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Étienne Souriau and the Overturning of Spinozism

Introduction: a turning point for modes of existence

Ontology has long been defined as the study of being *qua* being, the study of being in itself, independent of its many possible qualifications and attributes. Ontology therefore rests on the assumption that being *can* be considered in such a way: in brief, most modern ontology rests on the assumption of the *univocity* of being, closely associated with the name of Duns Scotus¹. Taking up Scotus' univocal ontology famously led Gilles Deleuze to claim that "there has only ever been one ontological proposition: Being is univocal"².

However, it is impossible to point out one philosopher who has really been able to theorize being as such without implicitly committing to a plurality of ways of being. The view that existence comes in many flavors was suggested by Aristotle's dictum that "being is said in many ways" (*Met.* 1003a32), and despite the underlying requirements of ontology, it has been so popular that Scotus can be considered "the only significant dissidence" within the "unanimous consent in favor of an extreme plurality of modes of existence" in the Middle Ages³. In recent years this concept, that of "mode of existence", has become central to debates in continental philosophy as a result of the rediscovery of Étienne Souriau's book *The Different Modes of Existence*, originally published in 1943⁴, as well as the publication in 2012 by Bruno Latour of *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*⁵, to the point of becoming a codeword to indicate that being is only in the different ways in which it occurs.

Is being univocal or equivocal? Are modes of existence ontologically

¹ O. Boulnois, *Être et représentation: une généalogie de la métaphysique moderne à l'époque de Duns Scot*, PUF, Paris 1999.

² G. Deleuze, *Difference and repetition*, trans. P. Patton, Columbia UP, New York 1994, p. 35.

³ É. Souriau, *The Different Modes of Existence*, trans. E. Beranek & T. Howles, Univocal, Minneapolis 2015, p. 104.

⁴ B. Latour, I. Stengers, *The Sphinx of the Work*, trans. T. Howles, in É. Souriau, *The Different Modes of Existence*, cit., pp. 11-90.

⁵ B. Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, trans. C. Porter, Harvard UP, Cambridge 2013.

significant? Should we cling to univocity or to the pluralism of modes of existence? In this paper, we suggest that the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza could have been a crucial turning point in the debate on modes of existence. This claim probably sounds curious, as “monism” is the first word that comes to mind when thinking about Spinoza. However, Souriau distinguished two forms of the monism-pluralism opposition: *ontic* monism vs. pluralism, the question of whether there is a single all-encompassing substance or there are multiple substances; and *existential* monism vs. pluralism, the question of whether being is univocal or there are many modes of existence. The two forms of monism can be defended together, as in Eleatic monism, which postulates a single substance with a homogeneous mode of being, and the same goes for the two pluralisms, as in the “polyrealism” that Souriau exemplifies with Schleiermacher’s fideism, which admits many substances with different modal connotations. But these associations are not necessary: “As pantheism shows, ontic monism can accommodate itself to an existential pluralism. And ontic pluralism can endeavor to enhance the value of an existential monism, as in the case of the atomists”⁶.

Now, while the champions of the pluralism of modes of existence (Souriau, Latour, etc.) also tend to be ontic pluralists, there can be no doubt that Spinoza is the quintessential ontic monist. However, the interesting aspect here is Spinoza’s peculiar relation with existential pluralism. Projected back to Spinoza’s system, the question that today we convey by speaking of “modes” refers less to the *modi*, the individual entities that Spinoza considers as “affections” of the only substance, than to the infinite *attributes* that characterize the substance. Extension and thought are the two attributes – today we would say: the two modes of existence – that Spinoza takes from Descartes to connote his substance. Does this amount to a pluralism of modes of existence? Was Spinoza the first conscious existential pluralist?

This would be an exaggeration, but contemporary existential pluralists do consider Spinoza as an ally. In 2016, Latour devoted a conference to a “portrait of Spinoza as a co-inquirer” of modes of existence, focusing on the “regimes of enunciation” (the prophetic and the philosophical) distinguished in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*⁷. More interestingly from a metaphysical point of view, Souriau claimed that Spinoza was the philosopher who came nearer to his own existential pluralism, while stopping one step before reaching the goal. This paper will focus on the way in which Souriau presented his own doctrine as a “corrected Spinozism”, that endorses the extreme pluralism of “attributes” or modes of existence, but gives up the menda-

⁶ É. Souriau, *The Different Modes of Existence*, cit., pp. 99-100.

