



Materialism and Politics, ed. by Bernardo Bianchi, Emilie Filion-Donato, Marlon Miguel, and Ayşe Yuva, Cultural Inquiry, 20 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2021), pp. 55–72

ERICKA MARIE ITOKAZU 

Temporality and History in Spinoza

The Refusal of Teleological Thought

CITE AS:

Ericka Marie Itokazu, 'Temporality and History in Spinoza: The Refusal of Teleological Thought', in *Materialism and Politics*, ed. by Bernardo Bianchi, Emilie Filion-Donato, Marlon Miguel, and Ayşe Yuva, Cultural Inquiry, 20 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2021), pp. 55–72 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-20_03>

RIGHTS STATEMENT:

© by the author(s)
Except for images or otherwise noted, this publication is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

ABSTRACT: Spinoza's philosophy is often characterized as a philosophy *sub specie aeternitatis* where time and temporality are notions without an expressive role. Consequently, understanding human history by means of the *Ethics* — using geometric demonstrations supported by metaphysical terms — and without the aid of the notion of time, can be considered as leading to an unsolvable problem. In this chapter, I draw upon Spinoza's refusal of finalism to propose a renewed investigation about Spinozism and the issue of temporality, asking the question: could the absence of time in Spinoza's work and his writings on efficient and immanent causality allow us to rethink a theory of history?

KEYWORDS: finalism; causality; history; time; duration; Spinoza, Baruch

Temporality and History in Spinoza

The Refusal of Teleological Thought

ERICKA MARIE ITOKAZU

INTRODUCTION: SPINOZIST ISSUES BETWEEN MATERIALISM AND IDEALISM

Some remarkable studies have shown Baruch Spinoza's influence on various materialist traditions and even on idealist philosophies.¹ Wherever he is quoted there seems to be some sort of dispute over the recognition of Spinoza as a predecessor of that particular tradition. However, there is a general consensus of the idea that Spinozism implies the refusal of any transcendent entity and the assertion of a radical immanence inextricably linked to the denial of final causality and teleology.

All the prejudices I here undertake to expose depend on this one: that men commonly suppose that all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end; indeed, they maintain as

1 Vittorio Morfino, *Genealogia di un pregiudizio. L'immagine di Spinoza in Germania da Leibniz a Marx* (Hildesheim: Olms, 2016); *The New Spinoza*, ed. by Warren Montag and Ted Stolze (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Adventures of Immanence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); André Tosel, *Du matérialisme, de Spinoza* (Paris: Kimé, 1994).

certain that God himself directs all things to some certain end, for they say that God made all things for man, and man that he might worship God. [...] Thus this prejudice was changed into superstition, and struck deep roots in their minds. This was why each of them strove with great diligence to understand and explain the final causes of all things.²

Given this striking statement from the *Ethics*' Appendix, Spinoza's rejection of finalism is almost undisputed. The foundation of the New Science as a modern project seems to depend on taking finalism out of the laws of nature (*Philosophia naturalis*). This teleology was preserved, however, by René Descartes in regard to God's will and human free will (*Prima philosophia*) — in which cases freedom determines the possible and the contingent.

The refusal of the teleological explanations for both *Prima philosophia* and *Philosophia naturalis* could be the key to understanding why Spinoza's philosophy is of interest to so few scholars of history.³ After all, by refusing to give any ontological status to the categories of possibility and contingency, his philosophy seems to reduce human actions to fatalism, especially if understood in terms of the rigid law of *Philosophia naturalis*. By a mistaken understanding of the efficient cause, the laws of nature are reduced to a restrictive form of necessary causality, thus making human freedom almost impossible to conceive. Moreover, the idealist tradition of Spinozism has often rejected his *Prima philosophia* precisely because there is no place for free will and a fundamental notion of the theories of history, i.e. time.⁴ On the

2 *Ethics* I, App.; CWS [*The Collected Works of Spinoza*, see [abbreviations](#)], I, pp. 440–41.

3 For example, Yovel recognizes that Spinoza's radical immanence and the refusal of all transcendent entities influenced Ludwig Feuerbach's concept of self-alienation as man projecting his essence outward into a separate, divine world, from which this essence then confronts him as external and oppressive (see Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics*, pp. 73–74); nevertheless, Yovel also writes: 'meanwhile, we should address the broader question of teleology, which prompted our discussion of Marx in first place. Based upon the foregoing analysis of man-in-nature, how does Marx's philosophy of immanence — lacking an inherent teleology while maintaining a historical perspective — trace its own way between Hegel and Spinoza?' (ibid., p. 93).

