Spinoza on Death and the Communism of Souls

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"The wise man thinks of death least of all things," writes Spinoza. That may very well be true, but the lover of wisdom - the philosopher - must try to make sense of death, and Spinoza was a philosopher.

Pieter Balling was Spinoza's friend. The circumstances under which their friendship began are a matter of speculation. Although Balling was a Mennonite and Spinoza a Jew, the two had similar backgrounds. They lived in Amsterdam in their youth where both worked as merchants – Spinoza in his father's import business – while developing independent interests in the natural sciences as well as Descartes' philosophy. The beginning of their friendship probably goes back to the time before the rabbis of the Sephardim excommunicated Spinoza at the age of twenty-four. It is possible that the two first met on business at the Stock Exchange in Amsterdam. Alternatively, they may have been introduced by Franciscus Van Den Enden, who knew Balling and directed the Latin School where Spinoza studied. Or it may be that the two met for the first time while frequenting meetings of Collegiants in Amsterdam.

The Collegiants were a rather ecumenical bunch who welcomed people of divergent religious backgrounds. They were part of the radical reformationist milieu of the time that included Mennonites, Hutterites, and other Anabaptists, as well as Quakers, English Diggers, and the century-old memory of Thomas Müntzer and the Peasant Revolt in Germany. The Collegiants had neither ministers nor a settled orthodoxy, emphasizing that God's revelation occurs in the heart of the believer. In this they were similar to the Quakers. In fact, Balling was to pen a famous text that he published anonymously and that the Quakers adopted as their own,

The Light Upon the Candlestick. This short treatise was influenced by Spinoza's early philosophical work, especially in its assertion that the inner Light of Spirit and the Light of the Intellect are one and the same.

Müntzer anticipated the identity of Spirit and Intellect, in spite of his apocalyptic yearning to see the blood of Satan's minions ebbing away. Most Collegiants embraced a pacifist version of Müntzer's veneration of the intellect better suited to it than his own cult of the sword, although some continued to have revolutionary aspirations. Many also shared the Anabaptist leader's desire to revive the communist practices of the early Church. These are described in the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 4, Verses 32-35:

> All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need.

Collegiant communism, like the communism of Acts, was not based so much in pity or compassion for the poor ("sad passions" that Spinoza abhorred) as it was in the desire to create fellowship among believers in the community of the Holy Spirit. Such fellowship – so its advocates believed – is strengthened by sharing worldly goods and weakened when the brethren are divided from one another by differences in wealth. This was the position of the Hutterites and, in more moderate form, the Mennonites, even while the latter sought to distance themselves from the sanguinary practices of their revolutionary Anabaptist past.

Sometime in the Spring of 1664, Balling's son died. We know this from a letter to Balling, dated July 20, 1664, (Letter 17 in the *Opera Posthuma*), in which Spinoza responds to news from him of the tragedy, expressing worry about his friend's psychological condition, while

trying to bolster his confidence that he will weather the onslaught of grief. This expression of consolation and personal tenderness shades into the discussion of a proleptic experience Balling had of his son's death. One day while lying awake in bed, Balling heard his son groaning, even though the boy was healthy at the time. When he sat up and strained to listen, the groans ceased, recurring when he lay down again. Some time later, when his son was on his deathbed, having contracted the plague, the father recognized the actual groans of the boy from the earlier experience. Balling appears to have asked in his letter, now missing, whether the initial perception of groans might have conveyed knowledge of his son's future. Spinoza assures him that this could not have been the case because perception proceeds according to the causal order. Since all causes are efficient (as Spinoza rejects any form of teleology), no perception can be caused by future events. Balling's imagination must have produced the original groans in the twilight state between waking and sleep. But then why did the imagined groans seem identical with the ones Balling heard while the boy was actually dying? Spinoza's answer to this question represents his first foray into an area that he will not enter again until much later, when he writes the very difficult fifth and final book of his masterwork, the *Ethics*.