⁷ See <http://modesofexistence.org/portrait-de-spinoza-en-co-enqueteur-du-projet-eme/> (accessed 6/4/2024).

cious “parallelism” that Spinoza established between them in order to reaffirm the univocity of the substance. The first section provides a cursory presentation of the metaphysics that Spinoza lays down in the *Ethics* and draws on Gilles Deleuze’s reading of it to explain how Spinoza used parallelism to conciliate his pluralism of attributes with a univocal ontology. The second section shows how this is precisely the aspect that Souriau contests, presenting his existential pluralism as an accomplished Spinozism and constantly using Spinoza’s system as a touchstone to clarify the stakes of his own project. The final section establishes a theoretical comparison between Spinozism and existential pluralism.

The reason why Deleuze will play such a role is that he is also an adept of Spinozism, but one who tried to bring Spinoza’s univocity to the extreme. The thesis that Spinoza’s ontology must be considered as a development of univocity in the wake of Duns Scotus is as old as Pierre Bayle and was defended by none other than Étienne Gilson⁸, but probably no one insisted as much on Spinoza’s role in the genealogy of univocity as Deleuze did. Souriau and Deleuze, the relationship between whom is difficult to construct⁹, thus show two possible outcomes of Spinozism as a sliding door in the debate on modes of existence: both see Spinoza’s system as an almost perfect foreshadowing of their own, and both believe that the ontological monism implied by Spinoza’s uniqueness of substance is the final obstacle to be removed. But this modification points in two opposite directions: for Deleuze, substance monism subordinated the univocity of being to a residue of transcendence, represented by substance, which, in Spinoza, “is prior by nature to its affections”¹⁰, in a way that is too reminiscent of the Christian God or the Neoplatonic One; for Souriau, substance monism prevented Spinoza from accessing the authentic pluralism of modes of existence¹¹. A small step further would have been enough to shift the destiny of ontology towards existential pluralism or towards univocity.

⁸ É. Gilson, *Jean Duns Scot: Introduction a ses positions fondamentales*, Vrin, Paris 1952, p. 273.

⁹ A. Wiame, *La dramatisation entre Gilles Deleuze et Souriau*, in D. Adnen (ed.), *Politiques de la philosophie chez Gilles Deleuze*, Metispresses, Genève 2015.

¹⁰ B. Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. M. Silverthorne and M. Kisner, Cambridge UP, Cambridge 2018, p. 4 (part I, prop. 1).

¹¹ A similar path from modern philosophy to existential pluralism could have been made starting from Leibniz, who is also a source for Souriau (C. D’Aurizio, *L’«étrange monadologie» du plérôme: Remarques sur L’instauration philosophique d’Étienne Souriau*, in “Aisthesis”, 15(2), pp. 71-81) and who is identically pushed towards univocity by Deleuze in *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley, Minnesota UP, Minneapolis 1992.

Spinozism *sive* univocity

Since this paper does not aim at a philological account, the simplistic presentation of Spinoza's thought that follows should be forgiven. Spinoza defines the substance as "that which is in itself and is conceived through itself, i.e. no concept of any other thing is needed for forming a concept of it"¹². Modes, those which we normally consider to be separate "entities" or "bodies", are just "affections" of the only substance: "By mode I mean affections of a substance or that which is in another thing through which it is also conceived"¹³. Following Descartes, all modes are composed of a body and a mind, extension and thought being the two "attributes" of the infinite substance: "By attribute I mean that which an intellect perceives of a substance as constituting its essence"¹⁴.

However, compared to Descartes, Spinoza makes two crucial shifts. The first is that extension and thought are not the only two attributes of the substance, but only those that our limited intellect can grasp. Substance, being infinite, has infinite attributes: "By God I mean absolutely infinite being, i.e. substance consisting of infinite attributes, each one of which expresses eternal and infinite essence"¹⁵. From this point of view, Spinoza's universe is much more pluralistic than Descartes's. There are many more attributes in the substance than are dreamt of in any single philosophy.

The second shift, however, makes this extreme plurality of attributes collapse back into the single substance. Differently from Descartes, Spinoza holds that extension and thought are not two different "substances" because, in fact, substance is unique; attributes are parallel "expressions" of this same substance, at the same time identical and absolutely different, like two sides of the same sheet of paper. This is what Spinoza means when he writes that "the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things"¹⁶. The same, *idem est*. In his complementary doctoral thesis, *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression* (1968), Deleuze describes this coincidence of attributes with a term taken not from Spinoza but from Leibniz, that of "parallelism". Extension and thought are two parallel manifestations of the only substance, coinciding point by point, body by idea.

This historiographical license is the culmination of an interpretative *tour de force* in which Deleuze presents Spinoza as an heir to the univocity of being established by Duns Scotus. The limit of Scotus's univocity was his *neutral* conception of being, that could distill being as being only by re-

¹² B. Spinoza, *Ethics*, cit., p. 3 (part I, def. 3).