4 As Vittorio Morfino notes in *Plural Temporality: Transindividuality and the Aleatory between Spinoza and Althusser* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 'The powerful acosmic interpretation of Spinoza [is] magnificently expressed in the following lines by Bloch' (p. 14): 'The world stands here as a crystal, with the sun at its peak, so that nothing casts a shadow. [...] Time is missing, history is missing, development is missing and especially any concrete multiplicity in the one ocean of substance. [...] Spinozism stands there as if

one hand, under the rigid laws of nature and necessary causality, we have a materialist fatalism (and the impossibility of freedom); on the other hand, by refusing free will and the notion of time, we have the impossibility of temporality in human history.

This chapter's proposal is to rethink Spinoza's rejection of finalism, and to relate the question of time to the problem of the final cause. I ask whether our understanding of Spinoza's critique of time as a refusal of teleological thought is successful or not, and whether thinking history as a non-teleological process could be possible. Furthermore, I clarify whether or not this can be done without the central notion of time.

To avoid creating any anachronisms, I shall only propose a hypothetical outline as to what the Spinozist critique of a historico-teleological thinking *could* be. After all, the theory of history is not a seventeenth-century problem. However, it is precisely that century that may provide the only philosophy actually capable of countering the kind of finalism which theories of history rely upon.⁵ This is the case insofar as one considers all historico-teleological thinking to depend upon the following four conditions:

1. the linearity of time;
2. a temporality that is progressively determined towards the future;
3. a continuity of time established by means of a relation between successive instants external to each other (in order to get rid of fatalism). That is, the connection between past, present, and future should not be determined by necessary causality but by free causality;
4. as a result, and in order to be able to conceive of *praxis*, human actions must be determinable, by themselves or accidentally, because they are *possible* actions. They are determinable by free

there was eternal noon in the necessity of the world, in the determinism of its geometry and of its both carefree and situationless crystal — *sub specie aeternitatis*' (Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, 3 vols (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), II, pp. 852–53).

5 The following arguments are a tentative attempt to reproduce, with a Spinozist lexicon, the thesis that 'democracy is a historical question' made by Marilena Chauí, 'A questão democrática', in her *Cultura e democracia: o discurso competente e outras falas* (São Paulo: Cortez, 2006), pp. 144–69 (p. 145).

will, but they are not necessary actions, that is, they are not already determined by nature. If these actions carry out their final goal, such an outcome would therefore be unpredictable and have to be explained in contingent terms.

This being said, I'd like to highlight the most important arguments of *Ethics* I. In this section, Spinoza demonstrates that the infinitely infinite, the one unique substance, is the cause of itself and operates by immanent, necessary, and efficient causality over the whole of nature (be it the *Natura Naturans* or the *Natura Naturata*). Extension and Thought are thus no longer independent substances, but attributes of the same unique and absolutely infinite substance. In other words, this viewpoint eliminates contingency, possibility, and finalistic causality.

In the famous Appendix, such categories (the contingent, the possible, and the final cause) appear as substitutes accomplished by human (imaginary) projections in two ways: firstly, the understanding of necessity is replaced by the imagination of the accomplishment of final causality; secondly, the inexorable interiority of immanent causality is imaginarily replaced by the impregnable exteriority of transitive causality. I argue here that these projections and replacements are made from a single instrument of imagination: time.

THE PROBLEM OF TEMPORALITY IN SPINOZA: THE NEGATIVITY OF TIME

The most important texts to analyse Spinoza's definitions of time are his early writings. In the *Metaphysical Thoughts*, Spinoza's own position seems to be nothing but an account of Descartes's philosophy, who defined time as a being of reason (*ens rationis*) or a mode of thought that serves to measure duration in the same way as number measures motion. According to Descartes's *Meditations*, if one exists, one is a possible existence, and one's duration therefore will need a continuous creation to actualize its possible existence. That is why an external force, or in Descartes's terms, God as an external and transcendent causality, is required to maintain these created things in existence.

For a lifespan can be divided into countless parts, each completely independent of the others, so that it does not follow

from the fact that I existed a little while ago that I must exist now, unless there is some cause which as it were creates me afresh at this moment — that is, which preserves me. For it is quite clear to anyone who attentively considers the nature of time that the same power and action are needed to preserve anything at each individual moment of its duration as would be required to create that thing anew if it were not yet in existence. Hence the distinction between preservation and creation is only a conceptual one.⁶

Hence, duration consists of a linear, homogeneous, continuously and punctually recreated existence. The same action and force is indeed required at any instant, no matter how short this instant might be, to recreate such an existence again and again, making all instants independent from each other and thus detaching the present instant from that which immediately preceded it. Moreover, because duration is composed of parts and is divisible, it becomes measurable in the same way that geometric space is measurable. That is, it becomes a geometrized duration measured by geometric time.

