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Spinoza: The Velocities of Thought

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It's quite curious the extent to which philosophy, up to the end of the 17th century, ultimately speaks to us, all the time, of God. And after all, Spinoza, excommunicated Jew, is not the last to speak to us of God. And the first book of his great work *The Ethics* is called "Of God." And from all of them, whether it's Descartes, Malebranche, Leibniz, we get the impression that the boundary between philosophy and theology is extremely vague.

Why is philosophy so compromised with God, and right up to the revolutionary coup of the 18th century philosophers? Is it a dishonest compromise [*compromission*] or something a little purer? We could say that thought, until the end of the 17th century, must take considerable account of the demands of the Church, thus it's clearly forced to take many religious themes into account. But one feels quite strongly that this is much too easy; we could just as well say that, until this era, thought's lot is somewhat linked to that of a religious feeling.

I'm going back to an analogy with painting because it's true that painting is replete with images of God. My question is: is it sufficient to say that this is an inevitable constraint in this era? There are two possible answers. The first is yes, this is an inevitable constraint of the era which refers to the conditions of art in this era. Or else to say, a bit more positively, that it's because there's a religious feeling from which the painter, and even more painting, do not escape. The philosopher and philosophy don't escape either. Is this sufficient? Could we not devise another hypothesis, namely that painting in this era has so much need of God that the divine, far from being a constraint for the painter, is the site of his maximum emancipation. In other words, with God, he can do anything whatsoever; he can do what he couldn't do with humans, with creatures. As a result, God is directly invested by painting, by a kind of flow of painting, and at this level painting will find a kind of freedom for itself that it would never have found otherwise. At the limit, the most pious painter who does painting and the one who does painting which, in a certain way, is the most impious are not opposed to each other because the way painting invests the divine is a way that is nothing but pictorial, in which the painter finds nothing but the conditions of his radical emancipation.

I provide three examples: El Greco. He could only achieve this creation on the basis of Christian figures. So, it's true that, at a certain level, these were constraints operating on them, and at another level, the artist is the one who -- Bergson said this about the living thing [*vivant*], he said that the living thing is what turns obstacles into means; this would be a good definition of the artist. It's true that there are constraints from the Church which operate on the painter, but there is a transformation of constraints into means of creation. They make use of God in order to achieve a liberation of forms, to push the forms to the point where the forms have



nothing to do with an illustration. The forms are unleashed [*se déchaînent*]. They embark upon a kind of Sabbath, a very pure dance, the lines and colors losing all necessity to be verisimilar [*vraisemblables*], to be exact, to resemble something. It's the great enfranchisement of lines and colors which occurs thanks to this outward show [*apparence*]: the subordination of painting to the demands of Christianity.

Another example, a creation of the world. The Old Testament sets up for them a kind of liberation of movements, a liberation of forms, lines and colors. As a result, in a sense, atheism has never been external to religion. Atheism is the artistic power of action [*puissance*] that labors on religion. With God, everything is permitted.

I have the distinct feeling that for philosophy it's been exactly the same thing, and if philosophers have spoken to us so much of God -- and they could well be Christians or believers -- this hasn't been lacking an intense sense of jest [*rigolade*]. It wasn't an incredulous jesting, but a joy arising from the labor they were involved in.

Just as I said that God and Christ offered an extraordinary opportunity for painting to free lines, colors and movements from the constraints of resemblance, so God and the theme of God offered the irreplaceable opportunity for philosophy to free the object of creation in philosophy, that is, concepts, from the constraints that had been imposed on them...the simple representation of things. The concept is freed at the level of God because it no longer has the task of representing something; at that moment it becomes the sign of a presence. To speak by analogy, it takes on lines, colors, movements that it would never have had without this detour through God. It's true that philosophers are subject to the constraints of theology, but in conditions such that they make this constraint into a means of fantastic creation. Specifically, they will extract from it a liberation of the concept without anyone even questioning it, except in the case where a philosopher goes too fast or too far.

This is perhaps the case with Spinoza. From the start, Spinoza was placed in conditions in which what he said to us no longer had anything to represent. That's why what Spinoza is going to name God, in the first book of the *Ethics*, [which] is going to be the strangest thing in the world. It's going to be the concept insofar as it brings together the set [ensemble] of all these possibilities. Via the philosophical concept of God arises -- and it could only have been made at this level -- arises the strangest creation of philosophy as a system of concepts. What painters and philosophers caused God to undergo represents either painting as passion or philosophy as passion. Painters subjected the body of Christ to a new passion: they condense [*ramassent*] him, they make him contract. Perspective is freed from every constraint to represent whatever it may be, and it's the same thing for philosophers.

