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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Body as Means: Bodily Becoming Active in Spinoza's Ethics

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## Abstract

Gilles Deleuze once said that Spinoza's observation that "we do not know in advance what a body can do" should be read as a battle cry against the philosophical tradition which, since ancient times, has minimized the role of the body in the formation of knowledge. This article delves into the role of the body in Spinoza's Ethics by examining what I will call the inter-activity of the body. Commentators often interpret the activity as relating to the formation of rational thinking through so-called "common sense" ethics. However, in doing so, they often overlook the central role that the body plays in the process of becoming active. Thought, for Spinoza, always exists "among things", and as such must be interpreted according to the essential causal relation of the body. Action of thought; the activity of thinking must be understood as an expression of a more fundamental activity of the body if we are to be faithful to the implications of Spinoza's monistic ontology. The purpose of this article is therefore to show how physical activity is a necessary complement to spiritual activity in Ethics. In light of this, I will show in the final parts of my research, how the role of the body and the role in Spinoza's philosophy urge us to rethink not only the actions, but the work of thought in general.

**Keywords:** Spinoza, Ethics, Activity, Becoming Active, Body, Affectivity.

## 1. Introduction

The work called *Ethics*, written by Baruch Spinoza and published posthumously in 1677, aims to show how man can be freed from "the slavery of passions", and from vague and confused ideas. that these passions give rise, in order to attain a sure and adequate knowledge of things and thus true beatitude in the knowledge of God. Man is an emotional being, his actions and beliefs are the result of the various affects that govern him at a given moment. Spinoza distinguishes here between passive and active affects. He defines passive affects as those of which we are not an adequate cause – they arise from external causes of which we have only partially or not at all formed a clear idea. Active affects, on the other hand, are caused entirely by our own nature. To act entirely according to one's own nature, and not according to external causes, is to be active, and only to this extent can man be free.

Ethics in Spinoza should not be confused with morality, because it is not a question of establishing a series of rules of life or prohibitions. Ethics must rather be understood as an art of living or a technique where good and evil do not denote any transcendental moral value, but rather are defined according to the knowledge of what is useful and what is not for his own body.

Knowledge of what is truly beneficial for the body and what makes the individual grow in potential is what will ultimately free man from passive affects (what Spinoza calls the "slavery" of man). In this sense, Ethics can be seen as the formulation of an art of living or a practice. Ethical life then consists of maximizing the number of active affects and minimizing the number of passive affects. Not as a self-examination where evil is isolated and separated from good. Rather, Spinoza's ethical practice is about allowing that which is not yet understood, the passive,

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to emerge in a new light - an ethical transformation by which passivity through knowledge is transformed into activity. In the present study, this practice will be called "active-of-being". I chose the word becoming-active to distinguish it from individual active affects. Active and passive affects occur at the same time in humans and moreover in varying proportions in relation to each other. By becoming active, I therefore mean not only the increase, the proportion or the sum of active affects, but also the practice by which the individual is led to increase them. It is more than a simple comparative activity by which the experienced world is made rationally intelligible through what Spinoza calls "common concepts." Implicit is also a certain "opening" to experience, a mode of being which makes this experience appear in a new light. Becoming active should therefore not only be understood as a ratio but also as a practice.

Spinoza's understanding of man as body and soul is strictly monistic. This means that the body and the soul are "the same thing", understood more under the attribute of extension than under the attribute of thought. These attributes are in turn simple expressions of Substance or God (or Nature, *Deus sive nature*). The consequence of this monist ontology is that there can be no real causality between the body and the soul. On the contrary, they denote two different registers of a single body-mind process, rather than a real interaction between two different substances. Spinoza explains it as the soul being the "idea" of the body, and conversely that the body is the object of the soul.

Becoming active in this way, given Spinoza's monism, also has a corporeal correlate. So, should becoming active be understood only as a mental process, that is, exclusively through the formation of common concepts? Otherwise, can we talk about the activity of the body? How does this body that has become active relate to the soul? What does it mean to live an active body? By also giving active becoming a bodily meaning, we better understand the diverse and complex function that the body fulfills in *the Ethics*. By extension, this also means an understanding of Spinoza's ethical practice which gives it a broader anchoring in the individual both spiritually and corporeally. The purpose of this investigation is therefore to show how becoming active is a fundamentally embodied process. By "incarnated", we do not mean here the trivial meaning of the word, that is to say that it is always an incarnated individual. I mean that becoming active always involves the body at a more fundamental ontological level, as a

limit but also It is about establishing an active body as a correlate of the active soul. By adding this bodily dimension, we gain a broader and more multifaceted understanding of active becoming as an ethical practice of ethics.

Becoming active is usually presented as being primarily linked to the formation of common concepts, meaning that only through these can we achieve an adequate understanding of things. Becoming active would therefore be situated above all in the transition from insufficient knowledge to adequate knowledge, that is to say above all understood in terms of the progressive development of reason in the individual. Gilles Deleuze writes about common concepts that they are an "art",

*The very art of Ethics: the organization of good meetings, the composition of current relationships, the formation of forces, experimentation. Common concepts therefore have a decisive importance for the beginnings of philosophy (Deleuze, 1981, p. 119).*

Stuart Hampshire similarly believes that common concepts form the basis of all true reasoning and scientific knowledge: "Mathematics in general, and geometry in particular, is the science which Spinoza primarily had in mind as being entirely based on common concepts" (HAMPSHIRE, 2005, p. 80).

Deleuze, on the other hand, also seems to emphasize a corporeal dimension of common concepts that goes beyond a purely rational definition, when he writes: "Spinoza's common concepts are biological, rather than physical or mathematical, ideas." (DELEUZE, 1968, p. 278). By understanding that becoming active is both bodily and mental, we can understand how these two perspectives on common concepts can complement each other. In a shorter contextual part of this investigation, I will therefore briefly summarize what Spinoza means by adequate and inadequate ideas, as well as the role that common concepts play for adequate knowledge. Thus, in the remaining three parts of the article we will have a clearer idea of how becoming active, understood as the formation of common concepts, relates to the body.

