

**A Hedonist
(and Materialist)
Spinoza.
A Cross-Reading**

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Abstract: The article proposes a cross-reading of two texts, one by Paolo Cristofolini (a philosopher), the other by Antonio Damasio (a neuroscientist). The two authors differ in formation but converge in interpreting Spinoza's Ethics in the sense of a hedonism strongly oriented towards sociality.

Keywords: Spinoza, ethics, hedonism, search for joy, social feelings

Readable books

To the curious, and above all to lovers of intellectual pleasure, I suggest cross-reading two texts: two books written at close quarters a decade or so ago, that come from two completely different fields, but which surprisingly converge in the way they interpreted the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza.

The first one, Paolo Cristofolini's "Hedonist Spinoza"¹, comes from a historian of philosophy who dedicated his life to the study of Spinoza's texts. From the very title, it explicitly suggests a Spinoza contiguous to the Epicureans, rather than one close to the Stoics, as a persistent romantic interpretation would have wanted. The second book, "Searching for Spinoza" by Antonio Damasio,² comes from a neuroscientist who considers Spinoza a "protobiologist" and who translates the categories of "The Ethics" into terms of contemporary physiology and neurobiology, using this key to expose his own biologic theory of consciousness.

I will immediately say that both books are very readable. Cristofolini's is a rare and precious text on the history of philosophy, a discipline which – at least in Italy – finds difficulties in having a good dissemination. There are abridged texts, made for the students who must at all costs pass an exam (versions that generally have the effect of diverting them forever from the subject or author treated); and then there are books made for competitions, that are more or less convincing, almost always verbose (the number of pages counts, for competitions of the humanities sector), and inevitably written only for professionals.

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1 Cristofolini 2002. Paolo Cristofolini (Arezzo 1937- Pisa 2020) was professor of History of Philosophy at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa; scholar of Descartes, Vico and Spinoza to whom he dedicated many essays and edited translations and critical editions.

2 Damasio 2003. Antonio Damasio (Lisbon 1944), neurologist, neuroscientist and psychologist, is Professor of Neurology at the College of Medicine of the University of Iowa; he has carried out important studies on the neurological bases of cognition and behavior. *Looking for Spinoza* completes the trilogy begun with *Descartes' Error* (1994) and continued with *Emotions and Consciousness* (1999), in which he proposed his neurobiological interpretation of consciousness against the background of modern philosophy.

Cristofolini intends instead to communicate to anyone interested in the great wisdom lesson offered by Spinoza, which he believes to be fully valid, even more than three centuries after its publication.³ Readable but at the same time precise – exemplary in proposing and explaining the terminology – “Hedonist Spinoza”, composed of five short essays, has the rare virtue of conciseness.

Damasio’s text is also addressed to everyone and not only to professionals: it offers in a very understandable way the essential notions for following reasoning on a biological and medical level and is an example of that ability to communicate that does not sacrifice precision for clarity. In the scientific field this ability is encountered more frequently, and especially biologists and neuroscientists in recent years, have contributed with high quality popular science. In addition, Damasio’s theoretical reflection is based on his experience as a clinician and his experiments: in *Looking for Spinoza* the exposition of numerous clinical cases serves to exemplify the theoretical passages but also to make the rigorous argumentation easier to understand, with a more narrative vein – a bit like Oliver Sacks, so to speak – which makes reading very enjoyable.

Wisdom as a search for joy

Spinoza’s lesson, it has been said, is a lesson in wisdom: according to Cristofolini, Spinoza’s philosophy is “the latest manifestation in the West of a sapiential ideal, where by wisdom is understood [...] the ideal synthesis between all knowledge available and the pursuit of what is good for us”.⁴ And wisdom has joy as its purpose: joy is “movement and purpose of wise perfection.”⁵ According to Cristofolini, that of Spinoza is in this sense “the wisest hedonism [...] that Western thought has known after that of Epicurus and before that of Diderot.”⁶

On the other side, Damasio reiterates that “the neurobiology of emotion and feeling tells us in suggestive terms that joy and its variants are preferable to sorrow and related affects, and more conducive to health and the creative flourishing of our beings.”⁷ “Seeking joy by reasoned decree”⁸ is the sophisticated way in which man pursues a goal common to all living beings, namely homeostasis – otherwise known

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³The same approach, with an even more explicit intent, is present in Cristofolini 1993 that I recommend as preparatory reading for those who want to directly address the works of Baruch Spinoza.

