

# Form vs Power: Pragmatism and the wave of Spinozism<sup>1</sup>

## *Forma x Potência: Pragmatismo e a onda do Espinozismo*

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**Abstract:** I begin by introducing some of Peirce's quotations about Spinoza. A few but important remarks suggest that a new consideration of the philosophical "essence" can emerge from this analysis. As we read in Spinoza's *Ethics*, essence (or meaning, in contemporary terms) is not to be regarded as *pure form*; nor is it a definite qualification with rigid designations. Meaning is *power*: in pragmatic terms, as I will try to show, the power of being ready to act, expanding one's disposition to respond, embodying effectively a certain habit. Thus, it is not that meaning *is*, definitely and once for all. Rather, it *makes itself as far as it can produce new effects*. It is, as Spinoza said, a *potentia agendi*, an inexhaustible *conatus* that always produces a readiness to persevere in acting. Concepts are measurable in light of their results: they expand their effects like a forest, or wave, without any clear border or limit. Our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object, says the pragmatic maxim. Meaning implies a vast ocean of unforeseen consequences, writes Peirce (CP 8.176). In Spinozian terms: no one knows the extent of a mind's power - or the body's. I will avail myself of some of Giorgio Agamben's and Gilles Deleuze's suggestions on this point, building upon them in order to approach Spinoza's ethics in pragmatic terms, and pragmatism in a Spinozian shape.

**Keywords:** Form. Peirce. Power. Pragmatism. Spinoza.

**Resumo:** *Eu inicio por introduzir algumas citações que Peirce faz do Espinosa. Poucos, mas importantes comentários, sugerem que uma nova consideração da "essência" filosófica pode emergir desta análise. Conforme lemos na Ética de Espinosa, essência (ou significado, em termos contemporâneos) não deve ser considerada como forma pura; tampouco é uma qualificação definida com designações rígidas. Significado é potência: em termos pragmáticos, como buscarei demonstrar, a potência de estar pronto a agir, expandindo a própria disposição para responder, encarnando dado hábito de modo eficaz. Deste modo, não procede que o significado é, de modo acabado e de uma vez por todas. Antes, este se faz na medida em que é capaz de produzir novos efeitos. Como disse Espinosa, é uma potentia agendi, um conatus inexaurível que sempre produz uma*

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*prontidão para perseverar na ação. Conceitos são mensuráveis à luz de seus resultados: expandem seus efeitos como uma floresta, ou onda, sem uma fronteira ou limite claros. Nossa concepção destes efeitos é o todo de nossa concepção do objeto, reza a máxima pragmática. Significado implica um vasto oceano de conseqüências inesperadas, Peirce escreve (CP 8.176). Em termos espinosanos: ninguém sabe até onde chega o poder da mente — ou do corpo. Lançarei mão de algumas sugestões de Giorgio Agamben e Gilles Deleuze a este respeito, tendo-os por base para abordar a ética espinosista em termos pragmáticos e o pragmatismo numa forma espinosista.*

**Palavras-Chave:** *Espinosa Forma. Peirce. Potência. Pragmatismo.*

*Tiger does not proclaim her tigerness. She assaults the prey and devours it.*

Wole Soyinka

## 1 Spinozism and Pragmatism: a common attitude

It was Shannon Dea, speaking from this stage in 2013, who emphasized the strong connections, both historical and philosophical, between Peirce and Spinoza.<sup>2</sup> Before her, only a few scholars had highlighted the frequent occurrence in Peirce's writings of the name of Spinoza (at least 25 times). Peirce recalls him especially while situating his own philosophy within an old intellectual tradition, a sort of *philosophia perennis* beginning with Socrates and proceeding until Alexander Bain. But Peirce also refers to Spinoza and Spinozism as vital, profound currents, not at all tired or outdated. "He deploras [writes Dea] the various historical attacks on Spinoza and Spinozism" (DEA, 2014, p. 26) and, quite significantly, he inserts the Dutch philosopher into one of his last genealogies of the fathers of pragmatism, writing of the latter that it flows in different waters, but all belonging to the same river: "Of those who have used this way of thinking [pragmaticism] Berkeley is the clearest example, though Locke (especially in the fourth book of his *Essay*), Spinoza, and Kant may be claimed as adherents of it" (CP 8.206, 1905. Repeated in *Pragmatism*, 1907, CP 8.206; and again in CP 6.490 and 5.11).<sup>3</sup> Dea concludes: "Spinoza is, then, one of Peirce's 'top three' canonical pragmatists, and the only one of whom he says that he, rather than Peirce, might have formulated the pragmatic maxim" (DEA, 2014, p. 28).

