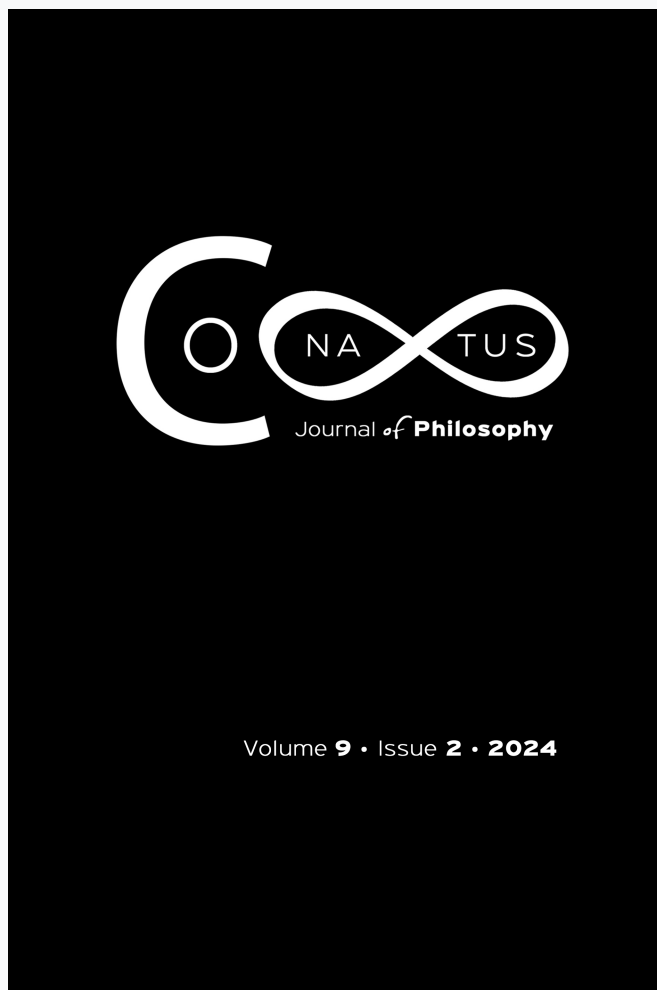


## Conatus - Journal of Philosophy

Vol 9, No 2 (2024)

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy



### Decoding Spinoza: Navigating Essence and Existence through Gnoseological Lens

*Antonieta García Ruzo*

doi: [10.12681/cjp.35839](https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.35839)

Copyright © 2024, Antonieta García Ruzo



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

#### To cite this article:

García Ruzo, A. (2024). Decoding Spinoza: Navigating Essence and Existence through Gnoseological Lens. *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 9(2), 75–101. <https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.35839>

# Decoding Spinoza: Navigating Essence and Existence through Gnoseological Lens

**Antonietta Garcia Ruzo**

*University of Buenos Aires, Argentina*

*E-mail address: [agarcia@bedes.com.ar](mailto:agarcia@bedes.com.ar)*

*ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2391-8354>*

## Abstract

*This work aims to depart from conventional interpretations of Spinoza's notions of essence and existence by offering an alternative perspective called the onto-gnoseological reading. Typically, these concepts of essence and existence are approached from an ontological standpoint or are simply disregarded. The objective of this paper is to demonstrate that Spinoza, within his corpus associates these notions with the activity of the genres of knowledge rather than with the ontological realm. This reinterpretation of the concepts from a gnoseological standpoint allows for a deeper comprehension of Spinoza's philosophical undertaking. It becomes evident that this project involves the coexistence of gnoseological duality in perfect harmony with the univocity of reality, serving as a crucial instrument for recognizing the boundaries and possibilities of human knowledge and, subsequently, the potential for achieving human virtue.*

**Keywords:** *onto-gnoseology; human knowledge; Spinoza; duality; monism*

## I. Introduction

The reception of Spinoza's ontology has throughout history been marked by what appears as an insurmountable problem: the problem of an apparent contradiction between a defense of the univocity of the real (monism), on the one hand, and the use of conceptual pairs that seem to refer to a strict ontological duality, on the other. These pairs, which all constitute different expressions of one and the same dual-

ity, are the pairs of *infinite-finite*, *essence-existence*, *eternity-duration*, and *substance-modes*. In the face of this, Spinoza readers have felt obligated to decide which aspects to conserve and which to suppress of an account that otherwise would have appeared paradoxical. This has given rise to, not only different, but also conflicting readings.<sup>1</sup> In more recent times, the main conflict has fundamentally concerned two radically antagonistic interpretations: the dualist and the univocal interpretation of Spinoza's ontology. The dualist interpretation – defended by authors like Valteri Viljanen,<sup>2</sup> Christopher Martin,<sup>3</sup> Tad Schmaltz,<sup>4</sup> and Charles Jarrett<sup>5</sup> – clings to the above-mentioned conceptual pairs to sustain that Spinoza's account ends up reproducing a Platonic ontology in which the real is perceived to be divided into two completely different realms: the infinite, essential, and eternal on the one hand, and the finite, existing, and durable, on the other. In contrast, the univocal interpretation – proclaimed by authors like Gilles Deleuze,<sup>6</sup> Marilena Chaui<sup>7</sup> and Vittorio Morfino<sup>8</sup> – ignores or suppress the dualities that Spinoza postulates in order to be able to embrace the absolute univocal character of reality. In sum, these interpretations of Spinoza's ontology have been inclined towards either duality or univocality.

This article inserts itself into the above-mentioned problematic context with the objective to gather evidence for a hypothesis which I call

<sup>1</sup> It is possible to identify a first wave of reception of Spinoza's philosophy between the years 1677 and 1830, that is, from the time of Spinoza's death to Georg W. F. Hegel's interpretation of his ontology. These first readings can be denominated unilateral readings in that they hold that Spinoza first separates the real into two areas, just to then embrace only one of these areas of being at the expense of the other. Among these first readings, it is possible to detect two confronting stances. The first was taken by those who accused Spinoza of annulling God, the eternal and the infinite; that is, of being atheist or pantheist. Among them we find Christian Thomasius (1688), Pierre Bayle (1697), Georg Wächter (1699), Sebastian Kortholt (1700), Johannes Colerus (1705), Christian Wolff (1739), and Moses Mendelssohn (1785). The second was taken by those who accused Spinoza of suppressing the finite and existing; that is, of being acosmist. Among them we find Friedrich H. Jacobi (1785), Friedrich W. J. Schelling (1795), and Georg W. F. Hegel (1830).

<sup>2</sup> Valteri Viljanen, *Spinoza's Geometry of Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Christopher P. Martin, "The Framework of Essences in Spinoza's *Ethics*," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 16, no. 3 (2008): 489-509.

<sup>4</sup> Tad M. Schmaltz, "Spinoza on Eternity and Duration: The 1663 Connection," in *The Young Spinoza: A Metaphysician in the Making*, ed. Yitzhak Y. Melamed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Charles Jarrett, "Spinoza's Distinction between Essence and Existence," *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 50 (2001): 245-252.

<sup>6</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1968).

