

A Spinozean Unconscious? Some Remarks on Deleuze's Problematic Inscription of Spinoza's Ontology in Psychoanalysis¹

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Porque la falta, en psicoanálisis, es algo positivo. La falta existe bajo la forma de lo que Freud llamó la castración; y existe, además, la privación y también la frustración. Hay varios tipos de faltas, varios tipos de agujeros; por esa razón no podemos ser spinocianos en psicoanálisis.²

1.

This essay locates itself in the whereabouts of the following thesis: the post-structuralist reading of psychoanalysis, as developed specially by Gilles Deleuze, might be based on a particular reading of Spinoza's God as infinite substance.

Everything stems, thus, from the definition that appears in sixth place in the *Ethics*: «By God, I understand Being absolutely infinite, that is to say, substance consisting of infinite attributes, each one of which expresses eternal and infinite essence» (*E*, I, Def. 6).³ To which, one must add the accompanying «Explanation: I say absolutely infinite but not infinite in its own kind (*in suo genere*); for of whatever is infinite only in its own kind, we can deny infinite attributes; but to the essence of that which is absolutely infinite pertains whatever expresses essence and involves no negation».

This is the definition of what I shall call the *ontological structure*, the key concept of which is *infinity*. As I see it, at the nucleus of Spinoza's philosophy,

1 This essay was originally delivered as a brief talk at the Centre of Modern Thought and Hispanic Studies of the University of Aberdeen, 16 May 2009, in the context of the Conference «Republicanism I: Marrano Views on Empire and Democracy». I thank the scholars that were present during the session, whose comments and responses I have kept in mind while writing this final version.

2 J.-A. MILLER, «Del saber inconsciente a la causa freudiana I», *Introducción a la clínica lacaniana. Conferencias en España*, RBA, Barcelona, 2006, p. 205. All the talks gathered in this book were originally delivered in Spanish.

3 This edition of Benedict De Spinoza's *Ethics* corresponds to the English translation made by W.H. White, and revised by A.H. Stirling, published by Oxford University Press.

and especially of his *Ethics*, stands a most correct and rigorous definition of infinity –whatever that’s worth.

Now, as regards the definition just quoted, we must bear in mind that, if there exists an infinite substance, this is because there is an infinite intellect on the first place (God’s), whose main function is precisely to conceive of the infinite forms of being that may be possible –that is, of all that can be. Also, one must remember that it is characteristic of such God to do so exclusively on account of an internal necessity (that is, by cause of itself), a principle which is better understood when identified with an absolute productive function. Again, this functional principle should be read *vis-à-vis* infinity, so that cause-of-itself, an exclusively productive function and infinity become three co-related terms, concepts whose meaning is shaped by the same structural frame. If God’s infinite intellect must produce all that can be –not some sort of beings in opposition to others, and not due to a partial desire, interest or need, but motivated by an absolute and internal desire of producing everything that can be–, if all this is the case, then the only aim of its productivity would be to attain and actualize infinity.

This will help us to understand that God’s intellect is ontological. The spectrum of His infinite intellect coincides with the spectrum of substance, with the infinite attributes and their respective modes, with the realm of being as a whole. It embraces being in general, all forms of being –and not only ideas, as the term «intellect» might induce us to think at first. For instance, bodies are also acts of God’s intelligence –we will later insist on this point a bit more. For God, to intellect and to bestow being are equivalent operations. Actually, to be is just to be in God’s intellect; to be is simply to be thought by God, independently of the manner of being involved in each case.

Now, in accordance with the laws of reason, the way God’s intellect proceeds is analytical in manner: first, it conceives of an infinite number of attributes, an attribute being that which an «intellect perceives of substance, as if constituting its essence» (*E*, I, Def. 4). Again, we can imagine an infinite substance as implying infinite essences; but the key resides in that these infinities depend directly on the possibility of an infinite intellect, since only then could an infinite number of qualities be conceived (and something like an infinite substance make any sense). We are dealing, therefore, with an infinite number of intelligible essences, or qualities, that only exist insofar as such a thing can be apprehended by an all-conceiving God.

