

## Lévinas as (mis)reader of Spinoza (translation by Beatriz Bugni)

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Publié dans *Levinas Studies, volume II*, Duquesne University Press, may 2007

In a certain respect, one can say that Levinas's ethics, as asserted mainly in *Totalité et Infini* and *Autrement qu'être*, but also partially in *De l'existence à l'existant* (1947) and *Le temps et l'autre* (1948), constitutes a rebuttal of Spinoza's *Ethics*. Levinas offers a succinct account of his thinking on this issue in *Totalité et Infini*, at the end of a section called "Separation and the Absolute," which concludes the first part of the book "The Self and the Other": "Thought and freedom result from separating from the Other and respecting him--this thesis is at the antipodes of Spinozism."<sup>1</sup> In all likelihood, what has provoked him at such a moment would have to be Spinoza's pretence to reach the infinite by means of understanding, while for him, Levinas, "the essence of the created existence consists in its separation from the Infinite" (in other words, as the passage in question begins to make clear, "God"). Let us nonetheless begin with the question itself: Why this intolerance towards Spinoza?

### I. Lévinas as a critic of Spinoza

Lévinas never made Spinoza the subject of detailed analysis, as he did for Husserl and Heidegger, but also Buber, Rosenzweig and even Gabriel Marcel. He does speak directly about him in two short articles: "The Case of Spinoza" (1955)<sup>2</sup>, which deals with the anathema (*Schammatha*) imposed on him in 1656 by the Amsterdam rabbinate, and "Have You Re-read Baruch?" (1966),<sup>3</sup> proceeds from Sylvain Zac's theses on Spinoza. In the first text--written at a time when Israel's head of state, Ben Gurion, had recommended lifting the anathema--Levinas gladly acknowledges that one could not blame Spinoza for paying tribute to Reason: "Rationalism," he observes, "is not threatening to the Jewish faith." (p. 153) However, because of his "theology without God," Spinoza does exercise "a decisive and anti-Jewish influence" (p. 154) on the history of ideas. Yet there is something worse in this: Spinoza subordinates "the

truth of Judaism to the revelation of the New Testament. Of course, this revelation surpasses itself through the intellectual love for God, but Occidental being comprises this Christian experience, if only as a stage.” (p.155) In fact, then, “thanks to the rationalism supported by Spinoza, Christianity triumphs surreptitiously. Conversions without the scandal of apostasy!” (p. 156) Do the Jews who admire Spinoza “still know that our great books, which are more and more frequently ignored, reveal a Synagogue that carries a blindfold? Do they know that Spinoza, for his Jewish learning, perhaps only had teachers of no real caliber?” (p. 156) Conclusion: Ben Gurion’s recommendation that the anathema be repealed did not promise to serve Israel, because this was tantamount to acknowledging Christianity as the heir to Judaism.

The second text is significantly richer in nuances: though Spinoza did not properly understand the subtleties of Scripture, since he obviously did not know the Talmud, he did admit that they lead to the Word of God, and sometimes acknowledged the superiority of the Old Testament over the New Testament. Moreover, by showing that the Scriptures do not have the same scope as philosophy, because they teach “a doctrine of salvation, God’s Word, consisting in justice and charity.” (p. 160), he protects them from the search for proofs characteristic of philosophical investigation. Yet this was unintentional on Spinoza’s part, for he also believed that “to inquire about the Author of a biblical text and the circumstances of the writing allows one to bring out the meaning of the Statement and to separate the temporal from the permanent.” (p. 160). This provides Lévinas an opportunity for a cutting remark on Spinoza: “The idea of applying the historical method to the Bible resulted from a concern to protect the true philosophy in the City, just as the sailors discovered America while hoping to reach India.” (p. 160). Moreover, this exegetic method presupposes that “one can understand a discourse without the prior illumination of vision by [its] truths.” (p. 161) In other words, Spinoza believes that he does not need the oral transmission (of the Talmud), which otherwise, on Levine’s account, provides us with the necessary keys for reading biblical texts. Moreover, Spinoza thinks that philosophy has nothing to say about the future, while prophets, inspired by the Word of God, can foresee it and their words “resounds in the hearts of men.” (p. 163); they transmit an ethical Message, a practical rule of life, precepts one follows for “affective motives, such as fear, hope, faithfulness,

respect, reverence, love.” (p. 163) In short, though Spinoza does consider the Scriptures to be somewhat useful, he denies them any ontological significance, any access to the truth of God and of Creation.

