



# Emotions as the engines of Spinoza's ethics\*

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*Written for K&K*

In contrast to those philosophers who conceive of freedom as free choice, Spinoza insists that the realization of true freedom is not an escape from necessity. On the contrary, freedom is its integration, in the sense that the free individual – the sage – conforms its being, and its action, to the network of causes at work in nature. As Spinoza says in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the intellect* (§ 85), its “spirituality” is simply that of an *automaton* – a sort of idea-producing machine. This is where a central problem of understanding arises. For this idea of the mind that is subjected, like an automat, to the causal processes manipulating it, seems to be irreconcilable with the idea that the mind can realize its freedom and develop its power to the point of achieving the most perfect joy, as the *Ethics* promises. How can this apparent contradiction be

overcome? In fact, Spinoza's entire philosophical project is at stake here: How can we make sense of this mechanistic conception of the mind, and how does such a conception make the elaboration of any *ethics* possible at all?

To begin with, one has to see what role self-consciousness plays for this mental automatism. The idea of self-consciousness has been largely neglected by Spinoza's interpreters, arguably because of the difficulty they encountered in trying to reconcile it with the determinism that is inseparable from his system. Nevertheless, a solution to this problem becomes possible if one can reconcile the two and show that the mind uses its self-consciousness for its very *automatic* functioning. In other words, since self-consciousness is nothing but one of the necessary effects of the automatic formation of ideas, this idea is ne-

\* The argument of this essay is more fully developed in my book, *Affects et conscience chez Spinoza: l'automatisme dans le progrès éthique*, Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2004. In fact, this essay is a translation, and reconstruction - by Bela Egedy -, of passages that can be found throughout that book.

cessitated just like any other, and laws apply to it like to any other. In this way, subjective consciousness need no longer be seen as a filter, or as a controller, of these ideas. We can fully preserve the necessity according to which the mind is subsumed under those laws which completely determine the formation of its ideas by saying that this necessity is compatible, within Spinoza's philosophy, with the mind finding *in itself* - "auto-matically" - that which ensures its progression. This will, in turn, make it possible that a form of activity - i.e. a form of freedom - emerge from this determination that was, apparently, purely passive.

In a passage echoing the figure of a "spiritual automat," Spinoza helps us better understand how progression can emerge within the very network of causal determinations:

Just as men, in the beginning, were able to make the easiest things with the tools they were born with (however laboriously and imperfectly), and once these had been made, made other, more difficult things with less labour and more perfectly, and so, proceeding gradually from the simplest works to tools, and from tools to other works and tools, reached the point where they accomplished so many and so difficult things with little labour, in the same way the intellect, by its inborn power, makes intellectual tools for itself, by which it acquires other powers for other intellectual works, and from these works still other tools, or the power of searching further, and so proceeds by stages, until it reaches the pinnacle of wisdom.<sup>1</sup>

1 Spinoza: *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, sections 31-32; translation by Edwin Curley in the *Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. I (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 16-17.

This passage suggests that the intellect develops its knowledge and power through an inner character that can explain its functioning without having recourse to anything external to it. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> this inner character is a kind of "automaton" which works on the model of a circular (retroactive) and linear causation. Indeed, a simple circular causation would not have accounted for the spiritual progress required by ethics. To that end, an *oriented*, "spiral-like" model of causality was needed. Having ruled out any form of final causation - i.e., of purposiveness inherent to nature -, Spinoza elaborated a mechanism whereby individual human beings, in addition to returning retroactively onto themselves, return to themselves "enriched." This is, in other terms, a form of dialectics that he conceived to explain the mind's progress.

It is at this point that Spinoza's concept of *conatus* or endeavour, and his theory of the emotions (affects), becomes crucial. The fact that Spinoza's philosophy is one of power, or *conatus*, explains that which otherwise would remain a mystery, namely, the congruence of a strict mechanism with the mind's *progress* towards the good. Because its essence is the *conatus*, i.e., the endeavour to maintain an essential relation among its ideas (just as the body endeavours to maintain an essential relation among its parts), the mind is pushed instinctively, automatically, to construct a network of knowledge with the help of its natural "tools." And this network of ideas will be more and more elaborate with time.