<sup>7</sup> Marilena Chaui, *A nervura do real: Imanência e liberdade em Espinosa* (São Paulo: Companhia Das Letras, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Vittorio Morfino, "Esencia y relación," *Revista Pensamiento Político* 6 (2015): 1-26.

the *onto-gnoseological reading*.<sup>9</sup> Basically, the hypothesis holds that Spinoza's project is richer and more profound than traditionally admitted, and that this richness stems precisely in the coexistence of univocality and duality. In order to make way for such a coexistence, the hypothesis holds as its central tenet the aspect of human understanding, an aspect that tends to have been overseen by Spinoza scholars when trying to interpret the problem in question.<sup>10</sup> Thus, my hypothesis is that the references to dualities that we can find within Spinoza's works, far from being references to ontological dualities, ought to be considered as references to the different ways by which human being understands.

Guided by this hypothesis, I will in what follows investigate more closely the conceptual pair of essence-existence.<sup>11</sup> I wish to show how these concepts do not refer to different ontological spheres, but rather to the ways by which human beings conceive of reality or nature. Such a gnoseological resignification of the concepts allows us to, on the one hand, conserve the pair of *essence-existence* without damaging Spinoza's expressed ontological univocality; on the other hand, to investigate the Spinozian philosophical project in greater depth. The latter is important in so far as that project, I would argue, is principally characterized by an ethical objective with gnoseological roots:<sup>12</sup> the objective of making the human being, together with other individuals, access "the knowledge of the union that the mind has with the whole of Nature."<sup>13</sup> Once achieved,

---

<sup>9</sup> I have developed this hypothesis elsewhere; see Antonieta García Ruzo, "La Ética de Spinoza como proyecto onto-gnoseológico," *Daimon: Revista Internacional de Filosofía* 86 (2022): 101-116.

<sup>10</sup> I should, however, mention Julie R. Klein's article "By Eternity I Understand': Eternity According to Spinoza" as an exception. There, Julie R. Klein suggests an analysis of the eternity-duration pair from the perspective of Spinoza's theory of knowledge. Julie R. Klein, "By Eternity I Understand': Eternity According to Spinoza," *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 51 (2002): 295-324.

<sup>11</sup> I have investigated this very hypothesis from the perspective of the other conceptual pairs previously. See Antonieta García Ruzo, "Eternidad y duración: perspectivas de la naturaleza spinoziana," *Contrastes: Revista Internacional de Filosofía* 28, no. 3 (2023): 81-99.

<sup>12</sup> Herman De Dijn, "Metaphysics as Ethics," in *God and Nature: Spinoza's Metaphysics: Papers Presented at the First Jerusalem Conference*, ed. Yirmiyahu Yovel (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991), 123; Henry E. Allison, *Benedict de Spinoza: An Introduction* (New Heaven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 84. For a reading that unites the ethical project and the gnoseological approach with the ontological aspect by focusing on the concept of conatus see Neşe Aksoy, "Spinoza's Conatus: A Teleological Reading of Its Ethical Dimension," *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2021): 107-130.

<sup>13</sup> TdIE §13. Spinoza's Works are cited according to the pagination of the canonical edition: Carl Gebhardt, ed., *Opera*, 5 vols. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925). I follow the translation of Edwin Curley: Edwin Curley, ed., *The Collected Works of Spinoza* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985). I employ its method of referring to the parts of the text. References

this knowledge will unfailingly lead to the highest form of blessedness; that is, the highest human virtue.

## II. On the different notions of essence

Already when approaching the conceptual pair of *essence-existence*, it stands clear that the problem of dualism comes accompanied by others. In fact, Spinoza does not limit himself to only using these two concepts but makes the account more complex by using different notions of essence: *formal essence*, *objective essence*, *actual essence*, and *singular essence*. This situation renders the problem before us even more opaque and calls for a few complementary clarifications. Above all, I must explain how these different notions of essence become fixated as the concepts of essence and existence, such as these appear in Spinoza's texts.

The notion of *formal essence* appears in the *Ethics* for the first time in the scholium to Proposition 17 of Part One and is presented as the opposite to *objective essence*. In this scholium Spinoza resumes Descartes and Suárez's scholastic postulates<sup>14</sup> by stating that:

If intellect pertains to the divine nature, it will not be able to be (like our intellect) by nature either posterior (as most would have it), or simultaneously with, the things understood, since God is prior in causality to all things (P16C1). On the contrary, the truth and formal essence of things is what it is because it exists objectively in that way in God's intellect.<sup>15</sup>

Although, as Mogens Laerke points out, this statement has serious complications associated with the postulation of a God who first conceives the world, and then creates it – postulation that is at the opposite end of the entire Spinozian project<sup>16</sup> – it is useful for the distinction that I am

---

to the *Ethics* are abbreviated according to the following standard method: Ethics (E), axiom (a), corollary (c), definition (d) before proposition, demonstration (d) after proposition, lemma (L), proposition (p), postulate (post), scholium (s) explanation (exp). Example: E2p7s = Ethics, part 2, proposition 7, scholium. References to the non-geometrically ordered passages from the *Ethics*, are sometimes supplemented by references to Gebhardt's edition *Spinoza Opera*, according to the following form: G II/208/25–30 = Gebhardt, Vol. 2, page 208, lines 25-30).

<sup>14</sup> Harold H. Joachim, *Spinoza's Tractatus de intellectus emendatione: A Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), 56.

<sup>15</sup> E1P17s.

<sup>16</sup> Mogens Laerke, "Aspects of Spinoza's Theory of Essence: Formal Essence, Non-Existence

currently analyzing. It is in this scholium that Spinoza introduces the difference between formal and objective essence. What does he, more specifically, say about these two classes of essence? As indicated by Vidal Peña, “the ‘objective essence’ is, for Spinoza, the concept or idea of a reality in the face of the ‘formal essence’, which is this very reality.”<sup>17</sup> In the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (TdIE), Spinoza explains this difference basing himself on the concept pair *idea-ideatum*. One thing, he states, is the – true – idea of a circle and another is the circle itself. The idea of something is associated with the objective essence of that thing; it is the way by which the thing is intelligible, the possible object of an idea: in this case, the idea of a circle. The circle, in so far as its ideatum, holds a formal – or real – essence. In other words, the formal being of a thing is its real being, it is the thing itself; the objective being is its being in so far as it is an object of an idea, that is, the being of the idea in so far as it is an idea of this thing.

What is, then, the objective essence of something? Spinoza himself explains this in the TdIE: “From this it is clear that certainty is nothing but the objective essence itself, i.e., the mode by which we are aware of the formal essence is certainty itself.”<sup>18</sup> There is no real difference, then, between formal and objective essence. The latter is the true mode of perceiving things, i.e., formal essences. What led to the “parallelism”<sup>19</sup> of the attributes, is nothing more than the assertion that the attribute of thought objectively contains within itself the formal essences of all things.<sup>20</sup> Or, in Laerke’s words, that

whenever I have an adequate idea of a thing, or that the thing is objectively given in the intellect, there must be a corresponding formal essence of that thing in the relevant attribute.<sup>21</sup>

---

and Two Types of Actuality,” in *The Actual and the Possible: Modality and Metaphysics in Modern Philosophy*, ed. Mark Sinclair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 24.

<sup>17</sup> Spinoza Benedictus, *Ética: demostrada según el orden geométrico*, trans. Vidal Peña (Madrid: Alianza, 2016), footnote 12.

<sup>18</sup> TIE §35. These ideas, in turn, have a formal being in so far as they are modes of the attribute of thought: “the formal being of ideas admits God as a cause only insofar as he is considered a thinking thing, and not insofar as he is explained by any other attributes.” E2p5.

<sup>19</sup> The proclamation made by Spinoza in E2p7 has been defined as his expression of parallelism: “the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things,” which implies that “whatever follows formally from God’s infinite nature, follows objectively in God from his idea in the same order and with the same connection.” E2p7c.

