

Configuring the Scene of Subjectivity, once again, and with Spinoza

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Abstract: How might we understand what Pierre Macherey has called Spinoza's 'philosophical actuality,' and account for the persistence of particular ideas and concepts associated with his thought? How might we write in the wake of his philosophy, placing this proper name in the middle of a thinking about political life? If it is the case that human subjects can no longer be understood to stand alone as the single principle or fulcrum of organisation for collective life, we might still agree that a deeper account is required of both its coming into being and its political capture and combination in wider political relations and forms. Spinoza's thought offers many resources to think this *scene of subjectivity* in novel and productive ways. I turn towards him to animate this political analysis, as well as to explore some of the intersections between contemporary phenomenological and structuralist philosophies.

Keywords: conatus, morphology, process without a subject, scene of subjectivity.

I want to use the opportunity offered by the invitation to join this special issue of papers on Spinoza to reflect upon my engagement with his philosophy. This could be described as a thinking *alongside* Spinoza, which is likewise alongside many other thinkers, concepts, and ideas that continue to enrich and inform his thought. We do not think alone, or in isolation, and each movement of my own thinking alongside Spinoza recognises countless debts to the work of many others. But what does it entail, today, to think alongside Spinoza? How might we write in the wake of his philosophy, and place this proper name in the middle of a thinking about political life? As I develop my own positions and perspectives on and around Spinoza, I have become fascinated by his abiding presence within so many strands of contemporary philosophical thinking. Alongside my intellectual fascination, however, also lurks a certain degree of caution, precisely because Spinoza's thought, in keeping with its colourful history, has become attached to so many diverse positions and styles of thinking, generating many kinds of politico-theoretical project. There are, indeed, infinite faces of Spinoza that have produced – and continue to produce – countless forms of recuperation and political effect.

Within my own philosophical thinking, I have found Spinoza's thought an indispensable resource to understand the form and the genesis of what in contemporary thought we might continue to call (albeit under duress, or even erasure) the subject. This is certainly a paradox since Spinoza rarely uses the concept himself and his own perspective presages in many respects the discourse of modernity that catapulted the modern subject to centre stage.

As I will only briefly demonstrate here, the matter of subjectivity is a deeply political matter tied closely to force and power, such that to

relinquish it completely is to limit the critical resources available to a project that can only find its place in the interstices or the margins of philosophy and politics. How might we continue to think the space, or scene of the subject *outside* the subject? If we might agree that human subjects can no longer be understood to stand alone as the single principle or fulcrum of organisation for collective life, we might also agree that a deeper account is required of both its coming into being and its political capture and combination in wider political relations and forms. Spinoza's thought, in my view, offers many resources to think this *scene of subjectivity* in novel, productive ways. I turn towards him to animate this political analysis, as well as to explore some of the intersections between contemporary phenomenological and structuralist philosophies.¹

I. The Latent Actuality of Spinoza

In a systematic and penetrating early essay titled 'Spinoza's Philosophical Actuality' Pierre Macherey mines some of the qualities that might account for the contemporaneity of a philosophy such as Spinoza's in a way that resonates with my own approach to reading him.² It is not so much that it is worked upon, translated, critically interpreted, or even that it constitutes an abundant source of inspiration that takes dramatically different forms in different times.³ More significant, for Macherey, is the way Spinoza's philosophy lives on or accompanies other forms of thought in ways independent of authorship and citation. To paraphrase Derrida, it may have a ghostly presence in other philosophies, accompanying them at a distance in a less acknowledged way. It is perhaps the way in which Spinoza thinks against tradition, against dominant philosophical concepts, problematizing and destabilizing certain ideas and positions, that helps account for how his thought continues to inform and enrich new styles of philosophical thinking. Macherey even suggests the presence of a 'latent actuality' where questions and themes considered by Spinoza find themselves at work in perspectives initially at odds with his own, transmuting and disrupting his thought in novel and creative ways. So, what is Spinoza's philosophical actuality? How might we account for the persistence of particular ideas and concepts associated with his thought?

