# Erotics as First Philosophy: Metaphysics and/of Desire between Aristotle, Avicenna, Cavendish, and Spinoza

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Theories of desire are largely thought to belong to one of two camps: *negative desire* as lack on the one hand or *positive desire* as engine or productive flow on the other hand.[1] While some say that desire is always after something that is not present, others say that desire is to be understood as an active force. Theories of desire thus seem divided between push and pull, production and attraction, drive and drag, lust and lack, surplus and scarcity.

In this text, I explore the connection of theories of desire to metaphysics. I aim to demonstrate that erotics (theories of desire) and ontology (theories of Being) go hand in hand. Or, more radically: Erotics is (a kind of) first philosophy. I also want to argue that instead of opting for push or pull, positive or negative desires, we should understand desire to be constantly *deflecting* between and beyond the two positions. In this sense, I argue, we should be Cavendishians about desire.

In the second section of this chapter, I introduce the problematicity of *Being*. In short, *Being* cannot be defined as a thing among things – or at least it cannot be defined *like* other things. Traditionally, this problem is solved in two directions: "Being" can mean a set of particular things or "Being" can mean that thing, of which all particular things are affections, modification, properties, etc.

The third section argues that, curiously, an understanding of Being as a plurality seems wired to negative desire as lack on the one hand. And an understanding of Being as one seems connected to desire as a driving force on the other. As exemplary

1 Famous proponents of negative desire are Aristotle, Hegel, Rawls and most of contemporary analytic philosophy (more on this later). Famous proponents of positive desire are Spinoza and Deleuze. For an overview of positions, see Jule Govrin, *Begehren und Ökonomie* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020). Many thanks to Oliver Thot and Sebastian Moske for support and commentary on this text, and to Yitzhak Melamed and Jason Yonover for inviting me to present a version of this text to the *Spinoza and Early Modern Philosophy* online Colloquium.

cases, I discuss Aristotle, Ibn Sina,[2] Descartes and Spinoza. The fourth section asks for the underlying reason of this curious cartography. With Spinoza as a test case, I demonstrate that a monistic metaphysics does not in fact allow for negative desire simply because it does not leave space for real negativity. Spinoza's model helps us understand why the negative model remains nevertheless attractive: it fits the human experience. In the fifth section, I return to the problematicity of *Being*. I argue that the problem *is real*. I then develop a notion of reality as *deflection* along the lines of Margaret Cavendish's *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy* (1668).[3] The problematicity that we experience while undertaking to think *Being* or existence itself as absolute infinity is just an adequate expression of the reality of existence itself – hazy, unstable, continuously changing, in constant withdrawal, erratic, transient etc. In the sixth section, I ask what the parallel *Erotics* to this metaphysics would look like. I find traces of such a theory in Baudrillard, Derrida and Spivak. Yet I argue that we should be Cavendishians about desire and take the deflective motion in thought to be isomorphic with the real motions in the body and elsewhere.

A note on terminology: I use the terms '*Being*' and '*existence*' roughly synonymously in the particular context of this paper. I nevertheless recognize that there may be reasons to opt for the one or the other (or another term altogether) in another context, especially regarding their use and etymology.

## 1. The problematicity of being

According to Aristotle, "[t]he hardest inquiry of all, and the one most necessary for knowledge of the truth, is whether being and unity are the substances of things."[4] Here is a way to understand why that is: definitions are often thought to hinge on

2 I am using the names "Avicenna" and "Ibn Sina" interchangeably, yet I will stick to "Ibn Sina" in the main text and use "Avicenna" only where the bibliography demands it. The reason for this is that "Avicenna" is the Latinised version of the Arabic "Ibn Sina." In an attempt of gentle decolonisation, I want to stick to the Arabic transliteration "Ibn Sina" so as to highlight that we are not talking about a white and Western man but rather about a Persian intellectual way before Western colonisation. In short, there was thinking before Western colonisation, and there will be thinking after and beyond it.

3 Margaret Cavendish, *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003). For the purpose of this chapter, I will focus on that last book. For more about her philosophy and its genealogy, see Deborah Boyle, *The Well-Ordered Universe – The Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018), 70.

4 Aristotle, Metaphysics 3.4.1001a3, 1581. For quotes of Aristotle, I refer to the customary Bekker numbers. Translations are from Jonathan Barnes, ed., "Aristotle: The Complete Works. Electronic Edition," in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Bollingen Series LXXI 2, vol. 1, trans. W. D. Ross (Charlottesville: InteLex Corp., 1992).

*specific differences* that distinguish some thing from all other things.[5] Thus, a straight line is exactly the shortest connection between two sides, a triangle is exactly that geometric figure whose internal angles add up to 180°, etc. These qualities (shortest connection, internal angles add up to 180°) are the *specific differences* in question.[6]

Now, *Being* is a special thing. At first sight, it looks like the thing that encompasses or constitutes all other things. And that is exactly what opens Pandora's box: *If* there is a thing called "*Being*," then we must define it by way of its *specific difference*. Now, a *specific difference* is that which *distinguishes* the thing defined from all other things. If there was a *specific difference* to *Being*, it would set it apart from all other things. We would then have a sequence of definitions, like: a boat, freedom, Luce, Being, the largest prime number etc. The problem is that in this case, *Being* is a thing among things – while it *excludes* all the other things. There is something about *Being* that is not all the other things. And yet, all things should *be.* If our definition of *Being* results in boats, freedom, Luce and prime numbers *not* being, then that defeats the purpose of the definition. This, then, is the *problem of Being*: We would want *Being* to capture everything, in some sense. But once we define *Being*, we do so by way of setting it apart from all other things in some way.[7] So then, *Being* will turn out to designate all things (because that is what we define it to do) *and not* to designate all things (because it requires a *specific difference from* all things as its defining feature). This, however, is a contradiction. What to do?

1. Accept the contradiction, exit philosophy, enter religious piety or mysticism. That path, I will not engage here.[8]
2. *Ontological Analogies*: Give up on *Being* as an overarching category: what we *mean* by *Being* is really dispersed into numerous categories. The classical form of this is Aristotelianism.[9]

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5 Aristotle, Topics 6.6, Met. 7.12, 10.4, 10.8, 10.9; Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (1968, reis., London: Continuum, 1994), 31. Also Porphyry, *Isagoge – Texte grec et latin*, trans. Boethius, Alain de Libera, and Alain-Philippe Segonds (Paris: Libraire Philosophique J. Vrin, 1998), 24, sections 8–9.

6 In no way should a definition point to two different things – in that case, we speak of an *equivocation*. And it is a (some say: *the*) philosophical task to avoid or at least mark equivocations wherever they occur.

7 Aristotle makes arguments of this kind in Met. 7.13.1038b1–1038b14, 1639, Met. 7.14.1039a24–1039b2, 1641 and Met. 7.16.1040b16–1040b27, 1643. See also Hobbes in *De Corpore* (Thomas Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, vol. 1 [London: John Bohn, 1839], 83).

8 See, for example, Bernard of Clairvaux, "On the Love of God," in *Late Medieval Mysticism*, ed. Ray C. Petry (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 62; Al'Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Utah: Brigham Young UP, 2000), 3.

9 Another prominent contemporary form is axiomatised set theory, but I will not argue that point in this chapter.

3. *Ontological Univocity*: Give up on the existence of particular *beings* as distinct from *Being* itself as Ibn Sina and Spinoza paradigmatically do.[10]

Curiously, option (2) leads to a notion of *desire* as lack, a striving towards something not present within the desiring actor, while option (3) leads to a notion of *desire* as productivity, a striving hardwired into existence as such and expressed in this or that way. Before I say more about this and why it is that way, I want to exemplify my claim in a few examples.

