

Hegel or Spinoza: Return to a Journey

Pierre Macherey

The formula “philosophical journey” prompts me to clarify my position with respect to work done a little over thirty-five years ago, in a context quite different from the one where its results are now available for reconsideration. From the outset, this change of conjuncture represents a “journey,” which does not arise from isolated particular initiatives, but whose scope is global and refers to what Hegel might call the “spirit of the times.” In 1979, the ideological ebb that marked the eighties had just begun, and one could still imagine that it was a transient phenomenon that would not call into question the effects of the great rupture made ten years earlier on the level of conceptions and practices of collective life. The book I composed at the time, *Hegel ou Spinoza*,¹ remained driven by the idea that the project of changing the world and putting an end to bourgeois ideology made sense and that the task of philosophy was to play its part, producing on its own plane “advances,” as was said at that time. In 2015, we can no longer see things this way: beneath a horizon from which the reference to a revolutionary perspective has been, if not completely erased, at least caused to be reconfigured in a rather different way, what has developed is a rather resigned and deceptive way of looking at things that encourages melancholy, uncertainty, a wait-and-see attitude, or even worry. In this new environment, theses that had been advanced or ventured in hope – let us take up again this formula that Althusser liked: to “shake things up” [*faire bouger les choses*] – no longer have quite the same meaning; and the relationship that is maintained with conceptions inherited from Marxism has been profoundly modified. Yet this does not mean that this relationship has completely come undone: it simply proceeds along other paths, it borrows from different “journeys” that oblige it to revisit a number of acquired certainties, which, as difficult and painful as this revision appears, ultimately turns out to be beneficial. There are several ways to progress, and the one that proceeds backwards, by stepping back, and not forwards, is perhaps not the most fruitless: if Christopher Columbus wound up arriving somewhere – it is not forbidden to regret it – it is because he started on the wrong side, which could be a pretty good illustration of the labor of the negative.

By the force of circumstances, I have therefore been invited to take up from behind a retrospective journey that is not very easy, the content of a work that had been conducted in an atmosphere that was not at all the same as where it is offered to be reread today. Reflecting in advance on what I could say on the occasion of the present intervention, I prepared to argue around the following theme: I would doubtless no longer write this book, *Hegel ou Spinoza*, in the same way now, if only because, in the meantime, I learned a little more about the two poles of this confrontation, of which I only had a rather partial knowledge then, which years of study and teaching practice backed up by the movements

.....
1 Macherey 2011. (Translator’s note).

of life in its two forms, individual and collective, have since enabled me to improve, at least in some respects. And then, in order to target the points on which the analyses I had proposed would have to be reworked, I picked up the book and reread it as closely as possible while trying to identify its approximations and shortcomings. This approach was neither comfortable nor obvious to me and, not without difficulty, led me to the following conclusion: it would doubtless be necessary to present certain things differently, and, moreover, not only to change the form but also to revise the content, to defend new viewpoints, better educated and more refined, responding to the theoretical and practical needs that cannot have remained unchanged. However, once this necessity has been recognized, it remains that today I could not, I would not know how to, write this book other than was done, at least for the most part, taking account of the numerous corrections of detail that would need to be made to it. I can therefore only note the following: for my own account, I have remained roughly at the same point. I have not been able to follow the new journey that should have been completed; I have not been able to follow it; I haven't adopted, concerning the stakes of the relationship of Spinoza to Hegel and of Hegel to Spinoza, a position that would truly be innovative compared to the one that I had so badly defended at the time, and that Althusser had welcomed as a part of the edifice he was trying to build, namely, the elaboration of the philosophy left dormant by Marx, an approach he considered urgently called for by the spirit of new times – times which, seen today, appear very old. Consequently, without any triumphalism, and even with the feeling of being in some respects a failure and of evading an inescapable obligation, I stand by my views: that is to say, I see myself formally bound to assume – no matter how little assured it is when viewed from a distance – an approach, a “journey” that I recognize I am substantially unable to modify, which I leave to others.

