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ABSTRACT: Common assertions suppose an incompatibility between critical-dialectical philosophies and Spinozist political ontologies, and allow for an Adornian critique of Spinoza's *Ethics*: to live in accordance with one's own being is a form of compliance to dominant values. By mapping contemporary Spinozism I show that within its tensions there is a place for dialectics, one which can be read in dialogue with the Adornian gesture denouncing the purported identity between particular and universal.

KEYWORDS: materialism; moral philosophy; ethics; logic; politics, practical; Adorno, Theodor W.; Spinoza, Baruch

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MORAL PHILOSOPHY OR ETHICS?

In his 1963 lectures, Theodor Adorno said that it was important not to abandon reflection on the ‘good life’ in terms of a *moral philosophy* and to resist the temptation of replacing its concepts with those of an *ethics*.¹ In broad strokes, his argument was the following: It is clear that the notion of morality rests on an essential conformism because it presupposes an ideal convergence between individual behaviour and public customs, so that *the good life* amounts to an obedience to community norms and acceptance of its actual forms. What is more, this conformism (a respect for a petrified facade of opinion and society) is redoubled by the affinity between morals and Puritan values: the Puritan subject’s rigidity and narrow conventionalism is perfectly suited to a reactive defence against any questioning of the status quo. That is why a preference instead for the notion of *ethics* — as a call to live according to one’s own nature — would thus seem admissible. If the definition of the ethical *good life* refers to the capacity to deploy, according to

1 Theodor W. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

one's own time and dispositions, each *ethos* or mode of singular being, then it seems to offer a sort of antidote against an externally imposed morality.

However, this call for an *ethics* of the 'good life,' while understandable, is just 'pure illusion and ideology.'² Beyond the emptiness of the assertion that one must live in harmony with one's own being lies the fact that the contents of one's self-identity, which are thought to be genuinely spontaneous, are in fact provided by the dominant culture. Congruence with one's own constitution or nature is nothing more than a form of compliance with certain cultural values. A naturalist ethics would thus be a kind of 'bad conscience of morality,' a 'morality that is ashamed of its own moralizing' that still behaves as morality but no longer wishes to be a 'moralizing morality.'³

For these reasons, Adorno prefers to retain the concept of 'morality,' which, despite its anachronism and evident limitations, has the advantage of avoiding further adulterations of the true problem: the contradiction between the particular and the general, between freedom and law, or better still, between empirical existence and the good life, which is an unrealizable aim in the context of an oppressive norm.

If we were to accept certain prejudices supposing the incompatibility between critical-dialectical philosophies and Spinozism,⁴ then it would follow that Spinoza's *Ethics* can also be subject to the Adornian critique of ethics. Indeed, there is a contemporaneous sort of neo-Spinozism which is perfectly in line with a neoliberal *ethos* that is associated with a pervasive rhetoric revolving around desire and affect. Along with the political and communicative strategies of global right-wing parties and tendencies, these neo-Spinozist perspectives imagine individuals as subjects of an affective self-consciousness that knows how to recognize what it loves and hates, a self-consciousness that defends the freedom to determine what it shall consume. But the items that one 'spontaneously' prefers or chooses (which can be such different things as commercial goods, political ideas, current information, or beliefs) tend to coincide, in point of fact, with a preference that

2 Ibid., p. 10.

3 Ibid.

4 Prejudices associated, in particular, to the tradition of readings of Spinozism that comes from Gilles Deleuze and passes through Antonio Negri.

has already been defined in another scene as the most suitable for that given profile. As an ideological mode, contemporary capitalism both reflects and reinforces the demand for accumulation, on the one hand, and the affective dispositions of the subjects, on the other, in a kind of virtuous convergence of differences that intends to uphold the expansion of global financial power.

This convergence is a fitting illustration of precisely what Adorno was concerned with in his critique of ethics. This is why I think it is imperative to assert — against those prejudices that rigidly separate dialectics and immanence — that Spinoza's *Ethics* can and should be approached with the Adornian gesture that denounces the purported identity between particular and universal, and replaces it with *contradiction*, a contradiction that can still be found in moral philosophy today despite its conservative tendencies.

