

The idea of God in Spinoza's philosophy

A study about its definition, influences and impact based on the first part of Ethics.

Emmanuel Jousse

Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris
University of Economics, Prague

Keywords

God, freedom, individualism, Spinoza and the Jewish tradition, Spinoza and the Christian philosophy, pantheism, causality.

Summary

Why do we need religion? In our so-called agnostic era, is it possible to conceive an idea of God compatible with our modern requirements? These questions are becoming excruciating nowadays shown especially by the spiritual despair leading to sects.

By defining a peculiar idea of God, Spinoza succeeded in making the synthesis of numerous spiritual conceptions of his time. This idea is not a given solution to all the problems we meet in our everyday life, but can make us think about our relationship with the world and ourselves.

Religion occupies a special place in philosophy since it has an ambiguous purpose: on the one hand, the aim of religion is, beyond the explanation of the divine principle, the revelation of the human nature and its destiny. But on the other hand, this hermeneutical eschatology lies entirely on faith, a personal engagement, instead of being built by reason. And that is why the philosophers are usually very careful with the concept of God, trying to choose between two solutions: rejecting or limiting all kind of spirituality by underlining the risks of fanaticism (materialism or agnosticism), or trying to introduce reason in a concept that cannot be rational (which is in fact a paradox and lead to a failure). But astonishingly enough, no philosophers can avoid this theological question, for the mere reason that explaining or discovering the human nature implies to wonder about his destiny, and to tackle the philosophical problem of death and the world beyond. Of course, this theological question can be reformulated more generally into a metaphysical way, and God being replaced by a transcendental principle. But the necessity remains the same, and every philosophy has to become, at one moment or another, ideological, confirming by the way that the transcendental principle is, with man and the world, one of the fundamental pillars of philosophy. This base is more or less important in each philosophical system, and it is obvious that it occupies an excruciating place in Spinoza's work: the *Ethics* begins with the definition and analyse of God, and the theological reflection is always present in each book of the Dutch philosopher. As a consequence, the understanding of God's idea is the key of a good analyse of Spinoza's system. But this idea tackles two problems.

The first problem to arise is epistemological: how is it possible to define God? This is the difficulty of all idealistic philosophy, since its definition must be formulated to give a strong base to the whole theory, but at the same time, it is almost impossible to give a shape to a transcendental principle which is, by definition, different and superior to human beings. Plato knew these difficulties and tried to create a cosmological explanation of his ideas, but didn't succeed in describing them rationally. Even idealism needs faith in a way. But Spinoza is at the crossroad of rationalism and idealism, and as such, tries to explain and prove in his *Ethics* his transcendental principle (God) in a geometrical manner. But it is paradoxical, so is it possible to conciliate rationalism and idealism? The second problem to be posed by this idealistic theory is historical, since idealism claimed its ability to formulate everlasting propositions, but all philosophers and especially Spinoza, are submitted to their historical context, the people they met and the events they lived. This problem is crucial because if Spinoza is completely determined by his time, it is not possible to apply his philosophy nowadays. And all the other problems (is Spinoza's idea of God a revolution or a continuity, is it atheism, what does it learn about the world...) are nothing but consequences of the two previous problems, because all of them need the answer to the two questions "What is it?" and "Where does it come from?". Why to solve all these problems? First, Spinoza has been misunderstood on many points, for instance on his vision of pantheism where God is present in every stone and trees. Maybe is it impossible to understand fully a philosophy, but nonetheless, it is possible to have right ideas on it. Secondly, it is obvious that Spinoza's philosophy can give some basic principles to help us to live according to our own nature. To put it short, the problems of the subject are not only scientific but also empirical, which is another proof of our Spinoza's misunderstanding: his idea of God is not merely metaphysical, it is also practical.

That is why God's idea in Spinoza's philosophy has to be defined, and analyse as the result as an historical and intellectual tradition, in order to give it its empirical dimension.

How could Spinoza's God be defined? In one of his works, *On the Improvement of Understanding*, the philosopher shows that a relevant definition consists in nothing but excluding all questions as "does the thing exist?", excluding all causes as well, and deducing from this definition all the properties of the subject. So the definition of Spinoza's God would be at first to prove its existence, then to show that he has no cause and determines the world, and finally to illustrate his properties.

