

**fluctuatio animi: on the role
of ‘vacillation of mind’ in
spinoza’s ethics**

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Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)
Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself, 51”

I: INTRODUCTION

If men could manage all their affairs by a definite plan, or if fortune were always favorable to them, no one would be in the grip of superstition. But

often they are in such a tight spot that they cannot decide on any plan. Then they usually vacillate wretchedly between hope and fear (*inter spem metumque misere fluctuant*), desiring immoderately the uncertain goods of fortune, and ready to believe anything whatever. While the mind is in doubt, it's easily driven this way or that—and all the more easily when, shaken by hope and fear (*dum spe, et metu agitatus*), it comes to a standstill. At other times, it's over-confident, boastful and presumptuous (TTP pre; G III 5).¹

What has caught most commentators' attention in these well-known and oft-quoted lines that open the preface of the *Theologico-Political Treatise* is the overt theme of superstition. But if read with care a more basic theme emerges, that of 'vacillation of mind' or *fluctuatio animi*, which serves as the affective bedrock of superstition (E2p50s; G II 178).² As the preface goes on to clarify, it is the fluctuating constitution of individual minds that breathes life into the theological-political problem and thus makes it inextricably related to Spinoza's political and ethical concerns.

Reading the paragraph carefully, we are in for a surprise. When Spinoza considers those who “usually vacillate wretchedly between hope and fear”, it makes us wonder whether one can fluctuate in ways that are not wretched, or phrased differently, whether *fluctuatio animi* can be said to play a constructive role in Spinoza's ethical system? *Fluctuatio animi* is technically defined and developed in Part III of the *Ethics*, apparently disappears from Part IV, only to re-emerge in the first ten propositions of Part V. These occurrences are decisive and lead us to propose that *fluctuatio animi* plays a pivotal function in the transition from passivity to activity according to Spinoza. To demonstrate this thesis, the following questions will direct the inquiry: Can the constitution of the mind when it fluctuates be tied to the situation Spinoza teaches in E4p7, namely that “an affect cannot be restrained or taken away except by an affect opposite to, and stronger than, the affect to be restrained” (G II 216)? When human minds fluctuate between contrary affects (*contrariis affectibus fluctuat*), is it possible that one of these affects, while

surely contrary to the other, is not contrary to the rules of reason (cf. E4p18s; G II 222)? If so, is it then conceivable that when we fluctuate between sad and joyful passions this fluctuation admits us to dispose ourselves to be affected mainly by the joyful passions at play? And finally, does the state of *fluctuatio animi* facilitate the condition of possibility that allows us to reorder and link the affections of the body to the order of the intellect as E5p10 proposes (G II 287)?

In considering these questions, *fluctuatio animi* becomes intimately linked to two of the central questions in Spinoza's ethical theory: How can fluctuating passions be transformed into constant actions, and how can doubt and inadequate ideas be turned into certainty and adequate knowledge? What must be proven, then, is that *fluctuatio animi* might bear some elements within it of a solution to the agitation of contrary affects. The analysis falls into three parts followed by a conclusion. First, I recount and intervene in a debate between Gilles Deleuze and Pierre Macherey on the status of 'joyful passions' and their relation to *fluctuatio animi* (sections II and III). I turn thereafter to contextualize Spinoza's concept of *fluctuatio animi* in relation to Descartes' concept of *irrésolution* to tease out its historically unique features (section IV). Next, because *fluctuatio animi* is not systematically treated in one place but must be culled from several propositions, I examine the concept's development in the *Ethics* by taking 'jealousy' as a case in point to emphasize the role of *fluctuatio animi* in Spinoza's ethical thought (sections V and VI). Finally, some conclusions are drawn from the analysis (section VII).

II: DELEUZE ON JOYFUL PASSIONS

One of the most original and enduring encounters with Spinoza's ethical thought is Gilles Deleuze's readings. I will here turn to Deleuze's discussion of how individuals can transition from a state of being determined mainly by sad passions to increasingly coming into possession of their power of acting (*potentia agendi*) from which adequate ideas can be developed and joyful actions produced. In particular, I am interested in the role Deleuze assigns to 'joyful passions' in this transition. Deleuze insists that in order to appreciate the profound ethical

questions Spinoza's philosophy raises, we must acknowledge two distinctions in his theory of affect; the distinction between *actions* and *passions* and the distinction between two types of passions; *sad* and *joyful* ones.³

The opposition of actions and passions should not conceal the other opposition that constitutes the second principle of Spinozism: that of joyful passive affections and sad passive affections. One increases our power, the other diminishes it. We come closer to our power of action insofar as we are affected by joy. The ethical question falls then, in Spinoza, into two parts: *How can we come to produce active affections?* But first of all: *How can we come to experience a maximum of joyful passions?*⁴

What exactly are these joyful passions? They are passions in the general sense that, when affected by them, we are given hostage to fortune. Passions are confused ideas and cannot, therefore, explain the causes of the affects we undergo adequately. This means that passions can only partially be explained by our nature alone (E3def3; p3s; GenDefAff; G II 139; 145; 204). Joyful passions share these characteristics with sad passions (and neutral ones), but they also share certain characteristics with joyful actions (E3pp58, 59; G II 187-8). They are joyful insofar as they increase or aid our power of acting (E3p11s; G II 149). So while they cannot fully be 'explained' by our nature or essence, they do "involve" a greater perfection to the extent that we become "less cut off" from our essential power.⁵ It is important for Deleuze to emphasize that joyful passions arise through "chance encounters" with external bodies that "agree" or "[have] something in common with our nature".⁶ In this sense, joyful passions are synonymous with 'good fortune'.

Joyful passions consequently imply a paradoxical nature. They are something that befalls us or that we undergo by chance, but they simultaneously enhance and augment our power of acting and thinking. This leads Deleuze to see them as occupying an intermediate place between sad passions and joyful actions. Having thus defined the series *sad passions* – *joyful passions* – *joyful actions* as the ethical

trajectory the *Ethics* develops, Deleuze, for obvious reasons, finds it difficult to categorize joyful passions. Do they belong wholly on the side of the passions, or do they reveal enough reasonable effects to allow us to place them on the side of reason? Are they merely something we passively experience, or do they give us access to our power of acting to such a degree that from them we can actively produce new joys?

