

**NANYANG
TECHNOLOGICAL
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SINGAPORE

**Patterns of “Reason”:
Spinoza and the Cheng Brothers on Understanding
the One and the Many**

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SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES**

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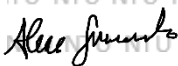
School of Humanities

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University in partial
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2023

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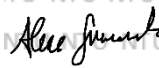
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SUMMARY

Since the Jesuits brought to Europe the first Latin translations of Chinese Confucian texts in the 17th century, scholars have attempted to interpret foreign ideas through the lenses of familiar ones by associating the Neo-Confucian tradition to the thought of the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza. In particular, the association has been variously made on the basis of a supposedly shared ‘monistic rationalism’, a categorization that has long remained unquestioned. Moving away from the religious and political agendas upon which this cross-cultural link has been initially elaborated, this research examines the philosophical value of this case study by enacting a comparison between Spinoza and the Neo-Confucian Cheng brothers, Cheng Hao 程顥 and Cheng Yi 程頤.

On the basis of specific methodological assumptions – which have been conceived in order to ensure conceptual clarity and differentiation in consideration of such distant cultural, historical, and linguistic contexts - I argue that an attentive examination of Spinoza and the Cheng’s thought can provide a unified understanding of the characteristics and functioning of ‘reason’ in its epistemological and ethical value.

By examining the metaphysical commitments of these philosophers, which ascribe to two kinds of oneness (*Natura* and *Dao*), I then discuss the epistemological and ethical consequences deriving from both frameworks. In light of the comparison enacted, I argue that Spinoza’s *ratio* and the Cheng’s *li* 理 of the mind (*xin* 心) and nature (*xing* 性) provide a coextensive notion of ‘reason’. The latter emerges as a *modus operandi* which is embedded and embodied, and that I interpret as a practice of self-extension by means of which the individual understands oneness through its differentiations. By articulating such an understanding of ‘reason’, the research also problematizes the ‘rationalist’ label that has been retrospectively attached to both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers, which may have hindered the full appreciation of this cross-cultural link’s philosophical value.

Introduction

“I borrow myself from others; I create others from my own thoughts.

This is no failure to perceive others; it is the perception of others.”

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sings*, 1960.

The Jesuits’ translations of Confucian texts brought to Europe at the end of the 17th century stimulated great philosophical interest towards Chinese thought. In the attempt to understand foreign ideas through the lenses of familiar ones, some European thinkers established a philosophical link between Chinese Neo-Confucianism and the thought of the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, a connection which found resonance in later centuries - both in Europe and China. This curious link, which was originally modeled upon specific political interests related to the China mission, led European philosophers to establish that both Spinoza and Neo-Confucian thinkers ascribed to forms of monistic rationalism and, as a consequence, that both traditions held the same heretic views on the nature and foundation of reality.

In light of these earlier yet partial analysis, this research provides a reassessment of the above-mentioned cross-cultural link in order to determine its philosophical value. Through the guidance of specific methodological assumptions directed at ensuring conceptual clarity and differentiation, the study enacts a comparison between Spinoza and the Neo-Confucian Cheng brothers - Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao - in consideration of their metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. By determining relevant planes of intersections across the two systems on the basis of their respective conceptual specificities, the study argues that both Spinoza and the Cheng articulate a coextensive notion of “reason”, which I propose to conceive as a practice of *self-extension*. In doing so, I argue that, in both systems, “reason” is conceived as both *embedded* and *embodied*, thus lacking the characters of transcendence and radical independence traditionally ascribed to rationalist thinkers.

Chapter one is devoted to discussing the three guiding methodological assumptions of the comparative analysis enacted by this study, namely, the *reciprocity assumption*, the

heterogeneity assumption, and the *systemic assumption*. While the first two are mostly pre-comparative in nature, the third assumption proposes to implement the widely used concept of family resemblance with Heidegger's tool of formal indication in order to establish the meaning of concepts on the basis of their contextual usage. Chapter two provides a literature review of the link between Spinoza and Chinese thought while, at the same time, providing timely considerations regarding how the methodology of the present research differs from that of earlier comparisons. Chapter three is devoted to the historico-philosophical contextualization of Spinoza and the Cheng brothers in order to outline the ways in which these thinkers established continuities with their respective traditions while, at the same time, bringing disruptive innovations. Together, the first three chapters constitute the overall methodological and historical framework within which the present research is inscribed, and thus serve as the groundwork for the enactment of the comparison articulated in the following chapters.

Chapter four provides a discussion of the metaphysics articulated by the Cheng and Spinoza; here, I consider Spinoza's theory of substance (*substantia*) and modes, and the Cheng's notion of one *li* with many manifestations (*li yi fen shu* 理一分殊). While the two metaphysics are articulated on the basis of different conceptual tools and argumentative strategies, I note that both systems ascribe to notions of immanent 'oneness', which operate *in* things and to which the latter depend for both their nature and existence. In chapter five I consider the Cheng and Spinoza's epistemology; here, I discuss the Cheng's theory of the extension of knowledge (*zhizhi* 致知) and their notion of 'self-getting' (*zide* 自得) while, on the other hand, considering Spinoza's theory of adequate and inadequate cognition. I argue that, in both systems, genuine and adequate knowledge consists in a transformative practice which is inherently reflexive. Chapter six is devoted to a discussion of Spinoza and the Cheng's theory of ethics; here I account for Spinoza's formulation of moral principles through his theory of *conatus* as related to his views on the emotions while, on the other hand, I consider the Cheng's formulation of the virtue of *ren* 仁 together with their articulation of 'selfish desire' (*siyu* 私欲). When comparing the two theories, I argue that both systems account for notions of 'good' and 'bad' as *derivative* principles that are formulated on the basis of the structure of finite things and in relation to broader mechanisms of natural dynamics.

On the basis of this threefold comparative analysis, chapter seven is devoted to a reconsideration of Spinoza's *ratio* and the Cheng's *li* 理 of the mind (*xin* 心) and nature (*xing* 性) as constituting two coextensive theories of "reason". By treating the latter as a formal indication, I propose to interpret the two theories as constituting a practice of *self-extension*, that is, a practice in which the self *becomes* united with Nature or *Dao in* apprehending its differentiations. Interpreting these shared views of "reason" in this way, I argue, illuminates the latter as inherently *embedded* and *embodied*, rather than transcendent and disembodied.

In conclusion, I note that the theories of reason developed by these thinkers may find resonance with contemporary discussions in the field of embodied cognition. In doing so, more importantly, I note that the notion of reason that this research has attributed to both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers problematizes their being understood as 'rationalist', an interpretative lens which may have hindered the full appreciation of both systems as well as the philosophical alignment found across them.

CHAPTER ONE

Methodological Framework: Three Guiding Assumptions for Comparative Analysis

Introduction

The question of *how* to compare different philosophical systems – which is equally applicable to intra-cultural and inter-cultural analysis – is of crucial importance and cannot be answered easily. The question has long animated comparativists' debates on translation, interpretation, and the nature of comparison itself. Some scholars have attempted to identify a methodological map applicable across comparisons, while others have argued for the impossibility of identifying a unified method against the multiplicity of styles and contents of philosophizing. Both approaches, importantly, are nevertheless faced with a set of implicit or explicit assumptions with regards to both the subject matter as well as the interpreters' method of inquiry; such assumptions set both the ground upon which a comparison can be carried out as well as the hermeneutical stand of the interpreter. In this sense, assumptions are pre-comparative in character, and bear direct influence on both the objectives and results of a comparison. With this in mind, the present chapter is devoted to discussing three guiding methodological assumptions that can serve as a blueprint upon which a comparison between Spinoza and the Cheng brothers¹ can be undertaken. While they will be here conceived and employed as serving the purpose of intercultural comparison, these assumptions are also applicable to intracultural analysis. The first section considers the role played by prejudice and incommensurability within the act of interpretation: here, I argue that awareness of one's hermeneutical stand is a requirement for ensuring an acceptable degree of reciprocity between the interpreter and the tradition which is being interpreted, and that reciprocity must be ensured in order to prevent the enactment (whether conscious or unconscious) of

¹ While Cheng Hao and Cheng Yi could also be considered as separate thinkers, the research assumes that they can be seen as displaying unity in their thought. As I will discuss later, the differences elaborated among the two brothers are a matter of emphasis rather than philosophical disagreement, and such difference in emphasis can well explain the later developments of Neo-Confucianism as deriving by both brothers.

mechanisms of assimilation and/or exclusion that can undermine comparisons. This discussion constitutes what will be referred to as the *reciprocity assumption*. The second section provides a general discussion of traditions as inherently dynamic and heterogeneous, rather than finished objects (*heterogeneity assumption*). The immediate consequence of such an account is that historical categorizations of philosophical traditions necessarily involve a degree of generality which does not represent their inherent heterogeneity. The latter, I argue, is better appreciated by considering that conceptual continuities and disruptive innovations coextensively constitute the range of a given tradition, which is always re-considered through interpretation. In the third and concluding section, I account for the way in which apparently incommensurable philosophical systems can be compared. Here, following Wittgenstein's approach of 'meaning as use', I argue that philosophical concepts should be understood by looking at the way in which these are employed within a given system, rather than in themselves (*systemic assumption*). In order to do so, I propose to implement the widely used notion of family resemblance with Heidegger's tool of formal indication. The systemic assumption allows for two advantages: on the one hand, it provides a higher degree of specificity for individuating planes of intersection across traditions while, at the same time, ensuring that such intersections are constructed through functional similarities rather than identities of meaning – thus safeguarding the differences characterizing the systems involved in the comparison. Overall, while the first two assumptions discussed in what follows are pre-comparative, as they concern the relation among interpreter and text(s), the third assumption aims at establishing the comparative framework between interpreter and texts to be put in dialogue.

1.1 Constructing reciprocity on prejudice and incommensurability.

It is undeniable that Spinoza and the Cheng brothers are distant thinkers that differ in many respects, some of the most evident being their language, together with the cultural and socio-historical context in which they were active. In the aim of constructing a fruitful comparative framework that can account for both philosophical systems, these undeniable differences need to be considered at all levels of analysis, as they constitute the specific

philosophical identities of these thinkers. Importantly, accounting for differences seems to be both an ethical as well as an epistemological imperative. Ethically, the misrepresentation of cultural and/or philosophical differences may lead (and often does) to the assimilation of ‘the other’² (i.e., the subject of interpretation and representation) on the part of the interpreter who, as such, represents a dominant paradigm of knowledge. Epistemologically, denying or undermining the specificities of culturally distant philosophical traditions (through, say, assimilation) depletes the interpreter of conceptual tools that can improve the understanding of others’ systems of thought. This point, it should be noted, does not only constitute an impairment in understanding the other but is also an impairment to self-understanding. This is because comparison is inherently reflexive, as it is grounded upon a set of assumptions which directs the interpreter’s interests and guiding questions. More on this reflexive aspect will be considered later in the section. For now, it suffices to consider that philosophical comparison entails difference as its very requirement (one would not engage in comparing identical things) and that it is the interpreter’s ethical and epistemological responsibility to identify and account for such differences. But if Spinoza and the Cheng brothers are *that* different, so much as to seem incommensurable, how is such an endeavor even possible?

Before providing an answer to this question, I think, it is best to reconsider its underlying assumption, namely, the incommensurability of culturally distant philosophical

² See Franklin Perkins, “Metaphysics and Methodology in a Cross-Cultural Context” in *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Chinese Philosophy Methodologies*, ed. Sor-hoon Tan (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 183-198. Perkins mentions the power of assimilation in tandem with the power of exclusion in his discussion of the term/category “metaphysics” as applicable or not applicable to the Chinese context. While Perkins’ discussion is illuminating, I am here specifically interested in the power of assimilation, since the power of exclusion is usually derived from questioning whether Chinese philosophy can be considered philosophy in the first place. I do not consider this question, as it is both fallacious and Eurocentric. While the Eurocentric character of the question is obvious, I say the question is fallacious because its answer would entail a unanimous and established agreement on the essence of philosophy or what philosophy is when, in fact, there is no such agreement. Some might respond that it is the “love for wisdom” as derived from the Greeks, but even then it is difficult to see how Chinese thinkers could be excluded by such definition (not to mention the problematic assumption for which European philosophy can be identified with Greek philosophy). For a discussion on the issue of defining philosophy in an intercultural context see Carine Defoort, “Is There Such a Thing as Chinese Philosophy? Arguments of an Implicit Debate”, *Philosophy East and West* 51/3 (2001), 393-413. For an exhaustive discussion on the power of exclusion see Marcel Parent, “Comparison and Domination: Towards a Genealogical Hermeneutics in Comparative Philosophy and Comparative Religion” (PhD diss., Concordia University, 2015). With regards to assimilation, it seems to be more of a danger for those that engage in intercultural comparisons, as it is enacted through the unwarranted assumption that philosophical concepts articulated in European traditions have universal applicability. In this regard, for example, Perkins notes that “those who emphasize the commonality of human nature tend to deny the dangers of assimilation, precisely because they see the framework of European philosophy as human rather than European.” (Perkins 2016, 185).

traditions. Generally speaking, two things are ‘incommensurable’ when they have no common measure through which they can be related or compared; in fact, in its original use, the term was employed in ancient Greek mathematics to denote difference of magnitudes. The notion of incommensurability became popular with Kuhn’s work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), in which the term is used to indicate the incommunicability between different scientific paradigms and, with that, to question the very possibility for scientific progress to be cumulative. Now, it is important to note that Kuhn’s usage of the notion of incommensurability – which is faithful to the original meaning of the term – should not be unproblematically transposed to the context of comparative philosophical practice. A distinguishing feature of the Kuhnian paradigm shift in scientific revolutions, in fact, is that once a paradigm revolution occurs it is impossible to shift back to the preceding worldview. As Kuhn’s himself explains:

“Looking at the moon, the convert to Copernicanism does not say, ‘I used to see a planet, but now I see a satellite.’ That locution would imply a sense in which the Ptolemaic system had once been correct. Instead, a convert to the new astronomy says, ‘I once took the moon to be (or saw the moon as) a planet, but I was mistaken’.”³

This notion of incommensurability does not apply to the case of comparing different philosophical traditions; in order to understand this, it suffices to consider that in reading the *Analects* of Confucius and finding the text appealing, one will not then consider Plato’s *Republic* as wrong (and the other way around). This is because different philosophical systems can coexist as worldviews that are coherent in themselves and that, in principle, are not in competition.⁴ In this context, incommensurability generally refers to the incommunicability

³ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago; The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 115. To better explain the incommensurability of scientific paradigms, Kuhn also differentiates between the impossibility for a scientist to have “recourse above or beyond what he sees with his eyes and instruments”, and the experience occurring in a gestalt demonstration in which the subject knows “that his perception has shifted because he can make it shift back and forth repeatedly” while holding the same object in his hands. Ibid, 114.

⁴ Of course, it can happen that some philosophical paradigms become more prominent than others and indeed this is testified by the history of philosophy. At the same time, however, it seems unproblematic that, unlike scientific paradigms, extremely different philosophical worldviews coexist without canceling each other out. Thus, again, if Kuhn’s notion of incommensurability is modeled upon science cumulative character (and indeed that seems to be the case), it does not find the same space of applicability with regards to the shift of philosophical paradigms.

or lack of understanding between traditions, usually ascribed either to fundamentally different underlying beliefs or to differences in language (or both).⁵ While differences between traditions (even radical ones) indeed exist and pose several difficulties to intercultural interpretation, it nevertheless seems that the notion of incommensurability can hardly be applied unproblematically; apart from the fact that we do not have a standard “measure” to evaluate cultures and languages (since in many cases these constitute their own “measure”), the possibility of interpretation – not just across cultures but also among individuals – is based upon the observation that those we are interpreting live and partake in the same world as we do, even though this does not entail absolute agreement between worldviews.⁶ This assumption is what allows the common yet fundamental practice of translation; if traditions and languages were incommensurable, translations would not be possible, not just those of Chinese texts (from the perspective of a European interpreter), but also among European languages themselves. Overall, it seems that the notion of ‘incommensurability’ does not find a justified application in comparative intercultural practices, and that, as a result, we shall perhaps speak of difference instead, even when such differences appear to be radical ones.

With regards to interpretation, one can rightfully observe some or several differences that make understanding another tradition (that of ‘the other’) particularly difficult; in general, these can be ascribed to one’s interpretative background as being different – to a relevant degree – from the background of that which is being interpreted. The interpretative background (consisting of one’s language, culture, socio-political context and, more generally, one’s positionality) constitutes the hermeneutic relativity or hermeneutic situation of the

⁵ For a discussion about treatments of incommensurability in comparative philosophy see David Wong, “Methodological Commensurability” in “Comparative Philosophy: Chinese and Western”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (2014 Edition): <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/comparphil-chiwes/>. See also Xinli Wang, “Incommensurability and Comparative Philosophy”, *Philosophy East and West* 68/2 (2018), 564-582. While Wong concludes that traditions are commensurable, Wang holds the opposite, namely, that there is incommensurability between traditions and this severely undermines the comparative project (even though he does not conclude that comparisons are therefore impossible).

⁶ See Donald Davidson, “Thought and Talk” in *Mind and Language*, ed. Samuel Guttenplan (Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1975) 7-23. The same assumption is formulated by Lin Ma and Jaap Van Brakel as the recognition of shared human practices: “The practices of human beings always show similarities (because they are *human* practices). Were this not so, communicative interaction [...] would be impossible.” See Lin Ma and Jaap Van Brakel, “Necessary Preconditions to the Practice of Comparative Philosophy” in *Comparative Philosophy and Method: Contemporary Practices and Future Possibilities*, ed. Steven Burik, Robert Smid, and Ralph Weber (London; Bloomsbury, 2022), 31-52, 31.

interpreter, and amount to one's *prejudices*. While prejudice is generally considered in its negative connotation, Gadamer's discussion provides a different picture of it:

The history of ideas shows that not until the Enlightenment does *the concept of prejudice* acquire the negative connotation familiar today. Actually "prejudice" means a judgment that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined. In German legal terminology a "prejudice" is a provisional legal verdict before the final verdict is reached. For someone involved in a legal dispute, this kind of judgment against him affects his chances adversely. Accordingly, the French *préjudice*, as well as the Latin *praejudicium*, means simply "adverse effect", "disadvantage", "harm". But this negative sense is only derivative. The negative consequence depends precisely on the positive validity, the value of the provisional decision as a prejudgment, like that of any precedent. Thus "prejudice" certainly does not necessarily mean a false judgment, but part of the idea is that it can have either a positive or a negative value.⁷

In itself, following Gadamer's understanding, prejudice does not entail positive or negative value; it simply describes a preliminary situation or a precedent which acquires value only when critically assessed in light of further information. As such, prejudice can be seen as the expression of situatedness; an interpreter is necessarily situated in a certain tradition and is thus bound to a certain perspectivity. And while the latter *can* be considered a worldview in itself, it is also necessarily situated in a broader interpretative paradigm, which Gadamer ascribes to tradition. The power of tradition, Gadamer notes, is always present in the bias with which an individual engages in interpretative activities or, more generally, in understanding⁸; as such prejudices can either have positive or negative value. In their positive value, preconceptions constitute the very ground of understanding and, as such, they are the premises of a dialogical movement between familiarity and strangeness; in their negative

⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London; Continuum, 2004), 273.

⁸ *Ibid.* Gadamer explains that the negative value of the power of tradition was exacerbated to the utmost during the Enlightenment, when "the prejudice against prejudice" arose in reaction to dogmatism and religious authority.

value, on the other hand, prejudices hinder understanding when treated as conclusions rather than premises or precedents (thus leading to mechanisms of assimilations or exclusions). The key for bias to be conducive to understanding lies in the interpreter's awareness of their situatedness and their consequential ability to critically assess preconceptions in light of 'the other'. As Gadamer states: "The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its truth against one's own fore-meanings."⁹ So the point is not to remove one's own prejudices (as that would perhaps be an impossible task to accomplish) but, instead, to *test* them in engaging with the other. But isn't this very activity, then, an exercise of comparison through which the unfamiliar and the familiar are confronted against each other? If that is the case, and I suggest it is, then understanding requires comparison as much as it requires pre-judgments. Elisa Freschi, for example, has recently argued that learning happens by means of (implicit) comparisons and, therefore, that comparing seems to be unavoidable. Given this necessity, she notes that the real choice one is faced with is "between comparing while knowing what one is doing and being unaware of the way one is accessing a new idea through the lenses of a familiar one."¹⁰

The reconsideration of incommensurability as inherently misleading, together with the positive evaluation of prejudice as constituting the ground for interpretation and understanding, shed light on the kind of relationship that shall be established between the interpreter and the interpreted for a comparison to be fruitful. According to my understanding, such relationship needs to be based upon *reciprocity*, that is, a kind of mutual dependence that involves mutual exchange. By 'mutual dependence' I refer to the dialogical movement of understanding between the familiar and the unfamiliar which, as such, is reliant upon the unfamiliar as much as it is bounded to the interpreter's hermeneutic situation or positionality. By 'mutual exchange', on the other hand, I refer to the transformative character of comparison, in which the interpreter reshapes their precedents against that which is

⁹ Ibid, 272. The term "fore-meaning" refers to the meanings we project on a text as a result of the expectations deriving from our prejudices. The positive value of prejudices and fore-meanings is articulated by Gadamer on the basis of Heidegger's hermeneutics. Gadamer himself quotes an important passage from *Being and Time* on this subject: "In the [hermeneutical] circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing, and we genuinely grasp this possibility only when we have understood that our first, last, and constant task in interpreting is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves." (Heidegger as quoted in Ibid, 269)

¹⁰ Elisa Freschi, "Thinking along with Texts from Afar: Why One doesn't Understand Texts without Philosophical Reflection and can't do Philosophy without Inspiration" in *Comparative Philosophy and Method*, 97.

interpreted while the latter presents itself with renewed meaning, at the same time. This mutuality, which I shall refer to as the *reciprocity assumption*, is helpful in appreciating an often underestimated benefit of comparing distant philosophical traditions, namely, that comparisons are not only directed towards understanding the other but produce, at the same time, an increased capacity for self-understanding and self-knowledge on the part of the interpreter. In order for reciprocity to be established in a genuine way, rather than as assimilation or exclusion in disguise, it is necessary for the interpreter to assume the principle of charity, according to which the other is presupposed to be sincere, consistent, and on the whole right – according to the interpreter’s standards, but also in consideration of the standards of that which is interpreted.¹¹ Such a presupposition is particularly important because, as stated by Ma and Van Brakel, “It is only possible to establish differences or have disagreements *given* a background of agreement.”¹² Such an agreement, importantly, does not primarily aim at general consensus of worldviews, because it assumes that two differing positions (stated in two different languages) may both be true. On a practical note, then, the *reciprocity assumption* requires the interpreter to work with explanatory categories that can – given the interpreter’s hermeneutic situation – represent both worldviews to a satisfactory degree. Representation is important because it defines, implicitly or explicitly, the terms of comparison and, in turn, the degree of differentiated understanding that a comparison can achieve. In this respect, working with categories such as “Western” and “Eastern”, for example, is not helpful because they both express a too high degree of generality, which means that they actively undermine – instead of clarifying – the boundaries within which the *relata* of a comparison can be defined. Arguably, the question of representation relies upon certain assumptions about the character and functioning of tradition, to which I shall now turn.

1.2 On the Dynamism and Heterogeneity of Traditions

¹¹ My formulation of the reciprocity assumption is aligned with what Ma and van Brakel call the “principle of mutual attunement” (Ma and van Brakel, “Necessary Preconditions to the Practice of Comparative Philosophy”, 42). At the same time, my account differs from theirs in that it emphasizes the reflexive character of comparison directed to self-knowledge.

¹² *Ibid*, 43.

As I earlier discussed, prejudices are concrete manifestations of the power of tradition – and our current conception of ‘prejudice’ as a false judgment, inherited from the Enlightenment, well exemplifies in itself how tradition effectively directs our understanding; it influences what is considered as worthy to be known and is operative in the choice of the questions to pose.¹³ This, however, does not entail that individuals are passively determined by tradition because they also actively participate in it and shape it. With regards to this point, Gadamer states the following:

The anticipation of meaning that governs our understanding of a text is not an act of subjectivity, but proceeds from the commonality that binds us to the tradition. But this commonality *is constantly being formed* in our relation to tradition. Tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather, we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further *determine it ourselves*.¹⁴

Thus, as much as we are “thrown” into a tradition and we are determined by it, we also determine it ourselves, and a crucial part in such active determination consists in the ways we confront our preconceptions. This relationship reveals that traditions are not ‘dead weights’ of the past or finished objects but, rather, that they are necessarily dynamic and evolving. Sometimes this understanding is challenged by the notion that interpreters may be able to suspend their pre-judgments in order to access the ‘original’ meaning of a text. Kwong-Loi Shun, for example, in discussing the methods for studying Confucian and comparative ethics, states: “The most important task in reading the classics is to go beyond the analysis of these texts as to come to grips with [their] insights. [...] Since these insights are unchanging in their relevance, the process is like that of listening to the ancient sages through the classics, and *we should empty our minds of any preconceptions so that we can accurately hear the voices of the sages*.”¹⁵ In his discussion, Shun mentions a type of comparative method called “direct comparison”, which “engages in explicit and direct comparison of thinkers, texts, movements, concepts, or themes from two different traditions, with a...goal of helping us

¹³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 268: “Tradition is already operative in the choice of the right questions to ask.”

¹⁴ Ibid, 293. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵ Kwong-Loi Shun, “Studying Confucian and Comparative Ethics: Methodological Reflections,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 36, no.3 (2009), 462. Emphasis mine.

understand the perspective of one or the other of the two traditions.”¹⁶ Now, if the goal of comparison is to understand one of the two traditions involved, then the other serves an instrumental purpose and is thus necessarily treated as a finished object. This approach seems to be widely shared (implicitly or explicitly) by comparatists, but in consideration of what discussed so far, I think we should be cautious in applying “direct comparison” methods. In fact, direct comparison not only actively denies the positive value of preconceptions but also, and as a consequence, fails to appreciate the valuable dialectic between traditions – in which *both* can potentially acquire new significance. Furthermore, the necessity to engage in understanding *starting* from one’s hermeneutic background does not exclude, in my view, the possibility of accessing “the voices of the sages”; rather, this necessity entails, at the same time, that interpretation consists in a mediation and negotiation between past and present.¹⁷ It is precisely in this mediation that the dynamic character of tradition resides, in both its preservation and renewal. The danger of undermining this aspect is dual: not only it could impair the ability to understand the other, but also (once again) that of acquiring knowledge of one’s own tradition.

The idea of tradition as constantly mediating between preservation and renewal, I find, can be best appreciated by considering the history of philosophy as an ever-evolving dialogue whose continuity is signaled by those concepts which persist (with different functions and meaning) in several philosophical traditions. Some of these concepts on the part of European philosophy, for example, are ‘essence’, ‘substance’, ‘God’, ‘reason’, ‘mind’, and so on – depending on which stream of thought is being considered. On the part of Chinese philosophers, some of these are *dao* 道, *xing* 性, *yin yang* 陰陽, *li* 理, *qi* 氣, *xin* 心, and so on – depending on the school and time considered. The persisting concepts that we find in tradition, generally speaking, are of particular interest for two reasons: on the one hand, they preserve the themes and concerns of their tradition by recurring in differing contexts and systems while, on the other hand, they persist *because* they acquire new meaning each time they are employed through reinterpretation and comparison with earlier or foreign usages.

¹⁶ Ibid, 468.

¹⁷ As Gadamer notes, “Whatever offers itself for our historical study from tradition or as tradition – the significance of an event or the meaning of a text – is not a fixed object existing in itself, which we have simply to establish. In fact, historical consciousness too involves mediation between past and present.” (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 470).

As such, these ‘indicators’ embody a tension between sameness and novelty which is, in itself, the mediation between past and present that is proper of traditions. Let us briefly consider some examples. Within the early modern European stream known as Rationalism, the concept of ‘reason’ plays fundamental importance and is discussed by all the thinkers that have been retrospectively identified with this category – most notably Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. Importantly, however, despite this shared concern for ‘reason’, we do not find a monolithic usage or definition of this term, since it acquires its meaning on the basis of the philosophical system in which it is described. Thus, while Descartes considers ‘reason’ to be an innate faculty of the mind which is separate from the will, Spinoza does not make such a differentiation and considers ‘reason’ a way of acting of the mind which entails judgment. So, while both philosophers partake in a discussion about the nature and functioning of ‘reason’ (establishing a continuity of tradition), they also employ the term with different senses which, while being related, outline the boundaries of meaning in different modes and directions. This mechanism can be seen in Neo-Confucianism by considering the Song and Ming dynasties usages of the character *li* 理: Neo-Confucian thinkers responded to Buddhism by reinterpreting this notion from indicating void, ultimate reality to expressing the principle of existence of things by using it as a synonym for other notions such as “nature” (*xing* 性) and the “Way” (*dao* 道). In addition to this, while Neo-Confucians share the notion of *li* as being foundational, it is also defined differently by each thinker. So, while for the Cheng brothers *li* cannot exist apart from concrete things, Zhu Xi considers *li* as prior to things.¹⁸ Once again, *li* serves as example of the tension between preservation and innovation that characterizes traditions.

The dynamism of philosophical traditions reveals another fundamental character to be considered in comparative endeavors, that is, traditions are necessarily heterogeneous, rather than monolithic. This aspect of heterogeneity is particularly relevant with regards to concerns of representation and differentiated understanding, as it warns us against the uncritical use of functional yet general categorizations, such as ‘East’ and ‘West’, Rationalism, Neo-Confucianism, and other ‘isms’.¹⁹ Categories are functional to the purpose of

¹⁸ This interpretation is debated. For a different reading see Stephen C. Angle, Justin Tiwald, *Neo-Confucianism: A Philosophical Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017.

¹⁹ Heterogeneity is displayed by both traditions and individuals. Later works of Spinoza, for example, display both continuity and innovation with respect to his earlier thought.

categorizing, but they are less helpful in comparative philosophical inquiry where one attempts to clarify, to the highest degree possible, the *relata* that are being compared as well as their similarities. Heterogeneity, in other words, demands the interpreter to value the differences found not only *between* traditions, but also *within* traditions themselves. In order to accomplish such a difficult task, it seems more practically viable to adopt a 'local' approach, rather than a 'global' one, that is, to consider specific instances of philosophical traditions (such as thinkers, concepts, or themes) rather than working with generalized 'isms'. What I mean by 'global' approach seems to be close to what Robert Neville defines as "comparative philosophy of culture" which, he notes, can present both advantages and disadvantages:

"This last point is the greatest strength of comparative philosophy of culture: whatever specific philosophers might say within each tradition, the general cultural traits constitute the intellectual medium of assumptions, problematics, and argument forms within which the individuals have to operate. The weakness of this approach also lies here: the characterizations of the culture might not be true of any or many individual philosophers."²⁰

While interpretation should undoubtedly rely upon a balanced consideration of the other's hermeneutical background (their "intellectual medium of assumptions, problematics, and arguments"), making the definition of general cultural traits the objective of a comparison might lead, in my view, to two unwarranted results; first, the comparison might perpetuate forms of essentialism by relying on 'cultural traits' instead of specific philosophical systems and, second, the comparison might fail in accounting for significant differences in worldviews *within* the traditions that are being interpreted. This leads us back to the question of representation and the importance of developing a differentiated understanding of traditions in order to achieve a constructive comparison between worldviews. The heterogeneity of traditions as derived from their dynamic character – what I refer to as the *heterogeneity assumption* – is key to such differentiated understanding because it assumes that "cultural traits" cannot possibly exhaust the various articulations of meaning found *within* a tradition, and that each of those articulations constitutes unique ground for understanding *in*

²⁰ Robert C. Neville, "Two Forms of Comparative Philosophy," *Dao* 1 no. 1 (2001), 7-8.

comparisons. This means that, according to the *heterogeneity assumption*, for someone to achieve a thorough understanding of the meaning of *ratio* as defined within European Rationalism, it is necessary to assume that it is defined differently in each of its instantiation (i.e., in each system of thought as developed by each thinker). The same goes for the Neo-Confucian notion of *li*: in order to achieve a differentiated understanding of this concept it is necessary to start from evaluating how Neo-Confucian thinkers shared a common concern (explaining the meaning of *li*) and then move to analyze how each thinker developed their own understanding of it. Since specific instantiations of meaning do not indicate incommensurability, but rather – as earlier discussed – a tension between innovation and preservation of tradition, it seems that such a differentiated evaluation is also beneficial in acquiring a better understanding of more general “cultural traits”.

On the basis of these considerations, it is now necessary to ask what are the assumptions that can guide the comparison of specific philosophical systems in consideration of their linguistic and conceptual differences. This is the question I consider in the following section.

1.3 Meaning and Systems: Family Resemblance and Formal Indication

Let us consider philosophical worldviews as systems, that is, complex wholes made of interconnected parts that reciprocally influence the functioning of both the parts and the whole. Each philosophical system, given the character of tradition, is always receptive to a certain continuity with earlier systems while, at the same time, producing outputs that can be further developed by future systems. This means that philosophical systems are inherently receptive to their surroundings (i.e., the tradition in which worldviews are elaborated), and are thus open networks rather than closed systems. Such openness certainly might undermine, to a certain extent, the possibility of clearly define the boundaries of a given system. At the same time, however, it is such openness that allows for various networks to be categorized as *a* tradition that establishes continuity across difference in the first place, while also allowing for the comparison *between* systems, at the same time. It seems, then, that the identifying traits of a worldview should not be formulated at its periphery (its

boundaries) but by understanding and establishing the value and functioning of its core concepts, that is, the parts forming the network of a system. Arguably, a comparison between systems that are recognized to be part of the same tradition and cultural background poses less issues than a cross-cultural comparison, as it assumes a higher degree of similarity in terms of language(s) and interpretative background. The question here is *how* two philosophical systems, which differ in terms of both language and “cultural traits”, can be compared in a way that some planes of intersections between them can be individuated *through* an appreciation of their differences. To this aim, and in consideration of the previous assumptions established, let us consider some viable options for the formulation of conceptual continuities across different philosophical worldviews.

Given the linguistic and cultural gap faced by cross-cultural comparisons, it is necessary to assume that the *aim* of such comparisons cannot entail the formulation of identities between concepts of different philosophical worldviews but, rather, the articulation of conceptual *similarities*. A very popular way of thinking about similarities across traditions is Wittgenstein’s idea of a family resemblance. The idea is exposed in the author’s posthumous work *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) and is developed as a resistance to the essentialism according to which the only valuable explanations of words are analytic definitions rather than particular instances articulated through reference to singular cases and examples.²¹ This view is based on Wittgenstein’s general view of language as unfolding in a series of related phenomena, rather than as having some core essence. The famous example which elucidates the notion of family resemblance is that of games which, Wittgenstein notes, are not related by a single feature but by a “complex network of overlapping and criss-crossing similarities, just like the different members of a family resemble each other in different respects (build, features, color of eyes etc.).”²² The idea here is not that games have nothing in common, but rather that they are not defined by a single sufficient condition through which they can be analytically defined.²³ The claim that Wittgenstein establishes through this notion is, more generally, that there is no need for analytic definitions when terms are considered as defined by a *series* of interconnecting and overlapping features

²¹ Hans-Johan Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary* (Hoboken; Wiley-Blackwell, 1996), 120.

²² Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* §64 as quoted in *Ibid*. Other examples: numbers and the others

²³ It could be stipulated, for example, that “a game is an activity”, but that would not identify the definition of a game, as there are many activities which are not games.

rather than by one core essence. So, while definitions can be stipulated, they might miss the very task of defining concepts in their usage; according to Wittgenstein, in fact, words become meaningful not primarily through their association with objects but because of their use, governed by a set of rules. Thus, he urges: “Do not ask for the meaning, ask for the use!”²⁴

In the context of comparative inquiry, the notion of family resemblance is useful because it provides a formulation for establishing similarities among different terms *across* languages. Ma and van Brakel, for example, consider family resemblance as a necessary methodological assumption for translation and interpretation. According to them, an interpreter “*must* assume that *all* general concepts in *all* languages are family-resemblance-concepts.”²⁵ A convenient example they offer is the resemblance between *knowing* and *zhi* 知 (to know and to understand): as *zhi* can be extended to cover relevant features of *knowing*, so can the latter be extended to cover those of *zhi*. Such extension, whether it is done in one or the other direction, does not entail that the two terms can be considered synonyms or identical in meaning because, as Ma and van Brakel state, “The similarities as seen from the Chinese and European side respectively are not the same”.²⁶ In the context of the present research, I share the assumption that all general concepts *can* be interpreted in the light of family resemblance across traditions. At the same time, it is important to recognize that family resemblances are necessarily characterized by a certain degree of underdetermination, as they entail different hermeneutic backgrounds. Underdetermination itself does not pose significant challenges to comparative accounts; on the contrary, it is a precondition to avoid the previously discussed mechanisms of assimilation through which valuable differences across philosophical systems would disappear. Indeed, the notion of similarity itself entails a degree of underdetermination.²⁷ At the same time, however, I think it is possible to decrease

²⁴ As quoted in *Ibid*, 377. I am here simplifying a much more complex picture of Wittgenstein’s understanding of meaning as use:

²⁵ Ma and van Brakel, “Necessary Preconditions to the Practice of Comparative Philosophy”, 31. It is unclear what is meant here by ‘general concepts’, but I think Ma and van Brakel are here referring to the fact that Wittgenstein did not hold that all concepts are family resemblances, and thus perhaps they mean “concepts which cannot be analytically defined”.

²⁶ *Ibid*.

²⁷ The logician Nelson Goodman, for example, noted that similarity cannot be formalized because everything could be bear similarity with anything else (see *Ibid*, 39). Moore has discussed this point as follows: “Whatever white patch you take, it is obviously not true, that nothing in the Universe except white patches resemble it at all. On the contrary, absolutely everything in the Universe must resemble it *in some sense*. Absolutely everything in the universe must resemble it in one respect at least – in respect of the fact that they are both in

the level of underdetermination between two different concepts expressed in two languages by delineating their meaning-function within a specific philosophical system. Let me clarify this point. Family resemblances across traditions allow for difference in articulations according to context, but they do not, *per se*, define the context in which they are articulated. This is because the latter is given by the complex network of concepts forming a given philosophical system, and it is through such network that the meaning-function of a concept can be delineated. Concretely, this means that a family resemblance between *knowing* and *zhi*, to stick with the previous example, can be better specified by looking at the way in which these two terms are articulated within their respective philosophical systems, and only after that, across systems through comparison. So, while family resemblance is a useful assumption for constructing comparison, it does not suffice in delineating the meaning-functions of concepts because it does not, in itself, explain the conceptual network which specifies the articulation of terms within a given system. Family resemblance, for example, does not explain *how* the meaning of 'substance' in Descartes is different from that of Spinoza, nor *how* the *li* of the Cheng brothers differs from that of Zhu Xi, even though it assumes the possibility for these instances to differ from each other; what it does, instead, is establishing that there is a resemblance between all the instances of these terms while also preserving relevant differences. It seems, then, that the assumption of family resemblances needs to be tested *in comparison* by means of a thorough contextualization of such resemblances *first* within the two systems considered and *then* across them. The underlying assumption here is that the meaning-function of concepts is *given* by their usage, by which I mean the context in which they are used (i.e., their philosophical system). According to this view, which I shall call the *systemic assumption*, comparisons need to proceed on two levels: first, the interpreter shall compare the two systems as a whole, establishing relevant planes of intersection in consideration of the concerns tackled by each system (their respective aims) and their conceptual articulations; second, on the basis of the plains of intersections established by a comparison *between* system, one can proceed to formulate the similarities between key concepts. If, for example, we wish to construct a meaningful comparison between, say, the notion of 'extension' as developed by Malebranche and the notion of *qi* as articulated by Zhang Zai, we shall first compare the two systems in order to establish relevant planes of

the Universe." (As quoted in Ralph Weber, "Comparative Philosophy and the *Tertium*: Comparing What with What and in What Respect?" *Dao* 12, no. 2 (2014): 151-171, 165).

intersections which can not only express similarities between the two, but that can also better specify the meaning of 'extension' and *qi* in each respective usage/contexts. When this is achieved, it is then possible to establish, in a more specific and differentiated way, *how* 'extension' and *qi* can be related in a way as to show some commonality in meaning-function in consideration of their differences. This procedure is important, because if one were to say that "extension and *qi* both *mean* embodiment", for example, they would need to show that the two concepts, considered in their respective contexts, both express 'embodiment' – even though in different ways (that is, covering different and mutually compatible features ascribable to this notion).²⁸ Arguably, while family resemblances across traditions are helpful at the first level of such comparative procedure (when comparing systems), they seem less effective at the second level, that is, when articulating the common function of two concepts in light of their usage. Thus, in order to individuate similarities *between* concepts by means of contextual specification, I propose to apply the method of formal indication.

Formal Indication was developed by Heidegger as a method of inquiry that, generally speaking, aims at avoiding the projection of *assumed* meaning when determining the spectrum of philosophical concepts.²⁹ As such, formal indication consists in a methodological tool devoted to reflecting on the "general character of philosophical concepts" as "formally indicating or signaling."³⁰ Heidegger's conception of formal indication derives from a differentiation between 'formalization' and 'generalization' originally made by Husserl, which Heidegger explains as follows:

"Generalization means generalizing according to genus. For example, red is color, color is sensuous quality. Or joy is an affect, affect is experience. One can, so it seems, drive this further: qualities as such, things as such are essences. Red, color, sensual quality, experience, genus, species, essence, are things. But the question arises: is the generalizing transition from "red" to "color" and from "color" to "sensuous quality" the same as that from "sensuous quality" to "essence" and

²⁸ Such as, for example, movement, rest, the capacity for being affected in a number of ways, and so on.

²⁹ In Heidegger's case, the aim was to avoid the objectification of the meaning of "Being", the core-notion of his inquiry.

³⁰ *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik* as quoted in David O. Dahlstrom, "Heidegger's Method: Philosophical Concepts as Formal Indications," *The Review of Metaphysics* 47, no. 4 (1994), 780. Heidegger's development of formal indication can be found in his methodological reflections developed between 1919 and 1930 and, in particular, in his lectures on religion delivered between 1920 and 1921.

from “essence” to “thing”? Evidently *not*! There is a break here: the transition from “red” to “color” and from “color” to “sensuous quality” is a *generalization*; that from “sensuous quality” to “essence” is a *formalization*.”³¹

Generalization and formalization are here explained as two different activities; while generalizing is a “way of ordering” which proceeds from the content of individualized objects and, as such, is pre-determined by the content or meaning of those objects, formal indication determines the content of its object from the ways in which the latter relates to broader domains of meaning. Because of its relational focus – as opposed to the “what-content-as-such” focus proper of generalization – formal indication aims at avoiding pre-judgments and assumptions that precede the enacting of the relational meaning through which a concept can be determined. In order to better understand the application of formal indication to the context of comparative philosophy, let us now consider an example. In comparing Aristotle and Zhuangzi, one can posit that the notion of ἐλευθερία (*eleutheria*, ‘liberty’) and that of *ziran* 自然 (‘spontaneity’) are two related instances of the notion of “freedom”, where the latter is considered as a formal indication. This means that the interpreter assumes – at the first level of comparison and in consideration of family resemblances - that both authors provide some account of “freedom”, and that each account must be specified contextually to its own system (i.e., in relation to other concepts that define it, and which are defined by it). In my opinion, if the identification of planes of intersections between systems is articulated in consideration of the assumptions discussed so far, then formal indication would consist in a tool to argue for significant *similarities* across concepts on the basis of a previous consideration of the *similarities* between systems. Going back to the example of *eleutheria* and *ziran*, this procedure allows “freedom” - as a formal indication of these two notions – to be investigated according to context, rather than in absolute terms; this, in turn, allows the interpreter to account for the specificities of each worldview and thus to identify planes of intersections *on the basis* of such specificities.

To sum up, I have noted that, on the basis of the *systemic assumption* (according to which philosophical concepts are defined by their meaning-function within a system) family

³¹ Martin Heidegger, “Formalization and formal indication” in *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, (Bloomington; Indiana University Press, 2004), 40.

resemblance is a fundamental assumption for operating comparisons between different philosophical systems. At the same time, I have noted that Wittgenstein's notion may not suffice in clearly explaining the meaning-function of concepts since it does not describe *how* concepts are defined in their context (admitting that *the same* concept can be defined in different yet related ways on the basis of contexts). With the purpose of increasing the possibility of differentiation across traditions, I have thus proposed to apply the method of formal indication. The latter, as I understand it, is a valuable tool for ensuring, on the basis of one's hermeneutic stand, that *similarities* account for both intersections and differences across systems, thus effectively restraining unwarranted mechanisms of assimilation and allow for the full appreciation of philosophical diversity.

The three methodological assumptions that I have discussed in this chapter (*reciprocity, heterogeneity, systemic*) set the blueprint upon which the comparison between Spinoza and the Cheng brothers will be articulated in the following chapters. The comparison will follow the two-level analysis proposed above. Thus, at the first level, it will consider the two systems as a whole in order to identify relevant planes of intersection; then, at the second level - and on the basis of the previously established similarities, I will propose to treat the notion of "reason" as a formal indication to be specified according to Spinoza and the Cheng's articulations. Before starting the comparison, however, I shall now turn to provide a map of the many ways in which Spinoza has been linked to Neo-Confucianism and, sometimes more generally, to Chinese philosophy. In light of the methodological assumptions here outlined, the next chapter thus provides a discussion of the relevant literature on this cross-cultural link while also providing some brief evaluation of the inadequacies and merits of previous comparisons between Spinoza and Neo-Confucianism.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review:

A Map on the Link between Spinoza and Neo-Confucianism

Introduction

The link between Spinoza and Neo-Confucianism can be traced back to seventeenth-century Europe. It then found resonance in twentieth century China, as well as in most recent works in comparative philosophy.³² Considering the great differences setting Neo-Confucianism and Spinoza apart, it is especially interesting that several thinkers – across various historical moments and through different interpretative lenses – identified conceptual similarities across these traditions. The following chapter is devoted to a discussion of the literature that accounts for this cross-cultural link, which I shall also evaluate on the basis of the methodological framework which has been established in the previous chapter. Considering the historical maps through which Spinoza and Neo-Confucians were linked is fundamental in understanding how differing modes of comparisons were developed on the basis of specific religious, political, and philosophical aims – depending on the context in which the link was elaborated. An understanding and evaluation of these elaborations, in turn, constitutes the starting point for the comparison between the Cheng brothers and Spinoza that will be developed in the following chapters of the present study.

³² For the most recent work on the subject, see Xiaosheng Chen, “A Neo-Confucian Approach to a Puzzle Concerning Spinoza’s Doctrine of the Intellectual Love of God”, (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2018).

2.1 Literature Review

As noted by Yuen-Ting Lai,³³ the linkage between Spinoza (1632-1677) and Chinese philosophy was first established by the French philosophers Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) and Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715). Their work later influenced several eighteenth-century scholars such as Jean Levesque de Burigny, Count Henri de Boulainviller, Anthony Collins, Jean Levesque de Burigny, and Jean Baptiste de Boyer (also known as Marquis d'Argens). The linkage resurfaced in the twentieth century in few studies which compared Spinoza to the Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi (1130-1200).³⁴ Other scholars with interest in Spinoza – such as Arne Naess, Siegfried Hessing, and Jon Wetlesen - connected his thought not only to Neo-Confucianism but also to Daoism and Zen Buddhism.³⁵ As previously mentioned, the linkage between Spinoza and Chinese philosophy is usually based on two main themes, namely, rationalism and monism; Bayle and Malebranche, for example, linked Neo-Confucianism and Spinoza in light of them both being forms of monistic rationalism. Let us now consider how the two philosophers elaborated a comparative account of these two explanatory categories.

In his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697),³⁶ Bayle links Spinoza to China by categorizing his monism together with other views from all over the world which he considered to be disreputable in Europe. It is uncontroversial to say that Bayle generalizes the ideas expressed in different sources, and categorizes them as recognizing a single metaphysical principle underlying all Being; such sources included “Japanese and Chinese Buddhists, and Chinese *literati*.”³⁷ In particular, the common ground shared by these traditions, as understood by Bayle, is that they maintain that “the whole universe is but one

³³ See Yuen Ting Lai, “The Linking of Spinoza to Chinese Thought by Bayle and Malebranche,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 23, no. 2 (1985). Lai argues that the link between Spinoza and Chinese thought has “largely escaped the attention of Spinoza scholars in the nineteenth and twentieth century” (Ibid, 151), and I argue that this same consideration is also applicable to scholars in comparative philosophy.

³⁴ Lai notes that this comparison is found in the work of scholars such as W.T. Chan, J.P. Bruce, O. Graf, W.E. Hocking, and Joseph Needham. (Ibid, 152).

³⁵ See Paul Wienphal, “Ch’an Buddhism, Western Thought, and the Concept of Substance”, in *Invitation to Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Arne Naess and Alastair Hannay (Scandinavian University Books, 1972); Siegfried Hessing, *Speculum Spinozanum: A Kaleidoscopic Homage, 1677-1977* (Routledge 1978). This latter volume contains several papers which connect Spinoza to Chinese Philosophy, such as “Spinoza and Chuang Tzu” by Hu Shi, “Prologue with Spinozana – parallels via East and West” by Siegfried Hessing, “Body awareness as a gateway to eternity : a note on the mysticism of Spinoza and its affinity to Buddhist meditation” by Jon Wetlesen.

³⁶ *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, 3d Edition (Rotterdam, 1715).

³⁷ Lai, “The Linking of Spinoza to Chinese Thought by Bayle and Malebranche”, 154.

substance, and that God and the world are but one being.”³⁸ More specifically, Lai explains that, in his linkage, Bayle draws from both Chinese Buddhism and folk religious beliefs: “He takes from the former the assertion that nothingness and vacuum is the principle of all things and parallels it with Spinoza one-substance doctrine. He takes from the latter the superstitious belief that events in the whole universe are governed by a pluralistic assortment of spirits or souls with uneven and contrary powers. This belief is regarded by him as the animistic version of Spinoza’s view concerning the infinite possibilities of individuating the one and only substance.”³⁹ Bayle’s reading of Spinoza is shared by Malebranche, who makes the linkage on the same monistic grounds.

Malebranche’s *Entretien d’un philosophe chrétien et d’un philosophe chinois sur l’existence et la nature de Dieu* (1708)⁴⁰ reports a dialogue in which two philosophers discuss the essential meaning of the Chinese character *li* 理 which, as I previously mentioned, gained prominence with Neo-Confucian thinkers. In this dialogue, the Chinese philosopher depicts *li* “as sovereign Truth, Wisdom, Justice” that “subsists eternally in matter, and is the source of order in the external world, as well as of illumination in the human mind.” In His study of these sources, Lai also explains that, according to Malebranche, “As eternal Law and Truth, *li* unites all of mankind, according to the capacity of individual understanding, and constitutes the bond of all societies.”⁴¹ The underlying principle characteristic of these French philosophers’ understanding of Chinese thought as monistic is that of a unitary substance which is both thought and matter at once. It is this underlying presupposition that helped Malebranche to make sense of the Neo-Confucian knowledge brought to Europe by the Jesuit missionaries, according to which everything is relatable to a unitary principle – of which each being is a manifestation. In this framework, the ultimate thinking substance of the world is not a transcendental God but matter itself. Thus, Malebranche understands Chinese thought as denying “the existence of a separate realm of pure spirit” by conceiving “of rationality as inherent in nature itself.”⁴² The monistic view linking Spinoza to China represents the working out of a rationalist system based on two main principles: first, that there are no brute facts in

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ See André Robinet, *Oeuvres complètes de Malebranche*, 20 volumes (Paris : J. Vrin, 1958-1967), Vol. 15.

⁴¹ Lai, “The Linking of Spinoza to Chinese Thought by Bayle and Malebranche”, 156.

⁴² Ibid, 157.

the world (or, in other words, that everything is explainable); second, that everything possesses a cause. These principles provide an ideal of explanation, as well as a theory of natural necessity – which bounds monism to a type of naturalism according to which the ultimate principle of reality is also Nature itself.

The unification of monism and rationalism is most clear in Spinoza's thought, according to whom the 'objective' world could not possibly be intelligible without a correlation between thought and matter.⁴³ Thus, God is the intelligible ground of all beings in a way that everything follows from God's nature "in the same way conclusions follow from premises."⁴⁴ This is because "God is the immanent but not the transitive cause of all things"⁴⁵, which means that immanent cause – in Spinoza's monistic rationalism – is the only type of causation in which "the effect remains united with its cause in such a way that together they constitute a whole."⁴⁶ Spinoza's ideas will be discussed at length in later chapters. For now, it suffices to note that one important consequence of such a metaphysical outlook is that, if everything follows from necessity of God's nature, then the world is deterministic, at least to a certain degree. This is perhaps why Lai states that "The position represented by Spinoza is that of a staunch refusal to countenance the assertion that [the order of reality] is alterable", and that Malebranche and Bayle attribute this same position to Chinese thought "not without a certain measure of plausibility."⁴⁷ This interpretation of Spinoza's determinism is common, even though it seems to overlook the tension between the infinite substance and the finite beings – a tension which provides for a compatibilist rather than deterministic reading of Spinoza's system.