According to Spinoza, the existence of God can at first be proved *a posteriori* (according to our experience). We know (and it is tautological) that if something is non-existent, it exists and vice-versa, (there is no mixed situation), and that everything is determined to existence or non-existence by a specific cause. For instance, I am determined to existence by a cause, which is named "parents". But by definition, God has no cause because he is unlimited and thereby cannot be created by something else (he is *causa sui*). Owing to this perfection, he cannot find in himself the cause of his non-existence. Consequently, God does necessarily exist¹. This proof is contestable because it is impossible to analyse the divine causality as a human one. God cannot determine the existence of things, even himself, as the artist a statue or the parents their child, because it would imply a temporal succession between the creator and the created, a beginning and an end which are incompatible with God's perfection and everlasting. It is preposterous to deduce the existence of God from a typical human and limited category (causality). But in fact, the problem lies in the impossibility for us to reach a logical knowledge of God, since we need to reduce the divine principle to some limited categories which cannot be applied to the most perfect being by nature. That's why Spinoza underlines another argument: each and everyone of us has the inner idea of God, because even if we cannot define him precisely, we can give him some properties: he is infinite, unique, almighty... But this idea has a cause which must exist and contain all this idea of God. This cause is nothing but God himself since he is infinite and cannot be limited by something bigger which could contain him; so he necessarily exists². This demonstration is much more convincing from an *a posteriori* point of view, because its base lies on an everyday experience. But even this quality is a problem since it answers to a specific background: individualism. In our civilization, where the individual is the centre of knowledge, a demonstration based on personal experience is much more effective than an argument lying on metaphysical logic. So that this argument is not persuasive in itself, but according to a specific culture, and is as such not universal and limited. Generally speaking, an *a posteriori* demonstration begins with properties to make of the essence the conclusion (which is not possible with God because we don't know all his properties), and the problems of such a way of thinking lead to make the contrary: a demonstration *a priori*. To build it, Spinoza makes the confusion between the power and the existence of God: God is perfect, he has an infinite power to exist and as such, necessarily exists³. But is it possible to make such a confusion, to say that power is existence and that the more something has power, the more it exists? This is preposterous. If the man has more power to exist than a horse, does it mean that the man exists more than the horse? Existence is a quality and not a quantity, and it is impossible neither to count nor to speak about it in terms of degrees. This demonstration is irrelevant, but Spinoza develops another one: what is known to be a characteristic of the essence of something can be said about it. That is to say that if existence is a characteristic of God's nature, God necessarily exists⁴. This argument is advantageous because it lies on God's essence in itself (ontological argument). So that the existence of God does not depend on

¹ This argument is developed in the *Ethics*, part I, proposition XI

² This argument is developed in the *Short Treatise*, Part I, Chapter I, II

³ *Ethics*, part I, proposition XI

⁴ *Short Treatise*, Part I, Chapter I, I

human experience, and this necessity is laid down in itself and therefore it is possible to say that God is *causa sui*. But all these demonstrations of God's existence are doubtable. It tackles a methodological problem, linked with the geometrical demonstration: the logic is perfect, only if the reader accepts all the definitions and axioms enounced at the beginning. For instance, the third definition of the first part of *Ethics* which writes that the substance is in itself and conceived by itself can be criticized for two reasons. The first one is empirical: nothing can be conceived without any reference to another concept already known. What is really unknown is at the same time unspeakable, unthinkable and rejected by all humans as horror. How is it possible to think something "in itself", that is to say without the help of any other concept? The second reason is linked with the *Ethics*, because Spinoza while saying that the substance has to be thought by itself needs eight propositions to characterise it, and refers to the concepts of freedom, of infinite... This is important because later, Spinoza writes that God is the only substance, so if the definition of substance is doubtable, the existence of God itself can be rejected. Moreover, the ontological argument, used by Spinoza, has been criticized by Kant afterwards, saying that existence is not a real predicate and cannot contribute to the definition of the concept. For example, I can imagine what I will cook this evening, and in that very case, essence does exist (I have the idea of the meal), but has no existence yet. So the existence of God cannot be deduced from the concept of the perfect being since the existence is not contained in the concept of the perfect being. And the last critic of this demonstration is linked with the current world, where the thinking is centred on the individual and has to include man. And the very problem of Spinoza's God is that he can exist without mankind, which is as useless and meaningless as ants or dust. Perhaps the demonstration of God's existence can be effective only if the reader has already faith, because all these proofs need to use a special framework, in which it is conceived that God is everlasting, infinite... Nevertheless, the argument lying on the inner idea of God is much more effective and is sufficient to prove that God exists. And according to its definition, God has to be *causa sui*.

