

# BEING A SPINOZIST TODAY

## Some considerations on eternity, happiness and philosophy

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**Abstract:** This paper is a response to Andrea Sangiacomo's invitation to participate in an exchange on the currency of Spinoza's philosophical project and to discuss whether Spinoza's overall project is worth pursuing as philosophy. Sangiacomo's provocative paper titled "Spinoza's mistake: the desire for eternal joy" –intended to trigger the discussion– argues that Spinoza's conception of happiness as *amor Dei intellectualis*, an infinite and eternal joy, rests upon a conceptual error, namely, that no affect (including this intellectual love of God) can be eternal. I believe his criticism entails a conception of eternity not shared by Spinoza himself. Thus, I argue that eternity and duration, although they are different spheres, are not opposing ones and I show that Spinoza understands eternity and duration as two perspectives from which we can conceive of the existence of things. Furthermore, it is my opinion that Spinoza's conception of happiness is intimately connected with the understanding of adequate knowledge as *action* and makes it possible to vindicate Spinozism as a valuable and current philosophy. The second section of this writing briefly develops this viewpoint, concentrating on the value of Spinoza's conception of philosophy as a transformative *praxis*.

**Keywords:** Eternity, Duration, Perspectivism, Happiness, Action

A few months ago, Andrea Sangiacomo invited us to participate in an exchange on the currency of Spinoza's philosophical project and to discuss whether Spinoza's overall project is worth pursuing as philosophy. In order to trigger the discussion, he sent us a piece of his own writing with the provocative title "Spinoza's mistake: the desire for eternal joy". What Sangiacomo sets out to do in this text, and also invites us all to do, is what every scholar should do from time to time; put aside the sympathy that one can feel for the philosophers, question the foundations of their thought, and undertake a sincere critique of their proposals. Nothing is more dangerous for philosophy than the fetishization of doctrines and the divinization of authors. In the case of Spinoza's project –admittedly a *practical* philosophy– this exercise is even more relevant. Sangiacomo questions the very heart of Spinoza's doctrine by arguing that his

conception of happiness as infinite joy rests upon a conceptual error. I believe his criticism entails a conception of eternity not shared by Spinoza himself. On the contrary, according to my reading, Spinoza's conception of happiness –intimately connected with his understanding of adequate knowledge as *action*– makes it possible to vindicate Spinozism as a valuable and currently relevant philosophy.

## 1. The eternity of joy

Sangiaco's main thesis could be summed up as follows: Spinoza identifies happiness or beatitude with an eternal joy provided by the knowledge of God –the famous *amor Dei intellectualis*– but he does not realize that, according to his own principles, no affect can be eternal. Affects are transitions between different degrees of power, variations of one's *conatus*, an increase or decrease of the power with which an individual strives to persevere in its being. However, in the sphere of eternity there is no place for change, hence affects cannot be experienced. Beatitude, if eternal, is *not* an affect. Spinoza's project rests on an error and abandons his readers to despair. We cannot deposit our happiness in worldly goods, always poisoned with sadness and regret, but neither is eternal joy possible. Sangiaco concludes that “the only option left is abandoning desire itself, or rather, challenging it in order to see the danger even in that desire”.<sup>1</sup>

The argument rests on the radical incompatibility between eternity and change. Change happens in the realm of duration and Spinoza himself warns that eternity cannot be understood as an indefinite temporal duration. Because all joy entails an increase in one's power of acting, it is impossible for a joy to be eternal. However, I believe that Spinoza's texts provide enough support to affirm that eternity and duration, although they are different, are not opposing spheres, but rather two perspectives from which we can conceive the existence of things.<sup>2</sup>

I will be brief. Spinoza defines eternity in the following terms: “By eternity I understand existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the

<sup>1</sup> See Andrea SANGIACOMO, *Spinoza's mistake: the desire for eternal joy*, in this section of “InCircolo” (pp. 399-417).