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2 DEA, 2014. The paper is the elaboration of the speech delivered at the IMP the previous year.

3 I quote from the *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (Cambridge [Mass.]: Harvard University Press. C. Hartshorne e P. Weiss eds., Voll.1-6, 1931-5; A. Burks ed., Voll.7-8, 1958) with the usual abbreviation CP followed by the volume and paragraph number; from *Writings of Charles Sanders Peirce. A Chronological Edition* (edited by the "Peirce Edition Project", Bloomington: Indiana University Press, Voll.1-8, 1982-2010) as W, followed by volume and page numbers; and from *The Essential Peirce. Selected Philosophical Writings* (ed. by N. Houser and C. Kloesel, Vol.1, 1992; by the Peirce Edition Project; vol.2, 1998, Bloomington: Indiana University Press) as EP followed by volume and page number. R is from R. Robin. *Annotated Catalogue of the Papers of Charles S. Peirce*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1967, followed by the manuscript number.

I would like to argue that Spinoza (or rather Spinozism, a current that breaches into a thousand streams and influences figures as different as Goethe and Hegel in the romantic and idealistic periods, and Deleuze and Balibar in twentieth-century) can be strongly assimilated to pragmatism for some relevant aspects—although obviously not for every traceable aspect.<sup>4</sup> As we shall see, these aspects reflect an entirely new inspiration, in my view, a revolutionary one, in the philosophical field of modernity. If we can really talk about a pragmatist revolution, well, this revolution has been prepared by Spinoza himself, by his way of considering philosophy as a real practice. I am referring to some crucial theoretical issues, of course, and not to clear and strong historical links. As is well known, for example, James was less enthusiastic about the Spinozian position, which he assimilated to a tough-minded attitude and a monism completely distant from his empiricistic pluralism, as we read in *Pragmatism* (JAMES, 1978, p. 25)<sup>5</sup>. Thanks to the mediation of Hegel, Dewey had more interest in this kind of philosophy, as revealed by one of his first articles, “The Pantheism of Spinoza.”<sup>6</sup> This article, however, is mainly addressed to Spinoza’s metaphysics, and is in part critical of it. Still, I believe the general inclination of their thought, as a properly pragmatist vision, can be traced back to some crucial insights of Spinozism, regarded exactly as a “philosophical attitude” to comprehend the meaning of the world. More simply, I think—exactly like Peirce and James—that there is a pragmatist current that flows beneath modern and post-modern thought and affects many different thinkers.<sup>7</sup>

I will then start with two quotations which neatly express the meaning of the pragmatist method: “Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object” (EP 1:131). As an example taken from that very text (*How to make our Ideas Clear*, 1878): “The idea of anything is the idea of its sensible effects [...] The idea that the word force excites in our minds has no other function than to affect our actions, and these actions can have no reference to force otherwise than through its effects.” (EP 1:136). The example of the diamond, so many times repeated in Peirce’s texts, is far more meaningful: if subjected to pressure, the diamond resists, thereby manifesting its *power* to resist, its *capacity to act and behave* as a hard material.

4 The most problematic aspect is evidently the necessitarianism of Spinoza and his denial of the presence of chance and purposes in the universe. But I am confident in the fact that a careful reading of Spinoza’s texts would lead to non-scholastic considerations also about these themes. In any case, we will only consider here the power of some Spinozist *insights*, and their relevance for our current times.

5 Yet, in Lecture VI of the *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), we read: “*Spinoza’s* philosophy has this sort of healthy-mindedness woven into the heart of it, and this has been one secret of its fascination”.

6 DEWEY, 1882, p. 249-257.

7 “The rivulets at the head of the river of Pragmatism are easily traced back to almost any desired antiquity. Socrates bathed in these waters, Aristotle rejoices when he can find them. They run, where least one would suspect them, beneath the dry rubbish-heaps of Spinoza” (CP 5.11, 1907). But remember the title of James’ 1907 book: *Pragmatism: a New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*.

Even more clearly, in a famous passage from the “Syllabus” of 1902, Peirce explained that, in order to give a definition of the word “lithium,” you don’t need to state that it *is* the element whose atomic weight is 7 very nearly, but you must prescribe “what you are to *do* in order to gain a perceptual acquaintance with the object of the word” (CP 2.330). That is: search among minerals that are translucent, hard, insoluble, triturate that mineral, then fuse it, extract the residue, and convert it into a chloride, and so on and so forth. This is a Precept, not a Definition, describing to the Interpretant what has to be *done*, which kind of behavior he has to acquire. In a manuscript that we will shortly approach, he writes: “What is then? Produce it!” (R 322:12, 1907).

