Interview with Pierre Macherey: Spinoza Today

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Let's begin with a rather personal question. Can you tell us some details about the history of your engagement with Spinoza? Does it date back to the seminars with Louis Althusser at the École Normale Supérieure (ENS), or does it precede it? What was it in Spinoza that affected you?

Pierre Macherey: In October 1960, at the beginning of my third year of study at the École Normale Supérieure, which I had entered in 1958, I went to see Canguilhem, whose classes I had been following diligently for several years (it is from these classes that I owe a large part of my philosophical training), to ask him to direct my master's degree, with the proposed subject subject "Philosophy and Politics in Spinoza." I had previously spoken to Althusser, who was officially monitoring the work of the ENS students enrolled in philosophy as an *agrégé répétiteur* (or 'caïman' in the jargon used in the establishment): it was he who advised me to direct my work towards the 'political' aspect of Spinoza's work. This topic had not been dealt with by the French commentators of Spinoza, and presented an opportunity for me to explore an almost untouched field, which was particularly exciting for a novice student.

My interest in Spinoza was established, and dated back to my years of study at the lycée, then at the university, where I attended, in 1958, the courses of an extremely energetic, passionate, and convincing person who was a lecturer with Vladimir Jankélévitch, Dina Dreyfus (she was Lévi-Strauss's first wife, the one who had accompanied him on the expeditions recounted in his book *Tristes Tropiques*). As part of the preparation for the certificate of "Moral and Political Philosophy" for the Bachelor of Philosophy, she gave me the first introduction to the demonstrative network of the geometrical structure followed in the *Ethics*; for her, Spinoza was not a more or less well-crafted package of general ideas to be glanced over (that was mainly how it was taught at the time, in a brief and cursory way), but a demanding and rigorous thought experiment, a difficult and complex journey, which needed to be followed word by word, as one later learned to do systematically by following the lessons of Gueroult (whose major works on Spinoza were published in 1968, and they completely changed the way Spinoza was read in France, by paying close attention to the detail of the texts and to the issues of reasoning behind them). Thanks to her, I understood that Spinoza's philosophy is not a doctrine alongside others but rather represents a different way of doing philosophy.

This idea was confirmed by Althusser, who was also convinced of the singular character of the tight dynamic of reflection set in motion by Spinoza, who, in his eyes represented a real turning point in the history of philosophy. During my first years of university studies, I had also been struck by the teachings of Deleuze (then a lecturer in the history of philosophy at the Faculté des Lettres under F. Alquié). These

courses influenced me in a way that I could not have imagined. But at the time he was not teaching on Spinoza (I had unforgettable classes on Nietzsche and Kant), and it was only later, when he published his thesis on Spinoza and the problem of expression, that I learned that he was devoting special attention to him. Spinoza's standout philosophical contribution was, moreover, at the center of the discussions he had with Althusser in 1965, some of which I later witnessed. At first, my proposal for a master's degree was not well-received: Canguilhem, who was known for his difficult character, got angry and told me: "You're making fun of me, I don't know anything [about Spinoza]!" (his official specialization was in the history of science and epistemology). But he finally agreed. I understood afterwards that what convinced him of the merits of my approach and his decision to support it was precisely my insistence on the political aspect of Spinoza's thought, which had been neglected until then. Canguilhem did not expressly adhere to any system of thought. He was neither Platonist, nor Aristotelian, nor Cartesian, nor Kantian, nor anything of that kind, but was interested in all of them freely on the condition that they were "true philosophy."

Behind the name of Spinoza one finds that of Cavaillès. The latter had been at the origin of Canguilhem's commitment during the war against the Vichy regime and the German occupation, and was for him a model of thought and action, as he explained in the commemorative writings he had devoted to him. Yet Cavaillès expressly declared himself to be a 'Spinozist,' including his philosophy of mathematics, which was partly phenomenological. Consequently, it was the phrase "philosophy-and-politics" (whose formulation I owed to Althusser) that caught Canguilhem's attention: he no doubt saw in it a kind of projection or extension of Cavaillès' militant approach, a reference that for him was not formally academic but was at the heart of his own philosophical attitude.

The year during which I prepared this work (which consisted of a hundred-page dissertation) was very studious and was an opportunity for me to cross a threshold in my philosophical training. It was also politically restless; it was the time of the OAS, of the final upheavals of the Algerian War, which were particularly violent during the first years of the Gaullist regime. I was very active, and it was difficult to reconcile research work with this engagement, but I managed to do so as best I could, and, at the same time, I found myself right in the middle of 'philosophy and politics,' in the very heart of the matter, which Canguilhem, on the contrary, had understood and had not disapproved of. It was also in that year that I met Étienne Balibar, with whom I later worked with He had just entered the ENS and immediately shared my keen interest in Canguilhem's teaching, which he also began to follow closely (two years later, he prepared a master's thesis on "The idea of work in Marx," also supervised by Canguilhem). Canguilhem followed my work quite closely, which at the time was unusual for a 'mandarin' at the Sorbonne: generally, his

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colleagues looked down on their students' work from a great distance and were careless and condescending. By contrast, he advised me with increasing benevolence, and was happy with the result I had achieved, which encouraged me very much and was decisive for the continuation of my studies.

I don't remember Althusser particularly helping me in the realisation of this work, for which he had only given me the initial idea: that year he was often absent for health reasons, a chronic problem with him which only got worse later on. I did not enter into a close working relationship with him until two years later, after I had successfully passed the *agrégation* in philosophy (Canguilhem was on the jury): this result, which was far from being a given as it was a particularly selective examination, allowed me to get an additional year of study at the ENS, a year completely free of any obligation and thus devoted to free research. When Althusser was present , he took the enrolled students in philosophy very seriously, he 'prepared' them, he advised them, he gave a few lectures, he corrected essays in his own very original and stimulating way, but that was as far as it went, and I don't remember having any real in-depth discussion with him before the start of the 1962 school year, i.e., at the beginning of my fifth and last year as a student at the ENS, which I left in 1963 to do my military service at the Prytanée de La Flèche (in the very place where Descartes had been a student of the Jesuits!). Étienne Balibar and I had spent part of the summer preparing a translation of Engels' "Outline of a Critique of Political Economy," which was then unpublished in French. At the beginning of the school year, we went to his office to show him the results of our work, and from then on, everything accelerated. We suggested that he organise a cycle of studies on Marx, something that had never been done in France in a university context. He was struck by the fact that a request of this kind was made by students in training, because it coincided with a desire he had had for a long time, but which had never materialised. This led to a series of seminars, one of which in particular was devoted to the young Marx, which launched the collective work which culminated in the two volumes of *Reading Capital*, which was followed in the ensuing years by a "Philosophy Course for Scientists," held at the ENS, which had a very large audience in 1967. At that time, I had thought to prepare a thesis on Marx (I don't remember exactly what subject I had proposed specifically, but it concerned the method of reasoning at work in *Capital*, and therefore dialectics). It would have been directed by J. Hyppolite, the director of the School, who was himself very close to Canguilhem and with whom Althusser had a very close relationship: but this project, which had been accepted in principle, was not followed up. At the time, Althusser advised people who were close to him not to enter the institutional university game, and therefore not to prepare a thesis: he himself did not defend one until about ten years later at the University of Amiens, in accordance with a procedure

known as "*sur travaux*", i.e., without a main subject, a procedure which had just been introduced in France.

I had thus temporarily put Spinoza aside, but he remained in the background of my preoccupations and above all of those of Althusser, who thought that the elements of Marx's philosophy, a philosophy that Marx himself had not elaborated and which remained to be done, were to be sought in Spinoza, provided, of course, that the concepts were reworked and the content nourished with the knowledge later acquired in new fields, essentially in the history of science, psychoanalysis, anthropology, political economy (rethought from a critical perspective), and, first and foremost, with the political experience linked to workers' struggles. Ten years later, I returned to working on Spinoza whereby I prepared, on the basis of lectures I had given at the university where I was then an assistant, my book "Hegel or Spinoza" which, in 1979, was one of the last titles published by Althusser in his *Théorie* collection published by Maspero. At that time, the practices of collective work that Althusser had initiated, and which were one of his main contributions for those who had continued to follow him, were no longer in use: the political and intellectual context had completely changed, with the arrival of the "new philosophers," "les nouveaux philosophes," as well as a renewed interest in the philosophy of human rights from a humanist and legalist perspective. In this context, to be considered 'Althusserian' was not a compliment but rather a stigma.

You ask me if my early orientation towards Spinoza led me to Althusser. This was undoubtedly one of the essential reasons for our agreement, especially when we realised that it was possible to attach it to broader issues, less narrowly doctrinal and academic. Althusser used to say: we must try to do philosophy differently, and he felt that the passage through Spinoza made this possible. I say: "passage through Spinoza," because the goal was never to settle on some closed, or self-sufficient theoretical system, it was, and I take this image from Deleuze, to use Spinoza as an optical instrument through which we could see things in greater detail, a move which had not yet captured the attention of professional philosophers.

The debate between Spinoza and Hegel is quite overdetermined and charged, especially when it comes to questions of politics and the state. Maybe one way of addressing it is to state that for Spinozists, the division between philosophy and politics can be set out from within philosophy itself, in terms of accepting and identifying the autonomy of politics. Hegelians on the other hand would argue that the very concept of reason forces philosophy to admit that it cannot make normative demands on politics, but that problems are historically posed and solved—to

give this Hegel a Marxist twist—by politics itself. This means that politics operates by constantly struggling with the maintenance, as it were, and reconstitution of its own autonomy, without having another instance in view which could do the work for it. It seems to us that the question between these two different emphases does not so much lead to an antagonism in the interpretation of Marx, as it seems to be a matter of relocating the question: from where does one stage and posit or declare the autonomy of (a Marxist or other form of) politics? This is to say that it is either from the side of philosophy or from that of politics itself – or maybe one has to do both, but in very different ways. The question that is at stake between Spinozist and Hegelian forms of political thought seems thus to be the following: from which position does one speak about politics? Would you agree with such a characterization (and please feel free to harshly criticize our account)?