As I see it, the mind possesses two main

2 See Syliane Malinowski-Charles, *op. cit.*, particularly chap. I: "La circularité causale dans la Nature," pp. 21-36.

tools in this construction of true knowledge: one is the true idea (as a criterion of truth and of falsity), the other is its affects. To begin with, let me elaborate on the first. One of Spinoza's central assumptions is that a true, or adequate, idea is at the same time an affirmation that has no need for any external justification in order to establish its own validity (cf. *Ethics* II, Prop. 43 and its *scholium*). The question then becomes: how can we construct adequate ideas out of those that are confused or mutilated? Spinoza's short answer to this question is that the human mind has the capacity to compare those inadequate ideas which are provided by the imagination, and can then go on to extract those notions which are common to all of them – what Spinoza calls the *common notions*. This is the basis for all adequate knowledge. And this adequate knowledge is best expressed in the adequate understanding of God.

Let us move to the second element now, or the second tool for building a body of knowledge that can be more and more adequate, namely, the affects. Spinoza's God – infinite substance – is a dynamic, living God. It is this dynamism that makes ethical development possible. God is the infinite dynamic reality of what is. It is an absolute power to be and to act. There is nothing external to it. Human individuals are finite modifications – one could say, degrees – of God's infinite power. Because they are finite, and because they are expressions of God's infinite power under some of its attributes, they strive or endeavour to preserve themselves in existence. All finite things “endeavour,” but some – including human beings – are also conscious of their endeavour. In their

case, then, affects and consciousness are very closely linked,<sup>3</sup> and the mechanism of the conatus will use the being's capacity to be affected in order to achieve its progress.

An exclusively rationalist reading of Spinoza pays attention only to the logical structure of the infinite substance. Isn't it difficult, however, to see how an ethics can emerge from such a static conception? If, on the other hand, affectivity is given a central place in the process of evolution, the joy accompanying the emergence of ethical life will not be seen as some miraculous end-product, something that would pop up out of the blue, totally unprepared.<sup>4</sup> Instead, it will be seen as a spur that makes evolution advance at each instant. In that way, Spinoza's project can be seen as a veritable ethical one: an achievement of power (virtue) and the accomplishment of human happiness. It is in its *experience* that a human being interjects its affectivity, in order that it may derive, as tools found within, the indica-

3 Spinoza defines the primary affects as desire, joy and sadness (E III Prop. 11 Scholium), by which he means that all affects are forms of these three. But desire is not pure appetite: it is “appetition together with consciousness” (E III P9 Scholium). I find it particularly illuminating that Spinoza only mentions desire, rather than appetite or will, that are unconscious forms of desire, when discussing the affects. Desire, defined as “man's very essence” (E III, AD I), is also the first term defined in the section of “definition of the affects” at the end of *Ethics* III. This is an indication that indeed, all affects imply a consciousness and that only the conscious forms of changes to our beings can be designated by the term “affects.”

4 This is exemplified by Ferdinand Alqu  , who expresses his wonder about the 5th part of the *Ethics* in *Le rationalisme de Spinoza*, Paris, PUF, 1981.

tions for orienting its progress and giving it the force to advance. The idea is that the *conatus* is helped by the mechanism of affectivity: when the individual is found in a situation in which his or her power to be is lessened, he or she feels it immediately, and is thus naturally prompted to react. Likewise, after having known the intuitive light and clarity of truth, the mind automatically strives to know more things in the same way and with the same clarity. For with each true idea comes also a joy, and the *conatus* makes us look for the renewal of such joyful experiences. The affects, together with a true idea, are thus all the tools that our striving beings need in order to progress towards more perfection.

