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About Spinoza, with Arthur Larrue

Julie Henoch: *Arthur Larrue, we're in Lisbon.*
Arthur Larrue: Hi.

J: *I wanted to hand you the microphone because a year ago now at Ségriès—actually a little more—we had this long late-night conversation that has stayed with me, around Spinoza and The Ethics. Of course, that book so many people talk about but that is still so hard to understand. I thought you had an approach to Spinoza, a way of talking about him, that was incredibly beautiful. So I wanted to try to reproduce at least a small part of that conversation. How did you come to Spinoza?*

A: If you remember, there was a third person with us, someone who had never read him, who had maybe just heard of him. The name "Spinoza" occupies a space. And the question that always comes up very quickly with him is transmission—his accessibility—knowing that he has a reputation, a deserved reputation, for being a difficult philosopher. Philosophy in general is considered difficult, but Spinoza is even more difficult than philosophy. And then we can add something definitive to that, in the sense that Spinoza *answers*. He answers a number of complicated, serious, but also unavoidable questions like: "Does God exist?", "What does it mean to be happy?", "What is the true good on earth, the thing really worth seeking?"
And he answers all that. That's quite an achievement. And he does it in a certain way. He does it in a way that can be transmitted. Transmitted like a code, as he says, "in a geometrical manner," meaning roughly like mathematics, in the form of formulas, of intellectual mechanisms that are essentially logical. The marvel of it is that these formulas he creates, that he conceives, are—well, they *should* be—easy enough to demonstrate in an ordinary conversation, because if you've gone through the whole operative mode, if you've reproduced the logical mechanisms, then it becomes possible to transmit them simply, since you know how the formula works.
So the right way to pose the Spinoza question is through his accessibility. Yes, it's difficult, but it's a system that can then be transmitted easily. The difficulty is justified by this issue of transmission. There's a poetic, beautiful, but above all extraordinarily true idea: that this truth, and culture in general, is the only good that, the more you transmit it, the more it multiplies. On one hand, you don't lose it, and on the other, you create a new copy in someone else, and so on, infinitely. And this idea, which is again both beautiful—beautiful to the ear - that culture is the only good that isn't diminished by being given away—this truth is also absolutely demonstrable.

J: *It's true that the form of The Ethics itself, with its various chapters, is indeed very mathematical and allows you to move step by step in depth, bringing you to chapter 5 which deals with beatitude, suddenly concluding the sum of everything proven beforehand to lead you to an understanding that is supposed to help you live better, simply.*

A: Yes. There's also, at one point, the decision to embark, to go for it. And since it's an exposition that presents itself geometrically, as he says—mathematically, more or less—it's not a story, it's not a confession. The first challenge is to define the terms. Just like

you'd say: let X be such and such an element, let Y be such and such another element, with +Y, –X, etc. He does the same thing with words.

So the word "God," which is also substance, which is also nature… Hearing it like that, I think we understand very well what it means. But then we're obliged to say that this entity, which we can call "God," "nature," "substance," has attributes, things that belong to it and not to us. And the inquiry begins roughly like that. So it takes time, but we can also approach the thing for what it is: a geometrical-mathematical exposition.
I know Bernard Pautrat recommends starting with the third part, on what he calls "affects," which we might translate as feelings or passions—though the French "affects" is often just translated as "affects," but since we don't use the word often, I would say: affects are all the affectations we receive, and we receive them constantly. But Spinoza begins by saying—since the aim of happiness is to reach what he calls beatitude, a form of tranquility in which we are no longer acted upon by affects, but act ourselves, and act first of all on the affects. Not by putting them at a distance, but by understanding their mechanics, so as not to exempt ourselves from them—that would be illusory—but to bring them to coexist in a mechanism that must basically be balanced, meaning these affects must cancel each other out in order to produce something he calls "beatitude."

