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*Written for K&K*

## Spinoza and the question of progress in history\*

*\* This essay has been inspired by one written by Gabor Boros.*

In this paper I will argue against both those who might accuse Spinoza of embracing a form of historicism that would contradict his basic ontological doctrines, and against those who might claim that he can have nothing interesting to say about history. Against the first I will argue that at no point does Spinoza say, or even imply, that history progresses toward a final goal. Against the second I will argue that Spinoza's method of finding the meaning of history from within history provides a non-teleological idea of historical progress.

Some Spinoza scholars in recent years have raised the question whether his ontology is compatible with the idea of historical progress. If Spinoza's ontology is

defined by the identification of God with Nature, the denial of any form of transcendence, the denial that nature is guided by some inner purpose and the rejection of all forms of anthropocentrism, it cannot allow that history be directed towards an ultimate purpose.<sup>1</sup> Still, just because Spinoza's ontology precludes a transcendent guarantee for historical progress it does not mean that Spinoza's philosophy must be silent on the question whether human history has evolved

Hegel, who also denied the existence of a transcendent God, nevertheless conceived of him as a person – the Infinite

<sup>1</sup> These ideas can be found easily in the Appendix to Book I of the *Ethics*.

Person. And in contrast to Spinoza, Hegel believed that God: the Absolute Spirit evolved through history. In fact, Hegel's God needs human beings and their history to accomplish itself. This view of God is completely unacceptable to Spinoza. Consequently, the temptation to assimilate Spinoza's views on history to that of Hegel ought to be avoided.<sup>2</sup> The dialectical progress of nature and of history which is an essential feature of Hegel's philosophy can explain human evolution towards "Absolute Knowledge", but it is totally alien to Spinoza's ontology. The question then becomes how Spinoza's conception of historical progress differs from Hegel's. Hegel's historicizing of Absolute Spirit makes him a unique figure of the modernist drive toward secularizing Christian theology. He transformed the Judeo-Christian idea of salvation into a secular, this worldly, phenomenon of progress.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, Spinoza's God is immanent in the

world but it is not, as it is for Hegel, a person. So, we need to explain how finite beings (modes) relate to infinite Substance. The shortest explanation would be that finite things express the infinite power of God to certain degrees. Spinoza calls this (limited) degree of power existing things their *conatus* – their striving to preserve themselves in existence. Some might argue that his idea of *conatus* might commit Spinoza, too, to a version of historical teleology, bringing his position close to Hegel's. But what Hegel and Hegelian critics of Spinoza ignore is that Spinoza's God, is a dynamic being. So, even though God does not – cannot - have a goal toward which it strives, finite beings do strive toward some goal by increasing their joyful, and by diminishing their painful emotions (passions). When Spinoza says that human beings are not "kingdoms within a kingdom" he means to indicate that they are not fully constituted independent beings in control of their destiny.<sup>4</sup> They are vulnerable to external circumstances as well as to the fluctuations of their own emotions (passions). Thus, their *conatus* is not only their effort to preserve, but also to constitute themselves.

In order to show this, and to clear Spinoza of the charge of having embraced a secularized eschatology of reason, one might invoke Thomas Kuhn's idea of progress.

2 "In the history of philosophy, he says, we meet with Substance as the principle of Spinoza's system... Though an essential stage in the evolution of the idea, substance is not the same as absolute Idea, but the idea under the still limited form of necessity. It is true that God is necessity, or, as we may also put it, that he is the absolute Thing: he is however no less the absolute person. That he is the absolute Person however is a point which the philosophy of Spinoza never reached: and on that side it falls short of the true notion of God which forms the content of religious consciousness in Christianity" *Hegel's Logic*, Oxford U. P. 1975. W. Wallace's translation. Section 151, p. 213-4. I agree with Hegel's characterization of the difference between his and Spinoza's position. But, I do not agree with his criticism.

3 "[T]he content of the absolute idea is the whole breadth of ground which has passed under our view up to this point. Last of all comes the discovery that the whole evolution is what constitutes the content and the interest". (*Hegel's Logic*, Section 237, p.293.)