I take the example of Leibniz. Leibniz begins the creation of the world anew. He asks how it is that God creates the world. He goes back to the classical problem: what is the role of God's understanding and God's will in the creation of the world. Let's suppose that Leibniz tells us this: God has an understanding, an infinite understanding, of course. It does not resemble ours. The word "understanding" itself would be equivocal. It would not have only a single sense since the infinite understanding is absolutely not the same thing as our own understanding, which is a finite understanding. What happens in the infinite understanding? Before God creates the world, there was indeed an understanding, but there wasn't anything else, there was no world. No, says Leibniz, but there are possibles. There are possibles in God's understanding, and all these possibles tend toward existence. That's why essence, for Leibniz, is a tendency to exist, a possibility which tends toward existence. All these possibles have weight according to their quantity of perfection. God's understanding becomes like a kind of envelope in which all the possibles descend and collide. All of them want to pass into existence. But Leibniz tells us that this is not possible, all cannot pass into existence. Why? Because each one on its own could pass into existence, but not all of them form compatible combinations.



There are incompatibilities from the point of view of existence. A particular possible cannot be compossible with another particular possible.

There we have the second stage. [Leibniz] is in the process of creating a logical relation of a completely new type: there are not only possibilities, there are also problems of compossibility. Is a possible compossible with another such possible? So then, which aggregate of possibles will pass into existence? Only that aggregate that, on its own, has the greatest quantity of perfection will pass into existence. The others will be repressed [refoulés]. It is God's will that chooses the best of possible worlds. It's an extraordinary descent for the creation of the world, and, thanks to this descent, Leibniz creates all sorts of concepts. We cannot even say of these concepts that they are representational since they precede the things to be represented. And Leibniz hurls forth his famous metaphor: God creates the world like a chess game; it involves the choice of the best combination. And the calculation of chess will dominate the Leibnizian vision of the divine understanding. It's an extraordinary creation of concepts that finds in the theme of God the very condition of its freedom and its liberation.

Once again, just as the painter had to make use of God so that lines, colors and movements would no longer be obliged to represent some existing thing, so the philosopher sets up God, in this era, so that concepts would no longer be limited to representing some extant thing. The philosopher employs God in this period so that concepts wouldn't be limited to representing something given and ready-made. It's not a matter of wondering what a concept represents. It's necessary to consider what its place is in an aggregate of other concepts. For most of the great philosophers, the concepts they create are inseparable, and are engaged in veritable sequences. And if you don't understand the sequence to which a concept belongs, you cannot understand the concept. I am using this term "sequence" because I'm making a kind of parallel [*rapprochement*] with painting. If it's true that the constituent unity of cinema is the sequence, I believe that, all things being equal, we could also say it about the concept and about philosophy.

At the level of the problem of Being and the One, it's true that philosophers in their attempt at conceptual creation about the relations of Being and the One are going to re-establish a sequence. In my view, the first great sequences in philosophy, at the level of concepts, are those Plato constructs in the second part of the Parmenides. There are actually two sequences. The second part of the Parmenides is made up of seven hypotheses. These seven hypotheses are divided into two groups: three hypotheses at first, four hypotheses following. These are two sequences. First moment [*temps*]: let us assume that the One is superior to Being, the One is above Being. Second moment: the One is equal to Being. Third moment: the One is inferior to Being, and is derived from Being. You never say that a philosopher contradicts himself; you will ask about a particular page, in what sequence to put it, at what level of the sequence. And it's obvious that the One about which Plato speaks to us is not the same according to whether it's situated at the level of the first, the second or the third hypothesis.

One of Plato's disciples, Plotinus, speaks to us at a certain level of the One as the radical origin of Being. Here, Being emerges from the One. The One makes Being; therefore, it is not, it is superior to Being. This will be the language of pure emanation: the One emanates Being, that is, the One does not emerge from itself in order to produce Being, because if it emerges from itself it would become Two, but Being comes out of the One. This is the very formula of the emanative cause. But when we establish ourselves at the level of Being, this same Plotinus will speak to us in splendid and lyrical terms of the Being that contains all beings, the Being that encompasses all beings. And he issues a whole series of formulae which will have very great importance for the whole philosophy of the Renaissance. He will say Being complicates all beings. It's an admirable formula. Why does Being complicate all beings?



