

Gilles Deleuze, "Spinoza's God", RTF radio, 10 December 1960

Translation : Charles J. Stivale

I wonder, in fact, whether there are not certain specific theses in Spinoza that partake of an atheist tradition. Here's what the first of these would be: Spinoza's anti-moralism. This stems from Spinoza's God acting neither as a judge, nor as a prince or a sovereign. This amounts to saying that divine laws are never moral laws. The very notion of a divine moral law strikes Spinoza as the height of absurdity. Spinoza's God is, therefore, a God beyond good and evil. In Spinoza, the very notion of ethics never coincides with morality. Ethics appeals to concepts such as the good (*le bon*) and the bad, but never to concepts such as good (*le bien*) and evil.

Let's consider an example. Seventeenth-century philosophers invoke an old axiom—namely, that reality equals perfection. However, whereas most seventeenth-century philosophers interpret this axiom as meaning as everything that exists is good (*bien*) or is determined by the good (*le bien*), Spinoza interprets it in a completely different way. He interprets it in the following sense: as if good (*le bien*) and evil were merely overly human and inadequate modes of thinking, the good (*le bien*) just as much as evil.

The second of Spinoza's theses that may be seen as part of an atheist tradition lies in what might be termed his materialism. In his philosophy, Spinoza poses a very important question: What is a body capable of? He seeks to define the body not by a genus, but by a species (*espèce*). He tells us: You chat about consciousness; you chat about the mind; you chat about all these things, yet you understand nothing so long as you don't even know what a body is capable of. According to Spinoza, the mind possesses power of its own only insofar as the body possesses power of its own. Thus, the power of perception inherent to the mind runs parallel to the body's power to be affected. The mind itself is active only to the extent that the body is likewise active; indeed, even the third kind of knowledge is defined by the idea of the essence of a body. In this sense, does the word "religion" retain any familiar or classical meaning when all power or all transcendence of the mind relative to the body is thus denied?

Finally, the third thesis of Spinoza that perhaps might align with an atheist tradition is this: Spinoza's positivism. For Spinoza, only that which affirms or that which is affirmed possesses value. He rejects any value in the negative whatsoever. Everything negative is at the same time mystifying. Spinoza's philosophy contains a critical dimension that is extremely important and exceptionally rigorous. This is why, in *Ethics*, he attacks sadness fundamentally and with great vehemence as well as everything that serves as a cause of sadness. He denounces and never ceases to denounce that which serves the ends of sadness, as well as those who rely on sadness to consolidate their power. Thus, in a certain sense, the entirety of Spinoza's philosophy

denounces the mystification inherent, in his view, to the feeling of sin (*faute*), remorse, feelings of guilt, and so forth.

The question, then, becomes this: is there any religion, still taken in the familiar sense of the word, that can dispense with a certain engagement with the negative, or with an affirmation of the negative? Insofar as Spinoza rejects that the negative might possess any philosophical value, any reflective value, or any vital value (4:00), he may be characterized as an anti-religious figure. I see but a single parallel in this struggle against the negative, in this demystification of the negative itself: that of Lucretius. Nevertheless, despite these three points indicating Spinoza's alignment with a certain atheist tradition, Spinoza himself assigns very precise meanings—not merely a single meaning, but several—to the word "religion," and preserves for religion as he understands it a certain value. (4:35)