

# CRISIS SPINOZA & CRITIQUE TODAY CRITIQUE

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**SPINOZA TODAY**

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# CRISIS & CRITIQUE

## **SPINOZA TODAY**

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# **Introduction: Spinoza Today**

**Frank Ruda &  
Agon Hamza**

In his 1964/1965 lecture series entitled *History and Freedom*, Theodor W. Adorno credits Spinoza with being the first modern thinker who in the seventeenth century raised “the problem of freedom and determinism.”<sup>1</sup> This is the case because for Spinoza - and therein Adorno identifies in him a predecessor of Kantian rationalism - to act properly and thus to act freely meant to act “*in accordance with reason*.”<sup>2</sup> But if acting freely is to act in accordance with reason - this is the argument Adorno is aiming at - and in this sense with what cannot but appear to be a structure already established, how can we effectively still call such action free? If we act according to reason, is it not reason which determines our actions and not us? Does this not mean that when we supposedly act freely, we are just following the causality of reason and hence are determined? Adorno identifies Spinoza with this problem – the problem of how to bring together freedom and reason without losing either –, a problem that he further locates as being in the very heart of all properly modern philosophy. The problem is: either we emphasize reason and lose freedom, or we rescue freedom and sever it from rationality. But the problem’s mode of appearance is worse: since it looks as if following the path of rationality will bring freedom, but it ultimately and this means practically does not. Adorno, as is well-known, will therefore identify Spinoza as one thinker in the long series of thinkers who in the last instance attempted to dominate, master and control everything in (our free) nature that is not rational; Spinoza’s philosophy in this sense, is a philosophy of domination; a philosophy whose “axioms... already contain the total rationalism he would go on to extract from them so productively through the process of deduction,... the insanity of systems as such.”<sup>3</sup> Spinoza’s rationalism paradigmatically brings forth the insanity of (rational and rationalist) systems as such, because his rationalism, and thereby prefiguring modern thought *tout court*, is one of the paradigmatic forms in which philosophical madness appears, namely in the form of endorsing rationality even if one has to pay the prize of freedom for it. Spinoza’s madness and endorsement of rationality are thus the two sides of his rationalism.

This very abbreviated reconstruction of Adorno’s critique is just one of many possible examples of how Spinoza was for a long time identified with a rationalism that was so rational that it basically turned into madness, that ended in determinism and thus did ultimately not only abolish freedom but worse – and was in this sense paradigmatic for all the abysses of enlightenment thought – thereby ultimately abolished rationality itself. In a similar sense, F.H. Jacobi, the great

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1 Adorno 2006, p. 193.

2 Ibid., p. 213.

3 Adorno 2008, p. 128.

classical German philosopher, famously opposed Spinoza's system, whose ontology he equaled with anti-freedom, determinism and with the ultimate realization of the principle of "a nihilo nihil fit", which is ultimately the principle of sufficient reason that grounds almost any knowledge-based rationalism. Spinoza's fully rational pantheism (relying on the identification of God with nature), in the last instance, turns in this reading out to be atheist – as not even God is able to escape the power of causal relation. Spinoza, for Jacobi, brings forth the truth of the Enlightenment, or more precisely: of the idea of philosophy as science. This truth is that scientific thinking in its philosophical form ultimately explains away freedom – but therefore, it is essential to read Spinoza, as you shall know thy enemy.

Another classical German philosopher, G.W.F Hegel, despite all his criticisms of Spinoza's philosophical system, loudly declared that in order to be a philosopher, one has to (first be or) be or become a Spinozist. Spinoza is the river one not only has to cross, but the medium in which one first has to think, in order to start thinking at all. All thought is determined and one does not know what a determination (of thought) is if one has not read Spinoza – even though he is ultimately not enough to grasp thought properly.

These are just some of almost endless examples that one can find in the history of philosophy, where Spinoza is assigned a crucial, absolutely essential, but often also only constitutively intermediary role. In this spirit, Spinoza's philosophy became also an object of poetry or literary writing: in Jose Luis Borges, Zbigniew Herbert, and others.

So, and maybe surprisingly, the conjuncture changed. Spinoza was no longer the object of harsh critique, but rather the subject of immense adoration. Recently, Slavoj Žižek even noted that academia today is organized under the injunction to love Spinoza:

Everyone loves him, from the Althusserian strict "scientific materialists" to Deleuzean schizo-anarchists, from rationalist critics of religion to the partisans of liberal freedoms and tolerances, not to mention feminists like Genevieve Lloyd who propose to decipher the mysterious third type of knowledge in *Ethics* as feminine intuitive knowledge surpassing the male analytic understanding...<sup>4</sup>

It seems to have become almost impossible today to be critical of Spinoza. His reputation was fundamentally and universally transformed. From the freedom-mortifying peak of 17th century rationalism to a thinker who has become compatible with a variety of different discourses

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4 Žižek 2007

and positions. But, if this is more than just the symptom of universal compatibility, how can we assert and understand Spinoza's importance and influence in academia and contemporary philosophy, for theory broadly speaking and even for psychoanalysis? One way of doing so would be to identify him as one of the if not the most significant predecessor of German Idealism, a philosophical conjuncture wherein he without any doubt played a crucial role, and consequently, he might be understood as the forebearer of the philosophy that followed him. Does something similar hold for (critical) theory, too? For psychoanalysis?

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In his texts on self-criticism, Louis Althusser rejected the readings of his work that depicted it as structuralist. Against such an interpretation, he openly declared himself to be a Spinozist. This is certainly because Spinoza is clearly the thinker whose presence permeates Althusser's entire opus. One could even consider Spinoza to be a conditioning instance, a constant determining point of reference for his thought. For Althusser, Spinozist thought potentially entails the greatest lesson in heresy the world has ever seen and heresy is the only way of genuine thinking - taking the risk of losing it all, being expelled, having no natural community to belong to.

In the very same text, Althusser adds a long remark that is worth quoting in its entirety:

Hegel *begins* with Logic, "God before the creation of the world". But as Logic is alienated in Nature, which is alienated in the Spirit, which reaches its end in Logic, there is a circle which turns within itself, without end and without beginning. The first words of the beginning of the *Logic* tell us: Being is Nothingness. The posited beginning is negated: there is no beginning, therefore no origin. Spinoza for his part begins with God, but in order to deny Him as a Being (Subject) in the universality of His *only* infinite power (*Deus = Natura*). Thus Spinoza, like Hegel, rejects every thesis of Origin, Transcendence or an Unknowable World, even disguised within the absolute interiority of the Essence. But with this difference (for the Spinozist negation is not the Hegelian negation), that within the void of the Hegelian Being there exists, through the negation of the negation, the contemplation of the dialectic of a *Telos* (Telos = Goal), a dialectic which reaches its Goals in history: those of the Spirit, subjective, objective and absolute, Absolute Presence in transparency. But Spinoza, because he "begins with God", never gets involved with any Goal, which, even when it "makes its way forward" in immanence, is still figure and thesis of transcendence. The detour *via* Spinoza thus allowed us to make out, by contrast, a radical quality lacking

in Hegel. In the negation of the negation, in the *Aufhebung* (= transcendence which conserves what it transcends), it allowed us to discover the Goal: the special form and site of the "mystification" of the Hegelian dialectic.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, according to Althusser, Spinoza rejected the notion of the goal or end and by doing so he rejected every element of teleology in his position. In Althusser's view, Spinoza was *the* critic of ideology of his time, during which ideology predominantly appeared in the form of religion. He refused to see ideology as an error or as ignorance, but located ideology on the level of the *imaginary* (on the first level of knowledge). In his radical criticism of

the central category of imaginary illusion, *the Subject*, it reached into the very heart of bourgeois philosophy, which since the fourteenth century had been built on the foundation of the legal ideology of the Subject. Spinoza's resolute anti-Cartesianism consciously directs itself to this point, and the famous "critical" tradition made no mistake here. On this point too Spinoza anticipated Hegel, but he went further.<sup>6</sup>

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For Hegel, substance does not exist; it is only a retroactive presupposition of the subject. Substance comes into its incomplete existence only as a result of the subject, and it is for this conceptual reason that it is enunciated as predecessor of the subject. In this regard, the idea that the substance is an organic whole is an illusion, precisely because when the subject presupposes the substance, it also presupposes it as a split, a cut. When substance would ontologically precede the subject, then we get a substance endowed with Spinozist attributes, but thereby we would ultimately not be able to account for the emergence or existence of a subject. What to make thus of this line of argumentation *à propos* the Althusserian concept of the process without a subject within a Spinozist-Hegelian framing? If we hold this position, then we are in a pre-Kantian universe. The Hegelian approach assumes that this understanding of substance is dogmatic religious metaphysics, because being/substance is posited as a totality, as indivisible One. This totality can be accounted for, as such, only in a kind of fantasy (this is precisely what leads Kant to elaborate on the antinomies of reason). In this regard, for Hegel, it is impossible to think that the substance will become a subject, because it always-already entails the indication that it has itself been posited by a subject ("*not only* as a Substance, but *also* as a Subject"): as it exists only

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<sup>5</sup> Althusser 1976, p.135

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.136



through a positing act of the subject and without the former substance is simply a nothing. Here, precision is paramount: when Hegel talks about substance and subject, he is here talking about the absolute: it is the absolute which is not *only* a substance, but *also* a Subject, that the “absolute is essentially its result.”<sup>7</sup> As Hegel himself put it in his critique to Spinoza, “substance is not determined as self-differentiating,” which is to say, not as a subject.<sup>8</sup>

Given these complications, wherein might we detect or locate Spinoza’s heresy - that Althusser identified - then precisely? At his time, Spinoza’s positions generated endless problems and much hatred, not only within the Jewish community, but also among the Protestant clergy. We might say he is *the* excommunicated philosopher in an even twofold sense: he was excommunicated from the community of believers and for a long time he also became something like the outcast of, a sign of the worst in Western thought). The radicality of thought that manifests in this fact seems to turn him (again) into a true and quite different philosophical paradigm: any philosopher should orient herself and see with Spinozist eyes, as Spinozism exploding all traditions thereby is a practice of subjective liberation that is needed to do philosophy in the first place.

How are we then to understand Spinoza’s significance and influence? Is there - and how would we answer this - a Spinozist account of Spinoza’s effects on the history of philosophy? How does this vary since early modern thought and, in particular, how does it differ from contemporary philosophy and theory? Contemporary French philosophy, from Althusser through Deleuze, Macherey, Balibar to Negri, works, broadly speaking under the banner of Spinozism, regardless of its different guises and orientations. It is thus interesting to note: Spinozism allows for an astounding multiplicity of variations. And the same is true for the history of Marxism: Georgi Plekhanov’s declaration that Marxism is a “modern Spinozism”, Althusser’s Spinozist-Marxism (that rejects Plekhanov’s all-encompassing characterization of Marxism as a world-view), Negri’s and Hardt’s Spinozist Multitude against Empire, Deleuze’s Spinoza of affects, etc. Even one of the more recent influential books in the cognitive sciences was Antonio Damasio’s *Looking for Spinoza*, which argues that Spinoza foresaw the discoveries in neuroscience and biology, whereby Spinoza seems to become even more a thinker of our present and maybe even our contemporary than one might have assumed. It is difficult to imagine a philosopher who is a constitutive reference for so many opposed philosophical orientations. But is this diversity and multitude of Spinozism just contingent (and if so, how can the great

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<sup>7</sup> Hegel 1969, p.537

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.373

thinker of necessity create such a contingency) or ultimately necessary (from a Spinozist or, meta-Spinozist perspective)? What precisely is the inherent potential of Spinozist thought for such creative multiplication? Is Spinoza a figure of contradiction or inconsistency, or can such multiplicity only spring from a uniform system)? What would Spinoza himself make of the reception of his thought?

It might be that precisely because of the multiform and divergent, often conflictual, interpretations that it is nearly impossible to search for the 'real' or 'true' Spinoza. But must there not be a substance of Spinozism? The present issue of *Crisis and Critique* is not an attempt to simply map the recent and traditional scholarship on Spinoza, it is therefore also not an attempt to produce an issue of 'Spinoza studies'. It is rather an attempt to think *with* Spinoza, to think through substance and to detect the potentials and limitations that have made and make Spinoza so productive. This will hopefully allow us to see through his eyes into the present.

Berlin/Prishtina, May 2021

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# **The Politics of Indignation: A Spinozist Perspective**

**Miguel de Beistegui**

**Abstract:** Contemporary social struggles increasingly recognise and use indignation as a positive political affect. But what is indignation, and to what extent can it serve as a foundation for political movements and claims for justice? I turn to Spinoza to explore the complexity of this issue, and ways in which it is played out in our current political context. In section I, I emphasise the ambiguity, if not the paradox of indignation: on the one hand, Spinoza tells us, indignation is a Sadness accompanied by hatred towards others. As such, indignation threatens the harmony of the social order, and can even destroy the civil state. But indignation is also itself a genetic force, *constitutive* of the civil state. This means that both the social consensus and its dissolution are *in fact* a consequence not of sound reason, but of the power of an essentially imitative affectivity, and of indignation in particular (section II). In section III, I illustrate the complexity of Spinoza's account by turning to recent historical examples. Specifically, and following the work of Didier Fassin, I focus on post-Holocaust Europe and post-Apartheid South Africa. Eventually, I arrive at a nuanced, plausible defence of indignation as a political affect, yet one that cannot serve as a model or a guide when we try and think the nature of the *demos*, by which I mean the constitution of the multitude as the greatest possible unit of power, or right.

**Keywords:** suffering, hate, indignation (ethics and politics of), resistance (and natural right), consensus, recognition (and reconciliation), justice, revenge (and destruction).

Since the publication of Stéphane Hessel's thirty-two pages-long essay *Indignez-vous !*, which sold over four million copies worldwide in just one year, and was translated in thirty-four languages, indignation has become an increasingly recognised as a positive political affect, around which protest movements of various kinds can rally (Hessel 2010). In his opusculé, Hessel, a hero of the French resistance deported to Buchenwald, celebrates indignation as the ferment of political resistance and, implicitly, presents resistance as the essence of politics. His brief call to indignation, in reaction to the treatment of the *sans papiers* and migrant workers in France, the fate of Palestinians in the occupied territories, the victims of inequality, France's politics of immigration, as well as the place of financial capitalism in today's world, clearly resonated with a large section of the population. Soon after the publication of Hessel's bestseller, Spain saw the formation and rise of the anti-austerity movement *Movimiento 15-M*, also known as '*Movimiento de los indignados*', which eventually led to the formation of political parties such as *Partido X* and *Podemos*. More recently, the so-called cancel culture, also rooted in indignation, has spread on university campuses, public forums, social media, and society in general.

Increasingly, indignation is seen as a right, if not a virtue and a political goal, one that is amplified and exacerbated by the “echo chambers” of social media, entrenching divisions within society, comforting each side in their certainty that their indignation is more valid, legitimate and founded than the indignation of others. Have we, then, entered the era of the politics and culture of indignation, directed at abuses of power, but also often bent on erecting new popular tribunals aimed at naming and shaming, and before which the accused are forced to kneel, confess, and repent (Hübl 2019)? With a bit of historical contextualisation, Axel Honneth claims, we observe that social struggles of the modern age find their point of departure not in pre-given economic interests, but in “moral feelings of *indignation*.”<sup>1</sup> They stem “from collective feelings of having been unjustly treated” and denied legal or social recognition.<sup>2</sup>

But what is indignation, and to what extent can it serve as a foundation for political movements and claims for justice? Can we even talk about a *right* to indignation? And can we rightfully think of indignation as a virtue, rather than a passion – and a sad one at that, fuelled by the hatred that we feel in the face of a wrong committed towards ourselves or others – which can, in the best of circumstances, lead to a democratic process of recognition and transformation on the part of the body politic, yet can also lead to assaults on freedom and the dissolution of the democratic consensus? Is indignation an end in itself, a genuine political stance, or a mere trigger, the murmur or tremor of a movement through which society either rescues itself from a state of inequality and alienation, or plunges further into bondage and oppression?

Those questions, and the ambiguous nature of indignation they imply, find a remarkable echo in Philip Roth’s *Indignation* (Roth 2008). Published two years before Hessel’s opusculum, Roth’s novel offers a nuanced and, as we’ll see, rather Spinozist account of this particular emotion. On the one hand, he describes the futile and ultimately destructive logic of indignation. At the same time, the narrator describes indignation as “the most beautiful word of the English language” (95), arguably because it helps us understand our emotional response to specific situations of injustice. In the novel, indignation appears as the necessary response to the implicit but tangible anti-Semitism of the Dean of men, and the bigotry of the deeply Christian ethos of Winesburg College, with which the young college student and main protagonist, Marcus Messner, is confronted. Roth thus brings to light the ambiguity if not paradox of indignation, which Spinoza analyses in his *Ethics* and political writings. Sometimes, indignation is the only possible response,

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<sup>1</sup> Honneth 1995, 161 (emphasis added).

<sup>2</sup> Honneth 1995, 165.

and the only way to live with dignity, however briefly. In Roth's novel, Marcus Messner's outrage leads him to drop out of his Ohio college. As a consequence, he is drafted into the US army to fight in the Korean war and killed in combat after only a few months.

In a recent interview and a different context, the French economist turned Spinozist François Lordon seems to come to a similar conclusion: whilst a sad passion, which combines anger and hatred, indignation is sometimes the only possible reaction, and, all things considered, the least bad option (Lordon and Foessel 2016). It signals the point at which a situation becomes intolerable for a particular group or society, a critical threshold that can lead to forms of resistance such as rebellions, uprisings, strikes, practices of civil disobedience, etc. a society remains normatively deficient so long as its members are systematically denied the recognition they seek and deserve.

Yet can we distinguish between types of indignation? What are to make of the indignation motivated by ethnic and religious supremacy, by conspiracy theories that lash out at technocrats and civil servants, the urban elite, the media, the judiciary, religions other than their own, foreigners and migrants, etc.? What are we to make of those who capitalise on the indignation of certain groups and claim to feel their pain, frustration, and anger; who tell them who is responsible for it, who deserves to pay, and against whom they should turn their vindictiveness? We want to believe in the possibility of distinguishing between different forms of indignation, of seeing some as legitimate and others as illegitimate, of attributing the former to *ressentiment* and revengefulness, and therefore to an imagined or hallucinatory alienation, and the latter to a genuine call for justice, rooted in real, historical alienation.<sup>3</sup> Yet how secure and well-founded are those distinctions? Can the *demos*, and democratic politics, be the result of indignation, or are the politics of indignation by definition the politics of the lynching mob? Is indignation a remedy which the body politic produces and applies to itself, and therefore a form of self-immunisation which restores a certain equilibrium, a key element of the state as a self-regulating system? Or is it a poison that threatens its very existence?

I turn to Spinoza to explore the complexity of this issue, and ways in which it is played out in our current political context.<sup>4</sup> In section I, I emphasise the ambiguity, if not the paradox of indignation: on the one hand, Spinoza tells us, indignation is a Sadness accompanied by hatred towards others. One of the political consequences of indignation, which Spinoza draws not in his *Ethics*, but in his political writings, is that

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<sup>3</sup>This is the view Didier Fassin develops in a recent article, to which I'll return (Fassin 2013).

<sup>4</sup>The literature on the topic of indignation in Spinoza is now significant. See A. Matheron, 'Indignation and the *Conatus* of the Spinozist State', in Matheron 2020; L. Bove 1996, 295-301; F. Del Lucchese 2009a, Chapter 3; T. Stolze 2009, 152-158.

indignation threatens the harmony of the social order, and can even destroy the civil state. It would be wrong, therefore, to consider it a good. But indignation is also itself a genetic force, *constitutive* of the civil state (*status civilis*), and one which remains alive within the state, thus providing it with its *regulative* dimension (section II). This means that both the social consensus and its dissolution are *in fact* a consequence not of sound reason, but of the power of aggregation, or federation, of an essentially imitative affectivity, and of indignation in particular. Politics, from the inception to the transformation of the civil state, is rooted in the economy and government of passionate affects. In section III, I illustrate the complexity of Spinoza's account by turning to recent historical examples. Specifically, and following the work of Didier Fassin, I focus on post-Holocaust Europe and post-Apartheid South Africa. Eventually, I hope to arrive at a nuanced, plausible defence of indignation as a political affect, yet one that cannot serve as a model or a guide when we try and think the nature of the *demos*, by which I mean the constitution of the multitude as the greatest possible unit of power, or right.<sup>5</sup> In other words, if indignation, and therefore sadness, is at the root of all politics, the truly democratic question consists in knowing how it can move beyond it, and give way to a different kind of affectivity, more prone to the flourishing or perfection of a community of minds and bodies. But does this simply mean to a joyful affectivity, such as the love of oneself – Spinoza calls it “*gloria*” (EIIIp30s), *philautia*, or *acquiescentia in se ipso* (EIIIp50s), and defines it as “Joy arising from considering ourselves” (EIIIp55s) – a love that can apply to one's nation (patriotism), but also to self-respect, self-confidence, and self-esteem? Or does it mean to an affectivity that is otherwise than imitative?

### I. From Suffering (or Sadness) to Hate and Indignation

Indignation (*indignatio*) seems to play a limited role in the *Ethics*, but a more important, if not crucial one in Spinoza's last work, *The Political Treatise*. It is entirely absent from *The Theological-Political Treatise*. Yet the consequences of what Spinoza has to say about it, and the various ways in which this can be interpreted, are highly significant. Three things are worth mentioning from the start.

First, aside from its definition – “Indignation is a Hate toward someone who has done evil to another”<sup>6</sup> – indignation appears three times, each time in connection with the question of the state (*imperium*)

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5Throughout, I will use the word multitude as a translation, or the most minimal possible translation, of Spinoza's *multitudo*. It would take me too long to justify the use of this translation, now adopted by most Spinoza scholars since the publication of Antonio Negri's *The Salvage Anomaly* (Negri 1981), and say why, in the end, I believe it to be preferable to the notions of “people,” “masses,” or class. For a synthetic and illuminating account of the meaning of Spinoza's concept, see V. Morfino 2009, 79-86.

6 Spinoza, EIII, Def. Aff. 20; also EIIIp22s.



and its consequences for society as a whole. This is not a coincidence: indignation is fundamentally a political affect. Spinoza contrasts indignation with the rule of law (EIVApp24) and distinguishes it clearly from the right of the state to punish its citizens in the case of a wrong committed (EIVp51s): the state, and the system of right that defines it, does not punish out of indignation, which is a secessionist, or at least divisive affect, but out of *duty*. The second point to emphasise from the start is indignation's fundamental, indeed irreducible connection with hate, and therefore with what Spinoza sees as a form of sadness (*tristitia*) (EIII, Def. Aff., 7). Indignation is a sad passion, which involves hate toward someone or a group as a result of a wronged committed towards them, and with whom I identify. The latter, related point, to which I'll return, is crucial: indignation is hate on someone else's behalf, who is like me, or in whom I recognise myself. It is a mimetic affect, of the kind that defines the sense of belonging that we can expect from the imagination (EIIIp27). But this feature is not unique to indignation: as propositions 16 to 27 of Part III of the *Ethics* seek to demonstrate, we tend to bond through shared affects, whether joyful or sad, and therefore through imaginary representations. Our sociality is first and foremost passionate and a matter of imagination. Anticipating a line of thought that runs from Hume to Adam Smith,<sup>7</sup> and Gabriel Tarde's sociology of mimetic desire,<sup>8</sup> based on the idea that social relations are, for the most part, relations of imitation, Spinoza comes to the realisation that, insofar as human beings are affective beings, the more they seek to preserve their own being, or follow their *individual* desire, the more they realise that they are inextricably bound to one another, according to a strict logic of imitation: their sociality happens and expands through a spontaneous propagation of affects.<sup>9</sup> Spinoza calls Pity or commiseration (*commiseratio*) the imitation of the affects that are related to Sadness in general. In EIIIp27s, he contrasts it with emulation (*aemulatio*), of which we could assume that it is an imitation related to Joy in general. But things are more complicated than it seems. To be sure, Spinoza defines emulation as a kind of imitation, or "a Desire for a thing which is generated in us because we imagine that others have the same Desire" (EIII, Def. Aff. 33). The difference between imitation (*including* Pity) and emulation, he adds, is that "we call emulous only him who imitates what we judge to be honourable, useful, or pleasant" (EIII, Def. Aff. 33, Exp.). However, Spinoza insists that emulation is almost inevitably accompanied by envy: "human nature is so constituted that men pity the unfortunate, and envy the fortunate" (EIIIp32s). This is because, whenever I desire something

7 A. Smith 1976, I.iii.2, III.ii.1-9; D. Hume 2000, 2.2.9-10.

8 Tarde 2000 [1890], 1989 [1901], 1902.

9 For a detailed exploration of this point, see Bostrenghi 2012; Bove 1996, Chapter 3.

that is desired and possessed by an other, I see the other as a rival whom I need to destroy, or whose object of enjoyment I need to dispossess her from (EIIIp32d). Thus, siblings feel that they are competing for the love of their parents. Their shared object of desire, namely, *laetitia*, requires that they hate and destroy each other. But they are precisely children, that is, minds and bodies governed by passions and external causes. The primal scene of puerile, imaginary or hallucinatory sociality (and not just the state of nature) is one of Jealousy, Envy, Rivalry, and Murder. It is that of Cain and Abel. In other words, and as Tarde, Lacan and Girard each tried to demonstrate in their respective domains, *imaginary* Desire is essentially mediated, mimetic, and envious: *my* desire is mostly the desire of an Other, whose existence and Joy are an obstacle to the realisation of my desire, and whose place I therefore need to take.<sup>10</sup> But, as Lacan used to ask: if I am to put myself in the other's shoes (*à la place de l'autre*), where will the other go? Is there room for the two of us, or is imaginary, passionate, narcissistic desire essentially a place of rivalry and conflict which pits me against the other, even (and especially) where and when I identify with the other?<sup>11</sup> The difference between imaginary, puerile identification and narcissistic paranoia is very thin indeed.

The Spinozist (and also Nietzschean) lesson is that nothing, it seems, spreads more easily and quickly than sad passions, especially of the envious and revengeful kind. A crucial point, to which I'll also return in my conclusion, is one of knowing whether the imaginary, reactive and narcissistic affectivity of imitation can give way to a real (or rational), active and democratic affectivity, rooted in friendship and solidarity; and whether the latter can lay the foundations for the constitution of the multitude as a true *people*, rather than as an obedient herd or a lynching mob. In other words, the question with which I'll be concerned *in fine* is that of knowing not how the state can become wholly rational – Spinoza himself believes it can't – and therefore neutralise our affective sociality, but whether human affectivity is exclusively auto-affective, or mimetic, whether it grows and spreads solely through imaginary representations of likeness, or whether it can crystallise through a genuine understanding of what we have in common, and makes us more powerful. This question, I will argue, allows us to overcome the alternative between the logic of the police, or governmentality, which channels and orders the contrary – and for that reason dangerous – desires of the multitude, thus turning

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<sup>10</sup> See Lacan 1966, 113, 121; Lacan 1975, 169, 199-200; Girard 1961, 1972.

<sup>11</sup> Naturally, for Lacan, this imaginary and essentially narcissistic regime of desire, with which his own itinerary as a clinician began, is normally tamed and overcome through the symbolic order. But this order is that of the Law and, as such, one that Spinoza would recognise as introducing a degree of ordered and obedient sociality, but one that would still belong to the order of representation and superstition, and therefore of imagination. The Real, according to Spinoza, can only be the rational, or the endlessly re-enacted movement that liberates us from the hold of imagination, and towards the adequate knowledge of causes.

it into an obedient herd; and the logic of conflictual politics, which takes place from within the former, but only to suspend or destroy its regimes of desire, its divisions and hierarchies. The alternative in question requires a different conception of politics, rooted not in resistance, and especially sad passions such as indignation, but creative and joyful assemblages of desire, conducive to the creation of greater units of power. The democratic body politic is one that reaches a degree of perfection, or power, and therefore a collective joy, through the systematic cultivation of Generosity.

### 1. Hate between suffering and indignation

Indignation is a social affect rooted in hatred. But hate is itself a consequence of one's suffering. Suffering – Spinoza calls it “sadness” – is the immediate reaction to, and sign of, a decrease of my power to act and think. Its signals a shift from a greater to a weaker perfection, a diminishing of my own being, a drop in my own vitality, a frustration or impediment in my desire to grow, in short, an expression of impotence. Nietzsche calls it “a feeling of obstruction” (Nietzsche 1994, 102). This shift or change is a direct result of the negative, even destructive effect of another and greater power on my own power to act and think. Insofar as this affection of the body is accompanied by an Idea that corresponds to it, it is an affect (EIIIdf.1), the range of which is broad: “sad” passions include fear, anger, hatred, cruelty, disdain, despair, envy, jealousy, spite, rancour, vengeance, etc.<sup>12</sup> As such, and whatever the nature of the suffering (a flesh wound, a disease, the loss of someone we love, a hurtful comment), suffering is *always* bad. Insofar as it affects the human (or animal) body negatively, it is *necessarily* bad. What we call “bad” (and should distinguish from evil in a moral sense) is nothing besides this ontophysiological drop in power, and the feeling that most often accompanies it. I call “bad” (*malum*), Spinoza writes, “every kind of sadness [*tristitia*],” and especially every force or affection of the body which “frustrates” our desire [*desiderium*] (EIIIp39s). The most extreme, indeed liminal version of sadness is melancholy; for then the body's power of acting and the mind's power of thinking are “absolutely diminished or restrained” (EIVp42). Human desire and, more generally, the effort of every “mode” or living being to persevere in its own being, or augment its power to the maximum of its capacity, is equivalent to what Nietzsche, in a perhaps more ambiguous way, calls the will to power. *Bad*, Nietzsche says, is everything that inhibits the will to power; everything that locks me into a passive, reactive position, frustrates my power to act, subjects me to the power of others; everything that inhibits my own vitality, my “instinct for growth, for continuance, for accumulation of forces... for power” (Nietzsche 1990, 129).

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12 For a long time, and to this day, *triste*, the word for “sad” in various romance languages (Italian, French, Spanish), carried the sense of base, contemptible, despicable, and malicious. See for example Montaigne 1965, Book I, Chapter II.

Yet every type or mode, every idea or affect, is an expression of the will to power or the conatus specific to the mode in question. The power of the generous person differs from that of the greedy, which itself differs from that of the ambitious man, or the Envious. “Good” and “bad” mean different things to them, and each acts and thinks according to his or her right or nature, that is, according to what it is naturally determined to do. Each one, “from his own affect, judges a thing good or bad, useful or useless” (EIIIp39s). The power of the envious person is highly selective, and restricted: from the other person, and as the cause of his own happiness, the Envious selects or retains only her unhappiness. What is useful to the Envious is precisely what is useless to the other person. His power is a lesser degree of perfection, which requires the sadness of others as the condition of his own satisfaction. In the state of nature, defined by the right of every individual to do those things that follow from the necessity of his own nature, “there is nothing which, by the agreement of all, is good or evil; for everyone who is in the state of nature considers only his advantage, and decides what is good and evil from his own temperament” (EIVp37s2). The natural right of each person is determined not by reason, but by desire and power: “Whatever anyone who is considered to be only under the rule of nature judges to be useful for himself – whether under the guidance of sound reason or by the prompting of the affects – he is permitted, by supreme natural right, to want and to take – by force, by deception, by entreaties, or by whatever way is, in the end, easiest” (TTP 16.8). This means that in the state of nature the ideas of evil and sin are meaningless: “This is just what Paul teaches, when he recognises no sin before the law...” (TTP 16.6). Things are different, however, in the civil state, which is significantly more advantageous, if only because it allows us to live securely, according to certain dictates of our reason, and without the constant fear of being subjected to the power and appetites of others: “all men fear being alone, because no one alone has the strength to defend himself, and no one alone can provide the things necessary for life. So by nature men desire a civil order” (TP 6.1). In the civil state, what is good and what is evil “is decided by common agreement. And everyone is bound to submit to the State. Sin, therefore, is nothing but disobedience, which for that reason can be punished only by the law of the State” (EIVp37s). The question, however, is one of knowing how the “common agreement” in question is generated in the first place. And the troubling answer Spinoza provides in Part III of the *Ethics* and various sections of *The Political Treatise*, as we’ll see, is that it is generated not through reason (as Spinoza suggests in *The Theological-Political Treatise*), but through indignation, and therefore through a sad passion. Equally troubling, as we’ll also see, is that civil disobedience, which from the point of view of the civil state, can only be seen as sin, but which corresponds to the inalienable right of the multitude, is itself born of a sense of indignation. But does this close the

political matter of indignation once and for all? Or does indignation in fact play a certain role not only in the constitution or emergence of the civil state, and the consensus that defines it, but also in its evolution or transformation? Can we imagine situations in which indignation is legitimate and politically productive, that is, conducive to restoring or improving the equilibrium of the state, through mechanisms of reconciliation, recognition and assimilation? I return to those questions in the third and final part of my essay.

In addition, and as a necessary corollary, insofar as those negative, revengeful passions diminish my power whilst always also expressing it, that is, whilst also expressing a degree of the will to power and the will to live, they limit my freedom. In their throe, I am subjected to the power of external forces over which, I feel, I have no control, and which affect me negatively, thus generating in me thoughts of hatred and revenge. I am locked in a state of servitude, forced to think and act like a slave, that is, to *react*. That is all I *can* do, what I have become. Unable to act, that is, to combine my powers with those of others around me so as to increase it, and thus experience joy, I can only *suffer* life. “What is *bad*?” Nietzsche asks. “Everything that proceeds from weakness, from envy, from revengefulness” (Nietzsche 1990, 191). Every form of suffering, from the most trivial to the most excruciating, is thus an indication of a passive or reactive life.

By contrast, anything that increases my power to act and think is necessarily good, or virtuous. So much so, Spinoza insists, that the person who is genuinely free, or led by reason alone, and has only adequate ideas, has no concept of either evil or good (EIVp68): for those concepts are relative and arise only in the context of drops and increases of one's perfection, which the person guided by reason alone does not know. And in the same way that a decrease of power or loss of vitality brings about sadness and pain, an increase of one's power, a growth in vitality brings about joy: “By ‘good’ [*bonum*] I understand every kind of joy [*laetitia*] and furthermore whatever is conducive thereto, and especially whatever satisfies a desire [*desiderium*] of any sort” (EIIIp39S). Laughter, joking (but not mockery) and other forms of well-balanced pleasure are intrinsically good. Only “savage and sad superstitions” discredit and prohibit pleasures. “For why is it more proper to relieve our hunger and thirst than rid ourselves of melancholy?” (EIVp45s). Philosophy itself, insofar as it is concerned with understanding the conditions under which power is increased, and the ways of bringing it about, is the highest expression of action and the “gay” or “joyful” science, which also acknowledges and includes the great woes and sufferings of life. It is the science that is concerned with the creation and transmission of joyful affects, and combats the introduction, reproduction and proliferation of sadness with all its heart. It is the struggle against the oppression of sadness and the glorification of suffering in all its forms; against

those who promote it, organise it, and derive their own power from the enslavement of others; against the ethics, politics and religion that draws on such passions, and sometimes injects the social and political body with its poison. It is an antidote and a resistance fought in the name of *hilaritas* or “cheerfulness,” an affect that “cannot be excessive” and “is always good” (EIVp42).

In that respect, the greatest historical *tour de force* – or should we call it *faiblesse*? – and the most unforgiveable lie has been to pretend that weakness is virtuous, that God loves weakness. What kind of God would love weakness, that is, praise us for our imperfection, for what makes us sad and feel small? A perverse God, no doubt:

Nothing forbids our pleasure except a savage and sad superstition... no deity, nor anyone else, unless he is envious, takes pleasure in my lack of power and my misfortune; nor does he ascribe to virtue our tears, sighs, fear, and other things of that kind, which are signs of a weak mind. (EIVp45s)

No, God's law, or the law of Nature, if there is such a thing, consists only in seeking the highest perfection possible, that is, and as far as we human beings are concerned, the greatest expansion of our powers or faculties (Nietzsche calls them our “instincts”) – our powers of understanding and knowledge, imagination and recollection, sensation and intuition, socialisation and love, physical strength and flexibility – through philosophy, science, art and literature, religion (yes, religion), politics, ethics, dance and gymnastics, celebrations and festivals, as well as the use of bodily pleasures. The only law or commandment is that we understand, test and stretch our nature so as to reach the greatest possible contentment (*gaudium*); and this means to avoid everything that causes us harm, sadness and suffering, for *tristitia* always diminishes or frustrates the power of the mind and the body, their capacity to understand (*intelligere*) the nature of each thing, to act, and bring our faculties to another, hitherto unknown power: “the greater the Joy with which we are affected, the greater the perfection to which we pass, i.e, the more we must participate in the divine nature. To use things, therefore, and take pleasure in them as far as possible... is the part of a wise man” (EIVp45s).

## 2. From suffering to indignation

Suffering (or sadness) is thus the physiological or mental condition that lies at the root of the range of emotions we call rancour, resentment, spite, indignation, vindictiveness, etc. However, whilst a *necessary* condition for the emergence of such passions, it is not a *sufficient* reason. The connection to be established is that between suffering and the spirit of revenge that lies beneath the range of passionate affects just



mentioned, and beneath indignation in particular. The movement from suffering to indignation is neither immediate nor inevitable: it requires an *interpretation* of this basic physiological feeling, the source of which, then, can only be attributed to something other than the suffering itself. The strange thing about pain, Nietzsche remarks in *The Gay Science*, is that it “always raises the question about its origin,” whereas “pleasure is inclined to stop with itself without looking back” (Nietzsche 1974, 86). In the face of suffering, we tend to ask ourselves: whom can I blame and *punish*? What is the meaning or purpose of my suffering? We attribute responsibility and project meaning onto it. We assume that things could have been different, and we can repair the past. This search for blame and punishment can be directed at others, or oneself. It is in any case destructive. In the face of a suffering we generally judge to be senseless and undeserved, we can’t help feel “indignant” (KSA 10, 7 [9]) and want “to make someone pay for it [*ohne irgendwen es entgelten zu lassen*]; every grievance contains the seeds of revenge [*schon jede Klage enthält Rache*]” (Nietzsche 1967-77/1998, 10, 5 [1] 20). Adam Smith puts it even more plainly: “We are angry, for a moment, even at the stone that hurts us” (Smith 1976, II.iii.1.1).

Hatred can thus be described as the emotion that naturally accompanies suffering, or the spontaneous rejection of suffering insofar as it is accompanied by the idea of its cause: as my power or perfection diminishes, I develop anger and hatred towards the idea – or, as we’ll see, towards the imaginary projection – of its cause. And in the case of indignation, the hatred in question involves a third party, with whom we identify for one reason or another. There is therefore nothing *morally* wrong about anger and hatred. As Spinoza puts it, insofar as anger leads us to “ward off from us that which has caused us some harm,” and “avoid the thing we hate,” it isn’t bad.<sup>13</sup> The greater the sadness or pain, the greater our desire to remove it (EIIIp37Dem). It is also natural, when we hate someone, and are understandably *angry*, to endeavour to cause them harm, unless we fear that we will suffer greater injury in return (EIIIp39). It is likewise natural, whenever we imagine the destruction [*destrui imaginatur*] of someone or something we hate, to feel joyful [*laetabitur*] (EIIIp20). The feelings of anger (*ira*: “the effort to harm those we hate”), revenge (*vindicta*: “to return the harm we suffered”) and indignation are natural consequences of hatred (EIIIp40s), which is itself generated by the representation of the cause of our sadness.

But to say that hatred, anger and revenge are not *morally* bad does not mean that they are not *ontologically* or *ethically* bad. There is, to be sure, something intrinsically *bad* about them: they are a negative feeling, a sad passion, indicative of a loss of power and the transition from a greater to a weaker perfection; I can’t feel hatred,

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13 Spinoza 1985, *Short Treatise on God, Man and his Well-Being*, II.6.1 and II.6.5.

anger and vindictiveness without imagining my own powerlessness, the frustration of my own essence (or perfection), the inhibition of my desire: “He who wishes to avenge wrongs by hating in return surely lives miserably” (EIVp46s). I can’t be subjected to those feelings without the representation of my own passivity and servitude, without the realisation that my desire (or will to power), that is, the force (*vis*) with which I persevere in existence (*in existendo*) is limited, exposed to the power of external causes, which can cause it harm. Such is the reason why “hatred can never be good” (EIVp45), and why “envy, derision, contempt, anger, revenge, and the other emotions related to hatred are bad” (IVp45c1).

As such, those reactive or passive affects never match the feeling of love, and all the feelings associated with love, the joy of which stems not from the destruction or sadness of others, but from the knowledge of their wellbeing and their joy, and thus the increase of their own power: “Desire arising from joy is, other things being equal, stronger than desire arising from sadness” (EIVp18). Similarly, “He who lives according to the guidance of reason will strive, as far as he can, to bring it about that he is not troubled with affects of Hate (by P19), and consequently (by P37), will strive that the other also should not undergo those affects”. Now hate is increased by being returned, in what amounts to a vicious circle. A prime, political example of this vicious dynamic is civil war, which is in fact a return to the state of nature: through a systematic campaign of hate, communities, families, and society as a whole, once united, are divided and pitted against one another. A line of hate cuts across the political body, and quickly becomes a chasm. The other side is no longer considered a political adversary (and even less, of course, an ally), but an enemy to be defeated, if not destroyed. Each is equally indignant and feels entirely justified in its hate towards the other side. Locked into a vicious cycle of sad, hateful passions, human beings are bent on defeating each other. But Hate can be defeated only by Love and Nobility, and not by a greater Hate (EIIIp43 and p44, EIVp46Dem), or even a sense of duty or obedience, such as the command to turn the other cheek, forgive one’s enemy, or love one’s neighbour (especially when that neighbour causes us injury) (EIVp7 and p14). Spinoza understands very well why, in order to pacify the fickle and unstable, for essentially passionate, Jewish multitude, and minimise the place of sad passions in its midst, the Prophets had recourse to the imagery of parables, and to the language of divine laws and commandments.<sup>14</sup> But we must not confuse this ideological, imaginary order of representation, or this superstition, with the natural order, accessible to thought. Those who live by the guidance of reason – and this, for Spinoza, means by the guidance of a complete *understanding* of the order of nature and

14 See for example Spinoza’s reply to Willem van Blijenbergh from 5 January 1665 (Letter 19), in Spinoza 2016, 357–361. See also TTP 4.



man's own essence (EIVp53Dem), rather than by a moral imperative – endeavour as far they can to repay with love or generosity another's hatred, anger, contempt, etc. towards them (EIVp46), not because they are ordered to do so, but simply because it is in their interest to do so, because their power and self-love increase rather than decrease as a result, because their virtue, or perfection, demands it: "Acting absolutely from virtue is nothing else in us but acting, living, and preserving our being (these three signify the same thing) by the guidance of reason, from the foundation of seeking one's advantage" (EIVp24; see also EIVp45s, 46s, 59Dem). For reason alone can reveal and express the true power of our nature, or virtue. "Therefore he who is ignorant of himself is ignorant of the foundation of all the virtues, and consequently, of all the virtues" (EIVp56Dem). Generosity is the necessary outcome of he or she who, through the sole force of an intuition consistent with the highest kind of knowledge, understands that relations of love, solidarity and friendship between human beings increase their power, and therefore their joy:

Therefore, there are many things outside ourselves which are advantageous to us and ought therefore be sought. Of these none more excellent can be discovered than those which are in complete harmony with our own nature. For example, if two individuals of completely the same nature are combined, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one singly.  
Therefore, nothing is more advantageous to man than man.  
(EIVp18s)

The goal of life, Nietzsche claims after Spinoza, is to create "bigger units of power" (Nietzsche 1994, 54), and therefore avoid the negative instincts that get in the way of such a goal: "It is especially useful to men to form associations, to bind themselves" through friendship (EIV, App. 12). It is in their advantage to form "a common society" and to come together "in harmony and friendship" (EIV, App. 14). The problem, however, is that human beings rarely live under the guidance of reason, and are mostly "envious, and inclined to vengeance than to Compassion [*miser cordia*]" (EIV, App. 13). The logic of alliance, which Spinoza advocates from the standpoint of reason, is constantly threatened by the logic of indignation and conflict. However, whilst the Yes to life will always be better than the No, and love than hatred, anger, and revenge, it is virtually impossible to imagine a *human* life that would be devoid of sadness and suffering, and therefore of a form of aggressiveness towards its cause.

Such is the reason why, ultimately, indignation (and the politics of resistance with which it is bound up) does not necessarily exclude the politics of alliance and the creation of bigger units of power, and may even be a regrettable but nonetheless inevitable stage towards their realisation. To be sure, compassion and pity, or commiseration

(*commiseratio*), which Spinoza defines as “a Sadness, accompanied by the idea of an evil that has happened to another whom we imagine to be like us” (EIII.def.aff.18; also EIIIp22s), are always more advantageous than forms of hatred, such as indignation, vindictiveness and resentment. This is because the compassionate spontaneously and naturally seek to relieve others (and themselves) of the suffering with whom they identify (EIVp50s). They are therefore animated by a kind of love. This definition of compassion, or pity (EIIIdef.aff.18 claims that they are virtually the same thing), is very close to that of indignation, and occurs in the same Scholium of Proposition 22, the difference between the two being that indignation involves *hatred* toward him who has done evil to another. Pity, Spinoza insists, is evil and useless, at least for the man who lives according to the guidance of reason (EIVp50). For pity is a sadness, and therefore evil. Moreover, our effort to free the person who suffers from their suffering stems from reason alone, that is, from what we *know* to be good (EIVp50s). Pity as such is therefore neither a way forward nor a useful state. Having said that, pity, like repentance and shame, and in a civil state governed not by reason alone, but by passions, can serve a positive political purpose, one of unity, accord and obedience. Those affects, which Nietzsche would associate with the ascetic ideal, and Spinoza with the ruler who, through a fine balance of hope and fear, is able to reign over the hearts of his subjects, can tame the multitude and transform it into a pacified and obedient herd. The fickle and contrary nature of the masses, which is due to the fact that they are governed “solely by their emotions,” is a “cause for despair” for those who try to govern them, and the reason why loyalty and obedience are most often arrived at through various regimes of discipline, through the introduction of rituals and habits, through work, etc. (TTP 17.9-17). Through such techniques, the norms prescribed by the State, those of *obsequium* and justice in particular, are internalised and perpetuated by the subjects themselves. But the herd is not the same as the *demos*: a true people governs itself not through blind and passive obedience, or through hateful passions, but through the combination of individual powers and maximisation of the power of the multitude. And that increase of power is also my increase, and my *interest*; that greater composition of power, that virtuous assemblage will always be better – stronger, healthier – than any relation based on sadness. It is also divine, in that it signals the transition from a lesser to a greater degree of perfection, and requires the full deployment (and therefore power) of thought.

## II. The Politics of Indignation

The “pessimism of indignation,” to borrow Nietzsche’s expression (KSA 13, 15 [30]), can’t be dissociated from the desire for revenge following a harm or injury. For

[i]ndignation originates not in the confrontation with the enemy, but in the injury caused by his victory [*Die Empörung entsteht über die Schädigung also über den Erfolg des Feindes, nicht über die Feindseligkeit*]. It is the feeling of the vanquished, the longing for revenge – not the feeling that an injustice has been committed [*Es ist das Gefühl des Besiegten - das Verlangen nach Vergeltung: nicht das Gefühl, daß Unrecht geschehen sei*]. (KSA 4, 16 [29])

Spinoza's own view is similar: indignation, the author of the *Ethics* remarks, "seems to present an appearance of fairness" (EIVapp.24). But it is in fact the feeling of the vanquished, provoked or increased – and this is perhaps the most significant element – by the arrogant attitude of the victors (who, were they to be wise, would act in the interest of the multitude, and do their best to generate affects of hope and love, rather than fear and hatred). We recall from EIVp37s2 that "fair" or "just" is defined by the law of the civil state, and has no place in the state of nature. "Fair" and "just," like "good" and "evil" are values that emerge from within the civil state, and as a result of a consensus. When addressed within and against an existing social order, indignation is lawlessness and a desire for revenge that leads to discord.

### 1. Indignation from natural right

Indignation is an intrinsically rebellious attitude, or a political affect that threatens – and has every *right* to threaten – the civil state when the multitude is confronted with abuses of power, loses the fear and reverence it ordinarily has for the sovereign, and displays hatred towards those it holds responsible. Whenever the social contract or transfer of rights to the Sovereign is broken; or, which amounts to the same thing, whenever the multitude feels that it is in its interest to violate the contract, the multitude exercises its natural right (or power). But the right in question is no longer a civil right, since the rebellion calls into question the social contract itself. Insofar as it is a matter of Law, it is not the civil Law, but the Law of war, and a pre-political situation, which prevails:

There's no doubt that the contract, or the laws by which a multitude transfers its right to a Council or a man, ought to be violated when it's in the interest of the general welfare to violate them. But (by §3) no private person is entitled to make the judgment about whether it's in the interest of the general welfare to violate them or not. Only the sovereign can rightly do this. Therefore, by the civil Law only the sovereign is left to be the interpreter of those laws. ...

