

Spinoza and Levinas: Science and Ethics

Spinoza lived in mid-seventeenth century Amsterdam, in Holland, which was then at the height of its economic, political and indeed global power. New York was still New Amsterdam. Spinoza was raised in a Jewish merchant family which had fled expulsion from Spain and Portugal. After being excommunicated from the Jewish community in 1656 at the age of twenty-three, he led a retiring bachelor life earning a living as a lens grinder while as a philosopher figuring out, as he believed, the true character of the universe and of the true condition and proper place of humans within it. Spinoza died in 1677, at the young age of forty-four, almost entirely unknown to the larger world.

In view of contemporary Christian religious persecutions, Spinoza published very little in his lifetime. His chief work, *Ethics: Demonstrated in Geometrical Manner (Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata)*, years in the writing, perhaps finished by 1674, was circulated to his friends for comment. It was left by its author with instructions that it be published posthumously, which it was, by his friends in the year of Spinoza's death, 1677, as part of the *Posthumous Works (Opera Posthuma)* under Spinoza's initials. A year later it was translated into Dutch, again with Spinoza's initials. The *Ethics* articulates by means of definitions, axioms, propositions, proofs, corollaries, and the like, in the manner of the ancient Greek mathematician Euclid, Spinoza's basic philosophy.

His philosophy is usually and correctly classified as "rationalist" and "pantheist." Its primary concern is to elucidate the basic truth of the universe, its true nature, in view of the truth of modern science. That basic truth is a rational pantheism.

It is not surprising that when a major shift, change, or reorientation in the world occurs, e.g., the Industrial Revolution, or, in this case, the rise of modern science, those who experience it firsthand often appreciate the differences it makes best, what is lost and what is gained, some to celebrate and others to bemoan them. Spinoza celebrated modern science. Indeed he venerates it more completely, more thoroughly, more radically than any other early modern philosopher in the West. Nevertheless, and again not surprisingly, he does not break free entirely or fundamentally from the intellectual grip of the pre-modern past. No one begins *de novo*.

Thus despite his best effort to thoroughly embrace modern science all the way, to affirm efficient causality and the lawfulness of nature in all things, it is still under the tutelage of classical Greek philosophy and medieval Christian theology that Spinoza continues to restrict rational truth – what he calls "adequate ideas" – to the *eternal, immutable and necessary*, in contrast to things temporal,

changeable and contingent, which are considered – in line with long tradition - to be merely subjective epiphenomena, imaginings and fantasies of the ignorant and deluded.

Levinas, whose life spans the twentieth century, was also born into a Jewish family, in Kaunas, Lithuania. He was born into the somewhat insular but extraordinarily vibrant and multilayered spiritual-intellectual world of pre-Holocaust *Litvak* Jewry, raised in a home both traditional and modern. As a bright young man of promise he left that world, to study at the University of Strasburg, France, including one year, 1928-1929, in Heidelberg, Germany, learning phenomenology from Husserl and Heidegger. He then moved to Paris and worked at a Jewish high school and teacher training college. He wrote a scholarly book and many articles introducing French intellectuals to German phenomenology, i.e., taking seriously the world of change, temporality, embodiment, language and sociality. Unlike Spinoza, then, Levinas is fully committed to contemporary thought, discarding philosophy's dualist heritage and idealist prejudice favoring the immutable, the eternal and the necessity. As Levinas puts the matter: "It has never been more difficult to think." Furthermore, in direct contrast to Spinoza and a long philosophical tradition, Levinas recognizes that *first philosophy* is not ontology and knowledge but *ethics*, caring for the welfare of the other person above all.

Despite their radical opposition, which is our primary topic, let us first note that Spinoza and Levinas share certain significant points of view. First, both are philosophers, and therefore take seriously and are bound to reason and argumentation, to making themselves clear, to elucidating the structures of the intelligible. Second, both affirm and have enormous respect for the specific methods and truths of modern science. Thus, third, both unflinchingly attack superstition, religious fanaticism, mythologization, ideology, worldviews without evidence, wishful thinking without justification, outlooks based on opinion and faith alone.

