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# Hume Contra Spinoza?

*Wim Klever*

In Book 1 of the *Treatise of Human Nature*<sup>1</sup> Spinoza enjoys the honour of being the only figure from the history of philosophy and science to be explicitly and extensively discussed by Hume. This honour is, however, a dubious one as the treatment he gets is not so friendly. The passage (T 232-51) is full of insults and denunciations: Spinoza is referred to as "that famous atheist" (T 241), and characterized as "universally infamous" (T 240). His doctrine contains "a true atheism" (T 240). His theory about the thinking substance is an "hideous hypothesis" (T 241); Hume does not want to enter "farther into these gloomy and obscure regions" (T 241), although he spends ten pages on the subject. Richard Popkin<sup>2</sup> suggests on account of this not too well studied section: "In introducing Spinoza into the discussion of the immateriality of the soul, Hume follows what was common practice in his day." This statement, if true, raises the question whether Hume was sincere in writing these 'satanic verses'. Does he, after all, hide the backside of his tongue? This would bring him pretty well in line with two of his English forerunners; with Hobbes about whom Aubrey<sup>3</sup> recorded: "He told me he [Spinoza] had outthrown him [Hobbes] a bar's length, for he [Hobbes] durst not write so boldly," and with Locke, who possessed in his private library all Spinoza's works but nonetheless, for one reason or another, refused to assess the theories of "those decried names," saying "I am not so well read in Hobbes or Spinoza as to be able to say what were their opinions in this matter" (namely the pre-existence of the soul).<sup>4</sup>

One commentator, named Gilbert Boss, wrote a two volume dissertation in order to argue for the fundamental opposition between the philosophical systems of both thinkers.<sup>5</sup> In this paper I wish to propose another view and to defend their overall agreement. I will not do so with regard to their thought on religion (as this is already done by Popkin), but I shall more specifically focus on the theoretical (mainly epistemological) part of their work.

Coming to Hume's text the reader of Spinoza's work who is, moreover, convinced by his geometrical demonstration of the propositions, does feel himself quite well at home *chez* Hume. Hume's is not another world for him. Apart from the question who is the real first modern thinker, Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza or Hume, there is much common in their treatises on man and world, not only methodologically. Hume's rejection of "the antient philosophy," in

which he criticizes the “fictions ... concerning *substances, and substantial forms, and accidents, and occult qualities*” (T 219), “*sympathies, antipathies, and horrors of a vacuum*” (T 224) could have been written by the three other candidates as well. In fact every one of those items may be traced out in Spinoza’s work; compare, for instance, *Ep* 13<sup>6</sup> (“doctrinam illam puerilem et nugatoriam de formis substantialibus, qualitibus etc.”) or 2 *PPC* 8s (“Quare omnia illa figmenta de sympathia et antipathia ut falsa sunt reicienda ... Nunquam dicendum erit, quod corpus aliquod movetur, ne detur vacuum; sed tantum ex alterius impulsu”).

But let us go to the main theme in Book 1 of the *Treatise*, already present in Part 1, Section 1, “Of the Origin of our Ideas.” All our ideas result from impressions, themselves also being ideas or perceptions, though with more force and liveliness. The original perceptions are said to be “the causes of our ideas” (T 5). We find the impressions in our mind and their effects, our ideas. Hume does not explain the cognitive status of the impressions by reducing them to non-cognitive processes. The “universe of the imagination” (T 68) is a world apart, irreducible to matter; we can’t step out of it, “since nothing is ever present to the mind but perceptions, and since all ideas are deriv’d from something antecedently present to the mind” (T 67). Ideas, whatever their character (about external existences or not), can only be explained by other ideas. Hume carefully avoids the category mistake of transcending the border from mental to material things and keeps consequently, at least methodologically, to the absolute caesura between mind and body.

The Spinozistic reader must necessarily feel sympathy for this position. The attributes of thought and extension, though in a certain sense identical (but that is another question), don’t have any communication or causal relationship with each other. In spite of the parallelism between modes of mind and body, they aren’t able to explain each other; a body is explained by material causes, an idea can only be explained by another mode of thought. In a somewhat unusual but yet very precise manner this is ascertained by Spinoza as a special proposition in 2 *Ethics* 5:

The formal being of ideas admits God as a cause only insofar as he is considered as a thinking thing, and not insofar as he is explained by any other attribute. I.e., ideas, both of God’s attributes and of singular things, admit not the objects themselves, or the things perceived, as their efficient cause, but God himself, insofar as he is a thinking thing.<sup>7</sup>

Descartes had still allowed a certain interference between mind and body; this interdependence (“the most occult of all occult hypotheses” [5 *Ethics* p]) is radically excluded by Spinoza.<sup>8</sup> It seems that Hume had learned the epistemological lesson from this reflection, or from elsewhere.

