas. The expansion of an individual to a collective is real – though it is inadequate, and that imagination is at play in becoming aware of the expansion. For both Merçon and Ravven, imagination plays an important part in classifying individuals. As a result, Merçon finds that ethics is a process of the education of imagination and desire since there is an inseparable relation between knowledge and affectivity between individuals. Therefore, Spinoza's metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics are a never-ending process of finding commonalities and differences as its procedure (Merçon 2007, 58).

In considering this continual process, *conatus* plays a significant role in its constitutive and conflictual capacity. Caroline Williams highlights its non-subjective principle, which is useful when conceived beyond the subject and in the wider context of an ontology of relations. This strengthens a human individual's capability of producing subjectivity by viewing it in its relations, as she finds the locus of the production of subjectivity in terms of the subject itself and its relations, by suggesting that there is a dynamic process involved in its subjectivation. She sees *conatus* not only as a power to persist or strive for self-determination, but as a differential force which drives complexity and accommodates conflict (Williams 2017, 498). Here, Williams focuses not only on the subject itself, but on the conditions that make discursive or material production possible. In Spinoza's words on the notion of natural right, "whatever each man does according to the laws of his nature, he does with the supreme right of nature. He has as much right over nature as he has power" (Spinoza 2016a, 508).

Williams considers this "morphology" as having two important components: (1) it is processual as it encourages a dynamic formation of the subject as an element in relation to other things and; (2) it has a tendency towards persistence and perseverance, as it is with all other beings that strive to preserve themselves (Williams 2017, 499). She further emphasizes that *conatus* is a non-subjective principle that is most useful when conceived beyond the subject and in the wider context of an ontology of relations.

This brings Williams to assert that *conatus* is better understood as a 'field of forces' that enables conflictual relations, as well as a series of power relations that enable an individual to persist in existence (Williams 2017, 506). Her understanding of Spinoza's concept of *conatus* composes a powerful politics that presents various transformations of the production of subjectivity. Furthermore, she remarks, politics is the mode of composing a morphology of relations, allowing the construction of the scene of subjectivity (Williams 2017, 507). Thus, by unravelling the subject using

Spinoza and his concept of *conatus*, as the non-subjective field of forces, acknowledges the possibility of conflict while maintaining an individual's persistence. Her morphology traces the dynamic movement of the conditions that allow for the recognition of an individual's identity, as well as its antithesis as a site of conflict. This is where it can retain or lose some aspects of its reality through the power relations it attaches itself to.

In highlighting individual existence in relation to *conatus* in this section, I demonstrate its capacity both in its individuating principle and relational aspect, which drives an individual towards forming a social configuration of ethical relations where imagination plays a significant role. Appearing initially as an individual's inadequate orientation of its sensory experience, I proceed to emphasize its importance in cultivating an individual in relation to a wider ontology of relations.

ETHICS OF THE IMAGINATION

Spinoza classifies imagination as the mind's contemplation about the thought or body it cognizes as if presently in juncture, informed by the vagueness of experience. According to him, in imagination the mind "lacks an idea which excludes the existence of those things which it imagines as present to itself" (Spinoza 2020, 132). In other words, when one imagines, one thinks of the image of one's imagination as existing. This is in conjunction with the signs, appearances, and resemblances the mind incorporates with the things it has experienced with its sensory perception. Furthermore, Spinoza maintains that imagination (along with sense perception) is the sole cause of falsity – but in itself is not flawed as its nature is to function exactly how he denotes it (Spinoza 2020, 146). It operates within its domain as the hinge for common notions where reason is its arbiter. With his ontology of relations in the background of this analysis, the mind in its imagining does not possess any adequate knowledge of itself and other bodies when thinking externally in isolation. Hence, making imagination passive since it stands specifically as the receptor of perceived affections by the mind and body.

While reason and intuition are considered by Spinoza as necessarily true, cognition of the first kind – imagination – as the sole cause of falsity stands in a place of reservation, where if one thinks Spinoza's philosophy intrinsically leans on rationality, judgments made from imagination are susceptible to false claims. As Spinoza argues, to have a true idea is to know a thing perfectly or in the best way possible – this implies that knowing a thing in its truest sense would mean for the mind to undergo an analysis of its relations towards others (Spinoza 2020, 147). On the other hand, completely understanding the imagination of the existence of a certain body or idea would be to think it in isolation from other bodies and ideas. Therefore, imagination contemplates things contingently rather than necessarily.