But to what extent are our affects reliable? Some of the questions that have particularly disturbed Spinoza's commentators, namely a) "What precisely is the nature of the relation between God and human beings (finite modes)?", and b) "What precisely is the nature of the relation between mind and body?", are also relevant to the discussion of ethical progress. Our affects seem to be teaching us something about our mind-body relation that Spinoza's system denies: they seem to be teaching us that there is an interaction between our mind and our body. But this cannot be the case, given Spinoza's metaphysics. Still, I believe that Spinoza would uphold to the reliability of our affects even in this borderline case, by saying that what our affects teach us is not the interaction of mind and body, but the unity of the two. From the point of view of ontology, human beings are unitary entities. In contrast to Descartes' dualistic conception which sees human beings as

the mysterious unity of two distinct substances, Spinoza maintains that mind and body are different expressions of one infinite substance, namely, God. Our strong sense that there is an interaction between our minds and our bodies is a result of a confused interpretation of what we feel, i.e., of our affects. What we feel is their unity, which confirms that affects provide us with an adequate knowledge of how mind and body are related, namely, as two aspects of one and the same thing.

Therefore, in order to reconcile Spinoza's ontology with what our experiences teach us – and to make sense of our strivings towards greater power (virtue) –, we need to posit two distinct causal chains: what we might call the "ontological chain," and the "chain of our lived experience." A way toward this reconciliation is indicated by Spinoza's rigorous ontological monism, saying that there is only one substance, and that while its attributes are distinct from one another, they all express the essence of one unique thing. There is a sort of indirect interaction between minds and bodies through the intermediation of God, the one infinite substance. Causes in our bodies will be translated, through the intermediary of the unique substance (God), to effects in our minds (ideas). Conversely, the chain of ideas constituting one of our mental states will be similarly mediated to cause effects in our bodies. Thus, we can at the same time avoid dualism and reductive materialism.

Spinoza defines the *conatus* as the "actual essence of each thing" whereby "it strives to preserve itself in its own being" (*Ethics* III, prop. 6-7). This implies that all things "strive," in a certain sense: this is the sense in which Spinoza's ontology is

a universal animism. However, human beings, due to the complexity of their bodies - and the complexity of their minds paralleling it - are also, reflectively, aware of their striving. In short, human experience, emotions, power and self-consciousness are intimately connected. Spinoza's vocabulary and definitions make this connection clear.

This endeavour (*conatus*), when referred solely to the mind, is called *will*; when referred to the mind and body in conjunction it is called *appetite*; it is, in fact, nothing else but man's essence,...., because we strive for it, wish for it, long for it, or desire it (*Ethics* III, Prop. 9, Scholium).

God, however, the dynamic totality of all that there is, does not strive to preserve itself in existence. As its power never changes, it has no affects (emotions).<sup>5</sup> To exist, and to act, is its essence. Since there is nothing outside it, it is not subject to any external causation - it is its own cause. It is, first, the eternal cause of the order of causation of finite things, and it is, also, the proximate cause of the chain of causation among finite, existing things. As we have seen, finite existing things are led by their endeavour, their *conatus*. Existing human beings are, in addition, led by their *conscious* endeavour (their "desire," which is their primary affect). Therefore, in order to complete our account of the ethical progress in Spinoza, we need to say some-

thing more about human consciousness as a lived experience.

Part III of Spinoza's *Ethics* is devoted to a description and explanation of the emotions (affects). Of the long list of affects, he singles out three as primary ones. These are desire, joy and sadness: "I recognize only three primitive or primary emotions, namely joy, sadness, and desire" (*Ethics* III, Definition of the Affects IV). We may summarize Spinoza's notion of affect as follows:

- 1) Appetite is the essence of all things (therefore it is given to all things at each moment of their existence).
- 2) Desire is the same thing as appetite, but it is appetite which is conscious of itself.
- 3) Desire is an affect.
- 4) An affect is not given to all things nor is it given to them at each moment of their existence.

