

Theory of definition and principle of causality in the deduction of the *conatus*¹

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Abstract: In the deduction of *conatus* in Part III of *Ethics*, Spinoza presents the same conclusion to the finite modes that he did in Part I concerning the power of God: essence and existence do not separate and, ultimately, identify themselves. In God, given the definition of *causa sui*, this identity is “easily” explained in the case of modes. However, there seems to be a greater difficulty since, according to the *de Deo*, their essence does not involve existence. How can we reconcile two irreconcilable ideas, an “essence that does not involve existence,” with the intrinsic and necessary relation between essence and existence? How can we maintain that similar to substance, the essence and the existence of the modes do not separate? What binds one to another? This article proposes to clarify these questions through the articulation of two important themes in Spinoza’s philosophy: the notion of causality and the theory of definition.

Keywords: Causality; Theory of Definition; Essence; Existence; *Conatus*; Spinoza.

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I

[...] The definition of any thing affirms, and does not deny, the essence of the thing itself; that is, it puts and does not take away the essence of the thing (ESPINOSA, 2015, EIII, P4, dem., p. 249, our italics).

[...] No thing has in itself something by which it can be destroyed, that is, that takes away its existence (by Prop. 4 of this part); on the contrary, it is opposed to everything that can take away its existence (ESPINOSA, 2015, EIII, P6, dem., p. 252, our italics).

The above passages are included in the group of propositions that, within Part III of the *Ethics*, operate the deduction of what Spinoza calls *conatus* or, we can say, the effort of perseveration in being. The question that revolves around them and that guides the letter of this text is the following: although when considered separately, the two demonstrations seem to deal with different things, one of the affirmations of the essence, the other of the affirmation of the existence, observed together they make explicit a single judgment, namely, essence and existence, are not dissociated. In a general panorama, therefore, they place in the ambit of finite modes or singular things that was deduced in Deo's perspective of substance: the essence of a thing is always an affirmation of its existence. Considering that these two notions are placed in a relationship of reciprocity, we are led to the conclusion that if the existence of something is denied, its essence is denied, and, in the same way, its essence is denied, its existence is denied. However, assuming this link in the perspective of modes seems, at first, to impose some difficulty because, as is known by EI, the essence of things produced by God, unlike His essence, does not involve existence, otherwise such things would be substances, possibility denied by Deo himself.

Because of this, how can one sustain that, like the substance, the essence and the existence of modes² are also not disconnected? What holds one together? The clarification of these questions inevitably involves the articulation of two important themes in Spinoza's philosophy: the theory of definition and the notion of causality. They are the ones that, explicitly or implicitly, run through the two threads of the diptych³³ that constitute the *Ethics*. Observed from the perspective of God and modes, they allow us to infer that "the divine potency is to the *conatus* as the divine essence is to the actual essence of the thing" (OLIVA, 2018, p. 72). Let's see.

II

The deduction of the *conatus* is one of the first operations made in Part III of the *Ethics*. It comprises five propositions: it begins in P4 with the statement that nothing has in itself the cause of its destruction and ends in P8, which, resuming this assumption, concludes that, except for the intervention of external causes, the perseverance of a thing goes on indefinitely. Of the propositions that comprise this deduction, we will stick to some precise points, and, following an order inverse to that of Spinoza, we begin with the conclusive propositions from there, returning, whenever necessary, to antecedent questions.

² After setting mode, in EI, def. 5, as what is in another and conceived by another, Spinoza distinguishes modes into "two types": on the one hand, he deduces infinite modes, which, in turn, are distinguished into immediate and mediate (Cf. EI, P21, P22, and P23), and, on the other hand, the finite modes (Cf. EI, P24-P29). In this text, our approach is restricted solely to finite modes, so whenever we refer to "mode" or "modes," it is the finite modes that are on our horizon. It is even in this perspective, and only in it, that we can deal with singular things — well, every singular thing as a finite thing with a determined existence is a finite mode (by EI def.5, EI, P25, dem., EI, P28, and by the EII, def. 7). Not every mode in turn, is a singular thing, given that, as we said, in addition to finite modes, there are also infinite modes, which we will not dwell on.

³ We borrow this expression from Marilena Chaui, who usually makes use of it to refer to the articulation between *naturing* nature and *natured* nature.



