

Jean-Marie Beyssade. *Études sur Spinoza*.
Jacqueline Lagrée, and Pierre-François Moreau (eds.)
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Abstract

The papers that Jean-Marie Beyssade dedicated to the work of Baruch Spinoza have recently been published under the title *Études sur Spinoza*. This review offers a general overview of the volume and a summary of some of the papers that highlights their underlying continuity by emphasizing Beyssade's methodological approach and his interpretative preoccupation with the problem of ethical salvation in the *Ethics*.

Keywords: Jean-Marie Beyssade, Descartes, Spinoza

Jean-Marie Beyssade's (1936-2016) status as one of the twentieth century's leading French historians of early modern philosophy, alongside Gueroult, Gouhier, and Alquié, was already sufficiently secured by his work as a commentator and interpreter, as well as editor and translator, of Descartes's œuvre.¹ However, he also dedicated much of his life as a scholar to studying Spinoza's work, especially the *Ethics*. His participation as a permanent member of the *Groupe de recherches spinozistes* since the eighties had seen him take on the task of translating the *Ethics* for the new critical edition of Spinoza's complete works for the *Presses Universitaires de France*, on which he worked until 2010 when he regretfully had to abandon the project for health reasons. This "tête-à-tête" confrontation with Spinoza's texts also resulted in a series of important studies, first published or delivered as talks between 1986 and 2002. Their compilation in the volume *Études sur Spinoza*

1 Most of his work dedicated to Descartes have been collected in two volumes: *Études sur Descartes: L'Histoire d'un esprit* (Paris: Points, 2001) and *Descartes au fil de l'ordre* (Paris: PUF, 2001). The monumental task of offering a new critical and annotated edition of Descartes's complete works (for *Gallimard*) was also partially completed under his and Denis Kambouchner's direction: the early works, the *Discours*, the *Meditations*, and the complete correspondence have already been published.

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contributes to consolidating Beyssade's overall legacy and gives testament to his rare capacity for successfully breaching the multi-secular divide that separates Cartesians and Spinozists.

Beyssade's Spinozistic studies—as both Jacqueline Lagrée and Pierre-François Moreau note, respectively, in the volume's preface and postface—are driven by the effort to combine scrupulous attention to the lexicographical issues that necessarily arise in the work of the translator and rigorous engagement, on that basis, with some of the most vexing doctrinal questions that Spinoza's texts present to the interpreter. The originality of Beyssade's approach to the study of Spinoza's works is marked by his conviction that such double effort must be carried out against the backdrop of the Cartesian roots of some of Spinoza's crucial conceptual tools to better measure the original theoretical direction in which he developed them. Beneath the superficial thematic diversity of the studies, the reader will thus find a formal common thread characterised by Beyssade's specific methodological approach, but also, more substantially, by his refusal to lose sight of what constitutes the self-declared purpose of Spinoza's philosophical endeavour, which is to offer an account of the ethical freedom that human beings are capable of achieving despite their being *passionibus obnoxius*, “exposed”—not “subjected,” as Beyssade emphasises (77-78)²—to the passions. Most of the collected texts are thus implicitly guided by the attempt to throw light on some aspect or other of the “Spinozistic itinerary,” centred around the theory of the *active* affects, that comes to fruition in *Ethics V*.

These features, characteristic of Beyssade's approach, are most clearly at play in the first of the collected studies, “De l'émotion intérieure chez Descartes à l'affect actif spinoziste,” first delivered as a talk at the *Chicago Spinoza Conference* in 1986. As its title suggests, Beyssade's aim in this study is to clarify Spinoza's distinction between passive and active affects by tracing its historical origin to Descartes's sometimes overlooked distinction between the passions, properly speaking (i.e., bodily movements that cause a passive, sensual or sensitive, emotion in the soul), and the internal emotions of the soul (i.e., “émotions spirituelles sans cause physiologique” (26) that are caused, in the soul, by its judgments) as it appears in the *Passions of the Soul* (I, 147-148). Against this antecedent, Beyssade seeks to specify the originality of Spinoza's account of the love of God as the paradigmatic active affect on which the process of ethical liberation, as presented in the first half of *Ethics V*, hinges.