It is in their larger philosophies, however, the worldviews within which these points of agreement make sense, where they radically part company. So while Spinoza integrates all and everything into a unified intelligibility conforming without exception to the coherent and quantifying logic of modern science, to modern science as efficient necessary causality and logical deduction, Levinas, in contrast, recognizes the transcendence of the human as a mortal separation from nature, and the transcendence of the human as aspiration for the good, the morally good and the just, outside the range of scientific knowledge and yet subtending it, making it possible, indeed justifying science. Thus Levinas writes in the last sentence of the first Section of *Totality and Infinity*, where he sums the two basic claims upon which his book and his philosophy are based: "Thought and freedom come to us from separation and from consideration of the Other – this thesis is at the antipodes of Spinozism."¹

The task of philosophy for Spinoza is not to supplement science by showing its relation to other avenues and forms of knowledge, sensibility, or sentiment, in order to situate science within a larger whole wherein it takes its place. Rather, following an ancient aspiration, the task of philosophy is to totalize science, to show the true world as the world of scientific intelligibility, *episteme* (knowledge) in contrast to *doxa* (opinion). For Spinoza *modern science* has for the first time and finally made such an aspiration and task accomplishable. Together science and the philosophy of science, i.e., science and Spinoza's philosophy, account for the whole, truth eternal, immutable and necessary. Together they represent the perfect intelligibility which in an earlier theological parlance – which Spinoza appropriates – had been called “God's mind” or “omniscience.” In relation to the ongoing researches of scientists such intelligibility would be an “ethics,” discovering knowledge that perfect, and in relation to the philosopher's all-embracing knowing it would be nothing less than “beatitude.”

Despite Spinoza's failures, both in understanding the true nature of science and in formulating a systematic and coherent philosophy of science, it is the absolute aspiration of this project, to take scientific knowledge as the exclusive intelligibility of everything, that makes him our contemporary. It is said that Spinoza was the first modern. If he was so it was because he was the first uncompromising and absolute positivist or naturalist. *Deus, sive natura*. “God, or nature,” i.e., nature as absolute. Everything would be Nature. The modern mathematical scientist would be the new Prometheus,² comprehending all and everything in its truth. All the rest would be illusion, ignorance, arrogance and self-seeking. Such is the project Spinoza set for himself and expounded in the *Ethics*, and in all his writings.

That Spinoza's philosophy is atheist, despite his protests, was recognized immediately, even by his select correspondents while he was still alive. To be sure, despite his appropriation of religious language in the articulation of this thought, his protests never affirmed traditional faith, anthropomorphism or theodicy. But in opposing childish religion he did not affirm an adult one, contrary to Kant and Levinas, who later also and no less radically opposed childish religion. Rather he proposed a new type of “faith” altogether, a faith in science, in the uniform lawfulness of nature. Henceforth the only absolute would be such lawfulness.

Certainly, too, Spinoza understood that such a stringent worldview would be too difficult for the many. It would be affirmed only by the few, the elect intelligentsia, scientists and philosophers. For the masses, the multitude, the many, the horde of ignoramuses, as he calls them, and of whom Spinoza is quite unable to disguise his contempt, traditional religion would have to suffice. Not, however, because of its truth, which it has none, but because of its *usefulness* to keep these otherwise unruly masses in

line, to regulate and dampen the dangerous consequences of their inevitable irrationality, their emotional outbursts and bondage to lies and deception, and to provide effective if imaginative sanctity and sanction to the obedience demanded by the no less imaginary morality which such fools and madmen must still obey and whose falsity they were incapable of transcending in any event.

