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From Complex Bodies to a Theory of Art: Melancholy, Bodies, and Art in the Philosophy of Spinoza

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ABSTRACT: Spinoza's limited words on the subject of art has led many to claim that his philosophy is incompatible and even *hostile* to a theory of art. Such a critique begins by confusing modern aesthetic standards with Spinoza's actual words on art and its objects. Beginning with this confusion, this paper will argue that Spinoza's philosophy naturalises the work of art and conceives of things such as paintings and temples through his theory of *complex bodies*.

Turning to the two places that Spinoza discuss art-IIIIP2Schol and IVP45Schol-this paper will argue that Spinoza understood works of art to be particularly *complex* and hence *powerful* extended bodies with a use value relative to the striving of the human individual. Accordingly it will be argued that because Spinoza conceived works of art to be external bodies-*artistic bodies*-we should therefore begin to study art and its objects through Spinoza's relational theory of the individual.

1. INTRODUCTION

Of the elements that Spinoza's philosophy is said to lack perhaps the most significant is an aesthetic theory or philosophy of art. This paper will attempt to contribute to the theorisation of this neglected area by examining the few places that Spinoza directly references art. In the first section I will turn to two commentaries that address the place of art in the Spinozist philosophy. I will show that a critique of Spinoza's position on art from the basis of his 'rationalism' is to misunderstand the place of the *imagination* relative to the life of reason in Spinoza's ethical project. Following this I will begin to reassess Spinoza's philosophical position on art by turning to the two places in the *Ethics* in which he directly discusses architecture, painting, and 'other things of this kind.' Turning to IIIIP2Schol and IVP45Schol I will argue that Spinoza asks us to consider works of art *as bodies* and, more specifically, *as complex bodies* that result *not* from the free mind of an artist-genius, but solely from the complexity of extended substance. Furthermore I will argue that according to Spinoza such bodies have the capacity to overcome complex affects such as *melancholy* and, consequently, have a particular value for the complex body of the human individual. From these premises it will become clear that Spinoza does in fact give us two central principles for any theory of art: the relationship between artist and art object (IIIIP2Schol), and the relationship between art object and perceiver (IVP45Schol). Finally I will suggest that by following Spinoza's understanding of art objects as complex bodies we can construct from his metaphysical and physical theory of individuation a relational model for theorising art that posits the art object as dynamic, active, and inextricably related to the socio-historical whole of which it is a constituent part.

2. SPINOZA, ART, AND THE AESTHETIC

Given the limited discussion of art in Spinoza's philosophy it has received scant attention in the secondary literature. Of the little that has been written, the extreme position argues that Spinoza's philosophy is *hostile* to art and that we should look away from his philosophy in order to think about art¹. This claim is made by James Morrison whose essay "Why Spinoza Had No Aesthetics" (1989) suffers from its reductive reading of Spinoza's epistemology. To quote:

Herein lies, I believe, the ultimate basis of Spinoza's philosophical neglect of aesthetics. For once the good life is *identified* with the life of reason, and reason is *opposed* to emotion, imagination, and sense, art and beauty become suspect. (Morrison 1989: 363)

According to Morrison Spinoza *opposes* the intellect to the imagination, reason to the senses, and such an opposition means that all that falls under the rubric of the imagination-and for Morrison this includes the objects and practices of art-is in direct contrast to, or impedes, the 'good life' considered as *purely rational*. But such an identification of the good life with the purely rational life is an equivalence rejected by many commentators of Spinoza's ethical philosophy. For example, according to the work of Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, the good life does not mean a life of pure rationality that is *opposed* to the imagination; the passive affects of the imagination are not in opposition to reason in the good life but, rather, they are continuous to one another. Here reason and imagination are understood to operate simultaneously with the former recognising the necessity of the latter in the inconsistent and changeable life of the human (Gatens and Lloyd 1999: 50). That Morrison attempts to critique Spinoza's position on art on the basis of the latter's 'rationalism' implies an anachronistic estimation of Spinoza's words on art. By reading into Spinoza's thought a modern aesthetic principle of art being *opposed* to the intellectual, Morrison points to Spinoza's emphasis on rational understanding in order to claim of art that, as a mode of the imagination, it must be an obstruction to Spinoza's intellectually driven ethics. By presupposing the anti-intellectual stance of certain modern aesthetic theories Morrison's thesis actively impedes any real engagement with what Spinoza actually says about art.

As with the above criticism of Morrison, Moira Gatens in her "Spinoza on Goodness and Beauty and the Prophet and the Artist" similarly notes that measuring Spinoza's thoughts on art through post-Spinozist aesthetic theories "risks foreclosing a consideration of the place of *art* in Spinoza's philosophy:" (Gatens 2015: 3; see also 13). Specifically, Gatens argues, such a confusion between art and the aesthetic restricts an understanding of the role that art might play in what she calls the 'art of living' or *ars vivendi*. Contrary to Morrison's view that as a mode of the imagination art is in opposition to the free life of reason, Gatens argues for the emancipatory function of certain 'collective imaginaries!'² For Gatens, the artist, like Spinoza's theorisation of the prophet in the *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP), has a 'superior natural ability to imagine' and it is from this special 'creative talent' that she can create affecting images that become habitual in the collective imagination (Gatens 2015: 11).

While Gatens's analysis correctly highlights the centrality of the imagination in Spinoza's philosophy, consequently rescuing the possibility of art contributing to freedom from Morrison's claim that art obstructs freedom, I believe that her theorising of art through the artist-prophet is not the way that Spinoza most explicitly explains art. Indeed, nowhere in Spinoza's texts does he appeal to the mind or imagination of the artist in order to explain works of art. In what follows then, I will argue for a new reading of how Spinoza conceives of art by appealing to his metaphysical and physical theorisation of *complex bodies*.

