As Heraclitus once said, to suppose the world was not already beautiful and orderly, without the aid of reason, would turn it into nothing but a pile of garbage. Drawing on this fundamentally anti-Platonic theme, Végso reveals that the gesture shared by many post-war philosophies is the reduction of the possibilities of ‘worldlessness’ into an unquestionably negative category, thereby foreclosing the positive attitudes of approaching the manner in which the world worlds today. In response, Végso proposes a unique and timely approach to affirming the conditions of worldlessness as the ‘limit-experience’ of contemporary philosophy.

Gregg Lambert, Syracuse University

Sets out an innovative agenda for the potential applications of worldlessness in practical philosophy

Roland Végso opens up a new debate in favour of abandoning the very idea of the world in both philosophy and politics.

Beginning with a reconsideration of the Heideggerian critique of worldlessness, he goes on to trace the overlooked history of this argument in the works of Hannah Arendt, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida and Alain Badiou. This critical genealogy shows that the post-Heideggerian critique of the phenomenological tradition remained limited by its unquestioning investment in the category of the ‘world’. As a way out of this historical predicament, Végso encourages us to create affirmative definitions of worldlessness.

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Spinoza, the Transindividual

ÉTIENNE BALIBAR

TRANSLATED BY MARK G. E. KELLY

ÉDIROURGH

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Spinozist ontology is an enigma, even today, not only in its doctrinal direction (its ultimate tendency on questions of theology, wisdom or politics) but also regarding the object about which it speaks and which it proposes to seize with its network of propositions, at least if we do not feel ourselves satisfied with the tautology that the object of an ontology of substance is that being called substance. Can we say that the Spinozist substance is an ‘object’ on the basis that it is clearly not a ‘subject’ (in the psychological, transcendental or dialectical senses)? This is the question. No matter what word we may use (we could speak in terms of ‘reference’), we cannot avoid this kind of question. Spinoza apparently speaks the language of classical ontology, but the extremism of his statements threatens at every moment to break out of categories. Should we, then, consider his philosophy the first major undertaking of a radical critique of this ontology, practically contemporary with its constitution, at the moment when the new ‘conception of the world’ linked to the emergence of classical science is also being formed? The difficulty arises from the fact that Spinoza, obviously, proposes not only to criticise but also to know something, by constituting a true analytic of substance without discontinuity between the initial
identification of its ‘essence’ and its ‘power’ at one extreme and
the minute description of individual *conatus* and the dynamics of
the affects which represent its complete unfolding at the other.
Perhaps the best formulation would therefore be this: the object
of the Spinozist ontology is individuation, or *the difference between
activity and passivity as such*. But this difference, which is only
the activity of its own production, is just as much an originary
unity. It is immediately ‘practical’. However, it must be thought
as completely ‘natural’.

Could Spinoza (otherwise than by metonymy) define the
singularity of this object in words? Could he reattach it to the
idea of an ontology, under which notion we have come to think
such things? The very invention of this term precedes his work
only slightly. However, whether he was familiar with it or not,
it would have to have been unacceptable to him, insofar as it
implies both the establishment of a distance between the general
and the special (or regional) and the dualism of ‘specialised’ ont-
ologies. In the Scholium of Proposition 40 of Part II of the
*Ethics*, Spinoza characterises ‘terms called *Transcendental* . . . like
Being, Thing, and Something’ as confused fantasies born of the
human body’s inability to distinguish between a multiplicity of
images. He categorises them as the same kind of knowledge
(or rather misunderstanding) as universal notions (for example,
the notion of Man) and contrasts them with ‘common notions’
which ‘are equally in the part and in the whole’. Why, then, have
his readers continued to represent substance as a new ultimate
kind or as a foundation? We should see an originary disagree-
ment here, but also a difficulty inherent in the system. Perhaps
Spinoza in fact had no univocal term to designate ‘his’ object
and to distinguish it from other analytical or speculative objects.
This difficulty becomes evident when Spinoza’s text is made to
confront other discourses that ostensibly figure in the same historical or theoretical space. The conflicts and misunderstandings that appear thus indirectly shed light on the issues.

