The Two Eyes of Spinoza

Monist doctrines always have trouble with the idea of negative freedom. It is only with great effort, and at enormous cost, that they succeed in salvaging it within their constructions; indeed it is doubtful whether this has ever been achieved without sacrificing coherence. Perfect solipsism aside (never seriously proposed and existing only in the realm of the imaginable), the monist project – to interpret all the qualities of existence as relative to one primordial being – inevitably ends up abolishing the entire realm of the subjective (understood as an irreducible realm). In this relativized monist world, subjectivity is always a particular state, arrangement, manifestation or phenomenon of something else – something that is not subjective – and can thus be defined entirely in terms of the object.

Belief in freedom as a negative quality of the subject is the belief that some if not all actions of the self-knowing subject have an unconditioned beginning: a perfect, ultimate source and spontaneous origin. It presupposes that when we ask about the reasons for our freely-made decisions, we will always reach an impassable barrier, a point where our question can go no further: the ultimate reason of our wanting something is, in the end, simply our wanting it – just that and no more. I can always ask why I want one thing rather than another, and sometimes I will be able to find an answer, but each new answer will be another “because I want . . .” After a number of such answers, going further and further back, the chain of explanations comes to an end, and I am left only with “I want this just because this is what I want.”

A subject to which we attribute this ability to evade determination, to refuse the question concerning the reasons for its own choices, is one whose every action must be considered as an unconditioned beginning: a new and unpredictable act of self-creation; a crack, or rather a kind of self-formed whirlpool, in the great mass of existence. Thus there are as
many absolutes as there are self-conscious subjects capable of choice: at every point of subjectivity in the universe, the unity of the divine absolute, or of the absolute of nature, breaks down. When we consider this, we can appreciate the difficulties with which the scholastics had to grapple in their search a non-contradictory formula that would reconcile God’s definition as the absolute and only beginning with freedom of choice – a freedom that determines ex nihilo but is not itself predetermined. The search is ultimately pointless, the solutions proposed fragile as porcelain, and the results paltry; but the huge efforts expended by Christianity, in all its varieties, to avoid the either/or – the disjunctive choice between divine omnipotence and human freedom – also have their roots in the monist temptation, present in the doctrine of creation.

Cartesianism disentangled itself from this predicament through the epistemological decision expressed in the cogito. The cogito allows us, in fact compels us, to salvage our own existence – existence as it is experienced by us; it is the uniquely compelling starting-point of thinking about existence. As a result, we can more easily endow this epistemological primacy with ontic meaning. Indeed we cannot avoid doing so: if we tried – if we considered that what is “given” in the most primary sense is merely an appearance – then we could not legitimately pass from the appearance to the reality. But the cognitive absoluteness of a self-directed act of thinking endows that act with the right to claim absoluteness in the ontic order for itself as well. Consequently, freedom is not hopelessly entangled in the shackles of divine Grace as soon as we begin to think about it; its foundations can be built long before we are even aware of such a thing as divine Grace. We do not need to rescue it with excuses and evasions. Cartesian freedom, being negative, knows no restrictions; it is, from the start, simply our inalienable ability to add our own fiat to that of God. This is something we do with each act of subjective consciousness, and through each such act we become equal with our creator. It is a freedom that lies in the power of our self-defined creativity to choose.

But the Cartesian construction suffers from a fundamental lack of continuity, for which there is no cure. How are we to go about reconstructing the world if the only absolute, unconditioned starting-point is the self-intentional act of consciousness – an act in which experience acquires just enough distance towards itself to glimpse itself for a fleeting moment in the act of reflection which splits it in two? Descartes’ famous appeal to God as the guarantor of truth, the savior of our belief in the reality of heaven and earth, was almost immediately revealed by his critics to be riddled with holes so gaping that the majority of Cartesians preferred to renounce it; and the very first critics found that
the Cartesian construction, for all its monumental sweep, was organically incapable of reconstructing physical existence from its initial principles. Freedom – the negativity which defines the particularity of human existence – remained a reward promised to those willing to suspend judgment about the reality of the world.