3. THE RELATION BETWEEN ARTIST AND ARTWORK:

IIP2SCHOL AND THE MATERIALITY OF ART

There are two places in the *Ethics*³ that begin to explain and account for how art is produced, functions, and should be thought.⁴ The first occurs in IIP2Schol where Spinoza takes as his starting point the proposition that: *The body cannot determine the mind to thinking, and the mind cannot determine the body to motion, to rest, or to anything else*. For Spinoza, there is no causal relation between the modes of each attribute, between mind and body, meaning that the mind cannot cause the body to motion and, likewise, the body cannot cause the mind to think. Because the body's motions cannot be explained from the causality of the mind, and the mind's ideas cannot be explained from the causality of the body, Spinoza reasons that each mode of each attribute must be

explained *solely through the attribute of which they are an expression*. It is on this point that Spinoza takes art, and specifically architecture and painting, as a case in point to demonstrate his non-standard mind-body thesis, to quote:

They will say, of course, that it cannot happen that the causes of buildings, of paintings, and of things of this kind, which are made only by human skill, should be able to be deduced from the laws of Nature alone, *insofar as it is considered to be only corporeal*; nor would the human body be able to build a temple, if it were not determined and guided by the mind. (IIP2Schol emphasis added)

In this Scholium Spinoza is anticipating the objections to his claim that there is no causal connection between the modes of each attribute. They will say, he notes, that a painting cannot be explained without recourse to the mind of the painter. Such an objection refers us back to Spinoza's claim in Appendix One, the claim that in the most part people *confuse causes* taking first as final causes. In this instance the idea of the painting that is the cause of the mind's act of thinking is mistakenly taken to be the final cause of the body's *act* of making the painting. Such a position is man's primary prejudice for it is to see corporeal action as directed by an incorporeal will. Here, being ignorant of the infinite complexity of corporeal substance and of our necessarily determined nature as a body caused to action by an infinite causal chain of other bodies, we mistakenly conceive of our actions as arising freely from the power of our mind (Appendix One, IIP48). It follows, therefore, that given his strict denial of free will coupled with the denial of causal influence between mind and body, Spinoza must explain the objects of human artistry in a way that follows the conditions of his non-hierarchical mind-body thesis.

Focussing on works of art such as paintings and buildings Spinoza appeals to the body in order to explain the complexity of extended substance, stating of his critics that: "they do not know what the body can do, or what can be deduced from the consideration of its nature alone" (IIP2Schol). According to Spinoza extension is no more or less complex than thought, and what can follow from the complexity of corporeal substance alone is not adequately known because *we do not know what the body can do*. Put differently, the complexity of the causal network of things considered through the attribute of extension alone is largely unknown to us. If we did have an adequate knowledge of the order and connection of modes of extension we would not attempt to explain works of art via the activity of an individual directing mind, but would instead appeal to the infinitely complex causal activity of extended substance.

And yet it must be made clear that while Spinoza's central point in IIP2Schol is to deny that the mind directs the body in its motions, he is not falling back into the mind-body opposition that his famous parallelism thesis seeks to avoid. While Spinoza is clear that the material painting is not the result of a thought in the mind of the painter but merely the result of a series of causes in extension that stretches back to infinity, he would still hold that there exists an *idea* of the painting in the attribute of thought. Spinoza's parallelism doctrine of IIP7 affirms that just as the painting exists as a body in the attribute of extension so also it exists in the attribute of thought as an idea, and both have a causal history that are identical to one another. The assertion of IIP2Schol is then not to deny the place of ideas in the creative genesis of works of art. Rather it simply aims to redress our skewed Cartesian mind-set that posits the complexity of the mind over and above that of the body, and then to conceive the mind as the driving force of corporeal action and artistic production. In this way Spinoza's focus on the material expression of the art object and his use of artistic production as an example of matter's complex self-modification seeks to emphasise the *equal* complexity of both mind and body and their like expression of the activity of the same one thing. Once more, Spinoza's aim is to right the misconception of matter's inferior complexity to thought, an idea that has

classically led to the belief that it is the 'genius' mind of an individual artist that is the cause of a work of art.⁵

Here, then, Spinoza is making two points: firstly that it is not the mind that manipulates matter but matter's activity itself that causes its modifications; and secondly that the cause of matter's affected states, i.e., this or that building or painting, cannot be located in the causally isolated actions of an autonomous individual even if we consider that individual's actions under the attribute extension alone. Hence as well as denying the mind's power over the body, Spinoza's intention in IIP2Schol is also to disperse the autonomous power of the individual into an active causal network, therefore positing the artist's individual creativity as the activity of extended substance itself. In this way Spinoza emphasises that the causal network of material things *is* complex enough to give rise to paintings and buildings without either a mind guiding its activity or the intervention of a human 'genius' that somehow acts from outside of nature's necessity. At this point we see Spinoza's contention most clearly: The work of art arises from the necessity of nature's activity and, whether considered under the attribute of thought or the attribute extension, both its idea and its body cannot be traced back to any single finite cause abstracted from the causal activity of the rest of nature, but must in-stead be understood to follow from the infinite complexity of substance's activity.