<sup>2</sup> I share this reading with many specialists. See, for example, Julie KLEIN, «By Eternity I Understand»: *Eternity According to Spinoza*, in “The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly” n° 51, year 2002, pp. 295-324; David SAVAN, *Spinoza on Duration, Time, and Eternity* in G. HUNTER (ed.) *Spinoza: The Enduring Questions*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1994, pp. 3-20; Pierre-François MOREAU, *Spinoza. L'expérience et l'éternité*, PUF/Epiméthée, Paris 1994; Chantal JAQUET, *Sub specie aeternitatis: Étude des concepts de temps, durée et éternité chez Spinoza*, Kimé, Paris 1997 ; Guillermo SIBILIA, *De la producción eterna de lo real al tiempo vivido: ontología y temporalidad en Spinoza*. Tesis de doctorado, Universidad de Buenos Aires / Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Buenos Aires 2017.

definition alone of the eternal thing.” (EIdef8)<sup>3</sup> We know that, according to Spinoza, this is the case of God or Nature alone. Only the essence of God or Nature implies his own necessary existence. In this sense, we can affirm that, for Spinoza, eternity is nothing more than the existence of Nature.

Now, from the absolutely infinite essence of Nature there follows, in addition to its own existence, the existence of a universe composed of infinite modes (EIp16). Unlike God, whose existence is eternal, modes exist in duration, which Spinoza defines as “an indefinite continuation of existence” (EIIdef5) and later characterizes as “existence insofar as it is conceived abstractly, and as a certain species of quantity” (EIIp45esc). Modes are not the cause of their own existence and require a different cause to bring them into existence (EIp24). However, this universe composed of infinite modes that necessarily follows from the essence of the substance, does not exist in itself, separated, disconnected from its cause. “Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God” (EIp15), claims Spinoza. The finite and infinite modes exist *in* Nature or God, who is eternal. We can thus assert that, according to Spinoza, every existing mode –including affects– exists both in duration and in eternity:

We conceive things as actual in two ways: either insofar as we conceive them to exist in relation to a certain time and place, or insofar as we conceive them to be contained in God and to follow from the necessity of the divine nature. But the things we conceive in this second way as true, or real, we conceive under a species of eternity, and to that extent they involve the eternal and infinite essence of God (as we have shown in IIP45 and P45S).

The *scholium* of EIIp45 points in the same direction:

By existence here I do not understand duration, i.e., existence insofar as it is conceived abstractly, and as a certain species of quantity. For I am speaking of the very nature of existence, which is attributed to singular things because infinitely many things follow from the eternal necessity of God’s nature in infinitely many modes (see 20 IP16). I am speaking, I say, of the very existence of singular things insofar as they are in God. For even if each one is determined by another singular thing to exist in a certain way, still the force by which each one perseveres in existing follows from the eternal necessity of God’s nature. Concerning this, see IP24C.

Eternity and duration are thus two ways of conceiving existence: either stressing its connection to Nature (the immanent cause) or stressing its connection to other modes (efficient causes).

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<sup>3</sup> I use the following translation: Edwin CURLEY, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1985, vol. I.

The key to all this lies in the radical nature of Spinoza's conception of immanence, which requires us to dismiss common sense. Common sense is imbued with Platonism and thus leads us to think of eternity as something beyond duration, which has no contact with our changing and degraded world. If we take immanence seriously, then we must admit that *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* are not two different spheres, which are split and opposed, but two different ways of considering the same reality. Eternity and duration are two perspectives or viewpoints for understanding the existence of modes.

Abandoning the conception of eternity as a transcendent realm untainted by change also leads to an abandonment of the idea that happiness, as such, is a permanent state that is conquered and enjoyed once and for all. The *amor Dei intellectualis*, the eternal joy born out of the intellectual intuition of the idea of God or Nature –which, by the way, all human beings without exception possess (EIIp47)– does not resemble that purely spiritual happiness promised to the pious by traditional religions as a prize after their death. Nor does it imply the rejection of all the pleasures of life. In fact, Spinoza provides an interesting alternative.

