

TWO NOTES ON SPINOZA’S EXPERIMENTALIST MIND, ACCORDING TO PEIRCE: ONTOLOGICAL PARALLELISM AND CONTINUITY¹

DUAS NOTAS A RESPEITO DA MENTE EXPERIMENTALISTA DE ESPINOSA, SEGUNDO PEIRCE: PARALELISMO ONTOLÓGICO E CONTINUIDADE

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Abstract: Spinoza is found among the metaphysicians Peirce admired the most. Peirce’s compliment to him is due to the fact that his metaphysics would stand for an “experimentalist mind”. The present paper aims at, exactly, pointing out some elements from Spinozan philosophy which, hypothetically, might perform the experimentalist character greeted by Peirce. Such main purpose will be fulfilled through two notes, which might not only demonstrate Spinoza’s experimentalist problems, but trace as well their echoes in certain important passages at Peirce’s “Scientific Metaphysics”. In fact, Spinoza dedicated himself, steadily, to the construction of the so called ontological parallelism between bodies and ideas. Being this parallelism one of the main thesis supported through Spinoza’s Ethics, it establishes, decisively, a Pragmatist link between the knowledge (ideas) and the world of the action (bodies). As for Peirce, also, new relations between bodies and ideas unchain beliefs that shall be established, drawing a new habit, which has the strength to make a shift in the conduct of life. In this case, these relations are based on the Peircean thesis of continuity. The same agreement is to be found either from the point of view of ideas or in the epistemological domain. As Spinoza indicated, the rise of a new relation between bodies compels us to knowledge, since new relations require new ideas. As for Peirce, we have the feeling of satisfaction whenever we are impelled from doubt to belief, so that new mental habits are also the epistemological guarantee that something new comes up. In short, for Spinoza as much for Peirce, it would apply certain resonance between the ethical joy and the satisfaction that follows knowledge.

Key-words: Peirce. Spinoza. Pragmatism. Ontology. Continuity.

Resumo: *Entre os filósofos da tradição metafísica elogiados por Peirce encontra-se Espinosa. A saudação de Peirce a este pensador se devia ao fato de que sua metafísica seria partícipe de uma, assim chamada, mente experimentalista. A presente comunicação visa, justamente, destacar elementos da filosofia espinosana que, por hipótese, realizam o caráter experimentalista alegado por Peirce. Tal objetivo principal será cumprido a partir de duas notas, onde se demonstrarão não apenas os problemas experimentalistas de Espinosa, como também, sua ressonância em certas passagens importantes de “Metafísica Científica” de Peirce. De fato, Espinosa se dedica, com afinco, à construção do chamado paralelismo ontológico entre corpos e idéias. Sendo esta uma das teses centrais de sua Ética, o referido paralelismo estabelece, decisivamente, um elo pragmatista entre o conhecimento (idéias) e o mundo da ação (corpos). Assim como, para Peirce, novas relações desencadeiam crenças que se estabelecerão, configurando um novo hábito que há de gerar uma modificação quanto à conduta da vida. Mas, neste caso, a essas relações estão baseadas na tese peirceana da continuidade. A mesma concordância, aproximadamente, se encontra do ponto de vista*

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das idéias ou no domínio epistemológico. De acordo com Espinosa, o surgimento de uma nova relação entre corpos impõe a necessidade de conhecimento, já que novas relações precisam de novas idéias. Com Peirce, temos o sentimento de satisfação sempre que se passa da dúvida à crença, de modo que novos hábitos mentais são também a garantia epistemológica de que algo novo surgiu. Em suma, tanto para Espinosa quanto para Peirce, vigoraria certa ressonância entre a alegria ética e a satisfação de conhecer. Por isso é que, hipoteticamente, a mente experimentalista de Espinosa atraiu a atenção de Peirce.

Palavras-chave: Peirce. Espinosa. Pragmatismo. Ontologia. Continuidade.

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“I understand Spinoza to be a realist” (CP, 6.593)

In the beginning of one of his *classical* texts, namely, What Pragmatism is, Peirce defined the type of mind that was molded by the life in laboratory, as his own had been since childhood. The *experimentalists* are most of the times physicists, chemists and all those who practice any experimentalist science. Though, Peirce also met philosophers whose way of thinking, especially their Metaphysics, recalled the *experimentalist mind* science requires:

In the writings of some philosophers, specially Kant, Berkeley, and Spinoza, he [Peirce refers to himself as a third person] sometimes came upon strains or thought that recalled the ways of thinking of the laboratory, so that he felt he might trust to them all of which has been true of other laboratory-men (CP, 6.412)

I begin with simple questions: why does Peirce rank Spinoza under that type of philosopher whose mind is an experimentalist one? Why does Spinoza's Metaphysics afford an experimentalist mind?

