

**Spinoza's Rationalist
Materialism:
A Contribution to
the Critique of
Contemporary
Naturalism**

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Abstract: The article emphasizes the materialist virtue at the core of what is held to be Spinoza's integral rationalism : namely, an epistemological position which entails both the disqualification of a transcendental ego, and the refutation of empiricism. In Spinoza's view, reason is the name of a collective disposition, so that the rationalist program concerning the constitution of a human life "under the conduct of Reason" has decisive political consequences. The disqualification of a philosophy of finitude, as well as the constitution of a logical, non-solipsist subjectivity, together with an original, immanentist theorizing of anthropological specificity, makes Spinoza's philosophy a powerful conceptual antidote against the manifold manifestations of contemporary naturalism : that is, a form of continuism whose defenders are fascinated by what Spinoza called the fictions of imagination, as for instance the postulation that "trees do speak" (*arbores loqui*).

Keywords: rationalism, materialism, Spinoza, naturalism

The aim of this article is to underline the main trends that constitute a particular notion of materialism at stake in Spinoza's philosophy, which I shall call *rationalist materialism*. Rationalist materialism represents, in my view, an original, elaborated form of materialism, neither reductive nor physicalist, since it cannot be separated from radical rationalism, that is, a theory of rational knowledge disconnected from a knowing subject, and coupled with a theory of the intelligibility of the infinite.

It is grounded, I shall argue, upon the following axioms:

First, *the notion of thought without a subject* (following Althusser's terminology), directly implied by the "*veritas norma sui et falsi*" epistemological model (E II, Prop. 43, sc).¹ This model entails that the Subject of thinking is erased from Spinoza's theory of knowledge, as comes out from the celebrated critique of the Cartesian, metaphysical Ego.

Second, *the disqualification of a philosophy of finitude*, which is the ontological doublet of Spinoza's constant opposition to any form of empiricism. These are the immediate consequences of the *sub specie aeternitatis* inscription of the third kind of knowledge, which yields the disconcerting postulate of a partial independency of the mind with regard

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1 Abbreviations used to quote the text of Spinoza's *Ethics*. E II, Prop. 43 Sc : Ethics, Part II, Proposition 43 Scholium. Definition: Def ; Axiom : Ax ; Proposition : Prop ; Corollary : Coroll ; Scholium : sc. Demonstration : Dem.

The *Treatise on the Emendation of the intellect* is abbreviated TEI, the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* is abbreviated TTP.

to the actual existence of the body (its existence in time) through the “*Amor Dei intellectualis*” dispositive.

Third, following from such a metaphysical and ethical dispositive (“*sentimus, experimurque nos aeternos esse*” (EV, Prop. 23, sc), *the unprecedented concept of a logical, subjected subjectivity*, referring, not to some constituent, transcendental Ego, but rather to a constituted subject within and throughout the rational norm of demonstration. Then arises the paradoxical, mathematical Self, as opposed to the model of an immediate and originary reflexivity, a Self whose desire gets orientated the knowledge of the infinite: “*Mentis oculi sunt ipsae demonstrationes*”. (EV, Prop. 23, sc).

My general claim in this study is to shed a new light on the powerful ethical *and* political liberation that is involved in such a non-idealist, integral rationalism, in so far as the latter allows for the emergence of a collective intelligence, opposed to the solipsist figure of the Ego, or even to the notion of some individual, atomic ipseity. The scope of a “human liberty” at stake in the fifth part of the *Ethics*, is the collective developing of the *conatus intelligendi*, and the reconfiguration of affectivity toward the universal, *Amor Dei intellectualis*, the universal of reason conceived through an immanentist frame. Liberty defined as a common, collective life under the conduct of Reason (disconnected from any form of transcendence), is the necessary correlate of Spinoza’s rationalism, in which the representation of free life under the conduct of reason cannot be dissociated from the thesis that “nothing is more useful to man than man” (E IV, Prop. 18 sc), far from the antagonisms and concurrences between singular-orientated affects. In that respect, Spinoza should not be seen as the “philosopher of the affect”, even less as the “philosopher of the body”, but rather as this radical rationalist whose metaphysical and epistemological theory offer the strategic elements for a pungent critique of contemporary forms of naturalism and sensibilism, i.e., this philosophical trend that denies any distinction between thinking and sensibility and promotes a continuist insight about human condition and history.²

To put it in a terminology borrowed from A. Badiou, Spinoza, the intempestive Spinoza, is the philosopher whose intransigent praise for the liberatory power of truth, a demonstrative truth, gives us a precious help to eschew the multiple contemporary manifestations of the philosophy of finitude; a philosophy of finitude omnipresent today,

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²This sensiblist trend is so overwhelming today that it would be meaningless to attempt to give a complete panorama of its representatives. Let us simply remark that it comprehends a large theoretical rank of very different philosophers, from Peter Singer to Emmanuele Coccia, all of them obsessed with the denunciation of what they call after J. Derrida ‘metaphysical humanism’, and constantly attached to vilipend what would be the dreadful insight of Cartesian dualism.

which seems to yield political resignation, and the renunciation to the philosophical, human desire of truth, whose emancipatory power is yet at the heart of the *Ethica, ordine geometrico demonstrata*.

**I Spinoza's radical antipsychologism:
Thought as a process without a subject, in the general
framework of anti-empiricism.**

Let us start from the classical representation of Spinoza's anti-cartesianism, implied by the radical critique of egology propounded in the *Ethics*. The opposition between Spinoza and Descartes is a well-known one, in the French tradition of the philosophy of concept.

