

## J.M.G. Le Clézio and Baruch Spinoza: Understanding and Accepting the 'God' of Material Reality

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### Abstract

The Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza and the contemporary Franco-Mauritian author J.M.G. Le Clézio place great emphasis on the materiality of the human condition. For both of these extremely divergent thinkers, the path to existential redemption and spiritual edification is inseparable from the biotic network of life to which we are inextricably linked. Given that nothing exists in a cosmic vacuum in complete isolation from other material organisms, Spinoza and Le Clézio urge the modern subject to deconstruct seductive, anthropocentric ideology and to embrace reality. Indeed, understanding and accepting our own corporality in addition to exploring the complex relationship between ourselves and the cosmic forces that sustain us is perhaps the only true path to self-actualization that allows us to project meaning upon the absurdity of the universe.

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### 1. Introduction

J.M.G. Le Clézio and Baruch Spinoza are thinkers that incessantly underscore the materiality of the human condition in an interconnected and interdependent universe. Although their writing styles are quite dissimilar, both authors have a predilection to explore the universal laws that govern the existence of every creature on this planet including human beings. Moreover, Le Clézio and Spinoza compel the subject to accept life for what it truly is as opposed to embracing seductive illusions that conceal fundamental, ontological realities. Deconstructing enticing anthropocentric and religious ideology that is antithetical to rudimentary ecological truths, the narrator of *L'Extase Matérielle* affirms: «Nous dressons les remparts de nos systèmes, de nos belles phrases et de nos paradis imaginaires; nous habitons nos maisons d'illusion» (161). For Le Clézio and Spinoza, if any type of meaningful redemption or transcendence is to be found, it is in the terrestrial divine that it must be discovered.

### 2. Contextualization of the Narratives

Published posthumously after Spinoza's untimely demise due to consumption, *The Ethics* is a rather complex work that many scholars consider to be his «philosophical masterpiece» (Nadler 31). In stark contrast to the lyrical prose of Le Clézio that explains why François Mauriac once referred to the Franco-Mauritian author as the «meilleur poète contemporain,» Spinoza attempts to convey his ideas with a sort of mathematical precision (Dormoy 123). As François Doyon elucidates, «Spinoza est convaincu qu'un sys-

tème métaphysique doit être déductif et nécessairement logique, selon un modèle calqué sur celui des mathématiques, des démonstrations géométriques en particulier. C'est pourquoi l'*Ethique* est présentée ‘suivant l'ordre géométrique’ avec tout un système de définitions, d'axiomes, de propositions, de démonstrations, de scolies, etc.» (10). In addition to this mathematical meticulousness noted by Doyon, Spinoza's fascination with science and the philosophical implications of its laws are also quite evident in *The Ethics*. Indeed, Spinoza's most renowned treatise transgresses traditional disciplinary boundaries in an effort to understand the human experience more fully.

Although Le Clézio was clearly unsatisfied with the final product of his essay *L'Extase Matérielle* given that he recently labeled it «une tentative vaine d'écrire un essai philosophique,» Stephen Smith asserts that *L'Extase Matérielle* is «possibly the single most important tract in his entire oeuvre» (Roussel-Gillet 30; 58). Despite the aforementioned differences in style, *L'Extase Matérielle* appears to have drawn inspiration from Spinoza's *The Ethics*. Similar to Spinoza, Le Clézio continually urges the reader to take a closer look at matter itself in this early seminal work. As the narrator declares, «Il faut que nous regardions un peu plus précisément la matière. La riche, la vertueuse, la douloureuse matière, tragique champ de bataille [...] Vous, vous êtes l'enjeu» (46). In this passage, the reader is also struck by the profound existential anguish expressed by the narrator which is reminiscent of the searing pain of Leclézian protagonists such as Adam Pollo, Beaumont, and Roch. In other words, the influence of existentialism<sup>1</sup> upon the author's early writings is also quite visible throughout the entire *oeuvre*.

### 3. Matter and its Modifications

In *The Ethics* and *L'Extase Matérielle*, Spinoza and Le Clézio posit that the universe is comprised of only matter and its modifications. Instead of trying to separate oneself from that which cannot be transcended, both authors beckon the subject to accept this scientific reality. Clearly explaining his position in the corollary to Proposition VI at the beginning of the essay, Spinoza affirms, «For in the universe nothing is granted, save substances and their modifications» (n.p.).<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Spinoza will later clarify that the substance to which he refers throughout the work is indeed matter. As the author elucidates, «matter is everywhere the same [...] its parts are not distinguishable, except in so far as we conceive matter as diversely modified, not really, but modally» (n.p.). Like every other sentient and non-sentient organism that inhabits this biosphere, the human race is merely one ephemeral mode that is inextricably linked to the rest of the universe. Additionally, matter is constantly evolving and recycling its energy in order to generate new life. Throughout *The Ethics*, Spinoza will theorize about the existential ramifications of this scientific knowledge.