For Spinoza then it is no more the artist herself that produces the work of art than all the previous causal relations she underwent. Indeed Spinoza is not alone in thinking of the creative act as dispersed amongst a matrix of relations. To take an example from literature compare here Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*:

For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice. (Woolf 2000: 66)

Woolf's contention that the work of George Eliot or the Brontës is the outcome of the experience of 'the body of the people' gives us a modern parallel through which to illuminate Spinoza's 'democratic' conception of artistic creation. There is nothing 'solitary' to the work of art, and Spinoza's contention that it is the activ-ity of extended substance, understood as the totality of material relations, that gives rise to the work of art, will only surprise us if we underestimate the extent of nature's complexity.

The model for explaining art objects that IIP2Schol puts forth and that Woolf illuminates follows Spinoza's naturalistic philosophy, precluding any onto-logical or epistemological distinction of works of art and instead explains them "from the laws of nature alone, insofar as it is considered to be only corporeal:" (IIP2Schol). It is in this Scholium that we first begin to discern a theory of art in Spinoza: Works of art such as paintings and temples are here considered as physical bodies brought to existence through entirely physical causes and, as such, should be explained solely through this infinite network of physical causality insofar as it is understood to express the activity of extended substance. But as well as this, IIP2Schol also makes a claim regarding how we should consider the position of the artist relative to the creative act. Artworks such as paintings and temples are considered from the complexity of substance's activity and are not the result of the controlling mind of a 'genius; as in certain aesthetic theories of the modern period. In sum then IIP2Schol touches upon two central issues in any theory of art. Firstly it tells us how artworks are produced, and secondly it sets out a method for how they can be explained, and both amount to the same thing: As expressed in the attribute of extension artworks are created through a certain causal mechanism of

bodies, and it is through this causal history and not through the isolated causal power of the artist that we can begin to explain and understand works of art.

4. THE RELATION BETWEEN ARTWORK AND SPECTATOR:

IVP 4 5SCHOL AND THE ARTISTIC BODY

The second place where Spinoza discusses art is the Scholium to Proposition 45 of Book IV. In what follows I will expand upon the various claims of this Scholium whilst continuing to situate its argument in Spinoza's wider philosophy.

The principal section of concern is as follows:

It is the part of the wise man, I say, to refresh and restore himself in moderation with pleasant food and drink, with scents, with the beauty of green plants, with decoration, music, sports, the theatre, and other things of this kind, which anyone can use without injury to another. For the human body is composed of a great many parts of different natures, which constantly require new and varied nourishment, so that the whole body may be equally capable of all the things which can follow from its nature, and hence, so that the mind also may be equally capable of understanding many things at once. (IVP45Schol)

Referring to this Scholium, Morrison states that Spinoza affords the arts only a *limited medicinal value* and that they have no *intrinsic worth* (Morrison 1989: 361-2). He is correct. It is clear that for Spinoza the objects and practices of art, like all things in his philosophy, do not have any value *in themselves*. They are not autonomous things that are exceptional in nature, for such a position would run counter to the foundations of his natural philosophy.⁶ Rather, works of art follow the conditions of Spinoza's metaphysics and are here theorised in relation to their *utility* for another body, i.e., via their usefulness in relation to the striving of the wise man. Indeed it is entirely misguided to critique Spinoza's notion of art objects via their lack of intrinsic value, for in Spinoza's philosophy nothing has value of itself. Spinoza is clear on this, specifically noting of music:

For one and the same thing can, at the same time, be good, and bad, and also indifferent. For example, music is good for one who is melancholy, bad for one who is mourning, and neither good nor bad to one who is deaf. (IV Preface)

Any intrinsic value that a work of art might traditionally be said to contain is here categorically denied. A piece of music only attains a value relative to a particular power to strive and a particular time and place. Thus for the melancholic music will be good because it will ease their melancholy, while for the mourner it will most often be bad for it will only deepen their sadness (see also IVP59Alt-Dem). Works of art, then, should not be measured by what *intrinsic value* they might traditionally be said to have. Rather, it is through the *extrinsic value* that they attain relative to a particular individual and its power to strive that we should begin to understand them. To measure art via its use-value immediately puts Spinoza at odds with various modern aesthetic theories that entirely remove the concept of utility from the experience of art.⁷ And yet just because art is opposed to utility in certain modern theories of art this does not mean that Spinoza deflates the value of art and belittles its particular contribution to human life. Spinoza's naturalism is not 'hostile' to art because it fails to afford its objects an objective, supernatural value; instead it asks us to think about a work of art as an active part of nature, as a body that is entirely *natural* and whose particular value varies according to the changing affective relations that it enters into.

This naturalisation of the art object follows Spinoza's wider philosophico-anthropological project of realigning man with Nature, a project that is also evident in his treatment of Holy Scripture in the

Theological-Political Treatise (TTP). In chapters 7-12 of the TTP, Spinoza argues that an object's sanctity is not connected to some objective or supernatural value that it contains but is rather determined by how its body is *used* by a people (TTP 165).⁸ As Warren Montag notes, for Spinoza, Scripture must be understood through its material presence and its value measured like any other body in nature, that is to say, through the effects it produces as a body among many other bodies (Montag 1999: 5). As well as his more explicit project of reducing humanity to a mere part of Nature, Spinoza's naturalisation of humanity's *products* -Scripture and the work of art respectively - is an equally important aspect to his wider ethical and political project. Just as humanity has often been posited through a Cartesian lens as a dominion within a dominion that disrupts rather than follows the necessity of nature (III App), so humanity's products such as societies, the Holy Scriptures, and art, are also often thought in opposition to the natural and therefore must undergo the same critique that Spinoza affords human action in the *Ethics*.⁹ In this way Spinoza's project of realigning both humanity *and* its products with Nature's necessity can be seen as a crucial part of his wider ethical and political philosophy.