Aristotle, of course, is paradigmatic. In his view, *Being* is predicated *analogously:* instead of signifying one thing, it is predicated in ten different ways or *categories.*[11] The most fundamental of these, called *substances,* occur in two ways. In a primary way, substances are neither predicated of an other nor are they *in* an other (i.e., individual things such as Ruby the horse). And in a secondary way, substances are predicated of an other, which they cannot be *in* (i.e. species such as horse in general). The other nine categories are specifications or accidents like quantity, quality, position, relation etc. Yet accidents fully depend on substances.[12] Thus, "what being is, is just the question, what is substance?"[13] And Aristotle's response is: only individual things and their species *are* – in the relevant sense of the word. This avoids the *problematicity of Being* in that these substances *can* be defined through a specific difference. A horse is a one-toed Perissodactyla, humans are rational animals etc. But *Being* is not a thing in this way.

10 A fourth way is this: give up on definitions based on *specific differences*. Both Hobbes (*The English Works*, 70) and Spinoza (ST, I.7.8–9, I/47, Ep. 60, IV/270/23) opt for a model of definitions that favour efficient causes over specific differences. That is to say, in their model, a definition should tell us *how a thing really comes about* and not *how it is different from all other things*. Yet Hobbes eventually opts for option (2) and Spinoza opts for option (3). Option (4), then, seems inconsequential regarding the eventual notion of *Being* favoured by an author. We are thus left with options (2) and (3).

11 One might wonder if "ontological pluralism" and "analogical Being" are two different things, because the former talks about Being as dispersed into multiple things while the latter talks about Being as predicated in multiple ways. However, I am not aware of anyone who would have an analogical yet monistic understanding of Being. Such an understanding would have to claim that "Being" is predicated of the *one thing*, Being, in multiple ways. But why, if there is only one thing, would we predicate it of itself in multiple ways? More precisely: if there is only one thing, why would that one thing predicate itself of itself in multiple ways? This does not seem to make much sense to me.

12 Aristotle, Met. 7.5.1031a1–1031a14, 1628.

13 Aristotle, Met. 7.1.1028b9, 1624.

Inversely, Ibn Sina famously claims the *univocity* of existence, meaning that "existence" or "Being" has "one meaning."[14] He argues as follows:[15] we do not actually need a separate definition of existence. More specifically, there cannot be one. That is because in every possible definition of "existence," we presuppose the term "existence" or something that exists. Other than in usual definitions, this is not an error but attests to the primordial and unified understanding of existence that we have. Though inexplicable, unified existence is nevertheless inevitable.[16] A mistake only occurs once we try to *add something* to our knowledge about existence. For existence is no such thing. It is always already fully known. We cannot possibly know it any better than it already is. Instead, the term "existence" or any possible argument for its necessity (such as the one in this paragraph) can only *indicate*, but never *add to* what we already know. The error thus lays with the Aristotelian mode of investigation, not with the univocity of existence. Yet, to Ibn Sina, just as to Aristotle, "the first thing to which [existence] belongs is quiddity [essence], which is substance."[17] But while for Aristotle, *Being* is predicated *analogically* of substance and its accidents, to Ibn Sina, existence is predicated *univocally*, such that everything *really exists in one and the same sense*.[18]

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14 Avicenna, *Metaphysics of The Healing*, trans. Michael A. Marmura (Provo: Brigham Young UP, 2005), I.5.26 (Book I, chapter 5, line 26), 29.

15 See Avicenna, *Metaphysics of The Healing*, I.5.5, 23.

16 Note that this kind of argument returns in Ibn Sina's *Flying Man Argument*, a concise predecessor of Descartes' *Cogito*. See Jari Kaukua, *Self-Awareness in Islamic Philosophy – Avicenna and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015), 31; Peter Adamson, *Philosophy in the Islamic World: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015), 84.

17 Avicenna, *Metaphysics of The Healing*, I.5.21, 27. See also Aristotle, Met. 7.6.1031a28–1031b21, 1628 for a parallel passage.

18 Are ontological monism and univocity about Being the same thing? I think so. (1) *Monism implies univocity*. If there is only one thing anyway, all predications are that one thing (if you think Spinoza was an exception, see Luce deLire, "Spinoza's Special Distinctions," *Journal of Philosophical Research*, Fall 2024, forthcoming.) (2) *Univocity implies monism*. To show this, assume the opposite: either many things "being" exist, or nothing exists. (2a) Assume any one sense of the word "being" (univocity) and simultaneously assume that there is no one thing "Being" (monism), but many (ontological pluralism). The predication is allegedly one, but the referents are allegedly many. It then seems undecidable what is "meant" by the univocal "being." (2b) Alternatively, assume that "being" is predicated univocally, while there is no thing "Being" at all. Then, all predications of "being" come out wrong in the same way (negative univocity) – nothing exists. Either (2a) "to be" has a murky referent, yielding essentially unintelligible statements. Or (2b) "to be" has no referent, yielding false statements. In the second case, nothing exists. In the first case, what it means to exist is constitutively unclear. Both seem unconvincing. Univocity is, hence, incompatible with ontological pluralism and ontological nihilism. Univocal monism, however, is both intelligible and allows for things to exist. Consequentially, univocity implies monism (2). And monism implies univocity (1). Univocity and monism are thus the same thing.

## 2. Theories of desire

Theories of desire generally answer to a particular question of movement: why do things move towards each other and act in particular ways? Why do people cross oceans to meet each other, or invest resources in order to access specific kinds of food? Are they motivated in the same way as the flower is to grow and the bullet is to kill? These are the kinds of questions that theories of desire, which I suggest calling *Erotics*, respond to.

Now, curiously, the analogical (pluralistic) and the univocal (monistic) approach to *Being* or existence map onto different theories of *desire*. Thus, Aristotle's view is that objects of desire are "the good or the apparent good,"[19] "i.e., that for the sake of which, [meaning] … [final] causes."[20] The Christian tradition especially tends to interpret final causes to reside temporally *after* their effects.[21] If you want to go home to sleep, sleep comes *after* going home and yet it (allegedly) *causes* movement.[22] The most extensive study on Aristotle's theory of desire to date comes from Gilles Pearson, who understands Aristotelian desire more generally to consist in "*the prospect of*

19 Aristotle, De Anima 3.10, 433a27–28.

20 Aristotle, Met. 1.2, 982b11–982b28. See also Gilles Pearson, *Aristotle on Desire* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 62, 105.

21 Aristotelianisms of the past two millennia can be roughly divided into materialistic (judeo-islamic) and idealistic (christian) interpretations. This division crucially turns on materialists highlighting "a desiring intellect or thinking desire," while idealist interpretations tend to opt for a "deliberate forgetting" of the same (Dobbs-Weinstein, Idit. "Aristotle on the Natural Dwelling of the Intellect." In: *The Bloomsbury Companion to Aristotle*. Edited by Claudia Baracchi (ed.). London: Bloomsbury 2014, 298 – for more on that same debate, see: Bloch, Ernst. *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* (NY: Columbia UP, 2019) as well as and Dobbs-Weinstein, Idit. "Thinking Desire in Gersonides and Spinoza." In: *Women and Gender in Jewish Philosophy*. Edited by Hava Tirosh-Samuelson. Bloomington: Indiana UP 2004, 56.). Given the debate's age and the partially unclear status of the source material (most of what we have of Aristotle are his lecture notes), it seems unlikely that we can find out what the historical Aristotle might have been up to. However, I do not think this interferes with my general argument.

22 Elisabeth Anscombe, *Intention* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1976); Dennis Stampe, "The Authority of Desire," *The Philosophical Review* 96, no. 3 (1987); Warren Quinn, *Putting Rationality in Its Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993); Daniel Friedrich, "Desire, Mental Force and Desirous Experience," in *The Nature of Desire*, ed. Federico Lauria and Julien Deonna (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017); Graham Oddie, *Value, Reality and Desire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005); Graham Oddie, "Desire and the Good: In Search of the Right Fit," in *The Nature of Desire*, ed. Federico Lauria and Julien Deonna (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017). Although the Aristotelian theory is often deemed *evaluative* in that it generates *reasons* for action, this seems to be an unnecessary and unhelpful conceptual restriction.

