

the perfection of duration

chantal jaquet,

translated by eric aldieri

The mind, according to Spinoza, is comprised of an eternal part and a perishable part. While the imagination dies, the intellect remains despite the destruction of the body—and “the part of the mind that remains, however great it is, is more perfect than the rest.”¹ The intellect, in fact, due to its adequate ideas, possesses more reality or perfection insofar as it is active. Tied to the duration of the body, the imagination is less perfect insofar as it expresses the passivity of the mind suffering from its inadequate ideas. The perfection of a mind is, in turn, proportional to the size of its eternal part. All that pertains to actual, present existence is endowed with a lesser perfection than that which depends on eternal existence. Given the above, if sadness is “the passage from a greater to a lesser perfection,”² it is surely the fate of present existence in comparison to the joy of eternal existence. Is it necessary, then, to lament the misfortune

of enduring and to stigmatize the imperfection of actual existence afflicted as it is by a procession of passive affects? Is the fact of enduring a sign of finitude, itself revealing the perishable character of modes, and inciting them to turn away from their condition in favor of the lonely search for eternal salvation? In other words, is to endure to die a bit? Duration undeniably possesses a lesser perfection than eternity, but should we, for all that, take it to have an imperfection by subtly slipping from a comparative assessment to the denunciation of an ontological deficiency inherent to its very nature?

I

In order to measure the degree of reality proper to duration, it is important to first clarify the concepts of perfection and imperfection. In absolute terms, imperfection is a form of lack that one must distinguish from both negation and privation. In Letter XXXI dating from June 1666, Spinoza reminds Hudde of the meaning of the word *imperfection*: “it signifies that something is lacking to a thing which pertains to its nature.”³ Negation, on the contrary, according to Letter XXI addressed to Blyenburgh, does not express a lack in the nature of a being. There is negation when something that does not belong to an object’s nature is denied. There is privation when something that we believe belongs to an object’s nature is denied. By contrast, there is imperfection when something that really belongs to an object’s nature is denied. For example, the fact that extension does not think is a negation, because thought does not pertain to its nature, but this is not an imperfection given that extension is perfect in its kind. Perfection and negation are thus compatible. Tiresias’s blindness, for example, is a privation, because we imagine, by comparison with other humans, that he lacks his sight and that this should belong to him by nature. The famous diviner’s blindness is not, however, an imperfection, insofar as it is contradictory that he be part of the seers given his nature and the decrees of God. In short, negation does not express a lack, privation is an imaginary lack, and imperfection a real lack. More than a lack, imperfection appears as a failure to the imagination which registers a deficiency where it expects wholeness (*plénitude*) and believes to detect the existence of a fault or formal defect.

In reality, imperfection is reduced to a mere privation because there is never actual lack in nature. Everything that is possible is real; consequently, everything that is not realized is not tied to a deficiency, but to an impossibility. This is why Spinoza considers to be fables the common beliefs that nature is sometimes deficient, commits sin, and produces imperfect things. Perfection and imperfection are in

fact only modes of thinking that we invent by comparing individuals of the same species or genus to one another. They constitute measures of the degree of reality of one thing in relation to another. Spinoza very clearly demonstrates the genesis of these concepts in the Preface to Part IV of the *Ethics*.

For we are accustomed to refer all individuals in Nature to one genus, which is called the most general, that is, to the notion of being, which pertains absolutely to all individuals in Nature. So insofar as we refer all individuals in Nature to this genus, compare them to one another, and find that some have more being, or reality, than others, we say that some are more perfect than others. And insofar as we attribute something to them which involves negation, like a limit, an end, lack of power, and so on, we call them imperfect, because they do not affect our Mind as much as those we call perfect, and not because something is lacking in them which is theirs, or because Nature has sinned.⁴

This allows us to understand why Spinoza generally prefers the concept of least perfection to that of imperfection. With this preference, he insists more on the comparative and relative character of this mode of thinking and avoids giving credence to the theory that there is a real lack in things.

On this basis, the details of the problem can be reformulated more precisely. Given that duration expresses a reality, a perfection of existence, and that its greater or lesser length is not the sign of a lack or flaw to be attributed to nature, can it nevertheless be called imperfect due to the presence in it of some negation or limit?