Leaving aside proposition eight, we start by highlighting the sixth and seventh propositions because while observing the same extensive perspective that governs that whole set of propositions⁴, together they name the “supreme law of nature” (ESPINOSA, 2008, TTP, XVI, p. 253), that is, they make known what, according to Spinoza, characterizes the essence of every singular thing. In this way, while one announces that “everything [that is, everything], as far as it is in its strength, strives to persevere in its being” (ESPINOSA, 2015, EIII, P6, p. 251), the other concludes that this effort to persevere in being “is nothing more than the actual essence of the thing itself” (ESPINOSA, 2015, EIII, P7, p. 251). To clarify what is included in these statements, we are mainly interested in the construction and particularities of the respective demonstrations.

It should be noted in the first place that, of the five propositions of deduction of the conatus, propositions 6 and 7 are the only ones directly and explicitly grounded in Part I of the *Ethics*, from which a fundamental notion, the notion of potency, matters. Both the demonstration of one and the other contain two parts, in both of which the first part consists of the resumption of two propositions from *de Deo*. Out of these two basic propositions, one is included in that group that, according to the division made by Guérout⁵ and later adopted by Chau⁶ performs the deduction of the potency of God;⁷ the other is in the group in which the deduction of God is identity between his essence and his potency.⁸ Thus, the first part of the demonstration of proposition 6 (“Singular things are ways in which the attributes of God express themselves in a certain and determinate way, that is, things that express themselves in a certain and determinate way, the power of God by which he is and acts” (ESPINOSA, 2015, EIII, P6, dem., p. 251)), is supported by the corollary of proposition 25⁹ and proposition 34¹⁰ of Part I. And the first part of the demonstration of proposition 7 (“from the given essence of anything necessarily follow [effects]; and things cannot do anything other than what necessarily follows from their determined nature” (ESPINOSA, 2015, EIII, P7, dem., 251)), in propositions 36¹¹ and 29.¹² The recourse to these sages denotes a clear aim on Spinoza’s part. Based on the ontology of immanence, the philosopher can, in the second part of the demonstrations: i) to show in what the power of singular things consists; and ii) clarify that, as in God, essence and potency are also identified in them.

The first two propositions invoked by Spinoza in the demonstration of EIII, P6, (EI, P25, corol., and P34) give ontological support to what propositions 4¹³ and 5¹⁴ demonstrate from a logical perspective, that is,

⁴The generic character of this deduction can be confirmed when we look at the noun that Spinoza uses and that governs all of it: *res* (thing). In this first moment, to demarcate the breadth of the conatus and the fact that all things, without distinction, are driven by the effort to persevere in being, Spinoza does not relate it to anything specific on the contrary, in a comprehensive tone, he says: “nothing,” “as a thing,” “everything,” etc. Once this is consolidated, it is only after proposition 9 that the use of the noun *res* disappears, and Spinoza’s approach takes on a less comprehensive tone, turning to the conatus of a specific singular thing, the human being.

⁵ GUEROUT, M. 1968. *Spinoza I: Dieu*. Paris: Aubier-Montaigne.

⁶ CHAU, M. 1999. *A nervura do real: imanência e liberdade em Espinosa*. Vol. I: Imanência. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.

⁷ Understands the propositions 16 to 29.

⁸ Understands the propositions 30 to 36.

⁹ “Particular things are nothing but affections of God’s attributes, that is, ways in which God’s attributes are expressed in a certain and determined manner” (p. 91).

¹⁰ “The potency of God is his essence” (p. 107).

¹¹ “Nothing exists whose nature does not follow some effect” (p. 109).

¹² “Like things nothing is contingent, but everything is determined by the necessity of the divine nature to exist and operate in a certain way” (p. 95).

¹³ “Nothing can be destroyed except by an external cause” (p. 249).

¹⁴ “Things are contrary, that is, they cannot be in the same subject, while one can destroy the other” (p. 249).



they corroborate the reason for a thing it can only be destroyed by the action of external causes, containing nothing in itself, that is, no internal cause, of its destruction. The logical character of this premise can be elucidated by the principle of non-contradiction and by the theory of definition, to which we will return. The ontological aspect, in turn, permeates the whole of Part I of the Ethics and is in the identification of singular things as an expression of the “acting essence of God,”¹⁵ therefore, in the recognition of singular things as intrinsically affirmative.

Shortly before the first half of Part I of the Ethics, the deduction undertaken by Spinoza leads to the following point: “everything that is, is in God, and nothing without God can be nor be conceived” (ESPINOSA, 2015, EI, P15, p. 67). This statement intertwines and synthesizes two others: one that identifies God as the only substance (P14) and another that is dedicated to the deduction of divine causality (P16). Developing this triad of propositions, Spinoza contradicts all the tradition that precedes him as he presents another way of understanding divine causality. Because no substance is given besides God, and because, from the necessity of His nature follows “infinite things in infinite ways” (ESPINOSA, EI, P16, p. 75), everything that is can only be in Him and through Him.¹⁶ This means, therefore, not only that cause and effect are not separate, but strictly speaking, that God is not a transitive cause but an immanent cause of all his effects. This is what the text of proposition 18 of the EI states, whose demonstration is made by resuming the three propositions mentioned here. God is neither separate nor separate from the world.

