

## Badiou and Deleuze on individuation, causality and infinite modes in Spinoza

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### 1. Introduction

In lieu of an introduction, let me simply say that my subject here is Alain Badiou's discussion of Spinoza's ontology in his masterpiece *L'être et l'événement*. He proposes a reading that foregrounds a concept which is as central and celebrated to his philosophy as it is strictly excluded by Spinoza: the void. In short, Badiou contents that for all Spinoza's effort to offer an ontology of total plenitude, the void returns in his philosophy under the (at first sight) unlikely name of *infinite mode*.

What follows is organised into three moments. I will first give an exposition of Badiou's intricate critique of Spinoza. Next, I will challenge on a number of points Badiou's exposition of Spinoza, notably his treatment of infinite and finite.<sup>1</sup> It is my contention that Badiou only presents the version of Spinoza amenable to his theoretical orientation, and that a more substantial account of the issues opens up alternatives to the reintroduction of the concept of void in order to provide his philosophy with consistency. Turning then to Deleuze, I will argue that he provides just such an alternative, on the basis of his account of the relationship between modal essence and individual existing modes.

### 2. Badiou's reading of Spinoza

Badiou dedicates two quite detailed texts to Spinoza's thought. The first, which the discussion that follows will be based upon, is the tenth meditation of *L'être et l'événement*. The second, dedicated to the notorious problem of the relationship between the attributes and the intellect that is first alluded to in EID4 of the *Ethics*, is found in his 1998 *Court Traité d'ontologie transitoire*, entitled "L'ontologie implicite de Spinoza". While the second is the stronger of the two pieces, it relies at certain points on the argument made in the first; an examination of this text will have to wait for another occasion. In both pieces, Badiou is concerned "to show that this foreclosure," the foreclosure of the void, "fails." (BE 113) This failure, according to Badiou, can only be a good thing, since it provides for a gap, a gap for the subject and for radical novelty in the form of events. As such – and this is particularly clear in the text to be examined here – his goal is to see in Spinoza a philosopher who fails in just the ways that his own philosophy succeeds. My concern is less to undermine this attempt as a whole than to question the validity of the reading of Spinoza that is used in its service.

The meditation on Spinoza in *L'être et l'événement* comes at the end of the second division of the text, in which Badiou elaborates his concept of the *state of the situation*. Given that this meditation begins with a paraphrase of *Ethics*, Book One, proposition 15 ("Whatever is, is in God . . . "[*Quicquid est in Deo est*]) which reads: "all situations have the same state", it will be worth defining these two terms briefly.

Situation is Badiou's first and most important ontological or meta-ontological concept. The situation is defined as any result of an operation of counting-as-one, that is, as any consistent multiple whatsoever produced through a unifying operation. We must consider this definition in its proper generality: in order for anything to exist as a consistent whole, an operation of counting-as-one must be presupposed. And every consistent whole as such is a situation. The scope of the concept of situation is likewise completely universal: it pertains to every level, every modality, every form of being, and every content thereof. This generality also guarantees the abstraction proper to the concept: the count-as-one is the universal operator of consistency, but it imposes no predication or form beyond the composition of consistency for a given multiple.

Let's note an important supposition: if consistent multiplicity (or multiple-oneness, or what Badiou also calls *presented multiplicity*) is the result of the count-as-one, then *inconsistent* multiplicity is implicated prior to the activity of the count. It is, Badiou says, a retroactively legible consequent of the count itself. Now, this inconsistency is in fact the source of a perennial and very real problem that confronts any situation: consistent unified multiples are always threatened with the inconsistency that their count-as-one presuppose. In fact, it is precisely this inconsistency as such which cannot be counted-as-one. Inconsistency haunts the abstract form of the situation, and challenges it with a particular kind of formal powerlessness. Badiou:

*The consistency of the multiple amounts to the following: the void, which is the name of inconsistency in the situation (under the law of the count-as-one), cannot, in itself, be presented or fixed. (BE 93)*

The inherence of that inconsistency particular to a consistent presented multiple is given a very precise name by Badiou, which is the *void*.<sup>2</sup> Whereas inconsistency is a retroactive posit relative to every count-as-one, the void is that *local* inconsistency "proper" to the situation in question. The void belongs to every situation, and it is a void particular to the situation in question.

It is at this point that the concept of the state is put into play by Badiou. If we take the situation as any set (as Badiou himself does), characterised by the primal relation of belonging  $\in$  (or counting-as-one), then the state of the situation is indicated by the relation of inclusion,  $\subset$ . It is for Badiou a second count of the original count-as-one itself, a resecuring of the structural oneness of the situation. Thus the goal of this second count is to attempt to master the *revenant* of inconsistency, i.e., the void, by further securing the relation of belonging at a more precise level. The second count counts-as-one all those elements counted-as-one in the formation of the situation.

Here Badiou draws upon a connection between this second count and what he argues is its set-theoretic counterpart, the power-set axiom, whereby every subset of the set in question is itself counted-as-one. As Badiou points out in *Meditation 7 of L'être et l'événement*, the power of this second count is vastly in excess of that of the first. This is of course one of Cantor's famous discoveries. Badiou also notes another important point which distinguishes the first count from the second: in the first count, what is counted is members of the set, or multiples themselves. What remains uncounted *directly* are the subsets or submultiples of the situation. Now these subsets certainly belong to the situation (insofar as the multiples they belong to have been counted), but they belong in an unregulated fashion. Furthermore, the void *qua* localised inconsistency, also belongs to the situation, and in the same fashion. It is thus at this sub-level of the situation that the threat of inconsistency remains, and which the second count-as-one takes as its regime.