But why not from the second part of the *Ethics*, which deals with “the nature and the origin of the Mind”? For both the human mind is nothing more than the set of its related ideas. Hume writes: “that what we call a *mind*, is nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions” (T 207), therewith joining Spinoza, who demonstrates (2 *Ethics* 15): “The idea that constitutes the formal being of the human Mind [quae esse formale humanae mentis constituit] is not simple but composed of a great many ideas [ex pluribus ideis composita].” The word “constitute” is also found in Hume, where he speaks about the “mass of perceptions, which constitute a thinking being” (T 207). According to both, personal identity is illusory. “Thus we feign the continu’d existence of the perceptions of our senses, to remove the interruption; and run into the notion of a *soul*, and *self*, and *substance*, to disguise the variation” (T 254). Spinoza is not less convinced of the fictitious character of personal identity than Hume. Not only is the existence of a substantial and free willing soul in sharpest conflict with every item of his ‘system’ (‘soul’ is the body reflected [2 *Ethics* 13] and both are modes, of extension and thought respectively); the body, and correlatively also the soul, is in a continuous flux and permanently changed by other bodies.

For I dare not deny that—even though the circulation of the blood is maintained, as well as the other [signs] on account of which the Body is thought to be alive—the human Body can nevertheless be changed into another nature entirely different from its own. For no reason compels me to maintain that the Body does not die unless it is changed into a corpse.

And, indeed, experience seems to urge a different conclusion. Sometimes a man undergoes such changes that I should hardly have said he was the same man. I have heard stories, for example, of a Spanish Poet who suffered an illness; though he recovered, he was left so oblivious to his past life that he did not believe the tales and tragedies he had written were his own. He could surely have been taken for a grown-up infant if he had also forgotten his native language.

If this seems incredible, what shall we say of infants? A man of advanced years believes their nature to be so different from his own that he could not be persuaded that he was ever an

infant, if he did not make this conjecture concerning himself from the example of others. (4 *Ethics* 39s)<sup>9</sup>

The idea of personal identity is a confused and false idea for Spinoza in every possible meaning or interpretation.

The very sequence of chapters and topics in Book 1 of the *Treatise* as well as in Book 2 of the *Ethics* does suggest, to say the least, that Spinoza's *Ethics* were on the top of Hume's desk when, as a young bright scholar in France (in 1735-36 in La Flèche), he was writing his 'premature' work. In that period Spinoza's work was nothing less than an obsession, hotly debated, secretly followed but never openly acknowledged by the leading philosophers and scientists of the Enlightenment.<sup>10</sup> It is hardly possible to maintain that Hume's acquaintance with Spinoza's work was only indirect, via Bayle's famous exposition and refutation of Spinoza in his article "Spinoza" in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique*.<sup>11</sup> But to mention this article was harmless for Hume. In a letter from France he advised a friend in England to read once over "le Recherche de la Verité of Pere Malebranche, the Principles of Human Knowledge by Berkeley, some of the more metaphysical Articles of Bailes Dictionary; such as those of Zeno & Spinoza."<sup>12</sup> I can't imagine that Hume did not participate in the debate on the basis of Spinoza's own texts, where Malebranche, Berkeley and the French connections wrestled with it.

After having delineated the territory of the research (we'll stay inside the attribute of thought) and having distinguished between impressions (of sensation and of reflection) and ideas (which distinction reminds us not only of Locke's but likewise of Spinoza's distinction between primary ideas and "ideas of ideas," already elaborated in his first though unfinished work, *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, and *passim* in the *Ethics*), Hume continues his essay with a section about the ideas of the memory and imagination (Part 1, Section 3), and one about the association of ideas (Part 1, Section 4). Impressions are mental entities, remaining in our memory when not expelled or overruled by other impressions; they are apt to be activated and to be more or less automatically combined with other impressions in the faculty of imagination on account of their resemblance, contiguity or causal relationship. The same subjects are forcefully discussed by Spinoza in 2 *Ethics* 17, 2 *Ethics* 18, and the scholia to these propositions. If Hume is an associationist from a psychological point of view, then Spinoza is even more so, and before him. A juxtaposition of quotes may show this.

