

SPINOZA, JONAS AND THE THEORY OF ORGANICISM

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Abstract

In this paper, I will discuss an on Spinoza written by Hans Jonas in 1965: “Spinoza and the Theory of Organism”. First, I will present Jonas’ main argument and the theoretical assumptions of his essay; then I will expand on the possible development of these assumptions with the aim of proposing a complete theory of being; a Spinozian ontology. Finally, my argument will focus on the interpretation of Spinoza’s work and thought as an organicism and the possible relations between this reading and Jonas’ article.

Spinoza’s thought is maybe one of the most discussed, both in positive and in negative sense, in the history of philosophy. Many of the great philosophers that lived after him acknowledged him as a source of inspiration or opposed to him as a blasphemous thinker. The inheritance of Spinoza was also important to Hans Jonas, whose interpretation of Spinoza will be subject of this paper.

In 1965, Jonas published an article entitled “Spinoza and the Theory of Organism”, in which he discussed some possible implications of Spinoza’s thought for an organic and biological theory of the body. Jonas’ aim was to explain how the philosophy of Spinoza could lead to an interpretation of the biological world centred on the notion of “organism”.

Jonas emphasizes that one of Spinoza’s main contributes to early modern philosophy was to undermine the idea (Stoic, Christian, and later Cartesian) that the “mere complexity of arrangement does not create new quality and thus not add something to the unrelieved sameness of the simple substrate that might enrich the spectrum of being”¹. The denial of this assumption characterises also the con-

¹ Hans Jonas, *Spinoza and the Theory of Organism*, in *Philosophical essays: from ancient creed to technological men*, Chicago-London, The University of Chicago Press, 1974, p. 207.

temporary tendency called “systemic philosophy” or “systemics”, which has its core idea in the following theorem: the concept of system is defined as a configuration of interconnected and interdependent parts, which relations allow to identify certain borders that distinguish it from other complex entities². This will be further discussed below.

For the moment, we will focus on a great difference that separates Spinoza from Descartes and Hobbes: whereas Descartes and Hobbes defend a “mechanicism” (the theory that intends every being in the universe as a part of an universal machine), Spinoza shapes a very different thought. Jonas underlines how “Spinoza was no longer compelled to view those complex material entities we call organisms as the products of mechanical design”³. What is the reason for this shift? In my opinion, it has to be the re-interpretation (or the complete denial) of the notions of “purpose” and “finalism”: “The idea of a purpose, in analogy to man-made machines, was replaced by the eternal necessity of the self-explication of the infinite nature of God, that is, of substance, that is, of reality”⁴.

The ancient and medieval concept of an universe governed by a purpose, created by something or someone in order to move in a preconceived direction, was refused by Spinoza:

What mattered in the understanding of an organism was no longer its lesser or greater perfection as an independent piece of functioning machinery, but its lesser or greater perfection as a finite “mode” [*sic*], measured by its power to exist and to interact (communicate) with the rest of existence, or, to be a less or more self-determined part of the whole⁵.

It is important to keep this idea of “communication” in mind, since it is, according to Jonas, maybe the most important feature of Spinoza’s ontology.

“The living organism exists as a constant exchange of its own constituents, and has its permanence and identity *only* [*italics is mine*] in the continuity of this process, not in any persistence of its material parts. This process indeed *is* its life”⁶. Jonas recalls here the concept of *conatus*, so often analysed in every criticism about Spinoza: “everything, in so far as it is in itself, endeavours to persist in its own being”⁷. The being of an organism (or actually every being, if we take Spinoza liter-

² See: Ludwig von Bertalanffy, *General System Theory*, New York, George Braziller, 1969.

³ Hans Jonas, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

⁴ *Idem.*

⁵ *Idem.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁷ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, part III, prop. 6. Translation by R. H. M. Elwes, in *The chief Works of Benedict of Spinoza*, New York, Dover Publications, 1951, v. 2, p. 136.

ally) is centred on the continuous *ratio* between the quantity of parts an individual takes from the environment surrounding it, and the quantity that it leaves in the environment itself. The *ratio*, in this sense, is the true essence of the individual, the only constant and persistent “part” of it. One of the possible implications of this concept is the involving in the essence of an individual of the notion of ‘time’, or ‘duration’. Spinoza is aware of that⁸, as Jonas also states:

The essence of organic being is seen, not in the functioning of a machine as a closed system, but in the sustained sequence of states of a unified plurality, with only the form of its union enduring while the parts come and go⁹.

