About Spinoza[1] - Brief Prelude to a Great Symphony

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Spinoza's thought derives, with evident signs, from certain traditions of antiquity, from ideas generated in the medieval period and, finally, from new Renaissance formulations.

As far as antiquity is concerned, it is worth remembering at least the conception of eudaemonic life, that happiness is the supreme practical good of man (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*), or that it results from intellectual contemplation and harmonious life, ideas that are transferred to the Alexandrian and Hellenistic periods. As for the concept of god, let us remember, for example, certain passages of the *Letter to Menoeceus* (123 and 124, according to the order of Diogenes Laertius): "The gods, in fact, exist, because the knowledge we have of them is evident. But they are not like the man who believes in them. Because he does not keep them as he intuits them. And it is not impious to deny the common gods, but to attribute the opinion of the people to the gods. For the common manifestations about the gods are not prejudices, but false assumptions". Or of the *Capital Maxims*: "The happy and immortal being [the divinity], has no worries nor seeks to give them to another, so that he is not subject to movements of indignation or gratitude"; "It was not possible to dissolve the fear in front of the most important questions without knowing in depth the nature of the whole, so that without the investigation of nature it was not possible to obtain pleasures without

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blemishes". For Epicurus, there is no longer a plan prefixed by nature, which is indifferent to the luck or fate of men, and even political life, the social pact, only partially compensates for the permanent and often superfluous conflicts.

As for the medieval period, the influence of Arab philosophers and Jewish cabalists is noticeable. Finally, Galileo, Bruno, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Kepler and Descartes were readings that contributed to his equally rigorous rationalism.

As far as medieval Arab-Jewish philosophy is concerned, there already appears the idea that God would not be a personal being, as understood by the orthodoxy of the synagogue, but a substance that penetrates everything and from which human beings emanate, as in Kabbalah, or a universal intellect from which individuals would be just fragments, an idea that can be found in Avicenna, for whom the essence, which exists by itself and is absolutely necessary, that is, God, is indifferent. Or even in Averrois, for whom, for example, one cannot attribute to God human wills and feelings; Maimonides, quite censored by Spinoza, but, even so, a critic of rabbinical and agnostic orthodoxy in face of the possibility of man to know all the attributes of God, or even Hasdaï Crescas and Ibn or Aben Ezra, this one of much influence in the writing of the Theological-Political Treaty.

In a way, this impersonal conception of the divine transfers a possible reward from the sphere of fear and hope to a properly human action, consecrated to intellectual development, knowledge, happiness lived among men, the practice of the virtues or, in short, wisdom. And here is Spinoza's ultimate goal, which is to make ethical reflection and moral behavior practical and permanent. That is why the notion of utility is present throughout his system. "I will understand what we know for certain to be useful to us" (Ethics, IV, definitions I).

Or: "We call good or bad that which is useful to us or harmful to the conservation of our being, that is, that which increases or decreases, causes pleasure or represses our power to act" (IV, proposition VIII, demonstration). Be it the usefulness of personal character (*suum utile*), or the common (*commune utile*). But this utility is neither that of divine reward nor that of economic calculation, but only rational. In the Treatise of God, Man and His Happiness it is written (part II, chapter XVIII): "Thus we see that man, being a part of the whole of Nature, on which he depends and by which he is also governed, can do nothing by himself for his salvation and the health of his mind. Let us now see what use can come to us from these propositions which we sustain, since, we have no doubt, they will seem shocking to many". From this right knowledge or belief that we are only one of the ways of the Substance, without being able to escape or modify it, arises the usefulness of the virtues, which the philosopher then enumerates, among which humility, love of neighbor and the common good. In the same book we see that Spinoza still has in mind to call attention to the indispensable control of passions: "For Hope, Fear, Security, Despair and Jealousy, it is certain that these passions are born from a bad opinion, because, as we have shown before, all things have their necessary cause and therefore must necessarily occur, as they do. And although Security and Despair seem to place themselves in the order and in the unshakeable sequence of the causes (having established the impossibility of modifying them), they are in no way so when one perceives what they are; there is never Security or Despair if before there was no Hope or Fear (and from these last passions both withdraw their existence)... However, after what we have said about Love, these passions can find no place in the perfect man".

And if it is then consecrated to the Treaty of Correction of the Intellect, it is because the happiness of man depends on the knowledge of nature and of himself: "...everything that occurs is produced according to an eternal order and according to determined natural laws. But while human imbecility does not grasp this order by thought, at the same time man conceives a human nature superior to his own in strength, and sees nothing to prevent him from acquiring a similar one, he is incited to seek means that will lead him to this perfection; and all that can serve as a means of arriving there is called the true good; the sovereign good being to enjoy, with other individuals if it can, that superior nature. What this nature is, we will show it in its proper place, since it is the knowledge of the union that the mind has with all nature".