How should we understand this eternal joy? We said that existing finite modes can be conceived as existing in duration *and* as eternal, depending on whether they are perceived in their necessary connection with the absolute power of Nature as a whole or whether they are determined to exist and produce effects by another mode. Therefore, a joyful affect is eternal insofar as we conceive its existence as an immanent effect of the necessary causality of Nature, as following from the absolute nature of God (EIp21). How is this possible? We know that affects always imply an idea, love entails the idea of the thing loved (EIIax2). Different kinds of ideas give rise to different kinds of affects. “The actions of the Mind arise from adequate ideas alone; the passions depend on inadequate ideas alone” (EIIIp3). Passions result from inadequate ideas, and can be sad or joyful, can both increase and decrease the power of the individual. Both inadequate ideas and passive affects are the effects of what Spinoza calls “the common order of nature” (EIIp29esc) and are not under the individual's control. Inadequate ideas are the expression in the mind of the affections that the body receives in its fortuitous encounters with other bodies. Thus, both inadequate ideas and passive affects exist in duration, are put into existence until they are taken out of it by external causes. Adequate ideas, on the contrary, are the result of the power of thinking of the individual's mind, which, in Spinoza's words, “is a part of the infinite intellect of God” (EIIp11cor). When the human mind conceives adequate ideas, we can say that “God, not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he is explained through the nature of the human Mind, or insofar as he constitutes the essence of the human Mind, has this or

that idea” (*Ibid.*). When the mind forms adequate ideas, it perceives things “under a certain species of eternity” (EIIp44cor2). Adequate ideas are eternal as well as the affects that arise from them, not because they remove us from the duration and place us in a transcendent sphere, but because both those ideas and those affects exist by virtue of the necessary and eternal causality of Nature. Adequate ideas and active joys are the result of the power of our own mind, which is a portion of the power of Nature and, as such, is necessary and eternal.

Experiencing happiness, experiencing the eternal joy born out of the idea of Nature does not mean abandoning duration, but experiencing an increase in our power that does not depend on fortuitous encounters and is not tied to the transitory existence of worldly objects. Infinite love of God has its cause in the adequate idea of the essence of God, which we are able to conceive as the sole result of the power of our own mind. It is the experience of our own activity and our own autonomy. We are thus faced with the virtuous circle of adequate knowledge and active joy, which leads to happiness and freedom. Eternity is thus experienced in duration and entails its own dynamism.

Spinoza understands neither wisdom nor happiness as a point of arrival or a permanent state. Adequate ideas always produce active affects that increase the power of thinking and acting of the individual. In order to prove this point, Spinoza puts forward what, in my opinion, provides the key to understanding his philosophical project as simultaneously theoretical and practical. “When the Mind conceives itself and its power of acting, it rejoices” says Spinoza. His aim here is to demonstrate the existence of affects related to individuals in so far as they are active. He continues: “But the Mind necessarily considers itself when it conceives a true, or adequate, idea (by IIP43). But the Mind conceives some adequate ideas (by IIP40S2). Therefore, it also rejoices insofar as it conceives adequate ideas, i.e. (by PI), insofar as it acts.” (EIIIp58dem). To conceive adequate ideas is an action of the mind.<sup>4</sup> Spinoza is explicit on this point and yet it is frequently overlooked by interpreters.<sup>5</sup> When we form a true

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<sup>4</sup> I believe Spinoza sees this clearly already in his TIE, when he states: “I saw this, however: that so long as the mind was turned toward these thoughts, it was turned away from those things, and was thinking seriously about the new goal. That was a great comfort to me. For I saw that those evils would not refuse to yield to remedies. And although in the beginning these intervals were rare, and lasted a very short time, nevertheless, after the true good became more and more known to me, the intervals became more frequent and longer (...)” (TIE 7-8).

<sup>5</sup> Many specialists have stressed the practical character of Spinoza’s project. It has been stated that, unlike Descartes who had attributed to philosophy the function of providing a foundation for scientific knowledge, Spinoza conceives philosophy as a scientific morality, an ethical-practical science, a meditation towards a certain way of life. However, the exact nature of the relationship between the practical and theoretical aspects of his philosophy remains contested. A common way of thinking

idea, when we act, we recognize ourselves as the cause of its existence and this consciousness of our own power of acting has the immediate effect of increasing that power. Spinoza's concept of *action* has been, for me, the key towards a deep understanding of his philosophical project as a striving towards both truth and joy. It reveals the interweaving of his gnoseological theory and his ethical-political proposal and, among other things, points towards the possibility of claiming that Spinozism, as a philosophy, is not only current but worth pursuing. I will briefly refer to this in the following section.