That Spinoza's philosophy is pantheist, this too was quickly recognized. His pantheism and his atheism are of one piece, and both are inseparable from his naturalist positivism. That all these were forms of scientism, an unbounded faith, defense and totalization of modern science, this – for the cognoscenti - was meant to be the saving grace of his thought, its liberating value, what Spinoza considered its "blessedness." Unfortunately, for we who are critical of Spinoza, that is to say, for we who no longer share his idealization and idolization of science, the alleged liberation he proffers requires some rather dark blinkers. That is, it comes only by means of a severe narrowing of consciousness, which eventually exacts its own terrible revenge, its own crisis of rationality. Despite our gratitude to science for liberating us from superstition, dogma, opinion and the violence of intolerance, if it also disregards and dismisses every other register of significance, denigrating everything which lie outside the competence of mathematics and quantification, as does Spinoza's positivism, then the larger world – not refuted but repressed – sooner or later comes back with a vengeance, comes back, that is to say, in distorted form to haunt and undermine all alternative forms of intelligibility and the legitimate accomplishments of science as well. Science exaggerated is no longer science. Levinas will uncover the limitation of science from the point of view of ethics, from the elevated orientation of ethics, the height of moral imperative, the call to alleviate another person's suffering, which for him represents not ignorance, illusion and arrogance, but the most worthy "humanity of the human."

Spinoza reaches his smaller and seemingly more secure world of rational intelligibility via two basic steps. They are not especially complicated, even if they are made so by a tortured Euclidean execution by which they are passed off as necessary and complete when in truth they are but a Procrustean bed. *First, everything is reduced to nature. Second, nature is reduced to what is knowable by modern science.* In sum, being is being-known, or as Parmenides declared: "being and *logos* are one." Though versions or parallels are found around the world, it is the defining story of the West as science and philosophy of science. Its added force in Spinoza comes from the unprecedented analytical power of the modern scientific *logos*, where mathematical formulae have expanded far beyond the confines of Aristotelian logic. In these basics, the outlook of today's positivists remains in fundamental agreement with Spinoza, even if they would revise his classically logicist conception of science. The quibble of these

latter day Spinozists with Spinoza is over the nature not the absoluteness of scientific knowledge. For all of them the real is rational and the rational is real.

Levinas rejects this fundamental agreement, as he rejects the Parmenidean grounds upon which it is constructed. "Thought and freedom," he writes in the concluding sentence of the first Section of *Totality and Infinity*, "come to us from separation and from the consideration of the Other – this thesis is at the antipodes of Spinozism."³ The dual thesis that each human being is (1) independent and separate from anonymous being, and (2) transcends but is morally obligated to one another, is the pillar of Levinas's thought. It stands in stark contrast to Spinoza's alternative claim that humans are homogenous with nature and as such that ethics is to true knowledge of nature. Levinas had already announced this two pronged thesis as early as 1947, indeed, in the fourth sentence of *Time and the Other*, with regard to the meaning of time: "To uphold this thesis," he writes, "it will be necessary, on the one hand, to deepen the notion of solitude and, on the other, to consider the opportunities that time offers to solitude."⁴ "To deepen the notion of solitude": a human sensibility and sensing irreducible to materiality or projective ecstasies, that is to say, subjectivity as vulnerability, pain as evil. "The opportunities that time offers to solitude": the transcendence of the other as the sollicitation and inadequacy – denucleation, "diachrony" - of my moral responsibility, and for justice as the future of humanity. The two dimensions are intimately related: deepening subjectivity heightens transcendence. Heightening transcendence deepens subjectivity. Sensibility evokes responsibility. Responsibility heightens sensitivity.

The contrast is a sharp one. For Spinoza, adopting a scientific view means not only treating the human as if it were in no way exception, but totalizing this treatment, subordinating the human to the real. For Levinas, in contrast, following the humanist tradition, such a subordination, however much it has genuine though limited value is for knowledge, cannot be totalized without a fundamental infidelity not only to the human but, and this is of no less importance, to the real as well. This is because the human, in myself, in the other, as a responsibility of the self to and for the other, has greater worth and wider consequences than Spinozists and all positivists are willing to admit. For one, there would not be scientific truth without a prior and conditioning moral responsibility toward truth telling. Scientific truth must be verified, and verification is a social and not merely a natural process.