⁴ Cristofolini 2002, p.71

⁵ Ibid., p.9

⁶ Ibid., p.11

⁷ Damasio 2003, p.271

⁸ Ibid.

as self-preservation.⁹ Damasio traces a sort of “tree” of the biological mechanisms responsible for this function: on the lower branches, the metabolism and elementary reflexes (such as tropisms and taxis that in some cases keep organisms away from extreme heat and cold, or that in other circumstances lead them towards light), which we share practically with all living beings; on the intermediate branches, automatic behaviours associated with pleasure and pain, such as reactions that cause approaching or moving away, in which experience has not yet come into play; at an immediately higher level, impulses and motivations – such as hunger, thirst, curiosity and exploration, play and sex¹⁰ – which give rise to spontaneous behaviours modulated by experience and learning; higher up, the real emotions, which we could define spontaneous evaluations, more precisely chemical and neural modifications in response to a given situation, that predispose the central nervous system to deal with it with specific repertoires of actions; and finally, at the top of the tree, the feelings, that is the emotions brought to the level of consciousness, the translation into the language of the mind of the vital state of the organism (in this sense, according to Damasio, Spinoza affirms that “the mind is the idea of the body”).

Consciousness and thought, these superior cognitive abilities of the human, do not in any way represent, in this vision, an “ontological leap”: it is a question of a greater complexity, of a difference of degree that integrates and does not oppose the lower degrees, involved in the same vital function. There is no spirit superior to matter, therefore, since the mind emerges from biological processes and is part of it – Damasio interprets in this sense the first part of Spinoza’s Ethics, dedicated to the relationship between mind and body. There is no superiority – if not in terms of greater complexity of brain functions – of man compared to other living beings: men “Human beings are as they are – living and equipped with appetites, emotions, and other self-preservation devices, including, including the capacity to know and to reason”¹¹ which offers wider possibilities to invent effective strategies for survival and well-being outside the stereotyped behaviours suggested by the most elementary devices. There is no “virtue” understood as the dominion of the mind over the body or of reason over instincts and desires, since “the basis of virtue is the very conatus to preserve one’s own being, and that happiness

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9 “The single word homeostasis is convenient shorthand for the ensemble of regulations and the resulting state of regulated life”, *ibid.*, p.30

10 “Spinoza lumped them together under a very apt word, *appetites*, and with great refinement used another word, *desires*, for the situation in which conscious individuals become cognizant of those *appetites*.”, *ibid.*, p.34

11 *Ibid.*, p.171

consists in a man's being able to preserve his own being"¹² making the best use of all the biological devices it is equipped with. Finally, there is no virtue based on fear, this negative passion heralding sadness.

Against superstition

On this level, the convergence between the biological "translation" of the Spinozian texts proposed by Damasio and the purely philosophical reading that Cristofolini makes of them is truly remarkable. If wisdom is the search for joy, the antithesis of wisdom is superstition, which consists in "judging as good that which brings sadness, and evil that which brings joy" (Ethics, IV, 31). The fourth essay of "Hedonist Spinoza" is dedicated to superstition, and it exposes the most critical part of the Ethics. Three are the points to consider: the criticism of the doctrine of free will, the criticism of the Jewish-Christian dogma of original sin, the criticism of any kind of morality based on fear. These points are actually closely linked.

Free will is rejected, because it implies a contrast between intellect and will, between the "high" decisions of reason and the "low" impulses, in fact between mind and body. It is a direct polemic against Cartesian ethics, but at the same time, as a "truly universal thinker", Spinoza opposes "all those theories of the passions, ancient and modern, which pose the problem of their domination in terms of control."¹³ Wisdom is not the dissociation between reason and desire but, on the contrary, "an integrity of powers"¹⁴ – or in Damasio's terms, a harmony in the operation of the biological devices that we are endowed with.

The contradiction between intellect and will is also what makes the dogma of original sin unacceptable: "if the first man, too, had as much power to stand as to fall, and if he was in his right mind and with his nature unimpaired, how could it have come about that knowingly and deliberately he fell?"¹⁵ In other words, if the first man had been perfect and therefore able to use his reason correctly, why would he have acted against his own preservation and in the direction of the corruption of his own nature? "So it must be admitted that it was not in the power of the first man to use reason aright, and that, like us, he was subject to passions."¹⁶ The "fall" thus becomes an error due to ignorance and the story of Adam, underneath the allegories *ad captum vulgi* of the biblical narrative, reveals the very natural story "of man in contact with natural

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¹² Spinoza 2002, part IV, pp. 330-331

¹³ Cristofolini 2002, p.58

¹⁴ Ibid., p.59

¹⁵ Spinoza 2002, p.684

¹⁶ Ibid.

phenomena, who by experience learns to know what is useful and what is harmful to him, but always in imperfect forms, and which is always subject to trespassing the borders that he should have learned to respect, with inevitable harmful consequences.”