Moving to a superior order of thought, both Spinoza and Jonas, the latter in his interpretation of the Dutch philosopher, come to the conclusion that the individual beings – the *res singulares* – have to be some form of union among parts, even if Spinoza never uses the word “organism” itself. This statement has to be seen not as a limited argument, only applicable on the organisms, but as applicable to every being, solving the ancient problem of the *principium individuationis*, or individuation principle.

Identity in Spinoza’s theory of individuality is the identity of a whole which is so little the mere sum of its parts that it remains the same even when the parts continually change. And since the individual is a *form of union*, there are qualitative grades of individuality, depending on the degree of differentiated order, and quantitative grades, depending on the numerical extent of inclusion [...] – so that the All forms a hierarchy of individualities, or wholes, of increasing inclusiveness culminating in the most inclusive one, the totality of nature as such¹⁰.

Jonas is here referring to one of the most famous propositions in the *Ethics*: the *scholium* to the 7th lemma of the *excursus physicus* taking place after the 13th proposition of the II part of Spinoza’s masterpiece: “[If we conceive an Individual], composed of several Individuals of diverse natures, we shall find that the number of ways in which it can be affected, without losing its nature, will be greatly multiplied [...]. We may easily proceed thus to infinity, and conceive the whole Nature as one Individual, whose parts, that is, all bodies, vary in infinite ways, without

⁸ Spinoza’s theories about duration are specifically thematized in the works of Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1988 and *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, New York, Zone Books, 1990.

⁹ Jonas, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

¹⁰ Jonas, *idem*.

any change in the Individual as a whole”¹¹. In this passage of the *Ethics* one can trace the root of the compositionality of all individuals within Nature, as parts of a complex individual whose parts are, in their turn, individuals with several parts.

This passage, though, is even more significant if one considers the importance given by Jonas to the concept of “totality”: individual as a totality, organism as a totality, nature as a totality. In fact, Spinoza himself suggests the appliance of the same process of individuation of beings, formed by several parts, to the whole nature as well as to the multiple individual organisms. Also Jonas endorses this interpretation: “The concept of organism evolves organically, without a break from the general ontology of individual existence. Of every such existence it is true to say that as a modal determination it represents just one phase in the eternal unfolding of infinite substance and is thus never a terminal product in which the creative activity would come to a rest”¹².

Jonas and Spinoza seems to have, here, a surprising coincidence: the several individual beings, which are parts of the nature, are involved in its developing as the parts of our bodies are involved in our life; not “independent”, but on the opposite side truly dependent in the sense of a real co-implication of the parts in the whole.

For this reason, Jonas’ comment to this statement is very interesting: “That activity, being that of substance as a whole, can of course in its universal movement overrule any individual *conatus*, and inevitably does so sooner or later”¹³. This kind of thoughts completely breaks with a tradition of philosophy coming from the medieval scholastic theory about the divine Providence; the universe is not build and functioning to the purpose of the advantage of men, quite the opposite: the men are involved in the being of the universe, without any choice.

The radical shift brought by these thesis is well described by É. Balibar:

Spinoza’s deep penetration in the individuality is often considered as responsible of unacceptable paradoxes, especially when it involves the concept of the *freedom* of the individual. Clearly the difficulty depends on the fact that, if the relationships between individuals immediately constitutes new and superior individuals, the autonomy of the parts (especially in the case of human beings) would be absorbed in the interests and claims of the whole, which tends to its own self-conservation¹⁴.

¹¹ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, part II, lemma 7, *scholium*. Translation by R. H. M. Elwes, in *The chief Works of Benedict of Spinoza*, v. 2, p. 96.

¹² Jonas, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

¹³ Jonas, *ibid.*, n. 6.

¹⁴ Étienne Balibar, *Spinoza: from Individuality to Transindividuality*, “Mededelingen vanwege het Spinozahuis”, 71 (1997).

This is the long-standing argument of freedom against all the organicistic philosophy: free will has no reason to exist, if all the human beings are just part of a spinozian substance (or the history, or the supreme spirit, or the Great Animal).

Actually, organicism is an ancient tendency of many systematic philosophies. From Plato (one might also say Parmenides) to Hegel, the inclination of an all-embracing thought is to explain the reality apart from personal freedom. What on a first sight differentiates Spinoza from this kind of philosophies is that the general tendency of organicism is to project the complete fulfilment of the proposals in an either temporal or spiritual future, e.g. in the Marxist utopia or, as stated above, in the description of the Great Animal of Plato.