Macherey's observations in this essay have offered an important critical resource for my own path of thinking alongside Spinoza, which has often entailed a certain break of philosophical allegiance (what can such allegiance mean for political theory today?) as I move from the spirit and the letter of his philosophy to situate concepts in new theoretical

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1 Here I will draw upon the some of the arguments presented in Williams, 2017

2 Macherey, 1998

3 See Moreau, 1996

scenes, duplicating and transforming them according to a different series of questions and interests. I shift away from internal commentary on Spinoza's writings, or the extraction of a structure that supposedly governs them to reveal a truth buried deep within. Neither do I aim to apply Spinoza's philosophical system, or his concepts, to a particular political approach or problem. This is not because I view such approaches to be always unproductive and without reward but rather because I prefer to track the fascinating imprints and mutations of his ideas and concepts. My strategy of reading Spinoza has been to identify limit-concepts, and to consider the way in which they unravel, subvert, or disrupt the structure of argument, opening his thought to the outside. I do not wish to freeze the movements of his thought or fix its multiple articulations since these, I would argue, have often been decisive to the kinds of encounter made with Spinoza in recent years, where concepts have been pushed towards a further labor not wholly anticipated in an earlier problematic.

This is not the time or the place to examine in detail, or track, the various imprints and mutations of Spinoza's ideas within contemporary philosophy and critical theory, despite the importance and theoretical necessity of such a work. Certain seminal works, however, have been especially important to theoretical developments. Taking its bearings from key writings by Etienne Balibar and Antonio Negri, Spinoza's construction of the political mass as multitude and his consideration of its power, affectivity, and force has become a kind of master-signifier in discussions of political agency and has invigorated aspects of Marxist social theory attempting to think the complex construction of a collective power. Some political and social theorists have also begun to explore this collective composition of the individual, drawing upon the important concept of transindividualism, transported by Etienne Balibar from the ontogenetic philosophy of Gilbert Simondon to the fertile context of Spinoza's ontology.⁴ Spinoza's philosophy has also played a somewhat iconic role in recent theories of new materialism, which have located the agency of things within the labyrinthine structure of his ontology, as well as within discussions of posthumanism, and other perspectives seeking to challenge the often myopic, net-like ideology of the Anthropocene.⁵ Equally fascinating (but with due regard of the manifold divergences between them) is Spinoza's latent presence in the philosophical projects of Giorgio Agamben, Jean Luc Nancy, and Alain Badiou, where it is pulled towards an exploration of existence and world that will neither collapse into a relation between subject and object (thus falling prey to the metaphysical limits of a philosophy of the subject), nor permit us

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4 See the most recent collection see Balibar 2020. Also Combes, 2013; Read, 2016.

5 See for example, Bennett, 2010; Braidotti, 2013. Whilst he is never explicitly named, the general shape of the ecological argument developed by Jason Moore in *Capitalism and the Web of Life* also resonances strongly with Spinoza's philosophy.

to view the sense and space of world and worldliness simply from the position of humanity.⁶

However, Spinoza's 'latent actuality' is most deeply present, and has arguably had some of its strongest reverberations, in the oeuvre of Louis Althusser. It is Althusser more than any other postwar thinker who has transformed and repositioned Spinoza's thought, causing it to ricochet into a new theoretical and political scene of structuralism, ultimately shaping and elucidating many of the terms of reference for a re-engagement between structuralism and phenomenology.⁷ Of course, the proper name Louis Althusser also stands in for a complex and influential structuralist turn within Marxism that generated a body of work both disparate and united.⁸ The rationale of Althusser's symptomatic reading of Marx is made clear in *Reading Capital*, where he draws attention to the absence of Spinoza in the history of philosophy. Referring to Spinoza's own time when the secreting of clandestine publications (a kind of underground *samizdat*) allowed his texts to emerge with bogus title pages and publishers, so Althusser describes a *repressed Spinozism* unfolding 'as a *subterranean history* acting at other sites in political and religious ideology and in the sciences, but not on the illuminated stage of visible philosophy.'⁹