Spinoza believes he can assert that all philosophy before him (with the possible exceptions of Democritus, Epicurus and Lucretius) has, in one way or another, succumbed to the illusion of teleology, to which he proposes to oppose a causality rigorously exclusive of any final ends. Over the course of the *Ethics*, the idea unfolds that all philosophies, in spite of their differences and their conflicts, are part of a single ‘doctrine of final causes’. What supports this bold – and historically very surprising – assertion? It is, above all, the identification of Aristotelian metaphysics with Cartesian metaphysics. In other words, it is the paradoxical idea that one can connect the naturalistic ontology of ‘substantial forms’, overtly linked to the primacy of the final cause, to the creationist ontology of ‘simple natures’, ordered by the theological and anthropological dualisms of extended substance and thinking substance, of the intellect and the will, and of the eminent cause and the formal cause, to one and the same problematic.

To discuss this idea in its own right here would be beyond my remit. I propose instead to formulate a hypothesis, which will at first take a negative form. While Aristotle’s and Descartes’s ontologies are from the outset metaphysics of substance, which means that they maintain a permanent and privileged foundational, imitative relationship with a representation of ‘physis’ (whence their antithetical conceptions of individuality), Spinozist ontology is not a metaphysics in this sense. In other words, what Aristotelianism and Cartesianism actually have ‘in common’, beneath the totally divergent representations of nature they construct, is precisely what sets them both apart from Spinozism, for which *natura*, in the final analysis, is not thought as either
a hierarchy of sensible forms or as an extension of quantifiable mechanical processes, which is to say not as a field of physical experience in either of the two great historically constituted senses. You may easily appreciate that such a difference (which is actually already noted in the equivocal form of the general title, which presents an ontology as an ‘Ethics’) is not very simple either to imagine or to explain, especially as this difference does not signify, manifestly, that Spinozist philosophy has nothing to say about *physis* and maintains no relation with it. One cannot ignore the fact that the whole theory of affects, which ultimately leads to the analytics of activity and passivity, is based on a theory of the mode of constitution of the *body* as ‘affections’ of the *res extensa* and of power peculiar to ‘the idea of the body’. And we cannot deal with this with the idea that the theory of the body is an ‘imaginary physics’, which would resolve nothing since Aristotle’s and Descartes’s physics also appear to us as imaginary. The nub of the question must lie in the very concept of the relationship between ‘causes’, ‘individuals’ and ‘substance’. It is here that it can be instructive to discover in Spinoza the admission of an aporia that shows that the problem of physics forms, in a way, an epistemological boundary of the system itself.

**The Confessions of Spinoza’s Correspondence and the Aporia of Physics**

I take my lead here from two points in Spinoza’s correspondence which are situated on either side of his drafting of the *Ethics* and from which it can be supposed – without this supposition being indispensable – that they are separated by a ‘refoundation’ of his system.
First, let us examine the debate that took place from 1661 to 1665 between Spinoza and Boyle via the intermediary of Oldenburg. The proposals advanced by Spinoza against Boyle’s ‘childish and ridiculous doctrine of substantial forms’ (Letters 11 and 13) and against atomism, concerning the subject of the composition of chemical substances or species, are at first sight Cartesian in inspiration: an insistence on the distinction between primary qualities and secondary qualities, and an assertion that the sensible properties of matter must be explained starting from the configurations and movements of geometrical extension (Letter 6). Yet, if Spinoza never totally adopted Cartesianism in matters of physics, one can think that this discussion would have helped to finally banish it from his thought, preparing the ground for the thesis of Propositions 8–15 of Part I of the *Ethics*, which refers to the imagination as confusing the essence of substance with that of the modes, the numerical distinction of individuals, and the alternatives of the divisibility or indivisibility of the infinity of matter. The back-and-forth of the arguments keeps bumping up against the ambiguity of the notion of the *individual*, which in the philosophical tradition sometimes refers to a ‘thing’ that is absolutely simple, and irreducible in idea or in practice to any prior elements (whence the paradox of indiscernibles), and sometimes to a ‘thing’ that is a whole, irreducible to the juxtaposition of its parts and liable to preserve its own existence (hence the dilemma between mechanistic and teleological explanations of the living being).

It is precisely on the issue of the ‘parts’ of matter and their assemblage in bodies characterised by specific properties that the debate ends (Letters 30–3). Spinoza warns us that he ‘does not have this knowledge’ that would allow him to ‘know absolutely how things really cohere [cohaerent] and how each part
of Nature agrees [conveniat] with its “whole” because such knowledge would have to encompass ‘the whole of nature and all its parts’. However, he undertakes an attempt to formulate the principle, and he does so with the precise intention of opposing an adequate idea of the ‘whole’ of Nature to the imagination of a cosmic order (‘me Naturae non tribuere pulchritudinem, deformitatem, ordinem, neque confusionem’).

