

# FREEDOM IN SPINOZA AS AN ONTO-EPISTEMOLOGICAL BASIS IN THE CONFRONTATION OF ETHICAL-POLITICAL SUFFERING

*A LIBERDADE EM ESPINOSA COMO BASE ONTOEPISTEMOLÓGICA NO ENFRENTAMENTO DO SOFRIMENTO ÉTICO-POLÍTICO*

*LA LIBERTAD EN ESPINOSA COMO BASE ONTOEPISTEMOLÓGICA EN EL ENFRENTAMIENTO DEL SUFRIMIENTO ÉTICO-POLÍTICO*

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**ABSTRACT:** The aim of this article is to focus, based on Spinoza's philosophy, on the concept of "ethical-political suffering", necessarily articulating it to the concepts of "good encounters" developed by Gilles Deleuze and Spinoza's "power of acting". For that, we weave a reflection on the concept of freedom for this author, going through his masterpiece, *Ethics*, articulated with some of his readers and interlocutors. We argue that recognizing the ontological and epistemological basis of these concepts allows us to demarcate an ethical and political direction that can contribute with Critical Social Psychology in Brazil. The idea of freedom as an ontology claims life expansion as a human foundation or as a desire that moves us in search of encounters that increase our possibilities of singular and collective existence. The restriction of this desire is at the genesis of the ethical-political suffering.

**KEYWORDS:** Ethics; Freedom; Ethical-political suffering; Good encounters; Power of action.

**RESUMO:** O objetivo deste artigo é focar, a partir da filosofia de Espinosa, no conceito de "sofrimento ético-político", articulando-o necessariamente aos conceitos de "bons encontros" desenvolvido por Gilles Deleuze e "potência de ação" de Espinosa. Para tanto, tecemos uma reflexão sobre liberdade para este autor, passando por sua principal obra, a *Ética*, articulada com alguns de seus leitores e interlocutores. Argumentamos que reconhecer a base ontológica e epistemológica destes conceitos permite demarcar um direcionamento ético e político que pode ser útil à Psicologia Social Crítica no Brasil. A ideia de liberdade como ontologia afirma a expansão da vida como fundamento do humano ou como desejo que nos move em busca de encontros que aumentem nossas possibilidades de existência singulares e coletivas. O cerceamento desse desejo está na gênese do sofrimento ético-político.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Ética; Liberdade; Sofrimento ético-político; Bons encontros; Potência de ação.

**RESUMEN:** El objetivo de este artículo es enfocar, a partir de la filosofía de Spinoza, el concepto de "sufrimiento ético-político", articulando-lo necesariamente a los conceptos de "buenos encuentros" desarrollado por Gilles Deleuze y el "poder de acción" de Spinoza. Para ello, tejemos una reflexión sobre la libertad para este autor, pasando por su obra principal, *Ética*, articulada con algunos de sus lectores e interlocutores. Argumentamos que reconocer la base ontológica y epistemológica de estos conceptos nos permite demarcar una dirección ética y política que puede ser útil para la Psicología Social Crítica en Brasil. La idea de la libertad como ontología afirma la expansión de la vida como fundamento de lo humano o como un deseo que nos mueve en busca de encuentros que aumenten nuestras posibilidades de existencia singulares y colectivas. La reducción de este deseo está en la génesis del sufrimiento ético-político.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Ética; Libertad; Sufrimiento ético-político; Buenos encuentros; Poder de acción.

## Introduction: freedom in Spinoza and Social Psychology

The notions of autonomy, emancipation, social transformation, that can be agglutinated and fundamented on the idea of freedom, have been the reference and direction of many reflexive processes within the scope of human sciences, in interface with contexts of research-intervention. However, the great majority of ethical reflections puts freedom as an inherent operation to modern man's rationality, or consciousness, from classic dichotomies that set on opposite pairs the body and the mind, rationality and emotion, and, as consequence, almost always reference freedom in the transcendent moral plan. In this sense, the definition of freedom would more or less pass through an autonomous, rational and deliberate choice of the individual face possible distincts, as Marilena Chauí (2011) points out, beyond being considered as a suppression or overcoming of affections imprisoned by rationality, which brings epistemological, ethical and political consequences to Psychology's praxis.

This is not the case when freedom is comprehended from Spinoza's philosophy<sup>1</sup>. The 17th century author breaks with the dichotomies mentioned above and places freedom as an ethical operation in the immanence plan and in the composition of encounters. The statute of freedom in Spinoza does not live in the idea of free will, it does not set decision making as an act of freedom, but self determination, the action of a body on itself and on the world from the proper knowledge to the cause of its affections.

