

---

## Hegel reads Spinoza<sup>†</sup>

---

Pierre Macherey

From *Hegel or Spinoza* (University of Minnesota Press, forthcoming)

Translated by Susan M Ruddick, Department of Geography and Program in Planning,  
University of Toronto, 100 St. George St., Toronto ON M5S 3G3

---

**Abstract.** *Hegel ou Spinoza* first appeared in 1979 after an eight-year near hiatus in Pierre Macherey's work. It marked, as Warren Montag argues, a divergence in the philosophical paths of Pierre Macherey and his mentor and (by then) colleague Louis Althusser, each responding in their own way to the violent misreading of their work as a so-called structuralism and the resurgence of humanism (or perhaps, more correctly an anti-antihumanism) in France at the time. This is a pivotal and arguably prescient work. The questions it addresses speak not only to the historical legacy of Hegel in France but to the persistent fault lines and potential points of convergence in contemporary social theory and political philosophy. These include, among others, questions about the role of the dialectic and the negative central to the work of Negri and Althusser; questions about the politics of ontology and how we conceive of multiplicity, a point of contention between Deleuze and Badiou; and questions about the immanence of expression and the role of representation in the play of difference, a point of divergence between Deleuze and Derrida. This first chapter—"Hegel reads Spinoza"—sets up Hegel's reading of Spinoza, which is for Hegel an arrested development, a moment of stasis in thinking that is at the same time a beginning of philosophy. But Macherey focuses his attention on this reading in order to uncover in subsequent chapters what is indigestible for Hegel in Spinoza's work, a kernel on which philosophy is made to move again, but this time in a renewal of Spinoza's thinking on three critical points: the problem of attributes, and the role of the negative.

### The point of view of substance

For Hegel everything begins with the realization that there is something exceptional and inescapable in Spinoza's philosophy. "Spinoza constitutes such a crucial point for modern philosophy that we might say in effect that there is a choice between Spinozism or no philosophy at all [*du hast entweder den Spinozismus oder keine Philosophie*]." <sup>(1)</sup> It is necessary to 'pass through' Spinoza because it is in his philosophy that the essential relationship between thought and the absolute is developed, the only point of view from which reality in its entirety is revealed and in which it appears that reason has nothing outside itself, but contains everything within it. Thus all philosophy, all of philosophy, becomes possible.

<sup>†</sup> This paper appears with permission from the University of Minnesota Press. The full English edition of *Hegel or Spinoza* will be published in 2011 by the University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>(1)</sup> My translation. Compare Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane and Francis H. Simson, 3 vols., vol. III (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Company, Ltd., 1896) 283. For this text Macherey relied largely on his own translations from the German. In an effort to remain as true to Macherey's text as possible while enabling English readers to consult comparable sources for Hegel and Spinoza's corpus, I used the following strategy. I cited the comparable English text when Macherey's French version was almost identical in wording. Where there was a slight divergence between the French text and the English, I cited the comparable English passages and indicated the passage was modified. Where there was significant and contentious divergence, I included both English and French, and at times German, sources. All translations from original French texts are mine unless otherwise noted. Any modifications or additions to quotes made by Macherey himself are indicated in parentheses; any modifications or additions to the work by the translator are indicated in square brackets.

For Hegel, therefore, Spinoza occupies the position of a precursor: something begins with him. But he is not just a precursor: what begins in him does not end there, in the manner of an arrested thought, which is prevented from the possibility of achieving an objective to which it nevertheless aspires. This is why Hegel discovers in Spinoza's work all the characteristics of an aborted project, hindered by the insurmountable difficulties it engenders, itself, in its own development. This fundamental but broken knowledge has, therefore, no significance except an historical one: in the entire body of philosophy Spinoza occupies a very particular position from which the absolute is perceived but grasped restrictively as a substance. To some extent, we acknowledge Spinoza and his effort to think the absolute, but the historical limits of this thinking make it impossible to go further, in the anticipation of a final point of view where Hegel is already situated and from which he interprets all previous philosophies retrospectively.

This analysis is illustrated by an altogether characteristic expression that arises whenever Hegel speaks of Spinoza. For example, in book I of *Logic*: "With Spinoza, substance and its absolute unity takes the form of an inert unity, of a rigidity in which one does *not yet* find the concept of a negative unity of Self, a subjectivity."<sup>(2)</sup> Or again, in paragraph 50 of *Logic* in the *Encyclopedia*: "Substance according to Spinoza is *not yet* absolute spirit". And in the chapter in *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* dedicated to Spinoza: "Absolute substance is the true, but it is *not yet* the true in its entirety" (1896, page 259, modified). Under this very particular modality of an 'already', which is also "not yet", proper to all anticipation, Spinoza frees himself from the foundation of the entire history of philosophy, whose progression he underscores by bringing it to a standstill.

In addition, since in the introduction of the third book of *Logic*, "Concerning the Concept in General", Hegel unveils the conditions that allow him to interpret philosophical doctrines and to explain their concrete significance, he could do no better than return to the example of Spinoza: "The only possible refutation of Spinozism must therefore consist, in the first place, in recognizing its standpoint as essential and necessary and then secondly by elevating that standpoint to a higher level."<sup>(3)</sup>

To take up a well-known formula in the preface of *Phenomenology*, this point of view is that of substance, insofar as this is "not yet" subject: "Substance is an essential stage in the evolution of the Idea, not however the Idea itself, not the absolute Idea, but the Idea in the still limited form of necessity."<sup>(4)</sup>

Spinoza's oeuvre is significant because it tends towards something that it does not achieve: to master its meaning is to follow this tendency beyond the limits that impede it, that is to say, to surpass it by resolving its internal contradiction.