PM: When I prepared my book *Hegel or Spinoza*, the basic source was provided by the many passages in Hegel's works devoted to Spinoza, a philosopher to whom Hegel attributed exceptional importance (Spinoza was the closest to him, but also the one who, as he sensed, challenged certain aspects of his own system of thought). I was surprised by the fact that he never referred to the political aspects of his thought: yet he must have been familiar with the *Theological-Political Treatise* (which he had dealt with in 1802, in Jena, when he had collaborated in the preparation of the German edition of Spinoza's works under the supervision of his colleague Paulus[1]). He was not the only one in his time to make this astonishing omission: it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that importance was attached to this aspect of Spinoza's thought, which had been considered marginal, almost anecdotal, and practically ignored for reasons that remain to be explained. This is very surprising, if only because of the abundance of writings in which Spinoza, in obvious connection with his philosophical positions of a strictly speculative nature, addressed political and social problems (the entire second part of *Theological-Political Treatise*, the *Political Treatise*, not to mention the many passages in the *Correspondence* in which he reacts to the events that marked the history of Holland during the 17th century). One of the characteristic features of Spinoza's approach is precisely his constant concern with questions pertaining to power, servitude, public liberties, community life, and citizenship, which he tackles by using notions that he has put to the test of philosophical reflection, thus giving them a rational

1 Lukac 1983, p. 127

foundation. To demonstrate his originality in this regard, we need only to contrast him to Descartes, to whom he owes a great deal in other aspects, but who believed that it is best for a philosopher, for reasons of prudence, to refrain from intervening in any way in matters of this kind. Of course, Spinoza was not the only philosopher of the classical era to think philosophy and politics together, nor was he the only one to have adopted the posture of what could be called a "philosopher in the city," as someone concerned with the formal, and yet to be determined, possibilities of the city's existence. . Hobbes, to name but one, was also a philosopher of this type, though his thought followed a process that was exactly the opposite of Spinoza's (his political thought was isolated to the point of imagining that it was completely self-sufficient, and it took a long time for people to realise or to remember that Hobbes also had a metaphysics, a physics, a logic, a theory of knowledge, a theology, etc.). But it can be argued that, in his time, Spinoza went even further in the effort to link philosophy and politics: he was not content to reflect on politics from a distance, to theorise about it, but rather he invested himself in its practice to the point of assuming on certain occasions, in his own way, an almost militant attitude. In any case, this is how he was seen by a number of his contemporaries, who attributed to him, in an atmosphere of scandal, the figure of a rebel, an opponent, especially after the secrecy was broken that had secured the anonymous publication of the *Theological-Political Treatise* in 1670.

Hegel did not take this into account, and perhaps, even consciously or unconsciously, denied it. This is one of the most singular aspects of his disagreement with Spinoza, for he too had strongly perceived that politics was not an external matter for philosophy, which could at best be considered from a distance, in a disengaged, indifferent, neutral way. Their political positions were undoubtedly at odds: Hegel's conception of the state and its relationship to civil society led him to be a defender, even an apologist, of constitutional monarchy in the more or less liberalized forms offered by the English model; whereas Spinoza, who was extremely original in his time, which made him immediately suspicious of all the dominant tendencies, and thus a thinker of democracy, which was understood by him not as a separate regime, an institutional form subject to particular legal rules, but as a kind of deaf impulse, a "conatus," which is at the origin of all social life that persists in unequal degrees of power within the various formations of state, including those which, in their form, seem furthest from democracy. By schematizing to the extreme, one could argue that Hegel was a thinker of *potestas* (which led him to see in the State "God on earth", the objective realisation of Spirit), whereas Spinoza was a thinker of *potentia*. Its immanent dynamic runs with greater or lesser intensity through every system and organisational mode of state power and, one might say, deconstructs it (from which it follows that the fundamental issues to

which social reality refers are not of the order of the state, but of what Hegel will conceptualise as 'civil society').

In view of this, we are led to thoroughly revise the representation of Hegelian philosophy that persists everywhere: according to this commonly accepted representation, Hegel was the first to introduce into thought the consideration of becoming, and thus to inscribe reason in history, whereas Spinoza was merely the thinker of a de-temporalized substance, the holder of an abstract and inert universality cut off from all historicity. Perhaps it is actually the opposite: the more 'historical' of the two would be Spinoza insofar as he refuses to permanently objectify the dynamic that carries reality in the direction of its permanent transformation, in search of a balance between activity and passivity that never ceases to be questioned or destabilised, which obliges one to reinvent it endlessly, in the absence of formal guarantees of right. In this way, Spinoza would have been the initiator, after Machiavelli, of a practical, and no longer exclusively theoretical, relationship to politics, with the particularity that this practical relationship is no longer posed as an alternative to philosophical rationality but is situated in its wake within the same network of necessities. From this angle, Spinoza is perhaps, and not only for his time, the political philosopher par excellence. For him, political reality was not an object to be examined rationally alongside other objects. He did not make a philosophy "of" politics or "about" politics, but he conceived and practised philosophy as an activity of thought in the strong sense of the word politics. The *Ethics* itself, from beginning to end, and even in its most speculative passages (the first and second parts, which are the only ones Hegel had studied closely, leaving out the other three), is pervaded by a concern with practicality, in which the conditions that make human or non-human collectivities more or less viable are implicated by various means.

So, you are quite right to put the question of the autonomy of politics at the center of the confrontation between Hegel and Spinoza: it is the crucial moment where the tipping point occurs, that makes one lean to one side or the other. For Hegel, politics is something whose limits can be defined once and for all: it is a specific moment in the course of the spirit which, as a moment, is prepared by others and destined to be surpassed, "relieved" as Derrida says. Whereas for Spinoza, the idea of a succession of the political is quite unthinkable: the political is not only a determined moment of the process, it is the process in its entirety. Its reason is not a special reason, legitimate within its limits, but it is, taken at its source, in its fundamental impulse, the natural movement of reality, *Deus sive potentia*, the universal *conatus* which is at the heart of things.

To follow up on this: Spinoza produced a theory of knowledge, which could account for the distinction between philosophy and politics. Althusser, for instance, argued that the role of philosophy for politics lies less in guiding the latter's action or in intervening in the theory of politics, but rather precisely in preventing ideology from closing the space for practices of indetermination within political activity. Political activity must thus be essentially philosophically undetermined (and consists in undetermining what philosophy thinks about it). Is there a place for a Spinozist theory of political indetermination (as a form of liberation or emancipation from external determinations, from merely heteronomously being determined) for you?

PM: I think I answered your question when I explained to you how, to my mind Spinoza is thoroughly a political philosopher (while Hegel is a thinker who reasons "about politics," as he does about art, religion, etc.). So, I would not agree that Spinoza "produced a theory of knowledge, which could account for the distinction between philosophy and politics." On the contrary, it seems to me that he does everything to abolish their distinction, in the sense that this distinction would create a threshold between politics and philosophy, or to put it differently, would separate theory from practice. When Althusser put forward the concept of 'theoretical practice,' which led him to define philosophy as a 'class struggle in theory,' he was inspired by a profoundly Spinozist concern.

That said, abolishing the distinction between philosophy and politics does not mean merging them and bringing them into the semi-darkness where all cows are grey: rather, this effort makes the permanent passage from one to the other thinkable Everything "here" is a matter of intensity, and this is where history and its conjunctures are considered. Before Spinoza, there was Machiavelli who was a philosopher or was someone who practiced philosophy in politics, as a practitioner, by raising questions such as "where are we?", "what is happening now?", "what position to adopt at this precise moment?", "how do you get on the passing train, having already left and never having to stop, once you realise that it is not going anywhere, that it is not regulated by a timetable and that it does not have a conductor?", etc.

To put it this way would be to adopt a radically nominalist position in politics; to free it from the mortifying weight of universality; to evacuate the fantasies of power in all its forms, to proclaim "neither God, nor master, nor tribune;" to initiate a liberating process while being aware of the risks involved; to seek to be less and less passive, and more and more active, etc. In short, it amounts to asking the question of how to orient oneself, a question that never ceases to be raised, under the conditions that are always changing, which means there is no ready-made answer

to it. This question relates to all areas of existence, and not only what we have come to call, by giving the word a restrictive and discriminating meaning, "politics," that is to say, strictly political "affairs," a domain reserved for competent professionals, or those deemed to be such.

Politics concerns what is common, not only because it concerns communities, but because it pervades life in all its forms, while avoiding gathering them together to place them under the suffocating cloak of the universal. And let us not claim that to support this conception of politics and its "commons" is to raise the black flag of anarchy, whose blackness does not prevent it from being and remaining a flag, a rallying point whose fixity is deceptive, a ready-made answer that it would be unwise to settle for!

To remain within Althusser's cosmos for another question: In the previous century and within the context of French Marxism, he undertook quite heroic attempts to revitalise a Spinozist reading of Marx. We all remember how he declared that he and his students were not structuralists, because they were Spinozist. You being his student and collaborator, do you find anything in his work that is worth preserving, that might help us think about the present situation? And if so, may it be linked specifically to what is Spinozist about his thinking?

PM: In short, you pose the question of Althusser's legacy, which Derrida might have called "the spectres of Althusser" in the sense that he spoke of "the spectres of Marx." The singularity of Althusser, we mustn't forget, is that during his lifetime he was already a sort of spectre, constantly living on borrowed time, like a dead man walking who tried to slip as best he could through the cracks of a collapsing actuality, driven by his own chaos. This explains the ambiguities, the gaps, and sometimes the contradictions of what he left behind and what we must call his "oeuvre," of which it is not easy, and even probably impossible, to examine it in order to identify, as we say, the "achievements." Reading Althusser today is a difficult operation, or at least a very delicate one, so closely was his work associated with what he called "interventions," tirelessly taken up and reshaped in haste, constantly under pressure, doomed to incompleteness, from which they derive both their fragility and their original form of relevance, which must be thought together. To be honest, I have to tell you that, from a distance, in times that are not at all the same, I have a certain amount of trouble getting there now: what I find now in Althusser's texts, which are always to be read between the lines (which is anything but simple and innocent), is first and foremost an overload of interrogations, the indication of unsolvable difficulties, the very opposite of "achievements," but rather a repertoire of appointments, some of which, most of which, perhaps, have been missed; or, to take up a

Derridean theme again, a collection of letters that did not all reach their addressees. But this is precisely what makes it interesting, and in a way unique and irretrievable, in a sense that he had not foreseen, that of what we might call, in contrast to the fantasy of the "Theory" that he cultivated and then abandoned, an anti-theory or a negative theory (in the way that one speaks of negative theology). Let's not kid ourselves: what remains of Althusser are fragments and sketches – the opposite of a system of thought.