Beyssade emphasizes a fundamental innovation presupposed by Spinoza's account of the ethical conversion by which a passion can cease to be a passion (E5p3): namely, the necessary continuity between imagination and reason. In particular, “si l'amour de Dieu doit finir par prédominer, c'est en tant que toutes les idées de l'imagination alimentent la connaissance adéquate de Dieu” (37). Just as there is a common notion to be extracted from the ideas of the imagination, there must be within passive affects an element of joy that their adequate knowledge isolates and through which they can be integrated into the domain of active affectivity.³ In this sense, the passage from servitude to freedom, at least up to the point to which it can be furthered by common notions, consists in a “displacement of equilibrium” (38, my translation) resulting from a struggle of forces:

2 The numbers in brackets refer to the page numbers of *Études sur Spinoza*.

3 Each of our encounters with external causes presupposes some common element through which they affect us, a common terrain that is not a mere “théâtre inerte, mais toujours une affirmation commune, un bien et une joie. Sans renvoyer à ces trois propositions (4p29-31), Spinoza ressaisit avec Dieu, facteur universel de convenance, le principe d'une joie active opérant jusque dans les mauvaises rencontres” (37-38).

even if the mind were to possess the exact same quantity of inadequate ideas that it possessed initially, they are overcome by the fact that the mind is mostly occupied by adequate ideas and thus by active affects, and therefore the former tend to constitute the smallest part of the mind.

Against Descartes, then, Spinoza partly restores the traditional conception of the soul as the dynamic theatre of an internal struggle between different parts (adequate against inadequate ideas, passive against active affects). The second study, “Du combat entre l’âme et le corps à la *fluctuatio animi*,” originally published in 1990, identifies in the *Short Treatise* the “frontier” between Spinoza’s early Cartesian elaboration of the problem of the passions in terms of a combat between two causalities over the control of the movements of the “animal spirits” of the body and his mature elaboration of the problem in terms of a conflict that divides the mind against itself (either as affected by opposite passions, or as divided into a passive and an active part). In KV II.19.11, Spinoza invokes the conflictual interaction between Descartes’s two causalities (the bodily and the mental) to account for a specific phenomenon: an affective state of anguish (*Benaauwtheden*) that we experience without grasping its causes. By naming and isolating this affective state, Spinoza takes a step towards generalising the phenomenon of *fluctuatio animi* that will characterise the *Ethics*. There, Spinoza will come to reject the Cartesian (and the KV’s) account of the interaction between body and soul, therefore excluding also the possibility of following Descartes in explaining ambivalence by the fact that “l’âme a conscience de son union avec le corps, elle n’a pas conscience du corps, de ses mécanismes, des voies par lesquelles il agit sur elle” (51). Consequently,

la *fluctuatio animi* (E3p17s) ne sera plus une passion dérivée ou particulière parmi d’autres—as it is for Descartes—, ce sera le régime général de la composition des affects puisque l’unité de composition n’opère plus, comme chez Descartes, entre l’âme et le corps, mais pour l’âme elle-même autant que pour le corps. (...) Affectivité et ambivalence affective, si l’on accepte cette traduction pour *fluctuatio*, acquièrent la même extension. (51)

A third text, “*Nostri corporis affectus*: peut-il y avoir, pour Spinoza, un affect du corps?”, first delivered as a talk at the 1991 Third Jerusalem Conference (*Ethica* III), explores a further aspect of Spinoza’s account of affectivity. In contrast with the first two studies, here Beyssade approaches Spinoza directly and on the basis of a technical issue that arises from within the text of the *Ethics* itself. Against the trend of distinguishing between *affectio*, as designating the modifications of the body (or of the soul), and *affectus*, as designating the consciousness of those affections in the mind, Beyssade argues in favour of taking the enigmatic reference to affects of the body (E2p17, E3p14d, E3p18d) in all its literality: just as there are affections and affects of the soul, there are for Spinoza affections and affects of the body.

This technical dispute is, however, only a platform for offering a more ample and radical interpretative position: not only are there also affects of the body, but since Spinoza founds his general theory of the affects on his physics, it follows that there is a priority of the affects of the body over the affects of the soul. This is clear from E3p14d, which arrives at its conclusion concerning the laws of association between the affects of the mind by arguing that the mind’s being affected simultaneously by two affects follows *as a consequence* of the body being simultaneously affected by two affects. For Beyssade, this implies that:

L’affect et l’enchaînement des affects sont parfaitement constitués au niveau du corps, ils n’ont aucun besoin que s’y ajoute conjointement (*et simul*) la dimension unifiante de l’âme ou de la conscience. Au contraire c’est par une sorte de dérivation (*et consequenter*) que l’affectivité déjà

constituée au plan du corps se transmet à l'événement de la *mens*, qui redouble l'événement corporel. (65)

Of course, given parallelism (E2p7), there is no affect of the body that is not simultaneously followed or accompanied by an affect of the mind: “c'est une seule et même chose qui est affectée et qui enchaîne ses affects. La physique de l'affectivité établit que cet enchaînement suit l'ordre des affections du corps. La question éthique de l'alternative entre servitude et liberté poussera au premier plan le versant mental du phénomène” (65-66).