To achieve this, there must be a change in viewpoint, located in the view of an absolute that is *not only* substance *but also* subject. And yet this passage from one point

<sup>(2)</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Pierre-Jean Labarri re, and Gwendoline Jarczyk, *Science de la Logique* Trad., Pr sentation et Notes par Pierre-Jean Labarri re et Gwendoline Jarczyk, Biblioth que Philosophique (Paris: Aubier) T.I. 249 my translation. [See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and George Di Giovanni, *The Science of Logic*, Cambridge Hegel Translations (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 212. Labarri re text is closest to the 1832 revised edition of *Logic*.—trans.]

<sup>(3)</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *G. W. F. Hegel. Science de la Logique ("Wissenschaft der Logik")* ... trans. S. Jank levitch (Paris: Aubier (impr. de G. Lang), 1949) my translation. [The French here is closer to the German. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1969) uses the term "immanent dialectic" but Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Wissenschaft der Logik. Zweiter Teil. Die subjektive Logik oder Lehre vom Begriff* (Duncker and Humboldt, 1841) does not—trans.]

<sup>(4)</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Encyclop die des Sciences Philosophiques. 1. La Science de la Logique*, trans. Bernard Bourgeois, Biblioth que des Textes Philosophiques (Paris: J. Vrin, 1970) Add. at   159, 405 my translation.

of view to another depends on historical conditions: history is this irresistible and irreversible process that transforms points of view not only in the sense of their gradual expansion but also in the real movement of their decomposition, followed by their reconstruction on new foundations: thus one 'elevates oneself' continuously to a superior point of view. It could even be said that Spinoza was Hegelian without knowing it, and thus incompletely, while Hegel would be a Spinozist conscious of the limits of this singular point of view, from which he knew how to extricate himself, for once and for all, locating himself in the point of view of the universal.

This is why Hegel's interpretation of Spinozism does not lead him back to the quest for a fully realized meaning. If there is a 'truth' to the doctrine (which makes all attempts at external refutation of this doctrine laughable because such a refutation arbitrarily opposes an independent point of view to its own viewpoint) this truth is relative to a very particular situation, which confines Spinoza within the whole process of the history of philosophy, and this truth cannot be detached from it. Grasped from the inside, in this tension and limitation that it imposes upon itself, this point of view is for itself simultaneously its own justification and refutation: if it is returned to its internal movement, it is evident that it destroys itself in the process of its own construction, and by these same means, because this movement transports it outside of itself. It is therefore not a question for Hegel of whether to 'return' to Spinoza to discover, there, the abstract form of a complete, coherent, and autonomous truth: it is necessary, on the contrary, to make this immanent transformation manifest, this 'passage' that already compels this system towards another system and incites us to read it as the draft, or outline, of an new and pending meaning, which has not yet encountered its conditions of realization. In this manner, the Hegelian reading of Spinoza is to a certain extent doubled: it searches within the doctrine for the signs of a truth that announces itself, and at the same time it discovers the real form of its absence, the obstacles that block its manifestation and that oblige us to talk about it only as a lack.

To understand Spinozism is thus first to identify the contradiction upon which it is founded. As we will see, this contradiction is manifest immediately. We have said that the profound truth of Spinozism consists in his effort to think the absolute. Even if, in the history of philosophy, this problem doesn't begin with him—there are precedents that we will discuss—he establishes it, for the first time, as the object of development and an attempt at a systematic resolution. With Spinoza there is an orientation toward an absolute understanding, and what it corresponds to [*et ce qui le représente*], according to Hegel, is the concept of "*causa sui*", which gives the entire doctrine its rational foundation: "The first of Spinoza's definitions, that of *causa sui*, conceptualized as this [ce] 'cujus essentia involvit existentiam' the inseparability of the notion from being is the main point and fundamental hypothesis in his system."<sup>(5)</sup>

In effect, with the *causa sui* an identity is immediately posed between what is and what is understood [*conçu*] between being and thought, which is for Hegel the condition of an absolute thought, which has nothing outside of itself and which consequently develops itself within an immanent and universal reflection. Returning to these definitions in the historic remarks in his book II of *Logic*, dedicated to Spinoza, Hegel talks of "these notions that are so profound and correct."<sup>(6)</sup> And, more precisely still, he says: "If Spinoza had been more attentive in developing that which is contained in the *causa sui*, its substance would not have been rigid and unworkable (das Starre)."<sup>(7)</sup>

<sup>(5)</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1873) §76 modified.

<sup>(6)</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, §1180.

<sup>(7)</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 259 modified.

Thus the specific contradiction of Spinozism appears immediately: his first concept contains within it the promise and the failure of a truth, for which he provides only one point of view, in an incomplete understanding.