One of his writings that speaks to me most today is the one on the ideological state apparatuses (*Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*), so full of suspension points. The phrase "but let's leave it at that" comes up again and again and at the same time, it has a sense of urgency that is impossible to escape. It keeps going back and forth, circling around problems that are largely unformulated. One might be tempted to speak of a theoretical unconscious, which plunges into the depths of the void and the absence, or at least the incapacity to settle into a stable position of identity. In her reflections on this text, Judith Butler insists a lot on its religious, almost mystical, background: I think she is right. Althusser has been criticized for his cult of scientificity and his dogmatic conception of philosophy, which would have led him to adopt the authoritarian position of a "master." This is to forget the feeling of anxiety that constantly haunted his positions. It is no coincidence that he was particularly fond of the phrase that Lenin himself had taken from Bonaparte in campaigns in Italy: "On avance, et puis on voit" ("we move forward, and then we see"). He was constantly going through the motions, not to say blindly, searching for an opening to slip through before it closed, even if it meant changing gears completely when the situation required it. This is why it would be futile to try to extract from the article on the ideological state apparatus, which is itself an extract from a more extensive text on "reproduction" (a question that preoccupied him enormously), which remained unpublished for a long time, the well-ordered elements of a "theory of interpellation". What he called interpellation, this procedure that constitutes individuals as "always-already-subjects," evokes a call launched under conditions that determine its success to such an extent that it necessarily fails. It is this failure that mobilises thinking, in the absence of a direction that would be fixed a priori. Althusser's stances were a succession of sideways steps. This is how he moved forward.

From this point of view, he was clearly the opposite of a "good conscience," obsessed with certainties, the type cultivated by a triumphant structuralism, which was more so opinion, a journalistic construction, than an approach actually practised by the researchers under this flashy, ultimately misleading name. The analytical grids that Althusser set up were destined to be constantly reworked. Even if they were based on strong intuitions, they had no guarantee of legitimacy.

They were fallible. The theoretical ideal to which they referred ultimately proved to be a mirage. And, in a way, this unsteady form worked, because it forced us to think, to take up the problems at the starting point, to start again and pursue other directions, without any assurance of success. Viewed from this angle, Althusser rather assumes the role of a deceiver, forcing thought to be untangled and to set out on new paths, cultivating a spirit of research that is rebellious to any form of prescription and perpetually unsatisfied: he was certainly not a master of truth. At least, this is how I understand him now, as an enigma that disturbs rather than as the bearer of shattering revelations whose legacy we need only to recover and maintain in order to pass it on to others in identical form, well packaged to ensure its preservation at all costs.

Let us proceed to the broader French context. The Spinoza who was so influential during the 20th century seems to have been to a certain degree a French invention because the French philosophy of the previous century established a very specific relation to Spinoza. It often pitted him against Hegel and thereby seemed to offer an alternative perspective on what followed after Hegel, from Marx through Sartre, to thoughts on practice, emancipation, and even art. It as if parts of the French tradition share Nietzsche's grand declaration: that there was a precursor to his thought (i.e., to contemporary, anti-religious, Materialism, etc.), namely, Spinoza. Here we are thinking of a diverse group of thinkers, who often opposed each other, like Cavaillès, Deleuze, Althusser, Gueroult, Balibar, yourself... Some of the members of this group argued that Spinozism was a position able to oppose the phenomenological, and also religious and conservative tradition, which was often viewed as deriving genealogically from Hegel. The antidote to Hegel and these co-adaptations of Hegelianism was then seen in a different conceptualization of action and belief. It has been claimed that it was effectively the crisis of Marxism that opened up this space for Spinoza. So, was the crisis of Marxism for you a crisis of Hegelian Marxism? Did it allow for a return to Spinoza in a new way? Does this Spinoza owe a particular debt to his French readers?

PM: There was indeed a "French turn" in Spinoza studies in the 1960s. It is also a fact that at the same time, in France, there was, to repeat Lacan's formula when he spoke of a necessary "return to Freud," a kind of "return to Marx," that is to say a reconsideration of the status of Marxism, moving in the direction of its re-actualization; a re-actualization that

was needed at the moment when it had taken on the appearance of an all-purpose vulgate, of an ideological prét-à-porter. It is still a fact that Althusser placed himself at the junction of these two movements. That all these phenomena were related is indisputable. But one should not hasten to conclude that there was a relationship of strict causal determination between them that would have rigidly bound them together. Rather, there was a crossing between relatively independent causal series, which through intersections, conferred on the intellectual conjuncture of the time. It was indeed a very rich conjuncture. Its thickness was so complex that it prevented this conjuncture from placing itself under any definitive form and even destabilized it from the inside, and objectively opened the perspective of the reactive and reactionary reflux of the eighties. Was this reflux inevitable? This is what we should ask ourselves.

To start from the beginning: at the end of the 1950s, Spinoza studies in France were at a kind of standstill. When I began to work seriously on Spinoza at the very beginning of the 1960s, the Spinozist bibliography was seriously outdated and, as far as the political aspect of Spinoza's thought was concerned, it was completely lacking (with the exception of very specialized studies that remained restricted, such as those carried out by Madeleine Francès): since Georges Friedmann's book on *Leibniz and Spinoza* (Gallimard, 1946) and Lachièze-Rey's book on *Les origines cartésiennes du Dieu de Spinoza* [The Cartesian Origins of Spinoza's God] (Vrin, 1950), there had been nothing really outstanding and the most widely distributed edition of Spinoza's works, the one produced in 1954 in the Pléiade collection at Gallimard, was far from satisfactory. When, at the same time, one referred to Marx, it was difficult to free oneself from this obligation at a time when, even after the death of Stalin, the dogma of "the realization of socialism," to which Russia supposedly offered a privileged site, a "homeland," persisted. It was by reducing it to a number of ready-made formulas or quotations extracted from different parts of his work and treated as general maxims, slogans smoothed over, devitalized, and cut off from any grip on the actual, in progress historical processes and their concrete contradictions that, in the margins of this official Marxism, a few original attempts (Lucien Goldmann in the wake of Lukács, whom he had managed to make known in France, Henri Lefebvre who had tried to loosen the stranglehold of the DiaMat, Merleau-Ponty, author in 1955 of *Les aventures de la dialectique*, and not much else that is really salient), managed to subsist in disorder. Marx's writings, apart from *Capital* (in the official translation by Joseph Roy), were only accessible in the precarious versions offered by the Molitor editions, and for some of them in the collection of "selected writings" published in 1934 by Lefebvre and Gutermann with Gallimard. Regarding this decline of Marxist thought, Althusser, who had just published his little book on Montesquieu in 1959, proposed the following diagnosis: on the one hand, Marx had never really been "introduced" in France, for which one of the

reasons was the workers' position adopted by the Communist Party at the time of its creation, which had installed a climate of generalized distrust of anything bearing the mark of intellectuality, which was stigmatized as tendentially "bourgeois". On the other hand, Marx himself, leaving aside, after 1848, the strictly philosophical reflection, had opened the way to a purely economist and formally politicized interpretation of his theoretical work. He had in a certain way made possible this detour of his thought and its recuperation by a catechism of pure propaganda, where there was no more place for the labor of the concept and the labor of the proof. Althusser concluded from this diagnosis that the best way to get Marx out of the hole he had fallen into – whether he had been made to fall into it or whether he himself had unwittingly prepared this fall – was to give him back the philosophy he had lost along the way, and which perhaps he had never even had: and this absent "philosophy of Marx", it was on the side of Spinoza that one had a chance to find it. Hence the necessity to reread Marx with glasses borrowed from Spinoza, and by the same token to go back to studying Spinoza in order to make these glasses. Marx and Spinoza, same fight! Let us note in passing that Althusser was not the first to have brought together the names of Spinoza and Marx: there had been, among others, Max Raphaël, an author who today is practically forgotten and who ought to be rediscovered, and J.T. Desanti, the author of the 1956 *Introduction to the History of Philosophy*, of which the entire second part (which contrasted with the first part in which the alternative "bourgeois science/proletarian science" was justified and presented as gospel of truth) was devoted to a Spinoza who was reinterpreted by means of analytical schemes borrowed from Marx.

Serious work on Spinoza had only just begun again. First, there were two books published in '63 and '65 by Sylvain Zac (whom Canguilhem had discovered in an obscure provincial high school from which he had helped him to emerge): *L'idée de vie dans la philosophie de Spinoza* [The idea of life in the philosophy of Spinoza] and *Spinoza et l'interprétation de l'Ecriture* [Spinoza and the Interpretation of Scripture]. From a distance these works, which had then the value of a rediscovery, are still worth it. Then it accelerated until the explosion triggered by Deleuze (*Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*) and Gueroult (the first volume of his *Spinoza*, which remained unfinished) in 1968. Then the following year Matheron (Individu et communauté chez Spinoza [Individual and Community in Spinoza], published in the collection "Sens commun" that Bourdieu was directing at the Editions de Minuit). Apparently, fifty years later, it is not yet over. It should be noted that a parallel movement, equally intense, took place around the same time in Italy, where the two currents met in Urbino during a colloquium organized in '82 by Emilia Giancotti, a person who played an important role in the whole affair. To know exactly what happened during this period would require a study of its own. There is no doubt that, on the part of some of those who participated in this

process, there was a political impulse, carried by Marxism or at least by a certain Marxist perspective. But there was also something else: a desire of rigor and analysis, after the emotional and syncretic drifts (or totalizing in the sense, not of the structure and its narrow formalism, but of a universal out of assignable borders) carried by the existentialist current that had dominated the 50s. In this respect, Cavaillès, by integrating Spinozist interests into his very precise approach concerning the epistemology of mathematics, played a crucial role (the famous sentence which, in the conclusion of his posthumous work *On Logic and the Theory of Science*, opposes the philosophies of consciousness to the philosophies of concepts, was expressly referring to Spinoza in the author's mind) And then there were personal affinities, a propulsive word of mouth. And all this snowballed.

