



Spinoza for a critical theism*

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It is correct to call Spinoza an atheist, if by atheism one understands - with this or that 17th century theologian - a doctrine which denies the supernatural and throws doubt on the Bible, discovering in it contradictions that the natural light of reason has to overcome; then Spinoza stands accused. Without a doubt, he speaks of God, but this God is not a personal God, he is not in relation with man, who can neither invoke him, nor love him with a passionate love. This God is not a creator of the world, or of man, he has no plans and exercises no particular will in their regard. One refers too easily to a so called “will of God” when one can no longer explain the course of things: that is nothing but a “refuge of ignorance”. It is that, God is not transcendent to nature and to history: he is neither besides nor above them in a distance that could be qualified as supernatural; he does not exercise power over man in the image of a sovereign over his subjects. The critique goes

far. One must admit it, it is a quite a lot for a religious orthodoxy to take. For, it is all the religions of Revelation that are shaken here: if transcendence of a personal God is no more, history is devoid of God. Judaism and Christianity are orphans from the moment God could not have chosen a special people for himself, or could not have incarnated himself in a finite being – his incarnation would be as contradictory as it would for a circle to become squared. All this is absolutely noteworthy. One grasps that there was no exaggeration in the indignation of Spinoza’s contemporaries. It remains to be asked what interest there is in pursuing the road in such company if one still holds some affirmations of God.

Spinoza’s God is nature (“*Deus sive natura*”), according to a formulation often understood in a reductionist manner. A language so speculative and so rigorously deductive – such as the one of definitions, propositions and demonstrations of the

* For a more complete, and more detailed, discussion of the affirmation of God see: Henri Laux, *Le Dieu excentre: Essai sur l'affirmation de Dieu*. Paris, Beauchesne, 2001.

Ethics - inspires, perhaps, more dryness than devotion. Without entering into the technicalities of the analysis, it is the profound sense of this logic that is to be understood. This God is excessive for the commonly held positions. But for Spinoza this excessive God is the God of *expression*. Substance expresses itself in the attributes which, in turn, express themselves in the modes. God, therefore, is a unique being, of which all other things are nothing but modifications. God's relation to the modes is a relation of immanence – of presence. Therefore, in fact, this God is not a creator. In the logic of creation, God makes things that are outside him- and that are different from him - exist. God does not create, he produces - God is that which produces – in this way, all that is,

is God. One sees that if there is no more relation of transcendence here, it is not by a will to embarrass the honour rendered religiously to transcendence. It is because this modality of being no longer has sense here. Substance is not an abstraction. All that is, expresses the nature of God in the manner appropriate for him. Each thing, each finite mode is alive, and this life is God.

God is not rejected; instead he is recalled in all. By contrast, it is those positions which seem most closely related to a classical theology of Revelation that are rejected by Spinoza, to the extent that they push aside God at the moment when they claim to be honouring him. One sees it, astounded, in the critique of miracle. What, in fact, does Spinoza contest? He contests that God intervenes in nature and in history, favouring particular events by breaking the usual course of thing. By rejecting that, Spinoza makes himself most critical precisely in regard to the Jewish and Christian Revelations, but he puts forward something that could be understood of this Revelation. He says in effect that the power of nature and the power of God are identical; that all that happens belongs to the essence of God; that God acts in all that is, because what is does not pertain to another order of being. his power is expressed fully and continually; it is not limited by anything. Consequently, if God has to intervene at some place to modify the course of events, it shows that something is not as it should be, and, therefore, that he has gone wrong in the organization of things. Miracle is the correction that God would bring to a defective creation, thereby confessing his own deficiency. To sup-

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pose miracles is, therefore, to doubt God's perfection, to detect a contradiction in it; but by putting God in doubt one arrives at denying him. As a result, the appeal to miracles is atheism.