The first part of the article focuses on what I will call here the "dynamic body" and how the various powers and abilities of this body relate to the abilities of the soul. The soul seems to stand in two relative relationships with the body. 1/The extent of one's perceptions is linked to the body's affective capacities; 2/The clarity of one's ability to understand (the ability to form common concepts) is relative to

the independence of the body. Pierre Zaoui believes that these are two incompatible paths towards activity in Spinoza. Either you choose the emotional body or you choose the independent soul <sup>1</sup>. In this part of the article, I will show how these two relationships between the body and the soul are in no way opposed, but on the contrary follow each other.

To better understand becoming-active or “activity” (*agere*) in Spinoza, we must distinguish it from what Spinoza calls “active actions” (*actiones*). In this investigation, I will show how activity in Spinoza can be understood as something more than a simple sum of adequate actions or ideas of the individual. In Spinoza, we must attribute to action a weaker meaning than to activity. Becoming active must be understood as an existential conversion, a passage from one mode of being to another, which involves the body both in its actuality and in its possibility. There are tendencies among certain commentators, for example Chantal Jaquet as well as the aforementioned Deleuze, not to separate these two meanings of “activity”. Many commentators, in my opinion, read Spinoza's activity too intellectually. The body is often interpreted exclusively as a source of error, rather than as a capacity or an active force (cf. JONATHAN, 1984, p. 178). The second part of the article therefore begins with a more in-depth examination of Spinoza's concept of activity in order to find out how we should actually understand the concept. Next comes the exposition of another central concept of *the Ethics*, namely the *conatus* or “effort”, to establish the link between what Spinoza calls the “power of action” and the “power of insight”.

Finally, to show how becoming active can be understood as a practice and not just as a rationality, I will show in the third part of the article how the active body is shaped in its affective interaction with the environment. Ultimately, this means that the full potential of the active body can only be released in its sociability – the body becomes more active the more it is part of the social body, as for example Susan James shows. The present investigation, however, considers the first stage of this more complex activity – becoming active is here examined at the individual level, although it ultimately serves to partially dissolve the concept of “individual” or “subject”. James' interpretation of the body also makes it far too reactive to its environment.

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Zaoui, “Spinoza: another salvation through the body?” », *Asterion*, 3 (2005), accessed November 16, 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/asterion/302>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/asterion.302>

Such an interpretation risks deepening the dualism that Spinoza is trying to overcome. The individual is not made up of an active soul and a reactive body (which reproduces the opposition between reason and passion). The soul and the body must be understood as united in their respective passivity and activity.

## 2. The Body, the Idea, the Human Soul

### 2.1 Adequate and Inadequate Ideas

Before beginning the article, it may be appropriate to clarify some of Spinoza's central concepts that relate to becoming active. Let's start with what Spinoza means by activity:

I say we are active (*Nos tum agere dico*) when something happens in us or outside us, of which we are an adequate cause, that is to say when, by our nature, something in us or outside us follows, which can clearly be understood only through this. But I say on the contrary that we are passive (*At contra nos pati dico*) when something happens in us or results from our nature, of which we are only a partial cause (Eth. III, Def. 2).

Becoming active seems first and foremost to be about becoming an adequate cause of what is happening inside or outside the body. But what do we mean by being an adequate cause? It is not a question of becoming a cause in the sense of a “physical” cause in a causal chain of events. Rather, we must understand with sufficient reason to form an adequate idea of what is happening. Moreover, Spinoza explains somewhat tautologically, an adequate idea is something that “has all the internal properties and characteristics of a true idea” (Eth. III, Def. 3). “Intrinsic characteristic” here means that the truth of an idea does not lie in any extrinsic conformity between an idea and its object. For this to become understandable, we must first clarify how the soul that forms the idea relates to the external world.

The soul only experiences the external world through the affections of the body (Eth. II, Prop 19). Any encounter with an external thing is therefore mediated by the body and the effect that this thing has on the body, and it is only by forming an idea of this effect (the affection of the body) that the soul can feel it. When the soul considers external things in this way, that is, through the ideas of the affections of the body, it imagines a thing as present, writes Spinoza. His “perceptions” contain no error in themselves because they strictly consider the affections of the body and not external things in any form. The soul is deceived

“only to the extent that it is considered to be in the absence of an idea which excludes the existence of the things which it imagines as present to it” (Eth. II, Prop 17). Adequate ideas and inadequate ideas are therefore the conceptions that the soul has of the affections of the body. The difference between them does not lie in any conformity with external things. Thought expresses for Spinoza, it does not describe. An adequate idea cannot be reduced to images or words. It is not a property but a relationship. To understand its deep meaning, and finally understand what characterizes an adequate idea (and therefore an activity) in Spinoza, we must examine what he calls “common concepts”.

## 2.2 Common Concepts

Spinoza distinguishes between “common concepts” (*notiones communes*) and “general concepts” (*notiones universals*). These relate to the distinction between adequate and inadequate ideas. General concepts are formed by relating the images of things as mediated by the affections of the body to a general characteristic, without first undergoing a comparative activity where the mutual concordances and contradictions between things are first taken into account. As such, they constitute insufficient ideas or knowledge:

*I expressly say that the human soul has no adequate knowledge of itself, nor of its body, nor of external bodies, but only a confused knowledge, whenever it perceives things in order: common of nature; by which I mean, all the times that it is determined externally by the fortuitous course of things to perceive this or that, and not all the times that it is determined internally, that is to say by the simultaneous intuition of several things, to understand their conveniences, their differences and their oppositions; because each time it is thus disposed internally in such and such a way, it sees things clearly and distinctly, as I will show presently. (Eth. II, Prop 29 scolia).*

As long as things are perceived according to the ordinary order of nature (*ex communi naturae ordine res percipit*), the soul imagines them only “at random” (*fortuito*) and elevates an arbitrary quality to a universal “essence” or “essence”. This is the transcendental error of philosophy, says Spinoza. Thought does not describe the hidden inner properties of things; it expresses the properties of things in their similarities and differences. When the soul thus forms ideas about things, that is, when it concentrates on their understanding (*intelligendum*) through comparative

activity, it forms common concepts about them. The difference between inadequate and adequate understanding is therefore presented in the passage above as the difference between simply “perceiving things” (*res percipendum*) and “understand” them (*res intelligendum*). The formation of common concepts about things is thus linked to a capacity for understanding or insight (*potentia intelligendum*). I will return to this later in Part II of the article.