On the one hand, Deleuze clearly states that because the ‘joy’ in these passions by nature is partial or indirect they are not sufficient to disrupt the affective chain of sadness we are immersed in: “The increase [of joyful passions] may proceed indefinitely, but we will never come into full possession of our power of action until we have active affection”; “It is not enough...just to accumulate joyful passions; we must find the means, through such accumulation, to win the power of action and so at least experience active affections of which we are the cause”.⁷ On the other hand, Deleuze claims that when we encounter bodies that agree with our nature we experience joyful passions and that they can become “an occasional cause of common notions”, which leads him to define reason in Spinoza as the “art of organizing encounters”, the “effort to select and organize good encounters, that is, encounters of modes that enter into composition with ours and inspire us with joyful passions”.⁸ The intermediate place between sad passions and joyful actions, which Deleuze first assigns to joyful passions, thus gives way in the final analysis to bending them towards the side of reason; they are the affective consequences that arise from chance encounters which “agree with reason” (E4p59def).⁹ “Before coming into full possession of his power,” Deleuze, therefore, states, “*the strong free man* may be recognized by his joyful passions, by affections that increase his power of action”.¹⁰

What is important here, though, is that our ideas about these passions are still inadequate and that we consequently do not know whether the joy they bestow on us is good or bad for us (E4p59s; G II 254). Due to this inherent ambivalence, joyful passions are only potentially rational or not fully rational yet. Deleuze, therefore, accentuates two stages of reason: “increasing our power of action

by striving to experience a maximum of joyful passive affections; and thence passing on to a final stage in which our power of action has so increased that it becomes capable of producing affections that are themselves active.” But he immediately adds a significant corollary: “*The link between the two stages remains, to be sure, mysterious*”.¹¹ It is characteristic of Deleuze’s discussion of the passage from passivity to activity through joyful passions that whenever he attempts to explain this ‘mysterious link’, he resorts to quasi-religious language; he describes the increase of joyful passions as approaching “the point of conversion, the point of transmutation that will establish our dominion, that will make us worthy of action, of active joys”, or as the experience of “a genuine ‘leap’” that enables us to produce the least general common notions.¹²

III: MACHEREY AND THE SAD DESTINY OF THE PASSIONS

While many elements in Deleuze’s expressionistic reading of Spinoza warrant serious discussion, a specific critique from Pierre Macherey seems to me unjustified. I shall briefly recall Macherey’s critique and use it as a steppingstone for my argument.

In “The Encounter with Spinoza”, Macherey takes critical stock of Deleuze’s overall project in *Expressionism in Philosophy*. Among several examples of Deleuze’s “distorting” reading, Macherey is particularly concerned with his exposition of ‘joyful passions’.¹³ As we have seen, joyful passions occupy an intermediate place between the extremes of passive slavery and active freedom for Deleuze and thus pave the way for the transition from one to the other. Macherey is unconvinced that we can talk sensibly about joyful passions in this way: “I would claim rather bluntly”, he avers, “that for Spinoza all passions, without exception, are sad – even those that are or appear to be joys...they are all ultimately sad”.¹⁴ This is so because, for Macherey, the ‘joy’ in joyful passions is imaginary and hence fleeing, unstable, and cannot be assembled into any coherent ensemble. He goes so far as to call joyful passions a contradiction in terms since anything that places the mind in a passive state is in the final analysis sad, bad, and harmful. This, he remarks,

constitutes the “sad destiny of the passions”.¹⁵

This sad destiny of the passions, Macherey continues, is above all seen in “the very important theme of a ‘vacillation of mind’, *fluctuatio animi*, which represents the state of mental confusion connected with situations in which the soul is at once sad and joyful, or joyful and sad, being simultaneously drawn towards both an increase and a diminution of its perfection”.¹⁶ Macherey notes that the theme of *fluctuatio animi* is only touched upon by Deleuze in passing.¹⁷ He surmises that Deleuze intentionally avoids treating the theme of *fluctuatio animi* because it “completely undermines the notion of joyful passion”.¹⁸ On Macherey’s reading, *fluctuatio animi* puts us in a pathological crisis situation that disrupts the normal functioning of our mental regime, because affective ambivalence taints all joy with sadness – imprinting joy with sadness, disguising hatred as love, or building fear into hope.¹⁹ Its paradoxical and conflictual nature thus forces our affective movements in a negative direction and brings about mental confusion. For Macherey, this makes *fluctuation animi* a ‘border form’ (*une forme limite*) of affectivity that exposes our mental life to insoluble contractions.²⁰ It is worth noting that Macherey bases his argument on Spinoza’s example of an essential sadness that doubles as an accidental joy.²¹ In the scholium to E3p17, however, Spinoza explicates that “in the preceding Proposition I have deduced these vacillations of mind from causes which are the cause through themselves of one affect and the accidental cause of the other”, because it was easier, yet he does not “deny that vacillations of mind *for the most part* arises from an object which is the efficient cause of each affect”, as is the case with jealousy for instance (G II 153, emphasis added).

In any case, Macherey is no doubt right in relating *fluctuatio animi* to a state of bondage, but he seems to forget the corollary that no one is born free and that freedom necessarily arises out of bondage (E4p68s; G II 261).²² Only by sketching out this concept’s dynamic or ‘dialectical’ nature in relation to its development in the *Ethics*, at least in outline, can Deleuze’s ‘mysterious link’ be explained, and the transformative role of joyful passions gain secure footing. Now that the stakes

are set, the historico-systematic examination of the subject can commence. To fully appreciate Spinoza's notion of *fluctuatio animi* requires that we begin by comparing it to Descartes' notion of *irrésolution*, his most important predecessor in the study of affects. The comparison will allow us to accentuate the unique features of Spinoza's conception, which will be instrumental in analysing the transformative role of *fluctuatio animi* in the *Ethics*.

