

Spinoza in the history of Cultural Psychology and Activity Theory

I will begin this review of the place of Spinoza in the history of CHAT with a synopsis of Ilyenkov's influential essay: "Spinoza – Thought as an Attribute of Substance."

Ilyenkov's essay is the second of a series of six essays, written in the final period of Ilyenkov's life, tracing the historical development of dialectics through Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel to Marx.

Things to be noted about this: although it is reported that "Ilyenkov *intended* to write but never completed, ... a large book about Spinoza" (Maidansky 2003), this is what he *did* write. Secondly, four representatives of German idealism lie between Spinoza and Marx, and subsequently the Russian cultural psychologists, before an adequate dialectics and general Psychology was formulated. What Ilyenkov presents to us is Spinoza's place in this historical development.

Further, summing up the main principles of Spinoza's materialism, he says: "That is how Herder and Goethe, La Mettrie and Diderot, Marx and Plekhanov (all great 'Spinozists') and even the young Schelling, understood Spinoza." He further quotes Hegel stating: "that thought must begin by placing itself at the standpoint of Spinozism; to be a follower of Spinoza is the essential commencement of all Philosophy."

This makes it clear that despite Spinoza's works being suppressed for 120 years after his death, once he was rehabilitated in the 1790s by Lessing, Herder and Goethe, his ideas entered fully into the current of science and philosophy leading up to present day Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, and is sublated in the works of all those just mentioned, recognized as sources and progenitors of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT).

It is worth mentioning however, that there are aspects of Spinoza's philosophy, aspects not highlighted by Ilyenkov, which Positivists, analytical philosophers and mainstream Psychologists could justly claim make *them* the rightful inheritors of Spinozism. Such is the history of science.

Prior to his rehabilitation in the 1790s, Spinoza was taboo and his ideas unknown to the scientists and philosophers of the time. This is not a lot different from the marginal position CHAT occupies in science today where every aspect of the human condition is explained by genetics and described in terms of brain chemistry. Insofar as we are worthy continuators of Goethe, Hegel, Marx, Vygotsky, etc., we are all Spinozists.

Spinoza's contributions according to Ilyenkov

Ilyenkov credits Spinoza with originating a number of principles which can be recognized as foundational to CHAT.

- There is no need to unite thought and matter, since there is "only *one single* object, which is the *thinking body* of living, real man ..., only considered from two different and even opposing aspects or points of view." Note that the formulation in terms of "points of view" differs from that in terms of a person having two distinct *attributes*.
- Thinking cannot be understood by restricting the object of investigation to the immediate situation (e.g. a sensation affecting a body). Spinoza held that infinite Nature had to form the object of investigation, not limiting the object to human culture, for example.
- Spinoza desisted from filling gaps in scientific knowledge with unfounded philosophical speculation, as Descartes and all the Scholastics had, instead leaving the resolution of outstanding enigmas to the science of the future.

- Spinoza solved the puzzle that we perceive the form of external bodies themselves, and not the impression they make on our sense organs, stating that the capacity of human beings which made thinking possible was: “*The capacity of a thinking body to mould its own action actively to the shape of any other body, to coordinate the shape of its movement in space with the shape and distribution of all other bodies.*” From this it followed that:
- It was this capacity to mould its actions to the form of any other body which needed to be investigated, “to elucidate and discover in the thinking thing those very structural features that enable it to perform its specific function.”
- Rather than seeing thought as something distinct and unique to human beings, Spinoza held that all creatures, though especially the higher mammals, possessed this capacity in degrees; the human body was marked out only by the fact that our capacity was *universal*, and not limited to a specific range of objects and environments.
- Spinoza eschewed introspection as a method for the investigation of thinking.
- It is in the *activity* of the human body in the shape of another external body that Spinoza saw the key to the solution of the whole problem. “Within the skull you will not find anything to which a functional definition of thought could be applied, because thinking is a function of external, objective activity. And you must therefore investigate not the anatomy and physiology of the brain but ... the ‘anatomy and physiology’ of the world of his culture, the world of the ‘things’ that he produces and reproduces by his activity.”