Common concepts express the properties of things. At the most general level, we can say that properties such as extension, motion and rest constitute concepts common to all bodies. The least general properties are those possessed by two or more bodies. Different bodies meet, affect each other and leave traces (*vestigia*) in each other in the form of images, which in turn are represented as ideas for the soul. Common concepts are not themselves images or ideas, like inadequate ideas, but they still have to do with ideas to some extent. They can be said to constitute representations of the relationships between bodies according to the traces they leave in the body, and as such they include the cause of two or more bodies agreeing or contradicting each other. The relations which agree or decompose with a body will be explained in part III below. The common concepts therefore stand in the following relationship to the idea: 1/ The idea, or the idea of the soul of an arbitrary affection of the body, does not constitute in itself an adequate idea, but when the idea also expresses the effect that a body has on its own body, this allows us to understand what these two bodies have in common. 2/ What the notion considers as extrinsic relations between bodies (how one body can be said “like” another), is understood through common concepts intrinsically, “and not so often from the inside (...) focuses on understanding (*intelligendum*) their consensus.”

In emotional terms, the main difference between general and common concepts lies in the difference between passivity and activity. General concepts ultimately only serve to reproduce a certain transcendental quality which is the fruit of chance or habit. However, the shared concepts are themselves productive, that is to say active, to the extent that they themselves shape the imagination and intensify the relationship between certain images or certain signs, without being themselves reducible to these. Common concepts (*notiones communes*) should therefore not be understood as concepts that “all men have in common”, corresponding to a sort of general meaning (*sensus communis*). Nor should they be

confused with a functional, Aristotelian classification according to genus and species. It is mainly in the difference between activity and passivity that we need to understand common concepts and how they deviate from conventional meanings.

Common concepts thus describe relationships between bodies in terms of agreement or opposition. That a body agrees with another body is only known to the soul through the affections of the body, that is to say, through the action of one body on another. The transition from general concepts to common concepts, or between inadequate and adequate knowledge, therefore consists of moving from a form of understanding which reproduces images or signs, to an understanding which gives them a genetic meaning - which also opens the possibility to actively produce the circumstances by which these images are made affectively present to the soul. As we will see later, a large part of *Ethics* deals precisely with the art of actively producing circumstances which intensify the emotional relationships that the individual maintains with those around him. But in this active production it seems that the body has so far only a secondary meaning as being a kind of mediating agent by which things are made present to the soul. To know more precisely what relationship the body has with active becoming, if it is possible to speak of a body becoming active, we must first examine more closely what Spinoza means by "body" and how this relates to the soul.

From the general definition of a body in *the Ethics* is the following: "By body I mean a mode which expresses in a certain defined way the essence of God, insofar as this is considered as an extended thing" (Eth. II, challenge.1). This applies to humans as well as animals, as well as all extended things that can be found in nature. The other mode of expression of a certain mode is the soul, insofar as it expresses the essence of God according to the attributes of thought. The body is thus the object of the idea which constitutes the human soul (Eth. II, Prop13). But what distinguishes the soul of man, as it is considered as an idea of a thing existing in reality, from other souls - for example, those of animals? Among the ideas of various bodies, Spinoza argues, there is some difference with regard to their reality or perfection (or excellence; Spinoza uses the terms *realitas*, *praestantia*, and *perfectio* interchangeably). The difference from one individual to another therefore lies in this degree of perfection, understood as the idea of a certain body, and not in some hidden or transcendental "essence".

### 2.3 The Dynamic Body

The full force of the argument that body and soul are united is presented by Spinoza in the assertion that:

(...) the more a body is able above others to perform several actions or to be affected in several ways at the same time, the more its soul is above others capable of perceiving simultaneously separately; and the more a body's actions depend only on itself, and the less other bodies join it in its actions, the more clearly its soul is capable of understanding. And from there we can realize the excellence of one soul over others (Eth. II, Prop13, scolia).

The soul thus stands in two proportional relationships to the body. 1/The more a body can act or be affected (*agendum vel patiendum*) in several ways at the same time, the more the soul is capable of perceiving (*percipiendum*). 2/ The more independent the actions of a body, the more capable the soul is of understanding clearly, which we have shown includes its ability to form common concepts. This passage, however, seems to rest on a curious contradiction. On the one hand, the body's capacity for influence is proportional to its perceptual power. The more ways a body can be affected at once, the more power it has to perceive things. On the other hand, this very capacity to be influenced seems to be in inverse proportion to his independence. The more a body is affected by other bodies, the less its power of understanding or insight seems to be. How can we interpret these apparently incompatible views of the relationship of the soul to the body?

Pierre Zaoui thinks that these are two different views on the body. Theoretically, according to Zaoui, they would not be incompatible, but in practice they constitute two different modes of relationship to the body in Spinozist ethics, which are opposed to each other. Ethics would thus emphasize two paths to the salvation or beatitude of the individual; one corporeal and one spiritual, corresponding respectively to the relationship that the body has with the soul in the passage cited above. However, Zaoui's argument rests on an equation of the body's capacity to be influenced (*patiendum*) and to participate in action (*in agendo compete*) with other bodies. In fact, these are two different ways for the body to relate to other bodies. The body's capacity to be affected and to act expresses an affective power of the Spinozist body which, as we will see later, is closely intertwined with the body's power to become active. Whether or not the body merges in its actions with external things is

linked to its capacity to form common concepts and does not preclude its capacity to be influenced. This is why Spinoza chooses two different verbs here, *patior* and *concurro*, to show that the faculties of the soul and the body are not opposed in their respective relationships of proportionality. Active becoming, like the formation of common concepts, does not consist of isolating the emotional body from external things. Rather, the ability to be affected refers to the extent of the body's affective experience of the world, while its independence consists of knowing whether it is active or passive in relation to this experience.

In other words, the body's autonomy is fully, indeed practically, compatible with its capacity to be influenced. It now remains to investigate what relation its mental correlates, the faculty of perception (*potentia percipendum*) and the faculty of intuition (*potentia intelligendum*), suppose each other. Finally, it is necessary to specify whether there is a link between these series of the soul and the body in order to be able to speak of a body that has become active. A hypothesis at this stage of the investigation would be that the intellectual capacity of the soul, its capacity to form common concepts, is proportional to the extent of the perception of the world and the intensity of the affectivity of the body (*potentia patiente and potentia percipendum*). According to such a reading, becoming active would have a corporeal correlate as the ultimate horizon of possible experience and potential meaning.

