Spinoza and Twentieth-century Italian Culture

Filippo Mignini*

Abstract
The paper distinguishes between philosophy and culture and explains the reasons why it is preferable to investigate the relationships between Spinoza and the Italian culture (rather than philosophy) of the twentieth century. Italian culture is characterized by five prevailing forces: Roman Catholicism, the neo-idealism of Croce and Gentile, fascism, Marxism, the mass media. Spinoza’s conceptual world has remained foreign to Italian culture, where it has not been expressly opposed, as, for example, by the Catholic side. The paper then examines some of the main philosophical interpretations of Spinoza (as advanced by Giovanni Gentile, Piero Martinetti, Augusto Guzzo, and Antonio Banfi) showing the relationships between them, the philosophy of their authors, and some salient characteristics of the Italian culture of the century. The theologizing attitude of these philosophers (except Banfi), although expressed in different forms, led them to often misleading interpretations that contributed to nullifying a possible encounter between Spinoza and Italian culture. Finally, mention is made of the historical, philological and exegetical research which, over the last thirty years, has offered a new and significant contribution, with an international impact, to Spinoza studies.

Keywords: Italian culture, Judeo-Christian tradition, neo-idealism, historical reconstruction, philological method

1 Introduction
In 1927, on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of the death of Spinoza, the Societas Spinozana published in The Hague the fifth and last volume of the Chronicon Spinozanum. Among the

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1 The text reproduces the report held as part of a conference promoted by Vereniging het Spinozahuis in 1997, the proceedings of which were not published. I thank the editors of this volume for including it—I remind the reader that it remains dated to the year in which it was composed.


* University of Macerata;

How to cite this article: Mignini, F., Journal of Spinoza Studies, 3, no. 1 (2024): 78–172, doi: https://10.21827/jss.3.1.41867

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dissertationes written by scholars from various countries in their own languages, there is a contribution by an Italian author: this brief essay is written by Giovanni Gentile and is entitled “Spinoza and Italian philosophy.” Along with Benedetto Croce, Gentile was the main representative of neo-idealism and Italian culture in the first half of the century and exemplary editor and commentator of the Spinoza’s Ethica in 1915. In his paper, Gentile traces a rapid and intense profile of Spinoza’s presence in Italian philosophy during the previous one hundred years. Now, having been invited to take up the same theme, I would like to explain why in the title of this paper I have replaced the word ‘philosophy’ with the term ‘culture’.

I say ‘culture’ and not ‘philosophy’ because, in the prevalent everyday sense of these terms, Spinozian philosophy really seems to be addressed to the broad world of culture, of which philosophy is an expression. The ‘philosophy’ that Spinoza intends to construct is a complex and universal system of knowledge, which is capable of expressing and giving sense to the entire culture of that time. On the other hand, Spinozian philosophy has an essentially ethical motivation: to lead the greatest possible number of human beings to enjoy a stable serenity of the soul, guided by reason. Every element of knowledge that is not subordinated to this end is considered futile and useless. But as the highest possible personal good cannot be obtained without precise (individual or social) rules of life (as the TIE teaches us), the real object of Spinoza’s reflection is made up of all the forms through which the world of life expresses itself, that is to say, human culture. Spinoza’s doctrine is not destined to be abstractly examined or discussed, as can occur in academic practice. It is not a philosophy for professional philosophers produced for intellectual consumption. It was with great awareness and determination that Spinoza had declined to enter the Academy. It thus strikes me as more consonant with the nature of Spinoza’s philosophy to investigate not only how it fared in academic philosophy and in critical scholarship, but also, and above all in the Italian culture of this century.

Besides this, varied and important research work has been conducted regarding Spinoza’s fortunes in Italy, which constitute valuable tools for all types of analysis on the subject. I refer to the studies by Adolfo Ravà, Emilia Giancotti and to the systematic bibliography of the works by and about Spinoza in Italy from 1675 to 1982, edited by Cristina Santinelli. It is not my intention to draw up a profile of Spinoza scholarship in Italy as the preceding works already provide a very comprehensive, if not exhaustive view. I have chosen to address the essential issue instead, by putting into question the influence and any transformations that Spinozian thought has produced in the Italian

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3 Giovanni Gentile, Spinoza e la filosofia italiana, Chronicon Spinozanum, V.
4 Spinoza, Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata latin text with notes by Giovanni Gentile (Bari: Laterza, 1915).
5 TIE §§ 3, 6, 10, 17 (G I 5-7, 9).
6 Ep 48, Spinoza to Fabritius, 30 March 1673 (G IV 235-6).
culture of the twentieth century. I shall then examine some of the more important interpretations of Spinoza from a philosophical point of view, which are also significant for an analysis of the national culture of this century. Finally, I shall make some brief observation about Spinoza scholarship and I shall propose a number of hypotheses regarding the role that Spinozian philosophy could play in the coming decades.

