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Mogens Lærke

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French Historiographical Spinozism, 1893-2018
Delbos, Gueroult, Vernière, Moreau

MOGENS LÆRKE (Maison Française d'Oxford, CNRS)

Abstract: This paper explores a methodological lineage among French Spinoza scholars which can be traced back to texts written by Victor Delbos (1862-1916), which later branched out into two diametrically opposed orientations in the work by Martial Gueroult (1891-1976) and Paul Vernière (1916-1997), only to be reunited reflexively in the more recent work by Pierre-François Moreau (1948-). The aim is mostly to offer an original reconstruction of the way in which Delbos' historical program was inherited by subsequent Spinoza scholars. While retracing this lineage, my focus will be on a specific historiographical principle first formulated by Delbos. In the conclusion, however, I briefly turn to Spinoza himself, arguing how this reconstituted family of twentieth century French historians of philosophy can be characterized as a form of 'Historiographical Spinozism'.

1. Introduction

I am here interested in a particular, and previously unexplored, strand of French Spinoza reception, a methodological lineage in the French historiographical tradition that can be traced back to texts written in the late nineteenth century by Victor Delbos (1862-1916), which later branched out into two diametrically opposed orientations around 1950 in the work by Martial Gueroult (1891-1976) and Paul Vernière (1916-1997), only to be reunited reflexively in the more recent work by Pierre-François Moreau (1948-).¹ When retracing this lineage, my focus will be on a specific historiographical principle. It states, in a nutshell, that the force of a philosophical system can be measured according to two parameters: (1) the conceptual consistency it has in virtue of its internal organization; (2) the capacity it has to adapt to varying historical contexts without losing its basic identity. These two parameters, when taken together, encompass the idea that the resilience of a philosophy is a function of the plasticity of its structure. It is designed to hold together a dual ambition of systematic and contextual reading by focusing on the various uses to which a philosophical system has been put by both the author and by subsequent readers throughout the successive historical debates wherein it has been called upon to contribute. It grants the history of reception a central place in the genesis of the historical meaning of past philosophical texts.

The story I want to tell is the following. The principle was first formulated by Delbos in 1893. His ambition was to integrate (1) and (2) into a single coherent historiographical program. He was, however, not evidently successful in carrying out that program, but arguably left a methodological breach between the two parameters, a breach that was widened by his successors. Gueroult did not explicitly refer to the principle as stated by Delbos in

¹ I thank Delphine Antoine-Mahut, Leo Catana, and the anonymous reviewers of the BJHP for comments and suggestions. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own. I use the following abbreviations for Spinoza: TTP = *Theological-Political Treatise*, followed by chapter number in roman numerals. E I-V = *Ethics*, parts I-V. d = definition; a = axiom; p = proposition; s = scholium; L = lemma. I quote Spinoza from *Works*, translated by Edwin Curley, 2 vols.

1893. While discussing other methodological texts by Delbos, he did, however, enthusiastically endorse (1). At the same time, however, he defended a perennialist conception of the history of philosophy which formed a both stark and instructive contrast to (2). Vernière, on the contrary, explicitly embraced Delbos' entire principle, but chose in his own work, defined as work in the history of ideas rather than the history of philosophy, to focus exclusively on (2) while tending to entirely lose sight of (1). Finally, Moreau has, in more recent work, attempted to formulate a way in which (1) and (2) could be applied more coherently together within an integrated historiographical method for the history of philosophy.

The aim of the paper is mostly to offer an original reconstruction of the way in which Delbos' historical program was inherited by subsequent Spinoza scholars. In the conclusion, however, I will briefly turn to Spinoza himself and his notion of individuality in the *Ethics*, centered on notions of structure and perseverance, and to the way he made use of this conception in his theory of text interpretation in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. On this basis I will conclude by arguing how our reconstituted family of twentieth-century French historiographers can be characterized as a form of 'Historiographical Spinozism'.

2. Delbos

As Maurice Blondel noted in his 1921 obituary in the *Chronicum Spinozanum*, in the French context at least, Spinoza owed as much to Delbos as Delbos himself professed to owe to Spinoza (Blondel, 'Un interprète', 290). Delbos wrote two important books on the Dutch philosopher. *Le Problème moral dans la philosophie de Spinoza* (1893) was his doctoral thesis. The first half comprises a fairly straightforward reconstruction of Spinoza's 'moral' doctrine in the *Ethics* and the political works. The second half is dedicated to the reception of Spinoza, mostly in the German context, except for two short surveys showing that 'Spinoza's thought, which remained entirely foreign to the development of English philosophy, only entered the French trend of thought with difficulty' (Delbos, *Le Problème moral*, 484-527, here 489). The second work, *Le Spinozisme*, scientifically less important than *Le Problème moral* but enormously influential due to an incessant stream of reeditions since it first appeared posthumously in 1916, contains Delbos' lectures on Spinoza at the Sorbonne, delivered in 1912-13. It focuses exclusively on the internal construction of the *Ethics*, showing how 'this effort of construction and systematic coordination by which Spinoza attempted to correlate the intellectual evidence of his doctrine to the force of the deeper idea animating it' (Delbos, *Le Spinozisme*, 12).