And so Spinoza limits himself to a literal reading of the Bible, which is nothing but a “childish representation of Revelation” (p. 165) to which he has “reduced” a vastly richer reality. Indeed, “in the quest for this message [i.e., the meaning of Revelation] a Jew benefits from many more resources than Spinoza could have dreamed of. The theological statements of his tradition carry within themselves the gains of a long inner experience. Talmud and rabbinical literature are neither folklore nor ‘purely human constructs,’ as Spinoza still thought; nor are they a method of locking up the Bible in some philosophical system of the moment, or of submitting the alluvium of Jewish history to some extra-historical logical order. They subsume many centuries of effort attempting to go beyond the letter and even the apparent dogmatic of the text, in order to bring even those passages of the Scripture called historical, or ceremonial, or thaumaturgical back to a fully spiritual truth.” (p. 165) Furthermore, where Spinoza thinks he finds only find confusion and a disorganized compilation, one must rather see bubbling thinking that rejects any schematism and puts into movement everything that seems solid and stable. This “secret” of the Talmud can only result from the encounter with an “exceptional teacher,” for “if they are detached from the Talmudic discussion, the very notions become drained of their blood.” (p. 167, note) Yet it would be asking too much from the philosopher “who wants to think *sub specie aeterni* to expect him to admit a lived experience among the prerequisites to properly appraise a text, the historical relativism of ideas among the causes of their fertility.” (p. 166)

All the same, let us not forget that Spinoza himself admits that one cannot go through God’s Word with the fine comb of Reason, that is, with ideas belonging to the second and third kind of knowledge. He therefore acknowledges that Judaism is not a theology but a revealed Law. Implicitly, he accepts that “philosophy does not give rise to itself. To philosophize implies going to the lights where one sees the lights and where the primary meanings shine, but having already a past. What Spinoza calls the Word of God projects this clarity and carries the language itself.” (p. 169)

Now, if this comes down to nothing more than blaming Spinoza for a lack of Talmudic culture, one would find him in a situation similar to that of many authors, Jews and non-Jews alike, who misjudge the scope of the Scriptures. But in the eyes of Lévinas his error is much more serious than that: Spinoza is the philosopher of immanence, of Being conceived as the enclosed sum of everything, and of a perseverance in being beyond which one cannot go. In short, Spinoza, as Levinas sees him, sentences humanity to be nothing but itself, in the middle of a closed and completed, albeit eternal world. That said, it is true that Lévinas never writes that what offends him most is the “*Deus sive Natura*” at the base of Spinoza’s philosophy. His criticism will instead focus with a remarkable persistence and coherence on eternity, perseverance in being (*conatus essendi*), and privilege of thought (and, in this connection, the unity of will and reason).

Of these, eternity is what one might consider as Levinas’s *bête noire*, because it brings about all the other errors of Spinoza. For Lévinas, eternity is immobility, lack of development, fixation in the Same, idealization of the undifferentiated One such as it is proclaimed first by Parmenides--the ancestor of Spinoza and Hegel. Spinoza is a good example of this tendency, but he is hardly alone, since this longing for identity pervades all metaphysics: “How can we give a meaning to time, when for philosophy, identity is identity of the Same, enjoys being in its stability of the Same, enjoys assimilating the Other to the Same, when any alteration is pointless, when understanding assimilates the Other to the Same? [...] That is when anything which is not identical with one-self, everything, which is still in the process of becoming, must be considered as purely subjective and romantic.”<sup>4</sup> Now, this eternity is not completeness, but abstraction, poverty, even inanity: “Is not eternity – of which without borrowing anything from a lived duration, the intellect would pretend to possess a priori the idea of a way of being where the multiple is one and which would give to the present its full meaning – always suspect to be nothing but hiding the lightening – the half-truth – of the instant kept in an imagination able to fool itself with timelessness and to delude itself regarding assembling what cannot be assembled? This eternity and this intellectual God, are they

not in the end elements of these abstract and unstable half-instants of temporal dispersion, abstract eternity and dead God?"<sup>5</sup> In another context, speaking of Rosenzweig and the notion of Redemption as future, as eternity of accomplishment, Lévinas castigates this eternity-being that annihilates any singularity: "Eternity is therefore not conceived as a logical ideal absorbing the individual, but as love's penetration of the world, as the accession of all creatures to the word 'us' but without annihilating the creature in this community."<sup>6</sup> This of course leads to a forceful and irrevocable rejection of empty eternity, which one might assimilate to the horror of the "there is" (*il y a*), of pure being, conceptualized in Levinas's own original philosophical works. In opposition to this impersonal eternity, one must assert the richness of a lived existence, of time as a connection to the Other, to that which—*infinitely* Other—one cannot understand, and indeed which does not allow itself to be assimilated to experience. One might even say that *Totalité et Infini*, where and to the degree that it thus promotes the transcendence of the Other is altogether a rejection of this eternity which, for Lévinas, is nothing but a Totality that leaves no space to the in-finite, to development, otherness, and, finally, divinity.

