Hegel’s Idealist Spinoza

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With the exception of false elements from the domain of strict empiricism, Hegel’s totalizing
dialectic does not recognize anything as remaining external or foreign to it; *a fortiori*, of an event
as fundamental to the history of philosophy as classical rationalism, he must propose an
interpretation that restores from its own point of view its global meaning, in such a way as to
present it as one of the stages in the progression of universal Spirit, that is, as one of the specific
forms of its self-knowledge. However, at the heart of the discourse of modern philosophy, a
section breaks off that seems to specifically resist this effort of integration: this is the doctrine of
Spinoza, which, beyond its ‘non-speculative’ character, which Hegel ceaselessly insists on,
seems to refuse in its principle, by the very fact of its existence, the enterprise of a dialectization
of rational thought. But Hegel possessed the means to resolve this difficulty: he comprehended
[compris], in all senses of the word, Spinoza, or at least he thought so. Under what conditions?

1. According to the general conception of the history of philosophy developed by Hegel, in
order to release the speculative content of a particular philosophical thought and to rationally
evaluate it, one must first situate it: that is, one must characterize its perspective, in such a way
as to place it within the process of philosophical thought as a whole, internal to which it must
occupy a determinate position, knowing which will condition how it is interpreted. The interest
that Hegel constantly had in Spinoza’s thought was constrained by this demand. But the
historical and rational examination to which Hegel submitted Spinoza’s text, sticking as closely
as possible to its letter, also made the latter appear as the work of a displaced thinker, whose point of view was strictly unassignable and unclassifiable because, in the movement of the history of philosophy as a whole, it simultaneously occupied many positions, with these positions giving rise to incommensurable evaluations. This fundamentally is the problem that Spinoza posed for Hegel, this problem reflecting, as if in a mirror, the image of his own system and the limits proper to it. In this sense, what the Hegelian reading of Spinoza expresses is less the truth of Spinoza than that of Hegel himself, which this reading reveals by making apparent that which ties him to a finite historical thought. To put it otherwise: Hegel, in trying to situate Spinoza, is himself situated in relation to Spinoza, through the idea that he has of him. And so, Hegel reading Spinoza forces us to reread Hegel, that is, to put his interpretations to the test.

From the first pages of the chapter of the Lectures on the History of Philosophy dedicated to Spinoza emerges the uncertain, and dialectically unthinkable, and so scandalous, figure of a primitive modern, “a living fossil who, in the Netherlands and in the fullness of the seventeenth century, would reintroduce, in Cartesian disguise, pre-Christian, even pre-Hellenic, in short Oriental modes of thought.”¹ Jew and Cartesian, Spinoza would thus be the one who, testifying against historical rationality, had effectuated the synthesis of the Orient and the Occident, which is also to say of the past and the present, not by resolving their dynamic contradiction, but by affirming abstractly, and thus arbitrarily, their identity, under conditions which, simultaneously, maintain their difference—in just the same way as thought and extension in Spinozist substance are gathered together without being reconciled [se concilient, sans se réconcilier], without them even really confronting one another, which alone would enable one to overcome their opposition.

“The Oriental theory of absolute identity was brought by Spinoza much more directly into line, firstly with the current of European thought, and then with the European and Cartesian philosophy.”² By this archaism, Spinoza would consequently represent the exceptional and aberrant case of a thinker who had leapt ahead of, or perhaps behind, his own time, and whose enterprise by this very fact would put into question the law of rational becoming in its very foundations.

² Hegel, G.W.F. Hegel’s Lectures on the History of Philosophy. Trans. E.S. Haldane. Prometheus Books, 1996. [Hereafter ‘Hegel a’. Macherey cites Garnion’s French translation of Hegel’s Lectures, but there are discrepancies between it and the two extant English editions. In what follows I will rely on both, and modify them with annotations when the differences are significant for Macherey’s argument. —trans.]
In the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, one finds two formulas which are often cited and commented upon: “Spinoza is made a testing-point in modern philosophy, so that it may really be said: You are either a Spinozist or not a philosopher at all.”³ – “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 commencement of all Philosophy.”⁴ Now one should notice that these two apparently similar remarks are in a subtle way out of sync with one another. The first only concerns modern philosophy, of which it presents Spinoza as the summit (*Hauptpunkt*). The second deals with philosophizing in general, in relation to which it assigns to Spinoza the position of beginning (*Anfang*). And so, Spinoza’s position is false because it is double. With him something begins, in the absolute sense of the term, and this is incontestably his Oriental side. But he is also, as an Occidental, one who continues, since, in the context of modern philosophy, he is after all only a successor to Descartes, and it is precisely by reflecting on this that the chapter in the *Lectures* dedicated to Spinoza begins: “Spinozism is related to Cartesianism simply as a consistent carrying out or execution of Descartes’ principle.”⁵ Spinoza’s position is at once that of a before and an after; and by this double inscription it wrecks all the landmarks in relation to which the general process of spiritual history is defined, since it interrupts its course, right in the middle of the proceedings, in order to return savagely to its very source. This is an intolerable violence for the dialectic, since it has little to do with the labor of the negative.

