The immanent tensions within the work of Louis Althusser, with regard to philosophy and its conditions, are worth a consideration. His project was an ongoing struggle between philosophy and the conditions that made his philosophical thinking possible. To a certain extent, one can argue that what characterises his work is the continuous struggle to identify, and then alter, the practices which serve his project of returning to Marx. Although his position was that philosophy is an autonomous discipline, it is nonetheless dependent on other practices, which we will refer to, following Alain Badiou’s vocabulary, as conditions.

Taking Althusser’s work in its totality, I can designate three non-philosophical traditions that, in the different courses of his philosophical work, played a determining role: religion (Christianity), politics, and science. In one sense, the relation of his philosophy to its conditions marks also the four periodisations of his work.¹

1 Setting the Stage: Matters of Principle

In one of his shortest and strangest pieces, Althusser writes that the philosophical work has no destination. It is, rather, an enterprise without beginning or end, therefore without a point at which a philosopher has to arrive, or without

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¹ For periodisation of Althusser’s work, see the Introduction. Wal Suchting provides a general periodisation of Althusser’s engagement with Marxism see Suchting 2004, p. 3; cf. Peden 2014, pp. 128–33.
a goal to achieve. A philosopher is an individual who jumps on a moving train, ‘without knowing where he comes from (origin) or where he is going to (goal).’ Through providing a ‘portrait of a materialist philosopher’, Althusser gave us the best description of his philosophical project. His project is characterised by jumps, breaks (epistemological or not); or to formulate this in his vocabulary, it is a philosophical project which consists of jumping from one train to another, thus leaving behind many stations and towns, most of which are rather unexplored or sometimes ‘superficially’ wandered around. The abruptness of Althusser’s jumping out of the train was determined by the political and theoretical horizon of the time. His first departure was a political and philosophical conjuncture shaped by the aftermath of the Second World War, and the beginning of the Cold War. Indeed, ‘materialist philosophy’ is presented as the trajectory of the ‘materialist philosopher’ because there is no materialist philosophy without the engagement of the philosopher, and that is why, when he was giving a portrait of philosophy, he spoke about position (of the philosopher) and not of a system (of philosophy).

Roughly put, the primary, and equally the most important, tension in Althusser’s entire oeuvre was constituted in the tripartite relation between philosophy, Marxism (as the theoretical aspect of the proletariat) and communism (as the political movement of the proletariat). In his epistemological period, Althusser sought to locate the scientificity, or what is scientific, in Marx’s Capital, and thus provide philosophical concepts that would be used by science. Becoming aware of the weakness of the epistemological foundations for his project, Althusser turns to its ontological presuppositions. Knox Peden argues that in providing the ontological contours for his project, Spinoza becomes his highest authority. Therefore, Peden argues, the emergence of Spinozism in Althusser’s work was conditioned by ‘his hostility to phenomenology and the imperative to salvage Marxism from Stalinism’. Here, I would supplement Peden’s line of thought by arguing that among the reasons for Althusser to seek refuge in Spinoza’s philosophy, I can add both Lebensphilosophie and the bourgeois appropriation of Hegel, alongside phenomenology and Stalinism. For Althusser, Spinoza is the ‘liberator of mind’, and Spinozism was, indeed, perceived as liberating from that reactionary conjuncture mentioned above, while being a Spinozist in philosophy was also perceived as a liberating experience.

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3 Peden 2014, p. 129.