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## *Continuous Variation*

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LECTURE 12  
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AFFECT AND IDEA

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Today we pause in our work on continuous variation to return temporarily, for one session, to the history of philosophy, on a very precise point. It's like a break, at the request of some of you. This very precise point concerns the following: what is an idea and what is an affect in Spinoza? Idea and affect in Spinoza. During March, at the request of some of you, we will also take a break to consider the problem of synthesis and the problem of time in Kant.

For me, this produces a curious effect of returning to history. I would almost like for you to take this bit of history of philosophy as a history *tout court*. After all, a philosopher is not only someone who invents notions, he also perhaps invents ways of perceiving. I will proceed largely by enumeration. I will begin chiefly with terminological remarks. I assume that the room is relatively mixed. I believe that, of all the philosophers of whom the history of philosophy speaks to us, Spinoza is in a quite exceptional situation: the way he touches those who enter into his books has no equivalent.

It matters little whether you've read him or not, for I'm telling a story. I begin with some terminological cautions. In Spinoza's principal book, which is called the *Ethics* and which is written in Latin, one finds two words: AFFECTIO and AFFECTUS. Some translators, quite strangely, translate both in the same way. This is a disaster. They translate both terms, *affectio* and *affectus*, by "affection." I call this a disaster because when a philosopher employs two words, it's because in principle he has reason to, especially when French easily gives us two words which correspond rigorously to *affectio* and *affectus*, that is "affection" for *affectio* and "affect" for *affectus*. Some translators translate *affectio* as "affection" and *affectus* as "feeling" [*sentiment*], which is better than translating both by the same word, but I don't see the necessity of having recourse to the word "feeling" since French offers the word "affect."

Thus when I use the word "affect" it refers to Spinoza's *affectus*, and when I say the word "affection," it refers to *affectio*.

First point: what is an idea? What must an idea be, in order for us to comprehend even Spinoza's simplest propositions? On this point Spinoza is not original, he is going to take the word "idea" in the sense in which everyone has always taken it. What is called an idea, in the sense in which everyone has always taken it in the history of philosophy, is a mode of thought which represents something. A representational mode of thought. For example, the idea of a triangle is the mode of thought which represents the triangle. Still from the terminological point of view, it's quite useful to know that since the Middle Ages this aspect of the idea has



been termed its “objective reality.” In texts from the 17th century and earlier, when you encounter the objective reality of the idea this always means the idea envisioned as representation of something. The idea, insofar as it represents something, is said to have an objective reality. It is the relation of the idea to the object that it represents.

Thus we start from a quite simple thing: the idea is a mode of thought defined by its representational character. This already gives us a first point of departure for distinguishing idea and affect (*affectus*) because we call affect any mode of thought which doesn’t represent anything. So what does that mean? Take at random what anybody would call affect or feeling, a hope for example, a pain, a love, this is not representational. There is an idea of the loved thing, to be sure, there is an idea of something hoped for, but hope as such or love as such represents nothing, strictly nothing.

Every mode of thought insofar as it is non-representational will be termed affect. A volition, a will implies, in all rigor, that I will something, and what I will is an object of representation, what I will is given in an idea, but the fact of willing is not an idea, it is an affect because it is a non-representational mode of thought. That works, it’s not complicated.

He thereby immediately infers a primacy of the idea over the affect, and this is common to the whole 17th century, so we have not yet entered into what is specific to Spinoza. There is a primacy of the idea over the affect for the very simple reason that in order to love it’s necessary to have an idea, however confused it may be, however indeterminate it may be, of what is loved.

In order to will it’s necessary to have an idea, however confused or indeterminate it may be, of what is willed. Even when one says, “I don’t know what I feel,” there is a representation, confused though it may be, of the object. There is a confused idea. There is thus a primacy, which is chronological and logical at the same time, of the idea over the affect, which is to say a primacy of representational modes of thought over non-representational modes. It would be a completely disastrous reversal of meaning if the reader were to transform this logical primacy through reduction. That the affect presupposes the idea above all does not mean that it is reduced to the idea or to a combination of ideas. We must proceed from the following point, that idea and affect are two kinds of modes of thought which differ in nature, which are irreducible to one another but simply taken up in a relation such that affect presupposes an idea, however confused it may be. This is the first point.

Now a second, less superficial way of presenting the idea-affect relation. You will recall that we started from a very simple characteristic of the idea. The idea is a thought insofar as it is representational, a mode of thought insofar as it is representational, and in this sense we will speak of the objective reality of an idea. Yet an idea not only has an objective reality but, following the hallowed terminology, it also has a formal reality. What is the formal reality of the idea? Once we say that the objective reality is the reality of the idea insofar as it represents something, the formal reality of the idea, shall we say, is—but then in one blow it becomes much more complicated and much more interesting—the reality of the idea insofar as it is itself something.

The objective reality of the idea of the triangle is the idea of the triangle insofar as it represents the triangle as thing, but the idea of the triangle is itself something; moreover, insofar as it is something, I can form an idea of this thing, I can always form an idea of the idea. I would say therefore that not only is every idea something—to say that every idea is the idea of something is to say that every idea has an objective reality, it represents something—but I would also say that the idea has a formal reality since it is itself something insofar as it is an idea.

What does this mean, the formal reality of the idea? We will not be able to continue very much further at this level, we are going to have to put this aside. It’s necessary just to add that



this formal reality of the idea will be what Spinoza very often terms a certain degree of reality or of perfection that the idea has as such. As such, every idea has a certain degree of reality or perfection. Undoubtedly this degree of reality or perfection is connected to the object that it represents, but it is not to be confused with the object: that is, the formal reality of the idea, the thing the idea is or the degree of reality or perfection it possesses in itself, is its intrinsic character. The objective reality of the idea, that is the relation of the idea to the object it represents, is its extrinsic character; the extrinsic character and the intrinsic character may be fundamentally connected, but they are not the same thing. The idea of God and the idea of a frog have different objective realities, that is they do not represent the same thing, but at the same time they do not have the same intrinsic reality, they do not have the same formal reality, that is one of them—you sense this quite well—has a degree of reality infinitely greater than the other's. The idea of God has a formal reality, a degree of reality or intrinsic perfection infinitely greater than the idea of a frog, which is the idea of a finite thing.