In Spinoza's letter, he emphasizes the special relationship between a father and the son he loves. Such love involves a near identity of the father's soul and the essence of the child: "... a father so loves his son that he and his beloved son are, as it were, one and the same." The subjunctive "as it were" (*quasi*) warns against misinterpreting the relationship as one of strict identity - father and son, after all are not one and the same individual being - but it also asserts an ontological intimacy between the two individuals. What is the precise nature of that intimacy? Spinoza describes it as the "participation" of the father in "the ideal essence of the son."[i]

There is much unexplored depth to this formulation. Spinoza's theory of essences was not fully developed at the time he wrote the Letter. As the French Spinoza scholar, Martial Gueroult warns, we should be careful not to read the mature formulations of the *Ethics* back into the Letter to Balling. Still, by 1664, Spinoza had already written his *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being* in which many of the propositions of the *Ethics* are anticipated, if not fully worked out. In fact, Balling was part of a small group of Spinoza's close friends – who were attending or had attended Collegiant meetings – with whom Spinoza shared his manuscripts when he was still in the process of writing them. Balling had undoubtedly read the *Short Treatise,* and probably commented on its formulations when they were in *statu nascendi*.

In Appendix Two of the *Short Treatise,* "On the Human Soul," Spinoza writes:

> As man is a created finite thing, etc., it necessarily follows that what he has of Thought, and what we call the Soul, is a mode of the attribute which we call Thought, and that nothing else except this mode belongs to his essence: so much so that when this mode comes to naught, the soul perishes also, although the above attribute remains unchanged. Similarly as regards what he has of Extension; what we call Body is nothing else than a mode of the other attribute which we call Extension; when this is destroyed, the human body also ceases to be, although the attribute Extension remains unchanged.

In this passage, Spinoza appears to claim that the soul is mortal. Let us put that aside for the time being. We will return to it later. For now, we will focus on the implication that Spinoza has already established the central distinction of the ontology he elaborates in the *Ethics*, namely that between substance, attribute, and mode. The soul is a mode of the attribute of thought, and the body a mode of the attribute of extension. Though the soul as "a finite created thing" may perish, the attribute of thought of which it is a modification is eternal. The same is true of the body, which ceases to exist at death, although the attribute of extension remains unchanged. In other parts of the *Short Treatise,* it is clear that Spinoza already holds many other core principles of the

ontology of the *Ethics*, twelve of which are significant in the present context: 1) there is only one substance; 2) substance necessarily exists (it is self-caused, or its essence is the same as its existence); 3) substance consists in infinite attributes only two of which we know, thought and extension, and such a substance is what we mean by God; 4) essence is activity and God's essence is infinite activity; 5) consequences flow from any essence with the same necessity that the equality of its interior angles to two right angles flows from the essence of a triangle; 6) God is the immanent cause of all things, which is to say that whatever he causes remains within him; conversely, the causal power, or activity, of a finite thing is an expression of the causal power of infinite substance; 7) God and Nature are the same; 8) body and soul (Spinoza substitutes the word "mind" for the word "soul" in the *Ethics*) are one and the same entity expressed as a modification of the attribute of extension on the one hand, and of the attribute of thought on the other; 9) each mode is a finite entity the essence of which does not imply its existence; 10) there is an infinite intellect in which everything that exists in reality exists in the form of thought; 11) that the infinite intellect has no thoughts other than those belonging to the totality of finite minds; and 12) that the infinite intellect is an immediate eternal mode in the attribute of thought, just as motion and rest are an immediate eternal mode in the attribute of extension (immediate eternal modes are expressions of God's essence that do not require the mediation of any other mode). All and all, these twelve principles indicate a considerable degree of coincidence between the ontology of the *Short Treatise*, which is also operative in the letter to Balling, and that of the *Ethics*.