Lévinas is equally severe, and for the same reasons, with the notion of a "perseverance in being," or *conatus essendi*. He returns to it time and again, and in the end states with the greatest clarity: "the same sudden appearance of the human in the being constitutes the interruption of the being that perseveres in being--and of violence somehow shown by this notion of perseverance and its *conatus essendi*--the des-interest-edness made possible by man awakening a thought directly to an order that is higher than knowledge."<sup>7</sup> For Lévinas, this perseverance of being is "obstination," a war of all against all, a refusal to let the Other break in, solipsistic auto-affirmation, and therefore malfeasance: "The being persisting in the being, selfishness or Evil, delineates in this way the very dimension of contemptibility and the emergence of hierarchy. That is where axiological bipolarity begins."<sup>8</sup> Selfishness, solipsism: it is a manner of the Self "whose existence consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity through all that happens to him."<sup>9</sup> Far from bringing plenitude or even a satisfactory realization of the human, this identification pushes it into pure existing, without a soul--for Lévinas,

psyche is sensitivity, maternity, fraternity--therefore into the horror of the *il y a*: "Essence stretching itself endlessly, without inhibition, without the possibility of interruption--the equality of the essence justifying, in all equity, no moment of standstill--without a pause, without any possible suspension--that is the terrifying there is standing behind all finality of the Self that thematises."<sup>10</sup> For the subject trapped in Essence, the alternative is dreadful. On the one hand, there is the commingling with the universal, "the ultimate aspect of the Essence, the immanence without a way to escape its imprisoning game; stoic wisdom in its variations from Zeno to Spinoza and Hegel; wisdom of resignation and sublimation." On the other hand, there is drunkenness, drugs, eroticism, and the quest for a second state. "Without a solution for the dilemma, without a way out of Essence: the horror of fatality compounds the anxiety of death, the relentless confusion of the there is --horrible eternity in the depths of Essence."<sup>11</sup> Eternity, essence, perseverance in being: these are terms closely associated, in alliance against "the humanism of the other human being." As maintained by Spinoza, one avatar of *conatus essendi* is the supremacy of desire, which leads to the contemporary nihilism: structuralism and psychoanalysis are targeted, as "Never, in the new science of man, will value serve as principle of intelligibility [...] One will have to remember Spinoza, the great destroyer of ideologies [...]; what is desirable is the value, it is not the value that triggers the desires." This leads to theories of impulse, to the death of the subject, and to the death of God.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond Spinoza and Hegel, Greek thinking itself is targeted: "What is Europe? It is the Greeks and the Bible. The Bible--an ontological reversal? The original perseverance of realities in their being--inertia of things, taking root of the vegetables, the fight of the wild animals, the war of men 'owners as well as lead by their interest' mentioned by Bossuet--reverses itself in the human being as it is announced to mankind in Israel. The human ego would then also mean, for the being dedicated to being, for the being that only has to be, the chance to end his *conatus essendi*, the possibility for him to answer for the other, though 'it is not his business' and is useless to him."<sup>13</sup>

As Levinas sums it up in his lectures of 1975-1976, "The human *esse* is not *conatus* but disinterestedness and farewell."; ethics is not "a level above being, but gratuity where

the conatus, or perseverance in being, un-does itself.”<sup>14</sup> It is in *Autrement qu’être* that Levinas’s break with the *conatus essendi* becomes most strongly apparent: “This book interprets the subject as a hostage and the subjectivity of the subject as a substitution breaking with the essence of the being.”<sup>15</sup> To be the hostage of the other implies, contrary to Spinoza, placing passivity (sensibility, susceptibility, vulnerability...) as the supreme value: “Subjectivity of the human being made out of flesh and blood, more passive in its extradition to the other than the passivity of the effect in a chain of causality--because it is beyond the very actuality which is the unity of perception of ‘I think’, uprooting-from-oneself-for-another in the giving-to-another-the bread-for-his mouth; not the meaninglessness of a formal relationship, but the entire gravity of the body extracted of its *conatus essendi* by its ability to give itself.”<sup>16</sup>

The identification of will with reason is the third “mistake” committed by Spinoza, because this implies the negation of any personality, of any freedom, absorbing the being in a anonymous totality, without a face. Again the triumph of the Same! “To justify itself, the I can [...] attempt to perceive itself in its totality. This what we believe seems to justify the freedom to which aspires philosophy which, from Spinoza to Hegel, identifies will and reason, which, against Descartes, takes away from the truth its character as a free work, locating it where the opposition of the I and the non-I disappears, in the middle of an impersonal reason. Freedom is not maintained, but reduced to the reflection of a universal order, which sustains and legitimizes itself, as the God of the ontological argument [...] Knowledge would be the way where freedom exposes its own contingency, where it vanishes in totality. In reality, this way hides the antique triumph of the Same over the Other.”<sup>17</sup> Through this identity, human suffering disappears, as does all the human pathos. “If it is possible for the will to aspire in one way or the other to reason, it is reason, a reason looking for itself or creating itself. It reveals its true essence with Spinoza and Hegel. The identification of will with reason is the ultimate goal of idealism, against which goes all the pathetic experience of mankind, pushed into the subjective or imaginary by a Spinozistic or Hegelian idealism.”<sup>18</sup> Spinoza in fact makes this even worse, as if it were possible, when he eliminates affectivity: “The

I identified with reason--as a thematizing and objectifying power--loses its very ipseity. To represent oneself implies draining away one's subjective substance and anesthetizing pleasure. By conceiving this unlimited anesthesia, Spinoza makes separation disappear."