## 2.4 The Kinetic Body

Before showing that this is indeed the case, however, it is necessary to briefly show another aspect of what Spinoza means by a body. Above we discussed what we might call the "dynamic body". The dynamic body is characterized by its affectivity, the proportional relationship between the capacity to be affected and to act, and this affectivity can vary to different degrees or intensities. The intensity or power of the body's capacity to be influenced and to act is its specific effort, its conatus, which we will discuss in more detail in Part II of the article. In other words, each individual has a certain dynamic affectivity which determines "what their body can do". The power of this affectivity distinguishes one individual from another in terms of "excellence" or perfection ("And from this we can realize the excellence of one soul over others").

Bodies, on the other hand, also differ from each other with regard to movement and rest, speed and slowness

(Eth. II, Prop13, Lem1). This, explains Spinoza, applies to what he calls "the simplest bodies", the *corpora simplicissima*. Let's call this the kinetic body. When bodies are subjected to pressures which keep them at rest in relation to each other, or which transmit their movements to one another in a certain mutual relationship, they form compound bodies, *corpora composita*. An individual is distinguished from others precisely by this composition: "What constitutes the form of an individual consists of a union of bodies" (Eth. II, Prop13, Lem4, dem). The mediation of movement between bodies gives rise to impressions or traces (*vestigia*) in the surfaces of the bodies. The soul having contact with other bodies only through the affections of the body, it is through the interpretation of these vestiges in images that the soul imagines things. Thus, at this stage of the article, one body is distinguished from another according to two determinants: The first concerns the dynamics of the body, as explained above. The second concerns the very composition of the body (*corpus compositum*) of bodies (*corpora simplicissima*) and their mutual relationships of movement and rest, speed and slowness; that is to say the kinetic body. The form of a body therefore does not refer to any hidden essence or interior property, but only to the specific conditions of movement and rest which make it possible to precisely identify a body as "this body". In other words, the Spinozist body is expressed partly by a dynamic force, partly by a kinetic form.

## 3. The Spinozist Body: A Dynamic Force and a Kinetic Form

So far in the article we have come into contact with a series of concepts in Spinoza which appear to be measures or intensities of becoming active. *Potentia agendi*, *potentia percipienti*, *potentia intelligendi* – they all seem to express a certain degree of "power" in the individual which seems to be decisive for his activity. This becoming must therefore be understood as a dynamic force that can both progressively increase and decrease. We will see below how this dynamic force is an expression of what Spinoza calls conatus, as well as how this effort can be considered as the general principle of the force of becoming-active. First, however, it may be appropriate to further clarify what it means to become active by contrasting it with "active actions."

### 3.1 Assets in the Making and Active Actions

It is important to pay attention to Spinoza's difference between "being active" (*agere*) and "acting actively"

(*actio*). From the general definition of affect (Eth. III, def. 3) we can deduce the following:

*By affect I mean the affections of the body, by which the body's own power of action is increased or diminished, strengthened or inhibited, and at the same time the ideas of these affections. If then we can be the adequate cause of one or other of these affections, then by affect I mean an active action, otherwise a passive state.*

Let us remember how Spinoza explains *agere*: "I say that we are active (*Nos tum agere dico*) when something happens within us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause." *Agere* does not designate any completed action, but here acquires the meaning of a kind of mode of being - a way of relating to one's own body ("when something happens in us") and to the external world ("or in outside of us"). The different actions of the individual designate at a less general level the individual actions or affects by which the body's power to act is increased. These are individual events where the body passes from one degree of perfection to another<sup>2</sup>. Even the power of action, *potentia agendi*, must be separated from the activity as such. Agency can be seen as the power of the individual to produce certain effects, whether actions or passions, and as a limited phenomenon it does not have the capacity to express the broader power to become active. As we will see later in the article, agency expresses a dimension of active becoming, but it alone cannot explain active becoming exhaustively. Perhaps we can speak here of the power of action as a "partial activity", as Chantal Jaquet suggests. Whether an action is adequate or not, it always contributes to producing effects which, in turn, can contribute to increasing the affective capacities of the organism (cf. JAQUET, 2004, p. 93)

The definition of an affect makes it clear that to become active means to be, as far as possible, an adequate cause of the body's affections, that is, to fill existence with as many active actions as possible: "It follows that the soul is exposed to the more passive affect the more inadequate ideas it has, and conversely the more active the more adequate ideas it has" (Eth. III Prop 1 corollary). An adequate idea is, in the strict sense, an event in the same way as an active action - it is an affect whose action is explained by the nature of one's own body, that is to say whose individual

<sup>2</sup> Chantal Jaquet supports a similar interpretation: "Agere for Spinoza therefore has a broader meaning than actio". Jaquet, *The Unity of Body and Mind: Affects, Actions and Passions in Spinoza*, Paris, PUF, 2004, p. 91

himself is the adequate cause. However, becoming active is not reducible to any sum of active actions of the individual, but includes, as we will see, at a more general level the various bodily constellations and affective possibilities that these actions in turn give rise to. Active action not only involves an adequate idea - it also gives rise to productive movement towards new horizons of potential action. Active becoming, we will see, covers the interval between actual and potential action as constituting a productive movement or transition.

### 3.2 Conatus and Affect

We have seen the difference between inadequate ideas (general concepts) and adequate ideas (common concepts) as follows: while inadequate ideas describe what things are ("Horse", "table", "circle", etc.) express adequate ideas about how things become what they are; the genesis of emotional relationships, explaining their similarities and contradictions. "What" something is therefore cannot be separated from the affective relations of that thing, that is, how a thing becomes what it is in relation to other things. In the adequate understanding is therefore included a certain movement of each thing (its genetic becoming), which manifests itself in the emotional relationships that it arouses. As we saw above, Spinoza understands affect as those "affections of the body, by which the body's power of action is increased or diminished, reinforced or inhibited." The power of this passage from one degree of perfection to another, Spinoza calls *conatus*.

For Spinoza, each thing strives to remain as much as possible in its being (*in suo esse perseverare*) (Eth. III Prop 6). No thing can be annihilated, that is, cease to exist, unless it encounters another thing of an opposite nature whose power exceeds its own. The conatus by which a thing - be it the human body - remains in its being is in fact the essence of that thing (Eth. III Prop 7). In (Eth. III Prop 28 dem) Spinoza further explains that: "Now the effort of the soul, or its power of thought, is by nature as great and simultaneous with the effort of the body or its power of action". The power of thought of the soul (or the power of action of the body, depending on which attribute we consider the power) is nothing less than the individual's own conatus. The essence of each individual is thus the expression of a certain conatus, of a certain power of thought/action, or of a certain degree of perfection.