This conception of freedom is not necessarily in the individual's limits, considering they are understood as an immanent relational composition. Being relational, freedom for Spinoza plots a discussion that embraces the political field, once it is comprehended in the scope of encounters that our bodies and minds suffer from, which may restrict or expand it. It also refers to the epistemological field, considering freedom depends on the affections' knowledge that inhibits and that potentializes it. Therefore, freedom for Spinoza is an ethical-political-epistemological concept, beyond ontological.

In this delimitation, the articulation between body, knowledge and the political is potentialized by a set of concepts of Spinozist foundation. This production has been developed in different research-intervention contexts, whose conceptual field has been unfolding into praxis operations. Among these different concepts, we highlight ethical-political suffering, good encounters and power of action. Consolidated in the scope of Critical Social Psychology over the last decades, they serve as tools for the comprehension and reading of reality along with group, community processes and collective actions, and as ethical-theoretical-methodological fundamentals for the planning, execution and evaluation of research-interventions in distinct contexts.

The concept of ethical-political suffering was proposed by Bader Sawaia (2008) in 1999, in the first edition of the book *As Artimanhas da Exclusão* (The Tricks of Exclusion). There, among other pieces, ethical-political suffering is defined as

suffering/passion, generated in bad encounters characterized by servitude, heteronomia and injustice, suffering that crystallizes itself in the form of power of affliction, that is, of reaction and not action, insofar as the social conditions are maintained, transforming themselves into a permanent state of existence (Sawaia, 2008, p. 370).

It is the synthesis of a system of ideas in which the psychological, the social and the political are intertwined, reaching the “multiple affections of the body and the soul that mutilate life in different forms... and that pictures daily experience of dominant social issues in each historical time” (Sawaia, 2008, p. 104).

Good encounters is a concept that Gilles Deleuze (2002) presents in the second chapter of his work *Spinoza: practical philosophy*. In this work, the author explicits a comprehension about the difference between morale and ethics from the interpretation of Spinoza’s work. In this sense, in order to comprehend the good and the bad encounter, a distinction of these is necessary while they are produced from the immanent ethics, and good and bad are linked to a transcendent morale.

The concept of power of action, according to Sawaia (2008), is the ethical principle that Spinoza named as right that each individual has of preserving themselves in existence, which presupposes the expansion of power and freedom, and therefore, of what is lived as happiness. As she highlights, happiness in this case is action. In action, the power of a body of “being affected presents itself as *power to act*, insofar as it supposes as filled by active affections” (p. 33, italics of the author).

It is important to consider that in Spinoza’s work the idea of essence necessarily refers to existence, not being, this way, an idea of essentialized or essentializing essence. In the same way, the idea of nature needs to be comprehended as an immanent set of the relations between bodies and *becoming*, that is, an idea of nature that is not naturalized or naturalizing, but opposed to the idea of transcendence, as points out Chauí (2011). Still, according to Deleuze (2002), given that there is nothing separated from the relations that compose with the world, there is also nothing isolated from these relations: “the interior is only a selected exterior; the exterior, a projected interior” (p. 130).

Our aim here is to present the foundation of these concepts on Spinoza’s philosophy while we weave a reflection on freedom for this author, going through his main work, *Ethics*, hand in hand with some of his readers and interlocutors. We argue that recognizing his ontological and epistemological basis of these concepts allows to demarcate an ethical, epistemological and political perspective that may deepen Brazilian Critical Social Psychology’s debate. For that, we undertake crossing through *Ethics’* itinerary, from its ontology until its proposal of freedom as practice and way of existence. In other words, our intention is to weave theoretical lines between the discussion about Spinoza’s freedom, the concepts of ethical-political suffering, good encounters and power of action, taking as direction the discussion about freedom for this philosopher. With this, we hope to contribute to the theoretical foundation that may base proposals of research-intervention together with community, group processes and collective actions, whose social practices aim to overcome ethical-political suffering and the ethical servitude towards the rising of thresholds of freedom (Strappazzon, 2017).

## A crossing through ethics

### *Spinozist ontology, substance, attributes and forms.*

Spinoza, creating his *Ethics* (1677/2009) during the 17th century, deepens an alternative to the philosophical tradition represented by the dualist strand that considers “uno” superior to the “being”, or that localizes its ontological starting point in transcendent and transitive causalities (Chauí, 1999). That is, the monist philosopher opposes himself to a conception based on the idea that there is something that transcends everything that exists – an essence separated from existence, or even a God, separated from his creation and who, from his deliberate will, would govern the laws of nature according to his taste (Deleuze, 2008).