To this, one must add, on a second level, the infinity of modes that each attribute involves by itself. This is conveyed by the second clause of the sixth definition, where, speaking of the attributes, Spinoza adds: «each one

of which expresses eternal and infinite essence». What is here involved is the fact that there are infinite ways in which each of these qualities might be thought of. That is: there are infinite ways in which they could differ within the range that constitutes their essence –and God's infinite intellect takes good care to think of all of them. Such variations are, precisely, the modes. They are defined as «affections of substance, or that which is in another thing (that is, in the attributes of the substance) through which also it is conceived» (*E*, I, Def. 5). Modes are therefore variations of a substance as conceived in and through the modifications of an attribute.

All this is summarized by Spinoza himself by saying that God «can think an infinitude of things in infinite ways, or (which is the same thing, by Prop. 16, pt. 1) can form an idea of His essence and of all the things which necessarily follow from it» (*E*, II, Prop. 3, Demonstr.).

Of course, once we reach this point, we can already discriminate between God's infinite *intellect* and human finite *thought*. This distinction is essential. While God's intelligence relates to all forms of being, human thought (which is included in the former) only has to do with ideas, which are the modes of being proper to one attribute only: thought. The ideas produced by the human mind are just one of the infinite ways God's infinite intellect conceives of infinite being, and produces being thereby.

Finally, a basic thesis already comes to the fore, which we must bear in mind: in Spinoza's ontology, to be conceived by God is the precondition of existence.

2

Having said this, a potential misunderstanding must be dissolved at once. It goes like this: one might think that infinite substance consists of an infinite number of sets (the attributes), each with an infinite number of members (the modes) –but it is not so. Firstly: we are always speaking of a single infinity (there can't be a plurality of infinities). Secondly, and derived from the first: we can only speak of sets and members once the qualification carried out by the attributes has come into play. Basically, the latter stand as the infinite ways in which a single infinity could be conceived of, every time under a different quality. The same infinity is seen differently through the prisms that the attributes present. For example, should we return to the distinction between human thought and God's infinite intellect, we would say that it is through human thought that God's intellect expresses its infinity in the form of *ideas*.

With this we come to what Gilles Deleuze called *modification* in his major work on Spinoza, *Expressionism in Philosophy*. According to this process,

each individual belonging to the same infinity is repeated under each of the attributes, each time as a different mode.⁴

As we see, modes are a form of existence internal to attributes only (*E*, I, Prop. 10). Provided this, Deleuze's next move is the following: God's intellect being infinite, he believes that there is a specific form of being that Spinoza's infinite attributes could not account for. In other words, there would still remain an ontological niche that neither attributes nor their respective modes could fill. We can see that at this point Deleuze attempts to do justice to Spinoza's definition of infinity in more coherent a manner than Spinoza himself. His line of reasoning goes like this: infinite substance should also include within itself a form of being that cannot be understood under the scope of any quality or essence whatsoever, but rather as the lack of it, as a qualitative indetermination or at least as an incomplete qualitative realization. One should not confuse this option with nothingness or absolute indetermination, but rather take it as a *partially undetermined, relatively undefined* or in some measure *undifferentiated* form of being. Also, we could well understand it in terms of a potential state. Such a form of being, indeed, would not come to be via the attributes, but would appear somewhere else in Spinoza's system. It would not partake of a modal form of existence.

Let's see if we can make more sense out of this. As we shall see, another way to explain how attributes actualize being is that they force it into the mold of the *identity principle*, another formulation of which can be found in Spinoza's thesis that *determination involves negation* and, also, in the mathematical paradigm. Again, this means that modal being relates and differs within the logics of presence, so to say. In opposition to this, the best way to understand the speculative challenge posed by Deleuze might be to imagine that, prior to crossing the threshold implied by attributes, something that shall come to be an infinite series of modes already exists in a way that doesn't conform neither to an ontic paradigm nor to the identity principle, in any of its attribute variants. Be it what may (Deleuze will speak of it in *Difference and Repetition* and in his *The Logic of Sense* in terms of *virtuality*), it cannot be thought as a member of a set, let alone an infinite one. For it is not yet sufficiently determined. In opposition to extension, to difference in space or on the axis of chronological time, Deleuze argues that at this point these virtual units of being (if we may call them so) only bear intension, that is, that they are only intense. Sometimes he says that this is the precise being of *time*. They relate within an altogether different paradigm to the one that

