

Spinoza

Christopher Norris

I have laboured carefully, not to mock, lament, or execrate human actions, but to understand them; and, to this end, I have looked upon passions, such as love, hatred, anger, envy, ambition, pity, and the other perturbations of the mind, not in the light of vices of human nature, but as properties, just as pertinent to it, as are heat, cold, storm, thunder, and the like to the nature of the atmosphere, which phenomena, though inconvenient, are yet necessary, and have fixed causes, by means of which we endeavour to understand their nature. (Spinoza, *Political Treatise*)

No one else during the century 1650–1750 remotely rivalled Spinoza's notoriety as the chief challenger of the fundamentals of revealed religion, received ideas, tradition, morality, and what was everywhere regarded, in absolutist and non-absolutist states alike, as divinely constituted political authority. (Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750*)

I am utterly amazed, utterly enchanted! I have a *precursor*, and what a precursor! I hardly knew Spinoza: that I should have turned to him just *now*, was inspired by 'instinct'. Not only is his over-tendency like mine – namely, to make all knowledge the *most powerful* affect – but in five main points of his doctrine I recognize myself; this most unusual and loneliest thinker is closest to me precisely in these matters: he denies the freedom of the will, teleology, the moral world-order, the unegoistic, and evil. (Friedrich Nietzsche, postcard to Franz Overbeck).

I believe in Spinoza's God, who reveals himself in the lawful harmony of the world, not in a God who concerns himself with the fate and the doings of mankind. (Albert Einstein)

Pure immanence, no thought of worlds elsewhere;
Mere superstition to think otherwise.
What price your mind-stuff minus body's share?

Yet I misspeak myself: to say that they're
Close kin's just two-bit Descartes in disguise.
Pure immanence, no thought of worlds elsewhere.

Try as you might to reunite that pair
Still my reproach to his sad ghost applies:
What price your mind-stuff minus body's share?

Though Platonists dreamed of a matter rare
Or superfine as soul, their dream-talk lies:
Pure immanence, no thought of worlds elsewhere.

The trouble is, those crypto-dualists care
Above all to revile my dread surmise:
What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?

'Deus sive natura': they can't bear
To think just what that phrase of mine implies:
Pure immanence, no thought of worlds elsewhere.

It's why the rabbis and the priests declare
Me heretic - for venturing to advise
'What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?'

They deem this doctrine one that's sure to square
With thinking soul as well as body dies:
Pure immanence, no thought of worlds elsewhere.

Still those there are who count it all hot air,
That soul-talk, yet whose spirits touch the skies:
What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?

And those there'll be with soulful thoughts to spare,
Like sage Novalis, who'll soon recognize
Pure immanence, no thought of worlds elsewhere.

'A God-intoxicated mystic': there
You have me, Saint Spinoza in his eyes;
What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?

If truth be told, both parties greatly err
Though naught's to gain by talk of compromise:
Pure immanence, no thought of worlds elsewhere.

It's this root principle for which I'll dare
Disturb the peaceful way of life I prize:
What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?

'Ultimi barbarorum!': my one flare-
Up moment when the mob made hackles rise.
Pure immanence, no thought of worlds elsewhere.

They killed my patron, dragged him by the hair,
But let's cut all this sin-talk down to size:
What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?

The elders ask me: which God hears your prayer,
Christian, or Jewish?, but I'll not baptize
Pure immanence: no thought of worlds elsewhere.

My revolution's long Eighteenth Brumaire
Is that which comes around when no one cries
'What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?'

Fast forward now and witness how *l'affaire*
Spinoziste gives enlighteners their highs:
Pure immanence, no thought of worlds elsewhere.

Yet it's a curse, this shockwave power to scare
That every call of kind and kin defies.
What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?

'Ecrasez l'infâme': fine for bold Voltaire
A century hence, but I'm the first who tries
Pure immanence, no thought of worlds elsewhere.

'Of all great thinkers the least doctrinaire'
They'll say, though here's one tag to memorise:
What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?

Fast forward again: see how the god-squad snare
Us with their latest test-of-faith surprise.
Pure immanence, no dream of worlds elsewhere.

Still, let's not say their tactics are unfair
When immanence with faith so boldly vies:
What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?

Almost we'll need a covert nom-de-guerre,
Us Spinozists, if we're to exercise
Pure immanence, no dream of worlds elsewhere.

Yet times there'll be when world-reformers swear
By us and our faith-shaking enterprise:
What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?

Let their reproaches and abuse run ne'er
So high, still our composure signifies
Pure immanence, no dream of worlds elsewhere.

Now I sit low on my lens-grinder's chair
As shredded lungs my choice of trade chastise.
'What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?'

The clerics taunt me like a tethered bear
Though I think cheerfully of my demise:
Pure immanence, no dream of worlds elsewhere.

And should you deem it reason for despair,
This thought of mine, then let me emphasize:
What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?
Pure immanence, no thought of worlds elsewhere.

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