Thus Cartesianism split philosophies into two distinct groups: those that start from the experience of the subject and try to return to the objective world from there – a feat they can accomplish only through invalid proofs; and those that start from existence itself, establishing it without anyone’s cognitive assistance – which bars the road to subjectivity, so that they are forced to treat human existence as part of objective reality, endowing it with the same status as objects, unless they endow it with a different status by arbitrary decree.

Spinoza’s metaphysics suffers from exactly the opposite problem. Whereas Descartes wanted to build up the external world from the raw data of our mental experience, the cogito, Spinoza’s starting-point (at least in the Ethics) was the unique, absolute, primary being; divine substance, definitively established by ontological proof, was the material of thought. This metaphysical picture leaves no room for self-consciousness, and Spinoza’s doctrine struggles in vain to find a way of accommodating it. For what does it mean to say that to be human is to have not only a body but also a soul, a soul not existentially identical with that body, if we, like all other things in the world, are modifications of infinite substance, and like them partake of that ideal or “mental” quality in which each individual existence shares? We are “soul” only to the extent that everything is. One thing only makes us specifically human: the fact that, in addition to the idea, we also have the idea of that idea – self-consciousness, which is not given to other things. But why is it not? The sole metaphysical justification for endowing us with it is the fact that the idea of everything, and therefore also the idea of the idea, is in God. But if so, one is tempted to ask why the idea of other things should not be similarly duplicated: why should perfect being – the participation of all things in the logical order of being – be deprived of this double endowment by virtue of which it becomes self-knowing, so that it not only knows, but also knows that it knows?

Spinoza refused to recognize the absurd consequences of his metaphysics. The restriction whereby he distinguished human existence was utterly arbitrary, with no foundation whatsoever in his metaphysical doctrine. His critics had good reason to accuse him of haziness on this point, and good reason to remark on his fundamental inability to take any kind of theoretical step that might confer legitimacy on the subjective realm. They had good reason, too, for saying that human existence
cannot be reconstructed in a way that would be consistent with the basic principles of his metaphysics; it can be distinguished only by purely objective, empirical qualities.

Spinoza’s version of the freedom and immanent necessity of the Absolute is not, in fact, very different from the kind of freedom that Platonist scholastics attributed to the Creator. For Spinoza, the nature of divine existence is such that the Absolute being cannot be said to be “free” in the sense in which human action is commonly said to be free, i.e., non-determined, because the Absolute does not exist in time. As a perfect being, the Absolute is by definition extra-temporal: it cannot be bound by temporal succession or subject to temporal change. A being for which there is a distinction between past and future could not have the Absolute’s direct cognitive link to the world; it would need mediation, in the form of memory and foresight. But if its relation to events were indirect, mediated through recollection of the past or projection into the future, its knowledge of the world would not be that direct cognitive participation which defines the Absolute’s relation to all that exists and takes place; it would entail a distinction between the possible and the actual. And since it is inconceivable that for God there should be a distinction between the possible and the actual, it is also inconceivable that He should exist within the framework of temporal succession.

By the same token, it is inconceivable that God should enjoy freedom from determination in the sense of being free at any given moment to choose how He will act. God cannot choose, for choosing entails choosing between possibilities, and He is by definition perfectly actualized; it is inconceivable that He could be confronted with an event to which His relation was not already determined. For God there can be no “already” and no “given moment” in time, for there is no distinction between past and future, actuality and potentiality. His relation to events can be said neither to be determined nor to be pre-determined; the distinction between what is necessary and what is free and undetermined makes no sense when applied to God. Thus God is “free” only in the sense that He cannot be constrained or influenced by any external circumstance – a freedom that follows logically from His definition as the absolute Creator. This is all Spinoza means when he calls God free and His actions necessary and inevitable: He is free because He is not constrained by anything outside Himself, and His actions are inevitable because, being perfectly actualized, He is bound by His own necessity. Always fully actualized in His immobile and immutable self-identity, God is temporal only for us; the framework of individual events, causally linked and succeeding each other in time, exists only in our perception. But in fact past and future are both actualized, for they are actualized in God-Nature. He is the only reality, the only independent being;
apart from Him there is nothing, and nothing else merits the name of being in the true sense.