IV: DESCARTES AND THE DANGER OF IRRÉSOLUTION

Evidence points to Spinoza having lifted the concept of *fluctuatio animi* from his study of *Passiones Animae*, the Latin translation of Descartes's *Les Passions de l'âme*. Stephen Voss has demonstrated that Henri Desmarets's Latin translation of the *Passions* could not have been authorized by Descartes himself and raises the question whether Spinoza's understanding of the passions might have been distorted by certain mistranslations in *Passiones Animae*, of which (we may add) *fluctuatio animi* is a case in point.²³ It is important to recall in this regard that Spinoza almost never employs concepts from his predecessors uncritically; a fact that is particularly true of his inheritance from Descartes and his theory of passions (E3pre; 5pre; G II 138; 278).²⁴ To put it somewhat differently: the concept of *fluctuatio animi* in Spinoza retains its specific meaning from its place within his overall doctrine of affect.

The passion Desmarets translates as *fluctuatio animi* (and which Spinoza employs under that name) had been termed *irrésolution* by Descartes.²⁵ This, we shall see, is not inconsequential for the different ethical solutions given by Descartes and Spinoza respectively to the problem of fluctuating minds. Descartes first introduces *irrésolution* in Art. 59. where he explains that it arises from a fluctuation in the soul between hope and fear of an uncertain outcome (CSM II 351; AT XI 375-6). This prompts doubt, which makes the mind irresolute and disposes it to seek advice or – under certain conditions – to deliberate. In Art. 170. Descartes returns to the problem of *irrésolution* to give a slightly different but fuller explanation (CSM II 391; AT XI 459-60). He explains that *irrésolution* is more properly defined

as “a species of fear” (*une espece de Crainte; species metus*) that holds the soul in suspense by casting doubt over several actions it might carry out and thus gives the soul time to choose between different actions before opting for one of them – if indeed it decides to perform any of them.²⁶ In certain cases, or in the right amount, *irrésolution* can therefore be good.

But for the most part, *irrésolution* is neither good nor useful, for it holds the soul in doubt for too long and thus causes it to waste time in deliberation when action is called for, which is bad. The bad form of *irrésolution* is described as an “excess of irresolution” (*excès d’irrésolution; excessus fluctuationis*), which in turn springs from an excessive desire to do the right thing. Here the fear of making a wrong decision becomes so habitual that – although there is no alternative to choose from and only one line of action to pursue – people become irresolute, and waste time looking for other possibilities. Besides the good and bad use of *irrésolution*, Descartes explains that *irrésolution* can also arise from an external situation where several options that appear equally good present themselves. In such situations, *irrésolution* does not arise from an agitated spirit and is consequently not a passion, technically speaking. Nonetheless, such situations effectively put the soul in a similar state of suspense and doubt (Art. 27. CMS II 338; AT XI 349).

Because Descartes explains *irrésolution* primarily with reference to one passion (“a species of fear”) and not – as Spinoza will later insist on – as an internal contradiction, a mental conflict between different contrary passions, his remedy looks quite different from Spinoza’s. According to Descartes, the only escape from *irrésolution* is to accustom ourselves “to form certain and determinate judgements regarding everything we that comes before us, and to believe that we always do our duty when we judge to be best, even though our judgement may perhaps be a very bad one” (CSM II 391; AT XI 460). Attentive readers have noted how this solution has a certain ethical ring to it and sounds like a restatement of the second maxim in the *morale par provision* from the third part of the *Discourse on Method*, where Descartes bids himself:²⁷

[...] to be as firm and decisive (*le plus ferme et le plus résolu*) in my actions as I could, and to follow even the most doubtful opinions, once I had adopted them, with no less constancy than if they had been quite certain [...] By following this maxim I could free myself from all the regrets and remorse which usually trouble the consciences of those weak and faltering spirits (*esprits foibles et chancelants*) who allow themselves to set out on some supposedly good course of action which later, in their inconstance, they judge to be bad (CSM II 123; AT VI 24.).

Descartes's solution states that resolute action following from a decision of the will is sufficient for dispelling the troubles that make the soul fluctuate. We must be resolute and follow the most doubtful opinions, even when we have judged wrongly, because we first opted for them.²⁸ By condemning irresolution and indecisiveness in practical judgments, Shoshana Brassfield has argued that Descartes's approach to practical judgments is almost exactly opposite to his approach to theoretical judgements, which dictates that doubt (methodologically conceived) must be cautiously devised to secure that knowledge will be built on a foundation of clear and distinct ideas.²⁹

Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia must have pressed Descartes on this point, for in their correspondence the philosopher courteously defends his view to the princess. He concedes that it is always reasonable to deliberate before any important business but insists that he cannot see any advantage in delaying things when a course of action has already been decided upon. "This is why", he concludes, "I am convinced that resolution and promptitude (*la résolution et la promptitude*) are very necessary virtues in the handling of a business already begun" (*Ep* 34, May 1646; AT IV 265). For Descartes, then, there exists a virtue opposite to *irrésolution* or *esprit chancelant*, namely *résolution*.

Spinoza's theory of passions in the *Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-being* is close to Descartes's on many scores and constitutes an intermediate stage between Descartes's *Passions* and his own mature theory in the *Ethics*. Regarding the

theme of fluctuations too, the *Short Treatise* leans towards Descartes's judgement. Here Spinoza briefly defines and discusses what in the Dutch text is called *wankelmoedigheid* (KV 2.9; G I 72-3). He explains that "if we must do something to bring the thing about, and (can) make no decision (*geen besluyten maaken*) about the thing, then the soul acquires a form we call Vacillation (*de ziel een gestalte die wy wankelmoedigheid noemen*)" (ibid.). A bit further, when evaluating *wankelmoedigheid*, Spinoza states that its very nature indicates its imperfection:

For whatever they [viz. vacillation, cowardice, and consternation] contribute to our advantage comes from actions of their nature only negatively. For example, someone hopes for something which he thinks is good, but which is not good. Nevertheless, because of his Vacillation or Cowardice, he happens to lack the Strength of Character (*moed; fortitudo*) required to carry it out. So, negatively, or by chance, he is freed of the evil he thought was good. These, then, also cannot have any place in the man who is led by true reason (KV 2.9; G I 72-3).