If any "affect" implies some "self-consciousness," and if by "affect" we mean an "idea," can we hold the preceding four claims simultaneously? By saying that an affect is not given to all things, or even to any one thing at all times, are we not committed to saying that there are some ideas, namely affects, which are not ideas of bodies? In other words, are we obliged to impose an idealist, "spiritualist," ontology on Spinoza? This would present a serious problem for our interpretation, and I want to stress that the four claims above are compatible without such an idealist reading to be necessary. Keeping in mind the distinction we have made earlier between the ontological and the experiential chains in our account of Spinoza's conception of human individuality - a distinction we found obligatory for reconcil-

5 God's intellectual love of himself and of men about which Spinoza talks in the 5<sup>th</sup> part of the *Ethics* is not properly speaking an "affect," since by definition God is the whole perfection and cannot lack anything, whereas the notion of "affect" supposes that of change in one's power (as seen in the definition of the affects in *Ethics* III, Def. 3). However, God's eternal and immutable state may still be called 'affective' in a broader sense, that of a constant love and satisfaction for oneself.

ing the ontological system of explanation with the facts of lived human experience –, then a solution offers itself. We can say that an affect, in so far as it is an idea, is for the mind that which allows it to feel the evolution of the power of its body.

“Joy, as Spinoza says, is the passage by man from a lower to a higher state of perfection” (*Ethics* III, Definition of the Affects II). Similarly, sadness “is the passage from a higher to a lower state of perfection” (*ibid.*, Def. III). Consequently, without these affects the mind could not have a consciousness of its essence. Its “essential” appetite could not become conscious, could not make itself into desire. In other words, if there were no variation in the power of the body, the mind would never be conscious of itself, for it would not be conscious of its attachment to the existence of the body.

Spinoza's ethical project is one of self-perfection, one of liberation from the harmful or sad affections. The assumption underlying this project is that human beings seek to augment their power to be and to act. This is achieved through an automatism in which, as this article suggested, the affects play a crucial role. Being conscious of its increase or diminution of power, the mind responds automatically to what it perceives as the causes for this increase or this diminution. In so doing, it is driven “instinctively” by its *conatus*. The struggle for freedom is the struggle to enhance one's power to act – one's perfection – and to diminish the power of external causes over the way one is and the way one acts. Naturally, human beings – limited as they are by external forces – are exposed to fortuitous encounters with their environment. Only a few, those who are

both fortunate and capable of understanding the causes of their joy or sadness, will be able to attain the highest form of ethical satisfaction, namely, a full acceptance of who they are and of the universe they inhabit. Spinoza calls this “beatitude,” or the intellectual love of God. However, for most, and most of the time, the task is to pass from a lower degree to a higher degree of perfection: actualizing the degree of power that is their share in the infinite power of God. Their only resource for attaining their own degree of perfection, and to act solely out of that perfection, is their joyful encounters. While these are still passive, relying as they do on external sources, they may lead their possessors to higher and higher levels of self-reliance; which, according to Spinoza, is equivalent to virtue.

If the above analysis is correct, then Spinoza's ethical project is primarily a private one. However, politics can also play an important role in it. For, it might happen that a community is also led, through the consciousness of its sad or joyful experiences, to maximize the number of its joyful members, and the intensity of their joy.<sup>6</sup> But, regrettably, this can seldom happen, because the spirit of a community is rarely defined by rationality. The mechanism would be the same, and the affects would surely be one of the tools for progress, but the primary adequate idea, as a standard of truth and of falsity, would be missing.

<sup>6</sup> I have developed these views in *Le rôle de la paix pour le progrès de la raison chez Spinoza*, Actes du XXVIII<sup>e</sup> Congrès International de l'ASPLF, La philosophie et la paix, Università di Bologna, Italia (29 août - 2 sept. 2000), Paris, Vrin, 2003, vol. I, pp. 217-222.



# Spinozove a Marxove stopy v knihe Ríša

**M. Hardt & A. Negri**

Úryvok z knihy *Ríša*, s. 91-92 (Harvard University Press, 2000)

## **Humanizmus po smrti Človeka:**

Foucault si v poslednom diele kladie paradoxnú a naliehavú otázku: Čo zostalo z humanizmu po smrti Človeka? Alebo skôr – čo je to antihumanistický (posthumanistický) humanizmus?