<sup>20</sup> KV II, appendix 2, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Laerke, 25.

This explanation permits me to make the following synthesis: formal and object essences are not different essences, but rather one and the same essence looked upon from different perspectives. Objective essence refers to the truthful conception of a thing's formal essence. Let us now take a closer look at this *formal* essence. In his *Metaphysical Thoughts* (CM), the appendix to the *Principles of Descartes' Philosophy*, Spinoza establishes that

the *formal essence* neither is by itself nor has been created, for both these presuppose that the thing *actually exists*. Rather it depends on the divine essence alone, in which all things are contained. So, in this sense we agree with those who say that the essences of things are eternal (emphasis added).<sup>22</sup>

Here, Spinoza introduces a characterization of formal essence that will remain intact throughout all of his work. It is a characterization that is based on the separation of formal essence and *actual existence*, and, on the affirmation that formal essences are contained in God and, therefore, are eternal. Proposition 8 of Part Two of the *Ethics* – a proposition that is known for its complexity – is proof of the invariability of Spinoza's understanding of formal essence. There, Spinoza writes that “the formal essences of the singular things, or modes, are contained in God's attributes,”<sup>23</sup> insisting on placing the formal essences in a direct relationship with the divine essence. In what remains of his magnum opus, Spinoza almost never returns to the concept of formal essence, but when he does, it is in relation to the essence of the attributes. To this end, it is for instance noteworthy that he uses the concept to characterize intuitive knowledge as knowledge that “proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the [formal] essence of things.”<sup>24</sup>

Let us now take a look at the concept of *actual essence*. In Part Three of the *Ethics*, Spinoza establishes that “the striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being (*conatus*), is nothing but the *actual essence* of the thing” (emphasis and inserted parenthesis added).<sup>25</sup> This striving is associated by Spinoza with the power to act that each

---

<sup>22</sup> CM, G I/239.

<sup>23</sup> E2p8.

<sup>24</sup> E2p40s2, bracketing in original.

<sup>25</sup> E3p7.

and every single thing holds.<sup>26</sup> With respect to this matter, Spinoza adds in Part Four of the *Ethics* that:

The power by which singular things (and consequently, [any] man) preserve their being is the power itself of God, or Nature (by IP24C), not insofar as it is infinite, but insofar as it can be explained through the man's actual essence (by IIIP7). The man's power, therefore, insofar as it is explained through his actual essence, is part of God or Nature's infinite power, i.e. (by IP34), of its essence.<sup>27</sup>

What Spinoza is establishing, on the basis of this demonstration, is that the *actual essence* of a certain thing is not associated with the way in which it is infinite and eternal, but rather the way in which it possesses actuality. Precisely that which is excluded by the formal essence – that is, the actual existence of the thing – is what appears to be associated with the actual essence.

In the Part Five of the *Ethics*, Spinoza provides for a distinction between two ways of conceiving things. This distinction is fundamental for making sense of the different kinds of essences discussed so far. In that part he writes:

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.<sup>28</sup>

Here, Spinoza distinguishes between two different *ways of conceiving* singular things: either in relation to a determined time and place – that is, as things in duration – or as contained within God – that is, as eternal. The first manner in which it is possible to conceive singular things appears to be nothing more than a conception of their actual essences.

---

<sup>26</sup> As Josep Maria Bech points out, in Spinoza each thing will persevere in its being “insofar as it is unaffected by anything else.” It means that nothing has “in itself” anything by which it can be destroyed. Josep Maria Bech, “Spinoza’s Conatus Undoes Bourdieu’s Habitus,” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2021): 133.

<sup>27</sup> E4p4d.

<sup>28</sup> EVp29s.

In so far as this essence is related to striving to persevere in being, or, in existence, we conceive its durable character. When the striving to persevere stops, existence stops; that is, the *actual essence* ceases. To this end, what Spinoza calls actual essence is the durable existence of a singular thing.<sup>29</sup> As phrased by Marilena Chaui:

a singular thing is a power to suffer and to act, and this passion and action are the striving of one's own perseverance in existence, this striving or causality being nothing more than the actual essence of a singular thing.<sup>30</sup>

The second manner in which we can *conceive of* things is, according to Spinoza, associated with the divine necessity and with the real, and it appears as being nothing other than the conception of the formal essence of the singular thing. In the subsequent proposition to the just cited one, Spinoza insists on this issue pointing out that

to conceive things under a species of eternity, therefore, is to conceive things insofar as they are conceived through God's essence, as real beings, or insofar as through God's essence they involve existence.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, to conceive things on the basis of – or as being *in* – God, is to conceive their *formal* and corresponding *objective essence*. This being *in* God is no other thing than the being contained in the divine attributes. This is to say that things' objective essences are *in* and conceived through the attribute of thought as true ideas of the formal essences, which are *in* and conceived through the attribute of extension.

So, what does this brief analysis so far allow us to establish? It tells us that the concepts of formal and actual essences can be linked and simplified as the *essence* and *existence* of things, respectively.<sup>32</sup> In what follows, I will try to show how this pair finds its coherence within the system through the *onto-gnoseological* proposal. This is, based on maintaining that the distinction between essence (formal essence)

<sup>29</sup> Steven Nadler, "Spinoza's Monism and the Reality of the Finite," in *Spinoza on Monism*, ed. Philip Goff (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 237.

<sup>30</sup> Chaui, 46.

<sup>31</sup> E5p30d.

<sup>32</sup> This conclusion has been reached by various scholars. Mogens Laerke, for instance, states that "for each thing, there is, on the one hand, a being of its essence (or formal essence) and, on the other, a being of its existence (or actual essence)." Laerke, 12.

and existence (current essence) must be preserved so as not to falsify the Spinozian project, but that, nevertheless, must be understood as a duality introduced by human knowledge. The concept of *singular essence* will be analyzed later – once the link between formal and actual essence in finite things has been investigated – finding its reason for being also in Spinoza’s theory of knowledge.

### III. Essence and existence: Identity and difference

Spinoza addresses the problem of the distinction between essence and existence from the outset of his philosophical project. In the second chapter of the CM, he seeks to cast light on these concepts that, as he shows, had been defined by many authors before him.<sup>33</sup> In order to do this, Spinoza distinguishes between the *being of essence* and the *being of existence*. About the first, he states that “*being of essence* is nothing but that manner in which created things are comprehended in the attributes of God,”<sup>34</sup> giving evidence of a visible continuity between the CM and what he later stipulates in the TdIE and the *Ethics* about *formal essence*. About the second, he states that “*being of existence* is the essence itself of things outside God, considered in itself. It is attributed to things after they have been created by God.”<sup>35</sup> Here Spinoza stipulates something that, as I will demonstrate, will maintain itself identical throughout his entire work: essence and existence both are and are not, the same. From the ontological point of view, *being of existence* is the (very) *essence* of things.<sup>36</sup> From another perspective, however, it is necessary to distinguish between something’s essence and that same thing’s existence. This perspective is no other than the perspective of human knowledge. Here, *being of essence* refers to the things in so far as they are comprehended within God’s attributes; *being of existence* refers to the things in so far as they are considered as in themselves, as outside of God. In this same sense, Spinoza indicates that

in God essence is not distinguished from existence, since his essence cannot be *conceived* without existence; but in other things it does differ from and certainly can be *conceived* without existence (emphasis added).<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> CM 239.