There are, however, at least two ways in which the early and late ontologies differ. The first is that, in the letter to Balling, Spinoza does not yet make a rigorous and consistent distinction between eternity and duration, since he thinks that the consequences that flow necessarily from

an essence include events that occur in duration. This is implied by Spinoza's assertion that a father who participates in the essence of his son may have an awareness of the circumstances of his son's death even before it has occurred. In the *Ethics*, however, Spinoza will distinguish more rigorously between the eternity of essences and the duration of events. According to his later view, what follows necessarily from a finite essence conserves the eternity that characterizes that essence itself, and so cannot include any event in the order of duration. In his letter, Spinoza offers consolation to his friend by interpreting the imaginary experience of groans as proleptic knowledge of the event of his son's death due to the intimacy bordering on identity between father and son. But this method of consolation is not available to the Spinoza who authors the *Ethics*, because the identity between father and son is an identity of essences that has nothing to do with the prolepsis of events.

The second way in which the two ontologies differ concerns Spinoza's conception of the immortality of the soul in the *Short Treatise*. In the point we left unexplored in our discussion of the passage from "On the Human Soul" excerpted above, Spinoza claims that a particular mode of the attribute of Thought belongs to the essence of a finite human being "so that when this mode comes to naught, the soul perishes also..." If we read this passage carefully, we can see that Spinoza is not asserting that the soul is inherently mortal. Rather, in the *Short Treatise* as later in the *Ethics*, Spinoza holds that the soul can perish, though it need not do so. In the words of the *Treatise*:

> …the soul can become united either with the body of which it is the Idea, or with God, without whom it can neither be, nor be known.
> … if [the soul] is united with the body alone, and that body happens to perish, then it must perish also; for when it is deprived of the body, which is the foundation of its love, it must perish with it. But …if it

> becomes united with some other thing which is and remains unchangeable and lasting, then, on the contrary, it must also remain unchangeable and lasting (Ch. 23).

In the *Ethics*, the theory that the soul may either perish or survive eternally persists, but takes a new form involving the distinction between adequate and inadequate ideas, and that between active and passive affects. A human mind consists in a finite number of ideas, some of which are adequate and some inadequate. An adequate idea is one in which the mind derives certain characteristics of the essence of a finite mode from the nature of the attribute of God that the essence expresses. An inadequate idea, by contrast, is one that originates in the haphazard encounter of the human body with some other physical thing and has no logical connection with necessary consequences. Adequate ideas belong to the order of eternity, inadequate ideas to that of duration. Every act of framing an adequate idea is an experience of the affect of joy, since it is an affirmation of *conatus*, the power of the mind to exist and act. In the experience of joy we refer adequate ideas to God as their source. This experience of joy with the idea of God as its cause is what Spinoza calls the intellectual love of God. Such love is eternal, as is the source of adequate ideas. The more adequate ideas the mind contains, the greater the part of it that survives the death of the body.

As many commentators have pointed out, this conception of the eternity of the mind does not allow for personal immortality if personhood involves continuity of memory. The reason is simple: for Spinoza, memories are traces of encounters with finite modes that are left behind in the body, and so these traces must perish along with the body itself. But if personal identity depends on memory, and both come to an end with the death of the body, then what consolation can we derive from recognizing that the mind is eternal? The answer would appear to be, no consolation at all.

Although Spinoza had not fully developed his conception of the eternity of the mind when he wrote his letter to Balling, he already held that the soul is able to win immortality by uniting with God. But in the Letter, he refers, not to this unity or the immortality it permits, but to the unity of father and son, which Spinoza describes as the participation of the father in the son's essence. What is at issue here is not the intellectual love of God, but the far more common affect of a father's love for his child.