In theorizing fluctuations in the *Short Treatise*, we see that Spinoza relies heavily on the Cartesian framework and vocabulary. Parallel to Descartes's opposition between *irrésolution* and *résolution*, he too pits 'vacillation of mind' (*wankelmoedigheid*) against 'strength of character' (*moed*). What is decisive for Spinoza's understanding of vacillation at this stage – and what he carries with him to the *Ethics* – is that it is not a species of fear but a 'constitution' the soul acquires (*een gestalte; constitutio*). Still, *wankelmoedigheid* plays a wholly negative role in the *Short Treatise*; a role that will look quite different upon Spinoza's return to the theme in the *Ethics*.

V: FLUCTUATIO ANIMI IN E3P17

If we turn to the forty-eight definitions of affects at the end of Part III of the *Ethics*, we shall not find any definition of *fluctuatio animi*. The definitions of "jealousy and other vacillations of mind" (*Zelotypiae et reliquarum animi fluctuationum*) are passed over precisely because they are not affects, strictly speaking, but composed (*componitur*)

of affects and because many of them do not have names (E3defaff48exp; G II 203). This does not imply that they cannot be known in general. In fact, proposition 17. supplies us with a general definition. In line with the *Short Treatise*, *fluctuatio animi* is here defined as a ‘constitution of mind’ (*mentis constitutio*) that arises when the mind is affected simultaneously by two or more contrary affects (*contrariis affectibus*) (G II 153). Such a constitution of mind can come about in three ways.

In the first case, *fluctuatio animi* arises when the same object becomes the efficient cause of two or more contrary affects. In the second case, it happens when a conflict of affects arises from “causes which bring about one of the affects essentially and the other accidentally”; this usually happens by way of the association of ideas, as when a thing that affects us with joy or sadness reminds us of a similar thing which usually affect us with an equally great but opposite affect. In the third case, fluctuations arise from the “image of a past or future thing”, in which case “it generally happens that those who possess much experience hesitate when they think of a thing as past or future, and doubt greatly concerning its issue,” and “there the affects which spring from such images of things are not so constant, but are generally disturbed by the images of other things” (E3pp17-18; G II 153-155). Human beings are thus susceptible to fluctuations due, in the first case, to the nature of affects themselves, and secondly, due to the memorization or imagination of the affections that have affected them or that they imagine will affect them.³⁰ Thus, because of our mind’s propensity to recall, transfer and associate affective states, on the one hand, and since there is nothing intrinsic in objects that prevents us from simultaneously finding joy or sadness in them, on the other hand, nothing prevents any given thing from becoming an object of fluctuating affects. As Macherey accurately remarks, this makes *fluctuatio animi* a quite ordinary condition to find ourselves in, since fluctuations can potentially permeate any passion or image belonging to the imagination (TTP pre; G III 5).³¹

VI: THE CASE OF JEALOUSY OR LOVE CONQUERING HATE

To analyse *fluctuatio animi* in greater depth, I will follow Spinoza in taking

obsessive and excessive jealousy (*zelotypia*) as my primary example. This choice conditions the following analysis in two ways: First, the analysis will only apply to *fluctuationes animi* that include a sad and a joyful passion (which, for instance, excludes ‘consternation’). Second, the analysis appears particularly relevant for those *fluctuationes animi* that – like jealousy – arise from interhuman relations.

Obsessive jealousy is ambivalence *par excellence*. It is defined as a “vacillation of mind born of Love and Hatred together, accompanied by the idea of another who is envied”, and thus involves a complex triadic relation with three affects at play (E3p35s; G II 167). Through jealousy, the object of our desire becomes the efficient cause of two contrary affects. In jealousy, we love and are attracted to the individual we simultaneously hate and feel a profound repulsion from whenever we imagine that he or she is more closely united to a rival. The scholium to E3p35 gives flesh to this logic: “He who imagines that a woman he loves prostitutes herself to another not only will be saddened, because his appetites is restrained, but also will be repelled by her, because he is forced to join the image of the things he loves to the shameful parts and excretions of the other” (ibid.).

I use the term ‘rival’ here because jealousy occurs in situations where “someone enjoys something that only one can possess”, which excludes the possibility of a *ménage à trois* (E3p32; G II 165). This means that in addition to entertaining contrary affects towards the individual we desire, imagining that a rival affects the individual we now hate with joy makes us ‘envy’ the rival (E3p24s; G II 158).³² Spinoza highlights this envious aspect of jealousy in the *Tractatus Politicus* with the example of the relation between kings and their heirs: “Kings even fear their sons more than they love them, and fear them the more, the more the sons are skilled in the arts of war and peace, and the more their virtues make their subjects love them” (TP 6.7; G III 299). In this case, the contested object of desire is the subjects’ love, which a king and his sons are competing for. Yet, the example also implies that envy is not exempt from fluctuations either, namely insofar as the king simultaneously loves and fears his rival sons. This means that to the extent that we still love an individual, and insofar as we imagine a rival benefitting him or her, to

that exact extent will we also be affected with ‘favor’ towards the rival (E3p22; G II 157). If it is correct that a fluctuation between envy and favor towards the rival can take place, then E4p51 will be indispensable because it highlights that like love favor can agree with reason and thus be seen as a joyful passion (G II 248).

The doubling of fluctuations of hate and love, envy and favor in this dual relation is only reinforced by the imitation of affects.³³ E3p31 clarifies that love or hate toward a thing is only deepened whenever others love or hate it as well, but if they love what we hate or hate what we love, an additional reason to “undergo vacillation of mind” (*animi fluctuationem patiemur*) is given (G II 164). Moreover, E3p43 asserts that hate is increased by being returned. Thus reinforced by the imitation of affects, *fluctuatio animi* can provoke a spiral of retributions and vengeance, which will lead to a perpetual state of reciprocal hate. The turning point, however, is found in the second assertion of this proposition: “love can destroy hate” (*Odium ... Amore ... deleri potest*) (G II 173). This is possible because the love component in jealousy entails a desire to bestow joy on the other in order to rejoice in the idea of oneself as the cause of their joy. “The affection triggers a change of perspective, a reorientation of the *conatus* towards joy”, notes Chantal Jaquet: “It does not increase the power of acting; it favours it instead by counteracting the sad affects”.³⁴ Desiring that another individual recognizes us as the cause of their joy equals a desire for making them love us in return. This means that if a person has the power to imagine that their loved one could be affected with love towards them, then – insofar as they *imagine* this – they might become disposed to strive not to hate or affect them with sadness (E3p33&d; G II 165).³⁵

At this point we must pause to consider two things: First, if love begins to gain an upper hand vis-à-vis hate, it does so qua being an affect. In this sense, *fluctuatio animi* denotes the very condition that makes the countervailing of affects possible: “An affect cannot be restrained or taken away except by an affects opposite to, and stronger than, the affect to be restrained” (E4p7; G II 214). Insofar as love expresses a joy that agrees with reason (which, however, is most often not the case), it is not only opposite to but also stronger than hate. This means that when love destroys

hate through the constitution of *fluctuatio animi*, this takes place solely on the register of affects. Second, what has mobilized this clash between love and hate in *fluctuatio animi* is nothing other than the *power of the imagination*.³⁶ So far, reason proper has not yet entered the stage.

