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## *Deus sive Natura*. Ernst Cassirer's Interpretation of Baruch Spinoza from a “Geistesgeschichtliche” Perspective

**ABSTRACT:** German philosopher Ernst Cassirer's writings devoted to Spinoza converge around a unitary thematic focus on the supposed incompatibility between the Spinozian system and a historicist approach. Cassirer, known for his theory of symbolic forms, challenges this assumption, arguing for the indispensability of a historical-philosophical inquiry whose primary function lies in illuminating, hermeneutically, the Spinozist concept of nature. This methodological necessity emerges most clearly in an unpublished manuscript from 1934, in which the German philosopher systematically addresses this epistemological problematic. The present contribution aims to critically analyze that text, identifying it as a privileged point of reference for exploring both Cassirer's reading of Spinoza and the theoretical implications underlying the dialectic between philosophical systematicity and historical reconstruction.

**KEYWORDS:** Cassirer • knowledge • philosophy • Spinoza • substance

*Wenn man anfängt zu philosophieren,  
so muß man zuerst Spinozist sein.*

G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die  
Geschichte der Philosophie*

The Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza cannot be regarded as a central figure in the philosophical apprenticeship of the German thinker Ernst Cassirer, who engaged primarily—to name a few—with Plato, Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, Humboldt, and Goethe. A cursory review of the titles within Cassirer's vast published and unpublished *corpus* reveals the rarity of Spinoza's explicit presence, with exceptions such as the 1932 essay *Spinozas Stellung in der allgemeinen Geistesgeschichte*,<sup>1</sup> the chapter on Spinoza in

<sup>1</sup> E. Cassirer, “Spinozas Stellung in der allgemeinen Geistesgeschichte (1932),” in: *idem, Gesammelte Werke*, Band 18: *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften 1932–1935*, hrsg. R. Becker, Hamburg 2004, pp. 177–202.

*Das Erkenntnisproblem*,<sup>2</sup> and a revised version of the 1932 essay published posthumously in *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, Band 14.<sup>3</sup> Cassirer's writings on Spinoza converge around a unitary thematic focus: the alleged incompatibility between Spinoza's system and a historicist (*geistesgeschichtlich*) approach. Cassirer, well known for his theory of symbolic forms, challenges this assumption, advocating for a historical-philosophical inquiry essential to illuminating the hermeneutic dimensions of Spinoza's concept of nature. This methodological necessity emerges most clearly in a 1934 manuscript, where Cassirer systematically addresses this epistemological problem. The present contribution critically analyzes this text, positioning it as a key reference for exploring Cassirer's interpretation of Spinoza and the dialectic between philosophical systematicity and historical reconstruction.<sup>4</sup>

Within this context, we now possess the text of a posthumous 1934 lecture by Cassirer, delivered to the Oxford Philosophical Society, concerning Spinoza's concept of nature. Here, as previously noted, Cassirer commences by examining the relationship between philosophy and history in Spinoza. He underscores to his audience the considerable difficulty—stemming from the internal structure of Spinoza's system itself—of subjecting his philosophy to *geistesgeschichtliche* analysis. As Cassirer states in a posthumous text written at Yale in 1941–42, Spinoza's framework contains “no trace of historical interest. If we follow the principles of his system, the mere concept of a philosophy of history becomes a contradiction in terms.”<sup>5</sup> In Spinoza's system, philosophical knowledge concerns eternal truths rather than temporally bound phenomena—a stark contrast to Hegel's emphasis on historical development in *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*.<sup>6</sup> This Spinozist conception derives from the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, which outlines three degrees of knowledge (*imaginatio*, *ratio*, and *scientia intuitiva*) as pathways to apprehending reality.

The first degree, *imaginatio*, corresponds to sensory perception, which Spinoza deems unreliable without rational clarification. *Ratio*, by contrast, signifies deductive knowledge grounded in common notions, immune to

<sup>2</sup> E. Cassirer, *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 2: *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit* (1906), Erster Band, Hamburg 1999.

<sup>3</sup> E. Cassirer, “Spinoza-Vortrag [Spinoza's concept of nature] Oxford Philosophical Society, Juni 1934,” in: *idem*, *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, Band 14: *Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza*, hrsg. P. Rubini, C. Möckel, Hamburg 2018, pp. 59–82.

<sup>4</sup> On Spinoza and history see G. Boros, “Spinoza and the Metaphysics of History,” *Tijdschrift voor Philosophie*, 1992, Vol. 1, pp. 70–76.

<sup>5</sup> E. Cassirer, “Descartes, Leibniz, and Vico,” in: *idem*, *Symbol, Myth, and Culture. Essays and Lectures 1935–1945*, ed. D. P. Verene, Yale 1979, p. 99.

<sup>6</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. S. Houlgate, Oxford 2008, p. 5.

error when rigorously applied. As Pierre-François Moreau explains, these common notions—such as space, rest, and motion—“serve as the basis for mathematical physics, which Spinoza credits with liberating humanity from finalistic illusions [...] Imagination produces inadequate ideas, but these clash with the stronger concepts of the intellect.”<sup>7</sup> *Scientia intuitiva*, the highest degree, proceeds from adequate ideas of God’s attributes to grasp the essence of things in their immediate, necessary ordering. Precisely in this manner, according to Cassirer, the so-called “idea” now acquires a new meaning: “The idea must therefore be termed a concept rather than an image, more a ‘conceptus’ than a ‘perception’; for only through this designation does it become evident that it is not something externally given, but owes its origin solely to the mind itself.”<sup>8</sup> In this sense, intuition does not merely subordinate the particular to the universal or introduce the former into the latter; rather, it unifies both through a singular act of comprehension. Intuition not only isolates the principles underlying reality but also apprehends them in their immediate operation, thereby mastering the wholly determined and unique ordering of becoming.

Within the parameters of this tripartite ontological structure, it becomes unequivocally clear that persistent adherence to sensory perception alone imposes an insurmountable barrier to the acquisition of genuine truth. Such epistemic limitation arises from the inherently subjective and fragmentary nature of empirical observation, which, while instrumental in apprehending superficial phenomena, remains fundamentally incapable of penetrating the essential verities underlying reality. Authentic truth, by contrast, is contingent upon the intellect’s innate capacity for abstract reasoning, synthetic integration, and transcendental contemplation—faculties that permit the discernment of universal principles beyond the mutable realm of sensory data. Consequently, the transcendence of empirical constraints through the deliberate exercise of intellectual faculties emerges not merely as advantageous but as an indispensable condition for the attainment of veritable knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Cassirer points out this truth, asserting that it “is to be found in the domain of Mathematics and in the domain of Philosophy, which are determined and governed not by the faculty of imagination but by the faculty of reason and intuition.”<sup>10</sup> This elucidates Spinoza’s “natural-

<sup>7</sup> P.-F. Moreau, *Baruch Spinoza. La ragione pensante*, trans. A. A. Santucci, Rome 1998, p. 57.