<sup>19</sup> It is thus clear that for Levinas, when Spinoza virtually equates will and reason the result is that will and desire disappear.

To sum up, Spinoza is the philosopher who, at the forefront of Occidental metaphysics, worked the hardest—no doubt together with Hegel, or perhaps even harder than him--to empty humanity from itself, in order to reabsorb it in being, a being that neither enjoys nor suffers, a being that ignores the other, is frozen in the certainty of oneself, that leaves no access to otherness; a being that amounts, in the final instance, to a totalitarian sum which leaves space only for a false in-finite, since after all the infinity it claims is an eternity, and moreover the eternity "produced" by the being that perseveres in its being (or in which it produces itself, since one might say: "to be eternal, in other words to persevere in one's being"). This being is not lacking anything and that is why it is terrifying.

Yet in reality human life is not a less-than-being but a different-from-being, a *pathetic* and therefore *ethic* experiment which is more than plain being or immutable being, because it is separated from being by the infinite, the infinite experience of being affected, being responsible for every other people. So, Will cannot be Reason: a perfect being, centered in itself, could not "serve as ontological standard for a life, a becoming, able to renew Desire and society. [...] The individual and the personal are necessary to allow Infinity to produce itself as infinity."<sup>20</sup> A person, in this way, could not reduce simply to a "being". Lévinas wrote, in 1947: *De l'existence à l'existant* (that we may translate: "From living to endurance or perseverance").

## 2. Spinoza despite Lévinas

When I began reading Lévinas seriously, at the beginning of the 90s, I thought that I finally had found an alternative to Spinoza, precisely because Lévinas was bringing openness to a world that was perfectly closed on itself—a world which, it seemed to me, was the world of Spinoza. Though I did not follow Levinas's scathing criticism, I accepted with him that what Spinoza calls Being is a Wholeness without development and therefore without outcome. Spinoza's God is immutable, without affection<sup>21</sup>, without desire, without love for humanity. To me, he thus seemed cold and remote --even bearing in mind his "*Deus sive Natura*." Furthermore, it was my impression that for Spinoza passivity is a reduction of being whereas activity is its growth, and that this was too simple, and indeed therefore impossible to practice: it would have sufficed to go from the first to the third kind of knowledge to reach Beatitude, or unadulterated happiness. And when Levinas speaks of the pre-original passivity, the passivity by which I am responsible to and for the other, I came close to believing that he has reestablished what Spinoza, for his part, had too quickly disposed of.

I was therefore in the process of making of Spinoza not a brother of Hegel--as Levinas was doing--but of Kant: a kind of ascetic, who, by another way, drains human being of all sensitivity in view of a kind of moral perfection. However, this aseptitized and anesthetizing Spinoza is not to be found in either the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* or the *Ethica*. I will focus on the *Ethica* because it is the *Ethica* that supplied the purpose and the range of the *Tractatus*. And it is in the *Ethica*, specifically where it develops the *conatus*, that one may see that Spinoza's philosophy is a philosophy of desire and consequently of becoming.

"Everything, as much as it can, makes an effort to persevere in its being."<sup>22</sup> What is a thing, on this understanding? Any thing, any body, any part of nature, wherever it is and whatever it is. What is the effort invoked here? It is desire, appetite, or impulse. Spinoza explains himself most clearly in the definition of Desire offered in the *Affectuum Definitiones*, which concludes the third part of the *Ethica*: "Desire is the essence of man