Noting that a more profound comprehension of the earth itself automatically entails greater self-actualization for Le Clézio's diverse protagonists, Sveket Kadioglu underscores, «la connaissance de la matière [est] est la conscience de la vie» (128). First, it should be noted that the Nobel Laureate even adopts Spinoza's terminology in *L'Extase Matérielle*. Articulating the same ecological realities as Spinoza, the narrator declares:

<sup>1</sup> Numerous critics have noted the influence of both existentialism and the new novel in the author's early works.

<sup>2</sup> All direct citations are taken from the Project Gutenberg Etext edition of *The Ethics* translated by R.H. M. Elwes.

La vie, la mort sont des modalités<sup>3</sup> sans importance, comme végétal ou minéral. La vie et la mort sont des formes qu'adopte la matière, parmi tant d'autres [...] comment découvrir cette loi qui ne serait même plus une loi, mais une réalité. (226)

Similar to Spinoza, Le Clézio maintains that the planet is comprised of infinite variations of one sacred substance. Highlighting that his fleeting existence constitutes a minuscule part of the larger biotic network that sustains all life, the narrator explains,

Les êtres naissaient, puis disparaissaient, se divisaient sans cesse [...] Les vies des autres comme ma vie, n'étaient que des instants, de fugitifs instants [...] matière impossible à sentir, impossible à aimer ou comprendre [...] On ne pouvait pas sortir du système. On ne pouvait pas s'exclure, on ne pouvait pas quitter. Cet infini était fabriqué de fini [...]. (11)

Given that nothing exists beside matter and its modifications, Le Clézio contends that there is no escape from the ontological shell of being. From a scientific standpoint, *homo sapiens* are part of the long history of the universe that predates our species by billions of years. Attempting to understand the organic cycles that engender all life in various forms is emblematic of an effort to find possible answers to the greatest existential questions such as «Who am I?» and «What am I?» However, it is evident that the author realizes that we will always possess merely a fragmented knowledge of other material particles and their complex relationship to us.

For Spinoza and Le Clézio, the web of life into which humankind is woven is much more complicated than simplistic, anthropocentric ideology suggests. First, both thinkers reject misleading dualities, such as man/nature and human/animal, which have created a schism between our species and the rest of the material universe. Instead of existing in a sort of cosmic void separated from the remainder of the planet as homocentric logic has led Western society to believe, Spinoza and Le Clézio remind the reader that we are part of a larger cosmic mystery. Thus, Richard Berkeley posits that Spinoza's philosophical realm reflects «a sense of a world in which we are participants [...] finite beings interconnected» (458). It is in this context in which the first page of *L'Extase Matérielle* should be understood. Cognizant of the reality that human beings are inseparable from the cosmic forces that created every single organism, the narrator reflects,

Quand je n'étais pas né [...] quand je n'appartenais à rien de ce qui existe, que je n'étais pas même conçu [...] graine confondue dans la graine, simple possibilité [...] Moi, ou les autres. Homme, femme, ou cheval, ou sapin, ou staphylocoque doré. (9)

In this passage and throughout the entire essay, Le Clézio elucidates that the eco-sphere randomly engendered life in all of its divergent forms according to its own laws. Given that humans were tossed into the chaos of existence just like every other living particle by impersonal cataclysmic forces, existential hierarchies are merely the product of wishful thinking.

Deconstructing the appealing notion that our species is the center of creation around which everything else revolves, Spinoza asserts,

<sup>3</sup> On page 228, the author yet again borrows Spinoza's philosophical terminology to explain the universe and humanity's place in it.

They come to look on the whole of nature as a means for obtaining such conveniences, as they look upon things as means, they cannot believe them to be self-created, they are bound to believe in some ruler or rulers of the universe endowed with human freedom who have arranged and adapted everything for human use, according with their own nature, they assert that the gods ordained everything for the use of man, thus the prejudice developed into superstition (n.p.).