2 The influence of Spinoza’s thought on Italian culture in the last hundred years

To examine the first question, we must consider what have been, in these one hundred years, the principal expressions of Italian culture, and in what way Spinoza’s thought has entered into a dialogue with this period. There appear to be five leading players in Italian cultural history during the course of this century:

1. The Roman Catholic Church, with strong connotations of clericalism and with persistent direction—although diversely accented and expressed intentions and operations of influence—and government, not only in a spiritual sense but also politically with regard to civil society.

2. In the first half of the century, Croce’s historical neo-idealism and Gentile’s contemporary idealism unquestionably represented the highest point of reference for Italian philosophy and culture.

3. Fascism, between (and also after) the two wars, represented both a form of government and the real and objective expression of the culture and ideality, also in a moral sense, of the majority of Italians. This aspect should not be forgotten, nor should it be forgotten that ‘the Italy of today’, to which Gentile refers in the abovementioned essay, considering it to be the offspring of Mazzini and Gioberti, was still the Italy with the Fascist government and majority of those years. I do not believe that Fascism can be considered an inevitable conclusion of the ideals of the Risorgimento, in particular those of the thinking of Mazzini and Gioberti. It is however certain that it cannot be considered a simple historical accident either. It was and still remains a physiological expression of an important component of society and national culture.

4. After the First World War and even up to the end of the 1980s, Marxism constituted, in its various expressions, the main antagonistic force of so-called bourgeois culture. It also occupied the spaces left empty by idealism at the universities. It was in the context of this latter idealism, however, that many Marxist intellectuals were trained. For more than twenty years Italian universities were clearly divided, and to a lesser degree are still divided now, into Catholic and lay. The word ‘lay’ generally indicated a Marxist orientation, which progressively diminished the influence of lay intellectuals in the traditional sense of the term (also inspired by the values of Italian Risorgimento). Meanwhile, in the sixties, a sort of genetic mutation started to occur in Italian Marxism which gradually led some of its theoreticians and leading exponents to consider the profession of authentic Marxist as being incompatible with authentic Catholic faith. During the 1980s, the practice of Catholic communism and communist Catholicism by the same individual, simultaneously blessed by both

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8 For an analysis of the nature and extent of popular support for fascism see the works of Renzo De Felice: in addition to the eight volumes of the famous Mussolini (Turin: Einaudi, 1965-1997), see Fascismo, antifascismo, nazione. Note e ricerche (Rome: Bonacci 1996); Il fascismo. Le interpretazioni dei contemporanei e degli storici (Bari: Laterza 1970; 2nd edition, 1998).
church and party hierarchies, no longer posed a problem. Such a practice, which is hard to think of as not being a hybrid in theory, really represented an absorption and a victory of Catholic-bourgeois ideology vis-à-vis Marxist ideological principles.

5. We then finally come to the fifth leading player, which has dominated the scene for more than a decade. I am referring to the cultural hegemony of the mass media, aimed at the mercantile conquest of the general consensus by means of the simplification—and even dissolution—of the traditional and codified forms of language and messages. This is a completely new cultural and technological scenario that has taken traditional cultural forces by surprise and caused them considerable difficulties as to how to orient themselves. Among the cultural forces, which are active in Italy, the one which has the greatest possibility of adapting to the new scenario due to its organization and centuries-old tradition is certainly still the Catholic church. It must, however, like the whole of traditional culture, take stock of the mutated capacity of reading and deductive argumentation, typical of traditional culture. This is a mutation, which is creating a growing number of difficulties for today’s new readers and, perhaps even more for those of the future, in their approach to the classics of philosophy and of literature itself, which are in danger of disappearing from the horizons of generations to come.