The human can be contextualized within a matrix of scientific knowledge, but the human, at the same time, is irreducible to such a context, or any context, whether atoms and void, double helix, or social or historical *Geist*. The human is always exceptional. This is what Levinas means by the "face," which is an imposition, a disturbance, always singular, always "you," which upsets all the niceties of my

integrating presuppositions and universalizing propositions, including the algorithms of statistical analyses. The immeasurability of suffering, the hunger for learning, the varieties of enjoyment, the unpredictable paths of conversation... very simply, but with no simplification, the otherness of the other person, these open up in an orientation of moral height, of goodness, greater, higher, nobler than any objective measures and procedures which would attempt to contain them, place them in a horizon, reduce them to their context. Vulnerable subjectivity. Responsible selfhood. In their service Levinas finds the ethical "better than being," the "for the other," the always "out of control," as I have called it, to resist and overcome the seductive but dehumanized hegemony of an administered society, the seemingly irresistible alliance of positivism in theory and commodification in praxis, the rule of numbers and private property.

The other person can be, and in certain situations is best placed within the context of objective knowledge and instrumental reason. For instance, a medical doctor operates on diseased or damaged organs, repairing or replacing them, better the patient is anaesthetized, unconscious, "body as object" rather than "lived body," as Merleau-Ponty has underscored. Of course, at the same time, the doctor tries to heal the patient, and anaesthetizes the patient, because illness and pain are evils, because we want to alleviate the patient's suffering, restore him or her to health, as much as possible. So the doctor temporarily treats the patient as a thing in order to restore the patient to his or her humanity, to enjoyment and happiness, restore the patient to his or her family and friends, and life. It is the very otherness of the other, then, that obligates us, makes us responsible. The significance of the other person emerges as what Levinas characterizes as "saying," sincerity, expressiveness, "face," which precedes and *orients* all that is "said," themes, theses, signs, propositions, representations, instrumentalities and the like.

The *ground* of science, Husserl taught, lies not in objects and objectivity, but in evidence and the illumination of what is evident. What Levinas discovers at the limits of science, even science as phenomenologically grasped, that is to say, what Levinas discovers at the limits of a treatment of reality as phenomena and as the product of the meaning-giving acts of intentional consciousness, are the imperatives of moral exigency. The *priority* of the latter comes not from some failure of science, however, but rather from a surplus beyond and above it, a surplus of goodness which makes science itself possible. For Spinozism, in contrast, reaching the end of science means reaching the end of the universe, beyond which there is nothing but the irrational, the illusory, babblings of "babies, fools, and madmen."⁵ Such a dyadic opposition, however, because it is abstract, sets up the unstable dialectical situation Husserl already in the early twentieth century called the "Crisis."⁶ Excluding what objectivity

cannot objectify, or what mathematics cannot formalize, dismissing everything outside of science as “irrational,” what is left out – which is surely not simply irrational and illusory – can only maintain itself in distorted form, lacking any legitimacy, and as such forced to *violently explode* the artificiality of the boundaries Spinozism sets up between the “rational,” which it approves, and the “irrational,” which it castigates, through a dialectic Sigmund Freud named “the return of the repressed.” In a seeming paradox which is no paradox at all, absolutized science, science totalized in the manner of Spinozism, which at first sight seems to eliminate superstition, dogma, blind faith, and their like, actually and precisely undergirds, exacerbates and unleashes a horde of irrationalism – in religion, in pedagogy, in society, in politics - whose *mythological status* is the one thing everyone agrees upon. Scientism, positivism, in a word Spinozism’s exclusivist science does not rid the world of irrationalism, it multiplies it.

For Levinas what is special about humans is not a generic ratio of motion and rest, which is what determines class adherence for Spinoza, but the independence established across a sensibility sensitive to pleasure and pain. At its most primitive level this sensible sensitivity is an animal-like enjoyment of sensations. But at the same time it is a vulnerability to pain and dissolution, to wounds, hunger, thirst, illness and ultimately, death. The embodied human subject, in a word, is a not just a materiality but a vulnerability, an enjoyment of sensations, but also a suffering from them. Embodiment is a complex phenomenon, a complex sensitivity, not a complex mathematical ratio. It is not accurately or sufficiently grasped if reduced to “sense data,” “confused ideas” or “secondary qualities,” which are intellectual constructs derived from already presupposing the primacy of scientific knowing.

