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## Spinoza in France, c. 1670–1970

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NB: This is the author version of “Leibniz, Spinoza, and the *jus circa sacra*. Excerpts from the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, Chap. XIX,” in L. Basso (ed.), *Leibniz und das Naturrecht*, Studia Leibnitiana, Sonderheft 55, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2019, 141-53. It has not been professionally proofed and page numbers and note numbers do not correspond exactly to the published version. For reference, please consult the published version.

### 1. Introduction

This chapter proposes a very condensed overview of some three centuries of Spinoza reception in France, from around 1670 to 1970. It is not the best known part of Spinoza’s reception. That prize goes to Germany. Yet, Spinoza’s presence in the history of French philosophy is pervasive, deep, and varied. Moreover, from the first reactions to *Tractatus theologico-politicus* by French biblical scholars in the late 1670s to Martial Gueroult’s monumental 1968–74 commentary on part I and II of *Ethica*, this presence gives a fascinating lesson in the way that the reception of particular philosophers both shapes and reflects the more general history of philosophy developing in parallel to it. This chapter presents some of the most important figures and stages in that inextricable double history of both Spinozism from the viewpoint of French philosophy and French philosophy from the viewpoint of Spinozism. Before delving into this complex story, however, three preliminary remarks are in order.

First, I readily admit that the separation of sections strictly according to centuries I have adopted below is artificial and that the periodizations it suggests should be considered flexible at best. Nonetheless, each century presents us with a relatively determined set of interpretative controversies around which Spinoza commentaries tend to cluster. These controversies emerge and recede from history as a result of a multitude of factors relating to both intellectual context and historical circumstances. Here, I shall mainly focus on the intellectual context, that is to say, on the ways in which the reception of Spinoza was shaped by other philosophers and by their engagement with Spinoza’s philosophy in their writings. It is important to realize, however, that these intellectual contexts did not exist in a vacuum but were constantly affected and shaped by the political, institutional, societal, and cultural circumstances of their construction.

Second, I shall not engage in writing book history, but it is important to realize that the reception of Spinoza’s philosophy—as is the case for any past philosopher—is inseparable from the concrete history of his publications. The reception is importantly shaped by the availability of the original texts and the existence (or absence) of translations. *Tractatus theologico-politicus* was quickly translated into French by Gabriel de Saint-Glain and circulated more or less clandestinely from 1678 onward under various titles, like *Traité des cérémonies superstitieuses des Juifs, tant anciens que modernes*. The first known translation of Spinoza’s *Ethics* into French was done by Henri de Boulainvilliers, a French nobleman and libertine, around 1712. The translation, careful and insightful, is a testimony to the depth with which the French libertine tradition of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century sometimes appropriated Spinoza’s philosophy for its own subversive goals. Boulainvilliers’s translation was, however, made for private use and was only discovered and published in 1907. The first published French translation of *Ethica* appeared much later in Émile Saisset’s edition of the works in 1842. It is also worth noting that, until quite late, the reception almost entirely focused on *Tractatus theologico-politicus* and *Ethica*. *Tractatus de intellectus*

*emendatione* only joined the canon of essential Spinoza texts in the nineteenth-century reception, where it was perceived as a kind of methodological preface to *Ethica*. The *Tractatus politicus* was largely ignored until the second half of the twentieth century. As for the *Korte Verhandeling*, it was not discovered and published until 1862 in Van Vloten's Latin translation of the Dutch manuscripts; a French version appeared in 1878, in a translation by Paul Janet.