Because they are immanent in God, singular things express His potency as a part of it, which can be understood in two contiguous senses: first, in the sense that they follow from God as His effects and therefore result from His activity, that is, of His power to act, so that the totality of reality is explained by divine causality; and second, in the sense that their potency, that is, of singular things, mirrors the potency of God. What do we mean by this? Because they are a finite expression of the infinite, singular things and, consequently, a part of their being and acting, that is, of their power, can be explained, similarly, to God’s way of being and acting. This is confirmed when we observe that the same deduction operated in *de Deo* or the potency of God is operated in *de Affectibus* for the potency of *res singulares*. In both Parts we come across similar conclusions: the power of God is the affirmation of his essence, which is identical to his existence, and the power of singular things is the affirmation of his essence which is an effort to continue existing; from the given essence of God, it follows to act and produce effects, in the same sense, of the potency of singular beings, by EIII, P7, dem. and by EI, P36, it follows to act and produce necessary and determined effects.

Indeed, as an expression of God’s potency, singular things are by nature “intrinsically positive and indestructible [and should, therefore] be conceived as potentialities to exist” (CHAUI, 2016, p. 177), or, in other words, conceived as affirmative degrees of power. However, as Part III and, more incisively, Part IV of the Ethics show, we must not forget that, although it is part of God, a singular is a finite mode, that is, a part of nature which, as such, is not can only be conceived in commerce with the other parties. Per axiom I¹⁷, which follows Lemma III of Little Physics, this means that neither the changes undergone by a singular thing nor the changes caused by it can be understood solely from its nature alone, on the contrary. This understanding involves several other factors and circumstances. Now, the changes that an

¹⁵ This expression appears only once in the course of the Ethics, in the scholium on proposition 3 of Part II. In his commentary on the *de Mentis*, Macherey clarifies that “an active essence is an essence that is directly bearer of a power to act through which it reveals its true nature” (MACHEREY, P. 1997. Introduction à l’Éthique de Spinoza, La deuxième partie, la réalité mentale, Paris: PUF, 1997, p. 58, note 1, our translation).

¹⁶ All the ways in which a body is affected by another body follow from the nature of the affected body and simultaneously from the nature of the affecting body” (ESPINOSA, 2015, III, P13, lem. 3, ax.1, p. 155).

¹⁷ Cf. ESPINOSA, 2015, EIV, P35, esc., p. 429; e ESPINOSA, B. 2009. Tratado político. Trad. Diogo Pires Aurélio. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, cap. 1, §5, p. 8 e cap. II, §5, p. 12.



individual goes through are the result of a complex web of experiences, encounters, and relationships, and in this web, each singular thing is just one of the threads, that is, a partial cause and, therefore, inadequate.

It so happens that, although this relationship with the outside is fundamental from the point of view of conservation and expansion of power (and here we can think in physiological, biological, and even political terms), it is not always a relationship of convenience: not every encounter it's a good date. Concerning interhuman relationships, for example, Spinoza never ceases to ponder that being guided by passionate affections can make human beings not agree with one another, and be contrary to one another, a precept that he sustains in the *Ethics* and which it takes up in the *Political Treaty*. Daily experience teaches that, because their behavior is guided more by the affections that are passion than by reason, human beings are, to a large extent, "envious and annoyance to each other" and, therefore, more prone to revenge than to forgiveness, to contempt than to empathy, to intolerance than to respect, to hatred than to love, etc. In this sense, opposition, conflict, and destruction, to a greater or lesser extent, are always crossing human relationships. One part of nature can always be destroyed by another. *Servitude's* axiom is blunt, "in the nature of things, no singular thing is given such that there is not another more potent and stronger than it. But, given any given thing, another is given more potent and stronger by which it can be destroyed" (ESPINOSA, 2015, EIV, ax., p. 318).