The concern for the systematic unity of doctrines was, however, already an important feature of Delbos' approach in *Le Problème moral*. In the methodological preface, he stresses how philosophical concepts cannot be conceived in isolation but only through the relations they entertain with other ideas within a system:

Ideas are not put into the world in a state of abstraction or solitude; it is through their reciprocal relations that they support and call out for each other; they are not some sort of intellectual atoms, independent from every law, preexisting all order; it is in the form of a synthesis that they appear and develop. (Delbos, *Le Problème moral*, vi)

This same concern for the systematic unity also explains Delbos' deep attachment to the 'letter' of the text and his mistrust of hermeneutics claiming to go 'behind' it in search for

deeper meaning.² For this reason, for example, Delbos criticized Frederick Pollock and his landmark study *Spinoza: His Life and His Philosophy* (1880):

I have difficulties really understanding, in its most extreme forms, this distinction put forward by Mr. Pollock between the spirit and the letter, the idea and the system.³ Does he believe, by any chance, that the spirit can be separated from the letter without losing anything pertaining to its meaning and its life? The necessity of expressive signs is only apparently subjected to thought; in fact, it prompts it to liberate itself, to let go of its most immediate tendencies, gaining in depth and self-criticism. It prevents the philosopher, as also the artist, from becoming complacent in confused intuitions, from letting his mind float around in a vague sense of infinity; it subjects the spontaneous constructions of the understanding to a test which, in many cases, is decisive for their value. (Delbos, *Le Problème moral*, v)

The interpretation of doctrines should stick to the texts, because it is within language that a doctrine is harnessed and acquires philosophical shape. This is also why, in a 1917 article on methodology, Delbos spent numerous pages stressing how ‘we must be capable of this first assimilation of the thought of our author which consists in understanding the meaning of words’ (Delbos, ‘De la méthode’, 369).

At the same time, his defense of text-based systematic reconstruction was accompanied by a theory of historical change and variability of meaning which explains the two-pronged approach to Spinoza in *Le Problème moral*. Delbos articulated his position by means of a double evaluation of doctrines in terms of their ‘force’ and their ‘influence’, predicated upon, respectively, their degree of organization and their capacity for disorganization without denaturalization:

However, if the internal force of a doctrine is measured by the degree of organization it implies, one could also say, conversely, that its historical influence is measured by the degree of disorganization it can sustain without becoming fundamentally denaturalized. Subsequently, the problem that it considered essential no longer appears as the dominant one; the relations it had established among its ideas break up, or loosen up, or are transformed; the elements constituting it go off in all directions, almost always destined to remain apart. There is no longer a single life which absorbs or retains everything within it, but seeds of life that move away and spread out as best they can, deploying, in a variety of meanings, their secret energy. This is the fate of all the great doctrines; it has in particular been the fate of Spinoza’s doctrine. (Delbos, *Le Problème moral*, vi-vii)

Behind the many references to the notion of ‘life’ in this passage—the ‘life’ of doctrines; the ‘living framework’ of thoughts; conceptual ‘seeds of life’; their ‘secret energy’—we should,

² I entirely disagree with Vieillard-Baron’s characterization of Delbos’ method as motivated by ‘a concern to go beyond the letter of a philosophical text so as to seize its soul [...]’. (Vieillard-Baron, ‘Delbos et Bergson’, 373). Perhaps he takes his cue from Blondel who wrote about Delbos’ understanding of Spinoza that ‘against the letter of the system, one can also call upon the spirit that inspires it, in order to revive its very conclusions and complement them’ (Blondel, ‘Un interprète’, 298). But Blondel was not always a faithful reader of Delbos (Tourpe, ‘La lecture’, 2013).

³ Delbos provides no exact reference, but I assume he alludes to the following remark: ‘The truth is that the strength of Spinozism is not in the system as such, but in its method and habit of mind. Hostile critics have attacked the system ever since it was made known [...]; but even when they are successful the spirit eludes them’ (Pollock, *Spinoza*, 374). In other contexts, however, Pollock professes methodological principles not so far removed from those of Delbos himself (see e.g. Pollock, *Spinoza*, xliii; 83-84).

as Alexandre Matheron suggests, doubtless hear echoes of German idealism and Hegelianism (Matheron, 'Les deux Spinoza'). Somewhat closer to home, however, we could also hear echoes of Léon Ollé-Laprune (1839-1898), a Catholic philosopher whose teaching at the École Normale Supérieure deeply influenced Delbos (Delbos, 'Léon Ollé-Laprune'). Ollé-Laprune's 'philosophy of life' was published in a large book that appeared in 1894, *Le Prix de la vie*, but was developed long before that.⁴ This philosophy of life also had a methodological application. Hence, in a preface to one of Ollé-Laprune's books, Delbos described his teacher's general approach to concepts in terms of a 'critique' which consisted in 'asking oneself about the extent to which they respond to that supreme condition of healthy intellectual activity which appears in the immediacy of reason and life' (Delbos, 'Léon Ollé-Laprune', xliii). Putting to one side Ollé-Laprune's—for today's sensibilities decidedly off-putting at the limit of being outright offensive—iterations of this theory of life into a pedagogy of 'intellectual virility' designed for young men, one can certainly see from such determinations how a student of his would conclude that the force of philosophical doctrine is predicated upon its 'life' and 'vitality'.

We should also take note of the metaphor according to which the progressive disorganization and subsequent disintegration and scattering of a doctrine in its reception should be seen as kind of sowing of 'seeds of life'. Those remarks must, I think, be correlated with a later claim according to which there is 'always, among the philosophers who seem to proceed from Spinoza, a kind of virtual and prior Spinozism' (Delbos, *Le Problème moral*, viii). The notion of a 'virtual Spinozism' taking root in other philosophers and growing out of them like seeds planted in foreign soil proposes an image of the enduring force and relevance of past philosophical doctrines which, as we shall see, stands in stark contrast to Gueroult's later conception of *philosophia perennis* and his understanding of philosophy's 'worth' as necessarily predicted upon the essential relation it entertains with a transcendental domain of atemporal truth (see below and Gueroult 1952, 1969). The notion of 'virtuality' reappears in Delbos' 1917 text on the conceptions of the history of philosophy (translated into English in *The Monist* in 1918) in the context of a notion of 'development' designed to explain how different philosophies relate to philosophy as such:

Every development is the realization of a virtuality. That which is potential in a subject passes into action as the result of development. Thus, one and the same subject passes through a number of states and degrees: this does not prevent it from being essentially one and the same subject. In the present instance, the subject that is one and the same is philosophy whereas the various historical philosophies are states and degrees of its realization. (Delbos, 'The Conceptions', 404; translation modified)

Hence, in the context of both how different readings relate to the philosophy of which they are the reading, and how different philosophies relate to philosophy as such, Delbos' notion of the 'virtuality' of doctrines is designed to capture the way in which philosophy is transmitted through time, in history. While not always clear about what kind of disorganization would denaturalize a doctrine and what would not, Delbos correlated the enduring importance of a philosophy through shifting historical contexts with a certain plasticity of internal structure: 'What I have labored to rediscover and bring to light is the strong and flexible unity of a philosophy that, without being ever essentially altered, has succeeded in bending to the most diverse conditions of existence' (Delbos, *Le Problème moral*, ix).