If you understood that, you've understood almost everything. There is thus a formal reality of the idea, which is to say the idea is something in itself; this formal reality is its intrinsic character and is the degree of reality or perfection that it envelopes in itself.

Just now, when I defined the idea by its objective reality or its representational character, I opposed the idea immediately to the affect by saying that affect is precisely a mode of thought which has no representational character. Now I come to define the idea by the following: every idea is something, not only is it the idea of something but it is something, that is to say it has a degree of reality which is proper to it. Thus, at this second level I must discover a fundamental difference between idea and affect. What happens concretely in life? Two things happen... And here, it's curious how Spinoza employs a geometrical method, you know that the *Ethics* is presented in the form of propositions, demonstrations, etc.... and yet at the same time, the more mathematical it is, the more extraordinarily concrete.

Everything I am saying and all these commentaries on the idea and the affect refer to books two and three of the *Ethics*. In books two and three, he makes for us a kind of geometrical portrait of our life which, it seems to me, is very, very convincing. This geometrical portrait consists largely in telling us that our ideas succeed each other constantly: one idea chases another, one idea replaces another idea for example, in an instant. A perception is a certain type of idea, we will see why shortly. Just now I had my head turned there, I saw that corner of the room, I turn...it's another idea; I walk down a street where I know people, I say "Hello Pierre" and then I turn and say "Hello Paul." Or else things change: I look at the sun, and the sun little by little disappears and I find myself in the dark of night; it is thus a series of successions, of coexistences of ideas, successions of ideas. But what also happens? Our everyday life is not made up solely of ideas which succeed each other. Spinoza employs the term "automaton": we are, he says, spiritual automata, that is to say it is less we who have the ideas than the ideas which are affirmed in us. What also happens, apart from this succession of ideas? There is something else, that is, something in me never ceases to vary. There is a regime of variation which is not the same thing as the succession of ideas themselves. "Variations" must serve us for what we want to do, the trouble is that he doesn't employ the word... What is this variation? I take up my example again: in the street I run into Pierre, for whom I feel hostility, I pass by and say hello to Pierre, or perhaps I am afraid of him, and then I suddenly see Paul who is very very charming, and I say hello to Paul reassuredly and contentedly. Well. What is it? In part, succession of two ideas, the idea of Pierre and the idea of Paul; but there is something else: a variation also operates in me—on this point, Spinoza's words are very precise and I cite them: (variation) of my force of existing, or another word he employs as a synonym: *vis existendi*, the force of existing, or *potentia agendi*, the power [*puissance*] of acting, and these variations are perpetual.



I would say that for Spinoza there is a continuous variation—and this is what it means to exist—of the force of existing or of the power of acting.

How is this linked to my stupid example, which comes, however, from Spinoza, “Hello Pierre, hello Paul”? When I see Pierre who displeases me, an idea, the idea of Pierre, is given to me; when I see Paul who pleases me, the idea of Paul is given to me. Each one of these ideas in relation to me has a certain degree of reality or perfection. I would say that the idea of Paul, in relation to me, has more intrinsic perfection than the idea of Pierre since the idea of Paul contents me and the idea of Pierre upsets me. When the idea of Paul succeeds the idea of Pierre, it is agreeable to say that my force of existing or my power of acting is increased or improved; when, on the contrary, the situation is reversed, when after having seen someone who made me joyful I then see someone who makes me sad, I say that my power of acting is inhibited or obstructed. At this level we don’t even know anymore if we are still working within terminological conventions or if we are already moving into something much more concrete.

I would say that, to the extent that ideas succeed each other in us, each one having its own degree of perfection, its degree of reality or intrinsic perfection, the one who has these ideas, in this case me, never stops passing from one degree of perfection to another. In other words there is a continuous variation in the form of an increase-diminution-increase-diminution of the power of acting or the force of existing of someone according to the ideas which s/he has. Feel how beauty shines through this difficult exercise. This representation of existence already isn’t bad, it really is existence in the street, it’s necessary to imagine Spinoza strolling about, and he truly lives existence as this kind of continuous variation: to the extent that an idea replaces another, I never cease to pass from one degree of perfection to another, however miniscule the difference, and this kind of melodic line of continuous variation will define affect (*affectus*) in its correlation with ideas and at the same time in its difference in nature from ideas. We account for this difference in nature and this correlation. It’s up to you to say whether it agrees with you or not. We have got an entirely more solid definition of *affectus*; *affectus* in Spinoza is variation (he is speaking through my mouth; he didn’t say it this way because he died too young...), continuous variation of the force of existing, insofar as this variation is determined by the ideas one has.

Consequently, in a very important text at the end of book three, which bears the title “general definition of *affectus*,” Spinoza tells us: above all do not believe that *affectus* as I conceive it depends upon a comparison of ideas. He means that the idea indeed has to be primary in relation to the affect, the idea and the affect are two things which differ in nature, the affect is not reducible to an intellectual comparison of ideas, affect is constituted by the lived transition or lived passage from one degree of perfection to another, insofar as this passage is determined by ideas; but in itself it does not consist in an idea, but rather constitutes affect.

When I pass from the idea of Pierre to the idea of Paul, I say that my power of acting is increased; when I pass from the idea of Paul to the idea of Pierre, I say that my power of acting is diminished. Which comes down to saying that when I see Pierre, I am affected with sadness; when I see Paul, I am affected with joy. And on this melodic line of continuous variation constituted by the affect, Spinoza will assign two poles: joy-sadness, which for him will be the fundamental passions. Sadness will be any passion whatsoever which involves a diminution of my power of acting, and joy will be any passion involving an increase in my power of acting. This conception will allow Spinoza to become aware, for example, of a quite fundamental moral and political problem which will be his way of posing the political problem to himself: how does it happen that people who have power [*pouvoir*], in whatever domain, need to affect us in a sad way? The sad passions as necessary. Inspiring sad passions is necessary for the exercise of power. And Spinoza says, in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, that this is a profound



point of connection between the despot and the priest—they both need the sadness of their subjects. Here you understand well that he does not take sadness in a vague sense, he takes sadness in the rigorous sense he knew to give it: sadness is the affect insofar as it involves the diminution of my power of acting.