¹³ *Ibidem* (part I, def. 5).

¹⁴ *Ibidem* (part I, def. 4).

¹⁵ *Ibidem* (part I, def. 6).

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 45 (part II, prop. 7).

ducing metaphysics to logic¹⁷. Only in Spinoza does univocity become a thoroughly ontological proposition, thanks to his *affirmative* conception of being. It is being itself, not merely its concept, that is univocal: “Univocity is the keystone of Spinoza’s entire philosophy”¹⁸. The tools through which Spinoza attains this result, however, are drawn from Scotus himself. In particular, a crucial role is played by the concept of *formal distinction*, which allows Spinoza to maintain both the *absolute difference* between attributes, which have nothing in common and cannot limit each other, and their *absolute identity* as different expressions of the same substance:

The new status of real distinction is fundamental: as purely qualitative, quidditative or formal, real distinction excludes any division... Detached from all numerical distinction, real distinction is carried into the absolute, and becomes capable of expressing difference within Being... *Real and yet not numerical*, such is the status of formal distinction... There are here as it were two orders, that of formal reason and that of being, with the plurality in one perfectly according with the simplicity of the other... to the formal distinction between attributes there corresponds no division of being. Substance is not a genus, nor are attributes specific differences.¹⁹

Formal difference is difference “carried into the absolute”: two things that are formally different have nothing in common and cannot limit each other. Yet this difference is not numerical, which means that formal difference occurs *within the same being*, the substance. “Ontologically one, formally diverse”²⁰, such is the status of the attributes. Extension and thought are absolutely identical because they express the same Being, and at the same time they are absolutely different, deployed on ontological dimensions that have nothing in common. What is formally different *differs absolutely but ONLY formally*, so that absolute difference rejoins absolute identity (a mechanism that Deleuze clarifies by rephrasing Spinoza’s formal difference between attributes in terms of Frege’s distinction between *Sinn* and *Bedeutung*). In short, being is univocal thanks to the very difference between its attributes, that prevents them from interacting as if they were different modes:

By his strict parallelism Spinoza refuses any analogy, any eminence, any kind of superiority of one series over another, and any ideal action that presupposes a preeminence: there is no more any superiority of soul over

¹⁷ F. Di Maio, *Univocità e individuazione: Gilles Deleuze lettore di Giovanni Duns Scoto*, Ventura, Senigallia 2023.

¹⁸ G. Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. R. Hurley, City Lights, San Francisco 1988, p. 63.

¹⁹ G. Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin, Zone, New York 1992, pp. 38-9, 64-5.

²⁰ Ivi, p. 66.

body, than of the attribute of Thought over that of Extension... Spinoza's doctrine is rightly named "parallelism", but this because it excludes any analogy, any eminence, any transcendence.²¹

In summary, the cornerstone of Spinozism is the combination between an extreme plurality of attributes and an extreme monism of the substance. Parallelism can be described as the *seal* placed on Spinoza's philosophical edifice that locks in the existential pluralism he almost established within the monism of the only substance.

Deleuze himself will try to break this seal in order to overcome the last limitation of Spinozism: substance monism, which must be replaced by a univocity that is said of difference itself. While Deleuze's philosophy of difference is a bold *existential* monism, his appeal to univocity is meant to counter *ontic* monism, the postulation of a single, absolute substance. All the differences that make up being share the same metaphysical or modal structure; Deleuze is one of those philosophers described by Souriau who "recognize a multitude of really substantial beings. But the more these latter become a multitude, the more their existential status becomes identical and unique"²². Univocal Being is said of the differences themselves: "All that Spinozism needed to do for the univocal to become an object of pure affirmation was to make substance turn around the modes"²³. The actual diversity of ways in which being comes is dismissed by Deleuze through a strategy that combines his Spinozism with his insistence on difference: the different "systems" (as he calls the attributes in *Difference and Repetition*) do not interact with one another, not because they run parallel, but because they *diverge* and create different, incommensurable worlds. Deleuze's concept of univocity replaces Spinoza's parallelism based on the only substance with a "divergentism" that turns around internal differences.

Both parallelism and divergentism *prevent modes of existence from relating to each other* and making a difference; from the point of view of the debate around modes of existence, it makes little difference whether they are parallel expressions of the self-identical substance or divergent affirmations of the virtual plane of immanence. They are the two forms of the "*non-rapport*", as Deleuze says with Blanchot, between modes of existence, which are thereby reduced to secondary expressions of the

²¹ Ivi, p. 109. Of course, Deleuze's reading is not the only possible one: a reading of Spinozism as based on analogy can be found in P. Di Vona, *L'analogia del concetto di res in spinoza*, in "Rivista Critica di Storia della Filosofia", 16(1), 1961, pp. 48-78; the continuity established by Deleuze between Scotus and Spinoza is explicitly challenged by A. Nannini, *Univocità metafisica dell'ens e individuazione mediante intensità di potenza in Duns Scoto*, in "Rivista di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica", 103(3), pp. 389-423.