Third, and finally, from a reflexive point of view, the French reception of Spinoza has itself been the object of growing literature over the last half century. I have drawn heavily on this literature when writing this chapter. But, even though I shall not engage with it on any deeper level, it is worth noting that the second-order history of how the French Spinoza reception has been studied over the last century or so is interesting in its own right and reflects general philosophical conjunctures in French thought as much as does the first-order history of that reception itself. So let me mention just a few highlights in the development of the historiography of Spinoza's French reception. Most importantly, in 1954, Paul Vernière—a literary scholar later best known for his work on Diderot—published a monograph of some 900 pages on the first hundred years of French reception of Spinoza, up to the French Revolution. *Spinoza et la pensée française avant la Révolution* is an enormous piece of original research that remains entirely unsurpassed. Still, a valuable addition on the eighteenth century reception, prolonging the heritage from Vernière, is Yves Citton's *L'Envers de la liberté* of 2006. The first hundred years' reception of Spinoza in France has also received more attention recently from historians of philosophy in the wake of Jonathan Israel's 2001 *Radical Enlightenment* (French translation in 2005). Indeed, in the French context, Israel's work has been an important catalyst for a wealth of sophisticated studies on early Enlightenment figures, currents, and texts, and prompted renewed interest in authors such as Boulainvilliers, Nicholas-Antoine Boulanger, and many other reputedly minor figures (see e.g. Secretan, Dagron, Bove 2007). As for the later reception, three relatively recent edited volumes, dedicated to the general reception of Spinoza, including French, in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, provide some very helpful but somewhat eclectic guidance to the complex story of French Spinozism in the *longue durée*—a story which however remains to be written in a more unified form (Bloch 1990 and 1993; Tosel, Moreau, and Salem 2008). For the twentieth century, Warren Montag and Ted Stolze's volume of English translations of various pieces by French Spinoza scholars in their 1997 *The New Spinoza* have made essential parts of recent French Spinoza scholarship available to an Anglophone audience, but has unfortunately also contributed—somewhat inadvertently—to the common misconception that twentieth-century French Spinozism must principally be understood in a structuralist or poststructuralist setting. Recently, the reception of Spinoza in twentieth-century France has been scrutinized from a somewhat different perspective in an excellent book by Knox Peden, which studies a lineage of anti-phenomenological Spinozists from Cavaillès to Deleuze, via Desanti, Gueroult, and Althusser (Peden 2014).

## 2. The Seventeenth Century

The publication of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* in 1670 reverberated far beyond the borders of the United Provinces. Spinoza's ideas about the Bible and its interpretation were hard to ignore but even harder not to ignore. As the French intellectual Henri Justel wrote about the proliferation of mediocre refutations, if done in that way, “it is pointless to undertake the apology of the Christian religion which must be strongly defended or not defended at all” (Leibniz 1923–: I, ii, 247). The task required, as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz noted, “a man equal to Spinoza in terms of erudition but superior to him in his respect for

Christianity” (Leibniz 1923–: II, I, 208). Such men were hard to come by, but a couple of serious candidates emerged from the French context.

One way of coming to grips with Spinoza’s biblical scholarship was to drown his argument in a deluge of superior erudition. This was the strategy of Pierre-Daniel Huet, tutor to the Dauphin and later Bishop of Avranches, a prodigiously learned former student of the humanist Samuel Bochart. Possibly on the suggestion of Leibniz, Huet’s voluminous defense of the Christian religion, the *Demonstratio evangelica*, was presented as a refutation of the anonymous author of the *libertas philosophandi* (Lærke 2006). Spinoza himself heard of Huet’s work from Tschirnhaus in 1676 (Ep. 80 | G IV/331/20–25). He was curious and asked for a copy (Ep. 83 | G IV/335/9–13). Huet’s treatise was already complete at that time, but its publication was delayed by unforeseen trouble with the Royal Censorship, so Spinoza died before having the opportunity to read it (Shelford 2006). It was published in 1679. The *Demonstratio* was presented as a geometrical demonstration of the divinity of Scripture. On the basis of a few definitions and axioms concerned with terms such as “authenticity,” “history,” “prophecy,” and “true religion,” Huet showed in excruciating detail the prophetic agreement between the Old and the New Testament. He moreover attempted to show how most of the main pagan deities were in fact pre-figurations of Moses. In the reception, unfortunately, this pan-Mosaic argument somewhat eclipsed his geometrical demonstration of Christianity and was often met with derision (Lærke 2014: 107–203).

Another way to approach the *Tractatus* critically was to acknowledge the merits of Spinoza’s historical analysis of the Bible, but attempt to use his insights in favor of the Christian religion rather than the contrary. The most prominent example was the Oratorian Richard Simon’s *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament*. It did not go well: when completed in 1678, the book was immediately banned, seized, and burned by the French royal censors. A new edition was not published until 1685, in Holland. And yet Simon was not writing in favor of Spinoza. In the *Tractatus*, Spinoza showed how the Old Testament was a text collated from multiple sources and written long after the events it recounts. Simon, for his part, attempted to save the authenticity of the Holy Scripture by appealing to a theory of “inspired scribes,” thus maintaining the original doctrine of divine inspiration (Simon 1685; Gibert 2010).