'Tis plain, that in the course of our thinking, and in the constant revolution of our ideas, our imagination runs easily

from one idea to any other that *resembles* it, and that this quality alone is to the fancy a sufficient bond and association. 'Tis likewise evident, that as the senses, in changing their objects, are necessitated to change them regularly, and take them as they lie *contiguous* to each other, the imagination must by long custom acquire the same method of thinking, and run along the parts of space and time in conceiving its objects. (T 11)

Spinoza demonstrates the possibility of hallucinations from the permanency of impressions in our mind (2 *Ethics* 17c) and explains the phenomenon of remembering one thing on occasion of another by referring to the co-presence or contiguity of imaginations. "If the human body has once been affected by two or more bodies at the same time, then when the mind subsequently imagines one of them, it will immediately recollect the others also" (2 *Ethics* 18). The association mechanism, especially the role of 'custom' in it, is marvellously illustrated in the following fragment from the scholium to this proposition:

For example, a soldier, having seen traces of a horse in the sand, will immediately pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a horseman, and from that to the thought of war, etc. But a farmer will pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a plow, and then to that of a field, etc. And so each one according as he has been accustomed to join and connect the images of things in this or that way, will pass from one thought to another.

In the original Latin, the threefold use of *incidet* (future indicative of *incidere*, "to fall in") for "will pass to" once more accentuates the quasi-mechanical character of these processes in the human mind.<sup>13</sup>

The target of Part 1, Section 6 ("Of modes and substances") is not Spinoza, as the terminology might suggest, but "those philosophers, who found so much of their reasonings on the distinction of substance and accident" (T 15) and imagine to have clear ideas of substances as such, that is, Aristotle and his Medieval epigones. Spinoza is not one of them and would certainly like to subscribe to Hume's modest position: "We have therefore no idea of substance, distinct from that of a collection of particular qualities, nor have we any other meaning when we either talk or reason concerning it" (T 16). The ideas of the qualities are united by the imagination and a special name is imposed on them. The knowledge of the substance so indicated as a substantial unity or a thing does not, however, transcend our knowledge of the

qualities perceived. Spinoza develops the same point in a series of propositions (2 *Ethics* 21-26). The phenomenalism included is presented in proposition 26: "The human mind does not perceive any external body as actually existing, except through the ideas of the affections of its own body," that is, through the mutilated and confused 'impressions'. Both Spinoza and Hume, however, accept reasoning activities on the basis of these perceptions.

Turning over some pages we find in Hume's and Spinoza's work another complete parallel in their common denial of the existence of 'general ideas'.

A great philosopher has disputed the receiv'd opinion in this particular, and has asserted, that all general ideas are nothing but particular ones, annexed to a certain term, which gives them a more extensive signification, and makes them recall upon occasion other individuals, which are similar to them. As I look upon this to be one of the greatest and most valuable discoveries that has been made of late years in the republic of letters, I shall here endeavour to confirm it. (T 17)

Was the "great philosopher" Dr. Berkeley, as is insinuated in a footnote, or Hobbes, or perhaps Spinoza? In any case, Spinoza was not less assertive in his first scholium to 2 *Ethics* 40:

But it should be noted that these [universal] notions are not formed by all men in the same way, but vary from one to another, in accordance with what the body has more often been affected by, and what the mind imagines or recollects more easily. For example, those who have more often regarded men's stature with wonder will understand by the word 'man' an animal of erect stature. But those who have been accustomed to consider something else, will form another common image of men—e.g. that man is an animal capable of laughter, or a featherless biped, or a rational animal.

And similarly concerning the others—each will form universal images of things according to the disposition of his body.

Hume and Spinoza are both thorough nominalists. Ideas are necessarily individual. Names may be common for different ideas. "[T]is certain *that* we form the idea of individuals, whenever we use any general term" (T 22) is perfectly in line with Spinoza's radical difference between all ideas on account of the radical difference

between all *ideata* and their complete convenience (2 *Ethics* 7: "Ordo et connexio idearum idem est ac ordo et connexio rerum").

In Part 2 of Book 1 of the *Treatise* Hume, in my opinion, does not move far away from Spinoza either. It is interesting to discover that he makes a distinction between the restricted capacity of the imagination, which comes to a minimum or an end, and on the other hand the power of the mathematical reason, for which extension is infinitely divisible and time and space are without boundaries. It was Spinoza who first distinguished between the "infinitem imaginationis" (the infinite as it is in human imagination: with parts, smallest parts, and parts in a certain quantity) and the "infinitem rationis sive intellectus," in which no parts nor boundaries are conceived.<sup>14</sup> Spinoza would not hesitate to follow Hume where he speaks about "the error of the common opinion, that the capacity of the mind is limited on both sides" (T 28), nor where he mentions the absurdity of the thesis that a finite extension would not be infinitely divisible (T 29). This does not prevent either thinker from conceiving of the universe as the infinite sum of all things and processes which does not supersede the 'number' of its parts, nor impede their seeing the roots of our everyday conceptions of space and time in the imagination.