But if that's the nature of these laws – that they can't be violated unless the strength of the Commonwealth is at the same time weakened, i.e., unless the general fear of most citizens is at the same time turned into indignation – by that very fact [of political

weakness arising from general indignation] the Commonwealth is dissolved, and the contract is inoperative [*Civitas dissolvitur, et contractus cessat*]. So the contract is defended not by civil Law, but by the Law of war. (TP 4.6)

It is therefore in the interest of the sovereign to observe the conditions of the contract, if only because he or she might otherwise fall prey to the hatred and violence of the multitude. To be sure, Spinoza writes in *The Theological-Political Treatise*, the supreme powers can, *by right*, “rule the multitude with the utmost violence and condemn citizens to death for the slightest of reasons” (TTP 20.7). But this reign of terror is ultimately detrimental to the whole state, for the simple reason that the supreme powers will “never be able to stop men from making their own judgment about everything according to their own mentality, and from having, to that extent, this or that affect” (TTP 20.7), and that of indignation in particular. As a result, Spinoza concludes, we can deny that governments can prescribe men how to think and judge “with absolute right” (TTP 20.7): no one can transfer absolutely to another person his natural right or faculty of reasoning freely, and of judging any matter. As Del Lucchese puts it, the actions of the sovereign are ultimately subject to the power and consensus of the multitude: “the stability of the state is proportional, at every instant, to the degree of consensus it is able to obtain from its subjects” (Del Lucchese 2009a, 38). If the sovereign doesn’t observe those conditions, violates or disdains the laws he himself has made, the fear and respect of the multitude turns into indignation, and the civil Law gives way to the Law of war (TP 4.5). Fear is therefore a double-edged sword: it is the dominant affect of the multitude subjected to abusive power; but it can also turn into indignation, at which point the sovereign himself ought to fear the wrath of the multitude: *terret vulgus, nisi metuat*.<sup>15</sup> The multitude reaches a boiling or tipping point, thus triggering a phase transformation, or regime change. The key point, here, is that the multitude always retains the right to exercise its power and freedom; it never surrenders this right entirely in the face of the destructive force of even the most arbitrary form of government. This, again, is not because of a transcendent, moral right, but because of the immanent law of nature according to which “there is in nature no singular thing” – a physical body, a political body, an affect, or an idea – “than which there is not another more powerful and stronger. Whatever one is given, there is another more powerful by which the first can be destroyed” (EIV, Axiom 1). As a consequence, resistance, as indicative of the *potentia* of the multitude, is built into the very structure of regimes of power, and the civil state in general. To quote Del Lucchese again, “resistance is nurtured continuously by man’s insuppressible

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15 “The mob is terrifying, if unafraid” (Tacitus 1888 I, 29). Spinoza cites Tacitus’ famous sentence in EIVp54s and TP 7.27.

power, thereby making conflict the ontologically constitutive dimension of politics” (Del Lucchese 2009a, 53). There is no “governmentality” or ways of “conducting conducts,” to use Foucault’s terminology, that does not contain the possibility of “counterconducts,” or the desire and power to be governed less, not in this particular way, and not in our name. Where there is power, there is resistance. As a result, indignation is a natural and inevitable outcome of power relations, and a key mechanism through which a new distribution of such relations, or a new, temporary equilibrium and consensus, can arise. It certainly does not tell or even indicate the form that the resistance in question will take – demonstrations, strikes, civil disobedience, rebellion, revolution, etc. – but it is the affective trigger without which counterconducts could not take place. And it is the direct political translation of the right or power of every mode, and of the body politic itself, to resist the power and domination of external forces which act against its own *conatus*. As Bove puts it, resistance lies at the root of every existence (Bove 1996, 14).

## 2. The genetic power of indignation

Yet the difficult, even troubling reality, which *The Political Treatise* invites us to confront, is that all politics, including democratic politics, is rooted in a shared affectivity, and especially in forms of hatred, such as resentment and the desire for revenge; that the very constitution of the civil state rests not on a social contract or original pact rooted in reason, but on the federation of individuals through indignation and exclusion:

Men... are guided more by affect than by reason. So a multitude naturally agrees, and wishes to be led, as if by one mind, not because reason is guiding them, but because of some common affect... [T]hey have a common hope, or fear, or a common desire to avenge some harm (TP 6.1).<sup>16</sup>

The *Ethics* already showed how the life of reason, which means of the adequate understanding of one’s interest, or power, is difficult to achieve at the individual, ethical level. And there is no doubt, in Spinoza’s mind, that the person who is guided by reason and desires to live freely, which means according to the principle of common life, and to the advantage and decision of the state, lives without hate, envy, or indignation (EIVp73s). As such, indignation has no place in the constitution of a free or rational state. But did such a state ever exist, and could it ever exist? Or is the state the necessary outcome of human passions, and therefore the necessary form of the struggle between reason and passions? In truth, the life of reason is most difficult, if not impossible to achieve at the social and political level:

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<sup>16</sup> Spinoza makes a similar point in TP 1.5, 2.14, 2.18, 3.9.

[T]hough we've shown that reason can do much to restrain and moderate the affects [EV P1-P10S], we've also seen that the path reason teaches us to follow is very difficult [EV P42S]. So people who persuade themselves that a multitude, which may be divided over public affairs, can be induced to live only according to the prescription of reason, those people are dreaming of the golden age of Poets. They're captive to a myth (TP 1.5).

In the same section of *The Political Treatise*, Spinoza makes clear not only that human beings "are necessarily subject to affects," but that they are more inclined to envy than celebrate those who are prospering, more likely to crush than to elevate each other, to seek revenge than mercy. Human beings tend to bond over sad passions, and over that of indignation in particular. To philosophers interested in the origin and foundations of the civil state, Spinoza seems to say: rather than look at reason and its dictates, look at human passions; and look not at *philia*, fraternity, solidarity, or generosity, but ambition for glory and domination, envy, indignation, and vengeance. If human beings are political animals, it is not by virtue of their rationality. This, in turn, suggests that it is not the multitude, but the individual, which is an abstraction, and that individuals are always already constituted as a web of relations (*connexio*), or a multitude, and through it.

This view is clearly at odds with that presented in Chapter 16 of the TTP, in which, as already indicated, Spinoza insists on the role of "sound reason" and its "dictates" in the emergence of the political state (*ex solo rationis dictamine*).<sup>17</sup> It would therefore seem that Spinoza provides a double genesis of the civil state, one, initially, through the interest of the multitude as guided by reason, and another, subsequent one, through the imitative, imaginary communication and crystallisation of passions, and of indignation in particular: "we must seek the causes and natural foundations of the state, not from the teachings of reason, but from the common nature, or condition, of men... (TP 1.7). The former resonates clearly with seventeenth-century social contract theory. The latter, rooted in Book III of the *Ethics*, reaches back to Plato's *Republic* and anticipates Nietzschean genealogy. I will not go into the reasons behind this radical evolution.<sup>18</sup> Instead, I will focus on the imaginary, passionate dimension of political life, and explore some of its current manifestations.

The existence of the state, Matheron insists, follows necessarily from the fact that human beings are subject to passions, and from

17 Bostrenghi notes that when Spinoza was writing Chapter 16 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, in which he puts forward his contractualist view, he had not yet written Part III of the *Ethics*, where he formulates his theory of mimetic affectivity. This theory underpins much of his genetic account of the civil state in *The Political Treatise* (Bostrenghi 2012, note 39).

18 It is discussed by Negri 1981, 229, and Matheron 2020, 163-178.



the very play of their passions.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, and most likely originally, everything happens as if politics were a matter of imagination, and of the fleeting, often contradictory, and therefore antagonist affects it generates. The true myth, to use Spinoza's own term, consists in believing that we can do away with myths in politics, or with political fiction.<sup>20</sup> The true myth is that of the (sole) power of reason to transform or reform that of imagination. The government of the multitude – and this genitive ought to be understood in the subjective as well as objective sense – is the government not of, or through reason, but of, and through, the affects (*non ratione, sed solis affectibus gubernatur*) (TTP 17.13). So much so that one could define politics as the art of governing human affects. If humans lived solely under the guidance of reason, they would spontaneously agree with one another and not need the state (EIVp37s2; TTP 5.20-22; TP 1.1). Otherwise said, and in the words of Matheron, “the State, even the best one, will only ever be the result of a relation of forces between individuals subject to passions, whose authentic liberation would entail its *disappearance* if it took place in everybody” (Matheron 2020, 113).

Indignation, as the desire to avenge a collective harm, is a key affect in the transition from the state of nature to the civil state, as well as in the political dynamics internal to the state. It is given a genetic force that seems to contradict its destructive dimension, which, as we saw, Spinoza emphasises in the *Ethics*. But this is precisely the apparent paradox which Spinoza invites us to consider: indignation accounts for the shift from the natural to the civil state, as well as from the civil to the natural state, or a “state of hostility [*status hostilitatis*]” (TP 4.4). Whilst we might naturally grant Spinoza the idea that indignation fuels the revolutions or social uprisings of the multitude, which can go as far as dissolving the Commonwealth, we might be less inclined to agree with him that it also accounts for the emergence and existence of any state (*imperium*), and of the democratic state in particular, which he defines as the exercise of the power of the multitude, of its right or Sovereignty, by a Council made up of a *common* element (TP 2.17). In his eyes, though, the connection is a matter of certainty: “*Indignation generates the State in exactly the same way that it causes revolutions,*” and therefore destroys the state (Matheron 2020, 128). It is, therefore, the condition of existence and dissolution of the state, or the very engine of politics. How exactly?

The first thing to recall is that “insofar as men are tormented by anger, envy, or some affect of hatred, they’re pulled in different directions

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19 This thesis, which Matheron initially developed in Chapters 5, 7, 9 and 11 of *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* (Matheron 1988), is refined in Matheron 2020, 109-110 and 119-120.

20 On this question, see the important work of Chiara Bottici (Bottici 2007).

and contrary to one another” (TP 2.14).<sup>21</sup> And “because men are by nature subject to these affects most of the time, they are by nature enemies” (TP 2.14). Rivalry and enmity are therefore the default mode of intersubjectivity in the state of nature. The latter corresponds to a state of alienation, in that it is governed by passions, and especially passions rooted in fear, hatred, and revengefulness. As such, human beings have less power, and therefore less right, than when they come together and join forces. But this can happen in two different and contrasting ways. On the one hand, insofar as human beings are prone to mimetic affects, and feel closer to those whom they think are like them than to those who aren’t, they tend to love and associate with those who are like them; and they tend to hate and rise against those who are not. In a dispute or struggle involving two parties, a third party identifies with the feeling of the adversary who is most like him or her. Similarly, she will feel indignation towards the adversary who is less like her, and will fight against her. And the person who most resembles her is of course the person with whom she shares desires and values, and possesses the same sort of things. As a result, the outcome and victory will tend to favour the adversary who most conforms to the model in place, and the adversary who is most remote from it will be defeated. A *consensus* eventually emerges, with norms designating what people can desire and possess without feeling endangered or threatened, what is “fair” and “just,” and what is forbidden. A collective power or commonwealth begins to take shape, guaranteeing the safety and security of the conformists, and repressing the deviant elements of the multitude. This, in effect, accounts for the emergence, however informal and embryonic, of a commonwealth.

But, as Proposition 35 in Part IV of the *Ethics* makes clear, whenever human beings cease to live under the influence of contrary passions, and live instead “according to the guidance of reason,” “they always agree in nature.” This proposition, strategically placed immediately after Proposition 34, as if each depicted one extremity of the political spectrum, indicates the conditions under which sad passions, and indignation in particular, would have no place in politics. As Del Lucchese puts it, “concord and discord would seem to correspond, respectively, to life under the guidance of reason and life under the ‘bondage’ of the passions” (Del Lucchese 2019a, 74). And most, if not all actual polities unfold between those extremities. In the (real rather than ideal) situations which Spinoza considers in his political writings, indignation, as a highly contagious affect rooted in hatred, would appear as both inevitable and limited, especially regarding the possibility of a truly democratic state.

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21 This claim echoes Proposition 34 in Part IV of the *Ethics*, in which Spinoza states that insofar as men “are torn by affects which are passions,” such as envy or anger, “they are contrary to one another.”



We can draw several conclusions from Spinoza's account of indignation. The first, general conclusion, is that the political order, or *imperium*, is spontaneously generated through human passions, rather than reason: political consensus are first and foremost affective, and a passionate affair. To be sure, Spinoza raises the question of what the *imperium* would look like, should the multitude be guided by reason alone. But such an *imperium* is not a realistic prospect, and may not even be necessary under the sole guidance of reason. Furthermore, the passions in question are not joyful, but sad, and rooted in forms of hatred: my indignation is not rooted in a feeling of love towards those who suffer in the hands of political power, or in compassion, and even less in the generosity that results from reason, but in the fact that we identify with their suffering and develop hatred towards its cause. Finally, the passive affects in question are imitative, and a matter of identity. This first conclusion raises a crucial question, to which I'll return in my conclusion: can we imagine a democratic politics, or a figure of the demos, which would be rooted not in indignation, or a form of mimetic affectivity rooted in sadness and leading to a consensus of impotence, but in a different affectivity, leading to a different conception of the consensus? Is political affectivity necessarily and irreducibly mimetic?

The second conclusion is that, since indignation is intrinsically and necessarily bad – unlike, say, humility, shame, or repentance, which are bad in themselves yet can be good indirectly (EIVp54s) – it would *seem* impossible to distinguish between forms of indignation, some of which, for example revolutionary indignation against tyranny, or indignation before the ill treatment of minorities, would be legitimate, whilst others, such as the indignation felt by some in the face of a perceived threat to their identity or way of life, would be necessarily bad. For even if we admit that indignation can be *right* for the multitude, in that it signals the crossing of an affective threshold, the sense that a situation has become unbearable, thus causing the multitude to move against the power in place, it can never be good for the person who feels it. In addition, it inevitably introduces elements of discord within the *imperium*, which is another way of saying that it is bad for the state. Finally, indignation necessarily reveals an imbalance between units of power, each of which is *by nature* entitled to exercise all of its power or right. Spinoza's uncomfortable if not shocking conclusion, then, is that something irremediably bad lies at the root of the commonwealth: not actions, but passions; not a disposition rooted in love and generosity, but a reactive, sad tendency rooted in hatred. As Matheron puts it, “the elementary form of democracy, according to Spinoza, is lynching [*le lynchage*],” or the hate-driven, bloodthirsty mob (Matheron 2019a, 133). Is the alternative, then between the violent mob and the pacified herd? Between indignation and obedience? In the absence of a political order governed entirely by the knowledge of adequate ideas, and given the fact

that the multitude is naturally governed by sad passions such as fear, hatred, envy and indignation, a big question mark remains the possibility of ever overcoming such a pessimist, if not nihilistic horizon. Are we left, then, with having to distinguish between types of passions, and even sad passions, such as indignation, envy, vindictiveness, etc.? In that respect, and as P. Roth's novel indicates, indignation is perhaps better than blind submission, or regret. Sad passions themselves – hate, anger and revenge – might even be necessary to arrive at the glorious Yes to life, the life that is itself struggle and hardship. To be sure, there is a Yes, a sheepish and spineless form of acceptance, that is detrimental to life, including political life, insofar as it turns the multitude into a herd, and diminishes its power: "When the peace of a Commonwealth depends on its subjects' lack of spirit [*a subditorum inertia pendet*] – so that they're led like sheep, and know only how to be slaves – it would be more properly called a wasteland [*solitudo*] than a Commonwealth" (TP 5.4). Similarly, there is a No, a form of struggle and combat, an anger and a rage that affirms *human* life, that speaks from a desire to grow and increase one's power, and not merely preserve *biological* life (TP 5.5). For peace or concord isn't merely "the privation of war, but a virtue which arises from strength of mind [*quae ex animi fortitudine oritur*]," requires genuine consent and, as such, does not shy away from conflict (TP 5.4). Peace, yes, but not at any cost. Consider, as a recent example, the constructive, transformative anger Audrey Lorde feels and claims in the face of racist and sexist attitudes, and the deep, destructive hatred that animates them:

We ["women, people of Color, lesbians and gay men, poor people"] cannot allow our fear of anger to deflect us nor seduce us into settling for anything less than the hard work of excavating honesty; we must be quite serious about the choice of this topic and the angers entwined within it because, rest assured, our opponents are quite serious about their hatred of us ... *This hatred and our anger are very different*. Hatred is the fury of those who do not share our goals, and its object is death and destruction. Anger is grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change.<sup>22</sup>

This kind of indignation in the face of "those who do not share our goals," this kind of rage and even fury – fury is a recurring theme in Lorde – needs to be distinguished, quite fundamentally, from the purely nihilistic hatred and longing for revenge – the indignation, yes – which characterises the desire for "death and destruction" animating their opponents. In a way, Lorde invites us to distinguish between a highly

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<sup>22</sup> Lorde 1984, 128-129 (emphasis added). See also Lorde 1981. Further positive accounts of anger as emotional responses to male oppression from feminist philosophers include Frye 1983 and Spelman 1989.

conflictual and antagonistic, yet *political* form of indignation, or even between indignation as a key mechanism of political life, which can lead to greater justice, and a form of indignation, or raw hatred, which is pre- or para-political, which negates politics, since its outcome is death and destruction, since the other side, for it, is not an adversary, but an enemy to be destroyed.<sup>23</sup> And it seems that, almost despite himself, Spinoza recognises struggle and conflict as the irreducible dimension of politics, as the negativity that propels the constant evolution and equilibrium of the state. Whilst indignation within the civil state can lead to the dissolution of the commonwealth, this outcome is extremely rare. Most often, indignation takes the form of disputes and struggles – of resistance – that are settled within the existing structure of the commonwealth, or force it to change its form:

Therefore, when disagreements and rebellions are stirred up in a Commonwealth – as they often are – the result is never that the citizens dissolve the Commonwealth – though this happens in other kinds of society. Instead, if they can't settle their disagreements while preserving the form of the Commonwealth, they change its form to another. (TP 6.2)

Does this mean, then, that we need to learn to live with indignation, and accept it as a necessary evil, or as the affective pole indicative of a problem, which political rationality needs to confront, and solve? Does this mean that we, as a polity, need to distinguish and prioritise between types of indignation and claims to justice? And can we imagine a democratic order that would not be *rooted* in indignation? In other words, can we imagine a politics beyond the negotiation of our contrary and conflictual passions? Before I address the latter in my conclusion, I want to turn to the first set of questions and argue for the need to distinguish between forms of indignation, and therefore begin to supplement and complicate the picture we inherit from Spinoza.

### III. Historical Examples

Rather than illustrate Spinoza's views by turning to his own politics, or his analyses of the politics of his time, I will follow up on my brief reference to A. Lorde, focused on the difference between anger and hatred, and analyse a few situations borrowed from our recent history.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> In that respect, I disagree with M. Nussbaum's claim in *Anger and Forgiveness* (Nussbaum 2016) that anger is necessarily bound up with retribution, and retribution with resentment. Resentment is rooted not in anger *per se*, but in the specific form of anger that is purely reactive, imaginary, and vindictive. Lorde points to the positive side of anger: "The angers of women can transform difference into power. For anger between peers births change, not destruction, and the discomfort and sense of loss it often causes is not fatal, but a sign of growth" (Lorde 1984, 131).

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion of Spinoza's own political struggles, see Del Lucchese 2009a, Chapter 4.

The situations I analyse – in Germany and Austria after the Shoah, in South Africa after Apartheid – can be described as extreme, or liminal, and as the greatest challenge posed to the possibility of processing or mediating indignation.

In a recent article, which I will use as a guiding thread, Didier Fassin explores affects such as “rancor, bitterness, acrimony, anger, ire, and indignation” (Fassin 2013, 249).<sup>25</sup> to assess a range of political situations. Those affects, he claims, belong to a grey territory that escapes the alternative between good and evil. Now we saw how, from a Spinozist perspective, those affects are necessarily bad, insofar as they are all expressions of sadness, and therefore of a decrease of power. In addition, we saw how, for Spinoza, good and evil are necessarily relative. At the same time, we saw that the affects under consideration are inevitable, and a key engine for political change: whilst irreducible to politics as such, by which I mean politics guided by reason and the *complete* understanding of human nature, they are indispensable to the politics of resistance. Fassin’s claim, which repeats that of Spinoza, is that the reactive affects in question are all “a response to what is experienced or imagined as an injury or injustice.”<sup>26</sup> Fassin focuses specifically on resentment, and suggests, somewhat arbitrarily in my view, that we distinguish the French *ressentiment* from the English “resentment.” Yet much of what he says applies to indignation as I’ve tried to describe thus far. The man (or woman) of *ressentiment*, such as the holocaust survivor or the victim of racial segregation in South Africa or the United States, he claims, “may have been directly exposed to oppression and domination, or indirectly, through the narratives of his parents or grand-parents, for instance.” *Ressentiment* thus results from what he calls “real” or “historical alienation:” something happened, “which had tragic consequences in the past and often causes continuing hardship in the present” (260). There is a real causality at work here, which can be subjected to an adequate form of understanding. Resentment, by contrast, results from imaginary, sociological alienation, and can’t possibly leads to forms of recognition: to the racist or the homophobe, who feels his country is taken over, and his identity threatened, by an Other, one can’t say: “I hear you. Your racism, your homophobia, your misogyny needs to find its place within the multitude.” The distinction between real and imaginary indignation is helpful, if not key. Yet it needs to be qualified. For we saw how, for Spinoza, indignation – or other political affects rooted in hatred and revengefulness – is necessarily imaginary, that is, passive, and therefore contrary to reason. However, the further distinction which Fassin invites us to make is that between

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25 In a similar vein, but a different context, that of bearing witness to sexist injustice, see McFall 1991.

26 D. Fassin, “On Resentment and *Ressentiment*,” op. cit., 249.

the affect itself, which is indeed necessarily passive, at least initially, and the idea of its cause, which can itself be real or imaginary, attached to a causality that is either verifiable or purely fictitious. Furthermore, the distinction allows us to distinguish between two different kind of politics, or political processes: one, as Audrey Lorde suggests, leads to change and to the growth in power – and therefore the freedom – of the multitude; and another to destruction and the decrease in power of the multitude, to further alienation. The first form of indignation calls for recognition, redress, compensation, etc. Recognition does not erase the injury, but transforms social and historical relations for the better – and this means with a view to increasing the power and freedom of the multitude. It transforms or creates norms, and is able to unite the multitude, and therefore move closer to the interest of reason itself. By contrast, the second form of indignation calls for revenge and destruction; it is too weak, too much subjected to its rage and hatred to do anything other than stigmatise, blame, divide, and annihilate. Its norms and values are those of the spirit of revenge itself, bent on the subjugation, domination or even annihilation of certain groups or classes: misogynistic, xenophobic, racist, etc.

### 1. Indignation from historical alienation.

Fassin introduces his discussion of *ressentiment* through the writings of Jean Améry. Originally published in 1966, *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne (Beyond Guilt and Atonement)* was translated in 1980 as *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities* (Améry 1980). Written in the first person, the series of essays consists of a description of Améry's experience, during and after the war, as a victim of the Nazi regime. The key essay, for our purposes, is entitled *Ressentiments* and is translated (regrettably, given its obvious and ultimately critical reference to Nietzsche) as "Resentments." The issue of *ressentiment* already appears in the very last page of the second essay, devoted to Améry's experience of torture in the hands of the Gestapo in the Belgian prison of Breendonk, and in those of a regime, the Third Reich, for which torture "was not an accidental quality, ... but its essence" (24). In just about everyone's mind, torture is the extreme form if not the very definition of pain, and thus legitimate grounds for the most radical form of hatred and desire for revenge. Améry's description of the pain he experienced is vivid and unforgettable. And the point is precisely that of the unforgettable nature of that pain and the insurmountable effects of that trauma: "Whoever was tortured, stays tortured" (34). Whilst the tortures he had to endure were not, on his account, of the worst kind, he can say with confidence, twenty-two years after they occurred, that "torture is the most horrible event a human being can retain within himself" (22). It is not just the severity of the pain, which is impossible to quantify and varies significantly from one subject to another. It is the

nature of it. When tortured, and from the very *first blow*, which announces all the others, potentially infinite in number, one feels *helpless* and *alone*. The torturers will do what they want, and no one will come to the prisoner's aid to assist him, or relieve him of his pain. The help from others that we normally expect can no longer be expected. With the first blow, the victim loses "trust in the world" (27), that is, the trust that his physical and metaphysical being will be respected. The body of the victim is invaded, taken over. It is like rape. After those initial blows by the Gestapo, Améry was handed over to the SS. His hands cuffed behind his back, he was hooked to a chain that hung from the vaulted ceiling and lifted from the ground, until, exhausted from the muscular effort to hold himself at a half-oblique, barely able to breath, he felt a crackling and splintering in his shoulders, a sound and a feeling he can still hear twenty-two years later:

The balls sprang from their sockets. My own body weight caused luxation; I fell into a void and now hung by my dislocated arms, which had been torn high from behind and were now twisted over my head... At the same time, the blows from the horsewhip showered down on my body... (32)

In torture, the body is experienced as never before: as pure flesh and a total reality from which there is no escape. Riveted to her own body, reduced to her suffering, the victim experiences the loneliest agony: "Amazed, the tortured person experienced that in this world there can be the other as absolute sovereign, and sovereignty revealed itself as the power to inflict suffering and to destroy" (39). With the cracking and splintering of the shoulder joints, all the things that one may, according to inclination, call the soul, or the mind, or consciousness, or personal identity, are also destroyed. Torture makes feeling "at home in the world" (40) no longer possible. It leaves one broken, physically and mentally. It is the experience of total disempowerment, of absolute powerlessness. In that sense, it is the experience of death. In *Ideas II*, Husserl suggests that, instead of the Cartesian "I think," and by virtue of its embodied nature, consciousness be thought of us as an "I can."<sup>27</sup> My body, he argues, is the vehicle of my power and my freedom. In torture, this power is negated, reduced to nothingness. I can *no longer*. The experience is thus one of total alienation from the world, and from others in the world. One remains forever distrustful, afraid and, yes, resentful. Fear and *ressentiments*, Améry concludes, "remain, and have scarcely a chance to concentrate into a seething, purifying thirst for revenge" (40).

How, then, could they possibly be integrated into a historical and political process? What sort of claim or reparation can come out of

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27 Husserl 1989, Section Two, Chapter 3 ('The Constitution of Psychic Reality Through the Body').



that experience of brokenness? How do we respond to those who, like Améry, wonder “whether one can live humanly in the tension between fear and anger,” and whose “bitterness” comes from having been robbed of their “trust in the world” (100)? How can their suffering, and our own indignation in the face of it, come to anything concrete?

Those are the questions that Améry addresses in the essay entitled “*Ressentiments*.” There, he offers a kind of confession, but one that not does not and, he claims, should not lead to atonement: I, a survivor, he says in substance, harbour a rancour, a deep grudge and *ressentiment*, which I feel entitled to and want to live by, as well as *understand*. The *ressentiment* in question, it is crucial to note, is towards not only his torturers and those directly responsible for his suffering, but towards the German people and post-war Germany as a whole, this “thriving land” along with its “idyllic towns and villages,” “the quality of its goods” and “unfailing perfection of its handicrafts,” its “impressive combination of cosmopolitan modernity and wistful historical consciousness” (62). The guilt, he says, is a collective one, and needs to be acknowledged as such by the very people who seem to have moved on and done so well for themselves, who are *happy*. They should all feel his indignation and rancour, define who they are, and what they do as a multitude, in response to this indignation.

I leave aside the question of whether this process is one that Germany (or Austria, for that matter) actually engaged in since the publication of Améry's book. There is evidence that it has. But one can also point to contrary evidence. The case of the production and reception of Thomas Bernhard's *Heldenplatz* is a case in point.<sup>28</sup> In 1998, Thomas Bernhard, Austria's most important post-war writer and playwright, was commissioned by Claus Peymann, the politically controversial German director, to write a play to commemorate the Anschluss of 1938 as well as the hundredth anniversary of Vienna's famous Burgtheater. Bernhard is also known in his country as a *Nestbeschmutzer*, or someone who defiles the nest, Austria. In *Heldenplatz*, he directed his ferocious and unapologetically resentful pen at what he perceived to be the collective amnesia, denial and revisionism of his *Heimat*. As Malkin puts it, “unlike most post-Shoah plays written in German or Austria, anger, hatred and bile are unmitigated in Bernhard's play by any agenda of forgiveness or reconciliation, or by any metaphysical appeal to higher meanings” (Malkin 1998, 282).<sup>29</sup> His line is, in that respect, very similar to Améry's, whose life inspired the main character of the play, Josef Schuster. His indignation

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<sup>28</sup> The following remarks and thoughts are indebted to Jeanette R. Malkin, ‘Thomas Bernhard, Jews, *Heldenplatz*’ (Malkin 1998).

<sup>29</sup> Malkin has in mind very different plays such as Rolf Hochhuth's 1963 *The Deputy* (*Der Stellvertreter*), Erwin Sylvanus' 1957 *Dr. Korczak and the Children* (*Korczak und die Kinder*), or Peter Weiss' 1965 *The Investigation* (*Die Ermittlung*).

is not a call to national healing, but a political end in itself: what the time calls for, he seems to suggest, is pure and simple indignation, and the reconstitution of the body politic around this sad passion. Before it was even performed, and following leaks to the media, the play caused a scandal. Most felt that its focus – the memory of Austria's Jews and Austria's responsibility in their persecution and extermination – was not fitting for the occasion, which they wanted to be a celebration of Vienna's contribution to the arts over a century. As Malkin puts it:

Heldenplatz erupted in an Austria still bruised by the campaign surrounding the election of Nazi collaborator (and two-time UN secretary general) Kurt Waldheim to the Presidency. Waldheim, in his victory, proved Austria's determination not to see itself as anything other than 'Hitler's first victim,' an epithet long cherished in Bernhard's homeland. (Malkin 1998, 283)

Unsurprisingly, Waldheim called the play an insult to all Austrians. He was joined by ex-Chancellor Bruno Kreisky, among others, in calling for the play's removal from the National Theatre. Bernhard's politics of indignation were, in the eyes of the multitude, too much to bear and a direct threat to the political consensus.

Josef Schuster is the central character of the play. A mathematics professor and a Jew forced into exile in 1938, he returns to Austria with his wife long after the war, only to jump out of his third-floor window on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the Anschluss. Robert Schuster, his brother, provides the following, pessimistic explanation: "The Austrians after the war/had become much more hateful and even more Jew hating/than before the war/no one could have foreseen that."<sup>30</sup> Malkin's own reading of Josef Schuster is that resentment "cannot be cured. It can only be overcome (if at all) through death" (Malkin 1998, 285). She ends her article by pointing to Bernhard's own indignation, which he tried to extend beyond his death by demanding in his will that nothing he had ever written was to be published or performed "within the borders of the Austrian state, however that state describes itself... for all time to come."<sup>31</sup> In addition, he forbade his own commemoration by Austria, or by any country supported by Austrian money. Thus, "his "rancor and resentment lived on after him in an act which continues to express his will to remember and, in a typical Bernhardian paradox, his refusal to *be* remembered in a country whose betrayals he could not forget" (Malkin 1998, 293).

Beyond the strictly historical question of whether nations that participated in the persecution and extermination of Jews under Nazism

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30 Bernhard 1988, 112. The translation is Malkin's.

31 Cited in Wille 1989, 19.



have sought genuine atonement since the publication of Améry's book, or Bernhard's play, what matters is the principled position, that is, the claim to a right to indignation and *ressentiment*, and its moral significance and superiority. In an explicit rebuttal of the politics of reconciliation, Améry ends his essay by voicing his scepticism regarding Germany's ability properly to atone and offer what he calls "a settlement in the field of historical practice" (77). By that, he means the nation's desire not to allow the reality of the camps to be neutralised by time; to weave it into the collective memory of the country in such a way that it becomes, to use Magnus Engensberger's words, Germany's past, present, and future – another, negative yet perhaps necessary experience of the eternal recurrence, one oriented towards not innocence, but guilt, or at least towards something like an open wound; to *own* this "realized negation of the world and its self, as its own negative possession" (78). Only then would "the overpowered and those who overpowered them" join "in the desire that time be turned back and with it, that history become moral" (78). Only then would "the German revolution be made good, Hitler disowned" (78). Yet the pacification of the victims' *ressentiment*, their ability to overcome their own subjective condition – one that, once again, Améry sees not as psychological, or clinical, but as moral – and become "objectively unnecessary" would require a final step, namely, "the spiritual reduction to pulp by the German people, not only of the books" printed between 1933 and 1945, as Thomas Mann had suggested in a letter to Walter von Molo, "but of everything that was carried out in those twelve years," in such a way that nothing could be rescued from that period, not even the Autobahn. This would amount to "a highly positive, a redeeming act" that would signal the end of the dialectical process, "the negation of the negation" (78-79). It would signal the emergence of a new consensus out of a sense of indignation. But this outcome is unlikely: "Our slave morality will not triumph," Améry writes ironically (81). The hatred, rancour and indignation of those who suffered the atrocities of Nazism will not find a place in the consensus of post-war Germany (or Austria). *Ressentiment*, as the inability to forget, to rise above, or to avenge an injury is unsurpassable in the case of an injury like the Shoah. To forget, as the only possibility open to the victims (in the absence of rising above and avenging), is precisely what Améry, Josef Schuster and Bernhard refuse to do. Instead, they prefer the self-harm of memory to what Améry calls "the anti-moral natural process of healing." But, taken to its logical conclusion, this decision leads to suicide, or an equivalent death wish, as Spinoza had understood a few centuries before:

We victims must finish with our retroactive rancor, in the sense that the KZ [concentration camp] argot once gave to the word "finish;" it meant as much as "to kill." Soon we must and will be finished. Until that time has come, we request of those whose peace is disturbed by our grudge that they be patient. (Améry 1980, 81)

Ultimately, Améry suggests in a way that remains ambiguous, the indignant community will need to be finished with its own indignation, and find a way of transforming it, as if according to a yet unknown alchemy, into a genuine historical and political process. There must be a horizon beyond that of indignation. But not now, not yet. For the time being – and time is of the essence – indignation, rage and resentment are the only possible response to the injury caused. Pure reaction, and this new form of alienation that comes from the dehumanisation of the camps, this complete entrapping within raw passion and passivity, is all there *can* be. Even if this means self-destruction, whether by suicide or through other means. To those who claim that one should not look to the past but to the future (“the genuine human dimension”) (68); to those who, even amongst Jews like Victor Golloncz and Martin Buber, “tremble with the pathos of forgiveness and reconciliation” (65), Améry opposes a right to harbour the hard feelings that are “condemned by moralists and psychologists alike,” the first regarding those emotions as “a taint,” the second as “a form of sickness” (64). Instead, and beyond the (essentially Christian) ethics and psychotherapy of “healing” and “closure,” of the need for reconciliation and forgiveness, it calls for the right, and even the need, *not* to obliterate the past and “move on,” “turn the page,” as if nothing had happened – the need to allow the past to continue to define the present, to keep the wound open, to remind ourselves, and especially the perpetrators, of what took place, at least as long as the victims of the holocaust, and perhaps their children, remain alive. For Améry’s *ressentiment* also applies to the younger generation of Germans, although to a lesser extent, given their lack of direct involvement. But he doesn’t feel they can claim their innocence, so long as they feel “German” in any way, so long as they claim to relate to their own past and history: “German youth cannot cite Goethe, Mörike, and Baron von Stein, and ignore Blunck, Wilhelm Schäfer, and Heinrich Himmler” (76). It would seem, then, that in addition to calling into question the Judeo-Christian ethics of forgiveness and reconciliation, or the ability to respond to hatred and extermination with love (if not of the perpetrators, of humanity in general, or one’s country, or the future, or God), Améry also calls into question the way of forgetting, and embraces slave morality. It is as if he were saying: ‘like many before us’ – and here one can only think of the enslavement of Africans by European powers – ‘we have been forced into slavery, and thus reduced to feel and think like slaves’. And in the same way that the slave mentality did not end with the end of apartheid in South Africa, or the end of colonialism in Africa, slavery does not end with the freeing of the camps. For slavery created indignation, rancour and *ressentiment*. It simply cannot be a matter of asking the (former) slaves to move on, forget or forgive, look towards the future. It cannot be a matter of adding that burden onto their shoulders, of asking them to lick their own wounds and heal their own scars. It is, instead, a matter

of asking at what cost, through what collective process, the creation of what norms and institutions, *ressentiment* can be overcome and indignation included in the democratic state. And that involves even the right to question the very Christian values of “truth” (as the truth that liberates) and “reconciliation,” as much as the desire for revenge. The “loudly proclaimed readiness for reconciliation by Nazi victims” strikes Améry as “either insanity and indifference to life or the masochistic conversion of a suppressed genuine demand for revenge” (71). Similarly, what we normally call forgiveness may be possible, but only at the cost of de-moralizing the deed, that is, of moving the subjective experience out of the moral sphere and into the social sphere. In other words, the traumatised or “distorted,” “warped” subject can forgive, but only as a de-individualized, interchangeable part of the social mechanism. And that is the reason why not just forgiving, but also forgetting, when induced by social pressure, is *immoral* for Améry. The healing process involves instead a process of recognition which culminates in the idea of settlement, ways of paying a debt, and of putting the overpowered back on the path of empowerment, of making them strong again. Ultimately, I believe it is a question of overcoming slave morality, not by ignoring and dismissing it, but by overturning it, by working with it and through it. Indignation, rancour and resentment are and always will remain sad passions. They are a poison which, Améry writes, “blocks the exit to the genuine human dimension, the future” (68), and locks one into a state of powerlessness. *Ressentiment*, in the Nietzschean, technical sense, is a historical and cultural construction that processes and transforms this sadness. But one can imagine other such processes, which don’t so much *capitalise* on indignation, transform its formula so as better to disseminate it in the social and political body, as create the conditions under which joyful affects, and that of generosity in particular, can thrive. This, I believe, is the truly democratic process sought by Spinoza.

It is possible to extend Améry’s or Bernhard’s militant and historically specific *ressentiment* to other situations, and to that of post-apartheid South Africa in particular. Fassin draws our attention to two different strategies which the black leaders of that country developed during that period. Whereas the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as envisioned by Mandela and Tutu, emphasised the joyful affects of forgiveness and generosity as a way of healing the wounds of the multitude, Thabo Mbeki’s 1998 “Two Nations” speech emphasized the deep and structural divisions between black and white, which required greater recognition and economic redistribution (Mbeki 1988). One nation, “white, relatively prosperous,” lives alongside the other, “black and poor.” The situation, he adds, is “underwritten by the perpetuation of the racial, gender and spatial disparities born of a very long period of colonial and apartheid white domination” (Fassin 2013, 255). In that same speech, and four years into the process of reconciliation Thabo Mbeki

presents the fundamental question, that is, the question that will allow for a true reconciliation and the overcoming of the blacks' indignation, in the following, straightforward terms: "are the relatively rich who, as a result of an apartheid definition, are white, prepared to underwrite the upliftment of the poor who, as a result of an apartheid definition, are black?" It is only at that cost, that is, at the cost of an economic sacrifice and a loss of economic power, similar to that accepted by Germany at the time of its reunification, rather than as a result of a process of symbolic recognition and reconciliation, and therefore as a new regime of superstition, that the suffering inflicted on black South Africans can be alleviated. In other words, and from a Spinozist perspective, Mbeki is claiming that the more arduous, and less compromising path, which seems to perpetuate the state and stage of indignation, is in fact the path that is closest to that of reason. For it is more real, by which I mean less symbolic or superstitious: it does not appeal to the (undoubtedly also effective) power of the heart, and to joyful affects such as forgiveness and reconciliation in particular, but to the redistribution of economic power as a more fundamental source of inequality, and a more arduous path towards social peace and unity. It is not a theological response, which unites through love and benevolence, but an economic one, which unites through redistribution and compensation, through the sharing of real, economic power. And it is rooted in the understanding that, to borrow Fassin's terminology, indignation "is more than an affect: it is an anthropological condition related to a historical situation of victim" (Fassin 2013, 256). In the case of post-Apartheid South Africa, *indignation* is already a process, a historical claim, a demand, as exemplified by Thabo Mbeki (and, before him and in a different context, Améry), and one that can be addressed.

## 2. Hallucinatory Indignation

By contrast, what Fassin calls resentment, and I have been referring to as the purely hallucinatory and imaginary form of indignation, "involves diffuse animosity and tends towards vindictiveness. It shifts its focus of discontent from specific actors towards society at large and vulnerable groups in particular, via *imaginary* projection" (Fassin 2013, 260). The injury or hatred felt is, for example, that of the white police officer in the presence of black people, whether in apartheid South Africa or the American South. In the case of France, the perceived injury is that of the police officers deployed in the *banlieues*, those poor suburbs largely populated by Arab and Sub-Saharan minorities, which themselves carry *la haine*.<sup>32</sup> Often recruited from the deindustrialized and mostly destitute

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32 *La Haine* (1995), or *Hatred*, is the name of a film by Mathieu Kassovitz, as well as an expression from the *banlieues*. The film is inspired by the case of Makomé M'Bowolé, shot in the head at close range by a police officer inside a police precinct. *Avoir la haine* means to harbor and feel hatred, not towards anything in particular, but towards an entire system. It is a socially generated *condition*.

northern part of the country, the police refer to those urban areas as “the jungle” (Fassin 2013, 258). It is also the condition of far-right constituents, whose social malaise takes the form of xenophobia, racism, and the rejection of the “system.” In each case, we have “a reaction to a relational situation, which results from a sociological position,” and translates into an imaginary, almost random projection: the origin and cause of their injury and rancour, they feel, include “the poor, immigrants, minorities, magistrates, superiors, and society at large” (Fassin 2013, 260, 259). Here, the situation is one of *ideological alienation*: “the reality is blurred, leading to frequently misdirected rancor” (Fassin 2013, 260). Unlike the man of *ressentiment*, the man of resentment (or hallucinatory indignation) is not directly or indirectly exposed to oppression and domination, to historical or objective alienation. Yet he expresses discontent about a state of affairs, about his situation and condition, and feels wronged: the indignation is real, yet the idea of its cause is a pure construction. His alienation, Fassin concludes, is *sociological*. I would extend the affect of pure resentment, or fantasmatic indignation, to include the attitude of all those whose hatred, born of a sense of being ignored, or not recognised, can’t find a way out or forward, and are thus trapped in an endless deferral of revenge, which takes the form, in their daily lives, of a constant vindictiveness and indiscriminate rage. What distinguishes it from real, historical alienation, and the indignation it leads to is, I feel, its inability to evolve into a process, a claim or a demand, and therefore the inability to create any norms or values. It is a purely destructive, purely negative form of indignation, which lacks mediation, and does so necessarily. It lashes out at just about anything and anyone, without being able to formulate a demand and enter a process of recognition, however fragile or tenuous. Unlike *ressentiment*, it lacks the minimal self-awareness that would allow it to set a course, however oppositional and conflictual. It is pure reactivity, raw negative emotion. As such, the only thoughts it can give rise to are thoughts – fantasies – of revenge, and the only actions it is capable of are those that will inflict pain and suffering on others, and rejoice in seeing their power diminish and sadness increase. It is indignation at its worst, and leads to the formation of the multitude as mob. If the type in question occupies, as Fassin claims (rightly, I believe), a sociological position, I don’t believe there is a collective responsibility towards it: the racist, the racist and murderous police officer especially, should not be understood; the petty and envious neighbour who hates your success should not be understood; the mob that launches an assault on the US Capitol cannot be “heard.” That politicians of today or yesterday use and capitalise on that energy, claim that they are on the side of those who feel disempowered, and promise them to bring them back to the time of their (imaginary) grandeur and glory, is of no consequence. The politics of the mob, which is, of, by and for the spiteful, should not be confused with the politics of the people. The people, as

a political entity motivated by the quest for the common good, and the increase of power of the many, is neither the mob nor the flock. It seeks to be governed not by weakness (and hatred and vindictiveness are weaknesses) but by strength (and generosity), by which, following Spinoza, I mean the ability to move from a lesser to a greater state of perfection. As such, it is not mere obedience. Knowledge, thought, acumen and generosity, which all contribute to understanding the origin and causes of situations, and the effort to improve them, are necessary to reach such a state.

### Conclusion

Were human beings not subjected to their passionate affects, which causes them to oppose and contradict one another, and force them into servitude; and were they, instead, to live in accord with the dictates of reason – they would naturally agree with each other, aid each other and join in friendship. They would only do those things that are good for human nature and therefore for every human being (EIVp35). The highest good, namely “to have adequate knowledge of the eternal and infinite essence of God” (EIIp47), is necessarily common to all, and enjoyable equally by all (EIVp36s). Furthermore, and in what *seems* like the true realisation of the mimetic, social affectivity we observed in passions such as indignation, my desire for and enjoyment of the supreme good increases as I see others enjoy it; and the more I enjoy the good the more I want (*conabitur*) others to enjoy it (EIVp37dem). Under the guidance of reason, relations of inequality, by which Spinoza means relations of power as struggle, domination, and exploitation, would be replaced by relations of composition of power (*potentia*), of assemblages of desire, through which my own power and the power of others would be inevitably increased, since such relations would be based on the fact that human beings agree with one another according to their essence or nature. To agree in nature, Spinoza insists, is to agree in power (*potentia*), not in impotence (*impotentia*) (EIVp32). Therefore, the true consensus cannot be based on expressions of impotence such as ignorance, negation, or opposition. Earlier on, I quoted the passage from the Ethics in which Spinoza claims that “if two individuals of completely the same nature are combined, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one singly” (EIVp18s). Similarly, if many individuals of the same nature – and human beings are such individuals – combine their powers in the same way, their overall power, reason, or perfection, will increase further. As a consequence, individual human beings would never be more powerful than if composed with *all* other human beings, in what would amount to the realisation of freedom as cosmopolitanism: “Man, I say, can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of his being than that all should so agree in all things that the Minds and Bodies of all would compose, as it were, one Mind and one Body; that all should strive together, as far as



they can, to preserve their being; and that all, together, should seek the common advantage of all" (EIVp18s).

In such a civil state – for this is what this combination requires – human affections are entirely active, which means that they express the very essence of human beings to persist in existing. In the course of this essay, I mentioned in passing what those affections of reason are: kindness, generosity, honesty, fortitude, friendship, being honourable, etc. And I also just alluded to the fact that they seem to confirm, albeit from the positive side, the essentially mimetic nature of human sociality. But the scholium of proposition 37 in part four of the *Ethics* questions this assumption and points, I believe, in the direction of a political affectivity of reason that exceeds the mimetic and ultimately narcissistic dynamic of social relations governed by passions. For Spinoza defines the latter as rooted in an implicit, twofold form of ambition, which Matheron helped reveal.<sup>33</sup> The first is an ambition of esteem (EIIIp29s), glory (EIII30s), and recognition, which generates a certain, *imaginary* kind of enjoyment and self-love (*philautia, acquiescentia in se ipso* [EIII53c]). Our desire is driven not by reason, and the manner in which it can agree in nature with the desire of others, but by the desire to be recognised by the other, and therefore by the emulation of the desire of the other, however imaginary and passionate it may be. Emulation, as we saw, is a form of imitation, “a Desire for a thing which is generated in us because we imagine that others have the same Desire” (EIII, Def. Aff. 33). It is rooted in our envy for the fortunate (EIIIp32s). Social relations of imitation are by definition imaginary, determined by the common constitution of external things, rather than by the nature of human beings, considered in itself (EIVp37s1). Such is the reason why the first kind of desire contains within itself seeds of aggressiveness and conflict, especially if my desire is frustrated. Such, also, is the reason why it is so close to the other kind of ambition, which Matheron describes as one of “ideological domination,” in which I force the other to desire what I desire, to love what I love and hate what I hate. The latter form of ambition is the source of political and religious intolerance (EIIIp31s). In both cases, self-love is exclusive and inextricably bound up with hatred, envy, and vengeance, as we saw in relation to indignation.