Later, in his *Essays in Self-Criticism*, Althusser's reflections resonate powerfully with Macherey's observations when he writes how the necessary detour taken via Spinoza was made to elucidate Marx's own detour via Hegel: 'In Spinoza's anticipation of Hegel' he writes, 'we tried to see, and thought we had succeeded in finding out, under what conditions a philosophy might, in what it said or did not say, and in spite of its form – or on the contrary, just because of its form, ... because of its *positions* – produce effects useful to materialism.'¹⁰ Althusser thus writes of the need for '...every philosophy to make a detour via other philosophies in order

6 In the particular case of Agamben, the recent volume *Use of Bodies* makes noteworthy use of Spinoza both to frame a modal style of ontological thinking, and to further develop one of the key categories for his oeuvre: form-of-life, where he now locates a much more dynamic ontology. For a helpful framing of this relation, see Jeffrey A. Bernstein, 2017.

7 One of the clearest early examples of this re-engagement is Pierre Macherey's book *Hegel ou Spinoza*. See Macherey, 2011.

8 We must note the renaissance of scholarship around a radical Spinozism in 1960's France. The establishment of the *Groupe Spinoza* in 1966 around Althusser made Spinoza's philosophy a constant source of reference and signaled a concerted attempt to intervene in politics as a philosopher. The *Groupe* included amongst its membership Balibar, Macherey, Badiou, Rancière, and Deleuze from which many influential and ground breaking texts emerged that continue to reverberate within contemporary Spinozism. We must further note the impact of Emilia Giancotti and Antonio Negri upon scholarship in Italy. Montag and Stolze 1997, is a good starting point to at least some of these developments.

9 Althusser 1979, p.102.

10 Althusser 1973, p.134-35.

to define itself and grasp itself in terms of its difference: its division [its rupture, we might say].¹¹ In this way, philosophy itself is in a state of incessant rupture or transformation; a laboratory without a *real* object, or a subject (science is a subjectless discourse); experimental, without conditions, and always obliged to look outside of itself (toward politics, science, psychoanalysis, art, etc) where ‘thought is practiced as the taking up of a position or thesis’.¹² Through this paradoxical sense of *incessant rupture*, philosophy might occupy a position, develop a strategy, a thought of practice, to ‘think practice via that thought’, and create through this process political (that is, ideological and material) effects. It is in this primarily *strategic* sense, I wish to suggest, that Althusser occupies the terrain of Spinoza’s philosophy: in order to utilise it - somewhat creatively - for his own ends; by developing theses that Spinoza would likely ‘never have acknowledged’ but that did not ‘contradict his thought.’¹³

Along with many others, my own engagement with Spinoza is overdetermined by the extremely long shadow cast not only by the writings of Louis Althusser but also by the community of thinkers associated with him, some of them included here in this volume. It was to the *Ethics* that I initially turned for a deeper understanding of structural causality, as well as to search for the epistemological purity beyond ideology that Althusser claimed to find (at least on occasions) within Spinoza’s account of the three kinds of knowledge.¹⁴ But it was also by reading Spinoza that I began to trace the lines of flight permitting Althusser to conjoin the former’s dynamic account of imagination with Lacanian psychoanalysis, composing a Marxist theory of ideology as an anonymous, collective, eternal structure whose real materiality could be located in the practical conditions of existence, forever nourished by the imaginary relationships lived out by alienated subjects in a never-ending process of *méconnaissance*.

This act of (re)reading Althusser, often also a symptomatic (re) reading of Spinoza performed collectively by many, elicited fresh attention upon elements of his arguments that had been overlooked, or had exceeded their formal consistency, their condition of truth. Sometimes, these had been covered over in the act of translation that rendered concepts such as contingency, the accidental, the singular event, invisible and under-explored.¹⁵ The emergence of unpublished

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11 Althusser 1973, p.133.