4 "Most writers on the emotions and on human conduct seem to be treating rather of matters outside nature than of natural phenomena following nature's general laws. They appear to conceive man to be situated in nature as a kingdom within a kingdom: for they believe that he disturbs rather than follows nature's order, that he has absolute control over his actions, and that he is determined solely by himself." *Ethics*: III, Preface, in *The Chief Works of Spinoza*, Dover 1951 p.128.

In his highly influential work on the philosophy and history of science Kuhn puts his own position on the idea of progress in the following way:

The developmental process described in this essay has been a process of evolution *from* primitive beginnings – a process whose successive stages are characterized by an increasingly detailed and refined understanding of nature. But nothing that has been or will be said makes it a process of evolution *toward* anything. Inevitably that lacuna will have disturbed many readers. We are all deeply accustomed to seeing science as the one enterprise that draws constantly nearer to some goal set by nature in advance.

But need there be any such goal? ...If we can learn to substitute evolution from-what-we-do-know for evolution-toward-what-we-wish-to-know, a number of vexing problems may vanish in the process.<sup>5</sup> I want to suggest that the idea of progress, as an evolution away from something in contrast to an evolution toward something is an accurate reflection of Spinoza's views on this issue. In fact, Spinoza's hermeneutical method for reading the Scriptures confirms my – Kuhnian – interpretation of his conception of historical progress. For, what does it mean to say that “the meaning of Scripture is made plain through Scripture itself”?<sup>6</sup> It means that the mean-

ing – not the truth – of the Biblical texts must be sought within the text.<sup>7</sup> And the same can be said of history in general: the meaning of history is to be found only in history. There are no “external” criteria for evaluating or judging it. Criteria must come from history itself. Spinoza himself speaks from within history, and this, in turn, leads him to make a number of characteristic judgments about politics and religion. Keeping in mind that Spinoza's God is a dynamic infinite being, and that finite beings act purposefully in accordance with their *conatus*, his ontology is compatible with a form of historical progress. His hermeneutical approach to history can accommodate a set of criteria internal to history. These criteria are related to the theoretical and ethical framework existing at a particular time. Critical rationalism, and the liberal democratic politics associated with it, is our horizon. It is our way of seeing the progress *away from* oppressive theocratic regimes of the past (and, regrettably, also of the present).

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does not widely differ from the method of interpreting nature – in fact, it is almost the same” (Chapter VII, p.99 TPT), or again: “we have shown both by reason and by examples that the meaning of Scripture is only made plain through Scripture itself” (*ibid.* p.117)

7 “I call passages clear or obscure according as their meaning is inferred easily or with difficulty in relation to the context, not according as their truth is perceived easily or the reverse by reason. We are at work not on the truth of passages, but solely on their meaning. We must take especial care, when we are in search of the meaning of a text, not to be led away by our reason in so far as it is founded on principles of natural knowledge (to say nothing of prejudices): in order not to confound the meaning of a passage with its truth, we must examine it solely by means of the significance of words, or by reason acknowledging no foundation but Scripture” (TPT: Chapter VII, p.101).

5 Thomas Kuhn: *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago U.P. 1970. Associating Spinoza with Kuhn has a number of advantages. Not only does it allow us to account for his theory of progress in non-teleological terms, it also throws light on the possibility of having faith in the progress of scientific knowledge without believing that even it moves toward some predetermined goal.

6 See, for example, “I may sum up the matter by saying that the method of interpreting Scripture

Still, it would be a mistake to see either rationalism or liberalism as the unavoidable final destiny of humanity.

In light of the above, it is wrong to say that Spinoza was advocating the kind of secularized eschatology that Loewith criticized in his *Meaning in History*. According to Loewith the modern project of secularism is based on an unacknowledged “imitation” of Christian eschatology. According to this eschatology, Christ has fulfilled the Messianic prophecy of the Old Testament. The “event” of Christ promises that the faithful will be saved at a time that is “outside” historical time.<sup>8</sup> Secularizing the Christian eschatology means to place salvation within historical time. This is precisely Hegel’s project. And, it is true there are passages in TPT which suggest that Spinoza might be embracing a secular version of that Christian eschatology. This comes out most clearly in his comparison of Moses and Jesus. His basic claim is that while Moses was a great political leader with a great power of imagination allowing him to interpret signs, “Christ was not so much a prophet as the mouthpiece of God”. In other words, “God revealed Himself to Christ, or to Christ’s mind, immediately”. Furthermore, Christ, unlike Moses, did not give commands, he was a teacher:

To those to whom it is given to understand the mysteries of heaven He [Christ] doubtless taught his doctrines as eternal truths and did not lay them down as laws [as did Moses], thus freeing the minds of His hearers from the bondage of that law...<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> In fact, Loewith’s main thesis in *Meaning in History* is that modern secularism is a perversion of the eschatological insight of Christian theology.