If the turning point is announced in proposition 43, the transition takes on an even greater significance in the following proposition. E3p44 states: “Hate completely conquered by love passes into love (*Odium...in Amorem transit*), and the love is therefore greater than if hate had not preceded it” (G II 174). The individual who begins to love (*amare incipit*) a thing it has hated or regarded with sadness will rejoice (*laetatur*). To this rejoicing which love intrinsically involves is added an additional joy that arises from the striving to remove the sadness involved in hatred. This joyful striving is not only determined by our own power but also enforced, accompanied, or aided by the image of the one once hated but now increasingly regarded as an external cause for joy (E4p18; G II 222). Hence, in quenching hate, the love-component grows.

In Part IV Spinoza returns to the theme of hate passing into love, this time from the perspective of the process having become a rational disposition. In E4p46s, after recapitulating the analysis of hate passing into love in E3pp43 and 44, Spinoza adds: “He who lives according to the guidance of reason strives, as far as he can, to repay the other’s Hate, Anger, and Disdain toward him, with Love of Nobility” (G II 245). A vivid picture of what such a disposition looks like is painted in the scholium: “One who is eager to overcome (*expugnare*) Hate by Love, strives joyously and confidently, resists many men as easily as one, and requires the least help from fortune. Those whom he conquers yield joyously, not from a lack of strength, but from an increase in their power” (E4p46s; G II 222).

We must, nonetheless, proceed to the final part of the *Ethics* to complete our analysis of how *fluctuatio animi* can mobilize a transition where joyful passions conquer sad ones, and a correct use of the imagination prepares the way for the habitual use of reason. So far, we have established that we can put ourselves in a

state where we are less torn by affects contrary to our nature solely by combatting affect with affect and merely by the power of the imagination. E5p10 teaches that if such a condition is brought about, the mind's understanding or power of forming clear and distinct ideas is awoken.

Still, provided that we lack adequate knowledge of our affects, the surest thing to do is to “conceive a correct principle of living, or sure maxims of life (*rectam vivendi rationem, seu certa vitae dogmata concipere*)” and apply them to diverse situations encountered in life.³⁷ One of the maxims Spinoza expressly singles out in the scholium is that hate is conquered by love or nobility, not by being repaid by hate in return (E5p10S; G II 287-8). Observing this maxim means that if we succeed in joining (*jungemus*) the images of wrongs done to us to a clear and vivid imagination of this maxim, then the effects sad affects have on our imagination will be minimized.³⁸ Spinoza's phrasing here clearly points back to E5p2, which posits that separating images from external causes and joining them to “other thoughts” such as this maxim can help us escape fluctuations. The proposition reads: “If we separate (*amoveamus*) emotions, or affects, from the thought of an external cause, and join (*jungamus*) them to other thoughts, then the Love, or Hate, towards the external cause is destroyed, as are the vacillations of mind (*animi fluctuationes*) arising from these affects” (G II 281). Spinoza's point is that when our passions are conceived as confused ideas then it becomes possible to form clear and distinct ideas of them or in gaining a greater degree of self-consciousness. This is what enables us to think in a more adequate manner, more actively (EIVp8d). More concretely, Spinoza's points out that when we stop considering the vices of others, indeed separate the affects we have towards them and instead strive to understand these affects and their causes, then we can begin to moderate and restrain those affects that are contrary to our nature and make those that aid our striving more constant. Hence, by redirecting our thoughts to these maxims, meditating on, and observing them, we “will soon be able to direct most of [our] actions according to the command of reason” (E5p10S; G II 288).³⁹

Importantly, while this separating and re-joining of our thoughts might assist us in

reconciling contrary affects in favour of the joyful ones, Spinoza reminds us that sad passions such as hatred and anger are never overcome without fluctuations of mind (*non sine animi fluctuatione...superetur*) (E5p10s; G II 288). This, I have explained, is because *fluctuatio animi* is a necessary prerequisite for the countervailing of affects to come about in the first place. When joyful passions conquer sad passions, the possibility of becoming less reliant on fortune, better thinking, and more active is accordingly increased. *Pace* Deleuze, this is less a quantitative question of becoming “affected by a maximum of joyful passions” that mysteriously “leap” into actions, than a qualitative change in self-conception.⁴⁰ Joyful passions, Spinoza teaches, only remain passions insofar as our power of acting isn’t increased to the point where we conceive ourselves and our actions adequately: “So if a man affected with Joy were led to such a great perfection that he conceives himself and his actions adequately, he would be capable—indeed more capable—of the same actions to which he is now determined from affects which are passions” (E4p59d; G II 254).⁴¹

VII: CONCLUSION

We can now draw some conclusions from the preceding analysis. Where Descartes disconnects *irrésolution* and the doubt that follows from it from practical judgments while upholding its methodological role in judgments about theoretical matters, Spinoza, on the contrary, insists on the unity or agreement of the theoretical and the practical, which requires us to consider the constitutive role *fluctuatio animi* plays on our path to freedom and understanding. In the last four articles of *Passions* Part I, Descartes argues that the strongest souls belong to those who can easily conquer their passions and stop the bodily movements which accompany them because they equip their will with “its ‘proper’ weapons” namely “firm and determinate judgements ... which the soul has resolved to follow in guiding its conduct” (CMS 347; AT XI 367). On the other hand, “weak and irresolute” souls, according to Descartes, only grant their will “the weapons which some passions provide for resisting other passions” which make their soul “battle against itself and so [put] the soul in the most deplorable state possible” (CMS 347; AT XI 367-8).