*objects of desire*."[23] In this prospect, however, the driving force of desiring activity is the lack of the desired object. Let us call this *negative desire* – desire as movement by final causes and towards an absence.[24]

Ibn Sina, however, is a prime example of another interpretation of similar topics (and a similar canon). To him, desire is not chasing for something absent. For him, desire ensues from an actual encounter. More concretely, desire happens in a (partially corporeal) animal soul that has certain dispositions whenever an imposing stimulus triggers that disposition into action.[25] Desire is thus not a longing but an embodied form that may be set in motion once the necessary ingredients occur.[26] There is no space for absence in this picture.

Things, however, may still be *imagined* as absent and possibly longed for. In this case, the reality of the representation of an imagined thing in memory is all the reality there is. Thus, when I desire a kiss, that kiss, to Ibn Sina, is not retroactively causing me to act in some way from the future. Rather, the concrete image (as a memory or a pastiche of sensations) *actually triggers my disposition* to move. This, however, is not a genuinely negative or suspended kind of reality. Rather, "its form is represented internally."[27] The form is, in fact, present, namely as reactivated memory (be it a concrete memory or one collaged together), an image stored in the mind that is literally re-present-ed, or re-activated. That representation itself *causes* the movement experienced as desire. No retroactive or final causation is taking place. Let us call this *positive desire* – desire as oriented by efficient causes.

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23 Pearson, *Aristotle on Desire*, 225. Pearson analyses the tripartite of Aristotelian desires: pleasure and revenge (117), the good (164), and the "goal" (165). For this chapter, a brief account is sufficient.

24 For examples in contemporary analytic philosophy, see David Pineda-Oilvia, "Defending the Motivational Theory of Desire," *Theoria: An International Journal for Theory, History and Foundations of Science* 36, no. 2 (May 2021): 244–247. The traditional proponents of this view on the continental side are Hegel and Lacan. See exemplarily Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "Lordship and Bondage," in *Hegel's Dialectic of Desire and Recognition: Texts and Commentary*, ed. John O'Neill (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), especially 33; Edward S. Casey and J. Melvin Woody, "Hegel and Lacan: The Dialectic of Desire," in *Hegel's Dialectic of Desire and Recognition: Texts and Commentary*, ed. John O'Neill (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 227. See more extensively Jacques Lacan, *Desire and its Interpretation*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2019).

25 Avicenna, "Selections on Psychology from *The Cure*, 'The Soul,'" in *Classical Arabic Philosophy – An Anthology of Sources*, ed. John McGinnis and David C. Reisman (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2007), The Soul Book I, chapter 5, section 4, 180.

26 Shams Inati, *Ibn Sina's Remarks and Admonitions: Physics and Metaphysics – An Analysis and Annotated Translation* (NY: Columbia UP, 2014), Part II, Class 3, Chapter 6, 357–358 (in the Arabic source), 97 (in Inati's English translation) (hereafter "II.3.6.357–358/97").

27 Inati, III.8., 367/98. See also Inati, II.3.30., 449–450/114–115.

Of course, Ibn Sina does believe in a strict normative hierarchy between the faculties of the mental apparatus. In fact, the "practical faculty" which moves the body based on reflecting "what is required by customary opinions,"[28] "should rule over the other faculties of the body in accordance with the judgments [of the theoretical faculty]."[29] This looks as though good minds were supposed to rule over bad desire-ridden bodies according to solid social norms, meaning according to a necessary purpose or *final causes*. Yet, to Ibn Sina, *theoretical* insight in its most immediate form, which we may call "intellectual intuitions," is neither brought about by forceful mental activity, nor is it opposed to desire. In fact, intellectual intuition relies on the "preparedness for accepting" sudden insight,[30] coupled with "the demand of the soul" (actively looking for insight),[31] although it may occur without the latter and despite differently directed desires.[32] To Ibn Sina, however, *receptivity for spontaneous recognition of the truth* and desire as an active force go hand in hand.[33] There is no final causation in play here, only efficient causal interaction between actualised things.

There is a link, then, between analogical ontology and negative desire, exemplified in Aristotle and inversely between univocal ontology and positive desire, exemplified in Ibn Sina. This link, however, may be spotted across the philosophical spectrum. Despite obvious candidates for the continuation of the Aristotelian model such as Ibn Rushd,[34] Ibn Hazm,[35] Kant,[36] Hegel,[37] Rawls,[38] and contemporary analytic philosophers,[39] we can find it even in Descartes. That should surprise us. To Descartes, allegedly the "father of modern philosophy,"[40] "the term 'substance' does

28 Avicenna, "Selections on Psychology," I.5.12, 183.

29 Avicenna, I.5.13, 186.

30 Inati, II.3.15, 403/106.

31 Ibn Sina, *The Cure* (*al-Shifā'*), edition by various scholars in 22 volumes, (Cairo, 1952–1983), 245–246, quoted in Dimitri Gutas, "Ibn Sina [Avicenna]," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2016 ed.).

32 Inati, II.3.11, 393/103.

33 Ibn Sina illustrates this process when he talks in his autobiography about his trouble understanding Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. See Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition – Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), 17–18.

34 Averroes, *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, trans. Simon Van Den Bergh (Gibb Memorial Trust, 2008), 354.

35 Ibn Hazm, *The Ring of the Dove*, trans. A.J. Arberry (London: Luzac & Company, 1953).

36 Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), AAV, 177, fn. For an English version, see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 13, fn 1.

37 Hegel, "Lordship and Bondage," 33.

38 "The general desire for justice limits the pursuit of *other ends*" (emphasis added): John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice – Revised Edition* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999), 5.

39 See Pineda-Oilvia, "Defending the Motivational Theory of Desire," fn. 18.

40 "[I]t was probably a German historian, Kuno Fischer (1824–1907), who first put Descartes forward as the father of modern philosophy": Christia Mercer, "Descartes' Debt to Teresa of Ávila,

not apply univocally …, there is no distinctly intelligible meaning of the term which is common to God and his creatures."[41] Descartes is thus in Aristotle's camp regarding the nature of *Being* as predicated analogically. Famously, however, he sports a *mechanistic* program, reducing all causation to efficient causation (modelled on the interaction between billiard balls etc.). Accordingly, final causation should not have any role to play here. Thus, it looks as though Descartes was a counter-example to my general observation: analogical ontology combined with a positive theory of desire.

Now, in the *Passions of the Soul*, Descartes defines the *passions* as effects on the soul, "caused, maintained and strengthened by some movement of [bodily] spirits."[42] With "spirits" referring to Early Modern medical theories, Descartes' philosophy of passions is supposed to be strictly physiological or mechanistic, effectively based on things acting on each other. Yet he states that "desire" works to "acquire a good which one does not yet have, or avoid an evil that one judges may occur, but also [applies] if one wishes nothing but the conservation of a good or the absence of an evil." All of these, Descartes says, are directed towards the "*future* [*avenir*]."[43] He continues, "It suffices to think that the acquisition of a good or the avoidance [*fuit*] of an evil be possible to incite a desire."[44] Further, he explains sexual desire (*agrement*)[45] with the natural feeling of being one half of a whole that is defective (*défectueux*) without an other.[46] Both cases, desire in general and sexual desire in particular, operate by virtue of a motivational *lack*, be it the lacking object that is being projected into the future (desire) or the lacking other half (sexual desire). Neither of them can be characterised as efficient causes.[47] Desire necessarily oriented towards an absent future and sexuality missing an absent other half both exemplify a theory of *negative* desire

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or Why We Should Work on Women in the History of Philosophy," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 174, no. 10 (October 2017): 2540.

41 René Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, Part I, section 51 (AT VIIIA 24). Translations are from René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985), 210.

42 René Descartes, "Les Passions de l'Ame," in *Oeuvres Complètes de René Descartes*, electronic ed. (Charlottesville: InteLex Corporation, 2001), part I, section 27 (hereafter "I.27"). Translations are mine.

43 Descartes, II.57. Emphasis added.

44 Descartes, II.58.

45 See Anthony F. Beavers, "Desire and Love in Descartes's Late Philosophy," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (July 1989): 288.