In Spinoza's early writings, therefore, time, number, and measure seem to be legitimate beings of reason. This is why one finds a certain transitivity between duration and that which measures it. Time and duration, like Siamese twins, thus become neutral, homogeneous, and perfect doubles of Extension as presented by Descartes's *Principles of Philosophy* in the section dedicated to physics.

Despite making use of Cartesian terminology, however, Spinoza's argument does not allow us to speak properly of an essence of time, for it is neither an objective essence (i.e., an idea inside of us) nor a formal essence (i.e., a condition of things outside of us). Although Spinoza calls it a 'being of reason', he adds to this nomenclature the proviso that, in spite of this choice of words, time cannot properly be called a 'being'.⁷ According to Spinoza, time has no formal reality. That is, it has no existence outside of us. Furthermore, time has no objective reality: it does not possess the status of an idea, be it true, false, or fictitious. Time is not an essence inside of us, while outside of us it

6 René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoot, and Dugald Murdoch, 3 vols (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91), II (1985), pp. 1–62 (p. 33).

7 CM I; CWS I, pp. 299–310.

has no existence. That is, it has *no ontological density* of any kind. To summarize this idea, we can say that for Spinoza *time is on the verge of non-being*.⁸

However, in 1663, Spinoza changed his position on this topic. Duration, henceforth conceived as indivisible, resists the measures that time would apply to it.⁹ After Spinoza's Letter XII,¹⁰ it becomes clear that those who explain duration through time fail to conceive of it properly, for time is but a mere abstraction. Time loses its epistemological value and ceases to be a legitimate being of reason to become, on a path of no return, one of the 'aids of the imagination' (*auxilia imaginationis*). In the following section, we will see what changed in Spinoza's concept of duration.

THE POSITIVITY OF DURATION

Following the demonstrations of the *Ethics*, we understand that there is no transcendent God above all 'created things', for they are now called 'finite things' or just finite modes (or affections) of the infinite substance, that is, God or Nature (*Deus sive Natura*). In the definitions of the *Ethics*, Spinoza argues that eternity and the duration of finite modes are indivisible. This is the main difference with his earlier writings.

To understand what it is to be a finite mode requires apprehending how, in this philosophy of immanence, Spinoza abandons the relation of *transcendent causality* between the infinite substance and its finite modes. The necessity of the substance's efficient cause is now determined by *immanent causality*, which displays the inner relation of substance's power to the power of the substance's finite modes,¹¹ that is, the inner force of *conatus*: 'each thing, as far as it can by its own

8 See Ericka Itokazu, 'Au-delà du temps mesure. La question du temps chez Spinoza', in *Ontologia e temporalità. Spinoza e i suoi lettori moderni*, ed. by Giuseppe D'Anna and Vittorio Morfino (Milano: Mimesis, 2012), pp. 387–98.

9 The displacement of the role of time in Spinoza's philosophy is admirably explored in the works of Chantal Jaquet (see especially her *Sub specie aeternitatis. Études des concepts de temps, durée et éternité chez Spinoza* (Paris: Kimé, 1997).

10 *Ep. XII* [Lodewijk Meyer]; CWS I, p. 200.

11 On this subject, I recommend the work of Nicolas Israël, *Spinoza. Le temps de la vigilance* (Paris: Payot, 2001).

power, strives to persevere in its being' and 'the striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing'.¹²

Duration, therefore, is no longer understood as a succession whose continuity is homogeneously neutral and which is characterized by an existential linearity restored instant after instant through continued creation. Instead, duration is understood as continuous, no longer as homogeneous or uniform, and certainly not as measurable by means of the operations of time. On the contrary, duration itself is the expression of diverse, multiple, and heterogeneous movements, insofar as the *conatus* — the constitutive inner power of duration — is also its *actual essence*. Indeed, every variation of power — every simultaneous affection of the body and of the mind — of this essence implies the diverse, multiple, and heterogeneous passages of this very body and this very mind. This is why, as is the case with the substance, duration is not divisible. Because it is the very characteristic of finite modes, duration can only be conceived of as a whole from which no parts can be divided.

In fact, after Spinoza's Letter XII, it is perfectly clear that duration can no longer be related to time. Not only is immanent causality the very core of Spinoza's thought, but it also constitutes a profound shift away from Cartesian philosophy. In Spinoza, one no longer has to cope with the complex problem of a divisible duration conceived as a succession of instants external to each other, precisely because this succession of instants requires the action of an external cause without which we simply could not understand how we continue to exist. Hence, with Spinoza, finite modes are no longer understood as instantaneous possible existences, and duration ceases to be dependent on God's continued creation (*contra* Descartes). The relation between the infinite and the finite is no longer that of an opposition between the eternal and the instantaneous, nor is it an external relation. Rather, the relation between the infinite and the finite is an internal or, better yet, an immanent relation.