It follows from the above then that because Spinoza conceives works of art through their affective relation to the human body it would be most accurate if we no longer spoke of *works* of art but, rather, of *bodies of art*. Put differently in the Spinozist philosophy we should begin to theorise works of art such as paintings and temples in the manner of *artistic bodies*, here understood as external bodies with a particular and changeable use-value that is always relative to a spectator and their power to strive at a given time and place.

4.1 *Melancholy and Art*

That Spinoza naturalises the work of art has been demonstrated through IIP2Schol and IVP45Schol respectively. But insofar as works of art are to be considered in this way exactly what degree of power artistic bodies contain, insofar as all bodies are individuated by a particular degree of power (JP36Dem), has not yet been shown. In the following I will go on to argue that Spinoza conceives artistic bodies to be particularly *complex* (and hence *powerful* and *active*) in the sense that he uses the term in his theory of the individual.

IVP45Schol sits within the part of the *Ethics* that deals with humanity's bond-age to the affects. Given the necessarily embodied condition of humans they will always be subject to external causes, which is to say, they will always be subject to affects (IVP3-4). For Spinoza there are three primary affects-*joy*, *sadness*, and *desire*-and an infinite variation of affects that derive from these principal affects:" *There are as many species joy, sadness, and desire, .. as there are species of the objects by which we are affected*" (IIP56). In IVP45Schol Spinoza aims to show that although the variation of affects that follow from the primary affects are often subject to classification in cultures, such a classification is merely a confused understanding of the primary affect from which they derive. Thus we hear Spinoza state:

Nothing forbids our pleasure except a savage and sad superstition. *For why is it more proper to relieve our hunger and thirst than to rid ourselves of melancholy?* (IVP45Schol, emphasis added)

Whether the affect of hunger or the affect of melancholy, both relate to a diminution in our body's ability to act for both are modifications of the primary affect *sadness*. Put differently, those who forbid pleasure are those who do not understand the nature of the affects and who confuse natural desires with images or universal values. Hence the superstitious that arbitrarily forbid certain species of one and the same affect are merely confusing the cultural imaginary of, say, *pleasure*, as something other than a modification of the affect *joy*. According to Spinoza then, insofar as both

melancholy and hunger are species of one and the same affect both equally require of the affected individual that she strive to overcome them so that she might flourish.

But even though every species of the primary affects of joy or sadness all have the same end (an increase or decrease in an individual's power), this does not mean that they can all be countered (or induced) by the same means. For Spinoza different affects require different affective offsets. In the case of the affect *hunger* the affected individual requires the external bodies of various foodstuffs so that it might be regenerated and maintained. Such simple external bodies as foodstuffs are here understood as specific to the overcoming of the affect hunger and not, say, to the overcoming of the affect *disdain*. But while such bodies as foodstuffs are effective in relation to hunger, Spinoza will go on to argue that in the case of more complex affects such as *melancholy*, the affected individual will require increasingly complex external bodies in order to overcome it, and such bodies, it will be shown, can arise through the particular activities of artists, musicians, and dramatists (IVP45Schol).

Of the eight times that the affect melancholy is mentioned in the *Ethics* and TTP, four times it is given in relation to art and culture.¹⁰ This is not an arbitrary connection, for when Spinoza states in IV Preface that: "music is good for one who is melancholy;" he is affirming a well known historical connection between melancholy and its cure in music and the arts. Indeed we know that Spinoza himself was aware of this historical collection for in his chapter on prophecy in the TTP he recites the Old Testament story of David playing the harp to ease the melancholy of King Saul (TTP 22). But *why*, beyond historical conformity, does Spinoza connect melancholy to art, specifically noting the latter's ability to overcome the former? In the following I will demonstrate Spinoza's linking of melancholy to art by showing how in IVP45Schol Spinoza uses his theory of the *complex individual*¹¹ in order to make their association.

4.2 Complex Bodies and Complex Affects

Here I want to return to the previously quoted IVP45Schol:

It is the part of the wise man, I say, to refresh and restore himself in moderation with pleasant food and drink, with scents, with the beauty of green plants, with decoration, music, sports, the theatre, and other things of this kind, which anyone can use without injury to another. For the human body is composed of a great many parts of different natures, which constantly require new and varied nourishment, so that the whole body may be equally capable of all the things which can follow from its nature, and hence, so that the mind also may be equally capable of understanding many things at once. (IVP45Schol)

There are two parts to this citation. The first part appeals to the necessity of artistic bodies to restore the wise, while the second part *demonstrates* this need by appealing to the *complexity* of human individuals. *Why* does Spinoza demonstrate the necessity of art by appealing to the composite nature of the wise man's body? To answer this we must first discern the key points of Spinoza's theory of the individual.