<sup>8</sup> E. Cassirer, *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 2: *Das Erkenntnisproblem...*, p. 69.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. B. Spinoza, *Complete Works*, Vol. 1: *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, ed. E. Curley, Princeton 1985, p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> E. Cassirer, “Spinoza-Vortrag...,” pp. 59–60.

ism,” a concept that Cassirer defines in his posthumous work, composed in 1931 and entitled *Die Einheit der Wissenschaft*: “Spinoza’s *Ethics*, at the apex of its reflections on man, establishes the postulate that the phenomena of the human world should be considered from the same angle of view as any phenomenon of physical nature.”<sup>11</sup> Consequently, Spinoza’s view of a *geometrical ethics* aligns deeply with the epistemic ideals of the 17th century, while his pantheism acquires a historical coherence “only if it is considered in the context of pan-mathematicism, which proved to be characteristic of and decisive for seventeenth-century philosophy and doctrine of science.”<sup>12</sup>

Conversely, Galileo in his *Dialogue* denied the permissibility of any qualitative distinction between God’s infinite knowledge and finite human knowledge, at least within the domain of mathematics. Cassirer observes in his 1942 essay *The Influence of Language upon the Development of Scientific Thought* that this conception of geometry—and its attendant ideal of geometrical truth—finds its parallel in Spinoza. The Breslau thinker adds that this ideal constitutes “one of the most fundamental and most characteristic motives of Spinozistic thought.”<sup>13</sup> In the Spinozistic framework, both *ratio* (reasoned understanding) and *scientia intuitiva* (intuitive knowledge) fundamentally surpass the limitations of the sensible domain, ascending to the realm of genuine philosophical truth epitomized by the third and highest degree of cognition. These constitutive elements of Spinoza’s epistemology necessitate a categorical repudiation of Cartesian dualism—most notably its axiomatic division between *res cogitans* (thinking substance) and *res extensa* (extended substance). Spinoza’s ontological monism posits instead a singular, infinite *Substantia* (identifiable as *Deus sive Natura*), within which all reality inheres. Within this schema, the apparent duality of mind and body dissolves into mere *modi*—transitory expressions of the one Substance—while thought and extension manifest not as independent substances, but as inseparable attributes through which the divine essence is apprehended. Consequently, the Cartesian bifurcation of reality is supplanted by an integrated continuum wherein all phenomena derive their existence and intelligibility from the absolute unity of the immanent divine essence. While it is true that Spinoza’s

<sup>11</sup> E. Cassirer, “Die Einheit der Natur,” in: *Idem, Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, Band 8: *Vorlesungen und Vorträge zu philosophischen Problemen der Wissenschaften 1907–1945*, hrsg. J. Fingerhut, G. Hartung, R. Kramme, Hamburg 2010, p. 130.

<sup>12</sup> E. Cassirer, “Zur Erkenntnistheorie der Kulturwissenschaften,” in: *idem, Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, Band 5: *Kulturphilosophie. Vorlesungen und Vorträge 1929–1941*, hrsg. R. Kramme, Hamburg 2004, p. 240.

<sup>13</sup> E. Cassirer, “The Influence of Language upon the Development of Scientific Thought (1942),” in: *idem, Gesammelte Werke*, Band 24: *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften (1941–1946)*, hrsg. C. Rosenkranz, Darmstadt 2007, p. 125.

philosophical approach, to borrow Voltaire's phrase, was born "under the cloak of Descartes" (*sous le manteau de Descartes*),<sup>14</sup> and that its structure aligns more closely with Cartesian thought than previously acknowledged,<sup>15</sup> it is equally undeniable that "the Jewish philosopher's intellectual autonomy would expand to the terms of his own systematic vision that would cause not only an effective overthrow of Cartesian philosophy, but a real scandal for all of Christian Europe."<sup>16</sup> Despite this system's apparent exclusion of historical inquiry a priori, Cassirer nevertheless underscores the possibility of analyzing it not only logically but also *geistesgeschichtlich*.<sup>17</sup> It is this ontological orientation—grounded in the radical unity of divine substance and the dissolution of metaphysical bifurcations—that fundamentally animates the philosopher of symbolic forms' hermeneutic engagement with Spinoza's concept of nature. Such an investigation transcends superficial exegesis, instead deploying a framework wherein nature is interpreted as an active, self-expressive matrix of signification. Within this paradigm, Spinoza's identification of God with Nature (*Deus sive Natura*) is reconstituted not as static pantheism but as a dynamic semiotic process: every modality of existence, from the geometric properties of extension to the cognitive structures of thought, becomes an intelligible symbol manifesting the infinite attributes of the singular Substance.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, the philosopher's inquiry reveals nature as both ontological ground and epistemic cipher—a perpetual dialectic between absolute immanence and the human intellect's capacity to decipher reality through symbolic mediation.

The concrete historical-intellectual *milieu* in which Spinoza formulated his philosophy indelibly imprinted upon its conceptual architecture, for it presented a constellation of theoretical frameworks that he would subsequently critically appropriate and transform. This acknowledgment, however, in no way implies the supplanting of logical rigor with historical contextualization; rather, in Spinoza's distinctive case, these modes of inquiry function as mutually illuminating rather than antithetical approaches.

<sup>14</sup> Voltaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. 38: *Les systèmes et les cabale*, London 1744, p. 337.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. W. Dilthey, "Die Struktur der Systeme von Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza und Leibniz und die in ihnen enthaltenen Voraussetzungen der Anthropologie," in: *idem*, *Gesammelte Schriften*, II. Band: *Weltanschauung und Analyse des Menschen seit Renaissance und Reformation*, hrsg. G. Misch, Leipzig 1991, p. 452.

<sup>16</sup> M. Molinu, *Lecture spinoziane. Spinoza nel contesto del pensiero occidentale*, Rome 2003, p. 122.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. D. J. Wertheim, *Salvation through Spinoza. A Study of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany*, Leiden 2011, p. 147.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. F. Minazzi, *Historical Epistemology and European Philosophy of Science. Rethinking Critical Rationalism and Transcendentalism*, trans. R. Sadleir, Cham 2022, p. 290.

As Cassirer observes, the immediate intellectual hegemony exercised by canonical figures—Descartes, Locke, Kant, and Hegel serving as paradigmatic instances—upon their respective epochs stands in stark contradistinction to Spinoza's trajectory. His system, radiating profound influence only posthumously, attained its ascendancy not through contemporaneous dominance but through a gradual permeation of the philosophical consciousness across subsequent centuries. Thus, the very belatedness of Spinoza's recognition underscores a singular characteristic: his thought operated not as an instrument of its time but as a subterranean current whose transformative power emerged precisely through its resistance to assimilation into prevailing paradigms.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the Dutch philosopher's *opus magnum*, *Ethica more geometrico demonstrata*, was published posthumously in 1677. Rather than sparking interest through genuine theoretical reflection, it provoked systematic rejection due to Spinoza's reputation as "the most dangerous atheist"<sup>20</sup> and his heresy charges, which culminated in his excommunication from the Amsterdam Jewish community on July 27, 1656.<sup>21</sup>

The polemical exchange between Lessing and Jacobi functioned as the seminal catalyst that propelled Spinoza's doctrine into a phase of vigorous intellectual engagement across the German-speaking world, subsequently permeating the works of seminal figures including Schleiermacher, Schelling, and Hegel, and precipitating its rapid dissemination throughout academic circles. Yet this very proliferation engendered a complex hermeneutic challenge: the assimilation of Spinozist principles into heterogeneous philosophical frameworks frequently entailed significant conceptual distortions, obscuring the architectonic coherence of the original system. Cassirer identifies this pervasive issue as endemic to Spinoza's historical reception, citing paradigmatic instances of exegetical divergence wherein later interpreters imposed alien metaphysical structures upon his rigorously monistic ontology. A particularly illustrative case is the protracted

<sup>19</sup> Cf. O. Boehm, *Kant's Idea of the Unconditioned and Spinoza's: the Fourth Antinomy and the Ideal of Pure Reason*, in: *Spinoza and German Idealism*, ed. E. Förster, Y. Y. Melamed, Cambridge 2012, pp. 27–28.