As I previously mentioned, the linkage made by Malebranche and Bayle was highly dependent upon their understanding of the Chinese character *li* – which Lai choose to render as "rationality" or "principle".⁴⁸ Even though the origins of *li* can be traced back to antiquity,

⁴³ See Spinoza's *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*: "Those things which are connected with others – as all things that exist in nature – will be understood by the mind, and their subjective essences will maintain the same mutual relations as their objective realities." (As reported in *Ibid*, 158).

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 159.

⁴⁵ *Ethics* 1 prop. 18.

⁴⁶ Benedictus de Spinoza, *Spinoza's Short Treatise on God, Man, and his Well-Being*, trans. Abraham Wolf (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), 34.

⁴⁷ Lai "The Linking of Spinoza to Chinese Thought by Bayle and Malebranche", 161.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 162. In current scholarship, the most widespread translations of *li* are 'principle' and 'coherence', while the 'rationality' reading has not gained much favor among scholars.

it is with the Neo-Confucian Cheng brothers (precursors of Zhu Xi) that *li* started to occupy a central stage in philosophical debates. As I will discuss in later chapters, the Cheng brothers do not provide a definition of this concept, but rather discuss it at length together with other notions such as nature (*xing* 性), matter (*qi* 氣), the human mind (*xin* 心), and knowledge (*zhi* 知). A passage from the Cheng brothers which illustrates the all-encompassing meaning of this concept is the following: “The myriad entities under heaven may be illuminated in the understanding by means of *li*. There being an entity, there must also be a regularity pertaining to it. Each individual entity necessitates its own *li*.”⁴⁹ A similar point is made by Zhu Xi, who states that “When a certain thing is made, there is in it a particular *li*. For all things created in the universe, there is in each a particular *li*.”⁵⁰

Neo-Confucianism flourished in the eleventh and twelfth century and was still prevalent at the time when Jesuit missionaries started to import Chinese philosophical texts in Europe. Since, at the time of the Jesuit mission, Neo-Confucianism was the most prominent philosophical tradition in China, missionaries were aware about the scholarly debate surrounding the notion of *li* early on and, as a consequence, the character also attracted the interest of European philosophers interested in the Jesuits’ interpretation of Chinese thought.⁵¹ A major event in the transmission of Chinese philosophy in Europe is the publication of the *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus sive Sciensis latine exposita studio et opera Prosperi Introcetta, Christiani Herdtrich, Francisci Rougemont, Philippi Couplet, Patrum Societatis Jesu* (Paris, 1687), which consists in a biography of Confucius and a Latin translation of three classics.⁵² Importantly, in its introduction (*Proemialis Declaratio*) *li* is equated with *ratio*:⁵³ here, it is described as “that from which differences between entities are derived. It is distinct from particular entities and is therefore a universal entity. And yet its locus is in things. It dwells both in species and in individuals. Consequently, *li* has to be regarded as ‘constitutive and distinctive form’.”⁵⁴ The Jesuits’ work shows that the importance of *li* in

⁴⁹ *Er Cheng Yishu* 18.12 as translated in *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁵² *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學), and *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸).

⁵³ *Ibid.* Lai points out that editors-translators “depicted *taiji* [太極] as the most central idea, and *li* occupied a secondary position. Instead of the duality of *li* and *qi* [氣] which was all-important for the Song philosophers, these Jesuits invented a *li-taiji* duality. Consequently, they found it difficult to comprehend the connection between *li* and *taiji*.” (*Ibid.*)

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 163-64.

Confucianism was understood quite early, and such understanding influenced both Bayle and Malebranche – not only with regard to their views on Chinese thought but also, and perhaps more interestingly, in their interpretation of Spinoza.

While Bayle does not explicitly employ the term *li*, he most probably has this very concept in mind when providing his description of Neo-Confucian thinkers. For example, he quotes some relevant passages from Fathers Charles le Gobien and Louis le Comte where the Neo-Confucians are described as identifying Nature with reason, so that nature is “le principe du mouvement & du repos” and “*la Raison par excellence*”.⁵⁵ Bayle’s understanding focused on the necessitarian and deterministic aspects of *li* that were seemingly described by Neo-Confucians such as the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi – in line with Spinoza’s monistic rationalism. As he states: “[*li*] produces order and is the source of change. It is responsible for the governance of the universe. Although it is uncreated, eternal, infinitely extended, and in some manner all-powerful, it is without discernment and without liberty.”⁵⁶ Again, we see how, since the end of the seventeenth century, Spinoza and the Neo-Confucians are linked in Europe as two forms of monistic rationalism. Central to this link are the two notions of reason (*ratio*) and *li* (principle/pattern/coherence/reason). In this context, Lai’s study highlights three main points which are relevant to the present research: first, Bayle and Malebranche are responsible for the initial link between Spinoza and Neo-Confucianism; second, this link is based on the Jesuits’ understanding of Chinese thought; third, central to this link is monistic rationalism, with particular reference to the notion of reason.

While Bayle and Malebranche undoubtedly expressed philosophical interest in understanding the Latin translations of Chinese philosophical texts, it is evident that their interpretation of the link between Spinoza and Neo-Confucianism was also (and mainly) guided by religious and political aims. This is perhaps most evident in Malebranche’s articulation and understanding of *li* in his *Entretien*, a text which was commissioned to him by Bishop de Lionne (a Jesuit with many years of experience in the China mission) in order to help missionaries make *li* commensurable – if not identical – with the Christian God.⁵⁷ The context in which the *Entretien* was conceived already shows that Malebranche’s inquiry was

⁵⁵ Ibid, 164.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Gregory M. Reihman, “Malebranche and Chinese Philosophy: A Reconsideration,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 21, no. 2 (2013), 269.

moved by a project of assimilation, rather than of intercultural understanding. As a consequence, the *Entretien* itself is organized and articulated on the basis of a set of assumptions which speaks more of Malebranche's philosophical views than of Neo-Confucianism. The Chinese philosopher who is enacted to be discussing with the Christian philosopher, for example, seems to be unproblematically familiar with concepts such as "substance", "property", "quality", and "modes".⁵⁸ Throughout the dialogue, *li* is, in fact, the only Chinese notion to appear. In addition to these obvious fallacies, the interlocutor of the Christian philosopher (named by Malebranche simply as "The Chinese") seemingly represents the whole of Chinese thought, as the French philosopher does not make any type of differentiation in reference to the history of Chinese thought. Overall, it should be noted that the European evaluation of Neo-Confucian thinkers, following the Jesuits' interpretation, was not a positive one, and this is most evident in Malebranche's link between his understanding of both Spinoza's God and the Neo-Confucian *li*, which he reiterates in his 'Advice to the Reader'⁵⁹:

"There is no satisfying the delicacy of the author but to change Chinese to Japanese or Siamese, or rather, to French; for it happens that the impious Spinoza wreaks great havoc here as it seems to me that there are many correspondences between the impieties of Spinoza and those of the Chinese philosopher. The change of name would not change anything of what is essential to my writing."⁶⁰

Malebranche's uncritical treatment of Chinese philosophy through the lenses of his worldview exemplifies a widespread early modern lack of interest and sensibility towards intercultural communication on the part of some European philosophers who were, nevertheless, the initiator of the link between Spinoza and Neo-Confucianism.

Lewis A. Maverick⁶¹ has considered the important question of whether Spinoza's thought might have been influenced by Neo-Confucianism through the circulation of the

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ This note was written by Malebranche to address some critiques to the *Entretien* that were published in 1708 with the Jesuit *Mémoires de Trévoux*. (Ibid, 266).

⁶⁰ Malebranche as quoted in Ibid.

⁶¹ Lewis A. Maverick, "A Possible Chinese Source of Spinoza's Doctrine," *Revue de littérature comparée*, 19 (1939).

Jesuits' work. Central to this hypothesis is the publication of a book by Bernhard Varen (*Descriptio Regni Iaponiae cum quibusdam affinis materiae, ex variis auctoribus collecta et in ordinem redacta*, Amsterdam 1649), in which he described the Confucians as scholars who believe that "God is the soul of the world, and that the world and all its creatures constitute his body, of which the several creatures are members."⁶² Varen's section on Chinese religion is acknowledged as taken from Trigault (a Jesuit missionary)⁶³. According to Maverick, in turn, these ideas "emerge later as central tenets of Spinoza's philosophy"⁶⁴, and thus he holds that Spinoza might have been influenced by Neo-Confucianism in his conceptualization of God. Maverick ultimately argues that it is possible to conceive that Spinoza was influenced by Chinese thought through acquaintance with another Jesuit, Van den Ende, who taught at a Latin school in Amsterdam. The latter was attended by Spinoza from 1652, and it is therefore possible that here the young philosopher came to know about the China mission and its details. According to Lai, Maverick's hypothesis is weak, since we do not have evidence supporting Spinoza's interest in the China mission. At the same time, however, I think Maverick's argument is plausible, and thus worth considering as a possibility yet to be proven since – as much as we are not given evidence of Spinoza's contact with Chinese culture, we also cannot be definitely sure that Van den Ende did not share some information on the Jesuits' mission in China. In addition, we also cannot be proven that Spinoza did not come across Varen's book or other works on Chinese philosophers.

Despite the uncertainty of whether Spinoza was indirectly influenced by Chinese thought, scholars in the twentieth century have recognized important similarities between his philosophical system and Neo-Confucianism. In his article on the study of Zhu Xi in the West (1976),⁶⁵ Wing-tsit Chan mentions that in 1953 Father Olaf Graf produced the first

⁶² Ibid, 418.

⁶³ "Of all the pagan sects, he says, which have come to our notice in Europe, none as fallen into so few errors as that of the Chinese, from the earliest centuries of their antiquity. As their books reveal, they from the beginning have worshipped a supreme and single God, whom they call the *Lord of Heaven* and *Heaven and Earth*. From the latter name, it would appear probable that the ancient Chinese imagined heaven and earth to be a living being, and that they worshipped the soul of that great being as the supreme God. On a level below this god, they worship also sundry tutelary spirits of mountains, rivers, and of the four quarters of the earth; they hold that all of their actions are *dictated by reason*, and this light of reason they acknowledge they have received from heaven." (Varen's translation of Trigault's section on China, as reported in Ibid,420. Emphasis mine). "They [the scholars] assert that the whole universe consists of one and the same substance, and that its creator, together with sky and earth, men and beasts, trees and plants, and finally the four elements, compose a single continuous body, of whose great body individual creatures are members." (As reported in Ibid, 421).

⁶⁴ Ibid, 418.

⁶⁵ Wing-Tsit Chan, "The Study of Chu Hsi in the West", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 35 no. 4, (1976), 555-77.

Western translation of Zhu Xi's *Jinsi lu*:⁶⁶in this work, Graf compares “Neo-Confucianism with Buddhism, Daoism, and Western thought – especially that of Spinoza.”⁶⁷ Decades prior to Chan's study, J. P. Bruce pointed out similarities between Zhu Xi and Spinoza – specifically, he considered the Great Ultimate (*taiji* 太極), together with *yin* and *yang*, as similar to Spinoza's God.⁶⁸ Following Bruce's comparison, father Graf entitled a section of his *Jinsi lu* “Zhu Xi and Spinoza's monism”: here, he emphasizes the identity of Spinoza's God with Zhu Xi's heaven (*tian* 天), as well as important similarities between Zhu Xi's notion of humaneness/care (*ren* 仁) with Spinoza's intellectual love of God.⁶⁹ Chan further notes that, according to Graf, “in both philosophers, philosophical discussion and analysis culminated in the highest good, thus making virtue the goal of knowledge.”⁷⁰ Beside father Graf, other scholars have compared the two philosophers: Ernst Viktor Zenker⁷¹, for example, compared Zhu Xi with Spinoza, Aristotle, and Leibniz; Joseph Needham⁷² compared Spinoza and Zhu Xi's naturalism; William Hocking⁷³, who wrote a study on Zhu Xi's epistemology, related him to Spinoza and Bergson. Among these studies, however, Graf's work on the comparison represents the most comprehensive.

The link between Spinoza and Neo-Confucianism as found in scholarship is not limited to Zhu Xi: a recent study by Xiaosheng Chen compares the Dutch philosopher to Wang Yangming (1472-1529).⁷⁴ Specifically, after constructing a parallelism between the two thinkers, Chen employs Wang Yangming's Neo-Confucianism in order to develop a new approach to Spinoza's puzzle of the intellectual love of God – which, in Chen's words, amounts to the question “How can God have intellectual love if, as Spinoza says, God is Nature

⁶⁶ 近思錄 “Reflection of Things at Hand”. This work was compiled by Zhu Xi together with philosopher Lu Ziqian (1137-1181), and consists in a summary of the concepts illustrated by major Song Confucian thinkers (such as Zhou Dunyi and the Cheng brothers).

⁶⁷ Chan, “The Study of Chu His in the West”, 559.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 570.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid. Graf has even noted that the life of the two thinkers were similar.

⁷¹ Ernst V. Zenker, *Geschichte der chinesischen Philosophie* (Reichenberg: Gebrüder Stiepel, 1927), 240, 247, 251.

⁷² Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China* (vol II): *History of Scientific Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 458.

⁷³ William E. Hocking, “Chu Hsi's Theory of Knowledge,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 1, no. 1 (1936), 109-27. Interestingly, Chan reports that Hocking considered Zhu Xi both a rationalist and an empiricist (see Chan, “The Study of Chu His in the West”, 564).

⁷⁴ Xiaosheng Chen, “A Neo-Confucian Approach to a Puzzle Concerning Spinoza's Doctrine of the Intellectual Love of God”, (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2018).

itself?”.⁷⁵ After combining Spinoza’s and Wang Yangming’s perspectives, Chen concludes the following: “Given that intuitive knowledge and action are one and the same, the intellectual love of God should be comprehended not only as man’s final fulfillment of freedom through intuitive knowledge, but also as man’s self-cultivation in practice.”⁷⁶ Chen’s study examines in-depth the metaphysical, epistemological and ethical parallelisms between the two thinkers and is thus illuminating. However, while stressing the monistic aspect articulated by both philosophers, Chen does not devote much space to explain the rationalistic one (despite mentioning it). Furthermore, in his explanation of *li* 理, the author does not consider more recent interpretations of the character as “coherence”⁷⁷ (instead of “law” or “principle”) or the widely mentioned yet unpopular rendering of “reason”.⁷⁸ These two interpretations, even though different, are closely related⁷⁹ and have influenced much of the more recent scholarship on Neo-Confucianism.

The “reason” interpretation, in particular, is of fundamental importance in understanding the interests shown by New Confucian scholars (that is, twentieth century Confucian scholars) toward Spinoza’s philosophy. Such interest is first displayed in a 1932 collection of essays (*Dem Andenken Spinozas* – in remembrance of Spinoza) that included both German and Chinese texts, and which was published in honor of the three hundredth anniversary of Spinoza’s birth.⁸⁰ In contribution to this special issue, Zhang Junmai 張君勱 (1887-1969, also known as Carsun Chang) and Hu Shi 胡適 (1891-1962) wrote two essays,

⁷⁵ Ibid, 1.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 2.

⁷⁷ First articulated by Peterson (1986), and later used by Angle (2009) and Ziporyn (2008, 2013). See Willard Peterson, “Another Look at Li 理,” *Bulletin of Song and Yuan Studies* no. 18 (1986); Stephen Angle, *Sagehood: The Contemporary Significance of Neo-Confucian Philosophy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Brook Ziporyn, “Form, Principle, Pattern, or Coherence? Li 理 in Chinese Philosophy,” *Philosophy Compass* 3, no.3 (2008), and *Beyond Oneness and Difference: Li and Coherence in Chinese Buddhist Thought and Its Antecedents*, (Albany: Suny Press, 2014).

⁷⁸ Dating back, as mentioned earlier, to the *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus* (1687), but also found in contemporary studies. See, for example, the following works by Carsun Chang (Zhang Junmai 張君勱): “Is there no Epistemological Background for the Chinese Philosophy of Reason?,” *Oriens Extremus* 1, no.2 (1954); “Wang Yang-ming’s Philosophy,” *Philosophy East and West* 5, no. 1 (1955); “Reason and Intuition in Chinese Philosophy,” *Philosophy East and West* 4, no.2 (1954).

⁷⁹ See Lyle Zynda, “Coherence as an Ideal of Rationality,” *Synthese* 109, no. 2 (1996). Zynda, among others, considers coherence as an ideal of rationality. More generally, I find uncontroversial that whether we consider reason as ‘cause’ of a thing/event or as the ‘faculty’ of human beings, it necessarily implies coherence in some form.

⁸⁰ *Deutsch-Chinesische Nachrichten: Dem Andenken Spinozas* (Tientsin-Peiping: Peiyang Press, 1932). See also M. Galik, “Two Modern Chinese Philosophers on Spinoza (Some Remarks on Sino-German Spinoza’s “Festschrift”),” *Oriens Extremus* 22, no.1 (1975).

respectively entitled “Spinoza’s Political Philosophy”⁸¹ and “Spinoza and Zhuangzi”.⁸² Later, in 1958, four prominent Confucian scholars (including Zang Junmai) jointly published in Taiwan and Hong Kong the so-called “Manifesto of New Confucians”, under the title “A Manifesto on the Reappraisal of Chinese Culture – our Joint Understanding of the Sinological Study relating to World Cultural Outlook”.⁸³ The text is divided in twelve sections which explore a great variety of religious, philosophical, and political topics related to Chinese culture. One section, in particular, explains the doctrine of *xin xing zhi xue* 心性之学, literally meaning “the study of heart/mind and nature” but rendered in English by the authors as “rationalism”. This doctrine represents a synthesis of some major Neo-Confucian concepts (such as human nature and *li*). Importantly, the authors explain the doctrine of Confucian rationalism by comparing it with the philosophy of Spinoza by stating that “The meaning of Nature as found in Greek Stoicism, in modern romantic literature and in the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza, bears as a rule some profound imports [importance] which may be analogous to the Chinese word *Xing* [nature].”⁸⁴ The reference relies on the similarities between Spinoza and Neo-Confucians’ monistic rationalism as outlined by the authors I previously mentioned. Importantly, this reference demonstrates that the interest in comparing the two systems for explanatory purposes has been shared by both European and Chinese scholars throughout the centuries, even though in different ways and with different purposes.

Despite the fact that terms such as “reason” and “rationalism” appear to be central to discussions on the link between Spinoza and Neo-Confucianism (as well as to discussions on the two traditions when considered separately), these terms have not been analyzed at length yet. A possible cause for such a research gap is that reason - as well as rationality - are vague terms that have been employed differently throughout the history of philosophy, and it is thus difficult to determine the boundaries which could constitute the *relata* if a comparison

⁸¹ 斯賓諾莎之政治哲學

⁸² 斯賓諾莎與莊子. In his analysis of the two essays, Nelson importantly reminds us that “Both authors are operating under the confines and pressures of censorship of the Nationalist regime.” See Eric Nelson, “Zhang Junmai’s Early Political Philosophy and the Paradoxes of Chinese Modernity,” *Asian Studies* 8, no. 1 (2020), 193.

⁸³ Mou Zongsan 牟宗三, Tang Junyi 唐君毅, Xu Fuguan 徐復觀, and Zhang Junmai 張君勱 (1958) 為中國文化敬告世界人士宣言—我們對中國學術研究及中國文化與世界文前途之共同認識. The text was published almost simultaneously in the two journals *Minzhu pinglun* 民評論 (*Democratic Tribune*) and *Zaisheng* 再生 (*National Renaissance*).

⁸⁴ Quoted from the English translation of the Manifesto, written by the authors of the original Chinese text, and published in the Taiwanese journal *Chinese Culture* in 1962 (p.23).

was to be centered around this topic. Furthermore, the fact that some scholars (such as Chad Hansen) ⁸⁵have argued that notions of “reason” and “rationality” are alien to Chinese thought has posed an additional challenge to such a comparison. The linkage between Spinoza and Chinese thought as shown above, nevertheless, frames *li* and *ratio* as key notions of this philosophical dialogue across cultures, and thus demand further research. In light of the methodological framework discussed in the first chapter, the present study thus aims at clarifying the philosophical value of the relation between Spinoza’s *ratio* and the notion of *li* as developed by the two Neo-Confucian thinkers Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao.

⁸⁵ See Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation*, (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1992)

CHAPTER THREE

Contextualizing the Dialogue: Between Differences and Continuities Across Traditions

Introduction

Philosophy takes place and is articulated as a conversation among thinkers, whether they be part of the same tradition or different ones. This dialectical movement is of great importance not only because it represents the very *activity* of philosophy, but also because it informs the philosophical content of those that sometimes are considered to be finite and well-defined philosophical systems. This means that, in order to understand the systems constructed by Spinoza on the one hand, and the Cheng brothers on the other hand, we need first to consider how they came about, or, in other words, what is the broader philosophical conversation with which they engaged. Since the debates leading to the formation of these systems heavily influenced their philosophical content, considering them has a twofold importance: on the one hand, it helps in clarifying and contextualizing the content of each philosophical system (of both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers) while, on the other hand, it is a necessary step in understanding the meaning and value of the link between them.

The following chapter thus considers the philosophical debates which characterized the birth and development of Spinoza and the Cheng brothers' thought. The first section is devoted to contextualizing the Neo-Confucianism of the Cheng brothers. In order to do so, I first consider the Buddhist stimulus to Neo-Confucianism itself, and how the fundamental notion of *li* within this tradition is, in fact, a transformation of the Buddhist conception of the same character. Secondly, I briefly consider in what ways the Cheng brother's thought differs from that of other Song Masters, with particular reference to their conception of *li*. The second section, on the other hand, is devoted to contextualizing Spinoza's philosophy. First, I consider the historical and ideological context of 17th century Europe, with particular reference to Dutch Cartesianism and its relation to Spinoza. Secondly, I briefly discuss the

main philosophical differences that set Spinoza and Descartes apart, in order to show how – despite sharing a number of conceptual tools – Spinoza greatly depart from the Cartesian tradition and transforms it. While the detailed analysis of the Cheng brothers and Spinoza’s philosophical systems pertains to later chapters, the current discussion aims at providing the philosophical-historical context through which it is possible to identify the continuities that these thinkers maintained with their traditions while, at the same time, also bringing to these unprecedented innovations.

3.1 Contextualizing the Cheng brothers

In order to understand the philosophical system proposed and developed by the Neo-Confucian Cheng brothers – in alignment with the methodological assumptions of the present study – it is of fundamental importance to frame the context in which their thought was articulated. The importance of such framework is not merely historical but also philosophical since, as previously mentioned, it is of key relevance in understanding the philosophical concerns to which the Cheng brothers were responding. However, in order to fulfill this understanding, it is not enough to contextualize these philosophers within Neo-Confucianism; as this philosophical category of Chinese history is very different from classical Confucianism, it seems that in order to understand Neo-Confucian thinkers it is important to first contextualize Neo-Confucianism itself. Thus, the following section is devoted to two aims: first, to understand the continuities between Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism, as they embody a great portion of the themes that differentiate Song philosophers from those of the classical period; second, to understand – within the context of Neo-Confucianism – what are the specific philosophical contributions and innovations that differentiate the two Cheng from other Neo-Confucian thinkers.

3.1.1 Neo-Confucianism and its Buddhist stimulus

The term “Neo-Confucianism” is generally used in Anglophone scholarship on Chinese philosophy as an umbrella term that includes a number of philosophical tendencies

developed during the Song (960 -1279) and Ming (1368 – 1644) dynasties. Despite the shared concerns addressed by the thinkers of this tradition, and the fact that such concerns indeed show continuity with classical Confucianism⁸⁶, Neo-Confucianism is heterogeneous and presents great differences – in both content and method – from classical thought. Such important differences, that I shall discuss more in detail later on, are the result of a syncretism between Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian philosophical discourse. Nevertheless, before elaborating more on such syncretism, I shall take account of the term “Neo-Confucianism” as a foreign and retrospective category that is functional to contemporary scholarship.

Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895-1990), in his *A History of Chinese Philosophy (Zhongguo zhe xuexi 中國哲學史)*, seems to have been the earliest twentieth century author to use the term. By that, he refers to Song and Ming philosophers associated with *Daoxue* 道學 (*Learning of the Way*) which, in turn, embraces both *Lixue* 理學 (*Learning of Li*) and *Xinxue* 心學 (*Learning of the heart/mind*).⁸⁷ Historically, Neo-Confucianism has been referred to by means of several Chinese terms. With regard to this, Wm. Theodore de Bary writes:

In time, this neoclassical movement [Neo-Confucianism] became a tradition spoken of as the “learning of the Way” (*tao-hsueh*) or the “orthodox tradition” (*tao-t’ung*) ... Within this tradition one of the more common terms for Neo-Confucianism was *hsing-li hsueh*, the “study [or learning] of human nature and principle” ... A variant was the term *li-hsueh*, the study or the learning of principle ... Another common term for Neo-Confucianism was *hsin-hsueh*, the “Learning of the Heart-and-Mind” ... Another common term for Neo-Confucianism was *sheng-hsueh*, the “learning of the sages” or “the learning of sagehood”.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ By “classical Confucianism” I am referring to the philosophical tradition born with Confucius (551-479 BC) and his disciples, which developed and continued until the end of the Han dynasty (220 AD).

⁸⁷ John Makeham, *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination*, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), xi. It is always useful to note that the terms “Neo-Confucianism” and “New Confucianism” should not be confused, as they are not the same. While “Neo-Confucianism” groups philosophers from the Song and Ming dynasties, “New Confucianism” is the literal translation of *Xin rujia* 新儒家 and indicates a twentieth century philosophical movement. More specifically, Makeham defines the latter as a “modern neo-conservative philosophical movement, with religious overtones. Proponents claim it to be the legitimate transmitter and representative of orthodox Confucian values. The movement is promoted and/or researched by prominent Chinese intellectuals based in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the United States of America.” Ibid, xii.

⁸⁸ De Bary as quoted in Ibid, xii.

Most of these Chinese variants do not appear in contemporary scholarship on the topic, where Neo-Confucianism is simply identified as *lixue*. A possible reason for such a simplification might be found in the importance given to the notion of *li* by Song and Ming thinkers – importance that indeed sets classical Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism apart. Following Makeham’s understanding of the term, by “Neo-Confucianism” I understand a category that describes “a set of ‘family resemblances’ discerned across clusters of philosophical ideas, technical terms, arguments, and writings” associated with thinkers from the Song and Ming period, thus indicating “concepts, ideas, and discourse rather than schools”.⁸⁹

The historical gap of four centuries that separates classical Confucianism from Neo-Confucianism is occupied by Buddhism, which started to spread in China as early as the second century⁹⁰ with the first translation of Buddhist scriptures, arrived in China through the Silk Road. The highly speculative nature of Buddhism was initially perceived to be in contrast with the pragmatist spirit of Confucianism, which was much concerned with ethics and politics rather than metaphysics.⁹¹ Nevertheless, the decline and fall of the Han dynasty – together with the period of division and civil wars that followed – contributed to the spread of Buddhism (and, to a lesser degree, of Daoism) as a new intellectual and spiritual ground that could remedy to the dissatisfaction with the old Confucian orthodoxy. According to the sinologist Arthur Wright, “The breakdown of the old order, the ensuing age of questioning, the social and intellectual discontent, rendered Chinese of all classes receptive to a great variety of new ideas and attitudes.”⁹² Despite the apparent irreconcilable differences

⁸⁹ Ibid. In addition to thinkers from Song and Ming dynasties, Makeham also includes thinkers from the Qing (1644-1911) period.

⁹⁰ According to Wing-Tsit Chan, “In 2 BC a Chinese official received instructions on a Buddhist scripture from a foreign envoy. This is the earliest record of Buddhism in China”. See Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 336.

⁹¹ The twentieth century Confucian scholar Zhang Junmai 張嘉森 (1887-1969), in his article “Buddhism as stimulus in Neo-Confucianism” (*Oriens Extremus* 2, no. 2, 1955), has summarized the main differences between Confucianism and Buddhism as follows: “The basic thought of Confucianism, whether orthodox Confucianism or Neo-Confucianism, is concerned mainly with human relations, moral values, and concrete life, which places it in great contrast with Indian thought. The latter is highly speculative, full of imagination, and other-worldly. Or, to put the difference more succinctly, Chinese thought *affirms* life and the world; Indian thought negates them. Buddhism as a religion and as an institution was in conflict with the Confucian pattern of life. Consequently, at first, there was much opposition to it.” (Ibid 157). It is worth noticing that in this passage (and throughout the article), Zhang is operating an essentialization by equating Indian thought with Buddhism on the one hand, and equating Chinese thought with Confucianism on the other hand.

⁹² Arthur F. Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), 40.

between Confucianism and Buddhism, the latter became an important intellectual stimulus for Chinese scholars. In this respect, Chan reports the following:

As time went on, more and more *prajña* [‘wisdom’] literature⁹³ became available in China and the movement became as prevalent as it was influential. This spread brought the Buddhist, the *prajña* scholars especially, into contact with the Chinese literati. Although in the beginning this contact was slight, records show that Buddhist monks came under the influence of the Light Conversation⁹⁴ movement and the metaphysical discussions of the Chinese literati, and followed the vogue. When Loyang, in the north (the capital of Chin, 265-420), fell to invaders and the government moved to the south, many of the literati and Buddhist monks also migrated south. Both groups being refugees, they became intimate, and the interchange of ideas became free and frequent.⁹⁵

Neo-Daoist thinkers shared many affinities with the Buddhists, and even prior to the move to the south they started the practice of matching concepts across traditions; thus, the notion of *tathata* (‘ultimate reality’, ‘thusness’), was translated with the Daoist notion of “original non-being” (*penwu* 本無). A central theme in Neo-Daoism was that of the relation between being and non-being, while they regarded non-being – or pure being – as the ultimate reality. Similarly, Buddhist regarded the latter as transcending all perceivable beings and forms and as empty. Importantly, Chan notes that “As in the case of Neo-Daoism this is not nihilism, for non-being thus understood is really pure being or reality undifferentiated.”⁹⁶ Buddhism not only “influenced” Chinese philosophical thought (as it is often put it); it actually *became* Chinese thought, so that from the beginning of the fourth century – and for several hundred years – philosophical debates were dominated by Buddhists, rather than Daoists or

⁹³ *Prajña* was one of the two Buddhist movements – together with *dhyana* (concentration) – that spread in China during the first quarter of the third century. As explained by Chan, “The objective of *dhyana* was to meditate and to achieve calmness of mind as to remove ignorance and delusions, while that of *prajña* was to gain the wisdom that things possess no self-nature (*svabhava*).” Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 336.

⁹⁴ Also known as “Pure Conversation”, it is a Neo-Daoist movement of the Wei-Chin period (220-420). For a summarized yet detailed explanation see *Ibid*, 314-18.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 336.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 337.

Confucians, and such domination, in turn, directed the course of the development of Confucian thought in its later forms.

The rich and complex history of Chinese Buddhism cannot be treated at length in the present study;⁹⁷ nevertheless, the discussion of some of its philosophical concerns and concepts is of great relevance to the project of understanding the system built by early Neo-Confucian thinkers. In particular, of the many schools constituting Chinese Buddhism, I shall consider *Huayan* 華嚴 philosophy, which flourished during the Tang dynasty (618-907).⁹⁸ With regards to the relevance of *Huayan* tradition for the development of Neo-Confucianism, Chan states the following:

The Hua-yen philosophy represents the highest development of Chinese Buddhist thought. It is the most syncretic, and with the T'ient-t'ai, forms the metaphysical basis of Chinese Buddhism in the last millennium. Except for the Zen School, it is the most Chinese and has exercised great influence on Neo-Confucian thought."⁹⁹

The school takes its teachings – and name - from the *Huayan jing* (from the Sanskrit *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, Flowery Splendor Scripture), and its main representative is the monk Fazang 法藏 (643-712), who extensively elaborated on the principles exposed in the text. He gained the support and favor of Empress Wu (624-705), for which he lectured on multiple occasions.¹⁰⁰ His most famous treatise, known as *The Golden Lion Treatise*,¹⁰¹ was first lectured in 704 at the Empress' palace; according to Chan, Fazang found that his philosophy was too abstruse for Empress Wu to comprehend, so “he used the figure of a lion in the palace architecture to illustrate his points”.¹⁰² Huayan philosophy is concerned with the Universal Causation of the Realm of Dharmas (which are elements of existence); the Realm of Dharmas

⁹⁷ For more details on the history of Buddhism in China see Arthur F. Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History* (1959). reports that, from the beginning of the fourth century until the end of the Tang dynasty, Chinese Buddhism unfolded in thirteen schools of thought, of which two disappeared, leaving in total eleven. See Zhang, “Buddhism as Stimulus to Neo-Confucianism”, 157.

⁹⁹ Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 406.

¹⁰⁰ For more details on this, see *Ibid*.

¹⁰¹ 華嚴金師子章 (*Huayan jin shi zi zhang*), fully translated as *The Flower Ornament Golden Lion Treatise*.

¹⁰² Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* 407.

(*Dharmadhatu*) describes the whole universe which, in turn, consists in four Realms. These are “the Realm of Facts (*shi* 事), the Realm of Principle (*li* 理), the Realm of Principle and Facts harmonized, and the Realm of all facts interwoven and mutually identified.”¹⁰³ *Li* and *shi* are two fundamental concepts in Huayan thought, and they can be roughly interpreted as the noumenon and the phenomenal, respectively. Their interaction forms a Perfect Harmony, through the principles of interpenetration and mutual identification (by which human beings can see things as interwoven and interrelated).¹⁰⁴ At the same time, totality (and Perfect Harmony) is hidden from human beings, as they observe one thing at a time and have a finite framework of reference. In Huayan terminology, this limitation is called “the obstruction of the concealment and disclosure”, a principle explained by Garma C.C. Chang as follows:

When we say, “Water is something for drinking”, we automatically exclude or *conceal* its other multiplex aspects, such as H₂O, aggregates of molecules, and so forth. Usually when we make an assertion of something, we reveal that aspect but conceal the others. But reality is a totalistic whole – the non-svabhāva¹⁰⁵ version of simultaneous arising and containment of infinite realms. So, the realm of Hwa Yen [Huayan] Buddhahood is essentially a complete and total revelation of all. It conceals nothing whatsoever. This, however, posits an extremely difficult problem for Hwa Yen philosophers. Because man’s very basic pattern of thinking is Svabhāva and realm-bound, it is hard for him to think or talk of the multiplex positions and their interrelationships and mutual subsistence simultaneously.¹⁰⁶

In contrast to this, Huayan thinkers emphasize the simultaneity and coexistence of hidden and displayed, a principle known as “the non-obstruction of concealment and disclosure”. The fourth patriarch of the Huayan school, Chengguang (738-839), has explained the principle of non-obstruction as follows:

¹⁰³ Ibid, 407.

¹⁰⁴ Chan notes that the notion of Perfect Harmony in Huayan thought is similar to that of the Tiantai school, but with one important difference: Tiantai’s Perfect Harmony is attained by means of mutual inclusion of the different Dharmas, while Huayan adds to mutual inclusion the principle of mutual implication. (Ibid)

¹⁰⁵ Svabhāva is literally translated as “own-being” or “own-becoming”.

¹⁰⁶ Garma C.C. Chan, *The Buddhist Teaching of Totality: The Philosophy of Hwa Yen Buddhism*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press 1971), 126.

“On the eighth date of the [lunar] month, half of the moon is bright, and the other half is dark; the very appearance of the bright part [the disclosed] *affirms but does not negate the existence of the hidden part*. Likewise, the manifestation of something always implies the existence of the unmanifested or concealed part of the same thing. At the moment when the bright part of the moon is disclosed, the dark part also “secretly” establishes itself. This is the reason for the so-called simultaneous establishment of concealment and disclosure in secrecy.”¹⁰⁷

The principles of obstruction and non-obstruction, as illustrated above, are concerned with our understanding of the relationship between unity and differentiation – the one and the many – which, in turn, is discussed on the basis of the relationship between *li* and *shi*. Similarly, In Fazang’s treatise mentioned above, the golden lion is used as explanatory device for clarifying the fundamental Buddhist notion of conditional arising; here, gold represents the non-differentiated *li* (the ultimate principle of reality, emptiness), while the form of the lion represents *shi* (the illusory phenomena). The metaphor illustrates that the phenomenal (the different parts of the artifact lion) are illusory changes of the unchanging *li* (the gold).¹⁰⁸At the same time, while *li* and *shi* are different, the Treatise also affirms their non-duality and mutual identity, and it is such non-duality that grounds the formation of Perfect Harmony in Huayan thought. While the notion of *li* was already prominent in Neo-Daoism, it acquired even more importance with Huayan Buddhism and, later, became the center of Neo-Confucian philosophical discourse. With regards to this, Chan states:

“The dual concepts of principle [*li*] and fact [*shi*] are essentially similar to those of nature and character, substance and function, and the Two levels of Truth (worldly or relative truth and absolute truth) common in all Mahayana schools,

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. Chan notes that “The point to note here is that *infinite forms* of a given object will show forth when the frame of reference is not set on one specific stand or dimension, but on Totality”.

¹⁰⁸ In the Treatise, this is called as principle of “non-arising”, and it is explained as follows: “Gold and lion coexist compatibly. There is no hindrance between the one and the many. In (the golden lion, the principle and the phenomenon are different. No matter the one or the many, they each occupy their own positions. This is called the Fate of the One and the Many containing each other without being the same.” Trans. Tai-Wing Wong, “An English Translation and Annotation of *The Flower Ornament Golden Lion Treatise*”, (PhilArchive, 2016), 6.

especially T'ien-t'ai. The two terms occur often in T'ien-t'ai literature. But in no other place have they occupied such a dominant position as in Hua-yen. The two concepts can be traced to Neo-Taoism and Early Seven Buddhist Schools where the dual concepts of being and non-being have enjoyed their central attention. The idea of principle was already prominent in Neo-Taoism. After it was developed in Buddhism, it eventually became the basic idea in Neo-Confucian thought."¹⁰⁹

In fact, the notion of *li* became so important for Neo-Confucian philosophers that, as mentioned earlier, we now refer to that moment in the history of Chinese philosophy as *lixue* (the Learning of *li*). The usage of *li* in Neo-Confucianism is of central importance for the present research, and it will be discussed at length in the following chapters. However, for the purpose of the current discussion, I shall consider how the Buddhist *li* was transformed by Neo-Confucian thinkers and, in particular, by the Cheng brothers.

3.1.2 The Cheng brothers' Neo-Confucianism

With regards to the evolution of the concept of *li* – articulated by Neo-Daoism and then further developed by Buddhism – Confucianism did not give significant contribution for almost a thousand years. This is because from the Han through the Tang dynasty, Confucian scholars have been occupied mainly with textual analysis and literary compositions so that, to use Chan's words, "By the tenth century these had become nothing but literary gymnastics".¹¹⁰ While there are several reasons that concurred to bring *li* to the center of Neo-Confucian debates, an underlying cause is that this concept – as discussed earlier – was crucial for the Huayan and Chan traditions, which flourished in China for several hundred years; it is no exaggeration, then, to say that Confucians could not but address – and eventually transform – the Buddhist metaphysical framework if they were to conquer the philosophical arena. At the same time, however, Confucians "had no use" for the Buddhist

¹⁰⁹ Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 415-416.

¹¹⁰ Wing-Tsit Chan, "The Evolution of the Neo-Confucian Concept of Li 理 as Principle," *Tsing Huan Journal of Chinese Studies* 4, no.2 (1964), 136.

doctrine of non-being and emptiness; on the contrary, it threatened the practice of filial piety and respect for the ruler, two principles at the core of Confucian ethics. Confucian scholars saw Buddhists as socially selfish and – to them – this selfishness was rooted in their other-worldly metaphysics; thus, in response to that, Neo-Confucians worked between tradition and innovation to articulate a metaphysical system that could ground Confucian ethics.

Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824) and Li Ao 李翱 (772-841), usually considered as the precursors of Neo-Confucianism¹¹¹, did not devote much space to discussions on *li*. The real turn started later on with the five Masters of the Northern Song: Zhou Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017-1073), Shao Yong 邵雍 (1011-1077), Zhang Zai 張載 (1020-1077), Cheng Hao 程顥 (1032-1085), and Cheng Yi 程頤 (1033-1107). The Cheng brothers had close relationships with all of them: Zhou Dunyi was their teacher, Zhang Zai was their maternal uncle, while Shao Yong was their friend and neighbor. And while the two Cheng were naturally influenced by the other Song masters, scholars¹¹² agree on the fact that they were the first philosophers that brought *li* to the center of philosophical inquiry. Thus, while the philosophical significance of *li* will be explored more accurately in the following chapters of the present study, I shall now briefly consider the Confucian developments that brought to the Cheng's innovation.

Zhou Dunyi's broadest contribution consisted, as noted by Chan, in the "establishment of a cosmological basis for Confucian ethics".¹¹³ With regards to his input to the development of *li*, it is subtle but significant: while the character does not appear in his *Explanation of the Diagram of the Great Ultimate* (太極圖說 *Taiji tushuo*), it is used in his *Tong shu* 通書, originally entitled *Yi tong* 易通 (*Penetrating the Book of Changes*) as a verb, meaning "to put in order".¹¹⁴ Importantly, Zhou's order is a natural one, which consists in the regulation of *yin* and *yang* through the five elements (五行 *wuxing*).¹¹⁵ This is already an important refutation

¹¹¹ According to Chan, while they are negligible as philosophers since they did not provide valuable innovation to the Confucian tradition, their greatness lies in the fact that "they saved Confucianism from its possible annihilation by Taoism and Buddhism and that they defined the direction and nature of its resurgence." Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 450.

¹¹² See, for example Chan, "The Evolution of the Neo-Confucian Concept of Li 理 as Principle" and JeeLoo Liu, *Neo-Confucianism: Metaphysics, Mind, and Morality*, (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017).

¹¹³ Yung-ch'un Ts'ai, *The Philosophy of Ch'eng I*, (Singapore: Springer, 2018), 3.

¹¹⁴ Chan, "The Evolution of the Neo-Confucian Concept of Li 理 as Principle", 124.

¹¹⁵ While *li* does not appear to be a prominent concept in Zhou Dunyi's thought, Chan has noted that according to the *Song shi* 宋史 (*History of the Song dynasty*) Zhou "wrote the explanation of the diagram [of the Great Ultimate] to show the origin of principle [*li*]". (Ibid, 136).

of the Buddhist notion of emptiness and the illusory character of reality. Such refutation became even more established with Zhang Zai's theory of *qi* 氣 (usually rendered in English as "material force" or "energy"), which he identified with the *Great Ultimate* and whose processes of formation and disintegration, beginning and end and so forth operate according to *li*. While Zhang refers to the *Great Ultimate* as *Great Void* (太虛), he states that "the Great Void is material energy [*qi*]", thus providing a powerful denial of Buddhist vacuity.¹¹⁶ From his cosmology, Zhang derives that, since all beings share the same *qi* (the body of Heaven and Earth), they are all part of the same family, and should be treated as such. Together with *qi* and its various differentiations, Zhang also discusses *li* as the principle regulating the patterns of movement of *qi*: "Though the condensation and dispersion of the *qi* of the universe pushes forward along a hundred different roads, its *li* (for doing so) is orderly and real".¹¹⁷ *Li*, again, is presented as an active regulating principle which organizes the changes of all beings. What is important here, is that Zhang's systematic coupling of *li* and *qi* (in substitution of the Buddhist coupling of *li* and *shi*) marks the powerful refusal of the illusory character of the phenomenal and its ultimate nature (non-being) as discussed by the Buddhists; at the same time, Zhang's system also affirms the *real* character of being, both in its unity and in its differentiations.¹¹⁸

The highest point in the Neo-Confucian development of the concept of *li* is found in the philosophical system of the Cheng brothers, Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao. Here, *li* does not merely occupy a prominent place as with the previous Song Masters; as stated by Chan, they made *li* "the basis of their philosophy", and they were "the first ones to do so".¹¹⁹ This is because they both start from the proposition that a thing must necessarily have its own *li* in order to exist: "All things under Heaven can be understood in the light of their principle [*li*].

¹¹⁶ Ts'ai, *The Philosophy of Ch'eng I*, 4.

¹¹⁷ Zhang Zai 張載 as quoted in Feng Youlan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy* vol. II, trans. Derk Bodde (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983, 482). While Bodde translates *qi* as ether and *li* as principle, I have left the two terms untranslated.

¹¹⁸ According to Feng Youlan, "Formulated in Greek philosophical terminology, *qi* is matter, *li* is form, and the imposition of form upon matter is what makes possible the coming to be of concrete particular objects." Ibid. While these parallelism with Plato might be useful for general explanatory purposes, it is not optimal. It is true that Zhang thinks of *li* and *qi* as different, but I think that his dualism is much weaker than Plato's, as I will discuss in the following chapters.

¹¹⁹ Chan, "The Evolution of the Neo-Confucian Concept of Li 理", 139. While I quote Chan here, it is a general agreement in scholarship that no other Confucian thinkers has ever put *li* at the center of their philosophical inquiry in the way that the two Cheng did.

As there are things, there must be their specific principles. One thing necessarily has one principle.”¹²⁰ The saying that “As there are things, there must be their specific principles”¹²¹ is already found in the *Book of Odes* (詩經 *Shijing*)¹²² and was quoted by Mencius 孟子 (372-289 BC), but the character used here for ‘specific principle’ is 則 *ze*, not *li*, and it is used in reference to the goodness of human nature rather than to the principle of existence. In the Cheng, *li* both grounds and regulates existence, and for this reason it is often used interchangeably with 道 *dao*.¹²³ As such, *li* is both one and many: “*li* is one but its manifestations are many” (理一萬殊 *li yi wan shu*). Not only this formula has important consequences for the Cheng’s ethical and epistemological system, but it also will become the most important slogan of Neo-Confucianism.¹²⁴ This same principle of ‘one-and many’ is applied by the Cheng in their conception of 仁 *ren*, the most important and all-encompassing Confucian virtue which has traditionally been rendered in English as ‘benevolence’ or ‘humaneness’, but more recently interpreted as ‘care’.¹²⁵ This concept was already of central importance in classical Confucianism, but it had strictly ethical connotations; with the Cheng brothers, *ren* acquires the status of ontological principle. It concerns human beings as well as the universe as a whole, and in this sense is one, but in its application it becomes differentiated depending on which relationship of care is established (it is filial piety with one’s parents, affection in relation to children and friends, loyalty in relation to the ruler and so forth). Another important innovation of the Cheng brothers (especially Cheng Yi) was the development of the doctrine of “investigating things” (格物 *gewu*) as the method for understanding *li*. This notion was already prominent in Zhang Zai, but only with the two Cheng it acquired fundamental importance. According to them, since everything has *li*, all things must be considered and treated as source of learning and understanding. It is chiefly because of this doctrine that the Cheng are considered to be the founder of the “Rationalistic school” of Neo-Confucianism together with Zhu Xi (1130-1200), also referred to as the “Cheng-Zhu school”. This is usually contrasted with the “Idealistic school” or the “Lu-Wang school”, whose

¹²⁰ Cheng Yi as quoted in *Ibid*.

¹²¹ As translated in *Ibid*, 140.

¹²² The *Shijing* is the oldest collection of Chinese poetry, composed between the 11th and the 7th century BC.

¹²³ While it is the first time the two characters are used as synonym, it is not the first time they are related. This, in fact, happen already with Han Fei 韓非 (?- 233 BC). More details on this in the following chapters.

¹²⁴ See JeeLoo Liu, *Neo-Confucianism: Metaphysics, Mind, and Morality*, 88.

¹²⁵ See Chenyang Li, “The Confucian Concept of Jen and the Feminist Ethics of Care”, *Hypathia* 9, no.1 (1994).

representatives are Lu Jiuyuan 陸象山 (1139-1193) and Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472-1529).¹²⁶

While Neo-Confucianism is a very heterogeneous tradition, it is usually considered as embodied in the figure of Zhu Xi, whose main contribution was to provide a systematic synthesis of the teaching of the two Cheng and the other Song Masters, while also elaborating on the relationship between *li* and *qi*. The widespread tendency in scholarship to consider the Cheng-Zhu school as monolithic, and thus implying an almost complete agreement between the two Cheng and Zhu's philosophical systems, has prevented a differentiated understanding of these thinkers.¹²⁷ For the purpose of the present study, two main differences between them shall be considered. Firstly, while the notion of *taiji* (Great Ultimate) plays a fundamental role in Zhu Xi's thought, it does not appear in the works of the Cheng brother. Since, as mentioned earlier, they were directly exposed to and engaged with theories of *taiji* both with their teacher (Zhou Dunyi) and their uncle (Zhang Zai), the exclusion of this notion from their discussion is certainly a deliberate choice that was made on their part. According to Chan, the justification behind such choice would be that the notion of Great Ultimate was not important at the Cheng's time, except in Shao Yong's thought.¹²⁸ While this theory might be plausible, I find it to be a weak explanation. Considering the many references to ancient texts and previous thinkers found in the Cheng's work, I find it strange that the Great Ultimate was simply considered as superfluous, especially given the importance it played in the discussions of the other Song Masters. In my opinion, the Cheng brothers (and, in particular, Cheng Yi) were in disagreement with the theory of *taiji* because it implied a weak dualism between *li* and *qi*, thus bringing Neo-Confucian discussions on the ultimate reality closer to the Buddhist tradition – of which the Cheng brothers were highly and explicitly critical.¹²⁹ In

¹²⁶ The definitions of 'rationalistic' and 'idealistic' in reference to Neo-Confucian traditions are first found in Derk Bodde's translation of Feng Youlan's *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, but later adopted by other scholars too (such as Zhang Junmai, who wrote several articles on the topic of Reason in Confucian thought). The differentiation of the two traditions is given by the locus of *li*; for the 'rationalistic school' it is found in nature, while for the 'idealistic school' is to be found in the mind (心 *xin*). This differentiation has important consequences for Neo-Confucian metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology.

¹²⁷ To my knowledge, the only work in Anglophone scholarship that considers the differences between the Two Cheng and Zhu Xi was published by Wing-Tsit Chan in 1978 in the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* under the title "Patterns for Neo-Confucianism: Why Chu Hsi differed from Ch'eng I".

¹²⁸ Ibid, 110.

¹²⁹ The Cheng's critique to Buddhism can be well summarized in the following quote by Cheng Yi: "The Buddhists wish to reject the affairs (of this world) without inquiring into them. But are these affairs in

their system, as I will discuss in the following chapter, the Cheng have treated *li* and *qi* as inseparable and interrelated, almost having an organic relationship: “It would be incomplete to talk about the nature of man and things without including material force [*qi*] and unintelligible to talk about material force without including nature [性 *xing*]. It would be wrong to consider them as two”.¹³⁰ Since the Cheng identified nature with *li*, this passage also identifies *li* with *qi*. Zhu Xi, too, considered the two notions as highly interrelated. At the same time, however, he did prioritize *li* over *qi*: in fact, he treated the Great Ultimate as the most perfect *li* – one and undifferentiated. According to him, “principle and material force cannot be spoken of as prior or posterior. But if we must trace their origin, we are obliged to say that principle is prior.”¹³¹ This priority of *li*, together with the notion of Great Ultimate, creates a separation between *li* and *qi* that I define as weak dualism.¹³² The latter, as mentioned earlier, is not found in the Cheng brothers’ thought and, thus, their views seem to be a more appropriate term of comparison with other monist systems, such as that of Spinoza. The issues of dualism and monism of substances will be treated in detail in the following chapters, while further analyzing the notion of *li*.

The contextualization that I reported above aimed at showing three main points: first, Neo-Confucianism is a syncretism of Buddhist and Daoist elements merged with the Confucian tradition. Such syncretism, which creates both differences and continuities across traditions, lies at the root of the philosophical concerns considered by Neo-Confucianism, and so it has to be addressed in order to have a more accurate understanding of Song philosophical discourse; second, Neo-Confucianism is a diverse and heterogeneous tradition which cannot be identified with one thinker, whether it be Zhu Xi, or the Cheng brothers, or Wang Yangming. In this context, while it is important to understand the shared concerns of Song thinkers by means of contextualization, it is fundamental to have a differentiated

conformity with existence, or are they not in conformity? If they are, how can they be rejected? But if they are not, then naturally they do not exist at all, so what is there to reject? Yet those (Buddhist) recluses push their steps far into the depths of mountains and forests, in order there to strive designingly for tranquility. This is because they do not understand *li*.” As quoted in Feng, *A History of Chinese Philosophy* vol. II, 509.

¹³⁰ As quoted in Chan, “The Evolution of the Neo-Confucian Concept of Li 理”, 141.

