

SPINOZA AND ECOLOGY

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In what follows I do not try to prove anything. I invite the reader to consider a set of hypothetic connections between spinozist and ecological thought. Most of them seem obvious to me, but every one needs to be carefully scrutinized. They are (of course) built upon a set of definite interpretations of ecology and of the texts of Spinoza.

The industrial states adopt policies which to some extent limit pollution and conserve non-renewable resources. There is also a slight recognition of overpopulation in the sense of too great consumption per capita. In short, there is in the industrial states a shallow movement in favour of protection of the environment, or better, the ecosystems. But there is also a deeper, international movement which tries to modify attitudes towards nature and the whole conception of the relations of culture to nature. It has deep social and political implications.

Rachel Carson, who started this international movement fifteen years ago, found man's arrogance or indifference towards nature ethically unacceptable. The driving force of the movement was and is still philosophical and religious. The field bioecologists, who work in nature, are on the whole manifesting attitudes of love and respect that have made an impact upon millions of people.

There is a deep convergence in metaphysics, ethics and life styles among the people inspired by field ecological thinking. The issues of pollution, resource depletion and overpopulation are not neglected within the deep ecological movement, but they are integrated in a vastly more comprehensive frame of reference. This frame includes the study of non-industrial cultures, some of them showing a remarkable ecological equilibrium combined with affluence.¹ History is littered with the remains of cultures that lost the equilibrium. There is a growing understanding that even if

¹ Highly readable: Sahlins, Marshall, *Stone Age Economics*, London: Tavistock, 1974.

we cannot and will not imitate any of the original affluent cultures, we shall have to establish post-industrial societies in equilibrium. Spinoza may turn out to be an important source of inspiration in this quest.

In what follows I accordingly invite friends of Spinoza to consider the many aspects of his philosophy that seem to accord with basic strivings within the deep ecological movement. I do not think it important to get to a final conclusion about exactly which concepts or aspects accord best with which concepts or aspects of that movement. There is room for different interpretations. I offer only one.

The interpretation made use of in this article is elaborated in more detail in A. Naess, *Freedom, Emotion and Self-subsistence* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget 1975). Footnotes will refer mainly to that work. (Abbreviation: *FES*.)

1. The nature conceived by field ecologists is not the passive, dead, value-neutral nature of mechanistic science, but akin to the *Deus sive Natura* of Spinoza. All-inclusive, creative (as *natura naturans*), infinitely divers, and alive in the broad sense of panpsychism, but also manifesting a structure, the so-called laws of nature. There are always causes to be found, but extremely complex and difficult to unearth. The Nature with capital N is intuitively conceived as perfect in a sense that Spinoza and out-door ecologists have more or less in common: It is not a narrowly moral, utilitarian or aesthetic perfection. Nature is perfect 'in itself'.

Perfection can only mean *completeness* of some sort when applied in general, and not to specifically human achievements. In the latter case it means reaching what has been consciously intended.²

² 'Perfection' is not a term which is introduced in the *Ethics* by means of separate definition, and it is something admitting of degrees.

Joy is an emotion through which mind is said to *become more* perfect. (Part 3, Scholium to Proposition 11.) Whatever its connotation, 'more perfect' cannot be separated in denotation from 'more powerful'. Compare Part 4, proof of Proposition 4): "Joy ... is the emotion through which the power of the body [and therefore also of the mind] to act, increases or is furthered". The relation to action, and therefore

2. The value-dualism spirit/matter, soul/body does not hold in Spinoza nor is it of any use in field ecology. The two aspects of Nature, those of extension and thought (better: non-extension), are both complete aspects of one single reality, and *perfection characterizes both*.

In view of the tendency to look upon the body as something more crude than spirit, both field ecologists and Spinoza oppose most forms of idealism and spiritualism — and, of course, moralism. (I am not sure these “ism” words deserve to be used in this connection.)

3. Nature (with capital N) according to Spinoza, and the ‘universe’ of modern physics, are not *in* time. As an *absolutely* all-embracing reality, Nature has no purpose, aim or goal. If it had a purpose, it would have to be part of something still greater, e.g., a grand design. Time is only defineable *within* the network of relations of Nature, therefore Nature as a whole cannot have aims or goals which refer to time.