For Spinoza, God is not separated from nature: he is nature. By elaborating, this way his starting point, he creates a non-hierarchical philosophy: if there is no abstract entity, perfect regarding existence and separated from it, there is also no ideal perfection in nature, of which existence would only be an imperfect copy, which would, in a last analysis, open space for moral flexing based on transcendent values. Spinoza’s idea, which combines essence to existence, is synthetized in the first definition of *Ethics* and is his starting point: “Because of oneself I understand that whose essence involves existence, that is, that whose nature cannot be conceived but as existent” (Spinoza, *Ética* I, def. 1). Thus, Spinoza introduces the idea of immanence, whichever is, to coexistence and inseparability between being, acting and existing (Chauí, 1995).

On Spinozist ontology, everything that exists consists in one nature only comprehended as an immanence plan that embraces the set of all things, defined as power that relate to one another, being nature the composition set between relations (Deleuze, 2008). Then there is his famous elaboration: *Deus sive natura* - God, that is, nature Deus, (Spinoza, *Ética* IV, preface). That is how appears Spinoza’s idea on the third definition of ethics: By substance I understand what exists in itself and what by itself is conceived, that is, that whose concept does not demand the concept of other thing of which it should be shaped” (Spinoza, *Ética* 1, def. 3).

A way of understanding the idea of substance is to take it with a strength, a causal power deprived of any goal or intentionality. It is unique, infinite, at the same time unbreakable and variegated, built by forms of being, that is, its attributes (Gleiser, 2005). Substance is the infinite unity of infinite attributes, cause added to its effects<sup>2</sup>.

Each one of its attributes express the substance and, at the same time, signify the same reality, but under different perspectives. And they are infinite. However, the human experience only can get or perceive two of them: extension and thought, both parallel effectuations of the same substance. Reading Marcos Gleiser (2005), the attributes are heterogeneous and autonomous, each one effectuates the substantial power according to their genre and with no causal distinction between them: the extension produces bodies; thought produces ideas. At the same time, the attributes are isonomic, that is, they act according to the same principle, the same production logic: “a way of extension and the idea this way are one and the same thing, but expressed in two different manners” (p. 19).

From substance, modes, manners of existing derive, effects of substance that do not part from it. The modes, different from the substance, do not have themselves as cause, as points out Spinoza on the fifth definition: “I understand the affections of a substance, that is, what exists in another thing, through which it is also conceived (Spinoza, *Etica I*, def. 5). According to César Bernal (2007) the modes are singular realities that derive from substance and give it expression in particular things. This way, the mode would be the provisory, finite and variable effect of substance, expression determined by nature’s power and that participates in determinate and diverse degrees of its causal dynamism, once its power of existence is conditioned by the encounters and affections with other modes (Gleiser, 2005).

The human being is a substance mode, therefore, expression of its two attributes. The parallelism that Spinoza establishes between the attributes is also present on the modes, when the body and the mind are taken into account or, in more contemporary terms, body-subjectivity, in a way they are understood in a non-hierarchical relation, not having superiority and causality of the mind towards the body, nor the contrary (Chauí, 2011). Body and thought do not establish influence on one another, but “*are active or passive together and as a whole*, in condition equality and with no hierarchical relation over them” (Chauí, 2011, p. 89, italics of the author).

Deleuze points out that the modes are substance affections and and of its attributes and “the affections designate what happens to the mode, the mode’s changes, the effects of the modes over this” (2002, p. 55), that is, the affections it tries out. The affection refers to the relation of the body with the exterior, while the affection concerns the variability of power in the body, resulting from affection.

As unfolding, in this conception there is no distinction between what a thing is and its capacity to affect and to be affected. The definition of something necessarily passes through its variation capacity with the affections, variations that get materialized in act inside of a scale of power that will define what a certain thing, while composition, may or may not realize (Deleuze, 2008). The affections resulting from affections are called joy when they increase the existing power and, on the contrary, sadness when they reduce this power.

The primordial affections of joy and sadness are *transitions* between different degrees of perfection; and in this sense every affection is passage, transition; the entire life gains the incessant transit form for there and for here, to the point of Spinoza peremptorily affirming that “we live in continuous variation” (Espinosa 3, V, prop. 39, esc.). That means that in our affective life everything is an issue of degree, proportions and correlations, increases and decreases; it does not know the states, or does not know them but abnormally, pathologically. The transition constitutes the bottom of our being (Santiago, 2012, p. 13, grifos do autor).