12 *Ethics* II, 6 and 7; CWS I, p. 499.

In such a philosophy, a finite thing is defined as that which ‘can be limited by another of the same nature’.¹³ Using this definition — certainly one of the finest in the history of philosophy — Spinoza explains finitude as simply the fact of being among and in relationship with other finite beings. Thus, finitude is no longer characterized by ephemerality or mortality, and instead thought of as the fact that all existences are always interconnected. To be a finite thing means simply to *co-exist*, to exist with other singular things: finitude is precisely the reciprocal determining factor of the existence of finite things.

The co-existence of this *conatus* with and among other finite modes is shaped and characterized by multiple movements of body compositions, re-compositions, and decompositions, interwoven through many encounters and disagreements, and through the immeasurable production of desires (*conatus-cupiditas*), joys, and sorrows of affective life, be they individual or collective.

If duration is no longer understood as succession, if it cannot be reduced to a mere linear continuation — i.e. to a continuity whose ability to be measured comes from its being emptied of any of the movements that are proper to its existence — then how should one understand Spinoza’s definition of duration as ‘an indefinite continuation of existing’?¹⁴ To be clear, here, the term ‘indefinite’ does not mean indeterminate. Spinoza uses this adjective (‘indefinite’) to define duration because a finite existence is not determined by its actual essence. That is, the limitation of a finite existence is not determined by its inner efficient cause (derived from the immanence of the substance within the *conatus*’ essence) that makes it exist and, in itself, could never make it cease to exist.¹⁵

Here we can apply some lessons we have learned from Letter XII to the *Ethics*, for in that letter Spinoza presented various definitions of the ‘infinite’: there are things we call ‘infinite, or if you prefer, indefinite’,¹⁶ he says, ‘because they cannot be equated with any number’ and we might say, to no measure of time, ‘though they can be conceived to be greater or lesser’ as in the case of *conatus*. Or, to quote the definition

13 *Ethics* I, Def. 2; CWS I, p. 408.

14 *Ethics* II, Def. 5; CWS I, p. 447.

15 ‘The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being involves no finite time, but an indefinite time’ (*Ethics* III, 8; CWS I, p. 499).

16 *Ep. XII* [Lodewijk Meyer]; CWS I, p. 205.

given in *Ethics* III, 4 Dem.: ‘For the definition of any thing affirms, and does not deny, the thing’s essence, or it posits the thing’s essence, and does not take it away’.¹⁷ Therefore the term from the *Ethics*, ‘indefinite duration’, is derived from the absence of inner boundaries in the *conatus*. Now, to assert the absence of an internal limit is precisely to acknowledge and to affirm the internal positivity of the *conatus* and to posit the absence of any inner negativity. In other words, to be ‘indefinite’ is our finite way of being infinite.

Duration is, so to speak, positively undefined. Its definition actually occurs through the unfolding of its power within the existential field among many other finite modes. In the end, this dynamic definition results from the composition of experience as a mosaic of multiple affects, affections, and desires. Duration (or ‘the indefinite continuation of existing’), therefore, far from indicating a negation or a lack of determination, points to its opposite, that is, an immeasurable field of dynamic determinations, interwoven through the relations of one’s internal power to exist and act with the external powers of many others. In other words, existence is defined through one’s various relationships with the world, with living beings, with people, etc. When seen in this way, duration is inseparable from the *conatus* which guarantees its dynamic breadth and exceptional ontological density.¹⁸

It is impossible for us to strive for a complete definition of that dynamic force within such ontological density. Duration is not only indivisible but should also be understood as inapprehensible. Defining the continuation of existence is precisely not to understand it as a process, that is, as the movement of the *conatus* in its various internal determinations and external limitations. To seek to define duration is not to conceive of it but to confuse it with time. Or, to put it clearly, to seek to intellectually define duration is to imagine it, rather than to conceive of it; and as per Letter XII’s warning, to imagine duration is to separate it from the substance, that is, *to imagine efficient and immanent causality in the shape of transcendent and external causality*.

17 CWS I, p. 498.

18 The argument about the positivity of duration and the negativity of time is a part of a major section from my doctoral dissertation: Ericka Marie Itokazu, ‘Tempo, duração e eternidade na filosofia de Espinosa’ (Universidade de São Paulo (USP), 2008) <<https://www.teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/8/8133/tde-18032009-110714/pt-br.php>> [accessed 02 July 2020].