<sup>34</sup> CM 238.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Thus, just as he comes to do in the *Ethics*, Spinoza associate the differentiation between essence and existence, not to the realm of being, but to the realm of knowledge. The distinction is based on the human capacity to conceive of one thing without the other. Now, with the objective to clarify even further what he understands by essence – although without providing any concrete definition of that concept, just as in the *Ethics*<sup>38</sup> – Spinoza writes after the just quoted statement that: “[s]ince we can give no definition of anything without at the same time explaining its essence, what do we understand more clearly than what essence is, and what existence is?”<sup>39</sup> Thus, something’s essence appears to be related to that thing’s definition. This clarification dismisses any kind of Platonic dualist reading of Spinoza’s philosophical project: far from holding that the essence of things is contained within an ontological realm different from their existence, here Spinoza argues that what he calls essence is *thinkable* or *definable* regardless of existence. The following example, illustrates this in a clear way:

Finally, if any Philosopher still doubts whether essence is distinguished from existence in created things, he need not labor greatly over definitions of essence and existence to remove that doubt. For if he will only go to some sculptor or woodcarver, they will show him how they *conceive* in a certain order a statute not yet existing, and after having made it, they will present the existing statue to him. (emphasis added).<sup>40</sup>

Again, it is clear that something’s essence can be thought of, without that something actually being in existence. The sculptor can *conceive* of the statue’s essence even when the statue does not actually exist.

In the third chapter of this early work, as Spinoza deals with the distinction between the necessary, the impossible, the possible, and the contingent, he immediately goes back to essences and existences. There, we find him insisting on that “God exists necessarily in respect to his essence, for his essence cannot be *conceived* without existence.”<sup>41</sup> What then about the finite things? Spinoza explains that the

<sup>38</sup> The definition in E2d2 is far from being a definition of essence as it rather thematizes the relationship between a thing and its essence.

<sup>39</sup> CM 239.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> CM 240.

same identification between essence and existence does not take place among things, because in things, essence depends on the eternal laws of nature whereas existence depends on the series and order of causes.<sup>42</sup> Is he not in fact making here, then, a dualist proclamation? Should we then conclude that essence and existence are indeed distinct when it comes to finite things? We find the clarification of this matter in the following section in which Spinoza introduces the concepts of possibility and contingency. Here, he states that:

[T]hese [the possible and the contingent] are taken by some to be affections of things. Nevertheless, they are nothing but a defect in our understanding. [...] a thing is called *possible*, then, when we understand its efficient cause but do not know whether the cause is determined. So, we can regard it as possible, but neither as necessary nor as impossible. If, however, we attend to the essence of the thing alone, and not to its cause, we shall call it *contingent*. That is, we shall consider it as midway between God and a chimaera, so to speak, because we find in it, on the part of its essence – neither any necessity of existing (as we do in the divine essence) nor any impossibility or inconsistency (as we do in a chimaera) (emphasis added).<sup>43</sup>

The distinction that Spinoza introduces here between the possible and the contingent is indeed interesting.<sup>44</sup> Both, he clarifies, are defects in our perception. In other words, they are modes of conceiving that are partial, inadequate, defective, and definitely false.<sup>45</sup> Now, here a distinction is made between two ways of perceiving things partially; one in relation to essence, and another in relation to existence. This is to say that Spinoza is affirming that it is as defective to conceive of the real solely from the perspective of essences, as it is to do so from the perspective of existences. Let us clarify this. For Spinoza, as already established, essence depends on the eternal laws of nature, whereas

<sup>42</sup> CM 241. The same explanation can be found in E 1p33s 1.

<sup>43</sup> CM 242.

<sup>44</sup> It is a distinction that, although important, appears to make the terms interchangeable: “And if anyone wishes to call contingent what I call possible, I shall not contend with him. For I am not accustomed to dispute about words.” CM 242.

<sup>45</sup> In this context, Spinoza’s definition of falsehood (or error) as a deprivation or lack of knowledge should be recalled. See TdIE §110, E2p35, E2p41.

existence depends on the series and order of causes.<sup>46</sup> When speaking about the possibility and the contingency, Spinoza is saying that when we understand the efficient cause of a particular thing, but ignore if it is determined, then we think of it as *possible*. This we do as a consequence of not knowing the eternal laws of nature; that is, the thing's essence. We call a particular thing *contingent* when we conceive it through its essence but ignore its efficient cause; that is, we think of the fact that this thing could or could not exist as something contingent. In both cases, we clearly ignore something.

Thus, already in the CM, Spinoza links the essence-existence pair to human ways of knowing. He does so in two ways in this early work: first by explaining that the only way to separate or isolate the essence from the existence is as a consequence of a lack of knowledge. That is to say, by attributing duality to a gnoseological question. Against any dualistic interpretation, Spinoza posits that essence and existence are only separable in a thing as a consequence of human perception: we can conceive the existence of finite things without conceiving their essence, and vice versa. For Spinoza, conceiving things this way constitutes an insufficient way of knowing; it is a way to *not* know Nature, to distort it. Second, Spinoza links the essence-existence pair to human modes of knowing by rendering explicit the fact that if nature is fully examined – that is, without partialities – then the possible and the contingent disappears, leaving us only with the *necessary*. What is the necessary? It is the verification of the unbreakable unity between essence and existence. In effect, Spinoza argues:

if he attends to nature and how it depends on God, he will find that there is nothing *contingent* in things, that is, nothing which, on the part of the thing can either exist or not exist, or as is commonly said, be a real contingent.<sup>47</sup>

Dealing with the same issue, but phrased more illustratively, is a footnote of the CM where he establishes:

But we also say that the necessity of really *existing* is not distinct from the necessity of *essence* (II, ix). That is, when we say that God has decided that the triangle shall exist, we

---

<sup>46</sup> CM 241. About this matter, Harold H. Joachim indicates that “The ‘essentiae’ of particular things which have a time-less actuality in the Attributes of God, have also an actuality or existence which shows itself as their appearance in the temporal and local series.” Harold H. Joachim, *A Study of the Ethics of Spinoza: Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901), 80.

<sup>47</sup> CM 242. In E1p29 and 33 this is repeated almost verbatim.

are saying nothing but that God as so arranged the order of nature and of causes that the triangle shall necessarily exist at such a time. So, if we understood the order of causes as it has been established by God, we should find that the triangle must really exist at such a time, with the same necessity as we now find, when we attend to its nature, that its three angles are equal to two right angles (emphasis added).<sup>48</sup>

True knowledge lets us see the necessity of reality. This necessity can be seen as expressed through, among other things, by the ontological unity, or identity, between essence and existence. If the order of causes were adequately comprehended, and the way in which we are *in* God, we would comprehend that there are no essences without existences.

From all of this, it stands clear that it is Spinoza himself that gives us the key to understand the conceptual pair of essence-existence from the point of view of the gnoseological factor. It is necessary, then, to rethink it from the perspective of the different ways by which human beings conceive: the imagination, reason, and intuitive knowledge. In the next section, I will therefore analyze these different kinds of human knowledge by asking what they can tell us about essence and existence.

#### IV. Duality and kinds of human knowledge

The *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* distinguishes between two kinds of imaginative knowledge: between what is called perception “from report” and perception of “random experience.” With respect to the first, Spinoza holds that

apart from the fact that it is a very uncertain thing – we do not perceive any essence of a thing [...]. And since the existence of any singular thing is not known unless its essence is known (as we shall see afterwards), we can clearly infer from this that all the certainty we have from report is to be excluded from the sciences.<sup>49</sup>

Within the context of random experience, the same problem connected to being ignorant of the essences is also visible. About this context Spinoza establishes:

---

<sup>48</sup> CM 243.