I will try to show in order to respond to such questions that Spinoza's Ontology through its own path accounts for the Pragmatist principle, which Peirce proudly found in the way of thinking of experimentalist philosophers:

Endeavoring, as a man of that type naturally would, to formulate what he so approved, he framed the theory that a *conception*, that is, the rational purport of a word or other expression, lies exclusively in its conceivable bearing upon the conduct of life (*ibid.*)

Any thought, then, convey a purpose so as to grant a “conceivable bearing upon the conduct of life”. And the *conduct of life* would be affected exactly because new beliefs point to new relations. The reality of thought shifts life, then. Peirce states that sensations follow one another constantly in our mind, thus in their succession “various systems of relationship” subsist (CP 5.396). Thought is among these various systems of relationship and its peculiarity lies primarily on the function of producing *belief* (*ibid.*). It carries out its function in a special way by trailing “congruence in the succession of sensations which flow through the mind” (5.396). Accordingly, thought makes congruence out of a mere succession amid sensations, so as to give rise to a *belief*. Beliefs imply practical and sensible changes:

The essence of the belief is the establishment of a habit; and different beliefs are distinguished by the different modes of action to which they give rise. If beliefs do not differ in this respect,

if they appease the same doubt by producing the same rule of action, then no mere differences in the manner of consciousness can make them different beliefs, any more than playing a tune in different keys is playing different tunes (CP 5.398)

As to this pragmatic commitment, *meaning*, by its turn, acquires a special mode of being, for its distinction also consists in a “possible difference of practice” (CP 5.400). If the settlement of congruence among sensations is meant to be the function of thought, then any shift in the route of congruence has practical effects over life. We *feel* that life changes whenever a belief appeases a specific doubt and it is an achievable task because thought has already done its job by modifying the system of relationship which rearranges the succession of sensations. In short, according to Peirce’s words: “logical self-control is a perfect mirror of ethical self-control” (CP 5.419).

Consequently, from now on I shall briefly exam what might stands for that Pragmatic resonance between the ethical joy and the satisfaction that follows knowledge (the appeasing of a doubt) in some excerpts of Spinoza’s Ontology. Afterwards, I will meet Peirce again to show that there is some immediacy between Spinozan ontological thesis and Peirce’s continuity.

The onto-pragmatic lesson implicated in the thought of Spinoza could be faithfully enunciated as follows: anyone creates a way of living while thinking, because the constructivism of thought is also a powerful field for experimentation. There is, therefore, vital experimentation in the strength to think, that is, it is involved by the strength to exist. In Spinoza’s philosophy, Ontology and the Action hold a steady link that shall be conveniently demonstrated through the clause of the *parallelism* between ideas and the bodies.

The alleged parallelism is a clause for immanence as an ontological principle that assigns the equivalence between ideas and bodies, as it avoids superiority or priority of the ideas over the bodies. In this sense, Spinoza’s ontology defies Descartes’, since such clause might confer to the body a magnitude not conceivable for the philosophies that begin with the presupposition that corporal sensitivity must be submitted to ideas. The body gains an ontological fullness, a mode of being of its own.

According to Spinoza, *substance* holds and accomplishes the immanence of the formal reality (attributes) with the objective reality (finite modes). The problem related to production of the finite mode is how modifications of the substance or attributes (formal reality) will be actualized in finite modes (objective reality). Thus, if two attributes of substance, those ones the human beings know, are thought and extension, then, finite expressions of these attributes, respectively, ideas and bodies, are finite modes that shall grant the parallelism of attributes. Otherwise, ideas and bodies would not enjoy the same ontological *status* in the world, that is, in their current existence. The equivalence between bodies and ideas start up with their definition as modes of the substance and is assured by Spinoza’s two basic proposals: “thought is an attribute of God, or God is a thinking thing” and “extension is an attribute of God, or God is an extensive thing” (SPINOZA, 1983 p. 120-121, part II, prop. I and II, respectively). These proposals guarantee formally ontological parallelism while thought and extension are attributes in the same substance.

Besides, ontological parallelism does not only assure the way attributes coexist in the substance, it extends the reach of the immanent principle to the existence in the finite modes. Bodies and ideas shall share the same degree on existence. From this points of view, the ontological parallelism are supposed to avoid all privilege of the mind over the body, objecting the Cartesian thesis on that issue, since the Spinozan parallelism contains the whole

rejection of it, for body is not only formally independent from mind, it is also equal to mind in principle. Though, as bodies and ideas possess different modes of being, ontological parallelism must be asymmetrically applied so that their differences are taken into account.