*Conatus* is therefore the expression of power in the individual. This power can increase or decrease:



“Thus we see that the soul can undergo great changes and pass either to a greater or lesser perfection; and these passive states explain to us the affects of joy and sorrow” (Eth. III Prop 11 scholia). Joy is the affect by which the individual moves from one degree of perfection to a higher degree. Conversely, pain is the affect by which the individual decreases in perfection (ibid.). In other words, joy is the affect by which the body passes from one degree of power to act or to be affected, or the soul from one power to perceive, to a greater and the greater is to in turn the affect of joy. The cause of the affect of joy, however, becomes an enigma or a confusing idea for the individual as long as he relates only passively to the world around him. As Spinoza writes: joy constitutes a passive state. – the individual can indeed grow in power in a passive manner if things are perceived “according to the ordinary order of nature”. From an affective point of view, becoming active means a deeper understanding of the affect of joy through which its causes can be adequately explained. We will see in Part III **how** becoming active involves an active interpretation of the joyful affects that arouse an effort to maximize them.

### 3.3 Conatus and Potentia Intelligence

We saw above how Spinoza equates the ability to form common concepts with a power or capacity for insight (*potentia intelligendum*). However, it is not clear how this capacity for insight relates to the perceptual capacity of the soul (*potentia percipendum*) or to the capacities of the body (*potentia agendum et potentia patientendum*). If we interpret the faculty of perception and the faculties of the body as essentially passive faculties (which is the interpretation towards which Zaoui 's reading tends), do we not risk introducing a new form of dualism? in Spinoza's ontology? A body that passively receives with a soul that actively compares. Does the body only passively transmit unprocessed sensory data (affectations) for the soul's formation of common concepts? *Conatus* would then be the extent and intensity of the individual's experiences and impressions, while the power of insight would constitute the capacity to form common concepts based on this dynamic experience through which experience takes on active meaning. The division of the individual into body and soul would therefore only be partially overcome in Spinoza's monist ontology, since reason and passion, according to this interpretation, retain their traditional meanings.

Spinoza clarifies any doubts we might have on this matter in the following passage: “Consequently, this applies to the soul which, to the extent that it experiences pain, to the extent that its power of insight, that is to say its power of action, is reduced or inhibited” (Eth. III Prop 59, dem). The power of insight is assimilated to the power of action, that is to say that these increase or decrease “simultaneously” (or rather express each other) in proportion to a certain happy or sad affect. Now the power of action of the soul is as great as the power of action of the body, and this power is nothing less than the individual's own conatus. Thus, the power of insight is also an expression of conatus. Each increase in an individual's power translates to both a spiritual and bodily level, therefore making it meaningful to speak of the body becoming active. This active bodily becoming must not be understood only in a secondary sense, as if the body were only indirectly active in relation to the soul, that is to say as passive reception of the active comparison of the soul. As I said, we must be wary of this type of interpretation if we do not want to reintroduce a new type of dualism in Spinoza.

It is certainly true that the body in the strict sense does not possess the capacity to form ideas - these can only be understood under the attributes of thought, that is to say as images or signs of the 'soul. But just as it is important not to confuse the becoming-active (*agere*) of the individual with his individual active actions, we must be careful not to confuse thought (*cogitare*) with his individual cogitative representations – the signs of thought must not be confused with thought itself as a power of expression. As we saw above in the case of the kinetic body, the body is affected by external things by leaving traces, vestiges. The soul considers these traces and thus imagines certain things as present. The soul is all the more capable of faithfully interpreting these traces as its power of insight is great, that is to say its capacity to form common concepts (to genetically understand things in relation to each other). . This power of insight varies from person to person depending on the specific conatus that expresses the essence of the individual as a certain measure of power. The power of interpretation, the dynamics and the intensity of the adequate interpretation of these vestiges thus find their corporeal correlates in the dynamic-intensive measure of the power constituted by the body's capacities to act or to be influenced.

However, Spinoza himself is somewhat mistaken when he speaks of the soul “considering bodies” and

“thus forming ideas” (Eth. II, Prop17, scolia). Such formulations seem to imply that there is a “soul in the machine”, a homunculus or inner interpreting eye for which the affections of the body are visualized. However, this cannot be the case if we are to be faithful to Spinoza's monist approach. The body's capacity to act and to be influenced is certainly a measure of its “openness” in its experience of the world, the extent of its perceptual field, the intensity of its sensitivity. However, the power of experience also immanently expresses the power of interpretation. The richer the experience of the world, the more its affective relationality is experienced clearly and intensely in relation to the body.

Rather than a “background” of experience, the body becomes for Spinoza a “space” or an “event”. The body is the center that affectively-intensely expresses the world in different ways, connecting to the world to form more or less stable affective constellations as expressions of its specific conatus. Thinking is only an expression of the power of this bodily affectivity - or rather, the power to express this affectivity and thus give it an active and productive meaning, and to this extent we must also attribute to active becoming its right dimension bodily. In the third and final part of the article, we will see how becoming active can be understood as a certain bodily arrangement, intended to open the body to a richer experience of the world. This bodily establishment includes a certain know-how or a certain technique, understood as the capacity to arrange good encounters with external things. Becoming-active, as we will see, implies a complex bodily becoming-becoming; the art of creating outside the body new constellations of compounds by which its conatus grows or increases in power.

#### **4. Active Becoming: Implies a Complex Bodily Becoming**

We saw above how the ability to form common concepts can be seen as an expression of the insight of the soul. The more insight the soul possesses, the greater its activity (Eth. III def. 2). The greater the capacity to form common concepts, the greater therefore is the power of the soul to become active. Since the ability to perceive can vary from person to person depending on the individual's specific conatus, the ability to form common concepts also has this variability<sup>3</sup>. The question then is how to get the soul to form common concepts, under what circumstances

this capacity becomes stronger and what role the body plays in it.