This understanding of the body as power that varies through affections, which affects and is affected, places humans as part of nature, essentially relational, with no correspondence to transcendentals and essentializing definitions. As part of nature, subject to infinite power relations, the body is a production given from encounters that make their power of existence vary more or less, constituting, this way, your life. And as we will see later, the ethical life.

Being a mode, the body is finite and limited by other bodies, but with an unknown capacity – as Spinoza points out – of relational possibilities. The affections provoke state changes in the body that vary as power degree: increase or decrease of its power of existence. That is what is perceived by Deleuze (2002)'s readings, when he refers to the body from Spinoza's comprehension, defining it in two dimensions, that are characterized as a union of multiple other bodies and by the power to affect and to be affected.

This is the ethical inversion that Spinoza proposes. The moral transcendence, the good and ill, the qualitative modes of existence, the good and the bad are changed (Deleuze, 2002). The good will be defined when in the encounter between bodies there is a combination that increases their power of action. The bad will happen when in this encounter there is a dehiscence, a power decreasing, making one of the relations that compose a body, or their totality, be decomposed (Sawaia, 2006).

In this perspective, the notions of the classic modernity subject, moral, integrated, coherent, stable and of organized essence, whose deliberative rationality finds itself as a nucleus, are deviated. In ethics, on one hand, we have existence comprehended as a power degree that carries out in a relational way. On the other hand, and at the same time, a qualitative difference in the ways of existence from the point of view of *afectos* that carry out the power (Deleuze, 2008). "There, then, is what ethics is, that is, a typology of the immanent ways of existence, replacing moral, which always relates existence to transcendent values" (Deleuze, 2002, p. 29). In this sense, Peter Pál Pelbart (2009) considers that ethics would be the study of the compositions and of the ways of existence that happen in them, whose cards get increased beyond the individual, reporting themselves to their encounters.

Being the body-subjectivity an immanent composition to all kinds of encounter with the world, the ethical issue of the ways of existence is linked to the discussion on the qualities of the compositions and on the degree of its amplitude and variability. This quality depends on the context and on the conditions of possibility in which encounters occur, as well as on the knowledge that we have about relating affections and its determinants. In this sense, the Spinozist ethics loads a debate beyond ontological, epistemological and political.

### *The genres of knowledge, servitude and freedom.*

Considering Spinoza's ontological position, the issue of freedom assumes a distinct perspective from that of free will, or even that of freedom as a voluntary choice among possible options (Chauí, 2015). In the seventh definition of *Ethics*, we find the following part:

Something is free if it exclusively exists for the need of its nature and that by its own is determined to act. And it is necessary, or better, coerced, that thing that is determined by another's existence and operation in a definite and determined way." (Espinosa, *Ética* I, def. 7)

According to this definition, once the modes are not the cause, only the substance is free. In the interpretation of Emanuel Fragoso (2007) this substance's freedom cannot be understood in association with the will, by understanding and by free will, breaking with

the notion of choice or creation will – that is why the substance is deprived of goal and intentionality. “Thus, freedom must be necessarily defined due to its relation to need – that is, one only must say the thing is the cause or self-caused and is determined to act by its own” (Fragoso, 2007, p. 35).

It is under this assumption that Deleuze formulates the question: “Can no one ever say in this sense that a mode is free considering it always refers to the other thing?” (2002, p. 89). Seeking the answer, Deleuze (200, 2008) will always refer to a problem of epistemological order. Once the modes are determined to exist for exterior causes, the problem of human freedom passes through the body’s power in seeking and producing encounters that affect in the sense of increasing its life power and, in parallel, through the mind power of knowing the causes that determine the body to act or weaken, and thus, knowing the affections as internal cause of body variations. This way, the problem of human freedom for Spinoza refers to the passage of passive affections, or passions, to active affections, or actions.

In order to better understand this statement, it is worth to highlight here that the current power degree of existing of a body, producing effects in a context of interaction – affections – with the world is, at the same time, the own essence of the human being when determined to realize its conservation (Gleiser, 2005) and expansion – that we are treating here as the power of existing, but that Spinoza defined with the Latin term *conatus*. This power degree is experienced with the affections, which can be passions or actions. Spinoza name passions the affections when they are passive or when the body weakens its effects, and in this sense, there are happy passions and sad passions; by action he understands those affections that have the human being as its cause, and these are always happy. What distinguishes the passion affections from the action affections is the proper knowledge of its causes. Thus, the ethical issue of freedom gets formulating in the following way: how is it possible in life to make the power of a body be defined by the dominance of action affections instead of passion affections? In this sense, the problem of human freedom passes through the body’s power on looking for and producing encounters that affect them in the way of increasing its life power and, in parallel, through the mind power of knowing the causes that determine the body to act and weaken, and thus, knowing the affections as an internal cause of body variations, making it active. In the same way, the more the body is capable of a plurality of simultaneous affections, the more the mind is fit to live a plurality of ideas and, thus, to overcome passions and illusions associated with them, because they are the affections of the body that promote changes. The form of effectuation and formation of the body’s affections’ ideas on the mind occurs by three genres of knowledge.