In this sense, I believe that the re-presentation of the pragmatic maxim, in the 1907 emended form, is crucial for my argument:

Consider what effects, that *might conceivably* have practical bearings—*especially in modifying habits or as implying capacities*—you conceive the object of your conception to have. Then, your (interpretational) conception of those effects is the whole (meaning of) your conception of the object (R 322:10, 1907, *the second emphasis is mine*).<sup>8</sup>

In conclusion, any judgment “is not a purely representitious event, but involves an act, an exertion of energy, and is liable to real consequences, or effects” (CP 5.547, 1905).

James was certainly clearer in defining pragmatism: “The attitude of looking away from first things, principles, ‘categories’, supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts” (JAMES, 1978, p. 32). The real pragmatist mind “turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action, and towards power” (JAMES, 1978, p. 31, *my emphasis*). Power, in James’ thought, is very well synthesized by the “dynamogenic” interpretation introduced by the short essay “The energies of men” (JAMES, 1907). There are some emotional excitements that have “dynamo-genic effects” (love, despair, anger). But there are also some “energy-releasing abstract ideas”, that have a “dynamic power” (Fatherland, Science, Truth, Liberty, Garibaldi’s phrase ‘Rome or Death’). Men often experience the possibility of freedom, of enlargement of their power, and they can exercise it. They have then to learn, according to the late James, how to energize their capacities.

The notion of effect, capacity, action—which is articulated as immediate and sensible by James, as a would-be produced in the long run of possible interpretations by Peirce—this notion returns in a fundamental passage from Peirce’s “Notes on the Question of the Existence of an External World:”

What evidence is there that we can immediately know only what is ‘present’ to the mind? [...] What evidence is there that a thing cannot act where it is not? This is a phrase that can be said because we think of forces as such that act through the resistance of materials. But further experience shows that attractions and repulsions are the universal types of forces. *A thing may be said to be wherever it acts*; but the notion that a

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8 As far as I know, the manuscript is unpublished. I owe this quotation to Mats Bergman.

particle is absolutely present in a part of space and absolutely absent from all the rest of space is devoid of all foundation (W8:78, 1890, *my emphasis*).

Saying that a thing is wherever it acts, means saying, in Peirce's vision, that a thing is wherever it produces effects and acts as a sign. This sounds antinominalistic if we consider nominalism as the theory that interprets facts as singularities eminently concrete and real, with a definite form.

There are some doubts as to whether Spinoza believed in the reality of universals, but the pragmatists' basic insight goes clearly beyond these distinctions. It claims that the reality of a thing lies in its capacity of expanding its own effects, affecting and being affected, operating encounters, generating new spaces for referral and signification, in a word: revealing its essence according to its power to act, and not its power to be. A being may be said "real" if and only if it has the power of producing some practical consequence, that is, "real" modifications and affections. And this seems to me to be essentially Spinozist.

## 2 Spinoza the Pragmatist

A few words about the absolute innovation introduced by Spinoza in the panorama of his time are then in order. Since Aristotle, an entity was defined on the basis of its essence, which is a form or *eidos*. The Greek word *eidos* refers to a pure form, well profiled and qualified, conceivably substantial. As it is well known, for Aristotle *eidos* and *ousia* coincide with each other, although naturally the substance is always a certain *tode ti*, a synergy of matter and form (contrary to what Plato thought). Yet, Plato wrote in the *Sophist* a phrase that in our perspective is extremely eloquent:

I suggest that everything which possesses any power of any kind, either to produce a change in anything of any nature or to be affected even in the least degree by the slightest cause, though it be only on one occasion, has real existence. For I set up as a definition which defines being, that it is nothing else but power (*dynamis*). (PLATO, 247d-e).

But I do not intend to wander in matters of ancient philosophy. I just want to stress that the Aristotelian vision is based on certain assumptions that will remain unquestioned until Spinoza (except the underground current represented by the *Sophist's* passage and some other Aristotelian *loci*). The reality of an entity is such as it is because it embodies a certain essence, that is, a certain form that can be perfectly defined. The idea of species, which resists until Darwin, is based on this Aristotelian principle.

Let us relate these notions to our contemporary practices: when we think of a thing or, even better, of the meaning of anything, we imagine a sort of photograph, a clear, well-defined image, with edges which are precise and recognizable to all. And we should add that, like Aristotle, we mostly think of it as immutable and eternal; something about which the question can be asked and answered according to rigid designations and precise qualifications: *Ti esti*, what is it (in the Socratic formulation)?