There is, in ecological thought, a marked reaction against *facil finalism*, especially in sophisticated research. The development of ‘higher’ forms of life does not make field ecologists less impressed with the ‘lower’ forms, some of which have flourished countless millions of years and still ‘are going strong’. (Too strong, some will say, thinking of recent epidemics of flu!). There is no ‘purpose’ in time such that the bacteria do not have any function or value when ‘higher’ forms have developed.

4. There is no established moral world-order. Human justice is not a law of nature. There is, on the other hand, no natural laws limiting the endeavour to extend the realm of justice as conceived in a society of free human beings. These spinozist thoughts are important for striking the

to understanding, is intimate. The more perfect, the more active and the less passive, according to Proposition 40, Part 5. In short, ‘more perfect than’ cannot in denotation be separated from a number of other basic relations. The application of the term to Nature or God clearly is on par with the application of terms like ‘love’ (*amor*), ‘rationality’, ‘mind’, that is, it cannot be taken in any precise sense known from phenomena *in* Nature.

balance between a submissive, a-moral attitude towards all kinds of life struggle, and a shallow moralistic and antagonistic attitude. Future societies in ecological equilibrium presuppose such a 'third way'.

5. Good and evil must be defined in relation to beings for which something is good or evil, useful or detrimental. The terms are meaningless, when not thus related.³

This accords well with the effort of field ecologists to understand each culture 'from within'. It contrasts with explaining or moralizing on the basis of a definite value code dominant within particular (mostly industrial) societies.

6. Every thing is connected with every other. There is a network of cause-effect relations connecting everything with everything. Nothing is causally inactive, nothing wholly without an essence which it expresses through being a cause.

The ecologist Barry Commoner has called 'All things are connected' the first principle of ecology. Intimate interconnectedness in the sense of internal rather than external relations characterizes ecological ontology.

7. Every being strives to preserve and develop its specific essence or nature. Every essence is a manifestation of God or Nature. There are infinite ways in which Nature thus expresses itself. And there are infinite kinds of beings expressing God or Nature.

The pervasive basic *striving* is no mere effort to adapt to stimuli from the outside. It is an active shaping of the environment. Successful acts create new wider units of organism/environment. The basic urge is to gain in extent and intensiveness of self-causing. The term 'self-realization' is therefore better than 'self-preservation', the first suggest-

³ The occurrences of the words *bonus* and *malus* in the *Ethics* admit of various conceptualizations. According to Definition 1, Part 4, in the *Ethics*, 'x is good for y' does not mean more than 'x is useful for y' or 'x is known by y to be useful for y'. The expression 'x is useful for y' is equivalent to 'x causes an increase in y's power', 'x causes an increase of y's freedom' and 'x causes an increase of y's perfection.' More about these equivalences in *FES*, p. 107-109.

ing activeness and creativity, the latter a passive conservative or defensive attitude.⁴

8. Another name for the ability to act out one's nature or essence is 'power', *potentia*, the substantivation of the verb 'to be able', *posse*. It is not the same as to coerce others.

The power of each thing is part of God's power. God or Nature has no other power than ours. "Each and every existing thing expresses God's nature or essence in a certain determinate way ... that is, ... each and every thing expresses God's power..." (Part I, Proof of Proposition 36.)

All beings strive to maintain *and gain* power. This need not be a striving to dominate, subdue or terrorize. The establishment of symbiosis, 'living together', rather than cut-throat competition marks a gain in power. At higher levels of self-realization, the self encompasses others in a state of increasing intensity and extension of 'symbiosis'.⁵ The freedom of the individual ultimately requires that of the collectivity.