When I said, in my first attempt to differentiate idea and affect, that the affect is the mode of thought which represents nothing, I said in technical terms that this is not only a simple nominal definition, nor, if you prefer, only an external or extrinsic one. In the second attempt, when I say on the other hand that the idea is that which has in itself an intrinsic reality, and the affect is the continuous variation or passage from one degree of reality to another or from one degree of perfection to another, we are no longer in the domain of so-called nominal definitions, here we already acquire a real definition, that is a definition which, at the same time as it defines the thing, also shows the very possibility of this thing.

What is important is that you see how, according to Spinoza, we are fabricated as such spiritual automata. As such spiritual automata, within us there is the whole time of ideas which succeed one another, and in according with this succession of ideas, our power of acting or force of existing is increased or diminished in a continuous manner, on a continuous line, and this is what we call *affectus*, it's what we call existing.

*Affectus* is thus the continuous variation of someone's force of existing, insofar as this variation is determined by the ideas that s/he has. But once again, "determined" does not mean that the variation is reducible to the ideas that one has, since the idea that I have does not account for its consequence, that is the fact that it increases my power of acting or on the contrary diminishes it in relation to the idea that I had at the time, and it's not a question of comparison, it's a question of a kind of slide, a fall or rise in the power of acting.

No problems? No questions?

For Spinoza there will be three sorts of ideas. For the moment, we will no longer speak of *affectus*, of affect, since in effect the affect is determined by the ideas which one has, it's not reducible to the ideas one has, it is determined by the ideas one has; thus what is essential is to see which ideas are the ones which determine the affects, always keeping in mind the fact that the affect is not reducible to the ideas one has, it's absolutely irreducible. It's of another order.

The three kinds of ideas that Spinoza distinguishes are affection (*affectio*) ideas; we'll see that *affectio*, as opposed to *affectus*, is a certain kind of idea. There would thus have been in the first place *affectio* ideas, secondly we arrive at the ideas that Spinoza calls notions, and thirdly, for a small number of us because it's very difficult, we come to have essence ideas. Before everything else there are these three sorts of ideas.

What is an affection (*affectio*)? I see your faces literally fall... yet this is all rather amusing. At first sight, and to stick to the letter of Spinoza's text, this has nothing to do with an idea, but it has nothing to do with an affect either. *Affectus* was determined as the continuous variation of the power of acting. An affection is what? In a first determination, an affection is the following: it's a state of a body insofar as it is subject to the action of another body. What does this mean? "I feel the sun on me," or else "A ray of sunlight falls upon you"; it's an affection of your body. What is an affection of your body? Not the sun, but the action of the sun or the effect of the sun on you. In other words an effect, or the action that one body produces on another, once it's noted that Spinoza, on the basis of reasons from his Physics, does not believe in action at a distance, action always implies a contact, and is even a mixture of bodies. *Affectio* is a mixture of two bodies, one body which is said to act on another, and the other receives the trace of the first. Every mixture of bodies will be termed an affection.

Spinoza infers from this that *affectio*, being defined as a mixture of bodies, indicates the nature of the modified body, the nature of the affectionate or affected body, the affection



indicates the nature of the affected body much more than it does the nature of the affecting body. He analyses his famous example, “I see the sun as a flat disk situated at a distance of three hundred feet.” That’s an *affectio*, or at very least the perception of an *affectio*. It’s clear that my perception of the sun indicates much more fully the constitution of my body, the way in which my body is constituted, than it does the way in which the sun is constituted. I perceive the sun in this fashion by virtue of the state of my visual perceptions. A fly will perceive the sun in another fashion.

In order to preserve the rigor of his terminology, Spinoza will say that an *affectio* indicates the nature of the modified body rather than the nature of the modifying body, and it envelopes the nature of the modifying body. I would say that the first sort of ideas for Spinoza is every mode of thought which represents an affection of the body...which is to say the mixture of one body with another body, or the trace of another body on my body will be termed an idea of affection. It’s in this sense that one could say that it is an affection-idea, the first type of ideas. And this first type of ideas answers to what Spinoza terms the first kind of knowledge [*connaissance*], the lowest.

Why is it the lowest? It’s obvious that it’s the lowest because these ideas of affection know [*connaissent*] things only by their effects: I feel the affection of the sun on me, the trace of the sun on me. It’s the effect of the sun on my body. But the causes, that is, that which is my body, that which is the body of the sun, and the relation between these two bodies such that the one produces a particular effect on the other rather than something else, of these things I know [*sais*] absolutely nothing. Let’s take another example: “The sun melts wax and hardens clay.” These points are not nothing. They’re ideas of *affectio*. I see the wax which flows, and right beside it I see the clay which hardens; this is an affection of the wax and an affection of the clay, and I have an idea of these affections, I perceive effects. By virtue of what corporeal constitution does the clay harden under the sun’s action? As long as I remain in the perception of affection, I know nothing of it. One could say that affection-ideas are representations of effects without their causes, and it’s precisely these that Spinoza calls inadequate ideas. These are ideas of mixture separated from the causes of the mixture.

And in effect, the fact that, at the level of affection-ideas, we have only inadequate and confused ideas is well understood for what are affection-ideas in the order of life? And doubtless, alas, many among us who have not done enough philosophy live only like that.

Once, only once, Spinoza employs a Latin word which is quite strange but very important: *occursus*. Literally this is the *encounter*. To the extent that I have affection-ideas I live chance encounters: I walk in the street, I see Pierre who does not please me, it’s the function of the constitution of his body and his soul and the constitution of my body and my soul. Someone who displeases me, body and soul, what does that mean? I would like to make you understand why Spinoza has had such a strong reputation for materialism even though he never ceases to speak of the mind and the soul, a reputation for atheism even though he never ceases to speak of God, it’s quite curious. One sees quite well why people have said that this is purely materialist. When I say “This one does not please me,” that means, literally, that the effect of his body on mine, the effect of his soul on mine affects me disagreeably, it is the mixture of bodies or mixture of souls. There is a noxious mixture or a good mixture, as much at the level of the body as at that of the soul.

