

Spinoza, Althusser, and the Question of Humanism

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Abstract: The myth of humanism – the view of the human subject as the end of creation and as being endowed with free will – was the subject of a seething critique by Benedict de Spinoza. Althusser was well aware of these strands of Spinoza’s anti-humanism, and it was partly by virtue of these strands that Althusser was so much attracted to Spinoza’s philosophy. Still, from another perspective, Althusser was far more of a humanist than Spinoza, and it is the primary aim of this short essay to illuminate the ways in which Althusser – and his disciples – might have failed to appreciate the full extent of Spinoza’s attack on humanism.

Keywords: Althusser; Spinoza; anti-humanism; God; infinity.

“Spinoza’s philosophy introduced an unprecedented philosophical revolution of all time, perhaps the greatest philosophical revolution of all time, insofar as we can regard Spinoza as Marx’s only direct ancestor, from the philosophical standpoint.”¹

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Introduction

In a memorable moment in his celebrated book, *For Marx*, Althusser announces:

It is impossible to know anything about men except on the absolute precondition that the philosophical (theoretical) myth of man is reduced to ashes [*la condition absolue de réduire en cendres*]. So any thought that appeals to Marx for any kind of restoration of a theoretical anthropology or humanism is no more than ashes, *theoretically*.²

The myth of humanism ³– the view of the human subject as the end of creation and as being endowed with free will – was the subject of a seething critique by Benedict de Spinoza. Althusser was well aware of these strands of Spinoza’s anti-humanism, and it was partly by virtue of these strands that Althusser was so much attracted to Spinoza’s philosophy.

Still, from another perspective, Althusser was far more of a humanist than Spinoza, and it is the primary aim of this short essay to illuminate the ways in which Althusser – and his disciples – might have failed to appreciate the full extent of Spinoza’s attack on humanism.

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1 Althusser and Balibar 1977b, p. 102. I would like to thank Zach Gartenberg, Mogens Laerke and Neta Stahl for their most helpful comments on earlier drafts of this piece.

2 Althusser 1977a, pp229-30, p. 236.

3 For a detailed discussion of the definitions of humanism (and anti-humanism), see my Melamed 2010, pp.149-50. Specifically, I do not have in mind here the notion of renaissance humanism which is more of a historical, than theoretical, category.

Part 1: The Predecessor

Louis Althusser had an enormous influence on the development of French Spinoza scholarship toward the end of the twentieth century.⁴ While Althusser did not compose any monograph dedicated squarely to Spinoza, Spinoza seemed to be a permanent interlocutor in Althusser's writing. In many ways, Althusser saw Spinoza not only as Marx's predecessor,⁵ but even as anticipating (and influencing) Althusser's own anti-humanist reading of Marx.

Spinoza was a writer who rejected the fundamental role of the Cartesian concept of the subjectivity of the *cogito*. He contented himself with putting forward as a fact: 'man thinks',⁶ without drawing any substantial consequences from this... *I later took from [Spinoza's thought] my description of history and of truth as process without a subject (providing the origin and basis of all meaning) and without end (without any pre-established eschatological destination); for by refusing to believe in the end as an original cause, I truly came to think as a materialist.*⁷

Spinoza's strict and uncompromising determinism, his disposal of final causes, as well as his radical rejection of the Cartesian (and Kantian) cult of the subject exerted a momentous attraction upon Althusser,⁸ but there was another decisive issue: Spinoza's analysis of religion.

What I discovered in Spinoza (as well as the well-known appendix to book I⁹) was a formidable theory of religious ideology, an 'apparatus of thought [*appareil de pensée*]' which turns the world

4 For an excellent discussion and overview of French Spinozism, see Laerke 2021

5 See Althusser 1977a, p.78, n. 40; p. 75, n. 40.

6 See E2a2. Unless otherwise marked, all references to Spinoza's works are to Curley's translation: *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2 vols. For the Latin and Dutch original text, I have relied on Gebhardt's critical edition. I cite the original texts according to the volume, page and line number of this edition (for example, III/17/5). I use the following standard abbreviations for Spinoza's works: TTP – *Theological-Political Treatise*, Ep. – Letters. Passages in the *Ethics* will be referred to by means of the following abbreviations: a(-xiom), c(-orollary), p(-roposition), s(-cholium) and app(-endix); 'd' stands for either 'definition' (when it appears immediately to the right of the part of the book), or 'demonstration' (in all other cases).