We also believe that one of Spinoza's most important convictions, which under this aspect still supports the scientific thinking of modernity, is that of antifinalism. To suppose a previous intention or to wait for a future culmination is to surrender to exclusively human feelings and, therefore, give way to an anthropomorphism without any basis in reality or experience. The apparently "perverse" character of his philosophy is, in the first place, to deny any teleological and redemptive perspective. In the appendix to part I of Ethics, for example, we can read: "All the [prejudices] that I set out to point out here, moreover, depend on one, and consists in that men commonly assume that all things in nature act, as themselves, with a view to an end, and come to assume that God himself directs everything in consideration of an end. They say, in effect, that God did everything in view of man and that he made man so that he would worship him. It is only this prejudice that I will consider in the first place, looking for the reason why most people keep it and why everyone is inclined to

embrace it. *Secondly,* I will show its falsehood and, in conclusion, I will show how prejudices regarding *good and evil, merit and sin, praise and reproach, order and confusion, beauty and ugliness* came out of it, and other objects of the same genre".

His absolutely pure ontology also does not allow him to understand good and evil or vices and virtues as the philosophical tradition analyzed them. Since man is one of the infinite modes of the single Substance, statements like the following emerge from the Political Treaty: "Nature is by no means subject to the laws of human reason that tend only to the true utility and conservation of men. It comprises an infinity of others that concern the eternal order, the whole nature, of which man is a small part. And it is by the exclusive necessity of this order that all individuals are determined in some way to exist and to act. *All that, therefore, which in nature seems ridiculous, absurd or bad, has this appearance only because we only know things in part, and we ignore, for the most part, the order of the whole nature and the links that exist between things , so that we want everything to be directed in a way according to our reason and, however, what reason says is bad is not at all, if we consider the order and laws of the universe, but only if we consider in view of the exclusive laws of our nature"*.

Ontologically, thus, there is no evil (or good), but a certain evil or sin in those relationships that decompose or ruin the image one has of the natural bond. This is a prior choice that, if the history of ideas is eluded, could be considered existentialist. In his first answer to Blyenberg, Spinoza says: "...it is undoubtedly true that bad people express, in their own way, the will of God; but they are not, therefore, comparable with good people: the more something has perfection, the more it effectively participates in the divinity, and the more it

expresses the perfection of God. Then, because the good have incomparably more perfection than the bad, their virtue cannot be compared with that of the bad, for the bad do not possess the love of God which flows from their knowledge, and only by which, according to our human understanding, we are said to be servants of God. Moreover, since they do not know God, they are only an instrument in the hands of a divine worker, and an instrument that serves insciently and destroys itself by serving, while the good serve knowingly and become more perfect by serving".

Spinoza's “perversity” is also visible in the contempt for ignorance of the common people (which at some point in political history would become “popular wisdom”) and for this reason avoids the most common behavior of men. In the same letter to Blyenberg (19) he says: “On the first point, I answer that Scripture constantly uses an entirely anthropomorphic language, convenient to the common people target; this common person is unable to perceive the slightly elevated truths”; in correspondence 78, addressed to Oldenburg, states: “Scripture, when it says that God is angry with sinners, that he is the judge who knows human actions, makes decisions and allows arrests, speaks in a totally human way and according to opinions coming from the common people, because its objective is not to teach philosophy or to make men wise, but to make them obedient”. In the Intellect Correction Treaty, he states: “In fact, the things that occur most in life and are considered by men as the supreme good are linked, so it can be inferred from his works, in these three: wealth, honor and lust. Each of them distracts the mind, which cannot think of any other good ... Honor, in short, is still a great impediment because, to achieve it, one must direct one's life according to the common way, that is, flee than he usually flees and look for what he

looks for ... Now, the objects that the common people follow not only do not provide any remedy for the conservation of our being, but they prevent it and, often, are the cause of the loss of those who have it ; they are always the cause of loss for those who are possessed by them ». And in the *Political Treaty* he is emphatic: “We have shown, moreover, that reason may well contain and govern affections, but we have seen, at the same time, that the path that reason teaches is very difficult; those who, consequently, are persuaded that it is possible to lead the crowd or the men engaged in public affairs to live according to the precepts of reason, dream of the golden age of poets, that is, they delight in fiction”. And even in the preface to the *Theological-Political Treaty*, he affirms with unmistakable conviction: “I also know that it is equally impossible to remove superstition and fear from the soul of the common person. And I know, finally, that in him the insubmission is constant, not being governed by Reason, but led by Passion to praise or censure. Therefore, I do not invite the commoners to read this work and those who are stirred by the same passions. Rather, I would prefer a complete neglect on their part to an interpretation which, being wrong, as is their invariable custom, would give them the opportunity to do evil and, without profit to themselves, harm those who philosophize more freely”.