The author further reiterates, «After men persuaded themselves, that everything which is created is created for their own sake» (n.p.). According to Spinoza, the laws of the universe are indifferent to artificial, ideological concepts related to human manifest destiny. From a rational or scientific standpoint, nothing about the economy of nature supports homocentric governance or superiority complexes.

Furthermore, the unfounded belief that the entire planet was created to help us live more abundantly could potentially have lethal ramifications. Underscoring that a healthy biosphere is paramount for the continuation of the human species, Spinoza explains, «The human body stands in need for its preservation of a number of other bodies, by which it is continually, so to speak, regenerated» (n.p.). Given his astute observations and evident fascination with scientific theories, Spinoza realizes that breaking too many links in the ontological chain is a self-destructive behavior that could lead to our own demise. As Michael Levine elucidates, «According to Spinoza all things exist for their own sake and not for anyone else's and they are all capable of their own form of self-realization [...] It is in our self-interest to preserve the environment and Spinoza endorses that which is done for self-preservation» (125). However, Levine insists that although Spinoza embraces ontological parity the Dutch philosopher was not a champion of animal rights. As an 'ethical egoist,' Spinoza attempts to debunk binary logic in an effort to ensure that humanity will continue to thrive (Levine 125). Spinoza expresses his disquieting anxiety that if we forget what and who we are, then human beings could one day destroy themselves entirely. Homocentric notions may be comforting, but they come with a potentially mortal price tag.

Similar to Spinoza, Le Clézio also exposes the flaws of what he terms the «genesis myth» in a recent speech.<sup>4</sup> In an affirmation that dismisses any notions of human exceptionalism, the narrator of *L'Extase Matérielle* declares,

cette matière brusquement surgie du zéro est celle qui compose mon corps et mon esprit. Autour de moi, partout dans le fragile spectacle de la lumière, dans le minuscule spectacle de mon univers d'homme. (16)

Since separation from elemental matter is impossible, the Leclézian narrator asserts that ontological parity or biotic egalitarianism is a more realistic *weltanschauung* than the genesis myth. Additionally, this existential epiphany fosters a type of cosmic humility which encourages the subject to accept his smallness in the greater scheme of life. As the narrator affirms,

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<sup>4</sup> See Moser, Keith. *J.M.G. Le Clézio: A Concerned Citizen of the Global Village*. Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2012.

Il faut que nous soyons humble [...] il faut que nous le sachions pour toujours et qu'au lieu de nous rebeller en voulant oublier ce que nous sommes, nous le disions [...] chaque jour [...] nous ne sommes rien [...] J'ai la parcelle du tourbillon en moi [...] en moi qui ne suis rien, qui ne suis qu'une poussière. (46; 139)

For Spinoza and Le Clézio, the first step to understanding the complex relationship between humanity and the remainder of the universe is to accept basic fundamental realities. If we deny our corporality and connection to the natural world that surrounds us, then how can we hope to comprehend ourselves?

Although *L'Extase Matérielle* does not have the same ecocidal tone as several of the author's other works such as "Pawana," "Villa Aurore," and "Orlamonde," Le Clézio highlights the same interconnectedness and interdependency as Spinoza in this early essay as well. As Gabrielle Althen notes in the context of the Franco-Mauritian writer's entire *œuvre*, «L'œil qui regarde le monde appartient au monde» (135). Underscoring the infinite threads that link our finite species to the universe upon which our very survival itself depends, the narrator of *L'Extase Matérielle* states,

Dans mon espèce, dans le règne de la vie et même dans l'inanimé, je procrée. Mes fils et mes filles sont partout: là, dans le fer, dans l'eau, dans l'espace [...] Les années, les siècles, est-ce que cela compte ? Est-ce que cela compte que j'aie disparu de la surface de la terre. (141-143)

Whether we like it or not, human life is just one mode or shape that matter temporarily takes before recycling its energy to continue various organic cycles. Le Clézio often reminds the alienated and disconnected modern subject that the earth predates humankind and it could continue its indifferent trajectory without us one day. Perhaps this realization is the most important point of departure for (re)-envisioning a more realistic and sustainable rapport between global human society and the cosmos.

