

Pour Mario Schenberg,  
avec le respect de  
l'administration de

MICHEL PATY

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EINSTEIN AND SPINOZA\*

Einstein was often asked to write on Spinoza, or to provide prefaces for books on him,<sup>1</sup> but he constantly refused, claiming to be largely ignorant of the work of the man for whom he had a deep veneration, speaking of him as “our master Spinoza” (*unseres Meisters Spinoza*, letter to Willy Aron, October 17, 1946), who “was the first”.<sup>2</sup> “Unfortunately”, he wrote, “to like Spinoza is not sufficient to be allowed to write on him: one must leave it to those who have gone further into the historical background” (letter to S. Hessing, September 8, 1932),<sup>3</sup> i.e. into a precise knowledge of his life and work. Probably I should have followed such an illustrious example of modesty and deep respect, leaving to those better acquainted with Spinoza’s thought — who are numerous — the task of speaking competently of him. However, after much hesitation, I finally made up my mind and stopped hesitating to speak, as I had been asked, on the topic ‘Einstein and Spinoza’, because I have become more and more convinced that these two thinkers have indeed a deep relation to one another. Knowing Einstein’s thought somewhat, I have been, so to speak, naturally led to go further in my knowledge of Spinoza’s; and I finally came to believe that I could perhaps help, though in a modest way, to make intelligible the nature of this relation, which in fact illuminates at the same time the depth of Einstein’s philosophical thought and the exceedingly contemporary importance of Spinoza.<sup>4</sup>

1. ON MISINTERPRETATIONS

In such a matter, one should be careful about misinterpretations. I shall stress two of these here. The first would be to think it possible, useful or legitimate to find in a given field of investigation of contemporary thought — and notably in science — some kinds of illustration or justification — as well as, on the contrary, of refutations — of Spinoza’s thought considered as a system capable of application.<sup>5</sup> Some have seen, for example, in the space-time of special and general relativity a modern equivalent of Spinozistic substance. Indeed, Hermann Min-