46 This theory responds to an old tradition of philosophies of the other half. See, for example, Plato, "Symposion," in *Plato – Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1997), 189e–193d; Govrin, *Begehren und Ökonomie*; Hazm, *The Ring of the Dove*; Lucrezia Marinella, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men*, ed. Anne Dunhill (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 63.

47 For a related point, see Beavers, "Desire and Love in Descartes's Late Philosophy," 288.

and final causation. Descartes thus aligns with Aristotle on the conjunction between analogical ontology and negative desire after all – against his overall commitment to the reduction of all causation to efficient or mechanistic causation.

On the other side of the spectrum, Spinoza, a central engine of the European Enlightenment and Descartes' natural enemy,[48] has no problem characterising desire in purely positive terms. Spinoza in particular, not unlike Ibn Sina, is committed to the univocity of *Being*.[49] For Spinoza, there is nothing outside God,[50] defined as "absolutely infinite Being,"[51] who is also the only substance or *Being* (*Ens*)[52] and, therefore, everything there is.[53] Departing from his predecessors, Spinoza claims that absolutely infinite Being (*Ens*) is the cause of itself (*causa sui*).[54] This is crucial because, to Spinoza, desire is the particularised form of the self-causation of absolutely infinite being itself (aka reality, aka God) accompanied by consciousness thereof.[55] It is a genuine expression of divine auto-motion. For example, my desire to kiss you

48 See Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), 22; Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Enlightenment, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670–1752* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008); Ursula Goldenbaum, "The Pantheismusstreit—Milestone or Stumbling Block in the German Reception of Spinoza?," in *Spinoza's Ethics: A Collective Commentary*, ed. Michael Hampe, Ursula Renz, and Robert Schnepf (Leiden: Brill, 2011); Ursula Goldenbaum, "Spinoza – Ein toter Hund? Nicht für Christian Wolff," *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2011). See also Luce deLire, "'[E]very Day the Matter Seems to Get Worse, and I Don't Know What I Should Do.' – Violence, Spinozism and Digital Reality," in *Skin and Code*, ed. Daniel Neugebauer (Spector Books, 2021).

49 For the often-neglected historical trajectory of an Islamo-Judeo-Arabic materialistic "Aristotelian left" tradition, see Ernst Bloch, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left* (NY: Columbia UP, 2019); Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion and its Heirs: Marx, Benjamin, Adorno* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015), 35. See also deLire, "[E]very Day the Matter."

50 E1p15. Quotation of *Ethics* are from Pierre-François Moreau, ed. and trans., *Spinoza – Oeuvres IV – Ethica/Éthique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2020), where a first number signifies a page in the Latin text and a second number the line on that page. "PUF 13/22–23" thus refers to page 13 in the Latin edition by Presses Universitaires de France, lines 22 and 23. They are noted by "E" (for *Ethics*), followed by the number of the chapter, and further specifications. So "E1p10s" refers to *Ethics*, chapter 1, proposition 10, scholium. "E3DA1" stands for *Ethics*, chapter 3, definition of affects number one, etc. Other texts are quoted from the Gebhardt edition and referenced by the so-called "Gebhardt numbers," referring to Carl Gebhardt, ed., *Spinoza: Opera* (originally 4 vols, Heidelberg: Carl Winter-Verlag, 1925; 2nd ed. Heidelberg: Carl Winter-Verlag, 1973). For example, "II/37/10–15" refers to the second volume of the Gebhardt edition, page 37, lines 10–15. "TIE" stands for the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, followed by the paragraph and the Gebhardt number. "Ep." stands for "letter." If not otherwise noted, translations from Latin are mine.

51 E1d6.

52 See E1p10s, E1d6.

53 E1p14.

54 E1p7.

55 E3p6d, E3p9s, E3DA1.

is a partial manifestation of divine self-causation or auto-motion. If that motion goes unblocked, Spinoza says, I feel joy. Yet in the inverse case, whenever external interferences obstruct that particularised motion (my desire), I sense sadness. From these three (desire, joy, sadness), Spinoza composes all other affects.[56]

Regarding positive desire and univocal ontologies, Spinoza is a particular case. Here, individual desires *are nothing but* particularisations of the self-causing force of absolutely infinite *Being*.[57] For absolutely infinite being is all there is.[58] And so, the self-causation of absolutely infinite being *as a whole* and the causal effects of its particular manifestations (such as you, me, and all the butterflies in the universe) are distinguished only by virtue of a particular, partial comprehension. To Spinoza, the distinction between the self-causation of the universe and a candle that causes its wax to melt is like the distinction between the movement of an ocean and the movement of a particular wave within that ocean.[59] No distinction actually occurs. The distinction is really just a constriction of perspective.[60] While Ibn Sina did claim the univocity of existence on the one hand and the positivity of desire on the other hand, to Spinoza, these two claims are one and the same thing. There is not only but one existence or *Being*[61] but only one self-causing cause as well,[62] absolutely infinite Being and its various manifestations. Spinoza, then, extends the univocity of Being to the univocity of causation:[63] "God must be called the cause of all things in the same sense in which he is called the cause of himself."[64]

## 3. Where being meets desire

In the previous sections, I have sketched some paradigmatic cases (Aristotle, Ibn Sina, Descartes and Spinoza) to motivate my hypothesis that an analogical ontology aligns with negative desire and a univocal ontology aligns with positive desire. For all I know, the parallelism persists in the history of Western philosophy. But mere historical pastiche will not do. How is this connection between ontological and libidinal commitments not merely accidental? A possible answer comes from Spinoza.

56 E3p9s.
57 E1p25s.
58 E1p15.
59 E1p15s; PUF 15/24–27.
60 Really, the matter is a bit more complicated. See further Luce deLire, "Spinoza's Conceptual Distinctions" (forthcoming).
61 E1p14, E1p15.
62 Mogens Laerke, "Spinoza and the Cosmological Argument According to Letter 12," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 21, no. 1 (2013): 57–77.
63 Laerke, "Spinoza and the Cosmological Argument According to Letter 12," 57–77; E1p25.
64 E1p25s.

Besides standing firmly on the side of univocity, Spinoza also firmly opposes desire as lack. I am going to present three arguments to this end: an argument based on the univocity of *Being*, another based on the univocity of *causation*, and a third based on the nature of negativity.

## 3.1 The univocity of being

In the appendix to the first part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza argues as follows: "… [I]f God [aka absolutely infinite Being] acts because of an end [including negative desire], he necessarily wants [*appetit*] something which he lacks [*caret*]."[65] But because God is all there is, she cannot lack anything.[66] If she *did* lack something, she would not be all there is, as that lacking thing would exceed her. But God *is* absolutely infinite *Being*,[67] and everything is within God.[68] Therefore, there cannot be anything that is not in fact God. Consequentially, God cannot desire *negatively*. And because all particular things in Spinoza's framework are just modifications of God, they cannot desire *negatively* in a real sense either. For if they did, they would fundamentally differ from God in exactly that respect. And yet, given the univocity of *Being*, they are nothing *but* God.[69] Therefore, they must behave *like* God. And just as God cannot desire negatively, her particularisations cannot do so either.[70]

## 3.2 The univocity of causation

To Spinoza, the distinction between the absolutely infinite cause (God) and its partial manifestations (such as the construction site outside your bedroom window that wakes you up in the morning) is really just an effect of our partial perspective. Therefore, individual desire *just is* absolutely infinite self-causation particularised, or actualised *for* a certain spectator. And as there cannot be any reality to anything lacking within absolutely infinite *Being* (because that is all there is), the same must count for its particularisations. Yet again, because all things are really just particularisations of God and God is driven *positively* by the necessity of her own essence, any particular thing must be driven by the same cause, namely the necessity of the divine essence.[71]

65 E1App; PUF 37, 6–7.

66 See also E1p33s2.

67 E1d6, E1p10s, E1p14c1.

68 E1p15.

69 E1p15.

70 In fact, to Spinoza, the existence of final causes is the mother of all prejudices. And end-driven desire, I think, should not be an exception. E1App; PUF 34, 7–19.

