Andy Blunden, February 2026

Spinoza and the Negation of Free Will

The Will entered European science and philosophy through the Christian Church, but I now turn to the excommunicated Jew Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), who was the first to challenge the concept systematically. Spinoza plays a decisive role in the genealogy of the Will because he negated the freedom of the Will altogether, without recourse to Scripture.

He did so by subsuming human beings under the totality of Nature, alongside not only other animals but also stones and trees. Beings act according to their nature: their striving is determined by necessity, not by choice. Nature is governed by endless chains of cause and effect; the freedom of the Will is therefore a delusion. Freedom can extend no further than acting as one is compelled by one's own nature and by the necessity of Nature.

Nature is the domain of cause and effect as Spinoza saw it. And this view is widely shared to this day. Even Vygotsky demanded of science *causal* explanations, but causality does not settle the question of freedom.

Although Spinoza is a thoroughly antique philosopher, he has "come into fashion" again in recent years. Consequently, I will not simply present his critique of Free Will, but also examine his rehabilitation in the 1790s and his reception in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

My aim is to outline Spinoza's contribution to the European philosophical conception of the Will by drawing out those ideas that carry this narrative forward, as well as often-overlooked aspects of his thought that are genuinely antique. I will draw extensively on Evald Ilyenkov's (1960) evaluation of Spinoza.

As Hegel noted, the Will is free according to its concept; an unfree Will is a contradiction in terms. The Will is always situated somewhere between the *natural* will and an absolutely Free Will.

> The usual idea of freedom is that of caprice. It is a midway stage of reflection between the Will as merely natural impulse and the Will as absolutely free.
>
> (Hegel, 1821, §15)

So as the target of philosophical criticism, absolutely Free Will is a "straw man." In fact, Spinoza negates Free Will but not volition or striving (*conatus*). Will, he says however, is a mode of *conatus*, not its source. *Conatus* is:

> the striving by which each thing endeavours to persevere in its being.
>
> (***Ethics***, III, prop. 6)

It is this *natural striving* which will be Spinoza's enduring contribution towards the development of a clear, scientific conception of the Will. Spinoza demotes the Will from being the source of action in its own right to being a "mode of *conatus*." And *conatus* is natural. There is nothing specifically human about *conatus*.

Spinoza's place in the history of philosophy

Spinoza goes further than merely rejecting the ideal of an absolutely Free Will. Taking human beings to be part of Nature, he subsumes the human condition under a conception of Nature as God, leaving room only for a natural will shared

by all creatures. “Natural will” refers to tendencies manifested in the behaviour of even the simplest organism which lacks any kind of consciousness.

Spinoza is often credited as a founder of philosophical materialism, and his excommunication from the Jewish community in Holland was a reaction not only to what was taken to be his atheism, but also to his political radicalism, including association with radical religious movements such as the Anabaptists. He is also credited with having cured modern philosophy of the dualism introduced by Descartes’ invention of the concept of consciousness. For centuries thereafter, Spinoza served as a role model for philosophically minded revolutionaries and materialists.

But not only for revolutionaries and materialists. Hegel famously remarked 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” (Hegel, 1805–6). For Hegel (1817), the germ cell of all philosophy is the syllogism; and it is Spinoza’s attempt to construct an understanding of the human condition strictly on the basis of syllogistic reasoning that constitutes the most antique aspect of his philosophy.

The rehabilitation of Spinoza

Prior to his rehabilitation in the 1790s, Spinoza was effectively taboo, and his ideas were largely unknown to scientists and philosophers of the time. Despite his works being suppressed for more than a century after his death, once he was rehabilitated in the 1790s by Lessing, Herder, and Goethe, his ideas entered fully into the currents of science and philosophy leading to the present day. Vygotsky (1931–1933) also declared himself a follower of Spinoza, and will be a key figure in our narrative. It is worth noting, however, that aspects of Spinoza’s philosophy are markedly antique and incompatible with even eighteenth-century philosophy and science, let alone contemporary science.

A central figure in Spinoza’s rehabilitation was Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), a critic of Kant and a friend of Goethe. In 1787, Herder published *God: Some Conversations* (1787/1940), in which he not only rehabilitated Spinoza but also *improved* on Spinoza’s pantheism. According to Herder, God—i.e., Nature—was *active*. Nature was not a gigantic machine, but was full of intentions, striving, and opposing forces; and human beings were *part* of that necessary activity which belongs to all living things. For Spinoza, however, *conatus* is not restricted to humans or even animals, but also to stones and plants: it is not a psychological concept but an ontological one. Activity was natural and did not need to be explained by any extramundane life-force or soul—or even by intentions, far less by the grace of God.