Before making explicit what, according to Hegel, is lacking in the concept of *causa sui* and what prevents it from overcoming its own limitations, we can immediately make a comment that clarifies the style of this interpretation and reveals the gap in which it immediately positions itself, in relation to the doctrine that it works on. First of all we can show, as Gueroult does, that the concept of *causa sui* does not really have an initial foundational value for Spinoza: it does not represent a kind of first truth, a principle in the Cartesian sense, from which the entire system can be developed, as if from the starting point of a germ of truth. The *causa sui* is a property of the substance and is explained through it [*et s'explique par elle*]. But there is no question, for Spinoza at least, of defining a thing (whatever it is) by its property: to proceed this way is to fall into serious confusion, subordinating the essence of God to his capacity, which is the key to all finalist theologies that rely on the imagination. It is therefore inadequately and as a matter of convenience that we restore substance to the *causa sui*, since, on the contrary, the concept of the latter does not truly clarify itself except by way of substance: “si res in se sit, sive, *ut vulgo dicitur*, causa sui” (*De intellectus emendatione*). It is thus only in a manner of speaking that substance is assimilated to the *causa sui*.<sup>(8)</sup>

But it is possible to go further still: what Hegel presupposes here is less that the *causa sui* is the fundamental concept of Spinozism, which already adds to the controversy as we will see, than the fact that Spinozism admits a first concept from which it proceeds. This signifies that the enterprise of an absolute understanding that Spinoza undertakes develops by way of an absolute beginning and that this is also the real point of departure of his interpretation. It is not astonishing, then, that Hegel himself would be engaged in the enterprise of a critique of Spinozism: one of the crucial ideas of his own system is, in effect, that absolute understanding does not begin, or rather that it cannot begin, absolutely; its infinity reveals itself exactly in this impossibility of a first beginning that is also a true beginning or a beginning of the true. So, whatever the actual truth of the concept of *causa sui* (which “resides in it”, to take up the terms of Hegel) the very fact that he gives a beginning to Spinoza’s system is sufficient to mark the limitation of this system.

Here we can, ourselves, begin to be astonished: does Hegel ignore that this aporia of beginning—which sets his *Logic* in motion, this impossibility of grounding the infinite process of knowledge in a first truth whose foundation or principle in itself—is also an essential lesson of Spinozism, the principal objection that he himself opposes to the philosophy of Descartes? In such a sense that it is only “*ut vulgo dicitur*”, “so to speak”, that the geometric exposition of the *Ethics* “begins” with definitions, which for that matter do not have an effective sense, except at the moment when they function in demonstrations or they really produce the effects of truth: Spinozist thinking precisely does not have this rigidity of a construction relying on a base and pushing its analytic to an end-point, which would find itself thus limited between a beginning and an end. It does not obey the model of the order of the reasons.

But, what is surprising here, is less that Hegel has misunderstood an important aspect of Spinozism—everyone can make mistakes, even Hegel who pretends, however, to be able to escape this common condition—than the unexpected content of this error. Because, what Hegel has not seen in Spinoza is this new truth that he claims himself to discover and that he uses to guarantee the final form of his philosophy and the success of its ultimate realization. Hegel thus ignores in Spinoza that which he is

<sup>(8)</sup> Martial Gueroult, *Spinoza I: Dieu* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1968), 41.

better placed than anyone to recognize, since he thought of it himself: it could be said that he proceeds from the denial of that which might be Hegelian in Spinoza, or at least that he does not seek to exorcise his own Spinozism. Is it not because he fears that Spinoza was not only already Hegelian, but because above all, that he was more profoundly so and with greater consequence than he himself? Thus the inadmissible presents itself: the historical evolution which subordinates that which comes before to that which comes after, and which leads successively from one to the other—making the key to all of philosophy into a teleology—is turned away from its inescapable meaning.

Having made these remarks, which we will need to return to, we can now indicate what is “lacking”, according to Hegel, in the concept of *causa sui* and which compromises its development in Spinoza. The *causa sui* is based on a substantial principle which “lacks the principle of the personality”: it thus constitutes a substance which cannot become subject, which fails in this active reflection of self which would permit it to undertake its own liberation through its own process.<sup>(9)</sup> If he did not grasp or was not able to develop the concept of the *causa sui*, it is because this concept, as he defined it, contained nothing other than an abstract and indifferent identity of self to self, in which the Self is nothing other than that which is already in its beginning, without the possibility of real passage toward self, of an immanent movement which would not be that of its pure and simple disappearance. The point of view of substance expresses the absolute in its own manner: without the life that animates it and that causes it to exist. This is an arrested and dead spirit, which is nothing but that self in an original restriction, which condemns it from the beginning.

In addition, even as it announces itself, the point of view of substance creates the conditions of its own destruction: its immobility is apparent, because it is the precarious equilibrium that results from an internal conflict, which is impossible to contain indefinitely. The limits of the system, even if they are truly real for the thought that they impede, are fictitious from the point of view of the absolute because the absolute opposes the violence that is done to it with a violence that is greater still and it propels the system beyond the illusory limits which impose upon it the conditions of its formal coherence. Immanent negativity undermines the doctrine from the inside and forces it to declare that which it refuses, nevertheless, to declare itself: here exactly, in this confession, is the Substance that becomes Subject.

Once this initial contradiction is revealed, the philosophy of Spinoza can be understood absolutely, in an inverted sense to the one that it professes. The discourse of Spinoza is, according to Hegel, entirely marked by this destiny, which condemns it and absolves it, simultaneously declaring its disappearance and its resurrection in the living body of absolute knowledge, where it realizes itself. To *really* read Spinoza is, for Hegel, to reconstruct the edifice of his thought, causing the conditions of another form of knowledge to appear, from what is only the unachieved form or the anticipated ruin: because in Spinoza the effort to link knowledge to the absolute only resolves itself in a broken promise.

### A philosophy of beginning

As we shall see, the interpretation that Hegel gives Spinoza foregrounds the idea of beginning. As the beginning of philosophy, Spinozism is also a thinking of beginning. Following the method of the *Encyclopedia*, it is “the fundamental establishment of all real subsequent development.” And again, in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*:

<sup>(9)</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic* § 1179.