The conception prompts a legitimate question about the relation a philosophical system entertains with the succession of concrete readings through which its meaning is

⁴ The book was based on lectures delivered in 1888-89. It subsequently went through a massive 49 editions. I have used the third edition of 1896 (Ollé-Laprune, *Le Prix*).

transmitted. More precisely, it prompts the question whether the system can be conceived in itself outside those readings or only within them, i.e. whether Delbos was committed to what at the time was referred to as ‘immanent critique’ or not. Delbos certainly subscribed to ‘immanent critique’ with respect to the relation *particular philosophies* entertain with *philosophy* as such. In a book-long commentary on *Le Problème moral* that he published in 1894 under the pseudonym Barnard Aiment, Maurice Blondel thus concluded that his friend had demonstrated how, ‘in the formation of this method which is named ‘immanent critique’, since it limits itself to understanding the internal organization of things and works without relating them to an external model or to preconceived criteria [...], the share of Spinozism is [...] even more considerable than that of Kantism’ (Blondel [pseud. Aiment], *Une des sources*, 32-33; cf. Troisfontaines, ‘Maurice Blondel’, 480-81). Delbos himself made similar point even more clearly in the article translated in *The Monist* in 1918, already quoted above: ‘At the outset, we must note that philosophy is not a thing that exists objectively [...]. *Philosophy* does not exist, but philosophies do, philosophical doctrines or conceptions which have appeared either successively or simultaneously [...]’ (Delbos, ‘The Conceptions’, 395). The Hegelian resonances are not accidental: Delbos praised Hegel for having shown that ‘no philosophy has wholly died; they all actually exist in genuine philosophy, as moments of a whole’, and for ‘mak[ing] philosophy [...] one with its history’, even though he rejected the idea that one could account for that history *a priori* (Delbos, ‘The Conceptions’, 405 and 407).

The question is, however, to what extent, for Delbos, the same considerations also applied to the relation various *interpretations* entertain with the *particular philosophy* of which they are the interpretation. Put in another way: did Delbos separate in any essential way a philosophy as originally conceived from its subsequent receptions, or did he consider the original, authorial conception of the doctrine simply as the first in a continuous succession of interpretations all staking a claim to the meaning of the philosophy as such? He often seemed to go in the latter direction. For example, he extolled ‘the advantage of understanding the vitality of Spinozism, the occasion to grasp, in action, its wonderful aptitude to transform itself, to rejuvenate itself, to blend in with new ideas that it could not have predicted, even with adverse ideas that it had expressly excluded’, asking rhetorically if it would ‘not be better to give free course, in its entire range, to the living framework of thoughts that have brought forth, through the various doctrines, the constantly renewed spirit of Spinozism?’ (Delbos, *Le Problème moral*, ix).

It is, however, not always clear just how willing he was in fact to give ‘free course’ to this ‘living framework of thought’, or the degree to which he placed all readings of a philosophy, including the author’s own, on a single interpretative continuum. Hence, in the conclusion of the work, Delbos decides to engage in an interpretative enterprise clearly at odds with such a conception:

This study coming to end, [...] it is perhaps permitted to extract the fundamental ideas that form the very basis of the *Ethics*, in order to discuss them independently from their particular applications. Doubtless, the way in which these ideas have performed and the ways in which they have had to transform themselves already provides an indication which allows to measure their importance and establish their value; however, without abstracting from these historical reasons, one is still in title to consider [these ideas] in themselves in order to see whether, in their own signification or relations, they adequately explain what they claim to explain. (Delbos, *Le Problème moral*, 531)

The reader here struggles somewhat to understand how, exactly, this concluding analysis coheres with what preceded it. Delbos fails to provide any principled explanation of how ‘consider[ing] [the principal ideas] in themselves’, ‘independently from their particular applications’, does *not* amount to ‘abstracting from the historical reasons’! Indeed, here, Delbos inadvertently drives a wedge between the systematic and the historical parts of his own project. This has certainly contributed to the impression, explored by Alexandre Matheron, that there exists ‘two Spinoza’s of Victor Delbos’ (Matheron, ‘Les deux Spinoza’).