To undertake an approach that one feels can or even must be partly outdated can first consist in explaining the reasons that served as initial justifications, therefore, to identify the objectives to which it tried to respond. Those were really situated on two different levels. On the one hand, there was a general concern about the study of philosophy, and more precisely about the texts in which its “journeys” are recorded, that is to say, to consider the institutional categories, the way to proceed in the “history of philosophy” in so far as it constitutes a discipline in its own right, having its place in an academic teaching system: rightly or wrongly, it seemed to me that this could play a significant role in the activity of doing philosophy otherwise. On the other hand, there was, on the plane proper to the conceptual apparatus used by Marxist theory, the specific question of the materialist dialectic, which it was desirable – in order to preserve its plasticity, in the last instance revolutionary – to remove the rigid, and ultimately conservative, straitjacket of “Dia-Mat” in which it had been unduly imprisoned and from which it was not easy to extricate.

Therefore, the journey I had personally taken at the time had a double aspect: on the one hand, it related in general to the way of reading and interrogating philosophers, relying on the specific case represented by these two great “authors” of the tradition of Spinoza and Hegel, generally regarded as classics; on the other hand, it was connected to the project initiated by Althusser of recasting Marxist philosophy in terms of the elucidation of some of its basic principles. It was not self-evident how to adjust these two concerns, one of which at first glance has a strictly conservative import (to read authors correctly is what, in France at least, any philosophy teacher is supposed to know how to do by profession, by professional obligation), while the other goes beyond this context and is even situated in relation to it in a delayed relationship of contestation. To interpose Marx between Spinoza and Hegel: is it not, in the end, to treat Marx himself as an “author,” an author like the others, an author among others, having his place in the official organizational chart of philosophy and no longer able to move? A follower of Bourdieu would have no trouble in diagnosing in this regard a “lector” approach, entangled in the nets of scholastic reason, which imagines that by unraveling texts it can help to change the world, and that the status of the dialectic, as a revolutionary method, is also the business of historians of philosophy applied to read their “authors” correctly, who are therefore frozen by the commemorative gesture that puts them off course. It is indeed to this objection that I exposed myself by engaging in a double effort practiced on a tightrope, which could only wind up with fragile, debatable results, resting on presuppositions whose validity, as much as it ever was, has ceased to be obvious today, which I would not try to deny.

To begin with, let us return to the first point, the one concerning method in the “history of philosophy,” that is to say, concretely, the reading of texts deposited in the great memorial of philosophy. The proponents of analytic philosophy have often criticized philosophers who have been identified as “continental” for their refusal to address directly the real problems with which philosophy should be concerned, such as whether coffee is sweet in the cup or in the mouth, timeless problems to which they have formed the bad habit of substituting questions on doctrines as they were elaborated and written down in their time by such or such a philosopher, under the authority of each and from the perspective that was his or her own. This attitude, in their eyes, is ultimately relativistic to the extent that, by historicizing reflection, it reintroduces into it – with the principle of temporality and its accidents – variation and consequently a certain degree of uncertainty which, in the long run, makes philosophical problems insoluble, or at least indefinitely defers their resolution. In reality, this criticism is not new: Descartes advocated, in order to build a system of truths based on certain principles, and capable of lasting, to skip provisionally, and in fact symbolically, what the philosophers who had preceded him had

upheld; and Hegel, in his official reports on the teaching of philosophy in high schools – he, who has been credited or blamed for having introduced historicity into the proper order of philosophy – proposed to remove from the curricula all that relates to the past history of philosophy, because these references according to him could only comfort the uninformed minds of young students with the idea that philosophy amounts to a free play of colorful opinions and shake their confidence in the power of reason. In the background of this reluctance to maintain philosophical activity under a horizon of historicity – a reluctance shared even by Hegel himself, who was particularly concerned not to be accused of historicizing empiricism and flattered himself for having reinstated the reference to the absolute in the field of philosophical thought – there is the concern expressed by Kant that, once introduced or brought back into the disputed arena of a *Kampfplatz*, this activity is condemned to go in circles without being able to escape. So, how to put an end to this inexpiable struggle of philosophies if not by dismissing the history that, by deploying truth on a potentially indefinite timeline, delays its recollection, thus preventing it from happening in itself and for itself? Althusser himself professed: philosophy has no history, which did not prevent him from defining it elsewhere as “class struggle in theory,” revealing that his main concern was not after all to pacify the steps into the absolute.