This ethical inversion of priority in the relationship between the physical and the mental reveals all of its consequences in “*Vix* ou peut-on se sauver tout seul?”, first published in 1994, where Beyssade takes on the fundamental problem of the relationship between ethics and politics in Spinoza's overall account of freedom or salvation. Following the procedure, by now familiar to the reader, of taking a specific technical issue as the basis for the resolution of a larger interpretative question, Beyssade argues against the trend of reading Spinoza as being primarily a philosopher of community for whom the salvation of the individual *necessarily* presupposes the mediation of politics. Based on a reading of E4app7 (G II 268) as describing, through the phrase *vix poterit* that appears at its end, the situation of an individual seeking to preserve their nature amidst the most unfavourable of hostile conditions—i.e., interacting with other human beings with whom there is a radical disagreement in nature—the question asked by Beyssade is whether an individual may achieve ethical salvation even in those hostile conditions: “Il s'agit de savoir si un sage peut se sauver sans le préalable d'une libération politique, s'il peut en ce sens se sauver tout seul” (77). Beyssade answers positively, thus going against the grain of the contemporary trend of subjecting in some sense or other the ethical to the political in Spinoza's thought:

Naturellement nul n'est jamais seul au sens strict ou métaphysique, sans rapport avec d'autres modes finis: c'est absolument impossible. Mais on peut, à la rigueur, vivre à l'écart des autres hommes, ou en dissidence avec ces concitoyens. Si la définition de l'homme comme animal social a fort souvi à la plupart, *plerisque valde arriserit*, le cas d'exception n'est donc pas oublié, encore qu'au total la société politique, *ex hominum communi societate*, engendre plus de commodités qu'incommodités. Ni l'État ni même la société des hommes ne sont ainsi des conditions absolument nécessaires du salut (77).

It is here that the core of Beyssade's interpretation of Spinoza comes directly to the fore: i.e., his interpretation, developed in this and his other studies, of Spinoza's distinction between passivity and activity as an ethical alternative between the priority of the body, operating as the source of a *passive* ordering of affectivity based on inadequate knowledge, and the priority of the mind as the source of the *active* reordering of the affects based on adequate knowledge. In Beyssade's reading, it is precisely through the absolute and necessary subjection to the order of nature, understood adequately, that the sage liberates themselves from being subjected to the passions in the domain of their specific interactions with other singular parts of nature, with external causes such as human beings. Beyssade thus concludes that politics is not an absolutely necessary condition for salvation, even if it may facilitate it or render it more probable: as exemplified by Spinoza's own ascetic isolation, a hostile political environment does not render individual salvation impossible but only rare and difficult. “Car c'est l'éthique qui fonde le politique, et non l'inverse” (78).

The reader will find three other studies that exemplify Beyssade's willingness to tackle the most complex of interpretative issues: a brief text arguing in favour of identifying the mediate infinite

mode in the order of the attribute of thought with “the infinite love that God has for himself” from E5p36 (“Sur le mode infini médiat dans l’attribut de la pensée”, from 1994); a study that analyzes in detail Spinoza’s argumentation for the impossibility of hating God (in E5p18, its corollary and scholium), which concludes that there is a sense in which God *can* be the object of hate (“*Nemo potest Deum odio habere. Peut-on haïr Dieu?*”, from 1999 and the only previously unpublished of the studies collected); and, lastly, a brief piece initially written as a presentation for the collective volume *Spinoza et la norme* (2002), in which Beyssade suggests that Spinoza’s philosophical framework is constantly supported by, and directed towards, a novel conception of normativity and finality as immanent to essence (“Norme et essence chez Spinoza”). The book closes with a selection of specific key passages from Beyssade’s unfinished translation of the *Ethics*, which most clearly reveal his method of intersecting translation with interpretation—by refusing, for example, to mechanically render a specific technical term with a single French equivalent in different argumentative contexts, such as the demonstrations against the appendixes or prefaces:⁴ the appendix to *Ethics* I, the preface and appendix to *Ethics* III, the appendix to *Ethics* IV, and the preface to *Ethics* V.

4 As pointed out by Moreau in his postface, see 136-137.