²² E. Souriau, *The Different Modes of Existence*, cit., p. 98.

²³ G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, cit., p. 304.

univocal Being, unable to escape the original expressive relation and thus deprived of ontological ultimacy.

Deleuze describes the result of his operation as a “chaosmos”. However, in so doing he dismisses the great *rigor* that his divergentism requires. If attributes are to be pushed to the point of absolute divergence, their actualization must be regulated so that no interactions occur. Absolute chaos is no less demanding than Spinozian substance, and divergence has no less stringent criteria than parallelism. Compared to Deleuze’s, the world that Souriau draws by reconceptualizing Spinoza’s system looks much more “chaotic”. Souriau does not break the seal of parallelism in order to replace it with strict divergence, but in order to release modes of existence from their subjection to substance monism.

Attributes out of joint: portrait of Spinoza as an existential pluralist

Perhaps no philosopher in history has ever really managed to avoid admitting a plurality of modes of being. However, no one had ever tackled the problem of different modes of existence head-on as Souriau did in the 1940s. Souriau’s name is still tied to aesthetics – curiously, in his attempt to define aesthetics in scientific terms, he described it as close to Spinoza’s third kind of knowledge, the intuition that puts the knower in touch with the whole of the substance, “the only knowledge which can give us the possession of the Other”²⁴. But it is his contribution to ontology through the pluralism of modes of existence that makes him a point of reference for contemporary debates on pluralism and has motivated his rediscovery.

In the growing literature devoted to Souriau, he is never portrayed as a Spinozist. This is not surprising considering Spinoza’s monism and some obvious differences in their “philosophical temperaments”: to mention only one, against the robustness of Spinoza’s substance, whose essence coincides with its power and the *modi* of which are characterized by a *conatus* that strives to maintain them into existence, Souriau’s metaphysics is centered upon “solicitude”, an affect which is required to maintain into existence those entities that “are present and exist for us with an existence based in desire, concern, fear, or hope, or even fancy and diversion. We could say of these beings that they exist in proportion to the importance they hold for us – whether many things take part in our mind’s disquiet, or whether one alone is enough”.²⁵ Souriau develops a

²⁴ É. Souriau, *L’avenir de l’esthétique*, PUF, Paris 1929, p. 393.

²⁵ É. Souriau, *The Different Modes of Existence*, cit., p. 153.

cosmology of fragility in which “a substantialist ontology is replaced by an ontology of amplifications, enrichments or intensifications”²⁶.

Still, Souriau’s generous ontology, that recognizes to every mode of existence its due, is an attempt to conform to the “rigorous immanent justice that places a being in the exact place it deserves, between an existential minimum and maximum”²⁷. Souriau presents the vindication of the ontological dignity of fragile beings as a reprise of Spinoza’s insight – “By reality and perfection I mean the same thing”²⁸ – that every moment of being can be considered as a cosmic *aboutissement*, “the equal right of individuals to represent the universal”²⁹. Moreover, according to Filippo Domenicali, the occurrence of the second congress of the Sociétés de Philosophie françaises, held in Lyon in 1939 and dedicated to Spinoza, that was supposed to have Souriau as its president (he apparently could not participate due to a last minute inconvenience), should not be underestimated while reconstructing the circumstances in which *The Different Modes of Existence* was born³⁰.

Above all, it is Souriau’s presentation of his own system as a “corrected Spinozism”³¹ that should push us to compare their philosophies. According to Souriau’s instaurative perspectivism, each philosophical system depends on a point of view, but every point of view is also an engineering *mise au point* of the cosmos from a particular perspective which implies selection and elimination because of “thetic impossibilities”³². The substance is the concept on which Spinoza’s *mise au point* occurs³³. It is true that every point of view implies some unity, excluding entities that should have been brought into existence, but Spinoza’s *mise au point* is particularly pernicious because it hypostatizes the unity of the point of view into an ontic totality³⁴. In order to establish the substance into existence, Spinoza sacrifices the being of the separate *modi*.