4 Cf. G. DELEUZE, *Expressionism in Philosophy*, trad. Martin Joughin, Zone Books, New York, 1997, pp. 110-111: «modes that differ in attribute form one and the same modification ... Every mode is the form of a modification in an attribute, every modification the being in itself of modes differing in attribute».

organizes ontic being. Number, extension, identity (and also infinity, were we to consider it as a numerical entity), together with the sort of existence involved by all of them, would only appear later on, with the passage to the attributes.

As we have said, the reason why Deleuze does not assume that this specific form of being can be provided by any attribute is that it should not be understood in terms of quality (and attributes are qualities, as we know), but as the relative lack of it. It would only be found in a stage previous, or different, to the qualification process put forward by attributes.

But there is another reason for this, and it consists in that, however infinite, God's intellect would still remain inscribed within the bounds of language and its structure. Indeed, if there is something that we owe to the structuralist investigation, it is precisely that it raised awareness of the strong affinity that holds between spatial-temporal difference, the ontic level, and language as a functional system. From this point of view, the modal actualization brought by attributes would tend to reproduce the structure that enables language, that is, the order thanks to which language creates sense.

If this is the case, then it all comes down to deciding whether God's infinite intellect is linguistic in form; whether the intelligibility of the essences that He perceives in a substance should be understood strictly within the bounds of linguistic meaning. Clearly, Deleuze's post-structuralist answer is No. His reading tends to underline that God's intellect must express itself in ways external to language (even if these would not come to be via the attributes), just like substance must manifest itself in ways that don't conform to spatial-temporal difference.

3

Let us return to the thesis according to which each individual receives a series of infinite modal forms, corresponding to the infinite attributes. For we know that God intellects an infinite number of such attributes, and yet Spinoza only claims to know about two: extension (*E*, II, Prop. 2) and thought (*E*, II, Prop. 1). As to the rest, we remain in ignorance. The modes of «extension» are bodies (*E*, II, Def. 1), insofar as extension is realized as different combinations of «motion» and «rest», undergone by the internal parts of bodies. On the other hand, ideas are the modes of «thought» (*E*, II, Def. 3).

And indeed, we already know enough to identify that extension and thought are but an earlier version of the two a priori categories that Kant would pose as transcendental to subjective experience: space and time. Bodies would differ and relate in space, while ideas would differ and relate

in time. As we shall see, these are, too, the dimensions along which language proceeds.

But why does Spinoza limit his own knowledge of the attributes to two? The answer is that it is only as modes particular to this pair of attributes (and only to them) that human beings participate in infinite substance; that is, participate in God's infinite intellect as acts of His conception. In doing so, they unfold the two modal infinities which saturate these two attributes. Indeed, they frame the human domain inside God's infinite one. On the one hand, we participate in and unfold the quality «extension» because we have a body, because we may come in contact with other bodies, and come to realize thereby different variations of motion and of rest. On the other, we participate in and unfold the quality «thought» because we have a mind, a «thinking thing» as Spinoza calls it, with which we produce ideas (*E*, II, Def. 3).

It might seem, then, that Spinoza places the human being in a diminished position by limiting his being to two attributes only. And yet, this is not so—or, at least, not as radically as one might suppose at first. The point is that, having said that a single infinity of elements is always reproduced, we now must conclude that the attribute thought already contains an idea corresponding to every element that belongs to this single infinity which is reflected, each time, in the light of a different essence. That is, for everything that exists in each of the infinite attributes, there is a corresponding idea. This mechanism is normally referred to as the *ontological parallelism*.