Spinoza's theory of the individual is most explicitly worked out in the *Physical Digression* but it is often also cached out in relation to his 1665 letter to Henry Oldenburg (Ep32).¹² The *Definition* of the individual in the Physical Digression states that an individual comes to be, *either* (i) when a number of bodies are determined to lie upon one another to create one composite body, *or* (ii) when a number of bodies enter into a certain fixed relation of motion and rest so that they all compose one complex body or individual. Focussing on the latter definition (for Spinoza confirms this to be the definition of the human individual in IVP39), this means that individuals are distinguished from one another not by substance, form, or function, but by the fixed ratio of motion and rest that

determines their composite parts to union.¹³ Furthermore HL7Schol and Ep32 tell us that complex bodies or individuals are things whose constituent bodies are complex bodies in themselves, each being composed of perhaps more complex bodies and each with their own corresponding nature. The more complex a body the more its constituent bodies are complex in themselves, and such an order is true of human as well as non-human individuals.¹⁴ However the specifics of what makes a body complex is not the *number* of bodies a thing is composed of, for such a numerical atomisation of the individual is rejected by Spinoza (see IP I 5ScholIV). Rather, a body is increasingly complex the more it can affect and be affected, and such an ability is determined by the diversity of bodies that it contains as a constituent. In this way a person can affect and be affected in as many ways as their body is complex and in as many ways as their constituent bodies allow them to affect and be affected in different ways (II Post.III, IJP I 3Schol).¹⁵ While this means that a person can be more affective and therefore more active because of the greater variation of their constituent bodies, it also means that a complex individual will be more susceptible to negative affects and the diminution of power that follows. A rock, for instance, has a low capacity to be active and a low capacity to be affected for its body's constituent parts have little variation and, therefore, regardless of how many constituent bodies it might contain (we might scale the rock up to be a boulder, for instance), it will always be limited in the ways it can enter into relations with external bodies. Because of its lack of bodily variation the rock cannot act upon the world in certain ways but, likewise, it is also insulated from being acted upon in certain ways. Given its limited complexity the rock cannot suffer the affects of hate, fear, or remorse, affects that in another individual might lead to a diminution in their power. However contrary to the rock's resistance to such negative affects, the human individual whose body is composed of a multiplicity of varying bodies and who can be affected in a great many ways relative to its complexity, will suffer a loss of power at the impressions of such affects. This means that while variation in composition makes bodies more complex and hence more powerful and active, it also has the negative consequence of opening them up to many destructive and increasingly complex affects that could have a negative impact on an individual's power.¹⁶

It follows then that a thing is more complex not only by the amount of bodies it contains but also by the breadth in variation of its constituent bodies. Such complex bodies are, by virtue of their various natures, at once increasingly affective but also more susceptible to being affected and, specifically, to being affected by complex affects. By "*complex affects*" I here understand affects such as *melancholy* and *cheerfulness* that have the power to affect all of an individual's varying constituent bodies at once (II1P I I Schol). The determination of melancholy as *complex* is significant for it means that, as bodies with the capacity to overcome melancholy, works of art such as music and theatre must be of an equal or greater power to melancholy itself. It follows that Spinoza's coupling of melancholy with artistic bodies implies the complexity of the latter, thus affording a definition of the artistic body as fundamentally *complex* in the sense of the term that we have elaborated upon above. To quote Spinoza's definition of melancholy we will see it given as a particularly complex and hence powerful affect:

The *affect of joy which is related to the mind and body at once* I call *pleasure or cheerfulness*, and that of *sadness, pain or melancholy*.

But it should be noted [NS: here) that pleasure and pain are ascribed to a man when one part of him is affected more than the rest, whereas cheerfulness and melancholy are ascribed to him when all are equally affected. (IIIP II Schol; italics in original, boldface emphasis added)

Melancholy is contrasted to pain as an affect that is not limited to any one part of the body *but affects all the parts of an individual equally*. It is in this sense that melancholy, alongside its antonym cheerfulness, is considered a complex affect. According to Michael Lebuffe melancholy and

cheerfulness provide a real problem for Spinoza because they appear to be always had or good *in themselves*. As Lebuffe notes (2009: 216-8), a passive affect can be good and cause an increase in a person's ability to act insofar as it takes away a greater evil. Melancholy and cheerfulness, however, because they affect all the parts of the body equally leaving no part unaffected, appear to be good or bad *without regard to circumstance*. Put differently melancholy and cheerfulness appear to be good or bad *in themselves*, a claim that contradicts Spinoza's ethical relativism but which at the same time highlights the particularly powerful nature that Spinoza understood melancholy to have.¹⁷

While IVP45Schol states that melancholy and hunger are both equally necessary to be overcome, it is nevertheless the former that requires particularly powerful bodies in order to achieve this. Music and works of art in general are correlated to melancholy for they are understood to have a particular kind of complex body that, like the affect melancholy, has the capacity to affect all the various parts of an individual at once. Thus Spinoza maintains that *music is good for one who is melancholy* precisely because a piece of music is understood as an external body with a degree of power equal or greater to that of the complex affect of melancholy. This is not so hard to conceive empirically, think of the all-encompassing power of a poem or musical performance to overwhelm and render inanimate the body with its affectivity. For the duration of the poem or musical performance the perceiver's own body is entirely subject to the movements of the words or the repetition of a certain refrain; the reading and listening body is thus rendered inert through the power of the artistic body and its capacity, like melancholy, to affect all the parts of our composite body at once. Here then, complex artistic bodies are understood in the same way as the composite bodies of Spinoza's theory of the individual. Artistic bodies such as music appear complex in virtue of their being composed of many varying bodies, and because of their ability to affect all the constituent bodies of the listening individual at once. It is for these reasons that Spinoza considers artistic bodies to be complex insofar as they are able to counter the complex affect of melancholy that the human individual suffers.

5. TOWARDS A SPINOZIAN THEORY OF ART

But what is it to say of artistic bodies that they are to be understood in the same way Spinoza theorises individuals and complex bodies? What are the implications of such a seemingly reductive theory of art? Before moving on to these concluding questions I would first like to anticipate an objection to the argument presented so far. The objection might run so: If it follows from the details of Spinoza's ontology that artistic bodies cannot be *really* distinguished from other *non-artistic* bodies, then how are we able to differentiate what is art from what is not? The answer to this problem lies in what Spinoza notes of Scripture in the TTP but given the limitations of this paper I can only detail the argument in brief.