The God of *expression* is present to all things, of which it is the life. It is legitimate to prefer a non-anonymous God to it, but one can at least acknowledge that, its absolute immanence will shape the concept of creation by marking in it the infinite presence of its being; acknowledge also the power of God in the rejection of a divinity enslaved to the arbitrariness of human passions, reduced to manifest itself in very fragmented actions. If the Spinozistic affirmation endeavours to think a God supremely free – that is how necessity is to be understood by Spinoza – of a freedom that knows neither the capriciousness of a prince over its subjects, nor the fantasies of subjects in a situation of intellectual inferiority, then this affirmation has a sense over and above its proper philosophical context – for those conceptions which recognize, according to another dynamic, a personal, transcendent God, in waiting. Hence, through Spinoza one encounters a critical discourse regarding the usual statements of the affirmation of God: the critique goes so far that it is generally perceived as negation of God in the course of a more and more devastating process. Other currents of thought might also serve as example; Spinoza's was taken for reason of its force.

But what am I saying exactly when I qualify a discourse *critique*? To present it as such is to affirm that it exceeds the knowledge I have of God: the knowledge that I had of God. This discourse develops

elsewhere where I am, pushing me to go elsewhere, it puts me off balance. Thus, I often experience that such discourse aggresses me when it does not conform to what I have received and in which I am, in which I think myself, and in which I think God in the most habitual way. And, by the same token, it is unacceptable. I can reject it; structured by convictions as I am. It is up to me not to consent to that which does not correspond to them. Short of not knowing who I am, exposed to all winds of thought, it is important not to fall into an indefinite succession of solicitations. That is all too clear. But there is also a way of silencing criticism that amounts to a refusal to enter into discussion. Ignorance of the exchange of arguments exposes then to a misunderstanding of God: a God that is present throughout our language. Paradoxically – but very logically – God could be denied in affirmations that make him out to be too self-centered. But this “unacceptable” discourse could also reach me: either because I no longer know very well what I must think, or when I want to go farther in thought – not by defiance or unconsciousness, but because the truth of thought gives rise to new questions (and, to begin with, the most critical among them).

In the present case, in the encounter with Spinoza, one sees the effects of critical discourse: it expands my available knowledge; it takes it somewhere else; it modifies its sphere. I do not come out unchanged from this confrontation, where all that I comprehend – inherited or maturely reflected – encounters new limits. Thus, critical discourse disorganizes my knowledge, but in so doing it also reor-



ganizes it, or, at least, *could* reorganize it (evidently, it is never given in advance that it go that far). It does not reorganize unless it is heard in its own power, which presupposes that it not be left aside.

The result is that a new knowledge is produced by this expansion. But is this simply a fruit of circumstances that could have been different? Or does it have a fundamental importance for the constitution of discourse? Put differently, can one know God in a way other than in expansion? Could this knowledge not be in a position and function of excess in relation to the first appearance of all discourse? One may ask if expansion is not the very form of the paradoxical structure at work in all experience of freedom, this human freedom that discovers itself as the overflowing of all determinations. Should one then dream of a knowledge “in good order”, the moment it concerns God? Yes, of course, if “good order” denotes rigour in what is said: the

right concept, fidelity to convictions, but not, if “good order” denotes a knowledge, so sure of itself that it never knows movement – without astonishment or surprise, never a re-composition of oneself in front of what exceeds the well known. When knowledge is frozen, when discourse becomes so high-handedly dogmatic, it is time to dis-organize the knowledge of God. It belongs to freedom to convey the knowledge of God by a methodical disorder that removes all pretensions of believers to make of their God the law of a God, finally mastered. But a God that is not mastered does not escape language and concept; it does not imply an indefinitely entertained doubt. He puts at a distance this imaginary centre where one wants to isolate him: free in his movements, he can then come to pass everywhere where his sovereignty calls.

Self-Criticism of a Marxist

Louis Althusser

Excerpt from *On Spinoza*

in: *Elements d'auto-critique, (Elements of Self-critique)*, Hachette, 1974, p. 55-83.

(Translated and introduced by Bela Eged.)