Perhaps one should go back to Althusser’s formula by simplifying the statement that he had highly politicized – and somewhat overpoliticized, which was perhaps an indirect way of depoliticizing it – and be content to say that philosophy is “struggle in theory”: it thus represents, at work in the production of knowledge and the practical implications associated with it, that which arises from the spirit of struggle, that is to say, fundamentally, the negativity that labors at its heart, wherever it takes place, the search for truth. But this struggle is without beginning or end: permanently destined to be revived, which leads it to reconfigure how its stakes are reached, it therefore involves neither victors nor vanquished, it leads nowhere. From this perspective, the particular conflicts between philosophers and the great quarrels that mark the history of thought – the quarrel between the friends of the forms and the friends of matter, the quarrel about universals, the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns, the quarrel of pantheism, the quarrel of anti-humanism, to mention only some of the most famous – are far from being accidents on the journey on which it is advisable to close one’s eyes modestly by returning them onto the subaltern terrain of a history of ideas understood as a history of opinions not having an authentically philosophical value. Rather, these conflicts and quarrels are very instructive on the occasion of which emerge the stakes of the reflection that the rut of speculative rumination rejects in the background or artificially flattens. This means disabling them under the guise of

identifying and systematizing the results. By attacking the disturbing relationship, mixing agreements and disagreements, which further destabilizes it, which passes between the philosophical positions of Spinoza and Hegel, and by trying to reconstruct the logic so illogical at the end of the exchanges that they maintain at a distance, concretely while making them have a dialogue, I was finally doing nothing but putting into practice the idea that philosophy is first and foremost a struggle in theory, a struggle that never ceases to recommence, to continue, to relaunch itself in new directions; which is why, perhaps, philosophy would have no history as understood in the sense of a history whose great narrative would lead step by step to an end, and which would consist, as Hegel argues, in the process of its own self-determination.

Brunschvicg said: Spinoza is Hegel without the leaven of becoming. And Althusser himself, in the chapter of his *Elements of Self-Criticism* devoted to Spinoza, remarked melancholically: "Spinoza will always miss what Hegel gave Marx, the contradiction." But isn't becoming, contradiction, in the sense that Hegel gives to these concepts, also that which, under the guise of the magical operation of absolute negation, is destined to put an end to becoming, and to resolve contradiction, that is, ultimately to suppress them? In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel complains to Spinoza for having "harmed the negative." By this Hegel meant that, when Spinoza maintains that *omnis determinatio est negatio* – a formula Hegel lends to Spinoza, but that in reality he himself completely fabricated in order to criticize him – he definitively linked the negative to the chain of finite determinations and bad infinity, which prevents him from freeing himself by operating the movement of return onto oneself which, in its very momentum, transforms the negation into the negation of the negation, that is, as a tool of its own dissolution/resolution/sublation. Then could it not be said that, by taking Spinoza as the target of his attack, Hegel tried to repress his own apprehension about a negative that, as he says himself, would be only negative, and at the same time, to appease his fear of a becoming that would be pure becoming, that is to say, which would not lead to an end for which it would be destined from the start?

It is this question that I had tried to raise by arguing that, when Hegel rereads Spinoza, in fact he exposes himself, he projects himself through the prism that Spinoza offers him, and, through a movement in return reveals at the same time, in the mirror that he stretched out to himself, his own obsessions: then, at the same time as the reading of Spinoza by Hegel, is imposed the rereading of Hegel that Spinoza encourages to do because of the relentless resistance that he continues to oppose to his reappropriation by the system of absolute rationality projected by Hegel. In the momentum of this re-reading, one might be tempted to uphold, by returning term for term, the theses that had been brought up at the beginning: Was Spinoza without the true negative,

expurgated from the proclamation and promise of his resolution that gives legitimacy and meaning? Was Spinoza without the real principle of historicity, that is, without becoming, meaning a becoming without origin or end, and producing gradually the modal forms of its rationalization that had not been programmed a priori at the start?