12 Althusser 2006, p.279.

13 Althusser 1973, p.132.

14 Williams 2013

15 Montag, 2014 explores the impact of translation and reception with rigor and care. A second, complete edition of *Reading Capital* in 2016, with all five of the authors contributions was also published, correcting at least some of the Anglophone distortions of ‘Althusserianism.’

transcriptions, unknown manuscripts, and letters focusing upon the encounter, the conjunction of disparate elements as a combination brought a new complex, materiality to the conception of structure. Althusser was fascinated by Spinoza's philosophical strategies, in particular the transformation of a medieval conception of a transcendental God as the cause and origin of all things into an infinite Substance that was able to think God and Nature simultaneously. For Althusser, it was this novel principle of Nature's infinite diversity and non-totalizable form, expressing or producing itself in every finite existence, which helped him think the question of structure anew.

No longer could structure be thought as simply containing, in a latent form, its various elements (however distinctive these might appear in themselves). Now it had a form of complexity and causality that was only understandable through its effects, thereby engendering these elements with a degree of autonomy, singularity, and specificity of their own.

It also became evident that certain concepts encountered limits and required radical revision, as with Althusser's conceptions of science and ideology; as if the fault-lines (both phenomenological and structuralist...) that might also be located in Spinoza's thought between reason and imagination, knowledge and affect, perhaps even between the concept of nature and life, or the body, pressed down upon his own position causing objects and ideas to mutate and transform as in within the surrealist frame of a Dali painting. From a Spinozist point of view, it made no sense to suggest that science has no history, or that its own species of production, its *causa sui*, established its own limits or measure of truth, without in turn questioning how science itself might be bound up with (or folded into) the process or practice of its production into which ideology may also seep and spill.

However, most incisive for the direction of my own thinking, was the opening up of the structuralist motif of 'a process without a subject or goal' that appears in various guises throughout Althusser's work (for example, in relation to history, science, the philosophy of the encounter). Is it possible to continue to speak of 'the subject' in this perjorative way, as an absent part, without becoming ensnared in the double-binds of modern philosophy? Certainly Althusser's strategic theoretical anti-humanism was less concerned with a *displacement* or evacuation of the subject and more with charting the subtle production of its multiple conditions of existence: its singularity. Both Althusser and Spinoza were also similarly concerned precisely with how forms of individuality were composed and preserved or how they might resist, decompose, or degenerate over time. But how might we think this strange, excessive formulation of the subject in relation to Spinoza's thought?

Spinoza's thought evidently predates the inception of the modern philosophical and political subject, and the modal structure of his ontology cannot hope - or indeed wish - to ground any of the

presuppositions or principles of modern subjectivity, (be they autonomy, self-presence, human essence, all of which remain for him imaginary conditions or properties), however these might be deconstructed or critiqued today. In a classic textual analysis of Spinoza's concepts of consciousness and conscience, Balibar makes a general observation relevant to the problematic of the subject that I see opened up by Spinoza's thought. He states, quite correctly, that 'one of the reasons why certain currents in modern philosophy, in spite of their divergences (be they, logicist, structuralist, vitalist, phenomeologist) are specifically interested in Spinoza is precisely that they view him as *an adversary of "subjectivity"*'.¹⁶ Balibar's analysis of the text finds in Spinoza not a subjectivist reading to correct an objectivist or rationalist one but a *process of consciousness without a subject*.¹⁷ Indeed, this concept makes it *impossible* to speak of the subject in Spinoza. 'In the *Ethics*,' Balibar concludes, 'we find something very odd in classical philosophy: an anthropology of consciousness without a subject.'¹⁸ Alain Badiou's observation resonates with Balibar's when he similarly credits Althusser with opening up 'the enigma of subjectivity without a subject as the intra-philosophical mark of politics.'¹⁹