Shortcomings of Spinoza noted by Ilyenkov

This is an impressive set of signposts for future psychologists and philosophers. But Ilyenkov noted certain shortcomings of Spinoza’s vision.

- Spinoza held that: “the individual body possessed thought only by virtue of chance or coincidence,” and a human body was not necessarily capable of thought, i.e., the ability to mould its activity to any external body.
- Spinoza held that: “thinking is a necessary premise and indispensable condition (*sine qua non*) in all nature as a whole,” whereas we now know that the universe existed for countless years without a thinking body anywhere.
- But as Marx affirmed, only nature that has achieved the stage of man *socially producing his own life*, nature changing and knowing itself in the person of man or of some other creature like him, of necessity thinks. This is a most significant insight that Spinoza failed to see.

An Innovation by Spinoza not noted by Ilyenkov

To the positive contributions made by Spinoza I would add the following, not mentioned by Ilyenkov.

- For Spinoza, the concept of emotion plays a fundamental role, but there are two kinds of emotion: (1) the *passions*, in which the mind is *passive*, and (2) *activity*, in which the mind is *active*. So there is no need to unite emotion (taken as inner readiness to act) and activity (taken as outer movement with inner correlates), let alone choose between them as fundamental concepts — they are one single process, with varying proportions of control by the mind, which is the “idea of the body.”

I think this is a very fruitful idea, alongside Spinoza’s effort to overcome Cartesian dualism for which he is most renowned. So far as I know, no proponent of CHAT has taken up this suggestion. It does show, however, how false it would be from a Spinozan

point of view, to counterpose the study of object-oriented activity, our practical life, to the emotions and feelings which underlie both our consciousness and our behavior.

In his study of the intellect, Vygotsky took as his fundamental category the sign- or tool-mediated action, and the various psychological categories are *abstracted from* the study of actions (i.e. activity), and developmentally speaking *arise as* phenomena of activity. Thus for Vygotsky, as for Spinoza (and Hegel), intellect and will are not ‘linked’, but are two abstractions from the same whole. By conceptualizing emotion as a whole which differentiates into the passions and activity, Spinoza has given us an even more fundamental category. *This* approach to overcoming dualisms – the formation of a concept which is primary to and deeper than the opposing moments which unfold from it, has proved to be a much more fruitful approach than that we usually associate with Spinoza – the conception of the opposing moments as *attributes* of an ineffable substance.

But if we are going to talk about being Spinozists, then I think it is important to take note of some aspects of his philosophy which reflect his antiquity and are untenable in our times, and other aspects which have been taken up in more recent times by currents of thinking antipathetic to the tradition of Herder, Goethe, Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky. But it would be helpful I think to first explain the broad outlines of Spinoza’s vision.

Spinoza’s Idea in Outline

Spinoza believed that people are slaves to their emotions, and failing to understand the causes of their desires, suffer from the illusion of Free Will. On the contrary, we are “driven about by external causes, ... like waves of the sea driven by contrary winds we toss to and fro unwitting of the issue and of our fate.” Being parts of Nature (= God), these emotions are determined by necessity like any natural process. Since an emotion can only be overcome by a stronger emotion, all that can be done is to counter the effect of negative emotions with positive emotions which allow you to act according to your own nature. Every event is the effect of some cause which in turn is the effect of other causes and so on to infinity; thus everything is determined with necessity. It is only possible to achieve equanimity by acquiescing in this necessity through understanding.

Such an understanding is possible, not by received opinion or fragmentary experience, not even through Reason, although the exercise of Reason can go some way to control the emotions, but only by intellectual intuition, through which the eternal necessity of God/Nature can be grasped and a person can achieve Blessedness.