For this reason, Spinoza affirms that we are bound to have only an extremely inadequate knowledge of our duration or of the duration of the singular things outside us,¹⁹ since we are bound to imagine efficient causality in the shape of transitive causality. The interesting thing is that the same restriction that impedes adequate knowledge and any satisfactory definition of duration now seems to open up a wide range of determinations and movements of our power in the unfolding (*sub duratione*) of existing and acting.

Sub duratione, the non-definition of duration, is the corollary of our existence among other existences which is identical to the process of singular things in the intertwining of simultaneous encounters of composition or decomposition — a contrariety or complementarity of images and relations — but also in the union or opposition of forces. In other words, *sub duratione* is the very nature of the modal condition of finite things in continuous and multiple sets of relations to other existences, but above all it is a continuous process of power (*potentia*), that is, the perseverance in one's own being.

It should be noted that there are two distinct processes which are not equivalent even though they may seem similar. As per *Ethics* II, we know that a body cannot be conceived of as an isolated unit amongst other bodies, since to be a singular thing is to be an individual composed of many others, each of which is also composed by many other individuals, etc.²⁰ From the concept of body, Spinoza characterizes a continuous process of composition and decomposition with other bodies, as though self-regeneration²¹ were occurring thanks to the relations with other internal and external individuals within what we can call a multiple and continuous process of *singularization* occurs. However, in *Ethics* III and IV, after the demonstrations concerning the *conatus*, Spinoza highlights another process which is relevant here: these singular things can then constitute, in their actual essence, a compositional or oppositional power in relationship with other external

19 *Ethics* II, 30 and 31; CWS I, pp. 471–72.

20 'By singular things I understand things that are finite and have determinate existence. And if a number of individuals so concur in an action that together they are all the cause of one effect, I consider them all, to that extent, as one singular thing' (*Ethics* II, Def. 7; CWS I, p. 447).

21 *Ethics* II, 13; CWS I, pp. 457–62.

forces that have the possibility of not only diminishing this *conatus* but also of destroying it.

In Spinoza's political writings, our natural right is defined by our power as a political expression of the *conatus*. Thus, a singular thing is determined by the multiple relations of an individual *conatus* or a collective one (as the *multitudinis potentia*) against external forces (*potestas*) within which it strives to persevere in its own existence. The duration of singular things is also inapprehensible in the political process of this individual and collective *conatus*. Thus, they establish relations with other forces that simultaneously determine their inner ethical power to freedom or slavery, and their political power within the various internal relations of a political body or against external relations with a political *potestas*.

The central dynamics of composing or opposing ourselves (as individuals and as a collectivity) rests in both processes, in a continuous definition of our existence: we are immersed in the world that we are also comprised of, and we persist and endure as a singular and collective *conatus* in and with this world as beings capable of producing common affects and actions. One understands how, in this dual movement of singularization and perseverance, which is also within the continuously in-definition of ethical and political existence, duration is as dense and thick from the ontological viewpoint as it is dynamic and indomitable from the historical viewpoint.

THE POSITIVITY OF DURATION OR THE NEGATIVITY OF TIME?

From what we have just seen, it should be easy to understand why Spinoza affirms that we may only have an *extremely inadequate knowledge* of duration. The in-apprehensibility of duration makes it impossible to conceive of it intellectually as a complete definition, which forces us to (only) imagine it. This being said, the problem of time and its relation to duration becomes harder and more complex at another level. Indeed, imagination is not the source of error, as Spinoza demonstrates; rather, the error consists precisely in taking imagination for intellection, that is, taking a misconception for a concept.²² There are

22 *Ethics* II, 17 Dem.; CWS I, pp. 465–66.

things one can only conceive of and never imagine, such as eternity; on the other hand, there are things one can only imagine and never conceive of, such as one's duration and the duration of external things.

The consequence is inexorable: seeking to understand duration necessarily involves imagining it through time. And this is exactly what, as Spinoza wrote in Letter XII, separates us from the substance. I would like to summarize the triple mechanism operated by time as follows:

- a) First mechanism: we are inclined, by a natural impulse, to confuse time with duration.²³ We begin to divide the total and indivisible inner force of duration into parts. We are inclined to imagine our immanent force (our *conatus*) by means of the image of transitive causality introduced by the negativity of time.

The continuity of our existence becomes the experience of its own fragmentation, since time does not bind one moment to another. On the contrary, time itself is the division that splits the indivisible inner force of duration into a before and an after, transforming the continuity of a life into a contiguity of isolated moments. As a result, we get used to smudging the ground on which the power of our existence unfolds, so that we feel deeply alienated (*ab alio*), that is, separated from ourselves. To confuse duration with time is to be forced to deal with the argument presented in Letter XII: 'For composing Duration of moments is the same as composing Number merely by adding noughts.'²⁴ Transitive causality replaces desire's immanent determination (our *conatus-cupiditas*) for the emptiness of free will (its misconception). The emergence of time reveals the eclipse of the *conatus*, transforming the power of a life into a non-power to live.