The conception of love in the letter and the *Short Treatise* differs from that in the *Ethics*. In the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza says that "Love … is nothing else than the enjoyment of a thing and union therewith …" The definition of love in the Ethics is: "Love is joy accompanied by the idea of an external cause" (3, Definition of the Emotions, 6). In both definitions joy is a fundamental component of the affect of love, but in the *Short Treatise*, joy is linked to union with the object enjoyed, and in the *Ethics* to the idea of an external cause. Union drops away in the later definition because, according to Spinoza, it is a property of love rather than part of its essence. In this case, the word "property" (*proprium*) means a being of the imagination (*ens imaginationis*). The sense of union with the object of love is not what it seems, but rather "the contentment that is in the lover by reason of the presence of the object of his love, by which the lover's joy is strengthened, or at least fostered" (3, Definition of the Emotions, 6, Ex.). The idea that love is an experience of union, which is in the letter to Balling as well as the *Short Treatise*, gives Balling's love for his son a quasi-mystical significance that it cannot have for the later Spinoza. It is important that the young Spinoza identifies Balling's love for his son with participation in the boy's essence. Were his love for the boy a participation in, or unity with, his son's instantiated mind and body, then it would fall on the side of duration rather than that of eternity. In the *Short Treatise*, the soul wins immortality through the love of God, by which it achieves unity with the

absolutely infinite being, the being whose essence implies its existence. The essence of Balling's son, however, is finite because its existence is a necessary expression of God's essence rather than a consequence of its own. It is a mode, not a substance. But, as an essence, it is an eternal mode. The implication is that Balling's love for his son elevates him above the mortal condition. But if this is an *unio mystica*, it is nonetheless union with a finite being.

The essence of Balling's son is eternal. Balling participates in it in the degree to which his essence and the boy's essence share a common nature. Since the boy is flesh of his father's flesh, he must also be soul of his father's soul. There is an intimate relation, not only between the body of the father and the body of the son, but between the essences of those bodies and their correlative ideas, in accordance with the parallelism of attributes. Like father, like son the saying goes. But the essences of all human bodies have common properties, and, so therefore, do their ideas, or souls. Every person who has ever lived or ever will live participates in every other, but with varying degrees of intimacy. As the *Acts of the Apostles* say, in their implicitly subjunctive fashion, we are "one in heart and mind."

Notice however that this spiritual communism is nothing that we need win. If we identify it with salvation - i.e. with fellowship in the "Holy Spirit" - then salvation is always already at hand. But we are normally unaware of that fact. Existence in the order of duration, as finite beings whose power is infinitely exceeded by the universe outside of us, exposes us to all of the passions that disturb our relations with one another. Hatred, anger, envy, indignation, guilt, jealousy, even overestimation of others set us at odds, and yet none of this is capable of eroding our essential commonality. For Spinoza, nothing that happens in duration has any effect on eternity. This is true even though the essence as expressed in a physical body (which Spinoza calls the "actual essence") is the same entity as the "formal essence" that exists eternally as part

of one or more attributes. However much we willingly cause each other to suffer, or even to die, we are of one flesh and spirit. The community of ideal essences is nothing other than what Spinoza means by the mind of God. Remember that, in the *Short Treatise*, he says that there are no thoughts in the mind of God that are not present in the totality of finite minds. If we call the communism of minds or souls, the "Kingdom of God," then it is a very peculiar Kingdom indeed, a Kingdom without a King. (There is no idea more foreign to Spinoza's philosophy than that of God as monarch).

Within this democratic "Kingdom," however, we remain individual beings. For Spinoza, all essences are singular, even when they are intrinsically related to one another. Universals are mere beings of reason (*ens rationis*), having no existence apart from thought. We are the persons we are not because of the continuity of our memories, but rather because our singular essences make us so. My essence appears in the realm of duration when the right combination of causal circumstances occurs. Only then does a finite body emerge whose parts are related in such a way as to instantiate my essence as something actual, in other words, as a durational being. This exposes me to the vagaries of the passions – mine as well as others' – and the antagonisms they bring in their wake. But my formal essence, and its relations with the essences of others, remain, on the plane of eternity, untouched by these passions and antagonisms. And they remain impervious to death. This is the hidden consolation in Spinoza's letter to Balling. The father participates in the son's essence eternally. "O death, where is thy sting? O grave where is thy victory?"