7 Althusser 1933, p.217, Althusser 1992, p.249. Italics added.

8 "By its radical criticism of the central category of imaginary illusion, *the Subject*, it reached into the heart of bourgeois philosophy, which since the fourteenth century has been built on the foundation of the legal ideology of the Subject. *Spinoza's resolute anti-Cartesianism consciously directs itself to this point...* Spinoza showed us the secret alliance between Subject and Goal which 'mystifies' the Hegelian dialectic." Althusser 1976, pp.136-7. Italics added. Cf. Althusser and Balibar 1977b, p.40.

9 Althusser obviously refers to the appendix to Part One of the *Ethics*. Veasey's English translation of *L'avenir* inserts here an erroneous and misleading reference to "*Tractatus*."

upside down and takes causes as ends;¹⁰ the whole thing elaborated in terms of its relationship to social subjectivity. What's a 'cleansing' operation it proved to be!¹¹

For Althusser, Spinoza's discussion of religion in the TTP provided a model of a penetrating analysis of the function of ideology. Both in the preface to the TTP and in its seventeenth chapter, Spinoza describes in great detail the socio-psychological mechanism which Moses employed to create social cohesion in the ancient Hebrew State without the use, or even threat, of brute force.

Frequently, Althusser describes the transition from ideology to science as a transition from *imaginatio* – Spinoza's first (and inadequate) kind of cognition, to *ratio*, the second¹² (and adequate) kind of cognition.¹³ Moreover, Althusser also ascribes to Spinoza the crucial realization that ideology is *inescapable*:

As is well known, the accusation of being in ideology only apply to others, never to oneself (unless one is really a Spinozist or a Marxist, which in this matter, is to be exactly the same thing). Which amounts to saying that ideology has no outside (for itself), but at the same time that it is nothing but outside (for science and reality). Spinoza explained this completely two centuries before Marx, who practiced it but without explaining it in detail.¹⁴

As we shall shortly see, the inescapable ideology of Marxism – even Althusserian Marxism –was: humanism.¹⁵

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10 See E1app (II/80/10-14): "This doctrine concerning the end turns nature completely upside down. For what is really a cause, it considers as an effect, and conversely [NS: what is an effect it considers as a cause]. What is by nature prior, it makes posterior. And finally, what is supreme and most perfect, it makes imperfect."

11 Althusser 1993, p.216; Althusser 1992, p. 248. Cf. Althusser 2003, p. 128.

12 On the development of Spinoza's distinction between the three kinds of cognition, see Melamed 2013.

13 Althusser 1977a, p.78, n. 40; Althusser 2005, p. 75, n. 40. Cf. Althusser 1976, p. 141, and Peden 2014, pp.147-8.

14 Althusser 1971, p. 175.

15 "Marx's theoretical anti-humanism, by relating it to its conditions of existence, recognizes a necessity for humanism as *ideology*, a conditional necessity" Althusser 1977a, p. 231 (cf. p. 229). Cf. Althusser and Balibar 1977b, p.314.

Part 2: Taming Spinoza's Anti-Humanism: Secularism qua Ideology

One of the most salient features of the Spinoza renaissance in French philosophy of the 1970s and 80s was the fact that with the notable exception of Martial Gueroult, the vast majority of the scholars involved in this endeavor were Marxists and leftists. The tension between the secularist ideology of Marxism and some of the foundational ideas of the *Ethics* generated some amusing constellations. Thus, in a late interview, the formidable Spinoza scholar Alexandre Matheron reflected upon the beginning of his serious engagement with the *Ethics* in the 1950s: "I was much more interested in the fifth part of the *Ethics* from the moment I took my distance from the Communist Party."¹⁶

Obviously, the fifth part of the *Ethics* with its celebrated doctrine of *amor Dei intellectualis* is not – to put things mildly – the first occasion on which ostensibly religious concepts appear in the *Ethics*. Of course, one can always join Leo Strauss and suggest that the entire edifice of Spinoza's metaphysics with its extremely precise, innovative and elaborate proof of God's existence – proposition 1 to 11 of Part One of the *Ethics* – was merely meant to deceive the *vulgus* and hide Spinoza's secretive atheism.¹⁷ As we have just learned from the presidency of Donald Trump, one should not underestimate the capacities of conspiracy theorists. The hermeneutics employed by Strauss would allow him also to infer secret atheism even from the phone directory of the Vatican. In another work, I argue that Strauss' conspiracy theory fails to make sense of the basic doctrines of both the *Ethics* and the TTP.¹⁸ Althusser's writing on these issues is far less sophomoric than Strauss', and his allusions to Spinoza's alleged Maoist guerilla warfare are more charming than Strauss' conspiracies.¹⁹ But still, when I read carefully Althusser's announcement: "Spinoza began with God, and deep down inside (I believe it,²⁰ after the entire tradition of his worst enemies) he was (as were da Costa and so many other Portuguese Jews of his time) an atheist" – I cannot avoid the suspicion of deep ideology (and self-deception) at work.²¹

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16 Matheron 2020, p. 359.