In this absolute unity of being there is no crack that could shatter God’s primordial self-identity, no imaginable opening through which something as yet undetermined could in the course of time become determined. Nor can we imagine this God engaged in any purposive activity, for God can have no purpose that is not yet fulfilled: purposive action is evidence of imperfection; it implies something not achieved, some need unsatisfied. But the Absolute being is completely fulfilled; it would be blasphemy to say that God acts towards a goal. Everything that will ever happen in the world has already happened; it is already a fact. There can be no hope of any spontaneous, freely self-determined irruption into the inevitable succession of events, no possible break of their continuity. Such a break would be a break in the chain of logical consequence: it would mean that something that follows logically from a given proposition or state of affairs could be made not to follow from it by an arbitrary decision, a whim. For the course of physical events proceeds with the same inevitability as that with which conclusions follow from premises in Euclid’s *Elements*. Thus the very nature of the Absolute is such that there can be neither contingency nor purposiveness in the world – unless we decide to consider as contingent everything whose causes are unknown to us. But that contingency would be related to our own ignorance, not to any property of being itself.

Given these principles, the absurdity of attributing what we commonly call free will to the human individual is so glaring that it would scarcely be worth pointing out but for the fact that we do so attribute it, and for the singular role played in our lives by the persistent illusion of free will, maintained by theologians in the face of all common sense. Spinoza believes the illusion to be so childishly easy to shatter that the task seems almost beneath his dignity; the ample space he devotes to the problem is owing only to its social importance, not to its philosophical complexity. For since everything is in God and nothing apart from God can be conceived, and since, further, God exists necessarily, it follows that every manifestation of His indifferent (i.e., non-purposive) creative power is also necessary; and in particular that “reason and will are [proper] to God’s nature [in the same way] as movement and rest.” Thus human behavior is just like the behavior of all other things: no less dependent, no freer, no more self-determined, no more purposive. Our power of choice is illusory. Whatever happens happens because it must; whatever does not happen does not happen because it cannot. In reality there is no middle ground between impossibility and necessity: what we think of as the realm of the contingent exists only in our imagination, and reflects our defective understanding of the world.
Divested of the peculiarly Spinozean vocabulary in which it is couched, this metaphysics may be summed up as follows. The world is indifferent to the fact that we are part of it. It has no intentions towards us, either hostile or friendly. In its perfection it has actualized everything than can exist. It has no aim, and does not intend to change anything in view of human suffering; indeed, is inconceivable that it would or could. There is no providence in the world; nothing protects us or watches over our lives. There is neither punishment nor reward, neither good nor evil, neither justice nor injustice. Good and evil, justice and injustice, exist in the world only through and for us, called into existence by our needs. Nature is not interested in our constructs.

But here is the paradox: the thing that makes us uniquely human, that inalienable feature of our existence which is its ability to experience itself, is metaphysically quite groundless; and yet it is the source not only of our specificity as human beings but also of our erroneous ideas about that specificity. In other words, the very thing that makes us human also gives rise to our misconceptions about what it is to be human; and that thing has no logical connection whatsoever with the rest of Spinoza’s metaphysical doctrine. The world according to Spinoza knows everything, but does not know that it knows. We know pitifully little, but know that we know, and what we don’t know, we know that we don’t know. Our physical behavior is subject to the same necessity as the movement of waves on the surface of the sea or the movement of a rock falling from a cliff-face. If a rock had our capacity of self-knowledge and could understand its movements, it would imagine, just as we do, that it controls them; it would think it was falling downwards rather than flying upwards as a result of its own free choice. But its movements are determined in exactly the same way as our actions; we have no more freedom than the rock. Our observation of ourselves is just that and no more – powerless observation; and it is this very capacity of self-observation that deludes us into thinking, with pathetic arrogance, that it is we who are the creative force behind our physical movements, which in fact are all purely mechanical. There is no efficient causal connection between our thought and our movement: we observe our own bodies as through a pane of glass, imagining that we control them, like boys who play at pretending to control thunder by ordering a thunderclap just at the moment when it comes.