## 2. What does it mean to be a Spinozist?

The history of the reception of Spinozism shows that for decades (and perhaps even centuries) Spinoza's doctrine was considered not only mistaken but also dangerous. His contemporaries already understood that the postulation of an immanent divinity suppressed the existence of the transcendent and personal God of traditional religions. In some way, the rumor that had spread through Amsterdam around 1675 and prevented the publication of the *Ethics* was true: Spinoza wanted to print a book that demonstrated that God does not exist (Ep68). The refutation of the anthropomorphic conception of divinity and the rejection of the transcendent moral values that Spinoza displays throughout his *Ethics* abolishes the foundation of a universally valid morality and of the system of rewards and punishments after death. The radical case for freedom of thought and expression, which he had previously articulated in his *Theological-political treatise*, together with his defense of democracy and the assertion that the purpose of the State is the freedom of its citizens, openly threatens any government that exercises power in a despotic way and treats citizens as slaves.

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about the relationship between the search for truth and the search for happiness is to appeal to a medium-end relationship, transforming rational research into an instrument to achieve a happy life. For example, Manfred Walther: "Keine diesen Wissenschaften, auch nicht die Philosophie an ihrer Spitze, darf aber zum Selbstzweck werden." (Manfred WALTHER, *Metaphysik als Anti-Theologie;: Die Philosophie Spinozas im Zusammenhang der religionsphilosophischen Problematik*, Meiner, Frankfurt a. M. 1971, p. 3). Walther considers "die philosophische Ausgabe, nämlich die vernünftige Erkenntnis der Wirklichkeit" (*ibid.*), as a means towards the authentique end –a completely ethical end– i.e., the perfect human nature. Also Garret: "The *Ethics* seeks to demonstrate a broad range of metaphysical, theological, epistemological, and psychological doctrines. Most of these doctrines, however, either constitute, support, or elucidate the premises for his ethical conclusions. Moreover, Spinoza's choices concerning which metaphysical, theological, epistemological, and psychological doctrines to emphasize and develop are largely determined by their usefulness in supporting his ethical conclusions." (Don GARRET, *Spinoza's ethical theory* in D. GARRET (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 268).

Spinoza's philosophy was a danger to the religious and political order as it was established in the seventeenth and the eighteenth century across Europe. Over time, the term *Spinozist* began to be used as an accusation that led to persecution, censorship, imprisonment, and even exile. Such was the case, for instance, of the renowned Christian Wolff, accused of Spinozism and atheism in 1723 by a group of theologians of the University of Halle.<sup>6</sup> Spinozism became a clandestine philosophy, which few dared to defend openly. On the contrary, it was frequent to find texts intended to refute him which often appealed to a violent tone and caricatured distortions of his ideas.

Certainly, times have changed. Today, at least in democratic countries, no one is forced into exile, expelled from their university or sent to jail on the account of Spinozism. And yet I am convinced that if Spinoza's philosophy –as is frequently admitted– has not lost its relevance and is still current, it is because it retains its ability to promote the exercise of a radical critique of our reality and our time.

Against the individualism and atomization on which contemporary societies are built, Spinoza emphasizes the unity of all that is real and the unbreakable links that bind us to others. Faced with the acceleration of globalization and gentrification, which tend to standardize identities and equalize desire, Spinoza vindicates the uniqueness of each singular being, irreducible and flawless. Faced with the imposition of aesthetic models and their normalizing effect, Spinoza denounces the imaginary origin of those supposedly transcendent and universal values.<sup>7</sup> He denounces the dissatisfaction inherent in the culture of consumption which, while fostering a longing for certain goods and experiences, limits the possibility of access only to a few; thus yielding general

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<sup>6</sup> On this aspect of Spinoza's reception and the so called clandestine Spinozists, see Winifried SCHRÖDER, *Spinoza in der deutschen Frühaufklärung*, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 1987; Rudiger OTTO, *Studien zur Spinozarezeption in Deutschland im 18. Jahrhundert*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt a. M. 1994; Stefan WINKLE, *Die heimlichen Spinozisten in Altona und der Spinozastreit*, Hambrug, Verein für Hamburgische Geschichte 1988. Also my contribution, result of my doctoral research: María Jimena SOLÉ, *Spinoza en Alemania. Historia de la santificación de un filósofo maldito (1670-1789)*, Brujas, Córdoba 2011.