These questions are important because they are the ones anticipated in the second part of the EIII demo, P6. Singular things are part of God and, therefore, internally affirmative. However, as they live concerning other parts, they also have an external determination that, on the other hand, does not always have an affirmative character, as Chaui summarizes (2016, p. 177): "the finitude of the human way, the weight of exteriority, and the destructive risk it can have to explain the need to make an effort." The power of existing of a singular thing is then realized as a *conatus*, that is, as an effort to continue existing: either through opposition to what presents itself as an obstacle (perspective of EIII, P6, dem.) or through the composition with what is presented as an aid (perspective of EIII, P7, dem.).

It is important not to lose sight of what we said above: the deduction of the potency of singular things in Part III of the *Ethics* is made, similarly, to the deduction of the potency of God in Part I. In this way, having established the cause of the potency of singular things and having determined what this potency consists of in proposition 6 of EIII, Spinoza's next step must be to show, as in EI, P34, that potency and essence are inseparable, which is what he undertakes in the demonstration of EIII, P7. This demonstration begins with a game of symmetry between essence and nature - which also occurs in the first definition of EI - a movement from which it moves to the relationship between essence and potency. Resorting to proposition 36 of Part I, what is first maintained is that essence is a power to act (from the essence of a thing necessarily follow effects) and, complementary to this, the appeal to EI, P29 excludes from the actions of singular things contingency and, indirectly, free will, thus pointing out that the power of a thing follows from its nature in a determined way.

Considering that God is the cause by which things exist and operate, that is, through which they are and act, or, what is the same, considering that singular things are expressions of the potency of God, the first conclusion to which enough is that they also exist and act producing necessary and determined effects. Thus, a singular thing is an effect, but it is also a cause, and it is from this perspective that the conformity between its essence and its potency must be determined. Thus, if effects necessarily follow from the essence of a thing and if all that a thing can (that is, all its effects) is what follows from its determinate nature¹⁸, then the potency and essence of that thing are not distinguished. This coincidence is precisely what Spinoza calls "actual essence." By proposition 6 of EIII, we know that the potency of a singular thing is its *conatus*,

¹⁸It is worth remembering that, by nature and essence, Espinosa understands the same, see, for example, EI, P36, dem. and EIII, P57, dem. Therefore, we can establish a triple identification: nature/essence/potency.

that is, the effort it takes to persevere in its being. Therefore, considering the precedent, “the potency, that is, the effort (*potentia sive conatus*) by which [each thing] strives to persevere in its being, is nothing other than the given essence of the thing, that is, its actual essence” (ESPINOSA, 2015, EIII, P7, dem., p. 251).

III

Having presented this panorama, we return to the first notes of this text. As the *conatus* deduction advances, Spinoza puts in equivalence not only the potency and essence of a thing, but also its essence and existence. Thus, anchoring itself in proposition 4 of Part III of the Ethics, proposition 6 of that same Part attests that nothing has in itself something by which it can be destroyed, that is, something that takes away its existence. When we start from this consideration and return to the proposition evoked, we observe, however, that Spinoza seems to be dealing with different things in one passage and another. Now, if in P6 he talks about the affirmation of existence, in P4 his emphasis is on the notion of essence. Thus, our author demonstrates that the definition of a thing affirms and posits its essence and in no way denies or suppresses it. However, despite the supposed dissimilarity, if Spinoza puts the two passages in relation and, more precisely, resorts to one to affirm the other, we have to conclude that, strictly speaking, essence and existence are not disconnected. But how to understand this link? In the case of God, there are no major difficulties, since he is assured from the opening definition of the Ethics: the nature (essence) of what is the cause of itself cannot be conceived other than as existing. The greatest difficulty is to think about this inseparability from the perspective of singular beings since, unlike God, they have an essence that does not involve existence. What needs to be clarified is that both in God and the finite modes, essence, and existence are inseparable and concomitant. This understanding justifies the appeal of EIII, P6 to EIII, P4, showing that there is no disparity between the statements made in the two passages.

The implicit foundations that guide and support these questions are the notion of causality and the theory of definition that, developed by Spinoza in the Treatise on the emendation of the intellect, is taken up in the Ethics in two moments, in the second scholium to proposition 8 of Part I,¹⁹ and definition 2 of Part II. In this passage, Espinosa (2015, p. 125) says: “*belonging to the essence of a thing* what, given the thing, is necessarily posited and, taken away, the thing is necessarily suppressed; or *that without which the thing cannot be or be conceived and, vice versa, which without the thing cannot be or be conceived.*” By defining what he understands by “belonging to essence,” Spinoza elucidates, then, not only that essence and existence are implied:

– because, given one, the other is necessarily put –, as well as that they imply each other,²⁰ which means that, just as there is nothing (existence) without essence, in the same way (vice versa), there is no essence without thing, that is, without existence. One is a *sine qua non* condition of the other and, therefore, given or taken away, the other is simultaneously given or taken away. Essence and existence are always together - this is exactly what the emendation *Treaty* makes explicit through the notion of genetic definition.