In short the state of the situation is what guarantees that everything counted-as-one in a situation is secured in its belonging by the excessive power of determination that the second count brings about, thereby excluding the void from disrupting the consistency of the situation. Badiou writes:

*The consistency of presentation thus requires that all structure be doubled by a metastructure which secures the former against any fixation of the void. (BE 93-4)*

Now, Badiou transposes these terms into Spinoza's thought in the following way: situation is the name given to the attributes, and substance (God or nature) the name of the state. There are thus an infinite number of situations, whose coherence or consistency are guaranteed or doubled by the substance which they are comprehended by or included in. So, if we return to Badiou's opening paraphrase of Spinoza's *Quicquid est in Deo est*, every situation has the same state, we can see that this is strictly speaking true. According to Badiou, in composing an indissoluble ontological unity between substance and attributes, Spinoza aims to foreclose any possibility of

the void returning to threaten the organization or structure of the attributes and the unity of *Deus* sive *Natura*. The force of Badiou's argument rests on the insistence that, however magnificent the effort to bring about this foreclosure, Spinoza's philosophy still admits the void, under the name of the infinite mode.

With these points in mind, we can turn to the substance of Badiou's argument in meditation 10 of *L'être et l'événement*. Badiou begins with a more detailed account of the equation between situation and substance than that which I offered earlier: "for Spinoza, the count-as-one of a multiple, structure, *is causality*." (BE 112) That is, the individuated elements of substance are in the first instance presented as unified-by-cause. Of course it is the modes that he is referring to here:

*A composition of multiple individuals (plura individua) is actually one and the same singular thing provided that these individuals contribute to one unique action, that is, insofar as they simultaneously cause a unique effect (unius effectus causa).*  
(BE 112)

It seems clear that he is invoking the following proposition (EIP28) in the *Ethics*:

*Every singular thing, or any thing which is finite and has a determinate existence, can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another cause, which is also finite and has a determinate existence; and again, this cause also can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another, which is also finite and has a determinate existence, and so on, to infinity.*

For Badiou, we can say that an inconsistent multiple of existing modes is counted-as-one through the causal activity of an existing consistent multiple (Spinoza's *res singulares*). Again, this seems consonant with Spinoza's text. However, Badiou claims, we are dealing here with a manifest case of circularity. Every operation of the count-as-one (which brings about the existence or presentation of singular things) relies upon the supposition of a prior singular thing which would be its cause. Thus the unity of the singular thing in question is being supposed in its definition. In Badiou's words: "If in fact I can only determine the one of a singular thing insofar as the multiple that it produces a unique effect, then I must already dispose of a criterion of such unicity" (BE 112).

Badiou then notes that this circularity does not bother Spinoza at all, and this is because the count-as-one of the multiplicity of existing modes which renders them consistent as a singular thing is guaranteed by the state of the situation, that is, God. It is not just the case that singular things are determined as such through causation, but that each thing which exists is caused to do so by God. In Spinoza's terms: "A thing which is determined to produce an effect has necessarily been determined in this way by God; and one which has not been determined by God cannot determine itself to produce an effect." (EIP26) This is a textbook example of what Badiou means by the second count-as-one, the state of the situation. Existing composite modes (singular things) in a given attribute are guaranteed in their composition by the causal agency of substance, which grasps them in their individuality.

Once more, it seems that little can be faulted at this point in Badiou's argument. He identifies the two orders of causation at work in Spinoza (it would be better to say the two modalities of causation were this term not liable to confuse, since God is the immanent cause of everything): on the one hand, the infinite network of cause and effect that characterises the world of existing modes, and on the other, God-or-Nature as the sole causal agent.

It is at this point that Badiou intervenes, suggesting that we find here, through the real identity of attributes (situations) and substance (state of the situation) “the philosophy *par excellence* which *forecloses the void*.” Given that the role of the state as we have seen is precisely to impose an excessive meta-structuring (I am tempted to write ‘overcoding’ in the sense given to the term in Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*, a term moreover which is precisely related to their account of the State) of the situation in order to exclude the return of the inconsistent void, we can see how Badiou can make this claim.

In a move reminiscent of a deconstructive reading, Badiou’s point (one I have noted a few times already) is that Spinoza fails:

*this foreclosure fails, and [ . . . ] the void, whose metastructural or divine closure should ensure that it remains in-existent and unthinkable, is well and truly named and placed by Spinoza under the concept of infinite mode.*<sup>3</sup> (BE 113)

More precisely, as we will see, it is the “notorious” point of intersection between “the infinite and the finite” that the void re-emerges. Thus it is important, before turning to the question of infinite modes directly, to insist on the role that finite modes play in Badiou’s analysis.

I quoted earlier EIP28, to the effect that every finite thing is caused by another finite thing, and so on to infinity, and Badiou himself quotes the same text. He insists in fact that finitude is “an essential predicate” of every singular thing, doubtless making reference to EIID7:

*By singular thing I understand things that are finite and have a determinate existence. And if a number of Individuals so concur in one action that together they are all the cause of one effect, I consider them all, to that extent, as one singular thing.*

In sum, what individuates singular things, or unified finite modes, is that they have a singular effect. But in what sense are finite things *finite* according to Badiou? Here we find a surprising lacuna in his text: not once does he mention Spinoza’s own account of finitude, or even provide an explicit definition of his own. The reader is left with two possible explanations. Either Badiou in fact has Spinoza’s definition of finitude (EID2) in mind implicitly, or he is employing a different definition that likewise remains implicit. To my mind, only the second of these is a viable option. As I will show in the next section of the paper, Badiou’s account of finite modes overlooks their essential character for Spinoza: their *limited* nature, rather than their denumerability. It is the latter that defines finite for Badiou given his mathematical orientation, according to which finitude is defined by the successor relationship between ordinals.