3. Gueroult

History of philosophy scholars today principally know Gueroult from his landmark monographs on Descartes and Spinoza and for his protracted dispute with Ferdinand Alquié over the interpretation of those two philosophers, beginning in the earlier 1950s (see e.g. Brunschwig, ‘Goldschmidt and Gueroult’; Macherey, *Querelles*, 13-32; Peden, *Spinoza*, 65-94). On account of his early embrace of what he called ‘structural analysis’ in the history of philosophy, Gueroult is sometimes—somewhat inappropriately—considered a forerunner of structuralism (Dosse, *History*, 79-80). In the first instance, however, he was neither an anti-phenomenologist nor a proto-structuralist, but a central figure in a long line of ‘historian-philosophers’, as Merleau-Ponty called them, going from Delbos to Jules Vuillemin (Merleau-Ponty, *Les philosophes*, 1362-74; see also Lærke, ‘Structural Analysis’). Hence, according to Gueroult himself, his work was conceived ‘under the auspices of Renouvier, Boutroux, Delbos, Bergson, Brunschvicg, and Bréhier’ (Gueroult, ‘The History’, 582). Among these figures, however, Delbos occupied a privileged position. The last of volume of Gueroult’s *Histoire de l’histoire de la philosophie*, dedicated to French historiography from Condorcet onwards, included chapter-long critical examinations of all the fellow philosopher-historians cited above, except for one: Delbos. Apparently, he did not feel any particular urge to demarcate himself from him. In fact, Gueroult never seemed to find anything in Delbos to disagree with, expressing nothing but admiration for his work: ‘the felicitous formula of Delbos’; ‘Delbos is not in the habit of making mistakes’; ‘Delbos is never wrong’... (Gueroult, *Philosophie de l’histoire*, 242; cit. in Matheron, ‘Les deux Spinoza’, 311; cf. Moreau et Bove, ‘À Propos de Spinoza’, 169). In his *Philosophie de l’histoire de la philosophie*, which together with the 3-volume *Histoire de l’histoire de la philosophie* formed his so-called ‘dianoematics’, Gueroult weaved Delbos’ methodological work seamlessly into his own, sometimes quoting entire pages (Gueroult, *Philosophie de l’histoire*, 45-48, 52; quoting Delbos, ‘De la méthode’ and Delbos, ‘Les conceptions’). The very first sentence of *Descartes selon l’ordre des raisons* embraced a methodological principle originally formulated by Delbos in his 1905 *La Philosophie pratique de Kant*.⁵ Finally, Delbos is everywhere present throughout Gueroult’s two-volume work on Spinoza from 1968 and 1974 (*Spinoza I-II*). In this last context, however, we note a curious circumstance: Gueroult constantly quotes *Le Spinozisme* with approval, but makes not a single reference to *Le Problème moral*. I shall return to this significant fact below.

But let us first consider the reasons for Gueroult’s deference toward Delbos. The first concerns a shared scientific ambition. As Pierre-François Moreau has observed, ‘the true founder of the scientific reading of Spinoza was Delbos, and Gueroult always acknowledged that’ (Lærke and Moreau, ‘Interview’, 72). By ‘scientific’ we should here understand moral and religious disinterestedness. Delbos ‘wanted his teaching to be neutral’, as Étienne Gilson wrote about him in *Le Philosophe et la théologie* (Gilson, *Le Philosophe*, 42). This effort came sharply into focus in *Le Problème moral*. Indeed, at the time of the book’s publication,

⁵ Gueroult, *Descartes*, I, 9; quoting from Delbos, *La Philosophie pratique*, I, i; cf. Gueroult, *Philosophie de l’histoire*, 242.

he was criticized for not having rebuked Spinozist atheism in sufficiently strong terms (Maisonhaute, 'Victor Delbos', 467). But Delbos insisted that, as historian of philosophy, we ought to study the systems 'beyond our prejudices' and not 'accommodate the ideas to our desires' and 'demand from the different doctrines the solution to problems that they did not pose and that we impose upon them' (Delbos, *Le Problème moral*, ii). These were all ambitions and motivations to which Gueroult also subscribed.

The second reason, deeper and also more important for the present purposes, concerned the importance that Delbos attached to the letter of the text and to the systematic unity of doctrines. Similarly, Gueroult presented his method as a 'return to the text' (Gueroult, *Descartes*, I, 10). This method came sharply into focus in the controversy with Alquié. Alquié had defended a reading of Descartes drawing on insights from phenomenology, searching for the fundamental 'gesture' of the philosopher, showing how Descartes' metaphysics was grounded in intimate existential experiences, beginning with that of the *cogito* (Alquié, *La Découverte*). Gueroult had no regard for such 'novelistic' re-appropriation of Descartes' philosophy, exactly because, for him as it would have for Delbos, the approach did not pay sufficient attention to the text and the conceptual structure of the doctrine. In this respect, the criticism that Gueroult addressed to Alquié directly echoed the criticism that Delbos addressed to Pollock, already quoted above, namely that he was 'becoming complacent in confused intuitions' and 'letting his mind float around in a vague sense of infinity'. It was thus entirely appropriate that, in his book on Descartes, Gueroult should begin, in the very first sentence of the book, with a thinly veiled stab at Alquié which took the form of a quote from Delbos: "One ought to be wary of those games of reflection which, under the pretext of discovering the deep meaning of a philosophy, start out by disregarding its precise meaning"; this maxim by Victor Delbos was constantly on my mind while writing the present work' (Gueroult, *Descartes*, I, 9).

In opposition to such perceived historiographical amateurism, Gueroult championed his method of 'structural analysis' which, sticking closely to the texts of the philosophers, aimed at reconstructing philosophical doctrines by following two basic methodological rules: first, to search out whatever maximal systematic unity a given work will afford us; and, second, to respect whatever instructions about interpretation provided within the work itself (Gueroult, 'De la méthode'). Doubtless, we can hear in those requirements the echo of Delbos' commitment to 'immanent critique' and to the notion that 'through the language and the works of a philosopher, as far as this is possible, we should be searching out the doctrine of the philosopher as he conceived of it himself. And all doctrines must present themselves more or less as an organized set of ideas' (Delbos, 'De la méthode', 373). In practice, in Gueroult, this resulted in myopic and painstakingly detailed systematic reconstructions of the philosopher's 'works', avoiding sweeping claims about the philosophy's fundamental 'nature', 'spirit', 'gesture', or the like. Or, as Moreau puts it, 'Gueroult [...] obliged Spinoza studies to undertake a rigorous return to the texts, a reconstruction of the precise meaning of concepts' (Lærke and Moreau, 'Interview', 73).