#### 4. Different conception of the divine

Given their firm conviction that nothing else exists besides matter and its unending modifications, Spinoza and Le Clézio maintain that external transcendence from this physical plane is impossible. If redemption from the poverty of the human condition is feasible, then this type of salvation must occur during our fleeting time on this planet. Numerous critics of both authors have asserted that a form of terrestrial spirituality allows the modern subject to project meaning upon his or her existence in both Spinoza and Le Clézio's works. Perhaps the most frequent term that researchers employ to describe the different conception of the divine that the reader encounters in Spinoza's *The Ethics* and throughout Le Clézio's repertoire is *pantheism*. Daniel Dombrowski offers the following operational definition of pantheism: «God is merely the cosmos, in all respects inseparable from the sum or system of dependent things or effects» (29). For a pantheist, the spiritual quest entails reducing the distance that separates oneself from the rest of the material realm to the greatest extent possible in order to understand one's small place in the cosmic whole more fully. In other words, the subject attempts to commune with the same elemental matter to which he or she is intertwined.

Yet, despite the common usage of the label pantheist in reference to Spinoza's worldview, this metaphysical and religious term has led to polemical discussions that have polarized the philosophical community. Summarizing conflicting points of view

concerning the spiritual sensibilities of the writer, Ezgi Aranyosi explains, «Spinoza's philosophy has been interpreted in various ways by philosophers so far. Some of these interpretations radically differ from each other regarding whether Spinozistic substance monism entails some kind of pantheism. As a result of this divergence in analysis, Spinoza has been labelled a pantheist, an atheist, a panentheist, and none of these at times» (15). Highlighting the philosophical nuances of *The Ethics* which resist a definitive answer to this enduring question, Dombrowski theorizes, «There is a strong case for either viewing Spinoza as God-intoxicated or as an atheist» (28).<sup>5</sup>

Although the debate concerning the spiritual sensibilities of Spinoza or lack thereof will undoubtedly continue to rage given the complexity of his *œuvre*, it should be noted that the philosopher appropriates and redefines words that are typically only used in a theological context. Is Spinoza's conscious decision to construct his entire philosophical argument by employing lexical items with heavy religious connotations indicative of spiritual undertones that pervade *The Ethics*? Proposing a possible answer to the aforementioned question «Yet one should ask why does Spinoza retain the term 'God' and prefer it to other alternative expressions?», Ze'ev Levy explains, «Spinoza's 'God shares absolutely nothing with the personal God of the *Bible* [...] Spinoza's denial of transcendent (divine) intervention entails the logical impossibility of energy penetrating from the outside, from an external cause. The physical world is thus once more conceived as its own cause, as self-generating and self-maintaining» (189; 190; 196). As Levy underscores, Spinoza's conception of the divine is inseparable from his firm conviction that this universe is the only one that exists. Moreover, the Dutch thinker insists that the 'sacred' cosmic forces to which everything is connected are utterly impersonal. In addition to the fact that there is nothing outside of this self-regulating biosphere from which transcendence is unattainable, Spinoza insists throughout *The Ethics* that the chaos which created our race and all others does not intervene in our affairs.

In a contention similar to that of Levy, Nils Kvastad asserts that Spinoza's 'God' is perhaps «what most people call the world» or «merely the substitution of one word for another» (3).<sup>6</sup> However, summarizing the other side of this aforementioned philosophical dispute, Kvastad affirms, «When you call it 'God' you also express certain emotions of a religious kind toward it» (3). By appropriating spiritual terminology to describe the universe, was Spinoza actually implying that the physical world in which we live is indeed divine? Or, was Spinoza simply attempting to catch the reader's attention by highlighting the attributes of the 'God' to which he refers in *The Ethics*? Is Spinoza's usage of the term *God* emblematic of an effort to delineate the appropriate relationship between humanity and the cosmos from a more realistic perspective in comparison to his anthropocentric predecessors? Could (re)-appropriating this expression force us to envision the earth and ourselves differently?

Perhaps the answer to these multifaceted questions lies in the existential paradox outlined by Spinoza throughout his most canonical essay. Given that matter and its modifi-

<sup>5</sup> In his aptly named essay "Spinoza the atheist," Steven Nadler adamantly maintains that Spinoza never attributes spiritual properties to the cosmos to which everything is connected. Thus, the Dutch thinker is an atheist that «does not believe that worshipful awe is an appropriate attitude to take before God or nature. There is nothing holy or sacred about nature, and it is certainly not the object of a religious experience» (31).