Turning now to infinite modes. Badiou presents the core of his argument in a summary of what he calls “Spinoza’s deductive procedure”, tying together propositions 21, 22 and 28 from Book I of the *Ethics*. Taken together, he considers that they show a causal fork emerging which separates infinite and finite. Proposition 21 claims that “everything which follows from the absolute nature of any of God’s attributes [ . . . ] is infinite.” The next proposition, worth quoting at length, applies this insight to modes:

*Whatever follows from some attribute of God insofar as it is modified by a modification which, through the same attribute, exists necessarily and is infinite, must also exist necessarily and be infinite.*  
(EIP22)

Badiou glosses this as: “everything which follows from an infinite mode – in the sense of the preceding proposition – is, in turn, infinite.”

Finally P28, which I have already cited, tells us that every singular thing (“or [sive] any thing which is finite and has a determinate existence”) only exists and causes effects of its own if it in turn is caused to exist by another pre-existing singular thing.

Now, Badiou argues that we confront two problems in the face of these allegedly existent infinite modes. The first is that we cannot *experience* them. He insists, first of all, that according to Spinoza all knowledge of finite modes comes from direct encounters with them. Their existence cannot be deduced through Reason, since (as P28 tells us), they come about when caused to do so by other existing modes – that is, there is nothing *necessary* about the existence of any particular finite modes. Given, that is, that existing modes cannot be deduced directly from God’s essence, being contingent on encounters with other existing modes, the only way we can gain knowledge of them is through direct encounter. However, if infinite modes can only have a causal relation with other infinite modes, such experience seems impossible, since we are finite beings ourselves.

While I am saving my general criticisms for the next section of the paper, let me note here that Badiou’s argument seems particularly ignorant of Spinoza’s epistemology at this point. The fact that we cannot know infinite modes directly through encounters has nothing to do with its ontological status and everything to do with the ontological status of human beings as beings of a certain finite composition. The famous worm in the blood from Spinoza’s letter 15 to Oldenburg can no more know the entire composition of the body which it is inhabiting than we can *know* the infinite extended Individual that we are an intrinsic part of. On the other hand, there is a sense in which we can conceive<sup>4</sup> of infinite modes, and that is through the common notions: all extended bodies form adequate ideas of other extended bodies of a greater or lesser size when they encounter each other, precisely insofar as they themselves are extended. As Spinoza claims: “Those things which are common to all, and which are equally in the part and the in the whole, can only be conceived adequately” (EIIIP38) Further, we can recall P47 from the same book of the *Ethics*: “The human mind has an adequate knowledge of God’s eternal and infinite essence” on the basis of the common notions.

The second, and to my mind more serious, problem that Badiou raises concerns the ontological status of infinite modes: “The question is that of knowing in which sense these infinite modes *exist*.” (BE 117) Here Badiou notes the fact that Spinoza’s discussions of infinite modes are few and far between, and when asked for concrete instances by Schüller in his letter of 1675 he only mentions absolutely infinite understanding (under the attribute of thought), and the famous *facies totius universi*, the figure of the entire universe (under the attribute of extension).

Furthermore, direct discussion of the topic in his key works is also sparse. On Badiou’s count, we only find three moments in the text which address these modes directly or indirectly, and by and large only repeat the examples given to Schüller: EIIP13L7 (concerning the entirety of extended modality as a single Individual), EVP40S (which invokes the totality of the modes expressing the attribute of thought as “the eternal and infinite understanding of God”) and EIP22 which I have already mentioned (the proposition that argues that infinite causes lead to infinite effects).

According to Badiou, this scarcity of reference is keenly symptomatic. Infinite modes seem to sit at the hinge between the infinity of substance, with its order of immediate efficient causality, and the finitude of modes – they seem to hover between two determinations, between finite and infinite, both a part of two causal chains and torn between them. Given that, in Badiou’s words, “the immediate cause of a singular finite thing can only be a singular finite thing, and, *a contrario*, a (supposed) infinite thing can only produce the infinite,” the name ‘infinite mode’ can only be given to the void that emerges here in the causal chain:

*It seems that the excess of the causal source re-emerges at the point at which its intrinsic qualification, absolute infinity, cannot be represented on the same axis as its finite effect.*

(BE 116)

As he notes on the next page, “the void would be the errancy of the incommensurability between infinite and finite.”<sup>5</sup> To invoke the terms of Badiou’s own project, the excess of power of the state (the causal efficacy of substance) is literally voided in the concept – or under the name – of infinite modes in order for the causal connection between infinite and finite to be made, that is, the causal count-as-one at work in the situation (the local and contingent order of modes). The symptomatic gap in the system is what at once allows the two orders of Spinoza’s system to cohere and at the same time what undermines his whole endeavour. I quote the entire final paragraph of Badiou’s discussion:

*Necessary, but inexistent: the infinite mode. It fills in [. . .] the causal abyss between the infinite and the finite. However, it only does so in being the technical name of the abyss: the signifier ‘infinite mode’ organises a subtle misrecognition of this void which was to be foreclosed, but which insists on erring beneath the nominal artifice itself from which one deduced, in theory, its radical absence.*  
(BE 120)

So what then is Spinoza’s infinite mode for Badiou? It is only a *name*, one which putatively fills a gap in the system but a gap it cannot fill – it is a name for the void itself.