SPINOZA'S MATERIALISM

The approach of combining Adorno and Spinoza that I attempt here is based on a materialist reading of Spinoza, whose articulating axes are worth explaining. The term 'materialism' is a problematic one. It does not help us to form a clearly shaped perspective because it was used to designate very different theories which are, in many cases, mutually incompatible. It is a noun traversed by the echoes of various controversies (between realism and idealism, empiricism and innatism, objectivism and subjectivism) that have been present as tensions within philosophy from the beginning; to put it more precisely, they have been present as tensions ever since Hegelian philosophy retroactively (and controversially) organized the history of philosophy into the confrontation of opposing positions. In any case, I want to cautiously assume this heritage, albeit in the way in which a certain Spinozian Marxism has re-signified it.

To consider how a modern sense of 'materialism' reached Spinoza, it is worth recalling that Robert Boyle (whose experiments on nitro were discussed in Spinoza's *Correspondence*) was the first to introduce the term, in 1674, in his work *The Excellency and Grounds of the Corpuscular or Mechanical Philosophy*. Between theorists and chemists that embraced the postulates of corpuscular-mechanical philosophy,

‘materialists’ were those that reduced phenomena to a few material components. This sense of the noun was consolidated when Cartesian dualism rewrote the old controversies about matter and form as an assertion of the existence of two substances: extended reality and thinking reality. Since that transformation, three major traditions, separated by their ontological emphasis, can be identified within modern philosophy: one that assigns a privileged reality to the ideal or psychic (spiritualism), to the material or physical (materialism), or to the balanced character of a reality that encompasses both ontological dimensions (monism).

In addition, in terms of Spinozist philosophy it is also relevant to consider the ‘ancient materialism’ represented by the atomism of Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius — a philosophical current that also interested Marx, who wrote his doctoral thesis on ‘The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature.’ Spinoza vindicated the ancient materialists in an explicitly controversial way when he wrote against the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition:

To me the authority of Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates is not worth much. I would have been amazed if you had mentioned Epicurus, Democritus, Lucretius, or any of the Atomists, or defenders of invisible particles. But it’s no wonder that the people who invented occult qualities, intentional species, substantial forms, and a thousand other trifles contrived ghosts and spirits, and believed old wives’ tales, to lessen the authority of Democritus, whose good reputation they so envied that they had all his books burned, which he had published with such great praise.⁵

Furthermore, in relation to contemporary discourse, let us consider the statement about Spinoza’s materialism made by Pierre-François Moreau:

We can talk about a materialism in Spinoza on the condition that we do not thereby understand a determination of the mind by the body. To those who object that Spinoza [...] maintains the balance between mind and body, [and therefore is] as spiritualist or idealist as he is materialist, we must answer

5 *Ep. LVI* [to Hugo Boxel]; CWS [*The Collected Works of Spinoza*, see [abbreviations](#)], II, p. 423.

that, precisely, tradition does not maintain that balance, and the simple fact of giving the body as much importance as the mind already constitutes an enormous effort of materialist rebalancing.⁶

Let us retain what Moreau calls here a *rebalancing effort*, that is to say, a kind of compensatory endeavour that uses the same conceptual elements of a philosophical tradition but adjusts the importance given to them. When that rebalancing — as in the case of Spinoza — works by rescuing the body from its traditional subordination to the mind, such an effort can legitimately be considered materialist. However, the image of a balance that must be restored, of a compensation or counterweight that works by levelling out an imbalance, does not fit Spinozist materialism as I understand it. Such a metaphor supposes that the elements whose relative weights must be equalized are already constituted and that it is only necessary to modify the weights in the balance to stabilize it.

This model is overly simplistic where a ‘materialist rebalancing’ is concerned. The Spinozian valuation of the body, rather than compensating with an undervaluation (giving the body as much importance as the mind), constitutes a theoretical innovation that transforms the idea of the body, insofar as thought is capable of doing justice to the irreducible reality it faces. This means that the body can be apprehended in its own corporeal being when it is understood through the absolute quality or attribute that explains it — without referring it to a mind. The effort to understand a particular thing is made on the basis of the recognition of its irreducibility (without homologating it to other things or realities).