<sup>20</sup> E. Cassirer, "The Myth of the Twentieth Century," in: *Idem, Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, Band 9: *Zu Philosophie und Politik*, hrsg. J. M. Krois, C. Möckel, Hamburg 2008, p. 191.

<sup>21</sup> While scholarly literature on Spinoza's life is extensive, seminal works such as J. Freudenthal, *Die Lebensgeschichte Spinoza's in Quelleschriften, Urkunden und Nichtamtlichen Nachrichten*, Leipzig 1899 and A. M. Vaz Dias, W. G. van der Tak, *Spinoza Mercator et autodidacticus*, Den Haag 1932, remain indispensable to any rigorous biographical inquiry. See also the more recent and extremely detailed study conducted by Steven Nadler: S. Nadler, *Spinoza. A Life*, Cambridge 1999.

scholarly conflict between Johann Eduard Erdmann and Kuno Fischer regarding the ontological status of attributes in Spinoza's *Ethica*. Erdmann, anchoring his analysis in post-Kantian idealism, posited the attributes as mental constructs contingent upon cognitive apprehension, whereas Fischer advocated a robustly realist interpretation, insisting upon their objective existence as fundamental expressions of *Deus sive Natura*. This irreducible hermeneutic dissonance—extending beyond mere academic disagreement to expose fundamental tensions between transcendental and realist epistemologies—epitomizes the enduring difficulty of reconciling Spinoza's immanent metaphysics with subsequent philosophical paradigms without compromising its internal logic:

Erdmann upheld a view that the difference between many various attributes does not belong to the Substance itself and cannot be derived from its own essence, which, on the contrary, possesses an absolute and indivisible unity. This difference does not follow from the substance itself; it is introduced into it only by our intellect which considers the essential unity of the substance from different points of view. Kuno Fischer objected to this view that there are many passages in the work of Spinoza which seem to be quite incompatible with this interpretation—which prove the discrimination of several attributes to be necessary, founded on the objective nature of substance and to be derived from its metaphysical essence.<sup>22</sup>

For Cassirer, the methodological fallacy inherent in such interpretations lies in their uncritical imposition of a rigid subject-object dichotomy—a categorical framework fundamentally alien to Spinoza's metaphysical monism. Both Erdmann and Fischer, despite their divergent conclusions, presupposed this epistemologically untenable division, thereby projecting anachronistic Cartesian constructs onto a system expressly predicated on the dissolution of all such dualities. Consequently, the philosopher of symbolic forms adjudicates historical-contextual analysis not merely advantageous but epistemologically indispensable. Its paramount function transcends mere chronological reconstruction; rather, it operates as a critical hermeneutic corrective that rigorously situates Spinozist concepts within their immanent logical architecture. Only through this disciplined historicization can the interpreter fulfill the essential task: elucidating *natura* as Spinoza conceived it—not as a passive object of contemplation but as dynamic *natura naturans*, the self-generative substance whose attributes and modes express divine necessity without recourse to transcendental subjectivity or

<sup>22</sup> E. Cassirer, "Spinoza-Vortrag...", p. 62.

reified objectivity. Thus, Cassirer positions historical methodology as the necessary antidote to the persistent tendency of appropriating philosophies through the distorting lens of later epistemological paradigms.

### Deus sive Natura. Spinoza's Concept of Nature

*Ordo et connexio idearum idem est,  
ac ordo, et connexio rerum.*

B. Spinoza, *Ética*

In Cassirer's epistemological assessment, while Spinoza's conception of *natura* arises not through a systematic engagement with prior philosophical traditions but through original metaphysical synthesis, a profound intellectual consonance nonetheless exists between the Dutch philosopher's framework and the broader epistemic currents characterizing seventeenth-century thought. Medieval scholasticism, by contrast, had conceptualized nature strictly as *creatio ex nihilo*—a derivative and subordinate manifestation of divine will, irrevocably severed from its transcendent source through an ontological chasm. This radical bifurcation between creator and creation emerged directly from scholastic interpretations of Aristotelian cosmology, particularly exegetical engagements with *De Caelo*, which axiomatically denied any proportional relationship or analogical continuity between infinite divine perfection and finite created existence. Within this scholastic paradigm, nature's inherent deficiency necessitated its ontological dependence, positioning the created order as fundamentally alienated from the absolute sovereignty of the *prima causa*. Spinoza's revolutionary identification of God with Nature (*Deus sive Natura*) thus represents not merely a departure from but a categorical inversion of medieval ontology, dissolving the creator-creation dichotomy through its assertion of divine immanence—whereby substance, attributes, and modes constitute an indivisible continuum expressing eternal necessity rather than contingent volition.<sup>23</sup> Although Thomistic philosophy moderated the extremity of this ontological bifurcation through its synthesis of Aristotelian rationalism with Christian theology, the prevailing medieval frameworks nevertheless maintained the ontological subjugation of both nature and natural reason to the sovereign dictates of revealed theology. The seventeenth-century intellectual revolution—within which Spinoza's philosophical project crystallized—constituted not merely a rejection but a systematic dismantling of this

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *De coelo*, ed. C. D. C. Reeve, Indianapolis 2020.



scholastic hierarchy. In his early *Korte Verhandeling van God, de mensch en deszelvs Welstand* (1660), Spinoza remained conceptually constrained by a profoundly pessimistic epistemology that equated cognition with 'pure suffering' (*louter lijden*), wherein truth emerged only through the mind's passive submission to externally determined objects.

The *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* (1662), however, articulates a transformative epistemological inversion: veridical cognition actively generates its own criteria of validation, distinguishing truth from falsehood not through contingent correspondence but by virtue of its immanent normative power—a self-legislating capacity inherent to rational thought itself. The distance between the 1660 and 1662 writings is identified by Cassirer in the first volume of his monumental work *Das Erkenntnisproblem*, where he posits that with the 1662 work, knowledge is no longer conceived as a merely passive reception. Instead, "true thought [*wahre Gedanken*] can be distinguished from false not merely by an external and contingent reference, but inasmuch as it contains within itself the criterion of its worth and validity."<sup>24</sup> This pivotal transition marks Spinoza's decisive emancipation from residual Neoplatonic passivity, Jewish-Arabic occasionalist frameworks, and the pantheistic ambiguities of Renaissance naturalism. But this signifies the emergence of a distinctly modern epistemology, wherein truth transforms into an autotelic activity rather than a mode of contemplative endurance. This paradigm shift forms the foundation for Spinoza's mature identification of intellectual autonomy with divine necessity, as Pozzi observes.<sup>25</sup>

As the philosopher of symbolic forms points out, this contrastive action was certainly not confined within the perimeter of mere speculative inquiry, since it manifested itself "in all the other fields of spiritual life: in the evaluation of science, of natural philosophy, of moral and political ideas."<sup>26</sup> Galileo Galilei, in his seminal confrontation with scholastic orthodoxy, articulated a rigorous epistemological critique of the *duplex veritas* doctrine—the proposition that truths revealed through divine authority exist in radical disjunction from those discerned through natural observation and rational inquiry. For Galileo, divine revelation manifests with coequal authority in two complementary modalities: the sacred scriptures (*verba Dei*) and the empirical fabric of the natural world (*liber naturae*). Yet he fundamentally asserts the hermeneutic sovereignty of nature over textual exegesis. Whereas scripture, filtered through linguistic and cultural con-

<sup>24</sup> E. Cassirer, *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 2: *Das Erkenntnisproblem...*, p. 68.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. P. Pozzi, *Visione e parola. Un'interpretazione del concetto spinoziano di scienza intuitiva. Tra finito e infinito*, Milan 2012, p. 181.