9. If one insists upon using the term "rights", every being may be said to have the right to do what is in its power. It is a "right" to express its own nature as clearly and extensively as natural conditions permit. "That right which they (the animals) have in relation to us, we have in relation to them." (Part 4, First Scholium to Proposition 37). Rights as part of a separate moral world order is a fiction.⁶

⁴ According to Part 3, Proposition 6, *every* thing, as far as it is in itself, strives to preserve in its being. The term *perseverare* I take to mean something much more active than just to survive. Therefore I accept as equivalent 'x increases in power' and 'x increases in level of self-preservation'. (FES, p. 97).

⁵ Good relations to others are obtained, according to Part 4, Propositions 46, 50 (Scholium), 72, a.o., through generosity and other forms of non-injury (*ahimsa*). According to Part 4, Proposition 45, "Hatred can never be good", that is, according to Part 4, Definition 1, it can never be useful to us. Therefore it cannot cause increase in power or understanding.

⁶ It must be conceded that Spinoza holds that we cannot be friends of animals or include them in our society. Only humans can be friends of humans and be members of our societies. (See Part 4, Appendix, Chapter 26). And because we are more powerful than animals, we have

Field ecologists tend to accept a general 'right to live and blossom'. Humans have no special right to kill and injure, Nature does not belong to them.

10. There is nothing in human nature or essence, according to Spinoza, which can *only* manifest or express itself through injury of others. That is, the striving for expression of own nature does not inevitably imply an attitude of hostile domination over other beings, human or non-human. Violence in the sense of violent activity is not the same as violence as injury to others.

The human attitude of violence and hostility towards some species of animals have made it impossible to study realistically their life and function within the whole. The field ecologist who deeply identify with the species studied is able to live peacefully with any kind of "wild" animal. This attitude harmonizes with the view of Spinoza concerning free man (*homo liber*). Spinoza's doctrine about the development of affects (Part 3 and 4 of the Ethics) makes the field ecologists symbiotic attitude inevitable if the development proceeds far enough.

In what follows other spinozist thoughts are mentioned which harmonize with those of field ecologists even if the latter do not often develop them consciously.

11. Every being has its unique direction of self-realization, its particular essence, but "the greatest good" is the "understanding realization of the union (*cognitio unionis*) of our mind with whole Nature". (*On the improvement of the understanding*, § 13-14.)

12. The realization of union with the whole Nature is made through the understanding of the particular things as a manifold of expressions or manifestations of Nature (God). But Nature or God is nothing apart from the manifestations.

Spinoza rejects the kind of *unio mystica* which results in a turning away from particulars and from nature. "The more

more rights. We may use animals as we see fit, and one cannot issue laws against molesting them. (Cp. Part 4, Scholium I to Proposition 37, and Appendix, Chapter 26).

we understand the particular things, *res singulares*, the more we understand God". (Part 5, Proposition 24). Spinoza's concept of Nature and its manifestations lack the features which makes nature (in the more common connotations) something inferior to spirit, or to God.

Ecological thinking presumes an identification with particulars in their internal relations to others. The identification process leads deeper into Nature as a whole, but also deeper into unique features of particular beings. It does not lead away from the singular and finite. It does not lend itself to abstract thinking or contemplation, but to *conscious, intuitive, intimate interaction*.

13. 'Rationality' is wise conduct maximizing self-realization. It cannot be separated from perfection, virtue and freedom. "Since reason does not demand anything contrary to Nature, it demands that everyone loves himself, look for what is useful, ..., and that he strives to obtain all which really leads man to greater perfection ..." (Part 4, Proposition 18, Scholium). Since self-realization implies acts of understanding with increasing perspective, rationality and virtue increases with the development of understanding. The maximum is 'an understanding love of Nature', *amor intellectualis Dei*. This implies acts of understanding performed with the maximum perspective possible, or loving immersion and interaction in Nature.⁷

14. Interacting with things and understanding things cannot be separated. The units of understanding are not propositions, but acts. To the content of ideas in the

⁷ The basic position of 'understanding', *intelligere*, in Spinoza's system is seen from its intimate relation to 'causing'. If something is caused adequately through something else, it is adequately understood through this something, *and vice versa*. (*FES*, p. 40, cp. Part 3, first part of first definition). Activeness is internally related to understanding because the specific activity of the mind is understanding. It is also related to power and freedom in so far as increased activeness is internally related to increase in power and freedom. In this way not only intuitive understanding of highest (third) kind but also the understanding of laws of nature is promoting power, freedom, joy and perfection.