As I have shown above, imagination is in a complicated place in Spinoza's epistemology. Moreover, it contributes to the reason human beings regard themselves as free, as when the mind thinks of an image, it assumes that it is capable of choosing freely what image it wants to think (Spinoza 2020, 141). This happens when the mind does not know the affections other ideas and bodies have on one's own predisposition

toward its imaginings. Additionally, by thinking of a certain idea or body consisting of more truth than others; one thinks of it in isolation since the property of truth to a certain object is thought intrinsically rather than relationally – inconsistent to what Spinoza tries to portray in his ontology of relations. This is why, in best contentions, Spinoza's philosophy adheres to a metaphysics of individuation but only to a certain extent. Its illusions are legitimized when it stops to an individuating analysis and takes it as an instrument for attaining truths in the world. Thus, precisely making it the kind of thinking where illusions such as free will springs from.

Spinoza's account of the imagination occupies a distinctive and significant role in his philosophy. As a result, studies on Spinoza's notion of imagination are gaining traction in scholarly treatment. For example, Sharp sees imagination as a way of liberating the human individual. She argues that by using Spinoza's philosophy against any privileging of the human subject in its affairs, we will come to better understand the forces that are at play in terms of various ontological constructions that we make. Her conceptual tool called *renaturalization* is the process of integrating nonhuman elements into the complexity of different movements of ideologies, social narratives, and status quo (Sharp 2011, 1). In reconceptualizing human beings and their affairs as completely natural, she sought to develop a demystification of humanity having a special property that puts them beyond the equation in the totality of nature, which shares the same motivation as Spinoza. Additionally, she maintains, *renaturalization* is not directly opposed to denaturalization, where the latter has been the primary endeavor of human affairs in terms of understanding and constructing its reality. It is the process of looking at human affairs as something that is artificial, where a removal of the natural is necessary in order to create a new domain that is apart from the existing nature. This is akin to Deleuze's understanding that nature does not have a distinction between the naturality and artificiality of things (Deleuze 1988, 124). This kind of process, Sharp characterizes, takes ideology critique to highlight the component of human agency when it comes to the formation of existing narratives. While denaturalization allows for an emancipatory act of liberating humans from the predicaments that shackle and render them oppressed, it has a tendency to emphasize the human aspects in its mobility.

Sharp recommends that we reconceptualize ideology critique in terms of *renaturalization*. As she notes, "an idea is the outcome of a decentralized play of human and nonhuman forces" (Sharp 2011, 67). Keeping this in mind, she conjures the elements at play in our affective constitution by bringing up the idea that there is a political aspect among the impersonal, nonhuman forces that take place in our existing narratives. Here, she introduces Spinoza's relentless critique of the anthropocentric view of nature as something that is other than the human subject. She develops Grosz's proposal of a politics of imperceptibility, which primarily avoids the Hegelian politics of recognition (Grosz 2002). Grosz contends that the model of recognition aims to look at subjectivity in terms of the identity of the master and slave dialectic. Hegel's negative process of recognition is significant in diagnosing the denaturalization of the human subject and its affairs from nature. Since Hegel gives emphasis to the mind as it thinks itself in relation to others in a subject-object orientation, it nonetheless presents a cold, rigid delineation between the mind and nature. (Hegel 1977, 6). Politics of imperceptibility, on the other hand, abandons this kind of intersubjective

relationship. It highlights the acts, forces, energies, and bodies that enable an individual to increase their own power. Therefore, *renaturalization* in terms of a politics of imperceptibility offers an appreciation of ourselves as parts of nature, having properties that play by the same rules as anything else, and as well as being dependent upon infinitely many other beings, humans and nonhumans alike.