<sup>26</sup> E. Cassirer, "Spinoza-Vortrag...", p. 65.

tingencies, demands interpretative mediation prone to human fallibility, the ‘book of nature’ presents an unmediated, mathematically legible text composed in the universal language of geometry. This ontological priority grants natural philosophy epistemological primacy: the phenomena of the physical cosmos—governed by immutable laws accessible to reason—constitute the primary revelation of divine intelligence. Consequently, any apparent contradiction between scripture and natural evidence signals not genuine opposition but deficiencies in human interpretation. Galileo thus subverts the scholastic hierarchy: theology may illuminate salvation, but natural philosophy alone provides objective access to the structural rationality of the *primum movens*—an epistemological stance that reconfigures faith not as the negation of reason but as its ultimate horizon.<sup>27</sup> He maintained that rational and religious truths, though distinct, are not mutually contradictory; rather, in both faith and science, as Giovanni Gentile says, “the human intellect does nothing but reflect the light that reverberates in nature from divine thought.”<sup>28</sup>

The ontological autonomy that Galileo ascribed to the natural order—wherein physical phenomena operate according to immanent mathematical principles independent of theological arbitration—finds its precise jurisprudential analogue in the works of Hugo Grotius. In his systematic reconceptualization of natural law, Grotius posited that the fundamental distinction between *ius* (right) and *iniuria* (wrong) derives not from divine commandment or scriptural revelation but from intrinsic rational principles accessible to human intellect. This epistemic independence constitutes a radical departure from medieval voluntarism, which anchored moral legitimacy exclusively in God’s sovereign will. Grotius’ assertion that natural law would retain its normative force *etiamsi daremus Deum non esse* (‘even if we were to concede God’s non-existence’) epitomizes this emancipation. Just as Galileo’s nature operates through self-contained geometric necessity, Grotius’ jurisprudence establishes an autonomous ethical framework governed by *recta ratio* (right reason)—a universal faculty discerning inherent moral truths through systematic reflection on human sociability, self-preservation, and equitable reciprocity. Thus, both thinkers reconfigure their respective domains: Galileo liberates physics from theological supervision, while Grotius severs jurisprudence from transcendent legislation, collectively affirming early modernity’s broader epistemic shift toward

<sup>27</sup> Cf. G. Galilei, “Letter to B. Castelli, December 21<sup>st</sup>, 1613,” in: *idem, Opere*, Vol. II, Milan 1832, p. 499.

<sup>28</sup> G. Gentile, *Opere complete*, Vol. XV: *Studi sul Rinascimento*, Florence 1968, p. 393.

immanent rationality.<sup>29</sup> As Cassirer observes, neither Galileo nor Grotius aimed to undermine religious authority; rather, they sought to assert that:

the truth of rational thought has a different sense and a deeper origin than dogmatical theology admits. In denying the original powers of reason theology has abandoned the only sure basis on which all truth, including religious truth, can be founded. Reason and truth are correlative: they imply each other and are to be defined by each other. To restore and defend the right of reason in all its extent is, therefore, not a denial but a corroboration and consolidation of religious truth.<sup>30</sup>

This epistemological reconfiguration inevitably precipitated profound confrontations with Catholic orthodoxy, which dogmatically affirmed the cosmos as exclusively God's *creatio ex nihilo*—a teleologically ordered totality shaped by inscrutable divine intentionality. The Magisterium, asserting scriptural and theological primacy, explicitly delegitimized autonomous rational inquiry into cosmological principles, denouncing such investigations as transgressions beyond humanity's providentially ordained duties. These intersecting controversies—scientific (concerning nature's self-governance), juridical (regarding ethics' independence from revelation), and theological (pertaining to hermeneutic authority)—coalesced into a fertile dialectical terrain that critically informed Spinoza's systematic deconstruction of the Aristotelian-scholastic natural paradigm. Within this charged intellectual *milieu*, Spinoza discerned the fundamental contradiction: a worldview demanding simultaneously that nature obey immutable rational laws and that it manifest arbitrary divine volitions. His resolution—the radical identification of God with Nature (*Deus sive Natura*)—emerged not merely as metaphysical innovation but as the necessary philosophical terminus of these century-long debates, dissolving the artificial schism between natural necessity and divine sovereignty by reconceiving both as expressions of a single, immanent, and rationally intelligible substance.<sup>31</sup> The Dutch philosopher operated a systematic and dialectical synthesis of extraordinary philosophical significance, transcending the elementary reaffirmation of nature's and jurisprudence's autonomy that characterized his predecessors. Rather than merely validating

<sup>29</sup> Cf. H. Grotius, *De iure belli ac pacis libri tres, in quibus ius naturae et gentium, item iuris publici praecipua explicantur*, ed. J. Barbeyrac, Amsterdam 1720.

<sup>30</sup> E. Cassirer, "Spinoza-Vortrag...", p. 70.

<sup>31</sup> As Semerari stated, multiple historical experiences converge in the Spinozist doctrine and in it develops "the struggle of two ideals of knowledge, one resulting from the Renaissance and the other related to the new mathematical science of nature", G. Semerari, "L'idea della scienza in Spinoza," in: *Annali della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia – Università degli Studi di Bari*, 1978, Vol. XXI, p. 209.

these discrete domains, Spinoza ontologically reconstituted them within a cohesive metaphysical framework predicated on the absolute unity of *Deus sive Natura*. This architectonic integration resolved the core theoretical tensions implicit in Galileo's emancipated *natura naturans* and Grotius' self-legislating *jus naturale* by subsuming both under a monistic perspective wherein natural necessity and moral law emanate identically from the divine substance's infinite attributes. Where Galileo liberated physics from teleological theology and Grotius decoupled ethics from revelatory authority, Spinoza demonstrated their essential identity: the geometric necessity governing celestial bodies and the rational principles ordering human sociability constitute parallel expressions of a single, eternally self-generative reality. Thus, his framework transcends particularistic solutions by deriving both *natura* and *lex* from the immanent causality of Substance—rendering physics and ethics complementary modes of apprehending one ontological truth. This elevation to a universal standpoint not only addresses but sublates the existential concerns of Galileo (nature's epistemic sovereignty) and Grotius (law's autonomous foundations), revealing their projects as fragmentary manifestations of a grander metaphysical unity. For Spinoza, it was essential to investigate

as soon as possible, whether there is a certain being, and at the same time, what sort of being it is, which is the cause of all things, so that its objective essence may also be the cause of all our ideas, and then our mind will (as we have said) reproduce Nature as much as possible. For it will have Nature's essence, order, and unity objectively. [...] But note that by the series of causes and of real beings I do not here understand the series of singular, changeable things, but only the series of fixed and eternal things. For it would be impossible for human weakness to grasp the series of singular, changeable things, not only because there are innumerable many of them, but also because of the infinite circumstances in one and the same thing, any of which can be the cause of its existence or nonexistence. [...] But there is also no need for us to understand their series. The essences of singular, changeable things are not to be drawn from their series, or order of existing, since it offers us nothing but extrinsic denominations, relations, or at most, circumstances, all of which are far from the inmost essence of things. That essence is to be sought only from the fixed and eternal things, and at the same time from the laws inscribed in these things, as in their true codes, according to which all singular things come to be, and are ordered. Indeed these singular, changeable things depend so intimately, and (so to speak) essentially, on the fixed things that they can neither be nor be conceived without them.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> B. Spinoza, *Complete Works*, Vol. 1: *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