<sup>9</sup> TPT: p.65.

It is tempting to see in these passages a confirmation of the view that, at least in TPT, Spinoza privileges the Christian religion, with its notion of a personal God who has a special relation with Christ. His comments on Revealed religion are not simply vulgarizations of an esoteric philosophy.<sup>10</sup> Rather, Spinoza is giving instructions to the philosophical reader; telling him that expressions like: “Divine Providence”, “God’s Decrees” and “the Divine Law” are to be understood, in the light of reason, as “eternal truths”. And, just because these eternal truths about right conduct and the proper plan of life need to be adapted to the popular mind, the manner of teaching them is important.

We conclude, therefore, that God is described as a law giver or prince, and styled just, merciful &c., merely in concession to popular understanding, and the imperfection of popular knowledge; that in reality God acts and directs all things simply by the necessity of His nature and perfection, and that his decrees and volitions are eternal truths, and always involve necessity.<sup>11</sup> In a similar way, when Spinoza speaks of the election of the Jewish people by God, he means simply that human beings, and even nations, preserve themselves in existence, only to the extent that their inner power and their external circumstances allow them. Spinoza’s rejection of any intervention in history by a transcendent God is made forcefully in the following quotation:

By the help of God, I mean the fixed and unchangeable order of nature or the causal chain of events: for as I have said

<sup>10</sup> TPT: p.11.

<sup>11</sup> TPT: p.65.

before and shown elsewhere that the universal laws of nature, according to which all things exist and are determined, are only another name for the eternal decrees of God, which always involve necessity. ... Now since the power in nature is identical with the power of God, by which all things happen and are determined, it follows that whatever man, as part of nature, provides himself with to aid and preserve his existence, or whatever nature affords him without his help, is given to him solely by the divine power, acting either through human nature or through external circumstances. ... Nations, then, are distinguished from one another in respect to the social organization and the laws under which they live and are governed; the Hebrew nation was not chosen by God in respect to its wisdom nor its tranquility of mind, but in respect to its social organization and the good fortune with which it obtained supremacy and kept it so many years....[The] means which conduce to security and health are chiefly in external circumstances, and are called gifts of fortune because they depend chiefly on objective causes of which we are ignorant.<sup>12</sup> In regards to the “superiority” of Christ’s teachings over the commands issued by Moses the situation is more complex. It is undeniable that Spinoza considered Christ to be a superior human being, one who had an *intuitive* knowledge of God and who was, perhaps, the greatest philosopher of all times. It is also clear that he considered the teachings of Christ and of the Apostles superior to those of the prophets, except, perhaps Solomon’s, because they taught in a way that promoted independent thinking among the faith-

<sup>12</sup> TPT: p.44-46.

ful. But there is no reason to think that Spinoza considered the Jewish religion to be inferior to the Christian one as a number of prominent thinkers have claimed. The Jewish religion was adequate, and even necessary, for its own time, and Spinoza does not exclude the possibility that it, too, contains the necessary elements for a true *universal* religion.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, if there is superstition in the Old Testament there is also in the New. For example, on one crucial point of Christianity, that Christ is an Incarnation of God, he considered their language to be absurd:

As to the additional teaching of certain Churches that God took upon himself human nature, I have expressly indicated that I do not understand what they say. Indeed, to tell the truth, they seem to me to speak no less absurdly than the one who might tell me that a circle has taken on the nature of a square.<sup>14</sup>

With these remarks I conclude my defense of Spinoza. I have argued that he does have criteria of historical progress without relying on the notion of a transcendent God. He can, in other words, maintain that history evolves from one particular stage to another without being committed to a form of secularized eschatology. His liberalism and Enlightenment rationalism rests on his belief in a God that is immanent to nature, on his rejection of anthropocentrism and on his belief in progress without an ultimate purpose.