Thus the path for thinking the subject in an altogether different way is opened up by Althusser and Spinoza's thought. In proposing the idea of history, or the materialism of the encounter, as a process that has no subject, something excessive is opened up by Althusser's thought. What had previously been the elusive ground of agency now mutates and turns into something altogether different. In order to investigate the shape and force of this scene of subjectivity (without the subject) I propose to return once again to Spinoza in order to consider him as an adversary of the subject. At the centre of this ontology lies the concept of conatus, which is also the conceptual starting point for his political theory. What, for Spinoza, is the ontological shape of this power, the conatus, that pushes beyond the subject and threatens to modify – compose and decompose – the activity of a mode? I turn now to briefly sketch the ontological shape of conatus that is located, I suggest, in a morphological structure of relation and combination where forms of struggle commence, and where politics constantly reshapes itself in the process.

16 Balibar 1992, p.37.

17 For some initial thoughts on this anti-humanist argument in a broadly Althusserian- Spinozist frame, see Williams 2013.

18 Balibar 1992, p.50.

19 Badiou 2006, p.64.

II. Elucidating the scene of the subjectivity

Contrary to readings that present Spinoza as a pure rationalist, or even as the true antecedent of structuralism whose philosophy is forever opposed to phenomenology,²⁰ we find his thought instead occupying a precarious space between phenomenology and structuralism, between a philosophy of life and consciousness and that of the concept. Significantly, it is, in my view, the strategic position his thought occupies that permits Spinoza to subvert many of the philosophical motifs associated with an account of the subject (causality, origin, essence, form) and yet to still offer an account of the scene of its production. It also permits us, in his wake, to revisit once more this tension, these fault-lines, between phenomenology and structuralism.

It is important, however, that we resist attaching unhelpful reductive labels to the profoundly heterogeneous movements of phenomenology and structuralism (that is, phenomenology as a philosophy of recuperation of consciousness or subjective experience, or structuralism as an absolute retreat from or dissolution of the subject) since none of these labels really fit. The former, I understand to refer to the mode of appearing of any thing or being, object or event.²¹ Structuralism similarly attends to the conjunction and combinations of elements, the complex relations between parts that overdetermine the identity and operation of any entity, institution, symbol.

My reading of Spinoza attempts to occupy this middle ground with mindful attention. I respond to these problems and tensions by placing a spotlight precisely upon this scene of subjectivity and configuring a conceptual tool to help map the ontological shape and force of this scene. I have elsewhere developed this analysis in more detail using the category of morphology as a heuristic device to place attention on the forming-making, processual quality of this scene.²² The morphological approach, or better, this *figure*, remains highly vigilant to the dangers of continuing to work with the subject in a reconfigured sense, neither reducing it to an effect nor assuming a discrete power of agency. It has a number of important facets that I can only very briefly elucidate here, before summarizing the kind of critical work it may do.

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20 See Peden, 2014 for this argument.

21 Alain Badiou, whose thought emerges in the context of formalism and is perhaps most representative of such a scheme, describes his own project in *Logics of World* as an objective phenomenology (even as he labels disparagingly as 'phenomenological' all kinds of politically redundant democratic materialisms).

22 I develop the category of morphology in Williams, 2017 where I also explore critically the engagements with Spinoza presented by Jane Bennett and Judith Butler, both of whom draw upon Spinoza's concept of conatus.

1. First, it is processual. The figure of morphology encourages a dynamic view of the unfinished formation of the subject, conceived as only one element or relation among a collection of many other bodies and things (the argument for which I take from Spinoza's discussion of individuation in Part II P13-14 of the Ethics). A temporal series of potential relations might compose a morphology when various parts 'stick', conjoin, combine or cohere as a dynamic form that is always in the process of metamorphosis, and always contains the possibility of its dissolution. If this concept of morphology is ontological, as I suggest it is, it nonetheless lacks a single centre, an essence, a simple unity; we might instead usefully think about its composition as an economy of differential relations.²³