In the following paragraphs we will see that asymmetrical parallelism between bodies and ideas constitutes important implications between ethics and theory of knowledge in the Spinozan system.

The originality brought by Spinoza's philosophy might be observed on the pragmatic implications that arise from the ontological parallelism. Traditionally, when philosophers think over ethical questions, they are usually committed to know if we act correctly, in accordance with some virtue or relatively to some agreement based on human values. But, they do not worry about what bodies are capable for and at what extent they concern our virtues. Spinoza, on the contrary, emphasizes this concern, since

To act absolutely in obedience to virtue is in us the same thing as to act, to live, or to preserve one's being (these three terms are identical in meaning) in accordance with the dictates of reason on the basis of seeking what is useful to one's self (SPINOZA, 1983, p. 46, part IV, prop. XXIV)

The pragmatic question concerning the strength of bodies becomes pertinent if they share the same statute with ideas. On the contrary, we would be inquiring - and then we would face a moral questioning - at what extent mind completes the lack or deficiency due to the way of existence of bodies. Pragmatic question is an immediate consequence of ontological parallelism, since bodies and ideas are equally ruled, though their properties are different being them related to diverse attributes.

Spinoza's ethics, then, consists of a system of relationship between bodies and bodies, ideas and ideas, bodies and ideas, which take into account their meeting and, thus, its relations. In the absence of this aspect, for Spinoza, what is regularly called ethics perform nothing but a moral point of view, which emphasizes some sort of anteriority of mind over body. Such an equivalence is suitable in regard to the specific relation between object and idea that comprises knowledge, since states Spinoza "the object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body, in other words a certain mode of the extension which actually exists, and nothing else" (SPINOZA, 1983, p. 143, part II, prop. XIII). Spinoza assures:

The body [Corpus] can by the sole laws of its nature do many things which the mind [Mens] wonders at [admiratur] [...] Thus, when men say that this or that physical action has its origin in the mind, which latter has dominion [Imperium] over the body, they are using word without meaning, or are confessing in specious phraseology that they are ignorant of the cause of the said action, and do not wonder at it (SPINOZA, 1983, p. 51, part III, note to prop. II)

The moral perspective upholds the supremacy of mind over body, since the former is supposed to overcome passions to which body is necessarily submitted. In this case, thinking would imply an operation in which conscience dominates body, being the latter envisaged as a nuisance or obstacle regarding the free course of thought. In contrast, the Spinozan ethical perspective keeps body as its model in order, not to pronounce its superiority over the mind, but to assure that bodies establish relations that exceed our knowledge.

The pragmatic partake of the body in the realm of ideas is obvious. For instance, when I met a friend and I feel myself happy in consequence, I could easily say that I have had a glad meeting. But my body does not teach me only with reference to the joy of this moment, it also allows me to learn about the relations established with other bodies. Thus, observing

attentively some given relations, I might come to know what my meetings with other bodies reserve. From the immediate meetings of bodies and its basic sensations - joy and sadness - I could possibly go upon a higher level of knowledge, from the moment when I shall begin to understand the relations between my body and the world.

Body gives rise to a kind of learning which goes beyond the knowledge allowed by its current meetings. That is why, we can say, in the company of Spinoza and Peirce, that the meetings, which really alter the conduct of our life performing an ethical joy, are those which allow us to shift from a state of doubt to a state of belief, carrying through the satisfaction that follows knowledge. In fact, the accordance between Peirce and Spinoza is expected, not only due to their ontological affinity, it arises from the very heart of Pragmatism as well, for:

According to that logical doctrine which the present writer first formulate in 1873 and named Pragmatism, the true meaning of any product of the intellect lies in whatever unitary determination it would impart to practical conduct under any and every conceivable circumstance [...] it is “an old way of thinking” in the sense that it was practiced by Spinoza, Berkeley, and Kant (CP, 6.490)

Without hesitating and symptomatically, Peirce declares: “I understand Spinoza to be a realist” (CP, 6.593). That’s why Spinoza’s experimentalist mind might have caught Peirce’s attention. In fact, Peirce does not develop any kind of ontological parallelism, as did Spinoza. Alternatively he set forth to a great extent the logic and the theory of relations between things and things, things and ideas, ideas and ideas. He called this theory “synechism”, which is based on the thesis of continuity, it means, “a law of relationship” (CP 6.172). The Peircean concept of continuity specifies that relations between bodies and ideas, although continuous, are asymmetrical, in the sense that body belongs to different modes of being. I tend to think that Spinozan parallelism and Peircean continuity are ontologically very close, because both are based on an asymmetrical principle.