Another example that I would like to include in treating Spinoza's concept of the imagination is in Gatens' account of 'imaginary bodies.' She concerns herself with the concrete conditions of the human individual, which contribute to its production, such as laws, institutions, and tradition. But another aspect of the narrative we configure is the "imaginary" that we create based on the historical, ideological, metaphorical, and theoretical conception of the subject. One particular case she demonstrates is the attached imaginary upon the woman's body and as well as her role in society. Conjuring Spinoza's account of imagination toward ethical relations, Gatens emphasizes the embodied conditions that contribute to the existing "imaginary" of bodies and the harms that come with it. In analyzing an individual as a point of departure in terms of its relations and its processes, the idea that it becomes embodied in various aspects of reality is apparent. This embodiment is realized not only in the domain of the theoretical and the ideological but also at the level of different political, institutional, and social narratives. Gatens analyzes the scene by which the subject becomes produced, immersed in, and continuously reconfigured. She problematizes the subject in terms of its representations: it cannot be confined to the metaphysical domains since it reverberates at the levels of epistemology, moral and social theory, and politics. In the representation of a human body, particularly the woman, there seems to be a singularity in terms of what it conveys: as a not-man (Gatens 1996). This is primarily her concern with regard to the philosophical account of the body, especially in its corporeal aspect, that it becomes taken for granted and has already been given a universal, atemporal image. What she terms "imaginary" in relation to bodies is used to portray images, symbols, metaphors, and representations, which help construct various forms of subjectivity (Gatens 1996).

The examples I incorporated above use Spinoza's concept of the imagination as the device in determining the effects of other modes on one's affective constitution. This is where imagination plays a significant role. Surely, reason corrects the mind by controlling the passions since it obtains necessary truths in the world as the mind contemplates on the universal essence of a particular thing, but it is imagination itself that has a direct access to one's own emotions, and it is in imagination's undertaking to steer the passions under the guidance of reason (Spinoza 2020, 146). On the other hand, by letting imaginings stay in their own state, it thinks of the image of the mind as taking place, or as having the illusion of existence. This is precisely the reason I sought to explain that Spinoza's philosophy is an ethics of the imagination. The philosopher sought to give an account of understanding the nature of emotions based on a naturalized view of the world through an immanent ontology of relations. He supposes that the reason human beings are led to believe that they are free is that they think that a human being determines its own laws for itself (Spinoza 2020, 105). However, when one further analyzes human beings' place in the scheme of reality, it does not occupy a special place. This shows that human beings are only a particular finite mode to which the whole of nature expresses itself as an infinite substance. This

idea naturalizes the human being's status when it comes to its participation and understanding of reality and itself.

Spinoza's philosophy as an ethics of the imagination examines the particularities of affects and clarifies them so they can be managed by reason. It acts as a preparation for such affections to be regulated, and imagination plays a significant role in this arrangement, since it is a place for contingency. Furthermore, as imaginings do not simply vanish by presenting a truth of an opposite image, it rather takes its place as it is stronger than the previous one. Here, we recognize that reason does not replace imagination. Instead, the latter becomes aligned with the former as it tends to curate what is good for them, which is understood through desire – or a conscious recognition of one's own *conatus* as a human being's essence. It follows that one is always liable to passions, as they continuously affect different modes, which in turn result in one's ability to persevere in its existence. In this case, imagination in collaboration with reason in its attempt to conceive of an adequate understanding of its state of affairs is precisely what constitutes an ethics. Reason, for Spinoza, does not assume a supreme position. It merely operates in its own domain as it attempts to understand a subject's imaginings.

As the knowledge of good and evil is not intrinsic in the things themselves, but rather dependent on the relationality of different bodies if it enables or hinders their ability to persevere, Spinoza emphasizes that we must be able to know what are the things that are aligned with our nature as human beings, which is always susceptible to passions, and are always governed by our emotions (Spinoza 2020, 232). The analysis in this area concerns the ethics of the imagination, since it thinks of the affections in isolation and contingently as how it affects a human being at a specific instance. In this sense, before one can arrive at understanding what Spinoza calls the *dictates of reason*, Steven Nadler points out that one must first be able to know whether one's passions are aligned with one's nature as a human being with one's own unique striving at a given point in time (Nadler 2015, 119). As such, human beings who are governed by reason are those who have first understood how significant their imaginings are, before giving over their passions to reason's regulation.