The latter point is not less stressed by Spinoza than by Hume. This may be illustrated by their explanation of the origin of our idea of time.

The idea of time, being deriv'd from the succession of our perceptions of every kind, ideas as well as impressions, and impressions of reflection as well as of sensation, will afford us an instance of an abstract idea ... Wherever we have no successive perceptions, we have no notion of time, even tho' there be a real succession in the objects. From these phaenomena, as well as from many others, we may conclude, that time cannot make its appearance to the mind, either alone, or attended with a steady unchangeable object, but is always discover'd by some *perceivable* succession of changeable objects. (T 34-35)

If Locke is not the historical source of this passage, Hume could have found inspiration for it in Spinoza. To 2 *Ethics* 44c ("From this it follows that it depends only on the imagination that we regard things as contingent, both in respect to the past and in respect to the future") Spinoza adds a scholium on the origin of our imagination of time, in which he says among other things:

Moreover, no one doubts but what we also imagine time, viz. from the fact that we imagine some bodies to move more

slowly, or more quickly, or with the same speed. Let us suppose, then, a child, who saw Peter for the first time yesterday, in the morning, but saw Paul at noon, and Simon in the evening, and today again saw Peter in the morning. It is clear from P18 that as soon as he sees the morning light, he will immediately imagine the sun taking the same course through the sky as he saw on the preceding day, or he will imagine the whole day, and Peter together with the morning, Paul with noon, and Simon with the evening. That is, he will imagine the existence of Paul and of Simon with a relation to future time.

Space limitations do not allow me to follow Hume in all his sections. I skip now to the last section of the second part, where the idea of existence is discussed. Here as elsewhere it is made clear that Hume is not a Kantian, and that Kant still slumbered after having read and not so well understood Hume. Hume does not deny, like Kant did, that human knowledge is knowledge, or that our ideas are ideas of objects, known in them, though sometimes very poorly. We cannot have impressions and ideas and at the same time think or suppose nothing. “[T]o form the idea of an object, and to form an idea simply is the same thing” (T 20), was already said in Part 1, Section 7 with the proviso, that this does imply that “the reference of the idea to an object [is] an extraneous denomination.”<sup>15</sup> Hume heavily underlines the fact that in our ideas the world is (partially and defectively) open for us, that in our ideas we know that some things do exist and in a certain sense how they are.

The idea of existence, then, is the very same with the idea of what we conceive to be existent. To reflect on any thing simply, and to reflect on it as existent, are nothing different from each other. That idea, when conjoin’d with the idea of any object, makes no addition to it. Whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent. Any idea we please to form is the idea of a being. (T 66-67)

I cannot have the idea that I am Wim Klever and you are sitting in front of me, listening to me, and at the same time doubt whether I and you do exist truly. My ideas say that I and you are; I affirm so in my having those ideas. “Qui veram habet ideam, simul scit se veram habere ideam, nec de rei veritate potest dubitare” (2 *Ethics* 43); “In mente nulla datur volitio sive affirmatio et negatio praeter illam, quam idea, quatenus idea est involvit” (2 *Ethics* 49). These propositions and other passages of Spinoza, indeed, the whole structure of the parallel

and identical attributes may lie behind Hume's position. And what is more, Hume may have known them. It is even possible to find in a logical conversion the same expression in Spinoza: "nam si posset concipi, deberet necessario concipi ut existens" (1 *Ethics* 14d). Ideas are not "mute pictures" like pictures on a blackboard, but "modes of thought," acts of sensing and understanding things (2 *Ethics* 43s). This does not mean that when we have ideas of things existing outside our body we step out of our universe of imagination. Not at all. "Let us fix our attention out of ourselves as much as possible: let us chase our imagination to the heavens, or to the utmost limits of the universe; we never really advance a step beyond ourselves." The idea of an external existence is still an idea, and as such is not essentially different from a reflection. I repeat, the Spinozist has no problem reading these paragraphs.