#### **4.1 Corpus Pluribus Modis Disponitur : Becoming-Active As Bodily Establishment**

Spinoza writes in (Eth. II Prop14) that “The human body is capable of perceiving much, and all the more apt, the more its body can be arranged”, and a little further in (Eth. II Prop 39): “It follows that the soul is all the more capable of adequately perceiving many things, the more its body has in common with other bodies.” To adequately perceive many things, that is, to form common concepts about them, is to become active. The power of this active becoming is all the greater as the body has more in common with the external things it experiences in existence. Becoming active therefore seems at the most basic level to be about creating a sense of one's own body interacting with external things. In Spinoza, in some way, the ontological border between the body and the soul and the external experienced world is blurred. Through the productive mediation of common concepts, subject and world draw their meaning from each other in an interaction whose power increases or decreases depending on the complexity and sensitivity of the body. Becoming active is at the same time a complex bodily development.

As we saw above, the difference between inadequate and adequate ideas can be understood as the capacity of the imagination to consider things either extrinsically (i.e. as representations or descriptions of things - and this is where the transcendental error lies), either intrinsically (that is, through an active affective-relational connection of things with one's own body - the idea as an affective force) : “in fact whenever it is arranged from within in this or that way, then it considers things clearly and distinctly” (Eth. II Prop 29 scolia). By this spiritual establishment or disposition we should mean the active interconnection of the body (as the object of the soul) with external things in increasingly complex and composite affective constellations. Ethics for Spinoza, we will see, is in fact the art of actively producing this increasingly multiform body: active becoming must first be understood as an ethical approach, a technique and a knowledge of what is useful and what is not useful for itself. The body – defined by Spinoza in terms of good and evil. This is a way of thinking about ethics that is radically different from the way we are accustomed to thinking. To understand the deeper implications of what such ethics means, and how the art of ethics relates to a bodily technique, we must first clarify

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3 Here I follow Alexandre Matheron's interpretation of common concepts. For more, see Matheron, pp. 71-74.

what Spinoza means by “bodily establishment” and “use” respectively, and “disuse”.

#### 4.2 Useful and Useless

Certain things can be said to be beneficial to the body in that they increase its potency. Conversely, other things are useless to the extent that they diminish this power. A thing is not in itself useful or useless, but only obtains its value in relation to a certain embodied individual - what is useless for one may be useful for another. External things increase the power (or perfection) of the body if they join with the body to form a new body – a “more” composite body. This can be understood as the body's affective possibilities increase as its points of contact with the external world multiply and intensify. For Spinoza, the degree of composition of an individual can be considered as a measure of his perfection. The greater or more complex an individual's body composition, the greater their perfection or power. Increasing in power therefore means increasing in composition.

This should not mean that the body passes from one essence (*conatus*) or form (interrelation of movement and rest) to another. As we saw with regard to simple and compound bodies in the second part of the Ethics (the description of the kinetic body), it is entirely possible for a body to enter into union with another without its internal conditions of movement changes. In other words, the body increases in power, but remains one and the same body to the extent that the internal relations of movement between its constituent parts (*corpora simplicissima*) are preserved. The body, on the other hand, diminishes in power when something external breaks its internal conditions of movement and rest. If the internal conditions of the body have deteriorated to a certain extent, it no longer makes sense to speak of the “same” individual, but he has passed from one form to another.

Understanding *conatus* and bodily composition as different expressions of the same affective force in the individual is entirely in line with Gilles Deleuze's assertion that *Ethics* must be understood as an ethology rather than as an organic determination of the body. The Spinozist body cannot be understood as constituting a certain individual of any species or genus. The essence of each individual is determined at each moment according to its possibilities and affective powers, “what a body can do”, which express at a more or less abstract level its specific *conatus*:

*Spinoza's ethics has nothing to do with moralism; he understands it as an ethology, that is to say as a*

*composition of fast and slow speeds, of capacities to affect and to be affected on this plane of immanence (...) Thus an animal, a thing, can never be separated from its relations to the world. The inside is only a chosen outside, and the outside only a projected inside. The speed or slowness of metabolisms, perceptions, actions and reactions come together to form a certain individual in the world. (DELEUZE, 1970, p. 125)*

External things can therefore be useful or useless to the body to the extent that they merge with it or decompose it, and thus form a more or less composed body, that is to say, increase or decrease the affective power of the body. individual. What increases power generates in the individual an affect of joy. On the other hand, what diminishes power generates an affect of mourning. Affects can thus be interpreted as signs of what is useful and useless for the body to the extent that its power or affective capacity is increased or decreased:

That which arranges the human body in such a way that it can be influenced in several ways, or which puts it in a position to influence external bodies in several ways, is useful to man, and all the more useful as the body is thus made more susceptible to influence and to influence other bodies in many ways, and conversely, it is harmful that the body is less suited for this (Eth. IV, Prop 38).

Let us compare this passage with the one given above (Eth. II, Prop 14): “The human Soul is capable of perceiving a very large number of things and all the more so as its body can be equipped with a greater number of manners”; and (Eth. II, Prop 13 scolia): “the more a body is able before others to perform several actions or to be affected in several ways at the same time, the more its soul is able before others to perceive simultaneously separately”. When the body increases in power, that is to say increases in its capacity to perceive and act, it is constituted according to the new composite body which arises following the encounter with certain useful external things. Establishment is therefore the result of encounter and association with useful things. The more different ways the body can be arranged, the greater its power. In other words, to grow in power is to establish oneself physically in various ways, and this according to the usefulness of external things in relation to one's own body. In this, the affective power of the Spinozist body is both an actual power (the complexity and intensity of a bodily association) and a potential power (its capacity to enter into new,

more complex associations). In other words, in this affective corporeality there is also a certain openness to experience where each establishment in turn opens the body to new experiences. Each encounter with things opens the body's field of experience and sets it up according to new horizons of possible growth. The body is never only an establishment and its power, but always at the same time a capacity or a potential to be established in several ways. Each threshold of action or perception, the power of the "current" body, in turn gives rise to a movement towards new ones, which means that the Spinozist body is never given in its *hic et nunc*, but must be understood in the movement or transition to the capabilities that are already included in its pursuit. The power of the body is at the same time its potential and therefore it is always already in transition to new powers and compositions. It is never a basis for affective experience, but must be understood as its locus, and as such it and its affective horizons are always in motion. Thought, in turn, as an expression of this corporeality, cannot therefore take place in any sphere independent of isolated thought, where clarity and sharpness would depend on the little thought affected by the affections of the body. Thought for Spinoza is always *in media res* and to this extent it is inseparable from the moving and variable constellations of the affective body.