Placing himself on the side of historicist theories of art Spinoza might maintain that artistic bodies are determined as artistic bodies historically. Just as Scripture is sanctified as Scripture, and not just any other 'inarticulate object' (TTP 164), both historically and socially through its use amongst a people, so too might certain bodies be determined as bodies of art. In sections five and six of Chapter Twelve of the TTP Spinoza offers an account of the sanctity of Scripture detailing the reasons for why a particular body of text is understood as sacred and how its sanctity makes it distinct from other non-sacred bodies of text. According to Spinoza that which is called sacred is legitimated in its sanctity by its use as a religious object. Thus, Spinoza notes, there is nothing inherently sacred about the tablets of Moses, but their sanctity is connected to their use as objects of worship, to their determination as sacred by a people's actions and collective imagination. But, as Spinoza notes in the *Ethics*, affects and their communication between a people is something that is inconsistent and changeable. At one time the tablets of Moses were sacred because they had

inscribed upon them the covenant that bound the Jews to God. But another time the historical conditions of the Jews changed and they began to worship the golden calf, thus neglecting the tablets and negating their legitimacy as sacred in doing so. Here, Scripture is determined as Scripture in history: it is the material conditions of a people and the affects that circulate between them that determine this or that body of text with sanctity or this or that word with a particular meaning. Just as with Scripture, for Spinoza art and its bodies might be legitimated *as art* in a similar way, and while this latter conjecture is speculative, it is nevertheless based on what Spinoza notes of the letter of Scripture and his determination of the artistic body as a particularly complex and affective body.¹⁹

Prior to addressing the above objection I had argued that artistic bodies are to be considered as complex bodies and therefore are composed of an increasingly complex nesting of bodies within bodies. Further, such complex artistic bodies were understood to be particularly powerful, for they were correlated to the affect melancholy and given as bodies that have the ability to affect all the constituent bodies of an individual at once. But in order to further develop the implications of conceiving works of art as complex bodies we must once again turn to Spinoza's theory of the individual and, specifically, to the recent research around the *relationality* of the Spinozist individual.

According to several recent commentators Spinoza's theory of the individual is fundamentally *relational* and follows from his 'ontology of power' (Laerke 2009: 181). Various methods have been used and various terms have been invented to describe the dynamic nature of the Spinozist individual. Etienne Bali bar uses the theory of 'communication' and the term 'transindividuality' to think the process of individuation and its political ramifications; Aurelia Armstrong employs the feminist literature of 'relational autonomy' to think the autonomy of the Spinozist individual; and Caroline Williams theorises a new kind of subjectivity in Spinoza coining the idea of a 'subjectivity without the subject.'²⁰ At the starting point of each of these theses is Spinoza's reworking of the individualist-holist binary and the particular relation that Spinoza conceives individuals to have to the totality of which they are a part. While an individual is defined in the *Physical Digression* via its *essence* as a certain fixed ratio of motion and rest between its parts, *Ep32* presents the individual in a different light by defining it *existentially* as a part in relation to an always more inclusive whole. In *Ep32* the individual is given as necessarily situated amongst a multiplicity of other finite modes. By limiting one another's indefinite power to strive (IIIP8) individuals come to be determinate and durational through the bodies that limit them. Put differently, this or that finite mode is individuated through the external relations they have.²¹ As well as this Spinoza is clear that "The human body, to be preserved, requires a great many other bodies by which it is, as it were, continually regenerated" (Tip 13PostulateIV). This means that although the Spinozist individual is defined in the first instance by its particular *conatus* or *actual essence*, this essential power to strive could not be maintained without certain relations with external bodies.²² In this way an individual cannot be abstracted from the network of causal relations that constitutes its individuation. Here the individual and the external environment that both cause it to existence and then sustain it in existence are seen as inextricably related, meaning that when thinking this or that individual we are likewise thinking the milieu in which that individual is situated.²³

Because an individual's individuality is so closely related to the relations it undergoes with the bodies that surround it, it follows that a body's delimiting boundary cannot be known by its phenomenal appearance alone. Spinoza is clear in the *Physical Digression* that the parts of an individual may be entirely replaced and its figure completely alter while the individual nevertheless remains. As Hans Jonas has noted, the most accurate analogy for thinking the Spinozist individual would be that of a flame. The flame's permanence as an identifiable individual is not an identity of fixed and immutable

substance. Rather, the flame, like the Spinozist individual, should be conceived as a perpetual process of mutual affectivity with external bodies that perpetually constitute and reconstitute it (Jonas 1973: 265). There is no substantial individual around which affects and relations emanate but, rather, the individual is the affects and relations it undergoes and as such can only be distinguished as this or that individual by the effects it produces as an active cause.