<sup>49</sup> TdIE §26; G/II/12.

As for the second [kind of knowledge], again, no one should be said to have the idea of that proportion which he is seeking. Apart from the fact that it is a very uncertain thing, and without end, in this way no one will ever perceive anything in natural things except accidents. But these are never understood clearly unless their essences are known first. So, that also is to be excluded.<sup>50</sup>

So, the problem is replicated in both of the imaginative kinds of knowledge: the essences are inaccessible to imagination. That is to say, that *the being of essence* or the *formal essence* of things is off-limits to the first kind of human knowledge. This position can also be seen in Spinoza's treatment of fictive, false, and doubtful ideas in the TdIE. Fictive ideas, for example, emerge from considering things as possible, that is, when being ignorant of a thing's essence, human beings cannot be sure of either its necessity or its impossibility.<sup>51</sup> This consideration appears to be in perfect continuity with what was established by Spinoza in the CM: when we understand the efficient cause of a thing, but ignore whether it is determined, we think of the thing as possible. This is what happens when we perceive based on imagination. Possibility emerges due to the ignorance of the eternal laws of nature – that is, the essence of things.<sup>52</sup>

Imaginative knowledge, however, can indeed give us access to one perspective of reality. Hence, imaginative knowledge is not absolutely false, rather only partial, or distorted.<sup>53</sup> Imagination puts us in contact with things' *existence*.<sup>54</sup> Through imagination, the human being has a direct experience of the external world. In the *Ethics*' in-depth analysis, Spinoza clarifies that the first kind of knowledge is based on the impacts of external bodies upon one's own body. The impressions, or affections, of the external things left upon us give rise to *ideas of affections*.<sup>55</sup> Albeit strictly speaking confused – implying two different natures, that of the external body and that of the own body<sup>56</sup> – they are fundamental ideas with respect to their vitality and vividness, in so

<sup>50</sup> TdIE §27; G/II/13.

<sup>51</sup> TdIE §53, G/II/20.

<sup>52</sup> CM 242.

<sup>53</sup> E2p35.

<sup>54</sup> E2p17.

<sup>55</sup> E2p16.

<sup>56</sup> E2p28d.

far as they emerge from the interaction of our body – and mind – with the world. Now, how exactly does the imagination *conceive of* reality? The mind, Spinoza writes, cannot imagine external bodies in any other way than as *actually existing*,<sup>57</sup> that is, as something present.<sup>58</sup> “In this sense, the imagination acts as a first conception of the world based on the relationship through which it recognizes things’ existence from their affections.”<sup>59</sup> Thus, these ideas of affections provide the mind with the perception of things that exist in experience. In other words, it is a knowledge of the existence of the singular bodies in the external world.<sup>60</sup>

What can we say at this point, then, about the conceptual pair of essence-existence from the perspective of imagination? Imagination, in being ignorant of essences, knows only what *is* from the point of view of existence, or *actual essence*. Put differently, the imaginative mode of knowing is existential and therefore, the term *existence* comes to allude not to a form of being, but rather a form of understanding or comprehending. Existence is nothing more than the perception of a thing as present, as actually existing, here and now. When we perceive a singular thing from what Spinoza classifies as the first kind of knowledge, we separate it from God and what is its essence; we ignore the way in which it is contained in the attributes and follows from other things in virtue of the divine nature’s necessity.<sup>61</sup> From this inability to capture the necessity by which things exist due to their essences emerges the partial perspective that makes us comprehend things as possible.

Let us now take a look at the second kind of human knowledge. The second kind of knowledge in the *Ethics* is approached with the help of a concept that Spinoza uses for the first time in this work: *common notions*. Reason is defined as that which allows us to have common notions and adequate ideas of things’ properties.<sup>62</sup> What are these notions? How can we make sense of them? Gilles Deleuze points out that, according to Spinoza, any existing thing possesses a singular essence, but also a set of characteristic relations through which it composes

---

<sup>57</sup> E2p26d2.

<sup>58</sup> E2p17d.

<sup>59</sup> Rodrigo M. Benvenuto, “El concepto de imaginación y la constitución de lo imaginario en la filosofía de Spinoza,” in *Actas del cuarto simposio de filosofía moderna. Rosario, 2017*, eds. Alberto Mario Damiani et al. (Rosario: UNR Editora. Editorial de la Universidad Nacional de Rosario, 2019), 112.

<sup>60</sup> Diana Cohen Agreste, *Spinoza: una cartografía de la Ética* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2015), 101.

<sup>61</sup> E5p29s.

<sup>62</sup> E2p40s2.

and decomposes with other different things in existence. A common notion, Gilles Deleuze argues, is precisely the idea of a composition of relations among many things.<sup>63</sup> Therefore he, in turn, establishes that these common notions oscillate between two thresholds in the *Ethics*: the maximum threshold of what is common between all bodies, and the minimum threshold of what is common between at least two singular bodies – my body and another one. That is, between common notions of more or less universality.<sup>64</sup> The first kind refers to those things that are common to all things, and which are equal in the part and the whole.<sup>65</sup> Put differently, to those things in which all bodies concord.<sup>66</sup> The second kind, being less universal, refers to that which is common and proper to the human body and to certain other external bodies by which the human body usually is being affected, and which is equally given in the part and in the whole in whatever of these bodies.<sup>67</sup> In so far as these notions constitute the basis of our human reason, both kinds of them will be perceived by everybody adequately, that is, clearly and distinctly.<sup>68</sup>

With this in mind, let us return to the question of what, more concretely, these common notions are. In the second Lemma to Part Two of the *Ethics*, Spinoza gives us a specific example of them. There he establishes that

all bodies agree in certain things. [In effect:] all bodies agree in that they involve the concept of one and the same attribute (D1), and in that they can move now more slowly, now more quickly, and absolutely, that now they move, now they are at rest.<sup>69</sup>

Spinoza is clearly referring here to the common notions of maximum universality, those who refer to all bodies. All bodies, in virtue of being extended bodies, have in common the fact that they belong to the attribute of extension. This attribute is a common feature of all the bodies which the essences encompass. As a common notion, it “is not

---

<sup>63</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1988), 114.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>65</sup> E2p37.

<sup>66</sup> E2p38.

<sup>67</sup> E2p39.

<sup>68</sup> E2p38 and 39; E5p12d.

<sup>69</sup> E2p13L2.

be confused with any essence; it designates the unity of the composition of all bodies: all bodies are in extension.”<sup>70</sup> Just as described by Spinoza, these notions do not refer to anything else than the essential character traits of the attributes which have been identified previously by him as the infinite immediate modes<sup>71</sup>: movement and rest, in the case of extension. In this sense, and as pointed out by Diane Steinberg, the most basic knowledge of what is common to all finite things is also knowledge of the divine essence.<sup>72</sup> That in which bodies agree, their shared properties, is what makes them be *in God*.<sup>73</sup> *Common notions* are in this sense, according to Gilles Deleuze, “more biological than mathematical, forming a natural geometry that allow us to comprehend the unity of composition of all of Nature and the modes of variation of that unity.”<sup>74</sup>

What is it, then, that the common notions allow us to understand? More importantly, however: what is the relationship between this second kind of human knowledge and the conceptual pair of essence-existence? Just as explained by Spinoza, common notions are nothing but the mode through which we know the attributes’ essences, that is, what is common to all essences of singular finite things. Put differently, through *reason* and *common notions* human beings have access to the essences of God’s attributes, which in turn are nothing but the totality of the essences of singular things. Let me explain this last consideration a little further. As mentioned, Spinoza establishes that the immediate infinite mode of extension is movement and rest. Regarding the immediate infinite mode of the attribute of thought, he postulates the

<sup>70</sup> Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 114.