“It is therefore worthy of note that thought must begin by placing itself at the standpoint of Spinozism; to be a follower of Spinoza is the essential beginning of all Philosophy.”<sup>(10)</sup> Thus is forged the link that unites the philosophy of Spinoza with all thinking of beginning.

Here Hegel engages in a form of reasoning that is quite paradoxical: at the same instance he both presents Spinoza as a point of departure, which he views as the point of departure of philosophy, and places him in the company of all those who have understood beginning, but who knew only that, without (through their efforts) being able to achieve the effective discovery of the true.

“God is in truth assuredly the necessity or, as one might say as well, the absolute Thing, but also at the same time the absolute Person, and on this point we must agree, that the philosophy of Spinoza falls short of the real concept of God, which forms the content of religious consciousness in Christianity. Spinoza was by descent a Jew, and it is in general the Oriental view according to which all achieved finite being appears only as transient being, as being which disappears, which has found in its philosophy an expression that conforms to this intellectual system. It is certainly true that this oriental view of the unity of substance forms the basis of all real further development, but one can’t stop there: it continues to be marked by the absence of the Occidental principle of individuality.”<sup>(11)</sup>

Spinozism is thus at the same time a point of departure and its conclusion—because, in that which begins, there should also be something that finishes. The singularity of Spinozism affirms itself in the perpetuation of an entire tradition, whose dynamic it encapsulates: what dominates within it once again, but here, for the last time, is an “oriental intuition”. Thus begins the chapter of *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* dedicated to Spinoza: “this profound unity of his philosophy such as it is expressed in Europe, his manifestation of Spirit, the identity of the infinite and the finite in God, a God that does not appear as a Third, is an echo of the Orient.”<sup>(12)</sup> This is what gives this philosophy its unmistakable character: it completes the discourse of origins.

In Hegel the Orient is the visible figure of that which begins: this figure is more mythical than historical, but is not myth the most appropriate form of exposition for origin? It is the moment where the absolute is affirmed for the first time, in substance that excludes the individuality of a subject:

“In Oriental thought, the principal relationship is as follows: the single substance is as such the true and the individual in himself is without value and has nothing to gain for himself in so far as he maintains his position against that which is in itself for itself: he cannot, on the contrary, have any real value without confounding himself with this substance, the result of which is that substance ceases to exist for the subject and that the subject, itself, ceases to be a conscience being and vanishes within the unconscious.”<sup>(13)</sup>

The sublimity, the immensity of this representation—which in one stroke absorbs all reality in a single being or a single idea, remains a formal representation because it coincides with the laughable poverty of the external manifestations of this substance, which are effectively nothing more than an empty exteriority:

<sup>(10)</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 257 modified.

<sup>(11)</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *L'Encyclopédie des Sciences Philosophiques*, trans. Bernard Bourgeois (Paris: Vrin, 1970), § 151 my translation.

<sup>(12)</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 252 modified.

<sup>(13)</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Jean Gibelin, *Leçons sur l'Histoire de la Philosophie. Introduction, Système et Histoire de la Philosophie ...* Trad. de l'allemand par J. Gibelin, Idées. (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 74 my translation.

---

“The finite cannot become truth except by immersing itself in substance: separated from it, it remains empty, impoverished, determined for itself, without internal connections. And, as soon as we find a finite, determined representation in their [the Orientals’] view, it is nothing but an exterior, dry enumeration of the elements, something very labored, empty, pedantic, flat.”<sup>(14)</sup>

Having considered the absolute for a single instance, this thought can do nothing subsequently beyond this, but abstractly enumerate its manifestations, between which, if we detach them from their origins, any real form of unity disappears.

Here the call to an absolute knowledge, which would not be solely the knowledge of the absolute, realizes itself in an immediate ecstasy, whereby all consciousness is necessarily abolished: it is the knowledge that realizes itself in the form of its own negation. But, in Spinoza himself, behind the appearances of a geometric rigor that are nothing for Hegel but a mask (a form without content) we find, once again, for the last time, this abyss of the unconscious, which excludes a rational discourse.

“Just as in Spinozism it is precisely the mode as such is untrue and substance alone which is true, such that everything must be restored to it, resulting in the submersion of all content in the void, in a purely formal unity, without content, thus too is Siva once again the great whole, no different from Brahma, but Brahma himself, that is to say that difference and the determination do nothing but vanish again, without being preserved, without being sublated (*aufgehoben*), and unity does not become a concrete unity, nor does division become reconciliation. The highest goal for man placed in the sphere of coming-to-be and ceasing-to-be, in a general way of speaking, is the submergence into unconscious, unity with Brahma, annihilation of self: it is the same thing as Buddhist Nirvana, Nibban, and so forth . . .”<sup>(15)</sup>

“It is the same thing . . .”: this extraordinary historical syncretism is for Hegel without limits, apparently because it is still relevant to explain certain aspects of ‘occidental’ thought.

Commenting in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, the famous speech of Parmenides on being and non-being, Hegel discovers once again the same collusion of a pure affirmation and a radical negation, which would find its ultimate exposition in Spinoza: “Here is the determination in brief, and negation in general comes under this void, and under a more concrete form of the limit, the finite, the boundary: ‘*omnis determinato est negatio*’ is the grand dictum of Spinoza. According to Parmenides, whatever form the negative takes, it is nothing at all.”<sup>(16)</sup>

The inaugural form of oriental thought still haunts the doctrine of Eléates, a form with which even Spinoza must maintain a privileged relationship: the One, pure, and immediate being is at the same time the dissolution of all determined reality, the disappearance of the finite in the infinite, the abolition of all individuality and all difference: and as Plato had already remarked in his last dialogues, relying on a dialectical point of view, the discourse in which this absolute or initial totality is expressed (to the extent that it excludes all negativity, to the extent that it refuses to grant the existence of non-being) is an impossible discourse.