With this in mind, the terms of Moreau’s statement can be reformulated as follows: Spinoza’s enormous effort of materialist rebalancing consists of an anti-hierarchical ontological equalization of essentially unequal realities, an ‘adjustment’ made through the recognition of an essential imbalance: in this way, he has achieved a theoretical justice for heterogeneous realities. So this Spinozian effort is materialist, not because the body is its object (it is clear that we can elaborate a materialist understanding of the ideas, as it is common

6 Pierre-François Moreau, *Problèmes du spinozisme* (Paris: Vrin, 2006), p. 65; my translation.

to find idealist theories of the body), but because it builds the just perspective that takes each reality into account, considering its irreducibility. Therefore, *materialism* is an ontological way of conceiving the power of thought to understand the singular quality of a reality.

TOWARDS A CARTOGRAPHY OF CONTEMPORARY SPINOZISM

With this notion of *materialism* in mind, we can now redirect the discussion back to our initial aim of relocating the question of *ethics* within materialism and in dialogue with critical theory. I will develop a sort of cartography of contemporary Spinozism, taking as a starting point a citation from Pierre Macherey, who said that ‘Spinoza obsesses and haunts us as if his work were a theoretical unconscious that conditions and guides a large part of our intellectual choices and effective commitments; and that helps us to reformulate most of the problems that concern us.’⁷ Using Macherey’s idea, I will assert that a set of contemporary readings of Spinoza can be grouped under the heading ‘Spinozism’, understood as the response to something condensed in the name ‘Spinoza’ that both obsesses, haunts, and conditions us: something that orients intellectual alternatives and practical commitments, and that lends a particular contour to certain inquiries, both ethical-political and theoretical.

While determining the Spinozist camp in this way it is possible to distinguish different interpretations. We can reproduce those interpretations and distribute them along an axis, the purpose of which would be to measure how the haunting of Spinoza is acknowledged by his readers, or what kind of relationship is established between a given thought and a Spinozist idea. Firstly, I would like to imagine the pure form wherein a thought considered to be a ‘theoretical unconscious’ would manifest itself: as an explicit absence, or a merely implicit presence. There thus exists a mode of ‘thinking *in* Spinoza’, where ‘Spinoza’, rather than being the object addressed by thought for further examination, instead constitutes a sort of *speculative element*, a terrain or medium in which thinking takes place. This mode of interpretation appears, for example, in Freud’s declared affinity for Spinoza,

7 Pierre Macherey, *Avec Spinoza. Études sur la doctrine et l’histoire du spinozisme* (Paris: PUF, 1992), p. 7; my translation.

when he writes in a letter: 'I readily admit my dependence on Spinoza's doctrine. There was no reason why I should expressly mention his name, since I conceived my hypotheses from the atmosphere created by him, rather than from the study of his work. Moreover, I did not seek a philosophical legitimation'.⁸ Secondly, there are researchers in the history of philosophy who have produced an enormous amount of texts in a field identified as *Spinoza Studies*. In these cases, Spinoza is the explicit object of the inquiry, and the haunting force of his name manifests itself in the rigorous and in-depth efforts of researchers to reconstruct the conceptual framework of his system.

Between these two extremes of interpretation (Spinoza as an explicit object of study, and Spinoza as a speculative element, absent from the actual research) a reading such as Althusser's explicitly asserts the Spinozian perspective as the supporting framework for his own theoretical interventions — yet he does so without elaborating the specific connections that were useful for him. Althusser effectively displays a mode of 'being Spinozist' that consists in taking from Spinoza certain hypothesis that he never proclaimed but did authorize;⁹ in fact, these Spinozist coordinates can be seen all throughout Althusser's texts, where they act as a type of channel for his own discourse that then flows — while contained by that immanent structure — onto other vital and urgent matters.

Another famous interpretation of Spinoza, in this case by Deleuze, also responds to the interpellation produced by the name 'Spinoza'. Deleuze became the explicit interlocutor of a philosophical conversation that creates a common discursive groundwork. I would say that the terms of Deleuze's philosophy emerge through a composition with other voices (among which Spinoza's and Nietzsche's voices figure prominently), while they also display an analysis whose plasti-

8 Sigmund Freud to Lothar Bickel, 28 June 1931, quoted from Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Adventures of Immanence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 139; English translation in H. Z. Winnik, 'A Long-Lost and Recently Recovered Letter of Freud', *Israel Annals of Psychiatry*, 13 (1975), pp. 1–5.