In truth, things turn out to be infinitely more complicated: to take into consideration and try to elucidate the relationship that passes between Hegel and Spinoza is to set in motion a turnstile whose rotation continues without stopping. It certainly cannot be denied that Hegel proposed an exceptionally strong reading of Spinoza, that is to say, a partisan reading in which his own philosophy is fully engaged, to the point of not leaving unscathed from the confrontation thus initiated. On the contrary, one can only admire the audacity and scale of such a venture, which is accompanied by a risk-taking whose magnitude locks in place when one becomes aware of it. It is inevitable that this reading of an exceptional power, which operates in the open, is downright tendentious: Hegel does not hesitate to do violence to the statements actually made by Spinoza in order to better invest them by making them enter into the logic of his own system of thought, concretely by making him speak with his words, and by taking him at the word of his own words – Hegel's. To achieve this, he must reinvent Spinoza in large part, recreating him from scratch by relying on certain elements of his discourse detached from their context (mainly the definitions of the first part of the *Ethics* and some statements included in the *Letters*).

But this practice is in reality common to all philosophers when they undertake to characterize their position by distinguishing it from another they regard a *contrario* as a witness of their own originality: even when Leibniz comments on Locke by following step by step the text composed by the latter, he is dealing with an entity that could be called “Leibniz's Locke,” and we do not see how it could proceed otherwise. Likewise, the *Gorgias* of Plato probably has little, or even nothing at all, to do with the real Gorgias of history of which only a few vestiges remain that can invalidate this reading, which is, one might say, a convenient reading, which does not make it any less interesting once the limits within which it remains closed have been specified. In all these cases, there is unquestionably abuse, but this abuse is in its way legitimate; in any case it is philosophically significant, to the extent that it is committed within the framework and dynamics of an experience of thought that cannot afford to be completely naive and innocent, which is the condition for it to stimulate reflection by orienting it in a certain sense, meaning in a well-defined sense, thus opening up a space for discussion within which it is open for others then to rush in. This is why we should be grateful to Hegel for having proposed a figure of Spinoza that mainly holds attention by the way it twists the original, so far as this “original” itself remains and can be attained independently of all the images of him that have been

elaborated according to it and after it, and that constitute what is called in Italy his “critical fortune,” that is, his posterity.

If the reading that Hegel proposes of Spinoza is faulty – as is easy to demonstrate, for example, on the subject of the interpretation he proposes of the concept of attribute – it must therefore be specified that it is systematically faulty, which means that it cannot be considered only by default and rejected. How does Hegel go about it? He extracts the notion of attribute from its context in order to insert it into the substance/attribute/mode sequence, a triad-shaped sequence in which the attribute as he interprets it formally holds the position of the medium term, and that he explains roughly by reducing it to the following terms: infinitely infinite (the substance)/ infinite in its kind (the attribute)/ finite (the mode). Thus configured, this sequence presents itself linearly as a forward-and-downward movement, without the possibility of going back: it is a process of degradation, of loss, during which substance consumes and gradually depletes its primary energy, to the point that it annihilates itself by blending into the details of a world that is in reality a non-world; thus is justified the label of “acosmism” that Hegel attributes to Spinoza’s thought. Naturally, if we look a little more closely at the texts, it does not work: on the one hand, the attribute does not play in Spinoza the role of an intermediary between substance and its modes; on the other hand, the whole that constitutes the modalized reality of the existing things, “natured nature,” is not a chaos abandoned to the vagaries of finitude, but it is marked by the seal of infinity, which testifies to the doctrine of infinite modes on which Hegel totally overlooks. If one follows Hegel’s interpretation, it becomes impossible to understand that substance is entirely present in the smallest of its modes, where its power occurs *certo ac determinato modo*, which is the key to the *conatus* doctrine that Hegel also overlooks, for if he took it into account, his entire reading would be invalidated. However, in carrying out these elisions and in committing these errors, which are by no means accidental, and which could be called true errors, to the extent that they hit the nail on the head precisely because they concern particularly sensitive points – we can call them critical points, where everything changes – Hegel points out the importance in Spinoza himself of themes such as infinite modes or the *conatus*, which he had to eliminate or discreetly put in brackets in order to sustain his interpretation of Spinoza, which allows him to appropriate it a *contrario* to his own system, because of what, according to him, is lacking.