From the meeting of these two movements (the re-actualization of Marx and the recallibration of Spinoza studies) resulted in the representation of a two-faced Marx: one side of which looked towards Spinoza and the other towards Hegel. Projected in the mirror afforded by Marx's thought, and used as optical instruments to decipher it, Spinoza and Hegel appeared as the terms of an alternative. On Spinoza's side, a rigorous, uncompromising, tendentially "materialist" necessitarianism, completely de-ideologized, immune to any form of return of the religious, and thus re-positivized. On Hegel's side, a rational finalism that exploits the negative placing it in service of Spirit and gives meaning to history, requalified as History with a capital H, mystifyingly taking its movements from its real unfolding. The simplicity, not to say the banality, of this confrontation does not hold when we take into consideration the complex work of thought that is overdetermined and carried through by both of these authors in very different historical environments: it is only when their objective was that of rereading Marx and they intended to justify the taking of sides, and thus to draw clear lines of demarcation, that it was able to function in a situational, in a conjunctural way, while waiting for the readjustments without which it is impossible to respond to new stakes. On examination, the two figures that emerge from this summary face to face are not, taken as such, defensible and are philosophically untenable: it is to do a disservice to both Hegel and Spinoza to limit their approaches by proposing these reductive, abstract images, carried by the logic of "either-or". One must look twice before reducing either of these approaches to a completed system of thought, perfectly coherent and synchronous, closed in on itself, having an illusory stability.

From a distance, I can no longer see things in this artificially simplified form which, in any case, has not made it possible to resolve what you call the "crisis of Marxism", and may even have precipitated its fatal outcome. What does the term "Marxism" mean today? At the very least, things of a very different nature, which are not easy to link together. Perhaps it is even from this dispersion of what remains of Marx,

a Marx whose identity to himself has become highly problematic, that he has a chance to reappear in unpredictable forms, such that in himself the vicissitudes of history will have changed him, a different Marx than the one that was familiar to us and that, it must be admitted lucidly, no longer holds. At the same time, if we still need to come back to Spinoza and/or Hegel, concretely to read and reread them, it is not to find them conforming to themselves, stuck to fixed, labeled philosophical positions, but to release the catalyst of revolutionary transformation, of *Veränderung* as Marx would say, of which their works, through their difficulties, their irregularities, their contradictions even, remain bearers. Just as Negri proposed to take Marx "beyond Marx", I think we should look for a Spinoza "beyond Spinoza" and a Hegel "beyond Hegel."

Hegel claimed that Spinoza can be consistently read beginning with one proposition from his Ethics: "the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things." And it might be quite tempting to read the entire Ethics in such a way that we appear to be constantly moving back and forth when Spinoza refers back to, say, a proof that he developed ten pages earlier or in a previous book of the Ethics, while at the same time we are not moving at all, we are just enlarging our understanding of the order and connections of things, ultimately of the differential substance. What kind of reading protocol do you think Spinoza demands?

PM: The notion of a "reading protocol" raises all sorts of problems and must be used with extreme caution. In any case, it can only be used in the plural, not only because we cannot apply the same reading protocol to philosophers as different, both in form and in content, as Spinoza and Hegel for example, but because the authors—and since Foucault we know how equivocal the categories of "author" and "work" are—require different approaches that require a particular lens. In the case of Spinoza, we know that he left a large number of texts unfinished, for very different reasons (the writing of *De intellectus emendatione* was stopped by his own decision, while the writing of the *Tractatus politicus*, whose last words are "Reliqua desiderantur," was interrupted by Spinoza's death). It is clear that these texts, which represent particularly significant moments in Spinoza's thought, cannot be read in the same way as the two books he completed, the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* published anonymously in 1670, and the *Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata*, which did not appear until after his death, but for which we know from his correspondence that in 1675 he sent it to the publisher and then interrupted the printing of the text for reasons of caution. Of these two books, we can say that they are subjectively finished (since they are so by the very admission of the one who wrote them and considered that they could be put into circulation

as they are), which is not to say that they are objectively finished (in the sense that they would be definitively closed on themselves and would not contain any flaw or point of uncertainty).

However, it would be perilous to submit them to an identical reading protocol; the first one is a text of intervention, composed under the light of reason but in what could be called a mixed language. In its first part, The first part is devoted to a philologically and historically informed rereading of the Bible that gives rise to debates that are not all philosophical, whereas the second part is driven by an objective of demonstration, effectively put into practice in the form of a surprisingly complex argumentative network, which gives it an internal rigor, though whose firmness is perhaps not as absolute as one would imagine (Spinoza sometimes drifts, or even contradicts himself, and it is perhaps in these moments that he is the most intellectually stimulating). And then there is the *Correspondence*, of which we have only selected bits and pieces by the editors of the *Opera Posthuma*, to which have been added some documents discovered later. There is also the *Cogitata Metaphysica* appended to the *Principa philosophiae cartesianae*, a hybrid writing in which fundamentally original and caustic ideas are exposed within the framework of a scholastic form of treatise, a particularly explosive mixture. Finally, there is the Korte *Verhandeling*, that was unearthed at the end of the 19th century, which is unquestionably a Spinozist-inspired text, but is perhaps not entirely written by Spinoza's hand (it was a study-text which circulated and must have been enriched on this occasion with various contributions). I am more and more reluctant to take uniform approaches that tend to group contributions in the same way, when in fact they are out of sync, something which makes them interesting, and opens up the space for reflection. Spinoza is a fundamentally plural, polyphonic thinker, whose thinking has developed *in situ* along different lines, which have crossed and uncrossed: and this is largely what characterizes the richness and power of his apparatus of thought, to which we keep coming back to at different times and in different contexts to discover unexpected aspects, as if he had not yet said his last word; in any case, it is not a repertoire of ready-made thoughts, but rather an incentive to produce new ideas.

This is not the case for Spinoza alone: all philosophers worthy our attention and study belong to this situation. Those who suddenly and forever reveal the depth of their thought are also those whose thought has little depth and little to tell us.

To come back to Hegel and the particular way in which he reads Spinoza: the reference you mention is enlightening in this respect. The interpretive paradigm on which he relies, in order to distance himself from the orientation of thought that he attributes to Spinoza, takes as its pretext a unique formula, the one in which the identity of the order of ideas and the order of things is asserted, as if it were self-evident, a

parallelist type of reading (the one that Leibniz had been the first to apply to Spinoza, already in order to refute him). In the perspective offered by this reading, the order of ideas and the order of things are two distinct orders between which there is a one-to-one correspondence. But this reading is quite questionable. On the contrary, Spinoza maintains that ideas and things are linked together within the framework of one and the same order, which is the order of causes. Moreover, if ideas fit into this order, it is because they are themselves, not representations but things, things in their own right which correspond to the way in which the understanding apprehends the world under the attribute of thought and not under that of extent; but it is indeed the same world, and not two parallel worlds, which is seen simultaneously under these two attributes according to an order which consequently must be identical. Now, if Hegel chooses a parallelist reading, which is obviously tendentious since it turns a distinction of reason into a real distinction, it is because, when he reads Spinoza's "order of things," he immediately places on this discursive sequence the sequence "order of bodies." In other words, he wrongly lends Spinoza a "Cartesian" type of dualism (whose imputation to Descartes is itself debatable, since it makes the representation of a "substantial union of soul and body" difficult to understand), which makes thought and extension the terms of an alternative (in obvious contradiction with Spinoza's thesis according to which God is both a "thinking thing" and an "extended thing", without making him a dualist; in being or nature, which is itself divided). From this, everything follows: the tendentious interpretation of Spinoza's formula allows us to evacuate a certain number of important notions in the economy of his thought, like that of *potentia*, of which the *conatus* is the derivation, and Spinoza becomes an "acosmist" philosopher, "weltlos" as Heidegger might say, which is a caricature. But these "misreadings" are not contingent; they carry a strong philosophical meaning: if we pay attention to them, they grant us knowledge regarding Hegel's own orientation of thought. This orientation is revealed when it is projected in the deformed and distorted mirror offered by a faulty, and in any case incomplete, reading of Spinoza's text. Finally, this is explained by the fact that, when Hegel reads Spinoza, what preoccupies him is not Spinoza's thought, which he takes as a pretext, but his own, which finds an opportunity to revive itself by confronting Spinoza's.

This confirms that a reading protocol elaborated from a single formula extracted from an author and taken to be canonically expressive, can only produce partial, tendentious results, which become downright wrong if taken as the basis of an interpretative system. Would Hegel have allowed us to reread the whole of his work light of this formula: "The real is rational, the rational is real," a ritornello in the form of a chiasmus which he actually used in the Preface to his *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, but which it would be imprudent to turn into a key

to deciphering the whole of his thought? Moreover, in order to apply to him the conclusions reached in the previous discussion, would it make sense to use an identical reading protocol vis-a-vis the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, that great philosophical novel in which the unfortunate adventures of consciousness and its failure to reconcile the viewpoints of subject and object and of certainty and truth are recounted, and vis-a-vis the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, the teaching manual that has been handed down to us with the *Bemerkungen* (Hegel's own handwritten remarks that he had to read orally during his lectures) and the *Zusätze* (additions reconstructed from students' notes where improvisations made on the spot were recorded, often unexpectedly illuminating the lesson that could be derived from the written passages in the manual)? It's likely that Hegel would not have appreciated someone doing to him what he himself had done to Spinoza.

Can we say that Spinoza is the philosopher of Substance, which means that there is no mediation between the attributes? In our understanding, there is a fundamental difference with Hegelian not only as a substance, but also as a subject. We can draw many consequences from this – let's say from Althusser's "history without a subject", to Deleuze's insistence on the univocity of being, and so on. But we wonder, how do you see this, that is to say, how do you read the difference between the Spinozist and the Hegelian notion of substance?

PM: Hegel focused his reading of Spinoza on the first and second parts of the *Ethics*: this is what led him to make of Spinoza a thinker of being and its representation, whose philosophy essentially consists of an ontology accompanied by a theory of knowledge. If he had not skipped the next three parts of the book and the political texts, he would not have been able to argue that Spinoza is the philosopher of a substance destined not to become a subject, cut off, as a result, from the realities of the world and of life. He did not understand, he did not want to understand, he could not allow himself to admit that Spinoza's philosophy is above all, as Deleuze characterises it, a 'practical philosophy,' essentially concerned with the problem of the conditions of liberation. It is not by chance that Spinoza titled the great treatise in which he gathered the different aspects of his philosophy "Ethics," taking this word in its ancient sense, the one given to it by Aristotle, namely a positive art of living ("*bene agere et laetari*") and not the statement of rules of moralitywhich have above all a restrictive and negative value of obligation, and therefore of constraint.The big question that Spinoza keeps coming back to is how to become more and more active and less and less passive, under the horizon of a substantiality that is not massive

and static but dynamically exerts its power in multiple directions and without stopping: in this power one participates to varying degrees of intensity that can be infinitely modulated, giving rise to a whole spectrum of attitudes, each of which negotiates in its own way the relationship between servitude and freedom.