<sup>(14)</sup> Hegel and Gibelin, *Leçons*, 76 my translation.

<sup>(15)</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *La Théorie de la Mesure* Traduction et commentaire par André Doz, *Epiméthée Essais Philosophiques* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1970), 22 my translation. [See Hegel, *Science of Logic*, §703 modified—trans.]

<sup>(16)</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 60 modified.

Note in passing that in the chapter of book I of *Logic* on measurement Hegel makes this same connection to Parmenides, but this time in order to discover within his work the indices of difference:

“The Spinozist mode, exactly like the Indian principle of change, is that without measure. The Greeks realized, albeit in an imprecise manner, that everything had a measure, to the point that Parmenides himself, introduced after abstract Being Necessity, as the ancient limit which imposed itself on everything: we find there the beginning of a concept that is much superior to that contained in substance and its difference with the mode.”<sup>(17)</sup>

There is therefore more than one kind of beginning: there are beginnings which begin over a longer period of time than others and those which on the contrary already ‘begin’ to differentiate themselves from pure beginning. Nevertheless, in spite of his position as a latecomer within the chronology of philosophy, Spinoza is grouped with those who begin absolutely, among the real primitives of this thought, as this is why, since it is necessary to note his singularity, the orientalist metaphor persists with Hegel.

In Spinoza’s biography, which Hegel includes in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, he notes: “It is not insignificant that he is preoccupied with light (optics): because in the material world (*in der Materie*), this is absolute identity itself, which constitutes the basis of oriental view of things.”<sup>(18)</sup>

This inaugural light is the element of immediate thought. It is significant that Hegel finds the same image in the first chapter of *Logic* to represent the illusion of pure being, which is itself also “without measure”:

“It happens that being comes to be represented in the image of pure light, as the clarity of untroubled vision, whereas nothingness is represented as pure night, and we attach their difference to this well known perceptible diversity. But, in fact, if we represent this vision in a more exact fashion, it is easy to understand that in absolute light [clarté] we see as much and as little as in absolute darkness, that one of these forms of vision is just as good as the other, pure vision is a vision of nothingness. Pure light and pure darkness are two voids that are the same thing.”<sup>(19)</sup>

The indeterminate brilliance of the immediate is profoundly obscure, like the night: like the night, it absorbs, effaces, and dissolves all contours, which would be for its infinity again a limit. Likewise, the pretension of seizing being in itself, in its instantaneous identity with itself, not yet contaminated with a relationship to another, resolves itself immediately in an inverse purity and is formally equivalent to an absolute nothingness: the contradiction of beginning which is the initiation of all passage.

From this point of view, we might believe that the privileged place in *Logic* where Hegel must have recalled his interpretation of Spinozism is the first chapter of book I where the immediate, itself, refutes its own illusion. But in this celebrated text there is not a single reference to Spinozism! Without doubt this is because Hegel wanted to avoid this too simple connection which, taken literally, would turn easily into a consolidation. As we have already noted, Spinoza’s philosophy is not a beginning like the others: less developed than the Greeks in terms of its intrinsic excess, it anticipates broadly enough, the most modern aspects of rational thought. One might say that it is a discourse that is fundamentally anachronistic, misplaced: a beginning which is not at a beginning, but which already finds itself displaced elsewhere.

<sup>(17)</sup> Hegel, *La Théorie de la Mesure*, 22–23 my translation. Compare Hegel, *The Science of Logic* 284.

<sup>(18)</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 253 modified.

<sup>(19)</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, §152 modified.

In fact it is remarkable that in order to present the point of view of substance in his ensemble, Hegel has chosen the chapter on “actuality” (*die Wirklichkeit*), which is found at the end of the second part of *Logic*. It is a key argument—which is a good indicator of the crucial significance that Hegel lends to Spinozism, in which the very destiny of philosophy is at stake. Because it is at this moment in the articulation of books II and III of *Logic* that the passage from objective logic to subjective logic is addressed. According to the place that it is assigned in the process of the ensemble of knowledge, it is clear that the point of view of substance represents a false beginning: a beginning which is itself the outcome and the recapitulation of a prior movement, a movement from thought to Being, to Essence. In the Spinozist sense it is thus the entire process of objective logic that is realized and encapsulated in substance.

Thus, in an analogical manner, the Spinozist consideration of substance has already appeared in rough form right at the end of the first book in the paragraph on “absolute indifference” in this internal articulation of objective logic, which is the passage from Being to Essence:

“As regards absolute indifference, which is a fundamental concept of Spinozist substance, we can recall this concept is the final determination of being before it becomes essence; but it does not attain essence itself.”<sup>(20)</sup>

Spinoza is thus present at all the turning points in rational thought: as an absolute beginning, he could not be limited to a single beginning of one sort or another, but he had to reappear each time that something essential emerged in the development of the rational process. Spinoza haunts the Hegelian system throughout its unfolding: the obsession, of which he is a symptom, is not immediately undone, it reappears continually in the discourse that itself never completely finishes with its beginning.