In *The Different Modes*, Souriau goes so far as to claim that “Spinoza is

²⁶ D. Debaise, A. Wiame, *Les âmes du monde*, in F. Courtois-l’Heureux, A. Wiame (eds.), *Étienne Souriau: Une ontologie de l’instauration*, Paris, Vrin 2015, p. 111; on the topic of intensity, see N. Plé, *Trajectoires intensives: Penser les circonstances du réel avec Étienne Souriau*, Université de Bruxelles, Bruxelles 2021.

²⁷ É. Souriau, *Via pulchritudinis*, in « Les Etudes Philosophiques », 1959, p. 340.

²⁸ B. Spinoza, *Ethics*, cit., p. 44 (part II, def. 6).

²⁹ É. Souriau, *L’instauration philosophique*, Alcan, Paris 1939, p. 158. On this, see D. Lapoujade, *Les existences moindres*, PUF, Paris 2017; I. Stengers, *Que vas-tu faire de moi ?*, in F. Courtois-l’Heureux, A. Wiame (eds.), *Étienne Souriau*, cit., pp. 63-86.

³⁰ F. Domenicali, *Il pluralismo esistenziale di Étienne Souriau*, in “Philosophy Kitchen”, 4, 2016.

³¹ É. Souriau, *Avoir une âme: Essai sur les existences virtuelles*, Les Belles Lettres, Paris 1938, p. 45.

³² É. Souriau, *L’instauration philosophique*, cit., p. 334; see F. Courtois-l’Heureux, *Le philosophème et ses lois d’instauration: Entre embrassement et embrasement*, in F. Courtois-l’Heureux, A. Wiame (eds.), *Étienne Souriau*, cit., pp. 87-110.

³³ É. Souriau, *Avoir une âme*, cit., p. 23.

³⁴ É. Souriau, *L’instauration philosophique*, cit., p. 262.

‘intoxicated’ by the unicity of substance”³⁵. From William James, another forerunner of existential pluralism, Souriau takes the attention to *prepositions* as the portions of language that reflect the implicit assumptions of a philosophical system; when considering modes of existence from the point of view of their mutual relations, “we would be in a world where the *or* rather or the *because of*, the *for* and, above all, the *and so*, and *then*, would be the true existences”³⁶. Now, “the meaning of the little word *in*”, as it is found in the phrase *esse in alio*, “is the key to all of Spinozism, that effort not to go beyond, but to annul the existential specificities with an apparatus borrowed entirely from, and only effective in, the ontic order”.³⁷ Rather than the *in* of Spinozism (or the *from* of Neoplatonism, another system he describes as an ancestor to his³⁸), Souriau could be seen as clinging to the preposition *to*. Rather than as a given totality *in* which things are, *in* which the harmonization of attributes is imposed by metaphysical unity, the substance should be conceived as a goal to be achieved; what is given at the outset it is the pure indeterminacy of *Bathos*, the Gnostic term through which Souriau denotes the void from which the trajectories of instauration emerge. When describing his system as a “corrected Spinozism”, Souriau means that the totality of being is not given in advance; rather, “the divine becomes the hypothetical sphere of the architectonic synthesis of all beings, in their radiant and total fulfillment”³⁹.

However, the aspect of Spinozism that Souriau disputes more often is not the unity of the substance, but the way it subordinates the multiplicity of attributes. In *Avoir une âme* (1938), we find the first comparison between modes of existence and Spinoza’s attributes, and also the first description of the parallelism between attributes as “an absurd, arbitrary supposition”⁴⁰. This idea becomes more systematic in *L’instauration philosophique* (1939), where he explains how the ideal “pleroma” that realizes all ontological possibilities resembles Spinoza’s substance with its infinite attributes: “in this cosmicity of the pleroma, every form of thought, every moment of thought, all the great philosophical cosmos that we discuss... represents something like an attribute”⁴¹. What must

³⁵ É. Souriau, *The Different Modes of Existence*, cit., p. 98.

³⁶ Ivi, p. 174.

³⁷ Ivi, p. 191.

³⁸ This is interesting also because one of the most remarkable aspects of Deleuze’s reading is that he considers Spinozism as a modification of the Neoplatonic view of emanation from the transcendent One, through the concept of “expression” *within* substance. We cannot expand on this, but Souriau himself presents his instauration cosmology as a reversed Neoplatonism in which the One is not given in advance but must be instaurated.

³⁹ É. Souriau, *Avoir une âme*, cit., p. 45.

⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 42.

⁴¹ É. Souriau, *L’instauration philosophique*, cit., p. 395.

be amended, however, is the “great error” of Spinoza: “the error of correspondence, term by term, of modes through their every attribute”. In fact, “these attributes of the supposedly accomplished Pleroma diversify the world in different modes, which do not correspond to each other: each assembles and disassembles entities otherwise, and each realizes different existences”⁴².