¹³¹ As quoted in *Ibid.*

¹³² I call it ‘weak’ dualism because it is not the same as the one we find in Descartes’ substances; it does not present issues of incommensurability between entities. Some scholars, however, would disagree with my reading and would argue that Zhu Xi is not a dualist. See, for example, Galia Patt-Shamir, “*Li* and *Qi* as Supra-Metaphysics” in *Dao Companion to Zhu Xi’s Philosophy*, ed. Kai-chiu Ng and Yong Huang (Cham: Springer, 2020), 243-263.

understanding of the ways in which each thinker addressed such shared concerns. Third, it is this differentiation that is conducive to a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the Cheng brothers' system, which represents both a disruption with earlier traditions and the establishment of a new philosophical discourse.

3.2 Contextualizing Spinoza

Bento (Benedictus or Baruch) de Spinoza (1632-1677) is perhaps the most revolutionary philosopher of the modern period. Together with Descartes and Leibniz, he is considered a prominent figure in European Rationalism, and the most fundamental thinker of what is known as 'Radical Enlightenment'. Both during his life and for several centuries after his death, Spinoza was considered to be a Cartesian, meaning an advocate of Descartes' (1596-1650) philosophy, which was gaining favor and spreading rapidly in the Dutch Republic during the 17th century. And while there were reasons for considering him a Cartesian - such as his borrowing of Cartesian terms and concepts - Spinoza was in great disagreement with Descartes on a number of issues. As it has been noted by scholars of Early modern philosophy, understanding Dutch Cartesianism is an important preliminary step in understanding fundamental features of Spinoza's thought.¹³³ Thus, this section will provide a context for Spinoza's thought by considering 17th century Dutch Cartesianism and, in particular, the relation that Spinoza had with it. Following this historical discussion, I will provide an analysis of the most fundamental differences between Descartes and Spinoza's philosophical systems in order to uncover important continuities and disagreements that played an essential role in the formation of Spinoza's thought.

3.2.1 Dutch Cartesianism, Spinoza, and Spinozism.

17th century Europe was torn by inter-confessional conflicts. Political and religious authority were so intertwined that, in such a context, monarchs and republics had necessarily

¹³³ This is argued, among others, by Theo Verbeek and Alexander Douglas (2013). See Theo Verbeek, "Spinoza and Cartesianism," *Judaean-Christian Intellectual Culture in the Seventeenth Century* 163 (1999): 173-184; and Alexander Douglas, "Spinoza and the Dutch Cartesians on Philosophy and Theology," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 51, no. 4 (2013): 567-588.

to take side. While the conflict was ideological, it also became physical, first in the Low Countries and France between the 1560s and 1590s, and then in Germany and Bohemia during the Thirty Years War (1618-48). Jonathan Israel, historian of the Radical Enlightenment, has described 17th century religious conflicts in Europe as follows:

“Rarely had these wars of confessions been a straightforward conflict between Catholics and Protestants. More often, the religious battle was triangular or even quadrilateral, as in Lutheran Germany were the New State Church simultaneously fought Catholicism, Calvinism, and radical Protestant fringe movements, such as Anabaptism, Spiritualism, and Socinianism. Between the mid-sixteenth and mid-seventeenth century, confessionalization and the resulting war of the Churches constitute Europe’s prime engine of cultural and educational change. So powerful indeed was the ideological, intellectual, and general cultural impulse of confessionalization that monarchs, patriarchs, and republics had little choice but to take sides, selecting one main block or another, and imposing their own local confessional agenda. Education, social welfare, the arts, scholarship, no sphere of activity remained free from the unrelenting demands of confessional and theological rivalry.”¹³⁴

So while a few states adopted a more tolerant approach to confessions – such as the Dutch Republic and Brandenburg-Prussia – in general, theology was the main criterion in the assessment of innovation and intellectual debates. Starting from the 1640s, however, such hegemony began to be seriously challenged by non-theological accounts of man and nature, which started to threaten the authority of the Scriptures after the Italian astronomer and philosopher Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) provided proofs¹³⁵ in support of the heliocentric system.

The French philosopher René Descartes – often considered the father of the ‘New Philosophy’ - was an adherent of such system, and by 1633 he produced a treatise on physics and cosmology entitled *Le Monde* (The World), which applied “reductive mechanical

¹³⁴ See Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 23.

¹³⁵ In particular, the discovery of the moons of Jupiter.

principles to the explanation of a wide variety of celestial and terrestrial phenomena”¹³⁶, and which placed the sun at the center of the planetary system. The work, however, was withdrawn from publication as soon as Descartes came to know about Galileo’s condemnation by the Inquisition (1633). In 1641 he published the first edition of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, and by the late 1640s Descartes’ work - which was driven by the project of providing a philosophical method guided by reason and no other authorities - became very influential in Dutch scholarship, while it was still unnoticed in France. This caused a lot of agitations in the academic circles of Dutch universities, especially Utrecht and Leiden which, as stated by Israel, “lapsed into a philosophical struggle unprecedented in European history since ancient times for acrimony, duration, and divisiveness.”¹³⁷ This, in turn, resulted in a split between philosophical innovators (the Cartesians) and conservatives (scholastic Aristotelians).

Within the circle of the Cartesian faction, there were various interpretations of Descartes’ philosophy; Theo Verbeek has identified three schools, all emphasizing different parts of Descartes’ thought.¹³⁸ The Cartesianism I shall consider here is the one that was more tolerated by universities officials, which consisted in a network of professors of theology, philosophy, and related subjects in Leiden, Amsterdam, and elsewhere. At that time, philosophy was taught as introductory course for what were known as the “higher faculties”; these included theology, law, medicine, and other sciences concerned with welfare and human conduct. It was precisely because of the direct influence that philosophy had on these faculties that Cartesianism was considered unacceptable. In this context, the reason that made certain Cartesians more tolerated than others was their claim that philosophy had no relevance whatsoever for the “higher faculties” – especially for theology – and thus had to be separated from the latter.¹³⁹ This claim was not just a political move by means of which the New Philosophy could gain more freedom, away from religious censorship, but was also substantiated by philosophical reasons. These were articulated by the most prominent

¹³⁶ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies*, ed. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1996, xx.

¹³⁷ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 25.

¹³⁸ See Theo Verbeek, *Spinoza’s Theologico-political Treatise: Exploring the ‘Will of God’* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2003), 151-152.

¹³⁹ This claim, according to the Cartesians, was supported by Descartes himself in his *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), in which he explains that his method of systematic doubt was meant to gain speculative rather than practical knowledge. (Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, Part I Article 3).

representative of the ‘tolerated Cartesians’, Johannes De Raey (1622-1702), who developed an original theory of meaning. According to him, the meanings of words are ideas, and the latter can be divided in two categories: on the one hand are the distinct and clear ideas of science, which are innate and thus belong solely to the mind while, on the other hand, the ideas pertaining to ordinary life and the senses which are confused and obscure.¹⁴⁰The split of ideas, for De Raey, resulted in two different languages: philosophical language and ordinary language. As he explains:

“The truth which Philosophy seeks differs greatly from that which we find in common life and in other disciplines. For the latter is, and should be, related to us as each thing is taken according to the senses, and considering the ways in which it is useful rather than harmful to life, which are diverse and even contrary. The other, by contrast, is, and should be, absolute and intrinsic, and moreover known solely by the intellect, which is always the same, as are its simple and primitive ideas, which we have seen to be very few.”¹⁴¹

Importantly, however, De Raey did not consider ‘common knowledge’ as a type of inferior knowledge: on the contrary, an important part of it – namely, faith and its Dogmas – were, according to him, beyond the reach of philosophical inquiry: “Those truth held by faith from revelation cannot also be referred to philosophy, for those we have said to be above philosophy.”¹⁴²

Theologians and philosophers of the conservative faction, however, did not think that the separation between philosophical and non-philosophical knowledge was possible and, therefore, that Cartesianism represented a danger to practical religion. Among these, the most prominent member was Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676), professor of theology and rector of Utrecht University, who published in 1648 his *Disputations Concerning Atheism*. In this work he never mentioned the Cartesians by name, but was clearly referring to them:

¹⁴⁰ See Verbeek, “Spinoza and Cartesianism”, 174.

¹⁴¹ De Raey *Cogitata* as quoted in Douglas, “Spinoza and the Dutch Cartesians on Philosophy and Theology”, 571.

¹⁴² *Ibid*, 572. De Raey’s distinction between philosophical and non-philosophical knowledge was based upon Descartes’ division between the intellect and the will, a division which was refuted by Spinoza, and that I will further discuss in the next section.

“For as there is no practice which does not presuppose knowledge, and no knowledge which may not be directed towards some practical end; so there is no practical atheism which does not presuppose some corruption of theory or of the judgment of the mind, and no speculative atheism which does not proceed to the corruption of practice: for in this they are mutual causes as indeed will and intellect are in all other things.”¹⁴³

But despite much resistance, the separation theory gained favor, and the ideological battle between Cartesians and conservatives was formally settled in 1656 when the leader of the States of Holland, Jan de Witt, published an edict that proclaimed philosophy and theology as separate subjects.

The heated ideological debates that I briefly discussed are the context in which Spinoza gradually formed his philosophical system which, both during his life and for many years after his death, was considered to be an extreme version of Cartesianism. Since Spinoza’s relation to Descartes’ thought is multifaceted, it would be simplistic to state whether he was or not a Cartesian. As we will see more in detail in the next section, it is clear that his mature thought (presented in the *Ethics*) is a refutation of the grounding elements of Descartes’ philosophy; at the same time, however, the young Spinoza beholden to basic Cartesian metaphysical elements, such as the dualism of mind and body. Nevertheless, as noted by many contemporary scholars, there were good reasons for 17th century philosophers and theologians to consider Spinoza a Cartesian. In fact, he only published two books in his lifetime, one being *Renati Cartesio Principia Philosophiae, more Geometrico Demonstrata* (*René Descartes’ Principles of Philosophy, demonstrated in Geometrical Manner, 1663*),¹⁴⁴ a “not uncritical”¹⁴⁵ summary of the first two parts of Descartes’ *Principles of Philosophy*. This work originated as a series of tutorial lessons for a young student who was studying at Leiden University when De Raey was professor of philosophy, but at the time of its composition Spinoza was already convinced of his disagreements with Descartes’ system.

¹⁴³ Voetius as quoted in *Ibid*, 569.

¹⁴⁴ Hereafter PPC. The other work published is the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (*Theological-Political Treatise*), published in 1670.

¹⁴⁵ Steven Nadler, “Spinoza, Descartes, and the Stupid Cartesians,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Descartes and Cartesianism*, ed. Steven Nadler, Tad M. Schmaltz, and Delphine Antoine-Mahut (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 664.

According to him, “The first and greatest error is that [Descartes] has wandered so far from knowledge of the first cause and origin of all things. Second, [he] did not know the true cause of the human mind. Third, [he] never grasped the true cause of error.”¹⁴⁶ Spinoza appointed his close friend Meijer to write a preface for the publishable version of the PPC, in which he wanted to let the readers know that the work was not a faithful representation of Descartes philosophy (since he had provided additional explanations) and that, at the same time, it was not a discussion of Spinoza’s own theories.¹⁴⁷ In the preface, Meijer faithfully follows Spinoza’s request¹⁴⁸, while also stating some of the reasons for Spinoza’s disagreement with the French philosopher, such as that Spinoza does not agree with Descartes’ conception of the mind as substance, and that “Spinoza does not think that the will is distinct from the intellect, much less endowed with such freedom.”¹⁴⁹ These are very significant differences that I shall discuss further in the next section. Meijer also adds in the preface, summarizing Spinoza’s main issue with the Cartesian system, that the overarching problem is that “the foundations of the sciences brought to light by Descartes, and the things he built on them, do not suffice to disentangle and solve all the very difficult problems that occur in Metaphysics. Different foundations are required if we wish our intellect to rise to that pinnacle of knowledge.”¹⁵⁰

The publication of the PPC could not but convince both the conservatives and the Cartesians that Spinoza was, in fact, a Cartesian himself, and the heated debates among the two factions did not leave space for a more attentive evaluation of Spinoza’s anti-Cartesian elements. At the same time, however, Cartesians did not want to be associated with Spinoza and Spinozism, as his thought could undermine their project of separating philosophy from theology. Surely, Spinoza proved to be a very radical and innovative thinker since a young age, starting from his excommunication from the Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam in

¹⁴⁶ Spinoza, *Letter 2* as quoted in *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ “I wish you would point out to [readers] that I demonstrate many things in a way different from the way that Descartes demonstrated them, not to correct Descartes, but to retain my own order better and not increase the number of axioms so much, and that for the same reason I demonstrate many things Descartes asserts without any demonstration and have had to add others Descartes omitted.” Spinoza, *Letter 15* as quoted in *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ “For since he had promised to teach his pupil Descartes’ philosophy he considered himself obliged not to depart a hair’s breadth from Descartes’ opinion, nor to dictate to him anything that either would not correspond to his doctrines or would be contrary to them. So let no one think that he is teaching here either his own opinions, or only those of which he approves. Though he judges that some of the doctrines are true, and admits that he has added some of his own, nevertheless there are many that he rejects as false, and concerning which he holds quite a different opinion.” PPC Preface as quoted in *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ PPC Preface, as quoted in *Ibid.*, 666.

¹⁵⁰ PPC Preface, as quoted in *Ibid.*

1656. For a variety of reasons, Spinoza was considered not only a Cartesian but also an atheist; this is because he identified God with Nature itself, he rejected the doctrine of the immortality of the soul and the freedom of the will, he denied the possibility of miracles, and he argued that the Bible is a work of human literature. All these claims, that were well substantiated in the *Ethics* (which was published after his death in 1677) made Spinoza also a heretic. So for the ‘tolerated’ Cartesians to be associated to his name was naturally troublesome. On top of that, as mentioned above in reference to Meijer’s preface to the PPC, Spinoza rejected the Cartesian division between will and intellect (since, according to him, there is no volition in the mind apart from that which ideas themselves involve)¹⁵¹, a division that grounded the separation theory articulated by De Raey. By the early 1670s Spinoza’s thought was already well known by Dutch intellectuals, and this is when the conservative faction strategically attacked the Cartesians by focusing on the atheistic doctrines of Spinoza, who was considered to be a more “extreme representative of their ideas”.¹⁵² Thus, in order to avoid the heretic Spinozist label, Cartesian had to distance themselves from Spinoza by attacking his writings¹⁵³ and repeatedly claiming that they did not approve “of his absurd dogmas”.¹⁵⁴ Spinoza was well aware of the organized attacks on the part of both conservatives and Cartesians, and he was especially disappointed with the latter who, in a letter to his friend Henry Oldenburg (Secretary of the Royal Society) in 1675, he addressed as “*stolidi Cartesiani*” (“stupid Cartesians”). Spinoza tells Oldenburg about a rumor circulating in the Dutch Republic concerning “a certain book of mine about God [that] was in press, and that in it I tried to show that there is no God. [...] The stupid Cartesians, because they believe to favor me, try to remove that suspicion from themselves by constantly denouncing my opinions and writings everywhere. Even now they are still at it.”¹⁵⁵

Considering what has been discussed so far, we can certainly have a better grasp of the complex historical and ideological context in which Spinoza and Cartesian thought were

¹⁵¹ *Ethics* part II, prop. 49c: “*Voluntas, et intellectus unum, et idem sunt*” (Will and Intellect are one and the same thing).

¹⁵² Nadler, “Spinoza, Descartes, and the Stupid Cartesians”, 660.

¹⁵³ Johannes Melchior, for example, published a letter in 1671 in which he offers a refutation of Spinoza’s doctrine as presented in his *Theological-Political Treatise*. As reported by Nadler, Melchior “accuses Spinoza, “a man condemned [*damnatus*] by his own statements and opinions”, of fostering Socianism through his “monstruous”, “blasphemous”, and “irreligious” book.” (Ibid, 663).

¹⁵⁴ Regnerus van Mansvelt in *Animadversiones ad Vindicias Dissertationis Samuel Maresius* (1671), as quoted in Ibid, 661.

¹⁵⁵ Spinoza, *Letter 68* as quoted in Ibid, 659.

linked. Nevertheless, as I mentioned earlier, it is not enough to simply state whether Spinoza was or was not a Cartesian. It is therefore necessary to briefly discuss the main philosophical similarities between Descartes and Spinoza, as well as the important anti-Cartesian elements that Spinoza substantiated in the *Ethics*.

3.2.2 Spinoza contra Descartes

As noted by Nadler, “Spinoza was probably first introduced to Cartesian philosophy in the mid-1650s by his Latin tutor, the ex-Jesuit political radical Franciscus van den Enden” (the same who might have introduced Spinoza to the Jesuits’ China mission), and much of Spinoza’s Cartesian metaphysical framework is found in his earliest work, the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* (*Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*).¹⁵⁶ It is likely that the model for the TIE was Descartes’ *Discours de la Méthode* (*Discourse on Method*), which was published in 1637 and was translated into Dutch in 1656. In fact, both works start with an autobiographical narrative on the author’s intellectual journey that led them to question what is valuable in the world, as well as what counts as genuine knowledge. For the both of them, the key to lead a good life is to find a sure method by which one can clearly differentiate true and false ideas, so that “one arrives at a true understanding of everything within one’s capacity.”¹⁵⁷ Also, in the TIE Spinoza shares the basic Cartesian metaphysical framework of dualism between body and mind, stating – similarly to Descartes’ *Meditations* and *Discourse* – that “the soul is *united* to the body”.¹⁵⁸

In the *Ethics*, however, which represents the ultimate and most complete formulation of Spinoza’s system, this basic framework is rejected, and this refutation is grounded upon Spinoza’s notion of *substance*. In his *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes defines a substance as being “a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence.”¹⁵⁹ In other words, the fundamental feature of a substance, for Descartes, is ontological independence, and the only substance which qualifies as such is God. At the same time, however, the term does not apply univocally; Descartes, in fact, notes that “In the case

¹⁵⁶ This work was probably written by the late 1650s, but it was published only after his death in 1677.

¹⁵⁷ Descartes’ *Regulae*, Rule 4, as quoted in Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* as quoted in Ibid. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵⁹ *Principia Philosophiae* 1.51, as quoted in Ibid, 669.

of all other substances, we perceive that they can exist only with the help of God's concurrence".¹⁶⁰ The other substances are extended substances (bodies) and thinking substances (souls), which are finite and therefore not ontologically independent. The problem with this (apart from a rather confusing understanding of what a substance amounts to), is that – as shown in his correspondence with the young Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia started in 1643 – Descartes was unable to provide a satisfactory theory of the interaction between mind and body.

Spinoza, on the other hand, rejects such equivocation by stating that there is only one substance, period. His formulation goes as follows: "By substance I understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, i.e., that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed."¹⁶¹ In this way, "except God, no substance can be conceived".¹⁶² For Spinoza, as he explains in the *Ethics*, thought and extension are two of the infinite attributes of God through which we conceive ourselves and the world. In terms of human nature, the mind is a mode of God's attribute of thought, while the body is a mode of God's attribute of extension. Thus, as a result of his conception of substance, attributes, and modes, Spinoza shows that Descartes' apparently insolvable problem of the dualism of mind and body is simply not a problem. According to him, "A mode of extension [a body] and an idea of that mode [a mind] are one and the same thing, expressed in two ways."¹⁶³ In the same way, "the first thing that constitutes the actual existence of the human mind is nothing but the idea of a singular thing which actually exists [namely, the body]."¹⁶⁴ While for Spinoza thought and extension are not substances, importantly, they still are to be considered as different attributes, not just conceptually but also in terms of causal relation. This "modal dualism"¹⁶⁵ and its relation to substance will be further explored in the following chapter.

From a difference in the way Descartes and Spinoza conceive substance, also derives an important difference in their conception of God. Descartes' notion of God seems to share a lot of characteristics with the Christian one, such as omnipotence, undetermined freedom of the will, kindness, and so on. Spinoza, on the other hand, famously conceives God as Nature

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ *Ethics* Part I, def. 3.

¹⁶² *Ethics* Part I, prop. 15.

¹⁶³ *Ethics* Part II, prop. 7, scholium.

¹⁶⁴ *Ethics* Part II, prop. 11.

¹⁶⁵ I borrow the expression from Nadler, "Spinoza, Descartes, and the Stupid Cartesians", 671.

(*Deus sive Natura*). This identification has a great variety of implications; for example, if God is self-caused and eternal (as Spinoza affirms), then Nature itself is eternal and self-caused, because God and Nature are the same thing. This, of course, denies the possibility of creation or the idea of a supernatural deity endowed with kindness.¹⁶⁶ Many other implications are derived from this notion of God (such as that there is nothing contingent in nature, because things follow a causal relation of necessity), which I will discuss in detail later on.

Another significant way in which Spinoza departs from the Cartesian system, as I mentioned earlier, is that he denies the separation of will and intellect, stating that “will and intellect are one and the same thing”.¹⁶⁷ In Descartes’ model, as explained by Nadler, the intellect is “the locus of perceptions or ideas, whether they be the clear and distinct concepts of the intellect proper or the obscure and confused ideas of sensation and imagination.”¹⁶⁸ In this context, the will is the faculty of the mind in charge of judgment, which is constituted by the power of asserting or denying, and it is precisely in this power that – according to Descartes – the freedom of the will becomes “self-evident”.¹⁶⁹ For Spinoza, on the other hand, the notion that ideas are “mute pictures on a panel”¹⁷⁰ is a “prejudice”¹⁷¹ which is caused by a misunderstanding of the nature of ideas. According to him, ideas are volitions in themselves because they necessarily involve some affirmation or negation,¹⁷² and such volitions are causally determined by antecedent states or events in accordance with the laws of nature. Consequently, Spinoza denies “that the will extends more widely than perceptions, or the faculty of conceiving.”¹⁷³ From the difference in conceiving the will and the intellect derive, in turn, a difference in the way Spinoza and Descartes conceive human passions (i.e. the

¹⁶⁶ In his Preface to part IV, Spinoza explains that our beliefs of a God that wants to be worshipped is in contradiction with the notion of God itself. Apart from matters of causality, that I shall discuss later on, Spinoza states that if we grant that the desire of something is caused by the lack of that very thing, than God cannot possibly want anything at all because he is infinite (in other words, there is nothing that is not God, in some form).

¹⁶⁷ *Ethics II*, prop. 49, corollary.

¹⁶⁸ Nadler, “Spinoza, Descartes, and the Stupid Cartesians”, 674.

¹⁶⁹ *Principia Philosophiae*, 1.39.

¹⁷⁰ *Ethics II*, prop. 49, scholium II.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² For example, in thinking of a horse I am affirming a ‘thing’ as something (namely, a horse) and, at the same time, denying that it is anything other than that ‘thing’ (a dog, cat, and so on).

¹⁷³ *Ethics II*, prop. 49, scholium III. According to Spinoza, our notion of freedom of the will is grounded upon our ignorance of the causes of volitions: “Men think themselves free, because they are conscious of their volitions and their appetite, and do not think, even in their dreams, of the causes by which they are disposed to wanting and willing.” *Ethics I*, Appendix.

emotions). Arguably, the two philosophers have a very similar conception of the role played by passions in the context of human life. Spinoza, as we shall see later on, devotes much space in the *Ethics* (the whole of part VI, in fact) to articulating a theory of emotions, together with the way in which they affect individuals as well as how, according to him, we can improve our lives on the basis of a deep understanding of such affections. According to him, Descartes was inclined to the opinion that one can achieve control over the passions through the power of the will.¹⁷⁴ However, as we saw, he rejects the notion of the will as an independent faculty of judgment and affirms that the management of passions lies in understanding them.

All these considerations let us better appreciate the complex relation that Spinoza had with the Cartesian system. It is true that Spinoza shares with Descartes many technical terms and conceptual tools that, indeed, show an undeniable continuity between the two philosophers. At the same time, however, it is clear that Spinoza's thought, as presented in the *Ethics*, employs the Cartesian tools not to affirm them, but rather to transform them and, consequently, building a new metaphysical framework.

3.3 Considerations on the Dialogue in light of its context(s)

In this chapter I aimed at providing a historical-philosophical context for both the Cheng brothers and Spinoza. In particular, the context provided aimed at showing two things: first, these thinkers were part of a larger and heterogeneous philosophical tradition and, as such, they cannot solely be identified with their respective contexts; second, while employing conceptual tools proper of their own tradition (or even of different ones, as in the case of the Cheng brothers), these thinkers radically transformed the philosophical conversation of their time. In both contexts, as I have discussed, together with the establishment of continuities within a given tradition, we find significant innovations and transformations of each conceptual framework that, to a certain degree, set these thinkers apart from the traditions with which they are conventionally associated. This consideration has important consequences for the cross-cultural dialogue that the present study wishes to establish and,

¹⁷⁴ As reported in Nadler, "Spinoza, Descartes, and the Stupid Cartesians", 674.

at the same time, can let us evaluate more appropriately the way in which this dialogue has been previously undertaken.

First, a comparison between Spinoza and (the whole of) Neo-Confucianism would inevitably lead to generalizations with regards to the latter. As we have seen, Neo-Confucians held different positions on a variety of matters, even with regards to the central notion of *li*. Such differences are explanatory tools, and thus neglecting them would mean losing the opportunity to gain a more rigorous and rich understanding of the Neo-Confucian tradition. It is thus natural that a thinker-to-tradition kind of comparison would result in a very unbalanced cross-cultural dialogue.¹⁷⁵ It is important to note, however, that 17th and 18th century European scholars who read or came to know about Chinese philosophical works through the Jesuits' translations did not have sufficient knowledge (and perhaps philosophical curiosity) to differentiate the internal debates surrounding a foreign concept such as *li*. On top of this, we also need to recognize that in 17th century Church-dominated Europe, there were also religious and political agendas at work, which inevitably affected scholars' understanding of Chinese thought. For example, we know that Nicholas Malebranche's *Dialogue between a Christian Philosopher and a Chinese Philosopher on the Existence and Nature of God* (1707)¹⁷⁶ was actually commissioned by the Bishop de Lionne in order to explain the ways in which Chinese thought was incoherent with respect to the Christian notion of divinity and, consequently, help the missionaries that were facing difficulties in reconciling the two, as previously mentioned.¹⁷⁷ The enterprise, thus, was far from being moved by genuine philosophical interest, and its aims inevitably set its results. The Jesuits, too, faced many difficulties in their interpretations of Chinese thought. While Neo-Confucians were considered as heretic (since, in the eyes of the Church, they lacked a clear dualism between creator and creature) they mainly focused on the classical texts, ignoring that the 'orthodox lineage' of those Confucian texts was established by Neo-Confucian thinkers. A few Jesuits, especially the Flemish Francois Noel (1651-1729), tried to explain the Neo-Confucian

¹⁷⁵ It would be possible, instead, to opt for a tradition-to-tradition comparison. For example, if we grant that a stream of Neo-Confucianism (the Cheng-Zhu school) is a form of rationalism, then we might compare European and Chinese rationalism. But such comparison would still require a shared definition of 'rationalism', which, as we have seen, can be very diverse in itself.

¹⁷⁶ For more details on this, see the previous chapter.

¹⁷⁷ See Reihman 2013, "Malebranche and Chinese Philosophy: A Reconsideration", in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 21:2, 262-280.

notions of *li* and *taiji* in a way that could be reconciled with Christianity.¹⁷⁸ And while very interesting and philosophically articulated interpretation were produced as a result, they were still guided by a scope that does not consists in genuine philosophical interest.

The historical and philosophical contexts that have been discussed so far are a necessary tool in order to appreciate the ways in which Spinoza and the Cheng brothers, respectively, constructed their philosophical systems in dialogue with their own traditions while, at the same time, bringing great philosophical innovations. The framework here provided, in accordance with the *heterogeneity assumption* of the present research, provides the ground for better defining the relata of the cross-cultural comparison enacted by the study, that is, the philosophical systems developed by the Cheng brothers and Spinoza, to which I shall now turn.

¹⁷⁸ See Thierry Meynard, "Fracois Noel's Contribution to the Western Understanding of Chinese thought: *Taiji sive Natura* in the *Philosophia Sinica* (1711)," in *Dao* 17, no. 2 (2018): 219-230.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Metaphysics of One and Many: *Substantia, Li 理, and particular things*

Introduction

This chapter presents and compares the grounds upon which Spinoza and the two Cheng brothers construct their views on knowledge and ethics, that is, their metaphysics. In particular, the chapter focuses on two notions which stand at the core of the systems elaborated by these philosophers, namely, Spinoza's notion of *substantia* (substance) and the Cheng's notion of *li* 理. Following the guiding methodological assumptions of the present research and, in particular, the systemic assumption, the two notions are first discussed independently in order to clarify their meaning as articulated in Spinoza and the Cheng's systems, respectively. The first section is thus devoted to discussing the metaphysics of substance and modes as presented in the *Ethics*. After providing some general remarks on the text, I examine the definitions employed by Spinoza to explain the notion of substance (such as "self-caused" and "conceived through itself"), with particular focus on how these are formulated on the basis of specific views on causation and conception. I then consider the notion of 'attribute' in order to clarify Spinoza's notion of particular beings (modes) and their relation to the one substance, which Spinoza famously identifies with God or Nature (*Deus sive Natura*). Section two provides a discussion of *li* 理 as articulated by the Cheng brothers; following a brief consideration of the two philosophers' works, I consider the characters which they employ to explain the all-encompassing meaning of *li*, with particular focus on *dao* 道 ("the Way") and *xing* 性 ("nature"). Looking at the different ways in which *li* is specified, I argue, allows to better grasp the Cheng's understanding of *li* as being both one and many (*li yi fen shu* 理一分殊, "one *li* with many manifestations"). The section also examines the relation between *li* and *qi* 氣 ("material energy"), a relation which I propose to regard as a modal duality - that is, indicating two modes of being - and which explains the Cheng's

conception of particular beings. After having considered *substantia* and *li* in their respective articulations, section three is devoted to a comparative evaluation of these notions in light of both their differences and similarities. Here I note that these foundational notions, which I understand as two kinds of ‘oneness’, are each articulated on the basis of different criteria; it seems that while *substantia* is constructed on the basis of structural features (such as that of being infinite), *li* is characterized by a specific functional role (which differs, for example, from that of *qi*). After considering other important specificities that characterize the two notions, I then note two important features through which a plane of intersection between the two metaphysics can be established: first, both *li* and *substantia* denote a One and Many framework, in which the one underlying principle of reality is manifested in particular beings; second, I note that both notions are conceived as necessarily immanent, making both *li* and *substantia* embedded principles, or, principles that are *in* particular things.

4.1 Spinoza’s Metaphysics of Substance and Modes

It is unanimously recognized by scholars that Spinoza’s views on the human being and the nature of reality are best formulated in his famous work *Ethics*, which was published with his posthumous *Collected Works* in 1677.¹⁷⁹ Its full title is *Ethics Demonstrated in Geometrical Order (Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata)*, and it is divided in five parts.¹⁸⁰ The work is, in fact, written in the form of a geometrical treatise, in which the author constructs a deductive framework by means of definitions, axioms, postulates, proposition, and longer discursive parts of philosophical argumentation (scholia and appendixes). This particular method of exposition, which characterizes the *Ethics* as the only philosophical treatise written in geometrical form, was inspired by Descartes, according to whom the chain of reasoning and proofs provided by geometers show that all objects of knowledge can be understood as

¹⁷⁹ Benedictus de Spinoza, *Opera Posthuma*, Amsterdam 1677. The translations that are used throughout the chapter are from G.H.R Parkinson (trans.), *Spinoza: Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), unless indicated otherwise. The Latin passages are taken from Gaetano Durante (trans.) *Spinoza: Etica*, (Firenza: Bompiani,, 2017).

¹⁸⁰ The five parts are entitled as follows: ‘On God’ (*De Deo*), ‘On the Nature and Origin of the Mind’ (*De Natura et Origine Mentis*), ‘On the Origin and Nature of the Emotions’ (*De Origine et Natura Affectuum*), ‘On Human Servitude, or, On the Strength of the Emotions’ (*De Servitute Humana seu de Affectuum Viribus*), ‘On the Power of the Intellect, or, on Human Freedom’ (*De Potentia Intellectus seu de Libertate Humana*).

interconnected in the same way.¹⁸¹ In a way, then, one could affirm that Spinoza took to full completion Descartes' methodological intuition. It is interesting to note that, despite Spinoza's employment of a seemingly scientific method of exposition, the definitions found in the *Ethics* (which usually serve as premises for the argumentations provided in the propositions and scholia) are not explained in absolute terms. Rather, definitions are always introduced in the form "By *x* I understand (*intelligo*)...", instead of "*x* is (*est*)...", where *x* represents the term to be defined.¹⁸² Through this language, Spinoza clarifies to the reader the meaning he attaches to philosophical terms throughout the *Ethics*, regardless of the ways in which the same terms have been used by other thinkers or philosophical traditions. As I previously discussed, Spinoza establishes both a continuity with previous philosophical themes while, at the same time, bringing great novelty to the discourse of his time. This is exemplified in the use of terms such as "mode", "attribute", "will", "freedom", and other important notions discussed in the *Ethics*. Among these, one term in particular characterizes the novelty and uniqueness of Spinoza's thought, a concept which serves as the ground of his metaphysical system, namely, the notion of 'substance' (*substantia*). The discussion of the concept of substance and its metaphysical implications occupies the whole of the opening book of the *Ethics*, entitled "On God" (*De Deus*). The reason for Spinoza to start his ethical project by discussing metaphysics lies in the author's conviction that human beings are not to be regarded as fundamentally different from all other beings (or, as he says, as "an empire within an empire")¹⁸³ but rather as partaking in a wider order of things. In this perspective, knowledge of ethical principles through which human beings can flourish is necessarily based upon knowledge of metaphysical principles. On a more practical note, this means that knowledge of the principles upon which one can conduct a flourishing life are dependent upon knowledge of the greater system in which human beings partake; such system, according to Spinoza, is substance (*substantia*), which he famously identifies with God or Nature (*Deus sive Natura*).

The notion of substance finds deep roots in the history of philosophy, and the standard use of this term in Spinoza's time derives from Aristotle, who provides two explanations of

¹⁸¹ *Discourse on Method*, part 3.

¹⁸² This is only the case for definitions; axioms, on the other hand, are explained in absolute terms since, for Spinoza, they are self-evident truths that do not require demonstration. An example is Axiom 1 part 1: "Each thing that exists exists either in itself or in something else". See Parkinson, *Ethics*, 12.

¹⁸³ E3, Preface.

the term, both found in *Categories* (5). First, 'substance' is explained as "that which is neither said of a subject nor is in a subject."¹⁸⁴ The first part of the definition describes substance as an ultimate subject of predication; for example, one can predicate many things of a horse (that it is white, tall, fast, and so on), but one cannot predicate the horse of anything. Furthermore, substance is said to not be in a subject, meaning that it is separable from it and has independent existence.¹⁸⁵ Secondly, Aristotle explains that "it seems most distinctive of substance that what is numerically one and the same is able to receive contraries";¹⁸⁶ in this sense, substance is that which remains the same through/despite change, such as, for example, a person who is happy at one time and sad at another time. While both of these meanings set the standard usage of the term 'substance' in 17th century European philosophical discourse, what is most relevant to our discussion is the first Aristotelian explication of this notion. For Aristotle, I have discussed, a substance is an individual (a person, a cat, and so on), which means that there can be a plurality of substances. Importantly, while Spinoza shares with Aristotle the notion that substance is independent, as I shall explain in a moment, he famously argues in E1p14¹⁸⁷ that there can possibly exist only one substance, namely, God or Nature (*Deus sive Natura*)¹⁸⁸: "Besides God no substance can exist or be conceived." While a detailed analysis of Spinoza's ontological argument goes beyond the purpose of the present study, it is important to note that the monistic character of the *Ethics* is based upon a specific understanding of substance that sets itself apart from Aristotelian tradition. In light of this distinction, I shall now turn to consider some of the propositions in which Spinoza articulates his notion of substance.

The main definition of *substantia* appears in book one, where it is defined as that which is "in itself and is conceived through itself" (E1d3). In later propositions, substance is also defined as infinite (E1p8) and necessarily involving existence (E1p7), as well as self-caused (E1p7 and d1). Among these descriptions, two related elements have a pivotal role in

¹⁸⁴ As quoted in Parkinson, *Ethics*, 16.

¹⁸⁵ Differently, for example, from color; the color of a grey cat cannot exist independently from the cat.

¹⁸⁶ Parkinson, *Ethics*, 8.

¹⁸⁷ Before this proposition, Spinoza concedes that there might be a plurality of substance, but this possibility is then ruled out with E1p14.

¹⁸⁸ The revolutionary character of this formula, which equates God to Nature and is thus highly heretic in the context of 17th century Europe, has been considered in chapter 2 during my discussion on Cartesianism. In the context of the *Ethics*, the identification of God with nature occurs in E4p4d, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

the metaphysics articulated in the *Ethics*, namely, causation and conception. The necessity of causal relations is presented in E1a3 as a self-evident truth according to which from each cause there necessarily follows an effect while, on the contrary, no effect can follow if no cause exists. Stated differently, Spinoza holds that all existing things are caused and, thus, nothing that exists can be a matter of brute facts.¹⁸⁹ With regards to conception (*concipere*, meaning “to think”, “to picture”, and “to understand”), Spinoza holds that each thing is either conceived in itself or through something else (E1a2). When transposed to the context of causal relations, conception thus implies that “Cognition of an effect depends on cognition of the cause and involves it.”¹⁹⁰ As noted by Melamed and Morrison¹⁹¹, among others¹⁹², the relation of implication between causation and conception formulates Spinoza’s central commitment for which – in Melamed’s formulation – “if *x* causes *y*, then *y* is conceived through *x*.”¹⁹³ In light of the formulation of substance as a self-caused being that is conceived through itself – or that does not require further ground to be conceived – Spinoza concludes that a substance cannot be produced by another substance (E1p6), and thus that there can possibly be only one substance that necessarily exists. The necessity of existence is, for Spinoza, implied by the consideration that as much as nothing else apart from substance can be considered the cause for its existence, in the same way there is nothing outside or apart from substance which could hinder it from existing (E1p7d).¹⁹⁴ An important implication of this reasoning is that particular beings (the things of the world) exist *in* substance, as nothing can possibly exist outside of it. While this point about inherence will be considered later in the section, let us now establish that Spinoza’s monism is grounded upon an infinite, self-caused and conceptually independent substance which necessarily exists and which, as I previously mentioned, is identified with God. The latter is defined in E1d6: “By God I

¹⁸⁹ According to various scholars (in particular, Micheal Della Rocca and Martin Li), Spinoza is here ascribing to the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR). See Della Rocca, M. “A Rationalist Manifesto: Spinoza and the Principle of Sufficient Reason,” *Philosophical Topics* 31, no. 1/2 (2003), and Martin Lin, “The Principle of Sufficient Reason in Spinoza” in *Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. Micheal Della Rocca, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹⁹⁰ E1a4.

¹⁹¹ See Yitzhak Y. Melamed, “Spinoza on Inherence, Causation, and Conception,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 50, no. 3 (2012): 365-386 and John Morrison, “The Relation Between Conception and Causation in Spinoza’s Metaphysics,” *Philosophers’ Imprint* 13, no.3 (2013): 1-17.

¹⁹² Lin, “The Principle of Sufficient Reason in Spinoza” and Della Rocca, “A Rationalist Manifesto”.

¹⁹³ Melamed, “Spinoza on Inherence, Causation, and Conception”, 367.

¹⁹⁴ Spinoza provides a similar argument for stating that substance is necessarily infinite; he notes that “to be finite is in fact a partial negation, and to be infinite is the absolute affirmation of the existence of some nature” (E1p8s), and since nothing outside of substance can hinder its existence, then the latter is necessarily infinite.

understand an absolutely infinite entity, that is, a substance consisting of infinite attributes, each of which expresses eternal and infinite essence". This definition introduces another fundamental concept of the *Ethics*' metaphysical framework, namely, that of "attributes", to which I shall now turn.

Spinoza's definition of an attribute is given in E1d4, in which the author states that by the term 'attribute' he understands "that which the intellect perceives of substance, as constituting its essence". The essence of substance is that which posits its existence and, conversely, that which would not exist apart from substance (E2d2); this means that, according to Spinoza, "God's existence and its essence are one and the same" (E1p20). It is important to note here, that an attribute is not defined in itself, but in relation to the intellect.¹⁹⁵ According to Parkinson, the latter is framed in the *Ethics* as source of genuine understanding,¹⁹⁶ and thus an attribute is that through which the mind acquires genuine understanding of the constitution of substance (i.e. its existence). The reason an attribute is defined by means of intellectual perception is that it cannot exist apart from substance, and thus cannot be defined in isolation from the latter. This, however, does not mean that attributes are fictional since, in a way (as expressing the essence of substance) they *are* substance and thus necessarily involve existence. I have already mentioned while discussing the definition of God or substance that the latter, according to Spinoza, consists of "infinite attributes". But substance is perceived under infinite attributes only from the perspective of an infinite intellect (God's intellect); with regards to human beings (that is, finite minds) Spinoza states that only two attributes are perceived, namely, thought (ideas) and extension (bodies).¹⁹⁷ In other words, we perceive God (or Nature) as thinking (under the attribute of thought), and as extended (under the attribute of extension)¹⁹⁸. Importantly, while both thought and extension - as well as the other infinite attributes which are unknown to finite

¹⁹⁵ It remains a question whether Spinoza is here referring to the infinite intellect (God) or to finite minds. According to Karolina Hübner, "intellect", in the *Ethics*, is used as referring to true or adequate knowledge, and thus indicate a "certain type of cognition" which is "necessarily true." See Karolina Hübner, "Spinoza's Epistemology and Philosophy of Mind," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Jan. 2022). This interpretation, which is aligned with that of Parkinson, might suggest that Spinoza is here referring to *both* the finite and the infinite intellect, as genuine or true cognition is attributable to both. This, importantly, is only the case if and only if "intellect" is understood as a mode of cognition, because Spinoza clearly differentiates the essence of God's intellect and that of finite minds (see, for example, E1p17s).

¹⁹⁶ Parkinson, *Ethics*, 322.

¹⁹⁷ These categories are already found in Descartes as substances, rather than attributes (*res extensa* and *res cogitans*)

¹⁹⁸ E2p1.

minds - express the same essence of substance under this or that aspect, Spinoza tells us that each attribute “must be conceived through itself” (E1p10). This is because both extension and thought are self-explanatory (meaning they do not require another fundamental concept to be conceived) and, as a consequence, cannot be reduced to or identified with one another. An individual, for example, can be said to be constituted of mind and body, but even if these are considered as one and the same thing (the individual) it does not follow that mind and body are identical (in the sense that the body thinks or that the mind is body). Thus, when speaking about bodies we necessarily speak of substance understood under the attribute of extension (*qua* extension), while when speaking of ideas we are necessarily conceiving substance under the attribute of thought (*qua* thought).¹⁹⁹ Importantly, since attributes, while necessarily conceived through themselves, are not separate from substance (but rather expressions of it), Spinoza notes that it is impossible to derive from the conception of an attribute that substance can be divided (E1p12, 13). The distinction between attributes and substance is best understood in light of Descartes’ *Principles of Philosophy*: here, he differentiates between real distinction (*distinctio realis*) which characterizes two entities that exist separately, such as the Cartesian thinking and extended substances, and conceptual distinction (*distinctio rationis*) which denotes a formal distinction between two things that cannot be considered as *really* distinct (as in a real distinction).²⁰⁰ The relations between substance and attributes is a *distinctio rationis* rather than a *distinctio realis*, because attributes do not exist independently from substance, as Spinoza explains in E1p10s: “Although two attributes are conceived as really distinct – that is, one without the help of the other – we cannot infer from this that they constitute two entities, or, two different substances.” Substance, then, is already one-and-many in the ways in which it is conceived by the intellect, namely, one infinite essence expressed in an infinite number of attributes.

The notion of substance itself, however, seems to not explain the existence of particular beings: if substance is one and indivisible, what is the metaphysical status of things? In order to answer this question, I shall turn to Spinoza’s theory of modes which, together with substance, compose the metaphysics of the *Ethics*.²⁰¹ The definition of “mode” (*modus*)

¹⁹⁹ For a more detailed discussion see Michael Della Rocca, *Representation and the Mind-Body Problem in Spinoza*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

²⁰⁰ As reported in Parkinson, *Ethics*, 17.

²⁰¹ As explained in E1p4d, substance and modes are the only metaphysical entity that can possibly exist (“Nothing exists outside the intellect apart from substance and their affections”).

is provided in E1d5 as “the affections (*affectio*) of substance, or, that which is in something else, through which it is also conceived.” So while substance is in itself and is conceived through itself (meaning that it does not depend on anything other than itself for existing and being conceived) modes necessarily depend on something else for their existence and conceivability (that is, God, as well as other modes). Thus, for example, while Nature cannot be conceived through something other than Nature itself, a tree is necessarily conceived through very many things such as the soil, water, the sun, and so on, which concur in causing the existence of the tree and that, in turn, ultimately depend on Nature. The term ‘mode’, in both its Latin significance as well as in its modern connotation, expresses a bivalency: on the one hand, it denotes a *way* of being while, on the other hand, it also denotes a particular thing as being the *manifestation*, i.e. the embodiment, of something. Spinozistic modes, then, can be understood as modifications of substance or, as Karolina Hübner has put it, they are ways in which “substance determines, modifies, and affects itself”.²⁰² So, in a sense, modes *are* substance, but while the latter *is* in itself, modes *are* in substance. In this framework, as Spinoza states in E1p25c, “Particular things are nothing other than the affections, i.e. the modes, of the attributes of God, by which the attributes of God are expressed (*exprimuntur*) in a certain and determinate way”. Since modes are ways in which attributes are expressed and, thus, are bounded to the same conceptual barrier for which each attribute must be conceived through itself, Spinoza differentiates between modes of extension (such as bodies) and modes of thoughts (ideas).²⁰³

While more on this differentiation will be explained in the next chapter, I shall now elaborate on the meaning of *exprimuntur*, an apparently obscure term which, in the context of Spinoza’s substance-mode metaphysics, plays nevertheless a fundamental role. In commenting on the term, French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995), in his *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* (1968), has provided an insightful elaboration of the concept of ‘expression’ by explaining it in terms of explication and involvement:

²⁰² Karolina Hübner, “Spinoza’s Thinking Substance and the Necessity of Modes,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 92, no. 1 (2016): 3-34, 7.

²⁰³ It should be noted that not all modes, however, are particular things. Motion and rest, for example, are described in E1p21 as being infinite and eternal modes. More specifically, they are what scholars call as ‘immediate infinite modes’: they are infinite as is the attribute which they express (extension), and they are immediate because their existence and conception requires nothing but the attribute of extension.

“To explicate is to evolve, to involve is to implicate. Yet the two terms are not opposites: they simply mark two aspects of expression. Expression is on the one hand an explication, an unfolding of what expresses itself, the One manifesting itself in the Many (substance manifesting itself in its attributes, and these attributes manifesting themselves in their modes). Its multiple expression, on the other hand, involves Unity. The one remains involved in what expresses it, imprinted in what unfolds it, immanent in whatever manifests it: expression is in this respect an involvement.”²⁰⁴

In this perspective, modes involve and explicate the unity of substance as much as the latter involves and explicates modes. Still, however, expression alone does not seem to completely clarify the metaphysical relation through which substance and modes are bound. It is clear that, according to the Spinozistic view, particular beings *depend* on substance to exist and be conceived, but it seems to not immediately follow from this that substance depends on modes for its existence. On the contrary, stating such a position would even seem to violate the very notion of God or Nature as self-caused and thus as *independent*. It should be noticed, however, that the indivisibility of substance does not also imply that the latter be *unmodified*, or one undifferentiated entity. Melamed, for example, has noted that the very definition of God as being “absolutely infinite” asserts the existence of an infinite multitude.²⁰⁵ Moving in the same direction, Hübner has argued for the *necessity* of modes by noting that, for Spinoza, “there can be no unmodified substance”.²⁰⁶ These positions, in my view, can be best understood in light of E1p16, which affirms that “There *must* follow, from the necessity of the divine nature, *infinite things in infinite ways*.”²⁰⁷ Thus, while the relation of modes to substance is one of dependance, that between substance to modes is one of necessity.

Both dependance and necessity lead us back to the idea that substance is “*in itself*” and that modes are *in* substance. The being *in* God of particular things, which represents the culmination of Spinoza’s monism, is formulated in E1p15: “Whatever exists is in God, and

²⁰⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zon Books, 1990): 15-16.

²⁰⁵ Melamed, “Spinoza on Inherence, Causation, and Conception”, 385.

²⁰⁶ Hübner, “Spinoza’s Thinking Substance and the Necessity of Modes”, 3.

²⁰⁷ Emphasis mine.

nothing can exist or be conceived without God”.²⁰⁸ This proposition is often source of debate among interpreters; the question, in particular, is whether being *in* God means that modes inhere in substance and, as a consequence, what inherence would entail with regards to the ontological status of particular beings. According to the 17th century French philosopher Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), by stating that things are *in* God, Spinoza means that they are properties or states of it (expressed under this or that attribute). Thus, in Bayle’s reading, just as motion is a state or property of a moving body, the latter is a state or property of God when conceived as extended; similarly, just as a particular thought I have at a particular moment in time is a property of my mind, so is the latter with respect to God when conceived as thinking.²⁰⁹ Thus, commenting on Spinoza’s God, Bayle states: “There is only one being, and only one nature; and this nature produces in itself by an immanent action all that we call creatures [...] It produces nothing that is not its own modification.”²¹⁰ According to the French philosopher, this picture of God (Nature), which he considered as “horrible”²¹¹, was controversial for both theological and philosophical reasons. Theologically, Spinoza’s view would imply that God is subject to motion, division, and change as much as its modes²¹²; philosophically, it would imply that God has incompatible properties (a joyful and a sad person would both be states of God), as well as that God would be the ultimate subject not only of the good thoughts and actions of human beings but also of the evil ones.²¹³ According to Edwin Curley, however, it is highly improbable that Spinoza could held such a problematic view of the relation between things and substance. Moreover, he notes, the inherence interpretation – while applicable to Descartes’ notion of a mode – cannot be ascribed to Spinoza, whose modes are particular things, rather than qualities, and it is difficult to

²⁰⁸ In Latin : « Quicquid est, in Deo est, et nihil sine Deo esse, neque concipi potest »

²⁰⁹ As explained by Steven Nadler, “‘Whatever is, is in God’: substance and things in Spinoza’s *Metaphysics*”, in *Interpreting Spinoza: Critical Essays*, ed. Charlie Huenemann (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 53-70.

²¹⁰ *Ibid*, 59.

²¹¹ “The most infamous things the pagan poets have dared to sing against Venus and Jupiter do not approach the horrible idea that Spinoza gives us of God.” (*Ibid*)

²¹² In the context of 17th century Europe, this view was plain heretical, as it opposed to the Biblical notion of God as “unchanging”. See *Ibid*.

²¹³ As I will discuss in the following section, this issue does not reflect Spinoza’s system as, according to him, notions of “good” and “evil” cannot be ascribed to Nature itself but only to the context of human finite existence.

understand how particular things can inhere in substance (“What it would mean to say that one thing is predicated of another is a mystery that needs solving.”, as he states).²¹⁴

If the inherence interpretation is not consistent with Spinoza’s metaphysics, as Curley thinks, how can p15 be interpreted? In the following proposition (E1p16), Spinoza states that “From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes”, and in later propositions he states that things are “produced” (E1p18d) and “determined” (E1p28) by God – which is “the cause of all things” (E1p18d). In this perspective, then, the relation between substance and things would be of causal dependence, rather than inherence. Thus, according to Curley, the notion of particular things as being manifestations of the attributes of God means that things are caused by the laws of Nature (i.e. God’s attributes) and, in this sense, Spinoza “is identifying the power or the essence of God with the scientific laws that govern phenomena [...or] rather with the general facts that the most fundamental of those laws describe.”²¹⁵ In short, if p15 is understood through Curley’s reading of causal dependence, things are *in* God in the sense that they are remotely produced by natural laws, and thus amount to effects of the natural order.

While Curley’s interpretation has acquired much favor among scholars, it seems to undermine the fundamental character of the type of causality which Spinoza ascribes to substance. In E1p18, he states that “God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things”. The distinguishing feature of immanent causation is that it describes a relation of inseparability and simultaneity between a cause and its effect: the latter is contained or implied by the cause, and can only exist insofar as the cause continues to exist (for example, the ideas produced by the mind are implied by it and exists insofar as the latter exists).²¹⁶ This

²¹⁴ Curley as reported reported in Nadler, “‘Whatever is, is in God’: substance and things in Spinoza’s *Metaphysics*”, 55. It should be noted that the inherence interpretation is not restricted to Bayle’s reading of Spinoza, but was also adopted by contemporary scholars. See Charles Huenemann, “Spinoza and Prime Matter,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 42, no.1 (2004): 21-23; John P. Carriero, “On the Relationship Between Mode and Substance in Spinoza’s *Metaphysics*,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 33, no. 2 (1995): 245-273; and Jonathan Bennett, *A Study on Spinoza’s Ethics*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1984).