Jean Cavailles, at the end of *Sur la logique et la théorie de la science*, had re-validated Spinoza's heritage, pointing out that his own, non-Husserlian theory of thought needed the developing of a "philosophy of the concept", as opposed to a "philosophy of consciousness".³ As regards Althusser, whose philosophy was deeply rooted in this tradition of French epistemology (from Cavailles to Bachelard and Canguilhem), he had stressed, from *Psychoanalysis and the Human Sciences* (1963-1964) up to *Essays in Self-Criticism* (1974), the materialist, i.e., anti-idealist virtue of the Spinozistic theory of truth, in so far as the latter conveyed both anti-idealism and anti-empiricism. Althusser had enlightened the famous theory of "*veritas norma sui et falsi*" by his own concept of "epistemological break". In Spinoza's view, the autonomy of the concatenation of adequate ideas, that "involve by themselves affirmation and negation" (E II, Prop. 48 and Prop. 49 sc) entailed, both the eviction of the Cartesian notion of a Subject of judgment, i. e. the subject of truth supposedly required for the discrimination between true ideas and false ideas, and the disqualification of any empiricist view about the origin of ideas.

As concerns the first point, which has been understood as the main, obvious opposition of Spinoza's epistemology against what would be the Cartesian philosophy of subject and representation, it is useful to remind the way Althusser had insisted upon the Spinozistic dissociation between knowledge and "representation": an internal representation which, as it is the case in the third *Meditation* of Descartes's *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, would reduce the ideas to images in the mind, and make depend their truth value on the jurisdiction of an Ego, a knowing subject. Focusing his attention on the striking comparative established in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (TEI §§ 30-32), between the process of knowledge and the technical production (the model of the hammer which is "always already given", just as the "idea vera" itself), Althusser thus wrote:

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³ Cavailles, Jean, *Sur la logique et la théorie de la science* [1947] re-ed. Paris, Vrin, 2008.

“In affirming that “what is true is the sign of itself and of what is false”, Spinoza avoided any problematic which depended on a “*criterion of truth*”. (...) Once he has set aside the (idealist) temptations of a theory of knowledge, Spinoza then says that “what is true” identifies itself, not as a Presence, but as a Product, in the double sense of the term “product” (*result* of the work of a process which “*discovers*” it), as it emerges in its own production”.⁴

Particularly striking is, on that matter, Althusser's reading of the Spinozistic understanding of the “*idea vera*” (TEI, § 33: “indeed, we have a true idea”, “*habemus enim ideam veram*”), a true idea which is disconnected from any idealist questioning about its very origin by virtue of its inscription in the infinite and necessary concatenation of adequate ideas, in the *De Intellectus Emendatione*, since “indeed, we have a true idea”.⁵

The very notion of a process without subject would then have emerged in the context of the extraordinary refutation Spinoza had propounded of the Cartesian Ego, which had led to this radically new theorization of a rational knowledge without a knowing subject. In other words, Spinoza's immanentist theory of truth, which is reformulated in the *Ethics* with the “*veritas norma sui, et falsi*” model (E II, Prop. 43, sc), conceives the dividing line between true and false as a procedure taking place within the knowledge process itself, and not as an external opposition of error and truth resulting from the operations of a “subject of judgment”. In that respect, Spinoza disqualifies in a crucial way the Cartesian subject, namely the “subject of truth”.

Althusser, in *Psychoanalysis and the Human Sciences* (1962-1963), had already drawn the attention upon what he called “the criticism that Spinoza makes precisely of the Cartesian *cogito*, of this ego that appears at the center of the cogito”, that is “Spinoza's abandonment of the subject of objectivity as the condition of possibility of any affirmation of truth”. Such a criticism would have been absolutely strategic in the history of philosophy, for it implied a totally new theory of the mind, which would have been cancelled for centuries⁶. This revolutionary attack against Descartes, i.e. against the philosophical category of “*cogito*”, disqualified in advance the “classical” idealism in philosophy and theory of knowledge. Knowledge is some kind of production, requiring no origin, no end, no subject, and the theory of science is independent from the notion of a transcendental Ego.

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4 Althusser 1976, p. 137.

5 See Althusser 1976, p. 115.

6 Althusser 2016, p. 79.

In that respect, Spinoza's heritage appears really central in the way the rationalist and formalist trend will oppose the legacy of (Husserlian) phenomenology in the field of French philosophy: an opposition of which the critique of Husserl's theory of science by Cavailles is paradigmatic, as Knox Peden has clearly established.⁷

One must insist on the fact that this reception of Spinoza's theory of science in the field of French epistemology (from Cavailles to Althusser), which leads to the portrait of Spinoza as the radically anti-Cartesian philosopher, is closely related to a general anti-empiricist perspective constantly asserted by Althusser, for example, in his theoretical program of reconstructing Marx's latent philosophy, the philosophy of *Capital*, such as it is developed in *Reading Capital* (1965). Indeed, radical anti-empiricism appears to be the other absolutely crucial consequence of Spinoza's claim about the very *reality* of ideas, their definition as *entia*, carrying their own truth value (affirmation and negation) in so far as they are inscribed in the infinite process, and are therefore irreducible to images or representations.