in so far it is conceived as defined by any of its liking to accomplish an action.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, as soon as a body is influenced by another body, that is to say as soon as it is in any relationship with this other body, it starts acting, either to preserve this other body, or to use it. Now this presupposes that no body can exist by itself: being only a part of nature, it needs other bodies to regenerate itself, as shown by the most common experience. The term “desire” sums up all moves made by bodies during this constant regeneration. Whether man knows it or not, he obeys his desires: “I understand under Desire all efforts, impulsion, appetites and volitions of man, which vary depending on the condition of a given man, and it is not rare to see them so opposed to each other that man, torn in different directions, does not know where to turn.”<sup>24</sup> This permits us to conclude: every being, in nature, desires to persevere in its being. But is this persevering the lasting-without-end and thus the remaining-identical that Levinas takes it to be? Not for Spinoza, because “to persevere in one’s being” means to increase one’s power to act, which is being less passive and more active, less sad and more joyful, less heinous and more loving, less in conflict with others and more in union with them, and consequently more able to establish diversified relations with the rest of nature, deploy multiple talents, and practice a great diversity of activities. For Spinoza, perseverance in being is about a continuous movement, without an end that would have been assigned to it or that can be reached: Spinoza’s Beatitude is not a “self-satisfied” state where a body/spirit that has been satiated digests its success, but rather is the ability to act raised to its highest level, when our activity goes widely beyond our passivity, when we act based on informed decisions. Because Spinoza insists on this understanding, it is not rare for commentators to state that for Spinoza the accomplishment of the self--what he calls perfections and satisfactions--are purely intellectual. This is again a misinterpretation: any knowledge comes only from the affection of bodies for each other; there is no such thing as purely intellectual knowledge, if by this one understands a knowledge that would be characteristic of a spiritual substance, a soul, that could act in any way independently of the body. For Spinoza, the body is not the support of the activity of the spirit, it *is* the spirit. We can only know what the body feels and endures. Because nature is infinite, because the

human body is made up of many “individuals”--today, we would say of “elements”--the capacities of the human body are diversified and give us access to many elements of nature, in a potentially unlimited manner. “To persevere in one’s being” is this uninterrupted increase, in an unlimited duration (but not infinite, because we are mortal) in so far as our capacities allow for it. But these capacities are not unlimited, because we are only, and always only will be, a part of Nature, which in itself is not organized for us or for anything else. According to Spinoza, Nature follows no goal, has no desire to fulfill, no appetite. God, he says, is impassive. And if everyone tends to persevere in his being, there is no general intention provoking complementarity or harmony among all the beings. It is therefore “as much as it can” that every thing makes an effort to persevere in its being. *As much as it can*: in other words, as much as it depends on its power, and as much as it can affect other things. This means at the same time that no thing has the tendency to destroy or limit itself and that many other things can contribute to its destruction or diminution; and it is of no purpose to accuse them of bad intentions. Spinoza’s *conatus essendi* does therefore not have the characteristics ascribed to it by Levinas: the war of all against all, the refusal the Other, solipsism, pure existence and, in the end, the there is. For a being with desire--and every being has desire--nothing is satisfied with the there is, with being without singular existence. However, though for Levinas desire is subordinated to responsibility, to the penetration of the other (and of the Other--God) in me, for Spinoza, desire well understood is responsibility, because “nothing is more useful to man than man” since, after all, whatever they have in common increases their power to act. If for Levinas virtue is the consequence of dis-interest, for Spinoza it is simply what is useful to man, useful in making him understand, when he sees the essence of things, that men live better in harmony than in discord, better in concrete plurality than in solitude. For Levinas, human desire comes from a transcendent God, for Spinoza it is part of every thing though only human beings have awareness of it.

It is probably this lack of any strong sense that human being has an exceptional place within the whole of Nature that most upsets Levinas, and indeed probably this that underlies the strong misinterpretation he proposes when saying that Spinoza

suppresses affectivity and sensitivity when he reduces will to reason. After all, when Spinoza tells us that “will and understanding are one and the very same thing,”<sup>25</sup> he does not subordinate will to reason, and does not make Reason the supreme guide for human history (as Hegel later did). Spinoza only says that will and understanding are nothing outside of their practice (as there is no thinking substance), which is always made up of single volitions and ideas. These ideas and wills have no other possible origin than the affections of the body, which is to say, consequently, that an idea about something is nothing other than the expression of willing it, since to will something is to affirm something or negate something—or, finally, to make it an object of attraction or aversion. For Spinoza, again, body and spirit are one and the same thing: will is not a decision of the spirit, which would be applicable to the body or through the body. It is an intrinsic element of desire, an awareness of craving. And it is craving that directs us toward a given thing, whatever it is, or else moves us away from it. This attraction or removal constitutes knowledge, as there is no other way to know but in the craving of the body for something. What I do not desire, I have no way of knowing as a thing or an object, since in that case nothing connects me to it.

To properly understand this identification of will and understanding—which, it may fairly be said, runs against the grain of everything we are commonly taught—it is essential to understand the status of words, images and ideas for Spinoza; or, in more technical terms, it is essential to better understand what he means with the three kinds of knowledge. Nothing exists outside of the things themselves: “The essence of images and words is formed only by the movements of the bodies, which do not in any way involve the concept of thinking.”<sup>26</sup> By the movements of the body we can feel an infinity of things, give them our agreement or withhold it—in short, know them. Things we cannot feel we cannot want; they are beyond our reach. But one can object that it is possible to suspend one’s judgment, therefore to dissociate oneself from what one knows and wants. Wrong, says Spinoza, because when the judgment is suspended it is only in uncertainty, as when perception is inadequate and we know that it is inadequate. When a child invents a horse with wings, and nothing stands in the way to of his inventing it, he will consider this horse as existing, even if he does not have

experiential certainty. Regarding real beings, things, we cannot suspend our judgment, because knowledge has action as a consequence. We can only doubt in two cases: when we know that we are dealing with ideas (words, images, memories), and when we know that our knowledge of a real thing is maimed or confused. This shows that “will” cannot be dissociated from “understanding.”