<sup>7</sup> In her paper included in this section of "InCircolo", Beth Lord also recognizes value in Spinoza's refusal of anthropocentrism and his denial to make moral worth contingent on human nature. According to Spinoza, she says, it is not better to be human than to be non-human. I completely agree with this point and find it is a fertile soil to think critically about speciesism and racism (see Beth LORD, *Outside of human nature: Spinoza on affective difference* included in this section of "InCircolo", pp. 461-472). However, I do not think that we can talk about a "human nature" *stricto sensu*. According to Spinoza, each mode has a singular essence or nature and all universal ideas are the result of our imagination. It is true that Spinoza speaks about "human nature", but whatever that means, it must mean something different from a universal essence or form in the traditional sense. Marta Libertà De Bastiani also addresses the problem of how to understand "human nature", in the context of discussing the possibility of finding a true common good (see Marta Libertà DE BASTIANI, *A social perspective on Desire: the problem of the common good*, included in this section of "InCircolo", pp. 446-460).

discontent and even fomenting depression.<sup>8</sup> He rejects both ascetic morality, which calls for the annulment of desire and the abandonment of worldly concerns, and the morality of sacrifice, which promises to reward us in accordance with our sufferings in this life and, thus, validates them. Against both selfishness and misanthropy, Spinoza proposes to understand happiness as a collective effort to know the truth and to free ourselves from prejudices and inherited errors. But, as I stated above, that striving for knowledge is a striving for joy as well, and thus, an effort to free ourselves from sadness, fear and hatred. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, given the complexity and sophistication of the modern mechanisms that seek to promote ignorance and fear in order to govern over us, Spinoza exhorts us to learn to identify these imposed mechanisms, in order to transform the rules that govern our lives.

So for those of us who believe that philosophy does not consist in a merely erudite exercise, but that it has a role to play in wider society of permanently questioning everything that common sense presents as fixed and naturalized, Spinozism is a philosophy worth pursuing. It is not simply about accepting his definitions, axioms and propositions. Neither does it imply that every claim he made is correct and free of mistakes –we all recall, for example, what he says in the final chapter of his *Political treatise* about women not being able to participate in politics. Rather, it is about recognizing the value of Spinoza’s conception of philosophy as a transformative *praxis*.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Spinoza teaches us that the striving to know and the striving to be happy are expressions of the same ontological force. He teaches us that to know is to act and to be active is to produce effects in oneself, in others and in the world. Thus, the path of knowledge is a path of creating the material and spiritual conditions that guarantee that we will continue to collectively increase our knowledge, our power, and our autonomy.

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<sup>8</sup> Ursula Renz, in her paper also included in this Dossier, claims that Spinoza’s main existential lesson rests on a radically anti-nihilist attitude, i.e., Spinoza provides the notion of the ultimate positivity of being. Renz proposes that this awareness of the inherent valuableness of life is Spinoza’s anti-depressive medicine (see Ursula RENZ, *Spinozism as a Radical Anti-Nihilism: Spinoza on Being and Valuableness of Being* included in this section of “InCircolo”, pp. 429-445). I find this idea very interesting and would add, in the same line of thought, that Spinozism constitutes a more interesting and robust alternative to the shallow and often conformist proposals of the Self-Help literature that usually addresses this problem.

<sup>9</sup> This idea underpins the proliferation of readings and the increasing interest on Spinoza’s philosophy in Latin America during the last three decades. The Brazilian philosopher Marilena Chauí inaugurated and continues to fuel a particular way of reading Spinoza as a philosopher who thinks against the philosophical tradition and uses Spinozism not only to think and analyse our reality but also to intervene in it. Among her many writings, the most relevant are: Marilena CHAUI, *A nervura do real: imanência e liberdade em Espinosa*, vol. 1, Companhia das Letras, São Paulo 1999; *O que é ideologia*, 2. ed, Brasiliense, São Paulo 2008; *Cultura e democracia*, 2 ed., Secretaria de Cultura / Fundação Pedro Calmon, Salvador 2009.

It is a path of criticism and denunciation. It is a path of transformation of reality and of emancipation of the oppressed. This is what, in my opinion, makes Spinozism, as a *philosophical-ethical-political* project, valuable, fruitful, powerful and –as is desirable of any authentic philosophy– dangerous.

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