2. Secondly, this morphology is characterised by a tendency toward persistence and perseverance as much as mutation and transformation. To comprehend the question of forming and formation as an activity intrinsic to all bodies and things, I turn to Spinoza's concept of conatus to help draw out the political contours of this morphology, as well as to indicate some of the ways in which politics itself is always its mode of composition. *Conatus* is the name for the power of *each thing* to 'persevere in its being' (E III, P6), to strive for improbable permanence and indefinite existence beyond the present. To remain close to Spinoza's radical philosophy of nature, I claim the conatus is best considered as a non-subjective principle, as an essential characteristic of all things, and that it is most usefully conceived beyond or outside the subject, in the wider context of an ontology of relation. There is no necessary or exclusive relation between the conatus and the persistence of the human subject, and care must be taken not to anthropologize Spinoza's meaning of it.²⁴ My reading of conatus proposes, therefore, to put some creative dissonance to work, by considering how the concept traverses and unravels the subject. This approach does not the subject, and the intention here is to track its production amidst the morphological relations of which it is a part.

3. Third, for Spinoza, affect names a power to affect and be affected, thus making the body a site of transformation and production, but also ambivalence and vacillation. The figure of morphology

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²³ My formulation of relationality here is indebted to scholarship exploring ideas of encounter and relation in the construction of Spinoza's ontology, in particular, Balibar, 1997; 1998; Deleuze, 1988; Morfino, 2006.

²⁴ Indeed, in his early engagement with, and critique of Descartes, Spinoza makes clear that such a striving must be attached not simply to a thought, or a purely human endeavour, but to the boundless form of matter itself (PCP, Part III, Postulate).

must encompass what Deleuze calls Spinoza's ethology of bodies whereby we understand a body not in terms of its distinct properties, qualities, and functions but instead as a ratio of forces that are in turn composed of relations of speed, slowness, rest, agreement, and disagreement. The conatus also manifests this intensive and extremely variable quality of affective power. In my reading of it, the conatus becomes inextricably tied to the movement of power and force revealing, I suggest, something akin to the life of power upon the field of subjectivity.

4. Fourth, drawing upon the wealth of research developing Spinoza's ontology of relation, conative striving may be described, with Spinoza, as the essence of a thing (EIII P7), but only if we underscore the way in which the metaphysical (Aristotlean) notion of a pure essence is challenged, or disrupted. The essence of a thing undergoes mutation and variation. This is a key aspect of my morphology: the unfinished nature of form. There are no properties and functions of a body that do not rely on an elemental relationality. In the case of human being, Spinoza, like Hegel after him, locates the conatus in desire. But desire should not be read simply as a subjective automaton, impulse, or drive. This would be (once again) to humanise and essentialise Spinoza's thought, and to deprive the conatus of the relational reciprocities characterising the field of an infinitely variable nature.²⁵ Rather, the conatus is better understood as a field of forces whose inevitable existence is caught up in the dynamic play of conflictual relations. In his most developed reflections on transindividualism, Balibar explores the 'extreme edges' of decomposition of this morphological form, a kind of excessive vanishing point entailed by where relations might turn into their opposite, decompose entirely, and call into question the stability of an individual formation.²⁶ It is in and through this deeply political process that shapes of subjectivity are mobilised and take form. Indeed, perhaps the conatus is precisely this open series of power relations at the heart of every mode of existence: the power (of all things) to persist (and to desist, or resist); a configuration of forces that are internal and not prior to the conflict itself. Such a formulation places the conatus at the heart, at the centre, of power relations and secures a fourth element of morphology.

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²⁵ In relation to this, I explore the specific risks of Butler's Spinozism in Williams 2017. At points in my reading, the tensions and the productive spaces between phenomenology and structuralism become readily apparent.

²⁶ Balibar 2020, pp.137-191.