### The reconstruction of the system

There are numerous references to Spinoza in Hegel’s work: they often take the form of incidental remarks, varying in precision or detail. But Hegel also proposed explanations of the entire Spinozist system: the chapter of *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* that is dedicated to him provides a sustained analysis based on a study of the text. Nevertheless, we will focus here on another commentary, which Hegel provides in the chapter of book II of *Logic* dedicated to the Absolute,<sup>(21)</sup> which is in a very different style: it consists of a global interpretation of the Spinozist doctrine, leading back to its general ‘meaning’ and detached from its details. From the beginning of this text, which nowhere else explicitly names Spinoza, Hegel distances himself to the margins of Spinozism, where he liberally reconstructs the discourse following a logic of his own conception. This violence to the text corresponds to a very precise objective: it permits the revelation of the essential ‘movement’ of the system, so to speak, since Hegel characterizes this philosophy above all in terms of its stasis. What is interesting in this apparently arbitrary reconstitution, in this reconstruction, is that it reveals the principal articulations of Spinozist thought such as Hegel understands it, by isolating its principal categories and situating them in relation to each other. It is through this interpretation that Hegel then exposes his critique of Spinozism in an important “Historical Remark” dedicated to Spinoza and to Leibniz, which concludes this chapter. This general presentation is extremely interesting because it situates the constitutive elements of the doctrine and makes their articulation explicit.

<sup>(20)</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, § 803 modified.

<sup>(21)</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, Book II “the Essence” Section 3, “Actuality” Chapter 1, “the Absolute.”

The absolute, which gives its object to the ensemble of this development, is first of all characterized by “its simple substantial identity”:<sup>(22)</sup> it appears confined in the interiority of substance, completely withdrawn into itself. And yet, as we will see, there is a process of exposition of the absolute: it is that of its exterior manifestation, which passes from initial affirmation of the absolute like substance towards its reflection in the attributes, then in the modes. It is this ‘passage’—we will see that it only has the appearance of movement—that organizes the point of view of substance in its singular disposition such as it expresses itself historically in the work of Spinoza. We will follow this development in its successive stages.

This process begins with the absolute itself, which presents itself immediately as such. Hegel’s argument consists of discovering the latent contradiction that haunts and secretly decomposes this apparent unity. In its initial constitution the absolute presents itself as an identity that is undifferentiated from form and content and thus indifferent to itself. The absolute, which is absolute, is at the same time a subject in which all predicates have been posited and a subject in which all predicates have been negated: it is a point of departure, a base, which cannot be recognized as such except at the moment where nothing is based on it any longer, and which is the basis for nothing. Hegel’s entire reasoning here is built on a play on words that takes as its pretext the expression ‘*zum Grunde gehen*’: to return to the foundation, which also means ‘to go to the abyss’. The plenitude of the absolute, imprisoned in the radical interiority of substance, is that of the void.

Thus, substance, which presents itself as a source of determinations, is also in itself, a nothingness of determination, because it is the indeterminate that precedes and conditions all determination. This is the contradiction that is peculiar to substance: it offers itself first in its absolute positivity, as that which is the most real: but at the same time, to guarantee this maximum of being, it must draw reality back to that which it is not, and it makes this reality dependent upon it. In affirming its anteriority and its preeminence, substance emerges as that which is, in light of the appearance of that which is not also in this beginning: whence its essential function of *de-realization*, since it casts into a bottomless abyss of the negative, which is nothing but the negative, all that does not coincide immediately with its initial positivity. In this substance, it is that which appears and vanishes at the same time, it is that which presents but also that which does away with actuality [*réalité*].

On the other hand, the self-sufficiency of substance that defines itself through itself, in the absence of all determination, makes the passage from subject to predicate, the relation of the foundation to that which it grounds, incomprehensible: the determinations which have a basis in the absolute cannot add themselves to it, except after the fact and from the outside, in an arbitrary manner, without immanent development. This is why substance, which is the object of all knowledge, is also unknowable: it is in itself a subject about which one can affirm nothing if not itself, and its relationship to the determinations it supports is incomprehensible; by the fact of its total self-sufficiency it has no need of these determinations, which are consequently adjuncts to it without necessity and without reason.

As absolute beginning, substance is thus also an end. In the plenitude of its own being, for which nothing is lacking, it has already exhausted all possibility of movement: what it initiates within itself is immediately fully realized. It is a beginning that begins nothing, where the immobile absolute constitutes the denial of all process. The system that begins with the exposition of the absolute finds itself immediately frozen: since it is itself given at the beginning of all reality, it cannot progress.

<sup>(22)</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, § 861 modified.

The Spinozist doctrine which is referred to implicitly in this analysis, however, is not content to indicate the plenitude of the absolute through an initial definition: it presents it in an internal order, in a coherent manner, by clarifying its rational content. But the progression of this exposé cannot be anything but apparent: its formal development is in fact a regression, since the immediate identity of the absolute to itself forbids all subsequent advances. The illusory ‘process’ of substance that inaugurates the exposition of the absolute cannot be the movement of a positive constitution, since everything is constituted immediately, but that of a degradation, which subtracts the elements of its reality successively from the absolute, by taking them away through extrinsic determinations, which cannot effectively add anything to it, since it is completely sufficient unto itself.

This regression is manifest in the first ‘passage’, which leads from substance to attribute, that is to say, from the absolute to the relative. The absolute that is absolute is also that which is *only* absolute: its primordial plenitude is also the inescapable form of its limitation. The perfection of the absolute is at the same time that which it lacks in order to be truly absolute being: the totality of determinations which it had to negate in order to merge with itself, in order to be nothing but itself. The absolute that is absolute is also the negation of the absolute: “It is not therefore the absolutely absolute, but the absolute in a determinateness, or it is attribute.”<sup>(23)</sup> The absolute-become-attribute acquires these determinations, but it therefore exhibits itself within a diminished reality.