The optimistic conclusion to be drawn is that there are, indeed, no more elements than those we may already encounter as bodies and ideas in the planes of extension and of thought. What really happens is that these elements also exist in other forms. Therefore, we are not limited regarding *how much* there is (since we still access an infinity of things), but only as to *how* we are to approach it—namely, through the attributes of extension and thought. We only access being in the form of ideas and bodies; and yet, through these two attributes, we still access all there is. Concerning the attribute thought and the process of knowledge that organizes it, we may know everything there is to know, if only in the form of ideas—obviously, since to know is precisely to have ideas.⁵

5 To *intellect* and to *know* are, therefore, different things. They reproduce the opposition holding between God's intellect and human thought. God intellects infinite bodies, infinite ideas, and infinitely more infinite things. From this it follows that God only knows through us, since it is only through ideas that God and human beings may know. To know, however, also means to intellect adequate ideas, in opposition to inadequate ones.

Now, if throughout the last section we have referred to the human being as a «we», as a species, it has been for exactly the same reason that we have spoken of infinite ideas to be conceived, or infinite bodies to be modified in extension. Indeed, the human genre as a whole necessarily overlaps with the two infinities proper to thought and extension. We said they form the human domain inside God's infinite one, and neither the fact that history must mediate this process, nor the possibility of there being different degrees of knowledge (some more adequate than others), make a difference as to the necessary coincidence of both levels.

And yet, this by no means implies that a single individual subject can grasp infinity of modes, whatever the attribute involved. As far as a single subject is concerned, finitude is a horizon that will not be transcended. The participation of each individual subject in the attributes of extension and thought is absolutely limited and well defined. For example, in «extension», one is reduced to his own body, formed of infinite smaller parts that are held together in a sort of balance of motion and of rest (*E*, II, Prop. 13 & passim). Corporeal organization tolerates a flexible balance also, but beyond a certain point (if exposed to too much strain) cohesion falls apart and a new body necessarily arises.

And, as regards the attribute «thought» and the aim to be obtained therein, it consists in a subject being able to achieve an adequate idea of his own mind. For the most part, this is the goal of knowledge. And it is well known what this idea of the mind consists in: a complex idea of the body, involving as it must the ideas of the infinite smaller parts we have already spoken about (*E*, II, Prop. 15). «The object of the idea constituting the human mind,» says Spinoza, «is a body, or certain mode of extension actually existing, and nothing else» (*E*, II, Prop. 13). The mind must therefore come to know its own structure, the structure from which it produces ideas, as a thinking thing.

In the fulfillment of this goal, however, a major obstacle must be surmounted, namely, that the mind only has at hand the ideas of those affections that disturb the body (*E*, II, Prop. 19). The point is that the representations of such affections have something to do with the mind itself and with its structure (for the mind produces them), but they do not include an explanation of this relation, and thus do not provide the mind with neither an adequate account of itself, nor of the outer bodies whose affections it perceives (*E*, II, Prop. 16, 19, 23 & passim). Indeed, we are before the causal dynamic that, within the field of Marxism, Althusser's group would call *structural causality*, where an *absent cause* wholly determines the process of

cognition. We are to witness, next, a similar dynamic in Lacan's rendition of psychoanalysis.

In Spinoza's philosophy, the possibility that the objective reality of extension may be experienced in itself is canceled straight away thanks to the independent status enjoyed by each attribute, by their absolute separation, by the fact that they maintain no contact with each other, even if their order corresponds (*E*, II, Prop. 7). Thus, as Spinoza defends, «the human mind does not know the human body itself, nor does it know that the body exists, except through ideas of affections by which the body is affected» (*E*, II, Prop. 19). We have seen how ideas don't provide an adequate knowledge of the processes occurring in extension. And yet, adequate or inadequate as they may be (since both types are equally necessary and perfect), ideas shape men's knowledge of being. That is, ideas define what being is for the mind.

A second thesis must be drawn therefrom, to complement the previous one. We have already defended that to be conceived by God's infinite intellect is a precondition for being⁶ –of this we are sure. To this thesis we must now add that men have no knowledge of the reality of extension, but only knowledge of ideas, knowledge circumscribed in, and affected by, the reality proper to the modes of thought.

This second thesis already orients us towards accepting what has become the major theoretical tenet of structuralism, namely, *the determination of language over reality*, over whatever we may experience or know; or –to say it in terms familiar to post-positivist epistemology– *the theory-ladenness of experience*.