5. The fifth and final aspect of this morphology that remains to be uncovered. In Part II of the Ethics, Spinoza proposes that 'the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection between things' (EII P7). This brings to mind the conative force and political power of ideas in Spinoza's philosophy. Hasana Sharp has identified a tendency within studies of Spinoza's philosophy towards a one-sided account of bodies at the expense of ideas. Spinoza's nuanced materialism accords ideas their material weight; my own approach intends to avoid both a one-sided analysis that focuses only on bodies and things, as well as the critique that presents materialist theories of affective process as having almost nothing to say about the political realm of ideas, beliefs, and ideology. Some critics have argued that the turn to affect has reinstated a dualism between mind and body, between the realms of rationality, cognition, and the representation of these as beliefs on the one hand, and affective, non-cognitive, non-representational states on the other. For Spinoza, these two attributes exist simultaneously in his ontology (where mind is thinking body, and ideas are dynamic activities imbued with affective resonance). Placing this alongside the highly influential position of Louis Althusser, who rediscovered in Spinoza the matrix of every possible theory of ideology, exposes the radical terms of Spinoza's philosophy. Althusser's conception of ideology as an imaginary relation famously removed the agency of ideas from the human subject; these were not rejected but firmly embedded within material practices. We need therefore to go much further than the terms of this critique of the affective turn and draw attention to a powerful forcefield of ideas irreducible to the thinking subject as their author. Thus ideas are living things that resist other ideas and endeavour to persevere and enhance themselves; they are, as Sharp writes 'determined and dependent upon the forces and strivings of other ideas, just like the being of bodies.'²⁷ Given the immense power of ideas to mobilise masses, to communicate and nourish the force of things, to capture and hold political elements and relations in place, the morphology developed here will underscore the conative force of ideas, signs and images as impersonal, non-subjective, autonomous conductors of power and affect, as well as being part of the scene of subjectivity itself.

My reading alongside Spinoza hopes to clarify how one can continue to refer to the scene of (an unfinished) subjectivity without becoming ensnared in forms of anthropomorphism. I have presented a concept of morphology as a heuristic device, a figure to map the dynamic activity of the conatus conceived as a field of forces through which relations

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²⁷ Sharp 2011, p.76.

between elements interact and take form. This idea of morphology is attuned with Spinoza's own geometric study of human actions, portrayed by him '...just as if it were a question of lines, planes and bodies' (E III, Pref). As a study of the form of things, morphology provides a conceptual mapping of the relations composing a particular form or *individuum*; it is a way of tracking their degree of complexity, magnitude, variation and, of course, their conative force and power. In this way, it offers itself a groundwork, a method (of sorts) for further study.²⁸ This morphological formulation also frees the conatus from a subject-centred approach and disrupts the notion of essence (human or otherwise), which is now aligned with the power, action and interaction of any thing.

In accordance with this reading, politics occurs in any situation where there is a composition of powers acting. Forms of interaction have infinite possibilities, but what makes their activity political is the setting in motion of a dynamic play of power relations, where relations and forces begin to take hold of the elements available. Politics, then, is literally the mode of composing a morphology of relations, of constructing a scene of subjectivity (perhaps by strategies of capture, combination, containment, compensation, exchange of parts, renewal, and transformation that indicate the life of power). How precisely these strategies take hold of relations, how they produce significant changes, not just of degree but of kind, and by what means they are mobilised (for example, the techniques through which they circulate and organise this scene), are precisely questions for politics.

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²⁸ One such example, (aside from the work of Balibar with whom I find the closest theoretical resonance), can be found in the recent work of Frederic Lordon (whose analysis helps explain how relations of power combine or hold a nominally dispersed or mutative subjectivity in a static position (of domination or servitude), whilst also presenting the struggle to capture the energy of the conatus as a strategic effort to create 'a continuous gradient of domination' (pp.133-34). This mapping of the conatus as a vector of power gestures in the general direction of my own formulations. Ultimately, Lordon never embraces this kind of approach and confines his discussion to human/social relations. See Lordon 2014.

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