It’s exactly like this: “I don’t like cheese.” What does that mean, “I don’t like cheese”? That means that it mixes with my body in a manner by which I am modified disagreeably, it cannot mean anything else. Thus there isn’t any reason to make up differences between spiritual sympathies and bodily relations. In “I don’t like cheese” there is also an affair of the soul, but in “Pierre or Paul does not please me” there is also an affair of the body, all this is tantamount to the same thing. To put it simply, why is this a confused idea, this affection-idea,



this mixture—it is inevitably confused and inadequate since I don't know absolutely, at this level, by virtue of what and how the body or the soul of Pierre is constituted, in what way it does not agree with mine, or in what way his body does not agree with mine. I can merely say that it does not agree with me, but by virtue of what constitution of the two bodies, of the affecting body and the affected body, of the body which acts and the body which is subjected, I can at this level know nothing. As Spinoza says, these are consequences separated from their premises or, if you prefer, it is a knowledge [*connaissance*] of effects independent of the knowledge of causes. Thus they are chance encounters. What can happen in chance encounters?

But what is a body? I'm not going to develop that, that may be the object of a special course. The theory of what a body or even a soul is, which comes down to the same thing, is found in book two of the *Ethics*. For Spinoza, the individuality of a body is defined by the following: it's when a certain composite or complex relation (I insist on that point, quite composite, very complex) of movement and rest is preserved through all the changes which affect the parts of the body. It's the permanence of a relation of movement and rest through all the changes which affect all the parts, taken to infinity, of the body under consideration. You understand that a body is necessarily composite to infinity. My eye, for example, my eye and the relative constancy of my eye are defined by a certain relation of movement and rest through all the modifications of the diverse parts of my eye; but my eye itself, which already has an infinity of parts, is one part among the parts of my body, the eye in its turn is a part of the face and the face, in its turn, is a part of my body, etc....thus you have all sorts of relations which will be combined with one another to form an individuality of such and such degree. But at each one of these levels or degrees, individuality will be defined by a certain relation composed of movement and rest.

What can happen if my body is made this way, a certain relation of movement and rest which subsumes an infinity of parts? Two things can happen: I eat something that I like, or else another example, I eat something and collapse, poisoned. Literally speaking, in the one case I had a good encounter and in the other I had a bad one. All this is in the category of *occursus*. When I have a bad encounter, this means that the body which is mixed with mine destroys my constituent relation, or tends to destroy one of my subordinate relations. For example, I eat something and get a stomach ache which does not kill me; this has destroyed or inhibited, compromised one of my sub-relations, one of the relations that compose me. Then I eat something and I die. This has decomposed my composite relation, it has decomposed the complex relation which defined my individuality. It hasn't simply destroyed one of my subordinate relations which composed one of my sub-individualities, it has destroyed the characteristic relation of my body. And the opposite happens when I eat something that agrees with me.

Spinoza asks, what is evil? We find this in his correspondence, in the letters he sent to a young Dutchman who was as evil as can be. This Dutchman didn't like Spinoza and attacked him constantly, demanding of him, "Tell me what you think evil is." You know that at that time, letters were very important and philosophers sent many of them. Spinoza, who is very very good-natured, believes at first that this is a young man who wants to be taught and, little by little, he comes to understand that this is not the case at all, that the Dutchman wants his skin. From letter to letter, the good Christian Blyenberg's anger swells and he ends by saying to Spinoza, "But you are the devil!" Spinoza says that evil is not difficult, evil is a bad encounter. Encountering a body which mixes badly with your own. Mixing badly means mixing in conditions such that one of your subordinate or constituent relations is either threatened, compromised or even destroyed.



More and more gay, wanting to show that he is right, Spinoza analyzes the example of Adam in his own way. In the conditions in which we live, we seem absolutely condemned to have only one sort of idea, affection-ideas. By means of what miracle could one move away from these actions of bodies that do not wait for us in order to exist, how could one rise to a knowledge [*connaissance*] of causes? For the moment we see clearly that all that is given to us is ideas of affection, ideas of mixture. For the moment we see clearly that since birth we have been condemned to chance encounters, so things aren't going well. What does this imply? It already implies a fanatical reaction against Descartes since Spinoza will affirm strongly, in book two, that we can only know [*connaître*] ourselves and we can only know external bodies by the affections that the external bodies produce on our own. For those who can recall a little Descartes, this is the basic anti-cartesian proposition since it excludes every apprehension of the thinking thing by itself, that is it excludes all possibility of the cogito. I only ever know the mixtures of bodies and I only know myself by way of the action of other bodies on me and by way of mixtures.

This is not only anti-cartesianism but also anti-Christianity, and why? Because one of the fundamental points of theology is the immediate perfection of the first created man, which is what's called in theology the theory of Adamic perfection. Before he sinned, Adam was created as perfect as he could be, so then the story of his sin is precisely the story of the Fall, but the Fall presupposes an Adam who is perfect insofar as he is a created thing. Spinoza finds this idea very amusing. His idea is that this isn't possible; supposing that one is given the idea of a first man, one can only be given this idea as that of the most powerless being, the most imperfect there could be since the first man can only exist in chance encounters and in the action of other bodies on his own. Thus, in supposing that Adam exists, he exists in a mode of absolute imperfection and inadequacy, he exists in the mode of a little baby who is given over to chance encounters, unless he is in a protected milieu—but I've said too much. What would that be, a protected milieu?

Evil is a bad encounter, which means what? Spinoza, in his correspondence with the Dutchman, tells him, "You always relate to me the example of God who forbade Adam from eating the apple, and you cite this as the example of a moral law. The first prohibition." Spinoza tells him, "But this is not at all what happens," and then Spinoza relates the entire story of Adam in the form of a poisoning and an intoxication. What happened in reality? God never forbade whatever it might be to Adam, He granted him a revelation. Adam foresaw the noxious effect that the body of the apple would have on the constitution of his own body. In other words the apple is a poison for Adam. The body of the apple exists under such a characteristic relation, such is its constitution, that it can only act on Adam's body by decomposing the relation of Adam's body. And if he was wrong not to listen to God, this is not in the sense that he disobeyed in this matter, but that he didn't comprehend anything. This situation also exists among animals, certain of which have an instinct that turns them away from what is poisonous to them, but there are others which don't have this instinct.

When I have an encounter such that the relation of the body which modifies me, which acts on me, is combined with my own relation, with the characteristic relation of my own body, what happens? I would say that my power of acting is increased; at least it is increased with regard to this particular relation. When on the contrary I have an encounter such that the characteristic relation of the body which modifies me compromises or destroys one of my relations, or my characteristic relation, I would say that my power of acting is diminished or even destroyed. We rediscover here our two fundamental affects or *affectus*: sadness and joy.