To be embodied, to be human, is therefore not only a puzzle or disappointment for knowledge, a “stammering thought,” as if embodiment reduced humans to second class citizen in the hegemonic state of scientific knowledge. Spinoza’s resort to “substance,” “modes,” and “accidents,” despite its philosophical pedigree, is also of no use here.¹ This is because the self-sensing of sensibility, grasped in its own occurrence and not fitted into *a priori* rational scheme or system, occurs through the seeming paradox of a “passive synthesis,” what Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his phenomenological investigations of the same phenomenon named a “fold” in the “flesh of the world,” as when one hand touches the other

¹ That interpreting the subject as *substance* – Spinoza goes so far as to interpret the universe as substance, indeed, nothing is more self-evident to him!- is an intellectualist importation to the phenomena itself is a great discovery of contemporary thought, whether or not one agrees with Nietzsche’s further claim that the substantial self is a fiction, “owing to the seduction of language (and of the fundamental errors of reason that are petrified in it) which conceived and misconceives all effects as conditioned by something that causes effects, by a ‘subject’...” Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals, Essay I, Section 13* (Kaufmann translation). We will see later in the present volume that Nietzsche’s critique of substance nevertheless remains closer to Spinoza than to Levinas.

hand without the subject being able to sort out definitively which hand is touching and which is touched. A faithful account of embodiment, enjoyment, pain, labor, vulnerability, and even representation, are occluded the demand for consistency and totality by a thought already submissive to propositional logic. The body is not a logical term, or is turned into something else when treated so. But that is how Spinoza treats it, reducing human embodiment to the causality of materiality. "By imagining this anesthesia limitless," Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity*, "Spinoza conjures away separation." It is what all positivism, all naturalism, all scientism does, and which Spinoza does systematically according to his totalizing interpretation of modern science as material causality and logical deduction.

In opposition to Spinozism and all such rational reductionism, Levinas affirms the independence, the freedom, the initiative of the human all the way to what he calls "the risk of atheism." Only a being fully capable of denying God, of doing and being without God, can truly affirm God. But to affirm God for Levinas is not a theological or dogmatic or faith based affair. Rather it is the difficulty of freedom, that is to say, responsiveness to the vulnerability of others, first of all the other person who faces, in a relation of kindness, my being for-the-other before myself, and no less of all the others, those who are other to me and other to the other as well, an alterity Levinas calls "the third," and a relationship not of kindness alone, but rectifying the singularity of kindness, a driven by the call to *justice*.

One can see, then, in contrast to classical philosophy which despised the body and its vulnerabilities by assimilating it to the logic of knowledge and knowing, taking the body seriously in its vulnerability has enormous consequences for the way we think about ourselves, how we conceive the status of ethics, and in reorienting our understanding of the science itself. Following Kant, but as a phenomenologist rather than a natural scientist, Levinas affirms the priority, the primacy of ethics. Because Levinas discovers the first initiative of subjectivity in self-sensing, upon which are built the higher level constitutive layers of sense such a dwelling, worldliness, labor and representation, which are elaborated in Section Two of *Totality and Infinity*, when he comes to account for inter-subjectivity in Section Three of *Totality and Infinity* and in the whole of *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (and most of his other writings), an inter-subjectivity whose *significance* is from the first weighted with the valence of morality, Levinas elaborates inter-subjectivity and morality based in embodiment, as a relation not of mind to mind, of me, myself, in my singularity, to the suffering of the other. From the first the ethical self is an obligation, a moral responsibility to and for the other. Like a bodhisattva Levinas is not distracted by intellectual perfection, by personal salvation. He has come, rather, to teach the meaning of suffering and the alleviation of suffering. The alleviation of suffering is the heart of morality, the very "definition" of the human, the highest vocation of humanity: to give to the other,

which is always a giving of oneself, “love of the neighbor” all the way to the possible extremity of “dying for” the other- ultimate expiation of responsible selfhood. A body, eyes, hands, skin, tears and laughter, pain and pleasure, hunger and need, conversation and imagination, are not obstacles to morality, they are precisely what require it and enable it.