Nor does he have many difficulties with the third part ("Of knowledge and probability"), inasmuch as he discovers in this part that according to Hume it is the "degree of intricacy" (T 71) between our ideas which is responsible for not only their weight but also their truth value. In contrast with the reveries of our fancy, in which we find only loose and therefore fluctuating and weak judgements, in the sciences, especially the mathematical sciences, the relationship between our ideas grows more and more and makes the items stronger. The relations between ideas, discovered or realized in processes of reasoning, may be constant or inconstant. The more invariable they are, the more real we judge them (Part 3, Section 2). We will never reach absolute certainty on the relation between cause and effect in matters of fact. How could we, when endless unknown factors could be in the game? We have sometimes the strong impression, the practically unavoidable idea, of a "necessary connexion," and that is all. That comes down to a relative certainty, "aris[ing] from the comparison of ideas, and from the discovery of such relations as are unalterable" (T 79). Gradually we arrive at Hume's philosophically so exciting statements on the nature of belief (Part 3, Section 7). In the case of "propositions, that are prov'd by intuition or demonstration ... the person, who assents, not only conceives the ideas according to the proposition, but is necessarily determin'd to conceive them in that particular manner, either immediately or by the interposition of other ideas" (T 95). Spinoza would call this the third kind of knowledge, of which mathematics and all the propositions of his *Ethics* form a part. "But ... concerning matters of fact, this absolute necessity cannot take place" (T 95). Not so bad, because there is a substitute, by which the mathematical intricacy and Spinozistic "concatenatio" is very closely approached and by which the ideas on matters of fact are distinguishable from "the loose reveries of a castle-builder" (T 97). Here

Hume points to “a superior *force*, or *vivacity*, or *solidity*, or *firmness*, or *steadiness* ... [which] causes them to weigh more in the thought, and gives them a superior influence on the passions and imagination” (T 629). What else may be the cause of the constancy and weight of these ideas than the high frequency of their relations with other ideas in the field of consciousness? Yes, that is the answer, given by Hume himself in Part 3, Section 9, in his reference to the interdependence of those empirical ideas and to the fact of their forming a system. I quote:

Of these impressions or ideas of the memory we form a kind of system, comprehending whatever we remember to have been present, either to our internal perception or senses; and every particular of that system, join'd to the present impressions, we are pleas'd to call a *reality*. But the mind stops not here. For finding, that with this system of perceptions, there is another connected by custom, or if you will, by the relation of cause or effect, it proceeds to the consideration of their ideas; and as it feels that 'tis in a manner necessarily determin'd to view these particular ideas, and that the custom or relation, by which it is determin'd, admits not of the least change, it forms them into a new system, which it likewise dignifies with the title of *realities*. The first of these systems is the object of the memory and senses; the second of the judgment.

'Tis this latter principle, which peoples the world. (T 108)

The difference between system-bounded items and unsystematical thoughts seems to be the high degree of intricacy in the former against the latter. This degree will be lower than in the earlier mentioned case of proved ideas in mathematical science. Is it nonetheless still a question of degree? This point also is conceded by Hume in the section on the probability of chances (Part 3, Section 11) where he asserts nothing more nor less than a gradual difference (“several degrees of evidence”) between the certainty in proofs on the one hand and the “probability, that evidence, which is still attended with uncertainty” (T 124) on the other. And in Part 3, Section 12 it sounds: “The gradation, therefore, from probabilities to proofs is in many cases insensible” (T 131). We have to do with a continuum.

A long story could be told in order to show that Spinoza's epistemological theory is exactly the same (which is something else than maintaining an influence). Also, in his view systematicity as such is, as it were, the criterium, or even more fundamentally, the ground for all truth value. Spinoza's geometrical practice is built on this second order idea. The *Ethics* tries to connect propositions to (and deduce them

from) axioms, definitions and postulates, accepted by everybody and to implicitly prove the latter by the former.<sup>16</sup> That "nature is always one and the same" (3 *Ethics* praef) or, as Hume formulated it, "*that the future resembles the past*" (T 134), is an example of an axiom or supposition, everywhere confirmed and therefore fairly stable in our system. A very illuminative passage in this connection is contained in 5 *TTP* 35-37, in which Spinoza characterizes the method of science, consisting in the deduction from intellectual notions, as a "*longa perceptionum concatenatio*" or as a "*omnes suas perceptiones ex paucis axiomatibus deducere et invicem concatenare.*" This is his practice in the *Ethics*; this is every scientist's practice; this is normal human practice. "[A]ll belief arises from the association of ideas, according to my hypothesis" (T 112). The degree of integration in the "totality of our beliefs" (Quine) is decisive for the force of our affirmations. Spinoza and Hume fully agree on this point.

So we believe in the fact "*that the course of nature continues always uniformly the same*" (T 89) with eventually some small deviations; so we are also convinced that "Nature, by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel" (T 183), in spite of the fact that with Hume we, humans, are sceptical concerning the cognitive quality of our ideas. We don't dispose of another guarantee for it than their "coherence" (T 84, 195) and haven't another access to material things. Our analysis of Hume's text and its comparison with Spinoza's has brought us to the fourth part, in which Hume starts with two very strong chapters on scepticism. As a Spinozist one must again be astonished by the congeniality of our two master-thinkers. On their own the senses cannot tell us something definite about the external existence of things perceived. How could they, as the impressions are affections of our body?