First, one must notice that when in *the Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (TEI §§ 31 and 32), Spinoza settles the immanent and intrinsic necessity of the process of knowledge against the trap of an infinite regression about the origin of knowledge and truth, he explicitly advocates what he calls the "native force of the intellect", using the vocabulary of "*innata instrumenta*" to express the immanent power of true ideas. Such a particular inneism, which departs from Descartes in so far as it is connected to the topic of the "spiritual automaton", is nevertheless the conceptual mark of a radical rationalism that proceeds from the logical distinction between *idea* and *ideatum*, between formal essence, i.e., the idea considered qua *cogitandi modus*, a mode of Thought, and objective essence, i.e., the object which is known through the idea, its referential property (see TEI, § 33). In the *Ethics*, this logical distinction is intertwined with the refutation of a pictural conception of thought: the *ideas* are defined, not as images, representations in the mind or mimetic reproductions of external objects, rather as *concepts, the concepts of Thought* (E II, Prop. 48 sc.). "*Non enim per ideas imagines, quales in fundo oculi, et, si placet, in medio cerebro formantur, sed Cogitationis conceptus intelligo*". Here, the disqualification of a philosophy of representation (cf. the distinction between "*cogitatio*" and "*pictura*"), appears to be a necessary correlate of the rationalist definition of truth as *adaequatio*, based upon the formal, intrinsic properties of the ideas, the ideas

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7 On this very topic of Spinoza's rationalism, and its heritage within French philosophy in the 20 century (the philosophy of the concept against the philosophy of consciousness), see Knox Peden's decisive book, *Spinoza contra Phenomenology. French Rationalism from Cavailles to Deleuze* (cf. in particular ch. 3, "Spinoza Contra Descartes").

considered “*sine relatione ad objectum*”, independently from their relation to the object (E II, def. 4).

In the TIE, this anti-empiricist theory of truth (which warrants correspondence upon adequation, the intrinsic properties of true ideas), is asserted through the following, remarkable formula:

“*aliud est circulus, aliud idea circuli*”: other is the circle, other is the idea of the circle” (TEI, § 33). The entire sentence goes this way: “*Idea enim circuli non est aliquid, habens peripheriam et centrum, uti circulus, nec idea corporis est ipsum corpus; et cum sit quid diversum a suo ideato* »). The logical autonomy of the idea, as concept, the fact that “the idea of the circle is not something having a circumference and a center”, comes from the very reality of ideas, which allows for an intrinsic distinction between true and false ideas (TIE, § 69: “() il y a dans les idées vraies quelque chose de réel, par quoi les vraies se distinguent des fausses”. “*Unde sequitur, in ideis dari aliquid reale, per quod verae a falsis distinguuntur*”). This means that Spinoza’s emphasis upon the intrinsic criteria of the *idea adaequata*, at the heart of his theory of truth as “*norma sui et falsi*”, strategically involves the rationalist claim that the idea adaequata is a *reality (res)* per se, with its own logical efficiency, and is not an image or a representation “in the mind”, in clear opposition to Descartes’s internalism.

It should be noticed therefore that Spinoza’s externalism (ideas are not “in the mind”, for they are not mental images), namely the disqualification of a philosophy of representation, and its Cartesian-idealist version, is grounded upon an explicit duality between the idea, the concept in the element of thought, in the one hand, and the objects known through the concept, on the other hand.

As a matter of fact, this logical duality between concept and object, i.e. the logical autonomy of thought, which represents the kernel of Spinoza’s anti-empiricist, externalist move, also happens to be central in Althusser’s reconstruction of Marx’s philosophy, and would constitute the epistemological basis of historical materialism in *Capital*.

In *Reading Capital*, ch. IV, dedicated to “The object of *Capital*”, on the occasion of the examination of the “theory of scientific practice” involved in Marx’s *Introduction (1857)* to the *Contribution to the Critique of Classical political Economics*, Althusser unequivocally asserts the *distinction between thought and real*, as a central thesis of Marx’s “Discourse on the Method”. This thesis, together with the thesis of the primacy of the real, is constitutive of Marxist epistemology, opposed to speculative idealism and to empiricism as well.

Althusser thus precises the terms of the logical independency of thought, or knowledge process, i.e. “the materialist thesis of the specificity of thought and of the thought process, with respect to the real and the real process”. Such a rationalist-materialist epistemology (since the autonomy of thought is coupled with the primacy of the real, against

any form of correlationism), explicitly entails that “Thought about the real, the conception of the real, and all the operations of thought by which the real is thought and conceived, belong to the order of thought”.⁸

This latter characterization of the specificity of the “order of thought” is directly inscribed in the filiation of Spinoza's doctrine about the causal autonomy of the attribute of Thought, as it is established in the *Ethics* (E II, Prop. 1; E II, Prop. 7 sc), and as it was already directly asserted was already asserted in the TRE, when “the form of true thought” was defined as being independent from its “object” (TEI, § 71).