¹⁹ In this passage, Spinoza highlights four points regarding the true definition: i) “the true definition of each thing involves nor expresses anything except the nature of each defined thing,” ii) “no definition involves or expresses a certain number of individuals since nothing else expresses, but the nature of the thing defined [...]” iii) “of every existing thing there is necessarily given a certain cause by which it exists” and, iv) “this cause, by which something exists or must be contained in the nature and definition of the existing thing, or it must be given outside it” (p. 55). These same points are presented in Spinoza’s Letter 34 to Hudde.

²⁰ This consideration also appears in the Brief treatise, in which, however, the teaching of EII, def. 2 is presented as a rule where it is possible to know what belongs to the nature of a thing. Similar to the Ethics passage, the KV says: “that without which it cannot exist nor be understood belongs to the nature of a thing; but not only that, but in such a way that the proposition is reversible, namely, that what is affirmed cannot, without the thing, exist or be understood” (ESPINOSA, B. Brief treaty. Trad. Luís C. Oliva and Emanuel A. R. Fragoso. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2014, p. 91, §5).



In the “second part of the Method,”²¹ Spinoza is thinking about the “conditions of a good definition”, that is, what, observed in a definition, makes it a perfect definition. As the text indicates, to be so distinguished, the definition must fulfill a single requirement, to say what the defined thing is, that is, to make known the essence of the defined as it exposes its cause, that is, how it exists. Given this criterion, the conclusion is not to be expected a perfect definition is a genetic definition. To illustrate this point, Spinoza uses a classic example, that of the circle. Defining it as a figure in which the points are equidistant from the center does nothing more than indicating a property of its own, it is, therefore, a nominal definition. To determine the essence of the circle and thereby fulfill the criterion of perfection presented above, a definition is needed that shows its genesis. In this sense, the emendation *Treaty* emphasizes that: “the circle must be defined as the figure described by any line, of which one end is fixed and the other movable” (ESPINOSA, 2004, TIE, §96, p. 57). Here is the perfect definition of the circle, it expresses what the circle is, offers its essence, saying the cause that generates it,²² that is, that makes it exist. Consequently, all the circle’s properties can be deduced from this definition, which is not the case in the other one that operates through predicates.

In a sense, what Spinoza does from this is nothing more than sustaining the Aristotelian premise that knowledge is knowing through causes. However, despite being guided by the same assumption as the Greek philosopher, he develops this thought in a completely different way, showing conclusions that in no way bring him closer to Aristotle. First, he does not propose to think of causality by dividing it into four types (formal, material, efficient and final).²³ Second, he weaves a rigorous critique of the notion of final cause. As we can see in the *de Deo* Appendix, the belief that nature is oriented towards some purpose is the fruit of ignorance and the source of all superstition; it is, says Spinoza, a “rooted prejudice.”²⁴ Of the four causes presented by Aristotle, the author of the *Ethics* maintains only two, the formal cause and the efficient cause, but without distinguishing them, as the Stagirite does, to identify them. This is what we followed in the paragraph above with the genetic definition of the circle. Defining it as a figure described by a line with one end fixed, and the other movable is to defend that there is no gap between the movement of construction of the circle and the circle itself. In this sense, not only is the efficient cause of the circle internal, but it is also identified with its formal cause. This coincidence between efficient cause and the formal cause is contemplated by a perfect definition, that is, by the genetic definition, has a name: immanent efficient cause, and in *Ethics* it is presented in the form of an axiom, “knowledge of the effect depends on knowledge of the cause and surrounds it” (ESPINOSA, 2015, EI, ax., 4, p. 47). Briefly,

²¹ From paragraph 91 onwards.