### 3. On Badiou’s reading

Before going on, let’s note that the problem that Badiou’s analysis concerns itself with is not a new one.<sup>6</sup> An awareness of the fork between finite and infinite in the regime of causation is certainly in play in medieval thought, involved as it is – to take only one important example – in the cosmological argument for the existence of God. And this argument itself, at least in the form given to it by Aquinas, relies on the positing of an uncaused cause, expounded of course by Aristotle. In the words of Errol Harris:

*Every finite and contingent existence requires a cause which is itself finite and contingent, and therefore itself inadequate ground for any existence. The entire series of causes reaching back to infinity cannot ex hypothesi be summed. Unless it can be grounded (as a whole) in a necessarily existent first cause, therefore, it is ultimately unaccountable. But even if there is a necessarily existing being, which to exist of necessity must be both infinite and eternal (for finitude implies contingency), how it can be causally connected with any finite thing remains a mystery.*<sup>7</sup>

While Badiou would not agree with this account – on the grounds that infinity is not produced by the successive addition of finite instances, but only through an axiomatic decision (precisely the axiom of infinity in ZF set theory) – the more general point still holds.

Now Harris demonstrates that the common solution to this problem has been recourse to either medieval or contemporary logic, and he cites Edwin Curley, Stewart Hampshire and AC Watt as proponents of this view. According to this view, and on the basis of Spinoza’s theory of ideas expounded in Book II of the *Ethics*, the infinite modes are taken to be a body of propositions which directly express the attribute in question, and finite existing modes are particular deductive applications of these. Thus the causal connection between infinite and finite is rethought as a logical one linking general propositions to particular cases. Harris takes issue with this (and he manifestly has reason to do so) arguing that

*Their interpretation [. . .] fails to do justice to Spinoza’s insight [concerning the relationship between infinite and finite], which went well beyond the ideas of the medievals and of his own day. In some degree it even goes beyond his own explicit exposition.*<sup>8</sup>

It is this implicit insight that motivates my reading of Spinoza on this point, and that I will return to at the close of the paper. For the moment, I want to challenge Badiou on three points of interpretation. First, I want to examine Spinoza's account of infinity more closely, particularly as he formulates his position in the letter to Meyer. Second, I want to discuss Spinoza's definition of finite things. Thirdly, I want to offer a provisional definition of a singular thing on the basis of the excursus on physics in Book II of the *Ethics* that undermines to a certain degree the importance given by the latter to causation. On the basis of these three points, I will then turn to Deleuze's reading to offer an alternative to Badiou's damning assessment.

*a. the letter to Meyer: on non numerical infinity*

I noted earlier that Badiou's criticism of Spinoza rests upon an unarticulated definition of the finitude of finite modes. It would be as true to say the same about his use of the term infinite. For Badiou himself, both finite and infinite are numerical categories. For Badiou following Cantor, the infinite must be seized under the auspice of number: to cite his formulation of the set-theoretic axiom of infinity: "There exists a limit-ordinal" (BE 156). In the world of finite ordinals, the relationship of succession holds such that there can always be 'one more' finite number, a process which can continue indefinitely without the intervention of such an axiomatic decision. In sum, as he puts it in *Le Nombre et les nombres*, "The space of the ordinals allows us to *define* the infinite and finite."<sup>9</sup>

For Spinoza, however, the infinite can in no way be accounted in terms of number. This is most forcefully stated in the well-known letter 29 to Ludovicus Meyer of April 1663. While for the bulk of the letter, Spinoza argues against the interconnected ideas of the finitude and divisibility of substance, he also provides a well-known definition of three different kinds of infinity:

*certain things are in their nature infinite, and can by no means be conceived as finite; whereas there are other things, infinite in virtue of the cause from which they are derived, which can, when conceived abstractedly, be divided into parts, and regarded as finite. Lastly, there are some which are called infinite or, if you prefer, indefinite, because they cannot be expressed in number, which may yet be conceived as greater or less. It does not follow that such are equal, because they are alike incapable of numerical expression.*

Now, in the first of these, we have no trouble recognizing the infinite pertaining to substance. As Spinoza shows in Book One, Proposition 8, along with its demonstration and scholia, if substance was not intrinsically infinite, it could not justifiably bear the name substance at all – a point that he also impresses upon Meyer earlier in the same letter.

We can recognize in this second definition the attributes, but also the infinite modes themselves. The infinity proper to infinite modes – as the direct or mediate expressions of the attribute in question – is the result of their cause. Furthermore, it is only through abstraction – and here Spinoza is doubtlessly referring us to the activity of the imagination and the first, inadequate, kind of knowledge – that this particular infinity can be considered as composed of finite elements that sum infinity (and here Badiou and Spinoza concur).

The third kind of infinite defined by Spinoza concerns modal existence: "there are some which are called infinite or, if you prefer, indefinite, because they cannot be expressed in number, which may yet be conceived as greater or less. It does not follow that such are equal, because they are alike incapable of numerical expression."

The surprising upshot of this claim is that finite modes are *also infinite*. Their finitude, that is, does not reside in the fact that they are a denumerable set of elemental particles. Spinoza's world in a *substantive sense* is *only* composed of infinities – finitude as countability finds no place in his

thought. However, unlike Badiou's presentation of his thought might suggest, he does give an alternative account of the nature of finitude such that it comes to bear on existing infinitely composed individuals without engaging with number, something we will turn to shortly.

Let's also note that what binds these three definitions together for Spinoza is their insistence on non-denumerability. Explicit in the third case as I have just said, it is implicit in the first two insofar as both substance and infinite mode are according to Spinoza indivisible, and thus not susceptible to counting. The operation of division, Spinoza suggests, is based squarely in the imagination rather than reason, and misleads us as to the essence of substance and attribute.<sup>10</sup> It would be interesting to speculate on the nature of Spinoza's discussion of the infinite nature of any existing mode, which is (while being irreducible to a number, being strictly "uncountable") able to be determined at least minimally as "lesser" or "greater" infinities, in relation to Cantorian set theory. This is of course taken to be Cantor's great achievement in the history of mathematics, the rigorous treatment of the theme of infinity such that it can be submitted to theoretical operations which allow comparison and ordering of the various magnitudes of infinity. Is there a rigorously Spinozist alternative to the set-theoretic account of infinity here? Perhaps Leibniz's assessment of this letter – that Spinoza's discussion of infinity exceeded that of the mathematicians of his day – might hold true in relation to set theory? These are questions to be debated elsewhere.