How does Spinoza deal with this world? He shatters it in a thousand pieces. Let us listen to a few passages of the *Ethics*:

The endeavour by which each thing endeavours to persevere in its being is nothing other than the actual—that is the essence of the thing. Demonstration: So *the power*, i.e., the endeavour of each thing by which, either alone or with others, it either *acts* or *endeavours to act* [...] is nothing other than the given, i.e., the *actual essence* of the thing (SPINOZA, *Ethics*, III, P7, *my emphasis*).<sup>9</sup>

By virtue and power I understand the same, that is virtue, in so far as it is related to man, is *the very essence, i.e. the nature of man, in so far as he has the power of doing* certain things which can be understood through the laws of nature alone” (My emphasis. IV, Def. 8).<sup>10</sup>

The power of God is simply the actual essence (*actuosam essentiam*) of God (II, P3Sc).

Such an equation between Essence and Power, which regards both God and man, the latter being obviously part of the Power of God (see IV, P4),<sup>11</sup> suggests that Spinoza, unlike Aristotle, does not conceive of potentiality as something which, in a second moment, results in an act. Rather, power is already fully in place; it is already an *Energeia*, a being constantly at work, an endeavor to affirm oneself, an inexhaustible force producing effects and marking differences, like any existing cause in the world. We are dealing with a wholly and perpetually ready-to-act (*actuosam*) essence.

This power resembles a habit, as Laurent Bove shows in his introduction to the *Tractatus Politicus*<sup>12</sup> referring to definition XXXII of the Affections (*Ethics*, Book

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9 I quote from SPINOZA 2000, referring to the Book and the Proposition (P), or Scholium (Sc), or Definition (Def).

10 Virtue comes from *vir*, man. The original latin, and old French or Italian meaning, is then force, strength, vigor; but also the quality, ability, the capacity of doing with talent certain actions. The phrase “by virtue of” preserves alternative Middle English sense of “efficacy.” Friedrich Nietzsche recalled this sense in his Twilight of Idols.

11 “The power by which particular things, and consequently a man, preserve their being is the power of God, i.e., of Nature; not in so far as it is infinite, but in so far as it can be explained by actual human essence. So, the power of a man in so far as it is explained through his actual essence, is a part of the infinite power, that is, of the essence, of God, i.e., of Nature.” And read the interesting sequence: “The power of God is his essence” (I, P34), “Nothing exists from whose nature some effect does not follow” (I, P36), followed by the Demonstration “Whatever exists expresses the nature, i.e., the essence, of God in a certain and determinate way. That is, whatever exists expresses in a certain and determinate way the power of God, which is the cause of all things, and so some effect must follow from it.”

12 BOVE, 2002.

3), in which the *dispositio* is assimilated to the *conatus* (“*dispositio seu conatus*”):<sup>13</sup> “When we recollect something [...] we are by that very fact disposed to think of it with the same emotion as we would if the thing were present”. And he clarifies that this one is: “a disposition, i.e. endeavor.” The passage is illuminating from a pragmatist perspective. In Spinoza, Bove writes, “it is the habit that ensures the continuity of our being. This habit, founding in the living present of its contractions a remembered past and an expected future, establishes time as the very substance of our existence [...] The habit in act explains the existence of all things: it is the figure of the perseverance of being, our habit of living” (BOVE, 1996, p. 56).

I shall not offer a philological reading of those sections of Spinoza’s *Ethics* which are dedicated to the power to act. But whoever is familiar with his thought knows that the strength of the great Spinozian book’s ethical invitation lies precisely in the first passage I quoted (III, P7). Nothing has a pure essence, in the sense of a defined or precisely definable form, because what each mode *is* simply coincides with its *ability and power to act* (the “implying capacities” of Peirce R 322). There is no virtue except as an expression of power, a hard endeavor, a reconquest of what our nature (which is then the nature of God/Nature, his own power) expresses, often without being immediately recognized. The main question should not be: what it is, but what does it do? What can a certain body do? What can a certain mind do?

Each thing, as Peirce wanted, is wherever it acts and renders its effects felt, wherever it networks with other things conceived as signs and weaves relationships of attraction and repulsion with other forces. In another famous passage, Peirce says that Alexander Bain had already perfectly understood the basic principle of pragmatism, which comes down to the identification of belief with “that upon which a man is prepared to act” (EP 2:399). Does Spinoza’s definition of the *conatus* differ? As Peirce goes on developing his thought, we read again in a unpublished and undated manuscript: “That which is communicated from the object through the Sign to the Interpretant is a Form; that is to say, it is nothing like an existent, but is a *power, is the fact that something would happen under certain conditions*”. (R 793:2, *my emphasis*). Yet, as we read in *Pragmatism* (1907): “no agglomeration of actual happenings can ever completely fill up the meaning of a would-be” (EP 2:402).