²² Regarding the method, therefore, the adoption or preference of the genetic definition concerning the nominal definition is justified. At this point, Spinoza seems to have followed Hobbes’ thinking closely. In *De corpore*, the philosopher already called attention to the genetic definition as a source of knowledge of things precisely because it has the cause as its starting point. In that text, precisely in the method chapter, Hobbes distinguishes two definition types, one of which concerns “terms that mean things of which the cause can be understood” (HOBBS, 2000, p. 85). Because it encompasses the generating cause and how the thing is generated, that is, how the defined is constructed, definitions of that type allow clear and perfect ideas to be defined. To illustrate this point, Hobbes uses the same example, later evoked by Spinoza, of the circle, whose genetic definition shows that it is “a figure born from the circumduction of a straight line in a plane” (HOBBS, 2000, p. 85). In this case, as in Spinoza’s text, we have a definition that says what the thing is as it contemplates its generating cause, and Hobbes clarifies the reason for this: “the reason why I say that what has a cause or generation must be defined by cause and generation is this: the end of demonstration is the knowledge of causes and generation of things [an end that coincides with what he presents about philosophy in §2 of chapter 1; philosophy is the knowledge of effects by the knowledge of causes or generations], which if it cannot be obtained by definitions, cannot be obtained by the conclusion of the first syllogism [...]” (HOBBS, T. 2000. *Treatise on el body*. Translated. Joaquín Rodríguez Feo. Madrid: Trotta, p. 86, our translation).

²³ To see about the four causes, see ARISTOTLE, 2005. *Organon*. trans. Edson Bini. Bauru: Edipro, (Later Analytics, Book II, chap. XI); 2009. *Physics I and II*. trans. Lucas Angioni. Campinas: UNICAMP, (Book II, cap. III); 1984. *Metaphysics*. trans. Vincenzo Cocco. São Paulo: Cultural April. (Col. The Thinkers), (Book II, chap. II).

²⁴ ESPINOSA, 2015, EI, ap., p. 111.

through that coincidence, Spinoza can show that cause and effect, or essence and existence, are given at the same time and are not separated.

From the above, it follows that the question of the essence of a thing and the question of its existence are not separate questions: whenever one is asked, the other is presupposed. Because it cause and because it is internal and inherent, the definition not only shows but also affirms the defined thing, linking its essence and its existence in a necessary relationship that, as we have clarified, is one of simultaneity and reversibility.²⁵ This is why it is impossible to affirm or deny either of them without, at the same time, affirming or denying the other. In any definition that wants to be perfect, this equivalence operates. In the context of Part III of the Ethics, this not only clarifies the text of proposition 4 but also elucidates the debate that guides and allows the demonstration of proposition 6 to invoke it.

Despite the necessary relationship between essence and existence being assured, and, even though its point of support is the same – the affirmative character of the definition – whether it is a question of God or modes, the way of understanding it in a case and the other is distinct, and for a reason already mentioned: the essence of God involves existence, the essence of modes does not. Thus, a question needs clarification: to what extent there is no conflict or contradiction in the affirmation of an essence that does not involve existence - an idea that seems to assume a certain distance between the two things - with the simultaneity and reversibility relationship that the definition imposes between essence and existence? The answer to this difficulty can be drawn from the Emendation Treaty itself. Shortly before introducing the discussion on the genetic definition, Spinoza emphasizes that the condition for having clear and distinct ideas is that things are conceived either by their essence or by their proximate cause and continues:

If a thing exists in itself, or, as is commonly said, is the cause of itself, it must be understood by its essence alone; if, however, it does not exist in itself, but requires a cause to exist, then it must be understood by its proximate cause. The knowledge of the effect is nothing more than acquiring a more perfect knowledge of the cause (ESPINOSA, 2004, TIE, §92, p. 55).

Addressing the *Ethics*, it is about God and the modes and the causality that operates in each one or, more correctly, the two ways to be distinguished in axiom 1 of the First Part, “everything that is, or is in itself or another.” By definitions 3 and 5²⁶ of the EI, being in itself (*in se*) and being in another (*in alio*) designate the way of existence of a thing, thus, it is in itself that which exists by its activity, and it is in another that which exists. Which, to exist, requires the activity of something other than itself. Let us remember, however, that to know is to know through causes in this sense, *in se*, and *in alio* do not only concern the existence of things, but also the knowledge of what exists. In this way, following §92 of the Emendation Treaty, those definitions emphasize that what exists by its activity alone is conceived by itself, by its essence, in such a way that the knowledge that one has of it is not subordinated to the knowledge of any other thing on which it depends. On the other hand, what is in another, because knowledge of the effect depends on knowledge of the cause, can only be conceived by another. In general terms, what is in itself is a cause of itself, what is in another relates to something else as its cause, and it is from this cause that the conjunction between its essence and its existence must be explained.

God is *causa sui* (by precedent, in itself, by itself, and conceived by itself), therefore, given the definition of cause of itself as “that whose essence *involves* existence, that is, that whose nature cannot be conceived

²⁵ Although this is not a question considered by Spinoza, we can say, from what has been exposed, that the genetic definition as presented by him seems to account for those four questions that, according to Aristotle, we ask about the things we know, they are: what, *to oti* (ask for the fact), why, *to dioti* (ask for the cause), if it is, *ei esti* (ask for existence), what is, *ti estin* (ask for essence). See Aristotle, 2005, p. 313.