In order to resolve the problem, it is necessary to analyze the very essence of duration such as Spinoza defines it in the *Ethics*. According to Definition V of Part II, duration is a property of existence that expresses its indefinite continuation. It is clear, then, that it does not consist of any imperfection. Not only does Spinoza not identify it with a finite continuation of existence, but neither does he specifically attach it to finite modes. It is true that the definition of duration is laid out at the beginning of the second part of the *Ethics* that concerns the nature and origin of the mind. However, Spinoza does not present it as a property of modes, in contrast with what he did in both the *Metaphysical Thoughts* and in Letter XII to Louis Meyer. In Chapter IV of Part I of the *Metaphysical Thoughts*, he explains that the distinction between duration and eternity stems from the division of being into two categories: being whose essence involves existence and

being whose essence involves only a possible existence. He defines duration as “an attribute under which we conceive the existence of created things insofar as they persevere in their actuality.”⁵ In Letter XII, he explains to Meyer that the difference between eternity and duration stems from the distinction between substance and modes and specifies that “it is only of Modes that we can explain the existence by Duration. But [we can explain the existence of] Substance by Eternity.”⁶

The *Ethics* marks a turning point, because Spinoza stops defining eternity and duration according to types of beings and their substantial or modal nature. We can, from this point of view, observe a symmetry between the definition of eternity in Part I and that of duration in Part II. In the same manner that eternity is, through Definition VIII, no longer explicitly tied to substance, duration is no longer tied to modes. Thus, duration wins a new positivity, because it stops being the sign of finitude. At the same time, there is a legitimate question as to whether or not it can be applied to other kinds of beings rather than solely to finite modes. While the *Metaphysical Thoughts* and Letter XII, by reserving duration for modes, do not introduce this line of questioning, the *Ethics* opens the door for speculation concerning the sphere of extension of this property. In the *Ethics*, Spinoza never specifically affirms that God or infinite modes endure, but he does not exclude this eventuality in as firm a manner as before. Be that as it may, it is in any case clear that neither duration nor the time that measures it are signs of finitude or impotence.

It is nonetheless necessary to note that Spinoza does not claim that duration is infinite continuity, but indefinite existence. Would this indefinite character not be the mark of an imperfection? The indefinite, indeed, should not be confused with the unlimited or the indeterminate. An indefinite existence does not include limits, but neither does it necessarily exclude them. It can be limited as unlimited. Spinoza explains his use of the adjective “indefinite”: “I say indefinite because it cannot be determined at all through the very nature of the existing thing, nor even by the efficient cause, which necessarily posits the existence of the thing, and does not take it away.”⁷ In other words, the indefinite does not exclude limitation, but the latter depends on neither the thing nor its cause. The limitation of duration is not inherent to the nature of the thing, because contrary to substance, the essence of a singular thing does not include existence, and so it cannot determine its duration. Neither is it the product of the efficient cause, whose function is to posit the existence of the thing, and not to eliminate it. The efficient cause in itself includes neither a limitation to nor a negation of the existence of the thing—for

if it did, it would not be able to produce it necessarily. It would be contradictory for it to simultaneously affirm and negate its effect. This is why Proposition VIII of Part III establishes that “the effort by which each thing strives to persevere in its being involves no finite time, but an indefinite time.”⁸

If Spinoza uses the adjective “indefinite” rather than “infinite” in order to characterize the continuity of durational existence, it is because the eventuality of a destructive external cause is never excluded.⁹ The man who exists here and now is only a part of nature and cannot help but suffer, no matter how active he is, from changes brought about by the presence of more powerful, contrary, external causes. Nevertheless, limitation is never internal to the duration of the thing that will always continue to exist by the very power which already makes it exist. Finitude is thus not linked to duration or to the time which measures it. Duration, on the contrary, is full affirmation of existence in its positivity. It expresses perseverance in being and demonstrates the thing’s power. Finitude results from the combination of three factors. It first comes from the existence of a plurality of things of the same nature. This is what Definition II of Part I tells us: “That thing is said to be finite in its own kind that can be limited by another of the same nature.”¹⁰ It is because we are not unique that we are finite. If we were unique, we would never be limited, for a thought cannot determine a body, and vice versa. If we were alone in our kind we would never be destroyed, and we would continue to affirm our existence.

Multiplicity alone does not explain limitation. In order to be able to be determined by an external cause, it is still necessary that it has a sufficient power at its disposal. The second condition is thus the existence of powers superior to those of one’s own. However, the presence of a more powerful thing does not in itself constitute a threat, because external causes can encourage efforts for persevering in one’s being just as well as they can discourage them. It is necessary, in the third place, that this power be contrary to the durational thing. Consequently, even though Spinoza holds onto one of the traditional causes of finitude—namely, the existence of the multiple—he ceases to consider the flow of time as a degradation or loss indicative of an impending end. In fact, he reverses this perspective, because duration is no longer the mark of impotence, but of the power of existence which affirms itself and perseveres in being.