What *continuity* is?

Continuity, despite being a complex subject, is not far from our everyday life. Universality and common sense are the most important concerns about continuity, so that it should be basically considered as a concept to build other. Let us follow some Peirce’s examples about continuity so as to illustrate its ordinary character.

It is well known, according to the basics mathematics we learnt at the elementary school, that points side by side form a line. For instance, let us compose a line with grains of sand; we will need magnifying lenses and small tweezers. At the end of this handmade work, Peirce would say: “it is not a continuous line, just a reunion of points, because being grains of sand independent, we are not able to make a continuous line out of them”. Confused, we try to go ahead through the same path; with the help of suitable tools we break infinitely the grains of sand so as to reach at last continuity. After our desperate activity, Peirce states definitely: “breaking grains of sand more and more will only make the sand more broken. It will not weld the grains into unbroken continuity” (CP 6.168).

The difference or gap between any line made out of grains of sand and continuous line lies in the difference concerning two diverse *modes of being*. It means, they are differently arranged. Actually, the former is related to brute existence, for instance, grains of sand exist, they are things or bodies; while the latter is related to generals or ideas, which are real but do not possess existence as actual beings do. The reunion between actual existence and generals performs Peirce’s concept of continuity most challenging character, because our universe is a world of brute existence organized and ruled by generals or ideas. The problem lies on how

these two different modes of being work together, *continuously*. About the necessity of their being together, Peirce is clear: "now the doctrine of continuity is that all things swim in continua²" (CP 1.171).

We are swimming in continua right now. Let us go on with more examples in order to make clearer the idea that continuity is a common and universal experience throughout our everyday life.

Imagine we were attending a lecture in a classroom. Is this room continuous? In a way, it is not, if we take into account the *multitude* of elements that forms the *collection* which allows us to call this place a room. We are a multitude of people filling different places in the so-called room; but if our idea of space were limited to our actual position or place, we could not feel the space as a whole, I mean, as *this* room. Continuous space is a general, it means, it is law that rules the different places of individuals. If we were not able to experience continuity of space as a reality apart from the position each one of us occupy in the space, I could not even say "we are in this room right now". Our experience of space would be hopelessly scattered in isolated perceptions.

The experience of time has a similar performance. If we were only immediate consciousness, then we would not be able to experience the flowing of time. Our consciousness would be only a dotted line skipping from instant to instant and we could not conceive time as a whole, as a continuous reality. Most of all, we would not be able to state that we attend a lecture and that it is going on right now.

It would be useless taking into account continuous reality without actual beings *swimming* in it. It would be useless because our world is the meeting between two kinds of reality, actual existence and generals. Matching them together makes Peirce's concept of continuity worthwhile, because the *pragmatic* commitment of our world lies on the relationship between both.

Peirce's primary lesson is that both modes of being must maintain their own realities. Indeed, any kind of reduction concerning their relationship would be disruptive to full conceptual accomplishment. We are not allowed to imagine, for instance, that what goes on with regard to actual existence is stored and forecast in the world of ideas; it would cheat the actual existence's mode of being. Conversely, if we suppose that the ideas should repeat or imitate actual things performing a shadow play, the general would lose its own mode of being. Not even the most platonic philosopher would be trapped by the idea that the relationship between actual existence and reality of generals should be like two reverse images in a mirror. It would be a poorer world!

The major concern about Peirce's concept of continuity is that the meeting between the reality of actual existence and the reality of generals must maintain an *asymmetrical* relationship, so as to preserve the richness of their respective modes of being. Building this kind of relationship is, I think, one of Peirce's most challenging and original contributions. Peirce tries hard not to lose continuity's asymmetrical character. And, that is exactly where he meets Spinozan parallelism.

In fact, the asymmetrical character of continuity is old enough through the history of Philosophy and, thus, it is not Peirce's privilege. Anyhow, Peirce goes as far as to provide an amazing chart of continuity's asymmetry. He builds asymmetry between the actual existence

² Continuum (singular form); continua (plural form).

and the reality of generals mapping their components out as different generating relations, which work together performing a system of relations.

In a way, as we saw, Spinoza develops continuity along with asymmetry within his ontological parallelism, for his experimentalist mind could not skip differences between them. By his turn, Peirce develops continuous asymmetry according to his own resources. But we have so far only set the problem in its general arrangement, it remains to be checked its specific resolution.

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