The example proposed by Spinoza (the composition of the blood) illustrates the essentially relative character of the notions of ‘whole’ and ‘part’ – not in the subjective sense, but in the sense of an objective order of magnitude, which corresponds to the distinction between ‘external causes’ and ‘internal causes’ subject to the same ‘relations of motion’. We can obviously ask whether this explanation is not tautological, since the magnitude of a given combination (the ‘parts’ of the blood, the blood itself, the man, the ‘medium’ of the man, etc.), characterised by interiority (the control of the variations of certain causes: ‘quae leges naturae sanguinis certo modo moderantur’) and exteriority (the independence of certain other things) is already equivalent to a given individuality. Spinoza does not stop there, and extends this model to the universe, which is to say to an ‘absolutely infinite nature’.

Here, the argument divides, in a troubling juxtaposition. On one side, the unity of the parts of the universe can be conceived as a reciprocity of action between these parts: ‘omnia enim corpora ab aliis circumcincinguuntur, et ab invicem determinuntur ad existendum et operandum certa ac determinata ratione’. The condition which allows us to think such a reciprocal action is that ‘the same ratio of motion to rest always being preserved in all of them at once [that is, in the whole universe]’. This proposition is almost literally borrowed from Descartes except
that conservation is not attributed to the constant action of the omnipotence of God. On the other hand, Spinoza adds that he conceives, *ratione substantiae* (that is to say, because of substance, or in relation to substance) an ‘even closer’ (*arctiorem*) union between each part and its whole. How should we understand this detail? We can see there the positive counterpart of the omission of the God of the continued creation. But this could be interpreted either as positing a ‘unity of substance’ that would be *more* (and something other) *than a whole*, or as asserting that *the true* (not relative, so infinite) *totality* can be conceived only as an indivisible substance, which is to say, without ‘parts’ in the proper sense. Without developing this point, Spinoza concludes that we can, on this basis, understand how the human body and the human soul are each ‘part of nature’ – specifically the ‘corporeal substance’ (*substantia corporea*) and the ‘infinite power of thinking’ respectively, each of these containing the other.

Oldenburg’s answer is extremely interesting:

I do not sufficiently follow how we can eliminate the order and symmetry from nature, as you seem to do, especially since you yourself recognise that all its bodies are surrounded by others, and are mutually determined, in a definite and constant manner [*certa et constanti ratione*], both to existing and producing an effect with the same ratio of motion to rest always being preserved in all together [*eadem semper in omnibus simul motus ad quietem ratione servata*]. This seems to be the formal ground itself of a true order [*ipsissima veri ordinis ratio fomalis esse videtur*].

In other words, Oldenburg, either by naiveté or by malice (he immediately follows this by asking Spinoza to explain again the rules of motion that Descartes thought he could infer from his principle), has raised the strongest possible objection. It implies
that, even without reference to divine creation, a principle like the ‘conservation of motion and rest in nature’ remains a teleological principle, and more generally that any statement about the ‘reason of the whole’ is the equivalent of a principle of order and symmetry.

We cannot ignore this objection. Not only because Spinoza, in the ‘physics’ that he will include in his system (or what, in Part II of the *Ethics*, can be read as the sketch of a physics), will continue to refer, if quite hypothetically, to this principle concerning the ‘whole of nature conceived as a single individual’. But above all because in the *Ethics*, after having disqualified the concept of order as typical of the teleological imagination, he does not, however, stop using it himself, both in the very formula that his definition of cause develops into (*ordo* and *connexio rerum*) and in his constant reference to ‘the order of Nature’ – conformity with which is a matter of thinking the chain of singular things and their ideas – not to mention ‘geometrical order’ and ‘the order of the intellect’ (or order ‘conforming to the intellect’).

There are therefore at least two notions of order, homonymous and yet antithetical, in Spinoza. One can immediately notice the difference in essential effect between these two: one requires a correlative notion of disorder which the other does not at all, any more than a notion of perfection understood as reality calls for imperfection as a correlate. But it is by no means obvious that they do not both imply finality. It is not enough just to say so. Moreover, even if he constantly rehearses the difference between these two notions, Spinoza explains it nowhere, never giving what might be called an adequate definition of order.