'Tis absurd, therefore, to imagine the senses can ever distinguish betwixt ourselves and external objects.

Add to this, that every impression, external and internal, passions, affections, sensations, pains and pleasures, are originally on the same footing. (T 190)

Compare this with Spinoza's radical proposition 2 *Ethics* 13:

The object which constitutes the human mind is its body, or a certain actually existing mode of extension and nothing else,

together with corollary 2 to 2 *Ethics* 16:

Secondly, the ideas that we have of external bodies indicate the constitution of our own body more than the nature of external bodies.

Of course, external bodies are involved in our own body. That is the reason why our impressions also, but secondarily, refer to them. In the first instance, however, they (I mean all of them) are the way we feel our own body and what happens in it (as a result of the influence of other bodies). The sensations we have about ourselves and about other things are, as Hume says so nicely, "on the same footing" (T 190). All our ideas are on the same footing. My former idea of a "winged horse," which I had as a child<sup>17</sup> is on the same footing as the idea I now have of a country I never saw or of a country I visited many times. Also, the idea of a horse, which I observe in the meadow out there, is an idea or an impression in my body. "[A]ll perceptions are the same in the manner of their existence" (T 193). All perceptions are projections and conclusions, but some of them more stable and constant than others which are more fluent. Their constancy is a result of their coherence with others, and of more relations with others. We adhere to the external existence affirmed by them as long as nothing in the field of our consciousness shows to the contrary ("nullum aliud habemus experimentum, quod hoc oppugnat" [TIE 18]). "Wenn alles dafür ist und nichts dagegen."<sup>18</sup>

Until now, Spinoza and Hume have found themselves on a par. This does not mean that 2 *Ethics* and Book 1 of the *Treatise* do not manifest considerable differences. My pretention is only that the main theses on Hume's side, as I have interpreted them, do not contradict those of Spinoza. The serious student of both texts must remark their fundamental agreement. What is more, further research may demonstrate that no other candidate in modern philosophy, not Descartes, not Hobbes or Locke, neither Leibniz or Berkeley, seems to have so much in common with Hume as Spinoza. Our imaginary Spinozistic reader must be utterly surprised, therefore, when arriving at the section "Of the immateriality of the soul" (Part 4, Section 5) he suddenly is confronted with so many harsh words on Spinoza's address.

What in heaven could be the reason for this unexpected, furious attack on the philosopher who haunted the ghosts of the century? Is Hume perhaps afraid of being accused of atheism himself on account of the closeness of his system to Spinoza's? This could indeed be a good reason: confession of 'Spinozism' was still equivalent with suicide. Flat denial of one's Spinozism was common practice among many of Spinoza's followers. His correspondent Tschirnhaus denied it, when caught on it by Thomasius.<sup>19</sup> The Leiden mathematician, Professor B. de Volder denied it, when accused by Leibniz.<sup>20</sup> Malebranche, deeply

influenced by Spinoza, had to protect himself by pretending to hate Spinoza and by calling him “athée, misérable, extravagant.”<sup>21</sup> Montesquieu found the inspiration for his work (social determinism) in Spinoza’s psychology but never showed his colours. Many refutations in the history of Spinoza’s reception were in fact disguised propagations.

Hume was afraid of the repercussions of the publication of his work. Therefore he cancelled “some reasonings concerning Miracles, which I once thought of publishing with the rest, but which I am afraid will give too much Offence even as the World is dispos’d at present.”<sup>22</sup> Hume had the reputation of being a subversive author and of entertaining principles leading to downright atheism. He must have been aware that the scientific scepticism, so forcefully defended in the first sections of the fourth part, would awake in his intelligent readers the conclusion that by that the foundations of traditional morality were undermined. In order not to block a successful career he had, therefore, all the reasons in the world to make clear that he was not a Spinozist (at the time the best known type of atheist).

The passage on Spinoza seems to be an insertion without a special relation to the subject of the section. It treats Spinoza’s (meta)physics as such and not his theory of the eternity of the mind (in the second half of 5 *Ethics*) that would have fitted better in the context of the chapter. Hume himself indicates the artificiality of the connection by writing: “This gives me an occasion to take a-new into consideration ... I cannot forbear proposing some farther reflections concerning it” (T 240). He then asserts straight on, without much ado, “that the doctrine of the immateriality, simplicity, and indivisibility of a thinking substance is a true atheism, and will serve to justify all those sentiments, for which *Spinoza* is so universally infamous” (T 240). The existence of God had not been spoken of until now, let alone demonstrated by Hume. Neither theism nor atheism had come up for discussion. How could he reject, then, a theory, in this case Spinoza’s, on account of its atheistical character? Isn’t this way of arguing in conflict with his sceptical attitude? As a reader one gets the impression that the argument is purely *ad hoc*. And the next sentence confirms this impression by giving the true reason: “From this topic, I hope at least to reap one advantage [!], that my adversaries will not have any pretext to render the present doctrine odious by their declamations, when they see that they can be so easily retorted on them” (T 240). Hume tries to immunize himself beforehand against the declamations of his adversaries. The purpose of the passage is primarily a practical one: personal safety.