Are we, then, not responsible even for our own bodies, buffeted about independently of our will, at the mercy of forces exerted by the motion of material particles? Spinoza would reply that here, again, the question is wrongly put; it is like asking why, in that case, we should lock away criminals, if we think they are not responsible for their actions. When we lock away criminals, we do so in order to protect society from
harm, not because the criminal determines himself “freely” in his crim-
nality; we act from the instinct of self-preservation, exactly as we would
in killing a poisonous snake or removing a rock that blocks our path. We
do not remove the rock or kill the snake because we consider them to be
free, and similarly with the criminal: he is no freer than they. Nor can
responsibility be identified with the absence of determination: there is no
such thing as a non-determined human decision, nor any action that is
not the result of a necessary causality. Responsibility in this sense does
not exist in the world; it is the product of our deluded imagination.

A bad doctrine, said Spinoza’s critics; a dismal, hopeless philosophy.

I don’t know whether it is good or bad, Spinoza replied; all I know
is that it is true.

But how wretched, they said, how tragic, to live in such a world!
Knowledge of the truth can never be tragic and wretched, he replied;
and a life based on illusion cannot be happy. And anyway, why tragic
and wretched? To understand the true nature of the universe, to grasp its
infinite perfection, its total self-sufficiency, is to love it for what it really
is. This love is not the kind of love we would feel for another person; it
comes from reason, and is arrived at by mental effort. It cannot be
returned, nor do we expect its return, for it knows, being rooted in our
understanding, that the Absolute is not subject to emotions. But it is a
happy love, for it can never disappoint us, and through it we can free
ourselves from the vain hope that the world might be different from
what it is. Our only freedom is the freedom of the Stoics – the under-
standing of necessity; and it is freedom insofar as all independence of
spirit in a situation which we are powerless to control can be called free-
dom. If we recognize this, we can attain the position of disinterested
observers, untouched by human passions, indifferent to quarrels,
despair, suffering or injury, able to contemplate them with the same dis-
passionate equanimity that characterizes the chains of our logical rea-
soning about abstract geometry. The effort required to achieve this state
will have been well worth it: no more absurd regrets, grudges against the
world, railings against fate that it has not treated us as we think we
deserve; no more bitterness at failure and thwarted ambition; no more
outrage at human wickedness or horror at the sight of evil; no more vain
and fruitless pity. All this we shall rise above, to enjoy the happy cer-
tainty that we are part of an infinite whole, with whose timeless, eternal
existence we can to some extent identify, since we have grasped it. We
shall no longer be afraid of death, oblivion or damnation, for in a world
whose necessity we truly love we shall see death as an inevitable part of
a perfectly coherent whole.

A masochist’s philosophy, commented the historian Lewis Samuel
Feuer. Who else could find joy in the boundless indifference of the
absolute world, a source of happiness in loving it with an unreciprocated
love, a cause for rejoicing in an order of things that destroys us as
inevitably as the wind shakes the leaves off trees, eternally imposing its
irresistible force on our frail powers?

A resigned mystic’s, let us say, rather than a masochist’s: the philoso-
phy of a mystic who has clothed his personal mysticism in Cartesian
concepts and categories. An escapist philosophy; a theory of freedom
attained through the spiritual denial of the finite order of the world.

But we know this is only one aspect of Spinoza’s world. The philoso-
pher who would have us bow down in admiration before an immutably
determined chain of events, would have us worship a perfectly indiffer-
ent divinity and seek freedom in understanding and accepting a world
in which everything that can ever happen has already happened – this
same philosopher was also a militant theorist of the liberal party in the
Netherlands, a defender of toleration and political freedom, a writer of
partisan articles in support of the republican movement, the author of
the *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*, and a vicious critic of theologians and
the Church.