J: *…and that via knowledge! There's a quote—I don't remember it exactly—that I often cling to in order to live well: "do not to judge, do not to condemn, do not to laugh, but understand." Meaning that all this mechanics is organized around the notion of knowledge. If we have the knowledge of the functioning of nature, if we understand how it all works, then we can only be at peace.*

A: Yes, he's an absolutely rationalist philosopher who believes that truth can be demonstrated, experienced. There is no mystery in Spinoza—I forget which commentator says that… There is no mystery in Spinoza. And to say "there is no mystery" is to affirm that everything can be understood, and understood by the help of reason. A reason that is at once purely logical but also extraordinarily intuitive—you spoke of the fifth part, which is a kind of great unveiling, but one that happens with a certain rhythm (this is Gilles Deleuze, who notes that at some point there is a speed in Spinoza), and suddenly the book, which until then was laborious—because very few people read mathematical books except mathematicians—suddenly offers you much shorter, more poetic expressions, but that arrive after a certain process and thus articulate reason and intuition together—something like a feeling.
So if we redo the demonstration: yes, there is no mystery in Spinoza, and yes, we can understand everything. And once you've understood everything, you just need to say it, simply say it, without having to pass again through reason.

J: *And that's the third kind of knowledge, since Spinoza distinguishes three kinds…*

A: Yes, and that's actually where many commentators on Descartes stop. They say: look, I don't understand the fifth part; it's a mystical part in a way… And there *is* something of another order at the very end. It might even be possible to begin with the fifth part and read it as poetic expressions, a very articulate and very mathematical poetry—and perhaps that's not a bad idea…

J: *The very subtle thing too—you were talking about Descartes—is the question of free will. There's something extremely deterministic in Spinoza, but also tiny cracks. You can be acted upon, but you can also be mistaken. You still have some form of choice in what can happen to you in the world, but… you see what I mean?*

A: Well, yes, the question of free will in Spinoza is what makes him so attractive, I think: there *is* no free will in Spinoza. None. We're talking about a philosopher who considers that the notions of will, of choice, are illusions—convenient illusions we naturally need, but illusions from the logical, rational standpoint.
Why? Because every action, or what we call will or choice, is situated in a network of causalities that is absolutely inaccessible to us. We cannot embrace all the causes that lead us to do this or that. And even if we tried to perform a free act—I think there's something like this in Gide, a novel where someone says: "I'm going to do a truly free act," and kills someone on a train for no reason… Well, Spinoza would think that besides being a not-so-great plot, it's also a philosophical error to believe that committing a sudden, random action would be enough to demonstrate free will.
He has a beautiful expression—because Spinoza is in a way a poet—he says that the illusion of will or free will is the illusion of believing we have "a kingdom within a kingdom," as if this potentiality (the fact of doing this or that and especially understanding why we do this or that), as if we could momentarily cut the chain of causes. That's why we do everything, always, through God and because of God. Or nature or substance. That's why we choose absolutely nothing.
That doesn't mean we sit down and wait to be acted upon. It would make no sense; we would only reduce the field of our action. But—this is where a fascinating notion comes in, one of the most famous in Spinoza—the *Conatus*: the striving to persist in being. Like anything in nature or substance, in what surrounds us, everything needs to exist. It is absolutely natural to exist—natural in the sense aligned with substance, God, nature (all synonyms for Spinoza). It exists, it creates.

J: *And it perpetuates itself in its being. That's what I love. We never do anything that goes against our own interest or our own life-force. And that's anti-moral…*

A: Yes, that's why it's called *The Ethics*, because it's not about morality; there's no notion of good and evil in Spinoza. Because the true scale of knowledge, the true judge—if one can be said to exist distinct—is God.
We must avoid imagining God as a person. That's an idolatrous mistake. Though one must go through it. There's a strange link between Spinoza and Christianity—something very strange happening there. That was actually part of my encounter with him. For Spinoza there is no individual; this perpetual striving is expressed between you and me. There are differences, but differences mostly of scale. In Spinoza there is continuity. Everything belongs to the same time, the same whole: God, nature.

J: Reading him, I remember thinking of my garden: there's bindweed climbing on my rose bush; it's not malicious, the bindweed, it just wants to persist in its being, it seeks light, it goes where it can… The essence of the living is to perpetuate itself in its being. That's where the idea that there is no good and evil takes root: each life simply persists in its being, as much as it can.

A: It's easy with bindweed; it's harder when it concerns a friend or someone you love, to tell yourself that they're not doing anything *against* you—that notion doesn't make sense —and that whenever we express morality, whenever we invoke good and evil (because that's morality: saying what's good and what's bad), whenever we invoke those notions, we're only expressing our own interest.