#### *b. finite existing modes and limitation*

We are now led to ask about the definition of finitude that Spinoza might utilise. Badiou is right to insist that finitude constitutes an irreducible part of the definition of any singular thing *qua* unified composite mode. The definition of finitude in question, however, never appears in Badiou's text. This is surprising if only because it is the second definition found at the very start of the *Ethics*:

*That thing is said to be finite in its own kind that can be limited by another of the same nature. For example, a body is called finite because we always conceive another that is greater. Thus a thought is limited by another thought. But a body is not limited by a thought nor a thought by a body.*  
(EID2)

For Spinoza, finitude is *limit* not *denumerability*. This definition will play an important part in grounding his arguments for the uniqueness of substance, insofar as it cannot have another to be opposed to if it is to be infinite. Taken together with definitions contained in the letter to Meyer, Spinoza's account of finitude can be described as an account of the limitations imposed upon certain infinite composite modes or individuals by other greater or lesser individuals. The point of view of finitude thus reveals the relative unity between parts rather than the view from infinity which provides us with a picture of total unity, characterising both substance and attribute, and what grants them the particular status as infinite that they enjoy. It is true that we are left at this point with a question about what constitutes 'greater' or 'lesser' in the case of finite-limited modes, something I will return to momentarily.

To sum up these points, what seems clear is that Badiou's insistence on the void that opens up between finite and infinite in Spinoza's philosophy seems misplaced. Existing modes are only finite insofar as they are limited by another existing mode of the same kind. In another equally ontological sense they are infinite by definition. The real kernel of the problem is thus the question of individuation: how can a limited being come to exist on the basis of determinations effected by an unlimited substance with an infinite number of attributes? Again the problem of causation between infinite and finite returns.

We seem then to have confirmed Badiou's basic insight, even though much has been said to challenge his reading of Spinoza. In fact, before an alternative reading can become fully legible, we must note that one more distinction is lacking which – like the Spinozist accounts of finite and



infinite – does not appear in Badiou's reading. That distinction is between modal essence and existence, and it is the basis for Gilles Deleuze's explication of both the infinite-finite relation and the specification of individuals. Before turning to Deleuze, however, there is something to be said about individuation without invoking modal essence directly.

c. *"this union of bodies": an harmonic account of the individual*

Let's recall that on Badiou's account, Spinoza provides only one way of individuating finite existing modes: that they together contribute to a single effect. To quote again:

*A composition of multiple individuals (plura individua) is actually one and the same singular thing provided that these individuals contribute to one unique action, that is, insofar as they simultaneously cause a unique effect (unius effectus causa), or una acto.*  
(BE 112)

Or in other words, "for Spinoza, the count-as-one of a multiple [. . .] is *causality*." (ibid.) Badiou's argument thus rests on causation being the *sole* agent of individuation on the level of the modes. This is in fact far from being correct. There are two other accounts of individuation to be found in the *Ethics*. The first and more important of these concerns modal essence, which we will return to in the next section of the paper. The second is at the level of existing modes themselves, and worth highlighting because it is a fairly straightforward element of Spinoza's account of extended modes, constituting what I would characterise as a harmonic account of the individual. The central definition of Spinoza's account of the physics of bodies that we have already seen states the following:

*When a number of bodies [. . .] are so constrained by other bodies that they lie upon another, or if they move, whether with the same degree or different degrees of speed, that they communicate their motions to each other in a certain fixed manner, we shall say that those bodies are united with one another and that they all together compose one body or Individual . . .*  
(EIIDef\*)<sup>11</sup>

Now, there is no doubt that causation is an important part of this description – but it is not what ultimately characterises the Individual or *res singulares* in question. It is rather that the internal quotient of movement and rest – the primal characteristics of all extended existing mode ("All bodies either move or are at rest" [EIIA1'\*) – of a given set of modes that defines the greater unified individual. It is even the case for Spinoza that if the particular bodies that make up the Individual change without thereby changing the overall harmony of movement, the same Individual is maintained:

*If, of a body, or of an Individual, which is composed of a number of bodies, some are removed, and at the same time as many others of the same nature take their place, the Individual will retain its nature, as before, without any change of its form.*  
(EIIP13L4\*)

The same is true if the members of the Individual diminish or increase while still retaining the same harmony of movement (L5\*), if the internal movements of members change but without effecting their contribution of movement and rest to the Individual (L6\*), or if the whole Individual moves in a new direction (L7\*).

Thus, contrary to Badiou's insistence on causality as the sole count-as-one, Spinoza's Individuals, composite existing modes or *res singulares* are less effected products than *swarms*, a ballet of parts.

#### 4. Deleuze's reading of the nature of infinite modes: the role of modal essence

I want now to turn to Deleuze's reading of the relationship between finite and infinite in Spinoza to demonstrate what this alternative might be. Badiou's reading of Spinoza as I have outlined it certainly opens up a problem in Spinoza's account – that of the nature of the relationship between infinite and finite – but is itself clearly mistaken with regard to the central concepts involved (the nature in Spinozism of infinite and finite, along with the actual significance of causality in the individuation of modes). My central contention here is that Badiou's emphasis on infinite modes is both exaggerated given the nominal being of such entities, and distracts attention from the real site of the difficulty. The simple reason for the paucity of reference that he notes is that infinite modes are not at all a decisive part of Spinoza's ontology. Badiou himself tells us this: they are a "nominal artifice" (BE 120), but not in the sense that he gives to this.