Spinoza's reflection on the notion of the possible is a particularly enlightening testimony to this concern, which is the common thread running through his entire philosophical approach. In the first part of the *Ethics*, it is demonstrated that there is nothing between the necessary and the impossible, and that speculating on the possible is a failure of reasoning; this leads to the thesis put forward at the beginning of the Appendix to the first part of the book: "*omnia praedeterminata*." This is a thesis from which a rigorous necessitarianism derives, i.e. the representation of an order of things whose implacable chains are irrevocably tied up. If we leave it at that, the result is that the ethical project, which consists in intervening in this order in such a way as to introduce modifications to it – changing the world instead of merely interpreting it, as we would say in another language –is as such emptied of its meaning from the start. Now it must be understood that this leading argument is aimed at a precise objective: the evacuation of the ultimate prejudice, which effectively, considered from the absolute point of view of the God-substance, does not hold water. But this is only one stage of the reasoning: in the preamble to the next part of the book, Spinoza explains that he is abandoning this overarching point of view, which leads to a radical ontologism and blocks all practical reflection; he then adopted a new orientation of thought intended to 'lead the soul as if by hand to supreme beatitude,' a project whose dimension is openly axiological. Now, it is by choosing to go down this path that we are led, step by step, to reconsider the notion of the possible: it is consequently redefined, by being distinguished from that of the contingent, at the beginning of the fourth part of the *Ethics*, where the idea of a perfect human life is introduced as an end to be achieved; and the last propositions of this part of the book expose, in the conditional tense—here we are apparently in the middle of a utopia, which is astonishing from Spinoza—what a life of free men would look like (who would think of nothing less than death, would strive to exchange as little as possible with the ignorant, would not form any concept of good and evil, etc.). This makes it possible to envisage a new relationship with finitude: if it has objectively no meaning in the totalising perspective proper to substance, which is and acts by virtue of the necessity of its infinite nature without fixing any goal in advance, in concrete terms this means that nature, considered in and of itself, does not follow any intentional aim, but rather pursues all paths that are open to it, planning nothing in advance, finitude regains vigour when it is apprehended, through the existence of the living, an existence shared with all other forms of modal reality that

are limited expressions to varying degrees of the infinite, and even the infinitely infinite, power of substance. The project of a better life, which in Spinoza's mind is ultimately political because such a life can only be a 'common,' an associative and integrated life, becomes legitimate even though it seemed to have been invalidated at the outset by the damning representation of natural determinism. This relegitimisation of the possible does not in any way imply that the principle of the *ratio seu causa*, which has its source in the nature of things, has been abandoned in favour of the representation of a world that is artificially and formally humanised after having been freed from the straitjacket in which the necessity resulting from the infinite power of substance imprisons it: but it raises the problem of the conditions under which, within the global framework set up by this power, certain vital orientations that are evaluated as better according to the criterion of usefulness (usefulness being itself what makes one more active) can be privileged. Otherwise put, the absolute point of view of substance (which affirms that everything is necessary) and the relative point of view of modal realities (which are not causes of themselves, the consequence of which is that they are permanently balanced between passivity and activity) are not opposed term by term, as if they were situated on the same level: once we understand that they are at different levels of power and intensity, we are entitled to ask the question regarding the adjustment of their effects, of which the art of living that is ethics constitutes the implementation.

This extremely simplified summary gives an idea of the complex path followed by Spinoza in the *Ethics*, where a web of necessities is not laid out flat and spread out on a single plane, but where these necessities are highlighted and modulated by being placed successively under different lights, thus opening up the spaces of freedom and action in the absence of which the project of an ethics would lose its meaning. The narrow and restrictive conception of an intransmissible "monism" is responsible for such a flattening, which denies substance any prospect of mobility and change: yet substance is not "one" in the purely numerical sense of "only one," which in the long run, by making it an isolated being, would strip it of its infinity, or, if we want to call it that, of its concrete, mobile, and complex thickness; it is one while being many, plural in all directions, and consequently open to unlimited perspectives of transformation, in a permanent state of overflow relative to its given state, whatever it may be, and not condemned to reproduce itself in such and such a form in an identical, fixed manner. This is what Hegel did not understand because he could not understand it, given the orientation of thought proper to his philosophical position, which, reduced to the essential, consists of placing becoming and history within the framework of a rational teleology informed by the idea of progress, following a momentum that appears to advance straight ahead, whereas in reality it moves backwards as if drawn or attracted by its goal, the definitive

reconciliation of Spirit with itself, the final word of philosophy. The interest of Spinoza's philosophy perhaps lies in the fact that it does not contain the last word: "*Reliqua desiderantur*", "everything is to be done," could be his motto, that is to say, a "practical philosophy." This is at least how I understand the "history without a subject" of which Althusser speaks: if it is without a subject, it is because it is in itself its own subject, as a process that is not predestined to any end and does not cease to go beyond any term and any limit. And it is also in this way that I understand the "univocity of being," i.e. the "plane of immanence" which Deleuze took from Scott: this univocity is multi-directional, just as this immanence is full, in a state of permanent invention, and not fixed, uniform, monolithic, which would be only be so under the condition of having been emptied of its power.

How do you square the ontological commitments that Spinoza's thought seems to demand from his readers with a more historically informed perspective (with a historical-materialist one even)?

PM: As I have just tried to explain, I think we have to understand Spinoza by removing him from a purely "ontological" interpretation that renders unthinkable what Marx calls the historical "Veränderung," or to use a formula that Althusser was particularly fond of, the possibility of "making things happen." Spinoza was not a purely speculative or contemplative philosopher who, in order to see things from a higher point of view, i.e., by adopting the point of view of an ideal and abstract rationality, would have freed himself from the demands of history, and in particular the history of his time, in which, on the contrary, he immersed himself completely. If it had been otherwise, would he risk putting into circulation the theoretically scandalous *Theological-Political Treatise*, the effects of which immediately spread like wildfire throughout Europe? From this point of view, his perspective was as 'historically informed' as it could be in his time. It was particularly original even in form: the trajectory of his life enabled him to accumulate the elements of a diversified culture whose main pillars were the Bible, Machiavelli, and Descartes. To have put these ingredients in the same bottle and to have created, after shaking it, philosophy in the form in which it has been transmitted to us proves that he was definitely not afraid of anything, which his contemporaries knew perfectly well.

That said, I don't see what interest there would be in applying to his work, under the pretext of updating it, a reading grid taken from Marxism, Bergsonism, or any other "ism." Spinoza is perfectly self-sufficient; he is neither an inheritor nor a predecessor. He was modern in his own time and has remained so in other times when different sides of his thought have been revealed, but we have not yet been able to make a

full assessment of him; to make him fit into the established order, which would have nothing new to say about him. We should not look for ready-made ideas in Spinoza, in the form of an intellectual fashion his strength lies in the fact that he continues to make us think, and thus pushes us to go further in new, possibly unforeseeable directions. This is what makes him a 'true philosopher,' in the sense of the 'vera philosophia' that he speaks of in his letter to Albert Burgh: he has never ceased to amaze us.

At one point you noted: "The truth of philosophy is as much in Spinoza as it must also be in Hegel; that is, it is not entirely in one or the other but somewhere between the two, in the passage that is effected between one and the other." This also seems to inform the title of your monumental book Hegel or Spinoza. In that book, you propose a reverse reading of Hegel, from the standpoint of Spinoza. That is to say, Spinoza functions as a reader-critic avant la lettre of Hegelian thinking. Can you tell us a bit more about what is at stake and why you see it necessary to return from Hegel to Spinoza and (re)read Spinoza with eyes and minds that know Hegel?

PM: The remarks I have just made in answer to your previous question should not lead us to set Spinoza apart, to make him a statuary, as if he were "the" philosopher par excellence, the only one worthy of the name, which would be tantamount to idealizing him: there is no need to call oneself a "Spinozist," and to brandish this sign like a flag in order to be interested in Spinoza. As far as I'm concerned, I don't consider him to be right about everything, and I don't think he's alone in this. I see in him and in his work a kind of thinking machine, which works at its best when put in confrontation with other philosophers. This is what I meant when I suggested that, if there is a philosophical truth, it is neither in Spinoza nor in Hegel that it can be found, but "between" them, in the space of discussion opened up by their encounter, which has produced and continues to produce explosive effects: occupying this interval forces one to think, to confront questions that one would not otherwise remain unexplored.

In this connection, I would like to make a remark concerning the way in which the discipline of philosophy is conceived today. The debate between "analytic" and "continental" bears on the problem of reading philosophers. The former argue that interest in the doctrinal positions taken by this or that philosopher distracts from the real philosophical questions, such as whether coffee is sweet in the mouth or in the cup, a question that should remain the same whether it is asked in Berkeley, Oxford, or Paris, whether it is formulated in the terms used in the Middle Ages, the Classical period, or any other, and whether it is labeled with the proper name of this or that philosopher; and they reproach "continental"

philosophers for having concentrated their reflection on monographic research, focused on the question of knowing what Aristotle, or Descartes, or Hegel "really said and thought" on a given subject, which inevitably has the consequence of reducing philosophy to the level of a tedious and vain doxography, against a background of historicist prejudice.

Reduced to this elementary dilemma, the debate is insoluble because it is distorted from the start. Personally, I think that we must continue to read and reread philosophers, as they themselves have never ceased to do, in order to configure their own philosophical position, which cannot in any case be assumed to be sufficient in itself. One does not do philosophy by oneself, proceeding to a kind of internal examination of one's own thought set up as a universal paradigm, but with others, and, at the limit, with all others. It is not enough to take note of what these philosophers thought, as if one were reading a meter with the aim of recording certain results, as a purely academic conception of reading recommends; but it is necessary to try to think with them, by spotting the singularities, possibly the anomalies and the difficulties that manifest the discursive sites to which their intellectual heritage is consigned, insofar as these sites always contain a part of incompleteness. And the best way to achieve this is precisely to settle in the "in-between", the interval; an interval that can on occasion present the appearance of a chasm opened when one puts them in confrontation with others, being animated by the conviction that the truth is not to be found as if it were ready-made or deposited in this or that philosopher, but constitutes the stake of their confrontation such as it continues in the course of a history which, having never really begun and going nowhere in particular, is destined to never end, to never lead to definitive conclusions, after which, when the show ends, the only thing left would be, as in the theater, to bring down the curtain on the representation and to return for the applause.