We are always in the process of imagining (be it the past, the present or the future), because we only can know things through the way they affect us. Still, we can also go beyond the images by searching for the causes of what affects us, in other words by attempting to understand Nature, which is the same in us and outside of us (as there only are bodies). By knowing how things affect each other and notably engender each other, we go beyond this imaginary knowledge (i.e., knowledge of the first kind), to reach adequate, rational knowledge (knowledge of the second kind). When we have become capable in certain situations of grasping without reflection—as it were, “in a glimpse”—some affects, we thus practice a strictly intuitive knowledge (knowledge of the third kind). Spinoza’s examples are famously centered on geometrical intuition, but one might just as well consider any activity that one accomplishes easily and without hesitation because one already has good knowledge of the underlying sequence of causes and effects: movements of a skill or craft, in sports and ritual, in use of a common language, and so forth. In any case, if we know through the third kind, insofar as the knowledge relates to an action (included “doing” mathematics, speak a language, etc.), we do want what we know, which means that the understanding we have of one or the other affection is identical to this affection. Since all affections that we can understand pass through what affects our body, it is the case that each affection either does not move it (because our body is not touched) or moves us (because our body is touched). To all of this, Spinoza adds that the will is not free but constrained through the linking of all things to one another, things of which we truly are a part yet without being their “possessors or masters.”

Far from exalting Reason, as do Descartes (because it overcomes the erring of the body), Kant (because it regulates, in any regard), and Hegel (because it assigns the goals of universal history), Spinoza in fact takes away its substance, for Reason is

nothing but the human effort, precisely in so far as aware of itself, to persevere in its being. Once again, Spirit and Body are one and the same thing and it is for this reason that understanding and will are also one and the same thing. “The Spirit only knows itself as far as it perceives the ideas of the affections of the Body.”<sup>27</sup> From this perspective, Spinoza appears much closer to Levinas than Levinas seems to think, if only in his opposition to the idealistic and rational philosophies they both condemn.

Perhaps then it is specifically with regard to eternity that Levinas is truly “at the antipodes” of Spinozism? For Spinoza, eternity is not a status but the result—the *immediate* result—of an understanding of Nature as it is. Eternity thus corresponds to human activity when this activity is unencumbered from any passivity, when we act based on fully informed decisions in such a way that nothing diminishes our power to act. Accordingly, there is nothing mysterious about the infinite, and indeed there can be no opposition to it (i.e., in its immobility), because it is, on the contrary, our proximity with infinity, our ability to experience infinity, which gives us access to eternity. This is not simple to understand. For Spinoza, the more we experiment the infinite possibilities of our active bodies (and spirits), the more we are part of Nature (God), the more we understand It (Him) and love It (Him). This kind of active infinity or infinity in action gives us a real (i.e. formal in the vocabulary of the 17<sup>th</sup> century) access to the very nature of Nature ; and *this* is eternity. “Eternity” for Spinoza is not a painted image, an immutable world or an immutable God (like the Aristotelian one), but the continuous recreation of Nature (or God), endlessly. Speaking of eternity is not fixing everything in a perfect state but looking at (or sensing) everything in its real –and not imaginary- transformations. I know that this is the most difficult part to understand in Spinoza’s Opera, but it is the major key of its construction. Eternity is not some kind of state; it is continuous, endless, infinite transformation of Nature.

This does not at all resemble at the “logical ideality where the individual absorbs itself” or this “idea of a way of being where multiplicity is one and which would give the present its full meaning,” would be approached as such by the intellect, outside of any lived experience. For Spinoza, all knowledge results from affections of the Body; pure knowledge does not make sense, and if we are able to perceive the essence of things,