The subtle transition of Spinoza's philosophy from a correction of faulty imagination lies in his contention that no human beings under the guidance of reason desire what they do not want others to desire as well (Spinoza 2020, 280). Here, the illusion of freedom and the idea of a human being in its solitude transform into a social configuration of ethical relations where an individual's imaginings have been rectified in order to fit reason and make use of it. This further demonstrates Spinoza's philosophical project through a politics of hope, which brings forth rationality. This notion of rationality, though, is in a sense of a 'harmony,' or the configuration in which nature expresses itself through its modifications as individuals arrange and organize themselves according to their properties, inclinations, and desires.

A POLITICS OF HOPE

Sociability has its benefits as human beings understand them through reason. From their natural response to the realization of their ability to take advantage of the

good they can make for themselves, they are inclined to want them for others as well. This legitimizes the predicate that is attributed to a human being: that he or she is a social animal by nature. By means of human beings understanding the usefulness of others as to their mutual benefit, they tend to formulate a social contract, so that “men may live in peace and be useful to each other” and that “they should give up their natural right and give mutual security that they will not do anything to each other’s injury” (Spinoza 2020, 254). This is the rudimentary principle of most, if not all, social agreements that have been formed throughout history. Spinoza associates this realization with reason’s prescription. Since we, as particularities of the whole of reality, possess natural rights where we are predisposed to strive in order to preserve ourselves and pick what is good for us (Spinoza 2016b, 158). As it functions under the law of nature, rather than reason, a human being liable to passions acts in accordance with its power. In the state of nature, Spinoza says that human beings are led by blind desire, rather than what reason prescribes: “it is by the highest right of nature that everyone does what follows from the necessity of his nature” (Spinoza 2016b, 283). Since nature is a much larger domain than the particular faculty of human reason, its bounds are beyond the scope of what reason tries to determine: to enable itself to act in liberty, rather than being swayed by blind passions.

This leads Spinoza to align his metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics in conjunction with politics. He synthesizes the fruits of his philosophical musings in order to further illustrate his argument about the dictates of reason, summarized in his phrase “nothing is more useful to man than man” (Spinoza 2020, 240). However, as he further demonstrates, it is impossible for a human being to dispose of their emotions completely, and reason cannot tyrannically take over and absolutely hold emotions captive. In *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza writes “the natural right of each man is determined not by sound reason, but by desire and power” (Spinoza 2020, 233). In this sense, Spinoza understands human actions against the backdrop of his ontology of relations, where affects are seen as the catalyst for enabling actions or remaining passive towards them. He sees social configuration of ethical relations in order to provide mutual security in terms of achieving good and minimizing harm. This configuration, with its collective power of self-preservation based on laws where human beings who strive to persevere in their existence are under reason’s regulation, is what Spinoza labels as the *State*. Thus, Spinoza’s advocacy of democracy is in line with his thought that the role of the state is liberty. He sees democracy as the ‘most natural state’ in which it avails of the nearest approximation of liberty nature provides to each individual: “So that Republic is most free whose laws are founded on sound reason. For there each person, when he wishes, can be free, i.e., live wholeheartedly according to the guidance of reason” (Spinoza 2016a, 289).

This is the aspect Antonio Negri highlighted in his engagement with Spinoza. By way of looking at democracy in the light of Spinoza’s philosophy, he offers a way by which one becomes inclined to such an endeavor. Through the realization of desire, an individual is naturally predisposed to endeavor to achieve liberty. This endeavor, or *conatus*, is a metaphysical determination of an individual since it indicates its power to act upon it. While this happens initially on an individual level, this kind of process happens simultaneously to other individuals. Through reason, one finds oneself among others who have the same endeavor. This constitutes what he calls *multitude* – an

inorganic subject that finds its subjectivation in unity and loses it in its dispersion (Negri 2017, 55). It is the expression of a people's general will as a unity among individuals who have the same goal. As such, Negri sees the individual naturally participating in a democracy since it expresses its own individuality in the domain of the political.

Considering democracy as the multitude's endeavor, Negri equally shares Spinoza's conviction, an individual's capacity for liberation. He proposes that desire, when realized, leads to an emancipatory motivation. Negri holds that freedom appears as an illusion since individuals can observe the effects of their actions but not what causes them, thereby dismissing their own volition as illusory. He recognizes the will's ability to strike a balance with the intellect (Negri 2017, 73). Therefore, it functions as a machine of truth – as it can widen freedom. An individual, by accumulating appropriate ideas, comes to a degree more appropriate with their nature. As each individual is characterized by their *conatus*, each of them can perform the task of balancing the will with the intellect, through reason's command. Negri argues that an individual's passion or desire becomes translated into will and becomes realized by an individual's process of liberation. Thus, freedom becomes a metaphysical determination by a realization of desire.