Now, Oldenburg’s objection touches on a central point in the philosophy of physics. This is the ‘break’ between ancient physics (which begins with Aristotle) and modern physics (such
as we see being constituted with Galileo proving the ‘simplicity’ of Copernicanism and the laws of motion, and being reflected upon for the first time with the Cartesian definition of ‘laws of nature’). This break does not lie in the fact that the former refers to the notion of order or symmetry and the latter does not. It lies rather in the fact that the former applies mechanistic or teleological principles to the explanation of the visible, symmetrical forms directly observable in nature, while the second looks for symmetry in mathematical laws themselves (later defined as their invariance for certain groups of transformations). The symmetry of laws does not exclude apparent disorder, which is to say irregular complexity or divergent evolution of phenomena (which depends on ‘initial conditions’). The Cartesian statement (from which the ‘laws of Nature’ or ‘laws of motion’ are deduced) is, despite its vagueness, the prototype of the seemingly teleological principles which assure the coherence and ‘simplicity’ of physical theory, and which will take the form of laws of conservation or principles of invariance. Without symmetry in this sense, the very possibility of a causal explanation would remain indeterminate. It would therefore not be traducing Oldenburg’s retort to read here in retrospect the following alternative: either a science of nature must be guided by principles of order in the search for causes and their (mathematical) determination, or it denies this necessity and claims to avoid it radically by only dealing with ‘pure’ causality. But then it will never be a science in the sense of physical theory (which indeed seems to be the case for the Spinozist theory of the body, this time unlike Descartes’s own physics, despite all his errors, not to mention those of Leibniz or Newton). But conversely, one may nonetheless look in Spinoza for the ingredients of an inquiry directed towards physics (or towards a philosophy of physics). What criteria distinguish a priori a
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scientific concept of order, of ‘simplicity’ or of symmetry from a theological or metaphysical concept by the same name, hanging on assumptions such as ‘nature does nothing for nothing’ and the belief in creation or in pre-established harmony? And to what extent does the deduction of laws of nature made by physicists from such principles (experimentally verified though they may be) amount in fact to abstraction, which means that physicists do not know things themselves, but only a theoretical ‘nature’, by hypothesis simplified to coincide with the domain of universal regularities, or situations of experience in which these regularities are approximately realised? What is a ‘thing’ if it is not the object of an organised experience according to the idea of an order that makes this possible? What we see looming on the horizon of this discussion and its incompleteness is nothing less than the question of the ‘principle of reason’.

Let us now turn to the final letters exchanged between 1674 and 1676 between Spinoza, the medico Schuller and the latter’s friend Tschirnhaus (also himself a philosopher-scientist, and a correspondent of the Royal Society and Leibniz), who had together undertaken to read the Ethics. Despite its apparent disorder, this discussion focuses on three key points, which turn out to be closely linked:

1. What is the nature of the definition of a ‘real thing’, expressing the essence of the thing, or the ‘efficient cause’ of all its properties (as opposed to the statement of a mere characteristic property)? (Letters 59, 60, 82, 83)

2. Of what does the ‘correspondence’ between thought and the understanding, and more generally between thought and ‘any other’ attribute, as mentioned in Proposition 7 of Part II of the Ethics, consist? Tschirnhaus notes in this respect
two (at least apparent) paradoxes: on the one hand, thought, containing all the adequate ideas of all things whose essence follows from all their attributes, seems thus ‘to extend itself much more widely than the other attributes’; on the other hand, singular things, as modes of substance, seem to have to be ‘expressed in infinite ways’ (that is, to derive simultaneously from an infinity of attributes), while the definition of the human individual centred on the soul as ‘idea of the Body’ seems to mean that the essence of a singular thing includes only one mode of thought and one mode of another determinate attribute. (Letters 63, 64, 65, 70, 72)

3. Finally, how does the (lone) attribute of infinite extension carry out the deduction (and, correspondingly, production) of the existence of singular things, conceived as ‘parts’ of matter or of the ‘Body’, having a determinate figure and motion? (Letters 69, 70, 80–3)

All these questions have in common the implication of new relationships between infinity (of substance, of each attribute and of the effects which follow from a cause or an essence), causality (of substance, of infinite extension in itself and of the modes between them – indeed, this is Tschirnhaus’s ‘counter-sense’ of the object of an idea of this idea) and finally the real singularity (of essences and existences). They also reflect the confusion of Spinoza’s reader at his rejection of the traditional depiction of the ‘possible’ and of the ‘real’, reinscribing all thought of the possible into the order of the real instead, either in the form of the anticipation of its actualisation, or that of the logical universe from which it derives the conditions of its existence.