9 'We were guilty of an equally powerful and compromising passion: *we were Spinozists*. In our own way, of course, which was not Brunschvicg's! And by attributing to the author of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and the *Ethics* a number of theses which he would surely never have acknowledged, though they did not actually contradict him'. Louis Althusser, 'On Spinoza', in *Essays in Self-Criticism*, trans. by Grahame Lock (London: New Left Books, 1976), pp. 132–41 (p. 132).

city seeks to distil the conceptual content of things themselves. And different results arise from the reciprocal contamination of these specific interlocutions: a Deleuzian Spinoza, a Deleuzian Nietzsche, a Spinozian/Nietzschean Deleuze; but also a Nietzschean Spinoza and a Spinozian Nietzsche.

From a different angle, we can observe that while Deleuze's reading is more philosophical than political, a reading such as Antonio Negri's, which draws directly on Deleuze, is more political than philosophical. Negri's interpretation has inspired a whole series of contemporary uses of Spinoza that renew his concepts as a kind of stimulant for political action in the present. Responding to the urgent nature of such multivalent interventions, the name 'Spinoza' is wielded as a kind of ontological guarantee for the emancipation of humanity.

The underlying benefit of understanding these different ways of relating to Spinoza is that they represent different ways of actualizing *immanence*, and this is true whether his philosophy appears as a speculative atmosphere favouring the production of ideas, or as an underlying structure explaining a series of argumentative moves, or as the theoretical-political inspiration for an imagination that trusts in concrete horizons of collective happiness.

To return to the polarity that organizes this argument, I would say that the works in the history of philosophy that address Spinoza as their explicit object of study principally focus upon the immanence of history in his philosophical texts. Spinoza's thought is reconstructed as a situated thought that participates in the life of his time and all the debates that traverse it; and this reading, which extends from the present back to seventeenth-century thought, argues for a universal dimension of certain human dilemmas. Of course, the readings I have located at the opposite side of the spectrum do not suppress history, but they relate *immanence* to the power of the human intellect to produce effects. When Freud admits his dependence on Spinoza's philosophy, he means that *immanence* is connected to the power of the singular and a certain dimension of universal experience. But now immanence refers to an ethics whereby 'knowledge is the most powerful affect'.¹⁰

10 'I am really amazed, really delighted! I have a precursor, and *what* a precursor! I hardly knew Spinoza: what brought me to him now was the guidance of instinct. Not only is his whole tendency like my own — to make knowledge the most *powerful passion*

Thus, methodological precautions around historical distance are not of any great concern for this type of Spinozism, wherein everything that may emerge from the reader's sensibility and acuity is suitable for *discovering* or *inventing* other realities and concepts.

The range of readings that I have briefly sketched out are distributed according to the nuances resulting from the tension between the presence or absence of Spinoza. This same series of contemporary readings (whose shared affinity, as I have said, can be considered from Macherey's idea of Spinoza as a theoretical unconscious) can be further interrogated by analysing their position in relation to Marxist philosophical and political debates from the 1960s onward. This is especially important because these 'Spinozisms' were essential for this period's response to the hegemony of Hegelian philosophy in critical theory (that is to say, in the theory that was affected, under various modes, by the *theoretical revolution* of Marx). Within this new virtual axis, which intercepts the aforementioned one, the relevant polarity distinguishes two positions vis-à-vis Hegelian dialectics: an open rejection (Deleuze) and a critical revision (Althusser).