Needless to say that such a concept is difficult to understand, because in the intellectual process, we need to connect an unknown notion with something we already know (for example, to conceive the concept of book, we have to perceive at the same time what is paper, what is a word and writing...). But to be *causa sui* means to be independent from all other concepts, to be generated not by something coming from the outside but by its own nature, and this is a real epistemological problem: how to know something which is not explained by something else? Spinoza tries to resolve this question by defining what the substance is (propositions I to VIII). The substance has specific affections it masters; it is unique, unconditioned and uncreated. The substance is conceived by itself, is infinite, and its nature is being. This definition has an important consequence: if God, the supreme substance as defined in the definition VI, is perfect, he as an infinite number of attributes. But if the attributes are specific to each substance, God has all the attributes possible, and is consequently the only substance that can exist. However the epistemological problem is not resolved yet, because it lies in the substance (defined as unconditioned, uncreated...), instead of lying in God as before. The answer could be that we cannot know anything about the substances, except from their affections (proposition I and definition V). In fact, we know **the idea of God**, not God in itself; we can just give him properties. But this resolution is another kind of problem: if we just know the affections of substances, perhaps what we think to be a substance is in reality just one of its affection. For instance, even the God we have defined previously can be nothing but an affection of something greater, and this point is extremely dangerous, because we are lead to doubt about everything, even about God. And this dissolves the meaning of the world and the consequence of all this process is anguish and death. Another limit to the concept of *causa sui* developed by Spinoza would be the proportionality

between the number of attributes of a substance and the level of being, which implies that if I withdraw an attribute from a substance, it is less “existing”. As mentioned above, existence is a quality and as such, cannot be evoked in terms of “levels”. But moreover, this standpoint is dangerous because people who give to God more attribute can consider their religion as the best one, which lead to intolerance. For instance, the Catholics acknowledge the divine mercy (seen as an attribute), contrary to the Protestants. The Catholics, according to Spinoza, are authorized to say that their religion is better, because “their” God has an “extra attribute”. But nonetheless, the concept of substance is necessary to think the perfection of God, because the divine principle must not be created by something else. The limits, however strong they could be, are just caused by the imperfection of our mind to think something which is above intelligence. And not only is God *causa sui*, but he is also the cause of nature. God is the only substance, and he has all the attributes. As anything exists except substances and affections, everything is in God, who is the immanent, free and efficient cause by himself. What are the modalities of this causality? God is *causa sui*, he is not determined to act, and the only relationship between God and nature is his necessary perfection, and as a matter of fact, God is the only free cause. This implies a critic of the “free will” of God or his “understanding”, which are anthropomorphisms. What is the argument? God cannot create everything because otherwise, he could not create something more. God is indifferent and decides arbitrarily to create or not what is in his understanding. But the divine understanding cannot be posterior to the things as the human intelligence, since he is the cause of the world. So if God is the cause of this human intelligence, the divine understanding and the human one are totally different. The demonstration is exactly the same for the divine free will. All these considerations about the nature of God lead to his definition, according to the two main ideas: God is a substance and he is the cause of everything: God is as a matter of fact unique, unconditioned and uncreated, conceived by himself, infinite and his nature is being. God is immanent cause (the effect stays in the object), free cause (obey to the necessity of his own nature), cause by himself (determined by nothing else to exist). God is the initial and fundamental cause, the origin and the unifying principle of the world, which lead to define pantheism. This conception is the alliance of two main ideas: everything existing is by the mean of God, and everything existing is in God. We have to be careful with this definition: everything is in God, but God is not in everything. For instance, the idea of egg is in God (present in God’s understanding), but God is not in the egg I’m eating (because life would not be possible without blasphemy), it is nothing but a limited and meaningless expression of something wider. In a way, it is preposterous to speak about pantheism, panentheism would be better ($\pi\acute{\alpha}\nu \epsilon\nu \theta\epsilon\omega$, everything in God) God is the unique substance (*Deus sive natura*). But this definition is highly problematic: from an epistemological point of view, because nothing shows us how to know God. Moreover, the place of mankind is insignificant, and is contradictory with the modern individualism of course, but also with the Judaeo-Christian conception of man and his personal relationship to God which motivated all the attempts to reach divine perfection. This conception is finally very theoretical, because if God is the original cause, the world should be perfect. Of course, the development about the divine free will and understanding proves that God’s aim cannot be perceived, but the question is not solved: why does evil exists? From a more general point of view, the pure definition is problematic because of the epistemological limit. It is a necessity as a consequence to analyse the properties of God (its attributes we can know), which could be in fact the best way to have a perception of the divine principle.