²¹⁵ Edwin Curley, *Spinoza’s metaphysics: An Essay in Interpretation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969): 49-55. As reported by Nadler, the “general facts” are also referred by Curley as “nomological facts” as they describe laws of nature. See Nadler, “‘Whatever is, is in God’: substance and things in Spinoza’s *metaphysics*”, 57.

²¹⁶ It should be noted that, according to Spinoza, causal necessity is equivalent to logical necessity: “I have shown clearly enough that from God’s supreme power, or infinite nature, infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, i.e., all things, have necessarily flowed, or always follow, by the same necessity and in the same way as from the nature of a triangle it follows, from eternity and to eternity, that its three angles are equal to two right angles.” (E1p17s2)

is not the case for transitive causation, in which cause and effects are differentiated (for example, a rock broke the window, but the broken window is not implied by the existence of a rock, or, the broken window is not *in* the rock).²¹⁷ The notion of God as immanent cause of things is further elaborated in two following propositions. In E1p24c, Spinoza states that “God is not only the cause of things beginning to exist, but is also the cause of their persevering in existence; or, to use Scholastic terminology, God is the cause of being [*causa essendi*] of things”. The same principle is reiterated in E2p10: “God is not only the cause of the coming to be of things [*causa rerum secundum fieri*] but also of their being [*secundum esse*].” In view of this, I think that Curley’s model of causal dependence, in which God is the remote cause of beings, considers the effects of God’s causal power as external or peripheral to it – a conception which does not entirely reflect immanent causation. If the latter is to be understood as the fundamental character of the relationship between substance and modes, as Spinoza demands, the inherence reading seems to be the most viable interpretative option: things are *in* God as properties are *in* a subject. Still, while there is general agreement on the fact that inherence implies causation, there is contention on whether causation implies inherence.²¹⁸ This is because, as a general consideration, the causation between particular beings is a transitive one (such as for the example of the broken window and the rock) which does not imply inherence. The latter, then, seems to be implied only by immanent causation, for which the effect inheres in its cause. Melamed has noted that the bifurcation of these two types of causation lies at the very core of the metaphysical bifurcation between substance and modes, and while I agree with this point, it is important to note that such bifurcation does not undermine the unity binding God and particular beings.

With regards to the identity of God with Nature (*Deus sive Natura*), Nadler has noted that there can be no doubt that this identity “is a strict and literal one”.²¹⁹ At the same time, however, I have explained that Spinoza is also adamant in differentiating between that which exists and is conceived through itself (God or substance) and that which exists and is conceived through something else (modes or things). This tension raises questions about the

²¹⁷ Nadler notes that an immanent cause should not be identified with a cause immanent in things; this is because in Spinoza, as well as for the medieval tradition, designates the inherence of the effect in the cause, rather than the inherence of the cause in the effects. Nadler, “‘Whatever is, is in God’”, 60. See Harry A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* vol. 1, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1934), 319-28.

²¹⁸ While that is the case for Michael Della Rocca, for example, Melamed and Garrett do not hold this position.

²¹⁹ Nadler, “‘Whatever is, is in God’”, 64.

extent to which God is to be identified with Nature; but if things (as properties) are particular ways in which the latter exists, then it seems that God is to be identified with the whole of Nature. The latter, according to Spinoza, contains two different yet indivisible perspectives, which are explained in E1p29s:

“I wish to explain here – or rather to give a remainder – of what must be understood by *Natura naturans* [literally naturing Nature] and *Natura naturata* [natured Nature]. By *Natura naturans* we must understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, or such attributes of substance as express an eternal and infinite essence, i.e., God, insofar as he is considered as a free cause. By *Natura naturata* I understand whatever follows from the necessity of God’s nature, or from any of God’s attributes, i.e., all the modes of God’s attributes insofar as they are considered as things which are in God, and can neither be nor be conceived without God.”

Spinoza explains here that God cannot be identified solely with the one, infinite, active aspect of Nature, but must also be identified with everything that is caused by it, namely, the infinitely many beings of the world.

This metaphysics of One and Many sets the ground for Spinoza’s theory of knowledge, which will be discussed in the following chapter. For now, it suffices to note that an immediate consequence of this framework is that genuine knowledge can be acquired only in consideration of the fact that each and every thing partakes in a wider organism whose becoming is traced on the basis of causal relations. Human beings, Spinoza notes, are not “an empire within an empire”²²⁰, and the same consideration, I will argue, applies to modes of knowledge such as reason. Having considered Spinoza’s metaphysics of substance and modes, let us now move to discuss the Cheng brothers’ metaphysics of *li* 理.

²²⁰ E3, preface.

4.2 The Cheng's Metaphysics of *Li* 理

As outlined in the previous chapters, the two Cheng brothers are fundamental figures in the evolution of Confucianism. Not only they radically transformed the philosophical framework inherited by classical Confucians such as Confucius and Mencius, by incorporating elements of Buddhism and Taoism, but they also initiated a philosophical debate that continued in the following centuries and gave rise to different philosophical schools. In fact, Zhu Xi – who is undoubtedly the best known among Neo-Confucian thinkers – considered them (and, in particular, Cheng Yi) as his masters in the lineage of Confucian orthodoxy.²²¹ Despite their importance, however, the amount of scholarship written in English or other European languages on these authors is extremely scarce, so much so that they appear to be the least known Neo-Confucian thinkers, second only to Shao Yong.²²²

The first European work which presents a chapter devoted to the Cheng brothers is found in Alfred Forke's *Geschichte der neueren chinesischen Philosophie*, published in 1938, and only ten years later we find another chapter on the brothers' philosophy in Feng Youlan's *Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, edited by the historian Derk Bodde.²²³ Since both works are histories of Chinese philosophy, however, both chapters are quite short. The first monograph which systematically presents the philosophy of the Cheng is published in 1958 under the title *Two Chinese Philosophers*, authored by the well-known sinologist and philosopher Angus C. Graham. The book remained the only monograph on the Cheng's thought until 2014, when Chinese philosopher Yong Huang published his *Why Be Moral? Learning from the Neo-Confucian Cheng brothers*, which was followed, more recently, by Tsai's *The Philosophy of Ch'eng I* (2018).²²⁴

An important reason for this scarcity of scholarship is practical in nature: the Cheng, in fact, only left a few unsystematic writings and are mostly known to us by their recorded sayings, which were grouped by their disciples after their death in various unfinished

²²¹ Yung-ch'ün Ts'ai, *The philosophy of Ch'eng I*, 14. Ts'ai's forward on this book is dated 1950, so while the publication itself is recent, the study is much less updated than that from Huang.

²²² As noted in *Ibid.*

²²³ A longer chapter on Zhang Zai and the Cheng brothers appears in the longer *History of Chinese Philosophy*, originally written in Chinese by Feng Youlan in 1934 and then translated into English by Bodde in 1983.

²²⁴ *Ibid.* 43.

collections,²²⁵ until Zhu Xi ordered them in two compiled volumes between 1168 and 1173. As the recorded sayings went through a long process of collection and editing, some of them remain unauthored, meaning that they are not attributable to one of the two brothers in particular. In terms of the Cheng's written work, Cheng Yi produced much more than his brother Cheng Hao: his most important work is his *Commentary of the Book of Changes* (*Yichuan Yizhuan* 伊川易傳) which is considered to be the most valuable commentary on the classic - in fact, most of the Chinese editions and English translations of the *Yijing* are based on it.²²⁶ Cheng Hao's writings, on the other hand, are collected in the *Collected Writings of Mingdao* (*Mingdao Wenji* 明道文集), which is now part of the Chinese edition of the *Collected works of the two Cheng* (*Er Cheng ji* 二程集)²²⁷, from which the Chinese passages that are reported in what follows are taken (when not indicated otherwise). While the two authors held, for the most part, similar philosophical positions, they sometimes differed in their articulations; this difference in emphasis is more evident with regards to their views on knowledge, which will be discussed in the next chapter. In general, the following discussions consider passages from both Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao while, whenever considering unattributed passages, the chapter refers to both philosophers.

In the previous chapter I have discussed the ways in which the Cheng brothers, while maintaining important continuities with classical Confucianism as well as inheriting elements from Daoism and Buddhism, transformed this tradition by making the notion of *li* 理 the very core of their philosophical inquiry and, at the same time, the basis of their system. In order

²²⁵ For a detailed timeline of these unfinished collection, see Ts'ai, *The Philosophy of Ch'eng I*. See also Hans Van Ess, "The Compilation of the Works of the Ch'eng Brothers and its Significance for the Learning of the Right Way of the Southern Song Period", *T'oung Pao* 90, no. 4/5 (2004): 264-98.

²²⁶ Yi Cheng, *The Yi River Commentary on the Book of Changes*, ed. and trans. Michael L. Harrington (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019). Harrington's recent translation of the *Yizhuan* (Harrington, L. Michael and Wang, Robin (2019), *The Yi River Commentary on the Book of Changes*, Yale University Press) represents the first complete translation into English of any of the Cheng brother's work. Prior to this, there has been a partial English translation by Shambhala published in 2003. Other than English, the commentary has been translated into French by Philastre in 1885-93 (together with Zhu Xi's commentary). The title *Yichuan Yizhuan* 伊川易傳 is the most popular but perhaps not the earliest, as Joseph Adler has noted, which was more probably *Yizhuan* (*Commentary on the Yi*). See Joseph Adler, "The Yi River Commentary on the Book of Changes," review in *Dao* 18, no. 4 (2011): 631-636. *Yichuan*, on the other hand, originally refers to the Yi River flowing in Luoyang, the Cheng's hometown in Henan province, but later became Cheng Yi's standard epithet. Thus, while Harrington and Wang's title is a literal translation of *Yichuan Yizhuan*, the latter is best understood as "Yichuan [Cheng Yi]'s commentary on the Yi".

²²⁷ Cheng, Hao 程顥, and Cheng Yi 程頤, *Completed Works of the Two Chengs* 二程集, 2nd ed. (Beijing 北京: Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, 2004).

to better appreciate this important shift, however, it is necessary to consider the place of *li* within the Cheng brother's own philosophical system and the ways in which it interacts with the other elements of their metaphysics. As I have already mentioned, *li* is multifaceted in its meaning, so much so that it has been translated into English in a great variety of ways. Choosing one of the English translations proposed by scholars at this stage of the present study might preventively restrict the hermeneutic significance of the character and, as a consequence, hinder possible interpretations and paths to understanding it. Instead, I will leave the character untranslated throughout the chapter in order to discuss *li* on the basis of its relation to the other elements of the Cheng brothers' philosophical system, thus making its hermeneutical significance emerge on the basis of its usage. This strategy, I maintain, will also be helpful in making sense of the most important and well-known formula from the Cheng brothers, namely, *li yi fen shu* 理一分殊, meaning "one *li* with many manifestations".²²⁸

²²⁸ The first formulation of this saying in the context of the Cheng brothers' thought is found in Cheng Yi's comments to Zhang Zai's *Western inscription* (*Ximing* 西銘) as "理一而分殊" (in *Er Cheng Ji*, 1267) Here, Cheng Yi is answering to a question posed by one of his disciples, who meant to know whether Zhang Zai was aiming at the same notion of universal love held by the Mohist; the response is that since each one's due is different (*fen* 分) people should not be treated without discernment. (*Er Cheng Ji* 1202-3. Moving in the same direction but in a different way, Cheng Hao employed the two categories of 'one *li*' (*liyi* 理一) and 'myriad things' (*wanshi* 万事) in commenting on the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸). See 《伊川文集》卷五, 《答杨时西铭书》. With regards to the English rendering of the formula *li yi fen shu*, it should be noted that some incongruities are found in scholarship. Huang, for example, translates it as "one principle in diverse appearances" (Yong Huang, *Why Be Moral? Learning from the Neo-Confucian Cheng Brothers* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 131, 205) as well as "one principle with many differences" (Ibid, 21), while Chan translates it as "*li* is one but its manifestations are many" (Chan, "The evolution of the Neo-Confucian Concept of Li 理 as Principle", 106). In looking at these renderings one might naturally argue that 'appearance', 'differentiation', and 'manifestation' greatly differ in meaning, and indeed that is the case. The confusion in translating the *yili fen shu* formula, as Chan and Liu have both indicated, is due to misinterpreting *fen* as read in the first tone (meaning 'to divide' or 'differentiate') instead of the fourth-tone reading (meaning 'one's due' or 'obligation'). See JeeLoo Liu, "Why Be Moral? Comments on Yong Huang's Book on the Cheng Brothers," *Philosophy East and West* 69, no. 1 (2019): 268-280. Another example of the fourth-tone *fen* usage is found in the following statement from Cheng Yi: "The *li* of things are already self-sufficient, and yet one often cannot fulfill one's due (*fen*) in the interactions between the emperor and the subject or between father and son." (*Erchengji* 1267, as translated in Ibid, 276). In my rendering of the formula I chose, following Chan, to interpret *fen shu* as 'many manifestations' with the specific meaning of "the universal embodied in the particular partially or completely", as Chan justifies this translation (Chan, "The Evolution of the Neo-Confucian concept of Li 理 as Principle", 106). At the same time, while I take issue with Huang's rendering as "appearances" because it seems to be in opposition to something 'real' (an understanding which would not reflect the Cheng's views), I do not think, unlike Liu, that 'differentiation' necessarily poses issues of misinterpretation. As far as I understand it, each manifestation of *li* is, at the same time, a differentiation since "All things have their [own] *li*" while the latter also being ultimately one. Furthermore, for *li* to be many in the first place, it means that the various *li* are necessarily differentiated from one another. (Cheng as quoted in Angus C. Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers: Ch'eng Ming-Tao and Ch'eng Yi-Ch'uan* (London: Lund Humphries, 1958), 8.) In light of this considerations, I will use both renderings of "manifestation" and "differentiation".

The difficulty in interpreting the Cheng's *li* lies in the fact that, as noted by Huang,²²⁹ the character is often used interchangeably with other terms such as *dao* 道 (“Way”), *xing* 性 (“nature”), *tian* 天 (“Heaven”), and *xin* 心 (“heart/mind”).²³⁰ Since the Cheng never provide a terse definition of *li*, its meaning(s) – as I previously mentioned – can be defined only through a consideration of those terms through which *li* is specified, thus appreciating both their difference as well as unifying thread. Let us thus consider some of the major concepts with which the Cheng brothers identify *li*. First, we find that they identify *li* with *dao*; when asked what is *tiandao* (heaven’s way), for instance, Cheng Yi replies: “It is *li*. *Li* is the way of heaven.”²³¹ In this usage, *li* is considered – like *dao* – as the ultimate principle shared by and uniting everything that exists: “Above and below, root and tip, inside and outside, are all one *li*, which is the Way (*dao*)”.²³² The identity of *li* and *dao* explains that, for the two Cheng, *li* identifies an all-encompassing and omnipresent principle underlying everything that is, whether it be human affairs or the natural world in general. Such all-encompassing unity explains why, according to the Cheng brothers (and as expressed in the first part of the formula mentioned above) *li* is one (*li yi* 理一). Secondly, we find that *li* is identified with *xing*, which has been traditionally rendered into English as “human nature” in relation to its usage in classical thought. For the Cheng brothers, however, *xing* is simply “nature”, thus referring to both humans and non-human beings.²³³ Importantly, the notion of nature has a double meaning: on the one hand, it indicates that which all beings are endowed with and thus it refers to what is common to the ten thousand things; at the same time, however, it also refers to the single nature of each particular being, according to which a thing or an individual

²²⁹ Huang, *Why Be Moral?*, 195-221.

²³⁰ These are not the only characters that are used interchangeably with *li*, but they are the most frequent and, in my opinion, the most important ones to the purpose of the present discussion. Other characters that the Cheng brothers identify with *li* include *li* 禮 (“propriety”, *Yishu* 11; 25), *sheng* 生 (“life-giving activity” as rendered by Huang in *Ibid* 210, *Yishu* 2a; 33), and *shen* 神 (“divinity” or “god”, *Wenji* 9; 597).

²³¹ *Yishu* 18; 223.

²³² *Yishu* 9; 316 as quoted in Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 12. It should be noted that this is not the first time in the history of Chinese philosophy that *li* is equated with *dao*. The first explanation of *dao* in terms of *li* is found in *Explaining the Laozi (Jie Lao 解老)* by Han Feizi 韓非子 (?-233 a.C.): “*Dao* is that by which all things become what they are. It is that with which all *li*[s] are commensurable. *Li*[s] are patterns [*wen* 文] according to which all things come into being, and *Dao* is the cause of their being. [...] Everything has its own *li* different from that of others, and *Dao* is commensurate with all of them.” (As translated in Chan, “Evolution of the Neo-Confucian Concept of *Li* 理 as Principle”, 127). Chan has noted that this passage denotes both the first time that *dao* and *li* are coupled as well as the first time that *li* designates particular beings in the sense of multitude. Thus, it denotes the most important moment in the pre-Han evolution of *li*. (*Ibid*)

²³³ This is clearly argued by Cheng Hao in *Yishu* 2a; 30.

exists and operates.²³⁴ Thus, Cheng Yi states that “Nature is nothing but *li*, and what is so-called *li* is nothing but nature”²³⁵, and that “All things have *li*, for example *that by which (suo yi 所以)* fire is hot and that by which water is cold.”²³⁶ The identity of *li* and *xing*, when considering the double significance of the latter, clearly mirrors the tension between *li* as both one and manifested in many (*fen shu 分殊*). The same tension is also found in the Cheng’s identity between *li* and *xin* (heart/mind). As Graham notes, by the time of the Song dynasty the character *xin* 心 is used to indicate both the physical organ as well as the latter’s agency in moving the body and acquiring knowledge.²³⁷ In addition to this double usage, the Cheng brothers interpret the character in a broader sense: to them, *xin* is not just the heart/mind of a person or of human beings in general, but it is also shared by heaven and earth, in a way that if one understands one’s own heart/mind, she will then be able to grasp that “heart/mind is *li*, and *li* is heart/mind”²³⁸, and that “heart/mind, nature, and *tian* are not different from each other”.²³⁹ With regards to the identity of *li* and *tian*, the Cheng claim that “*tian* is nothing but *li*”,²⁴⁰ and often use the two characters in the form of the compound *tianli* 天理. Interestingly, while the compound is not new to the history of Chinese thought,²⁴¹ Cheng Hao states that “Although I have learned much from others, the two words *tianli* are what I grasped myself.”²⁴² According to the twentieth century Confucian scholar Xu Fuguan, *tianli* is here meant as “natural *li*”, where *tian* serves as an adjective.²⁴³ This interpretation is

²³⁴ As noted by Graham, Cheng Yi defines *xing* on the basis of classical texts such as the *Mengzi* and the *Doctrine of the Mean*. Graham has identified four usages of *xing* in Cheng Yi, that are all mutually related and are summarized in the present discussion. These four definitions will become relevant in chapter 6, as they raise questions regarding the notions of causality and necessity in the Cheng brothers’ system. (See Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 47)

²³⁵ *Yishu* 22a; 292.

²³⁶ As quoted in Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 8.

²³⁷ *Ibid*, 62.

²³⁸ *Yishu* 13;139.

²³⁹ *Yishu* 2a; 15.

²⁴⁰ *Yishu* 20;132.

²⁴¹ The first instance of this compound is found in the *Book of Rites (Liji 禮記)*.

²⁴² *Waishu* 12;424.

²⁴³ Xu Fuguan as quoted in Huang, *Why Be Moral?*, 203. Huang also mentions an interpretation given by Deng Keming, according to which *tian* in Cheng Hao’s statement would serve as noun and thus expresses the *li* possessed by *tian* in contrast to the *li* of other things. However, I agree with Huang on the fact that this interpretation severely undermines the point made by the Cheng brothers that *li* is identical with *tian* (*Ibid*).

grounded upon Cheng Yi's claims that "*tianli* is naturally so (*ziran* 自然)"²⁴⁴ and that "the reason it is called *tian* [is] because it is the natural *li*."²⁴⁵

Indeed, the fact that the Cheng brothers identify *li* with other notions does not help the interpreter in formulating a clear and terse definition of the concept; this multifaceted usage, however, does provide a picture of the all-encompassing significance of its meaning, and it is proof of its fundamental role in the articulation of the Cheng's worldview. In addition to the couplings/identities considered thus far, there are other ways in which the two philosophers explain the meaning of *li*: for example, Cheng Yi states that "everything in the world can be understood in light of *li*. Wherever there is a thing, there is a standard; and everything has its *li*."²⁴⁶ The character here translated as "standard" is *ze* 則, which also means "rule", "criterion", and "regulation".²⁴⁷ Thus, *li* functions as rule and criterion of things in general and, at the same time, each things has its own *li*: "everything has its *li*. For example, fire producing warmth and water giving out the coldness, and one's being king or minister and father and son, all these are *li*."²⁴⁸ In this perspective, *li* can also be understood in terms of the cause or reason for which something is the way it is. But while each things' *li* is "self-sufficient"²⁴⁹, and thus the Cheng discuss the *li* of things (*wuli* 物理, the *li* of fire or water) and the *li* of human beings (*reli* 人理, the *li* regulating the five Confucian relationships²⁵⁰), they also state that each specific *li* is, in fact, one *li*, even though – as they themselves admit – we struggle in understanding this commonality.²⁵¹

²⁴⁴ *Yishu* 2a; 30.

²⁴⁵ *Cuiyan* 2; 1228. In Chinese: 其所以名之曰天，蓋自然之理也。

²⁴⁶ *Yishu* 18; 193.

²⁴⁷ In fact, Graham renders the term as "rule". This understanding of *li* is well aligned with Jana Rosker's interpretation of *li* as "structure". See Jana S. Rosker 2012, *Traditional Chinese Philosophy and the Paradigm of Structure (Li 理)* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012).

²⁴⁸ *Yishu* 19; 247.

²⁴⁹ *Er Cheng Ji*: 1267.

²⁵⁰ The five Confucian relationships (五倫 *wulun*) represent the paradigmatic social relations, that between ruler and minister, father and son, husband and wife, older and younger brother, friend and friend. The theory of the five relationships played a fundamental role throughout the history of Confucian ethical and political thought, and is originally connected to Confucius' doctrine of the rectification of names (正名 *zhengming*).

²⁵¹ *Yishu* 5; 76.

Apart from being a regulating principle, *li* is also described as “not having shape”²⁵² and “not being limited”²⁵³, as well as “constant” and “fixed”.²⁵⁴ These descriptions have led scholars to consider the Cheng’s *li* as a kind noumenal entity which exists and operates independently of perceivable reality. The scholar How Wailu 侯外蘆, for example, interprets the Cheng brothers as holding that “outside the material world, there is an eternal *tianli* that exists independent of this material world as its root and foundation”.²⁵⁵ This interpretation has probably developed from a parallel between the Cheng’s *li* with Plato’s theory of forms, initially proposed by the historian of Chinese philosophy Feng Youlan and, later, by the twentieth century Chinese philosopher Zhang Junmai.²⁵⁶ This interpretation, I think, is misleading and does not contextualize *li* in the broader picture of the Cheng brothers’ system which, instead, articulates this notion as being immanent and indivisible from sensible experience. This is clearly stated, for example, by Cheng Hao when he affirms that “outside *dao* [*li*] there are no things and outside things there is no *dao*”²⁵⁷, and that “nowhere between heaven and earth there is no *dao*.”²⁵⁸ In addition to this, with specific regards to human beings, the Cheng states that “in the relation of father and son, to be father and son lies in affection; in the relation of king and minister, to be king and minister lies in reverence. From these to being husband and wife, being elder and younger, being friends, there is no activity that is not *dao*. This is why we cannot be separated from *dao* even for a second.”²⁵⁹ As I mentioned earlier, *li* is understood as the regulatory principle for which things are as they are; however, if *li* was to be conceived as independent from sensible reality, it would be difficult to understand how it could serve as regulatory principle of things in the first place (how would *li* interact with things?), not to mention that such an interpretation would render the formula “one *li* with many differentiations” even more obscure. The idea of *li* as being independent from its manifestations (i.e. as existing *outside* of them) evokes the metaphor, employed

²⁵² *Cuiyan* 2; 1258.

²⁵³ *Yishu* 18; 204.

²⁵⁴ As noted by Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 14.

²⁵⁵ Hou as quoted in Huang, *Why Be Moral?*, 206.

²⁵⁶ According to Feng, *li* was considered as “independently subsisting apart from actual things” (Feng, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, 507), while according to Zhang the Neo-Confucian notion of *dao* is “what Plato calls the region of purity and eternity and immortality and unchangeableness.” See Zhang Junmai, *The Development of Neo-Confucian Thought* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1963), 47.

²⁵⁷ *Yishu* 4; 73.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁹ *Yishu* 4; 73-74.

first by the Buddhists and later by Zhu Xi, of the moon reflected in ten thousand rivers; importantly, this image is rejected by the Cheng brothers, as it suggests the existence of one real *li* existing independently of its manifestations while, instead, they hold that the one *li* cannot exist outside the ten thousand beings.²⁶⁰ And while the Buddhists regarded change as proof of the illusory character of reality, the Cheng brothers consider it as proof of the immanent character of *li* as the activity of being: “the reason it is said that the ten thousand things form one body is that they all have this *li*. It all comes from this fact. The unceasing life-giving activity (*sheng* 生) is called change (*yi* 易). It is right in this life-giving activity that *li* is complete.”²⁶¹

In order to better comprehend the relationship between unity and difference, or *li* and particular beings, it is useful to consider the Cheng brothers’ articulation of the relationship between *li* and *qi* 氣, the latter being usually translated as “energy”, “vital energy”, “ether”, and “matter”. *Qi* can be rarified or condensed, and its changes are regulated by the interactions of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 which, in turn, are responsible for all natural opposites (such as light and darkness, hardness and softness, heat and cold, and so on).²⁶² Cheng Yi distinguishes *li* and *qi* by stating that “Everything that has shape is *qi*, while *dao* does not have shape”²⁶³ and holds that “There is no *dao* if there are no *yin* and *yang*. The becoming so of *qi* is *dao*. *Yin* and *yang* are *qi* and so are physical, while *dao* is metaphysical.”²⁶⁴ The Chinese phrases for what is here translated by Huang as “physical” and “metaphysical” are *xing er xia* 形而下 and *xing er shang* 形而上 respectively, which are commonly rendered as “after the form(s)” and “before the form(s)”.²⁶⁵ *Xing* 形, as a noun, means ‘form’ in the sense of “body”²⁶⁶ or “appearance”²⁶⁷, while as a verb it means “to show”²⁶⁸ or “to compare”²⁶⁹.

²⁶⁰ See Huang, *Why Be Moral?*, 206.

²⁶¹ *Yishu* 2a; 33.

²⁶² Graham notes that, in the *Book of Changes*, *yin* and *yang* are also defined as the two *qi* (*erqi* 二氣). (Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 32).

²⁶³ *Yishu* 6; 83. According to Cheng Hao, “Movement and stillness are the basis of *yang* and *yin*”. (As quoted in *Ibid*).

²⁶⁴ *Yishu* 15; 162.

²⁶⁵ Huang, *Why Be Moral?*, 207. This interpretation is also found in Graham, Feng Youlan, Zhang Junmai, and others.

²⁶⁶ See *Daodejing* 41, James Legge’s translation.

²⁶⁷ See *Sunzi Bingfa*, *Xushi* 7, Lionel Giles’ translation.

²⁶⁸ See *Gaozi* II; 26.

²⁶⁹ See *Huainanzi* 2.

Rendering *xing er xia/shang* as “before/after the form(s)” resonates with the Platonic paradigm that, as I have argued above, seems to be inappropriate in the context of the Cheng brothers’ thought. Such platonic rendering, however, has become a widespread convention in anglophone scholarship on the two philosophers and, more in general, on Chinese philosophy; thus, as it often happens with historically established conventions, the rendering usually remains unquestioned with regards to its appropriateness when applied to specific texts and thinkers. But if we accept that the Platonic rendering of “after/before the form(s)” does not fit well in the case of the Cheng brothers’ system and, as a consequence, somehow hinders the interpreter from acquiring a broader and more rigorous understanding of the two philosophers, then we must question the rendering and – if necessary – construct a better interpretation that takes account of the overall context in which it is applied. Considering the worldview hold by the Cheng brothers, where *li* is an immanent principle and where the dualism between the latter and *qi* indicates two inseparable modes of being, I find more appropriate to consider the dualism between “physical” and “metaphysical” as a relation between what is embodied - or finite - and what is not embodied - or infinite.²⁷⁰ This interpretation is supported by the Cheng’s description of *li* as being without shape or sensible qualities and *qi* as constituting the embodiment of beings, and avoids the projection of a Platonic paradigm unto these texts. Another way to conceptualize the *li/qi* relationship is that between what is manifest (namely, that which shows in embodiment and is thus clearly defined) and what is concealed (namely, that which is obscure and profound, too broad to be defined). Commenting on a passage from the *Book of Changes*, for example, Cheng Yi states that the classic “illustrates *li* with images and knows *dao* from the image”²⁷¹, and that “the most hidden (*wei* 微)²⁷² is *li*, while the most manifest is the image (*xiang* 象).²⁷³ Substance

²⁷⁰ Note that by “embodied” here I do not mean “extended” as in early modern European philosophical usage. This is because, for example, Spinoza’s substance could be very well be said to be embodied if by the latter one means ‘extended’ (as Spinoza states in E2p2, “God is an extended thing”). With regards to the Cheng description of *li* as “not having shape” that I have reported above, I do not think that it implies that *li* would not be extended (in the early modern European sense of the term). Rather, by ‘embodied’ I am here referring to the quality of being bounded (and identified with) a limited and identifiable physical structure which can be generally ascribed to bodies. In this sense, it would be possible to consider *li* as both ‘extended’ and finite. And while the Cheng brothers do not discuss ‘extension’ as Spinoza does, I think that their idea of *li* existing only *in* things moves in a compatible, if not similar, direction.

²⁷¹ *Wenji* 9; 615.

²⁷² *Wei* also means “obscure” or “profound”. In this context, it designates *li* as that which is difficult to understand or grasp.

²⁷³ In this context, *xiang* designates what has shape, is individuated, and it thus can be grasped.

and function are from the same source, between which there is no slight gap.”²⁷⁴ This passage explains *li* as that which is profound and difficult to comprehend, and is thus hidden from our intellect; at the same time, however, we can gain knowledge of it through “images”, or what is manifest and individualized, namely, things and beings. This is because *li* itself is manifested in its many differentiations, and it is this assumption (articulated in the formula *li yi fen shu*) which grounds the possibility of gaining knowledge of *li* as such. The reason for which the Cheng state that we know *li* through images, I think, is twofold: on the one hand, human beings (and particular beings in general) are embodied, and thus gain knowledge through embodied experience (other bodies and images of things); on the other hand, *li* – in its differentiations – is present in each and everything which can be considered part of embodied experience. This is the reason for which Cheng Hao states that “the reason that ten thousand things can be in one body is that they all have *li*.”²⁷⁵ So while *li* and *qi*, according to the Cheng brothers, are not the same thing and are thus understood as different notions, they also emphasize their inseparability. Now, a question could be posed: if nothing exists outside *li*, and the latter is manifested in everything there is, why are we to understand *li* and *qi* as different modes? Simply because their identification could be source of great misunderstanding. As Cheng Yi explains, “Not that nature can be said to have ‘body and parts’ (*ti duan* 體段); we are speaking metaphorically [literally ‘borrowing this to explain that’]. If we call heaven round and earth square, have we the right to say that roundness is heaven and squareness is earth?”²⁷⁶

In conclusion, by looking at the usages of *li* as coupled with other fundamental terms of the Cheng brothers thought, it is possible to appreciate its significance as the ground of their One and Many metaphysics. *Li*, the Cheng hold, as one all-encompassing regulatory principle, is that by which particular beings can be said to form “one body”. On the other hand, each being’s nature (*xing*) functions and operates according to its own laws and characteristics (the many *li*), which are all “self-sufficient” manifestations of *li* as unitary. Importantly, as I will explain in the following chapter, this framework sets both the ground and the object of the Cheng’s theory of knowledge. An immediate consequence of *li* as applied to their epistemology is that the latter, for the Cheng, can only be known in experience, or, in

²⁷⁴ *Yizhuang*, Introduction, 689.

²⁷⁵ *Yishu* 2a; 33.

²⁷⁶ As quoted in Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 40-41.

relation to the things of the world in both action and intellect; that is to say, if the *li* of things are not “in themselves” or absolutely independent, then knowledge too demands for a relational endeavor. But before treating the Cheng’s positions on this matter, I shall now turn to provide a comparative discussion of the two metaphysical frameworks that I have discussed so far, namely, that of *substantia* and that of *li*.

4.3 *Substantia* contra *Li* 理: Two Kinds of Oneness

Previously, when discussing the link between Spinoza and Neo-Confucianism as established by seventeenth and eighteenth century European thinkers,²⁷⁷ I have noted that the two worldviews have been identified as ‘monistic’, as they both ultimately relate the multiplicity of particular things to one entity or being; this is embodied by Spinoza’s notion of ‘substance’ (*substantia*) or God, and the Cheng’s notion of *li* 理. Specifically, Spinoza’s monism is embodied in his proposition according to which “Whatever exists exists in God, and nothing can exist or be conceived without God” (E1p15), while the Cheng brothers’ is exemplified by the formula “One *li* with many differentiations” (理一分殊 *li yi fen shu*, *Yishu* 18; 195). But while the philosophical category of ‘monism’ is nowadays often used as generally expressing views which ascribe to underlying principles of oneness, the term originally implies certain cultural and historical specificities, and thus should not be applied uncritically – especially in light of the guiding methodological assumptions and comparative aims of the present study. First, it should be noted that the term ‘monism’ – as a derivation of the Greek *μόνος* (“monos”, meaning “one”, “single”, “only”) – was first coined by the German philosopher Christian Wolff (1679-1754) in his *Rational Thoughts* (1721),²⁷⁸ where he describes those thinkers “who admits only of one kind of substance” in opposition to the Cartesian mind-body dualism.²⁷⁹ This origin has two implications: first, that ‘monism’ is a European philosophical category

²⁷⁷ Especially Pierre Bayle and Nicholas Malebranche.

²⁷⁸ The complete title is *Rational Thoughts on God, the World, and the Soul of Human Beings; also all Things in general* (in German *Vernünfftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt, und der Seele des Menschen; auch allen Dingen überhaupt*).

²⁷⁹ This description is given in Wolff’s *Psychologia Rationalis* (1740), as reported in Mogen Lærke, “Spinoza’s Monism? What Monism?” in *Spinoza on Monism*, ed. Philip Goff (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012): 244-261.

which was conceived on the basis of specific philosophical debates in early modern European philosophy, and thus it does not belong to the Confucian philosophical tradition; second, the term ‘monism’ is posthumous to Spinoza’s time and was only retrospectively attributed to his thought. To be sure, these implications do not imply that the Cheng brothers cannot be conceived as monists,²⁸⁰ nor that Spinoza’s philosophy should not be conceived as monistic.²⁸¹ Instead, what I wish to emphasize here is that philosophical categories, such as that of ‘monism’, should be carefully applied in consideration of the fact that they are historically and culturally situated tools, especially in the context of a cross-cultural philosophical dialogue. Thus, in the attempt to avoid Eurocentric projections and conceptual inaccuracies, the following discussion does not focus on comparing the Cheng and Spinoza’s metaphysical systems as types of ‘monism’ but, instead, as ascribing to two kinds of oneness, that is, *li* and *substantia*. Giving that, as previously noted, cross-cultural comparisons imply a notable degree of difference between the traditions considered, the comparison between *li* and *substantia* shall not be focusing solely on aspects of compatibility. Rather, I argue that the metaphysical similarities found across the thoughts of these distant thinkers can be better appreciated by considering the unique articulations of each kind of oneness and, with that, the important differences that set *li* and *substantia* apart. In light of the previous discussion of Spinoza’s substance and modes on the one hand, and of the Cheng’s one and many *li* on the other, I shall now turn to provide a comparative analysis of *substantia* and *li*, with particular focus on the structural differences between the two metaphysical frameworks here considered.

As I have discussed, the *li* of the Cheng is a multifaceted notion that is used to indicate both oneness (as *dao*) and the nature of particular beings (as *xing*), a double usage which leads the two thinkers to affirm that *li* is one with many differentiations. This grounding and all-encompassing element is combined with that of *qi*, which consists in the various embodiments of the myriad things of the world; *li* is ‘hidden’ (i.e. difficult to grasp) while *qi* is

²⁸⁰ Graham, for examples, considers Cheng Hao’s notion of *li* as monistic. See Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*. While I agree with Graham’s considerations, one could still object that calling the Cheng brothers ‘monists’ is a Eurocentric projection. In order for one to unproblematically apply this categorization to the Neo-Confucian context, I think, she should argue for the metaphysical similarity between *li* and *substantia*. Even if that was the case, however, it should be considered that Neo-Confucianism does not present issues of dualism as found in the Cartesian tradition.

²⁸¹ On the contrary, scholars unanimously refer to Spinoza’s system as being monistic.

'manifest' (i.e. evident, that appears as it is). Both at the level of oneness and at the level of things, *li* is a creative principle which traces *qi* ("The becoming so of *qi* is *dao*"), but it is in the activity of *qi* that *li* is actualized ("outside things there is no *dao*"). The Cheng's dualism of *li* and *qi* thus concerns two different yet indivisible ways of being, as they hold that none of these two elements could be considered 'in itself'. The dualism of *li* and *qi*, in particular, speaks of two ways of being of oneness, which are expressed by the hidden/manifest dichotomy or, as I proposed, by the contrast between infinite and finite. In contrast to the double identification of *li* with both the One and the Many, Spinoza differentiates – both terminologically and conceptually - between substance as God or Nature, and particular beings as modes of the one substance, or ways in which substance modifies itself. The contrast between the two metaphysical entities is defined by Spinoza in terms of conceptual dependence and independence²⁸², as well as by means of the duality between finite/infinite entities. With regards to embodiment, Spinoza's system does not seem to have a structural equivalent to that of the Cheng's notion of *qi*. While they discuss the *li* of things and their *qi* as two necessary modes of the one *li* (or *dao*), Spinoza's theory of attributes articulates substance as both thinking and extended; and even though each attribute must be conceived separately, both thought and extension express the same one essence of Nature. That is to say, as I discussed above, that thought and extension are two ways in which substance exists and is conceived. It seems, then, that both systems identify reality as composed of two metaphysical entities that are indivisible: on the one hand, *li* and *qi* and, on the other hand, substance and modes.²⁸³ And while it is the indivisibility of both dualities which constructs Spinoza and the Cheng's grounds of oneness, it is important to note, I think, a fundamental difference regarding the criteria for which the two metaphysical entities are formulated in the first place.

²⁸² As I have explained in section one, while substance is self-caused and conceived through itself, modes are in substance and are conceived through something else (whether it be substance or other modes).

²⁸³ As I already noted, the reason for which modes depend on substance is more straightforwardly explicitly explained in the *Ethics* than that for which substance is necessarily expressed in modes. With regards to this, Hübner has a convincing argument according to which Spinoza's necessitarianism indeed implies the necessity of modes. She states: "if Spinozistic substance is a thing essentially "conceived" in a certain way (namely, without the help of other concepts), there must *actually be a conception, or idea, of this substance*. This is because necessitarianism dictates that nothing that pertains to infinite features of nature can remain merely possible or unactualized. So if it is truly the essence of substance – a necessarily infinite thing – to be conceived in a certain way, then this essential feature of substance must in fact be realized: there must actually be an appropriate conception of substance." (Hübner, "Spinoza's Thinking Substance and the Necessity of Modes", 21).

I have explained that, according to Spinoza, the most fundamental feature distinguishing substance and its modes is a structural one since, while substance is absolutely infinite, modes are finite; the distinction is thus made on the basis of a structural threshold related to individuation.²⁸⁴ The same criteria, however, does not seem to be applicable to the distinction between *li* and *qi* in the Cheng brothers. *Qi*, in itself, is not originally conceived as finite because the various embodiments of beings are generally understood as different qualities of *qi* depending on the interactions and proportions of *yin* and *yang* (for which “ether” can be more or less condensed).²⁸⁵ So while embodiment *comes to be* individuated, *qi* - in itself - does not serve as structural criteria for the finite/infinite dichotomy. On the other hand, *li* does seem to serve as individuating principle since it is described as “that by which (*suo yi* 所以)” something is and functions in a certain way (such as fire being warm and water being cold), and it is said to be the “rule” or “standard” (*ze* 則) of things. However, since *li* is both one and many, each *li* is ultimately the one *li* (*dao*) and this, indeed, creates confusion as to how *li* actually serves as individuating principle. This is because *li* *comes to be* a criterion of individuation only in relation to *qi*, which is why according to the Cheng brothers there is no *li* outside of things and there are no things outside of *li*; thus, in itself, *li* cannot be said to be finite. According to Graham, “*li* accounts not for the properties of a thing but for the task it must perform to occupy its place in the natural order.”²⁸⁶ Following this reasoning, I think the criteria for which the Cheng brothers differentiate between *li* and *qi* is primarily functional, rather than structural: on the one hand, *qi* serves the function of embodiment while, on the other hand, *li* functions as principle of intelligibility.²⁸⁷ These differing criteria illuminate that, even though *substantia* and *li* both indicate a principle of oneness, the criteria according to which each of these concept is formulated entails specific preconceptions about oneness itself, and therefore we cannot justifiably equate *li* to *substantia* or the other way around. But considering these differentiations, it is striking to note that, for both Spinoza and the Cheng

²⁸⁴ I say ‘related to individuation’ because the latter is consequential to other elements of Spinoza’s framework, primarily causation, conception, and inherence. See my discussion in section 1.

²⁸⁵ As noted by Graham: “By the time of the Song dynasty it had come to be accepted that solid things, in which the ether [*qi*] breathes and gives life and movement, themselves condense from and dissolve into the ether, so that matter (*zhi* 質) is merely ether in a very dense and inert state.” (Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 31). He also note that, since *qi* is both concrete and self-moving, it denotes both substance and force at once (Ibid).

²⁸⁶ Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 18.

²⁸⁷ This understanding is aligned with the different English renderings of *li* such as “principle”, “coherence”, “pattern”, “law”, “reason”.

brothers, the things of the world are manifestations of one principle that is immanent in particular beings and that does not exist apart from them. And despite the fact that both kinds of oneness present some form of dualism, I have argued that in both contexts it is a modal dualism; both *li* and *qi* (together with *li* being one and many), and the thought/extension attributes (together with the substance/mode distinction) could be seen as describing different modes of existence, or different perspectives on oneness.

In addition to the structural and functional features that differentiate the Cheng and Spinoza's metaphysical frameworks, a point should be made about some important linguistic differences that are reflected in the philosophical specificities of these thinkers' thought.²⁸⁸ It is interesting to note, in fact, that the Cheng brothers do not take issue in affirming that *li* is *both* one and many, that is, they do not think of the statement "x is one and more than one, at the same time" as a contradiction. Spinoza on the other hand, clearly differentiates between the one substance and the many modes; indeed, if Spinoza were to say that substance is *both* one and many, the very foundation of his metaphysics, based on the assertion that there can possibly exist only *one* substance, would have collapsed in contradiction. This leads to the question of why, contrary to Spinoza, the Cheng brothers see no contradiction in affirming that "x is both one and more than one, at the same time". An answer to this question can be found by considering the semantics of nouns in classical Chinese. Unlike *substantia* (which is a count noun, meaning that it can reference either a singular or a plural quantity), *li* is a mass noun that can also serve as a count noun on the basis of its context. According to Robins, who has argued that all classical Chinese nouns primarily function as mass nouns, "What distinguishes mass nouns from count nouns is that they do not divide their reference. This means that in learning a noun 'x' that is not free to function as a count noun one does not have to learn how much x counts as one x."²⁸⁹ Similarly, *li* is understood independently of *how many* it is, and so even though its reference can be divided

²⁸⁸ To be clear, I do not maintain that the linguistic specificities of classical Chinese on the one hand and Latin on the other hand, are the primary and only cause of the metaphysical differences found between *li* and *substantia*. What I wish to say is that semantic differences are reflected in philosophical arguments.

²⁸⁹ Dan Robins, "Mass Nouns and Count Nouns in Classical Chinese," *Early China* vol. 25 (2000): 147-184. Robins further develops and better explains Chad Hansen's mass noun theory by defending three theses regarding the semantics of nouns in classical Chinese: "First, [nouns] are all free to function as mass nouns. Second, though many of them can also function as count nouns, they do not do so as frequently as corresponding English nouns. Third, unlike English nouns, nouns in classical Chinese do not need to be classified as count nouns and mass nouns in order to explain their behavior in particular contexts." (Ibid, 147).

according to need (for example, when talking about the *li* of each particular thing), the primary mass noun function of the character also references all the *li* of particular things as being ultimately one.²⁹⁰

Apart from the different criteria for which the Cheng brothers and Spinoza account for metaphysical entities, which I have identified as functional and structural respectively, further differences emerge with respects to the ways in which causation is conceived within the two frameworks. In the *Ethics*, as I have discussed, causation has a role of central importance for defining Spinoza's metaphysics, as it is the guiding principle underpinning the distinction between conceptual dependence and independence and, by extension, between modes and substance.²⁹¹ According to this framework, where causal relations are identified with logical necessity, substance is the immanent cause of all things while modes are that which exist in (i.e., are caused to exist by) and are conceived through something other than themselves.²⁹² Spinoza's conception of causation also lies at the foundation of his necessitarianism, according to which "In Nature there exists nothing contingent, but all things have been determined by the necessity of the divine nature to exist and operate in a certain way."²⁹³ This causal framework, which derives from the philosophical and scientific debates of seventeenth century Europe, does not pertain to the Cheng brother's discourse. At the same time, however, it should be not inferred from this that the Cheng do not conceive of causal relations. As noted by Graham, the two terms *gan* 感 ("act on", "excite") and *ying* 應 ("respond", "answer") denote relations of stimulation and response which, in Song philosophy, may be understood as occupying the same place of causal relations within the European tradition.²⁹⁴ For the Cheng brothers, stimulation and response describe the interactions of things at all levels, from *yin* and *yang* to the innumerable things, and so they state that "Within heaven and earth there is nothing but stimulation and response. What else is there?"²⁹⁵ And again: "To stimulate is to move: if there is stimulation there must be

²⁹⁰ The same can be said, for example, about water: the fact that there is water in two different ponds does not imply that the water in each pond is actually different.

²⁹¹ For Spinoza, I have explained, causation is also related to inherence, the 'being *in*' something (such as modes being in substance).

²⁹² "Each thing that exists exists either in itself or in something else." (E1, a1) and "That which cannot be conceived through something else must be conceived through itself." (E1, a2).

²⁹³ E1, p29.

²⁹⁴ Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 38.

²⁹⁵ *Yishu* 168: 14 (as translated in *Ibid*)

response. Whatever moves stimulates, and what is stimulated must respond. That to which it responds again stimulates it, and when stimulated it again responds, so that the process is endless.”²⁹⁶ This position, while articulated in different terms, is much aligned with Spinoza’s axiom for which “From a given determinate cause, there necessarily follows an effect.”²⁹⁷ While the Cheng brothers do not speak of *li* as strictly ‘self-caused’ (as Spinoza describes substance), it should be noted that it is described as “naturally so” (*ziran* 自然)²⁹⁸, meaning that it does not depend on something other than itself for its activity of regulating principle (*ze* 則); this is the case both in terms of *li* as ‘oneness’ (*dao* 道) and *li* as the nature of things (*xing* 性). I have already mentioned that *li* as regulatory principle or rule can be understood in terms of reason, in the sense of ‘that by which something is the way it is’. Following this understanding, and considering that the innumerable *li* are ultimately one *li*, it is possible to draw a close parallelism between *li* and Spinoza’s immanent causation of substance: as substance, considered as cause (*Natura naturans*), is inseparable from its effects (*Natura naturata*), so *li* as ‘self-so’ oneness (*dao*) is inseparable from the nature of things (*li* as *xing*), or from the reason for which things are as they are. Despite this similarity, it is difficult to affirm with certainty whether the necessity of *li* leads the Cheng brothers to ascribe to the type of necessitarianism maintained by Spinoza. According to Graham, the principle for which everything has its own *li* leads the Cheng brothers to maintain the view that everything is “decreed” (*ming* 命);²⁹⁹ at the same, while they hold that whenever there is a thing there is *li*, they do not seem to ascribe to the reverse as well (whenever there is *li* there is a thing), and thus the necessity implied by *li* does not seem to prevent this possibility.

All of this considered, I think it is possible to identify two important shared characteristics which emerge from a comparison between Spinoza and the Cheng’s metaphysics as discussed above; first, both *li* and *substantia* are identified with a composite whole that encompasses all there is and, second, both concepts are described as immanent, i.e. as existing and operating *within* things. These two fundamental commonalities, importantly, do not emerge because of structural identities between the two systems, as they do, indeed, represent *two* separate worldviews with important differences such as those I

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ E1, a3.

²⁹⁸ *Yishu* 2°; 30.

²⁹⁹ Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 25.

have described above. Rather, they emerge from an understanding of the all-encompassing articulations of *li* and *substantia* as two views of 'oneness'. The articulation of these notions as immanent oneness is the framework within which both Spinoza and the Cheng construct their theories of knowledge and ethics. With regards to epistemology, to which I shall now turn, two important consequences shall be noted: first, the manifestations of the one into many results in the possibility of accessing knowledge of oneness; second, the immanent character of *li* and *substantia* entails that knowledge, even that of ultimate principles, is embedded in particular beings. This second aspect, which will be further developed in the next chapter, further implies conceiving knowledge as a practical endeavor, rather than a merely intellectual effort.

CHAPTER FIVE

Knowing Oneness in Multitude: Types of Knowledge in Spinoza and the Cheng Brothers

Introduction

On the basis of the metaphysical frameworks elaborated by the Cheng and Spinoza, the present chapter is devoted to a discussion of their respective theories of knowledge. The first section provides a discussion of the Cheng brothers' theory of the extension of knowledge through the investigation of things (*zhizhi gewu* 致知格物) and their differentiation between profound and superficial knowledge. Profound knowledge, I explain, is considered by the Cheng as necessarily implying action, and can be contrasted with its superficial counterpart on the basis of a first-person effort, which they identify with the notion of 'self-getting' (*zide* 自得). The latter, importantly, highlights the reflexive character of knowledge, for which knowing the 'outside' world implies knowledge of the self, and which is key to the Cheng's argument for which profound knowledge constitutes virtue. The second section is devoted to discussing Spinoza's taxonomy of knowledge on the basis of his differentiation between adequate and inadequate cognition. First, I discuss Spinoza's peculiar conception of ideas as being actions of the mind, in order to explain his argument for which will and intellect are one (E2p49). I then move to his treatment of adequate and inadequate cognition by considering his views on the mind and the body; these, I explain, offer a useful framework to understand why, according to Spinoza, the mind necessarily produces both adequate and inadequate ideas. I conclude by considering Spinoza's three types of knowledge (imagination, reason, and intuition) and the way in which they differ. The third and concluding section is then devoted to a comparative analysis of the Cheng and Spinoza's framework. After noting some of the differences characterizing the two systems, I then formulate three main points of commonality upon which a plane of intersection can be constructed. Here I note that, in both contexts, knowledge is conceived as a *praxis*, as transformative, and as

inherently reflexive. The overall aim of the following discussion is to pave and define the context in which a more in depth comparative analysis of “reason” can be articulated in consideration of the methodological guiding assumption of the present study.

5.1 Knowing *Li*: Extending Knowledge through ‘self-getting’ (*zide* 自得)

Given that *li*, both in its unity and in its differentiations, functions as a regulatory principle underlying everything that exists, the Cheng brothers hold that gaining knowledge of it is key to live a flourishing life, both as a society and as a *cosmos*. When considering their position for which each thing has its own *li*, together with that for which all particular *li*(s) are manifestations of oneness, it is possible to appreciate that knowledge of *li* amounts to ‘genuine’ or ‘true’ knowledge, that is, knowledge of the nature of things (their *xing* 性). At the same time, however, I have noted in the previous chapter that the Cheng also describe *li* as ‘hidden’ (*wei* 微), in the sense of being profound and difficult to grasp; in consideration of this difficulty, the question arises as to how can *li* be known in the first place, and what are the ways through which, according to the Cheng, it can be apprehended.

Let us first consider the first point regarding the possibility of knowing *li*. In the context of the Cheng’s epistemology, the character is often used together with terms such as *tui* 推 (to infer, literally “push” or “extend”), *de* 得 (“to grasp”), *guan* 貫 (“to relate”, literally “to thread together”), *lei* 類 (“class”, “category”), and *xun* 循 (“to follow”).³⁰⁰ For example, Cheng Yi states: “The innumerable things all have opposites: there is an alternation of *yin* and *yang*, good and bad. When the *yang* grows, the *yin* diminishes, when good increases, bad is reduced. This *li*, how far it can be extended (*tui*). It is all that people need to know.”³⁰¹ At the same time, he also states “all [things] have this *li*. If there were not, the inferences would not be possible”.³⁰² In addition to this, the Cheng also affirm that the confinements of knowledge,

³⁰⁰ See Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 9 and 78. *Lei* and *tui* are also found in form of compound, meaning “infer by analogy”.