But two aporias cannot fail to strike us in this exchange of arguments (which was interrupted, albeit by death). When
Spinoza is asked to clarify the way in which, from the causal definition of a *real thing*, an infinity of properties or consequences arises, he gives as an ‘example’ the *definition of God*, while the point of difficulty obviously lies in *singular things* (Letter 83). In particular, when he was asked by Tschirnhaus (who thought he had found the promising beginnings of a physics in Part II of the *Ethics*) to explain how the existence of extended modes is deduced (or constructed) from the essence of their attribute, Spinoza begins by dodging the question, reiterating his critique of the Cartesian ‘geometric’ conception of extended matter, both quantitative and inert. But he finally confesses that on this question he has ‘not been able to set out anything concerning them in an orderly way’: in short, he has not managed to prove anything (Letters 81 and 83).

Should we be wary of this confession? In relation to the classic duality of Descartes’s geometric mechanism versus Leibniz’s dynamism (which correspond to the directions explored by Tschirnhaus, who is trying to find in each mode or real individuality an expressive infinity which, implicitly, identifies it again with substance), Spinoza seems to be searching for a third way or for a way around. But, in this context at least, he does not manage to explicate this other than in a general manner. We find here the aporia of Spinozist physics (and of his philosophy qua metaphysics), as anticipated in his letters to Boyle and Oldenburg, before the elaboration of the *Ethics*. The difficulty is represented by the multiplicity of existing things, apt to ‘compose’ – or to ‘agree’ in forming – real ‘wholes’ and ‘parts’ (this is the ‘configuration of the whole Universe’: *facies totius universi*), although their essences only express modes of a single substance. We find, moreover, that this can be read simultaneously on two levels. It bears on the individuality of singular things, conceived both
as the essence and as the effect of universal causal ‘connection’, and it bears on the meaning and epistemological function of the concept of the attribute, since that represents both an essence from which an infinity of other essences can be deduced, and an existence constituted by the infinite chain of all the given existences that can affect one another.

The dilemma is thus renewed: either an ontology that is coherent in itself, but not ‘fit’ for founding a physics, or an enigmatic juxtaposition of ontology with a theory of the body, that we perhaps find in effect again at each major turn of Spinoza’s system. Gueroult proffers this latter interpretation, believing that ‘the Ethics must be based on physics as much as on metaphysics’, but also concluding that a problem in the unification of the different concepts of ‘cause’ persists in Spinoza’s account of immanence. This leads him to deem there to be two ‘physics’ in Spinoza: one, ‘abstract’ and ‘purely relational’, involves the study of the constitution of individuals as modes of extension, and would in fact be a variant of mechanism excluding any finality; the other, ‘concrete’, expressing a ‘metaphysical substratum’, takes us ‘into the interior of things’, where their conatus communicates directly with the unity of substance – the necessity for this move being indicated by the impossibility of applying to the ‘supreme individual, namely the whole universe’ the schema of the pressure of surrounding things. By contrast, Negri considers that Spinozist being, first determined as unequivocal in the terrain of ontology, ‘on the terrain of knowledge . . . is presented as equivocal being’: this is why ‘the tension that is released here . . . can therefore be resolved only on the terrain of practice’. He sees the system evolve from a utopia of being as plenitude towards an ‘ontology of the’ practical constitution of the real, in which ‘the infinite is not organised as an object
but as a subject’,¹² which is to say, as the power (*puissance*) of the multitude and the multiplicity of powers, of the ‘productive forces’ organising themselves collectively, tending towards their liberation.¹³ In the *Ethics*, Negri sees us passing from one metaphysics to another, the index of this passage being the progressive ‘extinction’ of the concept of the *attribute*, the last trace of the metaphysics of emanation.¹⁴

Let us try to reopen this question, *without* admitting as obvious the terms ‘physics’ and ‘metaphysics’.

**The Two Ways of Producing Singular Things and the Plurality of ‘Worlds’**

The correspondence with Tschirnhaus, despite the incomprehension of one of the interlocutors and the exit of the other, shows the possibility of understanding the relationship of substance, attributes and modes according to two antithetical patterns, each of which represents the beginning of quite a different ontology.

Either – this is what I will call path A – the concept of substance is ‘distributed’ across an infinity of distinct attributes, which each expresses its essence in its own way, which is to say that all of them are equally substantial. And it is these attributes that are *then* affected by finite or infinite modifications, which ultimately results in things which are ‘singular’, both in their essence and in their existence. Singular things are thus produced from substance *via the mediation* of attributes, in accordance with their own essences and causalities. Singular things are thus represented as being ‘in’ (or ‘of’) substance through the mediation of the attributes that are themselves already ‘in’ (or ‘of’) substance. This is seen as being unavoidable, because they