How then to think this processual concept of the individual in terms of the artistic body? A historical painting or contemporary piece of music are both art-works composed of many varying bodies, such as the various physical materials that a work of art might be composed of. The mutual relation of each individual artwork's bodies expresses the whole work of art whose ability to affect, due to its composition as a complex body, is rarely exhausted. At this particular time one is affected by a composition of a certain set of constituent bodies, such as a particular composition of this colour and that image, this refrain and that tone; and another time a new composition of its constituent bodies might emerge and elicit an entirely different affective response (see III PSI). This emergence of ever-changing affective relations is the active encounter that a human body might have with an artistic body. Given the complexity of each body and the continuously changing existential circumstances in which they relate, the affective composition that human and artistic body might enter into is never the same. For this reason the *particularity* of the artistic body, measured as it is by the various effects it has on the world, will continuously vary according to the differing relations it undergoes and according to the various spatiotemporal circumstances it is experienced under. Here we might point to the variation of affects produced by a well known artistic body across time and in different places. Defined by the affects it produces. Pablo Picasso's anti-war painting *Guernica* will be constituted in its individuality in a different way by a person in Spain immediately after the Second World War, than by a person in Britain in the twenty-first century. The painting will retain its individuality across this spatio-temporal divide but, like the flame's continuous process of reconstitution, its individuality will be constituted anew by the differing relations it effects with external bodies.

In a movement of reciprocal-determination the Spinozist encounter with a work of art is a transformative experience for both artwork and perceiver. Michael Mack comes close to a Spinozist conception of art as relational when he argues that literature functions to alter the normative and fictive ways of living that condition our everyday lives.²⁴ Challenging fictions such as Humanity, Good, Evil, Beauty, and Ugliness, literature and art seek to reveal these images and re-align our body anew to the whole in which it partakes. This, according to Mack, is the ethics of literature (Mack 2014: 54). But while Mack posits the relationality of literature as a movement from artwork to perceiver, he does not fully follow Spinoza's conception of individuation and make the movement *reciprocal*. As well as human individuals being disposed in different ways by artistic bodies, so too are artistic bodies disposed by the relations they effect. In this way the Spinozist understanding of the work of art is closer to Umberto Eco's concept of the modern work of art as 'open'. For Eco the work of art is 'open' in the sense that it is in a constant and continual process of completion by the perceiver; indeed according to Eco the nature of works of art is such that they actively *seek out* participation in their being (Eco 1989: 85).²⁵ For Eco, then, not only are works of art relational and open but they also actively seek out relations, thus opening themselves up to a continuous process of determination from external bodies.

Here then the work of art appears as relational because it is constituted in its being through the relations its body effects. This means that as a site of relation the individuality of an artistic body is never static but is continually modified by the multiple relations it stimulates; in Eco's terms the work of art appears as fundamentally 'open' and in a continual process of completion by the

perceiver that relates to the work. In this way Spinoza's philosophy requires that we take artistic bodies in their dynamic individuality and explain them through the relations they effect at a particular time and in a particular place. This method for explaining and thinking about art objects is a particularly nominalist theory and requires that each time we encounter a body of art we consider it anew based on the relations it stimulates and the effects it produces. The modern idea of a critique of taste that subjects works of art to a judgment of universality could not be further from the Spinozist model for thinking art. If it is against the backdrop of this modern model of aesthetics that we evaluate the place of art in Spinoza's philosophy, then his philosophy will ultimately appear hostile to art and its theorisation. However if we take him on his own words and think works of art via their existence as complex bodies and through his relational theory of the individual, then we arrive at the beginning of a truly Spinozian theory of art that considers each work of art in its individuality and through its capacity to have real effects in the world. Just as Spinoza notes of Scripture in the TTP that we should not look outside of its letter to legitimate its word, so it follows from his comments on art in the *Ethics* that we should not look to normative aesthetic standards that exist outside of the body of art in order to see how we ought to engage with art. Works of art, for Spinoza, should be taken in their materiality, as bodies amongst bodies, and they should not be measured through standards foreign to their body's immediate effects.

6. CONCLUSION

In this paper I hoped to have remedied the belief that Spinoza's philosophy is hostile to art and that his thought cannot provide us with various productive tools for thinking about art. I have argued that Spinoza gives us both a model through which to understand the creative act of the artist *and* a model through which we can theorise art objects and practices. Put reductively what I have argued for is Spinoza's naturalisation of the art object to the status of a complex body. The role of the artist relative to the creative act was identified, and the artist's intention was reduced to the complex necessity of extended substance and its infinite unfold-ing. This naturalisation of the creative act should come as no surprise to readers familiar with Spinoza's naturalistic project and critique of free will, and nor is such a position on the role of the artist relative to the creative act unprecedented in theories of artistic creation.²⁶ But as well as this Spinoza also naturalises and reconceives the objects that follow from the body of the artist. It is true that art objects are treated as particularly complex and powerful bodies with the capacity to overcome complex affects such as melancholy, but they are nevertheless treated like every other body, having both a determinable causal history and a certain capacity to affect and be affected. It is in this sense that Spinoza's theory of the individual affords us a relational theory of art that situates the art object as a body amongst bodies and, ultimately, as a part within an always greater social whole. This latter position situates Spinoza's theory of art squarely on the historicist side of artistic enquiry. As the theory of the Spinozist individual goes, an understanding of any body includes, albeit at varying levels of adequacy, an understanding of a body's milieu and, in consequence, of the circumstances that brought it to be. In this way any adequate engagement with a particular artistic body elicits a degree of understanding of the wider site of its production—a knowledge of the greater, social individual of which the artistic body is a mere part. If art is to be considered as a part in a wider social-whole, then the next phase in thinking a Spinozist theory of art would be an exploration of this part-whole relation.²⁷

Contrary to the dismissal of Spinoza's philosophy as a barren soil for art and its theorisation, this paper has argued that there are in fact several reasons why one might turn to the Spinozist philosophy in order to think about art and its objects and practices.