Philosophical inquiry ought not to dissipate its energies in cataloging the innumerable and ephemeral manifestations of reality—phenomena notoriously subject to the inexorable Heraclitean flux—but rather must direct its focus toward interrogating reality's transcendent unity. Nature, as conceptualized within Spinoza's monistic framework, admits no radical opposition between *materia* and *forma*, nor between the spiritual and the corporeal, for these ostensibly dichotomous categories exist merely as perspectival expressions of a single, indivisible Substance. As Spinoza establishes with axiomatic rigor in his *Ethica*: “*Ordo et connexio idearum idem est, ac ordo et connexio rerum* [The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things].”<sup>33</sup> This profound identity eradicates all ontological partitions: the structure of cognition mirrors the structure of extension not through analogy but through absolute isomorphism. What presents itself phenomenally as duality—mind contemplating matter, form organizing substance—reveals itself to thought as the self-unfolding of *Deus sive Natura* through its infinite attributes. Hence, philosophy's supreme task becomes discerning the eternal *natura naturans* beneath the mutable *natura naturata*, recognizing that the cosmic architecture manifests neither hierarchy nor antagonism, but an inexhaustible unity wherein every mode, whether conceived under thought or extension, participates equally in divine necessity.

Regarding this proposition of Spinoza, let us consider what Cassirer wrote in a posthumous text from 1924: “Spinoza: the way of thinking of Euclidean geometry is the absolute type of thinking. All philosophical thinking should be modeled on it—absolute geometry is the absolute form of knowledge and the absolute form of being—since there is no difference between the two.”<sup>34</sup> It is in this aspect that, in the view of the philosopher of symbolic forms, Spinoza not only grasps “the properly philosophical value of geometry [*den eigentlichen philosophischen Wert der Geometrie*],”<sup>35</sup> but “transfers this ideal of universal mathematics into ethics, into the doctrine of man [*in die Lehre vom Menschen*].”<sup>36</sup> Consequently, Spinoza's ontology

<sup>33</sup> B. Spinoza, “Ethics,” in: *idem, Complete Works*, ed. M. L. Morgan, Indianapolis 2002, p. 247.

<sup>34</sup> E. Cassirer, “Der Begriff der Form als Problem der Philosophie (Berlin, 20.III.1924),” in: *idem, Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, Band 4: *Über symbolische Prägnanz, Ausdrucksphänomen und “Wiener Kreis”*, hrsg. K. C. Köhnke, J. M. Krois, O. Schwemmer, Hamburg 2011, p. 274.

<sup>35</sup> E. Cassirer, *Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, Band 2: *Ziele und Wege der Wirklichkeitserkenntnis*, hrsg. K. C. Köhnke, J. M. Krois, Hamburg 1999, p. 131.

<sup>36</sup> E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, vol. III: *Phenomenology of Cognition* (1929), ed. S. G. Lofts, London 2004, p. 196.

admits no ontological primacy of the natural domain over the moral sphere, nor vice versa. This radical equivalence enables his definitive synthesis of Galileo's emancipated *natura naturans* and Grotius' autonomous *jus naturale*, thereby reconciling their seemingly divergent epistemic projects within a unified metaphysical architecture. Where Cartesian dualism reifies the schism between *res extensa* and *res cogitans* as ontologically distinct substances, Spinoza reconceives them as parallel expressions of the singular, infinite Substance (*Deus sive Natura*)—attributes through which the divine essence manifests with absolute simultaneity. Substance, being necessarily unique and indivisible, precludes all metaphysical multiplicity. Herein lies Spinoza's revolutionary proposition—unprecedented in the Western philosophical tradition—that thought, and extension constitute not separate realities but complementary modalities of one eternal truth. This monistic imperative, dismantling Aristotelian teleology and scholastic hierarchies, inevitably provoked profound consternation within a European intellectual *milieu* still deeply entrenched in medieval final causes, while simultaneously alienating orthodox Jewish thought through its rejection of providential transcendence. The disjuncture with Judaic tradition was also exacerbated by Spinoza's transgressive hermeneutical methodology in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (published anonymously in 1670),<sup>37</sup> which reconstituted Scripture not as divine revelation but as a historically contingent text, thereby subverting millennia of exegetical tradition and challenging the very foundations of religious authority.

In this seminal treatise, the human provenance of Scripture—as opposed to its traditional attribution to divine revelation—is categorically established, advancing an interpretative methodology prefigured by the iconoclastic Portuguese philosopher Uriel da Costa. Like Spinoza, da Costa suffered formal excommunication from the Amsterdam Portuguese-Jewish community for promulgating doctrines adjudged heretical, positions that conceptually adumbrate Spinoza's far more rigorous and systematic hermeneutics. Both thinkers contested rabbinic authority by situating sacred texts within historical and anthropological contexts, thereby relativizing their claims to transcendent authority.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, it would be epistemologically untenable to posit a lineal intellectual descent from da Costa's polemical assertions to Spinoza's philosophical framework. While da Costa's critiques remained embedded in theological disputation, Spinoza's approach consti-

<sup>37</sup> Cf. B. Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. J. Israel, Cambridge 2007, p. 243.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. G. Albiac, *La sinagoga vacía: un estudio de las fuentes marranas del espinismo*, Madrid 1987.

tutes a radical epistemological rupture: his hermeneutics derive from a coherent metaphysical system wherein scripture's analysis is subordinated to the sovereignty of natural reason (*lumen naturale*). Da Costa's contributions, however pioneering, operated within the conceptual limitations of religious dissent; Spinoza transcended such constraints by grounding textual critique in a totalizing ontology that reconfigured truth itself as immanent rational necessity. Thus, their shared historical circumstance—marginalization by orthodoxy—obscures fundamental divergences in methodological depth, systematic ambition, and philosophical legacy.