Because Spinoza famously denies that the mind can determine the body to motion and rest, he faults the Stoics and Descartes precisely for holding that human freedom is attained by the soul having dominion over and against the passions through a resolute will (E3p2; E5pre; G II 141 277-8).⁴² True freedom, Spinoza instead claims, is neither liberation from desire nor against the affects, but is rather achieved *through* them. In line with Deleuze, I have shown that for Spinoza human freedom is attained by transforming sad passions (our passivity and ignorance) into joyful action (activity and understanding), but I have insisted on the need for explicating that this transition cannot take place unless through a vertiginous stage of *fluctuatio animi* (*non sine animi fluctuatione...superetur!*). This, I showed, is because *fluctuatio animi* describes a constitution where multiple, contrary affects move us simultaneously. When sad and joyful passions concurrently affect us, this facilitates the possibility of working towards restraining and moderating the impact of sad passions by separating our images of their causes and joining them to moral maxims. If, by doing so, we succeed in becoming less torn by affects contrary to our nature, then “the power of ordering and connecting the affections of the body according to the order of the intellect” is released.⁴³ While Spinoza entertains no illusions as to whether the way he proposes to transition from passivity to activity “seems very hard”, he does reassure that “it can be found” (E5p42s; GII 308).

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NOTES

1. References to the Ethics follow the customary convention of abbreviation: ‘E3p17s’ refers to Ethics, Part 3, proposition 17, scholium. Other abbreviations used: ‘p’ – proposition; ‘pre’ – preface; ‘d’ – demonstration; ‘DA’ – definition of affect; ‘GenDefAff’ – general definition of affects; ‘exp’ – explanation; ‘s’ – scholium. Citations from Spinoza are to Edwin Curley’s translation, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vols. I-II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016) and Carl Gebhardt’s *Spinoza Opera: Im Auftrag Der Heidelberger Akademie Der Wissenschaften Herausgegeben* (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1987), hereafter ‘G’ followed by volume and page number, e.g. GIII/5. References to Descartes are given to Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch’s *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), hereafter CSM followed by volume and page number, and to Charles Adam and Paul Tannery’s *Œuvres de Descartes*, vol. xiii (Paris: Vrin, 1964), hereafter ‘AT’ followed by volume and page number, e.g. AT XI 459. For the Latin edition of *Passiones de l’Âme*, I refer to the original *Passiones Animæ*.
2. I will use the Latin term ‘*fluctuatio animi*’ consistently in the following. Translations of this concept are often subject to problems. In Germanic languages, different options with quite different associations are viable. In German, Wolfgang Bartuschat translates it as ‘Schwanken des Gemüts’; in Dutch, Nico van Suchtelen casts it as ‘weifelmoedigheid’; in Danish, Svend Rasmussen calls it ‘sindsbølge’; and in English, Samuel Shirley merely calls it ‘vacillation’, whereas Edwin Curley calls it ‘vacillation of mind’. In Romance languages, a different problem presents itself, namely the grammatical gender of animus. While Renato Peri’s Italian and Vidal Peña’s Spanish translation— ‘*fluttuazione d’Animo*’ and ‘*fluctuación del ánimo*’ respectively—retain the masculine; Charles Appuhn, Robert Misrahi, and Pierre-François Moreau all translate it to French in the feminine, ‘*fluctuation de l’Âme*’. One of the few who have written comprehensively about this topic, Hervé Maillolchon, suggests that despite the term animus is heavily loaded with suspicious philosophical and religious connotations, Spinoza employs the concept *fluctuatio animi* (and not for example *fluctuatio mentis*), because animus (in the masculine) functions as a middle term between anima and intellectus and designates an intermediate type of understanding that is still subject to the order of affectivity, cf. Hervé Maillolchon, “La Notion de *Fluctuatio Animi* Chez Spinoza”, *Philosoph’île, site de philosophie de l’Académie de la Réunion* (1999), 1-3.
3. Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza, Practical Philosophy* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1988), 27-8.
4. Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (New York: Zone Books, 1990), 249.
5. Deleuze, *Expressionism*, 240.
6. Deleuze, *Practical Philosophy*, 72.
7. Deleuze, *Expressionism*, 246; 274.
8. Deleuze, *Expressionism*, 245; *Practical Philosophy*, 55; 83. Deleuze’s choice of “occasional cause” is indeed surprising here. It is most immediately associated with Malebranche, and Spinoza would no doubt equal explanations that take recourse to occasional causes to taking refuge to an asylum of ignorance.
9. Deleuze, *Expressionism*, 274.
10. Deleuze, *Expressionism*, 262.
11. Deleuze, *Expressionism*, 262; 275; *Practical Philosophy*, 55-6, my emphasis.
12. Deleuze, *Expressionism*, 283; *Practical Philosophy*, 28; 50; 83; Eric Aldieri. “Guided by Joy: Becoming-Active in Deleuze’s Spinoza.” *Deleuze and Guattari Studies* 16, no. 2 (2021): 219-20.
13. Pierre Macherey, “The Encounter with Spinoza” in *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, ed. Paul Patton

(Wiley-Blackwell, 1996), 152-7.

14. Macherey, "Encounter", 153. A more optimistic perspective on joyful passions has been presented by Alexandre Matheron. He concludes his analysis of the 'Intellectual love of God' with the following remark: "...every joy and every love, including passionnal ones, implies a participation in beatitude. If we are barely aware of this, it is because the violence of the passage tends to eclipse the serenity of the result." Matheron, "Spinoza and Sexuality," in *Politics, Ontology and Knowledge in Spinoza*, ed. Filippo Del Lucchese, David Maruzzella and Gil Morejón (Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 100.

15. One of Macherey's criticisms of Deleuze's thesis on joyful passions is that it reveals a hidden dialectic that is all too Hegelian: "In this sequence of 'stages', and the leap that links yet separates them by invoking the tension of 'already' and 'still not', one might see the outline of a dialectic. Even though joyful passions involve, as passions, a sort of negativity, still, through them, 'by their aid', it is possible to initiate the transition that will eventually allow the soul to reappropriate its power by rising to the level of pure activity...one might be tempted to call this transformation of passivity into activity a negation of the negation, or a ruse of reason that makes use of an evil, passion, to advance something good, ethical liberation." Macherey, "Encounter", 153. By drawing on Macherey's critique of Deleuze in *Hegel or Spinoza* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 143, Aldieri alternatively notes that Macherey there faults Deleuze's affirmationist reading of Spinoza exactly for its 'nondialectical' aspects that are "incompatible with a dialectical, Marxist reading of Spinoza as a thinker of alienation", see Aldieri, *Guided by Joy*, 220; 231, n. 16.