One could conclude that the epistemology of historical materialism in Althusser's reading of Marx revendicates Spinozistic premises, particularly as far as the distinction between “the object of knowledge” and ‘the real object’ is concerned. This Spinozistic legacy at work in Althusser's reconsideration of Marxist theory of science, in return, puts a new light on what is at the very center of the peculiar type of materialism (the eviction of an idealist theory of knowledge founded upon the hypothesis of an ego, a thinking constituent ego) that would have been invented in the system of the *Ethics*. Namely, such a materialism is directly linked with a theory of thought, and knowledge process, which constitutes the deepest disqualification of empiricism, as appears from the decisive claim of the independence of “the object of knowledge” with regard to the “real object”. As a consequence, if Spinoza, with the insight according to which “the concept “dog” cannot bark”, in Althusser's reformulation, helps us to resist “empiricist temptation”⁹ within the very field of historical materialism, one has to admit that the peculiar materialism at stake in Spinoza's philosophy derives its theoretical fecundity from rationalism, integral rationalism. Which could mean that this singular materialism, rationalist materialism, since it requires the logical duality between thought and real, formal essence and objective essence, and still more particularly between “cogitation” and “extension”, implies a form of paradoxical dualism, *concept dualism*. Even though, it must be added, Althusser himself never sustained such an interpretation of Spinozism in the terms of concept dualism.

II The difficult problem: concept dualism without substance dualism

I shall move now in direction of a difficult point at the heart of early-modern philosophy, namely the over-determined concept of “dualism”, which contrives us to examine the complex relationship between Spinoza and Descartes (especially Descartes's rationalism).

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8 Althusser 2015, “The object of *Capital*”, ch. 3, p. 177.

9 Althusser 2015, “The object of *Capital*”, ch. 4, p. 192.

In general, I will defend the thesis that even though ontological dualism is of course totally cancelled from Spinoza's ontology, the case is quite different for concept dualism, for the latter results from the claim of an epistemological distinction between thought and extension which was already at the heart of Descartes' s re-elaboration of Galilean new science. In other words, I will sketch out in this section some elements that may erode the classical opposition between Descartes and Spinoza. The reason of this requalification of the Spinoza-Descartes relationship lies in the particular influence that Descartes's rationalism has played in Spinoza's refutation of empiricism. This general survey of the Spinoza-Descartes debate is not orientated towards an exegetic issue about the history of early-modern philosophy. It is rather conceived as serving a reflection about the contemporary issues at stake in Spinoza's rationalism, in so far as such a rationalism may help us to reactivate, in my view, a sharp conceptual distinction between thought and "sensibility", without reactivating, one may say, the idealist version of a philosophy of subject (intended as the constituent subject, the transcendental Ego).

This conceptual distinction, which lies at the principle of the definition of the "*specificity of thought*" (according to Althusser's terminology), is obsessively denied or just forgotten by contemporary dominant naturalism. By naturalism, I understand this philosophical theory that postulates the ontological immersion of mankind in a so-called "nature", erases then the representation of any anthropological caesura, and thus also denies the epistemological specificity of human sciences (the social sciences) with regard to natural sciences. The naturalist overwhelming contemporary trend is then conducted to dissolve the very conditions of the humanization process (that is, to put it very briefly, language, conceptual thought, and the existence in an always-already given social order), obliterating the very specificity of the symbolic order. This sort of naturalism, that can also be called 'sensibilism'¹⁰, seems to constitute a renewing of the double myth of *homo oeconomicus* and *homo psychologicus*, under the contemporary figure of *homo biologicus*; as such, it may be considered as conveying reactionary postulates against which Spinoza's rationalist materialism represents a crucial antidote. To put it in other words, Spinoza may be a precious ally in the necessity today to struggle against the reactivation of the psychologist ideology that Althusser had already sharply criticized in his time, when he attacked the Condillacian model, that happened to claim a continuity between nature and culture, in the general framework of the sensualist theorizing of child development:¹¹ a psychologist

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10 Cf. Introduction, note 2.
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11 See Althusser 2015, 2 conference, pp. 50-60. Althusser's criticism is specially orientated against the Condillacian pedagogy of XVIIIth century, whose philosophical postulates, concerning the acqui-

ideology derived from empiricist premises, that govern more than ever the contemporary many-fold manifestations of evolutionism and continuism.

Let us precise right from the beginning that such a concept dualism, when referred to Spinoza, has a meaning which is exclusively epistemological, and must be understood in a critical, negative way.

Indeed, Spinoza's re-configuration of the concept of substance, in the first part of the *Ethics*, strategically implies the disconnection of the concept of substance from the concept of individual; which means that Spinoza's philosophy cannot leave place for any sort of substance dualism, by definition. André Pessel, in his recent remarkable book, *Dans l'Éthique de Spinoza*¹², has demonstrated that Spinoza's substitution of the concept of power (*potentia*) to the classical concept of substance entails the developing of an ontology of the "integration to the infinite" (une "*intégration à l'infini*"), the integration of the "finite" to the infinite, through the original conceiving of the relationship between mode (*in alio esse*) and substance. The "realism of the infinite" should then be taken as the main feature of this ontology, which entails the constitution of plural types of infinite: from substance itself (since the concept of substance gets linked with a concept of the infinite rationally grasped, as it is shown in Letter 12), to the infinite attributes (the *infinita attributa*), and the infinite modes. The disqualification of the thesis of an ontological cesura between the finite and the infinite involves as its necessary theoretical correlate the eviction of any ontological dualism. Furthermore, substance being conceived as an infinite causal nexus, as some "*structural causality*", cannot be reduced, nor to expressive causality, nor to mechanical causality.¹³ This point suggests that Spinoza's reform of the concept of causality, through the notion of a non-finalist *potentia*, which exhausts itself, without any remainder, in the efficient production of its effects, leads to a philosophy of immanence (the famous '*causa immanens, non vero transiens*', employed to define God's causality in E I, Prop. 18) devoid from any pantheism or vitalism.