NOTES

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1. For work that deals with Spinoza and art directly, see Gatens 2012, 2013, 2015; Uhlmann 2011; Mack 2012; and Morrison 1989. For more indirect work on Spinoza and art, see O'Sullivan 2006.
2. For a similar argument, see Mack 2012.
3. In the text, I use the standard reference for the *Ethics*, whereby IP12Dem denotes the Demonstration to Proposition 12 of Book 1. All references to Spinoza's *Ethics* are from Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, in Spinoza 1994. References to the Letters are from *Ethics, Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, and Selected Letters* (Spinoza 1992), and referenced by their respective numbers, e.g., Letter 12 becomes *Ep12*. References to the *Theological-Political Treatise* are from *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Silverthorne and Israel (Spinoza 2007).
4. This is not to say, however, that Spinoza doesn't often turn to the art of poetry to expand his own ideas, for instance his use of Ovid in IIIP3ICor and 1VPI7Schol, as well as his paraphrasing of "the tragedian" Seneca in TTP: 73. But his uses of the poets in these instances function only to illustrate his own philosophical ideas. and while this gives us an idea about the epistemological function Spinoza thought literature and art to have, it nevertheless remains to be an illustrative reference to art in the service of philosophy and not a consideration of art on its own terms.
5. The theory of 'artistic genius' being most famously theorised in section 46 of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.
6. Once again Morrison takes as the standard to measure Spinoza's thoughts on art an *aesthetics* that post-dates his philosophy. Specifically Morrison, in dismissing Spinoza's thoughts on art via his philosophy's inability to afford to art objects an ontological excess, continues to read a Romantic, idealist condition of art as aesthetic back onto Spinoza's philosophy. On this conflation of art, the aesthetic, and the metaphysical autonomy of artworks in Romanticism, see Osborne 2004: 660-677.
7. For instance, the Kantian aesthetic theory holds that art must be judged *disinterestedly*, that is, without relation to a work of art having a relation of utility to desires that are specifically related to the individual who experiences the work of art. See *Critique of Judgment*§2.
8. Spinoza's theorization of the sacredness of Scripture will be returned to in Part 5.
9. For a reading that emphasizes Spinoza's project of human realignment with nature and situates this project within a wider historical framework, see Mack 2010.
10. For Spinoza's uses of melancholy, see IIIPI1Schol, IJIDef3, IV Preface, IVP35Schol, IVP42, IVP45Schol, TPT 21, TPT 22. For an excellent cultural history of melancholy and its relation to philosophy, religion and art, see Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl's important study, *Saturn and Melancholy* (Klibansky, Panofsky, and Saxl 1964). For a more contemporary study that develops the cultural complexity of melancholy as a kind of *assemblage*, see Daniel 2013.

11. In the *Physical Digression*, Spinoza uses *composite body*, *complex body*, and *individual* interchangeably.
12. An account of individuation in Spinoza is one of the most problematic of interpretations of the *Ethics*. Curley notes that the physical digression leaves many important things unanswered (Curley 1988: 112), Deleuze notes that the problem of individuation poses many problems for Spinozism (Deleuze 1992: 194-5), Garrett states that the problem of individuation has been the object of much puzzlement (Garrett 1994: 73), while Melamed states that it is Spinoza's weak theory of the individual that leaves his philosophy open to the critique of Hegel whose criticism questions the reality of finite things (Melamed 2010: 85).
13. For excellent commentaries on the details and problems of Spinoza's theory of the individual, see Balibar 1997, Garrett 1994, and Sacksteder 1978.
14. It is precisely this complexity of the human body that makes its idea—the human mind—also complex. Specifically, Genevieve Lloyd has remarked that given the complex structure of the human body, it is able to retain images or modifications of itself even in the absence of the affecting body (See Lloyd 1994: 45). This ability to remember, the capacity of memory, is a key factor in why human individuals are of greater complexity compared to many other individuals. However it is also this very capacity to remember that renders humans increasingly servile to negative affects, for even when the object of a negative affect is absent the human can still be affected by its image. Again this means that humans are at once more complex and affective but also more susceptible to sad affects and the diminution of power that follows. See IPI 8Schol for Spinoza's words on memory.
15. See also Sharp 2011: 98.
16. See also Armstrong (2009: 54), who correlates the power of the Spinozian individual to its degree of sensitivity.
17. Furthermore, and as LeBuffe remarks, Spinoza himself wavers on how exactly to fully explain such affects stating of melancholy and cheerfulness that they are "more easily conceived than observed" (IVP44Schol), a statement that appears deliberately ambiguous.

See also IPI 18Schol for how words gain their meaning through the circulation of affects between bodies.
19. For an excellent reading of the materiality of the Scriptural body, see Montag 1999: chap. 1, "Scripture and Nature: The Materiality of the Letter."
20. See, respectively, Balibar 1998, Balibar 1997, Armstrong 2009, and Williams 2012.
21. For a similar argument, see Rosenthal 2008: 115-6.
22. Alexandre Matheron determines this double aspect of the individual as, respectively, the 'formal' and 'material' elements of the Spinozist individual (Matheron 1969: 38).
23. For an excellent articulation of this tenet of Spinozism, see Genevieve Lloyd's discussion of the 'self' in Spinoza's philosophy. Specifically, see Lloyd 1996: 120.
24. See Mack 2014: 52-73.
25. See, specifically, Eco 1989: chaps. I, 4.

26. See, for instance, section four of *The Third Essay of Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morality* (Nietzsche 1997: 71), as well as Marcel Duchamp's essay "The Creative Act" (Du champ 1973: 138-40)

27. This might begin with a study of the 'historical method' of interpreting Scripture that Spinoza outlines in chapters 7-10 of the TTP.

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