To recapitulate everything at this level, as a function of ideas of affection which I have, there are two sorts of ideas of affection: the idea of an effect which benefits or favors my own characteristic relation, and second, the idea of an effect which compromises or destroys my



own characteristic relation. To these two types of ideas of affection will correspond the two movements of variation in the *affectus*, the two poles of variation: in one case my power of acting is increased and I undergo [*éprouve*] an *affectus* of joy, and in the other case my power of acting is diminished and I undergo an *affectus* of sadness.

Spinoza will engender all the passions, in their details, on the basis of these two fundamental affects: joy as an increase in the power of acting, sadness as a diminution or destruction of the power of acting. This comes down to saying that each thing, body or soul, is defined by a certain characteristic, complex relation, but I would also say that each thing, body or soul, is defined by a certain power [*pouvoir*] of being affected. Everything happens as if each one of us had a certain power of being affected. If you consider beasts, Spinoza will be firm in telling us that what counts among animals is not at all the genera or species; genera and species are absolutely confused notions, abstract ideas. What counts is the question, of what is a body capable? And thereby he sets out one of the most fundamental questions in his whole philosophy (before him there had been Hobbes and others) by saying that the only question is that we don't even know [*savons*] what a body is capable of, we prattle on about the soul and the mind and we don't know what a body can do. But a body must be defined by the ensemble of relations which compose it, or, what amounts to exactly the same thing, by its power of being affected. As long as you don't know what power a body has to be affected, as long as you learn like that, in chance encounters, you will not have the wise life, you will not have wisdom.

Knowing what you are capable of. This is not at all a moral question, but above all a physical question, as a question to the body and to the soul. A body has something fundamentally hidden: we could speak of the human species, the human genera, but this won't tell us what is capable of affecting our body, what is capable of destroying it. The only question is the power of being affected. What distinguishes a frog from an ape? It's not the specific or generic characteristics, Spinoza says, rather it's the fact that they are not capable of the same affections. Thus it will be necessary to make, for each animal, veritable charts of affects, the affects of which a beast is capable. And likewise for men: the affects of which man is capable. We should notice at this moment that, depending on the culture, depending on the society, men are not all capable of the same affects.

It's well known that one method by which certain governments exterminated the Indians of South America was to have left, on trails the Indians traveled, clothing from influenza victims, clothing gathered in the infirmaries, because the Indians couldn't stand the affect influenza. No need even of machine guns, they dropped like flies. It's the same with us, in the conditions of forest life we risk not living very long. Thus the human genera, species or even race hasn't any importance, Spinoza will say, as long as you haven't made the list of affects of which someone is capable, in the strongest sense of the word "capable," comprising the maladies of which s/he is capable as well. It's obvious that the racehorse and the draft horse are the same species, two varieties of the same species, yet their affects are very different, their maladies are absolutely different, their capacities of being affected are completely different and, from this point of view, we must say that a draft horse is closer to an ox than to a racehorse. Thus an ethological chart of affects is quite different from a generic or specific determination of animals.

You see that the power of being affected can be fulfilled in two ways. When I am poisoned, my power of being affected is absolutely fulfilled, but it's fulfilled in such a way that my power of acting tends toward zero, which is to say it's inhibited. Inversely, when I undergo joy, that is to say when I encounter a body which combines its relation with my own, my power of being affected is equally fulfilled and my power of acting increases and tends toward...what?



In the case of a bad encounter, all my force of existing (*vis existendi*) is concentrated, tending toward the following goal: to invest the trace of the body which affected me in order to reject the effect of this body, so much so that my power of acting is diminished accordingly.

These are very concrete things: you have a headache and you say, “I can’t even read anymore”; this means that your force of existing invests the trace of the migraine so fully, it implies changes in one of your subordinate relations, it invests the trace of your migraine so fully that your power of acting is diminished accordingly. On the contrary, when you say, “I feel really good,” and you are content, you are also content because bodies are mixed with you in proportions and under conditions which are favorable to your relation; at that moment the power of the body which affects you is combined with your own in such a way that your power of acting is increased. So although in the two cases your power of being affected will be completely actualized [*effectué*], it can be actualized in such a way that the power of acting diminishes to infinity or alternatively the power of acting increases to infinity.

To infinity? Is this true? Evidently not, since at our level the forces of existing, the powers [*pouvoirs*] of being affected and the powers [*puissances*] of acting are inevitably finite. Only God has an absolutely infinite power [*puissance*]. Right, but within certain limits I will not cease to pass via these variations of the power of acting as a function of the ideas I have, I will not cease to follow the line of continuous variation of the *affectus* as a function of affection-ideas that I have and the encounters that I have, in such a way that, at each instant, my power of being affected is completely actualized, completely fulfilled. Fulfilled, simply, in the mode of sadness or the mode of joy. Of course also both at once, since it’s well understood that, in the sub-relations which compose us, a part of ourselves can be composed of sadness and another part of ourselves can be composed of joy. There are local sadnesses and local joys. For example, Spinoza gives the following definition of tickling: a local joy; this does not mean that everything is joy in the tickling, it can be a joy of a nature that implies a coexistent irritation of another nature, an irritation which is sadness: my power of being affected tends to be exceeded [*dépasse*]. Nothing that exceeds his/her power of being affected is good for a person. A power of being affected is really an intensity or threshold of intensity.

What Spinoza really wants to do is to define the essence of someone in an intensive fashion as an intensive quantity. As long as you don’t know your intensities you risk the bad encounter and you will have to say, it’s beautiful, both the excess and the immoderation... No immoderation at all, there’s only failure, nothing other than failure. Advice for overdoses. This is precisely the phenomenon of the power of being affected which is exceeded in a total destruction.

Certainly in my generation, on average, we were much more cultured or trained in philosophy, when we used to do it, and on the other hand we had a very striking kind of lack of culture in other domains, in music, painting, cinema.

I have the impression that for many among you the relation has changed, that is to say that you know absolutely nothing, nothing in philosophy and you know, or rather you have a concrete grasp of things like a color, you know what a sound is or what an image is.

A philosophy is a kind of synthesizer of concepts, creating a concept is not at all ideological. A concept is a created thing.