Finally, as Gilles Deleuze still writes in *Espinoza*, *Practical Philosophy* (portuguese version, Ed. Escuta, Brasil, 2002), "it is not surprising then that Espinoza, in 1665, temporarily interrupted Ethics and began the drafting of the Theological-Political Treaty, whose main questions are: why are the people deeply irrational? Why are they proud of their own slavery? Why do men fight 'for' their slavery, as if for their freedom? Why is it so difficult not only to conquer, but to endure freedom”?

From a political point of view, Spinoza not only begins from the natural law, like Hobbes, but defends the idea that it subsists in civil law, as it is necessarily ineliminable. In this regard, one can read, first of all in the *Political Treaty* (chapter II, paragraphs 4 and 5): "By law of nature, therefore, I understand the very laws or rules of Nature according to which everything occurs, that is, the very power of nature. Therefore, the natural law of the whole nature and, consequently, of each individual, extends to where its power goes and, therefore, everything that a man does according to the laws of his own nature, he does by virtue of a sovereign right of nature, and he has as much right over nature as he has power. If, therefore, man's nature were so arranged that men lived according to the exclusive prescriptions of reason, and if all their effort tended only to this, the right of nature, for as long as one considered what is proper to man, would be determined by the exclusive power of reason. But men are led more by blind desire than by reason, and therefore the natural power of men, that is, their natural right, must be defined not by reason, but by all the appetite that determines them to act and by which they strive to keep themselves". That is, if the right of the individual means a determined power to produce actions that derive from his own nature, this right is confused with the desire and effort to preserve himself or to persevere in his being. Therefore, although the "rule of the city" cannot allow each citizen to live according to his own will, "the natural right of each one (if we weigh things well) does not cease to exist in the civil state. Man, in fact, both in the natural state and in the civil state, acts according to the laws of his nature and watches over his interests...". Also in a letter to Jarig Jelles, the author refers to the continuity between both rights: "You ask me what difference there is between me and Hobbes as to politics: such

difference consists in that I always maintain the natural right and that I do not recognize the right of the sovereign over the subjects, in any city, except to the extent that, by power, that one prevails over them; it is the continuation of the right of nature".

It is to be expected then that rivalries, hatreds and conflicts will also manifest themselves in the exercise of natural law and in the struggle for self-preservation, considering that they are natural passions. But among them are also fear, the search for security or the hope for peace. Passions that act in the sense of aggregation, of coexistence, of the common overcoming of these affections. Thus the passionate substratum of the human being is what really acts in the sense of collective overcoming and bases the reason for politics, because if men agree to live in a political society, and only in this way do they become citizens, it is above all by virtue of a shared passion: "In each of these two states it is the hope or fear that leads one to do or not do this or that, and the main difference between the two states is that, in the civil state, all have the same fears, and that security has for all the same causes, in the same way that the rule of life is common, which does not suppress, far from it, the faculty of judging each one's own. Whoever has decided, in fact, to obey all the injunctions of the city, either because he fears its power, or because he loves tranquility, watches over its security and its interests according to its complexion... Therefore, those who have neither fear nor hope depend only on themselves and are enemies of the State to which one has the right to oppose coercion".

Although it is evident that Spinoza had a theoretical preference for democracy, as it is clear in the *Theological-Political Treaty*, his enormous and always remembered distrust about the irrationality of the "vulgo" makes us imagine that, in practice, his preferences should

go to an oligarchic republic, as demonstrated in support of the principles and objectives of the De Witt brothers against the House of Orange, and the knowledge he had of the structured of the *Serenissima Republica di Venezia* (which already in 1311 had 1,017 voters in the Great Council, having reached 2,095 in 1520, in addition to being supported by various institutions moderating power). In addition, in the *Political Treaty*, he acted as a proponent of exemplary types in the constitution of public power. And whatever it is - monarchical, oligarchical or democratic - what matters is to have Reason as a guide, because in the natural state it is not indispensable for immediate common purposes, which are morality, security and peace. Or, in his words: "reason teaches us to practice morality, to live in tranquillity and inner peace, which is not possible unless there is a public power".

Using Spinoza's own "perverse" philosophy, I would say that even under the existence of public power, and especially in Brazil, natural passions continue to supplant what political reason may suggest most reasonable in all its institutions and powers. This only reinforces the philosopher's theses.