The attribute constitutes the second moment, the middle term, of the apparent process of the absolute, that devotes itself immediately as such at the beginning, and whose progression finds itself hindered by this event: “The attribute is the merely relative absolute”<sup>(24)</sup> or again the absolute determined only as regards its form. Substance, which expresses itself in its attributes, by discovering they are identical to it, is the absolute that reflects itself through its own exteriorization: precisely because, as such, it carries no determination at all within itself; it is incapable of immanent reflection. The absolute exhausts itself in this reflection because its determination confronts it, opposes itself to the absolute like the inessential to the essential: there the absolute recognizes only its inanity. The attribute is the predicate that reflects the subject outside of itself: it is the representation of the subject, the phenomenon; it provides only an image of the substance.

The attribute is thus an empty form because it describes substance from the exterior and without necessity: in it the absolute finds itself restrained, and diminished, to the extent that it establishes itself with the attribute as its own identical being. This restriction, which appears as soon as one reflects substance in an attribute, is reinforced when a multiplicity of attributes are proposed: because of its exteriority and its contingency, one single form is not sufficient to represent the absolute: this is why it relies on the indefinite quest for new determinations, which oppose each other (as, for example, thought and extension). Through these it seeks in vain to recuperate its completeness. In the form of the attribute, the infinite necessarily takes the appearance of plurality: it separates itself, scatters itself, loses itself in the unlimited series of images which provokes the illusory movement of its exterior reflection. The passage from substance to attribute is the becoming-appearance [*devenir-apparance*] of the absolute, which calls its unity into question in the dissipation of pure difference.

<sup>(23)</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*. Remark: Leibniz and Spinoza §1168. [The French text includes a typographical error, reading “l’absolu dans un déterminité où il est absolu” — trans.]

<sup>(24)</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, § 1170.

Substance undoes itself, dissolves itself in its attributes, by projecting itself into a consciousness that is necessarily foreign to it. This is because it requires the intervention of the abstract intellect that decomposes identity of content into its multiple forms in order that the unity of substance can be determined in a diversity of forms. Faced with the pure objectivity of the absolute, that is nothing but absolute, positing and op-posing itself [*se pose et s'oppose*], the exterior form of a subjectivity that opens a perspective, evokes a manner of being, projects an appearance. In spite of the abstract identity that links it to substance in a formal relationship of representation, the attribute taken as such detaches itself from this substance and distances itself as a simple modality: thus we have already 'passed' from attribute to mode, which constitutes the third moment of the regressive process of the absolute.

The mode is still substance but held in the element of absolute exteriority: "The mode is being outside of the self of the absolute, the loss of self in the variety and the contingency of being."<sup>(25)</sup> Thus the absolute is not at all identical to itself, it has lost all its reality, it is diluted in its own appearance, in the unlimited facticity of that which no longer has a cause in itself. At the extreme limit of its manifestation, as the ultimate emanation of a perfume that evaporates, substance is worn out, exhausted in the swarming of aspects that manifests it in its decomposition, in the terms of a presentation that is purely negative. Inversely, if we make the return to the absolute, the immediately perceptible reality which results from the addition of all these modes converts itself into an appearance in the most critical sense of the term, because this appearance does not give the absolute anything more than an illusory expression in which it ends by disappearing, and at the same time appearance is engulfed in the absolute. In this moment, when reality, immediately exposed within the absolute, is totally dissipated, the essentially negative 'movement' of substance is achieved.

In the mode there is nothing left of what is given in substance; nothing is left except this nothing in which all reality does away with itself. In another passage, at the beginning of the third section of book I of *Logic*, "the Measure", Hegel writes about the mode in general:

"If the third term were taken as a simple exteriority, then it would be a mode. In this sense, the third term is not a return to itself, but in so far as the second is the beginning of a relation with an exteriority, an exit [*sortir*] which still holds itself in relation to the original being, the third is the rupture, completed."<sup>(26)</sup>

Referring back to Spinoza, he immediately specifies:

"With Spinoza, the mode is likewise the third after substance and attribute; he explains it to be the affections of substance, or that element which is in an other through which it is comprehended. According to this concept, this third is only externality as such; as has already been mentioned, with Spinoza generally, the rigid nature of substance lacks the return into itself."<sup>(27)</sup>

The 'syllogism', which links substance to its affections through the intermediary of attributes and encapsulates the essential significance of the Spinozist system, is for Hegel an abstract syllogism: it does not describe the completion of the absolute, but rather this progressive degradation which distances it from itself.

From this reconstitution of the ensemble, the reason that the point of view of substance is characterized by its immobility now becomes clear. The movement that establishes itself beginning with the absolute, lending substance to the attributes and then the modes, is exactly the opposite of a real movement, of a process of the

<sup>(25)</sup> Hegel, *Science of Logic*, § 1173 modified.

<sup>(26)</sup> Hegel, *Science de la Logique*, 291 my translation [compare *Logic* § 703—trans.].