<sup>71</sup> Ep. 64. With respect to the association between infinite immediate modes and common notions, see Edwin Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method: A Reading of Spinoza’s Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 45; Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1984), 107; Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretic: The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989): 161. Eugene Marshall explains it with in the following terms: “Common notions are of common properties, which are those found equally in the part and in the whole; that is, they are found in their entirety in every mode of an attribute. The capacity for motion and rest is one such common property. This common property is an infinite mode, something that follows directly from the nature of extension itself. Thus, at least some of the common notions are ideas of infinite modes under extension [...]” Eugene Marshall, *The Spiritual Automaton: Spinoza’s Science of the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 32.

<sup>72</sup> Diana Steinberg, “Knowledge in Spinoza’s *Ethics*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza’s Ethics*, ed. Olli Koistinen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 150.

<sup>73</sup> With respect to this issue, Spinoza states in E2p46d that: “whether the thing is considered as a part or as a whole, its idea, whether of the whole or a part (P45), will involve God’s eternal and infinite essence.”

<sup>74</sup> Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 57.

absolutely infinite understanding.<sup>75</sup> As argued by Vidal Peña, “to say that movement and rest is the immediate infinite mode of extension is equivalent to saying that all bodies obey the natural laws of movement and rest.”<sup>76</sup> So, when we know through the common notions of reason, we perceive what is common to all finite bodies: their extension, which will inevitably be found either in movement or in rest. Thus, we understand the way in which bodies are in God, and from here we can conceive of them from *an aspect of eternity*. In other words, we get to know that, which is their formal essence. What about the absolute and infinite understanding, then? This is, according to Spinoza, an infinite idea which contains within itself all of nature objectively speaking, and just as it really is (*Short Treatise* appendix 2, 4).<sup>77</sup> It is the impersonal and universal order of rational ideas, that is, of things’ *objective essences*. In this sense, immediate infinite modes are those which allow us to think the unity of the finite: with respect to extension, the unity of the *formal essences*; with respect to thought, the unity of the objective essences.<sup>78</sup>

However, as a direct consequence of this way of understanding the formal essences, the question of whether we can say that these essence are singular is emerged. It would seem that if we sustain that the formal essence of a singular thing is its mode of being *in God* – that is, of being in God’s attributes – and if we define common notions as those notions that give us knowledge of these formal essence, then the singularity of these essences ends up being hard to affirm. The common notions of maximum universality provide me with the knowledge of what singular things share with each other, that is, being a mode of extension, moving and being at rest. Aren’t these essential traits common to everything finite? According to Christopher Martin, who reads

---

<sup>75</sup> In the *Short Treatise* Spinoza calls the infinite modes: “universal nature,” and he contraposes these with the “particulars” referring to finite modes. Of the infinite modes he says that they neither exist for themselves nor can they be perceived by themselves, but rather only through the means of the attributes of which they are modes. KV I, 8 and 9.

<sup>76</sup> Benedictus, *Ética*, footnote 15. In the same spirit, Nadler writes that Spinoza’s denomination of the immediate infinite mode of extension – that is, movement and rest – is an abbreviation of the formal essences of all finite bodies. Thus, to know *the* formal essence of a determined thing is to conceive of that thing as a part of God’s essences as expressed through its attributes in the shape of immediate infinite modes. Nadler, “Spinoza’s Monism,” 234.

<sup>77</sup> Joachim defines it as: “an act of apprehending which would comprehend all reality.” Joachim, *A Study of the Ethics*, 94.

<sup>78</sup> About the identification of the formal essence with the infinite modes, see Don Garrett, “Spinoza on the Essence of the Human Body and the Part of the Mind that is Eternal,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza’s Ethics*, ed. Olli Koistinen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 8; Martin, “The Framework,” 504.

Spinoza's ontology as a dualist ontology, the events that define us as particular individuals belong to our existence in duration, but not to eternity. In this sense, he claims that, for Spinoza, the formal essence is impersonal.<sup>79</sup>

In support of a reading like Christopher Martin's, we find, for instance, the following scholium:

[...] [A] man is the cause of the existence of another man, but not of his essence, for the latter is an eternal truth. Hence, they can agree entirely according to their essence. But in existing they must differ. And for that reason, if the existence of one perishes, the other's existence will not thereby perish. But if the essence of one could be destroyed, and become false, the other's essence would also be destroyed.<sup>80</sup>

Here, Spinoza once again distinguishes between two aspects of singular things: existence and essence. While existence always depends on the series and order of causes, that is, of other finite things – man is the cause of the existence of another man – from which it differs,<sup>81</sup> what happens with essence is something quite different. First of all, it cannot depend on a finite cause, since it is an eternal truth. Furthermore, it seems not to differ from the essence of another finite thing, in the case of the example, from the essence of another man. On the contrary, “if the essence of one could be destroyed, and become false, the other's essence would also be destroyed.”<sup>82</sup>

In contrast to this reading, other authors, like Steven Nadler, hold that a thing's formal essence should be identified as a kind of mathematical formula that describes a certain part of a particular extension. According to this view, the essence of every single body is a specif-

---

<sup>79</sup> Martin, “The Framework,” 493. Martin, however, does not identify formal essence with the immediate infinite modes, but with humanity: the formal essence of the human mode is common to all human beings and only to them.

<sup>80</sup> E1p17s.

<sup>81</sup> Spinoza affirms that “every single thing, or any thing which is finite and has a determinate existence, can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another cause, which is also finite and has a determinate existence; and again, this cause also can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another, which is also finite and has a determinate existence, and so on, to infinity.” E1p28.

<sup>82</sup> E1p17s.

ic ratio of movement and rest<sup>83</sup> that should not be confused or exchanged with another. Thus, the formal essence amounts to only one of the infinite modes of being extended. Defending this position, Mogens Laerke holds that the formal essence, in so far as being singular, eternal, and invariable, can be found as existing as well as non-existing within the divine attributes, although always in some form or other as an individual essence.<sup>84</sup>

In what follows, and in line with the interpretative hypothesis that I have suggested, I will now demonstrate that neither of the two mentioned readings manages to account for Spinoza's explanation, and this due to the fact that they do not take into account the factor of human knowledge. Adding this factor to the equation, the discussion of the singularity or universality of formal essences becomes more nuanced. I say nuanced because, although it remains a question to be analyzed, it no longer has to be analyzed from an ontological point of view. The formal essences, as we have seen, are the ways in which we know singular things from the point of view of reason. This way, just as imagination knows in an existential kind of way, reason knows in an essential kind of way. Reason, through the common notions, conceives of reality from the perspective of the common or general. This is something that Spinoza himself renders explicit when calling rational knowledge "universal knowledge."<sup>85</sup> Thus, in this sense we can indeed say that formal essences cannot be, in any kind of way, singular. In addition to the scholium cited earlier,<sup>86</sup> I think that this conclusion is supported by two further reasons. First, it is supported by Spinoza's exposition in the so-called "physical digression" about the nature of bodies inserted between proposition 13 and 14 in Part Two of the *Ethics*. There, he explains something that I have already mentioned: that "all bodies agree in certain things," fundamentally in the fact that they all involve the concept of one and the same attribute. In addition, he states, they agree in that they can all either move or be at rest.<sup>87</sup> This is the way, then, that Spinoza points out to us what all bodies have in common. However, he also explains how we can come to distinguish between different singular bodies: these "are distinguished from one and another by reason of motion and rest, speed and slowness, and

---

<sup>83</sup> Steven Nadler, *Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and Jewish Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 112.