The “great error” of Spinozism is parallelism, the seal through which Spinoza tames the infinite pluralism of attributes. This is not a transient insight. In *L'Ombre de Dieu* (1955), his last major book, Souriau still considers modes of existence “to a certain extent comparable to what Spinoza’s attributes of substance are, but without the complete parallelism between them that the philosopher so unduly asserted”⁴³. The clearest presentation comes in the brief intervention published as *Of the Mode of Existence of the Work to Be Made* (1956), when Souriau uses Spinozism to convey the “richness of the real in those various planes of existence”:

it is not a matter of a simple, harmonic correspondence of each being with itself, such that it is either fully present or else deficient across those various planes – a correspondence that I ask you to think of somewhat along the lines of the Spinozist attributes, in which the modes correspond to one another. We must realize, rather, that there are not only correspondences, echoes, but also actions and events through which these correspondences are made or unmade, are intensified as in the resonance of a harmony with many parts, or are undone and unmade. There, where a human soul has taken charge of the work to-be-made with all its might, there, upon a poignant point, two beings, which are only one, exiled from one another across the plurality of the modes of existence, regard one another nostalgically and take a step, the one toward the other, through that soul.⁴⁴

Using Frédéric Lordon’s terms, causality in Spinoza is exclusively “intra-attributive”: modes of extension can only act on modes of extension; there is no causality from thought to extension; no one was ever bitten by the idea of a dog⁴⁵. The last passage we quoted shows that, once the seal of parallelism is broken, the different modes of existence are no longer doomed to incommunicability or mutual “exile”, but can move towards one another. Through the agency of imagination, the idea of a dog could really bite. All modes of existence are reabsorbed into a plane of immanence where they can interact with one another on an equal footing. Harmony between modes can be composed, of course; but this is the result of a long and difficult operation of *mise au point*, not an ontological starting point.

⁴² Ivi, pp. 395-6.

⁴³ É. Souriau, *L'Ombre de Dieu*, PUF, Paris 1955, p. 331.

⁴⁴ É. Souriau, *The Different Modes of Existence*, cit., p. 238.

⁴⁵ F. Lordon, *Les affects de la politique*, Seuil, Paris 2016, p. 21.

This non-parallelism between attributes has relevant consequences in the aesthetic field, particularly for the problem of *La correspondance des arts* (1947): “Far from accepting that all art forms correspond to each other through their common translatability into poetry, the universal artistic language, we must take each art form in its own idiom and patiently and carefully establish a lexicon of translations. And note: ‘untranslatable’ where the artistic essence of the work effectively vanishes in any translation into another art form”⁴⁶. There is no “aesthetic substance” of which the different arts would be like the step-by-step correspondent expressions: “*The different arts are like different languages*, between which imitation requires translation, rethinking in a completely different expressive medium, inventing parallel artistic effects rather than literally similar ones”⁴⁷.

However, it is mainly in the consequences for ontology that we are interested in. In *The Different Modes*, Spinoza is engaged on the plane of the ontology of modes of existence twice. Firstly, at the very beginning of the book, when he poses the problem he’s going to confront:

Spinoza is “intoxicated” by the unicity of substance. But he immediately splits it apart and demonstrates an order, a connection of things, according to the attribute of extension; an order which is redoubled according to the attribute of thought, and then according to an infinity of other attributes, each attribute being eternal and infinite in its kind... Eliminate the keystone, take away the pantheistic unity of substance, and it is not the world that is divided into a plurality of parts (since, according to Spinoza, the modes correspond to one another, from one attribute to another), but the “to exist” that irremediably divides into a multiplicity of types.⁴⁸

This passage could almost be taken as the manifesto of the book: it shows that the plurality obtained by dismantling the unicity of the substance is not a plurality of existent beings, but a *plurality of existence itself*. It is, in Filippo Domenicali’s words, a *meta-ontological pluralism*, for which the rest of the book will try to account⁴⁹.

The second, equally decisive passage is in a long note where Souriau uses Spinozism as an example of the vain attempt to reabsorb the plurality of being in a single entity. In Spinozism, Souriau observes

the attenuation of the existential character of the attributes (only substance and the modes exist, properly speaking), on the one hand, and the preservation

⁴⁶ É. Souriau, *La correspondance des arts*, Flammarion, Paris 1967, p. 12.

⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 16.

⁴⁸ É. Souriau, *The Different Modes of Existence*, cit., p. 98.