These two opposed figures of Spinoza, that of an initiator and that of an epigone: can they both be true at the same time? And above all, are they equally true? This is indeed, for Hegel, the essential question, for on its resolution depends the validity of his own philosophical approach. The answer, or at least such as it is suggested in the last text that Hegel dedicated to Spinoza, in the courses on the history of philosophy of 1823-24 and 1825-26, is as follows: in the unstable synthesis that this thought effectuates, it is ultimately the occidental side that must win out. And so Spinoza turns out to be assimilable by the Hegelian dialectic to the extent that he can be presented as being above all a successor to Descartes, that is, another representative of the

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³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
analytic thinking of the understanding which, according to Hegel, dominates all investigations of ‘modern’ philosophy. On this condition, which trivializes Spinoza’s work, the ‘savage anomaly’ can be reintroduced into the historical framework that he otherwise threatens to escape. In other words, Hegel absolutely needed to perform a Cartesian reading of Spinoza in order to integrate him into his own system of thought, and to assure by the same stroke the internal unity of the latter.

2. Behind the apparent complication of the Spinozist doctrine, which is only for him an illustrative mess, Hegel detects the presence of a simple idea, which is representative par excellence of the abstract, and thus non-speculative, understanding: the idea of identity insofar as it is also, indissociably, that of difference. “The simple thought of Spinoza's idealism is this: The true is simply and solely the one substance, whose attributes are thought and extension or nature: and only this absolute unity is reality, it alone is God. It is, as with Descartes, the unity of thought and Being, or that which contains the Notion of its existence in itself.”

In this way the enormity of substance, as stated by the thought of the absolute One—and here one can recognize the Oriental intuition returning philosophy in general to its sources—is also only (as the term ‘only’, repeated numerous times in the preceding passage, indicates) the most superficial aspect of the Spinozist doctrine, whose essential truth, the key to the more authentic reading for the system as a whole, is its ‘idealism’: the reduction of everything to ‘a simple idea’, whose sole content is the affirmation of an identity.

Now what authorizes this interpretation of Spinoza’s thought, which turns it into an ‘idealism’? The passage that comes to be cited indicates it clearly: it is the slippage effected by Hegel, with regard to the substance whose attributes constitute it, from the relation between thought and extension (Denken/Ausdehnung) to that between thought and being (Denken/Sein), insofar as they themselves represent fundamental moments in the development of the philosophical spirit. This same analysis is found a little farther along, when Hegel examines in detail the Spinozist doctrine of the attributes: “the two of them are thought and extension, each

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6 Hegel a
7 This affirmation is only apparently in conflict with the passages from the Lectures in which Hegel underlies the privileged link that Spinoza’s doctrine has with French materialism (cf. Sämtliche Werke, ed. Glockner, vol. XIX, pp. 330, 509, 513); for this ‘materialism’, which he also situates in the wake of Descartes, is for Hegel only a figure of idealism, which explains its abstract character.
by itself being the entire totality in such a way that both have the same content…” “Here the unity of being (extension) and thinking is therefore posited in such a way that thinking is in itself the totality, and likewise what is extended is the same totality.”

“This means that the same substance, under the attribute of thought, is the intelligible world, and under the attribute of extension, is nature; nature and thought thus both express the same Essence of God.”

It is thus as if Spinoza’s reasoning were ordered according to the following schema:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THOUGHT (res cogitans)</th>
<th>EXTENSION (res extensa)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intelligible world</td>
<td>Corporeal world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System of ideas</td>
<td>System of things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THOUGHT (Denken)</td>
<td>BEING (Sein)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One could easily show how this presentation of Spinozism is abusive: the reduction of attributes to forms, which, as such, pertain to subjective understanding; the affirmation that these forms are only two in number, which leads Hegel to translate Definition 6 of Ethics I (“Per Deum intelligo ens absolute infinitum, hoc est substantiam constantem infinitis attributis”) as: “God is thus the absolutely infinite essence or the substance that consists of infinite attributes”, as if Spinoza had written *essentia* instead of *ens*, and as if the ‘infinity’ of the attributes expressed only a characteristic proper to each of them (of which there would only be two), and not the fact that an infinity of them exist; finally the assimilation of the concept of extension to that of being in general, which, later in Hegel’s text, presides over a manifestly erroneous interpretation of Ethics II Proposition 7, which Hegel reads as if Spinoza had written: *Ordo et connexio idearum iidem sunt* (instead of *idem est*) *ac ordo et connexio corporum* (instead of *rerum*), that is, as if the Spinozist notion of ‘thing’ (*res*) were strictly equivalent to that of ‘body’, and as if ideas were not also things. That all these interpretive decisions are literally incorrect would not be hard to show. But that is not the essential point, for it can no