Thus, instead of taking Spinoza’s consignment of human beings to the natural world and thereby abolishing Free Will in favour of causality, Herder used the idea of *conatus* to inject vitality, activity—and, in a certain sense, freedom—into Nature itself. The Will arose from a striving that permeated the universe. So rather than leading to Stoic passivism under Spinoza’s determinism, human beings were, by nature, *active*.

If we are going to speak of being Spinozists, however, we must also take note of aspects of Spinoza’s philosophy that reflect his antiquity and are untenable in our time, and of other aspects that have been taken up more recently by currents of thought antipathetic to the line of Herder, Hegel, Marx, and

Vygotsky that guides this book. But first it will be helpful to outline the context in which Spinoza was working and to sketch the broad outlines of his vision.

The context

Spinoza was an active participant in the Collegiant movement in Holland (Zabel, 2018). The Collegians were Christian Dissenters who met in what might best be called study groups, within what has been termed a "Second Reformation." Their meetings had no priest and practised free speech. Keep in mind that writing in 1677, the English Revolution, which had culminated in the execution of Charles I in 1649, was very recent. Dissenters had constituted the most militant wing of that Revolution before repression under Cromwell had driven the Quakers into Quietism.

Mennonites, Anabaptists, English Quakers, and Arminians attended meetings, and non-Christians were welcomed. Commitment to Christ as saviour was minimal; emphasis fell instead on the "light within," as the movement edged toward Rationalism. Inherited from their Anabaptist roots was a commitment to simple living, the rejection of worldly goods, and the cultivation of the Will as a means of freeing oneself from "the flesh." Spinoza's writings were composed for this milieu rather than for a general public, and a group of Collegians acted as a reference community while he drafted the *Ethics* (1677).

This is the predominant form in which Rationalism developed in the seventeenth century. The central argument was not whether God existed, but what God is and how God can be known. Spinoza's ethics were, in important respects, those of the Dissenting community of which he was a part. But religious sects were subject to brutal repression by the Calvinist establishment; the suppression of Spinoza's writings formed part of that broader repression.

Spinoza cannot be understood merely as a link in a chain of Great Thinkers. He was also part of a movement in transition from Protestantism to Rationalism. His critique of Descartes set him apart, but in many respects he expressed the ideas and aspirations of Dissenters of his time.

Spinoza directed his philosophy to a self-chosen elite: individuals capable of becoming conscious of their emotions and bringing them under control through the intellectual intuition of God, thereby rising above the masses who would remain ignorant of their bondage to the flesh. His social theory corresponded to a utopian image of a community in which everyone thinks and feels alike, and therefore bonds firmly to the common good—an outcome he recognised as impossible without that homogeneity.

Spinoza's argument in outline

> Each thing, insofar as it is in itself, endeavours to persevere in its being.
> (***Ethics***, III, PROP. 6)
>
> The striving by which each thing endeavours to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing.
> (***Ethics***, III, PROP. 7)

So this "striving" (*conatus*) is part of a being's nature; it cannot but strive to preserve itself. What is experienced as will, intention, and emotion are not independent faculties, but determinate modes through which this striving is expressed and, in some cases, consciously apprehended.

So for Spinoza 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," tossed to and fro "unwitting of the issue and of our fate." (III, PROP 59). As parts of Nature (= God), our affects are determined by necessity like any natural process. Since an emotion can be overcome only by a stronger emotion, the practical task is to counter negative affects with positive affects that enable one to act according to one's 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 by necessity. Equanimity is achieved only by acquiescing in this necessity through understanding.

Such understanding is possible not by received opinion or fragmentary experience, not even through reason—though reason can go some way toward *ordering* the affects—but only through intellectual intuition, through which the eternal necessity of God/Nature can be grasped and a person can achieve blessedness.

This provided Spinoza with an alternative to the irrational ethics preached by Church leaders, who asked people to bear suffering and forego pleasure in expectation of reward in the afterlife, ascribing behaviour to Free Will under the influence of Good and Evil. The Church, in Spinoza's view, denied the status of human beings as parts of Nature, subject to causality like any other part of Nature. But God is knowable through the concrete study of God's particular manifestations. Religious teachings that separate God from the material world only serve to mystify God and keep people ignorant of their own nature.