In that respect, one must insist once more on the exclusive epistemological issue of what I call here concept dualism, i.e., the thesis of the reciprocal logical independence between the two attributes, Thought and Extension, whose logical duality, Spinoza argues against Descartes' s view, entails no sort of ontological duality, a duality between

sition of language for instance, are the notion of the "individual" subject of needs, and the continuity nature-culture articulated upon a misleading "'biology-culture' vector" (p. 59). A schema which is precisely contested by modern linguistics and Lacan's theory of symbolic order praised by Althusser in *Psychoanalysis and the Human sciences*, as constituting the adequate theoretical basis for the rethinking of the specific scientificity human sciences.

12 Pessel 2018, especially ch. 3.

13 On this topic of structural causality, see Althusser 2015, and Balibar 2018 (on the "transindividual"). Althusser's concept of structural causality (borrowed to Spinoza and Lacan, and applied to Marx's theory) plays a central role in Pessel's reading of the *Ethics*.

substances, since the very concept of finite substances gets annihilated in the ontology of the *Ethics*, which operates a crucial linking between the concept of substance and the concept of infinite, in the context of a mathematization of the infinite that appears to take its start in Spinoza's philosophy (before its achievement in Leibniz's work).

Hence, *concept dualism* strictly intended in this strict epistemological frame admits no inscription in the field of ontology, against Descartes's deduction of a "real distinction" between substances, namely between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, from the epistemic modern claim of the mutual logical independence between thought and extension. But it is particularly striking to notice that Spinoza's explicit refutation of Cartesian substance dualism is built upon theoretical premises (the *conceptual duality* between the two attributes, thought and extension) which are precisely Cartesian premises.

Thus goes for example the beginning of E I, Prop. 10 sc:

"Ex his apparet, quod, quamvis duo attributa realiter distincta concipiuntur, hoc est, unum sine opus alterius, non possumus tamen inde concludere, ipsa duo entia, sive duas diversas substantias constituere". "Although two attributes are conceived as really distinct, that is, one without the help of the other, we cannot yet conclude from this distinction that they constitute two beings, or two different substances".¹⁴

The unique function of concept dualism then ("*duo attributa realiter distincta concipiuntur*", Spinoza writes) appears to lie in the radical critique of empiricism that directly follows from such a paradoxical dualism: that is, a dualism without an ontological correlate, since Spinoza propounds a crucial reformulation of the concept of substance, defined as "*substantia unica et infinita*", which gets linked to the concept of the infinite.

We are confronted, at that point, to the complexity and ambivalence of Spinoza's relationship to Descartes's philosophy, singularly to Descartes's rationalism.

Indeed, to the "Spinoza contra Descartes" model, which has been codified in French philosophy to account for the antagonism between rationalism (philosophy of the concept) on the one hand and phenomenology on the other hand,¹⁵ we are led to substitute the more

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¹⁴ I translate from the Latin original text. From now on, it will be the case for all the quotations of Spinoza's texts.

¹⁵ On the constitution of this « Spinoza contra Descartes » model in French philosophy, particularly at stake in the "Alquié-Gueroult" quarrel, cf. the accurate investigation by Knox Peden, 2014, ch. 2, pp. 65-93.

disconcerting model of “Spinoza with and against Descartes”. To put it briefly, our general insight would be that Spinoza’s rationalism is borrowed from Descartes’s, that it gets maximized, extended to the paradoxical point of an infinite knowledge : extended to the point that it gives place to the materialist view about a knowledge without a subject, and gets eventually redirected against Descartes himself, that is against the Cartesian ego, and against substance dualism, but also against Descartes’ limitations in the field of rational knowledge (cf. the topic of *the infinite* and the possibility of its rational, mathematical grasp).

Far from the dominant reading of a frontal antagonism Spinoza-Descartes, it should then be admitted that, even though the *cogito* thesis and substance dualism are discarded from Spinoza’s ontology and epistemology, it shouldn’t be inferred that the latter would lead to some metaphysical ‘monism’, neither to some sort of eliminativism as regards the very concept of subject.

As regards the *textual occurrences of concept dualism in Spinoza’s work*, apart from the remarkable scholium of E 1 Prop. 10 just quoted, we may mention, in the *Ethics*, the refutation of the definition of ideas in term of physical images (*picturae in tabula*, see E II, Prop. 43 sc, and E II, Prop. 49 sc) implied by their characterization as concepts (E II, Def. 3). We may refer as well (among other passages) to the Preface of EV, in which the sharp dismissal of Descartes’s solution to the Mind-Body problem, namely psycho-physical interactionism and the claim of a cerebral inscription of the soul, appears to be built upon the revindication of this logical distinction between thought and extension, and consequently between mind and body. Such a logical distinction was already at the core of Spinoza’s so-called “parallelism” (consisting fundamentally in the refusal of any causal interference between the two attributes, Thought and Extension, see E II, Prop. 7 sc and E III Prop. 2). As Spinoza reminds at the end of the Preface of EV, in order to sustain his philosophical indignation concerning Descartes’ “occult hypothesis” about voluntary movement and the neuro-psychological postulate of the pineal gland, “whereas there is no relationship between will and movement, there is no comparison either between the power or forces of the Mind, and the power or forces of the Body”.