<sup>6</sup> Adopting a similar perspective, Etienne Balibar elucidates, «What we call God, in reality is properly Nature, or what we call Nature, in reality is God» (30).

cations never truly disappear entirely because their energy is recycled to generate new life, a certain sort of immortality is unavoidable for each ephemeral being that inhabits this planet according to the physical laws of the universe. For this reason, Spinoza stipulates in Proposition XIX that «God, and all the attributes of God, are eternal» (n.p.).<sup>7</sup> Clarifying his earlier position, the author elucidates, «it follows that God, and all the attributes of God, are unchangeable, furthermore, a thing which thus follows from the necessity of the nature of any attribute cannot have a limited duration» in spite of the undeniable reality that «all particular things are contingent and perishable» (n.p.). Reminiscent of the first law of thermodynamics which posits that primordial energy is never created nor destroyed, Spinoza explains that a type of eternal life is inescapable. Indeed, these indifferent cosmic forces appear to be the ‘divine’ elements to which Spinoza refers in *The Ethics*. Furthermore, Spinoza does not seem to suggest that individual modalities or material subjects are able to be edified by reducing the physical and affective barriers that separate them from other distinct particles. In other words, an intimate relationship with the natural world to which we belong does not necessarily trigger serene emotions often associated with a pantheistic, mystical encounter in *The Ethics*.

In *L'Extase Matérielle*, Le Clézio also asserts that the notion that redemption is somewhere to be discovered outside of this physical plane is illusory. Thus, the narrator of this early essay grumbles in disgust, «Je blasphème tous les dieux et tous les démons, je provoque l'ordre du bien et l'ordre du mal, et je sais que jamais il n'oseront s'attaquer à ma vie» (220). Highlighting that traditional Western conceptions of divinity do not correspond to fundamental material realities that govern the fleeting existence of every creature that has ever roamed this planet, the Leclézian narrator dismisses them entirely. Nonetheless, numerous researchers such as Thomas Trzyna, Masao Suzuki, and Jean Onimus underscore a type of pantheistic or primordial spirituality that often inundates the author’s divergent protagonists and compels them to live otherwise.

As Jean Onimus explains, «S'il y a une mystique chez Le Clézio, elle est toute terrestre, ou plutôt cosmique : un déploiement, à perte de soi, dans l'espace et la lumière» (520). Since the path to self-realization, existential meaning, and religious ecstasy<sup>8</sup> entails a direct, sensorial contact with the sacred shell to which we are connected for Le Clézio’s characters, they often endeavor to commune or to ‘fuse’<sup>9</sup> with the divine elements. Elucidating that authentic spiritual experiences are actuated by a form of direct communication with the greater cosmic whole, the narrator of *L'Extase Matérielle* asserts, «Tout est rythme. Comprendre la beauté, c'est parvenir à faire coïncider son rythme propre avec celui de la nature. Chaque chose, chaque être a une indication particulière. Il porte en lui son chant. Il faut être en accord avec lui jusqu'à se confondre» (128). The cosmic harmony described by Le Clézio in this passage and the pantheistic nuptials that such an intimate rapport entails are much less ambivalent than Spinoza’s ‘God’ from a theological standpoint.

Moreover, the ‘material ecstasy’ to which the title of the author’s essay alludes possesses both a philosophical and spiritual dimension. In reference to the same existential paradox articulated by Spinoza in *The Ethics*, Stephen Smith notes, «The struggle for autonomy must yield to the realization that unity and individuality are but illusions, that in

<sup>7</sup> Spinoza also proposes the following definition of ‘eternity,’ “By eternity, I mean existence itself” (n.p.).

<sup>8</sup> See Moser, “Le Clézio’s Martin and His Religion of Ecstasy.”

<sup>9</sup> A term used by Le Clézio scholars like Hervé Lambert.

death nothing is autonomous. But the realization leads finally to serenity. Man is an integral part of the cosmos and the cosmos will endure» (58). Similar to Spinoza, the narrator of *L'Extase Matérielle* is cognizant that a complete death is impossible. Although mortality is inscribed in the genetic code of each distinct species, every being is also part and parcel of ‘eternal’ forces that never truly die. As Smith underscores, accepting bittersweet rudimentary material realities fosters a deep inner peace for numerous Leclézian protagonists.