Spinoza's "organicism", on the other hand,

is remarkable (and distinctive) because of its idea of eternity as something that might be partial (*Qui Corpus ad plurima aptum habet, is Mentem habet, cujus maxima pars est aeterna*¹⁵) [...]. To say that a partial eternity exists is to refuse the idea of the *corpus mysticum* – an imaginary transposition "to the whole" or "to the world" of the inadequate idea which we have about our body. Of this concept we found the opposite token in the idea expressed in the treatise *De intellectum emendation*: "habemus enim ideam veram". We already have some true ideas (and truly adequate), when we experiment the *beatitudinem* (*sentimus experimusque, nos aeternos esse*¹⁶). So "eternity" has nothing to do with future or a promised land¹⁷.

A partisan of Spinoza's supposed organicism can answer to this objection saying that it only strengthens the problem: the unity or the union of all organisms and individual beings in the unique Nature is not only imagined in a future or in an afterlife, but is strongly affirmed *hic et nunc*, here and now. Maybe the best answer is to underline – which Spinoza does in the beginning of the third part of the *Ethics* – that this process only works in the ontological dimension.

The argument turns around the following quote from Spinoza on the different kinds of knowledge:

From all that has been said above it is clear, that we, in many cases, perceive and form our general notions: (1.) From particular things represented to our intellect

¹⁵ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, part V, prop. 39. For translation see R. H. M. Elwes, *The chief Works of Benedict of Spinoza*, v. 2, p. 267.

¹⁶ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, part V, prop. 23, *scholium*. For translation see R. H. M. Elwes, *The chief Works of Benedict of Spinoza*, v. 2, p. 260.

¹⁷ Étienne Balibar, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

fragmentarily, confusedly, and without order through our senses [...]. (2.) From symbols, e.g. from the fact of having read or heard certain words we remember things and form certain ideas concerning them, similar to those through which we imagine things. I shall call both these ways of regarding things knowledge of the first kind, opinion, or imagination. (3.) From the fact that we have notions common to all men, and adequate ideas of the properties of things; this I call reason and knowledge of the second kind. Besides these two kinds of knowledge, there is, as I will hereafter show, a third kind of knowledge, which we will call intuition. This kind of knowledge proceeds from an adequate idea of the absolute essence of certain attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things¹⁸.

This theory, far from sanctioning the complete separation among the kinds of knowledge, affirms their deep union and interpenetration. Spinoza traces a theory of knowledge, or gnoseology, which connects the previous (or “lower”) degree of knowledge and accuracy to the following (or “higher”) one without contemning anyone: the imagination, or the reason itself, is not just a step to overcome in order to reach the intuitive kind of knowledge, named also *amor Dei intellectualis*. In the *scholium* preceding the quoted one, in fact, Spinoza sets a sort of community between the concept of “common notion” and the idea of “axiom”, underlining how the imagination (the “lowest” kind of knowledge) itself contributes to build them.

Accordingly, we can say that Nature is a unique organism while maintaining the claim that each individual has its own existence. Indeed, being in the reign of imagination, a human can truly affirm to be an organism and an individual; moving to “higher” kinds of knowledge, though, this is not adequate anymore. This can bring the argumentation to a paradoxical point, in which a multiple truth is possible: but, proceeding with care, one might affirm that this is just a pluralistic way to intend the reality, and the ontology, in Spinoza’s thought.

Pluralism is a feature that also characterizes the “systemic” tendency in philosophy, which has often been placed side by side to Spinoza¹⁹. The idea of system, as described above, seems to be very similar to the concept of individual being, or *res singularis*, described by Spinoza. Achieving a partial translation of Spinozian terms into systemic terms, one can see that the notions of the “whole” or the “set” are very similar to what we in reference to Jonas described as an “organism”, or an “in-

¹⁸ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, part II, prop. 40, *scholium* II. Translation by R. H. M. Elwes, in *The chief Works of Benedict of Spinoza*, v. 2, p. 113. For more information about the theory of the kinds of knowledge, see Vittorio Morfino, *La scienza delle connexiones singulares*, in *Sulla scienza intuitiva in Spinoza. Ontologia, politica, estetica*, edited by V. Morfino e F. Del Lucchese, Milan, Ghibli, 2003.