As a result, one could say that Hegel’s reading of Spinoza is a kind of symptomatic reading, in the sense that it consists mainly in reading in the text what it does not say, from which it follows that it says in fact something other than what it seems to say. But at the same time, by a sort of backfire, this reading is transformed into a symptomatic reading of Hegel by himself, which makes it possible to detect the articulations on which his own way of thinking rests, such as the theme of absolute

negation, or negation that comes back to itself in order to deny itself, the engine of the dynamic by which, according to Hegel's formula, "substance becomes subject." So, when Hegel declares that he wants to demarcate himself from the fact that, in Spinoza, there is no becoming subject of substance, he is perfectly right, and he even goes straight to a fundamental point: substance as Spinoza conceives it is in no way destined to become subject, whether it is a subject of itself or a subject of its affections; if there is a trial of substance as he conceives it – which is by no means immobile and massified as is too often said: on the contrary, it is constantly in motion, which is the condition for it to produce reality in infinitely varied forms – it is not the one by which it would attain self-awareness.

As astonishing as it may seem, by dint of departing from Spinoza, by taking liberties with the letter and spirit of his text, Hegel winds up returning to him and saying something essential about him. By engaging with Spinoza in a test of strength from which the spirit of compromise is absent, Hegel has revealed the stakes at the very heart of Spinoza's enterprise, stakes that are also at the heart of his own enterprise, from which it results that their relationship is not at all a false encounter, built solely on a series of misunderstandings: they do indeed encounter and clash, a test from which they both come out truer, for eternity, such that the struggle in theory, which is the essence of philosophical activity, changes them in themselves. This is what I had tried to report, in the title of my book, by playing on the ambiguity in the French language of the little word "*ou*," which signals both alternative [*aut aut*] and equivalence [*sive*]. Spinoza and Hegel, through the distance that separates them, are linked, inseparably united one to the other, as if they were writing on the back and front of the same sheet of paper.

Their connection is not due to chance: it is explained by fundamental reasons, which concern the way one understands the negative, becoming, that is to say, the process or set of processes during which, at the heart of a world dominated by causal relations of necessity, emerges a liberating project, an ethics that is both individual and collective opening up the possibility, let's return to this formula, "of shaking things up." On this last point, Hegel is very quiet in the context of the discussion in which he engages with Spinoza: his lecture in the history of philosophy devoted to Spinoza ends with the remark that in Spinoza there is also an ethics, which he sums up in broad strokes, by reducing it to the treatment of the problem of evil. He did not see, or refused to see, that the philosophical enterprise of Spinoza is thoroughly – and from the start, in the strictly ontological considerations that the first part of his work develops – supported and animated by an ethical and political concern. He did not realize that if in Spinoza substance does not become subject, which is quite true, it is because, in a certain way, from a certain angle, the condition of "subject," in the sense that

ethical activity can give to this term, is involved in it at the very beginning in its very nature as substance, without it having to pass through the stage of self-awareness. Indeed, in Spinoza, there is not first an ontology and then an ethics, which would be its derivation or application, but both an ontology and an ethics, which can be distinguished in theory only from the viewpoint of abstract understanding; whereas, in fact, in practice, from the perspective of the third kind of knowledge, they are indistinguishable. This explains why Hegel did not understand much about Spinoza's ethics, which he relegated to the status of a subsidiary inquiry, just as he did not understand the importance of his politics, which he eliminated purely and simply, deleted with a stroke of the pen from his reading, whereas, having participated in the edition of the *Theological-Political Treatise* carried out in Jena at the very beginning of the nineteenth century, he must certainly have known about it.