Spinoza's departure from the entirety of Christian ontology constitutes nothing less than a philosophical rupture of seismic proportions. He categorically repudiates not only the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* but, more radically, dismantles humanity's purported sovereignty as the "lord and possessor of nature"<sup>39</sup>—a teleological presumption that imbues creation with anthropocentric finality. The foundational scholastic opposition between Creator and creature, divine sovereignty and human subordination, dissolves irrevocably within his monistic framework. For Spinoza, nature exists not as a dominion fashioned for human mastery, but as the immanent manifestation of *Deus sive Natura*: humanity, far from occupying a privileged ontological station, constitutes merely one finite mode within the infinite expression of divine power. This reconceptualization effects a decisive negation of all teleological paradigms. Where traditional metaphysics posits purposeful design, Spinoza's system originates in a revolutionary principle of substantiality rather than causality. While causal relations suffice to explicate the transient interactions of particular modes—their ephemeral concatenations within the temporal order—substantiality alone reveals the eternal necessity governing the totality of existence. The human intellect, however, labors under inherent epistemological limitations: it apprehends nature's infinite nexus of causes and effects only fragmentarily, perpetually generating inadequate ideas. Even in its most rigorous efforts to penetrate the essence of phenomena, the mind remains captive to what Spinoza designates as imagination—the first and most fallible genus of knowledge, wherein perception remains bound to particularity and duration. Transcending this epistemic confinement necessitates the cultivation of *scientia intuitiva*: the intuitive apprehension of reality *sub specie aeternitatis*. This supreme mode of cognition bypasses discursive reasoning to grasp the necessary unity of Substance, perceiving particular things not as isolated entities but as eternal modalities

<sup>39</sup> Cf. T. M. Scholtz, "Spinoza and Descartes," in: *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. M. Della Rocca, Oxford 2018, p. 81.

flowing from divine essence. Here, the illusory boundaries between creator and creation, necessity and freedom, eternity and temporality dissipate—not through theological revelation, but through philosophy’s luminous insight into the absolute coherence of *Natura naturans*. This higher understanding, as Cassirer notes, lies beyond “the domain of the ‘imagination’.”<sup>40</sup>

Within Spinoza’s metaphysical architecture, God is fundamentally reconceived as *causa immanens*—an immanent cause—rather than *causa transiens*, the transitive cause that underpins both the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and Plotinian emanation. This distinction carries profound ontological implications: transitive causality intrinsically subordinates the effect to its cause while establishing an existential separation between them, thereby fracturing the unity of being. For Spinoza, such external causation constitutes a categorical impossibility, as all things necessarily inhere within the divine substance. Effects are not projected externally but remain eternally inherent to their cause, unfolding as determinate expressions of God’s essence rather than contingent productions. Divine causality thus operates through absolute internal necessity: phenomena exist solely because they follow with geometric inevitability from the infinite attributes of God’s nature. This framework necessitates a dual ontological perspective: *Natura naturans*: God conceived as dynamic, self-caused substance—the eternal wellspring manifesting through attributes like thought and extension; *Natura naturata*: the infinite totality of modes that flow necessarily from God’s essence, constituting the structured order of particular existents. Herein lies Spinoza’s revolutionary inversion of traditional metaphysics: where scholastic theology posits a hierarchical chain of creation, Spinoza articulates an indivisible continuum. *Natura naturata* does not stand apart from *natura naturans* but exists as its eternal, unmediated expression—much as waves are inseparable from the ocean whose essence they manifest. The human intellect, however, perceives these modes as discrete entities due to its confinement to *imaginatio* (imagination), the lowest epistemic grade. Only through *scientia intuitiva*—direct intuition of essences *sub specie aeternitatis*—can the mind apprehend the absolute coherence wherein every particular is recognized not as a contingent creation but as a necessary modification of the one eternal Substance. This duality clarifies the expression *Deus sive Natura*, since God is no longer conceived “as the remote cause of things but as their inherent principle.”<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> E. Cassirer, “Formen und Formwandlungen des philosophischen Wahrheitsbegriff (1929),” in: *Idem, Gesammelte Werke*, Band 17: *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften (1927–1931)*, hrsg. von T. Berben, Darmstadt 2004, p. 201.

<sup>41</sup> E. Cassirer, “Spinoza-Vortrag...,” p. 76.



Retaining Spinoza's conception of divinity as *causa immanens*—the immanent ground from which all existence necessarily flows—illuminates the fundamental fragility pervading critiques of his system, whether advanced by skeptics or dogmatists. This vulnerability arises from a recurrent hermeneutic failure: the imposition of extrinsic categorical frameworks upon a metaphysics that radically invalidates such distinctions. Cassirer observes this pattern in Pierre Bayle, the eminent French philosopher and Spinoza's contemporary, whose polemical critique targeted the very core of Spinozism—the identification of God with Nature. Bayle's objection reduces Nature to a mere aggregate of finite, corporeal entities, thereby construing Spinoza's equation as degrading the *ens perfectissimum* into a composite riddled with imperfections, contradictions, and limitations. Yet Bayle's critique possesses logical coherence only insofar as his reductive interpretation of Spinoza's *natura* holds validity—which it resoundingly does not. For Spinoza, Nature is not the sum of particular phenomena (*natura naturata* alone) but the dynamic, infinite, and indivisible substance (*natura naturans*) expressing itself eternally through inexhaustible attributes and modes. Imperfections arise not in Substance itself but in partial human perceptions confined to the realm of *imaginatio* (imagination). To accuse Spinoza's God of imperfection is thus to commit a categorical error: it conflates the modal manifestations—which appear flawed when viewed fragmentarily—with the perfect, self-contained totality of Substance, wherein all things exist with geometric necessity and constitute integral aspects of divine perfection. Bayle's critique, therefore, inadvertently vindicates Spinoza's epistemology: it exemplifies the very inadequate ideas that arise when the intellect, imprisoned by sensory data and anthropocentric prejudice, mistakes transient modes for eternal substance. The true scandal of Spinoza's system lies not in its unflinching dissolution of the ontological exceptionalism that positions humanity as judge of God's perfection. By insisting that reality can be comprehended *sub specie aeternitatis*—through the intuitive grasp of necessity rather than the enumeration of apparent flaws—Spinoza exposes critiques like Bayle's as artifacts of an inconsistent epistemological naïveté.

However, as Cassirer demonstrates, this critique lies on a profound misunderstanding: for Spinoza, Nature is not a passive aggregate but a dynamic system, a “totality [*ein Ganzes*] of universal rules that guarantees the order and nexus of all particular things.”<sup>42</sup> God—whose essence is necessity—is thus the law of the universe. Since there is only one all-embracing substance, it follows that “there is only one order and one law underlying

<sup>42</sup> E. Cassirer, “Spinozas Stellung in der allgemeinen Geistesgeschichte (1932),” p. 183.

happening.”<sup>43</sup> In Spinoza’s ontological framework, the dissolution of medieval theology’s anthropomorphic scaffolding extends beyond mere conceptual restructuring to eradicate the very obligation of devotional reverence toward a transcendent deity. Where scholasticism demanded affective submission to a personal God conceived in humanity’s image, Spinoza’s *Deus sive Natura*—an impersonal, necessary, and wholly immanent substance—transforms piety from ritualized worship into intellectual comprehension. This epistemological reconfiguration engenders a profound paradigm shift: authentic engagement with the divine manifests not through supplication but through the rigorous exercise of reason. Consequently, Spinoza articulates a comprehensive mathematical theory of existence wherein both cosmos and consciousness obey identical geometric laws. The mind’s operations and nature’s phenomena are governed by the same principles of causation and necessity—a symmetrical rationality permeating all attributes of Substance. This axiomatic unity enables humanity’s liberation from what Spinoza deemed the *servitus affectuum* (slavery of passions), replacing superstition with systematic understanding. Only through this unflinching rationalism—this alignment of human cognition with the eternal order of *natura naturans*—can humanity realize its *conatus*: the innate striving toward perseverance and flourishing that constitutes our supreme purpose: “a ‘philosophy of man’, of an anthropological philosophy, which is free from the errors and prejudices of a merely anthropocentric system.”<sup>44</sup> The ultimate aim of human existence thus becomes the cultivation of *scientia intuitiva*—the intuitive knowledge that apprehends particulars *sub specie aeternitatis*. In transcending partial and confused perceptions, the mind ascends to a state of intellectual beatitude wherein freedom coincides with the comprehension of necessity. Here is the culmination of Spinoza’s revolution: the reverence once directed toward an anthropomorphic deity is redirected toward the sublime apprehension of cosmic necessity itself—a devotion not of kneeling supplicants but of emancipated intellects contemplating the absolute coherence of Being.