³⁰¹ *Yishu* 11; 123

³⁰² As quoted in Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 10.

i.e. its limitations, are given by people's inability to "interrelate" (*guan*) the *li* of things.³⁰³ Overall, these terms suggest that knowledge of *li* is acquired by means of processes of deduction and induction,³⁰⁴ which are grounded upon the duality of *li* as constituting both the nature of each particular thing as well as the overall unity of beings; in this perspective, *li* can be inferred because it is present in the mind as much as in everything else outside of it. From this, however, it should not be gathered that the Cheng regard knowledge as merely theoretical or as a purely intellectual effort. This is because they hold that knowledge and practice are interdependent and should be equally concerned with following the regulating principles of things (their *li*). According to Huang, the Cheng brothers (especially Cheng Yi), prioritize knowledge over action,³⁰⁵ meaning that – according to them - one necessarily needs to know before acting. Yun-ch'un Ts'ai, on the other hand, considers the Cheng's relation between knowledge and practice as unitary, meaning that "to know is to do".³⁰⁶ In my opinion, both interpretations somehow reflect the Cheng's attitude: for example, Cheng Yi states that "If one wants to act, one has to know first"³⁰⁷ and that "knowledge has to be before action, as when walking one has to have light to lead."³⁰⁸ At the same time, however, he also states that "in order to learn something, one does not have to resort to discourses on *dao* in classics. One also *ought* to get it from one's behavior and action in consistence with proprieties"³⁰⁹, and that "Only through practice can one know *li*. If you do not apply it through practice, you can never know it."³¹⁰ Thus, according to my understanding, it would be misleading to consider knowledge and practice as two separate stages, and it would be equally misleading to consider them as one and the same thing. In the context of the Cheng brothers, knowledge

³⁰³ *Waishu* 3; 2, as quoted in *Ibid*, 78.

³⁰⁴ Graham holds that while the Cheng do seem to talk about deduction (*tui*) they do not seem to hold specific views that could be considered as induction (*Ibid*, 79). According to him, the Cheng don't seem to hold that the number of cases examined affects the object of knowledge because, when the *li* of a thing is grasped it does not need to be verified. This, in my view, does not seem to be accurate. The Cheng, and especially Cheng Yi often affirms that it is necessary to examine things in order to grasp *li*: "Only if you investigate one thing after another, day after day, after long practice the *li* will break loose and reveal themselves in their interrelations." (*Yishu* 209; 7). This is one of many examples that could be related to inductive processes. In general, it seems that *tui* indicates the grasping of particular *li* while, on the other hand, *guan* ('interrelate') seems to indicate the grasping of *li* as oneness.

³⁰⁵ See Huang, *Why Be Moral?*, Chapter 3. Perhaps Huang's position is framed within the overall purpose of his essay, which is to show how the Cheng brother's theory offers a solution to the problem of the weakness of the will.

³⁰⁶ Ts'ai, *The Philosophy of Ch'eng I*, 140.

³⁰⁷ *Yishu* 18; 187.

³⁰⁸ *Yishu* 3; 67.

³⁰⁹ *Yishu* 18; 188. Emphasis mine.

³¹⁰ *Waishu* 10; 404.

and practice seem to require a mutual and interdependent effort, for which knowledge informs practice and the latter is conducive to knowledge. I will return to this point later in the section.

Let us now turn to the second question regarding the ways through which, according to the Cheng, *li* can be apprehended. The consideration that everything has *li* might lead one to think that it is enough to grasp the nature of one thing in order to gain complete knowledge. This, however, is not the case. In fact, for the Cheng brothers, the underlying unity characterizing the *li* of things does not outweigh the fact that each manifestation is unique and “self-sufficient” (*zhizu* 至足).³¹¹ Thus, when asked by one of his disciples if the ten thousand *li* can be understood by investigating only one thing, Cheng Yi answers negatively³¹² since, according to him, it is necessary to investigate one thing after another in order to understand the various interrelations of *li*.³¹³ According to him, the method for acquiring knowledge consists in penetrating or exhausting the *li* of things (*qiongli* 窮理) through their investigation (*gewu* 格物). The compound *gewu* (‘investigation of things’) is found in the history of Chinese thought much earlier than the Cheng brothers’ and, in particular, in a famous passage of the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學)³¹⁴:

“The people of old who wished to make bright virtue plain to the world first put their countries in order, for which they had first to regulate their families, and for that to improve themselves as individuals, and for that to correct their hearts, and for that to give integrity to their actions, and for that to extend their knowledge. The extension of knowledge [*zhizhi* 致知] lies in the investigation of things [*gewu* 格物].”³¹⁵

³¹¹ This is Liu’s translation of *Erchenji* 1267: 萬物之理皆至足 *wanwu zhi li jie zhizu* (“The *li* of all things are already self-sufficient”, in Liu, “Why Be Moral? Comments on Yong Huang’s Book on the Cheng Brothers”, 276). 至足 *zhizu* could also be rendered as just “sufficient”, but giving that the subject is the many *li* (i.e. each *li* of each one of the ten thousand beings), it seems correct to render it as “self-sufficient”.

³¹² “Is it necessary to investigate one thing after another, or can all the innumerable *li* be known by the investigation of a single thing?” “In the latter case, how could they be interrelated? Even Yanzi [considered by Confucius as his brightest disciple] could not be expected to understand all *li* by investigating one thing. Only if you investigate one thing after another day after day, after long practice [*li*] will break loose and reveal themselves in their interrelations.” *Yishu* 18; 188.

³¹³ *Ibid.*

³¹⁴ Attributed to Confucius (551-479 bC).

³¹⁵ *Great Learning* as quoted in Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 74.

Ge can be understood as “to arrive at”, “to correct”, or “to oppose”, and since its meaning is not further clarified in the *Daxue*, it has been a matter of dispute among commentators. The Song historian Sima Guang 司馬光 (1019-1086), contemporary of the Cheng brothers, interpreted the character in the third sense, namely, “to guard against things”, meaning to avoid having one’s desires excited by them.³¹⁶ But for Cheng Yi, the compound means “to arrive at things” (to arrive at the *li* in them). As he states: “The extension of knowledge lies in *gewu*. *Ge* means ‘arrive at’. *Wu* means ‘activities’. In all activities there are *li*; to arrive at their *li* is *gewu*.”³¹⁷ The significance of the passage from the *Great Learning*, for Cheng Yi, is that the management of one’s state, one’s family, and the individual itself are dependent upon insights into *li*. How, then, is it possible to gain such insights? Since the *li* in outside things are also in one’s nature, it is possible to look both inwards and outwards in order to grasp them. For example, one might gain insight into the *li* of filial piety by investigating the relationship between fathers and children or by finding it through individual filial practice and introspection; both methods are equally valuable in the constant effort to extend one’s knowledge through the investigation of things. It is worth noting here that the Cheng brothers seems to disagree on whether the most effective way to gain knowledge of *li* lies in investigating the world outside of us or whether it consists in introspection. Cheng Hao seems to prioritize the latter through emphasizing the identity between *li* and the heart/mind, while Cheng Yi is much more concerned with the investigation of things. As noted by Graham, however, the two *modus operandi* are not incompatible, and the difference between the two brothers amounts to a difference in emphasis rather than a substantial philosophical disagreement.³¹⁸ This is exemplified by the following dialogue:

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ Ibid, 75. While, for the Cheng brothers, this is a difference in emphasis, it became a major point of philosophical controversy for the following five hundred years. As many scholars such as Chan, Feng, and Graham have noted, Cheng Hao anticipated the tradition which culminated with Wang Yangming (that Graham calls “subjectivist school”) while Cheng Yi anticipated Zhu Xi’s school (that Graham calls “objectivist”). Graham’s objectivist/subjectivist dichotomy is sometimes also referred to as rationalist/idealist, particularly by Feng Youlan. Interestingly, Graham notes that Cheng Yi was more averse to introspection than his brother because he feared that emphasizing self-reflection might have led people to believe in Buddhist doctrines, turning away from the concrete world. In discussing the Cheng brothers, I do not think that dichotomies such as rationalist/idealist or subjectivist/objectivist are helpful; on the contrary, they seem to corroborate the notion that the two Cheng should (or can) be sharply differentiated, and idea which, as noted by Chan, has been erroneously exaggerated (Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 518).

“Q. In examining things and searching the self, should one look back into oneself to seek what one has already seen in things?” “A. There is no need to put it in that way. There is a single *li* in things and in me; as soon as ‘that’ is understood, ‘this’ becomes clear. This is the way to unite external and internal. The scholar should understand everything, at one extreme the height of heaven and thickness of earth, at the other why a single thing is as it is.” “Q. In extending knowledge, what do you say to first seeking *li* in the ‘four beginnings?’”³¹⁹ “A. To seek them in the nature and the passions is certainly the most direct course; but a single grass and a single tree both have *li* which must be investigated.”³²⁰

As the passage explains, when one practices the investigation of things it is possible to recognize the oneness of *li* by means of understanding its differentiations, with the effect of apprehending the distinction between inside and outside in a non-dual perspective. This is the reason why the Cheng brothers, despite emphasizing different *modus operandi*, do not systematically differentiate between inward and outward knowledge. As mentioned earlier, however, it is Cheng Yi who developed the theory of the extension of knowledge through the investigation of things to the utmost, and elevated it to chief method in the quest for understanding *li*.

The theory of the extension of knowledge through the investigation of things explains that there are a variety of ways to learn about *li*, such as “to read books in order to be clear about principles, to discuss about people and events in history and contemporary world in order to know what is right and what is wrong; to deal with human affairs in order to be appropriate: all these are ways to grasp *li*.”³²¹ At the same time, however, Cheng Yi explains that not all knowledge can be considered as knowledge of *li* and, in order to explain his point, he distinguishes two types of knowledge in three separate ways. First, he differentiates between profound knowledge (*shen zhi* 深知) and shallow knowledge (*qian zhi* 淺知), and

³¹⁹ The ‘four beginnings’ here mentioned are a reference to Mengzi’s 孟子 (372-289 B.C.) prominent theory of human nature, also known as the ‘four sprouts’ (*sidian* 四端). The four sprouts are virtues which, according to Mencius, proved the inherent goodness of human nature and should be cultivated in order to fully realize such goodness. They are humaneness (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), propriety (*li*) and wisdom (*zhi*).

³²⁰ As quoted in Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 75.

³²¹ *Ibid*, 65.

states that “It is not that people do not know. The reason that one is not willing to act, is that the knowledge is shallow and belief is not firm.”³²² Profound knowledge, on the other hand, necessarily leads to appropriate action (or inaction). The distinction between shallow and profound knowledge is similar to a second differentiation made by Cheng Yi, namely, that between genuine knowledge (*zhen zhi* 真知) and ordinary knowledge (*chang zhi* 常知), which he explains with the following anecdote:

“Genuine knowledge is different from ordinary knowledge. There was a farm who had been hurt by a tiger. When hearing that the tiger was hurting people, nobody was not scared, but the farmer’s composure was different from everyone’s else. Tigers can hurt people; this is something even children know, but they do not have genuine knowledge. Genuine knowledge is the one that the farmer has. Therefore a person who knows that something is not good and still does it, does not have genuine knowledge. Had the person had genuine knowledge, he or she would have not done it.”³²³

Genuine knowledge, as articulated in the passage above, cannot be merely theoretical, as it is given by both knowledge and practice (in this specific case, the actual experience of being hurt by a tiger). This is further emphasized in a following passage, where Cheng Yi parallels the farmer to a learner: “The profound knowledge of a learner is similar [...] A learner ought to seek genuine knowledge; only then can one claim to have knowledge and *act naturally*. When I was twenty years old, I could interpret classics without much difference from the way I am doing today. However, what I get from classics today is very different from what I got then.”³²⁴ Saying that genuine knowledge leads to ‘act naturally’ means that, as soon as one gains and cultivates knowledge of *li*, then one will naturally act in accordance with it or, in the Cheng’s words, one will follow the *li* of things (*xun li* 循理). It is important to remember here that, since *li* is both one and many, the knowledge acquired through the investigation of things is not only knowledge of the specific nature of things and the ways in which these differentiate *and* partake in unity; it is always and necessarily also knowledge of one’s own

³²² *Yishu* 23; 305.

³²³ *Ibid*, 66.

³²⁴ *Yishu* 18; 188. Emphasis mine.

nature. This means that the Cheng brothers hold that through investigating and penetrating the *li* of things, we also gain insight into the mind (*xin*) and nature (*xing*) which, as I discussed in the previous chapter, they identify with *li*. The reflexive character of knowledge, as I shall discuss later, has a key place in the Cheng's overall project, so much so that they affirm that "To investigate the *li* of things is not as intimate (*qie* 切) as reflecting upon oneself"³²⁵ and that "what is to be known is something inherent (*guyou* 固有) in everyone."³²⁶ For now, it suffices to note that self-knowledge, for the Cheng, cannot be accomplished without considering its wider context (i.e., *li* as oneness). Thus, when asked about the meaning of the statement "to fulfill human *dao* is *ren* [仁, the highest Confucian virtue]³²⁷, while to fulfill the heavenly *dao* is sagely", Cheng Yi responds: "How can one know the human *dao* without knowing the heavenly *dao*? *There is only one dao*. How can the human *dao* be merely the human *dao*, while the heavenly *dao* is only the heavenly *dao*?"³²⁸

While it is clear that the Cheng brothers are concerned with explaining the overall unity of things, they also emphasize the importance of differentiations; this is because, as I earlier discussed, each thing has its own *li*, which is a finite and self-sufficient manifestation of the one infinite *li*. This is the case not only for different things but also for events, human affairs, and so on. Indeed, the infinite *li* is manifested in a great variety of ways that can be conceptualized in terms of classes or categories (*lei*), such as the *li* of human beings, the *li* of animal species, the *li* of different objects, and so on. It should be noted, however, that while this way of categorizing might serve an epistemic function (i.e. classifying with the purpose of understanding), it ultimately seems to be arbitrary, since classes can be broadened or specified according to context and need.³²⁹ For example, one can consider the *li* of animals, but could also further specify this class by considering the *li* of mammals, the *li* of armadillos, and so on (and the other way around, starting from a specific case and then broadening the

³²⁵ *Yishu* 17; 175. It should be noted that *qie* means "close to" but also "correspond to. In this perspective, Huang's rendering of it as 'intimate' should be intended as "close to, in the sense of having deep understanding of something".

³²⁶ *Yishu* 25; 316.

³²⁷ *Ren* is discussed in the last section of this chapter.

³²⁸ *Yishu* 18; 182-83. Emphasis mine.

³²⁹ I here say arbitrary in the sense that categorizations do not speak of *li* as one-and-many but, rather, of contextual ways of partially considering it.

category considered), depending on what is being investigated.³³⁰ It seems to be this very capacity of broadening or specifying one's object of inquiry which constitutes the Cheng's theory of the extension of knowledge through the investigation of things. With regards to human beings, Graham holds that, according to the Cheng, they share the same *li* while differing with regards to their *qi* and the ways in which "the temperament of any human type is revealed [in] the outward signs of ether (*qi xiang* 氣象)".³³¹ In terms of categorization this seems accurate, especially considering that – as discussed in the previous chapter – the Cheng identify *li* not only with *xing* (which designates both human and non-human natures) but also with the mind (*xin*). This position, however, should not overweight the perspective for which – given that *li* exists *in* things – each individual is a unique and self-sufficient manifestation of *li* in embodiment. While there does not seem to be explicit textual evidence for this interpretation, I think it can be unproblematically concluded from the elaboration of *gewu*; in fact, when discussing what is worth to be known, the Cheng do not only speak of categories (such as learning about the *li* of human affairs), but also urge us to investigate "a single grass and a single tree", thus pointing at the fact that each individual manifests *li* in a different way.³³² Once again, we find that, according to the Cheng brothers, oneness shall be grasped through its differentiations.

As I mentioned earlier, the importance of genuine or profound knowledge, for the Cheng brothers, lies in its leading to action and, in particular, to act *naturally* (i.e. in accordance with the *li* of things or *dao*). As stated by Cheng Yi, for example, "When knowledge is profound, action will be thorough. No one ever knows without being able to act. If one knows without being able to act, knowledge is superficial."³³³ More specifically, their primary concern is moral action which, according to them, is necessarily ineffective when practiced without knowledge and self-reflection. This is because acting to conform to laws or rules of

³³⁰ As explained by Zhu Xi, "It is only that *li* may be divided into four parts, and then into eight, and then you can go on to break it up into still smaller divisions." (As quoted in Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 58). The freedom of categorizing *li* in different ways is based upon the mass-noun function of classical Chinese terms that I have discussed in chapter one.

³³¹ *Ibid*, 38.

³³² *Yishu* 271; 1, as quoted in *Ibid*, 75.

³³³ *Yishu* 15; 164. The position for which knowledge implies action lies at the basis of Huang's argument according to which the epistemological framework elaborated by the Cheng brothers does not admit of issues surrounding *akrasia* (weakness of the will). On the other hand, whether the Cheng provide an answer to the problem of *akrasia* is still debated. For a critical perspective on Huang's interpretation see Liu, "Why Be Moral? Comments on Huang Yong's Book on the Cheng Brothers".

propriety does not provide a long-lasting ground for moral action (as these are ‘external’ standards which can be detached from individuals’ understanding and purposes).³³⁴ In addition, and more importantly, the Cheng brothers hold that it is only by acting through understanding and self-reflection that one can find joy in following *li* (*ziran le xun li* 自然樂循理).³³⁵ Huang has noted that joy (*le*) appears as the “highest goal of Confucian self-cultivation”³³⁶ and that, for the Cheng brothers, it represents the goal of the extension of knowledge through the investigation of things. This interpretation seems to frame the Cheng’s joy as a type of end state or goal that is achieved through the extension of knowledge and the moral actions that derive from it. As I understand it, however, joy is a way of being or *modus operandi* proper of those people who act in accordance with *li*; in this sense, it is not an end state but, rather, an emotion with intentional content,³³⁷ meaning that it describes a state of affair in which an agent acts naturally (i.e. free of doubts and external impositions, in alignment with both oneself and one’s surrounding). Cheng Yi, for example, states: “What a joy it is to be without any hesitancy *in interaction* with other human beings!”³³⁸ Here, joy is felt *in interaction*, and thus it seems to be described more as an intentional state than an end goal. The same goes for the following statement: “Only when one is illuminated by *li* can one naturally find joy *in following it*.”³³⁹

While the importance of joy and its ethical implications will be further discussed in the next chapter, I shall now turn to the last and third differentiation made by Cheng Yi in articulating genuine or profound knowledge, that is, the difference between knowledge from hearing and seeing (*wenjian zhizhi* 聞見之知) and knowledge of/as virtue (*dexing zhizhi* 德性之知),³⁴⁰ a distinction that was first made by Zhang Zai.³⁴¹ As Cheng Yi states, “knowledge from hearing and seeing is not knowledge of/as virtue. It results from the contact of one thing and another thing and therefore is not internal (*fei nei ye* 非內也). The knowledge of those

³³⁴ “One’s forced (*mianqiang* 勉強) action cannot be long-lasting” (*Yishu* 18; 187).

³³⁵ *Yishu* 18; 188.

³³⁶ Huang, *Why Be Moral?*, 47.

³³⁷ I say ‘intentional content’ because it is not unproblematic to affirm that all emotions are intentional states. For a discussion on this subject, see Michael Tye, “The Experience of Emotion: An Intentionalist Theory,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 243, no. 1 (2008): 25-50.

³³⁸ *Yishu* 18; 193. Emphasis mine.

³³⁹ *Yishu* 18; 187. Emphasis mine.

³⁴⁰ I am here adopting Huang’s rendering of the two formulas which, in the case of ‘knowledge of/as virtue’, does not explicitly translate the character *xing* (nature).

³⁴¹ As noted in Huang, *Why Be Moral?*, 113.

erudite and skillful persons belongs to this. Knowledge of/as virtue does not rely upon (*jia* 假) hearing and seeing”.³⁴² This passage might lead us to think that Cheng Yi is here implying that genuine or profound knowledge is grasped independently from perceptual experience, but that is not the case. On the contrary, Cheng Yi states that “without eyes, the heart/mind cannot grasp; without the heart/mind, the eyes cannot see”³⁴³, and that if one is to abandon ‘knowledge from hearing and seeing’ then “one is to abandon sagehood and reject wisdom (*jue sheng qi zhi* 絕聖棄智)”.³⁴⁴ In order to better understand the differentiation between these two types of knowledge it shall be noted that knowledge from hearing and seeing, as explained by Huang, does not only include the knowledge gained through sense organs, but also the knowledge one gains from the teachings of sages, from reading classics and, more in general, knowledge that is passively gained through external sources of all kinds.³⁴⁵ What Cheng Yi is emphasizing here, is that profound knowledge can only be obtained by oneself as it can only be “apprehended in one’s own heart/mind (*mo shi xin tong* 默識心通)”,³⁴⁶ and thus it cannot be obtained from others’ words.³⁴⁷ Thus, in contrast to knowledge from hearing and seeing, which has passive character, knowledge of/as virtue is active, in the sense that it can be obtained only by means of a first-person effort on the part of the agent. This effort is described by the notion of “self-getting” (*zide* 自得), which sets the threshold between profound and superficial knowledge. According to Cheng Yi, for example, “nothing is more important in learning than to get it by oneself. Because one does not get it from outside, it is called ‘self-getting’ (*zide*)”.³⁴⁸ Cheng Hao, on the other hand, affirms that “the key to learning is *zide*”, and that “only when one gets it oneself can it become one’s own”.³⁴⁹ The notion of *zide* is taken by the Cheng brothers from Mencius (*Mengzi* 孟子 4b14), who states: “Virtuous people (*junzi* 君子) explore deeply into *dao* in order to get it by themselves (*zide*). When they get it by themselves they will be at ease in it; when they are at ease with it, they can draw

³⁴² *Yishu* 25; 317.

³⁴³ *Yishu* 6; 9.

³⁴⁴ *Yishu* 25; 168.

³⁴⁵ Huang, *Why Be Moral?*, 119.

³⁴⁶ *Yishu* 17; 178.

³⁴⁷ *Cuiyan* 2; 1253.

³⁴⁸ *Yishu* 25; 316.

³⁴⁹ *Yishu* 11; 122. The same notion is employed by Cheng Hao in explaining *Analects* 5.13, which states that Confucius was never heard talking about the heavenly *dao* and human nature. With regards to the passage, Cheng Hao states: “One cannot know human nature and heavenly *dao* unless through *zide*. It is for this reason that it is said that one cannot hear Confucius’ talk about human nature or heavenly *dao*.” (*Yishu* 11; 127).

deeply upon it; when they can draw deeply upon it, they can rely on it to deal with everything properly. For this reason, virtuous people want to get it by themselves.”³⁵⁰ For Cheng Hao, when knowledge of *li* (*dao*) is grasped (*de* 得) by oneself it is transformative and becomes “inner force”³⁵¹ or “virtue”³⁵² (*de* 德). As I understand it, virtue is derived from the correspondence between the *li* of things (the object of knowledge) and the *li* of one’s mind and nature (the agent). By correspondence, here, I do not mean a one-to-one identity, but a relation of agreement between two or more parts of a composite whole. It is this correspondence, I think, that lies behind the ability to act naturally, i.e. in accordance with *li*. This interpretation of correspondence as agreement, I find, helps in making sense of the transformative power of knowledge. With regards to the latter, for example, Cheng Hao states: “It is what one’s get (*de*) from one’s heart/mind that is called virtue (*de*). Naturally, ‘it will be manifested in one’s face, shown in one’s back, and extended to one’s four limbs, rendering its message intelligible without words’. What is the need for any forced actions?”³⁵³ We can now understand that what sets genuine or profound knowledge apart from shallow knowledge is that it has transformative power, meaning that it necessarily implies and directs one’s actions. More specifically, it is a kind of knowledge that is conducive to virtuous action, and the more this knowledge of *li* is cultivated, the more one acts in accordance with *dao* naturally, without exerting effort.

Overall, the Cheng’s distinction between profound and shallow knowledge – in its three variants – is based upon their theory of the extension of knowledge through the investigation of things, particularly developed by Cheng Yi. As I have discussed, the Cheng start from the metaphysical assumption of *li* being both one and many (thus being manifested, although differently, in the agent as well as in the objects of knowledge), and it is this communal character which grants the possibility of genuine knowledge. The threshold which differentiates between the latter and shallow or superficial knowledge, for the Cheng, lies in *zide* (‘self-getting’), a first-person effort on the part of the agent through which the *li* of things

³⁵⁰ I rely on Huang’s translation (in *Why Be Moral?*, 113-114), but I have changed his translation of *junzi* as “superior persons” to “virtuous people”.

³⁵¹ Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 80. I prefer Graham’s interpretation of the character to the more conventional “virtue” interpretation, mainly because *de* as inner force offers a more defined perspective on the general notion of “virtue”.

³⁵² Huang, *Why Be Moral?*, 111.

³⁵³ *Yishu* 15; 147, quoting *Mengzi* 7a 21.

(together with those of the mind and the nature) are related by means of correspondences as well as differences.³⁵⁴ It is the criss-crossing patterns of unity and difference traced by *li* through self-getting, I will argue later on, that constitute what I consider to be the articulation of “reason” in the Cheng brother’s system. In order to provide further ground for my interpretation, the next chapter will provide a discussion of the ethical implications derived from the Cheng’s metaphysics and epistemology of *li*. But for now, I shall turn to discuss Spinoza’s theory of knowledge.

5.2 Knowing *Deus sive Natura*: Adequate and Inadequate Actions of the Mind.

Spinoza’s metaphysics sets the ground for his views on human nature; in his framework, individuals are to be regarded as partaking a wider order of things (namely, God or Nature) and thus cannot be understood without knowledge of such broader context. This view challenges the prejudice (*praejudicia*)³⁵⁵ for which humans are considered as fundamentally different from other beings. As he states:

“[When writing about] men’s way of living [authors] seem not to discuss natural things, which follow the common laws of Nature; rather, they seem to discuss things that are outside Nature. Indeed, they seem to conceive the place of man in Nature as being like an empire within an empire. For they believe that man disturbs the order of Nature rather than that he follows it, that he has an absolute power over his actions, and that he is determined by himself alone.”³⁵⁶

³⁵⁴ Remember that the formula *li yi fen shu* (‘one principle with many differentiations’) itself is formulated by Cheng Yi in order to explain the need to treat people in a differentiated manner.

³⁵⁵ According to Spinoza, the notion of human beings as being somehow different from Nature (and thus not entirely subjected to its laws) is especially represented by the notion of a purposeful God which acts by means of final ends in order to please human beings and be pleased by them in return. According to Spinoza, this idea derives from the projection of human characteristics onto God or Nature. The first book of the *Ethics* tackles such prejudices in terms of metaphysics, and shows that “Nature has no end which is pre-established for it, and that all final causes are nothing but human inventions.” (E1, Appendix).

³⁵⁶ E3, Preface.

As Spinoza has shown in his discussion of substance and modes, however, these notions ignore the causal relations which characterize particular beings *as* Nature and, in turn, necessarily lead to misconceptions about human nature. In order to correct such distorted views, Spinoza devotes the second book of the *Ethics* to providing a theory of knowledge which, in his words, can ultimately lead us to the “supreme blessedness” (*summae beatitudinis*) of the human mind.³⁵⁷ In deferring discussions of knowledge to a later stage, Spinoza distances himself from Descartes, whose *Meditations* starts by inquiring into the nature of knowing in order to consider what can be actually known. This is because while the *Meditations* follow an analytic method of exposition, the *Ethics* follows a synthetic method, in which Spinoza starts with self-evident truths (axioms) and definitions in order to then demonstrate their logical consequences.

I have mentioned earlier, when introducing the notion of substance, that Spinoza employs some key terms of the Scholastic and Cartesian traditions with different meaning and significance; these include, among others, Spinoza’s understanding of ideas. In E3d3 he states: “By an idea I understand a conception of the mind (*mens conceptum*), which the mind forms on account of the fact that it is a thinking thing.” The definition does not seem unusual or significantly distant from a general understanding of the nature of ideas; however, the ‘explanation’ following this definition suggests otherwise. There, Spinoza explains that he prefers to talk of ‘conception’ rather than ‘perception’ (*perceptionem*) because the latter seems to indicate a passive relation of the mind to an object, while he wants to affirm that an idea is an “action of the mind” (*actionem mentis*).³⁵⁸ This means that, in the context of the *Ethics*, ideas do not refer to images of things that are pictured in the mind, as they are intended by Descartes;³⁵⁹ this is because, as Spinoza explains that images (as well as words) pertain to motion and thus to the attribute of extension, rather than to thought.³⁶⁰ What

³⁵⁷ E2, Introduction.

³⁵⁸ With this differentiation Spinoza might have distanced himself from Descartes, who considered ideas to be “whatever is immediately perceived by the mind” (*Reply to Second Objection*, as reported in Parkinson, *Ethics*, 330). Notably, Descartes affirmed that an idea could be understood as meaning an activity in the Preface to the *Meditations*, but ultimately rejected this interpretation.

³⁵⁹ It should be noted that Descartes does not strictly *identify* ideas with images, and he holds that not all ideas can be visual in nature (such as that of sour, God, or justice, for example, are no visual); however, he does state that ideas are “as it were [*tantaquam*] images of things” (*Meditations*, p1, as quoted in Kurt Smith, “Descartes’ Theory of Ideas,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2021).

³⁶⁰ “The essence of words and images is constituted solely by corporeal motions, which are far from involving the concept of thought.” (E2p49s)

Spinoza means in stating that ideas are actions of the mind is clarified later on in E2p49, where he states that “There is in the mind no volition or, no affirmation or negation, apart from that which an idea involves in so far as it is an idea.” This means, in other words, that ideas already imply judgement; to have an idea of Y, for example, is to have a judgment about Y as in affirming or negating something of it. The conception of ideas as volitions or actions of the mind leads Spinoza to affirm, in the corollary of the same proposition, that “Will and Intellect are one and the same”. Spinoza provides here a confutation of Descartes theory of judgment involving the faculty of intellect (that which perceives ideas/images) and the faculty of will (that which judges ideas).³⁶¹ But if ideas, as affirmed by Spinoza, are volitions of the mind, then both intellect and will are just particular volitions themselves and thus cannot be ascribed to different cognitive functions. Importantly, despite the fact that all ideas are actions of the mind, it does not follow that they all play the same role with respect to knowledge.

An important differentiation found in the *Ethics* is that between ‘adequate’ and ‘inadequate’ ideas. An adequate idea, as defined in E2d4, is an idea which “in so far as it is considered in itself without relation to its object, has all the properties, or, the intrinsic denominations, of a true idea”. Thus, a true and an adequate idea are the same, except that the latter is considered in itself, while a true idea, on the other hand, “must agree with that of which it is the idea.” (E1a6). These definitions might suggest that Spinoza is here formulating a correspondence theory of truth, but this is problematized by an important remark in E2p43: “Someone that has a true idea knows *at the same* time that he has a true idea.”³⁶² This statement might seem odd, and if ‘true’ is intended – broadly speaking – as ‘corresponding to reality’ it might even seem wrong. For example, if in a football match I predict that a certain team is going to win and this reveals to be true, I do not know it to be true at the time of my prediction. But while the proposition might seem mistaken, it only indicates that – in the context of the *Ethics* – ‘truth’ acquires an uncommon usage. The latter, in fact, is better clarified in the scholium of Ep43s which states that “to have a true idea simply

³⁶¹ *Meditations*, IV.

³⁶² Emphasis mine.

means knowing a thing perfectly, or, in the best way.”³⁶³ Inadequate ideas, in contrast, are mutilated and confused, and thus amount, for Spinoza, to the sole cause of falsity. It should be noted, at the same time, that having inadequate knowledge of Y does not mean having no knowledge of Y; rather, it means not having the best knowledge of Y. This is why Spinoza states that “falsity consists in the privation of knowledge which inadequate ideas involve.” (E2p35)³⁶⁴ Considering this differentiation, it is clear that what we might call ‘true’ knowledge consists, for Spinoza, in the best knowledge possible, which is attained through the conception of adequate ideas. At the same time, however, he states that both adequate and inadequate ideas follow from the same necessity which characterizes the natural order of things (E2p36) which means, in other words, that we necessarily conceive both adequately and inadequately – a consideration which might challenge the attainment of genuine knowledge in its own right. In order to understand the necessary coexistence of both clear (adequate) and confused (inadequate) ideas, I shall consider Spinoza’s view on the mind and the body, which offers a practical ground for understanding his epistemological views.

I have explained that, in the *Ethics*, ideas are conceived as actions of the mind: but what is the mind? According to Spinoza it is, itself, and idea which is composed of many ideas (E2p15), and which has the body as its object (E2p13). It is important here to remind that, as mentioned in the previous chapter, while attributes express the essence of substance - and thus God is perceived as being both thinking and extended (E2p1,2) – each attribute must be conceived through itself (E1p10, s). This means that extended bodies must be considered and understood in terms of extension alone, and that ideas must be understood in terms of thought alone. The conceptual barrier of attributes, however, does not lead to issues of incommensurability between extended and thinking modes, as it was for Descartes’ mind-body dualism. This is because attributes *are* substance, and modes are particular expressions of substance conceived under this or that attribute (*qua* extension or *qua* thought). As a consequence of this metaphysical framework, Spinoza states in E2p7 that “The order and

³⁶³ As noted by Parkinson, this is clarified by a statement from Spinoza in his *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* (an unfinished text written from 1656), in which it is explained that “if someone says that Peter exists, but does not know that Peter exists, then his utterance is false even if Peter exists.” Parkinson, *Ethics*, 31.

³⁶⁴ The previous proposition (E2p43) states that “There is nothing positive in ideas on account of which they are called false”. This, I think, is clarified by the fact that ideas (as I discussed earlier) are actions of the mind and, as such, cannot be false.

connection of ideas is the same (*idem est*) as the order and connection of things.”³⁶⁵ In other words, to talk of Y’s body and Y’s mind is to talk about the same thing considered under different attributes; thus, the affections of the body are perceived by the mind in the same order and connection as the body senses them. Similarly to the mind (an idea composed of many ideas), the body is composed of many individuals³⁶⁶ of a great variety (E2, postulates 1-3)³⁶⁷; together, mind and body- as particular modifications of the attributes of God or Nature -constitute the nature of man (E2p10c, p13c). Let us now go back to the necessity of both adequate and inadequate cognition; with regards to minds and bodies, Spinoza notes that they are conceived inadequately because the body and its ideas are known by means of interactions with other bodies (i.e. by their affections) rather than as things ‘in themselves’. It is for this reason that Spinoza states that “the human body exists as we sense it” (E2p13c); here, he is not establishing sense-perception as the chief method of knowledge, but rather that the body can only be known through its being affected by other external bodies.³⁶⁸ In the same way, the mind does not have adequate knowledge of itself “except in so far as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the body.” (E2p23). It is from the fact that both the body and the mind can be known to us solely by means of their affections that we conceive of them inadequately, in the sense that they are partially affirmed and partially negated, depending on the ways in which mind and body are affected. Let us consider an example: if

³⁶⁵ This is generally called by Spinoza scholars as theory of parallelism (sometimes also called as psychophysical parallelism). According to contemporary scholar Chantal Jaquet, however, this label is misleading as two parallels can never meet, thus giving the impression that extended and thinking modes are in some way incommensurable. Furthermore, calling Spinoza’s theory as “parallelism” does not do justice to the fact that, as expressed in the Latin text, the connection of things and ideas is *the same* (*idem est*). See Chantal Jaquet, “The Mind-Body Union”, in *A Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Yitzhack Melamed (Hoboken: Wiley, 2021): 296-303.

³⁶⁶ Spinoza here mentions liquid, soft, and hard individuals. An individual is such in virtue of its structure. As explained in the definition following Lemma 3 of E2, if many bodies are restrained to each other in such a way as to share the same degree of motion and rest with fixed ratio, then these bodies are “reciprocally united to each other”, thus forming a composite body, namely, an individual. The bounding of individuals into more composite individuals, Spinoza notes, could continue to infinity so that one could conceive “the whole of Nature to be one individual, whose parts – that is, all bodies – vary in infinite ways without any change of the whole individual” (E2L7s).

³⁶⁷ While I do not consider Spinoza’s articulated conception of the human body in length, it should be noted that the latter is a central concern of the second book of the *Ethics*, whose first definition is that of body: “By body I understand a mode which expresses in a certain and determinate way the essence of God, in so far as he is considered as an extended thing” (E2d1) For more on this topic see Chantal Jaquet, *Les Corps* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2001)

³⁶⁸ More specifically, Spinoza explains that “The idea of any mode, by which the human body is affected by external bodies, must involve the nature of the human body and, at the same time, the nature of the external body.” (E2p16); and again: “The human body does not know the human body, nor does it know that it exists, except through the ideas of the affections by which the body is affected.” (E2p19)

Julia is touched on her leg by a cat, she will conceive of her body *through* the affection caused by the cat, and so she will conceive of it in a way that affirms something of the body (her leg as being affected by the cat, for example) and, at the same time, negates something of it (any part of the body that is not conceived by Julia when affected by the cat, say, her thumb). As Spinoza explains in E2p36d, while all ideas are in God and are necessarily true in so far as they are considered as attribute of thought, they become inadequate when they are related to someone's mind as considered in itself. This is best understood when recalling that, as Spinoza established in the first book, "to be finite is in fact a partial negation, and to be infinite is the absolute affirmation of the existence of some nature".³⁶⁹ Now, since the mind and the body are finite expressions of the attributes of substance, they necessarily involve some partial negation which results in the privation of knowledge proper of inadequate ideas. In this sense, partial or inadequate knowledge is the epistemological translation of the ontological status of mind and body as determinate expressions of Nature,³⁷⁰ and it is this condition which motivates Spinoza's statement that both adequate and inadequate ideas "follow with the same necessity".³⁷¹ The structural finitude of mind and body, however, does not impede the attainment of true knowledge, it only sets the liminality of the ways in which knowledge can be attained.

In his taxonomy of knowledge, Spinoza famously identifies three kinds: imagination, reason, and intuitive knowledge, all of which are explained E2P40s2. Here, Spinoza explains that imagination (which he also calls 'opinion' or 'knowledge of the first kind') is constituted by confused and inadequate ideas which arise from signs and inconstant experience.³⁷² When speaking about signs, Spinoza is referring to our use of language³⁷³ while, when referring to inconstant experience, he is referring to both sense perception as well as inductive knowledge. It is important to remind here that saying that sense perception is source of inadequate ideas does not equate with saying that it provides no knowledge; rather, it means that knowledge

³⁶⁹ E1p8s1.

³⁷⁰ This is also explained in E2p40s1: "the human body, in that it is limited, is capable of forming distinctly within itself at the same time only a certain number of images", and thus certain images are necessarily confused or mutilated.

³⁷¹ E2p36d.

³⁷² In Latin *experientia vaga*, literally meaning 'wandering experience'.

³⁷³ As noted by Parkinson, Spinoza considers language as source of inadequate knowledge because we often use many words for indicating the same meaning or the same word with different meanings (Parkinson, *Ethics*, 32).

deriving from the senses is not sufficient for us to explain and understand Nature. Let us consider an example: when I see a cup of coffee on the desk in front of me, I know that the cup is there by virtue of seeing it. At the same time, however, I am ignorant of the complex processes involving both my brain and sense-organs, and the cup, and since I have no knowledge of such processes my ideas about seeing the cup are necessarily partial (i.e. I do not have the best knowledge possible about me seeing the cup). The same goes for inductive knowledge: if I state that water boils at 100 degrees and the statement is based on my past experience, I know that *that* is the case but I do not know *why* that is the case. Imagination, thus, is knowledge of a 'lower' grade because, in Spinoza's words, it formulates "the consequence without its premises" (E2p28).

Despite this, sense perception and experience have a fundamental role with regards to acquiring knowledge of the existence of modes (i.e. particular things): this is because while existence is implied by the notion of God or Nature, as discussed in the previous chapter, modes can be conceived as both existing and non-existing (or, stated differently, the existence of modes cannot be inferred from the concept of a mode: the definition of a cup of coffee on my desk, for example, does not imply existence of the cup.).³⁷⁴ This is another reason motivating Spinoza's statement that "the human body exists as we sense it" (E2p13). Again, this is not to say that perception provides us with adequate knowledge of the human body (as explained earlier, our knowledge of the body is inadequate); rather, it means that it is only through perception that one can attain knowledge of her own embodiment.

While imagination is source of inadequate knowledge, Spinoza states that some things can only be conceived adequately; these are what he calls "common notions" (*communes notiones*), which are described as properties that are common to all things. More precisely, these are "equally in the part and in the whole", and constitute the essence of no particular thing (E2p37). In Spinoza's time, common notions (which are discussed by Descartes and, in other form, by the Scholastic tradition) indicate axioms, i.e. self-evidently true propositions.³⁷⁵ In order to explain common notions, Spinoza starts by considering that all

³⁷⁴ I have explained this more in detail in the first section of the present chapter. The idea that existence of particular things can be known by means of perception (and not by means of axioms and definitions) is discussed in Letter 10 (1663).

³⁷⁵ The Latin *communes notiones* translates the Greek *knoinai ennoiai* (literally meaning 'postulate') which was used by Euclid as a synonym for 'axiom'.

bodies have in common certain things, i.e. motion and rest, and thus - by virtue of the theory of attributes – they also share certain ideas. The latter, being equally in the part and in the whole, are present in the human mind as they are present in God’s infinite intellect, and thus cannot be mutilated and confused but necessarily adequate. In this sense, common notions imply a certain degree of correspondence or agreement between the ideas of the infinite intellect and those of finite minds. With regards to this perspective, Deleuze has noted that common notions are “not at all abstract ideas but general ideas”³⁷⁶ that do not describe the essence of particular things but, rather, the relations of agreement that are formed in constructing unity. By conceiving common notions, then, we are able to understand the ‘internal’ agreement of things and, with that, the ways in which they oppose and disagree (E2p29s).³⁷⁷ According to Spinoza, the conception of common notions amounts to the second kind of knowledge, namely, ‘reason’; the latter, unlike imagination, necessarily produces adequate and true ideas (E2p41). Importantly, what is common to all of Nature necessarily follows from God’s existence and, as such, is eternal.³⁷⁸ This is why Spinoza famously states that “It is of the nature of reason to perceive things under a certain species of eternity (*sub specie aeternitatis*).” (E2p44c2) Stated in other terms, one can say that reason conceives the timeless agreements characterizing the properties of things which causally affect each other; as a consequence, we do not conceive such ideas as pertaining to our mind (i.e. partial) but as partaking in the laws of Nature.³⁷⁹ Together with reason, upon which I shall expand in later chapters, the third kind of knowledge – which Spinoza calls ‘intuitive’ – is also source of true

³⁷⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988), 54. This conception is based on Spinoza’s explanation of E2p40s, where he speaks of the causes for which we tend to form ‘transcendental terms’ (i.e. general terms such as entity, being, and so on). According to him, since the body is limited, the more it is affected the more it forms blurred images in order to make sense of all the affections to which it is subjected. For this reason, we tend to individuate the common characters of things and, in doing so, we do not grasp the details of particular things. However, in forming ‘universals’ we refer to the images of things, rather than to their affirmations or negations (i.e. ideas), thus forming terms that are “in the highest degree confused”.

³⁷⁷ Common notions, while shared by all things, are not conceived by everyone in the same way because “they vary in each person in accordance with the thing by which the body was affected more often, and which the mind imagines or recollect more easily.” For example, each one might have a different understanding of common properties of man, such as beings a “biped without feathers”, an animal that laughs”, or “a rational animal”. (E2p40s) It is for this reason, Spinoza explains, that many controversies arise among philosophers when discussing such general terms.

³⁷⁸ In the *Ethics*, ‘eternity’ does not refer to a kind of everlasting existence, as it is not concerned with time: “By eternity I understand existence itself, in so far as it is conceived to follow necessarily solely from the definition of an eternal thing [that is, God].” (E1d8)

³⁷⁹ While I am here providing a discussion of Spinoza’s theory of knowledge, more on *ratio* will be said in Chapter Seven.

ideas, but while reason perceives the common properties of things rather than their particular essences, intuitive knowledge proceeds from adequate knowledge of the attributes of God to knowledge of the essence of things (E2p40s). This is illustrated by Spinoza with an example in which, given three numbers, one is asked to find the fourth proportional: if one is given numbers such as 1, 2, and 3, he explains, one can intuitively see that the fourth proportional is 6 without having the need to multiply or divide numbers. The third kind of knowledge is still regarded by scholars as particularly obscure, as it is unclear whether it differs from reason by virtue of its method or because of the content apprehended. While setting this controversy goes beyond the purpose of the present discussion, it is useful to mention a passage from E5p36s where Spinoza briefly formulates the difference between reason and intuitive knowledge as follows: “[By means of intuitive knowledge] it becomes evident to us, and in what way, our mind follows from the divine nature, and continually depends on God in respect of essence and existence.” Thus, while reason conceives Nature through acquiring knowledge of common notions (moving from the Many to the One), intuitive knowledge conceives the infinite essences of modes which derives (i.e. are in) Nature (thus moving from the One to the Many). Despite this difference, in both kinds we find that knowledge is reflexive: on the one hand, knowledge of the common properties of things leads to – and implies³⁸⁰ – knowledge of substance while, on the other hand, knowledge of the latter implies knowledge of particular things.

The reflexive character of knowledge plays a crucial role in Spinoza’s project of delineating a model of human nature which can set the guidelines for a harmonious life. It reveals that knowledge of oneself (in terms of body and mind) is intrinsically and necessarily related to knowledge of the other, namely, the expressions of Nature as one substance affected in infinitely many ways. Spinoza does not hold that we can have perfect knowledge of the whole of Nature; this would be impossible, considering the specific and finite perspective from which knowledge is formed by individuals.³⁸¹ Furthermore, that is not

³⁸⁰ This is clear from what I discussed earlier with regards to immanent causation and expressionism. Furthermore, it is useful to recall that, according to Spinoza, “Of things which have nothing in common with one another, one cannot be the cause of another.” (E1p3).

³⁸¹ For this reason, Chantal Jaquet has argued that Spinoza cannot be properly considered as an absolute rationalist, as his notion of reason is co-dependent with the finite nature of modes. See Chantal Jaquet, *Affects, Actions, and Passions in Spinoza: The Unity of Mind and Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

Spinoza's main concern in discussing his theory of adequate and inadequate cognition. As Deleuze has noted, "the aim is not to make something known to us, but to make us understand our power of knowing", in the sense of becoming conscious of such power.³⁸² The reflexive character of adequate knowledge, I will argue at a later stage, is key to understand Spinoza's articulation of reason as a relational *modus operandi*. For now, in light of the discussion of the Cheng and Spinoza's theories of knowledge presented so far, I shall now turn to a comparative analysis of the two frameworks.

5.3 Knowing Oneself through Oneness

The two theories of knowledge elaborated by Spinoza and the Cheng are the epistemological translation of their One and Many metaphysical frameworks, where *li* and *substantia* ground the existence of particular beings as differentiated manifestations of oneness. As I have discussed, it is precisely the communal and immanent character of these principles that guarantees epistemic access to genuine or adequate knowledge; for the Cheng, this consists in the extension of knowledge through the investigation of things in order to grasp their *li*, while for Spinoza it consists in the knowledge constructed upon the common notions, i.e. the properties that are shared by all the modes of substance and yet do not constituting their essence.³⁸³ Similarly to what has been discussed with regards to their views on oneness, these philosophers have each their peculiarities in articulating their views on knowledge and thus cannot be considered as equivalent. For example, while for the Cheng brothers it is evident that the object of genuine knowledge is also that which grants its very possibility (*li*), Spinoza is less explicit in affirming this identity and differentiates between the ground of epistemic access (God or Nature) and the object of knowledge (common notions).³⁸⁴ And again: while the first-person effort required in grasping genuine knowledge

³⁸² Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 83.

³⁸³ I am here referring to both 'reason' as well as 'intuitive knowledge' since both imply (each in a different way) the common notions.

³⁸⁴ Spinoza does affirm that the highest good of the mind is to know God (E4p28), but this is a much later stage in his discussion than that of the Cheng brothers *li*; while the latter lies at the basis of the Cheng's ethical theory, Spinoza's position on the knowledge of God constitute his ethical views. Thus, generally speaking, both the Cheng and Spinoza could be said to make the ground of knowledge its very object, but they do so

is implied by Spinoza's theory of ideas as being actions of the mind, the Cheng brothers are adamant in emphasizing the notion of 'self-getting' in order to differentiate between what I have called 'passive' and 'active' knowledge. While other examples could be provided, it suffices to note that the two theories cannot be considered as equivalent, as they present many differences concerning not only the linguistic peculiarities through which notions are articulated, but also with regards the argumentative tools with which they are constructed.

In consideration of this, I maintain, important similarities can be outlined across the two systems, not only with regards to the scope of knowledge (to conduct a flourishing life on the basis of the system in which humans partake) but also, and perhaps more interestingly, with regards to the ways in which knowledge itself is conceived. In particular, I think there are three common characteristics which can be outlined in order to appreciate such alignment.

First, for both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers knowledge is as a *praxis*, by which I mean an effort which requires and/or implies action. In the *Ethics*, this conception is found in Spinoza's unique notion of ideas as actions of the mind and his consequential identification of will and intellect. Here, as I have discussed above, the formation of knowledge always implies acts of affirmation and/or negation that directly inform the ways in which we understand the relations between ourselves and Nature and, with that, which trace individual's actions. In this context, adequate knowledge reveals the relation between substance and modes as both necessary and indivisible, a bond which – in turn – illuminates the relational character of particular beings (human nature included), that is, their being constituted and defined by relations. In the Cheng brothers, knowledge as *praxis* is embodied in the notion of "self-getting" which lies at the basis of the extension of knowledge through the investigation of things. Here, knowledge requires a first-person effort, in daily practice, through which the interrelations between the many *li* can be extended in order to understand their oneness. Here, again, knowledge of *li* directly informs one's behavior, in that knowledge of *li* – according to the Cheng – leads to act in accordance with the natural patterns of interactions among things. Since *li* and *substantia* are both one-and-many, the practice of acquiring genuine or adequate knowledge is always twofold: on the one hand, it entails knowledge of particular 'essences' (or knowledge of the manifold principles for which things

emphasize different elements and in differing stages of their arguments. In this, I say, they cannot be considered identical.

are as they are) and, on the other hand, it involves the recognition of the all-encompassing unity which underlies all aspects of reality (the fact that “Whatever exists is in God” or that “The ten thousand things form one body”). This twofold aspect, I think, is embodied in the general notion of relationality – i.e. the connectedness between things -, which is enacted, for Spinoza, by means of causal relation and for the Cheng brothers by means of relations of stimulation and response.³⁸⁵ In the same way relationality can be seen in the bond of dependance between the one and the many *li* on the one hand, and between substance and modes on the other hand, in the same way knowledge can be grasped only in interaction, rather than in itself. In this sense, I think that both systems articulate knowledge as the practice through which the individual establishes relations with the things of the world through *acts* of appropriate³⁸⁶ distinction and unification, at the same time. Giving that, on the one hand, affirming unity without difference would imply sameness while, on the other hand, distinction without commonality would imply incommensurability (two case scenarios in which relationality becomes impossible), knowledge is genuine or adequate only when acquired through both acts of distinctions and unification, at the same time.

A second aspect shared by Spinoza and the Cheng’s theories of knowledge is that, in both systems, adequate and genuine knowledge are described as transformative. More specifically, the result of acquiring knowledge is that individuals are lead to act non only according to their individual and finite perspective, but also according to Nature as a whole. In Spinoza, for example, reason is described as the *modus operandi* through which the mind perceives things *sub specie aeternitatis* (“under a certain species of eternity”) even though eternity is a property of God and its attributes, while modes, in themselves, are not eternal. This is because reason establishes the necessary relations involved by the nature of God and its modifications (the laws of nature, we could say), and thus it leads the intellect to perceive modes as determinate individuations or affections of an infinite unity – thus shifting from apprehending by means of finite existence to understanding in terms of God’s indivisible existence. In other words, adequate knowledge leads individuals to establish the non-duality of *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata* in a way that our finite constitution is understood as

³⁸⁵ See chapter four.

³⁸⁶ By ‘appropriate’ I do not here mean ‘according to a set of pre-determined rules’; rather, I mean the establishment of a relation which is constructed on the basis of all the parties involved (thus, appropriate to the *relata*).

necessarily related to that of other beings and Nature as a whole. In the Cheng brothers, the transformative character of knowledge is embodied in the effort of “uniting external and internal” by grasping the underlying oneness of the *li* of things. Through the investigation of things through ‘self-getting’, one becomes able to establish the underlying unity between one’s own nature (*xing*) and *dao* by understanding that “There is a single *li* in things and in me”. In other words, through genuine knowledge, individuals *become* able to gain a perspective of oneness *in* difference. Genuine and adequate knowledge are thus transformative in the sense that they involve a shift in perspective from a ‘one *or* many’ epistemic view to a ‘one *and* many’ framework.