Next to this remark Hume provides us in one paragraph with a rather good summary of *Ethics* 1, though he rephrases some elements

in his own terminology. He accentuates in Spinoza's philosophy the unity of the universe, called substance, of which thought and matter are attributes known to us. The world is a 'plenum'; there doesn't exist any vacuum. Substance is indivisible. Whatever we experience internally or externally: everything is a modification of the one substance according to one of its attributes, and necessarily so. Nothing has a separate or distinct existence. All modes of thought and extension, that is, the passions of the soul and the configurations of matter, "inhere," as he says (T 240), in the same substance, but still preserve in themselves their characters of distinction. Substance is not, as Hegel later misunderstood it, an abyss in which every distinction disappears. The modes are, as it were, produced and supported by the substance; in this permanent process of production and reproduction substance itself remains the same: it varies them without any variation. The infinite universe cannot be changed from without. It has no time or place; substance is eternally the same.

It may not be doubted that Hume gives a first hand report of Spinoza's point of view, a report which testifies to a better lecture and understanding than Bayle's famous article. He stresses several elements which are not present in Bayle.

After having said that this is enough ("sufficient for the present purpose" [T 241]), and having denounced only verbally "this hideous hypothesis" (T 241), Hume takes up the thread of the section, the dispute concerning the materiality and immateriality of the soul, on which he had already remarked that he did not even understand the meaning of the question. He then, incidentally, brings forward the view of Spinoza, and again it is hardly distorted. So he writes:

To apply this to the present case; there are two different systems of beings presented, to which I suppose myself under a necessity of assigning some substance, or ground of inhesion. I observe first the universe of objects or of body: The sun, moon and stars; the earth, seas, plants, animals, men, ships, houses, and other productions either of art or nature. Here *Spinoza* appears, and tells me, that these are only modifications; and that the subject, in which they inhere, is simple, uncompounded, and indivisible. After this I consider the other system of beings, *viz.* the universe of thought, or my impressions and ideas. There I observe another sun, moon and stars; an earth, and seas, cover'd and inhabited by plants and animals; towns, houses, mountains, rivers; and in short every thing I can discover or conceive in the first system. Upon my enquiring concerning these, Theologians present themselves, and tell me, that these also are modifications, and

modifications of one simple, uncompounded, and indivisible substance. (T 242)

Both systems are considered to be "unintelligible," "absurd" (T 243), though Hume had introduced them, declaring to find himself "under a necessity of assigning some substance" to them and describing his experience, saying: "I observe first the universe of objects" and "I consider the other system of beings ... my impressions and ideas. There I observe" (T 242). And why does he ascribe the second system to the "Theologians," where he full-fledgedly acknowledged himself its (mental) existence and Spinoza did likewise in his theory of the attributes?

His method now seems to be to argue against the simplicity and immateriality of the soul by means of a refutation of Spinoza's physics. "[L]et us ... see whether all the absurdities, which have been found in the system of *Spinoza*, may not likewise be discover'd in that of *Theologians*" (T 243). But he operates in an extremely prudent way. He simply refers to the objections of other people against Spinoza: "First, It has been said against *Spinoza*" (T 243); "Secondly, It has been said" (T 244); "Thirdly, It has been objected to the system of one simple substance in the universe" (T 244). Finally he concludes: "It appears, then, that to whatever side we turn, the same difficulties follow us, and that we cannot advance one step towards the establishing the simplicity and immateriality of the soul, without preparing the way for a dangerous and irrecoverable atheism" (T 244).

Hume knew, of course, that the substance or the universe is not simple according to Spinoza, neither materially nor in other attributes. "From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinite things in infinite ways" (1 *Ethics* 16). Spinoza also explicitly rejected the simplicity of the human mind: "The idea which constitutes the formal being of the human mind is not simple, but composed of very many ideas" (2 *Ethics* 15). He had, moreover, himself stressed "the characters of distinction" in the modes! The arguments he advances don't appear very convincing after what he said earlier. And if the aim of the passage is to demonstrate that we don't have an "idea of the substance of the soul," Spinoza fully agrees with this proposition. No mode of thought, no complex of modes of thought, not even the attribute of thought can be a substance. Thought and extension are one and the same.