To become aware of the fact that Hegel is united to Spinoza precisely by what separates him from him is to find oneself immersed in "dialectics" – a dialectic practiced in action and not only ruminated on at a distance by means of pure speculation. It is in this sense that Hegel's reading of Spinoza, and incidentally the reading of this reading, is dialectical, and not a reading that is frozen, stopped, blocked on insurpassable certainties: it sets thought into motion; it is a reading that makes one think, that forces one to reflect, that is, one would say in Spinoza's language, to become more active, therefore, freer. And, more precisely, it is a reading that itself is in motion; despite its systematic appearances that at first glance contribute to freeze it, it moves. Between Spinoza as he appears in the different parts of the *Science of Logic* and the one reviewed in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, professed some ten years later by Hegel, there is not opposition, reversal term by term, but a shift of emphasis: the first is basically a monist, a thinker of Being, who tends towards dualism, thus an Oriental inclined towards the West; the second is a dualist of the Cartesian type (the reference to Descartes, absent from the passages of the *Science of Logic* devoted to Spinoza, appears, and in the most sustained way, only with the *Lectures*), a reflexive thinker of Essence who, however, remains entangled in monism, like a Westerner who hasn't cut his oriental roots yet. It is around this paradox, this anomaly that represents a two-faced philosophy, torn in itself between two poles, an ontologism of the Parmenidean type and a rational formalism of the type he attributes to Descartes, which Hegel has turned into an intellectual leaven, and not just a theoretical fact, to take or leave as it is. And if you think about it, you realize that this anomaly that Hegel identifies in Spinoza is in Hegel himself: it would not be absurd to write, after a book entitled *Hegel ou Spinoza*, and in light of its results, another book entitled – but then there would have to be found a publisher willing to accept this somewhat bizarre title and probably hardly saleable – *Hegel ou Hegel*, maintaining the ambiguity attached to

the use of the word “ou” in the French language. In a book of this kind there is no longer any question of a monolithic thought engulfed in its system and revolving in its circle, but of a philosophical activity carried in the momentum that pushes it forward without succeeding in putting an end to this movement: in fact, after Hegel there is something like “Marx or Nietzsche”, a formula in which “or” works again as a signal of uncertainty.

The best alternative to Hegel, to the “idealist” Hegel whose shell Marx declared to want to crack in order to free the kernel, would basically be Hegel himself: for Hegel is not so “Hegelian,” entangled in his system, as is generally imagined – just as Marx himself said he was not a “Marxist,” nor was Nietzsche as “Nietzschean” as is claimed. Hegel, in fact, is not only a moment in the history of philosophy intended to make us the object of a retrospective look, but is in the present or, if one prefers, *sub specie aeternitatis* – these are two ways of saying the same thing – an incentive to think in action that is constantly offered to be taken up and relaunched on new bases. To have done with Hegel, to throw him into the rubbish heap of past ideas, who we would no longer need at all to do philosopher – as a thoroughgoing Nietzscheanism asserts – is an absurdity whose price to pay would be heavy. Having admitted this, it is no longer permissible to return materialism and idealism back-to-back, making them the mutually exclusive terms of a binary opposition. In the period immediately preceding that in which I wrote *Hegel or Spinoza*, great importance was attached to the motto: “One divides into two,” which I myself had taken up to name a contribution to the issue of *Kulturrevolution* devoted to Althusser on the occasion of his seventieth birthday. But why would one divide into only two? That the destination of One is to divide, one can easily admit, which amounts to affirming that one cannot think One without also thinking at the same time its division – and the negative is ultimately nothing else, that is to say, the fact that everywhere, it divides and it “is” divided, and that, by dividing, it becomes, it historicizes and it globalizes; but that this division must stop at two, while it does not cease to offer itself to be recommenced, relaunched in new directions – this is what is no longer at all obvious.

This brings me back finally to the formula “Philosophical Journeys” in the plural: the idea according to which philosophy would have to take only one journey, which would be the right one, its royal road, the one that leads it straight to its goal, should simply be abandoned. And with it, to return to the question of reading texts, we should also renounce doctrinal purity: true philosophers, those who make things happen simply because, after them, there are things that can no longer be said in the same way – and indisputably Spinoza and Hegel are among them – are not “authors” whose signature would guarantee a total adherence to oneself that would make them permanently irrefutable, unsurpassable, unattackable, and consequently secluded once and for all in their own viewpoint from which

one could no longer dislodge them. If I had the ability, today I would try to write a book that I would call *Spinoza ou Spinoza*, in which I would explain – giving again to the word “ou” the two values of equivalence and alternative – that I am no longer at all certain that Spinoza, who was finally no more Spinozist than Hegel was Hegelian or Marx was Marxist, would be in all respects in agreement with himself, which in my view makes him not less but even more interesting philosophically.

Translated by Ted Stolze

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Macherey, Pierre 2011, *Hegel or Spinoza*, translated by Susan M. Ruddick, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press