16. Macherey, "Encounter", 155. It is a simplification to understand the contrary affects at play in *fluctuatio animi* as pairs of sad and joyful passions (love-hate; hope-fear; compassion-envy). While these affective pairs are obviously contrary, on a more fundamental level, affects are said to be contrary when they pull individuals in different directions. This means that affects of the same genus - e.g. two competing desires or fears - become contrary at the precise point when they pull an individual in different directions simultaneously, cf. E4def5 | G II 210.

17. Cf. Deleuze, *Expressionism*, 243, n. 23, where he relegates this decisive theme to a short note that differentiates two types of *fluctuatio*, "one explained by extrinsic and accidental relations between objects; the other, defined in the Scholium, is explained by the different relations of which we are intrinsically composed."

18. Macherey, "Encounter", 156.

19. Pierre Macherey, *Introduction à l'Éthique de Spinoza. La Troisième Partie: La Vie Affective* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995), 160.

20. Pierre Macherey, *Introduction*, 168.

21. In *Introduction*, 166, Macherey confirms this reading: "Il reste néanmoins que Spinoza a choisi, pour exposer le thème de l'ambivalence affective, le cas où une tristesse se double de joie, et non celui où une joie s'altère en se colorant d'amertume : serait-ce qu'il y a quand même dans la joie quelque chose de plus fort et de plus stable que dans la tristesse, qui la protège contre ce risque de retournement ? La manière extrêmement ramassée dont le contenu de cette question est exposé dans la proposition 17 et dans son scolie, permet seulement de la poser, mais ne donne guère le moyen d'y répondre". Macherey is right in suggesting that E3p17 allows us to raise the question, but to seek an answer we are required to systematically follow the theme all the way to Part V of the *Ethics*, which he does not do.

22. That *fluctuatio animi* is related to bondage is explicitly stated in the TTP: "...that the highest reward for observing the divine law is the law itself, viz. to know God and to love him from true freedom and with a whole and constant heart (*animo integro et constante*), whereas the penalty

for not observing it is the privation of these things and bondage to the flesh, or an inconstant and vacillating heart (*carnis servitutem, sive animum inconstantem, et fluctuantem*); “According to Solomon only the wise live with a constant and peaceful heart (*animo pacato et constante*), unlike the impious, whose heart vacillates with opposite affects (*quorum animus contrariis affectibus fluctuat*), to such an extent that (as Isaiah too says in 57:20) they have neither peace nor rest” (TTP 4 | G III 62; 67).

23. Cf. Stephen Voss, “How Spinoza Enumerated the Affects,” *Archiv Für Geschichte Der Philosophie* 63, no. 2. (1981) and Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934), vol. II., 210, n. 2.

24. Cf. Chantal Jaquet, *Affects, Actions and Passions in Spinoza: The Unity of Body and Mind* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 27-47.

25. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* vol. II., 214.

26. In this sense, Descartes definition in Art. 170. is closer to the ‘affection of mind’ which Spinoza calls ‘consternation’ (*consternatio*) and defines as “a Fear that keeps a man senseless or vacillating (*stupefactum, aut fluctuantem*) so that he cannot avert the evil. I say senseless insofar as we understand that his Desire to avert the evil is restrained by wonder, and vacillating insofar as we conceive that that Desire is restrained by Timidity regarding another evil, which torments him equally, so that he does not know which of the two to avert” (E3defaff42exp; cf. E3p52s | G II 201-2; 180). As Pascal Sévérac reminds us, unlike the ‘sive’, which usually implies an identification, the disjunctive ‘aut’ employed here implies an alternative; see Pascal Sévérac, “Consciousness and Affectivity: Spinoza and Vygotsky,” *Stasis* 5, no. 2 (2017): 99. This implies that in the first case, consternation is “a species of Cowardice” (*pusillanimitas*) that stupefies a person at the horror of a single evil; in the second case, because two evils are imagined, consternation denotes a *fluctuatio animi* proper. Note that consternation understood as a fluctuation necessarily includes a double timidity that checks one another. Like Descartes, Hobbes understands ‘irresolution’ in the first sense and unlike Desmarets translates it as *cunctatus*: “Pusillanimity disposeth men to Irresolution (*Pusillanimitas cunctatorem facit*), and consequently to lose the occasions, and fittest opportunities of action. For after men have been in deliberation till the time of action approach, if it be not then manifest what is best to be done, ‘tis a signe, the difference of Motives, the one way one and the other, are not great: therefore not to resolve then, is to lose the occasion by weighing of trifles; which is Pusillanimity” (Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012), 156-7).

27. Lisa Shapiro, “Descartes’s Provisional Morality,” in *The Cambridge History of Moral Philosophy*, ed. S. Golob and J. Timmermann, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 224.

28. Such a ‘decisionistic’ solution to fluctuations, which Descartes and Hobbes both hold and which is Hobbes’ underlying reason for preferring monarchies, see *Leviathan*, 288–91, allows us to read a particular paragraph in the *Tractatus Politicus* as a critique of the political consequences such views entail: “It’s no objection that, while each city consults its own interest and is jealous of the others, they frequently quarrel with one another and waste time arguing. Some will remind us of the saying ‘while the Romans deliberate, Saguntum is lost.’ On the other hand, when the few decide everything, simply on the basis of their own affects, freedom and the common good are lost. For human wits are too sluggish to penetrate everything right away. But by asking advice, listening, and arguing, they are sharpened. When people try all means, in the end they find ways to the things they want which everyone approves, and no one had ever thought of before” (TP 9.14 | G III 352). As many scholars have rightly argued, Spinoza holds that fluctuations, tumults, and

conflict are not only constitutive but may play a constructive function in political institutions, which can lead to more joyous outcomes.