Fully aware that something larger than oneself exists (i.e. the cosmos), the narrator fervently declares, «Jamais ne viendra la mort, et jamais ne reviendra le doux marteau du néant [...] n'est-ce pas bien lumineux que nous sommes tous des dieux» (141). Critics such as Steven Nadler adamantly maintain that communing with the ontological shell of being to which all organisms are linked does not induce a state of serenity or trigger profound spiritual revelations in Spinoza’s philosophy. However, throughout Le Clézio’s diverse oeuvre, pantheistic fusions with the natural world are often emblematic of an existential remedy that allows various characters to cope with the materiality of the human condition and to project meaning upon their absurd existence. After accepting the «sweet hammer of nothingness» which crushes any hope that this universe can be transcended, the Franco-Mauritian author’s protagonists are able to confront ecological realities directly and to embrace the sacred cosmic whole including their minute role in the economy of life. Nonetheless, as in *The Ethics*, the narrator of *L'Extase Matérielle* incessantly reiterates that the elemental cosmic forces to which later Leclézian characters strive to attune themselves are indeed impersonal. Other divine particles of matter that take a given form during a fleeting period of time before being recycled do not intervene in human affairs.

## 5. Limitations of human knowledge

In addition to proposing another conception of the divine that differs radically from traditional Western monotheistic religions, Spinoza and Le Clézio underscore the limitations of human knowledge that prevent a perfect marriage between humanity and the remainder of the planet from crystallizing. As Spinoza explains in Proposition XXXI, «We can only have a very inadequate knowledge of the duration of particular things external to ourselves» (n.p.). Moreover, Spinoza clarifies,

Hence it follows that the human mind, when it perceives things after the common order of nature, has not an adequate but only a confused and fragmentary knowledge of itself, of its own body, and of external bodies. (n.p.)

Although knowledge of oneself is inseparable from environmental wisdom for both writers, our understanding of the universe and our place in it is destined to be fragmented. Observing nature’s laws and reflecting upon what they mean for both the human and non-human population does not grant the subject access to any type of definitive knowledge. Spinoza and Le Clézio beckon us to embrace the intellectual and philosophical ambivalence that concretizes our ephemeral existence on this earth.

Highlighting the epistemological limitations of homo sapiens and every other race that has ever roamed the biosphere thereby encouraging the reader to adopt a more humble and realistic *weltanschauung*, the narrator of *L'Extase Matérielle* affirms referring to the cosmogonic origins of the planet, «Ce qui se produisait, se produisait, ainsi,

surgissant au fur et à mesure selon un plan qui n'était pas discernable» (10). The narrator further elucidates, «Jamais rien ne pourra se détacher. Mais jamais rien ne donnera la clé de cette union» (242). Similar to Spinoza, Le Clézio is cognizant that we will never be able to solve the cosmic puzzle entirely. Yet, the path to a more authentic life entails fusing with the natural world to the greatest extent possible while simultaneously realizing that absolute truths will forever elude us. As Elisabeth Ravoux-Rallo asserts in her analysis of *Haï*, «il faut se mettre aussi à interpréter les signes: la réalité du monde est un réseau de signes incompréhensibles» (82). Le Clézio urges the modern subject to (re)-connect to the cosmos and to dismiss ontological superiority complexes that are the unfortunate by-products of narcissism, greed, and alienation. Although our efforts to construct a global vision of the interdependent and interconnected world in which we reside from the scattered pieces of knowledge that we possess will always be problematic, this unpleasant reality does not mean that the philosophical quest is in vain.

## 6. Conclusion

Despite the myriad of differences between Spinoza and Le Clézio including a vastly dissimilar writing style, both authors incessantly remind us that we are mortal beings bound to a material universe upon which our continued existence depends. Furthermore, by dismissing binary logic inherited from Renaissance humanism and exposing the inherent flaws of appealing Cartesian logic that have no basis in reality, Spinoza and Le Clézio encourage the alienated modern subject to seek philosophical and perhaps even spiritual redemption from the poverty of the human condition in the only place that we truly know exists. Instead of inventing imaginary celestial paradises that await our ‘privileged’ species after our brief time on this earth has come to a close, both writers assert that the first step to enlightenment is to stop denying our own material essence.

How can we expect to attain a greater understanding of ourselves when we choose to ignore the cosmic forces that tossed us into the chaos of existence? Although we should always be mindful of our intellectual shortcomings, the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza and the diverse writings of J.M.G. Le Clézio represent an invaluable point of departure for (re)-examining the relationship between humanity and the remainder of the planet during a disconcerting period of unprecedented ecological calamity. Neither author claims to have discovered absolute truths, but their profound reflections concerning matter and its infinite modalities could potentially alter the course of modern civilization by awakening us from our egotistical, anthropocentric delusions given that a better comprehension of the philosophical ramifications of scientific realities matters.

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