### 4.3 Good and Bad

Things that increase the body's ability to act and be influenced by external bodies in several ways at the same time are useful. To the extent that an individual is affected by such an external thing, he experiences an affect of joy. But affects do not necessarily have to be active, as we saw above. The difference between activity and passivity is whether one can make oneself the adequate cause of the affections by which the individual is affected by external things, that is to say, form common concepts about them. : "If we can therefore be the adequate cause of any of these affections, then by affect I understand an active action, otherwise a passive state."

To actively grow in power, it is therefore necessary for us to understand why something sparks joy, that is, by sorting out the reasons for its usefulness. Spinoza defines the knowledge of what is useful to us and what is not useful to us as the difference between good and evil: "By good I mean that which we know with certainty is useful to us" ( Eth. IV, def.1); "I understand by evil that which we surely know prevents us from being in possession of something good" (Eth. IV, def. 2). Good is therefore what is useful to us,

that is to say what increases our power, united with the knowledge of the benefit (the reasons for the emotional relationship that an external thing arouses). Actively increasing in perfection or power therefore means acting according to a knowledge of what is useful or not for one's own body. Actively increasing power is a knowledge-based practice – ethical practice as expressed in *Ethics* . Actively create good or useful compositions or encounters with external things in order to thereby develop the power of action or the capacity for insight. But this practice does not consist only of mediating good encounters between the body and external things through knowledge of what is common to both. This also includes the ability to avoid harmful effects:

*An affect which relates to several causes, which the soul considers at the same time as the affect itself, is less harmful, and we suffer less from it, and are less affected in relation to each particular cause, than if it it was another equally great affect linked to one or more causes (Eth. V, Prop 9).*

Ethics is an art of arranging the body in such a way that its affections only ever refer to a few causes: to preserve the dynamics of the body's affectivity, it must be arranged in a constantly evolving environment. Thus the body and its faculties are in constant movement; its dynamics never solidify in immobile homeostasis. The soul, insofar as it does not have complete knowledge of all the affections of its body, is both active and reactive, and its power is always determined in the interval between these two modes. The dynamically arranged body in the part of the soul which is passive can therefore also be seen as a reactive countermeasure for the soul to preserve the mobility of the power of thought. The sensitivity of the body guarantees the mobility of the soul<sup>45</sup>. This mobility of the soul can be seen as its ability not to let its desire go to excess:

*Because the affects with which we have to struggle daily relate in the majority of cases to a part of the body which is more affected than the others, and therefore the affects most often go to excess and keep the soul thus fixed in the consideration of a single object that he is not capable of thinking of anything else (Eth. IV, Prop 44 scolia)*

Since becoming active includes, among other things, the soul's ability to "perceive several things at the same time" (Eth. II, Prop13, scholia), it is important not to let the soul get caught looking at the one or the other object. The greater the capacity of the soul to consider several things at once – which in turn is an

expression of its capacity to form common concepts (Eth. II, Prop 29, scolia) – the less it tends to ‘lock in one’s vision of things. The sensitive body preserves openness and mobility in the field of experience where activity draws its power.

#### 4.4 Experimentation

A thing is therefore good or bad to the extent that it increases or decreases the affective capacities of the body. Ethics, to the extent that we understand it as the knowledge of good and evil, is therefore the knowledge of organizing good encounters with things in order to thus give rise to new, more complex and more emotional relationships with them. various. Every good composition gives rise to a new power in the individual, a power which has a double expression: the emotional body, with its capacities to act and be affected in several ways at the same time, finds its moving correlate in the power of insight, and it is in the unity between them that we must understand becoming active.

If we understand becoming active exclusively as a mental process, that is, only as the formation of common concepts, we miss the dynamic-intensive field of experience from which this formation draws its power and nourishment. We risk understanding thought as a descriptive record of the body’s affections, rather than as a productive force that gives meaning to that body, but at the same time derives meaning from it. If, on the other hand, we understand becoming active exclusively as a bodily process, we risk, on the other hand, reducing all the affections of the body to one and the same plane of experience, thus making impossible any distinction between the good and evil. Ethics would then not be ethics at all, but rather physiology. We must therefore understand becoming active both in our spiritual aspect and in our bodily aspect.

We have seen above how Spinozist corporeality can be defined both as dynamic and kinetic, as essence (a certain affective relationality) and as form (a certain relation, relation, of movement and rest between its constituent parts). However, we have no a priori knowledge of the exact proportions of motion and rest of the kinetic body. As Spinoza says:

*“And in fact, no one has yet established what the body is capable of (...) No one has yet learned the structure of the body in sufficient depth to be able to explain all its functions” (Eth. III, Prop 2 scolia).*

Thus, we also do not know why a certain body is useful or not useful for another. Experimentation is necessary to find out. Only by repeatedly exposing the body to various forms of encounters with other bodies (which register affectively for the soul as joy or sadness) can we achieve a knowledge of good (what our body has in common with another).

To become active, we must learn about both our own bodies and the nature of external things. Since the affections of the body simultaneously contain the nature of one’s own body as well as that of the external body, it is by actively testing its most external affective limits in relation to the experienced world that we can come to know its nature. This nature, to the extent that becoming active is an ongoing practice, can be understood as a field of bodily tension (ability to act and be affected) that diminishes or increases in magnitude, and in this ongoing movement that alternates between being active and reactive, the body always already becomes more or less than it was. It is only through experimentation that we can discover what reinforces and broadens this field of tension, that is to say, find an adequate cause. As we showed above, the specific conatus of the individual is his power; not only in its actuality but also in its potentiality. “We do not know what a body can do” can thus be understood as a call to “unlock” this hidden potential that every body possesses to “become what it is” in Nietzsche’s sense. The body itself already “is” this potential, the body is always as perfect as it can be – by nature there is no deficiency in it (Eth. III, introduction;). Ethics is therefore the art by which this hidden potential is explored through experimentation – to discover through the relational affectivity of the body to the external world which encounters strengthen or destroy it. It is the creation of the intense body. However, the body’s potential is also released by being affected by a large number of things, rather than a limited or small number: “An affect which relates to several causes is less harmful than one which relates to only one “. It is the creation of the sensitive body. We can thus say that experimentation constitutes the fundamental existential attitude which characterizes the philosopher’s relationship with the outside world, where each good encounter in turn gives rise to a new impulse of exploration along the sensitive and intense axes of the body. This is where the active becoming of the body resides and this is why Spinoza defines the ultimate goal of man, not as a perfection to be

achieved, but as *desire as such*.<sup>4</sup>

*Therefore, the ultimate goal of a man guided by reason, that is, the ultimate desire by which he strives to master all others, is that desire by which he is led to adequately perceive himself. - itself and all things that can fall within its reach (Eth. IV, Appendix 4).*