<sup>84</sup> Laerke, 32.

<sup>85</sup> E5p36s.

<sup>86</sup> E1p17s.

<sup>87</sup> E2p13L2.

not by reason of substance.”<sup>88</sup> Immediately after this, he affirms that this movement and rest is determined in the bodies by other singular bodies, which have been, in turn, determined by others, and so on, infinitely.<sup>89</sup> What can we infer from these affirmations? What all bodies have in common is that they are extended, and this extension – as we have established earlier – has movement and rest as essential traits. In this way, all bodies either move or rest, and they do so either more slowly or faster. The common notions allow me to truthfully know the essential traits of all singular things; that is, modes’ formal essences. However, singular things are determined by a specific quantity of movement and rest, a specific ratio that cannot be confused with another. This is what makes a mode unique and different from all other extended modes. And this specificity can only be thought in relation to actuality or duration.<sup>90</sup> So, there is no way to distinguish a singular ratio in eternity. While we think of ourselves as being *in* God – in God’s attributes – we conceive of what we have in common with all other singularities, leaving to a side that makes us singular, particular, individual, modal, parts. Second, I think that this issue becomes easier to grasp if we recall the characterization of reason which Spinoza provides in his theory of knowledge: reason is ignorant of *singular essences*. This term, which Spinoza goes to some lengths to distinguish from formal essence and actual essence, is incorporated into his account in order to warn us about the limitations of rational knowledge. With respect to this question, the TdIE states that through reason “nothing is attributed to it except propria, not the essence of a particular thing” (emphasis added).<sup>91</sup> In the *Short Treatise*, in absolute continuity with the TdIE, it is stated that this kind of knowledge can only say what corresponds to the being of a thing – that is, its general character traits –, and not what a thing really is.<sup>92</sup> In the *Ethics*, Spinoza insists on the same:

It is of the nature of Reason to regard things as necessary and not as contingent (P44). And it perceives this necessity of things truly (P41), i.e., as it is in itself (IA6). But this necessity of things is the very necessity of God’s eter-

---

<sup>88</sup> E2p13L1.

<sup>89</sup> E2p13L3.

<sup>90</sup> With respect to this question, Gilles Deleuze points out that “The existence of a mode is therefore its very essence in that it is not only contained in the attribute but it endures and possesses an infinity of extensive parts.” Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 67.

<sup>91</sup> TdIE §19, footnote f.

<sup>92</sup> KVII, 4,1, footnote a.

nal nature (IP16). Therefore, it is of the nature of Reason to regard things under this species of eternity. Add to this that the foundations of Reason are notions (P38) which explain those things that are common to all, and which (P37) *do not explain the essence of any singular thing*. On that account, they must be conceived without any relation to time, but under a certain species of eternity, q.e.d. (emphasis added).<sup>93</sup>

Thus, common notions give us access to the common traits of singular things. They are our means of getting to know the essence of the divine attributes in which we are contained: all extended things either move or rest.<sup>94</sup> Nonetheless, such notions seem to vanish into infinity, become enthralled by the divine, wander away in eternity. So much so that they end up losing sight of the finite, the individual, the *actual essence, or existence*, and, therefore, of the *singular essence*.

As Michel Henry points out, while imaginative knowledge showed us singular things as effects without causes, presenting the individual separated from the universe;<sup>95</sup> what happens with reason is the opposite. Primarily, because it allows us to know not the existential and singular aspect of external bodies, but rather what these necessarily share simply by virtue of being. That is, what they have in common, what makes them equal or equivalent. In other words, it shows us “the necessary relationship that links the individual to the universe.”<sup>96</sup> In this sense, it reveals to us, based on common notions, the attributes of substance, that is, the divine essence. Thus, in Michel Henry’s words, it must be considered as a partial knowledge, since it retains only the general laws of the total nature. The second kind of knowledge, the author indicates, fails to provide us with a complete explanation or vision of reality: one that allows us to discover the part as a consequence of the whole, in which it has its condition of intelligibility and existence.<sup>97</sup> This vision, as we will show below, can only be provided by intuitive science.

Let us now turn to the last and most perfect kind of knowledge: intuitive knowledge. In the TdE, Spinoza explains that “the best conclusion

---

<sup>93</sup> E2p44c2d.

<sup>94</sup> E2p8.

<sup>95</sup> Michel Henry, *Le bonheur de Spinoza: suivi de: étude sur le spinozisme de Michel Henry, par Jean-Michel Longnea* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004), 97.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 132.

will have to be drawn from some particular affirmative essence,<sup>98</sup> or, from a true and legitimate definition.”<sup>99</sup> This definition can only be achieved through intuitive knowledge, a knowledge that goes from cause to effect. This means in the case of finite things, from the absolute beginning, or God, as the first cause, to the singularity of this particular thing. In the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza holds that this last kind of knowledge allows us “an enjoyment of, and immediate union with what is known to be better than the first and enjoyed more,”<sup>100</sup> and that this is possible because intuitive knowledge apprehend the union between the singular and God in one and the same act.<sup>101</sup> In this sense, the last kind of knowledge turns back to the singular, but only to understand its union with the totality. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza insists on the same proposition when he sustains that intuitive knowledge “proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things.”<sup>102</sup> This progression from the formal essence of the attributes towards the essence of things is what gives rise to *singular essences*. With reference to this issue, Spinoza therein states:

I thought this worth the trouble of noting here, in order to show by this example how much the knowledge of singular things I have called intuitive, or knowledge of the third kind (IIP4OS2), can accomplish, and how much more powerful it is than the universal knowledge I have called knowledge of the second kind. For although I have shown generally in Part I that all things (and consequently the human Mind also) depend on God both for their essence and their existence, nevertheless, that demonstration, though legitimate and put beyond all chance of doubt, still does not affect our Mind as much as when this is inferred from the *very essence of any singular thing* which we say depend on God (emphasis added).<sup>103</sup>

Thus, this last kind of knowing seems to give us access to precisely that which escapes reason: the *singular essence*. Now, more precisely, what is

---

<sup>98</sup> The particular affirmative essence is in the TdIE tied to the theory about the perfect definition (§ 95-97). About this link see Chau, 11.

<sup>99</sup> TdIE §93.

<sup>100</sup> KV II 21, 2, footnote a.

<sup>101</sup> KV II, 22, 3.

<sup>102</sup> E2p40s2 and E5p25d.

<sup>103</sup> E5p36s.

this *singular essence*? I believe that it is nothing other than the result of the *immediate union*<sup>104</sup> between the *formal essence* (essence) and the *actual essence* (existence) of singular things; a union that lies in the overcoming of all kinds of duality, that is, in understanding of the absolute univocality of nature.