The first scholium of proposition 37 in part four of the *Ethics* draws the consequences of the in-built narcissistic aggressiveness of the imaginary social drive, and contrasts it with the kind of love and enjoyment that characterises the rational, active life. In other words, relations of imitation are both common, or constitutive of the social order, and exclusive, destructive, and hateful: “He who strives, only because

33 See A. Matheron, ‘Ethics and Politics in Spinoza (Remarks on the Role of *Ethics* IV, 37 Scholium 2)’, ‘Passions and Institutions in Spinoza’, and ‘The Problem of Spinoza’s Evolution’, in Matheron 2020.

of an affect [*solo affectu conatur*], that others should love what he loves, and live according to his temperament, acts only from impulse [*solo impetu agit*] and is hateful – especially to those to whom other things are pleasing, and who also, therefore, strive eagerly, from the same impulse, to have other men live according to their own temperament.” By contrast, he who strives *from reason* to guide or govern others acts not from impulse – from economic envy or social ambition, or from any other mediated and imaginary form of desire – “but kindly, generously, and with the greatest steadfastness of mind [*sed humaniter et benigne agit et sibi mente maxima constat*].” The humanity and benevolence that follow from reason, and define the manner in which I relate to others, is not a function of a mimetic, imaginary relation to others, and of the directly or indirectly hateful consensus it generates, but of the full understanding of the extent and limits of my power, and the power of nature as whole. The ability to rejoice in the happiness and success of others, that is a true virtue, and one that is most difficult to achieve. Spinoza does not have a name for it: “By what name we should call the Joy that arises from another’s good I do not know” (IIIp22s). Nietzsche forges a term, *Mitfreude*, which captures this affect nicely. Not *Mitleid* (pity), but *Mitfreude*, or the ability to rejoice from another’s Joy, is the most arduous path, and the truly ethical task.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Spinoza systematically affirms the need to respond to Hate with Love, to overcome our fantasies of revenge, and therefore our tendency to remain trapped in a vicious circle of sad passions, through an adequate understanding of our power and its ability to combine itself with the power of other individuals and bodies (whether physical, social, or cultural).

But we know that this political life is an ideal, towards which we must strive. Democratic politics, and the emerge of a true *demos*, free of superstition, fear and hatred, and even indignation, is not so much the end of the process as the process itself, an endless process of liberation, which involves the cultivation of joyful affects I have mentioned, and the rigorous practice of thought. Through this effort, we are indeed progressively able to overcome our herd mentality and our lynching instinct, and move ever close to a politics of solidarity, hospitality, and inclusiveness rooted not in a morality of duty, but a rigorous and univocal ethics of power. Democracy is always to come.

34 Nietzsche 2013, “Mixed Opinions and Maxims,” § 62. See also Nietzsche 1995, §§ 321 and 499; and Nietzsche 1974, § 338.



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# **Nothing Matters: Skepticism, Spinoza, and Contemporary French Thought**

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**Abstract:** This essay examines the influence of Spinoza on contemporary French philosophy, and in particular the work of Louis Althusser and Gilles Deleuze. Rather than seeing Spinoza as just another rationalist philosopher in the tradition of Descartes, the focus here is on the different methods at play in Descartes and Spinoza—the method of analysis for Descartes and the method of synthesis for Spinoza. It is the latter method that enables Spinoza to confront the skeptical challenge Descartes himself raises, and it is the implications of this response to skepticism that paves the way for how Althusser and Deleuze will employ Spinoza's thought. In particular, what is important for both Althusser and Deleuze is that Spinoza begins with God, or Spinoza 'begins with nothing' as Althusser stresses the point, an absolute that involves an 'absence of all relations'. Deleuze's philosophy of difference, I argue, can be seen to be developing an account of identity on the basis of this reading of Spinoza as beginning with a non-relational, univocal substance, or becomes multiplicity in Deleuze's own work.

**Keywords:** Deleuze, Spinoza, Metaphysics, Skepticism, Descartes

In his influential study of Descartes, Martial Guérout<sup>1</sup> stresses the distinction Descartes makes, near the end of his reply to the second set of objections, between two methods of demonstration—analysis and synthesis. Descartes claims that demonstrating by way of analysis entails presenting matters in a way that allows 'the reader [who] is willing to follow it and give sufficient attention to all points...[the opportunity to] make the thing his own and understand it just as perfectly as if he had discovered it for himself.'<sup>2</sup> This is the method Descartes claims he used in his *Meditations*<sup>3</sup>, or what Guérout calls the 'order of discovery' whereby what is crucial is that it proceed 'according to the requirements of our certainty,'<sup>4</sup> or by way of that which is already known to us, and for Descartes this is the fact that we are a thinking thing, a *Cogito*. The attentive reader of the *Meditations*, therefore, will come to acknowledge (i.e., discover) the certainty of their own *Cogito*, and from there they can then follow Descartes' reasoning for the existence of God and the external world.

Demonstrating by way of synthesis, by contrast, entails for Descartes arriving at a conclusion by way of 'a long series of definitions,

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<sup>1</sup> Guérout 1981 [1952], 1985 [1952].

<sup>2</sup> Descartes 1984 [1641], p. 110

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 111: 'Now it is analysis which is the best and truest method of instruction, and it was this method alone which I employed in my *Meditations*.'

<sup>4</sup> Guérout 1984 [1952], p. 9

postulates, axioms, theorems, and problems, so that if anyone denies one of the conclusions it can be shown at once that it is contained in what has gone before, and hence the reader...is compelled to give his assent.<sup>15</sup> For Guérout this method follows the 'truth of the thing...the order of the ratio essendi,'<sup>16</sup> and thus it does not depend on what we know with certainty but rather on the nature and essence of things themselves. Demonstrations done in accordance with the method of synthesis will thus begin with what is primary in the order of things, namely God, rather than the *Cogito*, for as Daniel Garber puts it, God is 'the real cause on which all else, including one's own existence, depends.'<sup>17</sup> As Garber goes on to argue, however, despite attempts by some commentators, among them Guérout, Curley, and others, to argue that Descartes will follow the method of analysis in the *Meditations* but the method of synthesis in his *Principles of Philosophy*, the reality, Garber claims, is that despite differences in their manner of presentation, they are both 'constructed on largely the same plan. Both works,' Garber claims, 'begin with doubt, both proceed from there to the Cogito, from the Cogito to God, and from God to the external world.'<sup>18</sup> Both works, in short, appear to follow the method of analysis, despite other differences, and Descartes himself lends support to this view when he claims that the method of synthesis is 'not as satisfying as the method of analysis,' because, he adds, 'it does not show how the thing in questions was discovered.'<sup>19</sup> More to the point, Descartes claims that while demonstrating by way of synthesis may work well in the case of geometry, where the 'primary notions which are presupposed for the demonstration of geometrical truths are readily accepted by anyone, since they accord with the use of our senses' (ibid.), this is not the case with metaphysical truths that are not readily accepted by anyone and may well 'conflict with many preconceived opinions derived from the senses...' (ibid.), such as Descartes' claim from the second meditation that the mind is better known than the body. If we are going to do metaphysics, therefore, it would appear that the method of analysis would be better suited than the method of synthesis.

One reason some commentators may have been quick to assume Descartes was open to adopting the method of synthesis may be the fact that Spinoza wholeheartedly does adopt this method, with the assumption here being that Spinoza is continuing down a path already found in

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5 Descartes 1984 [1641], p.111

6 Guérout 1984 [1952], p.9

7 Garber 2000, 55 Garber 2000, p.55

8 Ibid., p.47

9 Descartes 1984 [1641], p.111

Descartes' own work, and most notably his *Principles of Philosophy*.<sup>10</sup> In support of this reading, one can turn to Lodewijk Meyer's preface to *Spinoza's Parts I and II of Descartes' "Principles of Philosophy"*, where Meyer expresses satisfaction in having found someone 'who was skilled both in the Analytic and Synthetic order...[who] would be willing...to render in the Synthetic order what Descartes wrote in the Analytic,'<sup>11</sup> with the implication being here that Spinoza's own philosophy follows an approach that Descartes could have developed, had he chosen to do so. Spinoza was quick, however, to note that the philosophy laid out in the *Principles* is not Spinoza's own. As Spinoza explained in a letter to Henry Oldenburg, he only had his reworking of Descartes' *Principles* published on the condition that it include 'a short Preface warning Readers that I did not acknowledge all the opinions contained in this treatise as my own, since I had written many things in it which were the very opposite of what I held...'<sup>12</sup> More importantly, and as will be argued for here in this essay, Spinoza comes to conclusions that are 'the very opposite' of Descartes' because of the very different manner in which Spinoza addresses the problem of skepticism. As noted earlier, in both Descartes' *Meditations* and *Principles* he begins with doubt, with skepticism, and it is the method of analysis, the discovery of the certainty of the *Cogito*, that allows Descartes, or so he believes, to meet the problem of skepticism. For Spinoza, by contrast, we can never address the problem of skepticism through the method of analysis, by beginning with what we know, but we must begin with what is primary and essential in the nature of things—that is, we must begin with God and follow the method of synthesis. Spinoza's response to the problem of skepticism, therefore, and as will be detailed below, does not amount to a minor variation to and extension of Descartes; to the contrary, it marks a wholesale rethinking of a number of metaphysical assumptions, and a rethinking that leads Spinoza to conclusions that are 'the very opposite' of Descartes'.

The Spinozist metaphysics that emerges in response to the problem of skepticism will have a profound influence upon a number of contemporary French philosophers, most notably Louis Althusser and Gilles Deleuze. Althusser, for instance, draws particular attention to Spinoza's method, noting that Spinoza 'confesses in a letter that "some begin with the world and others with the mind of man; I begin with God."' "<sup>13</sup> For Althusser what Spinoza is able to do by beginning with God, unlike Descartes who begins 'with the mind of man', is to set

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Curley 1969, and Bennett 1984.

<sup>11</sup> Spinoza 1985 [1663], p.227

<sup>12</sup> Letter 13, *ibid.* 207 emphasis in original

<sup>13</sup> Althusser 2006, p. 176. As the editors note, Spinoza does not confess this in a letter but it was Leibniz who wrote this comment down after having a discussion about Spinoza with Tschirnhaus.



forth a philosophy that is out of the reach of any skeptical challenge. As Althusser puts it,

[Spinoza] deliberately takes up his position in God. Hence one can say that he occupies, in advance, the common fortress, the ultimate guarantee and last recourse of all his adversaries, by starting with this beyond-which-there-is-nothing, which, because it thus exists in the absolute, in the absence of all relations, is itself nothing. Saying that one “begins with God,” or the Whole, or the unique substance, and making it understood that one “begins with nothing”, is, basically, the same thing: what difference is there between the whole and nothing?...<sup>14</sup>

To clarify these claims, we will show that the nothing with which Spinoza begins, the unique substance that entails ‘the absence of all relations,’ is to be understood in the context of his response to the problem of skepticism. In the first section of this essay, therefore, I will set forth the key premises that give the skeptical arguments their force, in particular the problem of criterion one finds in Pyrrhonian skepticism, arguments that would have a profound influence among early modern philosophers.<sup>15</sup> With this in place, we will then sketch some of the important responses to skepticism, of which Descartes’ is an example, in order then to highlight the originality of Spinoza’s approach. In the second section we will further clarify Spinoza’s approach by homing in on the nature of God as substance. By stressing the absolutely infinite nature of God, Spinoza heads off the problem of the criterion before it even gets a chance to get started. It is this understanding of substance as absolutely infinite, or as the nothing beyond all relations as Althusser puts it, that Althusser will draw from in setting forth his understanding of the ‘problematic’ nature of ideology (Althusser), an understanding Deleuze will push this even further by developing claiming substance to be a multiplicity, or a problem. In the third and final section we develop the political implications of the problematic nature of substance, for it is the problematic nature of Spinozist substance, I will argue, that best brings the work of Spinoza and Marx together, and it is just this convergence that allows for a critique of ideology that would become an inspiration to the likes of Althusser, Deleuze, and many others.

### **The Challenge of Skepticism**

As Richard Popkin has famously argued, early modern philosophers took the challenges they saw in Pyrrhonian skepticism very seriously, and the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> See Richard Popkin’s classic account of this influence (Popkin 2003 [1960])

varied responses to these challenges would set the stage for many of the key philosophical developments in modern philosophy. Descartes' response to the Pyrrhonian challenge is perhaps the most noteworthy, and the method of doubt employed in the *Meditations* sets out to make use of skepticism to the point where it becomes undone, and he does this, as we saw, through the method of analysis. It was for this reason that the givens of perceptual experience, although perhaps suitable for the geometers and their use of the method of synthesis, was not suitable for overcoming the skeptical challenge. As Sextus Empiricus argues in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, for instance, experience teaches us that there are numerous animals whose senses reveal more than ours do.<sup>16</sup> Dogs can track a scent that humans cannot even detect; sharks and other ocean predators can detect the electric fields of prey; and so on. Given such differences, the skeptics goes on to ask how it is that we humans can presume to attain knowledge of the world given our limited abilities? Picking up on this line of argument, Descartes extends it even further by subjecting to doubt our very sense of bodily awareness in time and space through his example of dreaming.<sup>17</sup> We may think we are by the fire, having philosophical thoughts that we write down on paper, but in actuality we are asleep in bed dreaming a scene that is not real. How can we be sure we are not dreaming now?

Descartes brings these doubts to an end with his famous argument for the *Cogito*, for the fact that there must be something that is thinking it is awake and writing when it is in fact asleep. For Descartes, the method of analysis leads him to the discovery of the fact that we cannot doubt we are a thinking thing, for this very doubt proves we are thinking, and thus we have the experience of certainty, or clarity and distinctness, that becomes the basis for Descartes' subsequent arguments. As Michael Della Rocca, among many others, has pointed out, however, this does not close the door on the skeptics: 'No matter how clear and distinct the ideas are, the skeptic says, they do not amount to knowledge or genuine normative (and not merely psychological) certainty.'<sup>18</sup> In other words, the psychological certainty that comes with clear and distinct ideas is not sufficient in itself to provide the normative certainty that one indeed knows what they take to know with such clarity and distinctness. It was for this reason that Descartes required the assurance that God is not a deceiving God, an evil genius who causes us to have clear and distinct ideas of things that are not true; or, as Della Rocca argues, 'For the skeptic, the epistemic status depends on epistemic features of ideas,

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<sup>16</sup> See Sextus Empiricus (1933), I.44-49, pp. 27-31.

<sup>17</sup> Descartes 1984 [1641], pp.13-14

<sup>18</sup> Della Rocca 2008, p.128

typically other ideas,<sup>19</sup> such as the idea that God is not a deceiver. The minute we separate the epistemic status of ideas from the clarity and distinctness of these ideas, however, 'the door is left open for the skeptic.'<sup>20</sup> In particular, the dual Pyrrhonist threats of the regress argument and the problem of criterion come to cast doubt on our claims to know, for if the normative status of our clear and distinct ideas depends on the normative status of other ideas, then these ideas are subject to the same question. As Sextus Empiricus states the argument, and in a text that is the *locus classicus* for this discussion in the early modern period, the regress argument is one of 'Five modes leading to suspension [of belief] that have been handed down by skeptics.'<sup>21</sup> This particular mode, he goes on, is 'based upon regress *ad infinitum*...whereby we assert that the thing adduced as a proof of the matter proposed needs a further proof, and this again another, and so on *ad infinitum*, so that the consequence is suspension, as we possess no starting-point for our argument.'<sup>22</sup> If we need an idea other than the idea we hold to be clear and distinct to justify its truth, then what is the idea that justifies this idea? What we need, as Sextus Empiricus himself notes, is a 'starting-point,' a definitive, non-arbitrary justification that requires no further justifications. The Pyrrhonian skeptics, unsurprisingly, denied there were such starting-points. Descartes had hoped his method of analysis, and the resulting discovery of the *Cogito*, would bring about such a starting point, but many others, including Spinoza, would find that this was not the case.

A guiding premise in the argument of the Pyrrhonian skeptics is that an infinite regress undermines any claims to know. There must be a starting point. The options that are commonly taken in response, therefore, are either to end a regress with an indisputable, unquestioned fact, such as Descartes sought to do with the *Cogito*, or accept the regress and the skeptical consequence that no claims are ultimately justified and all are open to doubt. Spinoza adopts neither of these strategies. For Spinoza, beginning with God as the absolutely infinite, that beyond which there is nothing, is to begin with a truth that is true precisely because it entails the absolutely infinite, a truth that entails no starting point. Pierre Macherey will allude to this point when he discusses Descartes' example of needing tools or a method in order to arrive at the truth. If this were so, Macherey argues, then we would need tools to make these tools, but then, Macherey adds, 'just as the Skeptics...demonstrate the impossibility of attaining the truth, one could demonstrate by the same regression the lack of capacity confronting humans in forging

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19 Ibid. p.129

20 Ibid., p.130

21 Sextus Empiricus 1933, I.166

22 Ibid

metal, because they needed instruments to do this, which they also had to create, using already existing tools, etc.’<sup>23</sup> For Spinoza, by contrast, Macherey claims that ‘Because “humans think”<sup>24</sup>...no threshold was needed for a first tool, and at the same time, to understand things, no threshold was needed for a first idea...’.<sup>25</sup> Put simply, for Spinoza we are always already installed in thinking, in an idea that expresses the absolutely infinite nature of substance (God), and it is only once we begin representing this truth, the truth that is expressed in human thinking, that we then open up an infinite regress. This is the basis for Spinoza’s widely cited claim, from his *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, that

A true idea (for we have a true idea) is something different from its object. For a circle is one thing and an idea of the circle another... And since it is something different from its object, it will also be something intelligible through itself; that is, the idea, as far as its formal essence is concerned, can be the object of another objective essence, and this other objective essence in turn will also be, considered in itself, something real and intelligible, and so on, indefinitely’<sup>26</sup>

Spinoza will add, a few paragraphs later, that ‘certainty is nothing but the objective essence itself, i.e., the mode by which we are aware of the formal essence is certainty itself’;<sup>27</sup> and again, in the *Ethics*, he will reiterate this point: ‘What can there be which is clearer and more certain than a true idea, to serve as a standard of truth? As the light makes both itself and the darkness plain, so truth is the standard both of itself and of the false’ (E2P43S). Stated differently, human thinking always already expresses the absolutely infinite nature of God, or presupposes a reality that explains that which is, including the human mind and the truths regarding that which is, while this absolutely infinite reality is irreducible to any of these particular truths, or to any particular finite reality and relationship. This was precisely the point of Althusser’s claim regarding Spinoza’s ‘starting with this beyond-which-there-is nothing, which, because it thus exists in the absolute, in the absence of all relation, is itself nothing.’<sup>28</sup> We need neither end an infinite regress in a brute, inexplicable fact or given—e.g. the *Cogito*—nor does the regress

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23 Macherey 2011 [1979], p. 46

24 *Ethics* 2A2

25 Macherey 2011 [1979], p.47

26 Spinoza 1985 [1677], p.17; TdIE 33

27 Ibid. p.36

28 Althusser 2006, p.176

of determinations undermine the true idea that 'serve[s] as a standard of truth,' but we need simply to begin with an infinite reality that always already accounts for determinate facts and relations. In short, we need to turn to the method of synthesis which entails accounting, as Garber summarizes Guérout, for things in terms not of what is known by us but rather by the 'order of being,' and thus the method of synthesis presents 'things in an order that reflects the real dependencies that things have with respect to one another, independent of our knowledge of them... [and thus it] must begin not with the self and the *Cogito*, but with God, the real cause on which all else, including one's own existence, depends.<sup>29</sup>' We will turn now to explain what this means for Spinoza, and how Deleuze in particular picks up on Spinoza's embrace of the absolutely infinite.

### God or Problem

To understand the manner in which 'truth,' as Spinoza puts it, 'is the standard of both itself and of the false' (E2P43S), we need to turn to the nature of adequate ideas. As Spinoza defines an adequate idea, it is 'an idea which, insofar as it is considered in itself, without relation to an object, has all the properties, or intrinsic denominations, of a true idea' (E2D4). In other words, an idea is adequate, and thereby true, not because it is an accurate representation of a reality external to it, but rather it is adequate and true to the extent that it follows from its own nature and not the nature of another idea or reality. Taking Spinoza's claim that 'humans think' (E2A2), combined both with his famous assertion of parallelism whereby 'The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things' (E2P7) and his claim that 'The object of the idea constituting the human Mind is the Body' (E2P13), then the conclusion to draw is that the idea constituting the human Mind is adequate if it is caused by the reality that is the body and not by anything external to the body. Spinoza thus claims that 'the Mind has, not an adequate, but only a confused knowledge, of itself, of its own Body, and of external bodies... so long as it is determined externally, from fortuitous encounters with things,' and not, he adds, 'so long as it is determined internally... For so often as it is disposed internally... then it [the Mind] regards things clearly and distinctly...' (E2P29S). Ideas garnered through imagination, through external causes, are confused ideas, and confused precisely because they tend to be confounded (i.e., con-fused) with following from the nature of reality, the order of being as Guérout puts it, when instead they follow merely from our 'fortuitous encounters with things.'

It is at this point where the influence of Spinoza's thought on contemporary French thought becomes most pronounced. Returning again to Althusser's claim that by starting with God, he starts 'with this beyond-which-there-is-nothing, which, because it thus exists in

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<sup>29</sup> Garber 2000, p.55

the absolute, in the absence of all relation is itself nothing,' we can see that indeed God must not be limited, or determined by anything external, anything God is not, for then the ideas that follow from God would be inadequate in that God is in the end determined by something external. It is for this reason as well that Spinoza understands God to be 'a being absolutely infinite, i.e., a substance consisting of an infinity of attributes, of which each one expresses an eternal and infinite essence' (E1D6). If God were to consist of simply two attributes, there would be a determinate, numerical limit to God's nature, and thus God's nature would ultimately be determined by what God is not. As Macherey has stressed, however, and in sympathy with Althusser's claims,

There is only one substance [i.e., God], but it comprises an infinity of attributes; its unity is incomprehensible outside this infinite diversity, which constitutes it intrinsically. The result is that substance has multiplicity within itself and not outside itself, and from this fact, multiplicity ceases to be numerical, which Spinoza expresses exactly by saying it is infinite...<sup>30</sup>

Deleuze will also place tremendous importance on the concept of a multiplicity, arguing that 'Multiplicity, which replaces the one no less than the multiple, is the true substantive, substance itself.'<sup>31</sup> In other words, multiplicity is not to be thought of in terms of that which is numerically distinct, whether this be a single substance or totality that is one, or a totality of multiple substances and elements, each one of which is numerically distinct. God as multiplicity, therefore, as 'true substantive, substance itself,' is not to be confused with anything determinate, nor with any relations between determinate entities, and thus to start with God as Spinoza does is, as Althusser put it, to place oneself 'in the absolute, in the absence of all relation, [that] is itself nothing.' At the same time, however, Althusser places great weight on the ideas of the imagination, or on confused, inadequate ideas as Spinoza understands them. In particular, when Althusser defends the 'thesis that, for Spinoza, the object of philosophy is the void,'<sup>32</sup> the void he has in mind is the Epicurean void, the 'void [that] pre-exists the atoms that fall in it,' and thus the object of philosophy is to 'set out from nothing,' the void, 'and from the infinitesimal, aleatory variation of nothing constituted by the swerve of the fall.'<sup>33</sup> In a rethinking of the Epicurean claim that there was nothing but void and falling atoms until a random, fortuitous swerve of an

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<sup>30</sup> Macherey 2011 [1979], p.99

<sup>31</sup> Deleuze 1994 [1968], p.182

<sup>32</sup> Althusser 2006, p.176

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.175

atom set about a cascading process that gave rise to the reality we have, similarly for Althusser the task or object of philosophy is to create the opportunities for random, fortuitous encounters to bring about change, just as capitalism was born, Althusser argues, citing Marx, 'from the "encounter between the man with money and free laborers," free, that is, stripped of everything, of their means of labor, of their abodes and their families, in the great expropriation of the English countryside.'<sup>34</sup> On this point Althusser echoes Deleuze and Guattari's claim, from *Anti-Oedipus*, that the encounter that allowed for 'capitalism to be born' involved the 'contingent nature of this encounter' between flows of deterritorialized workers and money, and '[i]t is the singular nature of this conjunction that ensured the universality of capitalism.'<sup>35</sup> In other words, it is the fortuitous, contingent nature of encounters, the *singularity* of the event as Deleuze will also put it (and to be clarified below), that allowed for the birth of capitalism, and it is the task of philosophy, as Althusser reads and takes on Spinoza's project, to make way for the void, for the nothing that matters, that allows for encounters that may transform capitalism and seed the conditions whereby it becomes something other.

At this point, however, it may seem that Althusser, and likewise Deleuze and Guattari, have parted ways with Spinoza's project by stressing the contingent, fortuitous, singular nature of encounters. Does this approach not simply give undue emphasis to the role of the imagination and the inadequate, confused ideas this entails, and in the process overlook the importance of the adequate ideas that follow immanently and intrinsically from the nature of one's own mind (and hence body) rather than from anything external to the mind or body? There are two points to stress here. First, and most straightforwardly, Spinoza does not dismiss the inadequate, confused ideas of the imagination. Spinoza is quite clear: 'Inadequate and confused ideas follow with the same necessity as adequate, or clear and distinct ideas' (E2P36). By virtue of the fact that God is absolutely infinite, and thus without determinate limitations, and following from E1P15—'Whatever is, is in God, and nothing can be or be conceived without God'—the result for Spinoza is that even ill-conceived, inadequate ideas, to the extent that they are conceived at all, presuppose the absolutely infinite nature of God and thus 'follow with the same necessity as adequate, or clear and distinct ideas.' The difference between them, and this brings me to the second point, hinges upon how we understand the manner in which something

34 Althusser 1997, p.13. Althusser does not provide a reference, though Marx makes roughly this claim in the *Grundrisse*: 'For the encounter with the objective conditions of labour as separate from him, as capital from the worker's side, and the encounter with the worker as propertyless, as an abstract worker from the capitalist's side – the exchange such as takes place between value and living labour, presupposes a historic process...a historic process, which, as we saw, forms the history of the origins of capital and wage labour,' Marx 1993 [1858], pp.488-89.

35 Deleuze and Guattari 1977, p.224



*follows with the same necessity.* In interpreting Spinoza's claim, at E1P16, that 'From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes,' it is frequently assumed that the manner in which things follow from the necessity of the divine nature is in accordance with a law of nature, a law or rule that predetermines, and necessarily so, all that has and will happen in accordance with the necessity of this law (or rule).<sup>36</sup> If this were how Spinoza were to understand the manner in which something follows with the same necessity from the nature of God, then it could fall prey to the skeptical challenge Wittgenstein posed with his famous rule-following paradox.

As a brief aside, but one that will clarify the issues involved here, we can turn to the rule-following paradox, which Wittgenstein states as follows: 'This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be brought into accord with the rule...if every course of action can be brought into accord with the rule, then it can also be brought into conflict with it.'<sup>37</sup> For example, and drawing from Saul Kripke's famous study of Wittgenstein,<sup>38</sup> if in doing arithmetic one's actions are thought to be done in accordance with the rules of arithmetic, then the question for Wittgenstein is how we are to determine whether one is to follow the plus rule or quus rule when one is given the problem of adding  $68 + 57$ ? If in all previous cases of doing arithmetic one had never added a number greater than or equal to 68, and if the quus rule says that a summation that involves a number greater than or equal to 68 always results in 5, then how are we to determine whether or not to follow the plus or quus rule in this case? Is the answer to this problem 125 or 5? The point of Wittgenstein's skeptical paradox is that if doing arithmetic entails following a rule then we would need another rule to verify that we are following the correct rule, plus or quus, but then we then need a rule to verify this rule, and so on. Wittgenstein, however, does not accept the skeptical paradox, and he argues instead that 'there is a way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation, but which, from case to case of application, is exhibited in what we call "following the rule" and "going against it."'<sup>39</sup> This 'way of grasping a rule' that does not require another rule or standard of interpretation, a rule that needs its own interpretation and hence opens us to the skeptical regress arguments, was left unclear by Wittgenstein, and it has become the subject of much discussion among commentators.<sup>40</sup> Wittgenstein nonetheless does not

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<sup>36</sup> See, again, Curley 1969.

<sup>37</sup> Wittgenstein 2009 [1953], §201

<sup>38</sup> Kripke 1982

<sup>39</sup> Wittgenstein 2009 [1953], §201

<sup>40</sup> For more on this, see Bell, *Truth and Relevance: Vol. 2 Politics* (forthcoming)

accept the skeptical implications of the rule-following paradox, calling for an understanding of 'following a rule' and 'going against it' that does not open us to a regress. Similarly for Spinoza, I argue, the manner in which things follow from the nature of God is not such that it is to be thought of as being done in accordance with a rule, or a law of nature. In clarifying how this is so for Spinoza, we can gain both greater insight into how Wittgenstein avoids the skeptical implications of his rule-following paradox and we will be able to account for the emphasis Althusser and Deleuze place on the fortuitous, singular nature of encounters.

The reason for Deleuze's stress upon singularities, and the fortuitous nature of encounters, is because this is how we can account for the nature of abstract rules, rules that are then taken to predetermine that which follows or acts in accordance with the rules. A key claim for Deleuze is that 'Abstractions explain nothing, they themselves have to be explained: there are no such things as universals, there's nothing transcendent, no Unity, subject...there are only processes, sometimes unifying, subjectifying, rationalizing, but just processes all the same.'<sup>41</sup> It is in *Difference and Repetition*, and in his discussions of learning in particular, where Deleuze most clearly explains how abstractions and rules come to be. Deleuze does so by way of the example of a 'well-known test in psychology [that] involves a monkey who is supposed to find food in boxes of one particular colour amidst others of various colours...'<sup>42</sup> As we might imagine, a hungry monkey may fortuitously stumble upon food under a box and then begin to search for food under the remaining boxes, regardless of their color. At some point, however, and as Deleuze continues, 'there comes a paradoxical period during which the number of "errors" diminishes even though the monkey does not yet possess the "knowledge" or "truth" of a solution in each case....'<sup>43</sup> Deleuze will refer to this 'paradoxical period' as the 'objectivity [*objectivité*] of a problem (Idea),' whereby the elements that constitute the problem are drawn together—for instance, the boxes, their varied colors, food, hunger, etc.—

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41 Deleuze 1995, p.145

42 Ibid, p.164. Deleuze does not cite the experiment he has in mind, but he may be thinking of Wolfgang Köhler's experiments during the First World War. The most famous of these were the problem-solving experiments with Sultan the chimpanzee who was able to "figure out" how to attach two sticks together to reach food and, in another experiment, stack boxes on one another to reach bananas that were out of reach. Merleau-Ponty cites the latter experiment in *Phenomenology of Perception*, and hence Köhler's experiments certainly qualify as 'well-known.' Köhler's interpretations of the results to justify what has come to be called 'insight learning' also track the manner in which Deleuze interprets the results of the experiments he refers to in *Difference and Repetition*. Whether or not Köhler's work is what Deleuze had in mind, I could not find the experiments Deleuze cites among those Köhler conducted. Harlow's learning set studies with monkeys from the late 1940s and 1950s do more closely match those described by Deleuze (though not exactly), but the results of his own study lead, he argues, to the rejection of Köhler's conclusions regarding insight (see Harlow 1949, 1959). Harlow's studies were also well-known, especially his more notorious studies with attachment in monkeys, and what happens when a monkey is placed on a wire mother rather than a fur mother.

43 Deleuze 1995, p.164

in a way that allows for the solution to appear, a solution that then enables the monkey to “know” that the food is under boxes of ‘one particular colour.’ This process of encountering a problem (Idea) is precisely how Deleuze understands learning: ‘Learning is the appropriate name for the subjective acts carried out when one is confronted with the objectivity of a problem (Idea), whereas knowledge designates only the generality of concepts or the calm possession of a rule enabling solutions.’<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the determinate solutions that result from the process of learning do not exhaust the nature of a problem, a nature that is in-finite and indeterminate. When a child learns to tie their shoes, to take a simple example, they confront the problem of arranging and tying the laces of their shoes such that, among other things, (1) the laces remain tied together and do not unravel, (2) the shoes are tightened and don’t fall off, and (3) the laces can be easily untied. As anyone who has watched several children who have recently learned to tie their shoes will know, there are multiple solutions to this problem, or the solution a particular child comes to does not exhaust the problem. It is this process of learning that Deleuze claims accounts for the abstractions and rules we come to follow and employ when we possess “knowledge.”

In transitioning back to the Spinozism at the heart of Deleuze’s discussion, we can turn to the very next example he offers, and to the Leibnizian interpretation he brings to the example of learning. In this case it is the example of learning to swim:

To learn to swim is to conjugate the distinctive points of our bodies with the singular points of the objective Idea in order to form a problematic field. This conjugation determines for us a threshold of consciousness at which our real acts are adjusted to our perceptions of the real relations, thereby providing a solution to the problem. Moreover, problematic Ideas are precisely the ultimate elements of nature and the subliminal objects of little perceptions.<sup>45</sup>

The key to this passage is understanding the process whereby distinctive, singular points are conjugated ‘to form a problematic field.’ In the case of the monkey finding food under boxes of a particular color, these singular points are the boxes, colors, food, feelings of hunger, etc.; and in the case of learning to swim they are, as Deleuze put it earlier in *Difference and Repetition*, the singular points of the body, waves, etc.<sup>46</sup> It is here where Leibniz enters the scene, for these singular points are not extensive, numerically distinct points, but rather they are intensive differentials that

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44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., p165

46 Ibid., p.23

make extensive relations possible. When Leibniz brings up '[t]he idea of the sea,' according to Deleuze Leibniz did so to show 'a system of liaisons corresponding to the degrees of variation among these relations – the totality of the system being incarnated in the real movement of the waves' (ibid. 165). Deleuze is referring, of course, to Leibniz's famous example of the 'roaring noise of the sea'<sup>47</sup> in order to clarify the relationship between the subliminal, little perceptions and the actual, clear perception of the roaring waves. To hear the roaring noise of the waves, and to hear them clearly and distinctly, 'we must,' Leibniz argues, 'hear the parts which make up this whole, that is the noise of each wave, although each of these little noises makes itself known only when combined confusedly with all the others, and would not be noticed if the wave which made it were by itself.'<sup>48</sup> In other words, each of the little perceptions is not heard by itself, as numerically distinct from others, but it is only as con-fused perceptions that have crossed a threshold whereby we can then come to have a clear and distinct perception of the roaring noise of the sea. Similarly in the case of the 'objectivity of a problem (Idea),' it too consists of singular points that are not to be confused with being numerically distinct points, and yet when they are brought to the threshold and 'objectivity' of a problematic (Idea) then it makes possible the extrinsic relations between determinate points and the rules and solutions that relate such points.

We are now in a position to return to Spinoza, and in particular to the distinction Spinoza makes, as noted earlier, between adequate and inadequate ideas. An adequate idea, as Spinoza defined it, is 'an idea which, insofar as it is considered in itself, without relation to an object, has all the properties, or intrinsic denominations, of a true idea' (E2D4). An adequate idea, in other words, is one that is determined intrinsically, or immanently, and without any extrinsic reference to anything other. As we have seen, for Spinoza this is most certainly the case for God, which as an absolutely infinite substance 'has all the properties, or intrinsic denominations, of a true idea' without any relationship to anything other, to anything extrinsic. Moreover, it is precisely this reading of God as intrinsic, immanent cause that Deleuze brings to bear in his interpretation of Spinoza's claims regarding non-existent modes.

When Spinoza raises the possibility of non-existent modes at E2P8—'The ideas of singular things, or of modes, that do not exist must be comprehended in God's infinite idea in the same way as the formal essences of the singular things, or modes, are contained in God's attributes'—some have found this to be problematic. If God, as absolutely infinite substance, is a substance without limitation, then it would seem that this substance should be fully actualized, that there should be no

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<sup>47</sup> Leibniz 1996 [1704], p.54

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

possibilities that God has not realized for this would appear to be a limitation on the nature of God. There is something that God has not yet actualized, and thus something that delimits the actualized nature of God from the non-actualized. The mistake in this view is to prioritize the numerically distinct and extensive over the intrinsic and intensive nature of God. Stated differently, the mistake is to think one can understand the essence and nature of a singular thing by listing off its determinate properties, the actually existent properties one may think individuates the singular thing as being the thing that it is. In a late letter to Tschirnhaus, Spinoza uses his example from E2P8 to highlight this mistake:

For example, in investigating the properties of a circle, I ask whether from the idea of a circle according to which it consists of infinite rectangles, I could deduce all its properties. I ask, I say, whether this idea involves the efficient cause of the circle. Since it doesn't, I seek another: viz. that a circle is the space described by a line one end of which is fixed and the other moving. Since this Definition now expresses the efficient cause, I know I can deduce all the properties of the circle from it, etc.<sup>49</sup>

The determinate properties of the circle, the properties thought to constitute the essence or nature of a circle—e.g. 'that it consists of infinite rectangles'—are not to be confused with its nature but are merely 'beings of reason,' to use Spinoza's phrase,<sup>50</sup> tools we use as finite beings to make sense of our world (more on this in the next section), whereas for Spinoza it is a causal process that accounts for the true nature of a circle. This same mistake extends, Deleuze argues, to thinking of non-existent modes as possibilities—that is, as determinate, already individuated and distinct but not yet actualized modes. As Deleuze puts it, in just a few critical pages from his major work on Spinoza, 'a mode's essence exists, is real and actual, even if the mode whose essence it is does not actually exist,' to which he adds that a mode's essence 'is not a logical possibility, nor a mathematical structure, nor a metaphysical entity, but a physical reality, a *res physica*.'<sup>51</sup> A mode's essence 'can only be assimilated to possible,' Deleuze adds, echoing Spinoza's comments to Tschirnhaus, 'to the extent that we consider them abstractly, that is, *divorce them from the cause that makes them real or existing things*.'<sup>52</sup>

To clarify the causal process that accounts for the nature of singular things, or namely the process of individuation, Deleuze highlights

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49 Spinoza 2016 [1674], Letter 60, p.433

50 Spinoza 1985, p.301

51 Deleuze 1990 [1968], 192

52 *ibid.* 194, emphasis added

Spinoza's distinction between eternity and duration. 'It is through duration,' Deleuze argues, following Spinoza, 'that existing modes have their strictly extrinsic individuation,'<sup>53</sup> or the determinate properties we come to identify with a singular thing, but 'any extrinsic distinction,' Deleuze adds, 'seems to presuppose a prior intrinsic one. So a modal essence should be singular in itself, even if the corresponding mode does not exist. But how?.'<sup>54</sup> If we return to the example of the circle that contains infinitely many rectangles, the question Deleuze asks is how there can be a singular modal essence of a rectangle if the determinate, extrinsic rectangle does not exist? To answer this question Deleuze draws upon Scotus. In taking the whiteness of a wall, for instance, Scotus argued that whiteness may have varied intensities, none of which alters the quality of the whiteness itself, or as Deleuze states it, these various intensities 'are not added to whiteness as one thing to another, like a shape added to the wall on which it is drawn; its degrees of intensity are intrinsic determinations, intrinsic modes, of a whiteness that remains univocally the same under whichever modality it is considered.'<sup>55</sup> The circle in Spinoza's example is thus the attribute, or better 'God's infinite idea,' that 'remains univocally the same,' and the infinite, though non-actualized, rectangles are the intrinsic determinations and modal essences of this attribute or infinite idea, the modal essences presupposed by any actualized, determinate rectangle. A non-existent mode, therefore, is on Deleuze's reading an intrinsic mode, an intensive, quantitative difference that makes possible the extensive, numerical differences that differentiate and individuate the durational existence of singular things. Deleuze is clear on this point: 'modal essences are thus distinguished from their attribute as intensities of its quality,' to which Deleuze adds that the 'difference of being (of modal essences) is at once intrinsic and purely quantitative; for the quantity here in question is an intensive one...Individuation is, in Spinoza, neither qualitative nor extrinsic, but quantitative and intrinsic, intensive.'<sup>56</sup>

Restating Deleuze's reading of Spinoza in the terms of problems (Ideas) he will use in *Difference and Repetition*, we can say that something becomes numerically distinct with the extrinsic relations that are capable of being represented through the law-like rules of mathematics, among other ways (as we will see in the next section), on the condition of intensive differences. Deleuze will in fact echo Spinoza in the opening page of Chapter V of *Difference and Repetition*, which

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53 Ibid., p.196

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid. Deleuze cites *Opus Oxoniense* I.3.i, ii. (or see *Ordinatio* 1.3, part 1, question 2, paragraphs 55, 58, in Scotus [2016], pp. 63-4, 65).

56 Ibid., p.197



begins with the claim that 'Difference is not diversity,'<sup>57</sup> namely, it is not a difference between a diverse set of already given, and extrinsically distinct phenomena; to the contrary, for Deleuze, 'difference is that by which the given is given, that by which the given is given as diverse.'<sup>58</sup> More to the point, Deleuze argues that the given presupposes its modal essence, to bring the Spinozist term into play here, or an intensive, quantitative difference. As Deleuze puts it, every phenomenon is an expression of an intensity, and 'every intensity is differential, by itself a difference';<sup>59</sup> that is, every intensity is a Leibnizian little perception, an intensive, quantitative difference, an element of the objectivity of a problem (Idea). 'Every intensity,' Deleuze argues, or every differential, is  $E - E'$ , where  $E$  itself refers to an  $e - e'$ , and  $e$  to  $\varepsilon - \varepsilon'$  etc.: each intensity is already a coupling...thereby revealing the properly qualitative content of quantity. We call this state of infinitely doubled difference which resonates to infinity disparity. Disparity – in other words, difference or intensity (difference of intensity) – is the sufficient reason of all phenomena, the condition of that which appears.<sup>60</sup> In his own way, therefore, Deleuze has set forth his own Spinozist assumptions, calling upon an absolutely infinite substance, a disparity of infinite, intensive differences that is 'the sufficient reason of all phenomena' and from which follows all that is given, and given as a diversity of numerically distinct, extrinsically related phenomena.

With these arguments in place, we can now return to our earlier question regarding whether or not Althusser and Deleuze prioritize the role of inadequate ideas that follow upon the fortuitous, contingent nature of imagination over the adequate ideas that follow from our intrinsic nature. We now see that our intrinsic nature, including the intrinsic nature of God as absolutely infinite substance, is best understood as a problem (Idea), and thus when Spinoza says that '[i]nadequate and confused ideas follow with the same necessity as adequate, or clear and distinct ideas' (E2P36), we can see that on a Deleuzian reading that both adequate and inadequate ideas follow from the nature of God as problem (Idea). We can also see that for something to follow from the necessity of God's nature as problem (Idea) is not for it to follow in accordance with a rule; rather, such determinate rules, as well as our determinate ideas (both adequate and inadequate), are to be understood as solutions or modes of God's infinite nature as problem (Idea). This is not to say, however, that there are no important differences between adequate and inadequate ideas. There are, as we will see in the next section, and the key

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57 Ibid., p.222

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid

60 Ibid.



here is to understand the manner in which our ideas express the nature of a problem. This is how we will read Althusser's claim that an ideology can be characterized 'by the fact that *its own problematic is not conscious of itself*... So a problematic cannot generally be read like an open book, it must be dragged from the depths of the ideology in which it is buried but active, and usually despite the ideology itself, its own statements and proclamations.'<sup>61</sup> As we will see, the imagination plays an important role in allowing us to embrace the problems that allow for learning to occur, for problems to be expressed and given voice in their solutions, with learning understood writ large in the Deleuzian sense. The imagination plays, in short, a critical role in transforming sadness into joy.

### Joyful Thinking

As Spinoza recognizes throughout his writings, we human beings are limited in our capacity to understand the nature of singular modes. This is unsurprising given that we ourselves are singular modes subject to the strictures of duration, meaning our existence is dependent on the existence of other singular modes, which in turn are dependent on others, and so on to infinity. As Spinoza argues in his famous letter to Lodewijk Meyer (Letter 12, On the Nature of the Infinite), 'it is only of Modes that we can explain the existence by Duration,'<sup>62</sup> and such explanations entail thinking the singular thing in duration which exists and 'has God for a cause [but] not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he is considered to be affected by another idea of a singular thing which actually exists; and of this idea God is also the cause, insofar as his is affected by another idea, and so on, to infinity' (E2P9). As finite beings, therefore, we will forever be limited in our abilities to explain modes, but Spinoza argues that 'we can explain the existence of Substance by Eternity, i.e., the infinite enjoyment of existing.'<sup>63</sup> In our attempts to explain 'existence by Duration,' Spinoza claims that we rely heavily upon notions of 'Measure, Time, and Number [which] are nothing but Modes of thinking, or rather, of imagining.'<sup>64</sup> Moreover, Spinoza goes on to argue that 'if someone strives to explain such things [as Substance, Eternity, etc.] by Notions of this kind [i.e., Measure, Time, and Number], which are only aids of the Imagination, he will accomplish nothing more than if he takes pains to go mad with his imagination.'<sup>65</sup> If we ever seek to explain, understand, and hence participate in the 'infinite enjoyment of existing,' therefore, it is

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61 Althusser 1997 [1965], p.69

62 Spinoza 1985 [1663], p.202

63 Ibid., p.202

64 Ibid., p.203

65 Ibid

not to the imagination that we should turn if we are to grasp the nature of substance and eternity, 'but only by the intellect'<sup>66</sup> will this happen.

With Spinoza's critique of imagination, it is unsurprising that most commentators subsequently turn to stress the role and nature of the intellect, or the second and third kinds of knowledge, for it is only in this way that we can appreciate and grasp the 'infinite enjoyment of existing.' Although this is certainly the case, for Spinoza, it would be premature to ignore the role the imagination plays in our daily lives. In particular, with respect to the politics of daily life, and politics more generally, the imagination, I would argue, plays for Spinoza a crucial role in facilitating the power of living and thinking, or joy as Spinoza understands it. Spinoza is quite clear, in E3P11, that 'The idea of any thing that increases or diminishes, aids or restrains, our Body's power of acting, increases or diminishes, aids or restrains, our Mind's power of thinking.' Ideally Spinoza would like for us to come to the third kind of knowledge and attain 'The intellectual Love of God, which arises from the third kind of knowledge, [and which] is eternal' (E5P33), and thereby attain an infinite enjoyment of existing where we are less acted on by affects and ideas that diminish our powers. That said, however, Spinoza is acutely aware that 'the idea of any thing,' including an idea of the imagination, an inadequate, confused idea, may also aid or restrain 'our Mind's power of thinking.' If the ideas of the imagination aid our powers, then we have joy—'By Joy, therefore, I shall understand in what follows that *passion by which the Mind passes to a greater perfection*'—and if it restrains our powers, we have sadness—'by Sadness, that *passion by which it passes to a lesser perfection*' (E3P11Sch).

Returning now to Althusser's claim that an ideology can be characterized 'by the fact that *its own problematic is not conscious of itself...*,'<sup>67</sup> I would argue that an ideology is to be understood as a narrative construct of the imagination. In her reading of E3post2, where Spinoza recognizes that 'The human Body can undergo many changes, and nevertheless retain impressions, or traces, of the objects, and consequently the same images of things,' Susan James argues that it is helpful to think of such imaginings of the fortuitous encounters of the human body, and the manner in which they are retained, processed, and used in one's life, as narratives.<sup>68</sup> These narratives, moreover, as constructs of the imagination, involve inadequate ideas, but even these ideas follow, as we saw earlier, 'with the same necessity as adequate, or clear and distinct ideas' (E2P36). Furthermore, in light of our argument that following from the divine nature (God) does not entail following

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66 Ibid.

67 Althusser 1997 [1965], p.69

68 James 2010, 253 James 2010, p.253

a transcendent rule or law, but rather it is the immanent, problematic nature of substance that is the condition for transcendent, abstract rules, and for both adequate and inadequate ideas, including narratives and ideologies. To the extent that a narrative facilitates a process whereby fewer restraints stand in the way of expressing the problematic nature of substance in our lives, then this is a narrative that facilitates joy, or the passing '*to a greater perfection*'; and to the extent that a narrative places restraints in the way of expressing the problematic nature of substance, or presents a narrative as a solution without a problem, a solution that has exhausted and eliminated the nature of the problem the narrative expresses, then this is a narrative that brings about sadness, or the passing '*to a lesser perfection*.'