Chronology may explain some of these contradictions, but it cannot
explain them all. Spinoza’s metaphysics alone already contains a gener-
al outline of that duality which characterizes both his life and his moral
philosophy. It may be that a vision of the world in which individual
things have no autonomous existence, but are entirely swallowed up in
the divine Absolute, cannot be reconciled with that other in which every-
thing is guided by an instinct of self-preservation and is destroyed only
by violence or by death. But both visions find expression in Spinoza’s
advice to us, which is on the one hand to flee our own finiteness and seek
freedom through an intuition about being that will unite us with the
Absolute, and on the other to look after our own interests and preserve
our bodies and souls, to which end we may, if necessary, resort to equiv-
ocation, evasion and half-truths.

No doubt this double perspective is in part explicable by Spinoza’s
view that the supreme values of life, attainable only through persistent
intellectual effort, will in any case be accessible to only a few. Those few
who do not allow the passions and concerns of everyday life to blind
them to the true order of values (not a transcendental order, established
by nature in normative form, but one where a value is simply a quality
that is in harmony with human nature, and thus strengthens our bodies
or souls) cannot disagree about them, for what they all equally enjoy –
knowledge of eternal reality and an understanding adapted to it – and
can enjoy without diminishing its enjoyment by anyone else, they will all
equally value. But one cannot restrict one’s thinking about the world of
human affairs to things which are of interest only to that tiny elite: life in
a community requires rules, and these rules must take into account our most common natural inclinations. Human nature cannot be denied; we may praise or condemn it, but we must recognize that it exists. It would be absurd to delude ourselves that the world of human interaction can be sensibly ordered on the basis of the assumption that we can all be free in the sense in which to be free is to participate in the cosmic indifference of perfect being.

Let us consider freedom in its humbler sense – not the freedom that comes from an understanding of reality but freedom in the sense in which Hobbes was able to use the word consistently with his absolute belief in universal causality. Freedom in this sense is not a human attribute, innate or acquired, but describes a situation where nothing prevents us from doing what we want to do (which does not, of course, imply that our wanting it is spontaneous and undetermined by the conditions in which we find ourselves). In other words, it is the absence of constraint. The main question Spinoza asks about freedom in this sense is the following: since there is no supreme law that could \textit{a priori} restrict or regulate our actions, the extent of our freedom to act being commensurate with the extent of our powers, how best should a human community be ordered so as to minimize constraints on the freedom of the individual while preventing the general war which would inevitably break out if there were no laws to restrict individual actions?

His answer – at least in its general theoretical formulation – is simple: abolish the tyranny of the Church and end its competition with secular government; reject the demands of the clergy, who in the name of the infallibility of their dogmas would bind the whole world in the shackles of their catechisms; establish religious tolerance and freedom of speech for all; maintain free trade and freedom of conscience; combat fanaticism, superstition and claims to a monopoly on truth. But here, too, restrictions are needed: freedom of religion, for instance, cannot be understood as extending to anything we decide, on a whim, to define as religious; such a law would be worthless and absurd, for it would be a license to do anything we please by calling it religion. Freedom of religion must therefore be defined. Hence some form of established state religion is needed – a conclusion many people in Spinoza’s time concurred with, tired and disenchanted after a century and a half of religious wars. A religion subject to the authority of the state could not transform itself into a clerical despotism. Moreover, its content would be extremely limited, comprising only those beliefs which everyone – even Spinoza – could accept, although each could interpret them in his own way. Even Spinoza would be willing to agree, for example, that God exists and rewards or punishes human deeds, although he believes neither in God in the ordinary sense nor, \textit{a fortiori}, in His legislative or exec-
utive powers. But what we believe isn’t the important thing; to each his own interpretation of the truths of faith. What matters is that we do our duty towards our fellow men: support them in our joint undertakings, loyally do our share, inflict no suffering and do no harm. In its content, then, a state religion would not go beyond our basic moral precepts and rules of behavior, and would not threaten the body politic of tolerant state. In such a religion the Bible plays a role not because it contains any truths about the world, for it contains none, but because it contains those most basic teachings about how we should live and behave towards one another – teachings which simple folk will more easily absorb through anecdotes than through laborious philosophical inquiry. We may assume that the masses will, in great majority, cling to their superstitious beliefs: to their belief in God the Father, Protector and Ruler of the world; in life after death; in heaven and hell. This is perfectly all right as long as their faith contains no elements of fanaticism or hatred for unbelievers, and if it can accomplish what philosophical reflection cannot, at least not on a mass scale, namely rein in harmful passions and subdue the natural human tendency to greed, selfishness and lust for power.