²⁶ Respectively, the definition of substance (“that which is in itself and is conceived by itself, that is, that whose concept does not need the concept of something else from which it must be formed”), and the definition of mode (“affections of substance, that is, that which is in another, by which it is also conceived”).



but existing” (ESPINOSA, 2015, EI, def. 1, p. 45, our italics), in Him, the inseparability between essence and existence is explained by its very nature. The use of the verb *involvere* highlighted in the quote plays a key role in this understanding because it connects the essence and the existence of what is the cause of itself in a relationship such that one cannot be conceived without the other.²⁷ Which, certainly, could be questioned since the essence and existence of singular things also cannot be conceived without the other, and yet their essence does not involve existence. To avoid any dubiousness, we need to consider that “involving existence,” in the case of God, and “not involving existence” in the case of modes, are directly related to the very nature of the thing, so “the involvement of existence means that the action itself of the thing is to exist, that is, it is the fully actual affirmation of its existence,” in this way “the very being of the thing is it is being generated as existing” (OLIVA, 2015, p. 264). From what we have seen so far if this is the case with God, it is not the case with finite modes, whose nature is to strive to continue existing. To involve, says Deleuze (2017, p. 19), is to imply²⁸: the essence of what is a cause of itself implies existence, therefore, the nature of what is a cause of itself cannot be conceived other than as existing. In other words, God exists necessarily because it is of his nature, that is, to exist, the essence of God is necessary existence in itself.

The opening definition of *Ethics* fulfills the criterion of perfection of the definition demanded by the Emendation Treaty. And we say “absolutely” because it is not a definition by the proximate cause, but by the very essence of the thing as a cause of itself. Furthermore, it places the ontology as a starting point and supports of all Spinoza’s philosophy - for if all knowledge is knowledge of causes, we must start from the knowledge of the cause of all things -, nothing more than the controversial idea of an internal efficient cause, or rather of an efficient cause of itself, a notion that had already appeared in Descartes, but only as a possibility and by analogy.²⁹ This question, however, we will not develop at the moment. It remains now to clarify the perspective of modes.

Because they are in the other and the other, the relationship between the essence and the existence of modes is not explained by the necessity of their essence but by the necessity of their cause, that is, of God. Which does not mean that they are not necessary, but rather that a cause other than them puts their necessity.³⁰ In this way, although by EI, P24, the essence of modes does not involve existence – modes are denied the status of substances – given the nature of God exists necessarily. It is under this consideration that, after deducing God in the first 24 propositions of the *de Deo*, the scholium on proposition 25 (“God is the efficient cause not only of the existence of things but also of their essence”) concludes that “in the sense (*eo sensu*) in which God is said to be the cause of himself, he must be said to be the cause of all things” (ESPINOSA, 2015, EI, P25, esc., p. 91). From this follow two considerations, the first more directly related to the proposition and the second to the scholium. First, we can recognize Spinoza’s interlocutors. Our author puts himself in direct dialogue with the scholastic tradition and the distinction established by it between essence and existence, the former being uncreated and necessary, and the latter, in turn, by a

²⁷ It is in this same sense that the verb *involvere* is used, for example, in the demonstration of EII, P49, “let us conceive [...] a way of thinking whereby the mind asserts that the three angles of the triangle are equal to two right angles. This statement involves the concept, that is, the idea of a triangle, that is, it cannot be conceived without the idea of a triangle. It is the same if I say that A must involve the concept of B or that A cannot be conceived without B” (ESPINOSA, 2015, EII, P49, dem., p. 217, our italics).

²⁸ Marilena Chaui (1999, p. 786-787) highlights three meanings for the verb *involvere*: include/contain, imply/depend and unify/equalize, but she does not do this to oppose them. According to the author, all three meanings are contemplated in definition 1 of the *de Deo*, and they indicate only one thing, “the causality in question is not a temporal sequence of events, nor a succession of linked facts, but the action itself of a cause that gives the reason for its existence and which, for that very reason, cannot be conceived other than existing.”

²⁹ See DESCARTES. R. 1996. *Oeuvres de Descartes IX*. Ed. C. Adam & P. Tannery. Paris: J. Vrin, p. 73-95. First Objections and Answers.