Because each being explicates Being. There will be a [linguistic] doublet here: complicate, explicate. Each thing explicates Being, but Being complicates all things, that is, encompasses them in itself. But these pages of Plotinus are no longer about emanation. You tell yourself that the sequence has evolved: he's in the process of speaking to us of an immanent cause. And indeed, Being behaves like an immanent cause in relation to beings, but at the same time, the One behaves in relation to Being like an emanative cause. And if we descend even further, we will see in Plotinus, who nevertheless is not Christian, something which closely resembles a creative cause.

In a certain way, if you don't take sequences into account, you will no longer know exactly what he's talking to us about, unless there are philosophers who destroy sequences because they want to create something else. A conceptual sequence would be the equivalent of shades [nuances] in painting. A concept changes tone or, at the limit, a concept changes timbre. It would have something like timbres, tonalities. Until Spinoza philosophy proceeded essentially by way of sequences. And on this road the shades concerning causality were very important.

Is original causality or the first cause emanative, immanent, creative or something else entirely, such that immanent cause was present at all times in philosophy, but always as a theme that was never pushed to its own limit [*jusqu'au bout de soi-même*]? Why? Because this was undoubtedly the most dangerous subject [*thème*]. Treating God as an emanative cause might be accepted because there is still the distinction between cause and effect. But, [treating God] as immanent cause, such that we no longer know very well how to distinguish cause and effect, that is, treating God and the creature as the same, that becomes much more difficult. Immanence was especially dangerous, such that the idea of an immanent cause appears constantly in the history of philosophy, but as [something] held in check, kept at a particular level of the sequence, having no value, and faced with being corrected by other moments of the sequence. Thus, the accusation of immanentism was, for entire history of heresies, the fundamental accusation: you are confusing God and the creature. That's the impardonable accusation. Therefore, immanent cause was constantly there, but it didn't manage to gain a foothold [*statut*]. It had only a small place in the sequence of concepts.

Spinoza arrives. He was preceded no doubt by all those who had been more or less audacious concerning immanent cause, that is, this cause that's so bizarre that not only does it remain within itself in order to produce, but what it produces remains within it. God is in the world, the world is in God. In the *Ethics*, I think the *Ethics* is constructed upon an initial great proposition that could be called the speculative or theoretical proposition. Spinoza's speculative proposition is: there is only one single absolutely infinite substance, that is, one possessing all attributes, and what are called creatures are not creatures but modes or manners [manières] of being of this substance, therefore, one single substance having all attributes and whose products are the modes, the ways of being. Hence if these are the manners of being of the substance having all attributes, these modes exist in the attributes of the substance. They are contained [pris] in the attributes.

All the consequences immediately appear. There isn't any hierarchy in the attributes of God, of substance. Why? If substance possesses all attributes equally, there is no hierarchy among the attributes, one is not worth more than another. In other words, if thought is an attribute of God and if extension is an attribute of God or of substance, between thought and extension there won't be any hierarchy. All the attributes will have the same value from the moment that they are attributes of substance. We are still in the abstract. This is the speculative figure of immanence.

I draw several conclusions from this. This is what Spinoza will call God. He calls it God because it's absolutely infinite. What does it represent? It's quite curious. Can one live like that? I draw two consequences from this.



First consequence: he's the one who dares to do what many had wanted to do, namely, to free the immanent cause completely of all subordination to other processes of causality. There is only one cause, and it's immanent, and this influences practice. Spinoza didn't title his book *Ontology*, he's too shrewd for that; he titles it *Ethics* which is a way of saying that, whatever the importance of my speculative propositions may be, you can only judge them at the level of the ethics that they envelope or implicate [*impliquer*]. He completely frees the immanent cause, with which Jews, Christians, heretics up until then had so often played around, but he does it within very precise sequences of concepts. Spinoza extracts it from any sequence and accomplishes a forced takeover [*coup de force*] at the level of concepts. There is no longer any sequence. As a result of his extraction [*extraire*] of immanent causality from the sequence of great causes, of first causes, as a result of his flattening of everything onto an absolutely infinite substance that encompasses all things as its modes, that possesses all attributes, he substituted a veritable plane of immanence for the sequence. This is an extraordinary conceptual revolution: in Spinoza everything happens as if on a fixed plane, an extraordinary fixed plane which is not going to be a plane of immobility at all since all things are going to move on this fixed plane -- and for Spinoza only the movement of things counts. He invents a fixed plane. Spinoza's speculative proposition is this: extracting the concept from the state of variations of sequences and projecting everything onto a fixed plane which is one of immanence. This implies an extraordinary technique.