The first genre of knowledge refers to knowledge through experience, in the sensorial sense. In this genre the body reflects images of the bodies that it finds, and the consciousness is the effect of this encounter between bodies, in the means that it accepts this image as idea of the body’s affections, and that, if it stays only like this, it produces inappropriate ideas – those that confuse the effect by the cause, that is, our subjective states are taken as things’ properties (Gleiser, 2005).

According to Deleuze (1997), in the encounter with chance between the bodies, our power may vary in a way to find the passage to the second genre:

when we can select the idea of certain bodies that convey with ours and bring us joy, that is, they increase our power... Therefore, there is a *selection* of passionate *affections*, and of the ideas that they depend on, which must free happiness, vectorial signs of power increase, and repealing of sadness, signs of reducing: such selection of *affectos* is the own condition to leave the first genre of knowledge and achieve the concept acquiring enough power. (Deleuze, 1997, p. 162, italics of the author)

The second genre of knowledge is the one of common notions, that is, a knowledge composed by the ideas of common properties existing in things and of general properties present in the part and in the whole (Gleiser, 2005). He defines the person's capacity of knowing what composition is being set with them, understanding at the same time the conditions of this composition – that is, this is the genre of knowledge that comprehends the encounter between bodies, their conditions and resulting effects, and this way, is known by proper causes.

The third genre of knowledge is called beatitude by Spinoza, or intuitive science, and defines the person's possibility of invention (Ulpiano, 2014<sup>3</sup>) – and, it is worth to mark here, the invention of oneself and the creation of their existence conditions beyond natural and historical determinants. Instead of the person only knowing and/or being submitted to the encounters, new modes and life conditions will be created from the knowledge of the encounters' effects while common notions. In this genre of knowledge it is possible to seek, select and create what conveys to the body in the composition of an encounter that enables the power increase, producing manners of existing. The third genre enables the person to overcome history by seeking encounters, which would be defined in the sense of governing one's own affections and encounters.

This crossing through the three genres of knowledge shows the passage of the passion affections to action affections.

What is action? It is the capacity of the finite part of being the proper cause of the effects that happen in it, that is, of entirely responding for its affections, ideas and behaviors, even if all of them always mean reactions with the others and with the other things. (Chauí, 2011, p. 151)

In order to comprehend the output of passivity to activity, it is important to consider that a knowledge considered in the sense of traditional rationality is not enough to reach a transformation in the modes of existing. If that were the case, all it took was to know the proper cause of things so that instantaneously the affections would get modified by ideas, what everybody knows is not true. That is why a passion cannot be suppressed for an idea, nor the contrary. “An affection cannot be reflected nor canceled but for an opposite and stronger affection than the affection to be stopped” (Spinoza, *Ética* IV, prop. 7). The knowledge understood in terms of traditional rationality is not enough to win the passions; in order to win them it is necessary that knowledge is also an affection. As Chauí points out,

a true knowledge only wins a passion if it is itself experienced as an affection, because good and bad true *knowledge* is nothing more than a happy or sad *affection* when we are conscious of it. If the thought's work is experienced by us affectively,

it will be stronger than passionate affection. Thinking is the mind's acting as the proper cause of its affections and ideas, and this action, that Espinosa names *intellectual love*, is the strongest of active affections. If wishing to know is a sense such as joy and intellectual love for us and if ignoring is experienced by us such as weakness and sadness, rationality will begin its path on desire's interior, and not against it. (Chauí, 2011, p. 66, italics of the author)

In the passage from the first to the second and third genre of knowledge, the body-subjectivity passes, from the affections experience, to desire the composition with what knows to increase its power and this desire is the most powerful affection that enables the suppression of sad passions. Completing what we introduced above by affirming that a rational knowledge is not enough to suppress passions, here can already be said that the strongest affection towards freedom, towards action, is the desire for knowing.

The discussion about servitude and freedom crosses through these three genres and it is sustained by the comprehension of human affectivity in the anthropological sense, whichever it is, of the definition of what the human is as a being that varies their power in relations. This way, servitude and freedom are related with these three modes of existence, related to the problem of the affections' knowledge. Thus, it expresses the ethical interface between epistemology and the political.