A third characteristic shared by the Cheng brothers and Spinoza’s epistemological discussions is that, in both contexts, knowledge is presented as being reflexive, meaning that genuine knowledge of things always involves self-knowledge in the same way as self-knowledge is always involved in knowledge of the ‘external’. This aspect of reflexivity is implied in the characterization of *li* and *substantia* as being both one and many and thus as that which grants the possibility of acquiring genuine and adequate knowledge. In the Cheng brothers, for example, knowledge of *li* can be actualized precisely because *li* is present in the subject as much as in her sources of knowledge: “All have *li*. If there were not *li*, the inferences (*tui* 推) would not be successful.”³⁸⁷ Thus, knowing the *li* of *x* necessarily involves awareness or knowledge of the *li* of oneself and, at the same time, the more things one is able to investigate (by penetrating their *li*) the more one becomes aware of their own *li* as partaking in oneness. As a result, through the endeavor of knowledge “one can fulfill one’s own nature” and, by extension, they can also “enable others to fulfil their nature”.³⁸⁸ In Spinoza, on the other hand, the possibility of adequate knowledge is granted by the existence of properties that are shared by all beings as much as God or Nature; the common notions. By means of the latter individuals *become* able to grasp commonalities shared by all bodies and minds, as much as in extension and thought as indivisible attributes of God. In fact, the reason why individuals are able to conceive the attributes in the first place, is precisely that they *are*

³⁸⁷ As quoted in Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 10. And again: “The reason why [*li*] can be exhausted is simply that there is only one *li* in all the innumerable things, and even a single thing or activity, however small, has *li*.” (Ibid.)

³⁸⁸ Ibid. Here the Cheng use the expression “infer by analogy” (*tuilei*), meaning to extend one’s own *li* to that of others by means of establishing interrelations.

determinate instances of them, with which they share common properties; these, importantly, not only establish epistemic continuity between a subject and the things of the world, but also provide ground for *becoming* aware of oneself by means of being affected by the things of the world, thus apprehending those common notions which constitute things as much as subjectivity itself. This reflexive character of knowledge is well represented by Spinoza's ideas on the body (which "exists as we sense it")³⁸⁹ and its affections – that are also the affections of the mind: "The human mind [through the affections of the body] perceives the nature of very many bodies *together with* the nature of its own body".³⁹⁰ Furthermore, since modes are affections of God and thus minds are finite expressions of God's infinite intellect, each mode's way of knowing is part of the infinitely many ways through which God knows itself. In this sense, our knowledge embodies a certain determination of God's self-knowledge. It is precisely because of this general reflexive character of knowledge that we can perceive Nature as oneness and thus attain the highest good and virtue of the mind.³⁹¹

In consideration of Spinoza and the Cheng brothers' different articulations of their theories of knowledge, I have here identified three features which I think are present in both epistemologies: first, I have discussed that knowledge is considered as *praxis* that requires an active, first-person effort; I then explained that, in both systems, knowledge is transformative since it is an endeavor through which we shift from an individual perspective to a 'one *and* many' vision of Nature; in turn, and as third common feature, I have noted that for both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers, knowledge necessarily involves reflexivity or self-knowledge because it is based upon the interrelations of particular beings and Nature as oneness. These common features, I maintain, are directly related to the moral theories that these philosophers articulate on the basis of their views on oneness. As I will discuss in what follows, the immediate consequence of their 'one-and-many' metaphysics is that notions of "good" and "bad" do not indicate absolute values (whereby 'absolute' I mean 'in itself'), even though neither Spinoza nor the Cheng brothers ascribe to relativistic moral views. Rather, both systems inscribe the discernment of 'good' and 'bad' as resulting from the relational character

³⁸⁹ E2, p13c.

³⁹⁰ E2, p16c1. Emphasis mine.

³⁹¹ E4, p28: "The highest good of the mind is the knowledge of God, and the highest virtue of the mind is to know God."

of human nature. This normative dimension will be later discussed in relation to the notion of “reason” which, I will argue, is shared by both Spinoza and the Cheng.

CHAPTER SIX

The Ethics of One and Many: The Cheng and Spinoza on the Virtuous Self

Introduction

Building on the earlier established metaphysical and epistemological frameworks, this chapter presents and comparatively assesses the ethical theories developed by Spinoza and the Cheng brothers. The first section is devoted to a discussion of Spinoza's ethical views, with particular reference to his theory of *conatus* (power) and his understanding of the emotions. After presenting his notion of power as the essence of individuals, I consider how Spinoza relates this notion to his understanding of active and passive affects. Here, I argue that the emotions signal individuals' transition from a lesser to a greater state of perfection and, with that, of virtue; thus, emotions can either be conducive to a flourishing life or determine the opposite, depending on one's ability to adequately understand the causal network of one's affections. Following this discussion, I present Spinoza's articulations of moral principles as derivative from the structure and dynamics of Nature as a whole. The second section is devoted to discussing the Cheng's theory of ethics, with particular reference to their understanding of the Confucian virtue of *ren* 仁 and their views on desire. Here, I argue that the Cheng's articulation of moral principles (such as the goodness of human nature) is modeled on the basis of their views on one-and-many *li* and *qi*. To them, the attainment of virtue lies in the ability to relate one's own nature with that of others as partaking in the same oneness; morally bad behavior, on the other hand, is identified with selfish desires (*siyu* 私欲) which are at once symptom and cause of the inability to both understand the underlying unity of beings as well as realizing one's own nature. This framework is then related to the Cheng's understanding of "good" and "bad" as natural opposite that equally partake in the dynamics of the ten thousand things. After presenting the two systems, the third section presents their comparative assessment. Here I note that one major difference characterizing Spinoza and the Cheng's view on ethics is their respective treatment of the notion of desire – even though,

in both instances, this notion plays a crucial role in the formulation of moral principles. I then move to discuss the similarities found across the two theories: first, I argue that both systems are based upon two notions of what I call ‘extended self’, meaning that the referent of the virtuous self necessarily includes other individuals; second, I note that, for both Spinoza and the Cheng, the motivation for moral behavior is displayed by individuals’ desire but is found in the attainment of genuine or adequate knowledge. Overall the chapter serves for grounding the normative dimension of what I will argue to be a shared notion of “reason” in the following chapter.

6.1 Power and Perfection in Spinoza’s *Ethics*

While it might seem that the *Ethics* is primarily concerned with discussing the mind and its capacity for understanding Nature – what Spinoza calls the “intellectual love of God” (*Amor Dei intellectualis*)³⁹² – we shall not forget that such capacity necessarily involves a crucial role on the part of the body; given that the mind is the idea of the body, discussions about the affections of the mind always imply the affections of the body as well.³⁹³ For this reason, before entering his discussion of affections in book three, Spinoza reminds us that “Whatever increases or diminishes, helps or hinders, our body’s power of acting, the idea of that same thing increases or diminishes, helps or hinders, our mind’s power of thinking.”³⁹⁴

The power that Spinoza is here referring to is an effort which he calls *conatus* (from the verb *conatur* ‘to try’, ‘to attempt’) and through which each thing perseveres in its being and which, in the *Ethics*, is conceived as constituting “nothing other than the actual essence of a thing.” (E3, p6-7). Such endeavor, as articulated by Spinoza, has universal applicability as it is manifested by all things and not just human beings. The principle of *conatus* relies on the argument for which things cannot be destroyed but by means of an external cause; this is so because the essence of each thing, positing its existence, cannot possibly deny it at the same time. This means, for Spinoza, that something cannot self-destroy or be destroyed ‘internally’,

³⁹² The intellectual love of God is discussed in the last part of the *Ethics*. See for example E5p33-35.

³⁹³ E2p19: “The human mind does not know the human body, nor does it know that it exists, except through the ideas of the affections by which the body is affected.”

³⁹⁴ E3p11.

but only by means of external causes.³⁹⁵ With regards to *conatus*, this means that to say that X endeavors to persevere in its being means for X to continue to do X until it is hindered from doing so by external causes. Thus, a body in motion will continue to move unless determined to do otherwise by another body, and an idea will persist in thought until it is negated or modified by another idea. As noted by Cristofolini, Spinoza's theory of *conatus* is the metaphysical translation of one of the scientific interests of his time, namely, the principle of inertia, according to which a body tends to preserve its motion and direction unless subjected to external forces which determine it to do otherwise.³⁹⁶ In this sense, *conatus* denotes a principle of self-preservation. In the context of the *Ethics*, the notion of *conatus* as the power (i.e. the essence) of things also refers to the fact that particular beings are manifestations of the power of God or Nature; as modes inhere in substance and depend on it for their coming into being as well as their existence, their power does not derive from themselves alone but, instead, it is a determinate expression of God's power. But while the latter is infinite and therefore determined by itself alone, the power of modes is finite and is thus affected and determined by causal relations. As the essence of each thing, *conatus* is also the identity condition of modes, which means that each particular being has its own and unique way of persevering in its being (its own power).³⁹⁷ This can be fully appreciated simply by considering that even though all minds and bodies share some common characteristics, as Spinoza notes,³⁹⁸ only one's body and mind can be sensed as one's own.³⁹⁹ In this perspective,

³⁹⁵ E3p4-5. According to Spinoza, the fact that something cannot be destroyed 'internally' is self-evident, as "the definition of each thing affirms, but does not deny, the essence of a thing" (ibid). This is particularly clear when considering the notion of substance; as nothing is external to it, and its essence is existence, no external cause can negate or destroy it.

³⁹⁶ Paolo Cristofolini, *Spinoza per tutti* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2020). The principle of inertia as we know it today (also known as first principle of Newton's law of dynamics or principle of Galileo) was formulated in Isaac Newton's *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica*, which was published in 1687 (ten years after Spinoza's death). But inertia was discovered earlier in the 17th century by Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) and later Pierre Gassendi (1592-1655).

³⁹⁷ For a detailed discussion of this matter see Judith Crane and Ronald Sandler, "Identity and Distinction in Spinoza's *Ethics*," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 86 (2005): 188-200.

³⁹⁸ E2L2.

³⁹⁹ It should be noted that Spinoza differentiates between 'essence' and 'existence' such as in the following example he provides: "A man is the cause of the existence, but not of the essence, of another man. For the latter is an eternal truth, and therefore men can certainly agree in respect of essence. But in respect of existence, they must differ." (E1p17s). With respect to *conatus*, this differentiation translates into the fact that while the essence of each person is to persevere in their being (agreement by essence), they necessarily differ in the way in which this effort is pursued (different existence).

essences are not a priori and pre-given notions, but dynamic principles that account for both identity and becoming, at once.

Before discussing how the power of being is affected and why this is relevant to Spinoza's project, it should be noted that, in the *Ethics*, the notion of *conatus* accounts for a theory of purposive behavior without appealing to the Aristotelian notion of final causes. According to the latter, purposive behavior is explained in terms of the purpose or the end of an activity (its 'final cause'): for example, health is the final cause of doing exercise, as one does exercise for being healthy.⁴⁰⁰ This account is criticized by Spinoza in the Appendix to E1 from a twofold perspective. From the perspective of Nature, the problem of ascribing final causes to Nature (as it is for the notion of a purposive God) is that it implies that God is not perfect, "for if God acts on account of an end, it necessarily desires something which it lacks".⁴⁰¹ From the perspective of human beings, he states that "this doctrine of the end completely overturns Nature. For that which is really a cause, it considers as an effect, and conversely." In this perspective, for example, health should be understood as the cause of doing exercise, rather than its effect. Spinoza's argument for the confutation of final causes is based on his criticism of free will, a notion which – according to him - derives from the fact that human beings "are born ignorant of the causes of things"⁴⁰² which determine their actions. At the same time, he notes, they "all have an appetite for seeking what is useful to them, and they are conscious of this."⁴⁰³ Such appetite is a type of endeavor related to both mind and body, and is "nothing other than the very essence of men", namely, their *conatus*. I said, 'a type' of endeavor because Spinoza makes a differentiation: when it is related to the mind he calls it "will", while when it is related to both mind and body and accompanied by a consciousness of this appetite he calls it "desire".⁴⁰⁴ But the point to note is that even when we are conscious of *conatus* we might ignore the causes of our actions which follow from our relational nature (its constitutional connectedness to other natures), and thus mistakenly consider appetite as a final cause.

⁴⁰⁰ Aristotle, *Physics*, as reported in Parkinson, *Ethics*, 39.

⁴⁰¹ E1, Appendix.

⁴⁰² Ibid.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ E3p9s.

Now, the fact that human beings are ignorant of the causes for which they are determined to act poses a challenge: if humans are ignorant of Nature – and thus of their own nature – it seems impossible to know *how* to persevere in being – and preserve it, as the latter implies to seek “what is useful”⁴⁰⁵ in order to maximize one’s power of acting (conceived in both extension and thought). This is relevant because it illuminates that knowledge of one’s own essence is not innate, but rather discovered and cultivated in experience. At the same time, as I have discussed earlier, not all knowledge leads to understanding, and while the mind necessarily forms both inadequate and adequate ideas, it is only by means of the latter that, according to Spinoza, one’s power of acting can be maximized. He explains in E3p1 that the mind can either act or be passive: it acts by means of forming adequate ideas, while it is necessarily passive when forming inadequate ideas. Specifically, to act means to be ‘adequate cause’ of one’s endeavor: “I say that we act [...] when there follows from our own nature, either in us or outside us, something that can be understood clearly and distinctly through that nature alone.”⁴⁰⁶ A cause, here, should be understood as a reason⁴⁰⁷ since, as discussed earlier, Spinoza’s view of causality is that of logical dependence for which a cause implies its effects. Thus, X is said to act when something occurs (in or outside of it) which can solely be understood through – as logically implied by – X’s nature. On the other hand, X is passive when occurrences are not explained by – do not logically follow from – X’s nature: in such a case, X is said to be ‘partial cause’ (i.e. inadequate cause).⁴⁰⁸ The same principle can be understood in terms of *conatus*: when someone is determined to act ‘internally’, i.e. from the reasons which follow from their essence, the individual succeeds in persevering in being, in perceiving what is useful to them, and thus in acting. On the other hand, when someone is determined to act ‘externally’, i.e. for reasons which do not logically follow from her nature, that individual fails in maximizing their power of acting, in seeking what is useful to them, and thus is passive.⁴⁰⁹ Stated in different terms, someone who acts is someone who actively

⁴⁰⁵ E4p18.

⁴⁰⁶ E3d2.

⁴⁰⁷ The two terms are used interchangeably, such as in E1p11, first Alternative Proof: “*causa seu ratio*” (cause or reason).

⁴⁰⁸ The notion of adequate cause mirrors that of *causa sui* (cause of itself), which Spinoza uses to define God or Nature. But in the case of human beings, since – as modes – we are necessarily conceived through something else, they can be said to be ‘adequate’ rather than ‘true’ cause of their endeavor. For a discussion of Spinoza’s causation, see chapter four.

⁴⁰⁹ I say ‘fail in maximizing’ because we necessarily persevere in being (as that is our essence) even when we are passive, it is just that we only do it partially.

determines their existence, while someone who is acted upon (i.e. is passive) is someone who is determined to action by something other than themselves.

The tendency of being now active and now passive is intimately related to the way in which one's *conatus* is affected by other modes in the nexus of causal relations. As noted by Deleuze, "since this effort prompts us to act differently according to the objects encountered, we should say that it is, at every moment, determined by the affections that come from the objects."⁴¹⁰ According to Spinoza, these affections produce the emotions (*affectus*),⁴¹¹ which he defines as "the affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, helped or hindered and, at the same time, the ideas of these affections."⁴¹² In the *Ethics*, Spinoza provides a detailed account of the emotions as well as their fundamental role with regards to cognition;⁴¹³ but what is most relevant to the present discussion is a distinction he makes between active and passive emotions – which is, as it appears clearly from the terminological parallelism, intimately related to the above mentioned tendencies of being active or passive. When we are adequate cause of *affectus*, according to Spinoza, these are understood as actions, and when we are only a partial cause of *affectus* these are said to be passions. Thus, while individuals are acted on by passions, they act through active affects. This differentiation is linked to Spinoza's theory of knowledge, according to which the mind acts in so far as it forms adequate ideas, while it is passive in so far as it forms inadequate ideas. Spinoza's remedy to being governed by the passions is to form true ideas of them: as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of a passion, the latter "ceases to be" (E5p3) and is transformed into an active affect. Stated in other words, the more we understand the more we act, and the more we do not understand the more we are passive. The centrality of emotions, for Spinoza, is that they trace the directions of *conatus*. This is better understood

⁴¹⁰ Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 21.

⁴¹¹ E3, d3: "By emotion (*affectus*) I understand the affections (*affectiones*) of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, helped or hindered, and at the same time the ideas of these affections." Here, *affectus* and *affectio* have different meanings: *affectio* indicates the state of a body that is affected, involving both the affected and the affecting body (in this sense, it signals and describes causal relations); *affectus*, on the other hand, denotes a transition of increase or decrease of power, which implies the *affection* and follows from it. For a discussion on these two terms see *Ibid*, 48-51.

⁴¹² E3d3. This notion of affects results from Spinoza's discussion on the way the body and the mind perceive itself by means of being affected by other bodies: "The idea of any mode, by which the human body is affected by external bodies, must involve the nature of the human body and at the same time the nature of the external body." (E2p16).

⁴¹³ At the end of E3, Spinoza provides the definitions of a long list of emotions (48 in total), ranging from love to hatred, and from confidence to envy, among many others.

when looking at Spinoza's treatment of those which he defines as the most basic emotions, from which all the others can be derived, namely, pleasure and pain. Pleasure, he explains, is an individual's "transition from a lesser to a greater perfection", while pain is the transition "from a greater to a lesser perfection".⁴¹⁴ It should be noted here that by 'perfection' Spinoza means 'reality' (E2d6)⁴¹⁵: since everything exists in Nature, to which no defects can be ascribed, the degree of perfection of X depends on X's essence together with the degree in which X is successful in persevering in its being compared to other individuals of its 'species'. This means that there is no such thing as perfection in itself. According to him, in so far as we think of particular beings as divided in categories (which he calls 'genus') in which individuals are compared with each other so that "we find some to have more being, i.e. reality, than others", then "to that extent we call some more perfect than others." (E4, preface) Conversely, when we ascribe lack of power to something through comparison with other individuals, "to that extent we call them imperfect."⁴¹⁶ Importantly, Spinoza later reminds us that judging X to be more or less perfect (i.e. more or less 'real') does not speak of the essence of X itself, but rather of the way in which we are affected by it and conceive of it – in a way that involves more or less affirmation or negation of X's essence. For example, let us consider two subjects, Chiara and Paolo, and let us suppose that Chiara hates Paolo and consequently judges him as being far from perfect. According to Spinoza's view, Chiara's judgment of Paolo as being more or less 'perfect' speaks of the way in which Chiara is affected by Paolo in a certain and determinate way, rather than actually describing Paolo as such. In other words, Chiara's idea of Paolo is of 'Chiara as related to Paolo', rather than of 'Paolo'.⁴¹⁷ This is because when Chiara engages with Paolo, some emotions are produced in her (pleasurable or painful, depending

⁴¹⁴ E3DE2, 3.

⁴¹⁵ "By perfection and reality I understand the same". Spinoza provides a discussion of this naturalistic account of perfection in the Preface of E4, in which he says that the tendency to call something perfect or imperfect is based upon universal models that we imagine, as well as on the conception of final causes. He states: "[...] perfection and imperfection are merely ways of thinking, namely notions which we are accustomed to form from the fact that we compare with each other individuals which are of the same species or genus. This was the cause of my saying (Def. 6, Part 2) that by reality and perfection I understand the same."

⁴¹⁶ E4, Preface. As noted by Kenneth J. Bruder in his *Baruch Spinoza's Logic of the One or One Act of Love*, "Because Spinoza has split perfection into infinite degrees, it allows him to see each thing as perfect unto itself. Therefore each things can be imperfect as a part [a 'partial negation'] and yet in itself contain no imperfection. As a part of a whole. Each thing is imperfect, as a whole, all things are perfect." Kenneth J. Bruder, *Baruch Spinoza's Logic of the One or One Act of Love* (Freiburg: Albert Ludwigs University of Freiburg, 1970) 109.

⁴¹⁷ This is due to the principle of intersubjectivity that can be derived from Spinoza's treatment of the mind and the body that I have discussed above: we only gain knowledge of ourselves and others through the affections of the body (and their corresponding ideas).

on Paolo and Chiara's ability to agree or disagree in nature), and this emotions (in this case, hatred) not only affect Chiara's idea of Paolo (i.e. her ability to understand him) but also affect the way in which Chiara perseveres in being (i.e. her ability to understand herself). Now, Chiara can either have an adequate or inadequate understanding of her emotion; if she has inadequate understanding of her hatred, for Spinoza, it means that she is unable to understand the cause of her emotion *in relation* to her nature (i.e. as following from it), and thus will be passively determined by it. On the other hand, if Chiara forms an adequate idea of her hatred, she then will be able to remove it.⁴¹⁸

Spinoza's treatment of the emotions as bearing direct influence on judgment and, with that, on the ability or inability to actively determine one's existence, is key to understanding his theory of ethics. This is because, as he notes, "we do not endeavor, will, seek after, or desire something because we judge it to be good, but on the contrary we judge something to be good because we endeavor, will, seek after, or desire it."⁴¹⁹ Moral principles, he holds, are conceived on the basis of *conatus* (i.e. desire), because the latter functions for its own sake, rather than for the sake of something else. The central role of *conatus* in Spinoza's ethical theory is all the more evident when considering that it is identified with virtue itself. As he states: "By virtue and power I understand the same; that is, virtue, is so far as it is related to man, is the very essence, i.e. the nature of man, in so far as he has the power of doing certain things which can be understood through the laws of his nature alone."⁴²⁰ Thus, the more one is led to actively determine her existence by means of forming adequate ideas, the more real (i.e. perfect) and virtuous she will be. Now, the argument for which moral principles are formed on the basis of individual's desire might, on the surface, seem a dangerous move, because we seem to face a model of egoism rather than that of a virtuous person who is genuinely concerned with others' wellbeing. In order to explain *why*, for Spinoza, this is not the case, let us consider his articulation of the notion of 'good' and 'bad'.

⁴¹⁸ Like all the other emotions, love and hatred are derived from the two basic affects of pleasure and pain. Spinoza defines love as "pleasure with the accompaniment of the idea of an external cause", while hatred is "pain, with the accompaniment of and external cause." (E3DE6, 7). Importantly, while love is considered as an active affect and thus is positive, Spinoza holds that hatred can never be good and is necessarily bad (E4p45), but that it can be destroyed by love (E3p43).

⁴¹⁹ Ibid. 91.

⁴²⁰ E4d8.

In E3p39s it is stated that the notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are formed in relation to the affections of pleasure and pain, so that ‘good’ is whatever leads to pleasure and the satisfaction of desires (“whatever that may be”)⁴²¹, while ‘bad’ is whatever leads to pain and “frustrates a desire”.⁴²² This perspective should be compared with the definitions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ provided at the beginning of E4, where Spinoza states that we call ‘good’ “that which we know *with certainty* to be useful to us”, and ‘bad’ “that which we know *with certainty* to hinder us from possessing something good.”⁴²³ This, importantly, does not mean that all pleasure is good and, conversely, that all pain is bad. According to Spinoza, pleasure can be bad to the extent that it leads the individual to act without regards for the overall well-being of the body; conversely, pain can be useful in restraining excessive pleasure. An example of this is titillation, in which “one or several of the body’s parts are affected more than others [in a way that can] hinder the body from being capable of being affected in very many other ways and so (by E4p38)⁴²⁴ it can be bad.”⁴²⁵ For the same logic, anguish (an emotion which derives from pain) is good to the extent that “it can restrain titillation, with the result that it is not excessive.”⁴²⁶ This example suggests that the moral principles of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ cannot be formulated a priori of their application but, rather, that they shall be formulated in relation to an adequate understanding of the causal relations that govern the interactions of particular things as well as Nature as a whole. With regards to individuals, this understanding requires an adequate grasping of the emotions.⁴²⁷ This is the reasoning behind Spinoza’s statement in the preface to E4, where he discusses ‘good’ and ‘bad’ as follows:

“As to what concerns good and bad, these also indicate nothing positive in things considered in themselves, and are simply ways of thinking, i.e. notions which we form from the fact that we compare things with one another. For one and the same thing can at the same time be good, bad, and indifferent. For example, music

⁴²¹ E3p39s

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ E4d1, 2. Emphasis mine.

⁴²⁴ In this proposition Spinoza explains that the incapability of being affected is equal to an incapability of affecting others, and thus that that which hinders this capacity is harmful. On the contrary, that which leads the body to be affected and, in turn, to be capable of affecting others, is useful and good.

⁴²⁵ E4p43.

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ E5p15. Spinoza mentions here the love of God because the person who attains self-knowledge feels pleasure, a pleasure which derives from adequate knowledge of Nature and, as every true idea, is necessarily accompanied by the idea of Nature itself at the same time.

is good for someone who is melancholy, bad to a mourner, but neither good nor bad to someone who is deaf. However, although this is how things are, *we must retain these names*. For since we desire to form an idea of man, as an exemplar of human nature which we may look, it will be useful to us to retain these words in the sense which I have stated. So [...] I shall understand by 'good' that which we know with certainty to be a means by which we may approach more and more closely to that exemplar of human nature which we set before ourselves. By 'bad' I shall understand that which we know with certainty to hinder us from reaching that exemplar."⁴²⁸

The key to not mistake this view for some type of moral relativism is to note that Spinoza emphasizes the need of *certain* knowledge to the purpose of reaching an exemplar of human nature. In order for people not to be "pulled in different directions"⁴²⁹ by a confused knowledge of their appetites, Spinoza explains, it is key to form adequate ideas about the motivational structure embodied by *conatus* and directed by the emotions, i.e. about the causes of one's own actions. Only then, Spinoza holds, can one form an adequate conception of moral principles on the basis of certain knowledge and understanding of one's desire. This position, however, still doesn't explain *why* someone pursuing their desires, even when these are directed to pursuing what is good, should care about others' well-being. This is even more unclear when considering that the 'good' is here formulated on the basis of what is useful for someone to persevere in being. It is true, as Newland has noted, that Spinoza subscribes to a type of egoism since, according to him, we strive for power for its own sake and not for the sake of something else.⁴³⁰ At the same time, however, Spinoza's ethical project cannot be conceived as strictly self-centered, as the metaphysical framework of the *Ethics* does not conceive of independent and isolated beings (the very definition of a mode is that which depends on something else for its existence). As a consequence, the self – when conceived adequately – is understood as a relational entity which comprises and *depends on* all the other things by which it is affected in different ways, which are also that by which the self acquires

⁴²⁸ Emphasis mine.

⁴²⁹ E3, p2s.

⁴³⁰ See Samuel Newland, "Ethics, Motivation, and Egoism" in *Reconceiving Spinoza* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 171.

knowledge of itself. It is true that Spinoza differentiates between a passive and an active existence, and that the latter is defined by being the “adequate cause” of one’s own actions, but as I have discussed earlier, people’s actions are not strictly self-dependent, in the sense of being caused by a “free decree of the mind”. Being one’s own adequate cause (and thus succeeding in persevering in one’s being), rather, consists in forming adequate ideas about the causal structure of Nature within which the self is inscribed; it requires, in Spinoza’s terminology, the capacity for being affected in many ways and, with that, the capacity of affecting others as much as possible – both scenarios which refer to the capacity of establishing relations. This is the *praxis* undertaken by reason, through which the mind grasps those things which are common to particular beings as well as to Nature as a whole (the ‘common notions’). Through reason, Spinoza holds, we understand that all bodies and minds agree in certain aspects, and since the “good” (or what is most useful to our self-preservation and self-development) consists in entering relations of composition with those things with which we agree, it follows that “nothing is more useful to man than man”.⁴³¹ This does not mean that man is *instrumental* to man since, as I already mentioned, *conatus* functions for its own sake and not for the sake of something else; instead, what Spinoza is explaining, I believe, is that the referent of the rational self necessarily *includes* others. While this argument will be further discussed in the next chapter, it suffices now to note that, in terms of moral principles, the rational person who seeks what is useful to herself necessarily seeks what is useful to others and is intrinsically motivated to do so. This is stated by Spinoza in E4, p18s:

“Man can ask for nothing that is more efficacious for the preservation of their being than that all men should agree in everything in such a way that the minds and bodies of all should as it were constitute one mind and one body, and that all should simultaneously endeavor, as far as they can, to preserve their own being, and that all should simultaneously look for the common advantage of all. From this it follows that men who are governed by reason – that is men who, under the guidance of reason, look for what is useful to them – seeks for themselves nothing that they do not desire for the rest of human beings, and so they are just, faithful, and honorable.”

⁴³¹ E4, p18s.

Since Spinoza's egoism is constructed upon the metaphysical assumption that human beings depend on one another (as well as Nature as a whole) for their existence and preservation, the virtuous self is intrinsically motivated *by knowledge* to seek the common good. The latter, in its highest form, amounts for Spinoza to the love for God or Nature; love, defined as pleasure accompanied by the idea of an external cause, results from gaining adequate knowledge of human nature and, in turn, to understanding particular beings as manifestations of God, of which the latter is immanent cause. This is why, toward the end of E5, Spinoza states that true knowledge leads to an "intellectual love of God", in which the mind partakes in "the love by which God loves itself."⁴³² According to him, it is precisely this love which is the ultimate purpose of knowledge, not only because it consists in the true knowledge of Nature as such, but also because it is the firm ground upon which individuals can pursue the 'good' with certainty, and it is thus the cause of the highest state of happiness or 'blessedness' (E5p36s) which human nature can attain.⁴³³

From what discussed so far, Spinoza's philosophical project as articulated in his *Ethics* emerges as primarily directed towards self-knowledge. I have here argued, however, that the referent of the virtuous 'self' goes beyond the singular and embraces the multitude of beings constituting Nature. The relation between reason and the 'extended' self will be further discussed in the next chapter. For now, I shall now turn to examine the Cheng's ethical theory.

6.2 The Virtue of Selfless Care in the Cheng Brothers

As previously discussed, the Cheng brothers consider the grasping of *li* as having a twofold purpose: it leads to both understanding the regulatory patterns of things 'outside' the self while, at the same time, uncovering those same patterns in relation to one's mind (*xin*) and nature (*xing*). In addition, I have noted that the importance of extending one's knowledge to grasp the *li* of things lies, for the Cheng, in its being conducive to act naturally

⁴³² E5p36.

⁴³³ Other terms which Spinoza uses when referring to the state of blessedness (*beatitudo*) are 'happiness' (*felicitas* E4p18s), 'salvation' (*salus*, E5p36s), and 'freedom' (*libertas*, *Ibid*).

– which for the two philosophers amounts to act morally. On the basis of these considerations, I shall now turn to examine what the Cheng conceive to be moral practice together with its opposite and, with that, their notions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’.

In discussing morality, we find that the Cheng brothers establish strong continuities with the classical Confucian tradition by putting the notions of *ren* 仁 at the core of their theory of ethics. *Ren*, which is traditionally held by Confucian thinkers to be the most important virtue, has been variously rendered in English scholarship as “benevolence”, “humaneness”, and “care”, among others.⁴³⁴ This principle is discussed by Cheng Hao in a famous passage which was retrospectively entitled *Ren Shuo* 仁說 (*Discourse on Ren*), in which he explains as follows:

“The student must begin by knowing *ren*. By *ren* we are one undivided body with things. Righteousness (*yi* 義), propriety (*li* 禮), wisdom (*zhi* 知), and trust (*xin* 信) are all *ren*. It is only necessary to succeed in knowing this *li* and to preserve it by integrity (*cheng* 誠) and reverence (*jing* 敬). There is no need to be on one’s guard or make deep inquiries. If the mind relaxes we must be on guard; but if not, what is there to guard against? Inquiry is necessary only because there are *li*(s) which have not yet been grasped; if they have been constantly preserved they will be clear of themselves, and what need is there to inquire? This Way is not the opposite of anything, so that ‘great’ is too weak a word to describe it.⁴³⁵ The functions of heaven and earth are all my functions. Mencius says that all the innumerable things are all complete in me, and that there is supreme joy only when I look into myself and find integrity. If one cannot realize oneself in self-

⁴³⁴ Other translations include “love”, “exemplary life”, and “good”. While I am leaving the character untranslated throughout the chapter, I agree with Li’s interpretation that the notion of “care” is central to *ren* and thus offers a better interpretative lens for understanding the character. See Chenyang Li, “The Confucian *Ren* and Care Debate: Reassessment, Development, and Future Directions,” *Philosophy Compass* 17, no.9 (2022): 1-8. In my view, the notion of ‘care’ seems to be useful in making sense of some passages in Confucius’ *Analects* where notions of ‘benevolence’ or ‘love’ seem to not fit well discussions on *ren*. One passage that can well-exemplify this is *Analects* 4.3: “唯仁者能好人，能惡人”，“It is only the *ren* person who can love others or hate others.” Note that if *ren* was to be here interpreted as ‘benevolent’, indicating someone loving and kind, the passage might seem contradictory (how does someone benevolently hate others?). Care, on the other hand, seems to fit well: “Only the person who cares can love others or hate others.”

⁴³⁵ Cheng Hao is here referring to Mencius (*Mengzi* 7b 25): “To be great and be transformed by greatness is sage”. What he is indicating here, is that *li*, when grasped in itself, cannot be referred to by means of oppositions since it is absolute.

reflection, then some opposition exists between oneself and others. In this case, one tries to fit oneself to the other. If so, how can one have joy? [...] “Never do things with expectation. Let the mind not forget its objective, but let there be no artificial effort to help it grow.”⁴³⁶ The way to preserve *ren* is not exert slightest effort. When *ren* is preserved, the harmony between oneself and others is obtained. This is because our original *ren* and our ability to know *ren* have never been lost.”⁴³⁷

In Cheng Hao’s view, *ren* is that through which an individual recognizes the other as partaking in their own nature, thus undermining the distinction between subject and object, or “inner” and “outer”. *Ren* is the ultimate expression of Confucius’ ‘golden rule’, “do not do unto others what we do not want to be done to us”.⁴³⁸ In general, classical Confucianism articulates the *ren* person as someone who is concerned with the well-being of both herself and her family and peers, and who – by improving her own character and behavior – also improves that of other people by setting a moral exemplar.⁴³⁹ But while the Cheng brothers undoubtedly maintain a fundamental continuity with the classical tradition, they also reinterpret *ren* in light of their one-and-many worldview based on *li*. This is already shown in the passage quoted above, where Cheng Hao explains *ren* as a practice through which one can grasp and retain the unity of *li* and its differentiations, thus overcoming oppositions and recognizing its communal thread. Cheng Yi provides a more concise interpretation of *ren*, which assumes that a *ren* person regards herself and the other as one rather than two, which means that she is concerned for share goods (*gong* 公) instead of being selfish (*si* 私)⁴⁴⁰; as he states, “*Ren* then one, not *ren* then two.”⁴⁴¹ The realization of a *ren* approach towards one’s peers, as mentioned earlier, is based upon one’s realization that *li* is one-and-many and that, for this

⁴³⁶ *Mengzi* 2a 2.

⁴³⁷ *Yishu* 2a; 17

⁴³⁸ *Analects* 15.24.

⁴³⁹ Broadly speaking, Confucians do not advocate undifferentiated care of other peers. The practice of virtue and self-cultivation always starts from one’s family members, one’s friends, one minister, and then it extends to one’s country and the whole world. This approach is usually contrasted with that of Mozi 墨子 (479-371 B.C.), who advocated for “universal love” (*jian ai* 兼愛).

⁴⁴⁰ “Where there is *gong* there is unity, where there is *si* there are innumerable divisions.” (As quoted in Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 97.)

⁴⁴¹ As quoted in *Ibid.*

reason, one's nature partakes in the nature of other beings. Thus, according to the Cheng, an individual who acquires this insight is necessarily concerned with improving both oneself and others. Importantly, only then – the Cheng state - can one be considered to be a sage; “if one thinks that it is enough to have oneself ordered, one is not a sage yet”.⁴⁴² The insights into the *li* of things which are acquired through their being investigated lead to the ‘realization of one's own nature through self-reflection’ (*fan shen er cheng* 反身而誠), an idea that was already articulated by Mencius and that is also found in the classic of the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸).⁴⁴³ Specifically, in the Cheng brothers' philosophy, *cheng* 誠 (“integrity” or “realization”) describes the original unity of the mind/heart, while *jing* 敬 (“reverence”, mentioned in Cheng Hao's passage above) describes the way in which the unity of the heart/mind is maintained in activity.⁴⁴⁴ But if the heart/mind is identical with *li*, as I explained earlier, then it seems difficult to understand how, according to the Cheng, an individual can lose integrity and thus fail in becoming a morally virtuous person.

In order to answer this question, it is useful to consider the two philosophers' views on human nature in relation to their metaphysics of *li* 理 and *qi* 氣. The Cheng share with *Mengzi* 孟子 the position that human nature (*xing* 性) is originally good. In the context of the *Mengzi*, this position has been interpreted by Shun as meaning that people are born with the capacity for goodness.⁴⁴⁵ In the context of the two Cheng, as I understand them, while the Mencian tenet moves in a similar interpretative direction, it shall be contextualized within their metaphysical framework according to which human nature is identified with *li* 理; in this context, I think, human nature is not said to be good because it opposes to something bad, but because it is complete in itself (*wanwu jie bei yu wo* 萬物皆備於我).⁴⁴⁶ This means that, considered in itself – that is, apart from its responses to the stimuli that arise when interacting with things – human nature is intrinsically *ren* 仁 and thus virtuous (*de* 德). It is for this reason that Cheng Hao, for example, states that “Our original *ren* and our ability to know *ren* have

⁴⁴² *Yishu* 15; 179.

⁴⁴³ “Ten thousand things are all here in me. There is no greater joy than finding that I have realized myself through self-reflection” (*Mengzi* 7a 4, as quoted in Huang, *Why Be Moral?*, 46); “Integrity is self-completion [誠者自成也]” (As quoted in Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 67.)

⁴⁴⁴ See *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁵ Kwong-loi Shun, *Mencius and Early Chinese Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 220.

⁴⁴⁶ *Mengzi* 7a,4 reported in *Yishu* 2a;17. The latter passage is also known as *Ren Shuo* 仁說, “Discourse on *Ren*”.

never been lost.”⁴⁴⁷ This is because, as noted by Graham, *li* (and thus *xing*) is at once natural and ethical.⁴⁴⁸ As a result, the Cheng brothers are not primarily concerned with the formulation of moral principles (since they are identified with *xing* itself), but rather with the articulation of the reasons for which people fail in being moral as well with explaining the structure of moral motivation. According to them, even though nature is originally complete, people can (and often do) fail in realizing this because of their embodiment (their *qi* 氣). As they state: “In general, since man has a *separate* body, it is natural that it is difficult to unite himself with *dao*.”⁴⁴⁹ In particular, when discussing the reasons for which people might not act morally, the Cheng refer to one’s *cai* 才 (often translated as “talent”, “ability”, or “capacity”), which indicates the natural dispositions informing an individual’s personality and moral capacity and which, as dependent on one’s *qi*, is a natural endowment.⁴⁵⁰ To be sure, the Cheng do not mean that *qi* is, in itself, bad or in opposition to *xing*; as I have discussed in chapter four, *qi* and *li* both concur in the constitution of oneness (*dao*). What they are concerned with is that *qi* might lead people to conceive themselves as individuals that are separate from (or even in opposition with) the whole of nature. The misconception that one is an individual *in itself* goes against – or fails in affirming – the nature of *li* as ultimately one underpinning principle relating all particular beings and, at the same time, as being one’s own nature. Thus, the Cheng states that “if one cannot realize (*cheng* 誠) oneself, one is in opposition (*ni* 逆) to all things and feels uneasy (*bushun* 不順, literally “not going along” or “not agreeing”) with everything.”⁴⁵¹ In short, through a misunderstanding of embodiment, people tend to see themselves as substantially different from the rest of nature and thus constantly experience an opposition between the inner and the outer world (the self and other particular beings). Such misconception, as a consequence, leads individuals to perpetuate and act upon “selfish desires” (*si yu* 私欲) which, for the Cheng brothers, are the source of morally bad behavior. As Cheng Yi states, “That which is not heavenly *li* is selfish

⁴⁴⁷ *Yishu* 2a; 17.

⁴⁴⁸ Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 9.

⁴⁴⁹ As quoted in *Ibid.* 127. Emphasis Mine.

⁴⁵⁰ *Qi* and *Cai* are also referred to as “material nature” (*qizhi zhi xing* 氣質之性), a notion first used by Zhang Zai 張載 (1020-1077). For a detailed discussion on *cai* and *qi* in the Cheng brothers see Wong Wai-Ying, “Morally Bad in the Philosophy of the Cheng brothers,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 36, no. 1, (2009): 141-156.

⁴⁵¹ *Yishu* 11; 129.

desire (*si yu* 私欲).⁴⁵² To be clear, the Cheng do not advocate for the need to extinguish one's desires, as the latter are not – in themselves – morally bad; given that people have bodies, it is natural that they have desires to satisfy. Rather, what distinguishes selfish desires from healthy or good desires is that they stem from a misconception of the individual as being apart from nature and, as such, represent an endeavor through which an individual actively neglects her own nature as part of a wider whole. In this sense, selfish desires lead to “self-abandonment” (*ziqu* 自棄) and “self-destruction” (*zibao* 自暴).⁴⁵³ In particular, selfish desires are source of excessive or deficient emotions (*qing* 情) which prevent individuals from understanding and realizing human nature in accordance with *li* in its natural order. The Cheng's conception of the emotions derives from the *Doctrine of the Mean*, according to which “Before joy, anger, sorrow, and pleasure are emitted, there is said to be equilibrium (*zhong* 中); when they are all emitted in due order, there is said to be harmony (*he* 和). Equilibrium is the great root of the world; harmony is the universal way of the world.”⁴⁵⁴ For the two Cheng, emotions pertain to nature in the same way that waves pertain to water,⁴⁵⁵ and result from the stimulations that arise in interacting with other beings or things. As such, the emotions can either be conducive to self-cultivation or prevent the attainment of virtue, depending on how they are treated. With regard to this point, the Cheng state:

“By means of the body, humans come into contact with external things and thus are aroused from within [*dong yu zhong* 動於中].⁴⁵⁶ When they are aroused from within, the seven feelings, namely, happiness, anger, sorrow, joy, love, hate, and desire appear. When human feelings become increasingly strong and reckless, human nature becomes damaged [*zao* 鑿].⁴⁵⁷ Therefore the enlightened [*jue zhe*

⁴⁵² *Yishu* 15: 144.

⁴⁵³ As quoted in Wong, “Morally Bad in the Philosophy of the Cheng Brothers”, 143.

⁴⁵⁴ As quoted in Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 51.

⁴⁵⁵ “Q. Do joy and anger come from the nature?” “A. Certainly. As soon as there is life and consciousness there is the nature; when there is the nature there are the passions. Without the nature how could there be passions?” “Q. What of the view that joy and anger come from outside?” “A. They do not come from outside; when stimulated from outside they are emitted from within.” “Q. Does nature have joy and anger as water has waves?” “A. Yes. To be transparent, and level and still like a mirror, is the nature of water. When it meets with pebbles, or the ground is uneven, it may overflow; when the wind moves over it, it may be stirred into waves.” As quoted in *Ibid*, 52-53.

⁴⁵⁶ Literally “moved from the center/core” or “acted on the mean”. While whatever is in the mean is balanced, what is not in the mean is unbalanced; so the Cheng are here saying that when feelings are aroused they *can* become unbalanced, unless they are arranged according to the mean.

⁴⁵⁷ Literally “chiseled” or “cut”.

覺者]⁴⁵⁸ persons arrange their feelings in accordance with the mean [*zhong* 中]. They rectify their mind and cultivate their nature. This is to rectify human feelings in accordance with nature [*xing qi qing* 性其情]. The unenlightened persons don't know the need to direct their feelings. They let their feelings loose until they are depraved, fetter their nature and destroy it. This is to let feelings control nature [*qing qi xing* 情其性]."⁴⁵⁹

In consideration of this, we can better understand the reasons leading the Cheng brothers to take "selfish desire" as an emblematic case of letting one's feelings control their nature. While the virtuous person is one who establishes a firm relation between their nature and that of other beings, the selfish is unable to recognize the underlying commonality that constitutes the nature of all beings, and thus detach themselves not only from the things of the world but also from their own nature. This idea is well articulated by Cheng Hao when he considers how the opposite of *ren* (*buren* 不仁, non-*ren*) is employed by medical manuals:

"Medical books use the term 'unfeeling' (*buren*) for numbness in the hands and feet; this is an extremely good way to describe it. By *ren*, heaven and earth and the innumerable things are regarded as one substance, so that nothing is not oneself; and when this is recognized there is nothing one will not do for them. If they are not possessed in the self, naturally they are of no concern to it, just as when the hands and feet are 'unfeeling', *qi* does not circulate through them and they no longer belong to oneself."⁴⁶⁰

This image well describes the inability of the selfish person to act in accordance with the *li* of things, which comprises not only the nature of other beings but also their own nature. It is precisely this numbness which actively prevents one's extension of knowledge through 'self-getting' and, with that, the ability of 'realizing one's own nature through self-reflection'. While

⁴⁵⁸ Literally "those who are awake" or "aware".

⁴⁵⁹ *Wenji* 8; 577.

⁴⁶⁰ As quoted in Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 98.

the selfish person is unaware of the intrinsic motivations to be caring (*ren*), the virtuous person is able to cultivate others by cultivating their own nature.

The Cheng's treatment of *ren* and selfish desires offers a practical framework for better understanding their views of 'good' and 'bad' and, more broadly, of moral principles. According to Cheng Hao, "The good and evil in the world are both heaven's *li*. What is called bad is not fundamentally bad; it is as it is only by going too far or not far enough – for example, the errors of Yang Zhu [not going beyond egoism] and Mozi [advocating for universal love and thus failing in differentiating]." ⁴⁶¹ And again: "In activities there is good and there is bad; both are heaven's *li*. Within heaven's *li* some things must be excellent and some bad; for 'it is inherent in things that they are unequal'. We should look into this, but without ourselves entering into bad [as if it existed in itself], degenerating into separate things" ⁴⁶² According to the Cheng's view, then, "good" and "bad" should not be understood as an absolute or substantial distinction, but as a functional one, that indicate the ability or inability to establish relations of composition on the basis of the recognition of the one-and-many nature of things. This conception is well explained in the following passage, which considers the figure of the sage: "The sage *is* heaven and earth. Within heaven and earth, what thing is lacking? How should heaven and earth ever have the idea of distinguishing between good and bad? [...] If the sage kept near to the good and far from the bad, the things with which he had nothing to do would be many; how could he become heaven and earth?" ⁴⁶³ The figure of the sage exemplifies, for the Cheng, the all-encompassing regulating principle of *li* in both its unity and differentiation; by means of extension of knowledge, the sage is able to understand the commonality of individual nature and that of other beings and thus becomes one with them. Thus, in the same way the Cheng argue for the goodness of human nature on the basis of its plentitude, moral principles are established on the basis of their one-and many metaphysics of *li*, where the "good" represents the affirmation of both unity and differentiation while "bad" indicates the neglect of such duality "by going too far or not far enough", either in excessively differentiating the nature of things (such as in the case of selfish desire) or, on the contrary, excessively advocating for undifferentiated oneness (such as in the case of Mozi's undifferentiated love). For the Cheng brothers, neither of these two excesses can be morally

⁴⁶¹ As quoted in *Ibid*, 127. Slightly modified.

⁴⁶² *Ibid*.

⁴⁶³ As quoted in *Ibid*, 129.

virtuous because both positions do not model self-cultivation and the common good on the basis of natural patterns.

In articulating their positions on moral behavior, the Cheng propose a novel elaboration of Confucius' golden rule⁴⁶⁴ according to which one should "treat things according to things themselves and not according to ourselves, so that one can become selfless (*wuwo* 無我)."⁴⁶⁵ It is important to note that, in this context, *wuwo* does not consist in emptying oneself of desires and passions that might arise naturally (an attitude that would be in opposition to nature itself); instead, it designates the ability to behave appropriately in each and every context by understanding the *li* of things and not imposing oneself onto it. In other words, the *wuwo* approach requires one to cherish the ten thousand things in their differentiations, so that one can fully grasp their underlying unity; it designates a hermeneutical approach through which one is able to grasp the essence of things and recognize it as their own through self-reflection. To explain this notion, the Cheng compare the heart/mind of the sage with "still water" and a "bright mirror", and state that "when things that should be loved appear, the sage loves them, and when things that should be hated appear, the sage hates them."⁴⁶⁶

Having considered the Cheng's system in its metaphysical and epistemological articulation, we can appreciate the ways in which their ethical system is coherently bounded to such articulations and naturally follows from them. In this context, *li* emerges as both a natural and ethical regulatory principle, which serve as both the ground and the objective of the Cheng's philosophical inquiry. According to Huang, the highest good, for the two philosophers, is joy and, more precisely, the ability to live without doubt or hesitancy.⁴⁶⁷ However, in consideration of what has been presented so far, I am more inclined to argue that the highest good, in the Cheng's perspective, is knowledge of the one-and-many *li*, which necessarily leads to moral knowledge and practice. The ethical dimension of *li*, together with the theory of knowledge that I have discussed in the previous chapter, will concur in informing my discussion on what I propose to consider as the Cheng's notion of "reason". Before that, I

⁴⁶⁴ *Lunyu* 15.24: "己所不欲，勿施於人"，"Do not impose on others what you don't wish for yourself".

⁴⁶⁵ *Yishu* 11; 125.

⁴⁶⁶ *Yishu* 18; 210-11.

⁴⁶⁷ See Huang, *Why Be Moral?*.

shall now turn to examine the differences and the commonalities that characterize Spinoza and the Cheng's theory of ethics.

6.3 The "Good" as Plentitude in Oneness

From what I have discussed so far, it clearly emerges that, for both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers, oneness (*substantia* or *li*) cannot – in itself – be conceived as 'good' or 'bad': Nature is necessarily both, as much as it is the union of all natural opposites one could ever conceive (for the Cheng) or existence in itself (for Spinoza). For example, the Cheng brothers state:

"All the innumerable things have their contraries; there is an alternation of *yin* and *yang*, of good and bad. When the *yang* grows the *yin* diminishes, when good increases evil is reduced. This principle (*li* 理), how far it can be extended? It is all men need to know."⁴⁶⁸

In the preface to part four of the *Ethics*, on the other hand, Spinoza states the following:

"Nature does not act for an end; for the eternal and infinite entity that we call God, i.e. Nature, acts out of the same necessity of nature as that by which it exists. [...] Therefore, just as it does not exist for the sake of any purpose, neither does it act for the sake of any purpose, but just as it has no principle or end of existing, so it has no principle or end for acting. [...] As to what concerns good and bad, these indicate nothing positive in things considered in themselves and are simply ways of thinking, i.e. notions which we form from the fact that we compare things with one another. For one and the same thing can at the same time be good, bad, and indifferent. For example, music is good to someone who is melancholy, bad to a mourner, but neither good nor bad to someone who is deaf."⁴⁶⁹

Now, the fact that Spinoza and the Cheng do not ascribe moral principles to Nature itself does not imply that they do not develop a moral philosophy; on the contrary, both systems are fundamentally concerned with articulating an ethical theory on the basis of their

⁴⁶⁸ *Yishu* 11; 123.

⁴⁶⁹ E4, preface.

metaphysical views. But the starting point of their moral philosophy is precisely that ethics *is not* metaphysics, and thus that ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are derivative rather than grounding principles. One could say, in other words, that – in both systems - ethical principles are derivative of metaphysics in the same way as the dynamics of a system are derivative of its structural components. This assumption, which is shared by both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers, is developed in conjunction with two elements in particular, namely, knowledge and desire. While the first has been discussed in the previous chapter and will be further developed in the following comparative discussion of “reason”, I shall now focus on the different ways in which desire is discussed by Spinoza and the Cheng brothers respectively; this notion, which is conceived in diametrically different ways by these philosophers, has nevertheless an important role in both systems, as it represents the endeavor by which – according to them – individuals cultivate or lack the ability to discriminate between the “good” and the “bad”.

One difference which seems to set apart Spinoza and the Cheng’s articulation of their theories of ethics is the criteria according to which they each define moral principles themselves. On the one hand, Spinoza derives moral principles on the basis of the structure and functioning of Nature (i.e., substance and modes) while, on the other hand, the Cheng brothers identify moral principles with the nature of particular things (*xing ji li* 性即理).⁴⁷⁰ While this might seem a substantial difference, I think it should be seen, instead, as a difference in articulation or argumentative strategy. It is true that Spinoza defines ethics as derivative, but the “good” (in his view) is defined on the basis of the structure and functioning of Nature, and of what is most conducive for individuals to realize or affirm it as much as possible. Thus, if the moral capacity of an individual is considered in terms of their capacity for affirming nature (as Spinoza does), the moral principles are, in a way, the affirmation of Nature itself. On the other hand, when the Cheng brothers affirm that the nature of beings is originally good, they base this affirmation on the original plenitude that is ascribed to human nature as *li* prior to its entering relations of stimulations and response. Their position, thus, is not that nature in itself is morally good, but that it is complete and, as a consequence, it has capacity for morality. So despite the different argumentative strategies, a more attentive

⁴⁷⁰ *Yishu* 22a; 292: “又問: ‘性如何?’ 曰: ‘性即理也, 所謂理, 性是也. 天下之理, 原其所自, 未有不善..’”

analysis shows that both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers identify moral principles with the capacity of affirming Nature, or oneness.