<sup>43</sup> E. Cassirer, *Determinism and Indeterminism in Modern Physics* (1937), trans. O. T. Benfey, Yale 1956, p. 200.

<sup>44</sup> E. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, Yale 1944, p. 16. See also Y. Hamada, *Symbol und Gefühl. Ernst Cassirers kulturphilosophische Gefühlstheorie*, Hamburg 2016, p. 199.

## Conclusion

*God's essence is necessity, and his actions are to be understood as necessary or they are not at all necessary. This necessity is the logical link that in the mind of Spinoza connects the concept of God to that of nature.*

E. Cassirer, *Spinoza-Vortrag* [Spinoza's *Concept of Nature*], 1934

What has been presented here facilitates a more nuanced comprehension of Spinoza's philosophical locus within the broader intellectual currents of the seventeenth century. Spinoza's singular achievement constitutes nothing less than a synthetic masterwork that reconstitutes diverse epistemological and ethical trajectories—Galilean natural philosophy, Grotian jurisprudence, and Cartesian rationalism—within a unified metaphysical architecture, endowing them with renewed coherence and significance. Where Descartes' *mathesis universalis* remained circumscribed within the epistemological domain, Spinoza transcends this limitation by extending mathematical rationality into the ontological realm itself, thereby overcoming Cartesian dualism through a radical monism of substance. Spinoza's pursuit is not merely epistemological but fundamentally metaphysical: he seeks a new universality predicated on the absolute identity of thought and extension as attributes of the one infinite Substance. This reconceptualization expands the Cartesian paradigm to encompass all reality—physical, mental, and ethical—within a single explanatory framework governed by geometric necessity. Consequently, the concept of *lex naturalis*, whether articulated by Galileo in the context of celestial mechanics or by Grotius in moral philosophy, reveals itself as manifestations of a singular ontological principle. As Ernst Cassirer observes, these diverse applications of natural law “depend on the same principles and involve and express the same truth.”<sup>45</sup> In Spinoza's system, physics and ethics converge not analogically but identically: the laws governing falling bodies and those regulating just societies derive from the same divine necessity. This integration of *natura naturans* (dynamic substance) and *natura naturata* (structured modes) dissolves traditional disciplinary boundaries, positioning Spinoza's *Ethica* as the consummate expression of early modernity's quest for totalizing rational unity—a unity wherein truth, whether physical or moral, is eternally inscribed in the very fabric of Being.

<sup>45</sup> E. Cassirer, “Spinoza-Vortrag...,” p. 82.

This epistemological transformation fundamentally reconfigures the relationship between philosophy and religious consciousness by dissolving the traditional duality of revelation. No longer can one posit a distinction between divine truth manifested through sacred scripture and that expressed through the created order; for Spinoza, these constitute not separate disclosures but complementary expressions of a single ontological principle. Authentic revelation inheres in the very fabric of *Natura naturans*—the dynamic, self-causing substance that is *Deus sive Natura*. Consequently, theological engagement undergoes a paradigmatic transition: from the passive receptivity of *amor Dei* (devotional love of a personal deity) to the active intellectual pursuit of *amor Dei intellectualis*. The latter constitutes the highest form of human flourishing, grounded in *scientia intuitiva*—the intuitive comprehension of reality's essential structures and the eternal laws governing the infinite modes of Substance. Such cognition transcends affective piety, instead demanding rigorous alignment of the intellect with the impersonal rational order that permeates all existence. *Amor Dei intellectualis* is thus ontologically oriented toward the necessary coherence of the cosmos rather than toward an anthropomorphic will. Humanity, through the disciplined exercise of reason, achieves liberation not by supplicating a transcendent sovereign but by consciously participating in the divine necessity that animates all being. This love represents neither emotional fervor nor mystical ecstasy, but the serene recognition that truth, goodness, and beauty converge in the geometric perfection of the immanent whole—a recognition wherein the mind discovers its own eternity through union with the timeless order of Nature.<sup>46</sup> In this framework, beatitude emerges not from obedience to divine commandments but from the intellectual apprehension of causality itself. To love God intellectually is to perceive, with Spinoza, that the fractal intricacies of a spider's web and the moral imperatives of human justice alike derive from the same attribute of Extension unfolding under identical principles of determinism. Such understanding dissolves the illusory boundary between the sacred and the secular, positioning rational comprehension as the supreme act of veneration.

At the culmination of this concise exposition, a pivotal philosophical interrogation endures: does Spinoza's system resolve the problem of immanence with ontological coherence? Cassirer answers in a negative way. Notwithstanding this assessment, discerning the conceptual nexus binding the philosopher of symbolic forms to his critique of Spinozist substance necessitates delineating the foundational architecture of Cassirer's *opus magnum*

<sup>46</sup> Cf. V. L. Weibel, *Spinoza – Affektenlehre und amor Dei intellectualis*, Hamburg 2012.

concerning the evolution of epistemological consciousness. This intellectual horizon—the “problem of knowledge” (*das Erkenntnisproblem*)—is articulated not merely through Neo-Kantian parameters emphasizing philosophy’s symbiotic relationship with scientific methodology, but equally through a reactivated Platonism wherein ideas function as generative archetypes. For Cassirer, modern scientific knowledge epitomizes the actualization of idealism’s productive-constructive essence: it transcends passive observation to engage in active world-formation through symbolic mediation. Within this framework, Spinoza’s doctrine of immanent substance proves deficient precisely because it immobilizes becoming within static ontological unity. Where Cassirer’s dynamic epistemology posits knowledge as a perpetual process of cultural signification—a teleological movement toward infinite conceptual synthesis—Spinoza’s *Deus sive Natura* circumscribes reality within an indivisible, predetermined totality. The monistic substance thus negates the transcendental function of consciousness that, for Cassirer, constitutes knowledge’s very condition of possibility. Herein lies the irreconcilable divergence: Cassirer’s symbolic forms require epistemological becoming (a *natura naturans* of meaning), while Spinoza’s substance enforces an eternal *natura naturata* wherein all modalities are exhaustively contained. The critique, therefore, emanates from Cassirer’s conviction that true immanence must accommodate the historicity of reason itself—a ceaseless dialectic between consciousness and its symbolic expressions that Spinoza’s geometric determinism cannot conceptualize.<sup>47</sup> At the heart of *Das Erkenntnisproblem*, as Ferrari observes, lies not merely “the theory of knowledge as such, but knowledge as historically realized in modern scientific inquiry.”<sup>48</sup>

In Cassirer’s epistemological framework, ‘being’ manifests not as a static ontological data but as a dynamic problematic wherein thought itself operates as the constitutive principle that shapes its internal architectonics. This cognitive process, he maintains, represents an invariant structural feature throughout the historical unfolding of idealist philosophy—a continuous thread persisting beneath its varied doctrinal expressions. A definitive hallmark of idealism resides in its radical departure from the empiricist worldview, which Cassirer characterizes as predicated upon a theory of *Wirklichkeit* (reality) founded upon a ‘mirroring’ epistemology. Where empiricism collapses being into passive givenness—reducing reality to singular, unmediated sensory events—idealism, particularly in its

<sup>47</sup> Cf. G. Borbone, *Forma e idea. L’interpretazione di Platone nella scuola di Marburgo e in Ernst Cassirer*, Milan 2023.