This provided for Spinoza an alternative to the irrational ethics preached by Church leaders which asked the people to bear their suffering and forego pleasure in expectation of reward in the afterlife, ascribing their behavior to Free Will under the influence of Good and Evil, and in denial of the status of human beings as parts of Nature, subject to causality like any other part of Nature. God is knowable by the concrete study of his particular manifestations, so religious teachings which separate God from the material world mystify God, and keep people ignorant of their own nature.

The Antiquity of Spinoza’s philosophy.

Not only are thought and extension two attributes of one and the same Substance, but according to Spinoza, there are *infinitely many other* such attributes, unknown to us. Herder, in tune with the spirit of his own times, suggested that this could be interpreted as an infinity of forces, but this is hardly more satisfactory. It could simply be said that human knowledge will never exhaust what is to be known about the material world.

The way Ilyenkov formulates the idea of one Substance with thought and extension being two attributes, as quoted above: “only *one single* object, which is the *thinking body* of living, real man ..., only considered from two different and even opposing

aspects or points of view” seems eminently sensible to modern consciousness, but this is not really what Spinoza had in mind.

Both extension (that is to say, spatial form) and thought (the idea of a thing) are essential properties of *all* things, not just human beings. According to Spinoza, although the mind cannot exist without the body, it is not caused or produced by the body or any part thereof; there is *no* interaction, no unity between mind and body! Every idea and every body is each subject to an infinite chain of causality, and “The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things, and vice versa the order and connection of things is the same as the order and connection of ideas ... one and the same chain of causes.” So the coordination of mind and body (and the illusion of Free Will) is produced by the fact that each (the idea and its object) is produced by an identical, infinite chain of necessary causality from some original point of identity in God. No wonder that Einstein would have preferred Old Spinoza as referee in his dispute with Bohr, for Spinoza ruled out chance not only in the fundamental laws but even in infinitely long chains of causality.

For Spinoza, the idea of a stone exists as an attribute of the stone along with its spatial existence; by moulding our activity to the spatial form of the stone, we simultaneously mould our mind around the idea of the stone. Later philosophers interpreted this idea in something like the way Ilyenkov suggested: thinking was “*The capacity of a thinking body to mould its own action actively to the shape of any other body.*” This brings to mind the construction of a concrete idea of a material object through use of the object. The idea being inherent in the object itself was hardly what we would have in mind.

So the outcome of Spinoza’s effort to overcome Descartes’ dualism is parallel causal chains, one of ideas and one of bodies.

It should be noted then that there was no sense in which Spinoza saw ideas as social or ideological constructs. Ideas were inherent in their object, so it was dogmatic in that sense.

The Context

Spinoza was an active participant in the Collagiant Movement in Holland (Zabel 2018). The Colleges were Christian Dissenters who met in what could best be called ‘study groups’ in what has been called a ‘Second Reformation’. The meetings had no priest and practiced free speech. Mennonites, Anabaptists, English Quakers and Arminians attended the meetings and non-Christians were welcomed. There was minimal commitment to Christ as Saviour and more emphasis on the ‘light within’ as they moved in the direction of Rationalism. Inherited from their Anabaptist roots was a commitment to simple living and the rejection of worldly goods and a commitment to develop the will so as to free oneself from “the flesh.” All Spinoza’s writings were written for the Collegians, not the general public, and a group of Collegians acted as a reference group for Spinoza as he was drafting “Ethics.”

This is the predominant form which Rationalism took in the 17th century. The argument was not about whether God existed, but the nature of God and how he could be known. Spinoza’s ethics were those of the Dissenting community he was a part of. All the religious sects were subject to brutal repression by the Calvinist establishment; the suppression of Spinoza’s writing was part of the general repression of the Dissenters.

Spinoza cannot be seen just as a link in a chain of Great Thinkers, but rather as a part of a movement which was moving from Protestantism to Rationalism. His critique of Descartes set him apart, but overall he expressed the ideas of Dissenters of his times.