In the end, it seems necessary to recall, standing at the core of Spinoza’s *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (§ 33 : “*Idea enim circuli non est aliquid, habens peripheriam et centrum, uti circulus, nec idea corporis est ipsum corpus ; et cum sit quid diversum a suo ideato* »), the fundamental rationalist distinction between the *idea* (considered through its formal essence, as *cogitandi modus*), and its *ideatum*, its object (the objective essence), a distinction grounding the logical autonomy of the knowledge process. It is quite remarkable that, on this very occasion, Spinoza draws the thesis of the *conceptual* distinction between mind and body (“*nec idea corporis est ipsum corpus*”, “nor is the

idea the body itself”), as a consequence of his rationalist epistemology: “*other is the circle, other is the idea of the circle*”, other is the body, other is the idea of the body (i.e. the mind, the *mens humana*), even though no form of ontological duality between mind and body, that is between the idea and the object of this idea, might be admitted in Spinoza’s view. In a quite puzzling way, Spinoza, on the topic of mind-body relationship, sustains the claim that they *are both one* (they are one and the same individual, E II, Prop. 21 sc) *and two* (a duality derived from the logical duality between formal essence and objective essence). This latter claim happens to be, quite significantly, very far from any supposed “monist” insight which has been so often attributed to Spinoza’s ontology. In my view, the effective materialist charge of Spinoza’s philosophy does not consist in this so-called “monism”, but rather, much more strategically, in the re-formulation of the theory of thought and knowledge emancipated from correlationism (the subject-object dispositive), as well as from empiricism, and from the idealist notion of a transcendental Ego.

As a consequence, it may appear from this study of Spinoza’s epistemology that the real opposition between Spinoza and Descartes lies, not in the refutation (not quite univocal) of dualism, nor in the so-called rehabilitation of affectivity, nor in a “philosophy of affect”, nor in a “philosophy of body” resulting from a doubtful monist perspective. Rather, and more important, it first consists in the refutation of a “subject of knowledge”, a “subject of truth”, together with the dismissal of empiricism.

Yet, there is a place left for some sort of paradoxical reflexivity: a constituted, logical subject, as appears from the reading of the fifth part of the *Ethics*, starting from EV, Prop. 23, with the theorizing of an infinite rational knowledge *sub specie aeternitatis*, under the conceptual aspect of eternity, which entails the partial eternity of the *mens*.

III Sub specie aeternitatis: the philosophical disqualification of finitude, the paradoxical notion of a logical subjectivity and the constitution of humanity in the third kind of knowledge.

“*Sentimus experimurque nos aeternos esse*”: “we feel and experience that we are eternal”.

This celebrated formula in EV Prop. 23 scholium finds its location within the theoretical context of Spinoza’s definition of the third kind of knowledge, the *scientia intuitiva*. The “intuitive science”, coupled with the extraordinary axiom according to which “*demonstrations are the mind’s eyes*”,¹⁶ does not engage any return to some nebulous mysticism, that would involve some supra-rational, or irrational, type of thought. Rather, the term “intuitive” here at stake happens to refer to the particular status

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16 EV, Prop. 23 sc : *Mentis enim oculi, quibus res videt, observatque, sunt ipsae demonstrationes*”.

of rational, mathematized knowledge when it becomes a knowledge of the infinite, that is of the infinite causal order, *connexio rerum*. The cognitive model remains a *deductive* one (from the knowledge of the adequate idea of the formal essence of God's attributes to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things, as it is defined in E II Prop. 40, sc 2), which corresponds to the intellectual grasping of the integration of the finite within the infinite. This point is made particularly clear with the terminological recourse to the "demonstrations" in order to qualify the thought procedures in the third kind of knowledge. The demonstrative procedures are extended to the knowing of the causal structures that constitute the infinite, and they are identified with 'the mind's eyes'. This point has to be related, it may seem, to the ontological correlate of this supreme type of knowledge, the *sub specie aeternitatis* framework. The "intuitive" grasping of demonstrations, of deductive infinite concatenations, would refer to the decisive emancipation of thought and knowledge with regard to time and even duration. Time, in Spinoza's ontology, is the correlate of imagination. The emancipation, even fragmentary, from the imaginary dimension of time is thus allowed by the developing of the maximized rational knowledge that constitutes the *scientia intuitiva*, the access to the infinite causal nexus "*uno intuitu*", that is in the element of instantaneity, or "eternity", to be distinguished from immortality or sempiternity.¹⁷ Eternity, in that respect, is necessarily correlated to rational, logical activity, even though, in Spinoza's terms, it may concern only a "part" of the mind, and not the mind considered as an individual.

Important consequences follow from this rationalist account of supreme knowledge, conceived through the model of mathematical activity, since it is the nature of reason to "contemplate things" as necessary, i.e., as eternal, in Spinoza's conceptual dispositive, eternity being the other name of necessity (E II, Prop. 44 and Coroll).

First, this original, non-reductive materialism entails a *decisive critique of the philosophical category of finitude*.