It was Deleuze who most decisively responded to the challenge of breaking with dialectical negativity, and instead asserted the central concept of his project as *difference*. According to Deleuze, the concept of contradiction began to reveal its conservative core when compared to the potentialities that came with a politics of difference: he argued that contradiction revealed itself as a constellation of sad passions associated with the interiorization of subjection, a culture dominated by the specular dynamic of resentment, and a logic that ultimately served as an accomplice to the state's quest to capitalize on social conflicts for the accumulation of power. By contrast, Althusser was more cautious in his questioning of dialectics and, in his self-critical writings, ultimately recognized that 'a Marxist cannot make the detour

— but also in five main points of his doctrine I find myself; this most abnormal and lonely thinker is closest to me in these points precisely: he denies free will, purposes, the moral world order, the nonegoistical, evil; of course the differences are enormous, but they are differences more of period, culture, field of knowledge. *In summa*: my solitariness which, as on very high mountains, has often, often made me gasp for breath and lose blood, is now at least a solitude for two. Strange! Friedrich Nietzsche, 'To Franz Overbeck [Postmarked Sils Engd., July 30, 1881]', in Christopher Middleton, *Selected Letters of Friedrich Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 176–77 (p. 177).

via Spinoza without paying for it. For the adventure is perilous, and whatever you do, you cannot find in Spinoza what Hegel gave to Marx: *contradiction*.¹¹ Given Althusser's commitment to the renovation of Marxist thought, he performed an incisive critique of the contemporary versions of Marxism — especially those whose response to the determinist suffocation of the 'laws of history' was a subjectivist voluntarism that placed its faith in the end of oppression — while still never claiming outright that dialectical thought should be abandoned. The complexity of immanent causality was arraigned in order to counteract the simplifying and homogenizing nature of Hegelian dialectics, wherein the object of critique became the *specific structures* of idealist dialectics (that is, the simple negation, the negation of the negation, the identity of contraries, the transformation of quantity into quality, and the logic of the dialectical overcoming). Althusser pursued all this without eliminating the notion of contradiction from the conceptual horizon, which remained necessary for thinking of politics in its constitutively conflictual dimension.

Having offered this sort of cartography of contemporary Spinozist materialism, I must confess my own affinities: in the axis that displays the presence or absence of a direct reference to Spinoza in discourses attempting to address the present conjuncture, my sympathies lie with the Freudian strategy. I think the potency of the Spinozian perspective is at its most uniquely productive when one assumes it as one's own —without accepting the interdictions that come with speaking a 'Spinozist langue'. Along the other axis distributing positions facing dialectics, my sympathies are with the Althusserian strategy: the acceptance that one must be anti-dialectical in order to think on Spinoza's terms not only impoverishes the conceptual universe, but also leads to serious political limitations if it means to renounce incisive moments of twentieth-century emancipatory thought (especially works such as Adorno's, which sought to combat fascism in its several manifestations that included those of Western democracies).

Furthermore, a certain negative dialectics becomes necessary when, as I have suggested, there exists (as there does today) a type of neo-Spinozism that is functional to the neoliberal *ethos*. The management of affects by the global right-wing movements and governments

11 Althusser, 'On Spinoza', p. 141.

is evinced in two complementary ways. On the one hand, stoking and channelling social hatred, which in turn becomes the affective infrastructure required to demonize social policies and their beneficiaries and to spread an anti-political attitude among the masses (in Latin America, the right-wing forces have sought, in this way, to delegitimize the politics pursued by progressive governments — who are disqualified as *populists* — over the last decade). On the other hand, cultivating false emotions and banal happiness as the support for *positive thinking* that disposes people to deny pain (their own and that of others) and inhibit their sensitivity to the point that they become numb and are unable to recognize any kind of distress. This form of positive thinking reinforces adaptation to ever more hostile conditions of life and neutralizes any critical reflexivity that would allow for a questioning of the purported inevitability of the neoliberal course of the world. The resulting disposition is one in which people *trust* and *wait* for businessmen and post-fascist leaders to join up with the individual efforts of those who deserve the *good life* (that is, the part of the population that ‘puts in the effort’ and struggles to survive ‘without outside assistance’). Against both tendencies, it would be useful to exercise a certain Adornian dialectical negativity.

Now I will attempt to assimilate the Adorno/Spinoza intersection into this schema that presses for the importance of certain theoretical alliances in the name of a materialist critique of the contemporary world.