Spinoza directed his philosophy to a self-chosen elite who were individually capable of becoming conscious of their emotions and bringing them under control through the intellectual intuition of God, and rising above the masses who would forever remain

ignorant of their own bondage to “the flesh.” Spinoza’s social theory corresponded to his concept of a Utopia in which everyone thinks and feels the same in every respect and is therefore able to bond firmly to the common good, something which he believes impossible without that homogeneity.

Finally, Spinoza was a determinist and firmly rejected the idea of Free Will at any level. Herder welcomed this, remarking: “Lessing goes on to speak about the freedom of the will. ‘I desire’, he says, ‘no freedom of the will. I remain an honest Lutheran, and retain that more brutish than human blasphemy into which Spinoza’s clear, pure mind also found its way, “that there is no free will.”’ ... I know of no philosopher who has expounded the bondage of the human will more thoroughly and who has defined its freedom more excellently than Spinoza.” (1787, *Fourth Conversation*)

The ‘freedom’ Herder refers to is the Blessedness achieved through understanding and acquiescence in necessity. Spinoza was an enthusiastic participant in the revolutionary Anabaptist movement of his time.

None of the above points are intended to detract from Spinoza’s place in the history of philosophy or the importance of the principles outlined above. To be a ‘Spinozist’ today obviously means placing oneself in an entire tradition of thinking which long ago left aside those antique aspects of Spinoza’s philosophy. However, there are other aspects of Spinoza’s philosophy which are live issues today, in which we find Spinoza in the opposite camp.

Spinoza’s ‘Mechanical Materialist’ Legacy

(1) Spinoza’s Psychology was methodologically individualist, and there was no place in it for ideology, for the determining power of social position, language and class.

(2) Spinoza was an emotivist in Ethics. That is, he regarded “good” and “bad” as simply words for what gives us pleasure and what gives us pain, nothing more: “we in no case desire a thing because we deem it good, but, contrariwise, we deem a thing good because we desire it.” And the highest virtue is the effective pursuit of individual self-interest.

Emotivism was popular during the period in which natural science enjoyed high social esteem (late-19th to mid-20th centuries), and was regarded as the ‘scientific’ approach to Ethics. Emotivism is associated with G. E. Moore’s (1903) *Principia Ethica*, and is a reactionary current in Ethics. It is thanks to Kant and Hegel that it became possible to elaborate a rational foundation for Ethics not based on Revealed knowledge.

Spinoza’s emotivism was moderated only by his claim that we love that which is alike to us and wish to promote fraternity and fellow-feeling with those who are like us.

Therefore, to man there is nothing more useful than man – nothing, I repeat, more excellent for preserving their being can be wished for by men, than that all should so in all points agree that the minds and bodies of all should form, as it were, one single mind and one single body, and that all should, with one consent, as far as they are able, endeavour to preserve their being, and all with one consent seek what is useful to them all. Hence, men who are governed by reason – that is, who seek what is useful to them in accordance with reason, desire for themselves nothing, which they do not also desire for the rest of mankind, and, consequently, are just, faithful, and honourable in their conduct. (Spinoza, 1677)

(3) Despite the principle of activity first mentioned above in the list of principles Ilyenkov attributed to Spinoza, Spinoza was an Associationist in Learning Theory: “if the human body has once been affected by two external bodies simultaneously, the mind, when it afterwards imagines one of the said external bodies, will straightway remember the other.” The ideas of Associationism were continued by Locke and Hume

and to this day Associationism is embraced by Behavioral Psychology, and was one of the main protagonists against which Vygotsky developed his ideas about concepts and learning. Like Emotivism, Associationism benefited from the prestige of natural science, but it is a bankrupt current in social science and Psychology, a current to which Vygotsky developed his Cultural Psychology in opposition to.