To clarify this point further, we can turn to Marx. In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx acknowledges the productive activity of animals: 'They build themselves nests, dwellings, like the bees, beavers, ants, etc.'<sup>69</sup> There is a crucial difference, however, between the productive activity of humans and animals: 'an animal only produces what it immediately needs for itself or its young. It produces one-sidedly, while man produces universally. It produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need, while man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom. An animal produces only itself, while man reproduces the whole of nature.'<sup>70</sup> To state this in the terms used here, humans produce universally not because they possess a determinate universal Idea which they then proceed to instantiate in each of their productions, by the rule-book so to speak; rather, the universal is to be understood as the problematic nature of substance from which follows each and every determinate identity. A production is universal, therefore, in that every determinate human production presupposes a problem that the determinate production actualizes, but the problem is not itself a determinate problem, Idea, or universal. Animals, by contrast, reproduce their determinate identity without engaging in the nature of substance as problematic, even though the determinate identity they reproduce, as with everything for Spinoza, follows from the problematic nature of divine substance (God). With this Marxist distinction in mind, we can say that a narrative that simply reproduces itself, or presents things as if they were solutions without a problem, is a narrative that restrains our capacity to embrace the problematic nature that remains inseparable from our narratives, from our ideologies. When Althusser thus proposed a critique of ideology that entails encountering and bringing forth the problematic 'from the

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<sup>69</sup> Marx 1988 [1844], p.77

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

depths of the ideology in which it is buried but active,<sup>71</sup> Althusser was in effect seeking to transform a narrative thinking that has perpetuated a thinking of sadness and transform it into a joyful thinking, a thinking that embraces the problematic nature inseparable from its ideas, thoughts, and narratives (ideologies). If we take, to offer the sketch of an example, the prevalent narrative and ideology of contemporary society which makes the case that commercial culture, and the capitalist free market that fuels this culture, is the greatest source of our freedom of choice, and a choice that enhances our powers, we can see that this narrative portrays itself as one that brings about joy. A Marxist, Althusserian critique of this ideology would bring the problematic from the depths of this ideology to reveal that far from bringing about joy, such narratives reinforce the already determined options we have before us, and they ultimately present the free market itself as a solution without a problem, as a natural phenomenon that is offered to us as being in line with the universal rules and laws of nature itself. As Marx himself had already recognized, the processes inseparable from capitalism do not enhance the powers of human beings but limit these powers to fewer and fewer human beings, reducing the rest to a diminished status. Far from bringing about joy, the capitalist narrative and ideology brings about sadness.<sup>72</sup>

Returning to Spinoza we are now in a position to characterize the difference between narratives that instill joy and those that bring about sadness. Narratives that instill joy are free, and those that bring about sadness are forced. In line with Marx's claim that whereas animals are forced to produce from physical need, human being produce even when they are 'free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom,' we can say that a narrative is forced and inclines toward sadness if it predetermines and restrains the manner in which it is to be understood and interpreted, if it presents itself as a solution without a problem, as an exceptionless rule; and a narrative is free and inclines toward joy when it affirms the problematic nature inseparable from the narrative. We can see this distinction at work in Spinoza's most political work, his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, where the freedom to philosophize is seen by Spinoza as necessary for the enhancement of the powers of both the people and the republic that protects the people's interests. In a key passage, and one where Spinoza echoes the classical republican tradition, he summarizes his earlier arguments and points out that 'From the foundations of the Republic explained above it follows most clearly that its ultimate end is not to dominate, restraining men by fear, and making them subject to another's control....'<sup>73</sup> In good republican

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71 Althusser 1997 [1965], p.69

72 For more on this, see Bell, *Truth and Relevance: Vol. 2 Politics* (forthcoming).

73 Spinoza 2016 [1670], p.346

tradition, therefore, the purpose of a good government is to put in place institutions and practices that avoid the arbitrary domination of its citizens, or situations where citizens may be forced to act in accordance with the will of another. What is more important for Spinoza than allowing for unlimited, unimpeded freedom within the limits of the law, or what has come to be called negative liberty, following Hobbes,<sup>74</sup> is to have a republic that sets out 'not to dominate,' and through fear and arbitrary exercises of power *force* its citizens to become 'subject to another's control.' Consequently, in setting out 'to free each person from fear, so that he can live securely, as far as possible,' the goal of a proper republic, Spinoza argues, 'is not to change men from rational beings into beasts or automata, but to enable their minds and bodies to perform their functions safely, to enable them to use their reason freely...'.<sup>75</sup> In other words, the proper end of a republic is to enable us to express God's power more fully and to realize our nature as expressions of God as 'infinite enjoyment of existence,' as the freedom that is our nature as an expression of problematic substance.

In following through on his use of the method of synthesis, we have seen that Spinoza does indeed begin with God. The God that Spinoza begins with, however, is an absolutely infinite substance that is not to be confused with anything determinate, and more precisely God is a problematic substance that accounts for the determinate rules and ways of thinking that come to be used when we think in terms of 'Measure, Time, and Number.'<sup>76</sup> By arguing for an understanding of Spinozist substance as problematic, we have been able to offer a way to reconsider the role the imagination plays both within the context of the goals of Spinoza's *Ethics*—namely, as facilitating the process whereby we can attain the blessedness and freedom that comes with the intellectual love of God—as well as with Spinoza's political arguments concerning the importance of the freedom to philosophize. This freedom to philosophize, to return to and conclude with Althusser, is a freedom inseparable from the absolutely infinite problematic substance that is God, a substance irreducible to any determinate thing or relation between things, and thus a God that is the 'beyond-which-there-is-nothing, which, because it thus exists in the absolute, in the absence of all relations, is itself nothing.'<sup>77</sup> To regain the 'infinite enjoyment of existing' that accounts for who we are in our singular, determinate nature, Althusser, following Spinoza, encourages us to live a life where nothing matters.

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74 See, especially, Berlin 2002 [1969] for the work that popularized the distinction between positive and negative liberty

75 Spinoza 2016 [1670], p.346

76 Spinoza 1985 [1677], p.202

77 Althusser 2006, 1976

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# **Theological-Political Power: Spinoza against Schmitt**

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**Abstract:** In this paper we propose a counterpoint between Carl Schmitt's theological, monarchical and warmongering conception and Spinoza's critique of theological-political power, monarchy and war. To the transcendence of political power in Schmitt, we counterpose the immanence of political power in Spinoza and the defense of democracy.

**Keywords:** political theology, Theological-political power, monarchy, democracy

The President of the Republic of Brazil, Jair Messiah Bolsonaro, took charge of office on January 1, 2019. On January 6th, he was anointed and blessed by the evangelical pastor Macedo at a ceremony in which the choice of date (the Epiphany of the Christian calendar), the middle name of the president (Messias), and the ritual (the anointing and blessing) intended, in a gesture of political theology, to offer the spectacle of the sacredness of the ruler and political power, although the Brazilian Constitution states that Brazil is a secular republic.

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Starting from Carl Schmitt's assertion that the religiosity of an era determines not only theoretical formulations, but also the conception of political power, an interpretative tradition of his work gave to Catholicism a preponderant place, even though it placed it at a distance from De Bonald, De Maistre, and Donoso Cortez. Others, taking his status as a jurist, consider that, after *The Nomos of The Earth*, the discussion about law would have traced the course of Schmitt's work. Undoubtedly, many of the interpretations turned to European historical conditions and, particularly, to the overthrow of the Weimar Republic as references that would explain both previous and subsequent works to these events.

For our part, we think that an interesting way to understand Carl Schmitt's ideas is offered by his insertion in the field of thought instituted by German Idealism, although many may be surprised by this reference, once Schmitt was a fierce opponent of it. We are not referring here to the contents of these philosophies rejected by Schmitt, but to the gigantic theoretical event of dematerialization of reality, the most relevant expressions of which are the Kantian separation between phenomena and noumena, the Fichtean affirmation of the world as Non-I posed by the I, and the Hegelian Absolute Spirit as pure activity of the subject's self-constitution by the position and suppression of his determined negative or of the object. In other words, German Idealism states that the theoretical activity of reason places the world as an object of knowledge and the activity of practical reason places the world as morality, that is, objectivity and morality do not result from the materiality of a natural substance nor of the essence of a human substance, but they are

produced by the rational action of subjectivity. Every being is a being-positing and that is the reason why the philosophies of German Idealism are philosophies of action.

Schmitt's kinship with this heritage is evident. Let us highlight some of his theses: the definition of sovereignty as the absolute power of decision, that is, as an unconditioned action or an action not conditioned by the other spheres of existence; the statement that religious action precedes the Church (or the Church presupposes the religious because it is put in place by it), political action precedes the State (or the State presupposes the political because it is set by it), the decision precedes the norm (or the norm presupposes the decision that places it); the assertion that war is the *locus* par excellence of the manifestation of the political, not only because it is pure action but also because it explains the essence of the political, that is, the opposition between friend and enemy. These theses, which signal the desire for dematerialization and the primacy of action, lead to the idea that Church and State are not substantially different, but legally distinct institutions whose exemplarity stems from the way in which they operate with the idea and the practice of representation. These theses also explain Schmitt's criticisms of Kelsen's legal positivism, Weber's sociology of power and Marx's historical materialism, but also the statement that we live in the era of the decline of the State because the political was separated from it (or the predominance of the institutional and the normative over the action).

It is not our aim here to examine Carl Schmitt's thinking, but only to point out some of its aspects related to the link between theology and politics, because, according to him, Western politics has always been and is theological or mere secularization of religion, since all fruitful concepts in modern State theory are secularized theological concepts. And this is true not only because in their historical development they were transferred from theology to the theory of the State – the fact, for example, that the omnipotent God became an omnipotent legislator – but also because of their systematic structure, whose knowledge is necessary for a sociological analysis of these concepts.<sup>1</sup>

Since politics is secularized theology, there was a single historical moment in which this secularization took place perfectly: in the absolute monarchy, the glorious moment of European civilization that, after absolutism, only stopped because of the decay brought about by the French Revolution, which means the emergence of the republic and liberal democracy. With absolutism, the origin of the State became fully visible, as it is born of the pure will of the sovereign, of an absolute decision that is not based on reason, discussion or norm, but on the absolute power of the position of the State brought about by the will. Like God, the sovereign creates *ex nihilo* and has no obligation to be rational or just.

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<sup>1</sup> Schmitt 1988, p. 46. For the critics of these ideas see Blumenberg 1983.

Just as God is omnipotent to create the world, so the sovereign's will is omnipotent to create the State. Just as God is not chained by divine laws, so the sovereign, *legibus solutus*, is above the laws imposed by him. Just as God suspends his own laws and interferes in the universe by extraordinary means – the miracle – so, in times of danger, the sovereign's action is not retained by the laws, but responds to the exception with an exceptional act or with the reason of State: "the situation of exception has the same meaning for jurisprudence as the miracle for theology".<sup>2</sup> Demiurgy and exception therefore define sovereignty as a monopoly of decision: "The sovereign decides in the situation of exception".<sup>3</sup> And because absolutism was the reflection and manifestation of the cosmos – order and hierarchy, discipline and vitality – the perfect definition of what the State is realized in it, since in the strict sense of the term, the State, a historical phenomenon, is a mode of existence (a state) specific to a people, one that decides in exceptional moments, thus constituting, in relation to multiple imaginable *status*, whether individual or collective, the *Status* par excellence.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, for Schmitt, absolutism, by making explicit the essence of sovereignty and the State as an absolute decision, gives visibility to politics as an autonomous sphere, neither determined by knowledge nor by morality and religion nor even by law and economy. Each sphere of human existence is polarized by a constitutive dichotomy: good and evil, in ethics; the beautiful and the ugly, in aesthetics; profit and loss in the economy. The constitutive dichotomy of politics is the friend-enemy opposition: "the specific distinction of the politician, to which political acts and motives can be returned, is the discrimination of friend and enemy".<sup>5</sup> This distinction affirms the autonomy of the political because "it cannot be founded on any other opposition nor can it be reduced to any of them".<sup>6</sup> The autonomy of the political presupposes that its dichotomy should not be and cannot be defined according to the criteria of other dichotomies, i.e., friend and enemy cannot be thought of in ethical, aesthetic or economic terms. Politically, a friend is the one who shares our way of life, the enemy, the other, "the stranger", who threatens our way of life and our existence within it. According to this sense, the enemy, because political, is always a public enemy and only the sovereign or the State has the power to designate it as such.

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<sup>2</sup> Schmitt 1988, p. 46.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Schmitt 1992, p.57.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p.64

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

The distinction between friend and enemy expresses “the extreme degree of union and disunity, of association and dissociation”. An enemy is one with whom the conflict cannot be resolved by pre-established norms or by an impartial arbitrator and whose existence, being a danger to ours, requires war, that is, its neutralization or submission and, in an extreme case, his physical elimination. However, since true politics institutes a decision-making power over life and death, absolute power because it is unique and undivided, one who intends to share or divide the sovereign power will be an enemy and, thus, the enemy can also be internal or the other of our State, which must remove it, punish it, submit it and, in extreme cases, eliminate it. If it is necessary for the State to define the figure of the enemy, it is because it can only exist in a particular way and because moral, religious and economic antagonisms become political antagonisms when they have the strength to regroup men into friends and enemies. In this sense, the war of religions is a political event, as is the class struggle when it changes to a revolutionary form. In other words, the term politics does not designate a way of life that involves the various spheres of human existence or a specific activity, but only the degree of intensity of association and dissociation of human beings for economic, religious, moral, or other reasons for a proof of strength, with sovereignty deciding the conflict and restoring unity. Every war, that is, every situation of exception, depends, on the one hand, on the intensity of the antagonisms arising from other spheres of human existence and, on the other, on the determination of the enemy figure by the State. Its purpose is “the existential negation of the enemy”, a denial that does not necessarily have to mean extermination, it may mean submitting the other to our way of life (that is, colonization) and exterminating him only if this is not achieved.

Now, Schmitt puts us before an apparent paradox. In order to ensure the dematerialization and the autonomy of the political, thus refusing politics to be, in the Greek way, for example, a way of life and, in the contemporary way, a specific activity of professionals, Schmitt is obliged to affirm that political action is an event that depends on the intensity of conflicts arising from non-political spheres and that sovereignty is an action or the power to decide on the direction and on the end of the conflicts. What is the paradox? If politics is an event that depends on the intensity of antagonisms in other spheres of human existence, then the autonomy of the political is relative and the demiurgy of the sovereign is closer to the demiurge of Plato's *Timaeus*, who works on a given matter (in conflicts arising from other spheres), than to the God of biblical *Genesis*, which operates *ex nihilo*. Schmitt, however, manages to resolve the paradox: the emergence of politics, in each circumstance, by reconfiguring friends and enemies for a test of strength, is always a situation of exception over which the sovereign's absolute will acts, and, on the other hand, this exceptional reconfiguration indicates

that politics is a form of war. The famous adage states that politics is the war continued by other means, but Schmitt, by distinguishing between the political (the enemy-friend opposition) and the State (the standardized public institution) and between the political as sovereign action and public institutions as inert materiality, and by stating that the political emerges when social divisions are expressed by friend-enemy antagonism, it tells us, in short, that *there is no distinction between politics and war*. War, being an exceptional situation, defines sovereignty – or rather, without war there is no sovereignty and without sovereignty there is no politics inasmuch as only with sovereign there can be a determination of the figure of the enemy – and, since war is the maximum point of the friend-enemy tension, it is the most perfect sign of politics, given that this, after all, is the logic of force. Thus, it is no accident that, in agreement with De Maistre and Donoso Cortez, absolutism or imperial power as a secularized theocratic power seems to him to be the peak of politics, nor that French Revolution is considered the cause of its decay when “the idea of the modern rule of law imposes itself with deism, with a theology and metaphysics that reject the miracle and refuse the rupture produced by the laws of nature, a rupture contained in the notion of miracle and implying an exception due to direct intervention, exactly as they refuse the direct intervention of the sovereign in the existing legal order.”<sup>7</sup>

This quote, at the center of which is the criticism of the abandonment of the idea of the transcendence of power and its fundamental expression through exception, i.e., the miracle, synthesizes the Schmittian refusal of the Spinoza’s interpretation of politics and theology.

Let us follow what Spinoza writes in the preface to the *Theologico-Political Treaty (TTP)*, in the opening of which we read:

“If men could, in all circumstances, decide for the safest, or if Fortune were always favorable to them, they would never be victims of superstition. But, as they are often faced with such difficulties they do not know what decision they will make, and as the uncertain benefits of Fortune that they immoderately covet make them oscillate, most of the time, between hope and fear, they are always ready to believe in anything (...) They even think that God has an aversion to the wise and that his decrees are not inscribed in our minds, but in the entrails of animals, or that they are the crazy, the foolish, the birds, who by instinct or divine breath reveals them. To what extent does fear madden men! Fear is the cause that originates and fuels superstition, (...) men only allow themselves

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7 Schmitt 1988, p. 46.

to be dominated by superstition while they are afraid (...), finally, it is when States find themselves in greater difficulties that fortune-tellers have greater power over the commoners and are most feared by kings.”<sup>8</sup>

Fear is the cause that originates and fuels superstition and humans are only dominated by it while they are afraid. But where does fear itself come from?

If humans could have control over all the circumstances of their lives, says Spinoza, they would not feel at the mercy of the whims of Fortuna, that is, subjected to the imaginary order of the world as chance encounters between things, humans and events. Feeling at the mercy of Fortune because they do not have the mastery of the circumstances of their lives and are driven by the desire for goods that do not seem to depend on themselves, humans are naturally inhabited by two passions, fear and hope. They are afraid that evils will happen to them and goods will not happen to them, just as they are hopeful that goods will come to them and evils will not fall on their heads. Since these goods and evils, not seeming to depend on themselves, seem to depend entirely on Fortune or chance, and as they recognize that the things that happen to them are ephemeral, their fear and hope never cease, because in the same way that good or bad things came to them without knowing how or why, they can also disappear without knowing the reasons for their disappearance.

The genesis of superstition lies, therefore, in the experience of contingency. The imponderable relationship with a time whose course is ignored, in which the present does not seem to come in continuity with the past, and nothing, in it, seems to announce the future, simultaneously generates the perception of ephemeral and discontinuous time with the feeling of uncertainty and unpredictability of all things. Uncertainty and insecurity raise the desire to overcome them by finding signs of predictability for events, leading to the search for signs that allow us to predict the arrival of goods and ills; this search, in turn, generates credulity in omens and, finally, the search for omens, leads to the belief in supernatural powers that, inexplicably, send goods and ills to humans. From this belief in mysterious transcendent powers, religion will be born. In short, because they ignore the real causes of events and things, because they ignore the necessary order and connection of all things and events, as well as the real causes of their feelings and their actions, they imagine that everything depends on some omnipotent will that creates and governs everything according to designs unattainable by human reason. Hereby they abdicate reason as a capacity for knowledge of

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<sup>8</sup> Spinoza *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, ed. Gebhardt, Carl Winters Verlag, Heidelberg, 1925, T III, Praefatio, p. 5.

reality and expect religion not only to explain this, but also to dispel fear and increase hope.

But the preface of the TTP continues: if fear is the cause of superstition, three conclusions are necessary. The first is that everyone is naturally subject to it not because they would have a confused idea of divinity, but, on the contrary, they have it precisely because they are superstitious – superstition is not an effect but a cause of ignorance about divinity. The second is that superstition must be extremely variable and fickle, since the circumstances in which fear and hope vary, the reactions of each individual to the same circumstances vary, and the contents of what is feared and expected vary. The third is that superstition can only be maintained or endure longer if a stronger passion persists, such as hatred, anger and fraud. Humans easily fall into all kinds of superstitions. They hardly persist for a long time in one and the same. Now, says Spinoza, there is no more effective way to dominate men than to keep them in fear and hope, but there is also no more effective way to make them seditious and fickle than changing the causes of fear and hope. Therefore, those who aspire to exercise domination need to stabilize the causes, forms and contents of fear and hope. This stabilization is done through religion.

Officers of cults, lords of the morality of believers and rulers, authorized interpreters of divine revelations, and the priests seek to fix the fleeting forms and the uncertain contents of the images of goods and ills and the passions of fear and hope. This fixation of forms and content will be all the more effective the more believers believe that its source is the will of God Himself revealed to some men in the form of decrees, commandments and laws. In other words, the effectiveness in controlling superstition increases if the contents of fear and hope emerge as revelations of the will and power of a transcendent deity. This means that the revealed religions are more powerful and more stabilizing than the others. Religious power becomes even stronger if the different powers that govern the world are unified into a single omnipotent power – monotheism is a more powerful religion than polytheism. The strength of religion increases if believers are convinced that the only true god is theirs and that he has chosen them to send his will. In other words, a monotheistic religion is most potent when its faithful consider themselves elected by the true god, who promises them earthly goods, revenge against their enemies and salvation in another life, which will be eternal. And, finally, the strength of this religion is even greater if its believers believe that the god reveals himself, that is, he speaks to the faithful, telling them what their wills are – the monotheistic religion of the election of a people and the revealed god is the most powerful of all.

Now, the revealed divine will will have a much stronger power if the revelation is not something ordinary and available to everyone, but something mysterious addressed to some chosen ones – the prophets.



Thus, the core of the revealed monotheistic religion is prophecy, because from it comes the unity and stability that fix once and for all the contents of fear and hope. This fixation takes the form of divine commandments or laws, which determine both the liturgy, that is, ceremonies and cults, as well as the customs, habits, ways of life and conducts of the faithful. In a word, revelation determines the forms of human relationships with the divinity and with each other. On the other hand, prophecy is also the revelation of the divine will regarding the government of men: the divinity decrees the laws of social and political life and determines who should be the ruler, chosen by the divinity itself. In short, revealed or prophetic monotheistic religions found theocratic regimes in which the ruler does not represent his rulers but rather represents the power of the god, ruling by divine will.

However, even though the prophecies are enshrined in inviolable sacred writings – the revealed monotheistic religions we speak of here are the three “religions of the Book”, Judaism, Christianity and Islam – the fact that these writings are the source of theocratic power turns them into a permanent object of dispute and war. This dispute and this war take place around the interpretation of the sacred text, whether around those who have the right to interpret it, or around the content itself. It is in the dispute and war of interpretations that the figure of the theologian emerges. This means that theology is not a theoretical or speculative knowledge about the essence of God, the world and man, but a power to interpret the power of the god, enshrined in texts.

Theology is defined by the Jewish and Christian tradition as supernatural science, since its source is the divine revelation enshrined in the Sacred Scriptures. Spinoza considers that such a conception is a contradiction in terms (and a fraud). In fact, says Spinoza, philosophy is the knowledge of the essence and the power of God, that is, the rational knowledge of the idea of being absolutely infinite and of its necessary action; on the other hand, the Sacred Book does not offer (nor is its purpose to do so) a speculative rational knowledge of the essence and potency of the absolute being, but rather a very simple set of precepts for religious and moral life, which can be reduced to two: love God and the others (the precepts of justice and charity). In the sacred texts there are no speculative mysteries or philosophical knowledge about the essence and power of God, nature and men that can justify the existence of theology as a form of speculative knowledge, because a revelation is a knowledge through images and signs with which our imagination creates a figure of divinity with which we can relate by faith. In the case of the Judeo-Christian Bible, Tanach, called by Christians as the Old Testament, we are faced with the historical document of a determined people and their state, the Hebrew theocracy; the New Testament, for its part, is the historical account of the coming of a savior, of his life, his deeds, his death and his promises to those who follow him. In other words, the Old

Testament is a political-religious foundation while the New Testament is an ethical-religious foundation, with no political content, that is, without reference to the foundation of a State and its government. In other words, there is no scriptural basis for a *Christian State*.

Spinoza continues: since the sacred writings of religions do not address the intellect and conceptual knowledge of God, there is no theoretical basis in them for the emergence of theology understood as a rational or speculative interpretation of the being of God and divine revelations. That is why, appearing to give rational grounds to the images with which believers conceive of divinity and its relations with them, the theologian invokes the reason for, “after guaranteeing for correct reasons” his interpretation of what has been revealed, he finds “reasons for make reason uncertain”, fighting it and condemning it. The theologians, explains Spinoza, in chapter XV of the TTP, took care to discover how to extort from the Holy Books their own fictions and arbitrariness and therefore “do nothing with less scruple and greater temerity than the interpretation of the Scriptures” and the only thing that worries each one is to have the authority of his interpretation contested by others who dispute with him the power to interpret.

Theology, therefore, is a system of images with pretension to the concept in the scope of obtaining, on the one hand, the recognition of the theologian’s authority (and not of the intrinsic truth of his interpretation) and, on the other, the submission of those who listen to him, all the more so if it is achieved by inner consent. The theologian seeks to obtain the desire to obey and to serve. That is why *all theology is an exercise of power and a foundation for a specific type of politics, tyranny*. Useless for faith – because it is reduced to very simple contents and few precepts of justice and charity – dangerous to free reason – which operates according to an autonomous internal need – theology is harmful to political freedom because it precludes the labour of the social conflicts considering the sake of peace, security and citizens’ freedom. Nothing is more terrible for freedom and politics than political theology.

However, the stabilization of superstition through rites and doctrines may not be sufficient to ensure durability for political power. Indeed, the visibility inherent to politics seems to place sovereignty very close to other humans and within their reach, unlike religion, which, more distant because it would be closer to the god, seems to be heading towards invisibility. So we read in the preface of the TTP, those who know that “there is no way more efficient to dominate the crowd than superstition,” seek to deify the political and induce, “under the guise of piety, to love the kings as were gods or hate them as the scourge of mankind “. The sacralization of political power is the work of theology, which now holds the secrecies of the political. Captured by theological seduction, rulers adhere to the sacredness of political authority due to the ceremonial, the secrecy, the censorship laws, the possession of

armies and fortresses, and the use of imprisonment, torture, and death of the opposition, turned into enemies to be exterminated.

Therefore, born of fear, superstition gives birth to two new and powerful fears: in religion, one is afraid of the god (for, as it is read in the Holy Scriptures, “the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom”), and in politics, one is afraid of the ruler (because the “reason of State” hides the real reasons of power from citizens and reduces them to the condition of vassals) – but not only that. In an endless mirroring, the fear of the divine, invisible or what is visualized by the rites, creates in the religious imagination of the believers the fear of the theologian and, in this, the fear of heterodoxy and rivals. Fear of the human, under the effects of social and political division, creates in the political imagination of the dominated the fear of the governor and, in this, the fear of the governed. Thus, in order not to be subject to the vicissitudes of Fortune, immoderately craving goods that do not depend on them and fearing evils that do not seem to depend on them, humans, after all, accept to be at the mercy of powers whose form, content and action seem to them to bear security, as long as they are directly obeyed or their representatives are obeyed.

Religion rationalizes (in a psychoanalytic sense) fear and hope; submission to political power as the power of a secret sovereign will, situated above the individual wills of the governed, rationalizes the permitted and the prohibited. This double rationalization is most potent when religion is monotheistic, revealed and destined for a people who think they are elected by god. The potency of this political-religious rationalization is even greater if some experts or specialists claim the exclusive competence and the power to interpret the revelations (therefore the divine wills), deciding on the content of the good and the evil, the just and the unjust, the true and false, permitted and prohibited, possible and impossible, in addition to deciding who has the right to political power and the legal forms of civil obedience. This domination is religious and political – it is political theology.

Superstition delegates to religion and this one delegates to theology the delusional task of finding an imaginary unit, able to cover and reconcile a reality perceived as fragmented in space and time, made of multiple and contrary forces, a unit that appears to ensure the continuity of events and control over angry Nature, which pacifies angry governments, guarantees hopes and conjures terrors. This unity cannot, of course, belong to the same dimension as that of the fragmented and lacerated world, but it must transcend it, in order to keep the isolated and opposing parts cohesive. This cohesion can only be obtained by the extraordinary power of a will and a look capable of sweeping in a single stroke the totality of time, space, the visible and the invisible. Thereby, the fragmentation experienced with anxiety by imagination leads an imaginary unification also, whose household is the providential will of a divine ruler. Due to this power, which is one because it is transcendent

to the fragmentation of nature and the divisions of society, the course of events seems assured and the fate of each one safeguarded.

However, the safeguard is precarious. Because this power is imaginary, it remains unknown and surrounded by mysteries, the image of God becomes an incomprehensible amalgam, since the omnipotence of his will, the place where the intelligibility of his action would lodge, means, on the contrary, that he does everything he can as it sees fit and it is therefore contingent and arbitrary. Secrets are his reasons. Mysterious is his omniscience. Thus, in order to be seen as omnipotent and omniscient, divine power must be seen as unfathomable and illocalisable, duplicating the mystery of the world that had demanded it.

This image of the high powers or the power of the High seems to descend from heaven to earth. The same desire to submit to a single and sovereign power, because transcending the fragmentation of the conflicts that tear society and politics, produces among men a relationship that will lead, in the end, to submission to the mysterious power of the rulers. With the advent of the *arcana imperii* – the secrets of power or the “reason of state” – men, we read in the conclusion of the preface to the TTP, “fight for serfdom as if it were their salvation”. In reality, however, and Spinoza does not tire of repeating it, this representation has risen from earth to heaven – *politics is not religion or secularized theology; on the contrary, religion and theology are sacralized politics*.

Spinoza’s critique of theological-political power aims to untie the bond that holds the experience of contingency, the feeling of fear and the imaginary of transcendent power in a single fabric. To this end, Spinoza distinguishes between two ways of facing contingency or chance.

In one of them, since, being unable to dominate all the circumstances of our lives, we conclude that we have no power over some of them – this is living in fear of the uncertain future, in doubt and anguish, in insecurity, which gives rise to superstition, to the belief in the transcendence of divine power and the divinatory power of magicians and priests, in short, which gives rise to theological power and monarchical power. *Power born out of fear alone is always imagined as transcendent and separate from men (power of God), from believers (theological power) and from citizens (monarchical power)*.

There is, however, another way to face contingency. We now distinguish between what is completely subject to the power of external causes (or what is outside our power) and what is in our power under the circumstances. We direct our effort and our power towards the conservation of these circumstances and the expansion of their presence or, in other words, we seek to reinforce the present so that it is able to determine the future, in such a way that, thanks to us, circumstances receive stability or a kind of necessity. In this case, we move from hope

to security<sup>9</sup> and to preserve it we need to maintain the circumstances that allowed it. Now, the increase in circumstances in our power does not change the hope of security except when we establish the instruments of time stabilization, that is, political institutions that are and remain in our power. This means that the instituted political power is not separated from the citizens, but is immanent to the citizens, that is, it is the democratic politics. So, in TTP<sup>10</sup>, democracy is considered the most natural form of politics, and in the TP<sup>11</sup>, the superior form of politics, *absolutum imperium*, since power remains immanent to society or to the group of citizens that instituted it, realizing the natural desire to govern, because, “it is certain that each one wishes to govern instead of being governed”.<sup>12</sup> It is democracy that makes explicit the identity of the enemy, whom Spinoza designates with the term *privatus*, that is, the individual or group of individuals who, in the name of their private interests, give themselves the power to abolish or decree the laws and decide without the consent of all citizens.

Now, since the origin of political power is immanent to social actions, then the political subject is a collective subject (the *multitudo*), the civil law is the potency of the *multitudo*<sup>13</sup> and the constituents of the collective subject decide to act in common, but not to think in common, the theological-political power is three times violent: first, because it intends to deprive humans of the knowledge about the origin of their social actions and policies, placing them as the fulfillment of transcendent commandments of an incomprehensible or secret divine will, the foundation of the action of the ruler or of the “reason of State” as an absolute and exceptional decision; second, because the revealed divine laws, put as political or civil laws, prevent the exercise of freedom, since they regulate not only habits and customs, but also language and thought, seeking to dominate, in addition to bodies, spirits; third, because, insofar as it instrumentalizes religious belief to ensure consented obedience and make humans think it honorable to shed their blood and that of others to satisfy the ambition of a few, this power gives rise to voluntary servitude, a desire to serve those above to be served by those below – submission that is the desire for tyranny.

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9 Spinoza distinguishes between hope and security: the first refers to the uncertainty of the coming of a good or of preventing an evil from happening; the second refers to the certainty that good will happen and evil will not come.

10 TTP, op.cit., Chapter XVI. Spinoza describes the materiality of the emergence of social life through the community occupation of the soil and the equitable exchange of products, which lead to the institution of a political power that preserves this initial equality, therefore, to democracy.

11 Spinoza 1925, T.IV, chapter XI.

12 Ibid, 309.

13 “The right of the City is defined by the power of the multitude (*potentia multitudinis*) that is driven in some way by the same thought and this union of minds cannot be conceived if the City does not aim to accomplish what reason teaches all men that it is useful to wait”, Ibid Chapter III, p.

We will better assess the break with Schmitt when we understand that Spinoza's critique of theological-political power is aimed at understanding what monarchy is and its essential link with war, because it is the political regime that originates from the fear of war and is sustained thanks to this fear, as announced in the preface of the *Theological-Political* and developed in the *Political Treaty*. In other words, it is inevitable that, in thinking politics as war, Schmitt articulated political theology and absolute monarchy, articulation whose meaning is revealed by Spinoza's political analysis. Indeed, in Chapter VII of the *Political Treaty*, Spinoza writes: "if a king is often elected due to war because kings war better, this election is stupid, because to make war more happily one chooses to live in bondage during peace, and this admitting that let there be peace in a state where sovereign power has been transferred to one man simply because of the war inasmuch as in this one the boss has a value that serves everyone and appears best on that occasion."<sup>14</sup>

However, in chapter X, Spinoza takes up the genesis of the monarchy starting from a certain determination in the social experience which makes that "stupidity" mentioned in chapter VII to be something less stupid than we might suppose. Now we read:

"Those who are terrified by the enemy do not let yourselves be held back by any fear: throw yourselves in the water, rush into the fire to escape the opponent's irons. However well regulated the City may be, however excellent its institutions may be, in times of anguish for power, when everyone is possessed by a panic and a fear, when nothing else exists but the terror of the present, everyone is carried away by the dictated tendency out of fear, without worrying about the future or the laws, and all eyes are turned on the man whose victories were exhibited. Everyone places him above the law, by a disastrous decision they prolong their power and entrust him with public affairs".<sup>15</sup>

Political experience is determined by images of the social and the political. When these images are permeated by the fear of death and the loss of self, they produce a remedy that is a real poison: the need for a savior who is given much more than the immediate hope of salvation, because, to obtain it, the *multitudo* gives to someone the future right to oppression. The Schmittian praise of the absolute monarchy is opposed by Spinoza's conclusion:

"Experience seems to teach that, in the interests of peace and harmony, all power should belong to one. Indeed, no state has remained as long without any noticeable changes as that of the Turks, and in contrast, no city has been less stable than the popular or democratic

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p.307

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 357

cities, nor where so many seditions have occurred. But if peace has to be called servitude, barbarism and loneliness, there is nothing more regrettable for men than peace. (...) As we have already said, peace does not consist in the absence of war, but in the union of spirits, that is, in harmony. It is, therefore, servitude, not peace, that requires that all power be in the hands of one”.<sup>16</sup>

Translation by Diogo Faia Fagundes

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 298.



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# **Spinoza's Rationalist Materialism: A Contribution to the Critique of Contemporary Naturalism**

**Pascale Gillot**

**Abstract:** The article emphasizes the materialist virtue at the core of what is held to be Spinoza's integral rationalism : namely, an epistemological position which entails both the disqualification of a transcendental ego, and the refutation of empiricism. In Spinoza's view, reason is the name of a collective disposition, so that the rationalist program concerning the constitution of a human life "under the conduct of Reason" has decisive political consequences. The disqualification of a philosophy of finitude, as well as the constitution of a logical, non-solipsist subjectivity, together with an original, immanentist theorizing of anthropological specificity, makes Spinoza's philosophy a powerful conceptual antidote against the manifold manifestations of contemporary naturalism : that is, a form of continuism whose defenders are fascinated by what Spinoza called the fictions of imagination, as for instance the postulation that "trees do speak" (*arbores loqui*).

**Keywords:** rationalism, materialism, Spinoza, naturalism

The aim of this article is to underline the main trends that constitute a particular notion of materialism at stake in Spinoza's philosophy, which I shall call *rationalist materialism*. Rationalist materialism represents, in my view, an original, elaborated form of materialism, neither reductive nor physicalist, since it cannot be separated from radical rationalism, that is, a theory of rational knowledge disconnected from a knowing subject, and coupled with a theory of the intelligibility of the infinite.

It is grounded, I shall argue, upon the following axioms:

First, *the notion of thought without a subject* (following Althusser's terminology), directly implied by the "*veritas norma sui et falsi*" epistemological model (E II, Prop. 43, sc).<sup>1</sup> This model entails that the Subject of thinking is erased from Spinoza's theory of knowledge, as comes out from the celebrated critique of the Cartesian, metaphysical Ego.

Second, *the disqualification of a philosophy of finitude*, which is the ontological doublet of Spinoza's constant opposition to any form of empiricism. These are the immediate consequences of the *sub specie aeternitatis* inscription of the third kind of knowledge, which yields the disconcerting postulate of a partial independency of the mind with regard

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<sup>1</sup>Abbreviations used to quote the text of Spinoza's *Ethics*. E II, Prop. 43 Sc : Ethics, Part II, Proposition 43 Scholium. Definition: Def ; Axiom : Ax ; Proposition : Prop ; Corollary : Coroll ; Scholium : sc. Demonstration : Dem.

The *Treatise on the Emendation of the intellect* is abbreviated TEI, the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* is abbreviated TTP.

to the actual existence of the body (its existence in time) through the “*Amor Dei intellectualis*” dispositive.

Third, following from such a metaphysical and ethical dispositive (“*sentimus, experimurque nos aeternos esse*” (EV, Prop. 23, sc), the *unprecedented concept of a logical, subjected subjectivity*, referring, not to some constituent, transcendental Ego, but rather to a constituted subject within and throughout the rational norm of demonstration. Then arises the paradoxical, mathematical Self, as opposed to the model of an immediate and originary reflexivity, a Self whose desire gets orientated the knowledge of the infinite: “*Mentis oculi sunt ipsae demonstrations*”. (EV, Prop. 23, sc).

My general claim in this study is to shed a new light on the powerful ethical *and* political liberation that is involved in such a non-idealist, integral rationalism, in so far as the latter allows for the emergence of a collective intelligence, opposed to the solipsist figure of the Ego, or even to the notion of some individual, atomic ipseity. The scope of a “human liberty” at stake in the fifth part of the *Ethics*, is the collective developing of the *conatus intelligendi*, and the reconfiguration of affectivity toward the universal, *Amor Dei intellectualis*, the universal of reason conceived through an immanentist frame. Liberty defined as a common, collective life under the conduct of Reason (disconnected from any form of transcendence), is the necessary correlate of Spinoza’s rationalism, in which the representation of free life under the conduct of reason cannot be dissociated from the thesis that “nothing is more useful to man than man” (E IV, Prop. 18 sc), far from the antagonisms and concurrences between singular-orientated affects. In that respect, Spinoza should not be seen as the “philosopher of the affect”, even less as the “philosopher of the body”, but rather as this radical rationalist whose metaphysical and epistemological theory offer the strategic elements for a pungent critique of contemporary forms of naturalism and sensibilism, i.e., this philosophical trend that denies any distinction between thinking and sensibility and promotes a continuist insight about human condition and history.<sup>2</sup>

To put it in a terminology borrowed from A. Badiou, Spinoza, the intempestive Spinoza, is the philosopher whose intransigent praise for the liberatory power of truth, a demonstrative truth, gives us a precious help to eschew the multiple contemporary manifestations of the philosophy of finitude; a philosophy of finitude omnipresent today,

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<sup>2</sup>This sensiblist trend is so overwhelming today that it would be meaningless to attempt to give a complete panorama of its representatives. Let us simply remark that it comprehends a large theoretical rank of very different philosophers, from Peter Singer to Emmanuele Coccia, all of them obsessed with the denunciation of what they call after J. Derrida ‘metaphysical humanism’, and constantly attached to vilipend what would be the dreadful insight of Cartesian dualism.

which seems to yield political resignation, and the renunciation to the philosophical, human desire of truth, whose emancipatory power is yet at the heart of the *Ethica, ordine geometrico demonstrata*.

**I Spinoza's radical antipsychologism:  
Thought as a process without a subject, in the general  
framework of anti-empiricism.**

Let us start from the classical representation of Spinoza's anti-cartesianism, implied by the radical critique of egology propounded in the *Ethics*. The opposition between Spinoza and Descartes is a well-known one, in the French tradition of the philosophy of concept.

Jean Cavaillès, at the end of *Sur la logique et la théorie de la science*, had revendicated Spinoza's heritage, pointing out that his own, non-Husserlian theory of thought needed the developing of a "philosophy of the concept", as opposed to a "philosophy of consciousness".<sup>3</sup> As regards Althusser, whose philosophy was deeply rooted in this tradition of French epistemology (from Cavaillès to Bachelard and Canguilhem), he had stressed, from *Psychoanalysis and the Human Sciences* (1963-1964) up to *Essays in Self-Criticism* (1974), the materialist, i.e., anti-idealist virtue of the Spinozistic theory of truth, in so far as the latter conveyed both anti-idealism and anti-empiricism. Althusser had enlightened the famous theory of "*veritas norma sui et falsi*" by his own concept of "epistemological break". In Spinoza's view, the autonomy of the concatenation of adequate ideas, that "involve by themselves affirmation and negation" (E II, Prop. 48 and Prop. 49 sc) entailed, both the eviction of the Cartesian notion of a Subject of judgment, i. e. the subject of truth supposedly required for the discrimination between true ideas and false ideas, and the disqualification of any empiricist view about the origin of ideas.

As concerns the first point, which has been understood as the main, obvious opposition of Spinoza's epistemology against what would be the Cartesian philosophy of subject and representation, it is useful to remind the way Althusser had insisted upon the Spinozistic dissociation between knowledge and "representation": an internal representation which, as it is the case in the third *Meditation* of Descartes's *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, would reduce the ideas to images in the mind, and make depend their truth value on the jurisdiction of an Ego, a knowing subject. Focusing his attention on the striking comparative established in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (TEI §§ 30-32), between the process of knowledge and the technical production (the model of the hammer which is "always already given", just as the "idea vera" itself), Althusser thus wrote:

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<sup>3</sup> Cavaillès, Jean, *Sur la logique et la théorie de la science* [1947] re-ed. Paris, Vrin, 2008.

"In affirming that "what is true is the sign of itself and of what is false", Spinoza avoided any problematic which depended on a "*criterion of truth*". (...) Once he has set aside the (idealist) temptations of a theory of knowledge, Spinoza then says that "what is true" identifies itself, not as a Presence, but as a Product, in the double sense of the term "product" (*result* of the work of a process which "*discovers*" it), as it emerges in its own production".<sup>4</sup>

Particularly striking is, on that matter, Althusser's reading of the Spinozistic understanding of the "*idea vera*" (TEI, § 33: "indeed, we have a true idea", "*habemus enim ideam veram*"), a true idea which is disconnected from any idealist questioning about its very origin by virtue of its inscription in the infinite and necessary concatenation of adequate ideas, in the *De Intellectus Emendatione*, since "indeed, we have a true idea".<sup>5</sup>

The very notion of a process without subject would then have emerged in the context of the extraordinary refutation Spinoza had propounded of the Cartesian Ego, which had led to this radically new theorization of a rational knowledge without a knowing subject. In other words, Spinoza's immanentist theory of truth, which is reformulated in the *Ethics* with the "*veritas norma sui, et falsi*" model (E II, Prop. 43, sc), conceives the dividing line between true and false as a procedure taking place within the knowledge process itself, and not as an external opposition of error and truth resulting from the operations of a "subject of judgment". In that respect, Spinoza disqualifies in a crucial way the Cartesian subject, namely the "subject of truth".

Althusser, in *Psychoanalysis and the Human Sciences* (1962-1963), had already drawn the attention upon what he called "the criticism that Spinoza makes precisely of the Cartesian *cogito*, of this ego that appears at the center of the cogito", that is "Spinoza's abandonment of the subject of objectivity as the condition of possibility of any affirmation of truth". Such a criticism would have been absolutely strategic in the history of philosophy, for it implied a totally new theory of the mind, which would have been cancelled for centuries<sup>6</sup>. This revolutionary attack against Descartes, i.e. against the philosophical category of "cogito", disqualified in advance the "classical" idealism in philosophy and theory of knowledge. Knowledge is some kind of production, requiring no origin, no end, no subject, and the theory of science is independent from the notion of a transcendental Ego.

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4 Althusser 1976, p. 137.

5 See Althusser 1976, p. 115.

6 Althusser 2016, p. 79.

In that respect, Spinoza's heritage appears really central in the way the rationalist and formalist trend will oppose the legacy of (Husserlian) phenomenology in the field of French philosophy: an opposition of which the critique of Husserl's theory of science by Cavaillès is paradigmatic, as Knox Peden has clearly established.<sup>7</sup>

One must insist on the fact that this reception of Spinoza's theory of science in the field of French epistemology (from Cavaillès to Althusser), which leads to the portrait of Spinoza as the radically anti-Cartesian philosopher, is closely related to a general anti-empiricist perspective constantly asserted by Althusser, for example, in his theoretical program of reconstructing Marx's latent philosophy, the philosophy of *Capital*, such as it is developed in *Reading Capital* (1965). Indeed, radical anti-empiricism appears to be the other absolutely crucial consequence of Spinoza's claim about the very *reality* of ideas, their definition as *entia*, carrying their own truth value (affirmation and negation) in so far as they are inscribed in the infinite process, and are therefore irreducible to images or representations.

First, one must notice that when in *the Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (TEI §§ 31 and 32), Spinoza settles the immanent and intrinsic necessity of the process of knowledge against the trap of an infinite regression about the origin of knowledge and truth, he explicitly advocates what he calls the "native force of the intellect", using the vocabulary of "*innata instrumenta*" to express the immanent power of true ideas. Such a particular inneism, which departs from Descartes in so far as it is connected to the topic of the "spiritual automaton", is nevertheless the conceptual mark of a radical rationalism that proceeds from the logical distinction between *idea* and *ideatum*, between formal essence, i.e., the idea considered qua *cogitandi modus*, a mode of Thought, and objective essence, i.e., the object which is known through the idea, its referential property (see TEI, § 33). In the *Ethics*, this logical distinction is intertwined with the refutation of a pictural conception of thought: the *ideas* are defined, not as images, representations in the mind or mimetic reproductions of external objects, rather as *concepts*, *the concepts of Thought* (E II, Prop. 48 sc.). "*Non enim per ideas imagines, quales in fundo oculi, et, si placet, in medio cerebro formantur, sed Cogitationis conceptus intelligo*". Here, the disqualification of a philosophy of representation (cf. the distinction between "*cogitatio*" and "*pictura*"), appears to be a necessary correlate of the rationalist definition of truth as *adaequatio*, based upon the formal, intrinsic properties of the ideas, the ideas

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7 On this very topic of Spinoza's rationalism, and its heritage within French philosophy in the 20 century (the philosophy of the concept against the philosophy of consciousness), see Knox Peden's decisive book, *Spinoza contra Phenomenology. French Rationalism from Cavaillès to Deleuze* (cf. in particular ch. 3, "Spinoza Contra Descartes").



considered “*sine relatione ad objectum*”, independently from their relation to the object (E II, def. 4).

In the TIE, this anti-empiricist theory of truth (which warrants correspondence upon adequation, the intrinsic properties of true ideas), is asserted through the following, remarkable formula:

“*aliud est circulus, aliud idea circuli*”: other is the circle, other is the idea of the circle” (TEI, § 33). The entire sentence goes this way: “*Idea enim circuli non est aliquid, habens peripheriam et centrum, uti circulus, nec idea corporis est ipsum corpus; et cum sit quid diversum a suo ideato* »). The logical autonomy of the idea, as concept, the fact that “the idea of the circle is not something having a circumference and a center”, comes from the very reality of ideas, which allows for an intrinsic distinction between true and false ideas (TIE, § 69: “( ) il y a dans les idées vraies quelque chose de réel, par quoi les vraies se distinguent des fausses”. “*Unde sequitur, in ideis dari aliquid reale, per quod verae a falsis distinguuntur*”). This means that Spinoza’s emphasis upon the intrinsic criteria of the *idea adaequata*, at the heart of his theory of truth as “*norma sui et falsi*”, strategically involves the rationalist claim that the idea adaequata is a *reality (res)* per se, with its own logical efficiency, and is not an image or a representation “in the mind”, in clear opposition to Descartes’s internalism.

It should be noticed therefore that Spinoza’s externalism (ideas are not “in the mind”, for they are not mental images), namely the disqualification of a philosophy of representation, and its Cartesian-idealist version, is grounded upon an explicit duality between the idea, the concept in the element of thought, in the one hand, and the objects known through the concept, on the other hand.

As a matter of fact, this logical duality between concept and object, i.e. the logical autonomy of thought, which represents the kernel of Spinoza’s anti-empiricist, externalist move, also happens to be central in Althusser’s reconstruction of Marx’s philosophy, and would constitute the epistemological basis of historical materialism in *Capital*.

In *Reading Capital*, ch. IV, dedicated to “The object of *Capital*”, on the occasion of the examination of the “theory of scientific practice” involved in Marx’s *Introduction* (1857) to the *Contribution to the Critique of Classical political Economics*, Althusser unequivocally asserts the *distinction between thought and real*, as a central thesis of Marx’s “Discourse on the Method”. This thesis, together with the thesis of the primacy of the real, is constitutive of Marxist epistemology, opposed to speculative idealism and to empiricism as well.