### 3 Agamben: power and action in western tradition

Historical analogies aside, I am intrigued by this radical revolution of the common way of thinking, a revolution which assimilates the two traditions of thought, and whose significance has not been duly assessed by scholars. This commonality, in my view, is a sort of shock wave that radically reconfigures the terrain of philosophical discourse, like a tsunami that, once unleashed, no longer allows us to recognize the shape of the land.

I turn back for a moment to Aristotle, because I think he is a lucid example of the mentality that dominated philosophy and common sense at least until Darwin. Aristotle conceives of the universe in light of the distinction among various

13 Yet, the very *potentia agendi* is a synonymous for *conatus*: see III, P57 Dem (*potentia seu conatus*), and then for *vis existendi* (III, Definition of affects, and IV P29 Dem).

immutable, uniquely definable substances, considered as clusters of matter and form. The world is formed by many different frameworks, within which each entity must be precisely situated in accordance with its attributes. The essence is the first cause, but also the end or *telos* towards which every movement and action tend. Each being aims to acquire its own determined form, passing from power to act (which thus becomes synonymous with form). The notion of power is a mark of Aristotle's thought, but only as a possibility to be translated into act. Form, under the guise of act, appears as the implementation of a potential within matter. Some scholars believe that, with these references, Aristotle passes from a static to a dynamic conception of form; but we must certainly add that, for the Stagirite, power is constituted by an expectation of its own realization, a tendency to achieve its own definite shape. The most ancient meaning of power, which is in book Zeta of *Metaphysics* and was certainly inspired by Plato's *Sophist*—"capacity to act"—is transformed into the idea of power as the capacity to become form-in-act (*en-ergeia*) and find one's own goal (*entelecheia*). On the other hand, what is the meaning of a conception of power such as Spinoza's?

To answer this question, I will rely on two contemporary "continental" interpretations: Giorgio Agamben's and Gilles Deleuze's. The text of Agamben I refer to is the recent *Karman—A brief Treatise on Action, Guilt, and Gesture* (AGAMBEN, 2018). In this text, Agamben reflects precisely on the theme of action and power, without ever mentioning either Spinoza or the pragmatists. Agamben starts from attesting the lack, among the classical sources, of a clear word indicating the human will. We must guard ourselves against anachronistically projecting on ancient man the way we conceive of actions, desires, and the foundations of free and responsible action. The will in the ancient world is rather interpreted as something cosmic and detached from subjective action, something like "being ready or willing to do something" (AGAMBEN, 2018, p. 30), which obviously can be independent of rational choice and conscious will; it may be no more than a gesture, the expression of a know-how, a habit of response that unknowingly adapts itself to the world. "To the preeminence accorded by modern people to the will, there corresponds in the ancient world a primacy of potential (*potenza*): human beings are not responsible for their actions because they have *willed* them; they answer for them because they were *able* to carry them out" (AGAMBEN, 2018, p. 31). The tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles are still here to witness exactly this thought, so difficult for us to conceive.

What does it take, in a deep philosophical sense, to separate the will from the power (to)? What does it mean to separate the ability to do something from the deliberate choice leading to it? It means, precisely, leaving behind a certain metaphysical thought and arriving at a practical-pragmatist revolution, according to which "the place of ethics is not being, but acting" (AGAMBEN, 2018, p. 63). It means identifying practice as the place of philosophy, a practice (an ethics) exercised in the many capacities of doing that delineate our power as living beings. It means focusing our attention on the habit of response that is not voluntarily decided, but which belongs as "preparedness to act" to each and every one of us, as Hegel would say. It means, as Deleuze puts it, to learn to be aware of what one can do. We do not know what affections we are capable of or how far our power goes; we are mostly detached from them (from our essence and virtue, in Spinozian terms). Knowledge



leads us to be active, as well as to recognize the limits and abilities which are at our disposal, teaching us to act virtuously, that is, according to our nature.<sup>14</sup>

If we focus—as does the pragmatist tradition—on the reality and efficacy of action, however, we shall inevitably weaken the will of a permanent subject, to which actions and their consequences may be ascribed. Agamben observes as much, and we do not need to be reminded of Peirce's, James' and Mead's well-known critiques of the primacy of conscience—a criticism that is a natural consequence of the priority given to acting and the tendency to act.