This is what Spinoza’s advice comes down to if we see it as a series of strictly philosophical precepts within the framework of his moral theory. It seems, when viewed in this way, quite useless: too vague, too general, almost banal. But when we look at it in a practical rather than a purely philosophical light, and consider it within the context of the political conflicts in which Spinoza was embroiled as a writer, it reveals itself as rather more substantial, and much more interesting.

From quite early on in his life, even before his excommunication from the Jewish community, Spinoza had moved in an atmosphere of republican freethinking. This was owing mostly to the influence of his friend Francis van der Ende – ex-Jesuit, political radical, mocker of men and enemy of the Church and the monarchy. Van der Ende believed in the absolute sovereignty of the people, and he was true to his beliefs: when he became embroiled in an anti-monarchist conspiracy in France, he demonstrated his constancy by paying for them with his head. It is quite possible that Spinoza’s religious views were only a pretext for his excommunication, and that the real reason lay in his republican sentiments and allegiances: if they had somehow come to light, they would have been considered dangerous for the Jewish community, allied by tradition to the House of Orange. In any event, the young Spinoza, having absorbed this atmosphere of cosmopolitan freethinking, soon came into contact with republican politicians and activists. The Netherlands was a republic at the time, but a frail and shaky one, swaying under the weight of constant conflict with the aspirations of the Calvinist clergy on the one hand and the monarchist claims of the House of Orange on the other.
Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-politicus* was directed both at Jewish claims to be the chosen people, with a special place in history, and at Christian claims of infallibility; it was an attack on churches as breeding-grounds of superstition and obscurantism; and it was a defense of toleration, democracy and republicanism in politics. In its essentials it resembled the doctrine expounded by the de la Court brothers – a tandem of republican theorists – in their political and economic writings. Thus its main thesis was not revolutionary; on the contrary, its aim was to strengthen the party in power – a party that was weak and disorganized, and had its support base in the interests of the liberal, peace-loving and tolerant-ly inclined merchant class in the most developed cities of the United Provinces.

Most of the rest of the population was ill disposed towards government by an enlightened elite, and from time to time made it abundantly clear that its sympathies (fostered and stoked by the Calvinist clergy by every means at their disposal) lay with the princes of the House of Orange. The Protestant ethos which Spinoza so hated was well suited to organizing and channeling the resentments of the less privileged; moments of particular instability were deftly exploited to rally mass support for a conservative coup – which did indeed finally take place, in 1672, at a time of military defeat. At the moment of crisis, the freethinking patrician elite, the tolerant republicans, the sympathizers of Arminianism in theology all found themselves without popular support. The leaders of the republican oligarchy, the de Witt brothers, were lynched: torn limb from limb on the streets of the Hague by a vicious mob whipped up to a frenzy of fanaticism.

The question of democracy had to be reconsidered. If democracy meant lawless mob violence directed by demagogues, what arguments could Spinoza find in its favor – he, a philosopher whose sympathies lay with liberal and freethinking but comfortably prosperous regents? He did defend democracy, in his 1670 *Treatise*; but he never defended revolution in the name of democracy. He valued not only freedom but also stability of government, and therefore believed that it is better to submit to a tyranny than to overthrow it by violence. Besides, democracy as he conceived it, the democracy he defended, had always been more a political system of reason than a system of government by the majority; and then, he had always mistrusted the rabble. His mistrust, indeed his contempt, is far too evident in his writings for him to have been a credible spokesman of revolutionary tribunals. He was more concerned to inculcate the feeling of freedom than to propagate freedom itself: to establish a rational government which, acting on the recommendations of the Florentine master of the political art, could through careful steering make its subjects believe that they ruled themselves. He never achieved
the synthesis he wanted: he found no way of satisfactorily reconciling
the values of freedom with those of reason and common sense, just as he
failed to reconcile the need for tolerance with the need for stability of
government.