To imagine that philosophizing is an operation validated by someone, by whatever name one calls it, and that this person draws the matter (the "grey matter") entirely from himself, by placing himself in the perspective of an absolute beginning of thought, as pure reflection, whose management is assumed entirely by an independent rational subject, is hardly reasonable: eventually, the mention of the external references from which his reflection has been given can be erased from the account of the rumination to of a given philosopher, which, by the effect of a rhetorical procedure, formally confers an apparent generality that can claim a timeless universality. But this does not prevent the reflection in question from having taken place without being supported by others, who provide it with elements that it readjusts in its own way by carrying out a new arrangement from them, and it is this that constitutes its own contribution. Basically, if we think about there is, only one philosophy, or we should say, rather, that there is only one "philosophizing" in the sense of an ongoing activity destined to continue indefinitely, which crosses all

the "philosophies" in which it takes on each time, like a musical variation, a different rhythm: to philosophize is indeed nothing other than to participate in this uninterrupted movement of thought to which, whether willingly and knowingly or not , all philosophers without exception, the great ones as well as the small ones, the established ones as well as the marginal ones, the good ones as well as the bad ones, the true ones as well as the false ones, belong to it, at their own risk and peril, from their singular point of view, of which they only have to exploit the advantages and the disadvantages, the setbacks and the advances. From the fact that this exploitation is singular due to the unparalleled conditions on which it depends, because it must be carried out each time *in situ*, one should not conclude that it is solitary, that it constitutes an independent unit, and that the whole responsibility of it falls to the individual who occasionally assumes the initiative for it, however exceptional he may be, which would place him from the start outside of the norm, set apart from ordinary expectations, and ultimately inapproachable.

The most interesting thing about a philosopher's work is the ability to make something happen: an event occurs that turns thought on its head. Now this event cannot have an isolated meaning: its scope is necessarily unanimous, collective, if only because of the resonance it produces and which spreads beyond the conditions of its manifestation. This is why I consider the opposition often installed between the practice of philosophy and the study of the history of philosophy absurd. It's an opposition sanctioned by their academic constitution as autonomous disciplines. It is with this concern in mind that I have sought to understand what Spinoza became, viewed through the mirror that Hegel holds up to him, which is a particular case of the "between" that I have mentioned. But in my mind, it is not a question of a face-to-face exclusive relationship either. There are many other ways of relating Spinoza's thought to other thoughts. If I had the possibility, I would engage in the preparation of other studies that could be called "Spinoza or Descartes", "Spinoza or Pascal", "Spinoza or Leibniz", etc., which would reveal more and more surprising aspects of his approach. And in the end, if all these studies could be completed, I would gather them in a book entitled "Spinoza or Spinoza," which would highlight within own philosophy all the "in-betweenness" of which philosophizing consists in its infinity.

In the last chapter of Hegel or Spinoza, entitled "omnis determinatio est negatio," you discuss determination and negation in Spinoza and Hegel, departing from the statement "die Bestimmheit ist Negation." Here you make a very interesting point:

> "What Hegel read in Spinoza—and all authentic reading is in its own way violent, or it is nothing but the mildness of a

paraphrase—matters just as much as what he actually said, or rather, what counts, is the effect of these two discourses upon each other, because it offers an invaluable insight for each them. From this point of view, whether the famous phrase is Spinoza's or Hegel's, it is the best of symptoms for analyzing the relationship between these two philosophies."

This brings to mind the beginning of Althusser's chapter in your collective *Reading Capital*, where he argues that "the first person ever to have posed the problem of reading, and in consequence, of writing, was Spinoza." Later, in the same text, he proposed the term of "symptomatic reading." Would it be an exaggeration to read your statement from the standpoint of the method of "symptomatic reading"?

PM: The best way to approach philosophers from the point of view of what I have just called the "between," which allows us to reintegrate them in the endless movement of philosophizing, a movement without assignable origin and end, is to spot in them what, if one can say this, "makes symptom[atic]": namely tiny accidents of thought which, if we pay attention to them, can be revealing of some of their great theoretical and practical orientations. These accidents, at first sight imperceptible, become graspable when we take into account the relation of what is improperly called the "doctrine" of a philosopher and those of other philosophers with whom he or she has met on such and such an occasion (an encounter which, moreover, can be made only in the mind of a reader, even if it has not taken place historically): these events are bearers of meaning because of the enigmatic dimension that they often contain I have tried to identify clues of this kind by closely examining what happened to Spinoza when Hegel undertook to read him, in his own way - in a necessarily "twisted" way. Through these twists, which can in some cases take on the character of betrayals, something continues to speak: "it thinks," and what comes out of it doesn't necessarily belong to Spinoza or to Hegel; it is that something "happens" and "takes place" in the interval that separates them.

This kind of reading is indeed "symptomatic," in the sense or in a sense close to the one that Althusser gave to this word. What he calls "symptomatic reading" implies, first of all, a renunciation of looking directly at a theoretical discourse in order to find or receive a "meaning" that would be deposited there from the start; and it is to force this discourse to say more, by applying to it drifting, lateral reading, which proceeds from an angle and takes detours, which leads to partial and provisional results, destined to be constantly revised. Considered in this way, this type of reading notes how, in the discourses it targets, something is happening, things are moving, events are taking place, in the wake of which its own operation of analysis is calledto make a place

for itself, by playing, as it were, on lacunae which allow it to sneak in. To take up a metaphor that Althusser used to characterize political action through cross-readings of Machiavelli and Lenin—another way of ploughing the field of the "between"—it is a question of catching a moving train, even if it means missing it. In this sense, one can maintain that true reading must be engaged, it must be conscious of being dragged into a discursive cycle that is confused at both ends.

Does this cycle, which proceeds from discourse to discourse, from slant to slant, and from detour to detour, go perfectly round? Precisely not. This is what the concept of "symptomatic reading" intends to make clear. This method consists in inserting oneself into textual dynamics, not by taking them at face-value as with an external glance which purports to capture its totality, , but rather, this method advances by implicating itself in its failures and by bringing out the impurities, the difficulties. In the discursive sequences that it proposes to treat, symptomatic reading detects what plays and is played by privileging the imbalances that signal an activity which drives it forward, , following an irregular trajectory that continues without having a beginning or reaching a definitive end. The symptomatic reading is an open process, which moves forward by supporting its weak links, as with any historical conjuncture. To account for this singular approach, Althusser takes up the paradigm of vision by trying to subvert its use: the symptomatic reading separates what is visible and invisible, the manifest from the latent. To separate the manifest from the latent consists in unraveling the link that the scopic impulse artificially supports, which grants the gaze full purchase of its "object," as it does when it presents the latent content as manifest in potentiality, and the manifest as latent in action. The latent content that the symptomatic reading aims at has nothing to do with a hidden meaning waiting to be deciphered or interpreted: it is not a pre-existing original meaning, but rather it represents the non-sense, the labour of the negative that, from within, plays a part in the production of meaning, and orients it toward other meanings. To take into account an operation of this kind, forces one to think. A symptomatic reading is necessarily active and creative.

A formula of Spinoza's, that Althusser often referred, "verum index sui et falsi", is a striking illustration of this way of conceiving and practicing the symptomatic reading, insisting each time on the fact that it had to be taken in its complete wording, rather than amputated form, the "verum index sui," which absolutizes truth by constituting it as an isolated entity. This formula means that truth indicates itself only by tracing each time the dividing line that separates it from the false, or rather, one should say, from a false, from its false, there being false only within the framework of the movement in the course of which truth is produced, under partial forms, and not "the truth" considered as a self-sufficient whole: in the same way, in every discursive statement, in so far

as it assumes the active form of an intervention, is carried out and at the same time is given to read the scission between what in it reaches the visibility and what it makes invisible, in search of a precarious balance that has no ideal guarantee. Is the formula "omnis determinatio est negatio,"which Hegel criticized, actually Spinoza's? It is his while not being his: it emerges, as a symptom, from the virtual encounter between Hegel and Spinoza, an encounter whose effects has been and still is particularly disturbing, and so, philosophically interesting.

Althusser wrote: 'We were never structuralists, because we were Spinozists.' How do you relate to this position? In what sense is Spinoza's position always already post-structuralist?

PM: Let us not forget that Marx said: I am not a "Marxist!" It is in this sense that we should take the formula: we have never been "structuralists." Moreover, "structuralism," in the general form it has been given, has never existed, except in the heads of journalists or doxographers who have fabricate fiction for their own convenience. At the very least, we could speak of "structuralisms" in the plural, since those attributed to Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Lacan, or Foucault have little in common with each other. If there ever was an era of "structuralism," it was in the sense of opening up a space for debate that gave rise to permanent confrontations: free-flowing and without final result. What Althusser himself at one point called "Theory" was not, as he practised it, a complete system, closed in itself, but an invitation to carry on a research effort and to wage out a struggle against ready-made ideas: it was ultimately a working programme, or if you want to call it, a form of questioning destined to be endlessly enacted. If there has been a misunderstanding on this subject, which has supports the accusation of "theoreticism," it is because at a certain moment in his career, Althusser used and abused the word "theses" to express philosophical positions: these famous theses were in reality hypotheses, which only had value once they had been put to the test of reality, which engaged them in a process of constant correction, as opposed to definitively established facts. From this point of view, "to be a Spinozist" (and not a structuralist) cannot mean adherence to a system of thought that is supposed to exclusively and triumphantly hold "the truth": it is rather a call for a critical, undogmatic dissatisfied thought, which affords the condition for a revolutionary catalyst. The formula I mentioned earlier, "*Verum index sui et falsi*," applies here with exemplary force: there is no truth in itself, but only truth that only succeeds in asserting itself by tirelessly confronting the false, which it identifies as such because it sheds its light on it, in the context of a struggle that must be endlessly repeated. This being so, the temptation to be an "-ist" of any kind deflates itself. Spinoza was not a "Spinozist": and if he held this claim, it would have precluded the dynamic

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of "philosophizing" particular to him. For my part, even if I have worked a lot on the basis of texts signed with his name, in my understanding this does not justify the claim that I should be labelled as a "Spinozist" or as a "specialist" of Spinoza, at least not by choice.