#### 4 Deleuze, interpreter of Spinoza

In his commentary on Spinozian thought, Gilles Deleuze elaborates on the subject. I draw the following quotations from a text that appeared, in a somewhat piratic way, only in Italian, and which reproduces the lessons held by Deleuze in Vincennes in 1980-81 (DELEUZE, 2007).<sup>15</sup> Let us recall that Deleuze entertained a long and passionate relationship with the philosophy of Spinoza, which led him to characterize the other, in *What is philosophy?*, as “the prince of philosophers.” Deleuze wrote his doctoral thesis on Spinoza (DELEUZE, 1968), and his own philosophy of the event, or philosophy of pure immanence, is certainly modeled, albeit quite originally so, on Spinozian insights.

Deleuze's course has a promising title for our journey: “What can a body?” Here too, without ever explicitly comparing himself with the pragmatist tradition, Deleuze interprets Spinoza exactly as Peirce understood it, namely, as a precursor and forerunner of a fully practical, not at all intellectualistic philosophy.<sup>16</sup> As Deleuze writes in the introductory lesson, entering the domain of philosophy does not mean thinking or reasoning through arguments, but exercising the art of life (the techniques of life, as his friend Foucault would have said, who was working on these themes during the same years). It means exercising the art of encounters, knowing how to establish positive relationships with what surrounds us and break up or move away from what makes us sick and generates sadness. “One thing matters and that alone: one's way of life. One thing matters, meditation on life. Philosophy can only be this. Far from being a meditation on death, philosophy is the practice in virtue of which I minimize the part affected by it” (DELEUZE, 2007, p. 60). Think of *Ethics*, IV, P67, which sweeps away a centuries-old and ‘depressive’ tradition: “A free man thinks of nothing less than death, and his wisdom is a meditation, not on death, but on life.” For Spinoza, philosophy is simply a path to happiness, to joy (*laetitia*). Now, if we think of happiness in its latin etymological sense (*felicitas*), as something that gives birth to new sprouts, as fruitfulness, what I will continue with saying should be better understood.

14 On this interpretation, see the main book by Deleuze on Spinoza (*Spinoza et le problème de l'expression*, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1968).

15 The original version can be found in [www.webdeleuze.com](http://www.webdeleuze.com). The Italian text is a literal transcription of the lessons thereby recorded. We must add that the most relevant theses of this text were already present in DELEUZE 1968.

16 See also, in this perspective, DELEUZE, 2003 and, significantly, AGAMBEN, DELEUZE, *Bartleby, La formula della creazione*, Macerata: Quodlibet, 2012, with some passages on pragmatism and its method. On the Pragmatism of Deleuze, see the most recent S. BOWDEN, S. BIGNALL AND P. PATTON (Eds.), 2015.

In each of these lessons, Deleuze insists on the need to articulate Spinoza's philosophy pragmatically. Far from a bearer of rationalism! Far from being sad and frightened by life, advancing a plastered and suffocating metaphysics. Spinoza loved life and thought philosophy should teach us to live it better. The same degrees of knowledge (cf. *Ethics* II, P40 sc.2) that lead us from sensible and imaginative knowledge—inadequate knowledge—to adequate and rational knowledge up to the intuitive vision of God, indicate three concrete life practices, the ability to arrive at a flow of positive combinations that fits with our nature, “in the awareness that individualities are never pre-existing to the compositions we create. Everything happens according to a concrete, practical meaning” (DELEUZE, 2007, p. 55). It is no coincidence that the second book published by Deleuze on Spinoza is titled: *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (DELEUZE, 2003).

Do you see the revolution which is thereby brought forth in the field of modern thought? Spinoza is already a contemporary, much more than Leibniz, perhaps even Kant. Once Peirce saw this, as I believe he did, he considered the great theorist of the conduct of life as the father of pragmatism.

Deleuze certainly insists on the anti-intellectual side of Spinozian thought; however, undoubtedly, his greatest merit is to have placed in great relief Spinoza's reference to the theme of power and to the *conatus* as an expression of power. Spinoza's ethics is not normative or prescriptive; it has nothing to do with duty. It has to do with power. Does this fact make it immoral? Perhaps it rather puts it beyond good and evil, as happened with Nietzsche (who will name Spinoza as a forerunner of his thought, in this regard).<sup>17</sup> There is no reference to what is good at all, but to what is good for me, for my profit, that is, for the increase, the realization, the incarnation of my power to act. Isn't this a highly immoral, even utilitarian philosophy (remember, however, that even the pragmatists are accused of misguided utilitarianism)? Not really, because, as Spinoza explains, if I reach *my* good, harmony with *my nature* (my virtue), I reach harmony with the whole nature, that is with God. And if everyone behaves like me, I will also reach harmony with my fellow men. There is conflict among men because some of them want what they cannot achieve, what they do not have the ability, the power to carry out (see *Ethics* IV, P30ff.). “This is the point of view of an ethical theory: what are you capable of? What can you do?” (DELEUZE, 2007, p. 76). And the point, Deleuze emphasizes, is that this possibility can never be determined a priori. As the Megarian wrote, we *can* only when we act. We do not know what a body can do, what a mind can do. We do not know, writes Peirce, the “vast ocean of unforeseen consequences which the acceptance of the word is destined to bring about, not merely consequences of knowing but perhaps revolutions of society. One cannot tell what *power* there may be in a word or a phrase *to change* the face of the world.” (CP 8.186, *my emphasis*). Look at the effects, the consequences. These always are “something whose possibilities of determination no multitude of individuals can exhaust” (CP 6.170).