These properties can be analysed through the relationship between God and the world, and especially thanks to the definition of the attribute. According to the definition IV, an attribute is what the understanding perceives of a substance as a part of its essence. The attribute have to contain all the essence of the substance, which implies that it has the same properties as the

substance: it is necessary, infinite, everlasting, but it needs the substance to be conceived. The attribute has to be distinguished from the mode, which is the affection of an attribute or a substance. For instance, memory is a mode of thinking, which itself is an attribute of God. To explain the relationship between God and the world, and the properties of God, it is necessary to analyse the relation between the substance (God), and the attributes. This relation can be summed up in two words: conjunction and disjunction. God and the attributes are linked because of this causality evoked before, and because in a way, God needs the attribute to be defined. In fact, the attribute is the mean to perceive the substance which implies (and explain) that they have the same properties. For instance, we do not know God, but we know what is the divine mercy (which is his attribute), and we think that this mercy is a part of God's essence. But the latter is infinite, everlasting..., so his mercy has exactly the same characteristics. This example shows that God defines the attributes' properties, but also that these attributes define God himself. This is in fact a deep problem. If the attributes are conceived in a human spirit, limited and mortal, how can God be conceived as everlasting and infinite? Therefore Spinoza writes that the changing of an attribute has no effect on its essence leading by this way to a tautology. We have said before that the essence of an attribute is the substance, and that we can know the substance only thanks the attributes. The conclusion of these two propositions is: we can know substances thanks to substances. Again arises this epistemological problem which forces to analyse the relationship between God and its attributes as a disjunction, summed up in this chart:

| | God (substance) | Attributes and modes |
|--|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Relationship between essence and existence | Essence of God is existence | Existence and essence are different |
| Causality | Determines everything | Do not determine anything |
| Self-determination | Yes | No |

This chart illustrates the superiority of substance on attributes, and the natural order where the action and the creation come always from God, leading to the distinction between the naturing nature (the divine causality determined by itself), and the natured nature (the world determined by God). This relation of causality is in fact the basic property of God, and can be extended to a chain: something limited is determined to exist by something greater, itself limited determined to existence by something greater... This infinite movement is explained by the fact that an imperfect mode cannot be created by a perfect being, and as a consequence, has to be created by another imperfect mode... The properties of God are to create the world, to give it a mean. And it is important to understand that this order is obeying to a necessity, the world could not have been different because if God creates everything according to his perfect nature, and if the world could be different, it implies that God has two natures (which are not infinite as a matter of fact). It is useless to dream about a better world, we have to accept it as it is because it could not have been different.

This attempt of definition is necessary to answer the question "is Spinoza's God applicable to our time". This definition is highly problematic, but it is possible to see what exactly Spinoza meant by God. All the limits are in fact the points which can lead us to deepen our understanding, and thereby should not be hardships but starting points of a deeper reflection. But to understand more clearly what the God of Spinoza is, it is important to analyse it in relation with its time (that is to say where does the idea come from).