Althusser thus precises the terms of the logical independency of thought, or knowledge process, i.e. “the materialist thesis of the specificity of thought and of the thought process, with respect to the real and the real process”. Such a rationalist-materialist epistemology (since the autonomy of thought is coupled with the primacy of the real, against

any form of correlationism), explicitly entails that “Thought about the real, the conception of the real, and all the operations of thought by which the real is thought and conceived, belong to the order of thought”.<sup>8</sup>

This latter characterization of the specificity of the “order of thought” is directly inscribed in the filiation of Spinoza's doctrine about the causal autonomy of the attribute of Thought, as it is established in the *Ethics* (E II, Prop. 1; E II, Prop. 7 sc), and as it was already directly asserted was already asserted in the TRE, when “the form of true thought” was defined as being independent from its “object” (TEI, § 71).

One could conclude that the epistemology of historical materialism in Althusser's reading of Marx revendicates Spinozistic premises, particularly as far as the distinction between “the object of knowledge” and “the real object” is concerned. This Spinozistic legacy at work in Althusser's reconsideration of Marxist theory of science, in return, puts a new light on what is at the very center of the peculiar type of materialism (the eviction of an idealist theory of knowledge founded upon the hypothesis of an ego, a thinking constituent ego) that would have been invented in the system of the *Ethics*. Namely, such a materialism is directly linked with a theory of thought, and knowledge process, which constitutes the deepest disqualification of empiricism, as appears from the decisive claim of the independence of “the object of knowledge” with regard to the “real object”. As a consequence, if Spinoza, with the insight according to which “the concept “dog” cannot bark”, in Althusser's reformulation, helps us to resist “empiricist temptation”<sup>9</sup> within the very field of historical materialism, one has to admit that the peculiar materialism at stake in Spinoza's philosophy derives its theoretical fecundity from rationalism, integral rationalism. Which could mean that this singular materialism, rationalist materialism, since it requires the logical duality between thought and real, formal essence and objective essence, and still more particularly between “cogitation” and “extension”, implies a form of paradoxical dualism, *concept dualism*. Even though, it must be added, Althusser himself never sustained such an interpretation of Spinozism in the terms of concept dualism.

## **II The difficult problem:**

### **concept dualism without substance dualism**

I shall move now in direction of a difficult point at the heart of early-modern philosophy, namely the over-determined concept of “dualism”, which contrives us to examine the complex relationship between Spinoza and Descartes (especially Descartes's rationalism).

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8 Althusser 2015, “The object of *Capital*”, ch. 3, p. 177.

9 Althusser 2015, “The object of *Capital*”, ch. 4, p. 192.

In general, I will defend the thesis that even though ontological dualism is of course totally cancelled from Spinoza's ontology, the case is quite different for concept dualism, for the latter results from the claim of an epistemological distinction between thought and extension which was already at the heart of Descartes' s re-elaboration of Galilean new science. In other words, I will sketch out in this section some elements that may erode the classical opposition between Descartes and Spinoza. The reason of this requalification of the Spinoza-Descartes relationship lies in the particular influence that Descartes's rationalism has played in Spinoza's refutation of empiricism. This general survey of the Spinoza-Descartes debate is not orientated towards an exegetic issue about the history of early-modern philosophy. It is rather conceived as serving a reflection about the contemporary issues at stake in Spinoza's rationalism, in so far as such a rationalism may help us to reactivate, in my view, a sharp conceptual distinction between thought and "sensitivity", without reactivating, one may say, the idealist version of a philosophy of subject (intended as the constituent subject, the transcendental Ego).

This conceptual distinction, which lies at the principle of the definition of the "*specificity of thought*" (according to Althusser's terminology), is obsessively denied or just forgotten by contemporary dominant naturalism. By naturalism, I understand this philosophical theory that postulates the ontological immersion of mankind in a so-called "nature", erases then the representation of any anthropological caesura, and thus also denies the epistemological specificity of human sciences (the social sciences) with regard to natural sciences. The naturalist overwhelming contemporary trend is then conducted to dissolve the very conditions of the humanization process (that is, to put it very briefly, language, conceptual thought, and the existence in an always-already given social order), obliterating the very specificity of the symbolic order. This sort of naturalism, that can also be called 'sensibilism'<sup>10</sup>, seems to constitute a renewing of the double myth of *homo oeconomicus* and *homo psychologicus*, under the contemporary figure of *homo biologicus*; as such, it may be considered as conveying reactionary postulates against which Spinoza's rationalist materialism represents a crucial antidote. To put it in other words, Spinoza may be a precious ally in the necessity today to struggle against the reactivation of the psychologist ideology that Althusser had already sharply criticized in his time, when he attacked the Condillacian model, that happened to claim a continuity between nature and culture, in the general framework of the sensualist theorizing of child development:<sup>11</sup> a psychologist

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Introduction, note 2.  
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<sup>11</sup> See Althusser 2015, 2 conference, pp. 50-60. Althusser's criticism is specially orientated against the Condillacian pedagogy of XVIIIth century, whose philosophical postulates, concerning the acqui-

ideology derived from empiricist premises, that govern more than ever the contemporary many-fold manifestations of evolutionism and continuism.

Let us precise right from the beginning that such a concept dualism, when referred to Spinoza, has a meaning which is exclusively epistemological, and must be understood in a critical, negative way.

Indeed, Spinoza's re-configuration of the concept of substance, in the first part of the *Ethics*, strategically implies the disconnection of the concept of substance from the concept of individual; which means that Spinoza's philosophy cannot leave place for any sort of substance dualism, by definition. André Pessel, in his recent remarkable book, *Dans l'Ethique de Spinoza*<sup>12</sup>, has demonstrated that Spinoza's substitution of the concept of power (*potentia*) to the classical concept of substance entails the developing of an ontology of the "integration to the infinite" (une "*intégration à l'infini*"), the integration of the "finite" to the infinite, through the original conceiving of the relationship between mode (*in alio esse*) and substance. The "realism of the infinite" should then be taken as the main feature of this ontology, which entails the constitution of plural types of infinite: from substance itself (since the concept of substance gets linked with a concept of the infinite rationally grasped, as it is shown in Letter 12), to the infinite attributes (the *infinita attributa*), and the infinite modes. The disqualification of the thesis of an ontological cesura between the finite and the infinite involves as its necessary theoretical correlate the eviction of any ontological dualism. Furthermore, substance being conceived as an infinite causal nexus, as some "*structural causality*", cannot be reduced, nor to expressive causality, nor to mechanical causality.<sup>13</sup> This point suggests that Spinoza's reform of the concept of causality, through the notion of a non-finalist *potentia*, which exhausts itself, without any remainder, in the efficient production of its effects, leads to a philosophy of immanence (the famous '*causa immanens, non vero transiens*', employed to define God's causality in E I, Prop. 18) devoid from any pantheism or vitalism.

In that respect, one must insist once more on the exclusive epistemological issue of what I call here concept dualism, i.e., the thesis of the reciprocal logical independence between the two attributes, Thought and Extension, whose logical duality, Spinoza argues against Descartes' s view, entails no sort of ontological duality, a duality between

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sition of language for instance, are the notion of the "individual" subject of needs, and the continuity nature-culture articulated upon a misleading "'biology-culture' vector" (p. 59). A schema which is precisely contested by modern linguistics and Lacan's theory of symbolic order praised by Althusser in *Psychoanalysis and the Human sciences*, as constituting the adequate theoretical basis for the rethinking of the specific scientificity human sciences.

12 Pessel 2018, especially ch. 3.

13 On this topic of structural causality, see Althusser 2015, and Balibar 2018 (on the "transindividual"). Althusser's concept of structural causality (borrowed to Spinoza and Lacan, and applied to Marx's theory) plays a central role in Pessel's reading of the *Ethics*.

substances, since the very concept of finite substances gets annihilated in the ontology of the *Ethics*, which operates a crucial linking between the concept of substance and the concept of infinite, in the context of a mathematization of the infinite that appears to take its start in Spinoza's philosophy (before its achievement in Leibniz's work).

Hence, *concept dualism* strictly intended in this strict epistemological frame admits no inscription in the field of ontology, against Descartes's deduction of a "real distinction" between substances, namely between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, from the epistemic modern claim of the mutual logical independence between thought and extension. But it is particularly striking to notice that Spinoza's explicit refutation of Cartesian substance dualism is built upon theoretical premises (the *conceptual duality* between the two attributes, thought and extension) which are precisely Cartesian premises.

Thus goes for example the beginning of E I, Prop. 10 sc:

*"Ex his apparet, quod, quamvis duo attributa realiter distincta concipiuntur, hoc est, unum sine opus alterius, non possumus tamen inde concludere, ipsa duo entia, sive duas diversas substantias constituere"*. "Although two attributes are conceived as really distinct, that is, one without the help of the other, we cannot yet conclude from this distinction that they constitute two beings, or two different substances".<sup>14</sup>

The unique function of concept dualism then ("*duo attributa realiter distincta concipiuntur*", Spinoza writes) appears to lie in the radical critique of empiricism that directly follows from such a paradoxical dualism: that is, a dualism without an ontological correlate, since Spinoza propounds a crucial reformulation of the concept of substance, defined as "*substantia unica et infinita*", which gets linked to the concept of the infinite.

We are confronted, at that point, to the complexity and ambivalence of Spinoza's relationship to Descartes's philosophy, singularly to Descartes's rationalism.

Indeed, to the "Spinoza contra Descartes" model, which has been codified in French philosophy to account for the antagonism between rationalism (philosophy of the concept) on the one hand and phenomenology on the other hand,<sup>15</sup> we are led to substitute the more

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<sup>14</sup> I translate from the Latin original text. From now on, it will be the case for all the quotations of Spinoza's texts.

<sup>15</sup> On the constitution of this « Spinoza contra Descartes » model in French philosophy, particularly at stake in the "Alquié-Gueroult" quarrel, cf. the accurate investigation by Knox Peden, 2014, ch. 2, pp. 65-93.

disconcerting model of “Spinoza with and against Descartes”. To put it briefly, our general insight would be that Spinoza’s rationalism is borrowed from Descartes’s, that it gets maximized, extended to the paradoxical point of an infinite knowledge : extended to the point that it gives place to the materialist view about a knowledge without a subject, and gets eventually redirected against Descartes himself, that is against the Cartesian ego, and against substance dualism, but also against Descartes’ limitations in the field of rational knowledge (cf. the topic of *the infinite* and the possibility of its rational, mathematical grasp).

Far from the dominant reading of a frontal antagonism Spinoza-Descartes, it should then be admitted that, even though the *cogito* thesis and substance dualism are discarded from Spinoza’s ontology and epistemology, it shouldn’t be inferred that the latter would lead to some metaphysical ‘monism’, neither to some sort of eliminativism as regards the very concept of subject.

As regards the *textual occurrences of concept dualism in Spinoza’s work*, apart from the remarkable scholium of E 1 Prop. 10 just quoted, we may mention, in the *Ethics*, the refutation of the definition of ideas in term of physical images (*picturae in tabula*, see E II, Prop. 43 sc, and E II, Prop. 49 sc) implied by their characterization as concepts (E II, Def. 3). We may refer as well (among other passages) to the Preface of EV, in which the sharp dismissal of Descartes’s solution to the Mind-Body problem, namely psycho-physical interactionism and the claim of a cerebral inscription of the soul, appears to be built upon the revendication of this logical distinction between thought and extension, and consequently between mind and body. Such a logical distinction was already at the core of Spinoza’s so-called “parallelism” (consisting fundamentally in the refusal of any causal interference between the two attributes, Thought and Extension, see E II, Prop. 7 sc and E III Prop. 2). As Spinoza reminds at the end of the Preface of EV, in order to sustain his philosophical indignation concerning Descartes’ “occult hypothesis” about voluntary movement and the neuro-psychological postulate of the pineal gland, “whereas there is no relationship between will and movement, there is no comparison either between the power or forces of the Mind, and the power or forces of the Body”.

In the end, it seems necessary to recall, standing at the core of Spinoza’s *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (§ 33 : “*Idea enim circuli non est aliquid, habens peripheriam et centrum, uti circulus, nec idea corporis est ipsum corpus ; et cum sit quid diversum a suo ideato* »), the fundamental rationalist distinction between the *idea* (considered through its formal essence, as *cogitandi modus*), and its *ideatum*, its object (the objective essence), a distinction grounding the logical autonomy of the knowledge process. It is quite remarkable that, on this very occasion, Spinoza draws the thesis of the *conceptual* distinction between mind and body (“*nec idea corporis est ipsum corpus*”, “nor is the



idea the body itself”), as a consequence of his rationalist epistemology: “*other is the circle, other is the idea of the circle*”, other is the body, other is the idea of the body (i.e. the mind, the *mens humana*), even though no form of ontological duality between mind and body, that is between the idea and the object of this idea, might be admitted in Spinoza’s view. In a quite puzzling way, Spinoza, on the topic of mind-body relationship, sustains the claim that they *are both one* (they are one and the same individual, E II, Prop. 21 sc) *and two* (a duality derived from the logical duality between formal essence and objective essence). This latter claim happens to be, quite significantly, very far from any supposed “monist” insight which has been so often attributed to Spinoza’s ontology. In my view, the effective materialist charge of Spinoza’s philosophy does not consist in this so-called “monism”, but rather, much more strategically, in the re-formulation of the theory of thought and knowledge emancipated from correlationism (the subject-object dispositive), as well as from empiricism, and from the idealist notion of a transcendental Ego.

As a consequence, it may appear from this study of Spinoza’s epistemology that the real opposition between Spinoza and Descartes lies, not in the refutation (not quite univocal) of dualism, nor in the so-called rehabilitation of affectivity, nor in a “philosophy of affect”, nor in a “philosophy of body” resulting from a doubtful monist perspective. Rather, and more important, it first consists in the refutation of a “subject of knowledge”, a “subject of truth”, together with the dismissal of empiricism.

Yet, there is a place left for some sort of paradoxical reflexivity: a constituted, logical subject, as appears from the reading of the fifth part of the *Ethics*, starting from EV, Prop. 23, with the theorizing of an infinite rational knowledge *sub specie aeternitatis*, under the conceptual aspect of eternity, which entails the partial eternity of the *mens*.

### **III Sub specie aeternitatis: the philosophical disqualification of finitude, the paradoxical notion of a logical subjectivity and the constitution of humanity in the third kind of knowledge.**

“*Sentimus experimurque nos aeternos esse*”: “we feel and experience that we are eternal”.

This celebrated formula in EV Prop. 23 scholium finds its location within the theoretical context of Spinoza’s definition of the third kind of knowledge, the *scientia intuitiva*. The “intuitive science”, coupled with the extraordinary axiom according to which “*demonstrations are the mind’s eyes*”,<sup>16</sup> does not engage any return to some nebulous mysticism, that would involve some supra-rational, or irrational, type of thought. Rather, the term “intuitive” here at stake happens to refer to the particular status

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16 EV, Prop. 23 sc : *Mentis enim oculi, quibus res videt, observatque, sunt ipsae demonstrationes*”.



of rational, mathematized knowledge when it becomes a knowledge of the infinite, that is of the infinite causal order, *connexio rerum*. The cognitive model remains a *deductive* one (from the knowledge of the adequate idea of the formal essence of God's attributes to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things, as it is defined in E II Prop. 40, sc 2), which corresponds to the intellectual grasping of the integration of the finite within the infinite. This point is made particularly clear with the terminological recourse to the "demonstrations" in order to qualify the thought procedures in the third kind of knowledge. The demonstrative procedures are extended to the knowing of the causal structures that constitute the infinite, and they are identified with 'the mind's eyes'. This point has to be related, it may seem, to the ontological correlate of this supreme type of knowledge, the *sub specie aeternitatis* framework. The "intuitive" grasping of demonstrations, of deductive infinite concatenations, would refer to the decisive emancipation of thought and knowledge with regard to time and even duration. Time, in Spinoza's ontology, is the correlate of imagination. The emancipation, even fragmentary, from the imaginary dimension of time is thus allowed by the developing of the maximized rational knowledge that constitutes the *scientia intuitiva*, the access to the infinite causal nexus "*uno intuitu*", that is in the element of instantaneity, or "eternity", to be distinguished from immortality or sempiternity.<sup>17</sup> Eternity, in that respect, is necessarily correlated to rational, logical activity, even though, in Spinoza's terms, it may concern only a "part" of the mind, and not the mind considered as an individual.

*Important consequences* follow from this rationalist account of supreme knowledge, conceived through the model of mathematical activity, since it is the nature of reason to "contemplate things" as necessary, i.e., as eternal, in Spinoza's conceptual dispositive, eternity being the other name of necessity (E II, Prop. 44 and Coroll).

First, this original, non-reductive materialism entails a *decisive critique of the philosophical category of finitude*.

I shall not develop this crucial point, at stake in the previously mentioned formula, "*demonstrations are the mind's eyes*", in EV, Prop. 23, Scholium, a formula which is juxtaposed, in this very Scholium, with another striking statement "*sentimus, experimurque, nos aeternos esse*", "We feel and experience that we are eternal". I will simply suggest in the framework of this study that the epistemic dispositive of the third kind of knowledge, based upon the "ontology of the infinite" mentioned in the first section, operates a crucial intertwining between rational activity, and the question of existence, and even affectivity. An intertwining which implies a re-configuration of desire, whose object is now the infinite considered through its structural intelligibility: such a re-configuration is the very issue of the "*Amor Dei intellectualis*" in E V. This reconfiguration which allows

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17 On this point and this important conceptual distinction, See Moreau 1994.

for the existential meaning of the *scientia intuitiva* might be understood as the ultimate consecution of what had been posited as an ethical axiom, in the Appendix of the first part of the *Ethics*, when it was asserted that men would have remained for ever under the servitude of the illusions of imagination, if it had not been for the very factuality of “mathematics” (mathesis), that alone shows the way of an integrally rationalist, immanent *salvation* : an exceptional exit from the tyranny of imagination, and its cohort of alienating devices, such as ignorance and death. If the work of rationality may be developed and extended to its maximal point, i.e. the deductive knowledge of the third kind, if, consequently, “a free man does not think about death” (see E IV, Prop. 67 sc), it is the whole rank of manifestations of human finitude that might be then reduced by the immanent virtue of mathematics, in so far as mathematics shows in itself “the norm of truth”. This ethical wager, which annihilates the very postulates of a philosophy of finitude, and shows a collective way of emancipation, cannot be separated from radical rationalism.

The *sub specie aeternitatis*, logical existence, in the third kind of knowledge, entails that the existence in time, relative to the actual existence of the body within the context of duration (“*durante corpore*”, EV, Prop. 23 dem) is not a necessary horizon. This latter horizon can be overstepped, as far as the human mind is considered through its essential determination, namely the effort to understand rationally, *conatus intelligendi*, is concerned. We are therefore confronted to the postulation of the infinite of thought, by which the *mens humana* may develop its specific intellective power, beyond the temporal, finite condition of mortality, ignorance and intellectual limitation. This movement beyond finitude and the alienation devices of the imaginary, in the very course of infinite “demonstrations”, which means an obstinate labour of Reason (very far from the Revelation model) may lead the *mind*, the *mens humana*, to some sort of (even partial) eternity, *sub specie aeternitatis* (EV, Prop. 23 sc, EV, Prop. 29, dem and sc). The apparent paradox here at stake is that such an eternity is said to be “partial”, since Spinoza establishes a ratio of direct proportionality between the series of adequate ideas, and the degree of eternity in the mind – which, of course, underlines the theoretical gap between this logical eternity of the mind, and the religious schema of an individual immortality of the soul.

One could ask what is left, then, of the mind, when it is re-configured in the third kind of knowledge as this paradoxical and partial eternal “self”, since it is made mention of the “*part*” of the mind (“*ejus pars*”) which remains, proportionated to its degree of activity in the adequate knowledge.<sup>18</sup> A self whose constructed reflexivity needs the

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18 EV, Prop. 38 Dem : “(...) *quo igitur Mens plures res cognoscit secundo, et tertio cognitionis genere, eo major ejus pars remanet (...)*”. “The more the Mind knows things by the second and the third kind of knowledge, the more extended is the part of it that remains”.

detour by the knowledge of God, the infinite substance, and requires the “consciousness” of its integration to the infinite intellect of God. This point sketches out the strange features of a “subjectivity” which is subjected to the infinite, according to the general ontology of the integration of the finite within the infinite: a subjectivity therefore irreducible to the idealist figure of an auto-sufficient, constituent knowledge. This original notion of the logical self, who has lost the features of its originary individuation, since it is no more related to the actual existence in time of its “object”, the body (it remains related only to the *eternal essence* of the body), constitutes a particular difficult claim among the many difficult claims that constitute the fifth part of the *Ethics*, and this study can offer no positive resolution of such a problem.

Nevertheless, it is possible to infer some negative lessons of such a difficult and yet decisive conceptual redefinition of the mind in the *sub specie aeternitatis* theory. In a few words, one may sustain the hypothesis that such a disconcerting definition of the mind as “a part of” and not as an “I”, opens the way to the conception of a logical subjectivation, in the very context of the Spinozistic move against Cartesian egology.<sup>19</sup> The Self that happens to be constituted through the mathematical procedures of demonstrations, “*conscius sui et Dei*” (E V, Prop. 31 sc), this logical self, is independent from the criteria of personal, psychological identity. Yet in Spinoza’s text, it is effectively alluded to this “subject effect” induced by the very work, through the *mens*, of infinite rational procedures. This could leave place, not to a mere cancellation of the subject question, that is, not to eliminativism about the subject, but to some sort of integrative, non-individualistic understanding of the subjectivation process (the *conscius sui et Dei* process immanent to the third kind of knowledge), at the opposite of the substantial Ego of the *cogito*.

In that respect, it could be claimed in the last instance that, far from erasing any notion of “subject” in general, Spinoza’s philosophy, thanks to its rationalist inscription, provides the theoretical elements for an original conceptualization of subjectivity, intended through the very subordination of the *mens* to the logical procedures of demonstrations. In other words, the last part of the *Ethics* would propound an insight on subjectivity, a logical subjectivity, devoid of any debt to Cartesian idealism (the constituent Ego), and, *a fortiori*, extraneous to the ulterior line of phenomenology.

The geometrical Self, constituted by its subjection to truth, happens to be a fundamental issue of the anti-solipist rationalism developed in the *Ethics*. One could even make the conjecture that what Alain Badiou in *Vérité et sujet* calls the “radical reformulation of the category of subject” in the framework of a geometrical materialism built upon the concept of “*mathème*”, i. e., a non-reductionist materialism which assigns the

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<sup>19</sup> On that topic, See Pessel, 2018, ch. 4, p. 75.

“subject effect” to a cause which is “the mathematization of the thinking of being”<sup>20</sup>, recognizes Spinozistic premises.

Be that as it may, it is at least possible to argue from this brief reading of *Ethics* V that Spinoza's view on the *scientia intuitiva* does not exactly fit with the picture Althusser had drawn of Spinoza as the precursor of the “process without a subject” theory, whose theory of thought and knowledge would provide in advance the unequivocal rejection of the concept of subject.

As we have just seen, the consequence of the logical “subject effect” theory in Spinoza's system is the refutation of any solipsist defining of the self. Against the idealist notion of the “unity of the subject”, it appears to lead the unprecedented theorizing of an integrated *mens*, a collective “subject effect”, built upon the concept of “part” and of construction by parts. The claim that the largest *part* of the mind may become eternal makes conceivable the anthropological and political hypothesis of a collective construction (by integration) of a common *mens*, and by extension to the very construction of mankind through the procedures of free Reason<sup>21</sup>.

The political issues of the *potentia rationis* (the power of reason) defined as the essence of humanity, from ch. 4 of *Ethics* IV till the last pages in *Ethics* V, are numerous and determinant. They draw the lines of the constitution-production of collective intelligence, which also means the constitution-construction of humanity through the life under the conduct of Reason, since the life under Reason happens to be a collective life.<sup>22</sup>

This *collective* dimension of the constitution of a “human nature” in the field of knowledge, initially postulated in the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (§13), finds its crucial echo in the political (anti-Hobbesian) claim that life under a democratic State is aimed, not at domination, but at liberty understood as the *common* use of free Reason (*Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, ch. 16-20). It is also at stake in the decisive concept of the “*convenientia*” between humans (a unique body, a unique *mens*): a convenance that can be constituted only through the immanent elaboration of a rational life (E IV, Prop. 18 sc).

Such an understanding of the constitution of a common rational life, a constitution directly related to the political and institutional imperative of *education*, may serve, in the last instance, a renewed, non-hierarchical conception of the anthropological distinction, the latter being understood as a constituted one, within the immanent process of collective reason, of the common *conatus intelligendi*. If humanity, according to Spinoza's

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20 Cf. Badiou 1988, p. 252.

21 On this point, see Again Pessel, 2018, ch. 5, pp. 67-89.

22 See Antonio Negri, who correlates what he defines the materialist metaphysics of Spinoza, a “metaphysics of productive force”, to the constituent immanent power (*potentia*) of the multitude. Negri 1981.

philosophy of immanence, does not constitute per se “an empire within an empire”, it finds the means of its own construction and liberation from the servitude of the imaginary in the pursuit of its utility. Now utility, as regards humans, happens to be nothing else but a common life ‘under the own empire of Reason’. A rationalist content is then given to the statement: “nothing is more useful to man than man”, since the latter is said to be “the man led by reason”, according to E IV, ch. 9.

The liberation of humanity with regard to the numerous forms of servitude anchored in the imagination appears to be grounded upon what would be a politic of collective rational life; the “convenance”, according to E IV Prop. 18 sc, concerns the humans who pursue their own utility under the direction of reason, “*homines, qui ex ductu rationis suum utile quaerunt*”.

To conclude this study, we are allowed to see in Spinoza the philosopher of the “*potentia rationis*”, seen as a collective reason, rather than a philosopher of affectivity or body primacy. The analysis here propounded concerning concept dualism, antipsychologism, the critique of empiricism and the *sub specie aeternitatis* science, has led us to consider that Spinoza's main contribution to a contemporary materialist view in the field of philosophy does not consist in an insight on affectivity that could be inscribed in the tradition of a reflexion upon the theoretical primacy of “the body”, intended as “*le corps propre*” (the “lived body”). As though Spinoza's philosophy could be seen as some anticipation of an “a-subjective phenomenology” which would attempt to erase any form of “Cartesian” dualism, the way for example Merleau-Ponty tried to do. As a matter of fact, Spinoza's insistence upon the liberatory power of “demonstrations”, mathematics and *dictamina rationis* is hardly compatible with the philosophical tradition of phenomenology.

Furthermore, as regards the contemporary issues at stake in what we hold to be Spinoza's rationalist philosophy of immanence, we find, against the overwhelming tendency to continuism and evolutionism today, a remarkable and very precious defence of the anthropological caesura: a conceptual one, that is, emancipated from substance dualism and from a hierarchic conception of the specificity of humanity. If humanity does not constitute “an empire in an empire”, it must be yet seen as taken into the process of its own, political construction and *production*. A political production indissociable from a humanization process which corresponds to the very immanent production of rational, mathematized knowledge.

The philosophical lesson of this Spinozistic conception of anthropological cesura eventually reduces to the rank of fantasmatic products of imagination, and ‘vague experience’, the representations of what could be called “antispecism” ante litteram. Indeed, in his *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (§ 58), Spinoza had underlined the fictitious dimension of the representation of “speaking trees” (“*arbores loqui*”) which has nowadays infiltrated a large part of “sensibilist”

philosophy. But to imagine that trees do speak is in reality nothing else than being subjected to this form of superstition which postulates that nature is driven in the same delirium as men living under the conduct of imagination:

*"Sed, uti diximus, quo minus homines norunt Naturam, eo facilius multa possunt fingere; veluti, arbores loqui, homines in momento mutari in lapides, in fontes, apparere in speculis spectra, nihil fieri aliquid, etiam Deos in bestias et homines mutari, ac infinita ejus generis alia".*

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# **Imaginary Projections. Spinoza between Borges, Péron, and Freud**

**Mariana Gainza**

**Abstract:** Academics and researchers, but also musicians, poets, writers, politicians, activists, and people of a large variety of inscriptions and origins have expressed a strange love for Spinoza. Borges and Perón, a couple of famous enemies, are part of this universal current, that connect heterogenous historical modes of imagination. If a certain kind of *unconscious* takes part of the actualization of Spinoza over times, we have to think also in Freud, who was not alien to this Spinozian affinity.

**Keywords:** Spinoza - Materialism of the imaginary - Borges - Perón - Freud

## I.

Everybody loves Spinoza, says Slavoj Žižek. “One of the unwritten rules of today’s academia from France to the US is the injunction to love Spinoza. Everyone loves him, from the Althusserian strict ‘scientific materialists’ to Deleuzean schizo-anarchists, from rationalist critics of religion to the partisans of liberal freedoms and tolerances, not to mention feminists...”<sup>1</sup> Žižek’s irony takes note of something that does indeed happens; and it should be considered even more extensively, since this love for Spinoza is not restricted to the academic world, but appears mostly in spaces outside the sway of its fashions. Musicians, poets, writers, activists, militants and people of a large variety of inscriptions and origins have expressed over time this preference, which seems to recall an ancient love. In Argentina, we are not strangers to this universal love: Spinoza is part of the heterogeneous currents of national thought. To such an extent that even Borges and Perón spoke of Spinoza. Both, the great politician, leader of the Argentine working masses, and the great liberal writer, known not only for his remarkable literature but also for his anti-Peronism, pronounced significant words about Spinoza.

In a 1985 conference, Borges describes his relationship with Spinoza’s philosophy in a suggestive way. The navigator in a Conrad novel glimpses something from the bow of his boat: a shadow, a clearness at the ends of the horizon. That opaque line he sees is the coast of Africa, and so beyond it

there are fevers, empires, ruins, the Sahara, the great rivers explored by Stanley, Livingstone, and then palm trees, and what remains of Carthage, erased by Rome with fire and salt. And then the history of the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Zulus, the Bantus, and also the slave buyers, and ruins, and pyramids. In other words, a vast world. Of jungles, of leopards, of birds.<sup>2</sup>

.....  
<sup>1</sup> Žižek, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Borges, 1985 (all quotations from Borges come from this lecture).

Borges says that something similar happens to him with Spinoza. "I have spent my life exploring Spinoza and, nevertheless, what can I say about him?: I have glimpsed something, and I know that what is glimpsed is vast". Faced with this vastness (that of a world made of infinite worlds) barely glimpsed from an irreducible foreignness, one can only confess a "dazzled ignorance". Along with the impression that there is "something not only infinite but essential", which "somehow belongs to me" and "I can feel, mysterious as music", although "I could not explain it to others". That which can be felt but cannot be explained, is what opens the game of words and images, pouring the full weight of strangeness into the literary construction. For a writer like Borges, who considers philosophy and theology to be "the most extravagant and most admirable forms of fantastic literature", the relationship with Spinoza is deliciously elaborated between love and betrayal.

Between love ("so many centuries later, here we are, at the edge of a continent that [Spinoza] practically ignored, thinking about him, trying to talk about him, all of us missing him. And, curiously, loving him, which is the most important thing") and betrayal, because Borges betrays – in philosophical terms – Spinoza, in every step he takes to describe his philosophy, broadly understood as the philosophy of someone who spent his life *imagining God* (a God who, in turn, "imagines even the tiniest detail of our lives"). But this was exactly Spinoza's critique of tradition target. Philosophers *imagined* the infinite entity, when instead, it was a matter of conceiving it (since the absolutely infinite, God, cannot be imagined, only understood). Borges betrays Spinoza by transforming the attributes of infinite substance (extension and thought) into *space* and *time*; by dissolving, besides, space into time; by converting eternity into immortality. He betrays Spinoza not only because he neglects the critical and polemical sense that nests at the heart of his philosophy, but because he gives that heart a precise stab, by presenting Spinoza (with the greatest love) as the thinker of everything he fought against. And that is the marvelous thing about Borges' reading. He turns *imagination* into the true substance of every existing thing: the world, God, men, Spinoza, Borges himself. So he is strictly faithful to the philosophy of Spinoza, who indeed thought about everything he fought against. Borges elaborates his fictions under the modalities of *time*, *measure* and *number*, the imaginary operation modes par excellence, according to Spinoza: imagination with its rational attire. Only from love is it possible to carry out a betrayal of this magnitude, internal to the betrayed object itself (as a case that he himself contemplates), and endowed with the strength to suck him into an external and strange space: towards the Borgesian world, where Spinoza becomes one among many others, captive in the middle of labyrinths, mirrors, and paradoxes about time and the infinite.

## II.

At the antipodes of Borges, Perón. But Spinoza also appears in the lecture entitled “The Organised Community”, read by the former president at the closure of the First National Congress of Philosophy, in 1949. Beginning with a greeting to the visiting philosophers (“I wish, gentlemen, that by setting foot on this land you have felt a bit Argentinean. For the Argentine heart, in our land, no one is a foreigner”<sup>3</sup>), the text goes – with a classic totalizing pretension – through the themes of the individual, society, community, values, justice, peace, order, freedom, democracy, and also the more abstract ones, relating to God, spirit and matter, body and soul, salvation and happiness. Stressing these themes from the statesman’s concrete political interest<sup>4</sup>, the text aims to set the doctrinal foundations of a movement which, facing the post-war world, affirms a “third position”; and inward, it upholds the will to solve all conflicts and contradictions, in what the “democratic thought of the future” conceives as a new community. A community capable of transcending both the regime of economic interests founded on a negative idea of individual freedom, as well as the idolatry and mystification of the state, which condemns the individual to a “mute and fearful presence”. Perón’s lecture concludes by quoting the last words of the *Ethics*:

This community which pursues spiritual and material goals, which tends to improve itself, which aspires to be better and be fairer, to be kinder and be happier, in which the individual can fulfill himself and realise it simultaneously, will welcome the future man with the noble conviction of Spinoza: “We feel, we experience that we are eternal”.<sup>5</sup>

This quotation at the very end of the speech produces an effect of estrangement. The enigmatic force of the Spinozian sentence on the experience of eternity is projected over Perón’s speech, over the Peronist doctrine, over the idea of community, and its content of promise and frustration. Borges’ interest in the same philosopher and the same unresolved enigma evoked by the president he loathes also contributes to this estrangement.

David Viñas, a major figure in twentieth-century Argentine left-wing literary criticism, downplayed the well-known differences between Borges

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3 Perón, 2006, p. 5.

4 “I would never have the pretension of doing pure philosophy in front of the masters of the world in such a scientific discipline. But what I have to affirm, is to be found in the Republic fully realised. The difficulty for the responsible statesman consists in the fact that he is obliged to realise what he affirms”. Perón, 2006, p. 5.

5 Perón, 2006, p. 46.

and Perón, pointing out what they have in common: a shared conservatism<sup>6</sup>. The same exclusion of history, due to “the denial of class struggle in Perón” and “an analgesic literature in Borges”; the same “evacuation of the suffering and drama inherent to daily life”, due to Borges’ opposition to tragedy, and the “need to erase everything that implies questioning” in Perón. According to Viñas, both establish a vertical space that “excludes any horizontal dimension: incapable of making a community respect itself, even after having seen its own miseries”. A historical kinship in lexicon and cultural influences, but mainly a “kinship of symbols”, associated with an “elitist-liberal line” in Borges and the “national-populist” in Perón, and their middle-class roots, which converge in the great emblem of “an old Argentina of reassuring and stereotypical patriarchal virtues”. The values of verticalism, non-critical adherence, immobilising identification and projection, inheritance versus gamble. Perón and Borges are “the most famous bourgeoisie Argentina has ever produced”, two icons that feed back each other in a circular immobilism, which constitutes an *imaginary space* that –Viñas concludes– is exhausted and hatches in a “concrete historical space: today’s Argentina”<sup>7</sup>. That present-day Argentina is the year 1981. Viñas writes his article when the bloody dictatorship (1976-1983) has not yet fallen; the dictatorship that murdered his two children (María Adelaida, aged 22, and Lorenzo Ismael, aged 25), who are among the 30,000 kidnapped and disappeared by state terrorism. The profound bitterness and iconoclastic rage with which he confronts both mythical figures is well understood, in the light of what that Argentinean actuality made evident about the piled-up failures of a mortally wounded community.

However, several decades later and inspired by other historical experiences, we can illuminate with a different light that common ground between Perón and Borges, that goes beyond their irreconcilable differences. A distant, foreign reference (Spinoza) projects its enigma upon those who radically confront each other in the way they live and experience their rootedness to a geography and a history. And reminds us how porous, open and still available for new thoughts are the texts of our most illustrious conservatives. This ephemeral communion between irreducible positions, attracted by the idea that it is possible to express the essence of a singularity from the perspective of eternity, produces a tension in the idea of community, making it something different from itself: a multiplication of times and modes to imagine the perpetual misunderstanding constituting the world and history. The enigma then persists, and Borges confesses his ignorance, and Perón refers to an uncertain future something that was supposed to be realised; and the community can only appear as a desire.<sup>8</sup>

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6 Viñas, 1981 (2011).

7 Viñas, 2011, pp. 299-300.

8 A “desire of community” to which Diego Tatián often refers when he looks for secret ties (often “Spinozian” ties) linking very distant characters and experiences. According to him, “Spinoza invites us

## III.

Are we ascribing to Spinoza those quasi-magical qualities Žižek refers to when he talks about the universal love paid to him? Probably yes! In fact, we can recall the words of one of the great contemporary Spinozists mentioned by Žižek in his article, Pierre Macherey.<sup>9</sup> According to the French philosopher, Spinozian thought has a rare power to “resonate and mingle with most of what we do”, to the extent that it can be conceived as a sort of *intellectual structure* which, far from being timeless, would be defined by a peculiar force of adaptation or adherence to the most determined forms of the present. It is therefore a philosophy constantly updated, again and again, in different times and conjunctures, and in always different modes: it is not one philosophy but many, since everyone projects onto it their own “phantoms of actuality”. Macherey then suggests that Spinoza’s philosophy functions, for many and very different readers, as a theoretical unconscious.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it is inevitable to associate this suggestion with Freud’s declared affinity for Spinoza, when he admits his dependence on Spinoza’s doctrine: “There was no reason why I should expressly mention his name, since I conceived my hypothesis from an atmosphere created by him, rather than from the study of his work. Moreover, I did not seek a philosophical legitimation”.<sup>11</sup>

Certainly, between imagination and its projections and the unconscious, there are not only magical tricks. Paths of art and politics are woven there, and we evoke them here through Spinoza, who elaborated – as Althusser grasped it – an unprecedented *materialism of the imaginary*: a theory of the historical modes of imagination that constitutes the singularity of a people.<sup>12</sup>

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to think in community, not a community to which we belong, a prior, substantive one, but a community to be invented and which has as its horizon what is universal in men”. Philosophy plays a key role in this regard: “it opens a possible form of community (always an experiment and a construction, never a fact as society is and always absent)”, because “the common is not what is there but what is lacking”. Tatián, 2012.

9 “Is it, then, possible at all not to love Spinoza? Who can be against a lone Jew who, on the top of it, was excommunicated by the ‘official’ Jewish community itself? One of the most touching expressions of this love is how one often attributes to him almost divine capacities –like Pierre Macherey who (in his otherwise admirable *Hegel ou Spinoza*), against the Hegelian critique of Spinoza, claims that one cannot avoid the impression that Spinoza had already read Hegel and in advance answered his reproaches...”. Žižek, 2007.

10 “Spinoza obsesses and haunts us as if it were a theoretical unconscious, that conditions and guides a large part of our intellectual options and effective commitments; and that helps us to reformulate most of the problems that concern us”. Macherey, 1992, p. 7.

11 Freud, 1977, p. 168.

12 “Materialism of the imaginary”, which arises –says Althusser– from Spinozian biblical exegesis, and is explained by his theory of religious ideology, his theory of language, his theory of the body and his theory of modes of knowledge. We see in the TTP “the history of this singular people, living under a singular religion, the Thora, the observances, the sacrifices, and the rituals ([...] the *materiality of the very existence of ideology*), with a language determined socially and precisely with these incredible prophets, men who climb the mountain at the summons of the Lord but who only understand in

The Brazilian philosopher Marilena Chaui builds her reading of Spinoza<sup>13</sup> based on that historical modes of imagination. Through a research that wholly moves within the history of philosophy, Chaui reconstructs Spinoza's thought out of the contradictory images that his contemporaries and several generations of readers have formed about it. Thus, *Spinozism* is approached as a multiform image, made up of heterogeneous and divergent scraps and traces, that says more about those who felt affected by this strange theoretical body that needed to be exorcised or integrated, than about Spinoza himself. The uniqueness of his work is thereby obliquely marked by all those contrasting images; it is negatively outlined through the failed attempts to integrate his ideas into the field of the already thought and known. Chaui succeeds in presenting the debates and struggles that shook the European seventeenth century through this privileged prism: an unassimilable thought for the pre-existing philosophical positions.

The fundamental epistemological and ontological reference to read Spinoza's *Ethics* proposed by Chaui is the theory of light. This interpretative approach –which is based on the concrete practice of Spinoza, a lens polisher– explains the movement of her book, which is also constructed as a sort of optical artefact that focuses Spinoza's thought more and more closely, traversing the sea of images in which – across the times – the human swims, shipwrecks and survives. Thanks to this focus, a new perspective, immanence, is discovered or conquered; and from this point, another movement, inverse to the previous one, begins to illuminate the Spinozian logic for the constitution of the real and the singularities that shape the world.

There is no enlightenment in this reconstruction of Spinozism. In other words, this approach does not entail a belief that the progressive advance of reason will bring light to the darkest corners of reality and world. Against the naïve idealism of such rationalism, the reference claimed by Chaui to understand Spinoza's philosophy is Kepler's optical revolution, the one that inaugurates modern optics by considering the eye as a device that operates with independence of any will to see. The retinal image is produced by the convergence between this device and light rays; and human vision, placed in the middle of the world, is a material mechanism participating in it, in accordance with its laws – and not the sovereign point of view, which transforms it into the object of its representation. Spinoza, polisher

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the thunder crash and lightning flash some partially comprehensible words. Then they go back down to the plain in order to submit to their brothers, who themselves know the message of God. The prophets have not understood anything that God had say to them: it is explained to them carefully, and the generally they understand the message of God; except that imbecile Daniel who knew how interpret dreams but who not only understood nothing of the message received from God (...) but, what is worse, would never comprehend any of the explanations the people gave him of the messages he had received!". Althusser, 2008, p. 9.

13 Chaui, 1999 (2020).



of lenses, is aware of these discoveries and the virtue of telescopes and microscopes, which incorporate into the perceptive universe the infinitely great and the infinitely small, those supra and infra-human dimensions that make obsolete the classical privilege of human body as measure of all things. Moreover, Spinoza is an assiduous interlocutor of Christiaan Huygens, Dutch mathematician, astronomer, and physicist, whose perspective connects with his own in a much more decisive way – emphasises Chau – than Descartes'. Huygens' geometrical mechanicism is what allows to reorient what could be transformed into a Keplerian neoplatonism (that is, a harmonic vision of the universe, where symmetry and proportionality would reign, more compatible with Leibniz than with Spinoza). Huygens' theory of the ondulatory propagation of light, then, lends the most appropriate metaphors to address the relationship between substance, attributes and modes, according to Spinoza's thought. And 17th-century Dutch painting, also connected with the perspective transformations brought by the optical revolution, becomes a descriptive counterpoint, enabling a positive approximation both to Spinoza's truth and the truth of the image: to the mode in which imagination, recognising and unfolding its own power, is also constituted as a fundamental medium for the knowledge about being. Dutch painting, by the hand of Keplerian eye, plunges into the depths of space in its infinite mobility, where the sovereign gaze of the painter no longer reigns, but the work of light itself, which is realised by the contrast of colours and the variation of their intensities. Immersed in a world that precedes it, the eye presupposes it and travels through different paths and directions, so that movement is more relevant than the point of view. We are dealing with a mobile and ubiquitous eye, capable of multiplying points of view and simultaneous perspectives, allowing the experience of depth and infinity. Such an eye, then, would explain something of Spinoza's gaze.

#### IV.

However, twenty-two years before Kepler's birth died another painter, who "inquire the properties and laws of light, of colours, of shadows, of perspective, in order to achieve mastery in the imitation of nature". In this case is Freud who evokes Leonardo Da Vinci with a Spinozist rhetoric:

A man who has begun to have an inkling of the grandeur of the universe with all its complexities and its laws readily forgets his own insignificant self. Lost in admiration and filled with true humility, he all too easily forgets that he himself is a part of those active forces and that in accordance with the scale of his personal strength the way is open for him to try to alter a small portion of the destined course of the world—a world in which the small is still no less wonderful and significant than the great.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Freud, 2002, pp. 22-23.

Spinoza gets attached to Da Vinci by Freudian projection. And again we get the impression that Žižek is right when he points out this phenomenon of dislocation of times produced by the love for Spinoza. Just as Macherey speaks of Spinoza's anticipatory refutation of Hegelian arguments, Freud shows Da Vinci as an Spinozian (and a Keplerian, as well) *avant la lettre*. Quite differently from the idea of immanence prioritised by the history of philosophy (the immanence of history to texts), immanence here is associated with a rejoicing in the power of human intellect to produce effects. This is something Nietzsche points out very well when he recognises himself as a Spinozist: 'I am really amazed, really delighted! I have a precursor, and what a precursor! I hardly knew Spinoza: what brought me to him now was the guidance of instinct. His whole tendency is like my own –to make knowledge the most powerful passion'<sup>15</sup>. That affection which goes with intellectual passion and accounts for some of the transhistorical love for Spinoza, to which we refer in this text. A strange love, for it is associated – as Freud suggests– with a rare impassivity:

The view may be hazarded that Leonardo's development approaches Spinoza's mode of thinking. A man who has won his way to a state of knowledge cannot properly be said to love and hate; he remains beyond love and hatred. He has investigated instead of loving. And that is perhaps why Leonardo's life was so much poorer in love than that of other great men, and of other artists. The stormy passions of a nature that inspires and consumes, passions in which other men have enjoyed their richest experience, appear not to have touched him.<sup>16</sup>

An intellectual love. A great perspective – let's say to conclude – to confront the successful management of affections carried out by the global neoliberal right-wing. The sentimentalist, anti-intellectual and anti-political moralisation of emotions (whose lines of incidence are elaborated in marketing laboratories, counting with the pervasive power of social networks) has two pillars. On the one hand, the promotion and canalisation of social hate; on the other, the cultivation of false emotionality and banal joy. The production of selective mass indignation, for example, constitutes the affective infrastructure required by anti-corruption discourses that seek to delegitimize politics with a redistributive will (disqualified as populist in Latin America) – and eventually enable the removal of progressivisms in the hands of Bolsonaro and his ilk. Inversely and complementarily, the spread of positive thinking invites people to deny pain (their own and others'), to restrict their sensitivity and block critical reflexivity, in order to foster adaptation to more and more hostile living conditions. Against neo-

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<sup>15</sup> Nietzsche, 1996, p. 177.

<sup>16</sup> Freud, 2002, p. 22.

liberal management and neo-fascist reconstitution of the passions, Spinozian intellectual love becomes an antidote (*Non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari, sed intelligere*) and a fundamental weapon for today's ideological critique.

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# **Thinking Social Mobility with Spinoza**

**Chantal Jacquet**

**Abstract:** The aim of the article is to analyse the way in which Spinoza provides conceptual instruments for thinking about social mobility, transclasses and non-reproduction. The aim is to analyse Spinoza's methodological modernity in thinking about the singular, his etiological modernity through the model of causal determinism and his anthropological modernity, through the concept of ingenium or complexion. In return, this contemporary use of Spinoza's philosophy to understand the passage from one social class to another, its causes and effects, allows us to measure the power of his thought, to raise new questions and to question his concepts from a new angle.

**Keywords:** complexion, ingenium, social mobility Spinoza, transclass

If ideas, like any other thing, persevere in their being, their power would be measured in their current efficiency and their capacity to produce real effects beyond their time. Then it becomes possible to conceive Spinoza's modernity by analysing the manner in which his philosophy irrigates contemporary thought and provides operational concepts for new fields of knowledge. In this vein, it is here the aim to consider contemporary continuations of Spinozist thought within social philosophy, particularly, looking at the role it plays in studies in transclass individuals on and non-reproduction.<sup>1</sup>

At first sight, there is little to no relation between reflections on social mobility, class transference, and Spinoza's philosophy for self-evident historical and contextual reasons. The question of social non-reproduction inscribes itself within the question of reproduction as has been rigorously theorised by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, most notably in *The Inheritors* (1964) and *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture* (1977). It is clear that Spinoza never looked into the phenomenon, despite the concept of class not being absent from his system, and that he alludes to the love or hatred of class in proposition 46 of *Ethics* III.<sup>2</sup> The starting point for reflection here is anchored in the desire to clarify a blind spot of reproduction theory, namely those cases that present themselves as social exceptions, an exception to which Bourdieu himself belongs. It is not the least of paradoxes that reproduction's main thinker escaped its clutches, as he wrestled himself (or has been wrestled), out of his social milieu of origin! Born of a postman, who later became postmaster, and of a mother from an agrarian

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1 Jaquet 2014.