“attribute of non-extension” there corresponds an act in the “attribute of extension”. Ultimately these attributes are attributes of the same, but the human way of understanding is such that we have to treat them separately.

Increase of rationality and freedom is proportional to increase of activeness, each action having the aspects of understanding and of a behaviour or inter-action. Not all acts need be overt.

15. Since a gain in understanding expresses itself as an act, it is in its totality a process within the extended aspect of Nature and can be studied as such.

This point is of prime importance to the methodology of ecology: The ‘world’ of a living being is investigated through study of its manifest (“molar” not “molecular”) behaviour. Spinoza furnishes ecology a frame of reference completely devoid of the kind of “mentalism” and “introspectionism” that often has obstructed the study of cognition in animals and men.

The framework of Spinoza and general etology is also well suited to counteract the tendency to conceive human knowledge as something existing independent of acts of particular human beings in particular situations — and stored wholesale in libraries.

The formulation of Spinoza does not point to any definite form of “behaviourism”. We are free to inspect critically any contemporary version. There is no reason to identify the concepts of ‘behaviour’ with that of Watson or Skinner.

16. Most of the basic concepts used in the *Ethics* when characterizing the human predicament are such as can be used whatever the cultural context. They are furthermore adapted to general characterizations covering smaller or greater parts of the animal, plant and mineral kingdoms. Some of these concepts have already been mentioned.

Spinoza rarely touches upon questions concerning animals, but where he does, he shows that his main concepts are not only intended to apply to humans.^a He warns,

^a The panpsychism of Spinoza is expressed in the Scholium to Proposition 13 in Part 2 (of the *Ethics*). Other individuals than humans are

however, against thinking that the joys of insects are the same as those of humans. Each kind of living being is content with and delights in what corresponds to its nature or essence.

Among the important concepts which have a wider application than to the human species one may note the following:

- perfection (cf. point 2)
- good and evil (cf. point 4 and 5)
- striving to express one's nature or essence (cf. point 7 and 8)
- self-preservation, self-realization (cf. points 7, 11 and 13)
- power (cf. points 8,9 and 10)
- rationality (cf. points 13 and 14)
- virtue (cf. points 13, cp. the expression '*potentia seu virtus*')
- freedom (cf. points 13 and 14)
- understanding (cf. points 14 and 15)
- feeling
- emotion (The passive ones are confused *ideas*.)
- confused idea

For all these terms it holds that Spinoza's definitions are *open as regards their exact range*.⁹ Some are clearly intended to be applicable at least to a major part of the kingdom of animals. Because of equivalences holding between many of them the range of all of them can without doing violence to

animated, *animata*, but in different degrees, *diversis gradibus*. He even (in the proof of Proposition 1, Part 3) uses the expression "the minds of other things," (*aliam rerum mentes*). About the difference in appetites and joys between various kinds of animals, see Scholium to Proposition 57, Part 3.

⁹ Spinoza does not directly say so, but I think he would deny rationality of any kind to other beings than humans. He speaks, however, about "virtue or power" of animals, and he more or less identifies virtue and rationality. '... to act virtuously is nothing else than to act according to reason;...'. (Part 4, Proof of Proposition 56).

Spinoza may evidently be interpreted in various ways as regards the relation of animals to man. We have been interested in the main trend of his reasoning and the main features of his terminology.

Spinoza's texts be made as large as suitable within ecology and theory of evolution.

The wide applicability of Spinoza's *concepts* does not imply uncritical *statements* about similarities between humans and other living beings. It ensures a broad *continuity* of outlook, and the possibility of fighting human haughtiness and cruelty.

Ecological thought typical of active field ecologists is not entirely homogeneous. And Spinoza's texts are of course open to various interpretations. In spite of this my conclusion is positive: No great philosopher has so much to offer in the way of clarification and articulation of basic ecological attitudes as Baruch Spinoza.

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