71 E1p24c, E1p25, E2p10c.

## 3.3 The inexistence of negativity

Inversely, if there were real final causes for Spinoza, then there really was something that does not exist, or at least not yet – such as a future lover's kiss or tonight's sleep. Yet, to Spinoza, that is not the case: everything is always already actualised, including your future lover's kiss or the inexistence thereof. For if something was not yet actualised, God would lack it. But God cannot, by definition, lack anything.[72] Therefore, there cannot be anything in God that is not already actualised. And consequentially, there can be neither final causes nor negative desires.

Therefore, to Spinoza, negative desire cannot exist in a real sense. Not unlike in Ibn Sina's picture, however, negative desire *can* exist in an *imaginary* sense. For although all causal relations are necessarily determined, we may still *mistakenly* experience our goal as driving us. Thus, although that stone flying into a police officer's face is of course mistaken about her desire, she may still have the impression that she did really desire that line of flight. For in the absence of the full order of causes, we sometimes fill the blanks with non-existing causes, such as (and especially) final causes.[73] This imaginary desire is just an insufficient assessment of the actually determining causes at play. Yet that absence itself, in turn, serves as a full explanation for that imaginary desire: because I do not know what causes my desire, I ascribe the reason for desiring to the object of desire. For that is where I sense the action to happen. In fact, then, negative desire reifies a lack of knowledge into an ontological force.

An example: I love you. But I do not know why. I do not know that it is because you share some crucial characteristics with caregivers that traumatised me early in life. So I ascribe my love to your beauty, your sense of humour and overall perfection. When you are absent, I experience these characteristics as *lacking in my life*. In brief, I miss you. Without you, I am sad, my life is incomplete. I have thus turned a lack of knowledge into a magical force, pulling me towards you, situated in your particular characteristics – your smile, your jokes, the way you move. Consequentially, Spinoza's model enables us to explain *negative desire* as a kind of *positive desire*, namely as positive desire poorly understood.

Further, Spinoza's model helps us understand the connection between a univocal approach to ontology and positive desire: if everything is said to exist in the same way (and effectively as the same thing), then there simply is no negativity that would allow any *negative desire* in a real sense to get off the ground. Note that this claim is crucially connected to the univocity of *Being* – for *Being itself* has no space for non-being. In fact, *Being*, whatever it is, is that which is not non-being. But negative desire *relies* on non-being as its objective, as the pulling force, the location of lack. Yet

72 E1d6, E1p10s, E1p14c1, E2p8.

73 E1App; PUF 35.

without any possible lack, there cannot be a motivating force as the origin of desire either. So, if there is no lack in *Being* itself, *Being* cannot desire negatively. Now, if every particular is just a modification or determination of *Being* itself, then particulars cannot desire negatively either. And further, if every particular *cause* is just a modification or determination of *Being* as it causes itself, then the same must count here too: there are no negative causes within absolutely positive *Being*. In short, the univocity of *Being* and of *causation* leave no space for negativity – and thus no space for negative desire either.

Inversely, if *Being* is predicated analogically of really distinct things, then these things (may) well relate *negatively* to one another (although they may also not relate negatively to each other, depending on your other ontological commitments).[74] They may lack each other and be pulled in each other's directions. The question about the nature of desire is, therefore, deeply ontological. It is a question about the nature of reality, being or existence itself and about the position of negativity within it. Erotics as a field of study, then, *just is* metaphysics from another angle. In short, if reality is one, then negativity does not exist in a real sense. And consequentially, all desire must be *positive* desire, originating from a push and not a pull. Inversely, if reality is dispersed into really distinct things, then there is room for negativity in a real sense (although its existence is still not necessary). And consequentially, desire *can* be *negative* desire, originating from a pull and not a push.

But how come an analogical ontology has this inner tendency towards *negative* desire? How does "can" become "is"? As pointed out, the univocal picture provides an explanation for the disagreement between the two views to begin with: negative desire is positive desire poorly understood. Whenever we do not know what is going on, we fill the gap. It seems plausible to me that people would often go into Spinoza's trap: Where we do not have a good explanation at hand, we reify our own experiences into ontological truths. In other words, in the absence of knowledge, ignorance is being hailed as reality. And in fact, this seems to be a main reason for the prominence of *negative desire* as a paradigmatic philosophical stance: It just seems to be a fair description of our *experience*, which, however, is itself rendered by an incomplete understanding of the world at large and the causes that drive us in particular. Descartes is a good example; while trying to explain the force of desire, he goes so far as to betray his own mechanistic commitments.

74 Arguably, this might be a reason for the debate between the materialistic Aristotelian Left and the idealistic Aristotelian Right – see footnote 47 of this text.

## 4. The eclipse of existence

It would be nice if Spinoza had it right and the story could end here. And yet there is a problem. I want to argue that the problematicity of *Being* (see section 2) is not a mistake but a real phenomenon. In order to see this, we should try to think reality itself, *Being* or existence once more in the full sense of the term and see where and how exactly the undertaking fails.

When we try to think reality itself, absolute infinity, *Being*, we basically have two strategies: we can think it bottom up or top down, starting from particulars or starting from the most general level at our disposal. Let us then pursue both strategies and see what happens.

Particular things always exist by virtue of their context, other things, etc. But when exactly does the coffee I drink become a part of me? And how about the air I breathe, the society that shapes my personality, the historical era that provides the condition for my existence more generally? Each particular thing in a way overflows its particularity into other particulars and their surroundings, contexts, etc., respectively, *ad infinitum*. Each particular thing gives way to a more encompassing thing – me, the city, the universe, etc. We should think, then, that we would ultimately reach reality *itself*, existence *itself*, absolute infinity, *Being* or however you want to call it. And yet, upon thinking this ultimate frame of reference (however you want to call it), we must think it as *a thing* – as something particular. This may be an infinite, all-encompassing, ultimate *thing* – nature, the universe, *Being* – but a thing nevertheless. As the end point of a process of continuous dissolution, then, we reach an all-encompassing *particular thing* that entails all the other *things*. Yet this cannot be *Being* or reality itself, because obviously, train tracks, golf clubs, and natural numbers are real as well.

Let us then start top down. If we start thinking reality *itself* directly as absolute infinity etc., we may think it as a large, malleable sphere of indeterminacy or something like that. In this case, again, we think it as a sort of overarching *thing*, not as any set of particulars. Or else we may think reality itself as the set that entails all the (relevant) particulars. In this case, it will still eventually be one thing – *that set*, entailing all the (relevant) particulars. Or again, we may think reality itself simply as *all the particulars*. But then, we will miss combinations of particulars, such as the individual people that make up a political party or the particulars that make up a school of fish – and yet, the school of fish is not *just* a collection of individuals and the party is more than just its members.[75]

75 For an introduction to the related debate in metaphysical mereology, see Achille Varzi, "Mereology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2019 ed.). For an equivalent in political philosophy, see Shlomo Avineri and Avner de-Shalit, eds., *Communitarianism and Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992).

Existence or reality in its absolute infinity must be each particular (you, me, poetry, etc.) and all the particulars together and a particular particular (the indeterminacy that encompasses them all) and yet cannot be any of these (as pointed out in section 2 and just now). But in trying to think this through, one of these constantly gets into the way of the other, the one gives way to another, collapses into it, claims priority, and fails to fit the bill. The indeterminate sphere of things appears as *a particular thing*, yet cannot be just *one thing* because it entails all the things *and* all individual things – clearly, there are differences at play here. And each particular thing (as pointed out above) seems only poorly distinguished from its surroundings, yet it *is not* its surroundings … and yet all of this is supposed to be reality, existence, *Being* in some sense.