I shall not develop this crucial point, at stake in the previously mentioned formula, "*demonstrations are the mind's eyes*", in EV, Prop. 23, Scholium, a formula which is juxtaposed, in this very Scholium, with another striking statement "*sentimus, experimurque, nos aeternos esse*", "We feel and experience that we are eternal". I will simply suggest in the framework of this study that the epistemic dispositive of the third kind of knowledge, based upon the "ontology of the infinite" mentioned in the first section, operates a crucial intertwining between rational activity, and the question of existence, and even affectivity. An intertwining which implies a re-configuration of desire, whose object is now the infinite considered through its structural intelligibility: such a re-configuration is the very issue of the "*Amor Dei intellectualis*" in EV. This reconfiguration which allows

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17 On this point and this important conceptual distinction, See Moreau 1994.

for the existential meaning of the *scientia intuitiva* might be understood as the ultimate consecution of what had been posited as an ethical axiom, in the Appendix of the first part of the *Ethics*, when it was asserted that men would have remained for ever under the servitude of the illusions of imagination, if it had not been for the very factuality of “mathematics” (mathesis), that alone shows the way of an integrally rationalist, immanent *salvation* : an exceptional exit from the tyranny of imagination, and its cohort of alienating devices, such as ignorance and death. If the work of rationality may be developed and extended to its maximal point, i.e. the deductive knowledge of the third kind, if, consequently, “a free man does not think about death” (see E IV, Prop. 67 sc), it is the whole rank of manifestations of human finitude that might be then reduced by the immanent virtue of mathematics, in so far as mathematics shows in itself “the norm of truth”. This ethical wager, which annihilates the very postulates of a philosophy of finitude, and shows a collective way of emancipation, cannot be separated from radical rationalism.

The *sub specie aeternitatis*, logical existence, in the third kind of knowledge, entails that the existence in time, relative to the actual existence of the body within the context of duration (“*durante corpore*”, EV, Prop. 23 dem) is not a necessary horizon. This latter horizon can be overstepped, as far as the human mind is considered through its essential determination, namely the effort to understand rationally, *conatus intelligendi*, is concerned. We are therefore confronted to the postulation of the infinite of thought, by which the *mens humana* may develop its specific intellective power, beyond the temporal, finite condition of mortality, ignorance and intellectual limitation. This movement beyond finitude and the alienation devices of the imaginary, in the very course of infinite “demonstrations”, which means an obstinate labour of Reason (very far from the Revelation model) may lead the *mind*, the *mens humana*, to some sort of (even partial) eternity, *sub specie aeternitatis* (EV, Prop. 23 sc, EV, Prop. 29, dem and sc). The apparent paradox here at stake is that such an eternity is said to be “partial”, since Spinoza establishes a ratio of direct proportionality between the series of adequate ideas, and the degree of eternity in the mind – which, of course, underlines the theoretical gap between this logical eternity of the mind, and the religious schema of an individual immortality of the soul.

One could ask what is left, then, of the mind, when it is re-configured in the third kind of knowledge as this paradoxical and partial eternal “self”, since it is made mention of the “*part*” of the mind (“*ejus pars*”) which remains, proportionated to its degree of activity in the adequate knowledge.¹⁸ A self whose constructed reflexivity needs the

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18 EV, Prop. 38 Dem : “(...) *quo igitur Mens plures res cognoscit secundo, et tertio cognitionis genere, eo major ejus pars remanet (...)*”. “The more the Mind knows things by the second and the third kind of knowledge, the more extended is the part of it that remains”.

detour by the knowledge of God, the infinite substance, and requires the “consciousness” of its integration to the infinite intellect of God. This point sketches out the strange features of a “subjectivity” which is subjected to the infinite, according to the general ontology of the integration of the finite within the infinite: a subjectivity therefore irreducible to the idealist figure of an auto-sufficient, constituent knowledge. This original notion of the logical self, who has lost the features of its originary individuation, since it is no more related to the actual existence in time of its “object”, the body (it remains related only to the *eternal essence* of the body), constitutes a particular difficult claim among the many difficult claims that constitute the fifth part of the *Ethics*, and this study can offer no positive resolution of such a problem.

Nevertheless, it is possible to infer some negative lessons of such a difficult and yet decisive conceptual redefinition of the mind in the *sub specie aeternitatis* theory. In a few words, one may sustain the hypothesis that such a disconcerting definition of the mind as “a part of” and not as an “I”, opens the way to the conception of a logical subjectivation, in the very context of the Spinozistic move against Cartesian egology.¹⁹ The Self that happens to be constituted through the mathematical procedures of demonstrations, “*consciuis sui et Dei*” (E V, Prop. 31 sc), this logical self, is independent from the criteria of personal, psychological identity. Yet in Spinoza’s text, it is effectively alluded to this “subject effect” induced by the very work, through the *mens*, of infinite rational procedures. This could leave place, not to a mere cancellation of the subject question, that is, not to eliminativism about the subject, but to some sort of integrative, non-individualistic understanding of the subjectivation process (the *consciuis sui et Dei* process immanent to the third kind of knowledge), at the opposite of the substantial Ego of the *cogito*.

In that respect, it could be claimed in the last instance that, far from erasing any notion of “subject” in general, Spinoza’s philosophy, thanks to its rationalist inscription, provides the theoretical elements for an original conceptualization of subjectivity, intended through the very subordination of the *mens* to the logical procedures of demonstrations. In other words, the last part of the *Ethics* would propound an insight on subjectivity, a logical subjectivity, devoid of any debt to Cartesian idealism (the constituent Ego), and, *a fortiori*, extraneous to the ulterior line of phenomenology.

The geometrical Self, constituted by its subjection to truth, happens to be a fundamental issue of the anti-solipist rationalism developed in the *Ethics*. One could even make the conjecture that what Alain Badiou in *Vérité et sujet* calls the “radical reformulation of the category of subject” in the framework of a geometrical materialism built upon the concept of “*mathème*”, i. e., a non-reductionist materialism which assigns the

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19 On that topic, See Pessel, 2018, ch. 4, p. 75.