In some crucial respects, however, Gueroult did *not* follow Delbos, which explains why, in his volumes on Spinoza, he constantly quoted *Le Spinozisme* but never *Le Problème moral*.

First, since Gueroult held that correct interpretation must heed the authors' own instructions about how to read their texts, any reading diverging from that path was *a priori* put to one side as inauthentic: 'It is not temerarious to think that [...] a radical difference between the method recommended by the philosopher and that of those who have commented upon him have had regrettable consequences for the interpretation of his work' (Gueroult, 'De la méthode', 172-73). When writing this, Gueroult doubtless had Alquié in mind, but the underlying principle suggests that the history of reception could hardly amount to more than a

series of either slavish repetitions or ‘regrettable’ deformations. The second part of Delbos’ *Le Problème moral* simply had no place within Gueroult’s historiographical program.

Second, Gueroult did not adopt the language of ‘life’ omnipresent in *Le Problème morale* but conspicuously absent from *Le Spinozisme* (Matheron, ‘Les deux Spinoza’). He did not share Delbos’ semi-Hegelian conception of immanent critique and he did not subscribe to idea that the history of reception was an essential part of the ‘life’ of doctrines. Certainly, Gueroult would stress the importance of ‘the living experience’ of philosophy as the necessary starting point for any possible historiography. He would, however, in the same breath also stress that a transcendental a-temporal domain of truth ‘remain[ed] as the condition of possibility of the living philosophical experience in history’ (Gueroult, *Philosophie de l’histoire*, 105). Indeed, for him, philosophical truth was by definition ‘a conception claiming extra-temporal validity’ (Gueroult, ‘The History’, 566; cf. Gueroult, *Leçon*, 9). Hence, when Delbos predicated the ‘force’ and ‘influence’ of a philosophy on its capacity to maintain itself in *duration* throughout shifting intellectual contexts, Gueroult predicated its ‘worth’ on the *perennity* or *atemporality* of its claims. In this respect, Gueroult was more closely aligned with his predecessor at the Collège de France, Étienne Gilson (Chimisso, *Writing the History*, 136). This did not imply, however, that Gueroult entirely agreed with Gilson. Gilson thought of the *philosophia perennis* in terms of a general structure ‘wherein the individualized structures constituting the systems fade away’ (Gueroult, *Leçon*, 29). Gueroult denied that any such general structure could be determined: ‘There are no general structures, but only individualized structures, inseparable from the contents attached to them’ (Gueroult, *Leçon*, 33). On his view, there was not *one* perennial philosophy of which each philosophy elucidated a *part*, but only a *multitude* of philosophies each staking their distinct claims to the perennial truth of the *whole*. Hence, within this theory, the *philosophia perennis* figured as a kind of regulative idea in the Kantian sense, as the condition of possibility of all past and present philosophy (Lærke, ‘Structural Analysis’, sect. 5).

4. Vernière

In 1954, at the exact opposite end of Gueroult with respect to the reception of Delbos’ method, Paul Vernière, later best known for his work on Diderot and other key figures of the French High Enlightenment, published his doctoral thesis *Spinoza et la philosophie française avant la Révolution*, a monumental historical account of Spinoza’s position in the French intellectual world in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, inspired by the work on Diderot by the literary historian Jean Pommier, professor and successor to Paul Valéry at the Collège de France (Pomeau, ‘Paul Vernière’, 350).

In stark contrast to Gueroult’s approach to Spinoza, Vernière proposed, ‘without losing sight of the auteur, to turn to his audience’ (Vernière, *Spinoza*, 4). The aim, however, was not to simply to retrace the path that Spinozism had followed through the French eighteenth century, for Vernière agreed with Delbos that there wasn’t much of such a path: ‘Spinoza’s fortunes in France were not as brilliant in France as in England and, above all, in Germany’ since ‘nowhere was the public more rebellious with regard to this austere and stripped down thought than in France’ (Vernière, *Spinoza*, 1; cf. 695). He agreed entirely that Spinozism did not enter French philosophy unscathed or was ever transmitted in its original form. And yet his study put in full view an extraordinarily rich and varied reception of Spinoza in the French Enlightenment, showing that ‘the appearance of Spinoza in the field of French thought is of the utmost importance’ (Vernière, *Spinoza*, 698).

We should see no contradiction between these different assessments since, contrary to Delbos and especially Gueroult, Vernière was unmoved by ‘the worry that the real Spinoza was ignored’ (Vernière, *Spinoza*, 700). He entirely agreed that Spinoza’s reception in the

Enlightenment was shot through with misunderstanding, clumsy error, and random adaptation: ‘Instead of denying the interest of this prolonged misunderstanding between authentic Spinozism and French thought, I have preferred to search out its causes, to retrace its driving forces, and to mark its limits’ (Vernière, *Spinoza*, 696). His aim, in short, was to ‘study fruitful mistakes’ in all their ramifications:

I have not undertaken to retrieve a doctrine in its purity, but to study, within a society not at all prepared to receive it, the clumsy insertion of a doctrine, the hazardous adaptations it underwent according to whatever it hit upon or overlapped with, the influence which it exerted on the ideas and on the minds. (Vernière, *Spinoza*, 696; cf. 702)

As the paradigmatic example of his approach, Vernière demonstrated for instance how the notion of ‘neo-Spinozism’ developed by Diderot in his article on ‘Spinozism’ in the *Encyclopédie* was in fact a ‘conscious deformation’ of Spinoza’s philosophy aiming at updating it, taking into account the previous ‘hundred years of biological discoveries’, giving rise to a form of ‘evolutionist vitalism’.⁶

The explicit inspiration for Vernière’s history of French Spinozism was the methodology developed by Delbos in *Le Problème moral*, but only partially adopted. Vernière thus began his study with a brief methodological introduction, providing a rudimentary account of the philosophical value of the history of reception, focusing on a passage in Delbos with which we are already familiar:

Victor Delbos, who had no little knowledge of these matters, said: ‘If the internal force of a doctrine is measured by the degree of organization it implies, one could also say, conversely, that its historical influence is measured by the degree of disorganization that it can sustain without becoming fundamentally denaturalized’. (Vernière, *Spinoza*, 3)

When expanding on this view, Vernière adopted a vitalist language highly reminiscent of Delbos: ‘Maybe the life and efficacy of a doctrine requires incomprehension, alteration, amalgamation. Orthodoxy in philosophy is a seed of death’ (Vernière, *Spinoza*, 701). He moreover acknowledged the input from Delbos regarding this conception of the ‘life’ of doctrines, albeit indirectly. Hence, in his discussion of this conception of the ‘life’ of doctrines in the conclusion of his book, Vernière quoted a passage from Ollé-Laprune’s *Le Prix de la vie* of 1894 where the latter explicitly referenced Delbos’ book on Spinoza, noting how ‘truly, sometimes, one has the impression that, in this century now coming to a close, Spinoza shall replace Kant as the master of intelligences and lives’ (Ollé-Laprune, *Le Prix*, 30 [quoting Delbos 1893: 565], cit. in Vernière, *Spinoza*, 701n1).

What Vernière did *not* adopt from Delbos though, was the exact part of Delbos’ program that *Gueroult* embraced, namely, the idea that the force of a doctrine is a function of its *systematic unity*. Instead, he professed to having ‘been guided by a principle of efficacy: the real influence of a doctrine and the intellectual fermentation that it produces often does not depend on its dogmatic rigidity but on its disintegration’ (Vernière, *Spinoza*, 700). He deemed it ‘essential for the historian of ideas to ask himself about the reasons for these errors and distortions’, considering it ‘normal that every novel thought, when coming into contact with

⁶ Vernière, *Spinoza*, 699; cf. 528-611. See also Vernière, ‘Le Spinozisme’; Lærke and Moreau, ‘The Reception’, sect. 4. For a more recent iteration of Vernière’s perspective on the reception of Spinoza in the French Enlightenment, see Citton, *L’Envers de la liberté*.

the dominant opinion, is systematically deformed by its adversaries as well as by its first followers' (Vernière, *Spinoza*, 4 and 3).

Nonetheless, Vernière somewhat self-consciously nurtured doubts about the *philosophical* value of the Spinoza readings the history of which he had set out to recount. He admitted that, within them, 'the thinker and his work can only appear to be dangerously compromised' (Vernière, *Spinoza*, 3-4). Behind such remarks, it is not difficult to hear concessions to conceptions of the history of philosophy and its philosophical 'worth' similar to those found in Gueroult. For this reason, Vernière described his book as a work, not in 'philosophy, but in the history of ideas'. This conception of a 'history of ideas' was not identical to the one best-known among English-language readers, namely, Arthur Lovejoy's. As Victor Goldschmidt points out, it should rather be understood in the context of an original French school of *histoire des idées*—in political science and literary studies—in the 1950s and 1960s, which also included writers such as Jean Ehrard and Jean Touchard. Goldschmidt defines it as discipline which, in opposition to the traditional German-style 'history of problems' of which Gueroult was one of the principal French heirs but still not reducible to the 'history of civilizations' associated with Lucien Febvre and the *Annales* school, aimed at studying philosophies in their relation to 'public conscience' (Goldschmidt, *Platonisme*, 241; cf. Meyriat, *La Science Politique*, 21-40). At any rate, Vernière's 'history of ideas' was not concerned with 'retrieving authentic doctrine', but rather designed 'to move around with pleasure or even ease in errors, that is to say, the errors of others', with the goal of 'showing how the ideas are interpreted among each other, how they battle and overlap' (Vernière, *Spinoza*, 3). Hence, if we compare with the passage from Delbos that Vernière adopted as his own, he finally took Delbos' conception of the 'force' of a doctrine on the one hand, and its 'influence' on the other, to express two entirely separate aspects of a philosophy's life, indeed to be addressed by two distinct *disciplines*: the history of philosophy and the history of ideas, respectively.

5. Moreau

Pierre-François Moreau's approach to Spinoza is most often—and with very good reason—associated with such figures as Louis Althusser and Alexandre Matheron. In the English-speaking world, he is perhaps best known for his editorship of the new standard edition and French translation of Spinoza's works from the Presses universitaires de France and for his efforts to internationalize the study of Spinoza. Here, however, I want to focus on how his Spinoza research can be seen as an attempt to reactivate Delbos' full historiographical program and to overcome the internal tensions characterizing that program, in light of the diametrically opposed elaborations later proposed by Gueroult and Vernière. By the same token, Moreau's historiography represents an attempt at holding the history of philosophy and the history of ideas together in a unified historiographical program.

His clearest methodological statement can be found in the introductory chapter of *Problèmes du spinozisme* of 2006, mostly a collection of previously published articles on a variety of topics in Spinoza. In the very first phrase of that introduction, he unambiguously adopts Delbos' and Gueroult's shared commitment to text-based historiography: 'Reading Spinoza, as is the case for all the philosophers, is first of all to work on his texts' (Moreau, *Problèmes*, 7). Hence, in line with Delbos' attachment to the 'letter of the text' and insistence upon the 'necessity of expressive signs' and Gueroult's 'return to the text', he stresses how 'the workings of a thought play out through the workings of language' (Moreau, *Problèmes*, 8). Moreover, he stresses the crucial importance of reading the philosopher's concepts in the light of systematic context of the entire work:

Structural analysis aims at bringing to light the architecture of a philosophical system. The force of such a method is that it stresses the consistency of a universe, or the fact that the concepts of a philosopher are not reducible to homonymous concepts moving through the entire history of thought, but that, on the contrary, they derive their meaning from the systematic sequence into which they are inserted. (Moreau, *Problèmes*, 7)