Existence, reality, *Being* simultaneously occupies its role as indeterminate playing field, specified thing, set of things in such a way that they constantly tumble into one another. Whenever we understand that *existence-as-a-thing* actually *means* existence in its unrestrictably absolute infinity, its specificity collapses into withdrawal and indeterminacy. Existence loses its contour, stops being a thing and withdraws. It remains inevitable, but only by way of an irregular artifice: existence itself as a thing that dissolves in indeterminacy. It becomes a thing which is not a thing – a ~~thing~~. As soon as we envision its contours and consequences, existence as absolute infinity ceases to be an explainable *thing* and becomes an inexplicable ~~thing~~. Nevertheless, though, this artifice (the ~~thing~~) is necessary in order to comprehend the absolute infinity of existence, if even in its virtuality, its constitutive absence, its withdrawal – *its eclipse*.[76] There is thus a necessary remnant of particularity hardwired into the absolute infinity of existence or reality itself – its inevitable ~~thingness~~. And likewise, there is a dissolving tendency in each particular thing that always refers us to the next thing, to a more encompassing thing *ad infinitum* – hence an inner pathway between particular things and existence, *Being*, absolute infinity or reality as a whole. Like the moon is getting in the way of the sun, leading to a solar eclipse, existence is getting in its own way, leading to another kind of eclipse – an *eclipse of existence*.

Ibn Sina points out that "thing," just as "existence," is a term presupposed by each possible explanation of it (see section 2 for more).[77] And yet, Ibn Sina says, we *do understand* the term "thing," although in a properly *inexplicable* way.[78] The moment

76 "*[E]clipse (n.)* – c. 1300, from Old French eclipse 'eclipse, darkness' (12c.), from Latin eclipsis, from Greek ekleipsis 'an eclipse; an abandonment,' literally 'a failing, forsaking,' from ekleipein 'to forsake a usual place, fail to appear, be eclipsed,' from ek 'out' (see ex-) + leipein 'to leave' (from PIE root *leikw- 'to leave').": "Eclipse," in Douglas Harper, *Online Etymology Dictionary*.

77 Avicenna, *Metaphysics of The Healing*, 5.1.19–26, 22.

78 Some might claim that Spinoza would disagree with this because to him, everything allegedly must be explainable (see Michael Della Rocca, "A Rationalist Manifesto: Spinoza and

of eclipse between thing and existence that I described in the previous paragraph, I claim, is the location of Ibn Sina's "inexplicable" knowledge: The terms "thing" and "existence" (etc.) continuously give way to one another and thus presuppose one another. An explanation of "existence" (etc.) will refer us to things. An explanation of "thing" will refer us to existence etc. Yet the comprehensibility of the explanation shows that something is known here, although in a way that cannot be explained other than by itself.[79] And the robustness of the experience of this eclipse (it re-occurs, no matter how we try to cut the issue) in an attempt to explain existence (etc.) indicates that something real is going on.

What are we to do with this? Gladly, Margaret Cavendish can help us out. She is not only the most prolific woman philosopher of the 17th century but also one of the most underrated philosophers of the Early Modern period and beyond. Cavendish writes:

> [B]ut this I find, that there is no objection but one may find an answer to it; and as soon as I have made an answer to one objection, another offers itself again, which shows not only that nature's actions are infinite, but that they are poised and balanced, so that they cannot run into extremes … for, as nature and her parts and actions are infinite, so may also endless objections be raised.[80]

To Cavendish, continuous misalignment with one's own thoughts is neither an accident, nor does it attest to the flawedness of an argument. Cavendish claims that the continuous process of statements and their objections given a particular argument is a genuine expression of an ongoing real process. The problematicity of Being as pointed out in section 2 and just now is a paradigmatic case for a process like this: we continuously waver between Being/existence/reality as a thing, a ~~thing~~, an indeterminate surface, a particular class of things and all the things. In a Cavendishian way, then, the problematicity that we experience while undertaking to comprehend existence or reality is just an adequate expression of the reality of existence itself –

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the Principle of Sufficient Reason," *Philosophical Topics* 31, no. 1/2 (2003): 76; Michael Della Rocca, "Rationalism, Idealism, Monism, and Beyond," in *Spinoza and German Idealism*, ed. Eckhart Förster and Yitzhak Melamed (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012)). But I disagree. In fact, Spinoza's substance, aka God, is conceivable *through itself* (E1d3). It cannot, therefore, be explained by something else. Either you get it or you do not (while Spinoza arguably thinks that 'not getting' substance is impossible, see E2p46). Now, insofar as substance or God in this sense is equivalent to what in my argument occurs as reality, existence, *Being* etc., I take it that Ibn Sina and Spinoza actually agree about the epistemological status of basic notions such as existence. They are self-explanatory but *inexplicable* regarding other, less general notions. There are, of course, false ways of understanding such notions, as Spinoza points out (see E2p40s1; PUF 76/28–78/24). But that does not change the general assessment.

79 This self-explanatory version would be the Spinoza track to the same effect. See E1d3, E2p47.

80 Cavendish, *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*, 13. See also 26.

hazy, unstable, continuously changing, in constant withdrawal, erratic, transient, etc. This process, however, is *robust* in that it never dissolves in one direction completely. We never reach absolute indeterminacy (which would dissolve individual consciousness). We can never think of particular things *without* their correlations and embeddedness. We do not actually have access to *all the things* etc. These states (indeterminacy, an infinite sequence of things etc.) always only occur as *deflections from* some other such state etc. to infinity. I call this process *deflection* as a displacement of the idealistic claim that philosophy should be built on a process of *reflection*.[81] Existence continuously *deflects* from itself and into itself – from particularity to indeterminacy and back and elsewhere etc. The haziness of existence, I claim, is real. But how is this more than just a hypothesis?

To Cavendish, there is no difference between the deflection in thought (between arguments) and the deflection in nature. In fact, she says, they are one and the same thing. I want to offer two arguments in support of this claim.

1) The most general thing we can observe on all levels of thought and intellectual life is in fact deflection: Human culture at large is marked by continuous disagreement, questioning, revisiting and adjustment. Particular discourses show that same pattern, organised around particular questions, issues and terminologies (which are, however, themselves time and again subject to such disagreement and re-evaluation). And even in a particular mind, that same drama unfolds continuously, as Cavendish astutely observes and performatively demonstrates.[82] In fact, many religious practices, philosophies and even the empirical sciences are dedicated to *calm* or *transquilise* that continuous process of deflection.[83] The fact that terms such as "progress," "happiness," "enlightenment," or "blessedness" are often understood as victories over such continuous deflections shows just how powerful existential deflection really is – it constantly sneaks back in, must always be kept at bay, must eternally be managed and has functioned as such throughout the ages. Against many

81 This is close to Spivak's "*Entstellung*, or displacement as grounding in the emergence of significance": Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999), 219.

82 See Cavendish, *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*, 1–13.

83 See entries "Erleuchtung" and "Erlösung" in: Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer, Gottfried Gabriel (eds.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Volumes 1 – 13 (Basel: Schwabe Verlag 1971 – 2007), digital version without page numbers. See also Pasnau, Robert, "Divine Illumination," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). There are many examples of notions that serve this purpose in more or less secularized versions. For examples, see: Clairvaux, "On the Love of God," 56; Spinoza; E4App4, E5p33s; but also Kant's notion of "disinterested pleasure" (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (*Kritik der Urteilskraft*), translation by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2000, 90–96 and 42–50) or Schopenhauer's "tranquillity," in: Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. I, Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway (eds.), Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011 [translation from the 3rd edition], 220.

statements to the opposite, the deflection never stops: political discourse is ever changing, philosophy itself may be viewed as the science of existential deflection in thought, and even empirical sciences are prone to periodic revision, readjustment or revolutions.[84] If there is anything, then, that we can attest to with overwhelming evidence, it is that *deflection is real*, that the continuous give-and-take between claims and objections is inevitable. And as such, I claim, it is a genuine expression of nature as it is.

2) Now, take the opposite claim: assume that nature, other than thought, was not continuously deflecting. Assume that in nature, everything was finally hardwired in some solid form, whatever it be – the laws of nature, the smallest particles or something like that. Then, human reasoning would be said to escape nature more generally, that the constant deflection we are subjected to was peculiar to thought, or maybe even to the human mind. Instead of manifesting nature, human reasoning would then manifest a para-natural realm in its own right. And yet, in some sense, thought exists within nature *and as nature*. Thought, then, is natural and simultaneously it is not natural. This looks like a contradiction.