The idea of original sin, that is, of an original guilty corruption, is the basis of a vision of the world and of life whose dominant note is fear: fear of punishment, of evil, of death. Fear belongs to our nature, but it makes us live badly. Above all, ghosts elaborated from fear – “all the paradises and all the hells of revealed religions” – which constitute the nefarious and cumbersome body of superstition, make us live badly. Spinoza therefore joins Epicurus in outlining “the search for wisdom as a path that passes through the liberation from the super-mundane fears inculcated by religion”: “the task of wisdom is to eradicate or, at least, reduce to a minimum, the fear that is the foundation of superstition [...]. Against superstitious morality the basic principle of Spinozian morality is defined: pursuing good for the sake of good and not for fear of evil.”

This path passes through knowledge: “passions” such as fear, are passive moments in our emotional life. Knowing them, that is, acquiring a “clear and distinct idea” of them, means eliminating them, because an adequate idea is incompatible with passivity. We must essentially tap into the higher level, represented by that sophisticated biological mechanism that is cognitive performance. Once again, it is not a question of “repressing” a low drive with a high feeling, but of making our “powers” collaborate in a harmonious way to live in joy. “How does one come to wise control of the passions? The answer is only one: on the opposite path to all conceptions centred on sadness. Sadness means, for the life of the individual, the diminution of his power; and for social life the ongoing, current violence of fanatical and superstitious religions against the free development of the human personality [...]. Spinoza [...] calls *torva et tristis superstitio* every punitive morality, of sacrifice and senseless maceration, which inhibits the normal pleasures of life [...]. Precisely because repressive individual morality is constantly associated with collective repression, the religious tolerance of which Spinoza is a great and historical supporter is one with the proclamation of a universal, natural, and essential right, the right to joy.”

Ethics and social feelings

One point remains to be explored – and even on this the historian of philosophy and the neuroscientist fully agree. How can the search for one’s homeostasis – for one’s own conservation and well-being – overcome selfishness and establish a morality, that is, rules of behaviour aimed at other men? Here is Damasio’s answer: “how does Spinoza move from oneself to all the selves to whom virtue must apply? Spinoza makes the transition relying again on biological facts. Here is the procedure: The biological reality of self-preservation leads to

virtue because in our inalienable need to maintain ourselves we must, of necessity, help preserve other selves. If we fail to do so we perish [...]The secondary foundation of virtue then is the reality of a social structure and the presence of other living organisms in a complex system of interdependence with our own [...]The endeavor to live in a shared, peaceful agreement with others is an extension of the endeavor to preserve oneself.”¹⁷ Damasio adds that the tendency to seek social agreement is embedded in biological imperatives because of the evolutionary success of populations whose brains expressed cooperative behaviours to a considerable extent and that “Spinoza would have been pleased to know” that these behaviours are embedded in the architecture of our brain, as the chapters dedicated to social emotions and feelings explain clearly and in detail.

Cristofolini comes to a very similar interpretation in the first essay of “Hedonist Spinoza”, dedicated to the fear of loneliness, where he moves by comparison of Spinoza’s position on the origin of civil and political institutions with that of Hobbes. The *metus solitudinis* is an existential and primordial condition of human life and a primary psychological mechanism from which the need for civil institutions arises. “Before Spinoza it was Hobbes who indicated fear as the primitive spring from which the formative processes of civil and political society spring. In Hobbes, it was a question of that fear of violent death from which men are caught in the primitive state of nature, which was of uncontrolled reciprocal violence”¹⁸ (the famous *bellum omnium contra omnes*). But what in Hobbes is “a violent, forced passage to a rationality of submission [...] is instead in Spinoza a coherent development of human nature.”¹⁹ Man is a “social animal” by nature, he desires association with other men and must pursue this through the “active affections”, therefore virtuous, of courage and generosity, which consists in the effort to help other men and to unite them to itself with a bond of friendship. The Hobbesian perspective is thus reversed: instead of a link between fear and submission to force, Spinoza proposes a link between the desire for sociality and the search for peace and civil institutions.

Pursuing the common good, building a peaceful and righteous society, advantageous for all and free from coercion is therefore one of the faces of joy, understood as the full realization of human nature.

Translated by Arbër Zaimi

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¹⁷ Damasio 2003, pp.171-172

¹⁸ Cristofolini 2002, p.17

¹⁹ Ibid., p.18

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