After the publication of Spinoza’s *Opera posthuma* early 1678, *Ethica* quickly eclipsed the *Tractatus* as the center of attention. The public commentary was, as elsewhere, dominated by a relentless stream of refutations. The first were written by exiled philosophers based in Holland, like Noel Aubert de Versé, a religiously volatile intellectual whose *L’Impie convaincu* appeared in Amsterdam in 1685 (Hubert 1994). Another, very different, example is Pierre Poiret, a Cartesian and non-conformist protestant, follower of the mystic Antoinette Bourignon. His refutation, entitled *Fundamenta atheismi eversa*, was appended to the second edition of his *Cogitationes rationales de Deo, anima et malo*, also published in Amsterdam in 1685. The most popular strategy was to attack the basis of Spinoza’s philosophy in order to make the whole edifice crumble. This is why the majority of refutations focused on the first book of *Ethica* and on Spinoza’s metaphysics of substance, attributes, and modes. François Lamy, for example, argued in *Le Nouvel athéisme renversé* on Cartesian grounds that the conceptual independence of the attributes asserted by Spinoza was incompatible with the affirmation of a single substance (Lamy 1696; Stetter 2019).

The best-known among Spinoza’s first francophone refutations, however, was and remains Pierre Bayle’s long article in the *Dictionnaire historique et critique* of 1697, substantially expanded in the 1702 edition. According to Bayle, any reader of Spinoza’s metaphysics of substance and mode was confronted with a stark choice: either Spinoza understood by the foundational relation between “substance” and “modes” what the previous Aristotelian and Cartesian tradition understood by it, namely something comparable to a relation between a “subject” and its “predicates” or “properties,” in which case Spinozism got

entangled in irresolvable self-contradiction ; *or* Spinoza understood by it some other kind of relation, not explained within his philosophy, in which case Spinozism should be rejected as unintelligible and meaningless (Bayle 1820: XIII, 416–68).

As the turn of the century approached, the reception of Spinoza became more and more caught up in local French debates, mostly about the status of a declining Cartesianism which was further threatened by the possible association with Spinoza. A very public attempt at making that association involved Leibniz. Already from 1679 onward, in correspondence and personal notes, the German philosopher often suggested that “Descartes’s deepest convictions are not too far from Spinoza’s opinions” (Leibniz 1923–: VI, iv, 1478). It was not until 1697, however, that he expressed this opinion both in public and in French, instigating a brief but intense philosophical brawl with the “Prince of the Cartesians,” Pierre-Sylvain Regis. The controversy took off when the *Journal des Sçavants* published a letter to Father Claude Nicaise where Leibniz claimed that “Spinoza did nothing but cultivate certain seeds in Mr. Descartes’s philosophy” (Leibniz 1875–90: II, 563; Lærke 2014: 285–301; Lærke 2018). Leibniz’s main concern was with what he saw as the necessitarian implications of a marginal passage in Descartes’s *Principia philosophiae* (III, art. 47) according to which “matter must successively assume all the forms of which it is capable” (AT VIII 103 / CSM I 257–8).

The danger of being associated to Spinozism however also, and particularly, extended to the occasionalist branch of Cartesianism, incidentally something which was not lost on Leibniz either (Leibniz 1875–90: III, 545; IV, 515, 530; VI, 545; Lærke 2013). As early as 1684, Aubert de Versé already put considerable energy into showing that the doctrine of the “visionary” Nicholas Malebranche led to Spinozism (Aubert de Versé 1685: 142–3, 240). Another philosophically more interesting, and today better known, example is the correspondence between Jean-Jacques Dortous de Mairan and Malebranche from 1713–4, where Dortous de Mairan pointed out the similitudes between Spinoza’s understanding of the attribute of extension and Malebranche’s notion of “intelligible extension,” first developed in one of the “clarifications” added to the fourth edition of *La Recherche de la vérité*, published in 1678, and subsequently a key component in the Oratorian’s epistemology of “vision in God” (Malebranche 1678: 534–43; Rodis-Lewis 1988; Grene and Watson 1995; Moreau 2018). Dortous de Mairan’s reading did, however, not have any contemporary impact: the correspondence was not discovered and published until the mid-eighteenth century (Malebranche 1841). In any case, these are just a few examples of how Spinoza and Malebranche were very often associated in the early French reception (Vernière 1954: 268; Carbone 2018).