The nature of duration thus does not involve any internal limitation. However, could it not be called imperfect, not because something is missing, but because it does not affect our mind in the same way that so-called perfect things do? Indeed,

knowledge of the duration of our body, as well as that of all singular things, is inadequate. We cannot understand it adequately, we can only imagine it. This is because the duration of our body depends neither on our essence nor on the absolute nature of God, but on the common order of nature, on the infinite series of finite causes of which we are almost entirely ignorant. It belongs to the constitution of things whose adequate knowledge is in God insofar as God has ideas of everything and not only insofar as he has the idea of a human body. Is not the fact that the duration of our body escapes us and can only be evaluated in an inadequate manner a sign of an imperfection?

In reality, this inadequate knowledge is the positive sign of a perfection. In fact, if we could adequately conceive of the duration of our body, it would mean that either we would be endowed with another nature capable of understanding the common order of things, which is in contradiction with who we are, or that the moment of our existence would be included in our essence. In that case, adequate knowledge of the hour of our death would reveal the imperfection of our being since the latter would include the internal limits determining it. Ultimately, neither the indefinite character of duration nor the inadequate knowledge that we have of it allows us to conclude that its nature contains traces of imperfection. Still, the exact nature of the perfection that is proper to it remains to be determined.

II

In order to do this, it is above all necessary to guard against a double illusion. The first would consist in accentuating the positivity of history in Spinoza by arguing that salvation is realized in and by duration—in other words that the eternity of the intellect is acquired and progressively won throughout the whole of existence as adequate ideas prevail over inadequate ideas and as knowledge of the second and third type are developed. In reality, it is in vain that one wishes to restore (*réhabiliter*) duration by insisting on the necessity and positivity of a temporal process during which the eternity of the mind would be fulfilled and hard-won. In fact, eternity is, strictly speaking, not acquired; it is given and always already present. We are eternal, we do not become so through the course of time. Spinoza specifically reminds us of this in the Scholium to Proposition 33 of *Ethics V*: “the mind has had eternally the same perfections which, in our fiction, now come to it.”¹¹ To be sure, we represent to ourselves our eternity as a property that would be added to our existence, that would begin to be developed in the wake of our efforts to adequately understand things. But this manner of seeing is only a fiction destined to make us better perceive the eternity of the mind, a legitimate fiction

provided that we do not confuse an assumption favorable to understanding with a real process. Every being is eternal, for there is in God an idea which expresses its essence *sub specie aeternitatis*. Consequently, it is false to either believe that eternity is acquired in time or to make the perfection of duration reside in this achievement of eternity.

The second illusion is only a more subtle and shifted iteration of the first. It is based on the otherwise right idea according to which the problem of salvation does not so much consist in being eternal as in knowing it. Now, the consciousness of eternity is no more given from the outset than is consciousness of the self, of things, or of God. The discovery of the eternity of the intellect seems to be made over the course of actual, present existence. In this respect, does not salvation depend on the efforts that we deploy throughout the whole of the duration of our existence in order to grasp our eternity? Thus, duration would be the necessary condition of the development not of eternity, but of one's consciousness of it. This is where its fundamental perfection lies.

If it is true that consciousness of self, of things, and of God, is not given, it is also not, for all that, acquired in the course of actual, present existence. In fact, when the mind adequately knows things, it knows them under the aspect of eternity. Now, according to Proposition 29 of *Ethics* V, "whatever the mind understands under a species of eternity, it understands not from the fact that it conceives the body's present actual existence, but from the fact that it conceives the body's essence under a species of eternity."¹² In other words, it is not by understanding the actual, present existence of my body in perceiving its duration that I can adequately understand the eternity of my intellect. When I apprehend my actual, present existence, I can only conceive of things in relation with a certain time and a certain place. I cannot grasp them under the aspect of eternity. Consequently, I cannot know the eternity of my mind by basing myself on its duration. In order to perceive it, it is necessary that I conceive of the essence of my body under the aspect of eternity. It is necessary that I conceive of myself as actual in the second sense that this term takes on in Spinoza—that is to say, as contained in God and following from the necessity of God's nature. Knowledge of eternity is, to be sure, based on actual existence, but not on actual, present existence, that is, not on spatio-temporal existence. Consequently, it is false to believe that awareness of eternity is effectuated with present existence. It is linked neither to a privileged place, nor to a privileged moment, because it is not a perception of spatio-temporal order. The error which consists in linking this awareness to duration comes from the confusion between two types of actuality that Spinoza

takes care to distinguish in the Scholium of Proposition XXIX. That is why one must give up the search for the perfection of duration in this direction.