Yet Spinoza does not endorse the idea of universal salvation. Instead we seem to find in him a version of the traditional doctrine that salvation must be won, an idea that first appears in the *Short Treatise* and receives its canonical formulation in the concluding sentence of the *Ethics*:

Sed omnia preaclara tam difficilia quam rara sunt (“All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare”). But this conclusion does not sit well with the view that singular essences (in this case, minds or souls) are eternal and so remain what they are no matter what happens to their durational expressions. Gilles Deleuze attempts to resolve this problem in his book on Spinoza's expressionism with the ingenious idea that the essence as it exists outside of time is a sort of outline that the adventures of the essence as instantiated in duration either succeeds or fails to fill in. A life lived in passivity results in an essence that is an abstraction in the sense that it has little reality. The realization of an eternal essence depends on the intensification of the power of the body to act and the correlative power of the mind to conceive adequate ideas. Life is a test, although a sort of "chemical test" rather than one administered by a divine judge. In this way, Deleuze believes that Spinoza establishes an equivalent of salvation in traditional religion, minus its ideas of sin and judgment. But we can see that this solution to the problem of a life without purpose will not work - at least not as an interpretation of Spinoza's theory - and once again because it supposes that what happens to the body and mind in duration can affect the eternal essence. What then is the purpose of our existence in duration if our essence always remains what it is? That is Deleuze’s question: “What is the use of existing if we in any case rejoin our essence after death (*Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, 317) ?” The answer is that it has no use, which is to say that it serves no purpose at all. Spinoza’s ontology is inconceivable without its rejection of final causes. And if we ask what the efficient cause of this peculiar situation is, this duplication of our essence on the levels of time and eternity, we can only repeat Spinoza's insight, from a different context, that God does not lack the power to bring into being everything he is able to understand. That, of course, includes everything that comes into existence and is destined to pass away.

What is consoling in Spinoza's Letter is the message to Balling that he participates in the undying essence of his son. Even after death, father and son continue to occupy a small and intimate neighborhood on the sprawling map of eternal souls. But, as we have seen, Balling and his son are connected with others in a network of essences at greater or lesser degrees of proximity to one another, but in which none is an absolute stranger, each having its relational place in the Kingdom without a King.

Does this mean that we should give up the struggle to reduce the antagonisms that flow from our passions, and to create the social conditions necessary for winning the struggle, since we are destined to be saved anyway? Certainly not. The fact that we need not achieve salvation on the plane of eternity because there it is always secured does not mean that we do not need to achieve it on the plane of duration. And here we encounter the problem of material possessions.

Spinoza was fond of citing Plato's maxim, "Friends have all things in common" (although he mistakenly attributed it to Thales), and regarded the desire to cultivate friendship (*generositas*) as one the most important virtues. For Spinoza, private property is a cause of antagonism between people and therefore incompatible with friendship. The reason is that when you love something, by the principle of the imitation of affects I will love it too, other things being equal. But if your possession excludes my enjoyment of that thing, the result is pain with the idea of you as its cause, which is simply to say that I will hate you. I will try to do you harm so as to remove the cause of my pain, and the idea of me will be identified in your mind with the harm that I threaten. In other words, you will hate me in return. It follows that, in order to minimize hatred and encourage friendship, we must abolish private property to whatever extent we can. In Book 4 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza recognizes that, in a society with a sizable population, we cannot be friends with everyone. But we still need to reduce social antagonisms, since our true interest

demands that we have social peace as a condition of developing our powers of body and mind. From this recognition comes the political principle that society as a whole must meet the needs of the poor (4, App. 17). Spinoza anticipates the welfare state three hundred years in advance of its development, and he does so on implicitly communist principles. (It is easy to overlook that what neoliberals object to about the welfare state is precisely its implicit communism: distribution in accordance with need).