“subject effect” to a cause which is “the mathematization of the thinking of being”²⁰, recognizes Spinozistic premises.

Be that as it may, it is at least possible to argue from this brief reading of *Ethics V* that Spinoza’s view on the *scientia intuitiva* does not exactly fit with the picture Althusser had drawn of Spinoza as the precursor of the “process without a subject” theory, whose theory of thought and knowledge would provide in advance the unequivocal rejection of the concept of subject.

As we have just seen, the consequence of the logical “subject effect” theory in Spinoza’s system is the refutation of any solipsist defining of the self. Against the idealist notion of the “unity of the subject”, it appears to lead the unprecedented theorizing of an integrated *mens*, a collective “subject effect”, built upon the concept of “part” and of construction by parts. The claim that the largest *part* of the mind may become eternal makes conceivable the anthropological and political hypothesis of a collective construction (by integration) of a common *mens*, and by extension to the very construction of mankind through the procedures of free Reason²¹.

The political issues of the *potentia rationis* (the power of reason) defined as the essence of humanity, from ch. 4 of *Ethics IV* till the last pages in *Ethics V*, are numerous and determinant. They draw the lines of the constitution-production of collective intelligence, which also means the constitution-construction of humanity through the life under the conduct of Reason, since the life under Reason happens to be a collective life.²²

This *collective* dimension of the constitution of a “human nature” in the field of knowledge, initially postulated in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (§13), finds its crucial echo in the political (anti-Hobbesian) claim that life under a democratic State is aimed, not at domination, but at liberty understood as the *common* use of free Reason (*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, ch. 16-20). It is also at stake in the decisive concept of the “*convenientia*” between humans (a unique body, a unique *mens*): a covenant that can be constituted only through the immanent elaboration of a rational life (E IV, Prop. 18 sc).

Such an understanding of the constitution of a common rational life, a constitution directly related to the political and institutional imperative of *education*, may serve, in the last instance, a renewed, non-hierarchical conception of the anthropological distinction, the latter being understood as a constituted one, within the immanent process of collective reason, of the common *conatus intelligendi*. If humanity, according to Spinoza’s

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20 Cf. Badiou 1988, p. 252.

21 On this point, see Again Pessel, 2018, ch. 5, pp. 67-89.

22 See Antonio Negri, who correlates what he defines the materialist metaphysics of Spinoza, a “metaphysics of productive force”, to the constituent immanent power (*potentia*) of the multitude. Negri 1981.

philosophy of immanence, does not constitute per se “an empire within an empire”, it finds the means of its own construction and liberation from the servitude of the imaginary in the pursuit of its utility. Now utility, as regards humans, happens to be nothing else but a common life ‘under the own empire of Reason’. A rationalist content is then given to the statement: “nothing is more useful to man than man”, since the latter is said to be “the man led by reason”, according to E IV, ch. 9.

The liberation of humanity with regard to the numerous forms of servitude anchored in the imagination appears to be grounded upon what would be a politic of collective rational life; the “convenance”, according to E IV Prop. 18 sc, concerns the humans who pursue their own utility under the direction of reason, “*homines, qui ex ductu rationis suum utile quaerunt*”.

To conclude this study, we are allowed to see in Spinoza the philosopher of the “*potentia rationis*”, seen as a collective reason, rather than a philosopher of affectivity or body primacy. The analysis here propounded concerning concept dualism, antipsychologism, the critique of empiricism and the *sub specie aeternitatis* science, has led us to consider that Spinoza’s main contribution to a contemporary materialist view in the field of philosophy does not consist in an insight on affectivity that could be inscribed in the tradition of a reflexion upon the theoretical primacy of “the body”, intended as “*le corps propre*” (the “lived body”). As though Spinoza’s philosophy could be seen as some anticipation of an “a-subjective phenomenology” which would attempt to erase any form of “Cartesian” dualism, the way for example Merleau-Ponty tried to do. As a matter of fact, Spinoza’s insistence upon the liberatory power of “demonstrations”, mathematics and *dictamina rationis* is hardly compatible with the philosophical tradition of phenomenology.

Furthermore, as regards the contemporary issues at stake in what we hold to be Spinoza’s rationalist philosophy of immanence, we find, against the overwhelming tendency to continuism and evolutionism today, a remarkable and very precious defence of the anthropological caesura: a conceptual one, that is, emancipated from substance dualism and from a hierarchic conception of the specificity of humanity. If humanity does not constitute “an empire in an empire”, it must be yet seen as taken into the process of its own, political construction and *production*. A political production indissociable from a humanization process which corresponds to the very immanent production of rational, mathematized knowledge.

The philosophical lesson of this Spinozistic conception of anthropological cesura eventually reduces to the rank of fantasmatic products of imagination, and ‘vague experience’, the representations of what could be called “antispecism” ante litteram. Indeed, in his *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (§ 58), Spinoza had underlined the fictitious dimension of the representation of “speaking trees” (“*arbores loqui*”) which has nowadays infiltrated a large part of “sensibilist”

philosophy. But to imagine that trees do speak is in reality nothing else than being subjected to this form of superstition which postulates that nature is driven in the same delirium as men living under the conduct of imagination:

“Sed, uti diximus, quo minus homines norunt Naturam, eo facilius multa possunt fingere; veluti, arbores loqui, homines in momento mutari in lapides, in fontes, apparere in speculis spectra, nihil fieri aliquid, etiam Deos in bestias et homines mutari, ac infinita ejus generis alia”.

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