<sup>13</sup> See Chapter XIV, TPT, where Spinoza lists the seven creeds of the true universal religion. These, he takes to be the essential articles of faith of both, Jewish and Christian, religions.

<sup>14</sup> Letter 73, to Oldenburg: November-December 1675.



*Daniel Fischer: Tmavý lopúch*



# Spinozova zrada židovstva

## Emmanuel Levinas

Úryvok z *Le cas Spinoza (Prípado Spinoza)*, s. 154-57, in: *Difficile Liberté*

**J**e celkom zrejme, že ani Spinozovo vyobcovanie náboženskými vodcami jeho doby, ani Ben Gurionov plán toto vyobcovanie zrušiť, nezohrajú v otázke Spinozovej slávy a vplyvu žiadnu rolu. Posmrtná spravodlivosť? Spinozovia neumierajú .... Som absolútne presvedčený o tom, (že) Spinoza zradil. V dejinách ideí podriadil židovskú pravdu zjaveniu Nového zákona. Prirodzene, to druhé prekonala intelektuálna láska k Bohu, ale k západnej existencii patrí táto kresťanská skúsenosť len ako štádium, ak vôbec.

Z tejto pozície Spinozova škodlivá rola, ktorú zohral pri intelektuálnom rozklade židovskej inteligencie, priam bije do očí; aj keď je kresťanstvo pre jej zástupcov, a aj pre Spinozu samotného, len predposlednou pravdou, a aj keď sa uctievanie Boha v duchu a v pravde musí pozdvihnúť nad kresťanstvo. Uznanie evanjelií za nevyhnutné štádium na ceste k pravde je v sú-

časnosti ešte dôležitejšie ako vyznávanie kréda. Židovstvo ako predzvesť Ježiša – to sú prostriedky, ktorými spinozizmus dosiahol pre nenáboženské židovstvo to, proti čomu náboženské židovstvo vystupovalo počas sedemnástich storočí. Kolkým židovským intelektuálom, nestranným v otázkach náboženskej viery, sa Ježiš nejavil ako splnenie (na vyššej úrovni) učení prorokov, aj keď v ich myslení predbehli túto postavu alebo jej učenie hrdinovia francúzskej revolúcie alebo marxizmu?...

Plne sympatizujeme s kresťanstvom, ale naše sympatie sú čisto priateľské a bratské. Nemôžu sa stať otcovskými. Nemôžeme sa priznať k dieťaťu, ktoré nie je naše. Proti tomuto domnelému právu na dedičstvo, proti jeho netrpezlivosti dedič, protestujeme, plní života a zdraví duchom.

*z angličtiny preložila Jana Bašňáková*

# Spinoza's Betrayal Of Judaism

## Emmanuel Levinas

Excerpt from *Le cas Spinoza* pp. 154-57, in: *Difficile Liberté*

**E**vidently, neither Spinoza's excommunication by the religious authorities of his days, nor the plan formulated by Ben Gurion to lift this condemnation, will have any significance for the glory and influence of Spinoza. Posthumous justice? The Spinoza's do not die....

We are entirely of the opinion [that] there is a treason [committed by] Spinoza. In the history of ideas he has subordinated the truth of Judaism to the revelation of the New Testament. Naturally, the latter is surpassed by the intellectual love of God, but Western being involves this Christian experience, if only, as a stage.

From there, the harmful role played by Spinoza in the intellectual decomposition of the Jewish intelligencia, becomes glaringly obvious; even if, for its representatives, as for Spinoza himself, Christianity is only a penultimate truth, and even if God's worship in spirit and in truth must still rise above Christianity. The recogni-

tion of the Gospels as an inevitable stage on the road to the truth is even more important today than the profession of the credo. Judaism as a prefiguration of Jesus – there is the means by which Spinozism has accomplished for irreligious Judaism what religious Judaism opposed during seventeen centuries. To how many Jewish intellectuals, detached from all religious beliefs, has Jesus not appeared as the accomplishment [at a higher level] of the teaching of the prophets, even if in their minds this figure, or his teachings, would be surpassed by the heroes of the French Revolution or of Marxism?...

Our sympathy for Christianity is complete, but it does not go beyond friendship and fraternity. It cannot become paternal. We cannot acknowledge a child that is not our own. Against these pretensions of heritage, against its impatience to inherit, we protest, alive and of sound spirit.