In my exposition of Badiou above, I did not introduce any reference to the distinction between modal essence and modal existence for the simple reason that Badiou himself does not. The importance of this oversight is great, even if the concept of modal essence itself presents other very difficult problems. Furthermore, there is substantial evidence that Badiou does not have any grip on the distinction itself. In fact, we find him making the following claim and relying upon its efficacy throughout the tenth meditation: "to belong to God' and 'to exist' are synonyms" (BE 114), a point which is massively contradicted by a number of Spinoza's own propositions, for example:

*The essence of things produced by God does not involve existence.*  
(EIP24)

*God is the efficient cause, not only of the existence of things, but also of their essence.*  
(EIP25)

*The ideas of singular things, or of modes, that do not exist must be comprehended in God's infinite idea in the same way as the formal essences of the singular things, or modes, are contained in God's attributes.*  
(EIIIP8)

It is striking in particular that these first two propositions lie between P21 and 22 and P28 on the other, the three propositions (EI P21, P22 and P28) that Badiou insists make up the essential deductive chain that his argument rests on. Aside from its importance in giving an account of the nature of individuation in Spinoza's system, Badiou's apparent failure to distinguish between modal essence and modal existence renders many other elements of Spinozism impossible to understand – there is, for example, no way to make any sense of Spinoza's account of evil without it, since it involves precisely this distinction.

My concern here is to show how Deleuze, in insisting on this distinction, gives an account of the process of individuation that moves from infinite to finite without giving infinite modes the impossible task (strictly inconceivable for Spinoza) of mediating between substance and modes. Indeed, the title of chapter twelve of his *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* sums up his position well: "Modal Essence: The Passage from Infinite to Finite".

Deleuze begins by describing Spinoza's attributes as infinite and indivisible qualities – the quality of extension which expresses the essence of substance, the quality of thought, and so on. The problem is how this indivisible quality can pertain to individuated finite – that is, limited – existing modes. These qualities, in Spinoza's philosophy express God's essence, which is likewise his power of existing, – these points in turn lead Deleuze quite rightly to assert the identity of attributes and power. Where do modal essences fit in this picture? It is clear that they can neither

be reduced to the attributes directly, nor do they belong in the world of modal existence. It is also clear that modal essences are caused by God in the same way that everything else is, but without any existence beyond what pertains to essence itself. And this is the case, among other reasons, because the order of existing modes is characterised by contingency, contingent encounters, while at the level of God's essence (which is also modal essence), there is only necessity and complete harmony.

Let's recall the second definition of infinity in the letter to Meyer: "there are other things, infinite in virtue of the cause from which they are derived, which can, when conceived abstractedly, be divided into parts, and regarded as finite." I insisted earlier that this second infinity invokes infinite modes. It should now be clear, in the light of the division between modal essence and modal existence, that it strictly speaking refers to the former rather than the latter. We must then see that what Spinoza calls an immediate infinite mode is nothing other than the integral totality of modal essences, all in agreement given that they express God's own essence, and only subject to limitations in thought – limitations which moreover could only be extrinsic – through misunderstanding.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, we can precisely locate these infinite modal essences *in* the attributes in question. Deleuze writes that:

*Modal essences are contained in their attribute; as long as a mode does not exist, no extrinsic distinction between its essence and the attribute, or between its essence and other essences, is possible.*  
(EPS 195-6)

Deleuze summarises these points, remarking that:

*Attributes are so to speak dynamic qualities to which corresponds the absolute power of God. A mode is, in its essence, always a certain degree, a certain quantity, of a quality. Precisely thereby is it, within the attribute containing it, a part so to speak of God's power.*  
(EPS 183)

It is these infinite modal essences that immediately express God's attributes, and the attributes which *comprehend* or *contain* the modal essences in the first instance (Spinoza says "the formal essences of the singular things, or modes, are contained in God's attributes" [E1IP8]). However, given that they cannot be subject to any extrinsic distinctions, it may seem that this identification does no more than return us to the problem: how can a single and undivided infinite modal essence be related to particular finite modes? Deleuze poses the question like this:

*We cannot distinguish existing things except insofar as we suppose their essences distinct; similarly, any extrinsic distinction seems to presuppose a prior intrinsic one. So a modal essence should be singular in itself, even if the corresponding mode does not exist. But how?*  
(EPS 196)

It is here that Deleuze ambitiously invokes the figure of intrinsic differentiation, and an example that appears throughout his work starting with *Bergsonism*, that of the white wall:

*As long as the wall is white, no [white] shape is distinguished from or in it. That is: in such a state the quality is not affected by anything extrinsically distinct from it. But there remains the question of knowing whether there is another type of modal distinction, presenting an intrinsic principle of individuation.*  
(EPS 196)

Taking this principle of intrinsic individuation, which Deleuze states he takes from Scotus, we can posit that modal essences are distinguished without reference to an external limit, as “different degrees of intensity.” (EPS 197) To quote once more

*Individuation is, in Spinoza, neither qualitative nor extrinsic, but quantitative and intrinsic, intensive. There is indeed, in this sense, a distinction of modal essences, both from the attribute that contains them, and one from another. Modal essences are not distinct in any extrinsic way, being contained in their attribute, but they have nonetheless a type of distinction or singularity proper to them, within the attribute that contains them. (ibid.)*