¹⁹ See (as an example) Juliana Merçon, *La filosofía de Spinoza y el pensamiento sistémico contemporáneo*, in *Revista de Filosofía (Universidad Iberoamericana)*, n. 133, july–september 2012, pp. 83–101.

dividual”, the “elements” or “components” of which are just the Spinozian “parts”: the interaction and the relationships among them create new “properties”, called by Spinoza “affects” or “affections”, which are the actual essence of the individual:

When any given bodies of the same or different magnitude are compelled by other bodies to remain in contact, or if they be moved at the same or different rates of speed, so that their mutual movements should preserve among themselves a certain fixed relation, we say that such bodies are in union, and that together they compose one body or individual, which is distinguished from other bodies by the fact of this union²⁰.

The “certain fixed relation” is the most important feature of the individual, because it allows it to exist (in fact, when it is broken, the individual does not exist anymore) and to act, both in active or passive sense. So, if one can agree that an interpretation of Spinoza in a systemic view is admissible, also a pluralistic view of his gnoseology is worthy of consideration.

Finally, leading to the conclusion of this essay, one must turn to the most interesting (and, also, most controversial) consequence of an “organism-driven” interpretation of Spinoza: the politic world²¹ can or cannot be considered as ordered by this principle? The most famous forms of organicism consider the nation (or the *polis*) as an individual, as a living body, and the citizens as parts of it, as organs or cells whose life is subordinate to the life of the organism, and which can be easily replaced.

The “community” in Spinoza’s works – the *Ethics*, the *Theological-Political Treatise*, the *Political Treatise* – is described as an union of several bodies and several minds (this is why the psychological part of the *Ethics* is politically relevant) in an unique body which idea is an unique mind. The deep reason for this union is the utility – which has, in difference to Hobbes, an ontological root; in the corollary of the 35th proposition of the fourth part of the *Ethics*, in fact, Spinoza affirms: “There is no individual thing in nature, which is more useful to man, than a man who lives in obedience to reason”²². The utility, as we can see here, is individual: the individual citizen benefits from the union with other men, because they are the object (within the nature) which is most in harmony with his own nature. From

²⁰ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, part II, definition. Translation by R. H. M. Elwes, in *The chief Works of Benedict of Spinoza*, v. 2, p. 95.

²¹ An interesting exposition of these problem can be found in Sabrina Corsello, *La politica tra natura e artificio: l'antropologia positiva di B. Spinoza*, Palermo, ILA Palma, 1999.

²² Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, part IV, prop. 35, corollary I. Translation by R. H. M. Elwes, in *The chief Works of Benedict of Spinoza*, v. 2, pp. 209–210.

this Spinoza concludes that their union is the most perfect, and that an elevation to knowledge is only possible through such a community. As Balibar says, “In the same text where the precepts of reason are explicated, Spinoza shows that also the constitution of a community as a single body and a single mind becomes an assumption of self-conservation”²³.

Self-conservation and self-increase are the two of Spinoza’s aims and he claims that these are easier to attain if pursued from within a community. This is the case both for mankind and for any organism. The “risk” of an organicism in Spinoza is diminished, if considered in this order of thought: the union of the organism-nation is organized for the advantage of the organism-individual, as in the systemic philosophy the union of the system is advantageous for the parts, which are brought to new possibilities and horizons of acting. This argument is strengthened by the fact that, while in Hobbes the mechanism of co-building a community is forced by the passions of fear and hope, and so it is almost involuntary, in Spinoza only reason may have such a value²⁴. Only reason, in fact, is able to harmonize *virtus* and *utilitas*, the “good” and the “useful”: this association is, furthermore, that which separates Spinoza from the utilitarianism.

The co-operation and the conscious co-acting of the citizens are the bases on which the nation is built: otherwise the State will never be a community, but a mass of separate individuals whose bodies and minds will never be united in a single organism. The reason, though, is properly understood as the reason of the individual: it implements the action and the cooperation of the individuals with the aim of the individual utility, putting aside any form of organicism. Furthermore, Spinoza is one of the strongest supporters of the theory of the natural law, or *ius naturae*, a very debated question in the XVII century, which builds the State for the good of the individual. On the other hand, Spinoza’s thought and works nevertheless firmly oppose to the most extreme theories of individualism, relativism and utilitarianism, exactly for the arguments we have seen in their development through the second and the fourth part of the *Ethics*, and through the interpretation of Jonas: the co-building of the community of the men (the *civitas*) as an organism prevents from any form of social atomization or excessive fragmentation.

²³ Étienne Balibar, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

²⁴ For a deeper analysis of this argument, see Remo Bodei, *Geometria delle passioni*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 1994.