this is only by way of apprehending them through their causal links--and not strictly through our imagination or preference. Eternity is not a world hidden behind the temporal world. In fact, it cannot be distinguished from it. Eternity is a way of apprehending the experience of things, God and ourselves. Hence the famous sentence in the *Ethica*: "The Spirit of the one whose Body has many abilities is to a significant extent eternal."<sup>28</sup> It is the diversity and multiplicity of the activities of the body that gives the spirit its eternity. Because for Spinoza the Spirit has no substance, it is not a given quantity of the Spirit that is marked with the "label" of eternity. It is the rather dynamic of the Spirit, which is much more drawn toward the essence of things than for the individual whose Body is endowed with few abilities. Idealizing abstraction, the *apriori* pure intellectual knowledge, does not allow us to take a single step into eternity. "We live in a continuous change and it is depending on whether we change for the better or for the worse that we are called happy or unhappy. In fact, who from being a baby or an infant becomes a cadaver, is said to be unhappy, and in the opposite one qualifies as happiness to have been able to live the entire duration of a life with a sane Spirit and a healthy Body."<sup>29</sup> Beatitude or life in Eternity is not ecstasy—is not a unique experience that overcomes a fortunate few--but an experience everyone can have: it is a matter of increasing one's ability to act, one's joy, one's virtue, one's understanding of nature, etc. And all of this would appear or concentrating itself in what Spinoza calls the "Love for God," which cannot be distinguished from the understanding of Nature according to the third kind of knowledge. Eternity is the result of the permanent effort of understanding and an acceptance of things as they are, while inadequate knowledge condemns us to the erosion of time in as much as it diminishes us, renders us sad, diminishes our power to act, and leaves us at the mercy of affects contrary to those helping us to persevere in our being. In short, it is not by removing ourselves from world or time or human activity in general that we reach eternity, but through an increase in activity, by unfolding as widely as possible all our skills, in any field, giving us a wider access to the infinity of the world to which we belong—to the infinity, finally, of God.

This, then, is how to understand Levinas's somewhat ungenerous reading of Spinoza, mistakenly assimilating him with Hegel and in general with idealistic philosophy, in which case he would be exposed to all of the metaphysical mortification Levinas inflicts on those others. Now we have also just observed, quickly and easily, that Spinoza does not truly belong in that company. The entire thrust of the *Ethica* is one of search for a happy life, which can only consist in knowing things (God or nature, oneself and the other human beings) as they are, whereupon we may increase in our activity and decrease in the passivity that makes us prey of the adverse parts of nature and leads to our diminution or destruction. Spinoza invites us therefore to a discipline of the moment, indeed of each and any moment, a discipline consisting in trying all the time to apprehend things as they are... as a part of the infinite Nature.

### **3. Intellection and Revelation: Spinoza, the unforgivable.**

Let us return to the question: What is the true significance of Levinas's animosity towards Spinoza? What, from his perspective, would be Spinoza's real crime? Evidently enough, since the difference in ethics and metaphysics are considerably less than one might at first suppose, it must be a matter of source, or inspiration. It is to betray the Jewish spirit in favor of the Greek one, or rather to relinquish the Jewish spirit in favor of another that is exclusively Greek: in Spinoza's philosophy, there is no essential recourse to Revelation, no principle response to a transcendental God who would speak to us through the prophets. In the *Ethica* one instead finds a knowledge of God that is accessible to everyone (even if it is difficult), a knowledge that has no private domain and does not pass through any notion of the ineffability of the divine substance: God can be reached through the smallest human experience, as long as this experience transpires reflectively, which is perhaps to say advisedly. What Levinas might then object to, even after all of the foregoing ethical and metaphysical nuances, is Spinoza's thoroughgoing attempt to draw rather exclusively on a "Greek" reading of the world.

The following remarks could be read as if with Spinoza in mind: “In the Jewish reading, the intelligible is always outlined starting from a spiritual experience or from a word, that has always already been spoken, based on a tradition where transmission and renewal always come together. Reading a spirit that was never non-informed. Without confusing this essential predisposition with a sterile partiality of dogmatism. It remains the secret of creativity and an eternal starting again of new things, which is, most likely, the indelible trace of a thinking bearing the mark of Revelation. And, on the other hand, the Greek reading--books and things--the intelligence of a spirit that is marvelously non-informed, thanks to which symbols attempt to reveal themselves and, at least, to state themselves with clarity, which has become our university parlance.”<sup>30</sup> To be informed means to be warned, it is to know about the true nature of things, about their divine essence, to which no human experience can lead. Ethics is therefore a movement against nature, a deep alteration of nature, the irruption of absolute Otherness manifested by the Face of the other (human). For Levinas there is Revelation--and Election, because not everyone is able to receive the Revelation.

As for Spinoza: “There is no light superior to nature, there is no authority external to man.”<sup>31</sup> The relationship between human being and God is without mediation; those who understand the eternal essence of his Spirit, which is part of Nature (in other words God), know God. There is no task imposed on man except the one he discovers by himself as useful for his preservation. And as the similar is useful to the similar, nothing is more useful to man than man. It is therefore not by obligation, by coercion—not as a hostage of the other--that man becomes responsible: it is through his perceptiveness, which cannot be separated from the love for the good. Spinoza would surely not have liked the sentence from Dostoyevsky that Levinas, for his part, “always” quotes: “Each of us is guilty before all for all and everything, and I more than the others.”<sup>32</sup> For Levinas, this culpability is the very basis of the ethical I who, each alone and irrecusably, “is the unique point supporting the universe.” And this of course is the very root of the idea of substitution: I am responsible for the other, in an unlimited and pre-original manner.<sup>33</sup>