When all the things he had condemned and opposed – the regular
army as an independent political force, the theocratic aspirations of the
clergy, the fanaticism of the mob – came into their own and became fact,
Spinoza decided it was time to revise his theory of freedom. This he
attempted to do in his unfinished Tractatus Politicus. Here the emphasis
– the way in which he formulates the issues – has shifted somewhat by
comparison with his famous earlier treatise, written in support of the
republican government then in power. True to his conviction that active
political disobedience does more harm than good, he now concentrates
less on the general question of the ideal form of government than on the
problem of ensuring the stability of various particular forms of govern-
ment, monarchies included, while preserving as much political freedom
as is conceivable in the given circumstances. But even the best laid plans
will fail if we do not keep in mind that people’s blind, thoughtless pas-
sions will always prevail over considered analysis and rational calcula-
tion; we must never assume that human behavior will be guided by rea-
son. We should rather seek to harness people’s untamed passions and
exploit them for the public good.

Let us sum up.

Freedom, in Spinoza’s conception of it, is not an attribute of human
nature. In particular, it is not what we commonly call free will – the pos-
sibility of undetermined, spontaneous, self-willed action. The will is an
abstract thing, which exists only in theory. In reality there are only indi-
vidual instances of wanting, and these are inevitably conditioned by the
circumstances in which they occur.

Nor is freedom a natural human right, a capacity we should exploit
in the name of higher values. There are no rights except that of power
and force – the power which we are able to exercise to impose our desires
on a particular situation.

If freedom is possible at all, it is our freely given assent to the eternal
and immutable order of nature; our understanding and acceptance of
nature’s indifference and lack of purpose. The freedom that comes from
this understanding is freedom from dependence on our passions: free-
dom from superstition, from anger, from despair and pointless regrets,
from fear of death and of the terrors of hell. In this sense it is a negative
freedom. But it is also a positive freedom: it is the joy of knowing that
one is part of the eternal essence of the supreme being, united with it
through an effort of ultimate intuition; the happiness of intellectual love
for the cosmic order. This freedom, however, requires a certain sacrifice
on our part; it can be attained only at the cost of giving up certain things. Not just external goods (which we will be giving up in the sense that they will have ceased to have value for us), but also our individual identity: our self-affirmation as separate beings. And while in theory this freedom is accessible to everyone, in practice it can be enjoyed only by a select few. It is the supreme reward of intellectual effort, and can be enjoyed in full by those who attain it, regardless of their circumstances, for it is infinitely resistant to the pressure of events and entirely insensible to the blows of fate.

This, however, is not what Spinoza means by freedom in those passages of his writings where the word crops up most often—passages where he is concerned to define what it means for a thing to be free in any given circumstance. There, when he says that a thing is free, he means simply that its behavior is not determined by external conditions. This freedom, too, characterizes situations rather than human beings; but our understanding alone is not enough to ensure that any given situation will be characterized by it, and it is unclear whether it is possible at all. God is free in this way, but can this kind of freedom also characterize human existence? Spinoza says that it can, apparently unaware of the contradiction between this view and his own insistence on human powerlessness and dependence on external causality. It is hard to see how the view that our capacity of self-consciousness is no more than passive observation, and cannot be the efficient cause of our physical actions, could be reconciled with the view that our behavior is not, or need not be, externally determined. And indeed, between the fully internalized freedom of the Cartesian-style mystic and the positive freedom which affirms human individuality through the instinct of self-preservation there can be no true reconciliation.