But maybe, to save the argument, we could say that thought is super-natural in some respect, say in its deflective tendency. Thought, then, would exist entirely in and through nature – aiming at non-intellectual objects and be hardwired into the brain. But yet, it would itself be super-natural in its deflective tendency. In making this move, however, the argument itself *performs a deflection* – it moves away from its original stance of thought as something super-natural towards a more easily defensible stance: that only the deflective tendency in thought is super-natural. And in that deflection from the original stance *against* the ubiquity of deflection, the argument falls for a *performative contradiction*; by attempting to resist the claim (of ubiquitous deflection) it actually does exactly what the claim supposes it would – deflect from its original stance. Yet this was exactly Cavendish's original claim – that there is no claim without an objection, and no objection without a defence etc., ad infinitum. Existential deflection is thus not simply correct. Rather, it demonstrates itself in its own debatability, as every possible objection about it recites its internal logic. Existential deflection is not simply true. Rather it is *inevitable* in that the claim keeps reappearing, cannot be fended off *and simultaneously* governs the debate about itself. Every critical debate about existential deflection is effectively an expression of

84 See paradigmatically Banu Subramaniam, *Ghost Stories for Darwin: The Science of Variation and the Politics of Diversity* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2014); Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); Ludwig Fleck, *Entstehung und Entwicklung einer wissenschaftlichen Tatsache. Einführung in die Lehre vom Denkstil und Denkkollektiv* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980); Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (London: Verso, 2010).

existential deflection. That is why I agree with Cavendish about the isomorphism between deflection in thought and deflection in nature more generally.

Consequentially, there is no "real distinction,"[85] no "rigorous difference"[86] between reality as indeterminate playing field on the one hand and any particular or even all the particulars on the other hand. These are not things independent from one another, neither epistemologically nor ontologically – they can neither exist nor be conceived independently from one another. Further, particulars are not just properties of existence itself and neither is existence just the host or substance of its affections. They are *intimately connected* in a sense that I will elaborate on in the following section.[87] Let us call the difference between reality or existence as absolute infinity on the one hand and its particulars on the other hand an *intimate difference*, neither real nor rigorous, nor just an affection, a property, an accident or modification (and certainly no illusion).

The analogy approach and the univocity approach to reality, existence, *Being*, however, are snapshots of this intimacy between absolute infinity and its manifestations as it were. The struggle between the univocity approach and the analogy approach to existence can be understood to be hardwired into existence itself. It is a genuine expression of the *eclipse of existence.* Existence is such that it cannot but particularise into *things* and simultaneously dissolve into infinite indeterminacy. Whenever we think the one, the other is looming around the corner, ready for deflection. Existence sometimes looks like a set of particular things and sometimes looks like an absolutely infinite plane of reality itself etc. Yet the one approach continuously deflects into the other. In this sense, ontological univocity and ontological analogy both are genuine dimensions of this eclipse, focusing on different dimensions of it.

85 For more on distinctions in Descartes, see Melamed, *Spinoza and German Idealism*, 92. Spinoza discusses "the threefold distinction of things: Real, Modal, of Reason" (*CM* II.V., I/257–258; also E1p15s; PUF 16/10–11). For more on the connection between the middle ages and the early modern period regarding distinctions, see Tad Schmaltz, *The Metaphysics of the Material World: Suarez, Descartes, Spinoza* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2019), 103. See also deLire, "Spinoza's Special Distinctions."

86 Jacques Derrida, *Life Death*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020), 37.

87 For preliminary studies, see deLire, "Spinoza's Special Distinctions."

## 5. Seduction as erotic deflection

*Positive* desire is often called a kind of *production*.[88] *Negative* desire may accordingly be called a kind of *attraction*, from Latin *attrahere* ("to draw, to pull"). Here, the lack motivates the action by pulling it towards the lacking thing. In this section, I will argue for desire as *seduction*. Desire itself is *deflecting* from one state into the other.[89] In other words, we should be Cavendishians about desire.

Jule Govrin has recently demonstrated that both *negative* and *positive* approaches towards desire continuously collapse into each other.[90] Is there thus room for a third theory or a third kind of desire in line with the eclipse of existence outlined in the previous section? Are there theories of desire as deflection beyond production and attraction, beyond positive and negative, beyond push and pull?

We can indeed find explications of such a theory of desire in some philosophies of the 20th century. With Jean Baudrillard, we may call it *desire as seduction*, especially if taken, with Sylvia Plant, "literally."[91] Seduction, in this sense, is the process of accumulation and "disaccumulation,"[92] continuous expression of reversibility,[93] contraction, and dissolution – *libidinal deflection* in the terminology developed in the previous section.[94] What I called "*eclipse*" above, to Baudrillard, is a "void" "at the very heart of power."[95] Seduction thus encompasses both production and attraction, push and pull, in that it describes their *deflection* into one another.[96]

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88 Most famously in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus – Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 3.

89 That is also why *both* approaches have significant explanatory power. They are, as it were, in themselves infinite, may function as ultimate explanatory models for the set of phenomena under inquiry.

90 See Govrin's case studies of Plato, Hegel, Klossowski, de Lauretis, and others in Govrin, *Begehren und Ökonomie*.

91 Sadie Plant, "Baudrillard's Women – The Eve of Seduction," in *Forget Baudrillard?*, ed. Chris Royek and Bryan S. Turner (London: Routledge, 1993), 105.

92 Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, trans. Nicole Dufresne (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 54. See also Plant, "Baudrillard's Women," 89, 96.

93 Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*," 53. See also Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. Brian Singer (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1990), 10.

94 Note that although interesting especially regarding "the trans-sexuality of seduction which the entire organization of sex tends to reject" (Baudrillard, *Seduction*, 7–8), I want to point out that Baudrillard's theory has an inherently sexist angle and is at times conceptually murky. Although a great resource, it would need a serious reworking. For an on point feminist critique of Baudrillard, see exemplarily Plant, "Baudrillard's Women," 97, 103–105.

95 Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, 54.

96 Baudrillard, 54. For a general critique of Baudrillard's *Seduction*, see Douglas Kellner, "Jean Baudrillard," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2020 ed.).

A similar model may be found in some of Jacques Derrida's works. He expresses it as the *dynamis* between philosopher and philosophy,[97] the seductive force of *différance*,[98] or simply as the origin of pleasure. Other than Baudrillard, however, Derrida insists on a certain difference as the driving force of desire as seduction: "*Mimesis* brings pleasure only if it allows us to see in action what is nevertheless not given in action itself, but only in its very similar double, its *mimeme*."[99]

His point is that the seductive force of representation emerges from the difference *within* a represented thing between its reality and its intelligibility. In fact, the proximate distance that we have to represented things is the location of pleasure. What would otherwise incite horror, discomfort, or disgust may cause pleasure and excitement in its representational form – an image, a hyperrealistic simulation, an anecdote, etc. The great success of movies and computer games on war, crime, catastrophes, and mystical creatures attests to this point. And yet the condition of this pleasure is exactly the intelligibility itself of the terrifying, disgusting or discomforting thing. It is the fact that we can watch a family drama unfold without being involved, see wolves take out a village without being immediately threatened, that enables pleasure and enjoyment of movies, games, and storytelling. And yet representation does not befall the represented thing from the outside like a demonic force.[100] Rather, representability lives in the heart of each thing. Without intelligibility, representation (good or bad, true or false) would be impossible. This difference between the reality and the representation of the thing *within the thing* is an example of that *intimate difference* that we touched on earlier regarding the difference between reality or existence as absolute infinity and its manifestation in particular things. It is a difference *within the thing* that allows the thing to be what it anyway is. In this case, the *intimate difference* occurs between the real and the intelligible (as real).[101]

97 Jacques Derrida, *Otobiographies – The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name*, trans. Avital Ronell (NY: Schocken Books, 1985), 5. See also Derrida, *Life Death*, 26.