### 3. The Eighteenth Century

The early eighteenth century produced a substantial atheist literature, often circulated *sous le manteau*. Spinoza’s presence in these texts takes many forms but, as a general rule, they tend to accentuate the anticlerical aspects of his thinking. The most famous example is the *Traité des trois imposteurs*, also entitled *L’Esprit de Spinoza*, a text perhaps written by one of Spinoza’s first biographers, Jean Maximillian Lucas. The treatise circulated in manuscript as early as 1678 but was first printed in 1719 (Charles-Daubert 1999). It takes up the old argument, stemming from the Middle Ages, that the three main figures of the three monotheist religions—Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed—were in fact mere impostors who posed as prophets in order to gain or consolidate political power (Moreau and Mothu 2016). The printed version of 1719 defended the thesis by means of arguments drawn from modern authors including Gabriel Naudé, Thomas Hobbes and Spinoza.

Other sympathetic expositions of Spinoza from the period were disguised as refutations. A good example is Boulainvilliers’s *Essay de métaphysique dans les principes de*

*Benoît Spinoza*. It already circulated in manuscript from the time it was written around 1712, but was first published in 1731, ostensibly as a *Réfutation de Spinoza* along with the more sincere refutations by Lamy and Fénelon (Boulainvilliers 1731). Boulainvilliers knew Spinoza well for having studied *Tractatus theologico-politicus* extensively and having produced a full French translation of *Ethica* for his own use (Spinoza 1907). His own exposition, he claimed, aimed at making Spinozism accessible by “stripping it of this mathematical dryness that makes it impossible to read, so that the system, now rendered in a common language and reduced to ordinary expressions, can be stated in way that will stir up indignation similar to my own and procure, by these means, true enemies of such pernicious principles” (Boulainvilliers 1731: 155). The *Essay* was widely used as an authoritative presentation of Spinoza’s thinking throughout the Enlightenment.

The image of Spinoza in the later Enlightenment was deeply ambiguous. On the negative side, the mathematical paradigm of scientific knowledge adopted by Spinoza declined along with Cartesianism while the empiricist program defined by John Locke and Isaac Newton began to take center stage. In his *Traité des systèmes* of 1847, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac presented Spinoza’s geometrical method as the prime example of a vain and outdated “spirit of systems” that had to be replaced by a more empirically oriented “systematic spirit,” claiming that the demonstrations of *Ethica* “contain nothing that may lead to the knowledge of things” (Condillac 1798: 321). On the positive side, the materialist Spinoza inherited from the seventeenth century was more favorably received, but also profoundly transformed. One very characteristic feature of the French reception was the way that Spinozism was associated with the burgeoning life sciences, opening up the possibility of rethinking it within a vitalist framework (Vernière 1954: 555–611; Citton 2006).

The most important example of this development was Denis Diderot’s conception of a “modern” Spinozism. In his entry on “Spinosa” in vol. XV of the *Encyclopédie*, published in 1765, Diderot presented Spinoza in traditional manner as “the first who has reduced atheism to a system [...] following the method of the geometers,” a “ridiculous” and “incomprehensible” doctrine that Bayle had “ruined from one end to the other” (Diderot et d’Alembert 1751–72: XV, 563–74). His exposition was for the main part modeled on the standard commentaries of Bayle, already referenced above, and Johann Jacob Brucker in his *Historia critica philosophiae* (Brucker 1742–4: VI.2, 682–706). In a second article entitled “Spinoste,” however, Diderot distinguished between the original Spinozism and a new “modern” Spinozism according to which “matter is sensible” and in which the material world “turns into a big, sentient and living body in a great space” (Diderot et d’Alembert 1751–72: XV, 474). Diderot further elaborated this neo-Spinozism during the 1760s, arguing in the *Entretien entre d’Alembert et Diderot* that “there is not more than one substance in the universe, in man, in animals” and in *Le Rêve de d’Alembert* that “there is only one individual; it is the totality” (Diderot 1875–7: II, 117, 139).

#### 4. The Nineteenth Century

The first French translation of Spinoza’s works (excepting the *Tractatus politicus*, the *Hebrew Grammar*, and, of course, the *Korte Verhandeling*, not yet discovered) was published by Émile Saisset in 1842 (2 volumes; revised edition in 3 volumes, 1861). Saisset, however, was no Spinozist. He was a so-called spiritualist eclectic out of the school of Victor Cousin, the all-powerful chair in the history of modern philosophy at the Sorbonne, director of the *École Normale Supérieure*, member of the French Academy, director of the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences, minister for public instruction, and president of the *agrégation*. Towering over the philosophical institution of nineteenth-century France, Cousin was trying to steer a politically difficult course between, on the one hand, republicanism and burgeoning socialism

on the left and, on the other hand, conservative, clerical philosophy on the right. Text edition played an essential role in this effort because contemporary philosophical positions and the relations between them were articulated via competing commentaries on past philosophy. Cousin's established Descartes as the founder of a new French spiritualism focusing on the *cogito*, depicting him principally as psychologist exploring consciousness. For that reason, he had begun his philosophical crusade to reform the French philosophical landscape by publishing a new, complete edition of Descartes's works already in the 1820s (Descartes 1824–6; Antoine-Mahut 2019).