2 Yet, this remark does not allow to assimilate Spinoza's very general concept of class with that of Bourdieu's of which the technical and specific signification inscribes itself within a Marxist tradition and refers back to the possession, or the absence thereof, of four different types of capital: economic, cultural, socio-political, and symbolic.

background, Bourdieu achieved a social trajectory that his background wasn't meant to predispose him to. How can it then be explained that individuals like him do not necessarily reproduce the practices of their social class and move from one class to another? The main challenge hiding behind this inquiry is that of the power of human nature and of the extensions of the sphere of liberty. Non-reproduction brings into play the possibility to invent a new existence within the established social order, without its overthrow or revolution having to take place. The objective is therefore to understand the causes that make non-reproduction possible and the effects it elicits for individuals who move from one class to another. The difficulty then lies in conceiving the nature and origin of this *transitio* of transclass individuals, at the heart of non-reproduction.<sup>3</sup>

It's at this point that Spinoza's thought turns out to be of great help, not only to find answers, but to provide a theoretical framework and productive intellectual tools aiming at fostering new philosophical as well as sociological approaches to the problem. It is here not the objective to review all implicit or explicit references to Spinoza, in a lettered mode, but to revise properly operative usages of his thought. It is necessary to distinguish intermittent borrowings without decisive effects on the orientation of knowledge itself, from conceptual borrowings that produce new forms of intelligibility, including those that come at the cost of distortion or unintentional expansions of the system that make it squeak and put its power to the test. In this way, the mobilisation of the definition of ambition, or the reference to *fluctuatio animi* to describe the in-between state of the transclass, corresponds to a usage of the Spinozist lexicon that serves to render explicit ideas that could have been expressed using another grammar of the real. However, the injection of affect theory and affective imitation produces theoretical effects that are invaluable in contemporary thought and offers a serious alternative to rational agent theories and its calculative strategies.

It's specifically this second type of appropriation of Spinoza that I want to look at, using a prospective as well as a retrospective logic. In effect, it's interesting to examine how Spinoza's thought enlightens non-reproduction and how non-reproduction enlightens Spinoza—by examining him in return, leading us to read him differently. The approach will consist in analysing how Spinoza has been explicitly or implicitly mobilised in order to define both issue and methods. Secondly, in order to construct an analysis of the causes of non-reproduction and thirdly

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<sup>3</sup>This neologism was coined modelling itself onto "transsexual," to designate individuals who move from one class to another. It was indeed appropriate to change the language used and to come up with another concept, to move away from pejorative terms, such as "social climber" or "class defectors," as well as any other term using spatial metaphors of social ascension or downgrading that all lead to interpret this change as either a promotion or a degradation. To remain axiologically neutral, it would be more useful to keep all value judgement at bay. The prefix "trans," which signifies "on the other side," does not denote an overcoming or an elevation, but the movement of transition, of a passage to the other side.

to consider its effects on the constitution of individuals—i.e., Spinoza's modernity will be approached from a tripartite angle: methodological, etiological, and anthropological.

### **Methodological modernity:**

#### **Towards a Spinozist approach of the singular**

Concerning the nature of the problem of social mobility and the way to consider it, Spinoza firstly allows to break with what Francis Bacon calls the presumption of impossibility, and that constitutes one of the main obstacles to the emergence of novel investigative pathways and the development of new knowledge. Research on transclasses falls over an epistemological obstacle that relates to the nature of the object, namely exceptions to the rule of social reproduction. How can philosophy, tending to think through concepts, explain the existence of singular cases? The concept needs to bring together the diverse and unify by synthesising that which individual cases hold in common, otherwise the concept would dissolve in multiplicity. Is it possible to develop a concept of the singular, of the individual and the particular within that which is the most irreducible, targeting an intimate essence, grasping a certain freedom in its individual manifestations?

And yet, it is precisely this problem that is so central in Spinoza's philosophy, and has been much debated in the literature. If the first kind of knowledge consists of perceiving things and forming universal notions "from particular things represented through our senses to our intellect in a mutilated and confused fashion without any order," (IIp40s2) it means that knowledge of the first kind merely rests on a vague experience and remains inadequate. Far from being known, the singular is an in-between-seen; seen through the fog of the imagination. Reason, certainly, disperses confusion and delivers adequate knowledge but it drives us further away from the singular and remains powerless in capturing it. Knowledge of the second kind relies on common notions, on adequate ideas of the properties of things and thus does not deliver their essence. It forms its notions from "*anything that is common to all things [...] and that is equally in the part and in the whole does not constitute the essence of any particular thing*" (IIp37). Only knowledge of the third kind, or intuitive science, is supposed to grasp things in their singularity and infer their essence from the attribute of God (IIp40). However, this intuitive science, concerning the essence of singular things, is arduous to the extent that a great number of scholars judge it impossible to achieve, and make sure to remind that Spinoza himself indicates, towards the very end of the *Ethics*, that the way to salvation that the third kind of knowledge consists of is "as difficult as [it is] rare" (IIp42s).

Facing this difficulty, many commentators have come to think that Spinoza didn't intend to infer the essence of the singular, of Peter or of Paul, from the attributes of God, but only of a general essence.



Nevertheless, it is difficult to accept this thesis, given the fact that essence reciprocates itself with the thing, because essence is not only that which without the thing can neither be nor conceived, but equally that which can neither be nor conceived without the thing itself (III2). Furthermore, Spinoza stresses that there is an idea in God that expresses *sub specie aeternitatis* “the essence of this or that human body [*hujus et illius corporis*]” (Vp22).

Without dwelling on the scholarly debate, it is clear that for Spinoza, the question is not to simply settle for a general understanding of the nature of things and that it is possible to infer singularity from the essence of all beings. Spinoza thus offers a model of intelligibility of the singular through intuitive science. Hence, it becomes possible to think transclasses with him, and no longer as mysterious exceptions. To think them as separate cases, conducive to the emergence of superstitions such as the lucky star, of destiny and good fortune, or to the dissemination of easy ideology, such as that of the genius or the *self-made man*, but as the products of a whole of determinations that are comprehensible with a casual deductive schema. The aim was here to bring to light the body of causes that presides over the creation of transclasses and that explains the reasons for their individual social trajectories.

In order to do so, it is necessary to forge a philosophy of the singular that both combines a deductive method and the analysis of particular cases. This is the reason why it is needed to elaborate a theory of non-reproduction, not only by building upon philosophical concepts, such as transclass or complexion, but also by using thought instruments borrowed from other domains that have in common the aptitude to grasp the singular by giving it a universal scope, like that of literature. Initially, the reflections here presented were inspired by literary fiction that privileges examples of non-reproduction, such as Julien Sorel in Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* or Jack London's *Martin Eden*. My initial speculations equally drew on autobiographical narratives of transclass people that blend literary and theoretical approaches, such as Richard Wright's *Black Boy* or Edgard Wideman's *Brothers and Keepers*. But instead of privileging these novels that are primarily fictive or autobiographical, narrating personal trajectories, the narratives that stood out most were of an auto-socio-biographical nature, like those of Annie Ernaux,<sup>4</sup> Didier Éribon,<sup>5</sup> or Richard Hoggart.<sup>6</sup> These narratives aim to think the life or the fate of an individual in relation to their milieu as the production of the social and not as the advent of self-isolation from

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4 See, among others, Ernaux 1992 or 1998.

5 See Éribon 2009.

6 Hoggart 1991.

all external determination. Unlike autobiography that has the tendency to impose a reductive image of an author who writes about themselves, the work of auto-socio-biographic writing takes the form of a narrative in which it is the aim to place the “I” within the midst of a larger reality, within a condition in common or a shared social situation.<sup>7</sup> The apparent hiatus between the singularity of the exception and the universality of the concept is blurred as it is through the individual that the human condition expresses itself, sketching an anthropology in the moment. In this way, Annie Ernaux considers that a text can become all the more universal than it is personal, without a doubt because it expresses an intimate experience from which it is possible to recognise yourself, beyond the variety and the particularity of individual stories.<sup>8</sup> The analysis is born from personal experience, but vice-versa also clarifies it and is a witness of the back and forth between theory and individual (hi)stories.

This approach that combines philosophy, literature, history, and sociology can in turn enlighten Spinoza’s notion of intuitive science, giving it substance and leading to a reconsideration of the role singular examples and literary fiction can play within his system. The Spinozist method relies as much on that which reason demonstrates as on that which experience shows. Very often, Spinoza makes use of examples and singular figures that are both historical and literary, such as *Orlando Furioso*, Orestes, Nero, Medea, and Hannibal. He does this, not only to illustrate his arguments but also uses them as thought archetypes that highlight the human conditions’ prominent features of morality or of political organisation. Without a doubt, commentators have looked into one or the other of these figures in need to substantiate their claims with targeted examples, but after the work I’ve carried out in *Les transclasses ou la non reproduction*, (*Transclasses and non-reproduction*) it would be interesting to consider all these singular examples *uno intuitu* and to synoptically and systematically apprehend how Spinoza treats these examples, as to see what they can teach us about intuitive science. Even if it is in a relatively discreet manner, Spinoza will be the guiding threat in the definition of the issue here at hand and the method used.

### **Aetiological modernity: the Spinozist model of causal determination**

Secondly, Spinoza also played a decisive role in the analysis of the causes of non-reproduction, which is discussed in the first part of the book.<sup>9</sup> Spinoza opened up a third way, a way out of the alternative that traps the debate in either ascribing the causes of non-reproduction

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Ernaux 2003, p. 153.

<sup>9</sup> Jaquet 2014, p. 23-102.

to the illusion of free will and the all-powerful volition or by relying on some fatalistic theory of destiny. Thinking with Spinoza, the objective was to conceive of a singular and *in situ* power to act and to take into account exterior determinations, such as economic, social, and political conditions; the family novel, family relations, encounters, as well as interior determinations: physical and mental, like the composition of the body, sex, race, desires, and sexual orientations, knowing that the boundaries between interior and exterior are porous because we incorporate the traces of the social world and that we in turn imprint that world with our mark. It's this dynamic of circumstance and the interwovenness of causes that we have to understand .

Non-reproduction doesn't reduce itself to atomistic and individualistic logic, to a singular being facing its milieu. Non-reproduction demands us to apprehend the complex modalities by means of which everyone finds their way in being and defines themselves by identification and differentiation within given spaces, with and against others. Non-reproduction abides to laws and interconnected schemata within which the individual could not be thought as an isolated being seceding from their own class. Even if they are the expression of an exception, they are not islands, an empire within an empire, to use Spinoza's words. They are exceptions only to the extent that their environment permits it, a sort of atypical pathway that does not constitute a deviation. It operates with the help of the middle, at the crossroads of impulse and aversion. It is not the product of reregulation, but of a combination of rules other than those that normally prevail. Transclass people are often less solitary heroes than heralds with personal and collective aspirations, be it those of the family, the village or the neighbourhood, of race or class, of sex or gender.

Non-reproduction is thus not an individual phenomenon but a transindividual phenomenon. It cannot be understood when we separately consider economic, sociological, family, and affective determinations that are at play in everyone's individual histories. Consequently, the aim is not to think the primacy of individual free will or social and material conditions, as if desire wasn't determined by the economy and sociology, and as if the economy and sociology weren't in turn impregnated with affects. The reluctance to take into account the existence of affects which sometimes translates itself into a contemptuous refusal of "psychologism" or an *a priori* suspicion for psychoanalysis in general, (as if there was only one) prohibits us from understanding how emotions shape the social body.

In this regard, Spinoza's theory of affects serves as an antidote that can usefully be reinvested in the philosophical study of the social world in general, and that of the trajectories of transclass people in particular. The analysis of the causes of non-reproduction reveals the necessity to take into account the vital part affects play in the constitution of the

self. The transclass individual is the product of an affective complexion. They are not simply agents who mechanically imitate or rationally calculate a strategy. How to understand their trajectories without shame, desire for justice, pride, anger, and indignation, and all interwoven? How to account for your pain or the joyful strength drawn from romantic encounters and friendships? Affect plays a decisive role, and too often gets side-lined by sociologists in the name of a suspicion towards psychology, as if it weren't part of the social, reducing it to a character given from all eternity.<sup>10</sup> Within a Spinozist vein, affect is on the contrary social through and through. He covers the whole of bodily and mental modifications that touch upon our power to act, which either reinforce or limit it. Produced by the interference between a person's causal power and that of external causes, affect is the expression of interhuman relations and the exchanges with our surrounding milieu. Affect relates the history of our encounters with the external world and integrates itself within a determinism of interactive connections. The aim is however not to reduce behaviour to affective types and to imagine that a said feeling automatically produces a said effect, but to think a particular combination, a node of determinations.

Not a single determination in effect is operational or has efficacy in and of itself; it is only the intersection of determinations and their consolidation that can produce effects. Taken in isolation, determination is one of non-reproduction's possible threads, but it only becomes a real fabric when interwoven with other determinations. In this respect, the existence of alternative models, the establishment of political institutions and economic aid can be necessary conditions, but they are not sufficient—as the extremely divergent trajectories of individuals from the same generation in a family demonstrate. Every time, the interplay of strengths should be grasped, the place of everyone within a given configuration, the singular affects this interplay modifies and combines in a decisive manner, so that it gives way to an ambient model and initiates a different social trajectory. These class transitions should be considered in terms of the nodal form of the *complexio* and not as a mechanical and horizontal causality.

This remark allows to reconsider the proposition XXVIII, of the *Ethics*'s part one, <sup>11</sup> having in mind the singular and to think it less in terms of a series or a succession of a waterfall of causes, but rather as a connection of interconnected causes producing effects on the modelled

10 In this regard, Frédéric Lordon's innovative approach, grounded in Spinozist anthropology, and that introduces the social sciences to affects can only be welcomed. In particular Lordon's 2010 and 2013.

11 "Any particular thing, or anything that is finite and has a determinate existence, cannot exist or be determined to operate, unless it is determined to exist and operate by another cause, which is also finite and has a determinate existence; and this cause in turn is also unable to exist or be determined to operate, unless it is determined to exist and to operate by another thing, which also is finite and has a determinate existence, and so ad infinitum" (Ip28).

of the *complexio*. *Complexio*, composed of the prefix *con*, “with,” and of the stem *plexus*, derived from the past participle of *plectere* (to tie, to weave), clearly conveys the complex interwovenness of the threats that constitute the fabric of an existence and that tie it to those of others.

Non-reproduction does not undo determinism but implies a new arrangement thereof. In this regard, it doesn’t so much put at risk the *genius* as it does *engineering*, because non-production does not rely on a natural disposition to create whatever original, but relies on a complex device operating a synthesis of determinations that constitute an individual in relation to their surrounding milieu. It would thus be appropriate to think the *ingenium* of transclass people rather than the *genius*, understood as an exceptional inventive capacity arising from natural and innate dispositions. Even though originating from the same stem, the idea of the *ingenium* introduces a new inflection in relation to that of the *genius*. By putting an emphasis on habits and ways of being, the *ingenium* stresses the historical dimensions of the nature of a being and how exterior causes shape them, in a way that distinctive singularity is less than constitutive than it is constituted. If there is indeed a capacity for invention and originality, they are not as much the product of some inborn disposition than they are aptitudes developed in accordance with circumstances.

In this sense, the concept of the *ingenium*, as it is defined in Spinoza’s philosophy, makes for a powerful thought instrument. The *ingenium* refers to the unity of singular characteristic traits of an individual that are the product of common history, of their habits, of their encounters with the world.<sup>12</sup> The *ingenium* could be defined as a complex of sedimented affects constitutive of an individual, of their mode of life, of their opinions and their behaviour. It is anchored within bodily dispositions and counts physical and well as mental ways of being. It is constituted by traces things inscribe in us and that the body retains, traces with which we shape images; representations that we either reconfigure by interpreting them as signs, by associating them according to the distinctive logic of our minds and their preceding experiences of thought. This concept expresses the individuality of a human being we all recognise, as well as that of a people.

Spinoza talks in this way of the *ingenium* of the living human being under the conduct of reason which distinguishes itself from that of the ignorant,<sup>13</sup> of the *ingenium* of the Hebrew people, rude and rebellious, a disposition that has formed itself over the course of political and religious history.<sup>14</sup> Within this context, it is clear that the *ingenium* does not refer

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<sup>12</sup> On this point see Moreau 1994, p. 379-465.

<sup>13</sup> IVp26s

<sup>14</sup> TTP, V, 10.

back to a natural innate disposition. Spinoza in effect refuses to attribute the Hebrews' rebellious *ingenium* to a certain nature but ascribes it to their laws and habits<sup>15</sup>. The *ingenium* has something that is irreducibly singular and is not easily transferred from one individual to the next. This is typically one of the reasons why Spinoza affirms that "no one is obliged by the right of nature to live according to the views of another [*ingenium*] person,"<sup>16</sup> even if everyone tyrannically aspires that others live according to their views. The *ingenium* allows to think the diversity of individuals without referring to a common nature or to an immutable individual nature. In particular in the preface to the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza insists on this diversity of the *ingenium*, which is at the origin of indefinite variety of opinions and beliefs: "human beings have very different minds [*ingenium*] and find themselves comfortable with very different beliefs; what moves one person to devotion provokes another to laughter."<sup>17</sup>

If the term *ingenium* is sometimes translated as "spirit," "disposition," or "character," it is without doubt complexion that best translates the Spinozist context because it reconstructs the idea of complex assemblage and singular interconnected physical and mental determinations. Understood in this sense, *ingenium* or complexion designates the chain of determinations that interweave to form the fabric of an individual life. Both terms maintain the notion of the genius, of the original idea, but strip away all transcendental dimensions and traces of the innate, in order to put emphasis on the historical production of industrious weaving in relation with a milieu. Both notions invite us to think transclasses like beings caught up in a node of relational affects that combine and compose themselves as to produce a new configuration.

### **Anthropological modernity: the figure of the transclass individual in light of the *ingenium***

This is why beyond the causes studied in the first part of *Transclasses and non-reproduction*, the concept of the *ingenium* or of complexion could equally be mobilised to clarify the notion of transclasses, a concept that I used, in particular, to study the effects of the transition on the constitution of individuals,<sup>18</sup> even if Spinoza was not the first to have theorised it. The *ingenium* allows to take a critical distance from the concept of identity that is not suitable. Identity, whether it is personal or social, presupposes the existence of individuals that remain the same

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<sup>15</sup>TTP, VII, 26.

<sup>16</sup>TTP, preface, 13.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>18</sup>Jaquet 2014, p. 103-217.



and are reducible to a certain number of persistent character traits despite change. No matter how we define it, identity always implies the recognition of a consistent substratum throughout modifications. Whether this substratum is thought in terms of a substantial self, of the person, of the subject, etc., it always presents itself like an immutable core resistant to change. However, transclass people show us that it is uncertain human beings dispose of an identity like a business card giving us recognition and the attribution of a certain status. It must be acknowledged that individuals who do not reproduce necessarily have a floating or fluctuating identity because it cannot be assigned to their background and demarcates itself of that of their peers. It is change and transformation that govern their existence. They are thus more characterised by a process of disidentification, of dis-engagement, that cuts them off from their families and their class.

This disidentification does not reduce itself to the temporary stage by means of which they gain a new identity, because they are ultimately not assimilable to their milieu of arrival. They undoubtedly carry the traces of their background, even only of those of a past history, in a way that they will never share a common heritage with those with whom they will, nonetheless, share their condition with. In this regard, the transclass person appears as an exemplary figure of the ego's desubstantialisation. They radicalise the experience of the inconsistency of the self and the inconstancy of its qualities, an act to which Pascal invites each and everyone in his *Pensées*. The transclass person can only be understood in this movement of the passage, by means of which they acquire the experience of a transidentity and of the dissolution of the personal and social self. They live a double life of which its unity is very problematic because the change is sometimes so drastic that it is hard to believe they are the same person. Their existence is marked by transformation and mobility, in a way that makes it sometimes difficult to consider the existence of a subject or of a substratum that would remain intact throughout change. More than anyone else, transclass individuals have the feeling of not disposing of a fixed and congealed identity, but to be a floating and flexible complexion that adopts itself to the ambient colour of their milieu, in the manner of a chameleon. Adapting is first of all learning to undo old habits and to break away from previous customs, in order to enter in a new and foreign universe. The trick is to get rid of the ballast of the past, to sell off acquired ways of being, to liquidate a legacy. This is what Annie Ernaux concisely summarises in *A Man's Place*: "now I have finished taking possession of the legacy with which I had to part when I entered the educated, bourgeois world."<sup>19</sup> Adaptation implies a form of deposit or even of dispossession in order to position the self. Adaptation goes through a process of dismissal of old values and old ways of being

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19 Ernaux 1992, p. 100.



and it implies a casting off of a former skin, a stripping away of a self, a difficult operation that does not come naturally. This is why transclasses necessarily will be floating in their new habits, because they cannot pre-emptively adjust to them. They are thus simultaneously an adapted and an unadapted being.

It is this fluctuating posture and its variations of difference, and of a being-torn-between, that the concept of complexion allows to capture by stressing the process of weaving and cultural blending by means of which determinations become tied up and untie themselves. Complexion implies a rupture with identity and invites us to think the trajectory of transclass people as a reconfiguration that cannot be reduced to hybridity or an extension of their habitus. Instead complexion takes the form of a deconstructive dynamics and a permanent reconstruction through transitional tensions.

As such, these reflections on transclasses using the concept of the *ingenium* introduces it in other fields and thereby raises new questions as regards to Spinoza's thought itself. It demands us to refine our reading, as it invites us to reflect on the relation between the notion of complexion, which reintroduces the historical and affective dimension of beings, and that of essence. The articulation between these two notions and their confrontation has rarely been fully addressed. It could indeed be questioned whether essence only includes immutable characteristics, eternal singularity, or whether it can equally encompass ephemeral determinations, habits and aptitudes that alter and modify themselves. In other words, Is complexion expressing a truth that essence cannot express or include? It is self-evident that the two concepts cannot be simply equated but we would need to further our investigation into the extent to which they are related. In this way, it would be possible to conceive of complexion as the expression of essence within a given situation or state. But would this signify that essence, in so far as it is the expression of reality and the power of a being, should be thought as complexion minus the passions? In the case of the wise or the free man, does essence coincide with complexion? All these questions that are raised by non-reproduction invite us to anew explore the potential of Spinoza's thought.

Even though it is not the main objective of non-reproduction theory, it nonetheless gives us a new chance to evaluate Spinoza's modernity, the effectiveness, and contemporaneity of his thought. The mobilisation of concepts of intuitive science, of affects, cause and effect, and the *ingenium* produces heuristic and speculative effects that allow for the renewal of sociological and socio-philosophical categories, offering an alternative to classical ways of thinking social mobility. Spinoza never said anything about transclass people, yet, the whole of his philosophy is a philosophy of passage, of *transitio*: the transition from lesser to greater perfection, from sadness to joy, from passion to action, from servitude

to freedom. By putting an emphasis on the dimension of transition and its spearhead of difficulties, it delivers an important lesson on how to grasp the migratory process of passing-classes who transition between different social spheres. Spinoza never said anything about transclass people, and yet, he even helps to understand their joys, which surely is less related to an *acquiescentia in se ipso*, a self-satisfaction, than to a *gaudium*, the joy that accompanies the thought of a past event arisen against all hope. When not getting lost along the way, transclasses can fully take pleasure in the joy gained through struggle, self-satisfaction that is not the one given, rightfully or not, at birth, to inheritors.

Translated by Solanche Manche

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# **“Sed de his satis”: Spinoza’s Famous Last Words**

**Gregg Lambert**

Abstract: Employing a method that Spinoza used in both the *Tractatus Theologico-Political* and the *Political Treatise*, this article proposes an allegorical interpretation of the recent political events in the U.S. as repetition of the events in the Dutch Republic in 1672. In providing a close textual analysis of the *Political Treatise* in the historical context of the original Dutch situation when Spinoza was drafting the *Political Treatise*, the article also examines a regressive theory of the State-Form in light of Spinoza's own reflection on the future of the Dutch Republic.

Key Words: "Disaster Year," Democracy, Mathematical Absolute, Multitude, State Science, Spinoza, Politics

As Marx wrote in the 18<sup>th</sup> *Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, "all great world-historic events and personages appear, so to speak, twice ... the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."<sup>1</sup> The historical repetition I am referring to concerns the consequence of events and personages that took place in the United Provinces in 1672 ("*Rampjaar*") and then again in the United States in 2021. What began as a protest march of Trump supporters in the capitol, soon became the mob that stormed the capitol building to stage a right-wing version of the "occupy movement," and ended as the failed "insurrection" as was reported in the media. The principal character, of course, is Trump himself, who plays the role of William III of Orange in our farce, and Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer, who play the brothers De Witt.

The historical parallel raises some interesting questions: Like William III, was Trump behind the insurrection and did he order the state and federal police to stand down in the early hours of the mob storming of the capitol? If the occupation had been more successful, would the mob have dragged the senators outside to the steps of the Capitol building and lynch them, and then afterwards, roast their livers on *Weber* BBQs and consume them in a cannibalistic frenzy? Finally, if they had been better organized rather than merely a riotous mob, would they have occupied the Senate and issued a number of public edicts for reforms, including the purging of the democratic governors and election officials in the states of New York, Michigan, California, Georgia, and Pennsylvania? Although these events would make for a good alternative reality television series on *Netflix*, the political parallels between the events of 2021 and 1672 are compelling enough to draw similar conclusions to Spinoza's own sober observations on the role of the passions of the multitude in the *PT*, which he began drafting three years after the "Orange revolution" and the end of the First Stadtholderless period (1650-

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<sup>1</sup> Marx 1978, p. 584.

1672).<sup>2</sup> What both events perfectly illustrate, however, is a major axiom of Spinoza's realist interpretation of sovereignty concerning the "indefinite state" of any form of *Imperium*. (For example, as discussed in chapter XVI of the *TTP*, the social contract only binds the subjects of a multitude as long as its utility lasts; "If the utility is taken away, the contract is taken away with it, and remains null and void.")<sup>3</sup> More importantly, for the purposes of our contemporary allegory, *the future state of any form of sovereignty may change for the better or for the worse*. This axiom applies equally to our current period as it does to the end of the period of "True Freedom" (*de Ware Vrijheid*).

Even though Spinoza defines democracy as the most optimal constitution of sovereignty (*omnino absolutum imperium*), we have also witnessed how democracies can suddenly devolve into a worse constitution through the resurgence of another form of sovereignty in the imagination of the multitude. As he already addressed in the very beginning of the *TTP*, this most often occurs in a "time of crisis" in reaction to a greater power that threatens both the sovereignty of the state and the peace and security of the multitude, which I will argue is also the case of the recent pandemic. In Spinoza's own time, this might address the resurgence of the popularity of Orangist monarchy during the period of the Franco-Dutch war, and in ours, the despotic features of popular sovereignty, racism, and nationalism. One lesser known historical parallel with 1672 was the greatest crash of the Amsterdam exchange in early modern times, which could be compared to the NYSE market crash caused by the pandemic in early spring 2020.<sup>4</sup>

However, we must not imagine a simple teleological progression exists in the passage from Monarchy to the different historical arrangements of Aristocratic and Democratic sovereignty, but instead that all forms remain as permanent features of the popular imagination in accordance with Spinoza's own sober understanding of the common effects of human nature. In fact, Spinoza argues that the initial state of sovereignty was originally democratic, but due to fear of their own individual sovereignty, a more democratic constitution of sovereignty is gradually concentrated in a few (Aristocracy), and then finally in one individual (Monarchy). In the *PT*, he returns to this argument again: "That's the reason, I think, that Democratic States are transformed into Aristocracies, and Aristocracies in the end, into Monarchies. For I am quite convinced that most Aristocratic states were initially Democratic."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> According to Curley, Spinoza was working on it intensively from the second half of 1675 until his death in February 1677. See Curley (1985-2016), preface to *TP*, vol. 2, p. 488, n. 245.

<sup>3</sup> *TTP* XVI.25.

<sup>4</sup> Israel 1995, p. 798.

<sup>5</sup> *PT* VIII.12.

What I will call Spinoza's "regressive theory of the State-Form" contradicts the implicit teleology that guides much of the more recent "radical democratic" interpretations of the *PT*. For example, this is especially true of Negri, who recasts the Subject of the Multitude as the true ontogenetic source of resistance that has been present throughout this history in a revolutionary form of *potentia* that outstrips any constituted form of state power (*potestas*). Negri's interpretation of the asymmetrical nature of power, between *potentia* and *potestas*, is primarily based on an affirmative reading of the second definition of *Ethics* that "a body is called finite because it can conceive another that is greater," and "a body is not limited by a thought nor a thought by a body."<sup>6</sup> Negri applies this axiomatically to all of Spinoza's writings, including his interpretation of the *PT*, arguing that the expansive thought of the Multitude grows in potency as the association broadens; finally, *producing* the *democratia omnino absoluta* that is purportedly forecast in the last chapter.<sup>7</sup>

In *Spinoza politique: Le transindividual*, even though Balibar eschews a "simple progression," he still maintains the "absolute subject" of a free multitude as the "problematic" of a "Science of the State."<sup>8</sup> In other words, he simply replaces a "simple teleological progression" with a more complicated and overdetermined structural analysis in the manner of Althusser's own solution to the problem of the history of State-Form in traditional Marxist theory. Therefore, in each "model" of governmentality, or concrete "state-apparatus," he detects the perfection of the conditions of democratization, according to an onto-genetic principle of "perfectibility," as the golden thread leading to "the determination of the State-Form in the last instance," evoking the famous phrase of Althusser.

Of course, the reader will not be surprised to learn that this teleology can be found nowhere in the *PT* itself, but only in the tradition of modern interpretation that followed. Thus, it is somewhat ironic that the author of the *TTP*, a work of crucial importance for the invention of a secular form of biblical criticism, should also become the subject of so much bad interpretation. Although we might applaud the overall goals of affirmative reading and appreciate the providential design of "Universal History," the problem with this manner of theoretical interpretation is that it often by-passes the preliminary (and necessary) step of textual criticism to grasp the rhetorical intention of the author in the context of the text's own internal history and audience. This intention is clearly

6 *Ethics* I.D2. Matheron has demonstrated through a close reading of the *PT* a more equivocal use of these terms. See Matheron 2020, pp. 190-191.

7 Although after much criticism, Negri must finally acknowledge that "clearly there is nothing teleological in Spinoza's ontology"; nevertheless, he still claims that the absolute subject of democracy represents the "telos of his thought," a distinction that appears somewhat nebulous. Negri 2013, pp. 8-9.

8 Balibar 2020, pp. 118-136.



stated in the heading to Chapter One, which outlines the entire purpose of Spinoza's argument that was written in the immediate wake of the events of 1672 and the beginning of the Stadholderate of William III:

DEMONSTRATING HOW A STATE MUST BE SET UP,  
WHEN THE GOVERNMENT IS MONARCHIC,  
OR WHEN AN ELITE RULE [ARISTOCRACY]  
SO THAT IT DOESN'T DECLINE INTO A TYRANNY  
AND THE PEACE AND SECURITY [*Veilighide, Libertas*]  
OF THE CITIZENS ARE PRESERVED.<sup>9</sup>

Concerning the immediate context when Spinoza began drafting the *PT*, as recounted by Israel, after the tragedy of 1672 things only got worse:

The greater part of the Republic was in French, or Munsterite, hands and the rest was gripped by riots and political turmoil. [...] Groningen became a war zone and a city under siege. The countryside of Gelderland, Overijssel, and Utrecht ... was ravaged. [...] The Stadholder's purges ended the rioting and political turmoil; but the disturbances of the summer of 1672 left a lasting impression on the political élite themselves. The spectacle of mass insurrection against unpopular officeholders and policies, excited ambition in some, and anxiety in others.<sup>10</sup>

Out of 460 Regents, in 1672 William III purged 130 as "politically undesirable." However, the purges ultimately undermined the stability of the Republic by driving rivalry and contention deeper in civil society and rendering civic government more factionalized; consequently, the rival political blocs were either compelled to enlist support from the mob, or bow to their pressure, only creating further instability.<sup>11</sup> The final blow to the remaining hopes of the Republic came in 1674 when William III's stadholdership in the province of Holland was made "perpetual and hereditary," and there was also a political move by the States of Gelderland a year later to make him "Duke of Gelderland" and grant him true sovereignty over the province. Although William III declined the title, owing to opposition from the Republicans in Amsterdam, it was also clear

9 Even though the heading is ascribed to the editors of the original manuscript based upon the letter to Jelles in 1676 (Letter 84), Spinoza writes: "Now I am busy with the seventh chapter, where I demonstrate Methodically all the main points of the preceding sixth chapter, concerning the organization of a well-ordered Monarchy. Afterward I'll proceed to Aristocratic and Popular Governments, and finally to the Laws and other particular Questions concerning Politics." The editors--and the first readers of the *Political Treatise*--seem to have taken Spinoza's abstract of the argument of the sixth chapter in his draft as the summary of the argument of the entire treatise.

10 Israel 1995, pp. 808-809.

11 Israel 1995, p. 810.

that the new constitution of government would no longer be Republican.<sup>12</sup> Given this immediate political and social context in which the *PT* was written, as Nadler has also argued, Spinoza's primary intent "was ensuring that any steps away from a purely republican form of government and toward a monarchist one would be as benign as possible," but his greatest concern was *that it would not devolve into something worse!*<sup>13</sup>

On a sliding scale that runs from worst to best, of course, Monarchy is the "worst" model for the constitution of sovereignty, and democracy is the "best," meaning "absolute" in geometrical terms (meaning perfect, complete, total). The different models of Aristocracy (i.e., "the rule of the best") are distributed throughout the middle of the scale; moreover, some aristocracies are "better" than others (for example, aristocracies composed of several city-states or provinces). But in most cases, Spinoza concludes, aristocracies are "better" than monarchies (i.e., "coming close to being absolute, without actually being absolute"), but still not the "best" constitution of sovereignty, "for if there's any absolute rule, it's the rule that occurs when the whole (i.e., complete, total) multitude rules."<sup>14</sup> According to the above scale, which assumes the form of a Cartesian coordinate plane composed of absolute values (on the y axis) and multiple variables (on the x axis), the true target of Spinoza's "Science of the State" is the geometrical calculation of an ideal constitution in which the disposition of natural right and civil law achieves an absolute condition of ensuring the peace and security of *both the state and the multitude*, since the state can only secure its own right to sovereign power through the agreement of the multitude, including in special circumstances the use of force and violence to insure their peace and security. In representing the form of agreement (*convenientia*) that is established as the foundation each constitutional model, many scholars have already observed that in the *PT*, Spinoza abandons the juridical convention of the "social contract" he employed in the *TTP*, even though few have observed that in the historical example of the original covenant of the Hebrew Theocracy, the actual convention employed is a treaty of peace between a suzerain and his vassals (i.e., a suzerainty treaty). In other words, the original covenant between the cannot be understood a contract between equal parties, especially since all juridical agreements must refer to a third power to enforce the agreement between the parties (i.e., the law), and in the example of the original Hebrew covenant there is no stronger power than God, the absolute sovereign. As is well known, Spinoza does not abandon metaphorical conventions entirely in the *PT*, but merely substitutes one fiction for another, which the concept of

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12 Nadler 2018, p. 401.

13 Nadler 2018, p. 402.

14 *PT* VIII.3.

“agreement” or “symmetry” (the etymological meaning of *convenientia*) that is expressed by the phrase “as if by one mind” (*una veluti mente duci*).<sup>15</sup> “Thus, he writes: “it’s evident that the Right of a state, or of the supreme ‘power,’ is nothing more than the right of nature, determined not by the power of each individual, but by the power of the multitude, *led as if by one mind*.”<sup>16</sup>

Although I am in complete agreement with Balibar that the *PT* represents Spinoza’s “Science of the State” in applying the same geometrical method he used in the *Ethics*, we must understand that the “State” itself nothing more than a modern *convenientia* that expresses the same geometrical symmetry as the phrase “as if by one mind.” In defining this modern *convenientia* of the “State-Form,” however, I prefer Foucault’s definition of the State as simply a mobile “profile” of multiple concrete or physical governmentalities (*étatisations*).<sup>17</sup> This is because the state is an abstraction and should be understood exactly as Spinoza described the illusory figures of metaphysical concepts that cannot adequately represent the complex chemical and microphysical nature of the physical bodies they attempt to describe. Thus, as a mobile figure in profile, the apparition of the State-Form is a central perspective that emerges from every vantagepoint of civil society, “as if by one mind,” as the instantaneous apprehension of the simultaneous convergence of power and right in the manifestation of the State, even in a phenomenological sense. Perhaps this apparition is best depicted in Kafka’s *The Castle* as a vague and distant figure that appears through the mist, and yet seems to be present from any point of the village that surrounds the Castle, including the interiors of the most private chambers. However, when K. finally sees the Castle from a direct perspective, it is revealed in reality as a motley assemblage of thatched roof shacks and hovels spread out across a hill.<sup>18</sup>

Returning to the *TP*, what is crucial to observe in the convention that Spinoza invents to replace the common people (*plebians* or *vulgari*) is that the entity of “the multitude” (*multitudo*) is a numerically indistinct form of individuality. That is to say, the conventional agreement of sovereignty cannot be represented the “collective agreement” of each separate individual to cede a portion of their natural right to the sovereign, according to the fiction of the social contract employed in

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15 Matheron chooses to translate this phrase as “being, as it were, of like mind,” but this would be a much weaker figure based on a mere resemblance of the thought of two separate minds. This is much closer to Foucault’s use of *convenientia* as one of the cardinal orders of resemblance between words and things in the Renaissance. See Matheron 2020, p.192.

16 *PT* III.2.

17 Foucault (2008), p. 77.

18 For a discussion of Foucault’s analysis of the geometrical figure of the State, see also Lambert (2020), 28-39.

both Hobbes and earlier in the *TTP*, but instead as the mental *consensus* of all subjects (the sovereign included) in the image of coming together (*convenire*), which is expressed by a new mental image of symmetry, or a new *convenientia*. For Spinoza, however, the “image of thought” that this new *convenientia* assumes, at least in its outward appearance, is *more geometrico*.

In *Spinoza, the Transindividual*, Balibar perhaps comes closest to the above understanding when he defines the individuality of multitude as a “transindividual,” although preferring the onto-genetic principle of individuation from Gilberte Simondon over a purely mathematical figure. In defining the notion of the “trans-individual,” or “quasi-individual,” Balibar writes:

A ‘quasi-mens’—if this expression can be sustained—corresponds to the idea of a ‘trans-individual’ *mens*, and more precisely to what a mental identity for a transindividual composite would be, if precisely such a composite were not situated at the limit of application of the concept of individuality and if it were not a question of a quasi-individual rather than a given or completed ‘individuality’.<sup>19</sup>

In reply to this definition, however, we might ask if the concept of the individual ever grasps a given or completed individuality? In other words, are not all actual individuals always already quasi-individuals or trans-individuals given the fact that there is no such thing as a completely separate individual? (But I will not pursue this argument any further here.)

Instead, I will pause my allegorical reading to make a number of observations (or *scholia*) on the meaning of the “Absolute.”

a. First, we must understand the absolute form of intuition that a geometrical “image of thought” (or *convenientia*) expresses is the cognitive ideal of *scientia Dei* that was also held by Descartes and Leibniz, which is to say, an *absolutum visio libera* in which there is no form of successive contingency; or rather, all contingent predicates are reduced to an order of extensive magnitude through the concept of an infinite series. According to Leibniz’s famous description of the absolute expression of *scientia Dei*, “only God can see, not the end of the analysis, since there is no end, but rather the nexus of terms or the inclusion of predicates in the subject, since he sees everything which is in the series.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, the “final cause” that determines the definition of the “Absolute” is mathematical and cannot be understood by the metaphysical

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<sup>19</sup> Balibar 2020, p. 128.

<sup>20</sup> Leibniz 1969, p. 265.

category of “History,” which is the final cause of the Subject of the Absolute beginning with Hegelian philosophy, and afterwards. In the appendix of the *Principles of Descartes*, Spinoza already underlines the mathematical principle does not consider causes from the perspective of final ends, but rather with essences or properties of figures, since “Mathematics is concerned not with ends, but only with the essences and properties of figures, had not shown men another standard of truth.”<sup>21</sup> According to this mathematical determination, therefore, the multitude is the variable figure of a numerical multiplicity (xy), that is, the complete set of all individuals, almost as if Spinoza had discerned a primitive set theory from the algebraic principles of Cartesian Geometry—and almost two hundred years before Cantor!

b. Second, in applying this geometrical convention to the expression of “absolute imperium,” it expresses the absolute in terms of *the complete (or perfect) set of all individuals that are counted* in the sovereignty of the state, even though the axiomatic function of this definition is theoretical and not intended as practical or empirical description of a demographic population. In other words, according to a theoretical and geometrical construction of perfectly absolute constitution in which all individuals who constitute a multitude are also included in the state—the sovereign included (whether this refers to a single individual, as in a monarchy, or a subset of individuals, as in an aristocracy)—*then all individuals would express the same conatus of the State*. From this ideal constitution of *absolute imperium*, it would logically follow that there would be no individual of the multitude separated from the State who might threaten its future peace and security. In fact, the existence of such an individual would already constitute, according to the same axiom, the existence of another multitude and the possibility of an oppositional State, as in the case of a revolution or civil war between two separate factions of the *civitas*.

c. Third, from the above definition of the multitude as a purely numerical multiplicity this would also require the subtraction of any moral attribution as a “moral person,” or “humanity,” or even a “class of individuals,” which is why Spinoza no longer employs the term *vulgarus* in referring to the masses or the common people as he did in the *TTP*.<sup>22</sup> Rather, moral attributes and common affects that are deduced from the complete set of all individuals

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<sup>21</sup> PD 20.3.

<sup>22</sup> See TTP III/9, 10, 12.

who constitute the multitude are simply treated as variables like elements of the weather; thus, the difference between vice and virtue can be judged in the same way that one can determine it is hot or cold by measuring the temperature. Of course, in the beginning of the *PT* Spinoza clearly states this method explicitly: To investigate the matters pertaining to this science with the same *freedom of spirit* (i.e., *visio libera*) we're accustomed to use in investigating Mathematical subjects, ... I've contemplated human affects—like love, hate, anger, envy, love of esteem, compassion, and the other emotions—not as vices of human nature, but as properties which pertain to it in the same way heat, cold, storms, thunder, etc., pertain to the nature of the air.<sup>23</sup>

d. At the same time, the above theoretical principle is constantly modulated by the variable rule of proportion that Spinoza applies to determine the optimum size of the State (i.e., the supreme council): “From this it follows that for an Aristocratic state to be stable, we must take account of the size of the state in determining the minimum number of Patricians”.<sup>24</sup> This same rule of proportionality was applied earlier in the *TTP* concerning the imperfect establishment of the Great Sanhedrin after the death of Moses: “So in proportion as the Hebrew state was divided, there were many supreme councils in it, which inevitably led to many rebellions as the overall argument demonstrates.”<sup>25</sup> In the *PT*, for example, applying this same proportional rule, Spinoza “calculates” that an aristocratic state of moderate size must constitute an assembly of 5,000 members of the supreme council in order to insure at least 100 skillful and virtuous politicians at any given time.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, Spinoza never provides the total population of the “average aristocracy,” nor does he explain how he first arrives at the ratio of 50/1 at the basis of his calculation. In the case of democracies, moreover, where the legal exclusion of subjects from eligibility to serve on the supreme council is determined by laws that originate from history and culture, he calculates that the proportion of eligible citizens might be smaller than the average size aristocracy he previously discussed.<sup>27</sup> For example, the number of citizens that actually constituted the Greek *polis* was much smaller than

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<sup>23</sup> *PT* I.4.

<sup>24</sup> *PT* VIII.3.

<sup>25</sup> See *TTP*, XVII/55.35n.

<sup>26</sup> *PT* VIII.2.

<sup>27</sup> *PT* XI.2.

the population of an average village in the surrounding territory. Needless to say, in making these calculations, he would never have imagined a number over 17 million as the average size of a modern democracy.

At this point, let's turn now to the last chapter of the PT in order to see how this numerical principle returns in the calculation of the most complete and perfect state (*omnino absolutum imperium*). Concerning Spinoza's actual discussion of democracy, however, it is remarkable to observe in recent scholarship the almost complete lack of attention to the constitution of democracy through the principle of suffrage as the only model under examination, as Spinoza states quite explicitly: "to consider only those democracies where the laws of the country dictate, and also independent of class or a 'respectable life' (*honestesque vivunt*), all those who have the absolute right to vote in the supreme council and to hold offices in the dominion" (*sed meum institutum non est de unoquoque, sed de eo solummodo agere, in quo omnes absolute, qui solis legibus patriis tenentur, et praeterea sui iuris sunt honestesque vivunt, ius suffragii in supremo concilio habent muneraque imperii subeundi*).<sup>28</sup> Perhaps this lack of attention can easily be explained by that fact that it does not support a "revolutionary" origin of the constituent power of an absolutely free multitude? (Once again, here I am simply applying an exegetical method of textual criticism that is usually reserved for sacred texts.) But perhaps this is also caused by the controversy surrounding the natural exclusion of women in the passages that follow, that is, before Spinoza abruptly breaks off his own discussion with the famous last sentence—"but enough of that" (*"Sed de his satis"*).

For most readers, however, it may appear more than a little contradictory when, immediately after claiming democracy as the most complete and perfect state (*omnino absolutum imperium*), Spinoza begins his description of its constitution by first defining those classes of individuals (specifically, "legal subjects") who are excluded from being part of the multitude—including foreigners, women and slaves, children and orphans, and all those denied membership owing to some crime or disgrace. As he explicitly defines the criteria for their exclusion in the following passage, which would probably appear as a *scholium* in the *Ethics*:

I say, explicitly, who is bound only by the laws of his native land to exclude foreigners who are counted as subjects of another sovereign, aside from the fact that they are bound by the laws of

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<sup>28</sup> PT XI.1. I have modified the standard translation in order to make Spinoza's intended meaning clearer. I have also added the term "class" as an interpretation of "*honestesque vivunt*" given that the immediate comparison is with criteria of membership in the supreme council of an Aristocracy.



the state and in other things are independent. Next, to exclude women and menservants who are under the dominion of men and potentates, and also children and pupils, so long as they are under the control of their parents and tutors. Finally, I said, and who live honorably, to exclude especially those whose disgraceful means of livelihood is owed to some crime or moral turpitude. (*Dico expresse, ut peregrinos secludam, qui sub alterius imperio esse censentur. Addidi praeterea, quod, praeterquam quod legibus imperii teneantur, in reliquis sui iuris sint, ut mulieres et servos secluderem, qui in potestate virorum et dominorum, ac etiam liberos et pupillos, quamdiu sub potestate parentum et tutorum sunt. Dixi denique, honesteque vivunt, ut ii apprime secluderentur, qui ob crimen aut aliquod turpe vitae genus infames sunt.*)<sup>29</sup>

As one can see in the above explication, the criteria that is applied to determine exclusion is whether the individual is first determined as a “free” and “independent” substance (that is, legally free to become a subject of sovereignty of the state), or the “subject to another power” that has priority over the state’s dominion. This would be nothing more than the basis for any juridical claim of individual right, which presupposes that the individual is not subject to a prior legal claim by another form of dominion that determines the individual’s substance and thus under its power (*qui in potestate virorum et dominorum*). This is the same definition of legal subjection is stated earlier on in VII: “Insofar as they need the other’s power, they are subject to the other. For as we’ve shown in Chapter II [§2–3], right is defined only by power.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, in listing those classes of individuals who are excluded on the juridical grounds of being subjects to another form of dominion, Spinoza never asks whether their exclusion is just or unjust, but only deduces the laws of a particular individual’s substance either from the more general laws of human nature as outlined in *Ethics* III, or according to the legal determination of this class of subjects in the historical constitutions of both aristocracies and popular forms of government. Of course, it is only in the case of the exclusion of women that he asks whether this is *ex natura an ex instituto sub potestate virorum sint?*

Here, we must return once again to the definition of the “absolute,” since in the above passages it is clear that Spinoza does not understand it to mean that all individuals are included in the State, and indeed, there has never existed a form of democracy that includes all classes of individuals in its legal constitution. The question of the constitution of

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29 PT XI.3. Once again, I have altered the translation to highlight the legal definitions of power for each class of “subjects” (*imperio* for foreigners; *potestate virorum* and *dominorum* for slaves and women; *sub potestate* for children and pupils).