98 Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Disseminations*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 1981), 70.

99 Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," *New Literary History* 6, no. 1 (1974): 5–74, 39. For related passages, see exemplarily Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 40, fn 35; Jacques Derrida, "Parergon," in *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 39.

100 Except that, according to Derrida, this is the ur-demonic force. See Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," 117; Jacques Derrida, "Cogito and History of Madness," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1978), 68.

101 That is why to Spinoza, desire is the *consciousness* of the striving for perseverance in existence *both* in the body *and* in the mind: it is awareness of the *intimate difference* of that striving with itself.

Now, as Spivak points out, desire as deflection (or *seduction*) must always relate to *its material conditions*.[102] "What is marked [by the deflection] is the site of desire."[103] In other words, what is visible through the solar eclipse is a trace of the sun as it is blocked by the moon. And what occurs as the trace of desire as deflection or seduction is its material underpinning. That is why sexual relations never occur outside their gendered, racialised, and otherwise politically charged conditions. If anything, desire as seduction is a particular deflection from those conditions. As pointed out earlier, a certain distance aestheticises horror into shuddering enjoyment. And likewise, a certain distance turns political differences into libidinal attractions. Sexual desire, then, is another flavour of that intimate difference within each thing, embedded within a set of cultural norms and material practices.

And yet what both Baudrillard and Derrida lose out of sight is the question of *movement*.[104] As pointed out above, for Aristotle, Ibn Sina, Spinoza, etc., *desire* is an answer to a particular problem: Why do things move? Are we just stuck in linguistic determination without movement? Neither Baudrillard nor Derrida seem to have good answers to this question.[105]

What would Cavendish say? Cavendish understands that once motion has left the philosophical system, we cannot put it back in. This has in fact been a problem in Aristotelianism and still is one to Descartes, which is why both Aristotle and Descartes require a first mover to set nature in motion in the first place. Cavendish, however, turns the problem of motion from its head to its feet by positing self-motion as the general principle of nature itself: "[T]here is but one ground or principle of all … variety, which is self-motion, or self-moving matter."[106] To her, nature itself is infinite "in her actions, … parts … and has no set bounds or limits."[107] Nature is also eternally self-moving in itself, while particular things are patterns of motion *within* that overall auto-motion of infinite nature itself.[108]

But motion of what? This is in fact Cavendish's clou: "[M]otion is material; for figure, motion and matter are but one thing."[109] In fact, motion and matter are dis-

102 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value," *Diacritics* 15, no. 4 (Winter, 1985): 73–93.

103 Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 207.

104 Is this because they go into the trap of idealism and tacitly understand desire, seduction etc. as the *internal* movement of the soul?

105 Derrida comes closest to this question, as far as I know, in his notes on the spacing of time and the temporalisation of space regarding *différance*. See, for example, Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982), 9; Derrida, "Cogito and History of Madness," 74.

106 Cavendish, *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*, 70.

107 Cavendish, 199.

108 See also Boyle, *The Well-Ordered Universe*, 70.

109 Cavendish, *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*, 73.

tinguished as body and place are.[110] According to Descartes, whenever a body moves, the space it occupies moves with it. And even when a space is supposedly empty, it in fact still harbours something – just not the thing we would expect to be there.[111] Thus, when a city is empty, it is empty *of people*, but the buildings, the streets, etc. are still there.

Analogously, Cavendish argues, *motion is always motion of matter*. It is always *something* that is moving. And consequentially, "if motion should be transferred or added to some other body, matter must be added or transferred."[112] For if there is no motion without matter, what then is being transmitted when motion is transmitted, if not matter? And yet, when a billiard ball hits another, no material part of the one ball suddenly becomes a part of the other ball. Consequentially, Cavendish concludes, material things essentially *move themselves* and interact in a way that adjusts to the auto-motion of other things.[113] And inversely, *matter is always in motion*. For each particular thing, to Cavendish, is a certain pattern of motion. "[P]articular natures are nothing else but a change of corporeal figurative motions, which make this diversity of figures."[114] And because nature itself is entirely material, particular things must be material as well, distinguished only by their differing patterns of motion.[115]

Motion, then, is motion *of matter* and matter is always already *in motion*. Matter and motion are thus linked in a peculiar way; in fact, "motion and matter are but one thing."[116]

And yet there seems to be *some* distinction. It want to suggest that we read this as another instance of that *intimate difference* constitutive of a thing. Cavendish herself does not specify why we should distinguish matter and motion in the first place if they are allegedly "one thing."[117] I, however, want to suggest the following.

A thing only moves with respect to something else that functions as its reference point.[118] *Regarding other things*, then, a thing is a pattern of motion. But if we abstract from its embeddedness in a context, then a thing is just a particular formation of matter, its own thingness. Understood in this way, there is no real, no rigor-

110 Cavendish, 48.

111 Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, II.10, AT VIIIA 45.

112 Cavendish, *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*, 200; Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 74.

113 This is also the foundation of her epistemology; see Boyle, *The Well-Ordered Universe*, 77. For Cavendish's materialistic feminist politics, see Lisa Walters, "Redefining Gender in Cavendish's Theory of Matter," in *Margaret Cavendish – Gender, Science and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014).

114 Cavendish, *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*, 197. See also 191.

115 Cavendish, 205–206.

116 Cavendish, 73.

117 Cavendish, 73.

118 See also Cavendish, 27.

ous distinction between motion and matter. But neither can the difference between matter and motion in this sense be described in terms of modifications, affections or properties. For *all a particular thing is*, regarding another thing, is its pattern of motion. And *all a particular thing is*, abstracting from other things, is its matter. Yet the intelligibility as a pattern of motion is hardwired into each particular thing. Nothing prevents being perceptible to other things. Likewise, infinite nature itself cannot *not* manifest in its particulars. The intelligibility as motion of Cavendishian things is thus not an accident or a modification of that thing – it is the thing. The same counts as its existence-as-a-thing in abstraction from other things. This, then, is another instance of that *intimate difference* constitutive of existence, *Being* or (as Cavendish calls it) *infinite nature* as deflection. A difference within the thing (hence intimate), constitutive of its thingness, but not rigorous: deflection of the thing *into its own intelligibility*, hence its existence for others.

Although Cavendish does not talk about desire explicitly in this context, we can now reconstruct a Cavendishian theory of desire. In the terminology of the previous section, to Cavendish, motion, in fact, *is* a determined section of the deflection of *Being* itself. Some particular desire then is another manifestation of that same deflecting movement, a pattern of motion or deflection. Every particular thing is defined by its desire, by its pattern of motion. We *sense* this desire mostly when it is being blocked or suspended – longing for a lover, craving food, hoping for a better world. Yet the moving force experienced in these occasions is just what determines us most fundamentally. Consequentially, seduction in general is the infinite deflecting movement of nature itself. And each individual desire is a particularisation of this infinite seduction of nature. In this sense, I think we should be Cavendishians about desire.

## 6. Summary and conclusion

In this text, I have argued that there is a parallelism between ontologies and erotics, between theories about existence, *Being*, reality, infinite nature (etc.) on the one hand and desire on the other hand. I argued that univocal ontologies go along with theories of desire as production and analogical ontologies (tendentially) go along with theories of desire as attraction. I have further demonstrated that the division into analogical and univocal ontologies is not exhaustive. With Ibn Sina and Cavendish, I claimed that the problematicity of *Being*, its apparent ungraspability, is not a mistake of reason but an expression of reality itself. I then argued for a theory of desire as *seduction* along the lines of the parallelism between ontologies and erotics. Both desire and existence are caught in continuous *deflection*. This theory of desire conveniently encompasses both the erotics of production and erotics as attraction: attraction deflects into production and vice versa. This explains why they (attraction/pro-

duction) exist, why they are convincing and why they are nevertheless insufficient: attraction and production are states, phases or manifestations of the overall deflection of desire. I take it, then, that deflective ontology and the erotics of seduction are all the more compelling. In brief, let us become Cavendishians.

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