(4) Ilyenkov was quite correct when he quoted Marx: “Even with philosophers who gave their work a systematic form, e.g. Spinoza, the real inner structure of their system is quite distinct from the form in which they consciously presented it.” But it remains the case that Spinoza had not elaborated a logic suitable for philosophy, and his brilliant investigation was forced into a form – the ‘geometric method’ – which is quite unsuited to its object. It was left to Hegel and Marx to formulate a suitable logic.

Spinoza said: “It is no part of my design to point out the method and means whereby the understanding may be perfected, nor to show the skill whereby the body may be so tended, as to be capable of the due performance of its functions. The latter question lies in the province of Medicine, the former in the province of Logic. Here, therefore, I repeat, I shall treat only of the power of the mind, or of reason.” That Philosophy must solve philosophical problems by philosophical means, and desist from unwarranted speculation over what are empirical matters is one of the principles correctly mentioned by Ilyenkov and where Spinoza took a giant step forward from Descartes. So he was right in the second instance. But Spinoza was wrong in believing that Logic could be left to the Logicians and it was left to Hegel to develop the dialectical logic which is absolutely essential for the solution of the problems Spinoza posed to himself.

Any doctrine which denies Free Will absolutely cannot withstand criticism without falling into hopeless contradiction with itself. If you take determinism down to the lowest level, how is one to make sense of the wise person who learns to control their emotion? Spinoza allows: “Again, it is not within the free power of the mind to remember or forget a thing at will. Therefore the freedom of the mind must in any case be limited to the power of uttering or not uttering something which it remembers.” But if you grant the Free Will to utter or not utter something you remember, why stop there? Your case is lost. Only the dialectical concept of Free Will as elaborated by Hegel (1821) in his *Philosophy of Right* can transcend this contradiction.

Present day Philosophers of Mind still rely on formal, propositional logic. Formal Logic has made considerable progress since the days of the Geometric philosophers, but positivists like John R. Searle, who opposes the concept of Free Will, still gets tied up in laughable contradictions because of his reliance on Formal Logic. See for example, my brief review (2006) of Searle’s “Mind a Brief Introduction” (2004).

So, in summary, the call to be a Spinozist is not as straight forward as might seem at first sight. It can only be made sense of as a call to restore *particular Spinozan principles* to their place in our tradition. That is to say, Spinoza’s philosophy must be *critically appropriated*. “Spinozism” means something quite different to Antonio Damasio (c.f. Blunden 2006a) than it meant to Evald Ilyenkov or Lev Vygotsky (1931), and something different again to what it meant to Ivan Pavlov or G. E. Moore.

Spinoza and Vygotsky

Throughout his life, Vygotsky studied Spinoza, and with affection. In 1931, he wrote (1931) that “we have come to the same understanding of freedom and self-control that Spinoza developed in his *Ethics*.” But it was only in the course of his later, extended study of the conflicting theories of the emotions in the history of psychology and philosophy, that he made a reckoning with Spinoza.

In the manuscript “The Teaching about Emotions,” Vygotsky identifies opposite tendencies: on the one hand, Descartes founded a causal, visceral approach to the

emotions, an approach continued by William James and the Danish anatomist C. G. Lange, and on the other hand, voluntarist, cultural approaches followed by Wilhelm Dilthey and Henri Bergson. The former he characterized as “explanatory” because it sought to provide a natural-scientific explanation for the emotions, and the latter as “descriptive,” since these currents were much more successful in describing the full range of feelings manifested in the consciousness of the cultured, adult human being (which were inexplicable for those who sought natural-scientific explanations), but lacked any satisfactory scientific foundation.

As was characteristic of Vygotsky’s entire approach, he aimed to encompass both the cultural formation of the psyche as illustrated for example by Dilthey, and the more restricted physiological approaches typified by the Russian behaviorists. Spinoza’s emphasis on the causal nature of the emotions *and* his concern with how the emotions could be subjected to the conscious control of the mind, led him to the following conclusion.