For, while the question as to whether God's infinite intellect was or wasn't bound to language was still a doubtful one, I think we can fully endorse

6 If we remember well, the first one appeared in relation to the function of the attributes, insofar as intellect was ontological and provider of being –that is, insofar as the possibility or necessity of an infinite being depended, for Spinoza, on the one infinite intellect capable of conceiving an infinite number of essences (the attributes), as well as all the possible modifications for each of them.

Of course, once we had an infinite intellect such as God's, infinity was a given, and from then on –in the case of the attribute thought, for example– the task of the human being, as a genre, became to actualize this structural necessity through time and history, and do so precisely through the concrete acts of human thought.

That is: the human genre had to realize the infinite theoretical structure that had to exist insofar as God also expresses his infinity through thought and its particular modes. Now, if the temporal actualization of the modes enabled history to appear, the finitude and determination of each human being (as regards his body and his mind) enabled phenomena such as truth and falsity, happiness and sadness, to occur.

A qualitative aspect then became relevant amid the ontological structure defined by infinity, cause of itself, and infinite production. *Ethics* and epistemology arose amid ontology –even if this didn't cancel the fact that infinity continued to be the only goal, and infinite production, the only teleology.

the thesis according to which ideas in Spinoza's philosophy, or modes of thought, would share the structure of language. That Spinoza refers to ideas as images does not rule this out –images are well suited to this paradigm. Thus, the identity principle and a differential and causal logic that runs along the vertical and horizontal axes of space and time, appear now as the principles ordering the modes of the two attributes we know of, bodies and ideas.

We can now make explicit the parallelisms holding between the epistemological outline just described and Lacanian psychoanalysis. As we well know, Lacan exercised a quasi-complete linguistic determination of subjectivity and of all the phenomena inscribed in it, like libido and the forms of desire. According to Spinoza, the mind pursued an idea of its own structure, for this idea was necessary to obtain an adequate knowledge of itself and of the outer bodies the affections of which the mind perceived. Similarly, in psychoanalysis the subject pursues the knowledge of his or her subjective structure, but (just like before) stumbles upon a similar obstacle. For this structure includes a part (an unconscious language) the only signs of which are symptoms. In order to arrive at this knowledge, this unconscious language must be disclosed, the problem being, then, that symptoms do not make explicit the unconscious language from which they derive.

We shall part with Spinoza at this point.

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I hope I have made clear that the confrontation between structuralism and post-structuralism concentrates in the extent to which one is willing to interpret God's intellect and human thought from the standpoint implied by the linguistic structure.

Accordingly, the answer as to what use does Deleuze make of this philosophy will be that he voids both God's intellect and human thought of the linguistic determination that seemed to assail them. As regards psychoanalysis, this would mean that *free-association* can be truly free and undetermined, just like God's creative pulse.

On the one hand, intellectual conceptions foreign to linguistic and ontic difference appeared to Deleuze as a coherent conclusion to be drawn once we took seriously the infinite status of God's ontological and productive intellect. Infinite production would include forms that men's thought couldn't come up with. And yet, we soon discovered that, surprisingly, Deleuze wanted to introduce these external forms within men's thought, within the scope of finite subjectivity.

In doing this, Deleuze constructs a new structure for being and subjectivity. The first is infinite while the second finite –yet this is not the most relevant

aspect, which lies elsewhere. It consists in the fact that in both levels we find a model of structure that cannot be closed, insofar as it retains within itself an undetermined part. In opposition to the logic that regulates actuality in all its forms (spatial-temporal entities and propositional language), this part has a virtual ontological status. As we recall, its main feature was that it didn't comply with the identity principle. Such a structural shift entails a change even in respect to the most extended understanding of Spinoza's infinity, which (for the most part) had been read as entailing only fully actualized differences. Deleuze's new infinity, on the contrary, bears also relatively undetermined ones.

This is why his private ontology, as systematized in his more personal books *Difference and Repetition* and *Logics of Sense*, does away with the Spinozean attributes altogether, for in doing so he makes sure to cancel the question as to whether being produces only in ways that language (or a human, linguistic intellect) could show. Obviously, the answer is «no». In its stead, he poses cause of itself as a totally unrestrained productive function, guided exclusively by the desire for infinite difference, whatever its form.