Because Spinoza's excommunication made it impossible for him to continue managing his father's company (which he was never any good at anyway, probably through lack of interest), it rescued him from membership in the Sephardic bourgeoisie. The *cherum* was a godsend. Spinoza was in the process of rejecting a life devoted to the acquisition of wealth, which he came to regard as a false good when not devoted to the satisfaction of simple needs, as his earliest work, the *Treatise on the Correction of the Understanding* attests. In a letter to another Collegiant friend, Jarig Jelles (Letter 44), written a few years later, Spinoza rejects material acquisition as a guiding principle of social organization as well as a mode of personal life. He assures Jelles that through "greed for riches commonwealths must necessarily perish…" The political-economic problem is to organize social relations in such a way that greed is minimized. This is one reason Spinoza argues, in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, that true religion, as opposed to superstition, remains necessary, even after his withering critique of the established churches. A reformed religion in Spinoza's sense is indispensable to social peace because it is able to impress upon the minds of the multitude that the only way to serve God is to serve other people through acts of justice and neighborly love.

In Book 4 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza develops a conception of humans as inherently social beings. A human being in isolation is the most pitiable of creatures. He or she has very limited

powers and is exposed to all the dangers of a universe that is not automatically hospitable to human life. In order to survive, people must combine with one another, thereby augmenting their power to exist and act. There is nothing more useful to us than a being who shares our nature, and nothing shares our nature as fully as another human being:

> Therefore nothing is more advantageous to man than man. Men, I repeat, can wish for nothing more excellent for preserving their own being than that they should all be in such harmony in all respects that their minds and bodies should compose, as it were, one mind and one body… (4, Pr. 18, *scholium*)

This passage calls to mind the one in Spinoza's letter to Balling where he says that "a father so loves his son that he and his beloved son are, as it were, one and the same." There is a similar assertion of unity between singular beings and a similar subjunctive qualification, except that the passage from the *Ethics* concerns the political problem of establishing the best commonwealth, while the passage in the letter to Balling bridges the divide between this life and the one experienced in eternity. Anyone familiar with Spinoza's political philosophy knows that he is not naïve about the nature of human beings. On the contrary, he shares the hard-minded realism of an author he held in high regard, Niccolò Machiavelli. But, in spite of this realism, there is an utopian impulse at the heart of Spinoza's politics, which we might express by saying that he proposes, to whatever extent possible, to model the earthly commonwealth on the communism of souls.

The purpose of the earthly commonwealth is not merely human survival, but the establishment of the peaceful, cooperative relations necessary for cultivating wisdom and the intellectual love of God. This is where Spinoza's communism reaches its apogee. The intellectual love of God is a good that is augmented rather than diminished by being shared. Once again by the principle of the imitation of affects, your love of God, or Nature intensifies mine. But since

the absolutely infinite being is not a finite resource, its possession is not exclusive. It cannot be monopolized by anyone, nor can it be divided among us. Each of us enjoys it in its entirety without the envy or hatred occasioned by private property: "The highest good of those who pursue virtue [the power to act] is common to all, and all can equally enjoy it." (4, Pr. 36)

Of course, the highest good is eternal as well as infinite. By sharing its enjoyment in this life, we are already beyond death.

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[i] *…nempe, pater (ut tui simile adducam exemplum) adeo filium suum amat, ut is et dilectus filius quasi unus indemque sint. Et quoniam (juxta id, quod ali occasione demonstravi) filii essentiae affectionum, et quae inde sequuntur, necessario in Cogitatione dari debet idea, et pater, ob unionem, quam cum filio suo habet, pars memorati filii est, etiam necessario patris anima de essentia ideale filii et ejusdem affectionibus, et iis, quae inde sequuntur, participare debet, ut alibi prolixius demonstravi.*