In order to discover it, one must recall the rule that Spinoza states in the Appendix to Part I of the *Ethics*: “For the perfection of things is to be judged solely from their nature and power.”¹³ Now, the nature of actual, present existence is characterized by the imagination and memory, since the intellect belongs to the eternal part of our mind. Consequently, the perfection of duration depends on the capacity of images to persevere in their being and is measured in light of their power. But how can an indefinite continuation of images and memories express perfection? Isn’t there a paradox here insofar as we know that the imagination falls under knowledge of the first kind and does not generally appear as a power? Of course, the imagination possesses a positivity irreducible to the presence of the true, since the imagination does not disappear when the true appears. An imaginative idea expresses the manner by which the body is affected by external bodies and vanishes only when a stronger image comes to supplant it by excluding the present existence of the things that we imagine.¹⁴ The imagination, furthermore, is not the teacher of falsity, because error is not attributable to it, but comes from the fact that the mind is deprived of the idea excluding the existence of things that it imagines to be present.¹⁵

Can we nevertheless go beyond the claim of the mere positivity of images and attribute to them a power and a perfection that the intellect alone could not possibly have? Spinoza invites us to do so when he remarks that “if the mind, while it imagined nonexistent things as present to it, at the same time knew that those things did not exist, it would, of course, attribute this power of imagining to a virtue of its nature, not to a vice.”¹⁶ As it turns out, he devotes the whole beginning of Part V of the *Ethics* to analyzing its virtue and perfection.

In order to understand the perfection of the imagination, one must recall that the power of the mind resides in its ability to conceive of things in an adequate manner and to overcome passionable affects that hinder its activity. Now, the intellect alone, without imagination, is incapable of doing this. True ideas only have efficacy if they are accompanied by affects capable of touching the imagination and replacing one image with another. An affect can only be thwarted or eliminated by a stronger, contrary affect. In fact, images are affections of the body whose ideas represent, to us, external things as present. An imaginative idea thus perseveres in the mind in an indefinite manner until the body is touched by an affection which excludes the presence of the external body that we represent to ourselves. In this way, the

power of an image depends on its capacity to endure. This is why the perfection of the mind stems not only from its capacity to adequately understand things, but also from the duration of its images.

What, then, are the most durable and, consequently, the most perfect images? At the beginning of Part V, Spinoza outlines a typology to measure their degree of perfection according to three major criteria: vivacity, constancy, and frequency. Vivacity depends on the actual presence of the cause and of its necessity. Thus, the image of one thing whose cause is actually present is livelier than if we imagine that this cause has ceased to be. In the same manner, a feeling with regard to a thing that we imagine necessary is stronger than that of a possible or contingent thing. Constancy is linked to the permanence of the presence of the cause. Frequency varies in accordance with the capacity of an image to revive and be easily associated with other images.

We understand, then, that affects born of reason are, if we account for time, more powerful than those that are related to singular things that we consider absent.¹⁷ An affect born from reason is necessarily related to common properties of things that we always consider as present, for there is nothing that can exclude their existence. Thus, the power of our images is proportional to our cognitive power. The most perfect image that we can form is thus that of God such that we represent it to ourselves by way of the *amor erga Deum*. The *amor erga Deum* is, let us recall, the love of God as we imagine God present.¹⁸ This affect, the most powerful and most durable of all, only disappears when the body dies. It is at the same time the liveliest, because it is produced by a free cause¹⁹ only acting out of the necessity of its nature; the most constant, because it depends on an eternal cause; and the most frequent, because it is perpetually reawakened insofar as all of our images can be associated and related to the idea of God.²⁰ Thus, this powerful affect can come to thwart every other sentiment that does not have its same stability and permanence. If we could not imagine God as present, then the intellect would remain impotent in the combat against sad affects and would be unable to enjoy this love while the body endures, since only an image can overcome another image.