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8 Hegel b 159
9 Hegel a
10 *Wesen*. (Hegel, G.W.F. *Werke*, vol. 20. Frankfurth am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986. Pg. 172) In Hegel b this is translated as ‘Being’.
11 Hegel b 158
12 Hegel a
longer be a question of accidental blunders that could be explained as misunderstandings or ignorance. What is critical is that these are precisely those choices which, by virtue of a decision that we may suppose must be rational in its principle, approach the whole Spinozist doctrine from one side in particular, in such a way as to grasp it according to certain determinate categories that allow it to be integrated, in its proper place, within the Hegelian speculative system, as one of its precisely situated moments.

These categories do indeed have a clearly established function internal to the Hegelian system, within the framework of what strictly constitutes the ‘logic of essence’. We know that this intermediary development of the process described by the Science of Logic is interposed between the logic of being and the logic of the concept, and thus between the objective logic, to which it still belongs in a negative mode (since Hegel defines essence as the negation of being), and the subjective logic—and thereby it is what makes possible the passage between these two extremes. Essence is the negation of being; but this negation is not an external negation, which would place another being in opposition to being; it is reflective, and thus interorized, negation, which effectuates the transformation from being-given (das Gegebene) to being-posed (das Gesetzsein). In this way, what distinguishes the logic of essence from the logic of being, which is fundamentally unitary, and from that of the concept, which is by contrast ternary, is that its object is the pure relation to self; and this is why it consists in thinking, in a necessarily formal manner, relations, in a logic that is binary in principle. Its function is to think reality insofar as it is dual, which is to say insofar as it divides itself (for example by posing the relation between the essential, wesentlich, and the inessential, unwesentlich); that is, to think identity in difference. In the whole of its internal movement, this logic of essence is haunted by negativity—one could even say that it is negative from beginning to end—but the negativity proper to essence, bound within a strictly dual relation, is a negativity which does not lead to anything other than its indefinite repetition, without any third term, that is, without a way out, without resolution. And this is also why, according to Hegel, this logic, which is that of abstract, analytic thinking, is, in its spirit, profoundly idealist: it is internal to thinking itself, in the understanding, that all the relations of essence are posited, which are reflected only into itself, without being able to constitute an actual reality that would not be merely in and for the understanding as pure subjectivity, and which would come to an end as such [et qui ne soit comme telle finie].
Now it is these logical procedures, these intellectual mechanisms that Hegel correctly finds in the Spinozist doctrine, such as he interprets them in the Lectures on the History of Philosophy. Outside of its opaque presence, substance is, as the foundation of things, and precisely insofar as it is such a foundation (this category is in fact crucial for the logic of essence), divided: that is, it is above all the relation of self to self, reflected being, or even, as this relation of reflection can be laid out in its most general and abstract form, the unity of a relation and two terms. According to Hegel, Spinoza’s enterprise thus consists in the task “that Being must be grasped as the unity of opposites”; in the abstract thinking that discovers itself as the link between being and thought. The French edition of the 1823-24 lecture course, edited by Garniron, based on the original notebooks, included the following marginal note by Hotho, which, in this regard, is perfectly illuminating: “Spinoza’s approach to understanding consists in regarding the absolute as an abstract, rigid identity of distinguished terms, and thus to regard any difference as something merely negative and so as nothing in relation to identity, and so to suppress it within that identity, so that there is no difference in the absolute at all.”

This is essentially the Hegelian reading of the formula attributed to Spinoza, omnis determinatio est negatio: difference, insofar as it is merely posited, is also difference negated; these two amount to the same thing, and disappear into it, but without being surpassed, or being resolved as difference.