What I’ve defined up to now is solely the increase and diminution of the power of acting, and whether the power of acting increases or diminishes, the corresponding affect (*affectus*) is always a passion. Whether it be a joy which increases my power of acting or a sadness which diminishes my power of acting, in both cases these are passions: joyful passions or sad passions. Yet again Spinoza denounces a plot in the universe of those who are interested in affecting us with sad passions. The priest has need of the sadness of his subjects, he needs these subjects to feel themselves guilty. The auto-affectations or active affects assume that we



possess our power of acting and that, on such and such a point, we have left the domain of the passions in order to enter the domain of actions. This is what remains for us to see.

How could we leave behind affection-ideas, how could we leave behind the passive affects which consist in increase or diminution of our power of acting, how could we leave behind the world of inadequate ideas once we're told that our condition seems to condemn us strictly to this world. On that score we must read the *Ethics* as preparing a kind of dramatic turn. It's going to speak to us of active affects where there are no longer passions, where the power of acting is conquered instead of passing by all these continuous variations. Here, there's a very strict point. There's a fundamental difference between Ethics and Morality. Spinoza doesn't make up a morality, for a very simple reason: he never asks what we must do, he always asks what we are capable of, what's in our power, ethics is a problem of power, never a problem of duty. In this sense Spinoza is profoundly immoral. Regarding the moral problem, good and evil, he has a happy nature because he doesn't even comprehend what this means. What he comprehends are good encounters, bad encounters, increases and diminutions of power. Thus he makes an ethics and not at all a morality. This is why he so struck Nietzsche.

We are completely enclosed in this world of affection-ideas and these affective continuous variations of joy and sadness, so sometimes my power of acting increases, okay, sometimes it diminishes; but whether it increases or diminishes I remain within passion because, in both cases, I do not possess it: I'm still separated from my power of acting. So when my power of acting increases, it means that I am then relatively less separated, and inversely, but I am still formally separated from my power of acting, I do not possess it. In other words, I am not the cause of my own affects, and since I'm not the cause of my own affects, they are produced in me by something else: I am therefore passive, I'm in the world of passion.

But there are notion-ideas and essence-ideas. Already at the level of notion-ideas a kind of escape from this world is going to appear. One is completely smothered, enclosed in a world of absolute impotence, even when my power of acting increases it's on a segment of variation, nothing guarantees me that, at the street corner, I'm not going to receive a great blow to the head and that my power of acting is going to fall again.

You recall that an affection-idea is a mixture, that is to say the idea of an effect of a body on mine. A notion-idea no longer concerns the effect of another body on mine, it's an idea which concerns and which has for its object the agreement or disagreement of the characteristic relations between two bodies. If there is such an idea—we don't know yet if there is one, but we can always define something even if it means concluding that it can't exist—it's what we will call a nominal definition. I would say that the nominal definition of the notion is that it's an idea which, instead of representing the effect of a body on another, that is to say the mixture of two bodies, represents the internal agreement or disagreement of the characteristic relations of the two bodies.

An example: if I knew enough about the characteristic relation of the body named arsenic and the characteristic relation of the human body, I could form a notion of the disagreement of these two relations to the point that the arsenic, under its characteristic relation, destroys the characteristic relation of my body. I am poisoned, I die.

You see that the notion, differing from the idea of affection, instead of being the seizure of the extrinsic relation of one body with another or the effect of one body on another, the notion is raised to the comprehension of the cause, that is if the mixture has such and such effect, this is by virtue of the nature of the relation of the two bodies considered and of the manner in which the relation of one of the bodies is combined with the relation of the other



body. There is always a composition of relations. When I am poisoned, the body of arsenic has induced the parts of my body to enter into a relation other than the one which characterizes me. At that moment, the parts of my body enter into a new relation induced by the arsenic, which is perfectly combined with the arsenic; the arsenic is happy since it feeds on me. The arsenic undergoes a joyful passion because, as Spinoza says so well, each body has a soul. Thus the arsenic is joyful, but me, evidently I'm not. It has induced the parts of my body to enter into a relation which is combined with its own, the arsenic's. Me, I'm sad, I'm heading toward death. You see that the notion, if one can reach it, is a formidable thing.

We are not far from an analytical geometry. A notion is not at all abstract, it's quite concrete: this body here, that body there. If I had the characteristic relation of the soul and of the body of that which I say displeases me, in relation to my characteristic relation in myself, I would comprehend everything, I would know by causes instead of knowing only by effects separated from their causes. At that moment I would have an adequate idea. Just as if I understood why someone pleases me. I took as an example digestive relations, but we wouldn't have to change a line for amorous relations. It's not at all that Spinoza conceived love like he conceived digestion, he conceived digestion like love as well. Take a couple like the Strindbergs, this kind of decomposition of relations and then they are recombined in order to begin again. What is this continuous variation of the *affectus*, and how does a certain disagreement agree with certain people? Why can certain people live only in a certain indefinitely repeated domestic quarrel? They emerge from it as if it had been a bath of cool water for them.

You understand the difference between a notion-idea and an affection-idea. A notion-idea is inevitably adequate since it's a knowledge [*connaissance*] by causes. Spinoza not only uses the term notion here to qualify this second sort of idea, but he also uses the term common notion. The word is quite ambiguous: does it mean common to all minds? Yes and no, it's very meticulous in Spinoza. In any case, don't ever confuse a common notion and an abstraction. He always defines a common notion like this: it's the idea of something which is common to all bodies or to several bodies—at least two—and which is common to the whole and to the part. Therefore there surely are common notions which are common to all minds, but they're common to all minds only to the extent that they are first the idea of something which is common to all bodies. Therefore these are not at all abstract notions. What is common to all bodies? For example, being in movement or at rest. Movement and rest will be objects of notions said to be common to all bodies. Therefore there are common notions which designate something common to all bodies.

There are also common notions which designate something common to two bodies or to two souls, for example, someone I love. Once again the common notion is not abstract, it has nothing to do with species or genera, it's actually the statement [*énoncé*] of what is common to several bodies or to all bodies; or, since there's no single body which is not itself made up of several, one can say that there are common things or common notions in each body. Hence we fall back upon the question: how can one leave this situation which condemned us to mixtures?