As we have seen, the imaginative way of knowing is *existential* – the imagination knows singular existences.<sup>105</sup> To this end, its ignorance of the totality of the real makes imagination’s ideas inadequate or partial. The rational way of knowing, in being *essential*, indeed complements this lack of imagination, but only to give us another perspective that, in terms of perspective, it does not cover the totality of being. In the face of these insufficient kinds of knowledge, then, intuitive knowledge presents itself as a synthesis that perfectly overcomes all perspectival knowing.<sup>106</sup> The third kind of knowledge, instead of being biased thinking or proceeding by separating aspects of the real so as to hypostatize them, shows us the complexity and unity of what *is*. Its activity allows us to observe, in Michel Henry’s words, that

Parallel to this unity of thought, or rather beneath it, there is a unity of reality that also arises from the presence of the Whole in the part, of the absolute Being in each singular being, of the actuality of *Natura naturans* in every parcel of *Natura naturata*, and ultimately, from the immanence of essences in existences, and thus, of eternity in time.<sup>107</sup>

When we conceive something through intuitive knowledge, we neither perceive a skewed perspective of nature, nor do we confuse a concept of the real with the real. Rather, we capture the unity between the different perspectives. This means that when we know a thing through this kind of knowledge, the terms *essence* and *existence* are rendered completely superfluous. Singular essence is the expression of the overcoming of any form of duality; that is, the union between singular

---

<sup>104</sup> This is the term with which Spinoza describes intuitive knowledge in the *Short Treatise*. There he states: “[...] must be something that is more powerful, like an enjoyment of, and immediate union with, what is known to be better than the first and enjoyed more. And when thus is present, the conquest is always inevitable [...]” KV II 21, 2, footnote a.

<sup>105</sup> Chau, 9.

<sup>106</sup> For a defense of this hypothesis, see Antonieta García Ruza, “Univocidad y ciencia intuitiva en Spinoza,” *Areté* 35, no. 2 (2023): 324-334.

<sup>107</sup> Henry, 136 (the translation is mine).

things and God,<sup>108</sup> or, what amounts to the same, the inseparable unity between actual essence and formal essence in finite things.

### V. Closing notes

As I have demonstrated in this article, the conceptual pair of essence-existence finds its explanation not in an ontological kind of duality, as the dualist interpreters sustained, but rather in a gnoseological one. In this way, the distinction between *formal essence* (essence) and *actual essence* (existence) in finite things does not need to be eliminated in order to preserve the univocity of being, as the univocal readings made, but rather must be understood as indispensable to comprehend the ways in which human beings know. In fact, the separation between essence and existence is evidence of the limits of human cognition and teaches us – those of us who is ready to see it – that the truth, as difficult to grasp as it is rare,<sup>109</sup> is possible to attain. Intuitive knowledge shows us that we can rise above any form of separation in order to verify – through the *singular essence* – the absolute unity of the real. A verification that has as a corollary the supreme human perfection and, consequently, the highest form of happiness.<sup>110</sup>

### References

- Aksoy, Neşe. “Spinoza’s Conatus: A Teleological Reading of Its Ethical Dimension.” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2021): 107-130.
- Allison, Henry E. *Benedict de Spinoza: An Introduction*. New Heaven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987.
- Bech, Josep Maria. “Spinoza’s Conatus Undoes Bourdieu’s Habitus.” *Conatus – Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (2021): 131-152.
- Bennett, Jonathan. *A Study of Spinoza’s Ethics*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1984.
- Benvenuto, Rodrigo M. “El concepto de imaginación y la constitución de lo imaginario en la filosofía de Spinoza.” In *Actas del cuarto simposio de filosofía moderna. Rosario, 2017*, edited by Alberto Mario Damiani, Martín Arias Albisu, Carlos Víctor A. Alfaro, María Hulia Bertolio, Gisela Candirola, Luciano Florencio Corsico, Marilín Mercedes Gó-

---

<sup>108</sup> TdIE, §13.

<sup>109</sup> E5p42s.

<sup>110</sup> E5p27d.

mez, María Victoria González, and Rodolfo Leiva, 111-119. Rosario: UNR Editora. Editorial de la Universidad Nacional de Rosario, 2019.

Chauí, Marilena. *A nervura do real: Imanência e liberdade em Espinosa*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 1999.

Cohen Agreste, Diana. *Spinoza: Una cartografía de la Ética*. Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2015.

Curley, Edwin. *Behind the Geometrical Method: A Reading of Spinoza's Ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1968.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. Translated by Robert Hurley. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1988.

Dijn, Herman De. "Metaphysics as Ethics." In *God and Nature: Spinoza's Metaphysics: Papers Presented at the First Jerusalem Conference*, edited by Yirmiyahu Yovel, 119-131. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991.

García Ruza, Antonieta. "Eternidad y duración: perspectivas de la naturaleza spinoziana." *Contrastes: Revista Internacional de Filosofía* 28, no. 3 (2023): 81-99.

García Ruza, Antonieta. "La Ética de Spinoza como proyecto onto-gnoseológico." *Daimon: Revista Internacional de Filosofía* 86 (2022): 101-116.

García Ruza, Antonieta. "Univocidad y ciencia intuitiva en Spinoza." *Areté* 35, no. 2 (2023): 324-334.

Garrett, Don. "Spinoza on the Essence of the Human Body and the Part of the Mind that Is Eternal." In *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics*, edited by Olli Koistinen, 284-302. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Gebhardt, Carl, ed. *Opera*. 5 vols. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925.

Henry, Michel. *Le bonheur de Spinoza: suivi de: étude sur le spinozisme de Michel Henry, par Jean-Michel Longnea*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004.

Jarrett, Charles. "Spinoza's Distinction between Essence and Existence." In *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 50 (2001): 245-252.

Joachim, Harold H. *A Study of the Ethics of Spinoza: Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1901.

Joachim, Harold H. *Spinoza's tractatus de intellectus emendatione: A Commentary*. Oxford: Claredon Press, 1940.

Klein, Julie R. "‘By Eternity I Understand’: Eternity According to Spinoza." *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* 51 (2002): 295-324.

Laerke, Mogens. "Aspects of Spinoza's Theory of Essence: Formal Essence, Non-Existence and Two Types of Actuality." In *The Actual and the Possible: Modality and Metaphysics in Modern Philosophy*, edited by Mark Sinclair, 11-44. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

Marshall, Eugene. *The Spiritual Automaton: Spinoza's Science of the Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Martin, Christopher P. "The Framework of Essences in Spinoza's *Ethics*." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 16, no. 3 (2008): 489-509.

Morfino, Vittorio. "Esencia y relación." *Revista Pensamiento Político* 6 (2015): 1-26.

Nadler, Steven. "Spinoza's Monism and the Reality of the Finite." In *Spinoza on Monism*, edited by Philip Goff, 223-243. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Nadler, Steven. *Spinoza's Heresy: Immortality and Jewish Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Schmaltz, Tad M. "Spinoza on Eternity and Duration: The 1663 Connection." In *The Young Spinoza: A Metaphysician in the Making*, edited by Yitzhak Melamed, 205-220. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Spinoza, Benedictus. *Ética: demostrada según el orden geométrico*. Translated by Vidal Peña. Madrid: Alianza, 2016.

Spinoza, Benedictus. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. Edited and translated by Edwin Curley. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985.

Steinberg, Diane. "Knowledge in Spinoza's *Ethics*." In *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics*, edited by Olli Koistinen, 140-166. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Viljanen, Valtteri. *Spinoza's Geometry of Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Yovel, Yirmiyahu. *Spinoza and Other Heretic: The Marrano of Reason*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989.