The interpretation that Hegel proposes of the notion of attribute, such as it is found in Spinoza, is entirely dominated by this ‘logic’: according to the latter, the attributes as such, that is, insofar as they are distinguished from one another and insofar as they are distinguished from substance, are abstract forms which have their truth in the understanding. This point is explained in another note by Hotho: “The attributes are the totality of substance articulated in itself according to its necessity in the form of absolute oppositions each of which is modified in itself, without however their difference gaining any consistency, but on the contrary only existing insofar as it returns into the unity of substance.” And so this difference which, for Hegel, is fundamentally that of thought and being, is itself above all thought difference: it is in thought that being (itself identified with extension) is distinguished from thought, at the same time that it

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13 Ibid.
15 Ibid. 101
returns to it. This difference being only formal, it is indifferent difference, difference simultaneously posited and negated: through it is affirmed the absolute reign of a thought which is only pure thinking. From this perspective, one can understand how Hegel came to believe, in reading Definition 6 of *Ethics* I, that he was justified in translating *ens* as *Wesen*, and also in rendering *intellectus* as *Verstand*. All those formulas which, according to him, designate *par excellence* that which is non-speculative belong to the metaphysics of representation, which is based on the principle of an abstract identity that also involves the dual relation of thought and being, a principle whose general form [*allure*] had already been established in the chapter of the *Lectures* dedicated to Descartes, the veritable initiator of this tradition. From this point of view, according to Hegel, the formula *Deus sive Natura* must be situated strictly in the wake of that of *cogito ergo sum*, from which it in fact draws all the consequences.

This also explains the commentaries Hegel provides on Spinoza’s ‘acosmism’. It must be understood that this notion of acosmism can only be explained by that of idealism: in Spinoza, thought, being arrested at the moment of essence, and at its negations, can only be situated farther back than, and as trapped in relation to, actual reality, such as speculative thought grasps it in its complete development. Since difference is posited as difference negated, and so as not actual, it produces nothing in its ‘movement’ that tends toward anything other than itself and its indefinite repetition. Here is the most obvious measure of the rational deficiency which, for Hegel, characterizes Spinoza’s philosophy: “with him there is too much God”;¹⁶ this deficiency is also, as another passage from the *Lectures* specifies, why Spinoza “wronged the negative.”¹⁷

This latter formula is particularly remarkable: it expresses the fact that Spinoza did not do justice to the negative to the extent that he contained it within the reflexive limits of a pure relation of essence, and so prevented it from going outside its own characteristic of finite negation, thereby transforming itself into absolute negation, that is, returning into itself in order to produce the real. Too much God: let us translate this as, too much essence; and not enough of the negative: let us translate this as, not enough of the concept. It is within this precarious equilibrium defined by the coincidence of a ‘too much’ and a ‘not enough’ that Hegel attempts to pin down Spinoza’s philosophy, in view of assigning it a clearly identifiable position within his own system.

¹⁶ Hegel a
¹⁷ Spinoza hat dem Negativen Unrecht getan. (*Sämtliche Werke*, XIX, 374)
Too much and not enough: the conjunction of these two expressions characterizes well the equivocal, and thus divided, status of an initiator who is also one who continues. The reflection of the absolute offers precisely this double character: as inaugural, it develops, in all of its principal aspects, the theme of immediacy; but, by virtue of its formalism, it also takes place as an intermediary moment in the becoming of Spirit, whose ambiguous and divided nature it expresses. The absolute is one of the ultimate figures of the logic of essence, and it gains all its sense at the moment when this logic, having drawn out all of its own possibilities, also discovers its own limits, and turns over into the new configuration, which is properly conceptual, of a ‘subjective’ logic, that is, a thought of substance which is also grasped as subject. Now it is precisely in the chapter of the *Science of Logic* (II, III, 1) dedicated to the absolute (*das Absolute*) that Hegel presents an interpretation of Spinozism that enables him to integrate it within the global dynamic of authentic thought: Spinozism is there identified with this pure figure of representation, in which reality is absorbed and abolished, from the perspective of an idealism which is simultaneously an acosmism. With Spinoza, something begins, and something is brought to an end; three times, in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, one finds this bizarre remark according to which Spinoza “died … in harmony with his system of philosophy, according to which all particularity and individuality pass away in the one substance.”¹¹⁸ A beginning which is an end is also, according to the logic of inversion proper to the reflection of essence, an end which is a beginning, that is, a recommencement: in Spinoza’s work, Hegel ends up reading the necessarily unfinished prefiguration of his own thought.

Given the preceding remarks, one can see that the meaning of the Hegelian reading of Spinoza must seek its criteria and its references on the side of Hegel rather than on that of Spinoza. Naturally it remains to be asked to what extent Spinoza, transformed into a figure of Hegelianism, and completely rethought in light of the categories of that system, lends himself to an enterprise of theoretical recuperation, and thus also what resistance he might oppose to it. This is to say that, instead of reading Spinoza in Hegel, one would have to try to read Hegel in Spinoza, an operation that would only apparently be symmetrical with the former.

¹¹⁸ Hegel a