Spinoza defines servitude as

human impotence to regulate and curb affections. Because the man submitted to affections is not under his own command, but under chance's, whose power is so subjected that is, many times, forced to do, even if he realizes it is the best for himself, however, the worst. (Spinoza, *Ética* IV, preface)

The superstition is servitude's basic operator. The first, sustained by sad passions, especially fear and hope, produces itself when the person, confused about the causes of the affections that compose them or not knowing, becomes sad and vulnerable, available to establish obedience relationships facing an established political power and becomes passively determined from the exterior. Hope and fear are each other's reverse, being both passions because they are related to the unknown's instability. "Hope is an unstable happiness, originated from the idea of a future or past thing, whose realization we have some doubt" (Spinoza, *Ética* III, def. dos afetos), while "fear is an unstable sadness, originated from the idea of a future or past thing, whose realization we have some doubt" (Spinoza, *Ética* III, def. dos afetos).

In summary, as Chauí (2011) points out, Spinoza will consider fear and hope as passions that have more strength to establish human servitude and the ones that enable the most the link of the power's variations' cause of the body to exterior affections, because they make it so that good and bad are imagined, the establishment of good's desire and evil's fear, as having their causes related to an exterior will.

Servitude happens through the unfamiliarity of what we are, relational, immanent beings, that becomes systemic once feedback by the political. Servitude becoming a structured system organizes the real, including ourselves, our desires, our life.

Superstition is servitude's system. Its secret is the passage from occasional and fortuitous to necessary, systemic, structural. A qualitative transformation of the elements of our condition that superstition can precisely get from the contempt towards variation, from the rarefaction of transitions, from the environment's suppression; in the limit, it ends up with the story that for its empire to be more perfect, the most perennial as possible. Its finished shape is fatalism, understood in the precise sense of tensions' mystification, the world's stiffening, the exhaustion of the new, the ontologizing of freedom and happiness (only beyond, in heaven, the post-revolution, the post-reforms), of servitude and unhappiness (everything in this world, in this current condition), of consciousness (a substantial data), of ignorance (that could not be lessened or, on the contrary, would be easily overcoming). (Santiago, 2012, p. 17)

Overcoming servitude towards the increase of freedom thresholds equals overcoming passions (inappropriate ideas) towards people's action in relational conditions of existence and about themselves from the knowledge of causes (appropriate ideas) of their affections, which does not make them eliminate contingencies necessarily, but allows acting on them. This process allows the weakening of the fear-hope system (Chauí, 2011) and, from a common collective force, enlarging political freedom. This throws to Critical Social Psychology the ethical, political and epistemological foundation of its *praxis*, in the sense of contributing with the composition of the collective power and overcoming old splits between rationality/emotion, subjectivity/objectivity, singular/collective, freedom and determinacy.

## Ethical-political suffering, good encounters and action power as conceptual tools to think ethics in psychology

During the 17th century, Spinoza formulated two fundamental questions that are contemporary to us. The first of them refers to nobody having defined what a body can; the second asks what makes people fight for servitude as if they were fighting for freedom. Asking about what a body can, in Spinoza sense, sends us to the concern of not knowing a body as associative power. This is a fundamentally ontological issue. The second question refers to servitude's determinants. And this is a fundamentally political issue. Both questions incide one over the other and have an epistemological articulation: the body is subjected to the passions and to the servitude that weaken its action strength, while as an immanent associative power is unknown; there are modes of political organization that hinder the knowledge and the effectuation of this associative power between bodies, mystifying social, political and economic determinants of the life modes, producing and reinforcing servitude relations. On the other hand, this associative power is an ontological condition, a nature's need of a body resisting in existence, which has as effects the search for encounters that increase its power to act and to seek appropriate ideas of its affections. This way, the system of politically organized relations is tensioned towards freedom.

The variation of the freedom thresholds is the consequence of this game. In this sense, Spinoza's philosophy indicated the perception of life modes historically and politically located in a delimited flux between ethical servitude and freedom, founded on the body's affections along its existence and that are experienced as affections. A philosophy still relevant to us.

Critical Social Psychology is double implied in this problem, given it is theoretically located on the interface between person and society or, in Spinozist terms, on the unity between the singular and the collective, the ethical, the political and the subjective. At the same time, it proposes its praxis to contribute to overcome injustice and social inequality, current forms of servitude, seeking to strengthen persons and collectives.