These are the two faces of Spinoza—the two eyes of his thought, one directing its escapist gaze towards the all-encompassing power of the Absolute, the other concentrating it on the world of finite things, observed with the dispassionate rationalism of the scientist. One eye belongs to the apostle of deductive reasoning, the follower of Euclid, the rationalist who attempted, and failed, to construct his metaphysics on Euclidean principles; the other belongs to the mystic. This dual vision can perhaps be explained by the dual aspect of Spinoza’s life: his contacts with the petit-bourgeois mysticism of sectarian freethinkers and his involvement with the republican bourgeoisie are certainly responsible for that other, mystical strand of his thought, at least in its principal ideas.

Spinoza’s political doctrine, where he considers the freedom of the individual in relation to social institutions, is similarly marked by the uncomfortable coexistence of two conflicting tendencies, each pulling
him in a different direction. The strain produced by their conflict is expressed in an endless indecisiveness: he is torn between his natural sympathy towards the disinherited of the earth and his hatred of the rabble – primitive, irrational and unpredictable; between the value of toleration and the need for stability of government; between democracy and the need for an oligarchy of men of reason, unsusceptible to the temptations of fanaticism and dogmatism.

His deluded and quite fantastic hope that reason alone can enable us, always and everywhere, to act in accordance with our better instincts is at least restricted to a select few, which slightly mitigates its absurdity: Spinoza does not attempt to base his assessment of political systems on it. But one suspects that there is no overlap whatsoever between the freedoms he reserves for his select few aristocrats of the spirit and those he defends for simple folk. For the former, the act of freely identifying with the cosmic order and freely adoring its infinite perfection is the supreme value, next to which all other values pale into insignificance; the select few need no more. The wise man can lack nothing, and it is hard to see what form of coercion or physical constraint could diminish his uniquely authentic freedom. For the latter, on the other hand, concrete political freedoms are important values, since that highest and most perfect form of liberation which makes all other freedoms unnecessary is in all likelihood beyond their grasp. And such freedoms must be secured for them, since they cannot secure them for themselves.

It is clear, when we look at Spinoza’s doctrine stripped down to its core of fundamental ideas, that there is no way of reconciling its inconsistencies. Its duality and internal incoherence were to bear abundant fruit in the following century. These, roughly speaking, were as follows. Its “German reception,” which one might qualify, very generally, as pantheistic, singled out an idea elaborated in one part of the doctrine and present as a motif throughout in the whole: the hope of an ultimate reconciliation with the Absolute through the mystical abandonment of individual identity. The “French reception” stressed the republican free-thinking aspects, generalized the slogans calling for freedom and concentrated with satisfaction on highlighting the anti-clerical and anti-ecclesiastical sentiments. These two perspectives, that of the political radical and that of the metaphysician engaged in an attempt to encompass infinite being, are so different that it seems churlish to complain of inconsistency and lack of synthesis, as if others had succeeded where Spinoza miserably failed: it is not as if anyone else had ever managed to unite these two ways of looking at the world – one directed at being and one at the subject – into a coherent whole.

And Spinoza was aware of the incoherence. He was fond of saying, or rather of repeating after Epictetus, that human happiness and misery
depend only on the nature of the things we love; but at the same time he admitted that he himself had been unable to free himself completely of his attachment to those worthless goods which reason dictates that we should reject as insignificant. So he knew that his metaphysical eye and his scientific eye were at odds. He looked at the world through both and saw differently through each. Thus he saw freedom alternately as mystical liberation – the proud relinquishment of all that the world of objects has to offer – and as free choice – that situation in which reason and intellectual effort allows us to choose freely within the world of objects. He knew that, whether he wanted it or not, he was part of the human world, and as such embroiled willy-nilly in worldly concerns, conflicts and responsibilities; but as Spinoza the mystic, the Spinoza who had rejected God and belief in immortality, he wanted to deny his finiteness and touch being itself with his reason. He even thought he had achieved his aim, until the disturbing questions of his more penetrating friends undermined his certainty. Whether he died feeling satisfied or defeated we shall never know.

Translated by Agnieszka Kolakowska