⁴⁹ F. Domenicali, *Uno strano pluralista: sulla “metaontologia” di Étienne Souriau*, in “Scenari”, this issue.

of an architectonic relation between the modes and substance, despite a thousand inconveniences, on the other – all of which is mainly accomplished with the help of the theory of expression, in opposition to relations of causal dependence, of part to whole.⁵⁰

Three elements emerge here. Firstly, strictly speaking, *attributes in Spinoza do not exist*. They are the *ways* in which the substance expresses itself and takes form in different *modi*. Secondly, the centrality of the very concept of *expression*, and the way in which it sustains univocity, is grasped by Souriau before Deleuze did. Finally, the “architectonic relation” between these *modi* and the substance is deemed to be rife with “inconveniences”. In particular, Souriau is referring to the fact that, despite Spinoza’s univocal ontology, the distinction between the substance and its affections leads him to adopt the traditional *distinction between essence and existence*. It is only in the substance that the *modi* find their true essence; the substance is the only entity whose existence coincides with its essence, whose essence *involves* existence: “In calling something ‘cause of itself’ I mean that its essence involves existence, i.e. that its nature can’t be conceived except as existing”⁵¹. Now, the rift between essence and existence contradicts Spinoza’s generous equation between existence and perfection; it breaks the interior of entities and the univocal ontology that Spinoza sought to establish. It is not compatible with genuine univocity; but it is not compatible with existential pluralism either. Souriau considers the dualism between essence and existence to be “very poorly done and unworthy of a truly lucid mind”⁵², and suggests replacing essence with the “virtual” mode of existence. This is something he shares with most existential pluralists: committing to a plurality of modes of existence is also a way of claiming that entities are only in the different ways in which they come to be, that there is no univocal essence they have to realize from the start, that being is manneristic modulation rather than realization of a logical essence⁵³. Beings do not have to realize an essence given a priori but to compose their fragile unity through the plurality of modes in which they exist.

Conclusion: from substance to prism

Preparing his “overturning of Platonism”, Deleuze admitted: “That this overturning should conserve many Platonic characteristics is not

⁵⁰ É. Souriau, *The Different Modes of Existence*, cit., p. 190.

⁵¹ B. Spinoza, *Ethics*, cit., p. 1 (part I, def. 1).

⁵² É. Souriau, *L'ombre de Dieu*, cit., p. 297.

⁵³ S. van Tuinen, *Logical Modalities and Modes of Existence*, in “Scenari”, this issue.

only inevitable but desirable”⁵⁴. The same is true of Souriau’s overturning of Spinozism through the abandonment of parallelism. Deleuze himself tried to overturn Spinoza in his own way, and it is interesting that, since the end of the 70s, his reading of Spinoza was less and less centered on univocity and more akin to a “mannerist” style of thought centered on the intensive modulations within the substance, which is far from incompatible with a pluralism of modes of existence⁵⁵. What to do with Spinoza is the question that a comparison between different ways of overturning him should raise.

From the point of view of Deleuze’s genealogy of univocity, Souriau makes a regressive movement that takes him from Spinoza back to Descartes, to equivocity or analogy. For the genealogy of existential pluralism, however, this is actually a step forward in that equivocity is no longer treated as a difference between substances given in advance, between which it becomes impossible to establish a relationship, but as a mannerist modulation between different ways of being, which blend into one another, which overlap and admit mutual transcendence at most as an effect, as an achievement to be accomplished with effort and dedication, and not as a primary given.

If we combine the insights collected in the previous section, we are presented with one of Souriau’s deepest intuitions: *modal differences are real only if they give rise to something new, if they are not equivalent “expressions” of a univocal Being that presides over their development. Modes of existence must express themselves and only themselves, or they are not modes of existence at all.* If differences between modes of existence are to be ontologically significant, they must be free to interact and communicate on a plane of ontological equality. *Modal difference cannot be merely formal difference*, for the latter is an absolute difference that rejoins absolute identity. Entities are knots of modes of existence, that do not correspond point to point, that are unequally distributed, that must be assembled or instaured properly if the ontic unity we are considering is not to break up. Souriau shows how the rigor of parallelism (but also that of Deleuze’s divergentism) is not a given or an ontological ultimate, but something that can only be achieved with an enormous expenditure of energy, with the effort that every instauration entails and that must be continually maintained.

For Deleuze, to correct Spinozism was to “make substance turn

⁵⁴ G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, cit., p. 59.