29. Shoshana Brassfield, “Descartes and the Danger of Irresolution,” *Essays in Philosophy* 14, no. 2 (2013): 162–98.

30. Although Spinoza notes that *fluctuatio animi* is “related to the affect as doubt is to the imagination” and refers his reader back to E2P44S to understand this structural relation, it lies beyond the scope of this essay to treat the relation between *fluctuatio animi* and the imagination. For a clear examination of this relation, see Maillochon, *La Notion*, 8–11.

31. Macherey, *Introduction*, 162–3.

32. Cf. Matheron, “Spinoza and Sexuality”, 250–2.

33. Cf. Pierre-François Moreau, “Imitation of the Affects and Interhuman Relations,” in *Spinoza’s Ethics: A Collective Commentary*, ed. Michael Hampe, Ursula Renz and Robert Schnepf (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 167.

34. Jaquet, *Affects, Actions and Passions in Spinoza*, 116.

35. Matheron, *Spinoza and Sexuality*, 251.

36. For this power of imagination, cf. Moira Gatens, *Imaginary bodies: Ethics, power and corporeality*. (London: Routledge, 2013), 146ff. and Genevieve Lloyd and Moira Gatens, “The Power of Spinoza: Feminist Conjunctions: Susan James Interview” *Hypatia* 12, no 2 (2000): 54.

37. While this essay demonstrates the productive role of *fluctuatio animi* in Spinoza’s ethical thought, it is the task of further analysis to show how these insights can illuminate other aspects of Spinoza’s thought. I am specifically thinking about Spinoza’s proposed ‘doctrines of universal faith’ in TTP 14. An affective analysis of this chapter ought to show how the ‘doctrines of universal faith’ (*fidei universalis dogmata*) function analogously to the ‘correct principle of living, or sure maxims of life’ (*rectam videndi rationem, seu certa vitae dogmata*) in *Ethics* Part V. These doctrines constitute an imaginary-affective counterpoint that is aimed to tip the fluctuating and inconstant mind of the common people (*captui...varii, et inconstantis..vulgi*) to become more affected by joyful passions that agree with reason so that the fear and doubt that sectarianism and superstition feeds on can be uprooted. Contrary to a number of commentators, I see these doctrines as wholly imaginary-affective because it is not their truth but the piety they instill that matters. Their regulative-affective function is exactly to “move the soul to obedience” (*animum ab obedientiam movent*) by dispelling doubt and instilling “devotion, admiration, and love toward God” (*devotionem, admirationem, et amorem erga Deum*) so that neighborly love can be confirmed in the soul (*animum in amore erga proximum confirment*) (TTP 14 | G III 176).

38. Macherey ignores the theme of *fluctuatio animi* in Part V entirely, but he emphasizes the role played by the imagination there; Macherey, *Encounter*, 154. For the fullest account of the constructive use of the imagination in Spinoza, cf. Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present* (Routledge, 2002). See also Chiara Bottici, “Another Enlightenment: Spinoza on Myth and Imagination”, *Constellations* 19, no. 4 (2012):1–19, who argues that imagination in Spinoza is not systematically associated with the idea of unreality and falsity of its content as it will later become. Spinoza explicitly says that the imagination is the sole cause of falsity, but, at the same time, it is not necessarily false.

39. Seen from the perspective of reason, one can follow Matheron’s analysis of Spinoza’s sexual ethics, which concludes that: “Free men and free women, as such, are incapable, by definition, of any jealousy, and they have no rational motive for abstaining from parallel experience - even if they no longer had any reasons to go looking for them. Spinoza, doctrinally, could not have thought anything else” (*Spinoza and Sexuality*, 258). This implies that as soon as the loved-one

stops being considered a possession ‘that only one can possess’, the image of another’s enjoyment of him or her is not seen an obstacle to one’s joy and envy falls apart.

40. Deleuze, *Expressionism*, 273.

41. An illustrative way of accounting for the stages in the transition from sad passivity to possible activity, is to follow Pascal Sévérac’s affective analysis of Vygotsky’s example of three children brought to his research institute who had been living in the same traumatic environment. The youngest child was “completely overawed by his mother’s violence, and his inability to link the imagination of his suffering to the imagination of a means to avoid it is no doubt reinforced, if not fully determined, by his weak cognitive development”; the middle child “is certainly composed of sadness (with the idea of the mother as its cause: the child thus experiences tremendous hatred of his mother), but it is also composed of joy: the middle child, whose cognitive and affective development is greater than that of the youngest child, indeed also has the idea of his mother as a cause for help, therefore as a cause of joy, that is, as an object of love”; and finally, the eldest child moves “from the experience of trauma (if he was traumatized) to the experience of possible action within the situation: he goes to the help of his brothers, he feels pity for his mother, and tries to compensate for the devastating effects of her behavior”, Sévérac, “Consciousness and Affectivity: Spinoza and Vgotsky,” *Stasis* 5, no. 2 (2017): 94-102. Sévérac thus identifies three different affective responses with the three children respectively (i.e., consternation, vacillation of mind, and benevolence), but these can be seen as successive stages in an individual transition.

42. For an excellent account of this critique, see Warren Montag, “Commanding the Body: The Language of Subjection in Ethics III, P2S” in *Spinoza’s Authority Volume I: Resistance and Power in the Ethics*, ed. Dimitris Vardoulakis and A. Kiarina Kordela (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 147-73.

43. Interestingly, Moreau notes how it is possible “to construct a Spinozist theory of tragedy, where this effect [viz. *fluctuatio animi*] would replace the Aristotelian theme of catharsis” (*Experience*, 398, n. 29). Indeed, as my argument has made clear, I claim that *fluctuatio animi* expresses a kind of affective purgative process akin to catharsis. Tellingly, the application of a Cartesian-Spinozistic theory of passion to the field of dramaturgy and poetics was conducted by Spinoza’s friend Lodewijk Meyer, a member of the society *Nil volentibus arduum*, in the collectively authored ‘Instruction in the poetics of drama’ (*Onderwys in de tooneelpoëzy*). For an analysis, see Piet Steenbakker, *Spinoza’s Ethica from Manuscript to Print. Studies on Text, Form and Related Topics* (Groningen: University of Groningen Press, 1994), 103-28.