The final piece of the puzzle concerns how it comes about that an intrinsically individuated modal essence relates to an existing mode. We are not led to posit here a direct causal link, whereby the modal essence would be the primary agent in the individuation of an existing mode, since this would void Spinoza’s claim that “God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things.” (EIP18) In fact the relationship is more novel. As we have seen, a modal essence expresses a certain degree of power, a certain capacity. This capacity, being expressed by a modal essence, is immutable and eternal. Nothing more follows from this. However, we can say that the essence is expressed by an existence when existing modes are composed in a certain way which embodies or expresses the particular degree of power precisely expressed by the essence in question. In Deleuze’s words, “A mode comes into existence, not by virtue of its essence, but by virtue of purely mechanical laws which determine an infinity of some extensive parts or other enter into a precise given relation, in which its essence expresses itself.” (EPS 210)

The relationship between modal essence and modal existence in a particular case thus cannot be reduced to a causal one. Individuated modal essences (qua intrinsic degree of power) express a degree of God’s essence. In addition, – and this is the more important point – we are no longer dealing with a relationship between infinite and finite in Badiou’s limited numerical sense either, because the totality of the infinite mode is not what addresses itself to existing modes. Rather, finite-limited existing composite modes can be said to express a modal essence, when in fact they do, as a *particular* modal essence.

The ‘greater’ and ‘lesser’ infinities pertaining to existing modes are now also explicable. The greater the degree of power that an existing mode expresses is what is ultimately determinate. We can thus again reconsider Spinoza’s greater or lesser infinite existing modes as more or less powerful, expressing more or less of God’s essence.

To summarise, then. Modal essences are contained in their totality in the relevant attribute, understood as God’s essence or power. While being one, they are also intrinsically differentiated as intensive quantities. When it happens that existing modes are brought into a certain configuration by purely external relations, they can be said to express a particular modal essence. It is this theoretical configuration which at once answers the questions of individuation and the relationship between finite and infinite *without* involving Spinoza in any commitment to a infinite-finite transfer of causal force.

The scarcity of Spinoza’s discussions of infinite modes that Badiou notes can now be comprehended. Infinite modes are infinite because they are not limited by another of the same kind – they constitute the immediate or mediate expressions of God’s essence in its totality from the point of view of a particular attribute. However, their lack of external limit does not exclude, as Deleuze argues, intrinsic differentiation. Thus it is that infinite modes do not constitute the shadowy mediating figures that Badiou suggests they do. They are, we can say, nominal and descriptive rather than intrinsic entities. They play no role of agency in the determination of finite existing modes. If it is true, as Badiou asserts, that the presentations of substance that lend themselves to being read as descriptions of existing infinite modes do not form a part of the deductive chain (Badiou’s examples are nature as a single Individual [EIP13L7], and the infinite

understanding of God [EVP40]), this is precisely because the concept of the infinite mode has no ontological or causal privilege in relation to other existing modes, which are themselves also infinite in a certain respect. And, more decisively, it is not as infinite that infinite modes come into a formal or expressive relation with existing modes, but only in part, that part corresponding to a particular degree or quantity of power.

### Conclusion

Let me close by foregrounding a concern with Deleuze's account of modal essence. Two observations spring to mind to the reader of *Expressionism in Philosophy* – a book written concurrently with and published in the same year as *Difference and Repetition* – who is familiar with the wider philosophy of both Spinoza and Deleuze.

First of all, the textual support in Spinoza's *oeuvre* drawn on by Deleuze in this account of intensive differentiation vis-à-vis modal essence is very slim. In fact, it resides in a single claim, made in both the *Ethics* and before it in the *Short Treatise*, that singular modal essences are "contained" in the attributes without being in all propriety subject to division: "so long as singular things do not exist, except insofar as they are *comprehended* in God's attributes, their objective being, or ideas, do not exist except insofar as God's infinite idea exists." (EIIIP8C; my emphasis) Deleuze, both in *Expressionism in Philosophy* and in lectures relating to the question of individuation in seventeenth century thought, notes that the theme according to which *intensio* equals *modus intinsecus* (and *gradus*) has a long history, connecting Spinoza to themes in medieval philosophy and theology.<sup>13</sup> And it is true that the discussion of intrinsic modes plays a key role in Scotus, as Deleuze also notes, and that more generally that the relation of intrinsicity and immutable essence is a part of many discussions (particularly as regards morality) in thinkers as divergent as Suarez and Aquinas. However, this point seems wholly missing from Spinoza's own thought, to the extent that we are left to realise, like Errol Harris, with the fact that Spinoza himself does not explicitly address this problem that Deleuze solves on his behalf. Deleuze is at least modest enough to admit that "One may be permitted to think that, while he does not explicitly develop such a theory, Spinoza is looking toward the idea of a distinction or singularity belonging to modal essence as such." (EPS 197)

On the other hand, one cannot help but be struck by the similarity of Deleuze's account of individuation here, and that offered in the final chapter of *Difference and Repetition*. We need only recall the general principles of this discussion: that intensity is a primary and pre-individual milieu; as such, there is an activity of determination, but this determination is only ever intrinsic; that within this milieu, intrinsically differentially determined virtual Ideas are actualised; and that the result of this actualisation is an extrinsically identifiable individual. Consider the following Deleuzian formulation of Spinoza's *facies totium universi*: "the entire world may be read, as though in a crystal ball, in the moving depth of individuating differences or differences in intensity." (DR 247) And later, with a certain Leibnizian twist, "all the intensities are implicated in one another, each in turn both enveloped and enveloping, such that each continues to express the changing totality of the ideas, the variable ensemble of differential relations." (DR 252) We can also invoke, in a short sentence, a form of the response I have given to Badiou's arguments about Spinoza: "Individuation does not presuppose any differentiation; it gives rise to it." (DR 247)

My uneasiness stems from the fact that the introduction of external material to Spinoza's argument cannot be justified by reference to Spinoza's own work, an undecidability which readers of Spinoza should perhaps be unwilling to quickly resolve. In any case, this uneasiness that attends the reading of Deleuze on this point in Spinoza immediately invokes another feeling, a kind of curiosity whose locus would be what lies behind the explicit exposition in Spinoza himself.