However, as I see it, 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? For example, 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.
>
> (Spinoza, *Ethics*, Prop II)

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 Will as elaborated by Hegel (1821) in his *Philosophy of Right* and given a scientific explanation by Vygotsky can transcend this contradiction.

Spinoza's contributions to Science

Spinoza can be credited with a number of principles which are crucial for our argument. In the numbered points below I appropriate the work of Evald Ilyenkov (1960)[*].

1. There is no need to unite thought and matter, if 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

[*] Ilyenkov is evidently working from a Russian translation and I have been unable to source his quotations from Spinoza. The quoted passages here are from Spinoza but the sources were not given.

that the formulation in terms of "points of view" differs from that in terms of a substance having two distinct *attributes*.

2. 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 life.
3. Spinoza desisted from filling gaps in scientific knowledge with unfounded philosophical speculation, as Descartes and all the Scholastics had. Instead Spinoza left the resolution of outstanding enigmas to the science of the future. In this sense, Spinoza was the first *philosopher* of the Will.
4. 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:
5. 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."
6. 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.
7. Spinoza eschewed introspection as a method for the investigation of thinking.
8. It is in the *activity* of the human body conforming to the shape of another external body that Spinoza saw the key to the solution of the whole problem. In Ilyenkov's words:

> 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.
>
> (Ilyenkov, 1960)

To Ilyenkov's list of 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. Whether passions, affects or actions, whether retreating or attacking, the mind is active, not passive. 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. Action and emotion are *one single process*, with varying modes of external manifestation, which is the "idea of the body."

This is a very fruitful idea, alongside Spinoza's effort to overcome Cartesian dualism for which he is most renowned. It shows 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 behaviour.

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.

Shortcomings of Spinoza

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 *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.

The Antiquity of Spinoza's philosophy

Not only does Spinoza see thought and extension as two attributes of one and the same Substance, but 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.

Ilyenkov (1960) 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." This seems eminently sensible to modern consciousness, but this is not really what Spinoza had in mind.

For Spinoza, 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.

> 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.
> (II, PROP 7)

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. For Spinoza, the idea of a stone exists as an *attribute of the stone* along with its spatial existence, not as the product of a human being who thinks about a stone. 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 two 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 Spinoza was dogmatic in that sense.

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 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, social position, language or class.

(2) Spinoza can be read as an Emotivist in Ethics. That is, he regarded "good" and "bad" as simply words for what gives us pleasure and what gives as 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.
> (*Ethics*, Prop. 49)

And the highest virtue is the effective pursuit of individual desire.

Varieties of the Emotivism promoted by David Hume became 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 and was supported by G.E. Moore's (1903) ethical naturalism. Emotivism is a reactionary current in Ethics and is a gross distortion of Spinoza's thought. But 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, *Ethics*, IV, PROP. XVII)

(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.
>
> (*Ethics*, II, PROP. XVIII).

The ideas of Associationism were continued by Locke and Hume and to this day Associationism is embraced by classical Behaviourism, 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 nowadays a bankrupt current in social science and Psychology, a current in opposition to which Vygotsky developed his Cultural Psychology.

(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.
>
> (Ilyenkov, 1960).

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. (*Ethics*, Preface)

That Philosophy must solve philosophical problems by philosophical means, and desist from unwarranted speculation over what are empirical matters is 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.

Concluding

Present-day Philosophers of Mind still claim to rely on formal, propositional logic. Formal Logic has made considerable progress since the days of the Geometric philosophers, but they have never managed to make sense of the conundrums of Free Will. John R. Searle, for example, opposed the concept of Free Will, but got tied up in laughable contradictions because of his reliance on Formal Logic. See for example this author's brief review (2006) of Searle's "Mind a Brief Introduction" (2004).

In summary, the call to be a Spinozist is not as straightforward as might seem at first sight. It can only be made sense of as a call to restore *particular Spinozan principles* to their place. 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, and something different again to what it meant to Ivan Pavlov or G.E. Moore.

Let us recognise *striving* as a universal condition of all creatures from the single-celled organism to the human animal. It then remains to understand how the Will emerges from this natural striving. That is, how a can person can gain voluntary control over their own behaviour. For this we need a *concrete* concept of the Will, which recognises that the human body is an organism like any other, not something endowed with any divine impulse. What we cannot have, however, is a supernatural faculty of the Will which relies on God's grace to resolve the conflict of motives.

The next step forward in my narrative is with Hegel, but before I can deal with Hegel it will be necessary to look at the complex of responses to European science and philosophy in late nineteenth century German philosophy which formulated the problems which Hegel responded to.

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