For Levinas, nature is created and longs for its Creator; for Spinoza, nature is an auto-creation and longs for nothing. Therefore, all that Spinoza can say about the infinite, beatitude, joy, love, the perfecting the self, the indefinite augmentation of the power to act--and all of this constitutes the substructure of ethics—is simply unacceptable to Levinas: Spinoza is not well-informed, he reads God’s word as a child, he has no access to the true knowledge of God, therefore anything he can say and write is a caricature of the divine. It is virtually bound to become idealistic, rigid, negating subjectivity and personality, and inclined to erase any true thought of becoming in favor of one or another vision of disincarnated Being, of an existing without existence. If all of this testifies to Levinas’s incapacity to understand Spinoza, perhaps that is because siding with him would imply giving up the transcendental God, the experience of election, and indeed the grandeur of the Jewish tradition in which Levinas himself finds so much comfort, even and perhaps especially after the abomination of the Holocaust. What then of Spinoza’s freedom of spirit and his idea of an impassive God? Would they have withstood such a trial? One must at least entertain the possibility that they would have, since, according to Spinoza himself, “Who loves God cannot strive to have God love him back.”<sup>34</sup> After all, on his reasoning anything else would commit one to a God who is passive, a God could be perfected and therefore would not be God at all, for “God has no passion and is not touched by any state of mind of Joy or Sadness.”<sup>35</sup> God is the sum of the individuals composing Nature, which for its part is infinite: God thus lacks nothing and does not feel anything. This was and remains a scandal for the Jews and for that matter the Christians as well: with Spinoza, one wants to know what has become of the God of justice and mercy disappear. If he has vanished, then it remains an open question whether God is God at all anymore—in which case Spinoza will have been the father of atheism and the many negations of the subject that have followed. For this he could not be forgiven, even if one were compelled to admit the rest of his philosophy.

- <sup>1</sup> *Totalité et infini, Essai sur l'extériorité* (1971), Le Livre de Poche, Paris, 1990, p. 108.
- <sup>2</sup> *Trait d'Union*, n° 34-35, décembre 1955-janvier 1956, in *Difficile liberté, Essais sur le judaïsme*, 3<sup>e</sup> édition, Paris, Le livre de Poche, 1988.
- <sup>3</sup> *Les Nouveaux Cahiers*, n° 7, automne 1966, in *Difficile liberté*.
- <sup>4</sup> *La mort et le temps* (1975-1976), Paris, Le Livre de Poche, 1992, p. 123.
- <sup>5</sup> *Le temps et l'autre*, Paris, PUF, 1983, Préface (1979), p. 9-10.
- <sup>6</sup> « Franz Rosenzweig : une pensée juive moderne » (1965), in *Hors sujet* (1987), Paris, Le Livre de Poche, 1997, p. 80.
- <sup>7</sup> *Hors sujet* (1987), Paris, Le Livre de Poche, 1997, Préface, p. 11.
- <sup>8</sup> *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (1972), Paris, Le Livre de Poche, 1987, p. 89.
- <sup>9</sup> *Totalité et Infini*, p. 25.
- <sup>10</sup> *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (1974), Paris, Le Livre de Poche, 1990, p. 254.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 270-271.
- <sup>12</sup> « Idéologie et idéalisme » (1972), *Du Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, Paris, Vrin, 1986, p. 22.
- <sup>13</sup> « La Bible et les Grecs », 1986, in *A l'heure des Nations*, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1988, p. 155.
- <sup>14</sup> *La mort et le temps*, p. 17, p. 32.
- <sup>15</sup> *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, p. 282.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.
- <sup>17</sup> *Totalité et Infini*, p. 86-87.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240-241.
- <sup>21</sup> « Dieu est dénué de passions et il n'est affecté par aucun affect de Joie ou de Tristesse », *Éthique*, partie V, proposition 17, traduction Robert Misrahi, Paris, PUF, 1990, p. 304.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ethica*, III, prop. 6. « *Unaquaeque res, quantum in se est, in suo esse perseverare conatur.* »
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, II, prop. 49, corollary, p. 147.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, II, prop. 49, scholium, p. 149.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, II, prop. 23, , p. 127.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, V, prop. 39, “Qui Corpus ad pluram aptum habet, is Mentem habet, cujus maxima pars est aeterna.”
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, V, prop. 39, scholium.
- <sup>30</sup> *Transcendance et intelligibilité* (1983), Genève, Labor et Fides, 1996, p. 46.
- <sup>31</sup> *Traité des autorités théologiques et politiques*, Paris, Gallimard, La Pléiade, 1954, p. 734.
- <sup>32</sup> Note referring to P. Atterton's essay on Levinas and Dostoyevski in this same volume
- <sup>33</sup> E. Levinas, « Questions et réponses » (1975), in *Du Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, p. 135-136.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ethica*, Part V, prop. 19.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, Part V, prop. 17.