It is obvious then that Spinoza's conception of God is determined by a particular context and numerous influences. It is essential to understand them in order to know if Spinoza's God can be applied to our time.

Spinoza's God is firstly determined by its historical frame, and especially by Spinoza's life. Baruch Spinoza was born in Amsterdam in 1632, he owned to a family of Portuguese Jewish merchants. As he was supposed to become a rabbi, he attended the Jewish school and was initiated there to the Talmud. He went as well to a Jesuit school where he studied the Christian philosophy. But his studies led him to take some distances with the Jewish orthodoxy, crating thereby oppositions against him among the community. He was damned and excluded in 1656. He fled to Rijnsburg, changed his name in Benedictus (blessed by God), and began to polish lens for microscopes. He gathered some intellectuals and friends around him and participated to meetings where the members were speaking about his philosophy. At that time were published the *Short Treatise, On Improvement of Understanding*, and in 1663, *the Principles of Descartes' philosophy*. At the same time, he began to write his *Ethics*. But the political fight of the time between Republicans and Orangist party led him to be in favour of the first, more tolerant, and to go to exile in the countryside after the victory of the latter. This was the context of the publication of the *Theological-Political Treatise* in 1670. Spinoza died in 1677. What are the important elements in this biography? The first one is to notice that Spinoza is at the crossroads of three different philosophies: Jewish, Christian and classical. The second one is that the work of Spinoza must always be connected with the historical context, and that's why it is necessary for a better understanding of Spinoza's thinking to sum up briefly the situation in the United-Provinces in the XVIIth century. The XVIIth century in the Netherlands was an ambivalent period. On the one hand, it is the golden age of the country, one of the most powerful of Europe with France and Great-Britain. The state is ruled by a protestant aristocracy which headed the economic life as well. This exceptional political and economical situation is the cause of a very intensive intellectual life, the intellectual societies, the universities are flourishing, and the country is at the crossroads of all the philosophical trends. But at the same time, the politic inequalities are problematic, especially between the rich and urbanised provinces and the others. International difficulties are occurring as well with the wars against England in 1654 and the French threat. All these facts are producing troubles: a fight opposed at that time the orangists (monarchists, in favour of centralization), and the republicans (liberals and more tolerant). After a weak victory of the Republicans in 1653 (Jan de Witt headed the country), the monarchy is established in 1672, sign of an intellectual repression. Why is it important to notice all these facts to analyse the idea of God in Spinoza's philosophy? Because as a philosopher, Spinoza could not stay indifferent in front of the development of religious intolerance and the collapse of the Republic, and if some of his works are obviously influenced by these facts (*Theological-Political Treatise*), needless to say that all the aspects of his philosophy, even a God which cannot motivate intolerance, are a kind of answer to the historical background. And this historical background which influenced Spinoza's philosophy is completed by the evolution of the Jewish community, in which Spinoza was inserted and educated. This community was at that time very closed and on the defensive, because of the expelling of the Jews from Spain and Portugal in the XVIth century. These persecutions explain why the deviances were considered as extremely dangerous, and why intolerance was so important, and why, at least, Spinoza was so persecuted. A society which is loosing its confidence and security is becoming unfair; this was already the case with Socrates in the defeated Athens in 399 and this was the case with Spinoza in the persecuted Jewish community. But the Jewish community of the XVIIth century was also under the influence of

sabbatianism. To sum up briefly, Sabbataï Tsevi was a so-called messiah, who lived in the Turk Empire between 1626 and 1676. He claimed that we was about to gather the twelve Jewish tribes in Jerusalem and reveal the Torah in order to accomplish the destiny of Israel. This figure is not exceptional in Judaism, but what is astonishing is the impact of this man on the communities: his prophecy spread out all over the Turkish Empire, even to Europe, and was the cause of a real collective insanity (people believed strongly that 1666 was supposed to be the end of history, numerous prophets were announcing the ends of time...), and thus in spite of Tsevi's being under arrest and conversion to Islam. It is impossible that Spinoza was not informed of these events, even if he was expelled of the Jewish community, and it is probable that his vision of God (immaterial, without any human feeling), is a kind of answer to the religious fanaticism of the time.