Spinoza's philosophy, by contrast, was universally condemned as fatalist and pantheist. But the way in which it was rejected, the exact reasons why, and the consequences it had for other philosophical doctrines, were all questions about which there was intense disagreement among the philosophical factions of the day. Saisset's translation must be understood against this background: the project was undertaken not to promote Spinoza, but to appropriate him and strategically refute him so as to simultaneously promote the philosophical agenda of spiritualist eclecticism and allow the Cousinian school to neutralize accusations of Spinozism coming from the right. This meant, first of all, refuting the claim that "rationalism necessarily leads to pantheism" (Saisset 1859: I, 2; Moreau 1980; 2008). For, according to the anti-Cousinians among the clergy, Spinoza's pantheism was not only the high point of atheism, materialism and fatalism, but the logical outcome of *all* rationalism, including Descartes's. Cousin's own principal strategy for anticipating this argument was to dissociate Spinoza from his Cartesian heritage and depict him as an "essentially Jewish" philosopher, an oriental thinker and not a Cartesian one, "an indian muni, a persan sufi, an enthusiast monk." Taking up a perspective on Spinozism not too far removed to that of the German Idealists but more negative, Spinoza's philosophy was for Cousin not true rationalism, which had to be grounded in the self-evidence of the *cogito*, but rather a "mystical hymn" that "erased personhood from existence." Spinoza, "far from being atheist, as he is accused of, [had] the sense of God to such a degree that he loses the sense of man" (Cousin 1838: II, 163–6). This reading allowed Cousin to dissociate Spinoza from Descartes and argue that the philosophy of the *cogito* constituted the most efficient antidote to Spinozism (Moreau 1978, 2014; Vermeren 1990; Cotten 2008).

Views dissenting from Cousin's did, however, also emerge from within the school of spiritualist eclecticism. In particular, when the important Leibniz editor Count Louis Alexandre Foucher de Careil in 1854 published Leibniz's annotations to Johann Georg Wachter's curious 1706 kabbalistic-Spinozist treatise *Elucidarius cabalisticus* under the decidedly misleading title *Réfutation inédite de Spinoza*, and later, in 1862, issued a second edition which also included Leibniz's 1678 annotations on *Ethica*, his aim was not only to demonstrate, against the philosophers of the clergy, that Leibniz's rationalism did not lead to Spinozism, but also, in disagreement with Cousin, to demonstrate that Leibniz's brand of rationalism represented a more efficient antidote to Spinozism than Descartes's (Leibniz 1854, 1862; Moreau 1988, 2004; Lærke 2008: 63–5).

## 5. The Twentieth Century

In 1893, Victor Delbos, later professor at the Sorbonne from 1896 until a premature death in 1916, published a large volume entitled *Le Problème du mal dans la philosophie de Spinoza*, dedicated to Spinoza's moral philosophy and its later reception in European philosophy, mainly German. Delbos was criticized for not denouncing Spinoza's pantheism and fatalism in sufficiently strong terms, like his spiritualist predecessors did. And yet, Delbos was no Spinozist, but a devoted Catholic. It was, however, a central part of Delbos's historiographical project to give "neutral" accounts as Étienne Gilson later put it (Gilson 1960: 42). Delbos, a

neo-Kantian indebted to the German historiographical tradition, thus attempted to make a clean break with the philosophically engaged historiography of the spiritualist tradition and make room for a more disinterested or “scientific” approach to past philosophy.