There is, nevertheless, one particular theme which is treated in almost opposite ways by these philosophers, and which is represented by their respective views on the nature and role played by desire in the pursuit of virtue. While the Cheng brothers consider the latter as an expression of human nature that has capacity for moral goodness,⁴⁷¹ as I discussed above, it is mostly discussed in relation to selfishness and thus as implying morally bad behavior. For them, selfish desire is also identified with the incapacity of harmonizing the self with the whole of Nature through the establishment of relations, with going against one's own nature, and thus with a life of doubt and worry which leads to the abandonment of oneself and others, at the same time. As such, selfish desires are both symptoms and vectors of moral ineptitude which, in turn, stems from lack of knowledge of *li* and its relational dynamics; this is because in the Cheng's view, through selfish desires, the individual progressively sees themselves as isolated from oneness and ultimately denies their own self. Spinoza, on the other hand, conceives desire (*conatus*, power) as the very essence of the individual – a drive which defines at once both self-preservation and self-development. In itself, *conatus* does not have moral connotation but does, however, direct an individual's moral capacity: depending on how one directs their *conatus* (through understanding the affections by which one's desires are determined to will this or that thing) they will increase or decrease their virtue. Thus, while for Spinoza desire *leads* to moral behavior but is not, in itself, moral or immoral, the Cheng brothers tend to identify desire with selfish and thus unmoral behavior.

Despite these great differences in articulation, it is important to note that notions of 'desire' lie at the very core of both the Cheng and Spinoza's ethical theories. This, I think, is because – in both systems – desire is understood as an endeavor which both displays and directs one's individual constitution. Through desires, individuals can form relations of compositions or decompositions by means of which they can realize or damage their nature, as well as that of others. In other words, desire embodies the derivative character of moral principles, which are derivative not because they are *different* from Nature but because they derive from the constitution of human nature considered as part of wider organism (as modes

⁴⁷¹ For example see block quotation above.

of substance or as particular instances of *li*).⁴⁷² The importance played by notions of desire as well as the focus on the self-development and self-cultivation articulated by the Cheng brothers and Spinoza might seem to point to articulations of ethical egoism; but while their focus on the self is undeniable, I have mentioned that – in both framework – self-development implies an extension of the referent of the self, whereby the latter does not merely indicate the individual as an atomistic entity but, instead, as a highly composite instance of a more composite whole with which the individual can relate and even identify. This notion of an extended self, I maintain, is of crucial importance for both systems, as it represents the criterion for the formulation of moral principles and, with that, of moral action and its objectives. The extended self also highlights that the main interest for both Spinoza and the Cheng's ethical theories does not focus on the *motivations* of moral agents but rather in their *individuation*;⁴⁷³ this perspective guarantees that the self-centered character of morality as articulated by these thinkers does not result either in incommensurability of ethical values or in actual egoism. In other words, the self-interest of the extended self is intrinsically other regarding.

Indeed, one could argue that it might not be necessary to be an extended self (or other regarding) in order to perform moral acts, and that even the non-virtuous people with questionable motives could act “right”. To such a comment, I think that both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers would respond along these lines: even *if* a non-virtuous person *could* perform moral acts,⁴⁷⁴ she could not feel *joy* in doing so (*le 樂* and *beatitudo*) – because she would be externally determined to perform moral actions instead of acting on the basis of self-determination. Thus, in both systems, it is the feeling of joy, then, that serve as the marker of

⁴⁷² I have already discussed that Spinoza does not attribute to God or Nature moral qualities, nor do the Cheng brothers attribute goodness or badness to *Li*. This is because both Nature and *Li* are infinite entities, while moral qualities are necessarily partial (i.e., for something to be good there has to be something bad to which the good is contrasted or in opposition, but such opposition cannot be attribute to existence itself, nor to intelligibility as such).

⁴⁷³ This has been noted by Newlands in his discussion on Spinoza's egoism (Newlands, “Ethics, Motivation, and Egoism”, 192.) Considering my discussion on the Cheng brothers' thought, however, I believe the same position can be unproblematically attributed to their system as well (especially in light of their metaphysics of one-and-many *li*), granted the conceptual differences that I have discussed so far)

⁴⁷⁴ While I entertain this possibility for the sake of clarification, I do not think that neither the Cheng brothers nor Spinoza would consider this as an actually possible case scenario. This is because they consider the moral person as intrinsically other-regarding while, on the contrary, the immoral person is intrinsically self-centered (i.e. self-destructive), so I think they would hold that it is *structurally* impossible for a non-virtuous person to act virtuously.

a virtuous life. As I interpret it, the feeling of joy for both Spinoza and the Cheng stems from acting in agreement with one's own nature, that is, establishing relations with others on the basis of that which agrees with our nature. But as I have discussed above, the virtuous person – who *knows* Nature through knowing things – also knows that her *li* is the same as the *li* of others, or that she is a mode of the one substance; that is, she is able to relate to Nature not as a subject relates to an object but as a property relates to a subject. As a consequence, the more knowledge she gains of Nature, the more she realizes herself, the greater joy she feels. The small-minded or non-virtuous person, on the other hand, ignores the oneness of Nature, is unable to unite herself to others, and thus always feels in opposition to everything. In this sense, I think that both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers develop what could be understood as an ethics of harmony, in which the many modes or *li* relate (whether through processes of unification or distinction) on the basis of the shared oneness of Nature. In such one-and-many framework, the flourishing life is realized by partaking in the synergic character of a more composite whole which, as constituting both the *relation* and the *relata*, is greater than the sum of its parts.⁴⁷⁵ In different terms, this means that the more people are able to join themselves to that which agrees with their nature, the more virtuous (i.e. powerful) they become; in this sense, the realization of natural harmony translates, at the individual level, with the realization self-plentitude. It is in this sense that both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers identify virtue with nature.⁴⁷⁶

All this considered, I believe that the pivotal element for which individuals are led to pursue the “good” is, for both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers, adequate or genuine knowledge. In fact, as I previously noted, Spinoza holds that knowledge of God or Nature amounts to the “supreme blessedness or happiness” of human beings,⁴⁷⁷ while according to the Cheng brothers, those who act against nature (i.e., immorally) do so “only because they

⁴⁷⁵ The notion of harmony is usually discussed in relation to the Confucian tradition, rather than to European early modern thought. However, I think Spinoza's thought as here presented is well aligned with conceptions of harmony whereby different natures (i.e. individuals) join to form a greater whole. While Spinoza did not articulate his ethics in terms of harmony, some scholars have noted that Spinoza's usage of the verb *conveniunt* (“to agree”) can be better understood in terms of “harmonizing”. See Newlands, “Ethics, Motivation, and Egoism”, 192. See also Samuel Shirley, *Spinoza: The Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003). For a comprehensive discussion on harmony in the Confucian tradition see Li Chenyang, *The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony*, (New York: Routledge, 2014).

⁴⁷⁶ This is well exemplified in Spinoza's identification of virtue with power (where the latter is also understood as one's *conatus* or essence) and the Cheng's identification of *xing* with *li*.

⁴⁷⁷ E2, p49s.

lack knowledge”.⁴⁷⁸ Importantly, if the pursuit of the good *depends* on knowledge (whether it be adequate or inadequate) it seems that different modes of knowing Nature correspond to different modes of action. If this is accepted, as Spinoza and the Cheng brothers do, then the motivational source for pursuing the good, or the moving power by which an individual acts morally, does not lie in her desires, but rather in her *modes of knowledge* – by means of which she differentiates herself from or unites herself to something else. This interpretation is supported not only by the Cheng and Spinoza’s discussions on knowledge, but also by their understanding of desire as an endeavor which is informed and directed *by* knowledge. Thus, while commentators of both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers have identified the source of moral motivation with their notions of desires, I argue that it is their notion of adequate or genuine knowledge which ultimately functions as motivational source. But this, importantly, can be the case only if knowledge itself is understood as an endeavor. In order to clarify this position, I shall devote the next chapter to Spinoza and the Cheng’s notions of “reason”.

⁴⁷⁸ *Yishu* 25; 318.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Patterns of “Reason”:

Understanding the One and the Many as Self-Extension

Introduction

The previous chapters have discussed Spinoza and the Cheng brother’s philosophical systems, that is, their metaphysics, epistemology, and ethical theories. In interpreting their respective worldviews I have argued that, despite great differences of conceptual tools and argumentative strategies employed by these thinkers, the two systems share important commonalities. In particular, I have noted three main planes of intersection: 1) metaphysically, both systems ascribe to notions of immanent ‘oneness’ which permeate all particular things in both their constitution and interactions; 2) epistemologically, I have noted that both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers articulate knowledge as a reflexive and transformative endeavor; 3) ethically, I have noted that both systems consider moral principles as embedded within the nature of particular beings and as deriving from their notions of ‘oneness’. Since both Spinoza and the Cheng consider moral principles as deriving from nature, they greatly emphasize the role of knowledge as the locus of intersection between metaphysics and ethics. Importantly, while these thinkers articulate their notions of knowledge very differently, they both share the conviction that knowledge of nature (in terms of both oneness and particular things) is the highest good to which human beings should aim in order to live a flourishing life. Building on the comparative analysis of the previous discussions, the present chapter is devoted to further exploring the role of knowledge in Spinoza and the Cheng’s system. In particular, I discuss the two notions of adequate and genuine knowledge with specific regards to two notions of “reason”, namely, Spinoza’s *ratio* and the Cheng’s *li* 理 of the mind (*xin*) and nature (*xing*). Overall, the chapter argues that the fundamental role which is ascribed to reason, in both contexts, is better understood by interpreting “reason” as an act of self-

extension, in which the individual is able to develop their particular nature in both unity and differentiation.

Before entering the discussion on *ratio* and *li*, I provide some preliminary remarks on “reason” as related to European and Chinese philosophy, in order to better contextualize and clarify the following discussion. The first section is then devoted to an in-depth discussion of Spinoza’s notion of *ratio*; in particular, I examine his discussion of the ‘common notions’ in relation to his accounts of adequate and inadequate knowledge; in doing so, I argue that Spinoza’s *ratio* is a relational concept (i.e. working with *and* grounded upon relations) whose epistemological and ethical value is found at the intersection of God or Nature and particular beings. The second section provides a discussion of the Cheng brother’s theory of knowledge by focusing on their identification of *li* as both mind (*xin* 心) and nature (*xing* 性). Here, I elaborate on the Cheng’s notion of “self-getting” (*zide* 自得) as inherently relational (i.e. concerning connectedness among things), in order to explain how, as grounded upon their metaphysics of *li*, the apprehension of genuine knowledge of the mind and the nature has both epistemological and ethical value. In the last section, I individuate the planes of intersection between Spinoza’s notion of *ratio* and the Cheng’s notion of the mind and nature as *li* in order to argue that – in both contexts – “reason” can be interpreted as an act of self-extension. This understanding offers a series of interpretative advantages that, in my view, can be directed to enhance our understanding of both philosophical systems as well as formulating a notion of “reason” which, while respecting the philosophical specificities of both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers, can account for both its theoretical and practical realms. It is this notion of reason which, in my view, constitutes the philosophical value of the link between the Cheng and Spinoza.

7.1 Preliminary Considerations: “Reason” as a Formal Indication

The notion of “reason”, in its various translations (*logos*, *ratio*, *raison*, *ragione*, *Vernunft*, etc.) represents one of the hallmarks of the history of European philosophy. While it is generally recognized as a distinguishing feature of the European Enlightenment, formulations of this concept can be traced back to Greek philosophy, where it expressed by

the multifaceted notion of *logos*, variously rendered in English as ‘discourse’, ‘language’, ‘reason’, ‘rationality’, ‘foundation’, and ‘proportion’, among others.⁴⁷⁹ The Greek term was translated into Latin as *ratio* (from the verb *reor*, meaning “to estimate”, “to judge”, “to think”, “to calculate”) which, starting from the time of the Roman author Plautus (255 – 184 BCE), was used in the sense of “explanation”, “reasoning”, and “method”.⁴⁸⁰ The polysemy of both *logos* and *ratio*, together with the operations of expansion and reduction of meaning to which the notion of “reason” was subjected throughout the history of European philosophy, make this notion one of the most discussed in historical literature. But precisely because “reason” has been described in a great variety of ways, there is no unanimous agreement on a clear-cut definition that can be applied to all of its declinations. Indeed, the evaluation of whether or not there is a need for such a definition goes beyond the purpose and focus of the present study.⁴⁸¹ However, it should be noted that, even if one were to argue for such a need, the polysemy of “reason” would still have to be faced as a great challenge. Today, contemporary philosophers variously refer to rationality, reasoning, or reasons (here in the sense of the reason for which *x* believes or does *p*), but despite the great commitment to a rigorous terminology, the meaning of these notions is still greatly debated. In general terms, however, it is clear that the various declinations of reason and rationality indicate some standard of “correctness”, “proper functioning”, and “goodness”.⁴⁸²

With regards to the history of Chinese philosophy, reason might not seem to play the same fundamental role that European philosophers have attributed to it, and some commentators have argued that Chinese thinkers did not develop a “theory of reason” despite “reasoning competently”.⁴⁸³ Others maintain that the fact that a term expressing the

⁴⁷⁹ Barbara Cassin, Emily Apter, Jaques Lezra, and Michael Wood, *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 581.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid. It is interesting to note that *ratio* did not express the sense of “speech”, “discourse”, and “language” embodied by *logos*, but it did share with the latter the sense of “calculating” and “counting”. *Ratio* was also coupled with other nouns in order to better qualify its meaning according to context; a few prominent examples are *ratio et via* (method), *ratio et consilium* (intention, or the plan), and *ratio et mens* (reasoning, intelligence). Ibid, 586.

⁴⁸¹ Such a position would also be in contradiction with the guiding methodological assumptions presented in chapter one, which are based upon the recognition of differences both inter and intra-culturally.

⁴⁸² As noted by Karl Schafer, “Rationality as the Capacity for Understanding,” *Nous* 53, no. 3 (2019): 639-663.

⁴⁸³ Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation*, 25. Other interpreters have juxtaposed reason (strictly intended as “logic” and characteristic of “Western” traditions) to correlative thinking (which has been argued, especially by A.C. Graham, to be a defining character of Chinese philosophy); see Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, “Rationality, Correlativity, and the Language of Process,” *The Journal of*

ideas of “reason” and “rationality” appears only later on in the history of Chinese thought (supposedly as a product of the translations of European philosophical works into Chinese) does not mean that it previously lacked “concepts or ideas related to reason and rationality”.⁴⁸⁴ In fact, several commentators have explained Chinese traditions in terms of reason and rationality, especially in relation to Neo-Confucianism; as mentioned in the previous chapters, the notion that is usually conceived as the counterpart of “reason”⁴⁸⁵ is identified with *li* 理, which has been variously rendered in English as “principle”, “coherence”, “pattern”, and “reason”, among others. Accordingly, the Neo-Confucian thought elaborated by both the Cheng brothers and Zhu Xi (retrospectively known as the Cheng-Zhu school) has been categorized as “rationalist” in opposition to the later “idealist” school of Lu Xiangshan and Wang Yangming.⁴⁸⁶ The discourse which identifies Neo-Confucianism as related to ideas of reason and rationality, however, seems to take for granted the meaning of these terms, which sometimes are even presented in tautological form (such as “rationality means being rational”).⁴⁸⁷ As a consequence, the claim that Neo-Confucians may (or may not) argue for a theory of reason rests upon unclear foundations. This is perhaps due to interpretative difficulties; on the one hand, similarly to *logos* and *ratio*, *li* is a polysemantic character whose meaning is specified according to context while, on the other hand, such specifications can be hardly unified in a clear-cut definition applicable to the whole of Neo-Confucianism (let alone the whole of Chinese philosophy).

Speculative Philosophy 5, no. 2 (1991): 85-106. These discussions, however, seem to have a very narrow understanding of “reason” in European philosophy which, while presented as possibly representing the whole of European philosophical traditions, does not account for the Greek uses of the terms, let alone the later Scholastic interpretations which regarded *ratio* as a process relating human beings to God. In all these contexts, reason defines for sure way more than just logic.

⁴⁸⁴ Yang Guorong, “The Idea of Reason and Rationality in Chinese Philosophy” in *Philosophical Horizons: Metaphysical Investigations in Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Paul D’Ambrosio, Daniel Sarafinas, Sharon Small, Ady van den Stock, and Stefano (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 178. Another example of advocates of rationality in relation to Chinese thought can be found in the famous document known as the “Manifesto of New Confucians” written by the four prominent scholars Zhang Junmai, Mou Zongsan, Xu Fuguan, and Tang Junyi. For more on this, see Alice Simionato, “The Manifesto of 1958: A Discourse on Confucian Rationalism,” *Rivista di Estetica* 72 (2019): 125-138.

⁴⁸⁵ Another term that is usually rendered as “reason” in translations of Chinese classical texts is *gu* 故, which primarily means “old” or “ancient” but also designates reason in the sense of “cause” (rather than “reasoning”).

⁴⁸⁶ Examples of such categorizations can be found in Feng Youlan’s *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, Graham’s *Two Chinese Philosophers*, and Chan’s *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*.

⁴⁸⁷ See Xunwu Chen, “A Rethinking of Confucian Rationality,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 25, no. 4 (1998): 483-504. Chen states: “Rationality is, as I shall understand it, a cluster of methods and conditions of being rational and reasonable.” (483).

In light of these interpretative difficulties, the present chapter is constructed upon the assumption that the meaning of “reason” and “rationality” cannot be objectified through reductive procedures. I therefore propose to inquire into this notion as articulated in the two systems developed by Spinoza (*ratio*) and the Cheng brothers (*li*) as a formal indication. The method of formal indication, as discussed in chapter one, was developed by Heidegger in order to overcome the challenge of precluding the meaning of Being to a limited spectrum of assertions, it is – more broadly – a methodological tool devoted to reflecting on the “general character of philosophical concepts” as “formally indicating or signaling.”⁴⁸⁸ Heidegger’s conception of formal indication, I shall recall, derives from a differentiation between ‘formalization’ and ‘generalization’ originally made by Husserl, which Heidegger explains as follows:

“Generalization means generalizing according to genus. For example, red is color, color is sensuous quality. Or joy is an affect, affect is experience. One can, so it seems, drive this further: qualities as such, things as such are essences. Red, color, sensual quality, experience, genus, species, essence, are things. But the question arises: is the generalizing transition from “red” to “color” and from “color” to “sensuous quality” the same as that from “sensuous quality” to “essence” and from “essence” to “thing”? Evidently *not*! There is a break here: the transition from “red” to “color” and from “color” to “sensuous quality” is a *generalization*; that from “sensuous quality” to “essence” is a *formalization*.”⁴⁸⁹

Generalization and formalization are here explained as two different activities; while generalizing is a “way of ordering” which proceeds from the content of individualized objects and, as such, is pre-determined by the content or meaning of those objects, formal indication determines the content of its object from the ways in which the latter relates to broader domains of meaning. Because of its relational focus – as opposed to the “what-content-as-such” focus proper of generalization – formal indication aims at avoiding pre-judgments and

⁴⁸⁸ *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik* as quoted in Dahlstrom, *Heidegger’s Method*, 780. As mentioned in chapter one, Heidegger’s development of formal indication can be found in his methodological reflections developed between 1919 and 1930 and, in particular, in his lectures on religion delivered between 1920 and 1921.

⁴⁸⁹ Martin Heidegger, “Formalization and formal indication” in *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, (Bloomington; Indiana University Press, 2004), 40.

assumptions that precede the enacting of the relational meaning through which the object can be determined. This determination, in turn, is not meant to objectify meaning (that is, establishing a universally applicable meaning) but rather to preserve the enactment of the relation through which an object can be understood in its multiplicity of meanings. In my understanding, while generalization of philosophical concepts aims at answering a “what” question, formal indication seems to be more congenial to answering “how” questions; instead of posing the question as “what is the content of *x*”, for example, formal indication prompts the question “how does *x* function in relation to its system/in this context?”, and subsequently defines *x*’s meaning. This focus on the relationality of concepts, I maintain, comes particularly helpful in the context of the present discussion.

Giving the difficulties regarding the elaboration of a generalizable meaning of “reason” that I previously noted, I propose to treat this concept as a formal indication for determining the meaning of Spinoza’s *ratio* and the Cheng’s *li* as “reason”. More concretely, I propose to inquire into the meaning of this notion as elaborated in these two systems by considering the way in which *ratio* and *li* relate to other major concepts employed by Spinoza and the Cheng brothers in arguing for their positions in order to establish a shared notion of “reason”. Thus, rather than considering the concept in isolation, I examine its relation to these philosophers’ metaphysical and ethical views in order to define the functional role played by *ratio* and *li* in their respective contexts. With this purpose in mind, considering “reason” as a formal indication allows to account for the planes of intersection between Spinoza and the Cheng brothers without implying an identity between the two systems, thus respecting the philosophical differences that characterize these philosophers. In short, giving the polysemy of the terms usually rendered as “reason” (*ratio* and *li*), the following discussion is *not* constructed upon assuming an objectified meaning of these terms. Instead, I take the term to be a formal indication in order not to preclude or pre-assume its content. Furthermore, since the what-content of “reason” is formulated differently in Spinoza and the Cheng brothers because of the cultural, linguistic, and historical specificities of each worldview, I will focus on the *function* that notions of “reason” play in each system. After discussing the role of *ratio* in Spinoza’s system and the role of *li* in the Cheng’s theory of knowledge, I argue that both notions (as formally indicating “reason”) amount to an act of self-extension which entails both self-knowledge as well as the apprehension of oneness in differentiations.

7.2 Spinoza's *ratio*

Unlike Descartes, whose philosophical inquiry in the *Meditations* starts by considering the nature of knowing, it is only in the second book of the *Ethics* that Spinoza presents his epistemology; this is because the latter is grounded upon the axioms and definitions presented in book one which constitute Spinoza's metaphysics.⁴⁹⁰ As discussed in chapter five, Spinoza's taxonomy of knowledge (*cognitio*)⁴⁹¹ presents imagination as the sole cause of falsity or inadequate ideas, while reason and intuition are both kinds of knowledge that are necessarily true.⁴⁹² While a thorough differentiation of the three kinds of knowledge goes beyond the purpose of the present discussion, it is still important to consider their main characteristics in order to better understand the distinguishing features of *ratio*. Before reentering Spinoza's taxonomy of cognition on the basis of the discussion presented in chapter five, however, I shall recall his differentiation between adequate and inadequate ideas, as it is upon this distinction that the three kinds of knowledge are defined.

There are two propositions which are helpful in understanding Spinoza's notion of adequacy. The first is found in E2d4, where an adequate idea is defined as "an idea which, in so far as it is considered in itself with no relation to its object, has all the properties or, the intrinsic denominations, of a true idea." A true idea, in turn, is an idea which "agrees" (*convenire*) with its object.⁴⁹³ So an adequate and a true idea are the same, except for the fact that a true idea is related to its object while an adequate idea is considered in itself. It should be recalled, however, that "truth" is mostly employed by Spinoza as meaning "knowledge"; this is best illustrated by the statement found in E2p43s, which explains that having a true idea means *knowing* something "perfectly, or, in the best way"⁴⁹⁴, together with Spinoza's

⁴⁹⁰ As Parkinson notes, the difference between Descartes and Spinoza's starting points (epistemology and metaphysics respectively) reflects a methodological difference that was mentioned in chapter five; while Descartes employed an 'analytic' method, Spinoza employed a 'synthetic' strategy. Parkinson, *Ethics*, 31.

⁴⁹¹ While "knowledge" as a translation for the Latin *cognitio* is widely accepted, some commentators (such as Garrett and Bennet) have rendered it as "cognition" in order to account for those ideas that Spinoza characterizes as inadequate or false. See Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's 'Ethics'* and Don Garrett, "Spinoza's Theory of *Scientia Intuitiva*" in *Scientia in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Tom Sorell, G.A. Rogers, and Jill Kraye (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), 99-115. See also Sanem Soyarslan, "The Distinction between Reason and Intuitive Knowledge in Spinoza's *Ethics*," *European Journal of Philosophy* 24, no. 1 (2013): 27-54.

⁴⁹² E2, p40s2, p41, and p42.

⁴⁹³ E1, a6.

⁴⁹⁴ Spinoza's understanding of knowing something in the best way can be better appreciated by recalling an example from his *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* already mentioned in chapter four: "if anyone says that Peter, for example, exists, but does not *know* that Peter exists, his thought is, as far as he is concerned, false –

conception of falsity as privation of knowledge.⁴⁹⁵ At the same time, it is also important to consider that Spinoza does not conceive of someone that has a false idea of x as having no knowledge of it whatsoever. Instead, a false or inadequate idea is mutilated and confused or, stated differently, it is an idea which does not agree with its object in the best way – or that does not well explain its object when considered in itself. While more will be said on the notions of agreement and disagreement later in the section, it suffices for now to note that, in his taxonomy, knowledge includes both truth and falsity since it is conceived in terms of degrees. A second account of adequacy is found in E2p29, in which Spinoza states that the mind has adequate ideas “whenever it is determined *internally*, namely by the fact that it regards several things at the same time, to an understanding of their agreements, differences, and oppositions.”⁴⁹⁶ As John Grey has noted, here adequacy is described in causal terms, that is, adequate ideas are defined by the capacity of a mind to *internally* produce its own determinations.⁴⁹⁷ In contrast, when the cause of an idea (such as the contact with a body) is not internal to the mind, such an idea is inadequate, i.e. confused and partial – like “consequences without premises”.⁴⁹⁸ The causal terminology here employed to discuss adequate and inadequate ideas is related to the notion of adequate cause as defined in book three: “I call an adequate cause whose effects can be clearly and distinctly perceived *through itself*. I call that an inadequate, or a partial cause whose effect cannot be understood through itself alone.”⁴⁹⁹ From this definition, it is easy to see the parallel between adequate causes and adequate ideas: in both cases, the threshold of adequacy is the capacity for determining the causal relation that bounds a cause and its effects - or a mind and its determinations - and, more specifically, to *internally* determine these relations (whether *within* a cause or *within* a mind). In thinking of the mind’s determinations, we should remind that Spinoza understands an idea not as an inactive image that passively reproduce its object; to him, ideas are actions of the mind, that is, judgments by which the object of an idea is affirmed and/or denied in differing degrees (that is, defined).⁵⁰⁰ When Sarah conceives of her friend Mark, for

or, if you prefer, is not true – even though Peter really does exist. The assertion “Peter exists” is true only with respect to a person who knows for certain that Peter exists.” As reported in Parkinson, *Ethics*, 31.

⁴⁹⁵ E2, p35.

⁴⁹⁶ Emphasis mine.

⁴⁹⁷ John R. T. Grey, “Reason and Knowledge in Spinoza” in *Spinoza: Basic Concepts*, ed. Andre Santos Campo (Exter: Imprint Academic, 2015), 71-83.

⁴⁹⁸ E2, p29d.

⁴⁹⁹ E3, d1. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁰⁰ E2, p49.

example, she determines Mark to have certain characteristics (such as being polite and understanding) that, at the same time, exclude others (such as being unpolite and indifferent). To sum up, while ideas always entail the formation of a certain relation of determination between the mind and the object it conceives, the latter can be adequate or inadequate; according to Spinoza, ideas are adequate when they are *internally* determined (that is, they can be fully explained and understood with no relation to their object) while, in opposition, they are inadequate when *externally* determined (that is, they are partially or fully explained by something that is not contained in the mind).

As I previously mentioned, understanding the adequacy/inadequacy distinction is a necessary step to comprehend Spinoza's taxonomy of knowledge, to which I shall now turn. The three kinds of knowledge are all introduced in the second scholium of E2, p40: imagination (*imaginationem, opinionem*), or knowledge of the first kind, is said to be the sole source of inadequate ideas – that is, confused conceptions of the mind that are determined *externally* to it – which are formed on the basis of “signs” and “inconstant experience” (which can variously include the common use of language, sense perception, and inductive knowledge). Again, this does not mean that imagination provides no knowledge, but that the ideas of imagination are confused, thus amounting to a lesser degree of knowledge. On the other hand, reason (*ratio*) and intuitive knowledge (*scientia intuitiva*) – the second and third kinds of knowledge respectively – are both sources of adequate ideas,⁵⁰¹ but while reason is described as grasping “common notions” and “adequate ideas of the properties of things”, intuitive knowledge is described as proceeding from an adequate knowledge of some of God's attributes to a knowledge of the essence of things. This brief and complex differentiation between the two kinds of adequate knowledge, which Spinoza does not discuss at length, has led scholars to pose the question of whether reason and intuition should be differentiated on the basis of their mode of apprehension or on the basis of their content. According to Deleuze, for example, there is “no break between the second and third kinds of knowledge” as they provide two understandings of God which are coextensive,⁵⁰² while Soyarslan has argued that Spinoza differentiates between reason and intuition on the basis of their content since, while

⁵⁰¹ E2, p41.

⁵⁰² Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 58.

reason grasps notions that are common to all things and thus are general, intuition grasps the essence of particular things.⁵⁰³

While settling this debate goes beyond the purpose of the present discussion, it is still important to understand the differentiation between the second and third kinds of knowledge in order to better outline the mode and scope of reason as described in the *Ethics*. In my view, there seems to be evidence for understanding such difference in terms of both method of apprehension and content apprehended. As previously mentioned, reason is defined in relation to the “common notions” which are, by definition, common to all things (in Spinoza’s words, they are “equally in the part and in the whole”) and consequently do not constitute the essence of particular things.⁵⁰⁴ This means that reason grasps common properties that are shared by particular things but not their individuating essences. By means of intuition, on the other hand, the mind knows the essence of particular things as derived from the essence of the attributes of God (which are infinite, even though Spinoza explains that we only know of thought and extension). So there indeed seems to be a certain difference in the content apprehended by ideas of reason and intuition.⁵⁰⁵ In addition to this, the two cognitions can be differentiated in their mode of apprehension. When introducing intuition in E2p40s2, Spinoza illustrates it by means of an example where someone is given three numbers and has to find the fourth proportional: “given that the numbers are 1,2, and 3, everyone will see that the fourth proportional number is 6 [...] we infer the fourth number from the very ratio that we see with one intuition (*intuito videmus*).”⁵⁰⁶ As it is explained in conjunction with visual perception, it is clear that Spinoza considers intuition to be a direct and immediate apprehension. This, on the other hand, does not seem to be the case for

⁵⁰³ Soyarslan, “The Distinction Between Reason and Intuitive Knowledge in Spinoza’s *Ethics*”. Arguably, Soyarslan position could very well be compatible with Deleuze’s, as both common notions and particular essences are part of Nature (whether in the form of *Natura naturans* or in the form of *Natura naturata*). Still, Soyarslan emphasizes a difference in the content of apprehension of the two modes of knowledge, while Deleuze seems to undermine such difference.

⁵⁰⁴ E2, p37. While common notions are general, they are not universal. In fact, Spinoza considers “universals” among the ideas that are “in the highest degree confused”. See E2p40s1.

⁵⁰⁵ It should be noted that scholars have differing positions with regard to such difference. According to LeBuffe, for example, rather than defending views that maintain an incommensurable difference between a thing’s essence (pertaining to intuition) and a thing’s properties (pertaining to reason), it would be better to hold that “in knowledge of each of a thing’s properties, we gain some knowledge of a thing’s essence.” Michael LeBuffe, *Spinoza on Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Even though I partly agree with this position, it is important to acknowledge, as LeBuffe himself does (98) that Spinoza insists on distinguishing the properties of a thing and its essence.

⁵⁰⁶ Emphasis mine.

reason. The latter, among other things, is responsible for mathematical and geometrical operations (E2p40s2)⁵⁰⁷ which consist in processual operations rather than immediate apprehensions; as such, reason is differentiated from intuition as being a process, rather than an immediate apprehension. These differences might lead readers of the *Ethics* to conclude that intuition is somehow superior to reason, in that it leads the mind to know more or in a better, more reliable way. Indeed, some passages of the text itself explicitly state such superiority. Spinoza affirms, for example, that intuitive knowledge is the highest endeavor and virtue of the mind⁵⁰⁸ as well as the greatest human perfection.⁵⁰⁹ At the same time, however, commentators that emphasize the superiority of intuition over reason (such as Soyarslan) seem to overlook the fact that the latter is far more discussed than the former, and that Spinoza devotes more propositions to explaining the functioning and value of reason rather than that of intuition.⁵¹⁰ Leaving the debate about the superiority of one cognition over the other aside, the quantitative disparity between the propositions discussing reason and those accounting for intuition suggests, in my view, that *ratio* plays a more fundamental role than intuition in Spinoza's overall project of providing "a method" which "leads to freedom";⁵¹¹ such method, as he explains, derives from "the power of reason" (*potential rationis*), which is identified with that of the mind.⁵¹² Furthermore, the power of reason is also explained to be the foundation for the third kind of knowledge, thus illuminating the fundamental role that *ratio* plays as a middle ground between lower and higher forms of cognitions.⁵¹³ It is my contention that such power, which Spinoza calls "understanding", can

⁵⁰⁷ The same example of proportional numbers that is used in E2p40s2 to explain intuition, is previously used in a way that is presumably illustrative of reason, where Spinoza states that merchants would calculate the fourth proportional through multiplications and subtractions. LeBuffe has suggested that Spinoza's account of reason retains some important characteristics of traditional accounts (with specific reference to those of Pseudo-Dionysus and Aquinas); according to which reason is a cognition that is unique to finite minds as a processual and partial activity. God and the angels, on the other hand, are infinite minds that do not require the partial and processual activity ascribed to reason.

⁵⁰⁸ E5, p25.

⁵⁰⁹ E5, p27d.

⁵¹⁰ One might argue that this is the case because a processual activity *can* be explained while immediate apprehensions cannot. However, Spinoza does devote space in explaining the immediate apprehensions for which individuals form inadequate ideas, and thus the lack of extensive discussions on intuition seem to be more of a purposeful choice on the part of the author.

⁵¹¹ E5, Preface.

⁵¹² Ibid.

⁵¹³ E2p47s. Building on the fact that from an adequate knowledge of the attributes of God the mind forms an adequate knowledge of the essence of God, Spinoza explains that from the common notions we can deduce "very many things which we can know adequately, and so *form* that third kind of knowledge of which we spoke in E2p40s2." Emphasis mine.

be considered as a form of extension of the self by means of which the individual apprehends and embodies the order of Nature not only in its multitude, but also in its oneness *at the same time*. In order to explain this point, I shall now turn to further examine the foundations upon which Spinoza constructs his theory of *ratio*, namely, the common notions.

Surprisingly, while common notions underpin Spinoza's account of reason, we do not find many elaborations of them throughout the *Ethics*. Nevertheless, in E2p37 - 40ds, Spinoza establishes that common notions are axioms (i.e. self-evident truths), that is, adequate ideas from which the mind can derive more adequate determinations;⁵¹⁴ in addition to this, common notions seem especially important because they are defined as constituting "the foundations of our reasoning".⁵¹⁵ But what, exactly, are these foundations? In introducing the common notions, Spinoza starts by considering that those things which are common to all ("equally in the part and in the whole")⁵¹⁶ do not constitute the essence of particular things, and precisely because of their being common to all they "can only be conceived adequately".⁵¹⁷ Spinoza is here building on an earlier Lemma (2) in which he states that "All bodies agree in certain things", that is, they all are mode of the same attribute (extension), and they can all move or rest.⁵¹⁸ From this, and in conjunction with earlier propositions that establish the mind as the idea of the body which undergoes the same causal interactions as its object, Spinoza concludes that "there are certain ideas, i.e. notions, which are common to all human beings."⁵¹⁹ It is important to note, here, that common notions are primarily formulated in relation to the body and thus, as noted by Deleuze, they do not constitute abstract notions (i.e. universals) but rather *general* ideas;⁵²⁰ for this reason, they can be said

⁵¹⁴ In the *Demonstration* of the proposition, Spinoza explains that this is equivalent to stating that "an idea exists in the divine intellect [...] in so far as it constitutes the essence of the human mind." This is based on his conception of God or Nature as the immanent cause of things, meaning that nothing would exist without the presence and activity of God. For a discussion on this, see chapter one.

⁵¹⁵ E2p40s.

⁵¹⁶ E2p37.

⁵¹⁷ E2p38.

⁵¹⁸ E2l2 and d. This, in turn, builds on the preceding lemma for which bodies cannot be distinguished as different substances since, as explained in book one, there can possibly be only one substance (God or Nature) and particular things are modes of substance. See my discussion on the concepts of substance and modes in chapter 3.

⁵¹⁹ E2p38c.

⁵²⁰ Deleuze 1970: 54. This might lead to wonder why Spinoza devotes himself, in the last part of the *Ethics*, to treat the power of the mind, rather than that of the body. This is because, by his theory of attributes, the affections of the body correspond to that of the mind (E2p7), *and vice versa*: "Just as the order and connection of ideas in the mind

to constitute “a whole present in its parts”⁵²¹ and, more generally, a composition between more than one body.⁵²² Common notions are *general* ideas precisely because they do not pertain to the essence of particular things, even though they are conceived consequentially to the body’s affections produced in its interaction with other modes. In this sense, they are not innate to the mind since, as Spinoza has earlier established, we only know the body and the mind through their affections (i.e., through the states they undergo when interacting with other bodies and minds). Admittedly, however, even though they are not innate to the mind, common notions are characterized by a *givenness* grounded upon their being shared properties. In short, Spinoza characterizes the common notions as 1) the foundation of *ratio*, 2) as equally found in the oneness and multiplicity of Nature while constituting no particular essence, and 3) as necessarily conceived adequately.

This articulation prompts two related questions, regarding 1) the origin of common notions (which amounts to a question about the origin of *ratio*) and 2) the power of the mind to form common notions. In order to answer these questions it is useful to reconsider the notions of agreement and disagreement that I earlier introduced when considering Spinoza’s notion of adequacy. Andrea Sangiacomo has recently proposed to interpret the common notions as agreements (*convenientia*) in nature and, in particular, as agreements of causal powers.⁵²³ His interpretation, I think, highlights two fundamental aspects of common notions which are often overlooked: first, common notions – as earlier explained – are not abstract concepts, as they are conceived by the mind *because* they are apprehended from the affections of the body and vice versa; secondly, and as a consequence, common notions are *relational* properties and, as such, can only be apprehended through causal interactions among things and individuals. In order to further clarify these points, it is necessary to recall Spinoza’s theory of *conatus* (E3p6-8) according to which the essence of a thing consists in its

⁵²¹ Ibid.

⁵²² This seems further supported by an interesting differentiation that Spinoza makes in E2p40s between the common notions and what he calls “transcendental terms” (such as ‘being’ and ‘entity’); he explains that these ideas, which are “in the highest degree confused” (and thus, contrary to common notions, are conceived inadequately). These terms, he continues, are confused because they result from the finite body being affected by too many images simultaneously, and these images are too many for the mind to form a clear idea of them. This is also the case for “universal” terms such as dog, man, horse, and so on. There is no wonder, Spinoza then notes, that “so many controversies have arisen among philosophers who wanted to explain natural things solely by the images of things.” This is aligned with his notions that ideas are not images, but rather actions of the mind.

⁵²³ Andres Sangiacomo, *Spinoza on Reason, Passions, and the Supreme Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

endeavor to persevere in being; and while each thing perseveres in being by its own endeavor, the latter is always enacted - not in isolation - but within the causal network that follows from God or Nature.⁵²⁴ Thus, unlike God (identified by Spinoza as the sole “free cause”),⁵²⁵ particular things are not self-determined (in the sense of being free causes of their actions) since their *conatus* is directed by the affections that result from their interactions with other modes. The causal determinations of particular things result from their being finite and thus of limited power. Therefore, Spinoza states that individuals’ “power of acting is extremely limited and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes.”⁵²⁶ At the same time, however, individuals can *become* adequate cause of their thoughts and actions by increasing their power of acting as much as possible – and it is precisely the outlining of this “method” that constitutes the aim of the *Ethics*. In this sense, Spinoza’s notion of freedom amounts to understanding and the consequential ability to fulfill one’s power of acting. But how does reason serve such an aim? In E3p1, Spinoza explains that the capacity of the mind to act is measured against its ability to form adequate ideas, while its being passive is due to inadequate ideas alone. Remember that being active refers to an individual’s ability of producing some effects which can be clearly explained by the nature of that individual, while being passive refers to the opposite, namely, producing some effects of which the individuals’ nature is only a partial cause.⁵²⁷ This, I believe, is well explained by the notions of agreement and disagreement highlighted by Sangiacomo: our power of acting (i.e. of producing some effects) is increased when we enter in relation (i.e. are affected by) with the nature of something which agrees with our own, while our power is diminished when such natures are in disagreement. As I have earlier noticed, common notions are properties that are common to all things and, as such, can only be conceived adequately; and since common notions constitute the apprehensions of *ratio*, Spinoza states that “in so far as men live in accordance with the guidance of reason, to that extent alone they always necessarily agree in nature.”⁵²⁸ I have discussed in chapter five that the power of reason, which Spinoza also identifies with

⁵²⁴ E1p16: “There must follow, from the necessity of the divine nature, infinite things in infinite ways (that is, all the things which can fall under an infinite intellect).”

⁵²⁵ E1p17c2. Also recall E1p29, which states that nothing in Nature is contingent as everything follows from the necessity of the divine nature. For a general discussion of Spinoza’s metaphysics, see chapter three.

⁵²⁶ E4, Appendix 32.

⁵²⁷ E3d1,2.

⁵²⁸ E4p35.

“understanding”,⁵²⁹ is especially fundamental towards the ordering of the emotions (*affectus*), which *trace* an individual’s transitions of power from lesser to greater and vice versa. Spinoza’s distinction between active and passive emotions is based upon and is coextensive with his theory of *conatus*, and can equally be interpreted in terms of agreements and disagreements in Nature. That is to say, the more one forms relations of agreement with other individuals, the more they will act; conversely, the more relations of disagreement they maintain, the more they will be passive. The idea of agreement and disagreement between bodies, minds, and causal powers in general, is also helpful in understanding the derivative nature of Spinoza’s ethical views.

Ratio, importantly, has both epistemological and ethical value. Spinoza states in E4p31 that “In so far as something agrees with our nature (*cum nostra natura convenit*), to that extent it is necessarily good”, while in E4p27 he affirms that “We know with certainty to be good or bad nothing but that which truly leads to understanding.” The common notions, thus, by signaling the structural commonality of particular things also trace the threshold from which ethical values are derived. This is not because Spinoza advocates for unifying the nature of things into one homogeneous, undifferentiated whole, and indeed his metaphysics does not admit such a possibility (as I earlier explained). In particular, giving that common notions do not constitute the *essence* of things, they signal agreements and not identities. Furthermore, the finite nomological structure of particular things involves, in itself, both adequacy and inadequacy; for human beings to be in total agreement with the whole of Nature, their essence would have to be *identified* with that of Nature itself, i.e. God which, giving Spinoza’s metaphysics, would be absurd. Thus, since the distinction between whole (Nature) and parts (particular beings) is not solely mind-dependent, it follows that both adequate and inadequate ideas necessarily follow from the nature of a mode⁵³⁰ and, with that, its agreements and disagreements with Nature. The “method” that leads to a flourishing life, then, is that through which individuals *become* able to direct the proportion of agreements and disagreements in a way that they are capable to enter, as much as possible, in relations of composition of power, thus increasing their power of action. It is precisely this

⁵²⁹ *Intelligere*. It is interesting to note that the etymology of this verb seems to be well aligned with Spinoza’s characterization of ‘ideas’ as being action of the mind: it derives from *inter* (‘between’ or ‘among’) and *lègere* (‘to choose’ or ‘to select’), which makes understanding an act of choosing between or among several things.

⁵³⁰ E2p36.

capacity which Spinoza identifies with the power of reason, namely, *understanding*. The latter, it is important to remind, it is not solely an epistemological capacity, but rather the mental expression of a specific way in which the body interacts in causal relations.⁵³¹ This specific way, as Sangiacomo has noted, is *cooperative*, since it defines the production of “mutually compatible effects” that are beneficial to all the parts involved in a way that their power of action is mutually increased.⁵³² The increase in power of action through the formation of agreement is ethically relevant since Spinoza identifies power and virtue as one and the same thing.⁵³³

All this considered, we can now turn to the questions I earlier identified regarding 1) the origin of common notions (and thus the origin of reason) and 2) the capacity of *forming* common notions (that is, acting according to the guidance of reason). Given that the common notions are *relational* in character they cannot be innate to the mind or the body: they are, instead, apprehended on the basis of the causal interactions by which an individual is affected. This shows that *ratio* itself cannot be a way of acting that is innate to the mind, and thus that – in Spinoza’s framework - human beings are not born rational, but can *become* rational by means of understanding, as much as possible, the structural dynamics in which they partake. This point answers the first question. With regards to the second one, I have explained that the ability of *forming* common notions, for Spinoza, is acquired by identifying – as much as possible – the properties through which individuals can enter in cooperation on the basis of mutually compatible nomological structures (i.e. shared laws of nature). The guidance of reason is thus an ability to enter and organize relations of compositions, in which the individual’s power of acting (that is, her virtue) is increased in a way that is beneficial to her *because* it also increases the power and virtue of others in accordance with the laws of Nature.

On the basis of this cooperative account of *ratio*, I believe that the latter can be better interpreted as a capacity of extension of the self. Let me clarify this view and what I find to be its interpretative advantages. I have earlier noted that Spinoza’s mereology is not solely an

⁵³¹ As noted in Sangiacomo, *Spinoza on Reason, Passions, and the Supreme Good*, 125.

⁵³² Sangiacomo rightly specifies that “agreement does not presuppose identity of nature, but compatibility of effects. Agreement is not concerned with identity but rather with causation, and with the extent to which different causal powers can be mutually compatible. Two human beings agree in nature not because they are or become the *same* individual, but rather because they produce mutually compatible effects that can benefit both individuals.” (Ibid).

⁵³³ E4d8.

epistemological matter, as it is equally related to the mind and the body. At the same time, he argues that we do not (innately) have an adequate knowledge of the mind and the body, and that we *come* to form adequate ideas of them through their affections, that is, through their interactions with other modes. This, as I mentioned in chapter five, shows that knowledge (and with that, reason and understanding), for Spinoza, is inherently reflexive. This means, in a nutshell, that the possibility of self-knowledge is grounded upon and implied by knowledge of others. But since knowledge and understanding are acquired through relations of composition, it seems that self-knowledge too is primarily acquired through the apprehension and formation of common notions. The latter, then, are the grounds of self-knowledge, or the *starting points* through which individuals increasingly know themselves, rather than being consequential to self-knowledge. In this sense, the more one is able to form common notions, the more they approach the knowledge of one's essence (apprehended by intuition). This capacity, at the same time, is identified with the ability of *reason* to form relations of composition with other individuals in a way that their power of acting, and thus their virtue, is mutually enhanced and coordinated in producing certain effects. In Spinoza's mereology, this has structural consequences: by means of cooperation, an individual (which, in itself, can be considered a whole), *becomes* part of a greater whole together with other individuals. The ability to form a greater whole, importantly, bears a fundamental ethical value, as Spinoza describes in E4p18s:

“Man can ask for nothing that is more efficacious for the preservation of their being than that all men should agree in everything in such a way that the minds and bodies of all should as it were constitute one mind and one body, and that all should simultaneously endeavor, as far as they can, to preserve their own being, and that all should simultaneously look for the common advantage of all. From this it follows that men who are governed by reason – that is men who, under the guidance of reason, look for what is useful to them – seeks for themselves nothing that they do not desire for the rest of human beings, and so they are just, faithful, and honorable.”

It is in this sense, I think, that reason consists in self-extension: by apprehending the common properties of things, individuals extend their virtue and power of acting beyond their own

individuality⁵³⁴ by forming relations of agreement with a greater whole, whether it be another individual, a community, or Nature as a whole. But it is important to note that, in enacting this extension of the self, the individual is never lost, because what is common to all is not identified with individual essences, but rather signals the liminality of them. Such extension, then, is not only directed towards others but also towards the individual itself, because it involves and implies an extension of self-knowledge. Interpreting *ratio* as an act of self-extension, I think, has two main advantages. First, it helps us highlight that knowledge, which Spinoza identifies with the highest virtue of the mind, is not only epistemological but is also inherently ethical; in this sense, self-extension provides a unified reading of Spinoza's reason as being both theoretical and practical. Secondly, this interpretation is faithful to Spinoza's mereology, from which his notion of *ratio* derives. In this sense, reason is understood as the ability to understand the One and the Many as coextensive rather than incommensurable.

7.3 The Cheng's *li* 理 of the Mind (*xin* 心) and the Nature (*xing* 性)

As discussed in the previous chapters, *li* grounds the whole of the Cheng brothers' philosophical system: its polysemy allows for the character to have metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical significance and thus, as I argued throughout my earlier discussion, its meaning is specified contextually on the basis of how it relates to other concepts (much like a formal indication). Let me briefly summarize the points I previously discussed. Metaphysically, I have explained that *li* is a foundational principle of oneness that is manifested in each and every thing, so while each particular being has its own *li*, the latter also denotes immanent oneness. Accordingly, the Cheng brothers consider *li* as both the ground and the object of genuine knowledge: on the one hand, since *li* is equally present in the individual and the things which constitute the object of their knowledge, the possibility

⁵³⁴ Spinoza does not provide a definition of the 'self', but he does state that the essence of each thing is their *conatus*, i.e. the way in which a thing perseveres in being. It could be noted that *conatus* in itself cannot properly account for personal identity, because it speaks of a "how" rather than of a "what". However, the *conatus* of each thing is necessarily unique, as it is enacted by means of specific manifestations of extension and thought, that is, according to each mind and body. So the maximal agreement between the *conatus* of two individuals could never result in them being one and the same *conatus*, because for that to happen the two individuals would have to be the same mind and the same body, which is absurd. In this sense, *conatus* defines what a "self" is.

of acquiring understanding is metaphysically granted while, on the other hand, since *li* constitutes “that by which” (*suo yi*)⁵³⁵ a thing is what it is, it also constitutes the object of knowledge. I have also explained how the Cheng’s ethical theory is derived from their structural views on the oneness and multiplicity of *li*, whereby moral principles are not ascribed to nature as such (the one *li*) but to its manifestations (the many *li*) in a way that is coextensive to the functioning of *li* through interactions of stimulation and response. With regards to individuals, the apprehension of *li* is granted and enacted through the mind (*xin*) and nature (*xing*), which are both identified with *li*.

As noted in the previous chapters, part of the challenge in understanding the Cheng’s notion of *li* is practical in nature; the two philosophers, in fact, do not provide a definition of the term that can be applied to its many uses. Within their articulation, rather, the Cheng pair *li* with other characters (such as *dao*, *xing*, *tian*, and *xin*, among other) in order to specify its meaning according to context while, at the same time, re-establishing the ultimate unity of these declinations. Among these characters closely linked to *li*, we find two that play great importance in the Cheng’s articulation of their theory of knowledge, namely, *xing* 性 (‘nature’) and *xin* 心 (‘heart-mind’, abbreviated to ‘mind’ hereafter). Both characters are identified with *li*: according to Cheng Yi, “Nature [*xing*] is nothing but *li*, and what is called *li* is nothing but nature”,⁵³⁶ while Cheng Hao affirms that “The mind [*xin*] is *li*, and *li* is the mind.”⁵³⁷ These two couplings do not entail a disagreement between the two thinkers, as they both ultimately state that “The mind, the nature, and *tian* [天 ‘Heaven’] are not different from each other”⁵³⁸. But while both *xin* and *xing* are identified with *li*, it is important to note that they do not occupy the same place within the Cheng brothers’ thought, and thus should not be understood as being synonyms. Indeed, they serve different functions, both of which are fundamental to the development of the Cheng’s theory of knowledge. With regard to the

⁵³⁵ As quoted in Graham 1958, 8: “All things have *li*, for example that by which fire is hot and whater is cold.” Remember that *li* as manifested in particular beings is also explained in terms of a thing’s ‘standard’ (*ze* 則) in *Yishu* 18; 193. For a discussion about the Cheng’s metaphysics of *li*, see chapter three.