<sup>48</sup> M. Ferrari, *Ernst Cassirer. Dalla scuola di Marburgo alla filosofia della cultura*, Florence 1996.

Platonic legacy, asserts the indispensable necessity of conceptual distinctions and dialectical mediations. For Cassirer, such categorical frameworks are not merely advantageous but ontologically prerequisite: without these intellectual structures, coherent thought remains fundamentally impossible. The primary function of the concept within this paradigm is twofold: firstly, to apprehend the elemental substrates underlying the articulation of intuitive reality, serving as cognitive instruments that parse the continuum of experience into intelligible units. Yet beyond this analytic capacity, the concept's higher vocation is hermeneutic: to illuminate the specific *meaning* sedimented within these elements and to liberate their immanent relational matrices from the constraints of contingent factual existence. Concepts thus operate as vehicles of ontological emancipation, transcending the particularity of empirical instances to reveal the ideal structures—the invariant relational logics—that govern phenomena. In Cassirer's vision, genuine philosophical labor consists not in cataloging appearances but in discerning the symbolic forms through which consciousness organizes chaos into cosmos, transforming brute facticity into significant order. Herein lies idealism's enduring power: it reconceives reality not as a repository of inert objects but as a field of meaning dynamically constituted through the synthesizing activity of mind—a continuous *poiesis* wherein thought and being achieve their ultimate reconciliation through the mediation of symbolic signification.

For Spinoza, to comprehend entities in their substantial essence necessitates apprehending them through their intrinsic mathematical determinacy—a geometric necessity governing their existence and relations. Within this epistemological framework, substance operates not as a *causa transiens* (transitive cause) that produces effects external to itself, but as *causa immanens*, an immanent generative ground wherein all modes inhere eternally within the divine plenitude of *Deus sive Natura*. Yet herein resides a profound dialectical tension within Spinoza's system: his foundational commitment to a rigidly deductive concatenation of reality—expressed through the monistic concept of substance—paradoxically engenders an unresolved ontological duality.<sup>49</sup> This conceptual fissure manifests through two irreconcilable dimensions. Universal Determinism, that is to say a totalizing regime of necessary laws that annihilates ontological particularity, reducing *Wirklichkeit* (reality) to an undifferentiated continuum governed

<sup>49</sup> While one may accept Melamed's position that Spinoza is a *monist of substance* but also a *pluralist of attributes* (cf. Y. Y. Melamed, *Spinoza's Metaphysics. Substance and Thought*. Oxford 2013, p. 196), this admission does not suffice to eliminate the dualism detected by Cassirer.

by identical axioms. In this schema, individual entities possess no intrinsic autonomy, functioning merely as ephemeral nodes within an infinite causal chain. Substantial Plenitude: Substance as the “receptacle of all receptacles” (*res omnium rerum*), encompassing and preserving the infinite qualitative fullness of attributes and modes—a dynamic *natura naturans* that transcends mere logical abstraction to embody generative fecundity. The first principle demands the dissolution of all contingency into geometric uniformity; the second requires the preservation of reality's inexhaustible diversity within the divine unity. Thus, substance simultaneously asserts the eradication of particularity through universal necessity and the conservation of infinite particularity through its all-encompassing essence. This antinomy exposes the fundamental challenge in Spinoza's metaphysics: how can the One, governed by immutable laws, authentically contain the Many without reducing their multiplicity to illusory epiphenomena? The tension remains unresolved—a testament to the paradox of conceptualizing infinite substance through finite human cognition.<sup>50</sup>

Consequently, we confront two ontologically irreconcilable principles: the austere conception of reality as a nexus of mathematically necessary interconnections, and the Scholastic *Ens realissimum*—the supremely real being embodying maximal ontological plenitude. In fact, the dualism of Spinoza's conception of Substance is clear: “on the one hand, there is a universal and all-encompassing rule that excludes from itself any particular mode of being; on the other, a ‘thing of all things’ [*Ding aller Dinge*] that contains and preserves within itself the infinite plenitude of all attributes. Here lies the pure concept of the necessary interconnection of all reality; there, conversely, the Scholastics' *Ens realissimum*.”<sup>51</sup>

Spinoza endeavors to resolve substance into the pure formal concept of geometric order, yet this very ordering principle remains inexorably bound to a substantial substrate that exists *per se et per se concipitur* (through itself and conceived through itself). Herein lies the constitutive tension of his system: the deductive chain of eternal truths demands complete dissolution of particularity into universal necessity, while substance simultaneously asserts itself as the infinite receptacle of all determinations—the dynamic wellspring from which all attributes and modes emanate. This dual imperative generates a fundamental aporia. The Abstract Pole: Substance as *logi-*

<sup>50</sup> This perspective is entirely overlooked by Morfino, who maintains that Spinoza “makes God the immanent rather than transcendent cause of the world” (V. Morfino, *Spinoza e il non contemporaneo*, Verona 2009, p. 50) while failing to acknowledge the Spinozist substantialism emphasized by Cassirer.

<sup>51</sup> E. Cassirer, *Gesammelte Werke*, Band 2: *Das Erkenntnisproblem...*, p. 97.

*cal totality*—an all-encompassing system of relations governed by the *mos geometricus*, wherein individual entities function merely as transient nodes within an immutable causal matrix. The Concrete Pole: Substance as *ontological plenitude*—the *res omnium rerum* that preserves the inexhaustible qualitative richness of reality in its infinite differentiation. The first reduces being to an impersonal network of equations; the second demands recognition of substance’s immanent fecundity as the ground of all concreteness. Spinoza’s doctrine thus oscillates between Parmenidean unity (the elimination of all multiplicity within the One) and Plotinian exuberance (the overflowing abundance of the Absolute). The geometric order, while purporting to exhaust substance’s essence, cannot adequately account for the *thickness* of existence—the very *haecceity* of modes that arise from divine necessity yet manifest as irreducibly particular expressions. By binding order to a substrate that is *causa sui*, Spinoza inadvertently reinstates the very duality his monism seeks to overcome: the formal architecture of rationality remains ontologically dependent on a foundation whose essence escapes full rationalization. Substance’s self-containment (*per se est*) becomes its epistemological limit—a transcendent immanence that thought can circumscribe but never fully penetrate. Thus, the dream of a perfectly transparent rational system lies on the irreducible opacity of its own first principle: the enigma of that which is simultaneously absolute order and infinite fullness. This is why Cassirer, in his posthumously published *Hegel-Seminar*, asserts that in Spinozism “we find no real ‘immanence’.”<sup>52</sup> ∞

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<sup>52</sup> E. Cassirer, “Hegel-Seminar Yale 1941/1942,” in: *idem, Nachgelassene Manuskripte und Texte*, Band 16: *Vorlesungen zu Hegels Philosophie der Moral, des Staates und der Geschichte*, hrsg. C. Möckel, Hamburg 2013, p. 137.