This is why one of the remedies for impotence resides in time and in the duration of images. In any case, Spinoza specifically highlights this in the Scholium to Proposition 20 of Part V. Time figures among the five remedies for the affects. The power of the mind over the affects consists “in the time by which the affections related to things we understand surpass those related to things we conceive

confusedly, *or* in a mutilated way.”²¹ It is thus duration, the indefinite continuation of rational affects in opposition to passional affects, that can remedy impotence. In order to be able to thwart a passional affect, it is necessary that the mind be affected by an active joy linked to the presence of a cause more powerful than the one that engendered the passion. It is thus necessary that the mind imagines this cause as present not only actually, but always, and in a necessary manner. It is true that a passionate affect occasioned by a powerful external cause can momentarily have more vivacity, but with time, it diminishes as the exterior cause fades and as new affects come to mix with preceding ones. Let us not be deceived, however, concerning the nature of the remedy. Spinoza does not accept the cliché according to which time alleviates sadness and buries pain in oblivion. Time is, on the contrary, a power of conservation and fortification of the essential, of the necessary, since it has more to do with affirming the permanence of images linked to adequate ideas than with negating mutilated and confused images. It is, moreover, to a project of memory’s reinforcement that Spinoza invites us, so long as we do not have perfect knowledge of our affects. This is what emerges from the Scholium to Proposition 10 of Part V:

The best thing, then, that we can do, so long as we do not have perfect knowledge of our affects, is to conceive a correct principle of living, *or* sure maxims of life, to commit them to memory, and to apply them constantly to the particular cases frequently encountered in life. In this way our imagination will be extensively affected by them, and we shall always have them ready.²²

Spinoza takes the example of insults to illustrate the role of memory in the service of the intellect. In order to avoid, as much as possible, being affected by insults, one must memorize the rational principle according to which hate can be overcome by love, by training oneself to imagine the most frequent patterns of insults and the means of best repelling them by generosity. Thus, when there is an insult, we will most quickly overcome the anger which follows from it, because the image of the harm will be associated with that of a rational principle etched into memory and will be more easily detachable from the external cause that awakens hate. In short, the power of the mind depends on its capacity to make the imagination of the principle and its applications last in order to always have it ready at hand, thereby thwarting belligerent affects.

Ultimately, duration is not so much the mark of human impotence but of human power. It entails neither internal limitation nor the trace of finitude. It is true

that the part of the mind that perishes with the body is less perfect than the other insofar as the most powerful images are not eternal. Thus, the affect of the *amor erga Deum*, which presupposes that we imagine God as present, is the most durable and the most constant of all of our feelings; nevertheless, insofar as it is related to the body, it too is destroyed alongside it. To the extent that it is related to the mind, however, it is none other than the intellectual love of God whose nature is eternal. Still, this example shows that what endures does not possess internal imperfection, because between the *amor erga Deum* and the intellectual love of God, there is no difference in nature. It is a single and same love that is specified in *amor erga Deum* when it is related to the mind alongside the body, and in the intellectual love of God when it is related to the mind without relation to the existence of the body. To endure, in this case, is not to die a little, but to coincide, so to speak, with eternity.

CHANTAL JAQUET is Professor of Philosophy at L'Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.

ERIC ALDIERI is a PhD Candidate in Philosophy at DePaul University in Chicago.

NOTES

1. All citations are from Baruch Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume I*, edited and translated by Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), henceforth cited as *CWS I*, and Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume II*, edited and translated by Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), henceforth cited as *CWS II*. *Ethics V*, Corollary 40; *CWS I*, 615.
2. *Ethics III*, Definitions of the Affects, III; *CWS I*, 531.
3. *Letters 29 – 41*, “Letter XXXVI” (to Hudde) in *CWS II*, 30. (Translator’s note: The original incorrectly cites Letter XXXI).
4. *Ethics IV*, “Preface” in *CWS I*, 545.
5. *CM I*, 4; *CWS I*, 310.
6. *Ep. XII*; *CWS I*, 202.
7. *Ethics II*, Explanation of Definition 5; *CWS I*, 447.
8. *Ethics III*, 8; *CWS I*, 499.
9. *Ethics V*, 3; *CWS I*, 598.
10. *Ethics I*, Def. 2; *CWS I*, 408.
11. *Ethics V*, Scholium 33; *CWS I*, 611.
12. *Ethics V*, 29; *CWS I*, 609.
13. *Ethics I*, Appendix; *CWS I*, 446.
14. *Ethics IV*, 1; *CWS I*, 547.
15. *Ethics II*, Schol. 17; *CWS I*, 464 – 465.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ethics V*, 7; *CWS I*, 600.
18. *Ethics V*, Cor. 32; *CWS I*, 611.
19. *Ethics V*, 5; *CWS I*, 599.
20. *Ethics V*, 14; *CWS I*, 603.
21. *Ethics V*, Schol. 20; *CWS I*, 605.
22. *Ethics V*, Schol. 10; *CWS I*, 601.