⁵³⁶ *Yishu* 22a; 192: “性即理也，所謂理，性是也。”

⁵³⁷ *Yishu* 13; 139: “心是理，理是心。”

⁵³⁸ *Yishu* 2a; 15. As I have mentioned in chapter three, the Cheng’s identification of *tian* with *li* consists in one of their greatest philosophical innovations (as well noted in both Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, and Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*); while prior to Neo-Confucians *tian* signified the foundational cosmological principle, they elevated *li* to the same role withing their system of thought. This is why Cheng Hao famously claims that “although I have learnt much from others, the two words *tian li* are what I grasped myself.” (*Waishu* 12; 424).

mind, for example, they state that “one can obtain [knowledge] only by its being apprehended⁵³⁹ in one’s own mind”,⁵⁴⁰ thus making *xin* the agent through which knowledge is acquired. At the same time, they also state that “To fully grasp *li*, completely realize one’s own nature, and entirely reach the destiny [*ming* 命], are but one thing.”⁵⁴¹ These two passages signal two things: first, the mind and the nature play a fundamental and active role in apprehending knowledge of *li* and, secondly, that the activity of the mind in understanding *li* is directly related to *xing*. I will later argue that, despite serving different functions, the mind and the nature are both concurring to the same aim, which I identify with an activity of extension of the self through the grasping of *li*. In order to better argue for this point, I shall now turn to discuss the two notions of *xin* and *xing* in order to clarify how they differ and in what way they are intimately related.

Graham notes that by the time of Neo-Confucian thinkers, *xin* was mainly used in two senses, that is, for indicating both the physical organ as well as its agency in acquiring knowledge. With regards to the latter, in particular, Graham identifies three main aspects that characterize *xin*: 1) the apprehension of knowledge (particularly through ‘inferences’, *tui* 推, literally meaning ‘to push’ or ‘to extend’)⁵⁴², as seen in the passage quoted previously;⁵⁴³ 2) as locus of the passions or emotions (*qing* 情), such as joy, hatred, sorrow, and so on; 3) as the agent of intention (*yi* 意) and purpose (*zhi* 志), where the former pertain to specific actions while the latter refers to a general directedness of the mind (“The purpose is what persists, the intentions are motions”).⁵⁴⁴ According to the Cheng, apprehending *li* in one’s mind is not an easy task because one has to “know by personal experience” (*ti er de zhi* 體而得之).⁵⁴⁵ The character *ti* 體, here presented as that which apprehends knowledge in a first-person effort, is very important to the Cheng: according to Huang, it is both used as a noun referring

⁵³⁹ The verb for “apprehending” is *moshi* 默識, meaning “to recognize” or “to understand”.

⁵⁴⁰ *Yishu* 17; 178.

⁵⁴¹ *Yishu* 18; 193.

⁵⁴² This is interpreted by Graham as the general “ability to reason” (*Two Chinese Philosophers*, 60) It should be noted that *tui* was already used in an analogous way by Mengzi: “Hence one who expands [*tui*] one’s bounty can bring peace to the whole world, while one who does not cannot bring peace even to one’s own family” *Mengzi* 1a7 as quoted in Huang, *Why Be Moral?*, 150.

⁵⁴³ Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 60.

⁵⁴⁴ As quoted in *Ibid*, 61.

⁵⁴⁵ *Yishu* 25; 321.

to *xin* as well as a verb referring to the mind's activity.⁵⁴⁶ In other contexts, the same character is translated as 'substance' or 'body' when used in the coupling *ti/yong* 體用 together with "use" or "function", such as when Cheng Yi comments on the *Book of Changes* by stating that "Substance and function are from the same source."⁵⁴⁷ The difficulty in apprehending *li* is that the activity of the mind – which, for the Cheng, should be set on the unity of *li*⁵⁴⁸ - can be clouded by desires, by which the Cheng specifically mean selfish desires (*siyu* 私欲). As I explained in chapter six, selfish desire is explained as that through which the mind conceives the separation between particular things and the one *li* as incommensurable and thus, at the level of individuals, is translated in the impossibility of recognizing and acting upon the unity of *li*.⁵⁴⁹ This, in turn, is not only harmful for others but also -and especially- for oneself, since failing to act through knowledge of *li*, according to the Cheng, leads to self-destruction (*zibao* 自暴) and self-abandonment (*ziqu* 自棄). As a consequence, in turn, the mind loses its virtue (*de* 德).⁵⁵⁰ I will later return on this point, but for the moment it suffices to note that *xin* is usually ascribed with the activities related to knowledge in the broad sense. Let us now turn to *xing* 性, the nature.

While *xing* is generally translated as "nature", it is important to note that it does not reference nature as a whole; rather, it refers to the nature of particular things. For earlier Confucians, *xing* was used specifically to reference human nature, but with the Cheng brothers the anthropocentrism of this notion is substituted with a more inclusive and ontological sense referring to the nature of each particular thing, even though in most of the Cheng's discussions it is used to reference the nature of human beings.⁵⁵¹ Cheng Yi, in particular, uses *xing* in three related senses that are derived from the *Doctrine of the Mean*: 1) as an endowment decreed (*ming* 命) by heaven and that, as such, cannot be altered; 2) as

⁵⁴⁶ Huang, *Why Be Moral?*, 251. This usage of *ti* as a noun referring to *xin* is, as Huang notes, inherited from Mencius, *dati* 大體 ('the great body') and *xiaoti* 小體 ('the small body', referring to the physical body of human beings). Ibid.

⁵⁴⁷ *Yizhuang*, Introduction, 689.

⁵⁴⁸ "To make unity the ruling consideration is called composure [*jing* 敬]; unity is called integrity [*cheng* 誠]. As quoted in Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 67. More on these two notions later.

⁵⁴⁹ Even though the Cheng also recognize that selfish desire, to a degree, considerable as a natural tendency: "in general, since man has a separate body, it is natural that it is difficult to unite himself with the *dao*." (As quoted in Ibid, 127). This assumption does not take *li* into account, and thus the inferences of *xin* that derives from it can only be wrong or morally compromised; wrong premises lead necessarily to wrong conclusions.

⁵⁵⁰ *Yishu* 69 and 125.

⁵⁵¹ Huang, *Why Be Moral?*, 202.

something inborn (*sheng* 生) in contrast to what is learned; and 3) as something fundamental in the sense of what lies behind something (*gu* 故), a usage that Cheng Yi attributes to Mencius.⁵⁵² Among these three, in my view, the first usage well represents the general meaning of *xing*. The notion of decree (*ming*), which is also sometimes rendered as ‘destiny’, was used in classical Confucianism together with *tian* in the formula *tianming* 天命 to indicate what is naturally so and thus cannot be altered. But since, as earlier mentioned, the Cheng brothers elevated *li* to foundational principle of reality, they use *ming* to mean what is naturally so as decreed by *li*; as such, *ming* is another of the many specifications the Cheng employ to describe *li*. Since everything has its own *li*, and the latter are all expressions of the one *li*, the coupling of *ming* and *li* leads to the implication that everything is decreed or naturally so⁵⁵³ – a view that is most embodied in the Cheng’s notion of “nature”. Beside this aspect of fundamentality and givenness, there are two additional terms which describe *xing* in more concrete terms, namely, *qi* 氣 and *cai* 才: “*Cai* is [one’s] endowment of *qi*, and there is clear and muddy *qi*. Those endowed with clear *qi* become wise, those endowed with the muddy *qi* become foolish.”⁵⁵⁴ As I have noted in chapter four, *qi* (usually rendered as ‘material force’) is a key element of the Cheng’s metaphysics, and is described as “before the forms” (*xing er xia* 形而下) in contrast to *li* which they consider “after the forms” (*xing er shang* 形而上). In my discussion of this contrast (which describes two aspects of the same reality rather than signaling an incommensurable duality) I have proposed to interpret these notions in terms of the relation between infinity and finitude and, more generally, with the quality of being embodied.⁵⁵⁵ *Cai*, on the other hand, while it is usually rendered as ‘talent’ has more of a neutral sense and can be better understood as ‘capacity’. More specifically, Wong explains that *cai* concerns a person’s “natural abilities and tendencies”, influencing

⁵⁵² Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 47-48. *Gui* is defined by Mencius as “what something is like fundamentally” (本如此). Ibid.

⁵⁵³ That is not the case for all Neo-Confucianism. Zhang Zai, for example, who focuses on the notion of *qi* 氣 (“material force”) rather than *li*, does not advocate for such a view.

⁵⁵⁴ *Yishu* 18;204. As translated in Wong, “Morally bad in the philosophy of the Cheng Brothers”, 145.

⁵⁵⁵ See my discussion in chapter three. It is important to note that my interpretation does not entail that *li* is not embodied, as the Cheng brothers often reiterate that *li* and *qi* are inseparable and that we cannot speak of one without the other. In addition, my understanding of being embodied does not necessarily entail separability: many Neo-Confucian discussions of *qi* conceive it as something that changes on the basis of its degrees of condensation, rather than something that is divided up according to particular beings. I find that this echoes European seventeenth century’s discussion of extension as being indivisible.

their moral dispositions and personality.⁵⁵⁶ *Qi* and *cai* are closely connected, especially in the formula expressing “material nature” (*qizhi zhi xing* 氣質之性) which the Cheng brothers take from Zhang Zai.⁵⁵⁷ It is important to note here that, unlike *xing*, the *qi* and *cai* of a person can change. This is explained by the Cheng brothers when responding to a disciple who is asking whether someone’s morally bad behavior can be attributed to their *cai*:

“Certainly, it is, but it cannot be said that such a person cannot change. The nature [*xing*] is common to all; how could such a person be incapable of change? Because he is self-destructive and in self-abandonment, he is not willing to learn, and therefore he cannot change. Provided that he is willing to learn, it is still possible for him to change.”⁵⁵⁸

This passage, I believe, is illuminating with regards to three main points. First, while morally bad behavior is attributable to one’s *cai*, the latter is not the primary cause of such behavior; rather, self-destructive tendencies (which the Cheng identify as morally bad) are caused by unwillingness to learn and, with that, by ignorance.⁵⁵⁹ Importantly, as the passage reports, morally bad behavior cannot be attributed to one’s *xing* since the latter is identified with *li* which, as a standard or regulatory principle (*ze*) for which something is the way it is, can be understood in terms of a thing’s nomological structure (or the laws of its nature). A second aspect that the passage highlights is that the Cheng attribute to knowledge (*zhi* 知) a transformative power as well as an inherently reflexive character⁵⁶⁰: by acquiring knowledge of *li* through the investigations of things (*gewu* 格物) one is able to recover from their self-destructive tendencies and realize their nature (I shall clarify this point in a moment). Thirdly, while this passage does not explicitly mention the mind, it does shed light on the intimate link between *xin* and *xing*. The aforementioned “willingness to learn” is what I previously called “purpose” (*zhi* 志), which the Cheng attribute to the mind; this means that the mind has direct

⁵⁵⁶ Wong, “Morally Bad in the Philosophy of the Cheng Brothers”, 144.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁸ As quoted in Ibid, 145.

⁵⁵⁹ This is supported by other passages in which Cheng Yi denies that *cai* can be considered the primary cause of morally bad behavior, such as in *Yishu* 18; 207: “*Cai* is like timber. If it is bent, then it is suitable for making a wheel. If it is straight, then it is suitable for making a beam. If the beam or the wheel is destroyed, how could this be the business of *cai*?” As quoted in Ibid, 146.

⁵⁶⁰ These two points are discussed in chapter four.

influence over the material endowment of individuals, and it is for this reason that knowledge has a transformative power over it. In addition to this, another term that shows the unity of *xin* and *xing* is *qing* 情 ('passions' or 'emotions'), whose locus is the mind but that nevertheless are directly related to one's nature. As I noted in chapter five, the Cheng's account of the emotions, which is derived from the *Doctrine of the Mean*⁵⁶¹, describes *qing* as motions of the nature that occur in processes of interactions (*gan ying* 感應, literally 'stimulation' and 'response'). The Cheng explain that someone who is clouded by selfish desires and is thus in self-denial will let "the emotions control nature" (*qing qi xing* 情其性), while a person who has her mind set on moral cultivation and knowledge will let "nature control the emotions" (*xing qi qing* 性其情), i.e. align the emotions to *xing*.⁵⁶² This means that someone who does not have knowledge of *li* and is thus guided by selfish desires will let their emotions take over their nature, while someone who pursues knowledge will be able to direct their feelings in such a way that they are neither excessive nor deficient, in alignment with *xing*. Thus, the Cheng state that "enlightened people will take care of their feelings so that they accord to the equilibrium, straighten their mind, and cultivate their nature."⁵⁶³ In short, *xin* and *xing* represent two aspects of one and the same reality, which is why they are both identified with *li*. These two notions play a key role in the Cheng's epistemology, and it is on the basis of their functioning within knowledge that I consider the Cheng's notion of the apprehension of knowledge to be an act of self-extension.

I have previously discussed⁵⁶⁴ that, while Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao agree on the overall scope and framework of their philosophy, they also emphasize different aspects which are

⁵⁶¹ "Before joy, anger, sorrow, and pleasure are emitted, there is said to be equilibrium (*zhong* 中); when they are all emitted in due order, there is said to be harmony (*he*). Equilibrium is the greatest root of the world; harmony is the universal way of the world."

⁵⁶² Huang, *Why Be Moral?*, 157.

⁵⁶³ *Wenji* 8; 577. It should be noted that, while the Cheng consider selfish desires as both a symptom and a consequence of morally bad behavior, they do not think that desire in general constitute something that should be extinguished. Cheng Yi, for example, lists desire among the "seven emotions" that naturally arise when "when humans come into contact with external things and thus are aroused from within." (*Wenji* 8; 577). In their recent *History of Chinese Philosophy Through its Key Terms* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2020), Wang, Bao, and Guan state, in discussing the Cheng brothers, that for the two philosophers "human desire must be extinguished" in order to preserve the oneness of *li* (67). This seems to be a misinterpretation. As I have noted, the point for the Cheng brothers is not to get rid of the emotions (among which they list desire), but to strive for their balance and harmony. In this context, the problem with selfish desire is that it represent the exaggeration (and thus an unbalance) of what is otherwise a natural tendency.

⁵⁶⁴ See chapter four.

most evident in their epistemology.⁵⁶⁵ While Cheng Hao stresses the importance of apprehending principle through *xin* in a way that knowledge seems to entail the preservation of *li*, Cheng Yi emphasizes the importance of knowing the nature through the investigation of things in a way that seems to aim at the (re)discovery of *li*. The two tendencies have been retrospectively categorized as idealistic and rationalistic, respectively,⁵⁶⁶ but such a way of categorizing (which can hardly be deprived of its European heritage) seems to suggest a strong philosophical opposition which does not well represent the thought of the Cheng brothers. This is not only because they share, to a high degree, the same elaborations of the object and method of knowledge, but also because they agree in its immediate scope of “uniting external and internal”,⁵⁶⁷ that is, apprehending the oneness of *li* in its manifestations. In chapter five I have discussed three main differentiations⁵⁶⁸ the Cheng make in discussing knowledge that amount to three ways of presenting the same distinction, which I will hereafter call “genuine” and “shallow” knowledge. Briefly stated, while the first apprehends the *li* of its objects, the latter is superficial and thus fails understanding *li* (i.e. that for which something is and functions the way it does). With this differentiation in mind, it is important to note that, for the Cheng brothers, the distinction between genuine and shallow knowledge is not based solely on a difference in the content apprehended but, more importantly, on its method of apprehension. In fact, what ultimately differentiates knowledge of *li* from other kinds of “shallow” knowledge is a first-person effort that the Cheng call *zide* 自得 (“self-getting”). Thus, Cheng Hao affirms that “the key to learning is *zide* [...] only when one gets it oneself can it become one’s own”,⁵⁶⁹ while Cheng Yi states that “nothing is more important in learning than to get it by oneself. Because one does not get it from outside, it is called *zide*.”⁵⁷⁰ This act of self-getting is especially important because, in grasping the *li* of things, it leads the individual to the attainment of virtue (*de* 德), an inner force which is apprehended by the mind and that is also manifested in one’s body and nature. As explained by Cheng Hao, when virtue is apprehended, it is naturally “manifested in one’s face, shown in one’s back,

⁵⁶⁵ As well noted by Chan, their difference in emphasis have been exaggerated in a way that makes the two positions substantially different. However, as I have been arguing throughout this study, that is not the case. See Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 158.

⁵⁶⁶ See Feng Youlan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, and Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*.

⁵⁶⁷ As quoted in Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 75.

⁵⁶⁸ See chapter four.

⁵⁶⁹ *Yishu* 11; 121.

⁵⁷⁰ *Yishu* 25; 316.

and extended in one's four limbs, rendering its message intelligible without words."⁵⁷¹ This passage entails that knowledge is not merely a theoretical matter, as it also informs one's conduct and thus is also necessarily practical. In fact, *zide* itself is a practice, which is why Cheng Yi affirms that "Only through practice one can know *li*."⁵⁷²

As I understand it, *zide* is key to the idea of "uniting external and internal". I have earlier called the latter as the *immediate* scope of the Cheng's epistemology because such prescription (which is, however, explained in seemingly descriptive terms) is ultimately ethical. It is my contention that the intimate connection established by the Cheng between knowledge and ethics through their metaphysics of *li* can be better understood by appreciating *zide* as a relational enactment, that is, a way of acting that entails – and that produces, at the same time – a relation between the oneness of *li* and its manifestations. Let us better consider this point. I have earlier reiterated that *li* is both one and many: at the level of oneness it is identified with *dao*, the Way, while, with regards to particular beings, it is identified with their nature (*xing*) – and mind (*xin*), in the case of human beings. Whether it be as oneness or as particular beings, *li* is always an immanent regulatory principle.⁵⁷³ This articulation, which is inherently relational, underpins the possibility of apprehending genuine knowledge and, at the same time, it describes the object to be apprehended. This means that the reason why an individual is able, in the first place, to grasp *li* through self-getting (*zide*) is that the latter is equally present both within the subject (in her mind and nature) and outside, in the objects of knowledge. This means, more concisely, that *li* is necessarily intelligible both in the self and outside of it. At the same time, *li* also constitutes the object of genuine knowledge which entails not only the effort of self-getting but also that of "penetrating *li*" (*qiongli* 窮理). Now, for the Cheng brothers, the requirement for *zide* lies in "reverence" (*jing* 敬),⁵⁷⁴ an attitude which signals, on the part of the knower, a certain awareness about their partaking in a larger whole with shared dynamics. Cheng Yi, for example, states that "to obtain *dao*, nothing is more important than being reverent. There has never been a person who knows without first being reverent."⁵⁷⁵ And again "making unity the ruling consideration is

⁵⁷¹ *Yishu* 15; 147, quoting *Mengzi* 7a 21.

⁵⁷² *Waishu* 10; 404.

⁵⁷³ See chapter three.

⁵⁷⁴ Graham translates it as "composure" (67).

⁵⁷⁵ *Yishu* 3; 66.

called reverence; unity is called integrity [*cheng* 誠].”⁵⁷⁶ Such awareness, according to my understanding, is required to grasp genuine knowledge because it sets the mind on the underlying unity of *li* in its manifestations, that is, the connectedness of the many *li* (including that of the self); through *jing*, self-knowledge is coextensive with the knowledge of things, and thus the more an individual pursues the investigation of things through *zide*, the more one will realize their nature by “uniting internal and external”. Thus, the effort of self-getting is a relational act in which, by means of reverence, the *li* of the mind and the nature are recognized (through learning) as fundamentally related to the *li* of external things. Importantly, the more one practices *zide*, the more genuine knowledge of things they will gain and, at the same time, the more they will expand knowledge of the self, in an ever growing process of resonance between the One and the Many. It is precisely this process of resonance that consists, in my view, in an extension of the self, by which the Cheng’s aim of “uniting external and internal” is achieved.

This whole discussion, however, seems to assume that self-knowledge is not innate and that it is acquired coextensively with knowledge of things through the interactions of “stimulation” and “response”. This view, which indeed seems to be maintained by the Cheng brothers, prompts a question regarding their articulation of the mind and the nature: if both *xin* and *xing* are identified with *li*, how can the mind and the nature depart from it? As a general rule, the Cheng brothers do not develop their epistemology and ethics on the basis of a supposedly rational agent who systematically engages in analytical considerations before interacting with things. On the contrary, they start from the assumption that individuals are necessarily subjected to the stimulations and responses happening among things, that they are naturally subjected to emotional responses, and that they might spontaneously act in a way that is contrary to their nature. This is because, as much as knowledge of the *li* of things is not innate, nor is that of the *li* of one’s mind and nature. The Cheng thus note, for example, that since human beings have a body which is seemingly *different* from that of other beings, it is naturally difficult for them to “unite themselves with *dao*”⁵⁷⁷ and to understand that “the ten thousand things are all one body.”⁵⁷⁸ But while each thing functions by means of its own regulatory principle, the Cheng brothers note that when individuals consider themselves as

⁵⁷⁶ *Yishu* 1; 346, as quoted in Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 71.

⁵⁷⁷ As quoted in *Ibid*, 127.

⁵⁷⁸ *Yishu* 2a; 33.

incommensurably different from the rest of nature they become “in opposition to all things”.⁵⁷⁹ This opposition, which prevents the act of *zide* both outwardly (genuine knowledge of things) and inwardly (self-knowledge) is precisely what leads to self-destruction and self-abandonment. This shows that even though *li* is *given* – in the sense that it is always present in things – its knowledge cannot be innate because, for it to be apprehended, the enactment of a relation is always required.

The Cheng’s identification of the ‘bad’ with selfish desire clearly explains how their ethics is grounded upon their metaphysics of *li*. As such, moral development mirrors that of the apprehension of knowledge: a virtuous person (who acts by “following *li*”, *xunli* 循理) is able to extend themselves in a way that leads to the moral development of others through their “exemplary moving power”.⁵⁸⁰ In this sense, a virtuous person is self-extended not only with regards to the way in which she apprehends her own nature and that of others, but also in terms of moral principles, meaning that the more she is able to realize her nature the more she will help others in realizing theirs. Thus the virtuous person, by uncovering the *li* of their mind and nature, also uncovers that of others. In this sense, self-cultivation always entails and, at the same time produces, others’ self-cultivation. The virtuous person, for the Cheng, embodies *ren* 仁 (‘humaneness’, ‘care’), a moral quality central to Confucian ethics which was already greatly discussed by earlier Confucian thinkers; but while earlier accounts are usually articulated solely in ethical terms, with the Cheng brothers *ren* is reinterpreted on the basis of their one-and-many *li*. Thus, in commenting *Analects* 12.1,⁵⁸¹ Cheng Yi states that *ren* is “to treat things according to things themselves and not according to us, so that one can become selfless (*wuwo* 無我).”⁵⁸² To be sure, becoming selfless is intended as the opposite of self-denial, as a selfless person is that who acts according to the *li* of things rather than according to selfish desires. This is clearly shown by another passage from Cheng Hao’s *Discourse on Ren* (*Ren Shuo* 仁說), in which the latter is described as “realizing oneself through self-reflection” (*fan shen er cheng* 反身而誠).⁵⁸³ The Cheng’s ethical theory is thus modeled upon a metaphysics in which the self is one manifestation of an underlying unity which, in turn, also

⁵⁷⁹ *Yishu* 11; 129.

⁵⁸⁰ *Yishu* 18; 203. “*cheng neng dong ye* 誠能動人也.” *Dong* literally means “to touch”, here used figuratively.

⁵⁸¹ “To overcome oneself and return to the propriety is *ren*.” “克己復禮為仁”.

⁵⁸² *Yishu* 11; 125.

⁵⁸³ *Yishu* 2a; 17.

determines the self. As a derivation of this model, the moral person extends her own self-perception to embrace the commonality of particular things while, at the same time, treating each thing according to its *li*, by means of appropriate differentiation.

This framework seems to suggest that moral principles cannot be understood in absolute terms, but only derivatively through knowledge of the nature of things. This is indeed supported by the Cheng's discussion of "good" (*shan* 善) and "bad" (*e* 惡) as natural opposites (such as *yin* and *yang*) that are not distinguished at the level of oneness but only derivatively through the apprehension of genuine knowledge.⁵⁸⁴ Notably, the notion of 'good' and 'bad' as natural opposites, which are both ascribed to *li*, seems to be at odds with the Confucian tenet according to which human nature is originally "good", which the Cheng brothers share with the classical tradition; if *xing* is *li*, it is unclear why they would consider nature as good instead of neutral (that is, originally containing both goodness and badness). While classical thinkers (such as Mencius) have argued for the goodness of human nature by means of its virtues, the Cheng seem to conceive 'goodness' as denoting completeness or integrity (*cheng* 誠). In this sense, the *ren* person is that who realizes her nature by means of knowing the *li* of things and is thus virtuous. The person who is not *ren* (*buren* 不仁), in opposition, is incapable of apprehending *li* as one and many, and thus sees herself in opposition to each and everything; it is precisely from these opposition that self-destructive tendencies derive. As I have explained earlier, this is well explained by Cheng Hao's discussion of *buren* in its medical usage as indicating 'numbness' of the hands and feet:

"By *ren*, heaven and earth, heaven and earth and the innumerable things are regarded as one substance, so that nothing is not oneself; and when this is recognized there is nothing one will not do for them. If they are not possessed in the self, naturally they are of no concern to it, just when the hands and feet are 'unfeeling' [*buren*], *qi* does not circulate through them and they no longer belong to oneself."⁵⁸⁵

⁵⁸⁴ As quoted in Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 129. See my discussion in chapter five.

⁵⁸⁵ As quoted in *Ibid*, 98.

This passage well exemplifies the Cheng brothers' understanding of ethical principle as derivative of the structural duality of *li* as one and many that can be apprehended by the mind and the nature. As a result, genuine knowledge emerges as having at once both epistemological and ethical value; for them, according to my interpretation, knowledge emerges as an act of extension in which the self, by means of *zide*, apprehends the *li* of the self and that of particular beings as coextensive manifestations of *li* as being both One and Many.

7.4 "Reason": the Extension of the Self

At the beginning of this chapter I have proposed to consider "reason" as a formal indication in order not to pre-determine its meaning. After having presented Spinoza's notion of *ratio* and the Cheng brothers' notion of *li* as mind (*xin*) and nature (*xing*), I can now turn to assess the planes of intersections in which these notions can be seen as fulfilling very similar functions as denoting "reason". I say "similar" because giving the great linguistic, cultural, and socio-historical differences characterizing Spinoza and the Cheng brothers, it is hardly justified to imply philosophical identity – as earlier accounts have indicated. In order to assess how "reason" can be formally signaling a similar function enacted by *ratio* and *li*, I shall now turn to outline the main features which, as I understand them, emerge as shared by both notions. While some of the major philosophical differences characterizing Spinoza and the Cheng's thought have already been discussed in the previous chapters, I shall now focus on their planes of intersections. Arguably, "reason" as a formal indication seems to be more appropriate for indicating Spinoza's *ratio* than the Cheng's notion of *li* as mind and nature. It should be noted, however, that the appropriateness (or inappropriateness) of this formal indication as applied to Neo-Confucian thinkers speaks more of the perspectivity of this study than of potential philosophical inconsistencies. It is evident that I have chosen, as formal indication, an English word that bears with it a heritage endemic of the history of Greek, Latin, and European philosophy. Had I chosen *li* as chief formal indication for this inquiry, we most likely would have encountered similar issues of inappropriateness derived from the application of a Chinese term to the European context. Apart from this undeniable

perspectivity, the point of treating “reason” as a formal indication is precisely to define its content on the basis of the system in which it is formulated. Thus, having considered this, I shall now turn to discuss the main features that are shared by both Spinoza’s *ratio* and the Cheng’s *li* as mind and nature. It is in these shared characteristics, I maintain, that “reason” can acquire unitary meaning across the two systems.

Let me start by noting that, even though I have previously mentioned the great differences that characterize these thinkers’ argumentative strategies, they indeed present a peculiar commonality: both Spinoza and the Cheng, in fact, articulate their ethical views in seemingly descriptive rather than prescriptive terms, and while this might appear as a potential fallacy (as it derives normative prescriptions from factual observations), that is not the case. In both contexts, in fact, I have showed that ethical principles are formulated as *deriving* from certain structural dynamics upon which they depend, such as those regulating the relation between substance and modes or that between the one *li* and its manifestations. Both structural dynamics, translated in general terms, can be well represented by the One/Infinite – Many/finite binomials understood in a coextensive and immanent way, that is, as consisting in a relation of mutual dependence. As I have discussed, both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers argue that the distinction between “good” and “bad” cannot be ascribed to Nature in its infinite unity (*li/dao* or *Deus sive Natura*) but only to human beings as finite and contextualized beings, and thus to their perspectivity and embodiment. In this context, is therefore important not to conflate contextuality with arbitrariness: in fact, both systems conceive natural laws as necessary and unalterable, for Spinoza in terms of the necessity of God’s nature and for the Cheng in terms of the necessity of *li* as *ming*. Their one-and-many metaphysics, thus, entails fixed yet dynamic natural patterns which constitute the general rules through which particular beings interact. As a consequence, ethical principles are contextual to a finite perspective, but are nevertheless grounded upon the necessity of natural interactions (causal relations, or stimulations and responses). Overall, this means that the relativity ascribed to moral principle is structural, rather than ethical, and given that the structural dynamics from which they are derived are precisely those in which human beings necessarily partake, the aim of both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers is to establish firm moral precepts that can lead us to interact with others in the best way possible. Given their metaphysical commitments, this seems quite intuitive, but the same perspective can also be

illustrated by considering an example of someone playing a game. Let us consider someone (Giulia) who plays a card game. For Giulia to play the game, she necessarily has to know its rules in order to evaluate which are the “good” moves she should undertake to win, and which are the “bad” moves she should avoid. If Giulia plays the card game *ignoring* its rules, we might either question the fact that she is actually playing, or note that she is bounded to lose. Arguably, while such rules derive from a number of factors endemic to the game (such as its aim, the number of players, and so on) they do not constitute the entirety of the game; rather, they are fixed principles that Giulia can apply contextually to play her game as best as she can. Now, it is obvious that card games and moral principles are unrelated matters, but this example is useful in understanding Spinoza and the Cheng’s descriptive concerns, that is, their concern in *explaining* structural patterns: if moral principles are to be derived from the natural dynamics in which human beings partake, it is necessary to carefully describe and understand such dynamics, and only then it is possible to formulate (describe) a certain method of conduct that can serve as exemplary guidance. Scholars of Chinese philosophy have often recognized the descriptive character of Confucian philosophical discourse, mostly represented by the theory of *zhengming* 正名, ‘rectifying names’;⁵⁸⁶ Spinoza seems to share a similar concern when stating that “many errors consist solely in the fact that we do not apply names correctly to things.”⁵⁸⁷ Indeed, it is precisely these descriptive concerns which lead Spinoza and the Cheng brothers to place knowledge at the center of their philosophical inquiries, and while they do not systematically formulate moral prescriptions in the form of categorical imperatives, the prescription that these systems seems to equally point to is “be aware” or “face facts”.⁵⁸⁸

In order to better understand the grounds for attributing this prescription to Spinoza and the Cheng brothers, let us turn to examine the planes of intersection between *ratio* and the *li* as mind and nature. Firstly, and as already noted in chapter five, both conceptions account for knowledge (in its successful endeavor) as being a *practice*. This can be seen in

⁵⁸⁶ Other Chinese philosophical schools share the same descriptive concerns. This is particularly evident in the school developed during the warring states period, roughly formulated as a question about how to describe *Dao*. For a detailed and comprehensive discussion of this subject, see Angus C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (Chicago: Open Court, 1989).

⁵⁸⁷ E2p47s.

⁵⁸⁸ Angus C. Graham, “Value, Fact, and Facing Facts” in *Unreason Within Reason: Essays on the Outskirt of Rationality* (Chicago: Open Court, 1992), 27.

different layers of Spinoza and the Cheng's discussion. First, their metaphysics of one-and-many show that the distinction between parts and whole is not solely mind dependent. This already implies that genuine or adequate knowledge is not merely theoretical, but is also necessarily reflected in one's way of interacting with others. The same interconnection between theoretical and practical realms is particularly evident in Spinoza's theory of attributes from which he derives his notions of mind and body, and the Cheng's articulation of *li* and *qi* from which they derive their notions of mind and nature.⁵⁸⁹ While these are undeniably different frameworks, both explain the inextricable unity of the mind and the body; such unity, in turn, explains how the apprehension of the mind and those of the body mutually influence each other, thus also indicating a relation of mutual dependency between theoretical and practical knowledge. Another aspect of considering knowledge as practice is methodological: this can be formulated in a way that seems applicable to both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers as "the more one strives to understand, the less effort one will exert." For Spinoza, this is entailed by his pairing adequate knowledge and power of action: as I have previously discussed, the more one is able to form adequate ideas (through *ratio* and intuition), the more one is capable to act in accordance with natural laws. According to Spinoza, this doctrine of adequate knowledge "makes the mind entirely calm" and "teaches us our supreme happiness", that is, knowing God or Nature.⁵⁹⁰ In the Cheng brothers, a similar precept is found in their idea of following *li* (*xunli* 循理) in order to act naturally (*tairan xing jiang qu* 泰然行將去): "A learner ought to seek genuine knowledge; only then can one claim to have knowledge and act naturally".⁵⁹¹ In both cases, apprehending knowledge seems to entail a training or a process through which individuals *become* able to adapt and synchronize to the dynamics of nature not as passive agents, but as actors of resonance, in self-extension. The idea of individuals *learning* to synchronize with (and in) natural dynamics is particularly useful in recalling that both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers formulate their "methods of guidance" by considering individuals as already partaking in natural dynamics and thus as beings *necessarily* subjected to stimulations and responses, or causal relations. They do not theorize about ideal agents detached from Nature.

⁵⁸⁹ For a discussion on the difference between these two conceptions, see chapter three.

⁵⁹⁰ E2p49s.

⁵⁹¹ *Yishu* 18; 188.

This notion of synchronicity (which can perhaps also be understood in terms of harmonizing) lead us to a second plain of intersection: for both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers, knowledge is inherently reflexive. This means that the object of genuine or adequate knowledge always entails the self – which is, once again, a reflection of the inseparability of particular beings and their underlying oneness. This means that *while* gaining knowledge of things outside the self, one also gains self-knowledge. In the Cheng brothers, the reflexivity of genuine knowledge can be appreciated when considering the relational character of *li* as one and many, together with their notion of “self-getting” (*zide* 自得). I have earlier explained that the prerequisite for penetrating the *li* of things is reverence (*jing* 敬), through which one can “make unity the ruling consideration”.⁵⁹² Thus, reverence implies an awareness of shared principles which is then pursued by means of “self-getting”. The possibility of “self-getting”, at the same time, is grounded upon the *givenness* of *li* in its unity and multiplicity, which means that one can *know* the *li* of things because *li* is also present in the self; as a result, in gaining (self) knowledge one is able to understand the “inner” (the self) and the “outer” (particular things) as two different expressions of a unitary system. It is this reflexivity which explains the formula “realizing one’s nature through self-reflection”. For Spinoza, I have noted that the reflexivity of adequate knowledge is represented by the relational character of the common notions, which he defines as equally present in the whole and in its parts.⁵⁹³ The *givenness* of common notions does not mean that they are innate, as Spinoza sustains that we can only gain knowledge of the mind and the body (and thus their common properties) in their interactions with others. This means, in turn, that the apprehension of common properties of things produces and grounds the apprehension of such properties in the self. Overall, both contexts conceive genuine or adequate knowledge as inherently reflexive – thus implying and, more importantly, *producing* a synchronicity of resonance between the self and the rest of Nature.

A third plane of intersection which, more than the previous ones, has explicit ethical connotation, is the identification of knowledge and virtue (*virtus, de* 德), where the latter consists in some form of power or inner force. For the Cheng brothers, this is mostly evident

⁵⁹² As quoted in Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, 47

⁵⁹³ E2p37.

in their discussion of “knowledge of/as virtue” (*dexing zhizhi* 德性之知)⁵⁹⁴ apprehended through self-getting in the mind and manifested in the nature.⁵⁹⁵ Through knowledge of *li*, the nature is realized in its integrity (*cheng* 誠) and thus acquires a “moving power” which emanates from the self to set an ethical exemplar for others, too. Spinoza, on the other hand, explicitly states that he understands power and virtue as being one and the same thing.⁵⁹⁶ Notably, by power he understands *conatus*, or the endeavor to persevere in being. Depending on one’s ability to form adequate ideas, *conatus* can be more or less effective, that is, powerful or virtuous. Thus, while virtue comes in degrees, Spinoza holds that “the more each person endeavors to persevere in his being, the more he is endowed with virtue.”⁵⁹⁷

These three planes of intersections form a unitary understanding of “reason”, as they constitute the core features of both Spinoza’s *ratio* and the Cheng brothers’ *li* as mind and nature. I say “unitary” not because it consists in an identification between the two systems, but because the intersections I have individuated outline a shared conception of the function of “reason” and “rationality” as both epistemological and ethical. In this comparative picture, “reason” emerges as a *modus operandi* through which individuals are able to synchronize with the laws of nature by apprehending the underlying unity that bounds all particular beings. In light of this consideration, and as I have previously discussed, I argue that “reason” can be more concisely understood as an act of self-extension which is simultaneously directed to knowledge of particular beings and self-knowledge. The apprehension of shared properties and nomological structures results in a synchronicity or attunement between the inner self and the outer world, in which the One and the Many emerge as necessarily correlative and coextensive. According to the planes of intersections here discussed, “reason” as self-extension is to be understood as an inherently reflexive practice which, because of the metaphysical assumptions underpinning both the Cheng and Spinoza’s ethical theories, is also moral in character. Self-extension, as I understand it, is formulated upon the shared argument for which each particular being (modes or *li* as mind and nature) is part of an underlying oneness and, as a consequence, can only be properly known in its relational nature – rather than in isolation. In the same way, self-extension as moral endeavor cannot be enacted on

⁵⁹⁴ *Yishu* 25; 314. See the discussion of the Cheng’s three distinctions of knowledge in chapter four.

⁵⁹⁵ Cheng Hao states: “It is what one gets (*de*) from one’s mind that is called virtue (*de*).” *Yishu* 15; 147.

⁵⁹⁶ E4d8.

⁵⁹⁷ E4p20.

the basis of absolute moral principles, but is necessarily derivative of the nature in its unity and multiplicity. Granting this interpretation, two further characteristics of “reason” as self-extension should be noted. Firstly, it seems that for both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers, rationality and emotions (*affectus*, 情 *qing*) do not entail a dichotomy; since emotions are natural expressions of individuals’ interactions with things, no rational subject could aim at extinguishing the emotions, as that would imply self-denial rather than self-extension or self-fulfillment. The point for these thinkers, then, is not to get rid of the emotions, but rather to understand them in light of natural dynamics in order to harmonize them with natural laws. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, both contexts do not assume that human beings are *born* rational, but rather that “reason” – and, with that, the capacity for understanding – must be cultivated and practiced in experience. In the language of self-extension, which I find more effective and pragmatic, this means that even though the capacity for extension of the self is a given (as we have seen for both the common notions and the relationality of *li*), human beings cannot be said to be innately self-extended. Instead, self-extension can only be achieved *in relation* to/with other particular beings, by means of which we gain knowledge of the unity between the One and the Many. It is in this way that one is able to extend the self by extending understanding beyond the finite perspective of the mind and the body – not by overcoming or suppressing it – but by apprehending the laws of synchronicity that equally regulate one’s mind and body as well as others partaking in Nature. It is also through this extension of the self that moral principles are derived and practiced.

According to this unitary account of “reason”, then, normativity is not formulated in terms of “ought”; instead, precepts are derived from explanatory accounts of Natural laws, from which notions of “good” and “bad” can be derived. But even in this derivation, “good” and “bad” always retain a structural connotation; ‘good’ (*bonus*, *shan* 善) appears as generally referring to some notions of plenitude resulting from the attunement between the nomological structure of a particular beings and the general laws of Nature. As such, plenitude is identified with virtue, and is thus inherently ethical. In contrast, ‘Bad’ (*malus*, *e* 惡) is understood as the structural opposite of plenitude, that is, scarcity or inadequacy of human nature as a form of self-denial or self-inadequacy.

These conceptions lead us back to a reconsideration of the apparent fallacy in which prescriptive conclusions are derived from descriptive premises. In what discussed so far, I

have aimed at showing that both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers provide, in different terms and modes, a convincing explanation of the is/ought connection without falling into the so-called naturalistic fallacy. Such a connection, according to my understanding, is particularly evident in their notions of “reason” (*ratio, li* as mind and nature) which, while *not* constituting its own grounds, is conceived as a reliable method for acquiring adequate knowledge of both natural dynamics and, with that, moral principles. For these philosophers, the rational agent is not explained as engaging in analytical thinking *prior* to action, but rather as a subject who, as part of a system, is necessarily always *in medias res* and elaborates rational choices (related to general criteria of ‘correctness’, ‘proper functioning’, and ‘goodness’) on the basis of an adequate understanding of their contexts. So while these frameworks do not entail that reason is arbitrary, they do explain rationality as embodied and contextual; according to these understandings, the ground for rational choice is found, as Graham has put it, “between directions in which [the subject] is *already* being pulled.”⁵⁹⁸ The foundational elements that I have identified as “shared” between Spinoza and the Cheng brothers - which have been attentively considered *within* their characteristic differences – provide a coextensive explanation of natural laws and their normativity. The latter, in turn, disrupts the misleading dichotomy which contrasts “Western” tradition as generically aiming at objective and theoretical moral imperatives to the “Chinese” tradition as arguing for spontaneity.⁵⁹⁹ I have argued that, for both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers, “reason” is both theoretical and practical at once and that, in both contexts, it is achieved within spontaneous (i.e. natural) inclinations.

⁵⁹⁸ Graham, “Value, Fact, and Facing Facts”, 21.

⁵⁹⁹ Angus C. Graham, “What Was New in the Ch’eng-Chu Theory of Human Nature?” in *Chi Hsi and Neo-Confucianism*, ed. Wing-Tsit Chan (Manoa: University of Hawai’i Press, 1986). Graham generalizes as follows: “Western philosophy has assumed that we should get to that point of perfect objectivity and start again from zero to develop imperatives independent of spontaneity, while in the case of Chinese tradition nothing oblige us to take it for granted [...] that the ideal would be even conceivable. It is a common place that in all [Chinese] schools reason is practical.” This is a very misleading generalizations, and it unclear what Graham here means by “Western” and “Chinese”.

Conclusions

This research has taken, as its starting point, the comparative textual tradition originated in late 17th century Europe in response to the Jesuits' translations of Chinese philosophical works, which established – in different ways – a link between Spinoza's thought and the Neo-Confucian tradition.⁶⁰⁰ The connection established by European thinkers such as Bayle and Malebranche relied upon the argument according to which both systems are 'monistic' and 'rationalistic', meaning that they both ascribe to principles of oneness and both sustain the primacy of reason. While these early discussions have the merit of initiating the cross-cultural interest towards Chinese philosophy that was to animate European intellectuals in the following centuries, they were nevertheless directed by specific political interests that limited the scope of these thinkers' inquiry to the affirmation that Neo-Confucians and Spinoza shared the same heretic positions regarding God and the foundation of reality. In light of the unfulfilled possibility of establishing a philosophically valuable intercultural link between the two traditions, this research has re-enacted the comparison and reassessed the planes of intersections linking the two systems, with particular regard to the notion of "reason" – generally attributed to European traditions and, much rarely, to Chinese Neo-Confucianism. With the aim of establishing the philosophical value of the comparison, the study has been conducted on the basis of three methodological assumptions that have been formulated with the aim of avoiding mechanisms of assimilations and/or exclusions while, at the same time, ensuring conceptual clarity.

The *reciprocity assumption* has been formulated in order to establish, on the one hand, the inapplicability of the notion of 'incommensurability' to the context of comparative philosophy and, on the other hand, the necessary and positive role of prejudice in intercultural hermeneutics. In addition, and more importantly, through this assumption I have argued for the often overlooked reflexive character of comparisons, in which both *relata* can

⁶⁰⁰ The textual tradition on the link between Spinoza and Neo-Confucianism is not limited to 17th century Europe. As I noted in chapter two, it also includes Chinese studies from the 19th century and 20th century academic research.

acquire new meaning. The *heterogeneity assumption* has established the heterogeneous and dynamic character of philosophical traditions and concepts; given this diversity, I have argued that a fruitful intercultural comparison shall be based on specific systems of thought instead of supposedly unitary traditions. It is especially in light of this assumption that the research has undertaken the comparison between Spinoza and the two brothers Cheng Yi and Cheng Hao (instead of considering the whole of Neo-Confucianism). While the first two assumptions are fundamentally pre-comparative, the *systemic assumption* has proposed an applicative paradigm: on the basis of the Wittgenstein's idea of 'meaning as use', I have proposed to implement the widely used concept of family resemblance with Heidegger's tool of formal indication in order to establish the meaning of concepts in light of their usage within their given system and, by doing so, avoid pre-assumed meanings.

After contextualizing Spinoza and the Cheng's thought within their respective historical and philosophical arenas in order to trace their respective continuities with tradition as well as their innovative contributions, the study has undertaken the comparison of the two systems of thought by considering these thinkers' metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Each of these aspects has been considered in a threefold manner, that is, by discussing each thinker separately and then by comparing their positions. This approach has made it possible to construct the comparison between the Cheng and Spinoza by respecting the historical, linguistic, and conceptual specificities of each articulation and thus, as a consequence, to individuate not only the similarities found across the two systems but also their differentiations. With regards to metaphysics, I have examined Spinoza's framework of substance and modes and the Cheng's notion of one-and-many *li* 理; here I have noted that *substantia* and *li* are both foundational concepts that are nevertheless articulated according to different criteria and thus cannot be considered as equivalently 'monistic'. This is because while *li* is formulated on the basis of its *function* (understood as principle of intelligibility and as differentiated from *qi*) *substantia* is formulated on the basis of its *structure* (as absolutely infinite, in contrast to the finitude of modes). Despite these differences, the comparative analysis has established that the two concepts express two notions of immanent 'oneness' which operate and exist *in* the things of the world. In discussing their epistemologies, I have examined the Cheng's theory of the extension of knowledge through 'self-getting' (*zide* 自得) and Spinoza's theory of adequate and inadequate cognition. As a consequence of their

metaphysical frameworks and views on genuine or adequate knowledge, I have noted that, for both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers, knowledge is an *embodied* and practical endeavor that necessarily involves both mind and body. In addition to this, I have noted that – in both systems – knowledge is inherently reflexive, in that genuine or adequate cognition of things is coextensive with knowledge of the self. In discussing their ethics, I have considered Spinoza’s theory of *conatus* and the emotions and the Cheng’s articulations on *ren* 仁 and selfish desire (*siyu* 私欲). In comparing their positions I have noted that, while Spinoza and the Cheng have very different views on desire, both formulate notions of “good” and “bad” on the basis of the structure of Nature and *Dao* as explained in their metaphysics. As a result, moral principles are not *relative* but *derivative*, and shall be formulated through processes of both differentiations and unification.

On the basis of each system – together with the planes of intersections established across them - I have then proposed to treat “reason” as a formal indication, in order to formulate the link between the Cheng and Spinoza in consideration of their respective conceptual specificities. Building on the earlier discussions concerning epistemology and ethics, I have reconsidered Spinoza’s notion of *ratio* and the Cheng’s *li* 理 of the mind (*xin* 心) and nature (*xing* 性) as two articulations of “reason”, which – for both contexts - I have proposed to interpret as a *practice of self-extension*. I have proposed this interpretation in consideration of the fact that, for both Spinoza and the Cheng, the referent of the virtuous and rational person includes more than the individual itself, and the more the extension of the self is achieved, the more virtuous (and extended) the individual becomes. Given that, for both Spinoza and the Cheng, the apprehension of genuine knowledge necessarily involves and produces self-knowledge, “reason” as self-extension indicates not only the establishment of relations of agreement with the outer world but also, and at the same time, with the inner world. In this sense, the process of *becoming* rational involves an extension of the self in both its inner and outer dimension, simultaneously; becoming rational thus designates the process in which the individual *discovers* the structure of oneness through which beings are both united and differentiated and, with that, the self. For both contexts, this interpretation is reliant upon these thinkers’ one-and-many metaphysics in which no individual can be conceived as radically independent but, rather, is understood as inherently dependent upon the structural dynamics in which it partakes (causation for Spinoza, stimulation and response

for the Cheng). As a consequence of this account, “reason” emerges as necessarily *embedded* and *embodied*, rather than radically autonomous and transcendental; this is particularly emphasized by these thinkers’ understanding of the relation between knowledge and the emotions (*qing* 情 and *affectus*) as being not only coextensive but also necessary. A further consequence of Spinoza the Cheng embodied notions of “reason” is that, in both contexts, rational endeavor is neither innate nor universal, but rather *common* to all beings and discovered through practice and experience in and of the world. Importantly, while these shared patterns of “reason” are aligned with the general understanding of the rational as being generally related to standards of “correctness” and “goodness”, they do not seem to represent the historical category of ‘rationalism’ formulated in opposition to empiricism.

It is interesting to note that the notion of ‘reason’ as self-extension which this research has identified with both Spinoza and the Cheng’s articulations may find some continuity with contemporary studies in the field of *embodied cognition*. The latter, in contrast to computationalism, aims at accounting for mental processes as extending to the whole of the body and its interactions with the environment, rather than considering the brain as the sole locus of cognition.⁶⁰¹ This understanding has many consequences regarding the way in which reason and rational processes are conceived. With regards to this, the cognitive linguist and philosopher George Lakoff, a prominent advocate of the notion of embodied mind, has explained such consequences as follows:

“Reason is not disembodied, as the tradition has largely held, but arises from the nature of our brains, bodies, and bodily experience. This is not just the obvious and innocuous claim that we need a body to reason; rather, it is the striking claim that the very structure of reason itself comes from the details of our embodiment. The same neural and cognitive mechanisms that allow us to perceive and move around also create our conceptual systems and modes of reason. [...] In summary, reason is not, in any way, a transcendent feature of the universe or of disembodied mind. Instead, it is shaped crucially by the peculiarities of our human bodies, by the remarkable details of the neural

⁶⁰¹ See Mark Johnson, *Embodied Mind, Meaning, and Reason: How Our Bodies Give Rise to Understanding*. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017). See also Lawrence Shapiro, *The Routledge Handbook of Embodied Cognition* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

structures of our brains, and by the specifics of our everyday functioning in the world.”⁶⁰²

Certainly, unlike Lakoff, neither the Cheng brothers nor Spinoza articulated their views on the basis of recent findings in cognitive science. At the same time, however, the interpretation of their systems proposed in this research suggests that these thinkers do share – in their respective ways – the view for which the mind (and, with that, reason) is necessarily embodied. Thus, while earlier historical antecedents of embodied cognition are usually attributed to the phenomenological tradition, Spinoza and the Cheng brothers seem to provide two instances which illustrate even earlier elaborations of the unity of mind and body as derived from their metaphysical views on oneness. The continuity between contemporary debates and the historical accounts considered so far shall not be identified with the content of such debates since, as I previously mentioned, Spinoza and the Cheng each used arguments and conceptual tools that cannot (and should not) be considered identical to the current ones. The continuity, rather, shall be found in the shared concerns developed by these thinkers, together with the questions that these concerns pose. The extent to which Spinoza and the Cheng brothers’ thought could serve as contribution to contemporary accounts of embodied cognition may be the fruitful subject of future studies.

For now, I wish to turn once again to the findings of this research. As I have discussed, the Cheng and Spinoza articulate, within the boundaries of their conceptual specificities, two notions of ‘reason’ that are both embedded and embodied, and that I have proposed to coextensively interpret as a practice of self-extension. This way of conceiving reason, in turn, shall lead us to question the way in which these thinkers have been retrospectively categorized as ‘rationalist’. The general view ascribed to the broad category of rationalism is that knowledge is primarily innate and thus independent – to a considerable extent – from sense perception and bodily experience. This categorization (which is most likely the one to which Lakoff refers to in the above citation) suggests that the power and structure of reason goes beyond embodied existence, or is even detached from it. The research here conducted,

⁶⁰² George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenges to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 14.

however, shows that the conception of 'reason' articulated by Spinoza and the Cheng brothers is very different from that suggested by their 'rationalist' label, and that both systems are concerned with explaining the indissoluble unity between the theoretical and the practical realms of understanding. In this sense, one could say that both Spinoza and the Cheng brothers do not fall within the category through which they have been represented. The question of representation, which has been considered in the elaboration of the guiding methodological assumptions of this research, is important because it is intimately related to explanation; it seems that, when detailed analysis cannot be consulted, a subject *comes to be* understood through the categorizations through which knowledge is organized. In this context, questioning such categorizations implies questioning the ways in which certain themes – in this case, the philosophical link between Spinoza and the Cheng brothers – have been explained and, with time, have come to be crystallized. Questioning historical categorizations, in turn, might lead us to discover that the conventional understanding of past thinkers speaks more of the interpretative lenses through which these have been understood than of the philosophical systems they elaborated. If that is the case, the comparative approach – of which this case study is but one example – can indeed help us developing more diversified interpretative lenses and, with that, broaden the paths to understanding philosophical traditions in their unity and differentiations.

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