Althusser was the foremost Marxist intellectual of the sixties. His influence on post-modernist philosophical currents inside and outside France was enormous. But, his radical critique of orthodox – in his view Hegelian - Marxist doctrine left him open to attacks from within the French Communist Party. The following selection comes from a volume which contains his response to those attacks. As the first line of our quotation indicates, Althusser was above all concerned with discrediting the view that he was a “structuralist”, pure and simple. He believes that he was mistaken for a “structuralist” on account of his (undeclared) Spinozism. The suggestion he makes is that his “detour” into Spinozism allowed him to rid Marxism of its Hegelian – teleological -residues. However, Althusser makes another fundamental point in the following selection: he claims that he found in Spinoza’s doctrine of the “imaginary” a forerunner of his own theory of ideology. This is significant for understanding, not only the reception of Spinoza in France, but also important aspects of the post-structuralist movement. For, in opposition to orthodox Marxism, which viewed ideology as a form of “false consciousness” Althusser maintained that it was a fundamental aspect of the way in which social actors relate to the conditions of their existence. This, in turn, allowed thinkers such as Foucault and Deleuze to articulate a non-conspiratorial theory of power. Also, it helped Spinoza scholars to resolve the apparent tension between Spinoza’s ontology, and his views on religion.

If we have not been structuralists, we can now confess why: why we have seemed, but have not been, why, therefore, this singular misunderstanding: the subject of several books. We have been guilty of a far stronger, and compromising, passion: *we have been Spinozist*. Of course, in our own way, [...] by attributing to the author of the *Theologico-Political Treatise* and of the *Ethics* theses that he would

surely not have avowed, even though he had authorized. But, if Spinozism is one of the greatest lessons of heresy in history, then to be a heretic Spinozist is almost part of Spinozism. if Spinozism is one of the greatest lessons of heresy in history! In any event, with rare exceptions our sainted critics filled with their convictions and gnawed by the world, never suspected it. Their facileness got the better of them: it

was so simple to chime in with their cry of “structuralism”! Structuralism, it roams the streets, and since it cannot be found in any books, anyone can chat about it. But Spinoza, one must read him, and to know that he exists: that he still exists today. To recognize him, one must know him, at least, a little....

But then, here is the great objection: why, then, having referred to Spinoza, when it was simply a question of *simply* being Marxist? Why this detour? The fact is: we made this detour in the years 1960-65, and we have paid a pretty high price for it. But the question is not there. The question is: what can this question really mean? What can it mean to be *simply* Marxist (in philosophy)? [...] If one is to give one reason, and only one, hence, the reason of reasons, it is this: we have made the detour by way of Spinoza in order to see a little more clearly in the philosophy of Marx. Specifically, because Marx’s materialism obliged us to *think* its necessary detour by way of Hegel, *we have made the detour by way of Spinoza in order to see a little more clearly in Marx’s detour by way of Hegel.*

[...]The detour by Spinoza allowed us to discover, by its difference, a radicalism that was missing in Hegel. In the negation of the negation, in the *Aufhebung* (= an overcoming that conserves what it has overcome), we were able to discover the notion of the End [the Final Purpose]: the form and the privileged site of the “mystification” of the Hegelian dialectic.

Need one add that if Spinoza denies himself all use of “the End” [i.e. teleology], he

provides the theory of its illusion, necessity, and, therefore, well founded? In the Appendix to Book I of the *Ethics* and in the *Theologico-Political Treatise* we find, in fact – without a doubt the first – theory of *ideology*. [...] By identifying it as imaginary, Spinoza’s “theory” rejected all illusion about ideology and [in particular] about the first ideology of the times: religion. But, at the same time, this theory refused to take ideology for a simple error, or bare ignorance, because it founded the system of this imaginary on the relation of men to the world “expressed” by the state of their bodies. This *materialism of the imagination* opened the way to a surprising conception of the “First Type of Knowledge”: not at all “knowledge”, but, instead, the material world of men as they *live* it - their concrete material existence... But this theory of the imaginary went still farther. By radically criticizing in *the subject* the central category of the imaginary illusion, it struck at the heart of the bourgeois philosophy, one that has built itself, since the 16th century, on the basis of the juridical ideology of the Subject. ...

We wanted to understand Marx’s detour by way of Hegel. We have taken the detour by way of Spinoza: in search of arguments for materialism. We have found a few. And, by this detour, unexpected, if not unsuspected, by some, we were able to, even if not to pose or to enounce, at least we “raised” a few questions that might have continued to sleep, the peaceful sleep of eternal obviousness, in the closed pages of *Das Capital*.