As regards subjectivity, I am especially interested in making explicit the confrontation between this understanding and the position held by Lacanian psychoanalysis. According to the latter, the unconscious was (also) structured like a language, like conscious thought. The unconscious consisted in a deposit of not-necessarily-syntactic, metaphoric and yet fully significant associations which were operative for the subject (i.e. they were libidinally invested), even if he or she had no knowledge of them, and which –in addition– only manifested in the form of symptoms. This means that the unconscious was fully determined, in the philosophical sense of the word. Not only did it exist as language (it employed a metaphorical and metonymical logic throughout), but the articulation of unconscious signifiers was not a matter of chance either, for it had a function and obeyed a reason. Unconscious associations were not determined by society's syntax neither by its ideological goals, but rather by a traumatic event that presented the subject's confrontation with the Father, the Law, and thus with the need for language itself. This would be the Freudian reading of Lacan's Real, of course; that such a traumatic event actually took place or was fantasized was scarcely to the point, as regards its functionality. An individual subjective structure, whatever its form (pervert, neurotic or psychotic), and whatever the symptom and the desire constituted therefrom, could be traced back to this constituting event, for nothing except its repetition was enacted in symptoms, even when these referred to it elusively, and never in an explicit way.

Likewise, for Lacan, desire emerged as an effect of the articulation of two signifiers, of linking one signifier to another, one of which was located in the

unconscious. Desire was caused by, and inscribed in, the law of language, which was instantiated by the threat of castration.

As a contrast to all this, Deleuze doesn't allow that the whole space of subjectivity be covered by language; just as he doesn't allow the whole realm of being to be actual, linguistic or ontic in form; nor the whole scope of infinite substance to fall under the determination of the attributes –were we to interpret the latter as partaking of the linguistic structure. His rendition of the unconscious, as put forward in *The Logic of Sense* or with Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*, would run parallel to our definition of virtual being and to its specific forms, so it would not conform to the law of language. As a consequence, desire is seen as free, fluid, unbounded, and undetermined; a reaction against every linguistic form, be it conscious or unconscious, individual or social. It would not emerge as an effect taking place within the limits of a finite, concrete and bounded structure –the only one that, according to Lacan, can give meaning to desire.

Paradoxically, despite being an instance of subjectivity, Deleuze's unconscious would be tuned to the dynamics of ontology: it would function according to the cause of itself principle, that is, in agreement with an unrestrained and all-accepting urge. Structurally speaking, the unconscious would aspire to infinity, even if it could not realize it.

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Our main criticism to Deleuze shall now become obvious. Indeed, we could start by mentioning that the only reason to pose non-numerical forms of being is the possibility that there is an infinite intellect: God's. The demand to fill the ontological space opened up by Spinoza's definition of infinity was the only trigger forcing Deleuze's to speculate about such forms. But infinity is both an idealist goal and point of departure for philosophy. The question remains, therefore, if Deleuze sustains the idealist thesis of an infinite intellect, which seems to me the only guarantee for his claims to virtual functionality.

And yet, we know the deeper reasons why Deleuze kept loyal to these virtual, undetermined forms of being. Even if they stemmed from a reflection on infinity, virtual being was soon put to a different use. More concretely, I believe it tried to answer the question concerning how does *novelty* occur in actuality. As it is common to many contemporary philosophers (for instance, Alain Badiou), this is the main issue that Deleuze's philosophy tackles; in relation to it, his postulation of infinite being figures as a speculative and idealist tool. So, regarding this question, his answer was that novelty results from the interrelation of the actual, fully determined forms of being and the virtual plane; from the encounter, we might say, between linguistic or

actual entities and ontology, between a fully determined axis and a partially undetermined one.

But, again, psychoanalysis has its own answer to novelty, and in contrast to Deleuze's approach, it requires of no recourse to idealism. It is *over-determination*, not indetermination (however partial), which explains novelty. In psychoanalysis, the new emerges out of the interrelation, encounter or condensation between two perfectly determined axes, those consisting of the conscious and the unconscious language.

This encounter, as we know, is the psychoanalytic definition of *symptom*.