The most prominent heir of Delbos was Martial Gueroult, although the latter only adopted the systematic part of Delbos’s program while putting to one side the historical part which was rather taken up by Paul Vernière (Lærke 2019). Gueroult’s two volumes on Spinoza, published in 1968 and 1974, dedicated to the first two books of the *Ethica*, presented a painstakingly detailed reconstruction of the argumentative structure of Spinoza’s work, following the method of “structural analysis” that Gueroult had conceived already in the 1920s and already applied to numerous other philosophers, including Maimon, Fichte, Malebranche and, most famously, Descartes. Gueroult’s reading of Spinoza was partly caught up in his protracted controversy with Ferdinand Alquié about the aims and methods of the history of philosophy, ongoing since Gueroult’s grumpy denunciation of Alquié’s 1950 doctoral thesis on Descartes as “novelistic” (Anon. [Dussort] 1950). Whereas Alquié, a historian of philosophy close to existentialist and surrealist milieus, favored a hermeneutics seeking out the fundamental “gesture” of the philosophers, Gueroult preferred a more text-based approach (Macherey 2014: 13–32; Peden 2014: 65–94; Lærke [forthcoming]). Gueroult’s “structural analysis” converged with, but should not be confused with, the “structuralism” associated with figures such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes and Louis Althusser. If anything, Alexandre Matheron’s *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* of 1969 represents the closest one will get to an application of the structuralist method to the history of philosophy (Matheron 1969; see also Matheron 2011). As Sylvain Zac put it, Matheron had “done for Spinoza what Lévi-Strauss did for kinship systems” (Bove and Moreau 2000: 180).

Gueroult exerted outsize influence on the way that history of philosophy was practiced as a discipline in France in the second half of the twentieth century. The resurgence of Spinoza studies during that same period was, however, equally marked by Althusser. Althusser’s writings on Spinoza are notoriously scarce, essentially a list of scattered remarks including a few pages in the auto-biographical *L’Avenir dure longtemps*, and—as the most important source—the first part of a text entitled “L’Unique tradition matérialiste,” first published in 1993 (Althusser 1992: 208–11; Althusser 1993: 75–97; Moreau 1997). This gave Althusser’s followers and students considerable latitude to interpret his claim to have “taken the detour through Spinoza in order to understand Marx” (Althusser 1992: 352), something which partly explains the richness of his legacy, mediated through former students and future prominent French Spinozists such as Pierre Macherey, Étienne Balibar, André Tosel, and Pierre-François Moreau (see Balibar 1985, 2018; Macherey 1979, 1992, 1994–98; Moreau 1994, etc.). We should be wary of adjoining—as happens only too often—Gilles Deleuze to this group. Deleuze’s influential thesis on *Spinoza et le problème de l’expression*, published in 1968, came out of a different context. Deleuze followed Gueroult’s lectures at the Collège de France and appreciated the latter’s work on Spinoza when it was published (Deleuze 1969). But his own book predated the publication of Gueroult’s, was written under the supervision of Alquié and adopted an approach not too far from Alquié’s focus on the philosophers’ fundamental “gestures”—in Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza captured in a governing, but diffuse conception of “expression.”

## 6. Conclusion

As it should be self-evident, the brief narrative outlined above is highly selective and perhaps a little idiosyncratic: it picks out what I see as highlights or representative examples of Spinoza’s French reception but is nowhere near exhaustive. I can only hope that these few

remarks will prompt others to undertake more detailed study of the topic, still largely unexplored in the English-language literature. In his 1893 thesis on Spinoza, Delbos observed that

if the internal force of a doctrine is measured by the degree of organization it implies, one could also say, conversely, that its historical influence is measured by the degree of disorganization it can sustain without becoming fundamentally denaturalized [...]. No single life absorbs or retains everything within it, but seeds of life move away and spread out as best they can, deploying, in a variety of meanings, their secret energy. This is the fate of all the great doctrines; it has in particular been the fate of Spinoza's doctrine. (Delbos 1893: vi–vii)

It was a passage that Vernière enthusiastically cited in his 1954 volume on the eighteenth century reception, even adding that “maybe the life and efficacy of a doctrine requires incomprehension, alteration, amalgamation. Orthodoxy in philosophy is a seed of death” (Vernière 1954: 3, 701). It is also a perspective that, more recently, Moreau has appropriated to describe his own approach to Spinoza and Spinozism (Lærke and Moreau 2004: 70). As I have argued in some detail elsewhere, it is not, I think, a coincidence that it has been among French *Spinoza* scholars that such principles, stressing the productivity proper to the reception of a past philosophy, have taken root in France (Lærke 2019). Just like its more famous German counterpart, the French reception of Spinoza displays an astonishing variety of interpretation within which, however, the features of the Dutch Jew never, or seldom, disappear from view, testifying to the remarkably plastic nature of his doctrine.

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