The concepts of ethical-political suffering, good encounters and power of action, as part of Critical Social Psychology's theoretical scope, offer operability for its implication with the individual-society interface, at the same time they get constituted as ethical, political and epistemological reference in its basis. It has in the human affectivity dimension its nodal point, freedom in immanence, and its historicity in the exclusion/inclusion dialectics.

Thus, the concept of ethical-political suffering is defined to indicate a comprehension of servitude or of the political operation of domination as an experience, encounters that plot us in inappropriate ideas and that submit us to others' desires; at the same time, it allows to take out affections of the psychism and replaces them in the political game of domination and resistance. It is the ethical radar of the bodies' social conditions and their encounters. It does not only refer to the fact that suffering is affected by politics. It indicates a suffering that could be avoided, if the inequality conditions were overcome. This way, suffering appears as a category to be worked in public policies, by psychologists and by social assistants and its analytical horizon is the power of action, Spinozist concept that enlarges consciousness' scope beyond the mind and the ideas, by having affectivity in its basis as well as the parallelism body and mind (Sawaia, 2006).

Unfolding the comprehension of Sawaia's (2008) concept, enlarging its Spinozist emphasis, it is the suffering of those who experience immeasurable power and social inequality. It has as foundation the Spinozist conception of affection of affective relations that may reduce or increase the bodies' power of action, producing happiness or sadness. There lives the ethical dimension: indicating the encounters that reduce the political power of action and of self-determination of bodies.

It is not the cause, but the effect that becomes cause as it is not an universal suffering, but is generated by inequalities. Sad affection limits action, stops the collective's organization, makes the comprehension of the causes of their condition hard for humans and, more, blames them superstitiously as the only responsible for this condition. For this, as Fátima Betini (2014, p. 67) points out, once the "ethical-political suffering places in highlight the affective return of the social context's experience, reading the social situation from affection means to reveal a concrete reality, many times covered up by ideologies or conformisms".

The concept of good encounters, proposed by Deleuze (2002) on Spinoza's track, shows itself as an immanent operator for the comprehension of this ethical piece towards freedom. A good encounter occurs when a composition that produces happy affections, the increase of power of existing, and the enlargement of its capacity to affect and to be affected, is formed on the affection between bodies and, in order to get back the genres of knowledge, it is passed between the first, the second and the third genres.

Good encounters are the way to increase the power of action and, as consequence, the expansion of freedom's thresholds. The compositions understood as good encounters are those that expand, at the same time, the affective and reflexive capacity of a body-subjectivity, that is, enabling the predominance of action over passion on the affective

life, enlarging “sideways” its capacity to affect and to be affected. In the same way, the stronger and more varied is the composition of a collective, the more able and stronger it is to transform this collective power in sovereign action as political freedom’s expression – and the good encounters are condition for the composition of this collective common in the political field.

The freedom in Spinoza matches power of action as an action undertaken over the conditions of existence from a knowledge that an affective-reflexive synthesis on affections that compose good encounters with our bodies, increasing the power of acting – and there is the power of action as effect of the good encounters. These conditions are alteritarian, relational, political, environmental, all that involves our existence and produces effects that modulate our existence.

Under Spinozist optics, these three concepts are interrelated and pass through his work, offering themselves as operators of a practical philosophy, of immanence ontology to freedom’s ethics, passing through epistemology. The concept of ethical-political suffering may be taken as a powerful analysis model of the production and the affective and psychosocial effects of servitude relations, but also of the power of action’s promotion, as it is shared. It may not only limit, but also become a useful common composition mobilizer of a collective common.

The concept of good encounters can be adopted as a methodological operator of research-interventions under the perspective of its production, the one of encounters, from the ethical modes of existence – or of the three genres of knowledge and its works. The concept of power of action explicits an ethical principle that defines and supports the intentionality that accompanies the research-interventions in the field of Critical Social Psychology. This way, the concept of ethical-political suffering would be an analytical axle while the good encounters, the methodological axle as promoter of the increase of the power of action, the ethical axle of facing the ethical-political suffering. In them the ethical-political-epistemological fusion is found. There is the importance to localize these concepts in its Spinozist foundation as a search for freedom, as an ethics of thinking and doing Psychology.

These concepts, once founded in immanence, avoid the use of logic and general categories, moralizing and medicalizing – in summary, transcendent universalist naturalizations. By guiding the relation, they empty the functionalist logic that carries the risk of naturalizing and locating society and the individual as independent poles, without questioning that one and bringing to this adapting statute. They also make analyses of conjunctures more aligned with the functioning of society’s structure and its affective-reflexive effects in persons and collectives, indicating intervention forms that contemplate, along with people, the determinants of its life conditions towards building announcements that aim to increase the power of action, being this, part of the action process over these conditions.