Ethics is not a way of escaping the world or the body to seek good in the palace of the soul. Nor is it a matter of self-examination. Ethics for Spinoza is an art of living, a way of deepening and intensifying the experience of the world and one's own body. Allowing what was passively understood "according to the ordinary order of nature" to acquire active meaning. Knowledge of good and evil is only attained and takes its meaning from experience in relation to an affective-relational body whose powers and capacities interact with other bodies. As Spinoza writes:

*The best thing we can do, therefore, as long as we do not have perfect knowledge of our affects, is to design our own way of life, that is to say defined rules of life, and to engrave them in our memory and to apply them constantly to individuals whom we often meet in life, so that our imagination will thus be abundantly influenced by them and they will always be at hand for us (Eth. V, Prop 10, scolia).*

Ethics is a way of life – an art and a technique. Not just the ratio, but also the practice. This investigation has shown how this practice is constituted by an active becoming, and how this becoming is ultimately determined by the organization of the body as the limit and possibility of all ethics and all thought.

## 5. Conclusion

This investigation looked more closely at the bodily correlate of what we called becoming active in *the Ethics*. To become active with Spinoza is to arrive at an adequate understanding of things; not as they are in themselves, but as they are in their relationship

<sup>4</sup> As Deleuze writes: "The end of Philosophy, or the first part of the Method, does not consist in the knowledge of something, but in the knowledge of our power of understanding. Not to acquire knowledge of Nature, but to acquire a conception and to acquire a superior human nature" (Deleuze, Spinoza and the problem of expression, Paris, Minuit, 1969, p. 129).

By actively and experientially exploring our body in its relationships with external things, we come to an understanding not only of its dynamic nature (capacity to act and to be influenced), but also of our own capacity to understand (the power to insight as being the correlate of thought to the powers of the body). This understanding can be seen as an active transformation towards a higher nature, a new mode of being.

to the human body. The activity by which the soul achieves this adequate understanding is constituted by the art of common concepts. But, as Spinoza writes, the soul only has access to external things through the affections of the body - or more precisely: the soul only expresses these affections of the body, it does not describe any "reality". exterior. The greater the complexity of the body, the more aspects it shares with other bodies. The soul, as an idea of the body, will thus be able to form concepts that are all the more common as its body becomes more complex.

Thought, for Spinoza, does not take place in an isolated mental space where the clarity and clarity of its cogitations would depend on its independence and indifference in relation to the body and its passions. Thought, as an expression of the bodily affections, is always at the center of things. Included in a constant movement, it finds its meaning in a relationality which always locates it in the passage from its givenness or actuality to its possibility. As such it has neither beginning nor end, it lacks both foundation and guiding transcendental principle. As Deleuze writes: "We never begin: we never have a clean slate; one slips, advances in the middle; you take and set rhythms" (DELEUZE, 1970, p. 123).

Thought expresses the affective dimensions of the body. In this sense, "what a body can do" constitutes the limit but also the possibilities of thinking. The affective body constitutes the limits of thought in the sense that it is always the body in its relationship to external things which, through the capacity to imagine (the capacity to be "affected", patientendum, by external things ) determines the extent of thought and the perceptions of the soul. The essence of man is not made up of an isolated body, but always of the body in its relationship to external things and the degree of power that this relationship expresses. The originality of Spinoza's thinking on the body lies precisely in the fact that its boundaries are never given but are fundamentally relative and therefore mobile. It constitutes the possibilities of thought in the sense that thought is always the more or less rational representation of the affections of the body. As such, thought always has a capacity to transcend itself – each "threshold" reached in understanding in turn gives rise to a new movement of thought; destabilizes it while intensifying it. The sensitivity of the body expresses the mobility of the spirit.

The extent of the body's affective capacity, its capacity to act and to be influenced, expresses the extent of the

soul's perceptive capacity. The power of the body's capacity to act, however, also has its correlate in the soul's capacity for insight, its capacity to form common concepts. The extent of the body's affective capacity expresses the richness of the soul's cogitationes, but therefore also the capacity to extract active meaning from thought. Perhaps it is logical from this perspective to speak of a Spinozist unconscious; an affectivity which operates in the hidden, but which at the same time constitutes a source of power and wealth for active thought and which fundamentally constitutes its ultimate condition. The body becoming active can be interpreted as a transformation or transition to an actuality that never ends its possibility; a future that must be thematized according to the transition as such. As Spinoza writes: "We do not know what a body can do." We'll probably never know either. We can only strive to become as active as possible in experimentally letting our bodies enter new affective constellations, and to the extent that we like these, try to correct ourselves accordingly. Experimentation, the constant re-examination of "what a body can do," is the practice by which this possibility is actualized and put into action; and this within the framework of an activity which never runs out. In this ordeal and this bodily organization, we can therefore speak of an active becoming of the body, alongside the soul and common concepts.

Since the individual, in Spinoza, is only given in its passage from one relationship of force, from one perfection to another, to a certain extent atomistic individuality also dissolves. The individual, defined as a certain affective relationality, a certain measure of movement and rest of an accumulation of particles, becomes in this sense only a relative whole. The whole in relation to its parts, the part in relation to its sociality, the multitude or "social body". Individuals are all the more complete as they are more composite and in relation to this also the constituent parts. If we want to interpret the individual as a place or event rather than a terrain, it is the City which constitutes the place of ethical life. If becoming active consists of shaping an increasingly composite body, it is in its sociality that active life takes shape.

The becoming-active of the body, as much as common concepts, is the art of Ethics - not only as a ratio, but also as a practice. We are accustomed to thinking that knowledge presupposes stasis; that the mobility of life

is stopped so that the thinking subject can crystallize in a temporality linked to a "here and now". However, true thought, according to Spinoza, is not temporal but linked to eternity which constitutes the immanent plane of affective thought. True thought is intense, moving, bodily.

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