The historical influence has a deep influence on Spinoza's philosophy, but there is no denying that he has been inspired by some religious and philosophical traditions as well, which explain the way he dealt with the idea of God, and therefore it is interesting to analyze Spinoza's work as a revolution or a continuity with these traditions. The first one is Jewish, and it is not surprising, according to his biography, to notice that Spinoza wanted to develop a conception of God totally opposed to the Jewish one, especially by denouncing all kinds of anthropomorphisms. He is against the rabbinic tradition which underlined the convergence of providence and freedom in each action (contrary to Spinoza's determinism), the resurrection of body and the existence of the "kingdom of God", whereas in Spinoza's work, there is no world except the actual one, which is perfect and cannot be suppressed. Moreover, God in the rabbinic tradition is secret, lying on the duality of the Torah (the written one is known, but not the oral one). But according to Spinoza, God is Nature, and there is anything neither to reveal nor to announce. Finally, the rabbinic tradition defends a linear vision of history, accomplished by the ultimate revelation of the oral Torah. It is possible as well to interpret the idea of God in Spinoza's philosophy as a critic of the Talmudic tradition, where God is acting in legends as a mere character. The cabbalistic tradition as well is disparaged, because according to Spinoza, the identity between God and the world makes impossible the question about the world's creation, whereas all a part of the cabbala is precisely to explain how the world has been created (with the trees of life, the *sefirôt*...). But it would be too easy to say that all the work of Spinoza is a critic of the Jewish tradition and opposed to it. In fact, Spinoza uses a lot of conceptual instruments he learnt at the Jewish school. For instance, the cabbalist school defended the idea of the immanence of God, which leads to the division between the hidden face of God (Creature, named in the theosophical cabbala 'Eyn Sof), and the obvious side (Glory, illustrated by the *sefirôt*), recalling the distinction between naturing and natured Nature. In fact, Spinoza uses some Jewish concepts, but excluded everything which could lead to intolerance or fanaticism, explaining by the way why he rejected the praying methods to reach a mystical union with God. The second tradition which deeply influenced Spinoza's work is the Christian philosophy. It is possible for instance to make a comparison between the ideas developed in the first book of the *Ethics* and the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine. The basic opposition lies in the fact that Augustine has a transcendental conception of God, that is to say that he makes clearly the distinction between the world and its creator "I asked about my God the whole universe, which answered me "I'm not your God, I'm his work"". The consequences are huge: the inner idea of God is a problem, because if the man is strictly separated from God, how is it possible that the man has this inner idea? This explain all the difficulties of Saint Augustine in his *Confessions*, trying to know if the idea of God is in the memory or in the sensitive experience, concluding very quickly that anyway, the man has the idea of God. There is another opposition about the creation. Spinoza thinks that there is an identity between God and Nature, so it is preposterous to say that the first created the latter. Saint Augustine defends the opposite point of view, saying that there is symmetry