J: *And the word "interest" here isn't moral either.*

A: Right. Acting out of interest is supposedly bad… and yet it mostly reveals the considerable mistake of thinking we could ever act otherwise. We can't. Because we need to affirm our being. Actually we don't even "need" to—it's what defines us. A power of being.

J: *For example, concretely: you give money to someone begging on the street. You do it for them, but above all for yourself, because it feels good in a way that matches how you're built.*

A: What makes someone else happy will make me happy. That's the third part. Spinoza wrote in the 17th century, and what people did a lot at the time—there's a beautiful book by Descartes called *The Treatise on the Passions*—was analyze the passions. They would say: this is jealousy, this is love, etc. And there's this part in Spinoza—almost a dictionary of the passions—which is the third part, but a dictionary of passions with their articulations. And that third part teaches you to see exactly how they work.
So if someone loves something, I too will come to love that thing, because I want to feel it—since love is an increase in the power of being, and sadness is a contraction of that being.

J: *I thought a lot about Spinoza after doing a Vipassana retreat, a meditation technique based on ancient Buddhist texts, where you rediscover a form of unity, but also the bodily sensation of what Spinoza says: when joy arises in your mind, your whole body vibrates in a certain way; and when you find yourself with jealousy or other harmful thoughts, you contract. There are vibrations and contractions. So you feel physically what he describes mathematically. And once, speaking with a Buddhism specialist who had also read Spinoza, he told me it was very similar—just another way of saying the same thing.*

A: Yes, especially regarding continuity—this cosmic world that is not a creature of God but a creation of God, or even a co-creation. We are all God—not as a person, because that notion makes no sense at the scale of God. I've often, in discussions like the one we had, met people with a philosophical training that wasn't Western, and often quite strongly non-Western, almost anti-Western. And by Western I mean *logos*, reason, theoretical expression, rational development. So I'm happy to hear that a Buddhist specialist finds parallels with Spinoza. But I feel that if we compare them too closely, we abandon something essential in Spinoza: the notion of reason, of demonstration. Remove that from Spinoza and you remove more than a nerve… you remove the functioning, the mechanism—because *The Ethics* is a machine for being happy.
Spinoza is hard to really read, to study. So I understand writing, say, a hundred-page manual to explain him… I've read many commentaries, listened to lectures, etc. We need all of that. But at some point, this book was conceived as a mechanism. And whatever the commentaries, the essays, the simplifications, or exotic parallels, I feel something is lost. So: yes, it's hard, it's arduous, we're not used to reading things like that. But when we care about the questions, we care about the answers. And only the book can give them to you.
He has a beautiful expression about this. Spinoza often returns to the idea that knowing the Pythagorean theorem, for example—I don't know if he uses that exact one—but knowing a theorem, like the fact that the angles of a triangle sum to whatever…

J: $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$…

A: Yes, that one. It's fine to know the result, but if you can't reproduce the theorem, it's an inferior kind of knowledge, that's all. It's first-kind knowledge, which works through

images. And you can't build much from that. And the main reproach is that you can't transmit it. Even if you repeat the Pythagorean theorem 500 times to someone—if you can't explain how it works, what it really does, then your level of knowledge prevents you from transmitting it.

J: *I love that you use that example, because personally, I understood the Pythagorean theorem at the age of 35. I had memorized it at school—"$a^2 + b^2 = c^2$"—but I hadn't understood it. And then one day, a physicist showed me the proof, and showed me that when you say "square," you can literally draw a square on each side of the triangle. And suddenly everything makes sense… the poetry of mathematics appears, and you truly understand. And on top of that, you touch a form of beauty that makes you happy. That's when you reach the third kind of knowledge. You're "filled"—filled by the fact that understanding opens a field that makes you happy. It's so beautiful. I completely missed mathematics at school because they weren't taught to me in a way I could understand them. So I missed their poetry, which is wonderful.*

A: People often talk about mathematicians. This joy in Spinoza is beautiful. Not surprising, really. Because in understanding, you adhere more. You adhere in the noblest sense—you participate in what unfolds, if you know its mechanisms. So of course understanding something—especially something difficult—creates joy. And that shouldn't surprise us, since that's the flourishing we seek.