In the books in which you put forth a materialist approach to literature (we are thinking inter alia of Theory of Literary Production or The Object of Literature) you propose a renewed and powerful way of approaching of literary texts that thus far has rarely been taken up in contemporary scholarship (with few exceptions, like Warren Montag), somewhat similar to the texts on theater and literature Althusser wrote. Could you tell us in what way your approach is neither hermeneutical nor structuralist? Could one say that you are reading literature the way Spinoza reads biblical texts? What does it mean to read literary works as "expressions"?

PM: If I have been very interested in texts attached to the genre of "literature"—a genre moreover very difficult to define and to contain within precisely fixed limits so much it is heterogeneous and composite—it is by being animated mainly by the concern to widen the field of intervention of philosophy. Too often has philosophy been confined in the field of a pure speculation, which condemns it to sink in a certain formalism; concretely to turn in circle on itself; confronted to literary texts or reputed to be such at levels moreover very different, the philosophical activity is solicited by fundamentally impure forms of thought, either because they are obscure or because they are unaccomplished—not by default but, if one can say, by vocation—which makes obstacle to a conceptual recovery which allows to make them return in the order of the well-known. By confronting itself with literature, philosophy is brought to take distance with the conformism that inevitably generates the temptation of the withdrawal into oneself proper to a uniquely speculative attitude. From this point of view, I was immediately diverted from the project of making what is called a "philosophy of literature", which would take literature as an external object of reflection, by trying to give it a form to which it is necessarily resistant. My intention was not to track down traces of philosophical thought in writers that could be found in them as if they were on deposit and that it would be enough to extract for example, to try to identify a "Balzac" philosophy, a "Zola" philosophy, a "Mallarmé" philosophy, a "Proust" philosophy, etc. What I tried to do was rather to rework certain literary facts by being mainly attentive to what in their production and the modes of reading that they call for—that is to say, what one can call their reproduction—can lead to thinking in the sense that philosophy gives to this word, with the

double value of awakening and provocation, and thus of inciting to go further.

In 1990 I published the book "What does literature think?" I then regretted this title: literature, insofar as one can speak of it as a whole, does not think; it makes thought possible, which is something completely different. On examination, it appeared to me that literature, or what we attribute to it, can be used as a formidable machine to make people think, if it is made to function in this sense. When my book was reprinted by a different publisher in 2013, I decided to give it a different title: "Philosophizing with Literature." To philosophize *with* literature, and not about it, is to walk alongside it, as if it were an optical device that enables us to see unexpected things, without which would pass us by and from the perspective of pure speculation would hold little value. have In the second edition of the book, I have taken up the subtitle that was already in the first: "Exercises in Literary Philosophy." By "literary philosophy" I meant a way of relating to literary texts which, as I have just said, is opposed to a "philosophy of literature": the latter proposes to extract from literary texts a philosophical meaning that is supposedly there, in the name of a meaning that is already there, latent, dormant, awaiting Prince Charming, a philosopher of course! But literature is not a sleeping beauty, but rather, it resembles the formula I take up, that of a machine that propels thought, that is, if one knows how to start it, and if one uses it for exercises in thought. I say "exercises," in the sense of attempts in which one engages without a determined result and in the absence of any guarantee of legitimacy. In a general sense, I think that philosophy should practice this kind of exercise more often.

When one lends ulterior motives to literature to sufficiently flush out the philosophical meaning that it secretly nourishes, one is inevitably led to make a selection among literary works: one categorizes accordingly, holding onto those which have this a particular meaning, and casting aside those that don't, such that they lack interest for philosophy. In such a perspective, there are, on the one hand, writers with an intrinsically "philosophical" dimension, who are considered to be "at the height of thought," which justifies entering into a dialogue with them on an equal level, this is how Heidegger "reads" Hölderlin, by projecting onto the latter's poems his own philosophical preoccupations and by trying to extract from them elements that nourish his own reflections. I don't see things this way at all: if there is something in literature that can make people think, and thus activate a philosophical mode of thinking, it is not in the form of a predisposition that certain authors and works which would immediately set them apart by assigning them an exclusive dignity. The division between great and minor literature, the first being the bearer of a philosophical interest of which the second is deprived, has never convinced me. If literature is considered in a speculative way—as being afflicted, as a deficiency or a sign of impurity, because the imaginary

drifts, dragging with it narrative fiction and the affective impulses which sever the poetic expression from rational control—it can provoke thought, in all of its forms, including those which at first sight appear as withdrawn from a properly intellectual and reflected state; perhaps even these are the latter which, by their defects, their weaknesses, their rejection of what is methodical or conceptual, their irrational spontaneity, exerting a demand on thought thus propelling it toward new directions. When reading Jules Verne or detective novels, one is unlikely to come across speculative sequences that are sufficiently elaborate to make it worthwhile to dwell on them for a long time, whereas sequences of this kind are abound in the so-called literature of ideas, whereby reason figures as primary in the first instance which afford the reader many opportunities to question himself , to take a step back from what is said, to deal with anomalies that can be treated as symptoms, and thus taken seriously, provided, of course, that they are considered anew through the process of questioning.

You ask me if I approach literary works in the way Spinoza reads the Bible. It is obvious that Spinoza, by ploughing through the Holy Scriptures in all directions and in depth, has provided an unprecedented model for reading texts: he has marked out the ground on which a rigorous exegesis takes place, in particular by submitting to the requirement of a historical and linguistic recontextualization of the discursive facts to which it applies; following this path, he has subjected the sacred texts to a method of reading, which he calls, "natural," thus taking the risk of trivializing them, and it is understandable that this approach caused a scandal in his time. This method consists in treating the biblical accounts at face value, as they are stated, without subjecting them to the test of truth, i.e., of the representation that one makes of it in advance: considered from this angle, these accounts constitute an irreplaceable testimony about what he calls knowledge of the first order , that which proceeds from inadequate ideas, , beginning with opinion which is the most common practice of thought for both individual and collective form. Spinoza thus came to fathom the obscure depths in which people's lives are immersed, under the pressure of forces they do not fully understand , which tends to place them in a state of servitude and ignorance: the Bible is for him a book of truth, not because it delivers truths to be given without discussion, but insofar as it best informs about this state of unknowing and provides invaluable materials for analysis, which a philosophy that is driven solely by the power of the intellect cannot afford to ignore and pass over in silence, pretending that it does not exist. If the Bible interests reason, it is perhaps because of the content to which it refers, it stands at the furthest distance from reason: this rational deficit is at the heart of what Spinoza calls the "theological-political," a composite and moving reality with hidden aspects he undertook to probe. From this point of view, my attempt to philosophize with literature

is indeed in the wake of Spinoza's reading of the Bible: it does not credit literature with already elaborated philosophies; nor does it treat it as a mausoleum, a creation whose value would be sanctioned by an aesthetic judgment and thus preserved, but rather takes it as a field to be worked on, a raw material that one attempts to transform by looking attentively at some of its singularities that may occasionally present themselves as irregularities, which, and I take up the formula that I used earlier, makes one think. Having said that, I do not believe that we can find in Spinoza a "method of reading" that can be applied to literature, only because, if we follow the rules of a once-and-for-all defined method, we inevitably limit it, we render ourselves inattentive to the text and what could be called an event. In this respect, I refer you to what I said earlier about the difficulties raised by the notion of a "reading protocol:" it is each time, that we must find the partialities that allow us to make texts speak, that is to say, to identify the symptoms that can stimulate creative reflection, that produce new forms of thought.

In neurosciences, Spinoza is seen as a very important figure. Antonio Damasio, in his Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain, argues that Spinoza has foreseen the discoveries in biology, as well as the neurological vows on the relation between the mind and body. Damasio sees Spinoza as a proto-biologist. How do you see the relation of Spinoza to neuroscience, or even to psychoanalysis?

PM: Spinoza himself was very interested, as Descartes had been before him, in the medicine of his time. It is clear that the thesis stated at the very beginning of the fifth part of the *Ethics* according to which mental and bodily affections correspond to each other *ad amussim*), which formally opens the perspective of a new psycho-somatic medicine. I say "formally," because this idea, which, in breaking with traditional dualism, revolutionized the conception of the relationship between mind and body , which historically did not bear influence on the development of medical ideas: it was not until the 20th century that this way of seeing was taken seriously and that we had, in retrospect, the revelation that Spinoza, beyond the possibility of any kind of objective guarantee , marked the possibility of thinking in this speculative way. We must therefore be careful not to present him in this respect as a precursor, which is only possible as a projection. It is a fact that contemporary biologists such as Antonio Damasio or Henri Atlan, for example, recognize themselves in Spinoza, and seek to bolster their interpretations and results after the fact, by following a non-speculative path, thus delimiting the scope of their research But, this should not lead one to argue that Spinoza had anticipated and in some way prepared for their scientific approach, for his thinking was in fact on a completely different plane. If Spinoza's

philosophy can be considered as "actual," it is insofar as the ideas and demonstrations found in the text of the *Ethics* set up rational chains which, if not by founding science or substituting it, it occasionally instructs it by allowing a better understanding of the results by using its own means. A *topos* of this kind is, one can say, an *eternactuality*, that breaks with the notion that the past intervenes on the present, leading us to interpret the relation of the first to the second according to the modalities of the "already" and the "not yet," which imply the reference to a finality: it is thus necessary to avoid placing Spinoza's philosophy and neurobiology in the common movement of a history which would unfold on common ground.

If Spinoza's thought has a persistent intelligibility it is because he was careful not to push his philosophy beyond the limits imposed on them by their nature as philosophy, which prevents it from eclipsing the discoveries of science for the simple reason that it [philosophy] is not within their reach. Unlike Descartes, who was convinced that by using a mechanical model one could manufacture a complete knowledge of the laws of bodily nature, Spinoza claimed that "we do not know what a body can do." Today, it seems that we know much more, while scientific experimentation has developed in conditions that are out of all proportion to those available in the seventeenth century: in the light of what we know today, distinctions such as those that Spinoza makes in the postulates of his "little physics" (the set of considerations set out between propositions thirteen and fourteen of the second part of the Ethics) between fluid, soft and hard bodies, rightly appear derisory. We certainly know more, which feeds the illusion that, perhaps, as far as life in general and cerebral life in particular are concerned, the veil of Isis is not far from being lifted. Now, what we can find in Spinoza is precisely the critical device that allows to dissipate this illusion which, by its own logic, inevitably leads to a reductionism, whether it is idealistic as it is the case of the finalist theories of intentionality or materialist as it is the case of the mechanical theories of the transmission of information through bodily channels. If philosophy is able to serve science, it is by bringing its investigations within the limits of simple reason, limits that it is naturally exposed to cross: in this respect what Althusser wrote about the "spontaneous philosophy of the scientists" remains enlightening.