Turning for a moment to Badiou, I might add the following: at the beginning of his book on Deleuze, he notes that "Spinoza was a point of intersection" between them, but that "his' Spinoza

was (and still is) for me an unrecognisable creature.”<sup>14</sup> I hope to have shown here that if Deleuze’s use of Spinoza sometimes involves mobilising external resources in order to render consistent certain Spinozist arguments, there is more fidelity in the latter’s presentation than in Badiou’s procrustean bed, which offers a Spinoza shorn of power, a Spinoza whose project is just one example among others in the “monotonous”<sup>15</sup> series of failures to live up to Badiou’s own rarified account of ontology. A Spinoza who is indeed ‘unrecognisable’.

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<sup>1</sup> Badiou's discussion of Spinoza is admirably glossed in Sam Gillespie's "Placing the void: Badiou on Spinoza", a discussion which also considers the accompanying argument in *Court Traité*. However, the conclusions of this piece are at odds with my own.

<sup>2</sup> I leave aside here the further connections between the void of a situation, the null set, and the void as the proper name of being. As important as they are to Badiou's philosophy, they do not come to bear on his reading of Spinoza. For an excellent explication of some of these connections, see Clemens, J. "Doubles of Nothing: the problem of binding truth to being in the work of Alain Badiou" *Filozofski vestnik* 1:2 (2005)

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, he continues by adding the following remark which would be worth pursuing elsewhere: "One could also say that the infinite mode is where Spinoza designates, despite himself – and thus with the highest unconscious awareness of his task – the point (excluded everywhere by him) at which one can no longer avoid the supposition of a Subject." This is closely related to the central argument of the *Court Traité* text.

<sup>4</sup> See Deleuze's discussion of the importance of the Cartesian distinction between knowing and conceiving in relation to the infinite for Spinoza in his "Seminar sur Spinoza" of 17/02/81

<sup>5</sup> In his *Le Nombre et les nombres*, in the context of his sympathetic yet critique reading of Dedekind's account of the infinite, Badiou gives an account of the issue under discussion here that rests on slightly different points of emphasis:

*As regards questions of existence, Spinoza himself made sure not to proceed like Dedekind. He did not at all seek to infer the existence of the infinite from the recurrence of ideas. It is, on the other hand, because he postulated an infinite substance that he was able to establish that the chain that goes from the idea of a body to ideas of ideas of ideas, etc., is infinite. For him, and he was quite justified, the existence of the infinite is an axiom. His problem is rather "on the other side", the side of the body (or for Dedekind of the object). Because, if there is a rigorous parallelism between the chain of ideas and the chain of bodies, then there must be, corresponding to the idea of an idea, a "body of a body", the reality of which we cannot grasp. Dedekind evades this problem because his site of*

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*thoughts assumes the Cartesian closure: the corporeal exterior, the extensive attribute, does not intervene. But, in wanting to draw from the Spinozist recurrence a conclusive (and non-axiomatic) thesis on the infinite, it produces only a vicious circle. (NN 4.22)*

There is at least one obvious point we can take issue with here, and that is the claim that the existence of the infinite is axiomatic for Spinoza. In fact, what is striking about the opening of Book 1 of the *Ethics* is that whereas the finite is defined (EID2, a definition which I will return to), the infinite is only introduced as a predicate in EID6, the definition of God: "By God I understand a being absolutely infinite . . ." The axioms that follow these opening definitions make no reference to infinity at all. In EIP8D we find the demonstration of the proposition: "Every substance is necessarily infinite". There is no axiomatic reference to infinity to be found anywhere in *Ethics*.

<sup>6</sup> Badiou himself is aware of this – he opens his thirteenth meditation of *L'être et l'événement* by invoking the issue in Greek ontology of "the compatibility of divine infinity with the essentially finite . . ."

<sup>7</sup> Harris, Errol *The Substance of Spinoza* (1995: Humanities Press, New Jersey), 27-8.

<sup>8</sup> Harris, 28

<sup>9</sup> *Le Nombre et les nombres*, 10.10

<sup>10</sup> On this point, Spinoza writes to Meyer with uncharacteristic alacrity:

*Eternity and substance, being only conceivable as infinite, cannot be thus treated without our conception of them being destroyed. Wherefore it is mere foolishness, or even insanity, to say that extended substance is made up of parts or bodies really distinct from one another. It is as though one should attempt by the aggregation and addition of many circles to make up a square, or a triangle, or something of totally different essence. Wherefore the whole heap of arguments, by which philosophers commonly endeavour to show that extended substance is finite, falls to the ground by its own weight.*

<sup>11</sup> The asterisk here and in what follows only indicates that the texts in question form part of the excursus on the physics of bodies, and thus their nomenclature is worth distinguishing from the rest of the *Ethics*.

<sup>12</sup> I realise that this paper does not address the issue of distinction between immediate and mediate infinite modes. In brief, while the former are identified here with the total of modal essences, the latter would be the totality of existing modes taken together, the *facies totius universi* from the point of view of existence itself.

<sup>13</sup> EPS 191; Deleuze "Seminar sur Spinoza"

<sup>14</sup> *Deleuze: the Clamour of Being* trans. Louise Burchill (2000: MIT Press, Minneapolis), 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 14