between God and the world thanks to the transcendental conception of God: the world is limited and passing, God is perfect and everlasting. But how was the world created? Augustine answers this question in the part XI of the *Confessions*, saying that the demiurgic force of God is the Word, which has to be understood with the meaning of the Greek word λόγος (speaking and thinking). This Word is everlasting, and everything is expressed in it for ever in order to make this word out of its temporality and give it a demiurgic statute. In this world, what is the place of man and his happiness? According to Spinoza, happiness consists in understanding and accepting the world as it is, but Saint Augustine wrote exactly the contrary, because as the world is not God, there is a Supreme Good elsewhere which has to be reached. Therefore is developed all the eschatological thinking about the happiness lying in God and Truth, the vision of life which is a long temptation and guilt. But Saint Augustine is just a part of the Christian philosophy, and if the opposition with Spinoza is almost total, there is no denying that the Jewish philosopher was inspired by other Christian thinkers, and especially by Saint Anselm of Canterbury (XIth century), who was one of the main defenders of the ontological proof of God's existence. This argument is exposed by that way: God is because it is better to be than not to be. God is unique (*omne unum, totum et solum bonum*). God is the efficient cause and the norm of perfection. Of course, there are many differences with Spinoza, but some ideas are already present. The idea of God's greatness, which echoes to St John (XIV, 28: *ο πατηρ μειζων εστιν*) and St Augustine (*hoc enim Deo esse, quod est magnum esse*). Greatness is the mean to deduce God's existence, and called power, is reformulated in Spinoza's argument. But with Saint Anselm occurs the same problem as in Spinoza's Ethics: if God is unthinkable, how is it possible to speak about this inner idea? We saw that Spinoza didn't really solved the problem, but an answer can be read in Saint Anselm: we have to make the distinction between the conception of God *per se* (by itself) and *per aliud* (by another thing) whereas in Spinoza's conception, God must be conceived by himself. Saint Anselm tries in a way to make of the man the centre of the reflection about God, which is perhaps more convincing than this concept independent of the person who thinks it. The third source of the Spinoza's conception of God is the philosophy, and especially Cartesian's philosophy. Two common points are obvious: Spinoza uses the Cartesian terminology. The substance is present in the two works, even if there is a difference: Descartes thinks the substance from the particular things to come to the general concepts (kind of analytical process), whereas Spinoza first defines the supreme substance (God), and analyse then the world (synthetic process). Moreover, Descartes and Spinoza make the distinction between the thinking and the matter even if their conclusions are different (Spinoza defends monism, there is only one substance, God, *sive natura*, Descartes is favourable to dualism, separating the two substances, linked by a biological way). And both of them accept God as the supreme substance. But Spinoza uses as well the Cartesian thought process, especially the ontological proof of God's existence, reformulated by the Dutch in the *Short Treatise*. Of course, the two philosophers are different about numerous points, for instance the question of the absolute will, or the power of creation of God, which lead to the conclusion that Spinoza uses the concept of classical philosophy to give them a new meaning. This shift can be explained with the immanent conception of God, which is totally opposed to the philosophical tradition separating the Creator and the Creation (for theological reason, because it was thought that if God is the Nature, God is imperfect as the Nature). The consequences of the immanent conception of God are important because instead of having a compartmentalised philosophy, divided into several systems (God's universe opposed to the human world), Spinoza creates with his Ethics a single space of thinking, where everything can be conceived in the same system without any contradiction (the reflection about God cannot be separated from the human passion's analyse, for instance), which lead to abolished this two sided world being in force since platonic idealism. Therefore the system must take everything into account, and

this explains why the Ethics is so rich and complicated. The title is meaningful as well, since even the reflection about God, on principle extremely speculative, must have practical influences. And that is why the idea of God in Spinoza's philosophy cannot be a mere metaphysical problem and has to be re-evaluated in each period and each society, to have this necessary practical application.