Here Spinoza's texts are very complicated. One can only conceive this departure in the following manner: broadly speaking, when I am affected in chance encounters, either I am affected with sadness or with joy. When I am affected with sadness, my power of acting diminishes, which is to say that I am further separated from this power. When I am affected with joy, it increases, which is to say that I am less separated from this power. Good. If you consider yourself as affected with sadness, I believe that everything is wretched, there is no longer an exit for one simple reason: nothing in sadness, which diminishes your power of acting, can induce you from within sadness to form a notion common to something which



would be common to the bodies which affect you with sadness and to your own. For one very simple reason, that the body which affects you with sadness only affects you with sadness to the extent that it affects you in a relation which does not agree with your own.

Spinoza means something very simple, that sadness makes no one intelligent. In sadness one is wretched. It's for this reason that the powers-that-be [*pouvoirs*] need subjects to be sad. Agony has never been a cultural game of intelligence or vivacity. As long as you have a sad affect, a body acts on yours, a soul acts on yours in conditions and in a relation which do not agree with yours. At that point, nothing in sadness can induce you to form the common notion, that is to say the idea of a something in common between two bodies and two souls. What he's saying is full of wisdom. This is why thinking of death is the most base thing. He is opposed to the whole philosophical tradition which is a meditation on death. His formula is that philosophy is a meditation on life and not on death. Obviously, because death is always a bad encounter.

Another case. You are affected with joy. Your power of acting is increased, this doesn't mean that you possess it yet, but the fact that you are affected with joy signifies and indicates that the body or soul which affects you thus affects you in a relation which is combined with your own and which is combined with your own, and that goes for the formula of love and the digestive formula. In an affect of joy, therefore, the body which affects you is indicated as combining its relation with your own and not as its relation decomposing your own. At that point, something induces you to form a notion of what is common to the body which affects you and to your own body, to the soul which affects you and to your own soul. In this sense joy makes one intelligent. There we feel that it's a curious thing, because, geometrical method or not, we grant him everything, he can demonstrate it; but there is an obvious appeal to a kind of lived experience. There's an obvious appeal to way of perceiving, and even more, to a way of living. It's necessary to already have such a hatred of sad passions, the list of sad passions in Spinoza is infinite, he goes so far as to say that every idea of reward envelopes a sad passion, every idea of security envelopes a sad passion, every idea of pride, guilt. It's one of the most marvelous moments in the *Ethics*. The affects of joy are like a springboard, they make us pass through something that we would never have been able to pass if there had only been sadnesses. He solicits us to form the idea of what is common to the affecting body and the affected body. This can fail, but it can also succeed and I become intelligent.

Someone who becomes good in Latin at the same time that he becomes a lover...this is seen in the classroom. What's it connected to? How does someone make progress? One never makes progress on a homogeneous line, something *here* makes us make progress *down there*, as if a small joy *here* had released a trigger. Anew, the necessity of a map: what happened there that unblocked this here? A small joy precipitates us into a world of concrete ideas which sweeps out the sad affects or which is in the process of struggling, all of this makes up part of the continuous variation. But at the same time, this joy propels us somehow beyond the continuous variation, it makes us acquire at least the potentiality of a common notion. It's necessary to conceive this very concretely, these are quite local things. If you succeed in forming a common notion, at whatever point you yourself have a relation with such a person or such an animal, you say: I've finally understood something, I am less stupid than yesterday. The "I've understood" that one says is sometimes the moment in which you formed a common notion. You formed it quite locally, it didn't give you all the common notions. Spinoza doesn't think at all like a rationalist, among the rationalists there is the world of reason and there are the ideas. If you have one, obviously you have all of them: you are reasonable. Spinoza thinks that being reasonable, or being wise, is a problem of becoming, which changes in a singular fashion the contents of the concept of reason. It's necessary to know the encounters which agree with you. No one could ever say that it's good for her/him when



something exceeds her/his power of being affected. The most beautiful thing is to live on the edges, at the limit of her/his own power of being affected, on the condition that this be the joyful limit since there is the limit of joy and the limit of sadness; but everything which exceeds your power of being affected is ugly. Relatively ugly: what's good for flies is not inevitably good for you...

There is no longer any abstract notion, there isn't any formula which is good for man in general. What counts is what your power is for you. Lawrence said a directly Spinozist thing: an intensity which exceeds your power of being affected is bad (posthumous writings). It's inevitable: a blue that is too intense for my eyes will not make me say it's beautiful, it will perhaps be beautiful for someone else. There's good for all, you tell me...Yes, because the powers of being affected are combined.

To assume that there was a power of being affected which defined the power of being affected of the whole universe is quite possible since all relations are combined to infinity, but not in just any order. My relation doesn't combine with that of arsenic, but what can this do? Obviously it does a lot to me, but at this moment the parts of my body enter again into a new relation which is combined with that of the arsenic. It's necessary to know in what order the relations are combined. But if we knew in what order the relations of the whole universe are combined, we could define a power of being affected of the whole universe, which would be the cosmos, the world insofar as it's a body or a soul. At this moment the whole world is only one single body following the order of relations which are combined. At this moment you have, to speak precisely, a universal power of being affected: God, who is the whole universe insofar as He is its cause, has by nature a universal power of being affected. It's useless to say that he's in the process of using the idea of God in a strange manner.

You undergo a joy, you feel that this joy concerns you, that it concerns something important regarding your principal relations, your characteristic relations. Here then it must serve you as a springboard, you form the notion-idea: in what do the body which affects me and my own body agree? In what do the soul which affects me and my own soul agree, from the point of view of the composition of their relations, and no longer from the point of view of their chance encounters. You do the opposite operation from what is generally done. Generally people tend to summarize their unhappinesses, this is where neurosis or depression begins, when we set out to figure the totals; oh shit, there's this and there's that. Spinoza proposes the opposite: instead of summarizing of our sadnesses, taking a local point of departure on a joy on the condition that we feel that it truly concerns us. On that point one forms the common notion, on that point one tries to win locally, to open up this joy. It's the labor of life. One tries to diminish the respective share of sadnesses in relation to the respective share of a joy, and one attempts the following tremendous coup: one is sufficiently assured of common notions which refer to relations of agreement between such and such body and my own, one will attempt then to apply the same method to sadness, but one cannot do it on the basis of sadness, that is to say one will attempt to form common notions by which one will arrive at a comprehension of the vital manner in which such and such body disagrees and no longer agrees. That becomes, no longer a continuous variation, that becomes a bell curve.