What has been, therefore, the presence and fortune of Spinoza in the Italian culture of this century? We can answer, without pessimism, that Spinoza’s philosophy has remained completely extraneous to the fundamental expressions of the Italian culture of this century, taught more in the churches than in the schools, with little sense of the State, indifferent to autonomy and respect for rules, more inclined to compromise and transformism than to the clear assumptions of responsibility. Among the masses that populate the European nations, Italy easily presents itself as being the furthest away from the ethical and political world of Spinoza, especially when compared to those populations that have been in some way educated by Lutheran and Calvinist Protestantism. On the other hand, we cannot hide from the fact that Spinoza remained substantially on the fringes of Italian philosophy, by which, if he could not be ignored, he was often misunderstood and even criticized and challenged. From this viewpoint, beyond the proclamations, Italian philosophy played for threequarters of a century the role of sentinel of the dominant culture with regard to the subversive dangers of Spinozism.

Lest these statements seem exaggerated or gratuitous, let us briefly examine some of the main Italian philosophical interpretations of Spinoza. Due to the limitations of time and space and also due to the role played by their works, I shall focus my attention on the works of Giovanni Gentile, Piero Martinetti, Augusto Guzzo, and Antonio Banfi.9

3 Gentile’s interpretation of Spinoza

Let us begin with the reconstruction that Gentile proposed seventy years ago of the relationships between Spinoza and Italian philosophy, undertaken, according to the author, with serious interest and ‘passionate’ study around 1830. The first to have undertaken such studies was Vincenzo

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9 All quotes in English from these authors’ works are original translations from the Italian versions.
Gioberti, followed by Bertrando Spaventa, who was led to Spinoza by the attempt to understand the philosophies of Bruno and Gioberti himself. According to Gentile, the later studies on Spinoza “by Fiorentino, Acri, Maturi, Tocco, Gentile and Guzzo derive directly or indirectly from the movement that was started by Spaventa. Understanding Spinoza became for Italian scholars a necessity for the understanding of Italian philosophy”—this was characterized by Giordano Bruno, Giambattista Vico and Vincenzo Gioberti.

The distinctive character of Italian philosophy at the turn of the century was recognized by Gentile in the profession of the truth that had inspired Mazzini and Gioberti, the fathers of ‘the Italy of today’, and which Spaventa made his own, namely, the idea that the world, in its theoretical and practical dimensions, is “a product of spiritual energy.” With the notion of ‘spiritual energy’ Gentile meant two things: 1. The spirit, as an act of thinking in which one can recognize that the world is in itself, in the same way as it is in the act of thinking, i.e., necessary, eternal and perfect in nature. 2. The spirit, as an act in which one can recognize that the world, or nature, is an immanent product always exceeded by the spirit—in which this act of production puts its own liberty to the test. Spinoza came to know and conquer for humanity once and for all the first moment of the activity of the spirit, namely, the fact that spirit is an infinite eternal nature that is the unity of all things, where thought finds itself and, in itself, finds everything. Spinoza did not come to know the second moment, the creative liberty of the spirit itself, that is no longer content to ‘find’ the world, given as a fact, but wishes to construct it through the transformation (which does not occur without “conflict, struggle, effort and pain”) of its infinite energy. If, however, Spinoza’s philosophy is not sufficient to express the complete life of the spirit, it is nevertheless indispensable: this philosophy represents the “naturalism of the spirit and no longer of nature [...] a modern Christian naturalism that distinguishes

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10 For Gioberti’s references to Spinoza see Vincenzo Gioberti, *Introduzione allo studio della filosofia* (Milano: Ernesto Oliva, 1850).
to a very large degree the philosophy of Spinoza from that of the Eleatics, and of the Presocratics in general.”

It is not difficult to recognize behind this interpretation the profile of a Hegelian reading of Spinoza, which Gentile translates and adapts to the demands of interpretation of the whole of modern philosophy. This philosophy, according to Spaventa’s model, was characterized by a sort of circulation of the European spirit that received shape and impulse from the Italian Renaissance, was developed outside Italy from Descartes to Hegel, and then returned once again to Italy in the most recent philosophical season inaugurated by Gioberti. In order to understand this movement of the European spirit, or to understand the profound meaning of Italian philosophy, understanding Spinoza, who represented one of the two essential stages of that movement, was indispensable. That is why Gentile can state that “in this sense and for this reason the Italians felt the profound significance of the Hegelian saying that *spinozieren* means starting to *philosophieren*.”