17 Strauss 1988, p. 189. For critical discussion of Strauss, see Melamed, forthcoming b.

18 Melamed, forthcoming b.

19 "A supreme strategy: Spinoza began by taking over the chief stronghold of the adversary, or rather he established himself as if he were his own adversary... Military speaking, this revolutionary philosophical strategy recalls more than anything else the theory or urban guerilla and encirclement of cities by the countryside dear to Mao." Althusser 1997, pp. 9-10.

20 Notice the role of *belief* in this sentence. The alleged atheism of Da Costa and "the many Portuguese Jews" is just another secular fairytale, but we have no time to discuss this issue here. For a critique of Yirmiyahu Yovel's theories about the conversos, see my Melamed 2011.

21 Althusser 1997, p. 9.

In his later writings, Althusser identifies Spinoza's God as 'the Void [*le vide*]', and Spinoza's philosophy as an instance of the 'philosophy of the Void.'²² Althusser pursues several routes in order to reach the identification of Spinoza's God with 'the Void.'

Saying that one 'begins with God', or the Whole, or the unique substance, and making it understood that one 'begins with nothing', is, basically, the same thing: what difference is there between the Whole and nothing [*quelle différence entre le Tout et rien*]?²³

Now, one may genuinely wonder to what extent the Void could be that thing which – as Spinoza writes at the opening of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* – “once found and acquired, would continuously give me the greatest joy to eternity [*quo invento, et acquisito, continua, ac summâ in æternum fruerer lætitiâ*].”²⁴ True, unlike the perishable goods of wealth, honor, and sensual pleasure,²⁵ the Void is not a subject of false hopes: the Void is dead. It perished, and it will not die again. Still, why should we love the essentially perished being, and how precisely could it fill us with infinite joy?

There are plenty of empty synagogues today (especially in Europe), and if what Spinoza amounted to today is just another saint for the new – or, by now, old – cult of secularism (or yet represented another stepping stone in our “ascent” to secularism), then I can only sincerely hope that Althusser's manichean Spinozism of 'the Void' is able to rescue a genuine sense of *beatitudo* and “greatest joy to eternity” for its believers. Still, another issue needs to be clarified before we say farewell.

In a recent, elegant and beautiful piece, P.-F. Moreau suggested that “Spinoza is a thinker of finitude; the infinite for Spinoza is a means to think the finite in the most positive way possible.”²⁶ My high esteem for Moreau's work notwithstanding, I tend to see things in almost the opposite way.

The absolute infinity of God with which Spinoza opens the *Ethics* (E1p6) creates a perspective from which the egocentric claims and pretensions of humanity appear somewhat pathetic. It is this perspective that allows Spinoza to proclaim that “there is no proportion between

22 Althusser 2006, p. 176 | Althusser 1994, p. 549. For a somewhat different reading of the nature of 'the void,' see Lewis 2018, pp. 34-5. Cf. Peden 2014, p. 132.

23 Althusser 2006, p. 176; Althusser 1994, p.551. This view comes quite close to genuine ontological nihilism, since at the same time Althusser does not hesitate to assert that for Spinoza “anything which can exist never exists anywhere other than in God” (Althusser 2006, p. 177).

24 Spinoza, *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, §1 (II/5/16).

25 Spinoza, *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, §§3-4.

26 Moreau 2019, p. 56.

the finite and the infinite; so *the difference between the greatest, most excellent creature and God is the same as that between the least creature and God.*²⁷ From this perspective, human hubris is indeed “reduced to ashes.”

The vantage point of the cathedral of absolute infinity also allows Spinoza to claim (*pace* Moreau?): “being finite is really, in part, a negation” (E1p8s1).²⁸ Spinoza’s definition of God as the absolutely infinite plays an important role in his critique of anthropomorphic religion, but this very notion of absolute infinity also provides a sober reality check for the hubris of humanism.²⁹ By eliminating absolute infinity, the Althusserians reject Spinoza’s most powerful weapon against humanism. And thus, we are left again to think and celebrate the finite “in the most positive way possible.” “Human, all too human,” said – once upon a time – good old Zarathustra.

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27 Spinoza, Ep. 54 | IV/253/8-12. Italics added.

28 On Spinoza’s absolute infinity, see my studies Melamed 2014.

29 Though I am not in a position to demonstrate this point here, I would venture to say that Spinoza’s critique of traditional, anthropomorphic religion is primarily a critique of humanism.

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