- b) Second mechanism: although neither number, nor measure, nor time have any reality of their own, many 'have confused these three [aids of the imagination] with things themselves.'²⁵ Thus, to confuse time with duration produces a concrete effect, that

23 *Ep. XII* [Lodewijk Meyer]; *CWS I*, p. 202.

24 *Ibid.*, 204.

25 *Ibid.*

is, the imaginary construction of the reality of time outside of us.

This argument has a mirroring relation to the preceding argument. Given that duration is perceived as extremely fragmented, and living is perceived as various split instants that do not support their own continuity, we endeavour to imagine the consistency of our existence maintained by an exterior and continuous support. As an imaginary replica of Descartes's continued creation, we will imagine an endless and external time, an eternity which is the sole imaginary entity capable of colligating the split instants within oneself. Time becomes an external reality outside of us, and its mechanism and action are independent of all human actions. Since time is external, unrelated to anything, and devoid of a beginning as well as of an end, it becomes the symbol of the infinite beyond us. Our internal relation to the substance, established by immanent causality, will therefore be imagined as the transcendent causality of the absolute above us.

However, because it is an imaginary construction, its very nature is to present itself in various figures. It does not matter whether these figures are linear or cyclical ones, eschatological or soteriological, for they shall always be the metamorphic face of a Time *edax rerum*. One cannot escape the order of nature. There, life is perceived as a strange experience in which a single operator not only fragments the course of life, but also merges the instants it has split, reversing the constitutive power of the *conatus* from the inside out, and subsuming it under an imaginary external power (*potestas*) of an infinite Time that devours everything.

- c) Third and final mechanism: of all aids of the imagination, only time is able to fragment duration and to introduce, in a philosophy of the necessary, the experience of contingency. As long as one exists, one's *conatus*, the striving inner force to persevere in existence, is also one's actual essence. Even though essence and existence are inalienable pairs, in this paradoxical and imaginary experience, time (and time only) is capable of clandestinely alienating the inalienable.

This is why the operation of time introduces contingency and possibility, notions that Spinoza defines as the misconception of the necessary bond between essence and existence.²⁶ The ontological density of the *conatus*' inner process in singular things, necessarily determined by their intertwined co-existence, is now dissolved by the fiction that all things are individually isolated, for they are now separated from the substance and turned into *particular* things whose existence is corruptible by the contingency of the world.

For each singular thing [...] must be determined by another singular thing to exist and produce effects in a certain and determinate way, and this again by another, and so to infinity. But since we have demonstrated from this common property of singular things that we have only a very inadequate knowledge of duration of our body, *we shall have to draw the same conclusion concerning duration of singular things.* [...] From this it follows that *all particular things are contingent and corruptible.* For we can have no adequate knowledge of their duration, and that is what we must understand by contingency of things and the possibility of their corruption. For *beyond that there is no contingency.*²⁷

These three mechanisms are the source of the multiple variations of desire (*conatus-cupiditas*) that are related to *Ethics* IV and its demonstrations of Human Bondage (*De servitute humana*). The Powers of the Affects (*Affectuum viribus*), or their intensity, is connected with temporal operations which determine hope, fear, despair, security, and *fluctuatio animi*, all of which are temporal affects and fundamental political passions. The 'future contingents', the possible existence and corruption of the world, *Fors Fortunae*, and servitude: all of these images contribute to an internal superstition which is based on a passion forged by time, just like fear that simultaneously requires hope about the image of an external entity upon which we are dependent and which reinforces all theologico-political power. This could include the image of the impossible union with the infinite of an eternal and

26 Cf. *Ethics* IV, Def. 3; CWS I, p. 546: 'I call singular things contingent insofar as we find *nothing*, while we attend *only to their essence*, which necessarily *posits their existence* or which necessarily *excludes it*'. See also *Ethics* IV, Def. 4; CWS I, p. 546: 'I call *the same singular things* possible, insofar as, *we do not know* whether those causes are determined to produce them'; my emphasis.

27 *Ethics* III, 31 Dem. and Corol.; CWS I, p. 472.

transcendent God, or the secular image of the end of history, or the image of a final emancipation of humanity in which we overcome our endless and miserable present. The soteriological or the eschatological expectations are both temporal projections of finalist thought that instil fear and hope in the heart of one's affective life.