Having briefly resumed Gentile’s reading of Spinoza, I would like to emphasize three characteristic aspects which are, in my opinion, at the same time extraneous to the literal content and to the spirit of Spinozism.

The first observation concerns Gentile’s interpretation of Spinozism in the wake of Hegel as acosmism, that is, as a doctrine where the world is denied in its difference and in its transformation to be annulled in the identity of the unique substance. It is sufficient for now to refer only to this aspect, which has already been amply discussed in Spinoza scholarship. I wish only to add that, plausibly, this prejudicial interpretation of Spinoza’s philosophy may have caused Gentile to commit a symptomatic translation error (that cannot be assumed solely as a pure translation error) in the preface of the commendable 1915 edition of the *Ethica*. Recalling the three propositions that Spinoza attached to the Ep. 2 to Oldenburg, and to which he refers in that letter, Gentile presents the first with this formula: “1. That in nature there cannot be two substances that are different in their whole essence.”

However, one wishes to interpret the text that Gentile proposes, its ultimate meaning is that there can only be one unique substance in nature. This conclusion certainly coincides with a fundamental Spinozian thesis but does not correspond to the Latin text of which it is offered as a translation. The Latin text states: “Primo, quod in rerum natura non possunt existere duae substantiae, quin tota essentia different.” The precise translation should be: “1. In nature two substances cannot exist, unless they differ in their whole essence.” It is apparent that the sense of this proposition is profoundly different from and even contrary to the conclusion implied by Gentile’s translation. Spinoza’s proposition does not deny the plurality of substances; it limits itself to stating that in nature as many substances can exist as there are really different essences present in nature. The proposition only denies that different substances with the same essence can exist. The following argumentation by Spinoza demonstrates a further relationship between the different substances made up of different essences. It sets out to prove that different substances must coincide with one sole, identical substance, in which, however, the real essential differences do not cancel each other but are preserved as infinite attributes. This demonstration is open to discussion; but one cannot simply deny the passage from

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17 Spinoza, *Ethica*, XXI.
18 Ep 2 (G IV, 8, 7–8).
the infinity of substances to the infinity of really different attributes, assuming these attributes are simply ways of knowing and thus are properties of the intellect transferred to substance. Gentile’s translation error, which should be considered further on another occasion, is therefore an authentic lapsus caused by a prejudicial interpretation of Spinoza’s philosophy understood as acosmism.

The second consideration concerns the interpretation of European philosophy as the circulation of the spirit, which was initiated during the Renaissance by the Italians. In this regard, spinozieren is necessary because Spinoza’s philosophy enables us to understand, in different forms and ways, (a) Bruno’s philosophy, to which it attributes a precise and coherent achievement, (b) Vico’s philosophy, of which it represents the point of departure ‘in his rigid naturalism’ (given that Vico goes beyond naturalism with his ‘idealistic vision of history’) and (c) Gioberti’s philosophy, of whose initial phase Spinoza’s thought constitutes the logic.19 Spinozian philosophy is therefore assumed historiographically by Gentile as an evolutionary moment in Italian philosophy. Apart from the inaccuracies that such a historiographical method implies, we should recognize that the outlook that directs it, if not nationalistic (and this aspect needs to be examined further), is certainly italocentric. And if such an outlook is comprehensible in light of the historical and cultural context of the time, it is nonetheless a very far cry from the conceptions that Spinoza’s philosophy, but also those of Bruno, Vico and Gioberti, follow in the determination of relationships between peoples and nations. For Gentile, “contemporary Italian thought lives off the moral impulse which the Italian Risorgimento made possible in the last century. The more studies that are made of the Risorgimento, the more it shows itself to be the effect of a powerful reconquest of the national spirit produced by moral forces.”20 This national spirit and these moral forces that expressed themselves in Italy during the experience of Fascism, were put to the test and reinforced in the First World War and were to lead, little more than ten years later, to the celebration of the Second World War. Furthermore, Gentile considered war to be the inevitable expression of the life of nations, in particular of the lowest segments of populations that had no higher form to express their creative vitality.21 How far this vision of things is from that quietly ironic consideration of the “armed masses” and “bloodthirsty warmongers” that caused the Amsterdam philosopher neither to laugh nor to cry, but only to try to understand human nature!22