No, it seems to me that the only reason Hume distanced himself from Spinoza must have been to protect himself against the accusation of atheism. This becomes evident throughout the text.

I add in the second place, that if it brings any advantage to that cause, it must bring an equal to the cause of atheism. For do our Theologians pretend to make a monopoly of the word, *action*, and may not the atheists likewise take possession of it, and affirm that plants, animals, men, &c. are nothing but particular actions of one simple universal substance, which exerts itself from a blind and absolute necessity? This you'll say is utterly absurd. I own 'tis unintelligible; but at the same time assert, according to the principles above-explain'd, that 'tis impossible to discover any absurdity in the supposition, that all the various objects in nature are actions of one simple substance, which absurdity will not be applicable to a like supposition concerning impressions and ideas. (T 246)

This is a passage to read twice or even more times over again. To what extent is the acknowledgement of the unintelligibility of Spinoza's position ambiguous? Is there not much 'double talk' in Hume? Is his logic not crooked here, inconsistent with his own principles? Why does he always speak in such an indirect manner (for instance, "This you'll say is utterly absurd" [T 246])? Is Hume sincere in his sharp anti-Spinozistic utterings?

My doubts remain. "What is important to note in these pages is that Hume *does not* attack Spinoza, or his 'hideous hypothesis'. Instead the force of the point Hume keeps making is that a very popular theological view, that of the immateriality of the soul, is almost the same as Spinoza's view.... In spite of the concession to the rhetorical denunciation of Spinoza's view, expected of any philosophical author who mentioned him, Hume concentrated on a much more subtle point in which the theologians in general became the Spinozistic villains rather than Spinoza himself."<sup>23</sup> One may admire Hume's strategical talent.

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1. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1978). Further references ("T") are given in parentheses within the text and notes.
2. Richard Popkin, "Hume and Spinoza," *Hume Studies* 5.2 (November 1979): 67
3. John Aubrey, *Brief Lives* (Oxford, 1893), 1:357.
4. See John Locke, *Mr. Locke's Reply to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop's of Worcester's Answer to his Second Letter* (London, 1699).

5. See Gilbert Boss, *La différence des philosophies. Hume et Spinoza* (Zürich, 1982).
6. The following abbreviations are used for references to Spinoza's works within the text and notes: *Ep*: *Epistolae*; *Ethics*: *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata*; *PPC*: *Principia Philosophiae Cartesianae*; *TIE*: *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*; *TTP*: *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. The following abbreviations are used when reference is made to the *Ethics*: c: corollarium; d: definitio; p: propositio; praef: praefatio; s: scholium.
7. Benedict de Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton, 1985).
8. Cf. also 2 *Ethics* 2: "Nec corpus mentem ad cogitandum ... determinare potest."
9. Curley (above, n. 7), 569.
10. See P. Vernière, "L'ère des confusions 1715-1750," in *Spinoza et la pensée française avant la Révolution*, 2d ed. (P.U.F., 1954; 1982), 333-413; "Spinoza joue le rôle ingrat du maître qu'on renie mais qu'on utilise" (p. 413).
11. Pierre Bayle, "Spinoza," in *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (Rotterdam, 1697).
12. Quoted by E. C. Mossner in his introduction to the Penguin edition (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1969).
13. See further 4 *TTP* 2: "Sic etiam, quod homo, quum unius rei recordetur, statim recordetur alterius similis, quam simul cum ipsa perceperat, lex est, quae ex natura humana necessario sequitur."
14. See *Ep* 12, and 1 *Ethics* 15s.
15. Cf. for this proviso Spinoza's explication to 2 *Ethics* d4: "dico intrinsecas, ut illam secludam quae extrinseca est, nempe convenientiam ideae cum suo ideato"; we remember that ideas are related to other ideas, not to non-ideational things.
16. Cf. my "Axioms in Spinoza's Science and Philosophy of Science," *Studia Spinozana* 2 (1986): 171-91.
17. Cf. 2 *Ethics* 49s.
18. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*.
19. See J. P. Wurtz, "Tschirnhaus et l'accusation de spinozisme," *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 78 (1980): 504.
20. See "Briefwechsel zwischen Leibniz und De Volder 1698-1706," in G. W. Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften*, ed. C. J. Gerhardt (1978), 2:260.
21. See Vernière (above, n. 10), 269.
22. Letter to an English friend, quoted in Mossner's (above, n. 12) introduction.
23. Popkin (above, n. 2), 67.