J: *The first kind of knowledge is passive. The second is in-between. And the third one is truly active. You're engaged in the result.*

A: I imagine there aren't many truths on Earth—truths as grave and essential as those Spinoza develops in *The Ethics*. And philosophers throughout the ages say the same things in different ways. One image by Nietzsche has accompanied me all my life. Nietzsche was a great reader of Spinoza. The image of the camel, the lion, and the child. You must begin as a camel, carry everything on your back; then be a lion, send everything flying; then become a child again. These three stages are very Spinozist, in the sense that we cannot avoid the difficulty, the logical articulation, the work it requires; but somewhere at the end, there is a lion who says—not that it's better not to care, but that by having calibrated your mind in a certain way, you become capable of intuition and candor. Not naïveté—candor. It's wonderful to feel that everything can be understood, that nothing acts *by me*, and that I must participate in it as much as possible. So it's not a determinism that leads to passivity.

J: *That's what's brilliant.*

A: It's striking because these are two terms we systematically oppose, but if we think carefully—and especially as carefully as Spinoza—this opposition dissolves. Like black and white: I'm sure somewhere in some chemistry manual there's an explanation that they're not truly opposite colors… What I mean is, most of the opposites we use in everyday life are things we *need*—I need to know that this house isn't mine so I don't walk into the wrong one, sure. But does that mean the houses are radically different, that one truly belongs to someone else? That's another question… I need these errors, yet they remain errors. You—reading Spinoza—your world changed. Because earlier we were saying that Spinoza is almost an instruction manual for happiness.

J: *…that uses reason, and pushes the system to its limit. You can't be more rational than Spinoza, in the articulation at least. Do you remember the effect this reading had on you? Or how you carry it now in your daily life?*

A: I remember being scared of it. My first publisher, Allia, had republished the entire corpus under Bernard Pautrat, who spent his whole life teaching *The Ethics* at the École Normale Supérieure on rue d'Ulm. I spoke with my publisher, Gérard Berréby, and told him my fear of approaching this work—its difficulty, the legend surrounding it—and he told me it was possible. So I bought all of Spinoza's works and began with *The Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, which is a kind of young man's confession, where he says something I've felt in my life—something I think everyone feels: there are three things on earth we are told are desirable—money, sex, and glory (basically fame). And Spinoza looks at these three and says: there's a problem… There's a problem because they are things that exhaust themselves and exhaust me. After sex I'll be sadder, more tired, and it will consume my attention. Glory will enslave me to the gaze of others; I'll depend on their look; I'll need others to validate this fame. As for money, it's obviously only a half-answer, since it's the means to an end, and doesn't answer the question of what we'll do with it. So he searches for a good—a good above these corrupting impulses of life—something that does not exhaust itself. And that goes through knowledge, but more than knowledge as a pastime—no mere diversion. You see this very quickly when reading the book. Added to that, it is written by the most brilliant and powerfully intelligent mind I've encountered in my readings.
And—this is Pautrat in his preface—he ends with a comment I think we can end on too, because it's beautiful and true: Spinoza is, in the end, a friend. At the end of this intellectual adventure, the adventure of reading him, you know that someone, sometime, existed—he died very young, not even forty—someone who dedicated his life to truth and found something more than its expression—found its mechanism, its method. And that makes you happy. Not every minute, not every second, it's not an ecstasy… But something stays in your mind telling you someone succeeded. Succeeded in saying, in answering, almost everything. And without ever offending you—because Spinoza never tells you stories, he never lies, never uses images. He never says: here is the Son of God—when we know it's more complicated, or we don't agree, or we don't know, or we say it's a mystery… None of that. Of course, that's pleasant, cultural, and it produces beautiful things—from Leonardo da Vinci to any Gothic architect. But here, you have a raw truth, the way it should be if it is to be shared easily, operatively.

J: *It's the user's manual for joy, really. Because you mentioned sex, money, glory. What's above that is joy…*

A: Yes, yes. Often, when I read commentators, Spinoza is labeled a philosopher of joy. I feel the word "joy" is too brief to be systematically attached to him. But still, joy is not the same as beatitude. Joy is an indication that we're doing roughly what we should be doing. Bergson has a beautiful idea: we only ever create in joy. I can feel that as a writer, even if I need unhappiness, even if writing is painful, there is behind all that a joy, in the sense that literature is something I love, and trying to enter the great dialogue it is—that animates me, yes. Fills me with joy.