At the same time, however, he cautions that ‘the danger [...] is to fix the thought of the author within a closed system’ (Moreau, *Problèmes*, 7). The structure of the system must be opened up to context and reception. In that context, in a 2004 interview destined for a Danish philosophical journal, while discussing the relation between materialism and what Vernière designated as the French Enlighteners’ ‘neo-Spinozism’, he alludes to the same passage from Delbos as did Vernière:

But it so happens that this reformulation of materialism took place under the sign of what Vernière describes as ‘neo-Spinozism’; the paradox, so to speak, is that one must also modify Spinoza’s thought in order to make it the engine of such a transformation. But, after all, maybe one can measure the force of a thought by the number of modifications it is capable of undergoing. In any case, it is more interesting to decipher the history of ideas in that way than reducing it to a series of misunderstandings. (Lærke and Moreau, ‘Interview’, 70; cf. Lærke and Moreau, ‘The Reception’)

And yet, the way in which Moreau appropriates Delbos’ principle is different from Vernière’s. It can be illustrated by turning to a text from 2004 on the notion of ‘radical Enlightenment’, here understanding by this expression what Jonathan Israel understands by it in his *Radical Enlightenment* (2001). For Israel, we recall, the ‘radical enlightenment’ refers to a pervasive pan-European current in early modern intellectual culture ostensibly rooted in Spinoza’s philosophy, deeply secular, democratic, egalitarian, tolerationist, and opposed to the mainstream ‘moderate Enlightenment’, represented by figures like Locke and Voltaire. It has been noted frequently that the categories of Israel’s ‘Spinozist’ enlightenment apply only very superficially to *Spinoza’s* philosophy (e.g. Melamed, ‘Charitable Interpretations’). This is a point that Moreau takes up as well, but on a positive note. Hence, he notes that, even for Israel himself, the most paradigmatic expressions of the various ideological features that make up the ‘radical’ conception of Spinozism are not found in Spinoza’s texts. Instead, Israel seeks them out in texts written by thinkers in his entourage, like his Latin master Franciscus van Enden, or his friend Lodewijk Meijer, or Adriaan Koerbagh. Spinoza himself is conspicuously absent from the core formulations of ‘Spinozist’ radicalism: ‘Everything thus occurs as if we were confronted with a Spinozism without Spinoza’ (Moreau, ‘Spinoza est-il spinoziste?’, 293). In fact, if the radical enlightenment is ‘Spinozist’, it is not because it conforms to Spinoza’s considered philosophical views, but because it entertains an essential relation to a common notion of Spinozism extracted partly from texts by authors who were part of Spinoza’s own context, and partly from innumerable readings, both appropriations and refutations, of Spinoza’s texts from the period. In reality, the same point applies not only to Spinoza’s works, but to practically all texts labeled ‘radical’ by Israel: they never map perfectly onto Israel’s definition of Spinozist radicalism, a category which only becomes applicable to particular cases on the condition of readjustment, restriction, displacement, and critical demarcation. However, rather than taking that as a pretext to reject the notion of radical enlightenment, Moreau takes it to bear witness to the adaptability and productivity of

the category of Spinozist radicalism, making it a useful tool in a historiographical heuristic. Hence, he speculates,

one could imagine a form of argumentation based on the idea that the true significance of an author in intellectual history has less to do with what he truly said than with what his successors have made him say—on the condition of showing that what they made him say was in a certain sense allowed, or produced, by the dynamics of the system itself. (Moreau, ‘Spinoza est-il spinoziste?’, 295)

On this understanding, as Moreau points out in another text, ‘the history of reception [...] is an invitation to ask what such interpretations, even when they are biased, hang on to in the texts’ (Moreau, *Problèmes*, 8). Moreau here clearly separates his approach from both Gueroult’s and Vernière’s, but performs a reflexive return to the full formulation of Delbos’ principle. Rather than reconstructing, like Gueroult, the singular systematic intention of a philosophy exclusively following interpretative instructions supplied by the author himself, he proposes to study how, within a succession of intellectual contexts that puts the original context of writing on a par with those of subsequent receptions, a philosophy is conceived or, later, called upon to solve a variety of problems, while considering its ability to sustain such divergent uses without the fundamental structures of the philosophy being compromised. At the same time, however, and contrary to Vernière, he also invites us to return to the system with each reading, to consider what, within the system itself, could prompt such receptions. On such a reading strategy, considering how a philosophy fares in the confrontation with other systems in different contexts, the ‘dimension of controversy’ takes on particular urgency to the extent that ‘a philosophical system constructs itself in relation an exterior or, rather, the exterior is in the interior [...], so that one must pay attention to the conflicts into which a philosophy inserts itself’ (Moreau, *Problèmes*, 8). When envisaged in this way, instead of having only ‘regrettable consequences’ as Gueroult put it, differences and displacements in interpretative perspectives on a given work, both within a given single context and from one context of debate to another, become the central engine in the history of philosophy. A past philosophical text, in the successive historical contexts wherein it is called upon to play a role, acquires original layers of meaning throughout its reception that are constantly being added to its full historical signification. It acquires, as Moreau puts it, ‘a history in the strong sense’ (Moreau, ‘Pour une épistémologie’, 346).