Spinoza defines fear as an inconstant sadness and hope as an inconstant joy, and writes that they are both 'born from the idea of a future or a past thing whose outcome we to some extent doubt'.²⁸ Fear and hope, however, are so inconstant that they take the shape of existential doubt, and in this case we might understand that to doubt is *not to affirm* the power of our existence. On the contrary, doubt suspends our ability to act, that is to say, it suspends the action of our *conatus*. That is why Spinoza explains that there is no fear without hope, and there is no hope without fear. The inability to act is introduced by the negativity of time; the soul's *vacillation* of mind is the passion that most makes us politically and existentially powerless. Vacillation is like being a prisoner of permanent doubt floating between fear and hope. It is an affective experience of impotence, of lacking power to act, as if we were all merely possible existences in a contingent world.

Removing doubt about the 'uncertainty of the future' is the same as requiring that the *conatus* gets rid of the impossible image of the same future being simultaneously fearsome and hopeful, even though this amounts to cultivating the fiction of an 'uncertain present' that brings the promise of our 'possibility to act'. Through such an inversion of images, it is 'the present' that would become 'uncertain'. It becomes open to the imaginary possibility of human actions as a decision towards a better future, that is, the false image of free will and the very definition of finalist thought. To avoid the powerless effort of a suspended existence due to the vacillation of mind and in order not to expect the impossible disclosure of future times in the present (the verge of despair), some effort to build a resistance to doubt is required. The introduction of an action is required, even if it is the image of free will seeking the good: the closest affective image of some certainty, a fragile and necessary pulse of the *conatus* from within passional life.

28 See *Ethics* III, DA 12 and 13; CWS I, p. 534.

How can we understand that same process outside of finalist thought and within the operation of the efficient cause?

First, by paying attention to the fact that these teleological operations reveal another important concept in Spinoza: *utilitas*. As he defines it: 'By good I shall understand what we certainly know to be useful to us',²⁹ and 'by the end for the sake of which we do something I understand appetite'.³⁰ These definitions are clearly reinverting what has already been inverted by our imaginary misconception. Thus, Spinoza uses the lexicon of teleological thought, a corollary of servile imagination, precisely to escape servitude. This is why, in *Ethics* IV, he explains that one must differentiate the 'contingent' from the 'possible'. The distinction between these images determines the intensity of distinct passions which are more or less subservient to fortune.³¹ Further, they determine different interrelations of human actions within the political body that produce different dynamics inside of it — transforming fear and hope into either security (certainty of a future joy), or into despair (certainty of a future sadness) — and explain the social dynamics of a political body, generating a higher or lesser propensity to either freedom or servitude.

Our appetite (our efficient cause), based on its imagination as a final causality and on its imagined quest for what is good (*utilitas*), in fact proposes a determination in order to rid itself of the doubt and uncertainty brought forth by our fears and hopes. For this, it is required that the *conatus* push aside the fearsome image of contingent futures, even though this amounts to fostering *the imaginary construction of an uncertain present*. The confrontation of the *conatus*' determinations with the contingent future, even if it is through imagined free will and finalism, thus produces an individual action, or a cooperation of individuals in action, which, in turn, develops into a renewed effort (isolated or in common) to transform the image of the *contingent* future into another *possible* future. That is *actually and precisely the appropriation of the present time*. The same mechanism can also simultaneously explain,

29 *Ethics* IV, Def. 1; CWS I, p. 546.

30 *Ethics* IV, Def. 7; CWS I, p. 547.

31 'An affect toward a thing which we know does not exist in the present, and which we imagine as possible, is more intense, other things being equal, than one towards a contingent thing' (*Ethics* IV, 12; CWS I, p. 552).

in terms of passional processes, the corporal imaginary constructions that survive through the actions of time (be it an individual or political body). The traces of memory (*vestigia corporis*) and social memories,³² as well as the corporal striving to maintain the image of its own existence, is what is expressed by the internal dynamic of resisting, or renewing,³³ the culture, language, customs, habits, rites, and ceremonies.

CONCLUSION: SPINOZA AND HISTORY

We can now see how both the denial of time's ontological status and the positive density of the *conatus* is likely to change one's views on Spinozism. *Tempus* is not an essence, existence, *res*, *idea*, or epistemological value for knowledge or the sciences. This is perhaps so because time is precisely this innate negativity, or the only instrument capable of introducing the fissures of contradiction within the intense and plain positivity of duration. This is precisely what we were looking for: the connection between the positivity of duration and the negativity of time seems, little by little, to reveal itself as the dynamic composition of the existential human realm (be it individual or collective) of striving in existence with all its consequences within the realms of imagination, ethics, and, above all, politics.