⁵⁵ G. Deleuze, *Sur Spinoza: Cours novembre 1980 – mars 1981*, Minuit, Paris 2024. See S. van Tuinen, *The Philosophy of Mannerism: From Aesthetics to Modal Metaphysics*, Bloomsbury, London 2022; C. D’Aurizio, *Dalla maniera al modo, dal modo al manierismo: Deleuze e lo stile tra Spinoza e la pittura*, in “Scenari”, this issue.

around the modes”⁵⁶. For Souriau, on the contrary, we should make *both substance and its modes turn around attributes* – that is, modes of existence. The modal multifariousness of being is the primary datum. The entities are individuated starting from this modal dispersion. Each entity divides through the different existential planes “as if through a prism”⁵⁷. Souriau’s plane of immanence should be thought of as a giant prism that takes the place of Spinoza’s substance. Filtered through Souriau’s prism, every entity reveals its fragile multimodal composition and the vanity of the attempts at realizing all its possible modes of existence at once.

It is true, however, that even Souriau does not seem immune to the prejudice that considers heterogeneity to be a defect and purity to be an ideal. Instead of being a sign of the modal richness of the world or as a problematic empirical given that should impel inquiry, “multimodal dispersion” is defined as the “original wound” in identity, a mere “*coacervatio*”. The question then becomes how to “recover from plurimodality”⁵⁸. But existence is so inherently plurimodal that the only cure is to *escape from existence itself*. The last part of *The Different Modes* is devoted to *surexistence*, which is *amodal*, or better, *surmodal*, because *it results from the convergence of modes of existence and removes them all*. The univocal substance is not overturned by the revolt of its attributes; rather, it is postponed as a result to be achieved. If the cosmos is in reality a modally fragmented *kakosmos*, all that remains is to recompose it, overcoming this dispersion towards a new form of univocity.

Despite its ethical and political potential⁵⁹, surexistence is arguably Souriau’s main shortcoming as an existential pluralist. Rather than accepting the cancellation of existential pluralism in this eschatological univocity, let us conclude this article by appealing to the way in which, in 1938, Souriau claimed that the intensification of one’s existence on one existential plane comes at the expense of the different life possibilities that could have been instaured for oneself, and that it is precisely this differential instauration of ourselves that breaks down the strict parallelism between modes of existence: “let us suppose that a being has risen to a high point of determination and lucid presence in a particular kind of existence. Then it necessarily becomes even more

⁵⁶ G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, cit., p. 304.

⁵⁷ É. Souriau, *La correspondance des arts*, cit., p. 109.

⁵⁸ É. Souriau, *The Different Modes of Existence*, cit., p. 196.

⁵⁹ F. Domenicali, *La vie comme œuvre d'art: Sur l'esthétique de l'existence d'Étienne Souriau*, in « Nouvelle Revue d'Esthétique », 19(1), pp. 23-31; S. van Tuinen, *The Use of Souls: Souriau and Political Spirituality*, in “Aisthesis”, 15(2), pp. 103-13.

difficult to construct in another mode a being that corresponds to it, that resembles it profoundly in essential truth. It is a new creation to be made, not from scratch, but at least from a particular basis that can be taken as a starting point”⁶⁰.

⁶⁰ É. Souriau, *Avoir une âme*, cit., p. 42.

Étienne Souriau and the Overturning of Spinozism

This article will present Baruch Spinoza as a possible turning point in the debate on modes of existence, which is central to the contemporary philosophical landscape. It will do so, on the one hand, by following Gilles Deleuze's reading and presenting Spinozism as a radicalization of the univocity of being, established by Duns Scotus; on the other hand, by showing how Étienne Souriau, one of the leading exponents of the pluralism of modes of existence, presented his own system as a "correct Spinozism" and his modes of existence as corresponding to Spinoza's attributes once freed from the parallelism that subjected them to the unity of substance. The consequences of this slight modification will prove to be decisive and will allow us to discover some crucial points in the debate on modes of existence.

Keywords: Spinoza, Deleuze, Souriau, modes of existence, univocity

Étienne Souriau e il capovolgimento dello spinozismo

Questo articolo presenterà la filosofia di Baruch Spinoza come un possibile punto di svolta nel dibattito sui modi d'esistenza, centrale per il panorama filosofico contemporaneo. Lo farà, da un lato, seguendo la lettura di Gilles Deleuze e presentando lo spinozismo come una radicalizzazione dell'univocità dell'essere, stabilita da Duns Scoto; dall'altra, mostrando come Étienne Souriau, tra i maggiori esponenti del pluralismo dei modi d'esistenza, abbia presentato il proprio sistema come uno "spinozismo corretto" e i suoi modi d'esistenza come corrispondenti agli attributi di Spinoza una volta liberati dal parallelismo che li sottometeva all'unità della sostanza. Le conseguenze di questa leggera modifica si mostreranno essere decisive e permetteranno di scoprire alcuni snodi cruciali del dibattito sui modi d'esistenza.

Keywords: Spinoza, Deleuze, Souriau, modi di esistenza, univocità