30 PT VII.16

democracy will be who counts as a sovereign subject belonging to the imperium? Therefore, if earlier on I formulated a purely theoretical (i.e., mathematical) principle of the absolute imperium where all individuals who constitute a multitude are also included in the State, this principle must now be redefined in practical and legal terms to include only those individuals of the Multitude *who are counted* as subjects of sovereignty, or as sovereign individuals. This transforms the purely theoretical set of all individuals into a finite set of all individual “subjects” who are legally counted as part of the body of the multitude. As for the rest of the individuals, they are not counted as subjects and thus appear as merely *supernumerary individuals* (i.e., not enumerated among the regular components of a group).<sup>31</sup> Once again, the association with Cantor’s set theory is somewhat uncanny, since what Cantor called an absolute (or perfectly closed) set, can also be finite and moreover the rules that determine the inclusion of members can indeed be quite arbitrary.

Therefore, while it may have appeared at first as counterintuitive for Spinoza to begin his discussion of democracy as absolute imperium by determining those subjects who are excluded from being eligible to participate in the Supreme Council (i.e., to vote or be eligible to participate in dominion), this is where the purely theoretical principle is once again submitted to the proportional calculation that is deduced from actual statutes and customs, which can be arbitrary. For example, when a child reaches the age of majority and leaves his or her parent’s dominion to become a “free” and “independent” substance, the legal determination of majority is quite arbitrary since there is no guarantee that the individual has obtained an adequate conatus of his or her own individual substance to act independently of other forms of dominion. (Of course, this will become the basis of the Kantian problem of “self-incurred tutelage” as the primary obstacle to Enlightenment.) In the case of other classes of individuals who were excluded as legal subjects under the original constitution of sovereignty, especially women and slaves, they underwent a long historical ordeal until their own natural power as a class cast off the dominion of their former “Lords and Masters” (*potestate virorum et dominorum*). At that point, since right follows natural power, according to Spinoza, the State had no other choice than to hold them equally with all other subjects “who have the absolute right to vote in the supreme council and to hold offices in the dominion.”<sup>32</sup>

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31 In employing the definition of the “supernumerary individual,” I favor the theatrical convention that does not count members a crowd that appears on stage as individual actors, but instead as “extras” or “spear-carriers.” This convention will be important when I return to the figure of the mob in the conclusion.

32 In the history of suffrage law in the United States, there were actually many classes excluded by the property laws that were replaced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by income tax requirements in many states. It is only when wealth requirements were weakened by the “common school movement” that new restrictions emerged that were specifically designed to keep “undesirable groups” out of the elector-

Nevertheless, simply a change in laws and their legal status as subjects are not like “miracles” immediately enfranchised these classes with the necessary political power as well, since if “laws rest only on reason alone,” *and not also on the “common affect” that belongs to the body of the multitude*, “they are weak, and easily overcome.” Of course, it is well known that Spinoza doesn’t believe in miracles, and so it follows that these classes of “supernumerary individuals,” in particular, have been vulnerable to the resurgence of common affects (racism, sexism) and other “sad passions” (class hatred or envy, the desire for revenge or justice, etc.) that also belong to the bodies of the multitude. Concerning Spinoza’s own observations on the primary causes for the fall of historical aristocracies in Ch X—implicitly an allegory of the failure of De Witt’s “True Freedom” (*de Ware Vrijheid*)—he concludes that it is either owed to the fact that the original constitution was not “set up prudently” to begin with, creating a permanent affliction or poison in the entire body, or by an external cause that overcomes the peace and security of the state, thus threatening its dissolution and return to something like a state of nature in which all individuals are enemies. However, there is also a third cause in the convergence of both internal and external causes in what can be compared to “a perfect storm,” which I will return to address in the conclusion.

But at this point, I will depart from this calculation of who legally constitutes the multitude to what I earlier called Spinoza’s “regressive theory of the State-Form.” How are we to understand the statement that the initial constitution of sovereignty was democratic? As I have discussed elsewhere, in Chapter XVII, “On the Hebrew Theocracy,” Spinoza narrates the original account from *Exodus* precisely in terms of the Hobbesian state of nature as the war of all against all, in which suddenly freed from a state of slavery, each individual entered into his natural right and was “bound by no covenant,” and was free to either retain this right, to give it up, or transfer it to another.<sup>33</sup> And yet, there is a fundamental distinction with Hobbes argument, since the state of nature in Spinoza’s account is not prelapsarian, but rather a state that follows the first period of subjection. This is what Spinoza describes as the first covenant with God, the first Hebrew understanding of their freedom. It is precisely at this point where the Hebrew people are said to most resemble a universal form of *imperium* in which each individual has an exactly equal share in self-government and thus equal authority interpretation of

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ate—e.g., blacks, women, Native Americans, the mentally incompetent, those with criminal records, and immigrants who were non-residents. Poll taxes were revived in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, along with literacy tests (which naturally excluded blacks, Native Americans, immigrants, and poor whites). See S. Engerman, K. Sokoloff, et al. (2002), pp. 41-109.

33 *TTP* III. 24. See my “Two Covenants of Authority in the *TTP*,” in Kordela, Vardoulakis (2018), pp. 153-166.

the laws by which they will choose to govern themselves. However, at this point Spinoza immediately recounts the actual return to a state of nature, that is, to the original state of fear that leads to the creation of a new superstition by which they shrink back before the abyss opened in the voice of an equality they could not understand, as a power they became fearful of in that they did not feel capable of possessing this power for themselves. “Full of fear, therefore, they went afresh to Moses, saying, lo, we have heard the voice of God ourselves speaking in the fire, and surely we will die and this fire will consume us.”<sup>34</sup>

It was after their experience in slavery under a sovereign who was an animal like themselves, the Multitude wanted to avoid this same form of sovereignty in the future as a means of also avoiding the complete loss of their own natural sovereignty as free individuals. Consequently, as Spinoza writes, “it is because they believed that nothing, but God’s power, could preserve them that they surrendered to God the natural power of self-preservation, which they formerly, perhaps thought they possessed, and consequently they surrendered at the same time all their natural right.”<sup>35</sup> This is why I defined the convention of this agreement or consensus in the form of a suzerainty treaty between a Lord and his vassals. Consequently, the original decalogue can be understood as the articles of a peace treaty with the Lord of Nature, as truce that outlines the conditions of peace and security in order to guarantee that the Lord will cease his endless war against the people themselves. In another sense, which is that of Moses himself as warlord and sovereign under the terms of the new agreement, it might also be understood as the establishment of a civil society by outlining the juridical laws of the State, which in reality are only very practical guidelines that would ensure peace and security of the Multitude—e.g. don’t murder, don’t steal, don’t perjure yourself in taking oaths, don’t sleep with your neighbor’s spouse, or envy his house, his animals, or his slaves, etc. As Spinoza writes, “They thus clearly abrogated their former covenant, and absolutely transferred to Moses their own right to consult God and to interpret his commands.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, as Spinoza interprets it, the original covenant—the covenant that would have been more democratic in principle since it establishes a subjective principle of equality by investing the principle of sovereignty not in any human being, but in a pure voice that speaks in consensus in giving each individual access to the direct interpretation of the law and to a form of self-government—is thereby, owing to fear, transformed into the principle of sovereignty that replaces the democracy with a form of government that Spinoza identifies as Theocracy.

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34 *TTP* III.33.

35 *TTP* III.36.

36 *TTP* III.36.

As a whole, the *TTP* employs the Hebrew state as an allegory of the different articulations of political power: the Davidic dynasty corresponds to the arrangement of monarchy, which is succeeded by the construction of the temple and the rule of the Levites who represent the aristocracy or nobility (the feudal states), and finally, the Diaspora (the loss of the State and the destruction of the temple) which foregrounds the return to an earlier state of nature in which State does not yet exist in actuality. Of course, this is the state of the Dutch Republic itself that Spinoza forecasts at the very beginning of the revolutionary period that culminates in the “disaster year” and the return of the House of Orange. Thus, the allegory of the Hebrew Commonwealth in reference to the contemporaneous Dutch situation. Like the Hebrew who just came out of bondage to a form of Monarchy, the Dutch are also in the perilous situation of choosing their own form of government, and thus the allegory of the Hebrew people who were in the unique position of choosing something resembling a form of democracy, but then retreated from fear for their own individual substance and decided instead to choose a form of sovereignty that resembled a Monarchy. This informs a somewhat pessimistic outlook that Spinoza has on the future of Dutch politics in 1670 and the ultimate failure his own aspirations for a more radical democratic constitution, especially following the imprisonment and eventual death of his closest friend Koerbagh on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1669, after which, and despite the objections of his editors and closest friends, he decided to publish the *TTP* anyway. Anyway, the rest is history.<sup>37</sup>

Returning now to penultimate chapter of the *PT*, it is here that Spinoza again employs the allegorical method used earlier in the *TTP* to outline both the internal and external causes of the overthrow of the Dutch Republic through the historical examples of the fall of the Florentine and Roman aristocracies. The external cause concerns the fear of death that grips each individual in a time of crisis that Spinoza also begins with in the *TTP*, certainly in reference to the Anglo-Dutch wars and the immanent Franco-Dutch war that effectively ended De Witt's government and the period of “True Freedom” (*de Ware Vrijheid*). Here, we can see a similar state of fear that originally drove the Hebrews to abandon their own autonomy and surrender their natural power to the sovereign figure of Moses. However, Spinoza will ultimately argue that the true cause of the dissolution of the sovereignty of the state is not from an external enemy, but rather from the weakness of the aristocratic constitution to preserve the state in a time of crisis by inspiring in the mind of the Multitude a common affect of hope--if not love!--for the future of the Commonwealth. While the common affect of hope can assume a theologico-political image of the state or the figure of the sovereign himself, as in the case of the divinity of Moses for the Hebrews, the

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37 See Nadler (2011), p. 42.

common desire for vengeance can also unify composite individual bodies of the multitude into a conspiratorial form of temporary alliance. As Filippo Del Lucchese has observed, *conspirare* etymologically means “to breathe in the same direction,” referring to the composition of individual bodies into a larger body of the mass that moves in the same direction as if it was being blown by the same breath or great wind.<sup>38</sup> Thus, “coming together” (*convenire*) of separate individual bodies to form a more powerful body is vividly demonstrated in the formation of a mob, and here Spinoza is clearly commenting on the recent events of mob violence and the murder of the De Witts. Moreover, although it may appear that a mob is also “led as if by one mind,” it is commanded less reason than one of the common affects addressed in proposition 45 of *Ethics* IV: “Envy, Mockery, Disdain, Anger, Vengeance, and the rest of the affects which are related to Hate or arise from it.”<sup>39</sup> Concerning the primary affect that first cause individuals to suddenly become a mob, which is the fear of death and solitude, the most remarkable aspect of the collective phenomenon is the absence of individual fear. Thus, as Spinoza already observed, “the mob is terrifying, if unafraid.”<sup>40</sup> Finally, if the above historical example is not vivid enough, one can easily witness the farcical repetition of the same mob-scene in the crowded streets of Amsterdam on “King’s Day,” including boatloads of drunken pirates sailing in from the *Oost*! However, the sad passions of revenge and cannibalistic rage that had originally animated the Dutch mob have today been replaced by extremely joyful affects, such as the self-love of “being Dutch,” accompanied by the entire Multitude singing “*Willhelmus*” (“The William”) in unison.

I will now return to our contemporary allegory; although, at this point I am not sure whether its proper genre is a tragedy or a farce. I suppose it is more tragic than comic if one regards 2021 as yet another “disaster year,” but according to a more Freudian principle of repetition that one repeats what one does not remember. As I have already commented on the internal cause for recent events that stems from an inherent defect in the original constitution, which is fruit from a poisonous tree, but besides war with an external enemy, there is another external cause that Spinoza only mentions in passing, but which can be interpreted to refer to a caused by natural disaster, plague, or pestilence, when each individual is reduced to a state of fear and solitude by the overwhelming power of nature itself.

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38 Lucchese, “The Revolutionary Foundation of Political Modernity,” in Melamed, Sharp eds. (2018), p. 201.

39 On the topic of revenge, see Chantal Jaquet, “Longing (*desiderium*) for Vengeance as the Foundation of the Commonwealth,” in Melamed, Sharp eds. (2018), pp. 77-92.

40 *PT* II.10.



For there's no affect which isn't sometimes overcome by a stronger, contrary affect. We see that the fear of death is often vanquished by the desire for someone else's property. Those who flee an enemy, overawed by fear, can't be restrained by fear of anything else, but rush headlong into rivers or into a fire, to escape their enemies' steel. So, however properly a commonwealth may be organized, and however well its laws may be set up, still, in the greatest crises of the state, when everyone is seized by panic, as often happens, then everyone approves only what the present fear urges, without giving any consideration to the future or to the laws.<sup>41</sup>

In this case, the weakening of the state's sovereignty occurs as if "by some inevitable fate" that the state could never have avoided by simple "prudence" (in reference to Machiavelli's primary virtue in the "art of government"). However, it is also in the periods of crisis caused by natural disasters and plague, that new *conspiracies* abound in the body and mind of the Multitude, as well as superstitions and miracles, as Spinoza addressed in the *TTP*—but this is certainly also true of the crisis caused by the pandemic of 2020, our *Rampjaar*! As I have already observed above, for the State to survive caused by the fear of death and enforced solitude against each citizen, the multitude must already have as a common affect a sufficient love and confidence in the sovereignty of the state to maintain its hope in a future state of peace and security; otherwise, as Spinoza argues, every free multitude has the "natural right" to completely dissolve its alliance with the State, which in some ways implies that all political alliances, including an established Commonwealth, are indeed temporary. Spinoza deduces this natural power that innately belongs to the multitude from the fact that in a state of nature each individual is his own master:

But if either Commonwealth loses its hope or fear, it is once again its own master (by II.10), and the chain by which the Commonwealths were bound to one another is broken of its own accord. So each Commonwealth has a complete right to dissolve the alliance whenever it wants to. It can't be said that it acts deceitfully or treacherously because it rescinds its assurance as soon as the cause of fear or hope is taken away.<sup>42</sup>

In other words, in being forcefully reduced to a state solitude and loneliness in which every individual is at its weakest, any free multitude can either return to a state of nature where every autonomous individual

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41 *PT X.2.*

42 *PT X.4.*



becomes a little despot (although, powerless to exercise its sovereign right over others), or, on the other hand, losing all hope in the current constitution of sovereignty, each separate individual can surrender his or her own individual substance to form a larger and more powerful body, a body that in some respects resembles another natural power, like a hurricane, that destroys the institutions of the State itself. However, unlike a natural force like a hurricane, a final parallel between recent events and the events that took place in Holland in 1672 is that winds that blew the mob in a particular direction were subject to political calculation.

To conclude our allegorical interpretation, as Spinoza observes, “in a time of crisis something happens which returns a state to the principle on which it was established.”<sup>43</sup> However, since the democracy of the United States was not originally established as a Monarchy (although some would argue that it was originally an Aristocracy), the original principle upon which the United States was established returns us to the revolutionary situation of a “free and independent multitude.” Therefore, as was also the case in the Dutch situation, this has effectively split the multitude into two opposing minds, if not into two completely different bodies as well. According to one mind and one body, the revolutionary aims of B.L.M. protest movement and the “1619 Project” seek nothing less than to completely *re-constitute the constituent power of the State* in order to finally enfranchise those originally excluded classes (but especially blacks) with actual political power (*potestas*) and not only civil or legal rights (*potentia*). According to the opposing mind and body, the revolutionary aim of Trump-supporters like the “Proud Boys” (who actually identify themselves as “patriots”) is to defend the original constitution of sovereignty, and in particular, the exclusion of blacks, immigrants and women.

In keeping with Spinoza’s own method of deducing the common affections of human nature, I am make these observations without any moral evaluation, that is, just as if I were describing two natural bodies simply by listing their properties and affects. And yet, from a realist description I will say that it is impossible for one body to contain only virtuous and joyful affects, and for the other body to be filled only with vices and sad passions. Of course, the only remaining question is whether a multitude can actually be composed of two separate minds and two different bodies and still belong to a single State by whatever form of consensus, agreement, or even mere “convention” (*convenientia*)? Since the answer is most likely negative, we can only conclude that the entire multitude can think “as if with one mind,” it will be necessary for the state of democracy that Spinoza defined as *omnino absolutum imperium* to become—for an indefinite period of time!—indeed, something that

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43 PT X.9.

resembles “a state within a state” (*imperium in imperio*). But since I have clearly departed from Spinoza’s method by prophesizing of future things that are yet unknown, I will simply conclude by invoking his own famous last words:

“*Sed de his satis.*”

Fayetteville, New York  
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# **Hegel or Spinoza: Return to a Journey**

**Pierre Macherey**

The formula “philosophical journey” prompts me to clarify my position with respect to work done a little over thirty-five years ago, in a context quite different from the one where its results are now available for reconsideration. From the outset, this change of conjuncture represents a “journey,” which does not arise from isolated particular initiatives, but whose scope is global and refers to what Hegel might call the “spirit of the times.” In 1979, the ideological ebb that marked the eighties had just begun, and one could still imagine that it was a transient phenomenon that would not call into question the effects of the great rupture made ten years earlier on the level of conceptions and practices of collective life. The book I composed at the time, *Hegel ou Spinoza*,<sup>1</sup> remained driven by the idea that the project of changing the world and putting an end to bourgeois ideology made sense and that the task of philosophy was to play its part, producing on its own plane “advances,” as was said at that time. In 2015, we can no longer see things this way: beneath a horizon from which the reference to a revolutionary perspective has been, if not completely erased, at least caused to be reconfigured in a rather different way, what has developed is a rather resigned and deceptive way of looking at things that encourages melancholy, uncertainty, a wait-and-see attitude, or even worry. In this new environment, theses that had been advanced or ventured in hope – let us take up again this formula that Althusser liked: to “shake things up” [*faire bouger les choses*] – no longer have quite the same meaning; and the relationship that is maintained with conceptions inherited from Marxism has been profoundly modified. Yet this does not mean that this relationship has completely come undone: it simply proceeds along other paths, it borrows from different “journeys” that oblige it to revisit a number of acquired certainties, which, as difficult and painful as this revision appears, ultimately turns out to be beneficial. There are several ways to progress, and the one that proceeds backwards, by stepping back, and not forwards, is perhaps not the most fruitless: if Christopher Columbus wound up arriving somewhere – it is not forbidden to regret it – it is because he started on the wrong side, which could be a pretty good illustration of the labor of the negative.

By the force of circumstances, I have therefore been invited to take up from behind a retrospective journey that is not very easy, the content of a work that had been conducted in an atmosphere that was not at all the same as where it is offered to be reread today. Reflecting in advance on what I could say on the occasion of the present intervention, I prepared to argue around the following theme: I would doubtless no longer write this book, *Hegel ou Spinoza*, in the same way now, if only because, in the meantime, I learned a little more about the two poles of this confrontation, of which I only had a rather partial knowledge then, which years of study and teaching practice backed up by the movements

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<sup>1</sup> Macherey 2011. (Translator's note).

of life in its two forms, individual and collective, have since enabled me to improve, at least in some respects. And then, in order to target the points on which the analyses I had proposed would have to be reworked, I picked up the book and reread it as closely as possible while trying to identify its approximations and shortcomings. This approach was neither comfortable nor obvious to me and, not without difficulty, led me to the following conclusion: it would doubtless be necessary to present certain things differently, and, moreover, not only to change the form but also to revise the content, to defend new viewpoints, better educated and more refined, responding to the theoretical and practical needs that cannot have remained unchanged. However, once this necessity has been recognized, it remains that today I could not, I would not know how to, write this book other than was done, at least for the most part, taking account of the numerous corrections of detail that would need to be made to it. I can therefore only note the following: for my own account, I have remained roughly at the same point. I have not been able to follow the new journey that should have been completed; I have not been able to follow it; I haven't adopted, concerning the stakes of the relationship of Spinoza to Hegel and of Hegel to Spinoza, a position that would truly be innovative compared to the one that I had so badly defended at the time, and that Althusser had welcomed as a part of the edifice he was trying to build, namely, the elaboration of the philosophy left dormant by Marx, an approach he considered urgently called for by the spirit of new times – times which, seen today, appear very old. Consequently, without any triumphalism, and even with the feeling of being in some respects a failure and of evading an inescapable obligation, I stand by my views: that is to say, I see myself formally bound to assume – no matter how little assured it is when viewed from a distance – an approach, a “journey” that I recognize I am substantially unable to modify, which I leave to others.

To undertake an approach that one feels can or even must be partly outdated can first consist in explaining the reasons that served as initial justifications, therefore, to identify the objectives to which it tried to respond. Those were really situated on two different levels. On the one hand, there was a general concern about the study of philosophy, and more precisely about the texts in which its “journeys” are recorded, that is to say, to consider the institutional categories, the way to proceed in the “history of philosophy” in so far as it constitutes a discipline in its own right, having its place in an academic teaching system: rightly or wrongly, it seemed to me that this could play a significant role in the activity of doing philosophy otherwise. On the other hand, there was, on the plane proper to the conceptual apparatus used by Marxist theory, the specific question of the materialist dialectic, which it was desirable – in order to preserve its plasticity, in the last instance revolutionary – to remove the rigid, and ultimately conservative, straitjacket of “Dia-Mat” in which it had been unduly imprisoned and from which it was not easy to extricate.



Therefore, the journey I had personally taken at the time had a double aspect: on the one hand, it related in general to the way of reading and interrogating philosophers, relying on the specific case represented by these two great “authors” of the tradition of Spinoza and Hegel, generally regarded as classics; on the other hand, it was connected to the project initiated by Althusser of recasting Marxist philosophy in terms of the elucidation of some of its basic principles. It was not self-evident how to adjust these two concerns, one of which at first glance has a strictly conservative import (to read authors correctly is what, in France at least, any philosophy teacher is supposed to know how to do by profession, by professional obligation), while the other goes beyond this context and is even situated in relation to it in a delayed relationship of contestation. To interpose Marx between Spinoza and Hegel: is it not, in the end, to treat Marx himself as an “author,” an author like the others, an author among others, having his place in the official organizational chart of philosophy and no longer able to move? A follower of Bourdieu would have no trouble in diagnosing in this regard a “lector” approach, entangled in the nets of scholastic reason, which imagines that by unraveling texts it can help to change the world, and that the status of the dialectic, as a revolutionary method, is also the business of historians of philosophy applied to read their “authors” correctly, who are therefore frozen by the commemorative gesture that puts them off course. It is indeed to this objection that I exposed myself by engaging in a double effort practiced on a tightrope, which could only wind up with fragile, debatable results, resting on presuppositions whose validity, as much as it ever was, has ceased to be obvious today, which I would not try to deny.

To begin with, let us return to the first point, the one concerning method in the “history of philosophy,” that is to say, concretely, the reading of texts deposited in the great memorial of philosophy. The proponents of analytic philosophy have often criticized philosophers who have been identified as “continental” for their refusal to address directly the real problems with which philosophy should be concerned, such as whether coffee is sweet in the cup or in the mouth, timeless problems to which they have formed the bad habit of substituting questions on doctrines as they were elaborated and written down in their time by such or such a philosopher, under the authority of each and from the perspective that was his or her own. This attitude, in their eyes, is ultimately relativistic to the extent that, by historicizing reflection, it reintroduces into it – with the principle of temporality and its accidents – variation and consequently a certain degree of uncertainty which, in the long run, makes philosophical problems insoluble, or at least indefinitely defers their resolution. In reality, this criticism is not new: Descartes advocated, in order to build a system of truths based on certain principles, and capable of lasting, to skip provisionally, and in fact symbolically, what the philosophers who had preceded him had

upheld; and Hegel, in his official reports on the teaching of philosophy in high schools – he, who has been credited or blamed for having introduced historicity into the proper order of philosophy – proposed to remove from the curricula all that relates to the past history of philosophy, because these references according to him could only comfort the uninformed minds of young students with the idea that philosophy amounts to a free play of colorful opinions and shake their confidence in the power of reason. In the background of this reluctance to maintain philosophical activity under a horizon of historicity – a reluctance shared even by Hegel himself, who was particularly concerned not to be accused of historicizing empiricism and flattered himself for having reinstated the reference to the absolute in the field of philosophical thought – there is the concern expressed by Kant that, once introduced or brought back into the disputed arena of a *Kampfplatz*, this activity is condemned to go in circles without being able to escape. So, how to put an end to this inexpiable struggle of philosophies if not by dismissing the history that, by deploying truth on a potentially indefinite timeline, delays its recollection, thus preventing it from happening in itself and for itself? Althusser himself professed: philosophy has no history, which did not prevent him from defining it elsewhere as “class struggle in theory,” revealing that his main concern was not after all to pacify the steps into the absolute.

Perhaps one should go back to Althusser’s formula by simplifying the statement that he had highly politicized – and somewhat overpoliticized, which was perhaps an indirect way of depoliticizing it – and be content to say that philosophy is “struggle in theory”: it thus represents, at work in the production of knowledge and the practical implications associated with it, that which arises from the spirit of struggle, that is to say, fundamentally, the negativity that labors at its heart, wherever it takes place, the search for truth. But this struggle is without beginning or end: permanently destined to be revived, which leads it to reconfigure how its stakes are reached, it therefore involves neither victors nor vanquished, it leads nowhere. From this perspective, the particular conflicts between philosophers and the great quarrels that mark the history of thought – the quarrel between the friends of the forms and the friends of matter, the quarrel about universals, the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns, the quarrel of pantheism, the quarrel of anti-humanism, to mention only some of the most famous – are far from being accidents on the journey on which it is advisable to close one’s eyes modestly by returning them onto the subaltern terrain of a history of ideas understood as a history of opinions not having an authentically philosophical value. Rather, these conflicts and quarrels are very instructive on the occasion of which emerge the stakes of the reflection that the rut of speculative rumination rejects in the background or artificially flattens. This means disabling them under the guise of

identifying and systematizing the results. By attacking the disturbing relationship, mixing agreements and disagreements, which further destabilizes it, which passes between the philosophical positions of Spinoza and Hegel, and by trying to reconstruct the logic so illogical at the end of the exchanges that they maintain at a distance, concretely while making them have a dialogue, I was finally doing nothing but putting into practice the idea that philosophy is first and foremost a struggle in theory, a struggle that never ceases to recommence, to continue, to relaunch itself in new directions; which is why, perhaps, philosophy would have no history as understood in the sense of a history whose great narrative would lead step by step to an end, and which would consist, as Hegel argues, in the process of its own self-determination.

Brunschvicg said: Spinoza is Hegel without the heaven of becoming. And Althusser himself, in the chapter of his *Elements of Self-Criticism* devoted to Spinoza, remarked melancholically: "Spinoza will always miss what Hegel gave Marx, the contradiction." But isn't becoming, contradiction, in the sense that Hegel gives to these concepts, also that which, under the guise of the magical operation of absolute negation, is destined to put an end to becoming, and to resolve contradiction, that is, ultimately to suppress them? In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel complains to Spinoza for having "harmed the negative." By this Hegel meant that, when Spinoza maintains that *omnis determinatio est negatio* – a formula Hegel lends to Spinoza, but that in reality he himself completely fabricated in order to criticize him – he definitively linked the negative to the chain of finite determinations and bad infinity, which prevents him from freeing himself by operating the movement of return onto oneself which, in its very momentum, transforms the negation into the negation of the negation, that is, as a tool of its own dissolution/resolution/sublation. Then could it not be said that, by taking Spinoza as the target of his attack, Hegel tried to repress his own apprehension about a negative that, as he says himself, would be only negative, and at the same time, to appease his fear of a becoming that would be pure becoming, that is to say, which would not lead to an end for which it would be destined from the start?

It is this question that I had tried to raise by arguing that, when Hegel rereads Spinoza, in fact he exposes himself, he projects himself through the prism that Spinoza offers him, and, through a movement in return reveals at the same time, in the mirror that he stretched out to himself, his own obsessions: then, at the same time as the reading of Spinoza by Hegel, is imposed the rereading of Hegel that Spinoza encourages to do because of the relentless resistance that he continues to oppose to his reappropriation by the system of absolute rationality projected by Hegel. In the momentum of this re-reading, one might be tempted to uphold, by returning term for term, the theses that had been brought up at the beginning: Was Spinoza without the true negative,

expurgated from the proclamation and promise of his resolution that gives legitimacy and meaning? Was Spinoza without the real principle of historicity, that is, without becoming, meaning a becoming without origin or end, and producing gradually the modal forms of its rationalization that had not been programmed a priori at the start?

In truth, things turn out to be infinitely more complicated: to take into consideration and try to elucidate the relationship that passes between Hegel and Spinoza is to set in motion a turnstile whose rotation continues without stopping. It certainly cannot be denied that Hegel proposed an exceptionally strong reading of Spinoza, that is to say, a partisan reading in which his own philosophy is fully engaged, to the point of not leaving unscathed from the confrontation thus initiated. On the contrary, one can only admire the audacity and scale of such a venture, which is accompanied by a risk-taking whose magnitude locks in place when one becomes aware of it. It is inevitable that this reading of an exceptional power, which operates in the open, is downright tendentious: Hegel does not hesitate to do violence to the statements actually made by Spinoza in order to better invest them by making them enter into the logic of his own system of thought, concretely by making him speak with his words, and by taking him at the word of his own words – Hegel's. To achieve this, he must reinvent Spinoza in large part, recreating him from scratch by relying on certain elements of his discourse detached from their context (mainly the definitions of the first part of the *Ethics* and some statements included in the *Letters*).

But this practice is in reality common to all philosophers when they undertake to characterize their position by distinguishing it from another they regard a *contrario* as a witness of their own originality: even when Leibniz comments on Locke by following step by step the text composed by the latter, he is dealing with an entity that could be called "Leibniz's Locke," and we do not see how it could proceed otherwise. Likewise, the *Gorgias* of Plato probably has little, or even nothing at all, to do with the real Gorgias of history of which only a few vestiges remain that can invalidate this reading, which is, one might say, a convenient reading, which does not make it any less interesting once the limits within which it remains closed have been specified. In all these cases, there is unquestionably abuse, but this abuse is in its way legitimate; in any case it is philosophically significant, to the extent that it is committed within the framework and dynamics of an experience of thought that cannot afford to be completely naive and innocent, which is the condition for it to stimulate reflection by orienting it in a certain sense, meaning in a well-defined sense, thus opening up a space for discussion within which it is open for others then to rush in. This is why we should be grateful to Hegel for having proposed a figure of Spinoza that mainly holds attention by the way it twists the original, so far as this "original" itself remains and can be attained independently of all the images of him that have been

elaborated according to it and after it, and that constitute what is called in Italy his “critical fortune,” that is, his posterity.

If the reading that Hegel proposes of Spinoza is faulty – as is easy to demonstrate, for example, on the subject of the interpretation he proposes of the concept of attribute – it must therefore be specified that it is systematically faulty, which means that it cannot be considered only by default and rejected. How does Hegel go about it? He extracts the notion of attribute from its context in order to insert it into the substance/attribute/mode sequence, a triad-shaped sequence in which the attribute as he interprets it formally holds the position of the medium term, and that he explains roughly by reducing it to the following terms: infinitely infinite (the substance)/ infinite in its kind (the attribute)/ finite (the mode). Thus configured, this sequence presents itself linearly as a forward-and-downward movement, without the possibility of going back: it is a process of degradation, of loss, during which substance consumes and gradually depletes its primary energy, to the point that it annihilates itself by blending into the details of a world that is in reality a non-world; thus is justified the label of “acosmism” that Hegel attributes to Spinoza’s thought. Naturally, if we look a little more closely at the texts, it does not work: on the one hand, the attribute does not play in Spinoza the role of an intermediary between substance and its modes; on the other hand, the whole that constitutes the modalized reality of the existing things, “natured nature,” is not a chaos abandoned to the vagaries of finitude, but it is marked by the seal of infinity, which testifies to the doctrine of infinite modes on which Hegel totally overlooks. If one follows Hegel’s interpretation, it becomes impossible to understand that substance is entirely present in the smallest of its modes, where its power occurs *certo ac determinato modo*, which is the key to the *conatus* doctrine that Hegel also overlooks, for if he took it into account, his entire reading would be invalidated. However, in carrying out these elisions and in committing these errors, which are by no means accidental, and which could be called true errors, to the extent that they hit the nail on the head precisely because they concern particularly sensitive points – we can call them critical points, where everything changes – Hegel points out the importance in Spinoza himself of themes such as infinite modes or the *conatus*, which he had to eliminate or discreetly put in brackets in order to sustain his interpretation of Spinoza, which allows him to appropriate it a *contrario* to his own system, because of what, according to him, is lacking.

As a result, one could say that Hegel’s reading of Spinoza is a kind of symptomatic reading, in the sense that it consists mainly in reading in the text what it does not say, from which it follows that it says in fact something other than what it seems to say. But at the same time, by a sort of backfire, this reading is transformed into a symptomatic reading of Hegel by himself, which makes it possible to detect the articulations on which his own way of thinking rests, such as the theme of absolute

negation, or negation that comes back to itself in order to deny itself, the engine of the dynamic by which, according to Hegel's formula, "substance becomes subject." So, when Hegel declares that he wants to demarcate himself from the fact that, in Spinoza, there is no becoming subject of substance, he is perfectly right, and he even goes straight to a fundamental point: substance as Spinoza conceives it is in no way destined to become subject, whether it is a subject of itself or a subject of its affections; if there is a trial of substance as he conceives it – which is by no means immobile and massified as is too often said: on the contrary, it is constantly in motion, which is the condition for it to produce reality in infinitely varied forms – it is not the one by which it would attain self-awareness.

As astonishing as it may seem, by dint of departing from Spinoza, by taking liberties with the letter and spirit of his text, Hegel winds up returning to him and saying something essential about him. By engaging with Spinoza in a test of strength from which the spirit of compromise is absent, Hegel has revealed the stakes at the very heart of Spinoza's enterprise, stakes that are also at the heart of his own enterprise, from which it results that their relationship is not at all a false encounter, built solely on a series of misunderstandings: they do indeed encounter and clash, a test from which they both come out truer, for eternity, such that the struggle in theory, which is the essence of philosophical activity, changes them in themselves. This is what I had tried to report, in the title of my book, by playing on the ambiguity in the French language of the little word "*ou*," which signals both alternative [*aut aut*] and equivalence [*sive*]. Spinoza and Hegel, through the distance that separates them, are linked, inseparably united one to the other, as if they were writing on the back and front of the same sheet of paper.

Their connection is not due to chance: it is explained by fundamental reasons, which concern the way one understands the negative, becoming, that is to say, the process or set of processes during which, at the heart of a world dominated by causal relations of necessity, emerges a liberating project, an ethics that is both individual and collective opening up the possibility, let's return to this formula, "of shaking things up." On this last point, Hegel is very quiet in the context of the discussion in which he engages with Spinoza: his lecture in the history of philosophy devoted to Spinoza ends with the remark that in Spinoza there is also an ethics, which he sums up in broad strokes, by reducing it to the treatment of the problem of evil. He did not see, or refused to see, that the philosophical enterprise of Spinoza is thoroughly – and from the start, in the strictly ontological considerations that the first part of his work develops – supported and animated by an ethical and political concern. He did not realize that if in Spinoza substance does not become subject, which is quite true, it is because, in a certain way, from a certain angle, the condition of "subject," in the sense that



ethical activity can give to this term, is involved in it at the very beginning in its very nature as substance, without it having to pass through the stage of self-awareness. Indeed, in Spinoza, there is not first an ontology and then an ethics, which would be its derivation or application, but both an ontology and an ethics, which can be distinguished in theory only from the viewpoint of abstract understanding; whereas, in fact, in practice, from the perspective of the third kind of knowledge, they are indistinguishable. This explains why Hegel did not understand much about Spinoza's ethics, which he relegated to the status of a subsidiary inquiry, just as he did not understand the importance of his politics, which he eliminated purely and simply, deleted with a stroke of the pen from his reading, whereas, having participated in the edition of the *Theological-Political Treatise* carried out in Jena at the very beginning of the nineteenth century, he must certainly have known about it.

To become aware of the fact that Hegel is united to Spinoza precisely by what separates him from him is to find oneself immersed in "dialectics" – a dialectic practiced in action and not only ruminated on at a distance by means of pure speculation. It is in this sense that Hegel's reading of Spinoza, and incidentally the reading of this reading, is dialectical, and not a reading that is frozen, stopped, blocked on insurpassable certainties: it sets thought into motion; it is a reading that makes one think, that forces one to reflect, that is, one would say in Spinoza's language, to become more active, therefore, freer. And, more precisely, it is a reading that itself is in motion; despite its systematic appearances that at first glance contribute to freeze it, it moves. Between Spinoza as he appears in the different parts of the *Science of Logic* and the one reviewed in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, professed some ten years later by Hegel, there is not opposition, reversal term by term, but a shift of emphasis: the first is basically a monist, a thinker of Being, who tends towards dualism, thus an Oriental inclined towards the West; the second is a dualist of the Cartesian type (the reference to Descartes, absent from the passages of the *Science of Logic* devoted to Spinoza, appears, and in the most sustained way, only with the *Lectures*), a reflexive thinker of Essence who, however, remains entangled in monism, like a Westerner who hasn't cut his oriental roots yet. It is around this paradox, this anomaly that represents a two-faced philosophy, torn in itself between two poles, an ontologism of the Parmenidean type and a rational formalism of the type he attributes to Descartes, which Hegel has turned into an intellectual leaven, and not just a theoretical fact, to take or leave as it is. And if you think about it, you realize that this anomaly that Hegel identifies in Spinoza is in Hegel himself: it would not be absurd to write, after a book entitled *Hegel ou Spinoza*, and in light of its results, another book entitled – but then there would have to be found a publisher willing to accept this somewhat bizarre title and probably hardly saleable – *Hegel ou Hegel*, maintaining the ambiguity attached to



the use of the word “ou” in the French language. In a book of this kind there is no longer any question of a monolithic thought engulfed in its system and revolving in its circle, but of a philosophical activity carried in the momentum that pushes it forward without succeeding in putting an end to this movement: in fact, after Hegel there is something like “Marx or Nietzsche”, a formula in which “or” works again as a signal of uncertainty.

The best alternative to Hegel, to the “idealist” Hegel whose shell Marx declared to want to crack in order to free the kernel, would basically be Hegel himself: for Hegel is not so “Hegelian,” entangled in his system, as is generally imagined – just as Marx himself said he was not a “Marxist,” nor was Nietzsche as “Nietzschean” as is claimed. Hegel, in fact, is not only a moment in the history of philosophy intended to make us the object of a retrospective look, but is in the present or, if one prefers, *sub specie aeternitatis* – these are two ways of saying the same thing – an incentive to think in action that is constantly offered to be taken up and relaunched on new bases. To have done with Hegel, to throw him into the rubbish heap of past ideas, who we would no longer need at all to do philosopher – as a thoroughgoing Nietzscheanism asserts – is an absurdity whose price to pay would be heavy. Having admitted this, it is no longer permissible to return materialism and idealism back-to-back, making them the mutually exclusive terms of a binary opposition. In the period immediately preceding that in which I wrote *Hegel or Spinoza*, great importance was attached to the motto: “One divides into two,” which I myself had taken up to name a contribution to the issue of *Kulturrevolution* devoted to Althusser on the occasion of his seventieth birthday. But why would one divide into only two? That the destination of One is to divide, one can easily admit, which amounts to affirming that one cannot think One without also thinking at the same time its division – and the negative is ultimately nothing else, that is to say, the fact that everywhere, it divides and it “is” divided, and that, by dividing, it becomes, it historicizes and it globalizes; but that this division must stop at two, while it does not cease to offer itself to be recommenced, relaunched in new directions – this is what is no longer at all obvious.

This brings me back finally to the formula “Philosophical Journeys” in the plural: the idea according to which philosophy would have to take only one journey, which would be the right one, its royal road, the one that leads it straight to its goal, should simply be abandoned. And with it, to return to the question of reading texts, we should also renounce doctrinal purity: true philosophers, those who make things happen simply because, after them, there are things that can no longer be said in the same way – and indisputably Spinoza and Hegel are among them – are not “authors” whose signature would guarantee a total adherence to oneself that would make them permanently irrefutable, unsurpassable, unattackable, and consequently secluded once and for all in their own viewpoint from which

one could no longer dislodge them. If I had the ability, today I would try to write a book that I would call *Spinoza ou Spinoza*, in which I would explain – giving again to the word “ou” the two values of equivalence and alternative – that I am no longer at all certain that Spinoza, who was finally no more Spinozist than Hegel was Hegelian or Marx was Marxist, would be in all respects in agreement with himself, which in my view makes him not less but even more interesting philosophically.

*Translated by Ted Stolze*

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# **Spinoza, Althusser, and the Question of Humanism**

**Yitzhak Y. Melamed**

**Abstract:** The myth of humanism – the view of the human subject as the end of creation and as being endowed with free will – was the subject of a seething critique by Benedict de Spinoza. Althusser was well aware of these strands of Spinoza's anti-humanism, and it was partly by virtue of these strands that Althusser was so much attracted to Spinoza's philosophy. Still, from another perspective, Althusser was far more of a humanist than Spinoza, and it is the primary aim of this short essay to illuminate the ways in which Althusser – and his disciples – might have failed to appreciate the full extent of Spinoza's attack on humanism.

**Keywords:** Althusser; Spinoza; anti-humanism; God; infinity.

“Spinoza's philosophy introduced an unprecedented philosophical revolution of all time, perhaps the greatest philosophical revolution of all time, insofar as we can regard Spinoza as Marx's only direct ancestor, from the philosophical standpoint.”<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In a memorable moment in his celebrated book, *For Marx*, Althusser announces:

It is impossible to know anything about men except on the absolute precondition that the philosophical (theoretical) myth of man is reduced to ashes [*la condition absolue de réduire en cendres*]. So any thought that appeals to Marx for any kind of restoration of a theoretical anthropology or humanism is no more than ashes, *theoretically*.<sup>2</sup>

The myth of humanism <sup>3</sup>– the view of the human subject as the end of creation and as being endowed with free will – was the subject of a seething critique by Benedict de Spinoza. Althusser was well aware of these strands of Spinoza's anti-humanism, and it was partly by virtue of these strands that Althusser was so much attracted to Spinoza's philosophy.

Still, from another perspective, Althusser was far more of a humanist than Spinoza, and it is the primary aim of this short essay to illuminate the ways in which Althusser – and his disciples – might have failed to appreciate the full extent of Spinoza's attack on humanism.

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<sup>1</sup> Althusser and Balibar 1977b, p. 102. I would like to thank Zach Gartenberg, Mogens Laerke and Neta Stahl for their most helpful comments on earlier drafts of this piece.

<sup>2</sup> Althusser 1977a, pp229-30, p. 236.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion of the definitions of humanism (and anti-humanism), see my Melamed 2010, pp.149-50. Specifically, I do not have in mind here the notion of renaissance humanism which is more of a historical, than theoretical, category.

## Part 1: The Predecessor

Louis Althusser had an enormous influence on the development of French Spinoza scholarship toward the end of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> While Althusser did not compose any monograph dedicated squarely to Spinoza, Spinoza seemed to be a permanent interlocutor in Althusser's writing. In many ways, Althusser saw Spinoza not only as Marx's predecessor,<sup>5</sup> but even as anticipating (and influencing) Althusser's own anti-humanist reading of Marx.

Spinoza was a writer who rejected the fundamental role of the Cartesian concept of the subjectivity of the *cogito*. He contented himself with putting forward as a fact: 'man thinks',<sup>6</sup> without drawing any substantial consequences from this... *I later took from [Spinoza's thought] my description of history and of truth as process without a subject (providing the origin and basis of all meaning) and without end* (without any pre-established eschatological destination); for by refusing to believe in the end as an original cause, I truly came to think as a materialist.<sup>7</sup>

Spinoza's strict and uncompromising determinism, his disposal of final causes, as well as his radical rejection of the Cartesian (and Kantian) cult of the subject exerted a momentous attraction upon Althusser,<sup>8</sup> but there was another decisive issue: Spinoza's analysis of religion.

What I discovered in Spinoza (as well as the well-known appendix to book I<sup>9</sup>) was a formidable theory of religious ideology, an 'apparatus of thought [*appareil de pensée*]' which turns the world

4 For an excellent discussion and overview of French Spinozism, see Laerke 2021

5 See Althusser 1977a, p.78, n. 40; p. 75, n. 40.

6 See E2a2. Unless otherwise marked, all references to Spinoza's works are to Curley's translation: *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, 2 vols. For the Latin and Dutch original text, I have relied on Gebhardt's critical edition. I cite the original texts according to the volume, page and line number of this edition (for example, III/17/5). I use the following standard abbreviations for Spinoza's works: TTP – *Theological-Political Treatise*, Ep. – Letters. Passages in the *Ethics* will be referred to by means of the following abbreviations: a(-xiom), c(-orollary), p(-roposition), s(-cholium) and app(-endix); 'd' stands for either 'definition' (when it appears immediately to the right of the part of the book), or 'demonstration' (in all other cases).

7 Althusser 1933, p.217, Althusser 1992, p.249. Italics added.

8 "By its radical criticism of the central category of imaginary illusion, *the Subject*, it reached into the heart of bourgeois philosophy, which since the fourteenth century has been built on the foundation of the legal ideology of the Subject. *Spinoza's resolute anti-Cartesianism consciously directs itself to this point...* Spinoza showed us the secret alliance between Subject and Goal which 'mystifies' the Hegelian dialectic." Althusser 1976, pp.136-7. Italics added. Cf. Althusser and Balibar 1977b, p.40.

9 Althusser obviously refers to the appendix to Part One of the *Ethics*. Veasey's English translation of *L'avenir* inserts here an erroneous and misleading reference to "*Tractatus*."

upside down and takes causes as ends;<sup>10</sup> the whole thing elaborated in terms of its relationship to social subjectivity. What's a 'cleansing' operation it proved to be!<sup>11</sup>

For Althusser, Spinoza's discussion of religion in the TTP provided a model of a penetrating analysis of the function of ideology. Both in the preface to the TTP and in its seventeenth chapter, Spinoza describes in great detail the socio-psychological mechanism which Moses employed to create social cohesion in the ancient Hebrew State without the use, or even threat, of brute force.

Frequently, Althusser describes the transition from ideology to science as a transition from *imaginatio* – Spinoza's first (and inadequate) kind of cognition, to *ratio*, the second<sup>12</sup> (and adequate) kind of cognition.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Althusser also ascribes to Spinoza the crucial realization that ideology is *inescapable*:

As is well known, the accusation of being in ideology only apply to others, never to oneself (unless one is really a Spinozist or a Marxist, which in this matter, is to be exactly the same thing). Which amounts to saying that ideology has no outside (for itself), but at the same time that it is nothing but outside (for science and reality). Spinoza explained this completely two centuries before Marx, who practiced it but without explaining it in detail.<sup>14</sup>

As we shall shortly see, the inescapable ideology of Marxism – even Althusserian Marxism – was: humanism.<sup>15</sup>

.....  
10 See E1app (II/80/10-14): "This doctrine concerning the end turns nature completely upside down. For what is really a cause, it considers as an effect, and conversely [NS: what is an effect it considers as a cause]. What is by nature prior, it makes posterior. And finally, what is supreme and most perfect, it makes imperfect."

11 Althusser 1993, p.216; Althusser 1992, p. 248. Cf. Althusser 2003, p. 128.

12 On the development of Spinoza's distinction between the three kinds of cognition, see Melamed 2013.

13 Althusser 1977a, p.78, n. 40; Althusser 2005, p. 75, n. 40. Cf. Althusser 1976, p. 141, and Peden 2014, pp.147-8.

14 Althusser 1971, p. 175.

15 "Marx's theoretical anti-humanism, by relating it to its conditions of existence, recognizes a necessity for humanism as *ideology*, a conditional necessity" Althusser 1977a, p. 231 (cf. p. 229). Cf. Althusser and Balibar 1977b, p.314.