The third consideration concerns Gentile’s interpretation of Spinozian philosophy, no longer as naturalism of nature, but as naturalism of the spirit, and therefore as “Christian” naturalism.23 For Gentile, naturalism is a characteristic feature of Spinozism: Spinoza “is the most conspicuous representative of the naturalistic conception of the world,” which goes back to Plato and Parmenides and which consists of thinking of nature as a necessary and eternal being, not however abstractly placed before and face to face with thought, but containing and expressing the very thought that is thinking it.24 In this sense and for this reason Gentile seems to consider Spinoza’s naturalism as distinct from that of the Eleatics and, in general, from the Presocratics, who limited themselves to

21 Gentile, Guerra e fede (Naples: Ricciardi 1919).
22 Ep 30, Spinoza to Oldenburg, s.d. (G IV 166).
placing nature face to face with thought. In what sense would Spinoza’s naturalism also be Christian? What can explain, if not justify, the juxtaposition of naturalism with Christianity? Arguably, the association is made possible by the mediation offered by the notion of spirit and by the ambiguous placement of Christianity within the area of the philosophies of the spirit. Whatever may be the legitimacy and the justification of such an action, it is interesting to note this reference to Christianity and Gentile’s attempt at treating Spinoza’s philosophy as a stage in the historical evolution of Christianity. It is easy to see to what extent such a conclusion is a long way from the historical truth of Spinozism and Christianity. It is however interesting to observe Gentile’s need to refer to Christianity and to examine the reasons for this need. This is clearly not the place to develop such an analysis; it is enough for us now to stress that this reference is present and that it is not insignificant in the general reconstruction of the presence of Spinoza in the Italian culture of the twentieth century. We can observe, in this regard, that the complex of Spinozian readings proposed by Italian neo-idealism starting from Spaventa, also including the young and elderly Antonio Labriola, are marked by a substantial Judeo-Christian vision filtered by Hegelianism. Therefore, despite the interest and the different forms of ‘falling in love’ with Spinoza, these readings are incapable of truly understanding Spinoza, whose philosophy is essentially a-Christian.

### 4 Piero Martinetti’s (1872-1943) Spinoza

In a specific essay, I have already had the opportunity to examine Piero Martinetti’s posthumous volume, published in 1987. I do not intend here to go back to the details of that interpretation and of my proposed reading of it. I make only three considerations.

1. Martinetti’s work was written around 1914, at the time when Gentile published his edition of the *Ethica* and a few years before the publication of Guzzo’s monography; it was then revised, expanded and corrected between 1939 and 1943, the year when the author died. It is essential to note that Martinetti was led to the study of Spinoza by the composition of his *Metafisica*, which he worked on for all his life and which constituted the constant background of his work. It could be said that Martinetti too came to the conclusion that it is not possible to philosophize without coming to terms with Spinoza. However, such a discussion seems more like the application of the author’s own metaphysics to the thinking of Spinoza.

2. Such a superimposition becomes most obvious when the discussion turns towards Spinoza’s claim that evil is a privation and thus a pure being of reason: “How is it possible to think of evil as a pure negation, as a pure not being of absolute perfection? Evil seems to be something positive.” Martinetti’s judgement is based on his own personal conviction that evil “is not simple negation,

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but is a contraposition of specific form which is hostile and deceptive.”  

30 It is the individual’s own task to oppose evil and redeem themselves from it:

in spite of everything, we need to understand and realize in ourselves and in the world the will of God against evil. We should not lie down to rest in the cowardice of evil or in pain. Evil is real in our world. We can also agree with the pessimists in considering a large part of what is well thought of as evil.

31 How far from Spinoza, and how incomprehensible is this appeal to “understand and realize in ourselves and in the world the will of God against evil”! Let us leave to one side the fact that for Spinoza evil is a simple ‘privation’, that is, an ens rationis, and not a ‘negation’, as Martinetti proposes.  

32 In reality, Martinetti needs the hypothesis of the real principle of evil in order to justify the relative autonomy of empirical reality disguised as absolute reality in an abnormal and painful form, made possible by the “radical imperfection of the imagination.”  

33 In Martinetti’s reconstruction, the formally existing and constituted evil is thus the imagination. From this premise, corollaries follow that are incompatible with Spinozian doctrine, like the life of the sage seen as an escape from the world, the waiting for death as a liberation from pain, and the condemnation of the pleasures of the body.