To conclude, one might ask how to understand the historical process implied by these remarks. The question about the relationship between history and time can be renewed. To seek a theory of history with the notion of time turns out to be an idealized abstraction that surrenders to the temptations of finalist thought, and an error that confounds knowledge with imagination, a concept with a misconception, and a science with an ideology.

In contrast, to understand history *sub duratione* amounts to rethinking the challenges of a materialist conception of history. Given the in-apprehensibility of duration and its ontological positivity, the

32 See Laurent Bove, *La Stratégie du conatus. Affirmation et résistance chez Spinoza* (Paris: Vrin, 1996) and Lorenzo Vinciguerra, *Spinoza et le signe. La Genèse de l'imagination* (Paris: Vrin, 2005).

33 'An affect whose cause we imagine to be with us in the present moment is stronger than if we did not imagine it to be with us' (*Ethics* IV, 9; CWS I, p. 551).

historical process maintains in itself an overture to immeasurable and indomitable determinations for multiple images and operations of time, which contain passions and actions of reciprocal relations between *conatus*. The *affectuum viribus* is now determined by the opposition of affects: ‘By opposite affects I shall understand, in what follows, those which pull a man differently, although they are of the same *genus* — such as gluttony and greed, which are species of love, and are opposite not by nature, but accidentally.’³⁴ The accidental is entirely different from the contingent and the possible, and not related to time. Spinoza designates the accidental as that which constantly modifies the inner force of our *conatus* through the relations between things of the same *genus* in a multitude of affections and affects, which are multiple interconnections of various and diverse durations constantly composing and de-composing the complex thread of a dynamic tissue of the maintenance of their own existence, in other words, their own historicity.

If one thinks of the movement of history as a non-teleological process, and if one thinks about the relation between materialism and history in Spinoza’s philosophy, perhaps the answer can simply be this: human actions do not occur according to a succeeding temporal framework (characterized by transitive and final causality), whether it is pursuing a linear, cyclic, progressive, or regressive time, since human history does not move through time. On the contrary, it is the imagination of time experiencing accidental causes (through the multiple efficient and partial causalities intertwining and presenting in our own power) that mobilizes us into history.

TRANSLATED BY BAPTISTE GRASSET

34 *Ethics* IV, Def. 5; CWS I, p. 546.

Ericka Marie Itokazu, 'Temporality and History in Spinoza: The Refusal of Teleological Thought', in *Materialism and Politics*, ed. by Bernardo Bianchi, Emilie Filion-Donato, Marlon Miguel, and Ayşe Yuva, *Cultural Inquiry*, 20 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2021), pp. 55–72 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-20_03>

REFERENCES

- Bloch, Ernst, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), II
- Bove, Laurent, *La Stratégie du conatus. Affirmation et résistance chez Spinoza* (Paris: Vrin, 1996)
- Chauí, Marilena, 'A questão democrática', in *Cultura e democracia: o discurso competente e outras falas* (São Paulo: Cortez, 2006), pp. 144–69
- Descartes, René, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoot, and Dugald Murdoch, 3 vols (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91), II (1985), pp. 1–62 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511818998>>
- Israël, Nicolas, *Spinoza. Le temps de la vigilance* (Paris: Payot, 2001)
- Itokazu, Ericka, 'Au-delà du temps mesure. La question du temps chez Spinoza' in *Ontologia e temporalità. Spinoza e i suoi lettori moderni*, ed. by Giuseppe D'Anna and Vitorio Morfino (Milano: Mimesis, 2012), pp. 387–98
- 'Tempo, Duração e Eternidade Na Filosofia de Espinosa' (Universidade de São Paulo (USP), 2008) <<https://www.teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/8/8133/tde-18032009-110714/pt-br.php>> [accessed 02 July 2020]
- Jaquet, Chantal, *Sub specie aeternitatis. Études des concepts de temps, durée et éternité chez Spinoza* (Paris: Kimé, 1997)
- Montag, Warren, and Ted Stolze, eds, *The New Spinoza* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997)
- Morfino, Vittorio, *Genealogia di un pregiudizio. L'immagine di Spinoza in Germania da Leibniz a Marx* (Hildesheim: Olms, 2016)
- *Plural Temporality: Transindividuality and the Aleatory between Spinoza and Althusser* (Leiden: Brill, 2014) <<https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004270558>>
- Spinoza, Benedictus de, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, ed. and trans. by Edwin Curley, 2 vols (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985–2016)
- Tosel, André, *Du matérialisme, de Spinoza* (Paris: Kimé, 1994)
- Vinciguerra, Lorenzo, *Spinoza et le signe. La Genèse de l'imagination* (Paris: Vrin, 2005)
- Yovel, Yirmiyahu, *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Adventures of Immanence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989)