Not only, as some have claimed, does Spinoza carry out the Copernican revolution to the highest degree, but he is also already a precursor of Darwinism. In the following sense: there is no program, no table of values, no *telos* and no

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17 See a letter to Franz Overbeck in July 1881.

pre-established forms. There is only the unpredictable evolution of being able to do. The essence of the good is identified with the practice of acting and doing well, reaching the greatest amount of joy, far distant from suffering (this is what is properly said to be useful). And this practical guidance of life leads to certain ascetic (spiritual) exercises, which are to be remembered and reiterated by being transformed into incorporated garments. “There opens up a huge field of exploration, experimentation, where essence has nothing to do with anything at all. People begin to be seen as sets of possibilities to be described” (DELEUZE, 2007, p. 77). The question is not what an entity is, but what it is capable of doing and suffering, of affecting and being affected. What encounters reactivate its power, which ones depress it? Here we find again the platonic *dynamis*, where power is not yet the unexpressed act, but the capacity, full of consequences and unpredictable effects, “either to produce a change in anything of any nature or to be affected even in the least degree” (PLATO, 247d).

But there is another very important aspect of this Deleuzean discourse, which brings us go back to Agamben’s reading:

By definition, power is not what I *want*, but what I *have*: I have this or that power, that is, I am located in a certain place in the quantitative scale of beings. Regarding power as the object of a will is a contradiction. The opposite is true: whether I shall be able to want this or that depends on the power I possess [...] This is very different from the problem of morality, which is: what ought you to do, by virtue of your essence? (DELEUZE, 2007, p. 77).

The essence is nothing other than an entity’s degree of power—this is the great philosophical revolution of Spinoza, which is still to be incorporated in a philosophical practice, and a practice of fruitful life. Deleuze recalls Nicola of Cues, who merged the words *posse* and *est* into a new term, *possesit*, to indicate the perfect identity between power and act, essence and existence. Perhaps only existentialists have been able to recover a similar idea in the contemporary age.

## 5 Form vs power: Boundary-frame vs boundary-tension

What are the philosophical consequences of this way of thinking, which has nothing to do with metaphysics, but with the concrete practice of life? Deleuze explains it very well by referring to the notion of limit. If we say that any being is not form, but power - a power which is at every instant already perfect, but not always recognized as such—if we say that its essence is the conatus’ effort to persevere, that is, the affirmation and strengthening of the habit, we are also saying that power is the tendency towards a limit, a constant tension to perfect itself, to rediscover one’s own being in the infinite perfection of God-Nature.

The traditional idea, writes Deleuze, is that of the essence considered as a boundary-frame, the picture or photograph I introduced at the beginning of this paper. I reach my perfection when I occupy all the available space, as if I were enclosed by the form that is assigned to me. “Since then, individual means ‘form bounded by the frame of a perimeter’” (DELEUZE, 2007, p. 130). The limit, in

Greek thought, is productive of harmony and logos. The unlimited, on the other hand, is irrational. The *eidōs* here reveals its tactile origin; it is something we scan by touching even before seeing. It is not by chance that the Greeks practiced in sculpture, not so much in painting.

But as the Stoics, the Byzantines and the moderns enter the scene, the perspective changes completely.<sup>18</sup> It is painting, and the use of colors, especially, that teaches modern man that a limit may reflect a potentially unlimited expansion. It is the limit of the light or the edge of the forest, a dynamic limit that moves in accordance with the expansive force of those who tend to it. "The limit of a thing is not the frame that surrounds its figure, but the limit in which the action comes to a halt" (DELEUZE, 2007, p. 134). What is the edge of a forest? It is indeed a dynamic, evolving, self-propelled, undecidable limit. Where the trees express their ability to grow and strengthen, the forest is dense; at some point, the trees thin out, lose height and foliage, and the forest opens onto a clearing. This, and only this is the limit of vital action. It is not a frame, but an infinite *conatus* (*cupiditas*, also writes Spinoza), whose directions we cannot predict a priori, but only see a posteriori. Not a predominantly tactile, but a decidedly optic universe: this is demonstrated by the fact that, in painting, it is light, with its vague halo, that creates space; not the other way around. Not space, but spatialization, an operation that aims at making space, rather than fitting into an already formed space.