Negri extends this concept of an individual's ontological conditions for freedom through the realization of its passions to the domains of the social and the political. Spinoza's system unveils what he calls an "ethical surplus" at the ontological level, where people equipped with the optimism of reason see it necessary to establish democracy as the realization of freedom (Negri 2017, 47). It is the stage when the desire for liberation becomes concrete. It is where a general *conatus*, or striving, is apparent. In this sense, it is the multitude that produces society and community among individuals. Additionally, Negri points out that it is not the multitude that forms the general will but appears as the expression of an individual's strength translated in the language of multiplicity (Negri 2017, 53). Hence, as an inorganic subjectivation with its distinctiveness, the multitude allows a creative room for the collective to prosper. It is the ontological device of the multiplicity of a people, and it is the tendency of an individual into the political as a result of intertwining with other subjectivizing individuals as reason's schematization of the social life.

Negri utilizes Spinoza's ontology to highlight an individual's passion for freedom. It is configured from an external determination of desire, which also corresponds to the ontological dimension when the passions interrelate with the singularity of reality. It translates into a pursuit of liberation that makes an individual strive to maintain their liberty in the spheres of social and political life. This is where Negri suggests that democracy is the expression of the multitude, since it allows what individuals value, and that freedom provides a room for a creative common (Negri 2017, 56). Therefore, Negri highlights the human individual's capacity for balancing the will and the intellect to translate their desire into the language of multiplicity, akin to what Spinoza calls democracy.

In contrast to Negri, Etienne Balibar develops and maintains a position that does not necessitate the political in an individual when it comes to understanding their ontological constitution. Though the ontological and the political inform and transform each other, they do not have a connection that necessitates them to be together. In line

with this thinking, Balibar contends that an individual is never ontologically self-sufficient. His idea of individuality as transindividual gains its validity through Spinoza's immanent philosophy. In this conception, an individual is composed of different bodies, affects, and ideas, and it is only possible through the relations that it constitutes with other individuals, through which the imagination and reason are the process that synthesizes these connections in order to form an idea of such.

In terms of fashioning Spinoza's ontology and conceptions of the individual and its relations, Balibar approaches this very same topic using a different device to explore the subject matter with a preference for neither the ontological nor the political. Jason Read analyzes Balibar's contention on this matter: for him, thinking and engaging in politics necessarily have an ontological bedrock, and at the same time, ontological relations have direct participation in the political (Read 2020, 8-9). In this manner, there is no putting either of the domains on a pedestal. Additionally, for Balibar, for the ontological to have a proper political predication, it must be practiced on that territory, but it does not mean that ontological concepts contain in them inherent political necessity. The same applies to political transformations. For them to qualify as ontology, they must be turned into concepts and relations. It is where ontology and politics inform and transform each other. This is also where Balibar introduces his version of an individual's method of subjectivation: *transindividuality*. He borrows this notion from Gilbert Simondon on the process by which individuation happens at different levels, degrees, and orientations. According to him, "In order for the collective to be able to exist, separated individuation must precede it and still contain the pre-individual, that through which the collective will be individuated by joining the separated being" and that "the fact that the individuated being is not entirely individuated but still contains a certain charge of non-individuated, pre-individual reality that it preserves and respects, living with the awareness of its existence instead of retreating into a substantial individuality" (Simondon 2020, 277).

Citing this, Balibar contends that Spinoza's ontology can be characterized as one that is of individuation, of emphasizing the difference between activity and passivity, thus denoting its practicality as it is natural due to its immanent nature (Balibar 2020, 3). Here, the notion of individual existence is within the context of a chain of all existing things affecting each other. For him, we should not interpret Spinoza's conception of the substance with the ability for individuation in terms of promoting an individualistic way of thinking and acting upon accumulating adequate ideas. Rather, Balibar emphasizes that it should be thought of as an establishing principle for developing relationships with other individuals. In fact, Spinoza contends that a human individual is always in reference to their relations, and never in isolation. In this sense, when talking about a thing that we consider an individual, transindividuality also happens at a microscopic level. Through combinations of different affects, ideas, and perceptions as a process of individuation, individualization also happens through the logic of desire. It is the association of affects with ideas where the will meets the intellect. However, in thinking of transindividuality, Balibar says that it also applies to the constitution of the imagination and reason. It is after that procedure that we can synthesize them into a single process. Imagination is responsible for constituting and differentiating the individual "self" through identification, recognition, and assertion (Balibar 2020, 3). On the other hand, reason emphasizes