Táto otázka je však paradoxom len zdanko, jej protirečivosť prinajmenšom čiastočne pramení z terminologického zmatku medzi dvoma rôznymi koncepciami humanizmu. Antihumanizmus, ktorý bol pre Foucaulta a Althussera v šesťdesiatych rokoch minulého storočia veľmi dôležitým projektom, v konečnom dôsledku súvisí s bojom, ktorý pred tristo rokmi vybojoval Spinoza. Spinoza poprel chápanie ľudskosti ako *imperium in imperio* (ríše v ríši). Povedané inak, odmietol možnosť, že by sa ľudská podstata riadila inými zákonitosťami než tými, ktoré sú súčasťou všeobecných prírodných zákonov...

Tento antihumanizmus však nemusí byť automaticky v rozpore s revolučným duchom renesančného humanizmu.... Vlastne priamo nadväzuje na renesančno-humanistickú sekularizujúcu agendu a ešte presnejšie na objavenie „ríše imanencie“, ktoré sa v rámci nej udialo. V základe oboch z nich je útok na transcen-

dentnosť. Medzi náboženským myslením, ktoré udeľuje moc nad prírodou Bohu, a moderným „sekulárnym“ myslením, ktoré udeľuje tú istú moc človeku, je striktná kontinuita. Transcendencia prislúchajúca Bohu sa jednoducho presúva na Človeka. Tak ako predtým Boh, tento Človek, ktorý nie je súčasťou prírody, ktorý je nad ňou, nemá vo filozofii imanencie miesto. A tak ako Boh, aj tento transcendentný Človek rýchlo smeruje k zavedeniu spoločenskej hierarchie a tyranie. Antihumanizmus chápaný ako odmietanie transcencie teda nemožno zamieňať s popieraním *vis viva* (životnej sily), tvorivej životnej sily, ktorá poháňa revolučný chod modernej tradície. Práve naopak, odmietnutie transcencie je nevyhnutnou podmienkou pre realizáciu tejto imanentnej moci, anarchistického základu filozofie: *Ni Dieu, ni maître, ni l'homme* (Ani Boh, ani pánovník, ani človek).

Toto je humanizmus po smrti Človeka: to, čo Foucault nazýva *le travail de soi sur soi*, neustála formujúca sila umožňujúca nám tvoriť a pretvárať samých seba a náš svet.

*z angličtiny preložila Jana Bašňáková*



# Traces of Spinoza and Marx in the book Empire

**M. Hardt & A. Negri**

Excerpt from *Empire*, pp. 91-92 (Harvard University Press, 2000)

## **Humanism after the Death of Man:**

Foucault asks in his final work a paradoxical and urgent question: What is humanism after the death of Man? Or rather, what is an anti-humanist (or post-human) humanism?

This question, however, is only a seeming paradox that derives at least in part from a terminological confusion between two distinct notions of humanism. The anti-humanism that was such an important project for Foucault and Althusser in the 1960s can be linked effectively to a battle that Spinoza fought three hundred years earlier. Spinoza denounced any understanding of humanity as an *imperium in imperio* [an empire within an empire]. In other words, he refused to accord any laws to human nature that were different from the laws of nature as a whole....

This anti-humanism, however, need not conflict with the revolutionary spirit of Renaissance humanism.... In fact, this anti-humanism follows directly on Renaissance humanism's secularizing project, or more precisely, its discovery of the plane of immanence. Both projects are founded on an attack on transcendence. There is a strict continuity between the religious thought

that accords a power above nature to God, and the modern "secular" thought that accords that same power above nature to Man. The transcendence of God is simply transferred to Man. Like God before it, this Man that stands separate from and above nature has no place in a philosophy of immanence. Like God, too, this transcendent figure of Man leads quickly to the imposition of social hierarchy and domination. Anti-humanism, then, conceived as a rejection of any transcendence, should in no way be confused with a negation of the *vis viva* [life force], the creative life force that animates the revolutionary stream of the modern tradition. On the contrary, the rejection of transcendence is the condition of possibility of thinking this immanent power, an anarchic basis of philosophy: *Ni Dieu, ni maitre, ni l'homme* [Neither God, nor master, nor man.]...

This is humanism after the death of Man: what Foucault calls *le travail de soi sur soi*, the continuous constituent power to create and re-create ourselves and our world.