SPINOZA AND ADORNO, ALLIES IN CRITICISM

Adorno and Spinoza can be regarded as materialist critics of moral philosophy because both of them depart from the Platonic tradition in a similar way. The model of the *subject* that emerges from Platonic philosophy — as the theoretical response to a practical need to justify the existing social order — is replicated across Western philosophical moralism right up until the present day. When that moralism seeks to justify the social order by relying on the *identity* between particular and general, Adorno responds by emphasizing the falsehood of that identification and re-establishing the legibility of the *contradiction* hidden by the idealist operation.

Spinoza's political anti-moralism, which he asserts as anti-Platonic,¹² goes with his Machiavellianism. His assertion that 'no men are less suitable to guide Public Affairs than Theorists, or Philosophers'¹³ is in direct conflict with the Platonic model of the Philosopher King. But against the temptation of a vulgarly pragmatic interpretation of this defence of politics against philosophical idealism, Spinozian ethics is far from any immediate facticity (that is to say, far from the affirmation of the things and men in their existing state) and instead produces something that is explicitly labelled as a 'model': one must 'form an idea of man, a model of human nature which we may look to'. This is then a theoretical-practical necessity that is upheld by straining the system's own postulates: although nature does not work in favour of ends or models, and despite the fact that nothing in it can be regarded as either perfect or imperfect, 'we shall say that men are more perfect or imperfect, insofar as they approach more or less near to this model!'.¹⁴

So, while Spinoza's ethics is anti-moralist on the practical terrain, and anti-Platonic on the philosophical terrain, it nevertheless calls for the need to use *ideal models* (analogous to what moral philosophy conceives of as the 'ought' that guides all behaviour). The counterpoint between reality and model, between the actual functioning of things and the invocation of another, sought-after mode of being, is deployed in order to think of *human types* and *forms of life* capable of condensing the critical energies of the present. And that operation allows for non-conventional modes of conceiving of the meaning of *realism* within philosophical-political discussion.

Therefore, the opposition between reality and model in Spinozian ethics can be schematized in the following manner: if the *image of man* evoking an inexistent human nature corresponds to norms of an existing social order, the *idea of man*, arising from what an actually existing human nature *can do*, would correspond to a non-existent social order, since it would emerge from the transformation of the present.

12 See *Ep. LV1* [to Hugo Boxel]; CWS II, p. 423.

13 *TP I*, 1; CWS II, p. 504.

14 *Ethics IV*, Praef.; CWS I, p. 545.

I would argue that this counterpoint coincides precisely with the ‘contradiction’ that Adorno says we must not abandon: the short-circuit at the heart of reality itself. But if we think this alongside Spinoza, we are able to see that this ‘contradiction’ does not assume the form of a logical contradiction. Instead, it has the complex structure of a chiasmus, which contrasts a false reality with a true model. Against the *false reality* — where the idealized, non-existent individual (whose free self-determination is based on his desire, will, and understanding) responds to the imperatives of an existing order (which requires the aforementioned falsity for its own reproduction) — a *true model* is invoked, one which connects the power of the collectively existing individual with the possibility of a just, non-existent order.

However, it must be said that this model is not an utopian one: efforts of thought aimed at this transformation are not guided by an image of a future society to be obtained (‘a Fantasy, possible only in Utopia’¹⁵) but rather by the attempt to think the actual given conditions and developments unfolding from a situation in the sense of its subversion.

The idea of a ‘model’, which serves the role of imagining a reality more perfect than the present reality, constitutes a peculiar type of realism which is far from all pragmatic reproductive possibilism. Thinking rigorously from the conditions of a present conjuncture does not mean, however, that the political response to this concrete situation is conceived of as the *political expression* of those conditions, that is, as a political ratification of facts. Quite the contrary: this political response is motivated by the desire to transform those conditions, a desire which is recognized in an imperative: *suffering must cease*. Such an imperative is clearly not derived from the norms that organize this given order, but rather from the sensibility associated with another ethics or morality.

To conclude, what I am suggesting here is that this anti-Platonic, Spinozian/Machiavellian realism is compatible with the Adornian critique of facticity and administrative utopianism that tries to spiritualize it; and it is compatible with the fragile promise of emancipation that emerges from the determinate negation of this actuality.

15 TP I, 1; CWS II, p. 503.

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