6. Conclusion: French Historiographical Spinozism

As Delphine Antoine-Mahut has observed, in nineteenth-century France, writing the history of philosophy was a family affair (Kolesnik-Antoine, ‘Is the History of Philosophy a Family Affair?’). How different philosophical lineages, allegiances, and quarrels were delineated, how philosophical families were circumscribed, was not just a question of convenient classification or historical exactitude, but a way of expressing one’s philosophical background and demarcating oneself from adversaries both inside and outside one’s own philosophical family. At the turn of the twentieth century, Delbos’ self-conscious effort toward a new ‘neutral’ approach was both meant and received as an attempt to close this whole family business. And yet it is clear that, in the century that followed, the history of French historiography of philosophy did not cease to play out as a series of protracted family feuds between Marxist, structuralist, and phenomenological, etc., approaches to largely the same corpus of canonical philosophical texts. For example, in recent work, Knox Peden has traced an anti-phenomenological lineage within French Spinozism from Cavailles to Deleuze, via

Gueroult, Desanti, and Althusser (Peden, *Spinoza*). Here, I have tried to circumscribe another such family of historiographers, formed by Delbos, Gueroult, Vernière, and Moreau.

But what kind of family do they form? Obviously, they all have a common interest in Spinoza. And, to be sure, Spinoza's philosophy lends itself particularly well to the application of Delbos' two original principles: It is, at the same time, animated by a strong *systematic* ambition—geometrical demonstration in philosophy, no less—and the object of a particularly varied and influential history of *reception*. I think, however, that there is one additional reason why the historiographical concerns and methodological approaches we have studied above have been formulated within a genealogy of *Spinoza* scholars. That additional reason concerns Spinoza's own theory of text interpretation and, in particular, the relation it entertains with his general conception of individuals and individuation.

According to Spinoza's *Ethics*, what defines the formal essence of an individual is a kind of *structure*, or what Spinoza describes as a structure of motion and rest, according to which its parts 'communicate their motion in a certain fixed manner' (EIIp13, L1 and a2). What defines the actual essence of an individual is a striving to 'persevere in being' indefinitely in time, or what Spinoza calls its *conatus* (EIIIp7). Structure and perseverance correspond to the two sides of an individual's essence, formal and actual, respectively. The passage into non-existence, or destruction, of an individual is caused by external forces overwhelming its *conatus*, so to speak, causing the dissolution of this structure and ending its duration. However, depending on different factors, most importantly the complexity of the defining relation or structure, individuals are endowed with a certain flexibility of essence, a relative power to be affected in various ways which allows them to undergo certain modifications without however losing their form or individuality (EIIp13, L4-7).

Spinoza develops this theory of flexible essences through the consideration of physical bodies in the excursus inserted into the second part of the *Ethics* which is sometimes described as the 'physical digression' (after EIIp13). Throughout the *Ethics*, he shall apply it particularly to the consideration of human beings, their bodies and minds. However, as he insists, 'the things we have shown so far are completely general and do not pertain more to man than to other individuals [...]' (EIIp13s). And he does, in fact, apply the exact same kind of analysis to other kinds of individuals, including to individual *texts*. Indeed, in the *Tractatus Theologico-politicus*, this is exactly how he proposes to interpret the text that is the *Bible*, claiming that 'the method of interpreting Scripture does not differ at all from the method of interpreting nature, but agrees with it completely' (TTP VII, in *Works*, II, 171; see also Laux 1993: 97-104). This exegetical principle is not an analogy. Spinoza is not correlating two distinct domains, proposing to interpret the Bible *as if* it was comparable to (the whole of) nature. Instead, he suggests analyzing it as (the part of) nature that it in fact *is*, as a *thing* that exists. And, like every other thing, the Bible is a body with a corresponding idea, an open, individual structure formed by a *text* and a *meaning*. In order to grasp this meaning, we must enquire into the contexts and circumstances of its constitution and transmission, i.e. write a history of how it has persevered in existence. This history is double. First, it is a history of how the Bible was conceived and collated by its authors, including 'the life, character, and concerns of the author of each book, who he was, on what occasion he wrote, at what time, for whom and finally, in what language' (TTP VII, in *Works*, II, 175). Second, it includes the history of transmission and reception, or what Spinoza calls the 'fortune' of the text, including 'how it was first received, into whose hands it fell, how many different readings of it there were [...]' (TTP VII, in *Works*, II, 175: translation modified). From this varied history of the Bible's constitution and reception, Spinoza does however also extract a simple meaning not only common to all of its internal parts, or books, but also to all versions, editions and translations of the whole, and which thus constitutes both its specific individual character and guarantees its identity through time. This individual core structure is what Spinoza calls

‘universal faith’ and it reduces to a set of simple doctrines which necessarily prompt people who believe in them to practice justice and charity (TTP XIV, *Works*, II, 268-69).

In short, Spinoza proposed a naturalist model of text interpretation in which the truth of the Bible is understood in terms of an enduring basic, individual structure of meaning which perseveres through a great many variations, text versions and interpretations, throughout history. Now, to my knowledge, our four French historiographers do not explicitly discuss, or only very briefly, whether their own principles for the study of past philosophies are aligned or not with the principles of historical text interpretation proposed by the one past philosopher about whom they all wrote, namely Spinoza.⁷ I shall not speculate about the role Spinoza in fact played in the elaboration of their historiographical approaches. Yet I hope it should be evident enough how much Spinoza’s basic conception of individuality, including the theory of text interpretation he derives from it, resonates with the historiographical principles discussed above; it hope it should clear how much Spinoza’s understanding of the structure, variability, and effort of individuals, when applied to such individuals as are past philosophical works, will generate historiographical principles that are strikingly similar to those first formulated by Delbos, and subsequently explored in its various aspects by Gueroult, Vernière and Moreau. This given, I think it not inappropriate to speak of the family of philosopher-historians reunited above in terms of a ‘French Historiographical Spinozism’.

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⁷ On one occasion, however, Moreau offers some general remarks about the history of reception as a history of ‘theoretical structures’ and their ‘force’, explicitly adopting a Spinozist model (Moreau, ‘Pour une épistémologie’). One could also mention how, for Maurice Blondel, ‘Delbos treats the world of systems and Spinozism in the same way as Spinoza treated the world of nature and passions [...]’ (Blondel, ‘Un interprète’, 295).

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