3. The interpretation of life as a rigorous ascetic exercise, which led Martinetti to be one of the few professors of philosophy not to swear allegiance to Fascism, also derived from a particular and personal form of religion, which Martinetti called “philosophical religion”. The essence of such a religion, of which the author considered Spinoza to be the supreme expression and example, consisted of the renunciation of oneself, which is painful in itself, but which can become serene in the life of the sage.  

34 However, the term ‘renunciation’ is absent from the Spinoza’s material and intellectual vocabulary, as those who read him without prejudice know well. But the term constitutes an illuminating reason for the way in which a fundamental theme of historical Christianity, mediated by the reading of Schopenhauer and Indian philosophy, came to constitute a guiding principle of Martinetti’s own metaphysics and his interpretation of Spinoza.

5 Augusto Guzzo’s monograph

Augusto Guzzo (1894-1986) was a pupil of Sebastiano Maturi, who was, in his turn, a pupil of Bertrando Spaventa. He published in 1924 (with a new edition in 1964 and a reprint in 1980) the first comprehensive monograph in Italy dedicated to Spinoza.  

35 This work brings together information on the life of the philosopher, a presentation of his works, and a critical assessment. The popularizing

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31 Martinetti, *Spinoza*, 278.
32 Ep. 21, Spinoza to Blyenbergh (G IV 128).
introduction to Spinoza written by Di Vona, Giancotti, Cristofolini and my own Introduction to Spinoza, whilst certainly of value, cannot be considered in the same way. This observation needs to be noted because it does not seem to be without significance that, contrary to what has occurred in other countries (in France and Germany, in particular), in one century of studies on Spinoza no monographic work conceived in the same way, other than that by Guzzo, has been published in Italy, even though Guzzo’s work has now become unsatisfactory from historico-philological and theoretical points of view. A detailed analysis of this work is not necessary here. Rather, we need to identify and discuss a fundamental critical point, namely, the central difficulty that the author points out in Spinoza’s philosophy. According to Guzzo, this consists in the irreconcilability between metaphysics and ethics. The ethical feature of Spinoza’s philosophy, its fundamental character was entirely preempted by the metaphysics of naturalistic and deterministic immanence, which leaves no room for liberty and responsibility, which are at the base of every ethical activity.

The difficulty has two sides: on the one hand, the immanence of a cause in its effects leads to the complete identification of the same cause with the effects. In turn, this makes vain and impossible to recognize the cause or to recognize it in the effects. Let us read Guzzo’s words, from the preface to the 1964 edition:

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[W]ithout selfness, the immanent would fade away in what it is immanent to, thus identifying itself with it, in fact resolving and dissolving itself in it. In this way there would be no more immanence of an immanent, but a simple closing of the facts in their own compact and insuperable order. \]

On the other hand, Guzzo is convinced that Spinoza’s absolutely deterministic metaphysics makes ethics vain, since the latter is founded on the possibility of emendation of the passions and on a process of human improvement in relation to a perfect ideal human being. In the same preface, after having said that in 1924 he was an ‘immanentist’ in authentic good faith, Guzzo states:

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\text{everyone knows that in order to save Spinoza’s ethics, we need to sacrifice his metaphysics, or return immanence to be the immanence of a God, not nature but spirit, which leaves men the capacity to err and to sin, but also the ability to be inspired and educated, in an authentically historical variety, because it is not petrified in necessity.} \]

The God to which Guzzo alludes, seeing the traits conferred, is the personal and transcendent Christian God. What sense then does it make to want to save Spinoza’s ethics by replacing its very foundation, that is, that God of the first part of the Ethics, who certainly has nothing in common with the willing and merciful God-the-creator of the Christians? Why should Spinoza’s ethics continue to be sustained once its specific foundation, his metaphysics, has been denied and substituted? Why not also abandon

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36 Emilia Giancotti Boscherini, Che cosa ha veramente detto Spinoza (Rome: Ubaldini, 1972); Piero Di Vona, Baruch Spinoza (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1975); Paolo Cristofolini, Spinoza per tutti (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1993); Filippo Mignini, Introduzione a Spinoza (Bari: Laterza 1983).
37 Guzzo, Il pensiero, XIII.
38 Guzzo, Il pensiero, XIV.
ethics and turn our backs once and for all to the philosopher? Let us also admit, with Guzzo, that “coming to terms with Spinoza is an unavoidable task for those who philosophize.” It is difficult for us to understand, however, how a philosophy, whether it be that of Guzzo or others, can come to terms with Spinoza by using as a point of view “that biblical thought” that Spinoza himself described as the supreme expression of the human imagination, except in its fundamental practical precept, coinciding with the very teaching of reason: “practice justice and charity and you will be saved.” This is how Guzzo concludes his preface to the revised 1980 edition:

‘Created creator’: this was how man was described by that biblical thought that Spinoza intended to avoid by proclaiming the necessity of all things. But when that ‘necessitated’ man proposes something, the biblical thought once again includes the negation that Spinoza wished to make of it, because Spinoza presents the path of man towards virtue and beatitude—not immobilized, indeed mobilized to walk, from that special action of creating which creates man as a creating being [porre che lo pone ponente].

Doesn’t this reasoning seem to want to come to terms with Spinoza more as regards faith than philosophy? Why shouldn’t we, once again, turn our backs on Spinoza, once and for all, without pretending to have something essential in common, except for the unconscious demonstration that he gave, in perfect good faith, of the truth about the Judeo-Christian revelation?

The outcome of the speculation that Guzzo has conducted for sixty years on Spinoza can be seen as emblematic in at least two senses. First, it shows the preponderantly theological soul of Italian culture and philosophy. Second, it shows the typically Italian tendency of not knowing and not being able to pronounce a clear ‘no!’, preferring the practice of conciliation, settlement, inclusion, or transformation.

6 Antonio Banfi’s (1886-1957) Spinoza

Antonio Banfi’s interpretation of Spinoza is radically different. Having first been a pupil of Martinetti, he was trained in Germany, especially with Georg Simmel. He dedicated to Spinoza various university courses especially during 1934-35 and 1952-53, and his notes were posthumously published in 1969 under the title *Spinoza and his time*. Although Banfi’s historical and philological approach to Spinoza is sometimes inaccurate, there is no doubt that his overall interpretation is correct, illuminating and precise. This interpretation is an exception in the panorama of Italian scholarship of the first half of the century. I would like to emphasize four aspects of Banfi’s reading of Spinoza.

1. Banfi presents Spinoza as the philosopher of real life, where ‘real life’ refers to the world of life and of culture in its concreteness and historicity. He sees Spinoza’s metaphysical theory as having an instrumental function, subordinated to ethics and politics. Although he did not dedicate

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39 Guzzo, *Il pensiero*, V.
40 TTP XIII, §§ 8-9 (G III 170-172).
41 Guzzo, *Il pensiero*, VI.
the same attention to Spinoza’s political works as he did to the TIE for example, Banfi nevertheless develops a comprehensive interpretation of Spinoza’s philosophy by taking the political works as a frame of reference. It is from this viewpoint that the world of life, declared by Banfi to be “absolute human benediction,” can be more effectively considered.

2. Banfi understood the importance of the role played by Spinoza’s reflection on religion in the construction of his entire system. Spinoza was able to preserve the essence of religiosity by transforming and sublimating traditional religion into elements of pure rationality. Spinoza knew how “to teach that the essence of religion is in reason.”

3. Banfi also underlines the interest that Spinoza had for the sciences of his time and interprets their associated philosophy as an authentic scientific attitude. Reason, understood as the second kind of knowledge, is properly the organ of scientific knowledge and, insofar as this is knowledge of singular and empirical reality (the object of the true idea), it is indispensable to the construction of philosophy. Emphasizing the novelty of Banfi’s assessment on this front is particularly important given the cultural climate of the time in which the dominant idealism condemned the natural sciences as false knowledge.

4. Finally, it should be noted how Banfi valorizes in Spinoza’s philosophy the character of the positivity of existence and human action, the identification between virtue and power, between virtue and joy, the conception of human life guided by reason as activity and constructiveness. Banfi writes:

Here lies Spinoza’s secret: wisdom is not only serene and joyful, but it is an understanding of everything, a justification of everything. [...] Truth is no longer the definition of a plan of ideal values above reality, but it is the understanding of reality in its thousands forms and in its thousand contrasts. Here is Spinoza’s problem, which is also our problem today: a capacity to resolve the whole of reality: a realism of a practical order made possible precisely because the mind has elevated itself to a theoretical plane from which everything is accepted and justified: a theoretical idealism and a practical realism. [...] Few like Spinoza, today, are close to the contemporary soul.