Still, being debits of the immanence ontology, these concepts pass to the proposals of prior research-interventions. That is, there is no set of rules and proceedings *prior* to knowing what to do and where to go, nor a teleological purpose. However, there is an ethical principle that points to the increase of life power, an expansion that may be understood not in teleological direction, but “sideways”, increasing the existing and acting possibilities of the collective and its singularities. There is not a truth to be discovered

as guide and reference, but life modes to be produced. In summary: on ethics' track, these concepts allow one to think of freedom in Spinoza as an ethical-political foundation to Psychology.

For Spinoza, human freedom refers to the power of the body and the mind of realizing its essence of perceiving in existence – the *conatus* referred above. Thus, Spinoza places the essence of freedom in history. According to Chauí (2011) is the first philosopher to consider history, highlighting encounters as places of ethics.

In synthesis, no human being, as mode, has absolute freedom in terms of substantial freedom as complete cause of oneself. The human being's existence depends on the connection with other things and with other humans for its persistence and expansion – and not only oneself, that is why there is no way of the human being to be the total cause of their affections. It is not fit to human beings the absolute freedom of substance, considering there is no way to live out of the relation with what it is not as a body. But it is only in this dependence that there is power and, therefore, freedom. Depending on the context in which one lives, the encounters are good or bad, producing variable degrees of ethical-political suffering and/or power of action. The fair society is the one that allows us to seek freely what we judge as good without plotting the illusion of servitude, lived as freedom. In this sense, as Sawaia (2011, p. 41) points out, “the essence of the being is power in act, in continuous change that depends on the others to exist. Therefore, there is only the person before others, acting in the world”. Thus, when one talks about freedom in Spinoza, it is not referring to an individual's freedom, that ends where the other's begins, but of a freedom that is built from a political inclusive and collective body that, in process of composition and decomposition, recognizes the appropriate common cause that allows public joy and the realization of the power of being and acting in act.

## Final considerations

Freedom does not concern an individual problem. It is also not something that one reaches in the order of transcendence. Its conquer is an immanent collective practice that demands the constitution of a common to the collective and that contributes to overcome the exploitation of some over others facing servitude relations founded on ideological superstitions.

In this text, on the Spinozist philosophy's track, we started by immanence, idea that operates a conception about existence as positive production, whose unfolding puts the human as a body in relation. Thus, ethics merges with ontology in the first great question that goes unanswered: “What can a body?” This ethics gets articulated with politics in the formulation of the second great question: “what makes people fight for servitude as if they were fighting for freedom?”. The ethical-political articulation between both is epistemological, under genres of knowledge that, at the same time, are life modes and, in the last instance, degrees of freedom.

How to find this common in the ethical relation between bodies in the politics field? How to make it so that common does not overrule singular and nor this to that one, but that strengthens both? In what way Critical Social Psychology gets inserted there? We would not risk to say that there is a formula for this, but we could say that a possible

starting point and directioning concerns the bet on encounters, on the collective, on the composition of immanent singularities that get defined each time, in act, and that do not place themselves against becoming.

We did here an attempt to bring three conceptual tools that follow this direction: ethical-political suffering, good encounters and power of action. Three concepts that flow through ethics. They are forms of comprehending the human impotence and potency in relation with a collective of forces. These tools jettison us of individualizing, essentializing and isolated explanations. With them, we get apart from the risks of separating subjectivity from politics, the individual from the collective, the composition of powers from contexts and conditions through which relations are established. With them we find a direction exactly to what was historically denied: knowing through the affections and the search for freedom not in the limits between individual and society, but together from its composition.

## Notes

1 The inscription of *Ethics*' author's last name varies in two forms depending on the translations and editions: Espinosa or Spinoza. On the *Ethics* (2009)' edition we work with here, Spinoza' s inscription was chosen and thus we have maintained it in the text while we were referencing this edition specifically. We used "Espinosa"'s inscription when referring to the author in general and when it is used that way on the consulted references, although Spinoza is kept on the translation to English.

2 On the fourth definition of *Ethics*, Spinoza defines attribute as "what, from a substance, the intellect perceives as constituting its essence" (Spinoza, *Ética* 1, def. 4). However, the attributes cannot be resumed only as manners of perceiving. Each attribute expresses a certain existence, that is, causal power of substance and if it refers to understanding it means the attribute is expressive and that implies an understanding that perceives it (Deleuze, 2002).

3 Claudio Ulpiano in a recorded conference, recovered from <https://vimeo.com/10348233>

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