So the question is: can Spinoza's God be applied to our world? And why? It is necessary there to explain the crisis of the civilization. Since the fifties has been emerging a new type of individualism, transforming the old disciplinary-revolutionary-conventional order into a new type of organization with as less restraints as possible, and as most individual choices as possible. The motto is to "humanise", to "psychologise". The universalistic order organising the individuals into a homogeneous world has disappeared, the free display of the personality is occurring, making of the individuals the centre of the world. This implies that, as every form of global backgrounds intending to unify the mankind in a universal framework, religion is deeply criticised nowadays. But nonetheless, one should acknowledge the strength of official religion and the need of spirituality formulated by most of the people, which can, in extreme cases, be satisfied by sects. Anyway, the question has to be tackled: is Spinoza's God still valid in this spiritual context? Can he be one answer? But another question arises: is spirituality necessary? Each and everyone of us is in a paradoxical situation because of our death: we are mortal, passing, but at the same time, we are aware of it. This is an excruciating and insolvable problem, because if we want to imagine what death is, we have to think without conscious, which is absurd. Our mind is eternal in a way, because we can size with it the past and the future; imagine other places and other people. Thanks to his mind, the man is not submitted to temporal or spatial determinism. But what is the meaning of this mind if the man has to die? What is the meaning of life if we are already about to disappear? It is particularly easy at this point to fall in pessimism as Kafka: the world is a huge trial, and we are condemned at our birth to death, and we are just waiting for the sentence during our lives. The meaning is dissolved in absurdity and nothingness. Therefore human beings need to tend toward a transcendental principle, toward an idea which gives them the possibility to survive in spite of their death. And I will call this phenomena metaphysical tension. So we need to believe in a spiritual principle, and can Spinoza's one be suitable? To some extent, God's idea in Spinoza's philosophy is in contradiction with the modern individualism. The concept of freedom is for instance totally different: Spinoza defines it as the integration and the understanding of the world's order and necessity, in order to be free to choose the reasonable solution to each problem. This point of view is illustrated in Racine's work, where the characters become really free when they accept and understand the necessity and are ready to act according to the reason. This conception has changed, and nowadays, to be free consists in acting according to our personal interests. Moreover, the modern individualism formulates the need of a human religion, with a God which can be merciful and personal, totally opposed to Spinoza's God (who is neuter, unspeakable, and universal). Moreover, religion is not a collective choice any more, but a personal engagement. The demonstration of God's existence is useless because if religion is a personal choice, I don't need a global demonstration but a proof adapted to my way of thinking. If I believe in God, I don't need any demonstration, and if not, there is no problem. The real question today is how God can directly influence my life. And in such extent, Spinoza's philosophy is a little bit out of the subject. And the world created by Spinoza's God is totally impersonal, since it can work without men. Another problem is the historical evolution which makes Spinoza's God irrelevant: the demiurgic evolution, initiated by Descartes and Bacon, defended that man can control the Nature, whereas according to Spinoza, the world cannot be changed because it is God's creation. The XXth century has shown as well how weak can be a philosophy centred on God (question of evil). So it seems obvious that Spinoza's God cannot be adopted by our individualist society.

But maybe the characteristics of our society are not ideal, and Spinoza's idea of God could improve it. The first advantage would be the introduction (or the reintroduction) of a transcendent principle which could fulfil the metaphysical tension evoked before, without the risks of common ideologies: intolerance would be impossible, because Spinoza makes a deep difference between the political sphere and the religious one. All the dramatic speeches about redemption and apocalypse which traumatised one millennium of civilization would be unthinkable as well, since there is no world except from the existing one. And above all, Spinoza's idea of God prevents all hegemony of a person or an institution on dogmas or religious practises, since as God necessarily exists, and is everywhere, it is sufficient to be alive to honour him. But the lessons of Spinoza's God would not be limited to religion, but can also be applied to environmental or economic matters for instance: as the world created by God is already perfect, it is useless to try to dominate it. Men have their place in the world, nothing less but nothing more. We have to accept it as it is, and try to preserve the creation. The only thing to be done could be the equalization of the living condition in order to make all men have the same place and live peacefully.

As a conclusion, it seems obvious that Spinoza's God in spite of his historical and intellectual influences, can be applied to our world and could really improve it by solving its excesses. But how it is possible? All the definition of God has been built with reason, so God's idea in our world has to be introduced with reason, and, as a consequence, by education. That is why it is so important to learn to young people how to think and how to grasp these metaphysical problems. They would surely name transcendence differently (moral, reason), the most important is that they understand they have to believe in something to build their future, without any intolerance. This is one of the conditions to solve a part of the problems the Western societies are living. But this educational project involves the political level as well, because learning young people how to respect their world while building their future is a redefinition of citizenship. Of course these ideas seem very ideological, but there is no denying that ideology is cruelly lacking nowadays and has to be reintroduced, so that this idea of God become not only a way of thinking but also a way of living.

Sources

- Oeuvres de Spinoza, 4 volumes, GF, Paris, 1965
- Saint Augustin, *les Confessions*, GF, Paris, 1964
- G. Lipovetsky, *L'ère du vide*, Folio Essais, Paris, 1983
- *Encyclopédie des Religions*, Bayard Presse