It's also a certain mode of life, living in a fixed plane. I no longer live according to variable sequences. But then, what would living on a fixed plane be? Spinoza is one who polishes lenses, who abandoned everything, his heritage, his religion, every social success. He does nothing and before he had written anything whatsoever, he is insulted, he is denounced. Spinoza is the atheist, the abominable. He practically can't publish. He writes letters. He didn't want to be a prof. In the *Political Treatise*, he conceived of the teaching profession as a volunteer activity, and further, that it would be necessary to pay in order to teach. Professors would teach at the risk of their fortunes and their reputations. That would be a true public prof. Spinoza was involved with a large study group; he sends them the *Ethics* as he writes it, and they explicate for themselves Spinoza's texts, and they write to Spinoza, who replies. These are very intelligent people. This correspondence is essential. He has his little network. He survived thanks to the protection of the De Witt brothers, since he is denounced from all sides.

It's as if he invented the fixed plane at the level of concepts. In my view it's the most fundamental attempt to give a status to the univocity of being, an absolutely univocal being. Univocal being is precisely what Spinoza defines as being substance having entirely equal attributes, having all things as modes. The modes of substance, this is what is be-ing [*l'étant*]. The absolutely infinite substance is Being as Being [*en tant qu'Être*]. The attributes all equal to one another are the essence of being, and here you have this kind of plane onto which everything falls back and on which everything is inscribed.

Never has a philosopher been treated by his readers the way Spinoza has been, thank God. Spinoza was one of the essential authors for German Romanticism, for example. But even these most educated authors tell us a very curious thing. They say at once that the *Ethics* is the work that presents us with the most systematic totality, the system pushed to the absolute; it's univocal Being, Being that is expressed only in a single sense. It's the extreme point of the system. It's the most absolute totality. And at the same time, when one reads the *Ethics*, one always gets the feeling that one will never reach a comprehension of the whole [*ensemble*]. The whole escapes us. We are not quick enough to keep everything together. There is a very beautiful page where Goethe says that he re-read the same thing ten times and he always fails to comprehend the whole, and every time that I read it, I comprehend another piece [*bout*].



He's a philosopher who has a conceptual apparatus that's among the most systematic in all philosophy. And nevertheless, we always get the impression, we readers, that the whole escapes us and we are reduced to being struck by one piece or another. We are really struck by one part or another. At another level, he's the philosopher who pushes the system of concepts the furthest, therefore one who demands a very extensive philosophical background [culture]. The start of the *Ethics* begins with definitions: of substance, of essence, etc. This all refers to Scholasticism, and at the same time there is no other philosopher who can so easily be read without knowing anything at all. And the two [approaches] must be maintained.

So, go ahead, then, and grasp this mystery. [Victor] Delbos says of Spinoza that he is a great gust of wind that carries us away. That goes well with my story of the fixed plane. Few philosophers have had this quality [mérite] of achieving the status of a great calm breeze. And the miserable, the poor sorts who read Spinoza compare that to the storms [rafales] that sweep us away. How do we reconcile the fact that there was an illiterate reading and an illiterate comprehension of Spinoza with this other fact, that Spinoza is one of the philosophers who, once again, composes the most meticulous conceptual apparatus in the world? There's a success at the level of language.

The *Ethics* is a book that Spinoza considers as finished. He does not publish his book because he knows that if he publishes it, he'll find himself in prison. Everyone falls upon him, he no longer has a protector. Things go very badly for him. He gives up on publication and, in a sense, this doesn't matter since the study group already had the text. Leibniz knew the text.

What is this text made of? It begins with the *Ethics* demonstrated in a geometric manner. It's the use of the geometric method. Many authors had already employed this method, but generally on a sequence in which a philosophical proposition is demonstrated in the manner of a geometrical proposition, a theorem. Spinoza extracts this from the state of a moment in a sequence and he will make it the complete method of exposition of the *Ethics*. As a result, the *Ethics* is divided into five books. It begins with definitions, axioms, propositions or theorems, demonstrations of the theorem, corollary of the theorem, that is, the propositions that result from the theorem, etc. That's the great gust of wind. It forms a kind of continuous layer [nappe]. Geometric exposition is no longer the expression of a moment with a sequence at all; it can be completely extracted since the geometric method is going to be the process which consists in filling in the fixed plane of absolutely infinite substance. Thus, [it's] a great calm breeze. And in all of this, there is a continuous linkage [enchaînement] of concepts, each theorem referring to other theorems, each demonstration referring to other demonstrations.¹

¹ Note: For archival purposes, the French transcript originates in documents available at Web Deleuze and translated there by Timothy Murphy, both documents updated in January 2020 for posting on this site.