<sup>(27)</sup> Hegel, *Logic*, § 702.

constitution of the absolute: this is why the efficacy of the real cannot be determined here except as a kind of caricature, in the derision of decline. It is the regressive movement of a successive degradation which leads from a maximum of being given at the beginning, towards its total depletion, in forms which are increasingly exterior to it, and which, for it, rather than manners of being are manners of no longer being. This movement of descent, contained between a positive absolute origin and a definitively negative end beyond which there is nothing, is exactly the opposite of a rational cycle, of a dialectical process from which Hegel elsewhere establishes the principle of all reality: a process which exposes quite the opposite of what we have just described, the indeterminacy of its beginning, its apparent and provisional character, in order to direct itself progressively towards an end in which it realizes itself, through the total determination of an identity which cannot be affirmed except at the moment when it has become truly effective. Whereas the manifestation of the absolute that is only absolute, has not taken place except within the empty repetition of a disappearance, of a diminution, of a loss of identity, in such away that the progression is evidently formal, since it is determined by a 'growing' lack of content.

The point of view of substance, which claims to embrace all of reality in a single concept, thus inverts itself in a negative understanding [*connaissance*]: reality's absolute, which lays claim to substance, has as a counterpart, the denial of reality borne by all that it is not and that succeeds it.<sup>(28)</sup> The pure discourse of the absolute primarily develops the theme of the lesser reality of things, of everything that is not it: the becoming of the absolute can do nothing except distance itself from its initial integrity and cause it to wither. This is a skepticism of the substance, which absorbs in its formalism reality in its entirety: thus the negative is only a movement of subtraction, which leads to a disappearance, outside of any real work of determination. This is expressed very well in the passage from *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*:

"As all differences and all determinations of things and of conscience are returned to the unity of substance, one can say that, in the Spinozist system, all things in effect find themselves cast into the abyss of annihilation. But from this abyss nothing reemerges and the particular that Spinoza speaks about is not recaptured and recuperated except in representation, without finding its justification there. In order that it be justified, it would have been necessary for Spinoza to have derived it from his substance: but this substance does not open up, does not achieve life, or spirituality, or activity. ... The misfortune that befalls this particular is that it is nothing but a modification of absolute substance, but that is not declared as such: moreover the moment of negativity is what is lacking for this immobile and rigid being, whose single operation consists of dispossessing everything of its determination and its particularity, in order to reject it in the unity of absolute substance, where it disappears and where all life decays. This is what leaves us philosophically unsatisfied with Spinoza."<sup>(29)</sup>

The absolute opens up, but only as a pit where all determinations annihilate themselves, where all reality is lost in the irresistible abyss of the void.

The philosophy of Spinoza is thus for Hegel a completely abstract school of thought, in which all movement and all actualized life disappear. At the conclusion of a brief biography of Spinoza, which Hegel provides in his *Lectures*, we find this extraordinarily significant observation: "Spinoza died 21 February 1677, in his forty-fourth year, from

<sup>(28)</sup> Unless otherwise noted, I have translated *savoir* as understanding and *connaissance* as knowledge.

<sup>(29)</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 288 modified.

consumption that he had suffered from a long time in accordance with his system in which as well, all particularity, all singularity fades away in the unity of substance.”<sup>(30)</sup>

Spinozism is a consumptive philosophy, declining progressively towards the disappearance of all effective reality, belabored in the affirmation of an absolute which it cannot represent except from the outside, inactive and without life.

The verdict of insufficiency, which was ordained in the encounter with this philosophy, and the point of view that supports it, thus finds legitimacy. As negative thought of a negative that is only negative, it unfolds only through the abolition of its content: it cannot therefore be revealed except negatively, according to its failures, its own inanity. Philosophy of beginning = philosophy of decline. It is only in going against this beginning, through the work of the negative that is not only negative, that thought can elevate itself above the abyss of substance, in order to discover the concrete movement of the effective. It is necessary to begin with Spinoza, it is necessary to pass through Spinoza, it is necessary to depart from Spinoza.

For this, it is necessary to submit the doctrine to a proof of critique that does not rely solely on a global interpretation, such as the one that we have just followed, but that considers his argumentation in detail. In this way we will emphasize the contradiction that is appropriate to his content. This analysis isolates three critical points in his system, three concepts, on which Hegel concentrates his argument: these are the problem of demonstration (designated by the famous expression ‘more geometrico’), the definition of attributes, and finally the formula ‘*omnis determinatio est negatio*’ which Hegel imputes to Spinoza and in which he concentrates his entire system. These are the three points that we will now consider precisely.<sup>(31)</sup>

Pierre Macherey

UMR Savoirs, Textes, Langage (STL), Université Charles de Gaulle–Lille III

<sup>(30)</sup> Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, 254 modified.

<sup>(31)</sup> The orientalist interpretation of Spinozism is a common link with German philosophy. One can read in the opusculé of Kant on *The End of All Things*: “The good sovereign is nothingness; one pours oneself into the abyss of divinity; one immerses oneself there, and personality disappears. To know the foretaste of this happiness, the Chinese philosophers close themselves off in obscure locales, compel themselves to keep their texts closed, they try to meditate, to sense their nothingness. From there again, the pantheism of Tibetans and of other oriental peoples, then later through a metaphysical sublimation, Spinozism; two doctrines closely affiliated to one of the oldest systems, that of emanation, according to which all the human spirits after having emerged from divinity finish by reentering and being reabsorbed by it. All of this expressly [*uniquement*] in order that at all costs men could in the end enjoy this eternal rest which constitutes in their eyes the blissful end of all things; a conception that is nothing less than an abolition of all intelligence, this cessation even of all thought...” [Emmanuel Kant, *Pensées successives sur la Théodicée et la religion*, Traduction et introduction par Paul Festugière (Paris: Vrin, 1931), my translation.] Hegel, as we see, has invented nothing.

**Conditions of use.** This article may be downloaded from the E&P website for personal research by members of subscribing organisations. This PDF may not be placed on any website (or other online distribution system) without permission of the publisher.