ethical matters where it seeks to create a structure or system of relations as an expression of its striving toward preservation by establishing connections with other individuals. Here, we see reason operating at the practical level with an ontological background that enables it to conceive its striving for preservation. Additionally, in reason, other individuals are considered useful not because of their sole utility, but because they understand that there is a common goal, which is preservation.

The idea of *transindividuality* that Balibar proposes is one that he designates as a process rather than a fixed pattern (Balibar 2020, 69). In contrast with Negri's proposal of the pursuit of liberation as the necessary result of the multitude's subjectivation, Balibar finds that in the *transindividual*'s transition from imagination to reason, politics becomes a step in this process (Negri 2017, 55). For Balibar, although politics eventually becomes the domain of the collective *conatus*, it is not a fixation upon each individual's ontological structuring of reality.

Negri and Balibar emphasize the role of the individual in their participation with others toward the purpose of demonstrating a hopeful configuration of ethical relations. As Spinoza notes, "hope is an inconstant pleasure arising from [the idea of] a past or future thing, concerning the issue of which we are in some degree doubtful," imagination takes an important role in this configuration (Spinoza 2020, 212). This, in turn, takes Spinoza's first level of cognition as it develops into a more concrete understanding of the nature of human beings, especially in their relation with others. As a result, it manifests as a way human beings as modes with attributes of thought and extension, not merely influencing reality but manufacturing it – thus exhibiting what Spinoza broadly understands as substance and its rationality.

CONCLUSION: MANUFACTURING RATIONALITY

A politics of hope is informed by the collective striving of social configurations derived from the ethics of the imagination, which allows affects to flourish at the level of contingency. This is where Spinoza's notion of rationality lies. It can be observed that it is through the development of modes demonstrated through thoughts and bodies that strive to obtain what enables them to participate and become active, rather than being passive.

In conclusion, I have demonstrated how Spinoza's philosophy treats imagination as a significant aspect in producing rationality – in both senses of the term. First, as a manner in which reason guides human action, and second, as an understanding of an ontological principle in which we can explain reality as an expression of nature. Overall, this attempt at reading Spinoza's philosophy in the light of the notion of rationality itself demands something extra-rational – that which goes beyond the usual faculty that we ascribe to human individuals.

From Spinoza's philosophy being a metaphysics of individuation to demonstrating it as a politics of hope, I demonstrate the conceptual process how the transformations happen as a human individual strives to correct their own illusions – which appear initially as truths but are nonetheless corrected as the mind tends to understand the particularities of its affects and its own imaginings that contribute to its fictions of its individuality and isolation. In the ethics of the imagination, where it

examines its affects in order to select them at the level of contingency, *conatus*, or the striving of a particular mode of substance, is translated into human terms as desire.

As a human being under the guidance of reason consciously attends to the needs of others, it demonstrates an ethical configuration that enables one to freely desire without causing or receiving any harm, which is only possible through democracy, a form of social configuration of ethical relations that maximizes a human individual's liberty. This form of political reality is the highest good that human beings, under the guidance of reason, can hope and strive for. It is also a task that proves to be so challenging that even today, centuries after the philosopher, we stand at the perils of losing this kind of sociability. However, as Spinoza himself optimistically declares at the end of the *Ethics*, "everything excellent is as difficult as it is rare." (Spinoza 2020, 317).

Human beings, as a speck in the whole of nature, are inclined to think of themselves as having absolute dominion over the totality of reality. What causes their concerns is primarily the modes of being seen in the attributes of thought or bodies that render them either powerful or powerless. This relation provides human beings with the idea of what is good and evil. These modes affect an individual in doing what one is supposed to do, based on their essence and their way of participating in the organic whole. This is the optimism human beings share in the theater of human endeavors.

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