You leave joyful passions, the increase in the power of acting; you make use of them to form common notions of a first type, the notion of what there was in common between the body which affected me with joy and my own body, you open up to a maximum your living common notions and you descend once again toward sadness, this time with common notions that you form in order to comprehend in what way such a body disagrees with your own, such a soul disagrees with your own.

At this moment you can already say that you are within the adequate idea since, in effect, you have passed into the knowledge of causes. You can already say that you are within



philosophy. One single thing counts, the way of living. One single thing counts, the meditation on life, and far from being a meditation on death it's rather the operation which consists in making death only finally affect the proportion that is relatively the smallest in me, that is, living it as a bad encounter. It's simply well known that, to the extent that a body is tired, the probabilities of bad encounters increase. It's a common notion, a common notion of disagreement. As long as I'm young, death is truly something which comes from outside, it's truly an extrinsic accident, except in the case of an internal malady. There is no common notion, on the other hand it's true that when a body ages, its power of acting diminishes: I can no longer do what I could still do yesterday; this, this fascinates me in aging, this kind of diminution of the power of acting. What is a clown, vitally speaking? It's precisely the type that does not accept aging, he doesn't know how to age quickly enough. It's not necessary to age too quickly because there's also another way of being a clown: acting the old man. The more one ages the less one wants to have bad encounters, but when one is young one leaps into the risk of the bad encounter. The type which, to the extent that his power of acting diminishes as a function of aging, his power of being affected varies, doesn't do it, continues to act the young man, is fascinating. It's very sad. There's a fascinating passage in one of Fitzgerald's novels (the water-ski episode, in *Tender is the Night*), there are ten pages of total beauty on not knowing how to age... You know the spectacles which are not uncomfortable for the spectators themselves.

Knowing how to age is arriving at the moment when the common notions must make you comprehend in what way things and other bodies disagree with your own. Then inevitably it will be necessary to find a new grace which will be that of your age, above all not clinging to youth. It's a kind of wisdom. It's not the good health which makes one say, "Live life as you please," it's no longer the will to cling to life. Spinoza knew admirably well how to die, but he knew very well what he was capable of, he knew how to say "Piss off" [*merde*] to the other philosophers. Leibniz came to him to steal bits of manuscript in order to say afterward that they were his own. There are very curious stories about this, he was a dangerous man, Leibniz.

I end by saying that at this second level, one attains the notion-idea where relations are combined, and once again this is not abstract since I've tried to say that it's an extraordinarily vital enterprise. One has left the passions behind. One has acquired formal possession of the power of acting. The formation of notions, which are not abstract ideas, which are literally rules of life, gives me possession of the power of acting. The common notions are the second kind of knowledge [*connaissance*]. In order to understand the third it's necessary already to understand the second. Only Spinoza has entered into the third kind. Above the common notions... You've noticed that while the common notions are not abstract, they are collective, they always refer to a multiplicity, but they're no less individual for that. They are the ways in which such and such bodies agree, at the limit they are the ways in which all bodies agree, but at that moment it's the whole world which is an individuality. Thus the common notions are always individual.

Beyond even the compositions of relations, beyond the internal agreements which define the common notions, there are the singular essences. What's the difference? It would be necessary to say that, at the limit, the relation and relations which characterize me express my singular essence, but nevertheless it's not the same thing. Why? Because the relation which characterizes me... what I'm saying here is not entirely in the text, but it's practically there... The common notions or the relations which characterize me still concern the extensive parts of my body. My body is composed of an infinity of parts extended to the infinite, and these parts enter into such and such relations which correspond to my essence but are not confused with my essence, for the relations which characterize me are still rules under which are associated, in movement and at rest, the extended parts of my body. Whereas the singular



essence is a degree of power [*puissance*], that is to say these are my thresholds of intensity. Between the lowest and the highest, between my birth and my death, these are my intensive thresholds. What Spinoza calls singular essence, it seems to me, is an intensive quality, as if each one of us were defined by a kind of complex of intensities which refers to her/his essence, and also of relations which regulate the extended parts, the extensive parts. So that, when I have knowledge [*connaissance*] of notions, that is to say of relations of movement and rest which regulate the agreement or disagreement of bodies from the point of view of their extended parts, from the point of view of their extension, I don't yet have full possession of my essence to the extent that it is intensity. And God, what's that? When Spinoza defines God as absolutely infinite power [*puissance*], he expresses himself well. All the terms that he explicitly employs: degree, which in Latin is *gradus*, refers to a long tradition in medieval philosophy. *Gradus* is the intensive quantity, in opposition to or differing from the extensive parts. Thus it would be necessary to conceive the singular essence of each one as this kind of intensity, or limit of intensity. It's singular because, whether it be our community of genera or species, we are all human for example, yet none of us has the same thresholds of intensity as another. The third kind of knowledge, or the discovery of the essence-idea, occurs when, on the basis of the common notions, by a new dramatic turn, one happens to pass into this third sphere of the world: the world of essences. There one knows in their correlation what Spinoza calls—in any case one cannot know the one without the other—the singular essence which is mine and the singular essence which is God's and the singular essence of external things.

That this third kind of knowledge would on the one hand appeal to a whole tradition of Jewish mysticism, and on the other imply a kind of mystical atheist experience proper to Spinoza, I believe the only way of comprehending this third kind is to seize the fact that, beyond the order of encounters and mixtures, there is this other stage of notions which refer to characteristic relations. But beyond the characteristic relations, there's still the world of singular essences.

Well then, when one forms here ideas which are like pure intensities, in which my own proper intensity will agree with the intensity of external things, at that moment the third kind of knowledge appears because, if it's true that all bodies do not agree with one another, if it's true that, from the point of view of relations which govern the extended parts of a body or a soul, the extensive parts, all bodies do not agree with one another; if you arrive at a world of pure intensities, all these are supposed to agree with one another. At that moment, the love of yourself and at the same time, as Spinoza says, the love of things other than you, and at the same time the love of God, and the love God bears for Himself, etc...

What interests me in this mystical point is this world of intensities. There, you are in possession, not merely formally but in an accomplished way. It's no longer even joy, Spinoza finds the mystical word *beatitudo* or active affect, that is to say the auto-affect. But this remains quite concrete. The third kind is a world of pure intensities.