The reading proposed by Banfi in his university lectures has not yet received an adequate follow-up in a comprehensive systematic monograph. Nevertheless, it marked a new track along which other authors, mainly from the Marxist area, have constructed their own interpretations. I refer in particular to the studies of G. Semerari, E. Giancotti, P. Cristofolini and A. Negri. It is not possible now to

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43 Banfi, Spinoza, 68.
44 Banfi, Spinoza, 147.
go into this in detail. However, the research of these authors is characterized by an interest in certain specific themes of Spinozian doctrine, such as his political thought, the doctrine of knowledge, especially imagination, materialism, and the relationship between Spinoza and Hobbes. In terms of method, these studies distinguish themselves through their new historical-critical sensibility and constant dialogue with international scholarship.

7 New methods and international perspective between 1960 and 1997

It is only since the 1960s that Italian scholarship has become a constant and significant voice in the international concert of research that has undergone a singular development in the last thirty years. In this regard, I would like to recall P. Di Vona’s important investigations on the relations between Spinoza and the Second Scholasticism and G. Saccaro’s historical research on the evolution and on certain sources—Jewish ones in particular—of Spinoza’s thought. An important historical date, a sort of dividing line between past and present for Spinozian studies not only in Italy, but throughout the world, is constituted by the publication in 1970 of the Lexicon spinozanum by E. Giancotti. This tool can be considered emblematic of a series of other tools for lexical and philological analysis, published in subsequent years in France and Italy. This was also supported by digital means, which allow not only for a more precise and fruitful analysis of texts, but also for a new intellectual disposition towards them. These tools enabled us to experience the lexicon not as an inert and almost indifferent vehicle of thought, but as the exclusive, living and fruitful form of it. It is on the basis of such an experience and conviction that philological, erudite and historical-critical research has been initiated and has already seen the light of day in the last twenty years in Italy.

In particular, it was during the 1980s that Spinozian research in Italy also gave itself objectives and organized forms of collaboration, consolidating its role in the international context. It was in those years that three important international conferences took place: in Urbino in 1981, the first to be held in Italy; in L’Aquila in 1987, on the basis of the new critical edition and commentary of the Short Treatise; and again in Urbino, in 1988, on Spinoza and Hobbes.


In 1989, the Italian Associazione degli amici di Spinoza was founded by E. Giancotti, P. Cristofolini and F. Mignini, and the first complete edition of Spinoza’s works in Italy was completed by the same scholars. At the same time, a systematic project of new historical-philological research on Spinoza’s environment, life and works was launched, coordinated by F. Mignini and supported by the Italian National Research Council. A dozen young scholars participated in the project, whose work is in part already known and in part will soon see the light of day in an editorial plan that envisages the publication of around ten volumes. I wish to mention here the names of O. Proietti, R. Bordoli, G. Totaro, M. Chamla, L. Spruit. Other young scholars are carrying out further research, from which one can expect interesting results.

8 Concluding remarks

To conclude, I would like to propose three brief considerations on the future prospects of an encounter between Spinoza’s philosophy and the world of culture.

(1) I think it is realistic to assume that the process of internationalization of culture no longer allows this problem to be posed in terms of national specificities but rather makes it preferable to think of it at least in terms of large, culturally homogeneous supranational areas. Traditions and national specificities will remain, but it will certainly no longer be possible to think of the relations between Spinoza and Italian philosophy as Gentile thought of them seventy years ago and, perhaps, not even to pose the problem in the terms in which it has been posed by the Vereniging van Spinozahuis conference in 1997.

(2) One of the possible terrains of encounter between Spinoza and contemporary culture could be that of the reaffirmation of a conception of the principle as absolute power or energy, indifferent to all its possible determinations and therefore capable of constituting the self-identical unity. This terrain, on which contemporary sciences are moving, from physics to biology, from psychiatry to psychoanalysis in search of a monist model of man, seems to be the most likely to result in a fruitful dialogue with Spinozian philosophy.

(3) Of highest priority among all the tasks facing world culture in the coming decades is the initiation of a permanent, roundtable dialogue between East and West. We cannot ignore the fact that the fate of humanity probably depends on the outcome of this dialogue. From this perspective, we might regard the theoretical model elaborated by Spinoza as constituting, among the different models elaborated by the West, a privileged point of encounter and discussion.

References