³⁰ By scholium 1 to proposition 33 of Part I of the *Ethics*: “a thing is said to be necessary either because of its essence or because of its cause. Indeed, the existence of a thing necessarily follows either from its essence and definition or from a given efficient cause” (p. 103). The first case refers to God, the second to the modes.

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voluntary act of God at the moment of creation, the fiat of Genesis, created and contingent.³¹ Essence and existence would thus not only be distinct but also separate before the position of one in the other. Contrary to this interpretation, the author of the Ethics maintains that in no case does essence take precedence over existence both occur simultaneously because God is the efficient cause not only of the existence of things but also of their essence. To deny this would be to say that the essences of singular things can be conceived without God, which by proposition 15 of the EI (“everything that is is in God, and nothing without God can be nor be conceived”) is absurd.

For the second consideration, we repeat what the scholium says to EI, P25, “in the sense that God is said to be the cause of himself, he must also be said to be the cause of all things.” The expression “in the sense” has a precise function, incorporating the criticism of the “school” evidenced by the respective proposition and demonstration, the scholium highlights God’s causal activity and productive power, which in the Preface to Part III terms, is “always the same and the same everywhere,” that is, it does not assume different meanings depending on whether it is referred to God himself or the modes. Therefore, just as from the deduction of God as a cause of himself, the inseparability between his essence and his existence follows as a necessary consequence, in the same way, to conceive him as the cause of another in the sense where he is said to be a cause of himself is to assume that he is a cause of himself. It is the cause not only of the existence and essence of that other thing but also that it causes them simultaneously and inseparably since it is an immanent efficient cause. This is an important step: “by denying the ontological fracture between creator and creatures through the immanent causality of God, Spinoza can give the man the conceptual instruments to know the divine nature” (GATTO, 2016, p. 289) and, therefore, to understand its nature, which has relevant developments both in the field of ethics and in politics.

With this coming and going, we believe that we have answered the questions raised in the meantime. The efficient and immanent causal activity of God guarantees, that is, shows and explains the necessity, simultaneity, and inseparability not only between his essence and existence but also between the essence and the existence of his effects. Furthermore, once the essentially active and affirmative character of the divine nature has been established at the beginning of the Ethics, it follows that all its expressions, because they share its power, are affirmative. The corollary of the EI, P24, supports this reflection: in it, Spinoza ponders that “God is the cause not only of things beginning to exist but also of their persevering in existing.”³² On these grounds, our author can demonstrate going beyond the interpretation defended by his contemporaries – we are referring to Descartes and Hobbes, who think of *conatus* from a primarily physical and mechanical perspective³³ – that the effort to persevere in being has its roots fundamentally in the ontology.

God continues the precedent corollary: “is the cause of the being of things,” and as he is the cause of them in the same sense in which he is said to be the cause of himself, the actual essence of a single thing is, we reiterate, intrinsically affirmative. We have seen that, for Spinoza, the actual essence of a thing is its

³¹ Guérout (1968, p. 332) points out that, together, propositions 24 and 25 of Part I “have a refuting and indirect character [...] it is false that the essences of things produced by God involve existence, that is, they are substances, and it is ‘absurd’ to ‘deny’ that God is the cause of essences” (our translation). On this and the recipients of Spinoza’s critique, see GUÉROULT, 1968, p. 327-331, §§III and IV.

³² Although not directly invoked by Spinoza, this idea reverberates in the body of EIII, P6, and, more clearly, in paragraph 2 of chapter 2 of the TP, when the philosopher begins to deduce the notion of natural law relating it to potency.

³³ On the understanding of the notion of *conatus* in Descartes and Hobbes, see OLIVA, L. 2018. The *conatus* in Descartes, Hobbes and Spinoza. In: Dois Pontos, v.15, n.1, Philosophy and Sciences in the 17th and 18th centuries, p. 61-77. Available at: < <https://revistas.ufpr.br/colon/article/view/57176/35686> >. Accessed on: 08/11/2018, and JESUS, P.B.M. 2015. On the elaboration of a science of passions in Descartes, Hobbes and Spinoza. Sao Paulo. 140 p. Thesis (Master’s degree). Department of Philosophy, University of São Paulo. Available at: < <http://www.teses.usp.br/teses/disponiveis/8/8133/tde-06112015-152933/pt-br.php> >.

conatus, that is, the very act of existing, from which it follows that the essence of a singular thing is not only logically inseparable from its existence, at the risk of contradiction with the theory of definition and with the notion of efficient causality immanent by it, as even ontologically inseparable from it. After this route, we can conclude, taking up Oliva's words, that: "the divine potency is to the *conatus* as the divine essence is to the actual essence of the thing."

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