But let's get to the last aspect I want to highlight. Deleuze works very well in this cycle of lessons, also for didactic purposes, on the above mentioned three modes of knowledge. He tells us: look, we are not dealing with abstract ideas, do not stop at math and geometry, do not interpret the common notions that belong to the second level of knowledge as spatial or geometric notions. Think of them as ideas which, being intertwined in the encounters among people, enable mutual understanding and virtuous relationships. And he makes an amazing example: swimming. He invites us to reflect on how we inhabit water when we are not yet able to swim. We have only inadequate knowledge, we grope, sink and drink. We are hostages of a hostile matter. We and the world are not in harmony, our mutual parts are composed in a disorderly manner. We have no control over these relationships. We do not know the causes, but only suffer the effects. Knowing how to swim becomes a vital achievement at this point. Nothing intellectualistic here: it is a practice that must be learned and exercised. For a properly theoretical end? No. Rather to feel good, live well, deepen one's joy. "Knowing how to swim is not a mathematical or physical form of knowledge, a scientific knowledge of the wave movement. It is a know-how, an incredible know-how. To swim well you need to feel the rhythm of the water." (DELEUZE, 2007, p. 165). We need to learn how to relate our arms to the water in the most suitable way; nothing is left to chance. Here we are in the realm of adequate knowledge, of 'knowing how to be in the world.' Find the right attitude, breathe in the right way. "It is an art: the

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18 The Stoics wrote: *Quod facit corpus est*, that is, what has real existence is defined by what it does, how it acts—not by what it is. "Body is the power that determines most effects," they added. So also the mind is a body, as well as thought and even God. Cf. *Stoicorum veterum fragmenta* II, 49. On these very interesting topics, BREHIER, 1997. Unfortunately, I have no space here to pursue the question in greater depth.

art of composing relationships” (DELEUZE, 2007, p. 166). When we enjoy it, when we become one with the open sea and cease to perceive any fatigue, letting bliss come forth—being fully abandoned to the warmth of the sun and the rinsing of the water—, here we are entering the third kind of knowledge: the world of *amor dei intellectualis*.

I believe Deleuze teaches us some important things about Spinoza, which Peirce had certainly grasped,<sup>19</sup> and which reverberate throughout the pragmatist revolution, despite James’ and Dewey’s hesitations (paying as they do particular attention to the theological and metaphysical aspects of Spinoza’s philosophy, and to nothing else). First of all, as we have seen, Deleuze stresses the importance of the *potentia agendi* as the sole “essential” property of the living; second, he teaches us that the three kinds of Spinozian knowledge are not cognitive categories but ways of living. Or that one thing is equivalent to the other. We could say, in Peircean terms: “we come down to what is tangible and practical, as the root of every real distinction of thought, no matter how subtle it may be; and there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice” (EP 1:131). Therefore, philosophy indicates less a form of knowledge than a kind of know-how, the forming of an effective habit of conduct. Otherwise, it is indeed sterile metaphysics.

Being spinozists is a concrete practice. Who is it for? For those who feel ready to have an experience of understanding [...] What does it prescribe? Something like this: sadness, anguish, are products of the world of equivocal signs, at the mercy of which people live. What I propose to you, I myself, Spinoza, is a concrete practice, the concrete practice by which we can replace this dark, nocturnal universe, the universe of equivocal signs, with a universe of different nature [...]. It is not a matter of attracting it from the outside, but of reaching the universe of unequivocal expressions by passing through this forest of equivocal signs, going beyond—which requires a thousand attentions—the domain of ambiguity” (DELEUZE, 2007, p. 188).

While Spinoza proposes the practice of an intellectual emendation from equivocal signs as the way to happiness, the pragmatists teach us that only by clarifying our ideas in light of their conceivably practical effects can we free ourselves from our rational superstitions. The way, the method (*met'hodos*) they indicate seems to have infinite resonances.

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19 See for example the amazing review for “The Nation” of *Spinoza’s Political and Ethical Philosophy*, by R. Duff, MacMillan, New York (written on July 21st, 1904), “Mr. Duff makes no reference to pragmatism [...] but Spinoza considered philosophy from an intensely practical point of view.” Spinoza has taught how “the substance of what one believes does not consist in any mere sensuous representation, but in how one would be disposed to behave.” And some lines before he appreciated Spinoza’s “extraordinary approaches toward pragmatism.”

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