Transcendence, alterity in its strongest sense, the alterity of the other person as moral solicitation, then, is *more other even than negativity*. “Transcendence is Not Negativity,” Levinas entitles one of the subsections of *Totality and Infinity*.² Alterity is not a *lack*, as Plato thought, but a *surplus* of obligations, a surplus which disrupts, disturbs, overwhelms the self-interest of the subject. Despite the nobility of Socrates’ quest, one never knows the good, and never can: first one serves the other. But this is far from an endorsement of ignorance or the exaltation of feeling over thinking. To be sure, the demands of kindness come first. The hungry person needs bread. But kindness is not enough. There are many hungry persons. Justice, not only for one but for all, is required. It is here, in the demand for justice, that knowledge is required. Without knowledge we cannot help the one who is far away. Without knowledge there can be no provision of food and housing, transportation, preservation of good, their equitable and timely distribution, and the like. Science and technology are not ends in themselves, however, despite the contemplative and Spinozist myopia. They serve justice.

Meaning is not first of all a matter of pure freedom, thought thinking undisturbed. There is a higher calling, “despite oneself”: to be “for the other.” Contrary to the seductive allure of Spinozism, the disturbances of caring are *better* than the complacency of *conatus*. Being is not enough. Spinoza can win all his arguments, and still lose – be the worse for it. Sacrifice, service to others, is *better* than signification by itself. Levinas’s teachings are teachings, not merely propositions, themes, theses, hypotheses. That is to say, they are claims: truths bound to obligations, impositions, demands, exigencies; they unsettle us. The nominative is not enough. Truth itself emerges from the imperative, accusative, what Levinas has also called “prophetic speech,” whose first word is always the first word even if it is never articulated: “Listen to me!” “Hear me!” not as mere aesthetic expressions, but as the “saying before the said,” cries for aid, for help, for assistance, for healing, and ultimately as a call to join in the greatest task of human solidarity: justice for all.

All this Spinoza can only dismiss as “ignorance” and “illusion.” All this Levinas raises to its true height, and in the process provides what Spinoza most desires but cannot offer, namely, a justification for science beyond the self-serving rhetoric of its usual question-begging. There is no irony in Levinas’s position, which is straightforwardness itself, “proximity and not truth about proximity,”⁷ what in *Totality*

² TI, 40-42. The allusion to Nietzsche is no doubt quite consciously made.

and Infinity he calls “sincerity” and “teaching,” and in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* he names with such terms as “nakedness,” “patience,” “substitution,” “non-indifference” and “witness,” among others. “It is time,” Levinas writes, and surely he is also thinking of Spinoza here, “the abusive confusion of foolishness with morality were denounced.”⁸ Moral obligation is not irrational, not ignorance, not a childish thought. Rather, the face of the other inspires a *difficult freedom, freedom bound to obligations, obligations coming from the Other before oneself, coming ultimately from all Others, in an orientation inescapable and from the first oriented by goodness and by right, demanding kindness and justice, prior to choice or contract*, and most certainly invisible to Spinozism or, worse, despised by him.

¹ TI, 105.

² Mary Shelley, who in 1818 already had a very different idea of the alleged beneficence of science, entitled her new horror story *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*

³ TI, 105.

⁴ TO, 39.

⁵ See, Richard A. Cohen, *Out of Control: Confrontations Between Spinoza and Levinas*, Chapter Eight, “Spinoza’s Spleen: ‘Babies, Fools, and Madmen’” (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 279-316.

⁶ See, Edmund Husserl, *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, ed. and transl. Quentin Lauer (New York: Harper and Row, 1965); and Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, transl. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

⁷ OBBE, 120.

⁸ OBBE, 126.