As for psychoanalysis, which is above all, , a caring practice enriched by theory in the precise sense, not “applied” theory, it seems that Spinoza’s advances present strong analogies with psychoanalysis. For instance, in the first twenty propositions of the last part of the *Ethics*, where the emancipatory project takes on the appearance of a real "cure," in which the body and the mind are simultaneously engaged, against the background of affect, including the primordial affect of desire , which it attempts to manage by progressively widening its scope: rereading Spinoza in the light of Freud's Metapsychology can be justified by this

precise point. But this comparison comes up against limits that must not be crossed: and it is precisely the revelation of these limits that makes it enlightening in its own way. The "cure" of the imagination advocated by Spinoza and the "cure" of the Freudian unconscious differ by way of substance. Briefly, we can say: Freud's analysand tells his stories, and for that he requires the mute presence of the analyst to whom he tells them; whereas the objective of Spinoza's ethical subject is to stop telling himself (imaginary) stories, and for that he doesn't need the affective presence of another to whom he can talk, because he doesn't need to pass through the meditated, symbolic realm of language.. The interventions on behalf of the imagination—consist of putting order in the representations directly associated to passionate affects, in order to imagine more and more intelligently ("magis vivide et distinctius") or less and less "simply" (simpliciter)—the following twenty propositions, which end the journey of the whole *Ethics*, set the emancipatory project on a completely different path where the soul is treated as separate from the body and its accidents, allowing it to "feel and experience itself as eternal," rising to the level of the pure and ineffable joys of the "*amor intellectualis Dei*" where the affective and the rational are entirely merged: one is then drawn into an almost mystical realm which is situated beyond the plane of medicine and psychoanalysis. Should we give in to this ultimate drive? This is a question that we have every right to ask ourselves.

> **In what way does a materialist theory of literature allow us to understand that literature forms and shapes ideology? Can we formulate a theory of why a certain form of what you call "false totality" is unavoidable or necessary, and still learn something about its constitution? Otherwise put, does it[false totality] attempt to account for what internally divides and separates the literary work from itself (whereby it becomes a multiplicity)?**

PM: It seemed to me—and this is a working hypothesis—that literature, a complex reality with uncertain frontiers and of which it is impossible to go around (and a fortiori to present a complete theory), can be used as an observer of the mechanisms of ideology: it brings out certain articulations, the limits and the other side of its functioning and possibly the failures or shortcomings. This explains its paradoxical situation: literature is completely immersed in the ideology that constitutes its material surroundings, and at the same time it looks at it from a distance, which allows it to emerge from it and make it emerge from itself. It is both inside and outside, at a subtle turning point where it only takes a little for it to go one way or the other. It can be said that it plays with ideology while at the same time making it play at the risk of making it slip

and sometimes disjoin. It is this equivocal position, between balance and imbalance, between sense and nonsense, that has preoccupied me the most: I have tried to read texts labelled as "literary" in order to identify the points of rupture, the blind spots, where things crack, which forces us to reflect. This approach has nothing to do with the attempt at legitimisation based on the traditional criteria of aesthetics: I have not attempted to distinguish between beautiful forms and others that do not deserve this qualification, which establish a hierarchical classification supported by value of judgments. But neither do I claim that the type of detouring approach I have chosen is exhaustive and invalidates others with which it would compete. To put it bluntly, I am not interested in what literature "is"—which, given the instability of the literary world, is perhaps definitively impossible to know: in this respect, I leave the problem to others—but as to what it 'does,' and as to what one can do with it by maintaining a partisan relationship with it, a partnership that combines complicity and refusal; it is a kind of cat-and-mouse game whereby one never knows who is the cat and who is the mouse. In the context of our present discussion it would be difficult for me to go any further on this point: moreover, I am increasingly reluctant to enter a circularity where theoretical statements of a general nature about "literature" are bound to go round and round ; I prefer to devote myself to "exercises in literary philosophy" a practice which savors particularities– of which there are many – where literary texts, carefully approached from certain angles, and not claiming to exhaust their content or, as we say, their "meaning" leads in an often unexpected way, to doing a little philosophy with them, in their company and on their margins, and perhaps leads to doing philosophy differently.

We are doing this interview in the midst of the pandemic COVID-19. Here one might also be reminded of Spinoza's "the free man does not think of death." In the present context, this is not meant to dismiss the real threat of COVID-19 – as right-wingers, truthers and some on the left do, on the contrary. The difficulty to obey Spinoza's dictum seems to lie in the absurdity of thinking about death in any form as a motivational force. What is your take on this Spinozist line? Might we be so unfree and so thinking about death is a symptom of this?

PM: Spinoza does not say that the free man "does not think of death", but that "he thinks of nothing less than death" (*de nulla re minus quam de morte cogitat*). This strange, roundabout formula, which he decided upon after much reflection, must be taken literally: it means that the free man thinks about death in the mode of "nothing less than," that is to say that he tries to control as much as possible the affects unleashed

by his awareness of his condition of mortal being—would he be free in the absence of this awareness?—linked to his nature as a finite mode, therefore he exerts himself to support, and to live this perspective as an alternative to being dominated by the fear of the death which makes one passive. One must conclude that it is impossible not to think about death at all, except to escape into a world of pure fiction whose representation is even more dangerous than any fatal accident. Death, one cannot stop thinking about it, one always thinks about it, unless one sinks into unconsciousness: all one can do, or try to do, is to think about it, in a way that brings it into being , which is inevitable in any case, and to its proper measure, thus in the mode, of "nothing less than," as something that is going to happen but does not have the importance that the imagination lends to it by forming an inadequate, mutilated and confused idea of it. In other words, the free man is or would be the one who tries to live his death in a peaceful way, in an atmosphere that has nothing morbid or mortifying about it: this is what he has to do best, and of course it is not easy to achieve this. To think of nothing less than death, consists in understanding and accepting that death is an integral part of life, that it is a necessary moment, that it takes place in its course, to the point that the temptation to escape it is not only vain, but fundamentally harmful: it poisons the whole existence by delivering it to despair and madness.

Following this line of reasoning, Spinoza's project would therefore be to remove death and its representation from the jurisdiction of the negative, and consequently to repositize it. What does it mean to repositivize it? It can only mean to apprehend it more and more from a positive point of view, therefore less and less negatively: it is an effort (in the sense of "conatus"), and therefore a tendential movement that launches itself forward without speculating on its outcome. . From this point of view, death as a condition that accompanies the whole of life is one thing that would be difficult and harmful not to think about at all; and death as an event, that is, as an accident, that puts an end to life and cuts short the momentum of the conatus, is another thing, which should not be confused with the previous one. Becoming aware of this distinction liberates us; it makes us more active and less passive. Death as a condition is a necessary determination of our nature: it is consequently the object of certain knowledge, insofar as its cause is in us. Death as an event necessarily occurs, but its cause, which is certainly not in us, must escape us, which affects it with a certain dimension of contingency. Its cause remains unknown because it is not in reality a cause but an infinite multitude of causes whose meeting does not obey any internal or external finality: this is what Spinoza explains in the Appendix to the first part of the *Ethics*, devoted to a radical critique of finality, in the often commented passage where he uses the example of a banal and disconcerting event (a man leaves his house to go and see his friends; as he crosses the threshold of his door, a tile detached from the roof by a strong wind falls

on his head and kills him); if this event seems indeterminate – it is in the gap freed by this absence of determination that the representation of an end comes to lodge itself, to fill the hole in a way – it is because it is too determined, so determined that it is impossible for a finite understanding to master the totality of the chains of which it is a part; if this is understood, one will grant it less importance, one will avoid feeding fears by drowning it under streams of imaginary preoccupations. From this point of view, yes, we can say that the free man does not think about death: he does not think about the death-event, even though he cannot avoid thinking about death-condition, which has another nature because it cannot be reduced to an event determined by an unlimited number of causes which, because of this unlimitedness, must remain unknowable. To think of nothing less than death is to occupy, as best we can, the interval between these two incommensurable figures of death which are death-condition, of which it is possible to form an adequate idea, and death-event, which can only be represented through inadequate ideas.

The analysis I have sketched invalidates the interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy that has long been imposed: that of an absolute rationalism, which has the last word on everything and ensures the absolute triumph of knowledge over ignorance. In contrast, Spinoza embarked on the enterprise of a practical philosophy for which the dividing line between wisdom and ignorance, between the known and the unknown, is never definitively drawn: as one knows more, which increases the chances of being active and thus of living more freely, the domain of the unknown of which one has a share widens, which makes one fall back into passivity. The world as Spinoza sees it is not deflated and serene, but unfinished, full of traps, disquieting and worrying: the infinitely infinite power of substance engenders it by engaging it from the start in an incessant and multidimensional movement of transformation, the end of which we will never see, which inextricably mixes production and devastation. So, for viruses, not to mention other figures of disaster, war, oppression, climate disruption, and others, the best "solution" , in the end, would be to think about them in the mode of "nothing less than" (*de re nulla minus cogitare*), that is, not to think about them while thinking about them.

One last question: in the last years, the notion of communism re-emerged as an important—we would not dare to call it central—category of thinking not only politics, but also for analysing contemporary capitalism from a standpoint that is reducible to what exists already. Do you accredit a (strategic or conceptual) significance or value to this signifier, to communism as an idea that is worth fighting for?

PM: Is there any other idea worth fighting for? I can't think of any. But let's not kid ourselves: nobody knows what communism is. It's an idea that awaits content; it's a practical idea that we cannot know until it's realised, if it's ever realised at all, which we now have far too many reasons to doubt, but which doesn't mean that we should give up on it. Spinoza can perhaps help us get closer to this, insofar as his thinking is nourished by the idea of the "common," which I would be tempted to spell "as-one", or simply "as one." "Like one" is not "one" in the sense of a totality compressed upon itself and definitively obtained owing to this closure: it is a movement or a tendency that one can engage with in order to unify the infinite order of causes and effects, that is to say, more mastery and control over what happens and does not cease to happen in good and in bad ways. It is to cultivate the schema of the ‘‘in between’’, to take up this quite problematic notion that I had on my mind and which I used to reply at some of your precedent questions.

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