... this teaching [Spinoza’s] on solving the one and only problem, the problem of a deterministic, causal explanation of what is higher in the life of human passions, also partially contains explanatory psychology, retaining the idea of causal explanation but rejecting the problem of the higher in human passions, and descriptive psychology, rejecting the idea of a causal explanation and retaining the problem of the higher in the life of human passions. Thus, forming its deepest and most internal nucleus, Spinoza’s teaching contains specifically what is in neither of the two parts into which contemporary psychology of emotions has disintegrated: the unity of the causal explanation and the problem of the vital significance of human passions, the unity of descriptive and explanatory psychology of feelings.

For this reason, Spinoza is closely connected with the most vital, the most critical news of the day for contemporary psychology of emotions, news of the day which prevails in it, determining the paroxysm of crisis that envelops it. The problems of Spinoza await their solution, without which tomorrow’s day in our psychology is impossible. (1931-33, p. 222)

It should be noted that for Vygotsky the term “determinist” has a positive connotation; he simply means “causal” or law-governed, without any connotation of fatalism.

Spinoza’s philosophy would have to go through considerable transformation before it could fulfill Vygotsky’s ambition for it, but it was Vygotsky who provided the key piece in the puzzle here: the conception of ‘culture’ in terms of a constellation of material artifacts, including both signs and tools, language and means of production. Proponents of CHAT in our day have, I believe, completed the essential task of bringing Vygotsky’s ideas to the solution of the problem of the emotions, as illustrated by the work of Manfred Holodynski (2013) and his associates. Holodynski described his approach in a private communication as follows:

For me, Vygotsky’s and Leontiev’s work is my philosophical and psychological background and their psychological theories and principles guide my theorizing and critical analyses of psychological and pedagogical writings on emotions and their regulation. However, I have gotten my inspirations and impulses about the concrete conceptualization of specific emotions and specific stages of emotional development from the empirical emotion research literature such as Campos, Camras, Frijda, Malatesta, Sroufe. The integration of their ideas and empirical results into the framework of the cultural-historical paradigm, this has been my source of inspiration.

Our philosophical foundation must of course be subject to continuous review, but that review takes place within a specific tradition of scientific practice.

Affect as a germ cell?

The claim that affects could be a ‘germ cell’ for Psychology is plausible. After all, phylogenetically, the intellect grows out of feeling and sensation. But this does not justify the claim that affects are “the alpha and omega of psychic development,” as Vygotsky wrote. Humans share affect with all animals, so affect may be the alpha but not the omega, and a Psychology which takes the intellect simply as a form of affect misses something *qualitative* which is specifically human.

Concepts are implicit in human activity and despite terminological and conceptual differences, Vygotsky and Leontyev were in agreement on this point. Every activity has an object, so when a person acquires a concept through their participation in activities, the psychic reflection of that concept necessarily retains a trace of the affect connected with that object. But to say that affect is an irreducible moment of a concept is not to reduce concepts to affect. The intellect is a distinctive form of human activity and Vygotsky was correct in identifying ‘word meaning’ as the unit of analysis for study of the intellect. But the intellect is not the ‘alpha and omega’ of human life. There is a whole alphabet to explore, and a number of different studies utilizing different units are necessary.

Science and History

Any work on the history of psychology (or science or dialectics) must give Spinoza his rightful place. As Goethe said: “The history of a science is a part of that science,” so when we deploy one of the above principles which we attribute to Spinoza, we should note that, giving the principle concerned its rightful place in the foundations of CHAT.

However, to be a follower of Spinoza in our times means to also be a follower of Herder, Goethe, La Mettrie and Diderot, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Marx, Plekhanov and Vygotsky, having learnt what all these others have taught us. To claim to be a Spinozist any other way is just bravado, in my opinion. Herder can have the last word:

How it grieves me that Spinoza’s philosophy which points in that direction [for science and against natural-philosophical speculation], should be interwoven with so many forbidding difficulties! For in its present form it can be only for a few. That is precisely its merit. The great mass cannot read his philosophy. It must never found a sect. (Herder, 1787, *Third Conversation*)

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