## Part 2: Taming Spinoza's Anti-Humanism: Secularism qua Ideology

One of the most salient features of the Spinoza renaissance in French philosophy of the 1970s and 80s was the fact that with the notable exception of Martial Gueroult, the vast majority of the scholars involved in this endeavor were Marxists and leftists. The tension between the secularist ideology of Marxism and some of the foundational ideas of the *Ethics* generated some amusing constellations. Thus, in a late interview, the formidable Spinoza scholar Alexandre Matheron reflected upon the beginning of his serious engagement with the *Ethics* in the 1950s: "I was much more interested in the fifth part of the *Ethics* from the moment I took my distance from the Communist Party."<sup>16</sup>

Obviously, the fifth part of the *Ethics* with its celebrated doctrine of *amor Dei intellectualis* is not – to put things mildly – the first occasion on which ostensibly religious concepts appear in the *Ethics*. Of course, one can always join Leo Strauss and suggest that the entire edifice of Spinoza's metaphysics with its extremely precise, innovative and elaborate proof of God's existence – proposition 1 to 11 of Part One of the *Ethics* – was merely meant to deceive the *vulgus* and hide Spinoza's secretive atheism.<sup>17</sup> As we have just learned from the presidency of Donald Trump, one should not underestimate the capacities of conspiracy theorists. The hermeneutics employed by Strauss would allow him also to infer secret atheism even from the phone directory of the Vatican. In another work, I argue that Strauss' conspiracy theory fails to make sense of the basic doctrines of both the *Ethics* and the TTP.<sup>18</sup> Althusser's writing on these issues is far less sophomoric than Strauss', and his allusions to Spinoza's alleged Maoist guerilla warfare are more charming than Strauss' conspiracies.<sup>19</sup> But still, when I read carefully Althusser's announcement: "Spinoza began with God, and deep down inside (I believe it,<sup>20</sup> after the entire tradition of his worst enemies) he was (as were da Costa and so many other Portuguese Jews of his time) an atheist" – I cannot avoid the suspicion of deep ideology (and self-deception) at work.<sup>21</sup>

.....  
16 Matheron 2020, p. 359.

17 Strauss 1988, p. 189. For critical discussion of Strauss, see Melamed, forthcoming b.

18 Melamed, forthcoming b.

19 "A supreme strategy: Spinoza began by taking over the chief stronghold of the adversary, or rather he established himself as if he were his own adversary... Military speaking, this revolutionary philosophical strategy recalls more than anything else the theory or urban guerilla and encirclement of cities by the countryside dear to Mao." Althusser 1997, pp. 9-10.

20 Notice the role of *belief* in this sentence. The alleged atheism of Da Costa and "the many Portuguese Jews" is just another secular fairytale, but we have no time to discuss this issue here. For a critique of Yirmiyahu Yovel's theories about the conversos, see my Melamed 2011.

21 Althusser 1997, p. 9.



In his later writings, Althusser identifies Spinoza's God as 'the Void [*le vide*]', and Spinoza's philosophy as an instance of the 'philosophy of the Void.'<sup>22</sup> Althusser pursues several routes in order to reach the identification of Spinoza's God with 'the Void.'

Saying that one 'begins with God', or the Whole, or the unique substance, and making it understood that one 'begins with nothing', is, basically, the same thing: what difference is there between the Whole and nothing [*quelle différence entre le Tout et rien*]?<sup>23</sup>

Now, one may genuinely wonder to what extent the Void could be that thing which – as Spinoza writes at the opening of the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* – “once found and acquired, would continuously give me the greatest joy to eternity [*quo invento, et acquisito, continua, ac summâ in æternum fruerer lætitiâ*].”<sup>24</sup> True, unlike the perishable goods of wealth, honor, and sensual pleasure,<sup>25</sup> the Void is not a subject of false hopes: the Void is dead. It perished, and it will not die again. Still, why should we love the essentially perished being, and how precisely could it fill us with infinite joy?

There are plenty of empty synagogues today (especially in Europe), and if what Spinoza amounted to today is just another saint for the new – or, by now, old – cult of secularism (or yet represented another stepping stone in our “ascent” to secularism), then I can only sincerely hope that Althusser's manichean Spinozism of 'the Void' is able to rescue a genuine sense of *beatitudo* and “greatest joy to eternity” for its believers. Still, another issue needs to be clarified before we say farewell.

In a recent, elegant and beautiful piece, P.-F. Moreau suggested that “Spinoza is a thinker of finitude; the infinite for Spinoza is a means to think the finite in the most positive way possible.”<sup>26</sup> My high esteem for Moreau's work notwithstanding, I tend to see things in almost the opposite way.

The absolute infinity of God with which Spinoza opens the *Ethics* (E1p6) creates a perspective from which the egocentric claims and pretensions of humanity appear somewhat pathetic. It is this perspective that allows Spinoza to proclaim that “there is no proportion between

22 Althusser 2006, p. 176 | Althusser 1994, p. 549. For a somewhat different reading of the nature of 'the void,' see Lewis 2018, pp. 34-5. Cf. Peden 2014, p. 132.

23 Althusser 2006, p. 176; Althusser 1994, p. 551. This view comes quite close to genuine ontological nihilism, since at the same time Althusser does not hesitate to assert that for Spinoza “anything which can exist never exists anywhere other than in God” (Althusser 2006, p. 177).

24 Spinoza, *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, §1 (II/5/16).

25 Spinoza, *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, §§3-4.

26 Moreau 2019, p. 56.

the finite and the infinite; so *the difference between the greatest, most excellent creature and God is the same as that between the least creature and God.*"<sup>27</sup> From this perspective, human hubris is indeed "reduced to ashes."

The vantage point of the cathedral of absolute infinity also allows Spinoza to claim (*pace* Moreau?): "being finite is really, in part, a negation" (E1p8s1).<sup>28</sup> Spinoza's definition of God as the absolutely infinite plays an important role in his critique of anthropomorphic religion, but this very notion of absolute infinity also provides a sober reality check for the hubris of humanism.<sup>29</sup> By eliminating absolute infinity, the Althusserians reject Spinoza's most powerful weapon against humanism. And thus, we are left again to think and celebrate the finite "in the most positive way possible." "Human, all too human," said – once upon a time – good old Zarathustra.

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<sup>27</sup> Spinoza, Ep. 54 | IV/253/8-12. Italics added.

<sup>28</sup> On Spinoza's absolute infinity, see my studies Melamed 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Though I am not in a position to demonstrate this point here, I would venture to say that Spinoza's critique of traditional, anthropomorphic religion is primarily a critique of humanism.

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# **Spinoza and the Materialism of the Letter**

**Warren Montag**

**Abstract:** Chapter 7 of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” is often read as a learned exercise in the desacralization of the Bible or, more precisely, that portion of it originally written in Hebrew. According to this reading, Spinoza uses his training in Hebrew and Aramaic, together with his knowledge of Hebrew language commentary, to discredit the authority of Scripture by revealing its inconsistencies and faults. In fact, by suggesting that the method of interpreting Scripture is no different from that used to interpret nature, Spinoza carries out a desacralization of *Scriptura* in general, that is, of writing, stripping away the covering that masquerades as its interior or depth, and revealing the letter of the text as the irreducible site of meaning. By overturning the sovereignty of spirit, Spinoza opens the way to a materialism of the letter.

**Keywords:** interpretation, the Bible, Spinoza, materialism, desacralization

Certes la lettre tue, dit-on, quand l'esprit vivifie. Nous n'en disconvenons pas, ayant eu à saluer quelque part ici une noble victime de l'erreur de chercher l'esprit dans la lettre, mais nous demandons aussi comment sans la lettre l'esprit vivrait. Les prétentions de l'esprit pourtant demeureraient irréductibles, si la lettre n'avait fait la preuve qu'elle produit tous ses effets de vérité dans l'homme, sans que l'esprit ait le moins du monde à s'en mêler.

Jacques Lacan, “L'instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient ou la raison depuis Freud”

It is not easy to understand the beginning of Ch. 7 of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP), “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” nor is it easy to understand to degree to which we do not understand it. Commentators often overlook it, perhaps because appears to them to be little more than a denunciation of the exploitation of Scripture for purely worldly purposes by means of extravagant interpretations of Biblical passages that, upon examination, exhibit little real connection to the texts whose meaning they purport to elucidate. From this perspective, the interpretations Spinoza condemns are designed to appeal to the imaginations, hopes and fears of the faithful in order to bring them under the sway of the interpreter who claims Biblical authority, rather than to determine the meaning of the words of which Scripture is composed. Every, or nearly every, interpreter thus enters into conflict with every other in a competition for the adoration and obedience of the greatest possible number of readers. Further, the competition for followers, far from leading

to ever more accurate and informed interpretations, instead encourages each commentator to distinguish himself from all others by offering a truth inaccessible to his competitors, thus emphasizing the importance of hidden meanings and secret messages at the expense of the actual words of Scripture. Only a disenchantment of the Holy Scripture, carried out, of course, with the utmost prudence, could put an end to the exploitation of the Bible for worldly ends, and the religious conflict (within Christianity) that it inevitably entails. According to this reading, Spinoza has written the TTP to show that the Bible consistently teaches only a few basic lessons, and while it does not arrive at them by means of reason, these lessons nevertheless correspond to conclusions to which reason leads: human blessedness consists of loving God and loving one's neighbor as oneself.

While this reading of the introductory section of chapter seven of the TTP has a basis in Spinoza's text, it can pass as an adequate account of the text only by leaving some of the work's most original and powerful statements unread and unexplained. These are precisely the statements that render Spinoza's writing irreducible to his moment, that is, to the Dutch or European Enlightenment, or even the Enlightenment plus its resident aliens, whose work, while contemporaneous with the impulse toward the secularization of knowledge, neither clearly supported nor opposed it. To say that Spinoza is irreducible to the historical moment is neither to remove him from history, nor to dissociate him from the debates and discussions of his contemporaries. On the contrary, it is to say that neither he, nor we as his readers, can be confined to what is too quickly determined to be a moment, period, or context, whose thought, however conflictual, constitutes an unsurpassable limit both for Spinoza and for those who seek to understand and explain his work. Such a limit, in Spinoza's case at least, runs through his texts, not around them, meaning that alongside allusions to Hobbes or Lodewijk Meijer, we find not only indelible traces of Medieval Hebrew language commentaries and the polemics that animated them, but also traces of ideas still to come whose mark on Spinoza's texts could only become intelligible and even legible three centuries later. To insist on the non-contemporaneity of the time both around and in Spinoza's work is also to call into question (or rather to allow ourselves to see Spinoza call into question) the idea of historical progress as reaching its fulfillment in the realization of the ideal of secularism. The "operation of the *sive*," as André Tosel called it (e.g., *Deus, sive Natura*, God, or Nature),<sup>1</sup> never simply serves to replace a theological term with its secular equivalent, as if the latter were the true meaning of the former; as we will see, this operation unfailingly complicates both terms: nature is not the same when it is made, if only for a brief moment in the preface to part IV of the *Ethics*, the equivalent

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<sup>1</sup> Tosel 37.

of God as conceived by Spinoza in parts I-III. Similarly, Spinoza's association of the methods used to understand nature and Scripture not only naturalizes Scripture, but provokes a questioning of the notion of nature itself and the extent to which, even as understood by natural philosophy, it remains in part obscured by assumptions foreign to it.

Spinoza's objectives in the TTP, however, are not always easy to discern, perhaps because they take shape as objectives only retroactively, in the course of the exposition before which they could not be thought or even imagined. His denunciation of the interpreters of Scripture quickly becomes an analysis of both the theory and practice of interpretation and of the concept of Scripture that necessitates something like interpretation, that is, something more than mere reading, perhaps a reading that itself requires a second reading, or a translation (one of the meanings of the Latin verb *interpretor*). To transform the Hebrew Scriptures into a movement from a beginning, the Creation, to an end (of Days), from Sin to Redemption, that is, both teleology and eschatology, required a reconceptualization of both writing and reading, as well as of language itself. Spinoza located the weak point of the immense apparatus of interpretation, the place from which he could, given the prevailing conditions of his time, sabotage its workings and in doing so make its operation intelligible: Paul's declaration (2 Corinthians 3:6) of a New Covenant, "not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life [οὐ γράμματος ἀλλὰ πνεύματος· τὸ γὰρ γράμμα ἀποκτείνει, τὸ δὲ πνεῦμα ζωοποιεῖ].

We should not mistake Paul's meaning. "Letter" here refers not simply to the letter of the law, the commandments in their literal sense, dead words, applied without mercy by dead souls, but also to the letters and words of Scripture, its narratives and histories, as well as its 613 commandments. Slavery to the letter will give way to reading according to the spirit, a reading that denies the meaning of the written words it reads in order to render them signs of prefiguration and anticipation, that is, of the coming liberation from servitude to the flesh and from the life that ends in death. Spinoza, in opposition, seeks to overturn the subjection of letter to spirit in the TTP, just as in the *Ethics* he lays the groundwork for an insurrection of the body against the soul, not the soul that is one and the same thing as the body, but the soul that it is imputed to it by law and moral doctrine. By referring to Scripture (or Scriptures in the plural as he does at the beginning of chapter 7) as the Sacred letters (*Sacris Literis*), he sets them apart from both profane use and abuse and renders them irreducible, beyond the reach of the disfiguring operations of allegory and typology, now defined as impious acts. In declaring the letters sacred Spinoza has paradoxically restored them, and the texts of which they are the basic elements, to their material existence on the basis of which alone an adequate knowledge of Scripture can be developed.



"On the Interpretation of Scripture" begins with a rather complex set of assertions concerning the status of Scripture in which Spinoza separates what is generally said about Scripture from the practice that corresponds to it. In words, "everyone" (*omnibus*--the first of the terms he uses to designate the subject of these common pronouncements) says "the Holy Scripture is the word of God" and the road to blessedness.<sup>2</sup> In practice, however, they proceed from a very different understanding of the Holy Scripture. The actions and words of the *vulgus* (crowd), whose relation to *omnibus* (everyone) is not yet clear, suggest that they live without regard to the teachings of Scripture. Of course, "*vulgus*" can designate nothing more than a great number, the vast majority of a given population, although it may also attach to this neutral sense an additional pejorative coloring. And while the absence of any desire on the part of the vast majority of the people to live according to Scripture is condemnable, what is next attributed to "nearly everyone" (*omnes fere*) may deserve even greater condemnation. "Nearly everyone, as we can see, attempts to pass off (*venditare*) their inventions (or fabrications, their *commenta*), as the word of God, and seek nothing more than to constrain others using the pretext of religion, to think as they do."<sup>3</sup>

While Spinoza initially allows his readers to imagine themselves among the exceptions to "the mass of people" who disregard the teachings of Scripture, the third and final assertion, whose implications are far more serious, denies all but an insignificant number of people the possibility of being exempted from the charge of substituting their own commentary for the Scripture itself and thereby using religion as a cover for the effort to force others to think as they do. Does this mean that Spinoza has accused "nearly all" of his readers of fraudulently representing their own words as the word of God for the purpose of deceiving others into obeying the commentator in the belief that they are obeying God? In fact, the ubiquity of the practice suggests that individuals are both its agents and its patients, the simultaneous purveyors and victims of the fraud. But, more fundamentally, how is it possible, given that the commentary must refer to the written text of the Bible that is either read by or to the people, for a human invention to be taken as the word of God?

The next sentence, so often overlooked by modern readers, addresses exactly this problem: "We see, I would argue, that the primary concern of theologians is to be able to deform the sacred letters (*ex sacris literis extorquere possent*) so as to be able to derive from them their own fabrications and opinions."<sup>4</sup> In early modern Latin scholarship, the

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2 Spinoza 2002, 456. Here and elsewhere I have modified the translation.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

phrase "Sacred Letters," (*sacris literis*) functioned as a synecdoche of "Holy Scripture" (nearly always in the singular), but appeared far less frequently, most often in ecclesiastical controversies concerning matters of ritual that in theory had a basis in Scripture and thus demanded a careful reading of "what scripture literally says." Spinoza's reading of the phrase "sacred letters" in the passage cited above, however, disrupts the synecdoche according to which the letters in their literal and graphic existence are the means of conveyance of the meaning of the Holy Scripture (in the singular), itself a synecdoche representing the spirit behind the letter, and the voice behind the writing.

For Spinoza, the Sacred Letters can no longer be understood as the most superficial level of meaning, the superficies of the surface. He turns the synecdoche against itself and refuses a reduction of the letter (or letters) to spirit by conferring sanctity on the letters themselves. To regard the letters as sacred in his sense is to allow them a reality apart from what they are said to represent and to render the act of changing or replacing them under the pretext of more accurately transmitting the spirit of the text, "impious."<sup>5</sup> Spinoza goes to great lengths to compel his readers to confront the letter or letters of the text: he generally cites the many scriptural passages that appear in the TTP in Hebrew, and not transliterated but printed in the Hebrew alphabet, before supplying the Latin equivalent (which often departs from the rendering made familiar by the Vulgate). We should note that this gesture is often suppressed in translations of the TTP, as if against Spinoza's argument, the spirit of the text lies outside of the arrangement of letters in a particular language, the latter no more than one instrument among others by which it may be communicated. Modern versions of the TTP that omit the Hebrew or, in the case of a single word, transliterate it, subtract from the experience of reading the chapter devoted to reading and interpretation something of its unyielding complexity. Apart from the relatively small percentage of its readers able to read the cited passages in Hebrew, the vast majority of those who have read some variant of the original Latin versions experience in the most graphic way (graphic understood both literally, or graphically, and metaphorically) the stubborn alterity of the Sacred Letters and have seen that only an act of faith allows them to take translations (whether Latin or vernacular) as a faithful rendering of the Hebrew text, that is, as something more than an invention or fabrication..

As far as I have been able to determine, "Sacred Letters" has served as the object of the verbs *torquere* or *extorquere*, meaning to twist or wrench, and figuratively to extort something from someone or to torture someone to extract information or a confession, only in Spinoza's text. This is hardly surprising: while in English, for example, few readers discern a link between the terms "distort" and "torture," the physical

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5 Ibid.

and violent senses of the Latin *torquere* and *extorquere* overshadow its figurative uses.<sup>6</sup> What passes for interpretation is an act of violence directed at the letter of the text, as if, because “the letter killeth, while the spirit giveth life,” one must kill the letter that kills so that the spirit may live. In response, Spinoza restores sanctity to the letters, just as he does to the body and to nature as a whole: no part of existence is “unworthy of the divine nature” (*Ethics* I P2, sch). And the very letter that Spinoza repeatedly places before the reader, not in spite of its foreignness but because of it, the letter in its irreducible materiality, reminds us that there is no meaning hidden behind or beneath it from which it must be removed to reveal. There is nothing hidden: meaning emerges from the infinite concatenation of letters, a horizontal movement of conjunction and assemblage. Both interpretation and the translations that the Jews, even in the case of the Aramaic translations or *targumim* typically included in the so-called Rabbinical or Commentators Bible), regarded as interpretations rather than reproductions of the text, have been extracted through the torture of the Sacred Letters, that is, the act of interpretation whose violent coercion serves as a fictitious guarantee of the truth of what Scripture has been made to say, just as the testimony of slaves in Roman legal proceedings was credible only if it was obtained through torture. This is Spinoza’s response to Augustine’s *De doctrina christiana*: the Hebrew Scriptures have been seized in the course of violent conquest by those who, without understanding or wanting to understand what they have taken, use them as a decorative covering for their own doctrines. Spinoza has no interest in asserting their truth or their superiority over other texts that claim a similar status; his objective is to make visible how they are used, distorted and deformed, in short, converted into something they are not and forbidden, like the conversos of Spain and Portugal, ever to refer to their previous life. Thus, it was not the recovery of the Holy Tongue (Hebrew: שְׂדֵקָה וְנוֹשֵׁל), the language of the utterances (תּוֹרְמָא) with which God created the world, with all its admitted peculiarities, that allowed Spinoza to think about Scripture, writing, and letters in a way so new that it sometimes seems to have arrived from an unknown future rather than derived from the past. It was precisely his confrontation with the violence of interpretation, the experience of the discrepancy, the gap, the fault, conceptual as well as linguistic, between the original Hebrew and the Greek and Latin that allowed Spinoza the freedom to take what he needed from both the traditions of Jewish thought and from the great scientific advances of his time to carry out his exploration of Scripture.

Spinoza’s use of *torquere* and *extorquere*, with the inescapable connotations of “graphic,” corporeal violence, to describe the operation

6 Moreau 1994, 337. “Torturer le texte (expression qu’emploie souvent Spinoza) ce ‘est rien d’autre que de le faire de l’*usus*.” Moreau argues that Spinoza rejects the opposition between the literal and the figurative and declares the possible meanings of Hebrew words in Scripture limited to those actually found there.

of interpretation, however, does not simply convey information about the means and motives at work in the interpretation of Scripture. It also calls attention to the resistance of Scripture to interpretation that necessitates the violence inflicted on the Sacred Letters. The critique of the letter codified and established by Augustine was founded on the notion of its emptiness and insubstantiality; it was reduced to nothing more than a temporary, superficial, and inessential means of conveying a meaning to which it remains purely external. The fact that letters that must be twisted and mangled to yield up the desired message to the interpreter means that their existence is not spiritual but material: they display the resistance to force that is one of the defining characteristics of matter, in this case, sonic or graphic forms of matter coextensive with and inseparable from the meaning they carry. The meaning immanent in Hebrew, in the patterned configurations of sounds and letters, and the words as they are used in the texts in which they exist, has been declared a pretext for the meaning added to it and then declared its true meaning. The true, spiritual Israel has, according to Augustine, has rightfully supplanted carnal Israel, as the younger reigns over the elder, and the letter is submitted to the authority of spirit.

Spinoza delivers the letter from the its subjection to the spirit and allows it to display the power proper to it. We might recall Lucretius's account of sound and voice in Book IV of *De Rerum Natura*: "*Corpoream quoque enim vocem constare fatendum est, Et sonitum, quoniam possunt impellere sensus.*" According Thomas Creech's seventeenth-century translation: "'Tis certain, then, the voice that thus can wound; Is all material body, every sound."<sup>7</sup> As Spinoza reaches the peroration of his condemnation of the theologians, and the conclusion of the long sentence we have not yet found our way out of, he condenses into a single phrase the diverse lines of argumentation concerning the nature of speech, writing, and language in general. Speaking again of the theologians, now likened to inquisitors who extract false confessions through the torture that serves to guarantee their truth, he maintains that "there is nothing in which they act with less care (the word is "*scrupulo*" or *scrupulus*, a sharp stone, and in its figurative sense, the pain it inflicts, as in "to take pains" or "painstaking") or more rashly (but also dishonorably) than in the interpretation of the Scriptures, or the mind of the Holy Spirit (*Scripturas, sive spiritus sancti mentem*)."

The Scriptures, or the mind of the Holy Spirit: if very few of the commentators on the TTP appear even to have noticed this passage, the general avoidance it has occasioned is not difficult to explain. In fact, the prominence of the terms Scripture and Holy Spirit encourage the reader to make haste to rejoin Spinoza in his continuing harangue against theological interpretations of the Bible. If we pause, however, at

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7 Lucretius 118.

this phrase, another example of the operation of translation/substitution of incommensurable terms indicated by the conjunction *sive*, we are immediately confronted with a series of questions. First, while Spinoza nearly always speaks of Scripture in the singular, as in Holy Scripture, he here uses the plural form, Scriptures, a use many translators have chosen to ignore, as if it were an error or a matter of insignificance. It would seem, however, that Spinoza calls attention to his use of the plural by asserting that the Scriptures are the mind, or are what we mean by the mind of the Holy Spirit, in the singular, thus introducing a discrepancy between them. The words that follow, "the mind of the Holy Spirit," or the "the Holy Spirit's mind," only complicate the meaning further. How is it possible to attribute a mind to the Holy Spirit given that *Spiritus* often served as a synonym of *mens*, both of which could be translated as "mind?" Finally, while Spinoza might have said that Scripture is an expression, a reflection or a representation of the (mind of) the Holy Spirit, thus making Scripture derivative of and dependent on the Holy Spirit from which it emanates, he declined to do so. Instead, he informs us that when we speak of the Holy Spirit, of what it commands or forbids, praises or blames, that is, its judgment or intellection, its *mens* is entirely immanent in the material existence of Scripture, its letters, and the words and phrases they compose. Conspicuously absent from the presentation of the two phenomena joined by the conjunction is that which would mediate their relation: in this case, because we are speaking of writing or written language on the one hand and a mind on the other, the notion that Scripture "expresses," "signifies," or "represents" the mind of the Holy Spirit. The exteriority of Scripture to that which it represents or that of which it is a sign is, of course, critical to the very possibility of translation. The mind of the Holy Spirit must possess an existence prior to and outside of the written form of its expression not only to remain present to writing as a guarantee of its truth, but also as that which remains present to any translation, that which is repeated and re-presented in the translation itself, which becomes the transmission of an identical meaning through another language or system of signs. By rejecting the notion that Scripture "expresses" the mind of the Holy Spirit, and instead suggesting that, as in the case of God and nature, the mind of the Holy Spirit is entirely immanent in and therefore not separable from the Scripture, from the very properties of the language in which it was written, in its lacunae, inconsistencies and redundancies, is to eliminate precisely the dimension that would be susceptible to translation by virtue of its transcendence of and separability from the accidental and merely material form in which it was first realized.

It is this that allows us to understand Spinoza's use of the plural "scriptures:" as he will show in great detail in the remainder of chapter 7, there is no unified or consistent scriptural doctrine, any more than there is a uniform style of writing, or use of language. It is a composite

of multiple and diverse texts that together form a text that in no way transcends the diversity it embodies. This, to recall *Ethics* II, Def. 7, is both its irreducible reality and its perfection. The mind of the Holy Spirit does not exist either prior to or outside of the Scriptures in their very plurality but is entirely coincident with them. To understand what is at stake in the idea that the Scriptures are the mind of the Holy Spirit, we might turn to a strikingly similar passage in *Ethics* I P33 Sch2: "God was not (or did not exist) before his decrees nor could he have been without them." While the proposition concerns the necessary character of what God has produced, such that not even God has the freedom to change their configuration, Spinoza advances the extraordinary notion that God does not exist before his own the decrees, the decrees through which that which exists was produced. I want particularly to call attention to Spinoza's use of "decrees" (*decreta*) in this passage, a performative term that captures a necessary coincidence between speech and power in the sense of *potentia*: it is a command accompanied by the force to assure its realization. But Spinoza refers here to decrees and commands in which language and the reality on which it acts become inseparable, and thus to commands without a commander and therefore to a process of production without a subject or agent. Neither language nor the reality to which it not only refers, but which it also produces, can be said, according to Spinoza, to originate in God, as long as we understand God to remain prior and external to his decrees. If a notion of origin (or originating cause) survives, it is only as that which is absolutely immanent in its effects as, in the earlier passage from the TTP, the mind of the Holy Spirit neither precedes nor transcends the letters in which alone it inseparably dwells.

Those who would correct or improve Scripture by translating the Hebrew into another, "more philosophical," language, such as Greek or Latin (to follow Augustine's argument) or by covering the original text, the mind of the Holy Spirit, with invented meanings, have "falsified" it, and thus committed "sacrilege." And while their worldly interests are served by the falsifications they pass off as Scripture, their interpretations are governed by a set of "theological prejudices" that prevent us from apprehending Scripture in its reality and that represent an extension of superstition as Spinoza defines it in EI appendix to the realm of written texts. The theologians transform Scripture into the mere surface or pretext of the meaning they claim to have found hidden in the depths of the Sacred Letters, but which they have in fact added to it. For them, the surface or external appearance of the text exists precisely to conceal what lies hidden within it, whether to humble those readers given to inordinate pride (as suggested by Augustine) or to protect the truths it conceals by restricting access to those willing and able to undertake the arduous journey into its interior regions. Only those who understand the carnal nature of the letter, its impermanence and worldliness, know enough to seek the immutable spirit beyond, beneath or behind



it, and hence not immediately available to the interpreter. If Scripture presents the appearance of disorder and diversity, a true reading, one in accordance with spirit, will discover the providential order that extends from God's creation even into his Word. Just as what appears to be a sequence of events governed by chance alone, as a series of Spinoza's contemporaries showed, further study reveals the laws and principles determining the movements of bodies, both simple and complex, and the place of these movements in the service of the ends assigned to them by the divine intellect, so Scripture becomes intelligible only on the basis of the purposes that every element of its composition exists to fulfill. The letter of the text by virtue of its bodily character is the site of diversity, ambiguity and confusion: the coherence of the work cannot be found there, but only by a reading that leaves it behind to find Scripture's hidden coherence.

The practice of allegorical interpretation proposed by Augustine in *La Doctrina Christiana* represents one of the most important contributions to the "theological interpretation" Spinoza opposes. His critique of the devaluation of the letter of Scripture, that is, the Sacred Letters, begins with an assertion that the Scriptures, in their plurality, are the word of God and not signs of the word of God that could legitimately be replaced by other signs. The Scriptures as they are, in Hebrew, with its many sources of confusion and undecidability, replete with contradictory statements, discrepancies and lacunae, are the mind of the Holy Spirit, meaning that this mind has no existence apart from the Scriptures, existing neither before nor outside of them, but as their immanent cause, the cause immanent in their multiplicity and present nowhere outside of it to confer unity upon their diversity. To define the letter of Scripture as a degraded expression of the Holy Spirit in order to set it aside or to add through imposition a meaning not found in the Hebrew letters and words is, Spinoza tells us, impious disobedience to the direct command spoken in the first person by God in Deuteronomy (4:2): "Do not add to the word with which I command you nor take away from it," echoed subsequently in Proverbs (30:6): "Do not add to his words." Every attempt to supply the order and design regarded as missing or to add what is necessary to reconcile its discordant and conflicting parts of Scripture or cover over its gaps represents a rejection of the actual text on the basis of imaginary norms external both to it and to nature.

The entire opening section of Chapter 7 consists of a series of theoretical experiments often with only slight variation in the instruments, here words and concepts, in the development of a theory of language (in the sense of *langage*, rather than *langue*, or of the immanence of *langue* in *langage*, to cite Althusser)<sup>8</sup> adequate to his discussion of Scripture, even as he is compelled to take Scripture, both as it is as

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8 Althusser 82



an artifact, and as the site of a philosophical mobilization supported by a number of apparatuses and institutions, each with the practices, rituals and liturgies by which they persist, as his immediate object. At first, he operates, as a matter of necessity, within the field of Scriptural interpretation as it has been defined historically, occupying the points of contradiction and conflict to shift the relations between their terms in a way favorable to thinking in a new way about both Scripture and language (as did Augustine more than a millennium earlier): his use of “Sacred Letters” (drawing on the ever increasing emphasis in Jewish thought up to his time on the holiness and power of Hebrew letters (תּוֹרָה) in their graphic as well as phonic existence; his use of Scriptures in the plural in place of Scripture, and finally his definition of Scriptures as the mind of the Holy Spirit, which simultaneously made God the author of Scripture and declared that his mind (or thought) had no existence outside of the letter of the text.

The effects of Spinoza's procedure becomes clear when the passage in question is read in the light of his discussion of prophecy in chapter 1 of the TTP, in the course of which Spinoza asks “what is meant in the Bible by the prophets' being filled with the Spirit of God, or the prophets speaking with the Spirit of God [*quidnam sacrae literae intelligant per spiritum Dei prophetis infusum, vel quodi prophetae ex Dei spiritu loquebantur*], ” and more particularly the meaning of the Hebrew word רוּחַ or *ruach*, commonly translated as spirit [*quid significat vox Hebraea רוּחַ ruagh, quam vulgus spiritum interpretatur*].<sup>9</sup> From the Sacred Letters, Spinoza deduces seven distinct meanings, none of which correspond to the sense of the Greek and Latin terms, πνεῦμα and *spiritus*, assigned to *ruach* by the various translations of the Bible. Instead, he argues that the “genuine” or basic meaning of *ruach* is “wind,” necessitating a revision of the translation of Genesis 1:2 of which the King James version is typical ( “And the spirit of God [רוּחַ ה' הָיָה מְעוֹלָה עַל-מַּיִם] hovered over the face of the waters”) to “God's wind (a “wind” that, like all things, comes from God) blew across the surface of the waters.” *Ruach*, like πνεῦμα and *spiritus*, can also mean “breath,” and by extension life, a meaning from which a number of subsidiary uses are derived: persistence, fortitude, courage. In addition, the term may signify an individual's disposition or tendency, often involuntary or unconscious, that moves him as a wind would. We should note, however, that in none of these senses can *ruach* be understood as a substance external and opposed to bodies, human or otherwise. It is only through translation and interpretation that such a meaning is added to the text. And what Spinoza says later in the TTP is perfectly applicable here: “Now if this is to be called interpretation, and if one can assume such licence in expounding Scripture, transposing entire phrases, adding to them and subtracting

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9 Spinoza 399.

from them, then I declare that it is permissible to corrupt Scripture and to treat it as a piece of wax on which one can impose whatever forms one chooses.”<sup>10</sup>

We have now sufficiently complicated the notion of interpretation both in and around Spinoza to be able to return to chapter 7, to the precise point at which he changes terrain and abandons, for the moment, the language of theologians, arguing that “in order to extricate ourselves from this confusion” and “to liberate our thought from theological prejudices,” it is time to move towards “the true method of the interpretation of Scripture [*vera method Scripturam interpretandi*] and examine it carefully.”<sup>11</sup> To express it as succinctly as possible, he will say that “the method of the interpretation of Scripture does not differ from the method of interpreting nature, but is consistent (*convenire*) with it.”<sup>12</sup> The exact wording of the statement is important, above all, Spinoza’s use of the negative. He does not say that the method of the interpretation of Scripture is the same as the method of interpreting nature, but that the first does not differ from the second. Moreover, he both calls attention to and complicates this non-difference by using the verb *convenire* to designate the relation between the two methods of interpretation. This verb appears in Spinoza work frequently, perhaps too frequently, in the sense that it encompasses such range of meanings that it is left to the reader to choose from among them, and serves to mark a relation of agreement, compatibility or consistency between two things that unites them and allows them to form a greater thing. It does not, however, negate their difference. The use of *convenire* suggests that the relation between these methods is something closer to compatibility, that is, non-antagonism or non-opposition, than non-difference. Is the relation between the interpretation of nature and the interpretation of Scripture one of identity or sameness, or of harmony or unity? Spinoza leaves these questions unanswered for the simple reason that, just as the discourse on the interpretation of Scripture does not appear at the beginning of his analysis but in the middle of it, the seventh of fifteen chapters, so the precise relation of the true method of interpreting scripture to that of interpreting nature cannot be specified until it has been put into practice and tested. He takes the reader with him to observe the experiment as it is conducted and to note the modifications of method its results demand. In this sense, it is possible to say that the TTP represents an experiment in progress, not simply its results, but both the conceptualization and the carrying out of the experiment or experiments, all of them, whatever their result, a journey of discovery that repeatedly encounters dead ends and

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid,

<sup>11</sup> Spinoza 457.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

detours. It could not be otherwise: Spinoza is not the first to explore and chart the unknown world of the letter as letter, understood as irreducible to anything prior to or outside of itself, but he is perhaps the first to propose to do so systematically.

As if this were not enough to unsettle the reader at the beginning of the journey, the sentence cited above contains yet another question or problem that while not explicitly posed as such nevertheless remains unavoidable: the meaning and usage of the term “interpretation.” The phrase “interpretation of Scripture” was very common in English, French and Latin in the second half of the seventeenth century. It appears frequently in in Hobbes’ *Leviathan* and Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. More broadly, both Hobbes and Locke employ the verb “interpret” and the noun “interpretation” in their discussions of law and how settled law is construed (Hobbes approximately 30 times in *Leviathan* and Locke half that in the *Essay*). Both use the verb ‘interpret,’ although rarely, in other senses, primarily as a synonym for understanding or to designate translation from a foreign language. The term “interpretation” does not appear in any of Descartes’ major works: *The Discourse on Method*, *The Meditations*, the *Principles of Philosophy* or the *Passions of the Soul* (where questions of Scripture or law are seldom treated). Newton’s reference to a faulty interpretation of Scripture is his only use of the term in the *Principia*, while it appears once in Galileo’s *Discorsi*, in the account of the way the human ear “interprets” or experiences sound vibrations. From these examples, not simply those immediately relevant to Spinoza as his predecessors, but also the contemporaries whose concerns overlapped with his, we can offer the hypothesis that “interpretation,” with a handful of exceptions, designates the activity by means of which the knowledge of texts and written documents, Scriptural or legal, is produced, or the results of such activity. If it is possible to formulate a rule that establishes the need for interpretation, it would be that artifacts made of words and letters require a procedure distinct from that employed in the natural sciences. Further, for Hobbes and to a lesser extent Locke, “interpretation” as a mode of knowledge is not only different from, but inferior to, the knowledge of nature, as if the act of interpretation, haunted by the indeterminacy of its object, could never arrive at the certainty that defines true knowledge and thus remains forever open to dispute.

This helps explain why the phrases “interpretation of nature” and the “method of interpreting nature” (*methodo naturam interpretandi*), that is, the use of “interpretation” to designate the means of arriving at a knowledge of nature, is quite unusual in this period, and largely limited to Francis Bacon in his *Novum Organum* (1620), the subtitle of which is “True Suggestions for the Interpretation of Nature.” Should we thereby assume that Spinoza’s use of the phrase indicates Bacon’s influence on the method of interpreting Scripture as well as nature? The evidence provided

by Spinoza's correspondence would seem to point in the opposite direction. In his initial exchange of letters with Oldenburg, he responds to a question concerning his view of Descartes and Bacon.

"Of Bacon I shall say little; he speaks very confusedly on this subject, and simply makes assertions while proving hardly anything. In the first place he takes for granted that the human intellect, besides the fallibility of the senses, is by its very nature liable to error, and fashions everything after the analogy of its own nature, and not after the analogy of the universe, so that it is like a mirror presenting an irregular surface to the rays it receives, mingling its own nature with the nature of reality, and so forth. Secondly, he holds that the human intellect by reason of its peculiar nature, is prone to abstractions," and imagines as stable things that are in flux, and so on. Thirdly, he holds that the human intellect is in constant activity, and cannot come to a halt or rest, Whatever other causes he assigns can all be readily reduced to the one Cartesian principle, that the human will is free and more extensive than the intellect, or, as Verulam more confusedly puts it, the intellect is not characterised as a dry light, but receives infusion from the will. We

should here observe that Verulam often takes intellect for mind, therein differing from Descartes.) This cause, then, disregarding the others as being of little importance, I shall show to be false. Indeed, they would easily have seen this for themselves, had they but given consideration to the fact that the will differs from this or that volition in the same way as whiteness differs from this or that white object, or as humanity differs from this or that human being. So to conceive the will to be the cause of this or that volition is as impossible as to conceive humanity to be the cause of Peter and Paul."<sup>13</sup>

Although Spinoza's critique of Bacon (referred to here as "Verulam") does not bear directly on Scripture, it touches on the reasons for Bacon's use of "interpretation" to represent a knowledge of nature in ways that illuminate the practice of scriptural interpretation. The fact that Bacon was a proponent of observation and experiment as the basis of scientific inquiry, did not prevent him from understanding this inquiry as a decryption of nature's secret forms and the hidden order they together composed, guided by a cryptography. The idea of a unity that precedes and makes possible the diversity of the world as it appears to us, renders our world the code that, when decrypted, will lead to the discovery of what has remained unknown. Spinoza's critique in the letter to Oldenburgh of the notion of a unified will concealed under the innumerable particular volitions that emanate from it, even at this early stage in his intellectual development, represents a rejection of the emanative or expressive conception of causality implied in Bacon's idea of decryption as an obstacle that bars the way to a philosophy of immanence.

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13 Spinoza 762-763.

It would appear then that Spinoza has chosen to use a phrase, the interpretation of nature," associated with Bacon's *Novum Organum*, published fifty years earlier which, despite Bacon's continuing reputé as a defender of scientific knowledge, may well have had a dated air about it. The strangeness of his choice of phrase is underscored by the near absence of any variant of "interpret" or "interpretation" in Spinoza's other works. This absence is total in the case of the *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione*, the *Tractatus Politicus* and his correspondence, while in the *Ethics* we find a total of three variants of the verb or noun forms. Particularly noteworthy is the first of these, found in the long appendix to Part I, where the positive valence with which Spinoza has endowed "the method of the interpretation of nature" in the TTP, is replaced by its contrary. Midway through the appendix, whose focus is the origin and function of teleological thought, Spinoza describes the proponents of a providential worldview that renders their rule over others the fulfillment of a divine purpose, as those "the mass reveres as interpreters of nature and the gods (*quos vulgus tamquam naturae deorumque interpretes adorat*)."<sup>14</sup> The problem Spinoza identifies is not or not simply the fact that the mass mistakenly regards these individuals as diviners of providence; the act of interpretation itself is impugned as the passing off of an invented world added to the actual world as its hidden truth, of which the interpreter then claims to have unique knowledge. Here, knowledge derived from an interpretation of nature is treated as the pseudo-knowledge of a realm of final purposes deemed supernatural, but whose reality lies entirely in this world, in the ideas and bodily dispositions of subjection and servitude, themselves justified as means necessary to the end of God's will. It flourishes where causes are not yet known, in unexpected and unusual events, whether an earthquake or a plague, mobilizing fear and stupefaction to the benefit of the powers that be.

The verb "interpret" appears at only two points in the *Ethics*. In Part II, P47, Spinoza writes "From this come most disputes, namely that people do not explain their own thinking correctly or interpret badly the thought of others [*atque hinc pleraeque oriuntur controversiae, nempe quia homines mentem suam non recte explicant, vel quia alterius mentem male interpretantur*]."<sup>15</sup> It is used in a similar way in Part III, P55 sch, where he argues that people "interpret the actions of their equals incorrectly, while embellishing their own as much as possible [*suorum aequalium actiones perperam interpretando, vel suas quantum potest adornando*]."<sup>16</sup> In neither case can interpretation be understood as a means to knowledge; in fact, it appears as the operation by which error imposes itself as truth through

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14 Spinoza 241.

15 Spinoza

16 Spinoza

the attribution of one individual's thoughts and feelings, not clearly known even to that individual, to another individual. The projection of what one imagines about oneself on to another is similar to the action by which individuals project ends or purposes on nature because they imagine that they are the causes of their own actions, which arise from a desire to bring about a certain end. In Parts II and III, however, Spinoza identifies the unconscious mechanisms at work in the fabrication of realities that require, or are simply susceptible to, interpretation and their place in the production of a world of human servitude.

Chapter I of the TTP, "On Prophecy," begins by linking prophecy and interpretation: the prophet is the *interpretes*, or go-between, the means of communication between God and his people: "prophecy, or revelation, is the sure knowledge of some matter revealed by God to humankind. A prophet is one who interprets God's revelations to those who cannot attain to certain knowledge of the matters revealed, and can therefore be convinced of them only by simple faith. The Hebrew word for prophet is 'nabi' (נָבִי)\* that is, speaker and interpreter; but it is always used in Scripture in the sense of interpreter of God, as we gather from Exodus chapter 7 v. 1, where God says to Moses, "See, I have made thee a God to Pharaoh, and Aaron thy brother shall be thy prophet." This implies that because Aaron was acting the part of prophet in interpreting Moses' words to Pharaoh, Moses would be to Pharaoh as God, or one acting in God's place."<sup>17</sup>

The first supplementary note of the first chapter of the TTP thus confronts the reader with Hebrew words in bold, and a discussion of *Nabi* in relation to Hebrew phonology and orthography, as if Spinoza were more interested in the correct attribution of the root of the words and the rules governing combinations of letters than in the meaning of this fundamentally important word. Although overshadowed by the history of and rules determining the word, Spinoza's brief definition of *nabi* as "interpreter," translator, or orator, reduces the prophet to the role of messenger whose message itself must be diminished to be made acceptable to those unable to arrive at a certain understanding of "the matters revealed."

In chapter 9, Spinoza notes that what he calls "dubious passages," in the Hebrew Scriptures, statements whose meaning he admits he finds undecidable, were marked with a marginal notation by the scribes responsible for the reproduction of the text. They did this both for future scribes, so they would not take these passages as errors and try to correct them, and for future readers, to indicate that the fault is neither in their understanding, nor in the scribes' copy. The fact that these ambiguities were not explained away or made the pretext for the addition of mysteries to the text to fill in its gaps led Spinoza to come

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17 Spinoza 394.



very close to giving praise to those reviled in the Gospels as worshippers of the letter and reveal quite ostentatiously his familiarity with the most “Pharasaical” of texts (in the sense Spinoza uses the term in the TTP), the *Tractate Soferim* [מִירְפּוּס תַּכְסֵּם], a set of rules for scribes. It might well be useful to for readers of the TTP to follow their example and mark those particularly difficult passages whose very difficulty has so often been overlooked.

The statement that “the method of interpreting Scripture does not differ from the method of interpreting Nature, and is in fact completely consistent with it” is undoubtedly one of these passages, especially when read in the light of his treatment of “interpretation” elsewhere in the TTP and in the *Ethics*. His statement of the non-difference between the method of interpreting nature and that of interpreting scripture inscribes the difference elsewhere, not between the methods of interpreting nature and scripture but within them, as if the contradiction within the approaches to the interpretation of nature simply continues on or extends into the interpretation of Scripture. Here two alternative readings of this passage appear. On the one hand, it may be that the single method for the interpretation of nature and scripture represents the application of the model of scriptural interpretation to nature, dividing it into appearance and essence, surface and depth, exterior and interior, and adding the second term to the first as its truth and reality. The end result of such an operation is or ought to be the discovery of an initially invisible order, whether the formal order of a written text or the providential order of the world, within which apparently discordant moments are resolved into harmony. From this perspective, nature and scripture can be said to be known to the extent that the disorder they seem to present is reduced to an order whose origins lie beyond them, beyond letters, bodies and movements, in the spirit that confers order on matter.

The second, true, method does not exist in symmetrical opposition to the first, for which the knowledge of both nature and scripture requires a hermeneutic procedure. Natural philosophy, as Spinoza conceives it, must begin with the act of renouncing any recourse to the supernatural, to mysteries, to hidden realms; the causal processes it establishes are those internal to nature. If God is, as Spinoza argues, the cause of all things, it is not as an external or transcendental cause, but a cause so absolutely immanent in its effects that it might be taken as absent, having no existence outside of them. This notion of God, or nature, hardly seems to offer a model for the understanding of scripture (both as a written text and as the word of God that it contains) which requires the dissipation of the letter to gain access to the spirit it conceals. If Spinoza rejects the notion of interpretation as it is commonly practiced and understood, however, he does not offer an alternative notion to replace it. On the contrary, chapter 7 begins with the gesture by which Spinoza divides himself from the existing concept of the interpretation of scripture,



a gesture made possible by the work evidenced in the preceding six chapters and reaffirmed in the next eight. Spinoza does not begin with a method, but is compelled to theorize his own practice of reading as he reads, lingering in its wake for the few moments it takes to summarize its lessons and record its successes and failures, all the while engaged in a labor that perpetually exceeds its theory.

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# **Is It Right to Revolt? Spinoza, the Multitude and Insurrection**

**Pierre-François  
Moreau**

**Abstract:** The criticism of tyrannicide in the *Theological-Political Treatise* could have led one to believe that Spinoza was socially conservative and opposed to any revolt. An analysis of the examples he cites shows that this is not the case: in each case his arguments take into account the structure of the state and his criticism of revolt concerns only one type of situation. In the *Political Treatise*, he develops his positions by giving the people an active role, through the concept of the multitude, and by conceiving the possibility of a positive social upheaval.

**Keywords:** Spinoza, revolt, State, affects, tyrant, usurpation, multitude

A paradox of Spinozist scholarship is that, on the one hand, one of its commonplaces is to recall that Spinoza is hostile to revolutions (a reminder based on well-known texts, but perhaps more quoted than read), and that, on the other hand, a number of Spinoza's readers have long claimed a desire to change society. One could compare this situation with that of Epicureanism, which is understood to be hostile to participation in public affairs but which nevertheless counted some Roman politicians among its followers.

If, beyond ready-made answers, we want to take stock of this paradox, we must necessarily differentiate two questions: 1) on the objects that Spinoza dealt with, have we really read closely what he says and, more exactly, have we verified what he is talking about and within what limits, when he is supposed to manifest the hostility in question? In other words, can we reduce his position to a simple rejection of all political change? and 2) on objects that Spinoza did not deal with, can we build a reasoning based on the instruments of thought that he conceived?

As for the first question, we should first notice that in the two political works we have, Spinoza each time takes on the task of showing what contributes to the peace of the City – the first time by showing that freedom to philosophize is necessary for this peace, the second by describing what kind of states can last as long as possible. It would therefore be difficult to expect in these pages a direct praise of the revolution. But these demonstrations perhaps do not exhaust the full power of his thinking on politics. In fact, we see him several times analyzing situations where one or more citizens oppose the state or the sovereign. These are various situations, ranging from tyrannicide to the sacrifice of one's own life, chosen from the history of the Hebrews, the Romans, England, and the Netherlands, and these analyses themselves deal with very different points which call for different conclusions.

Let us first look at the texts. It is worth considering first the *Theological-Political Treatise* and then the *Political Treatise*; but it should be remembered that some passages of the TTP were taken up as they were in the TP and that the latter explicitly refers to what was said in the

TTP: Spinoza thus assumes a minimal coherence between the two works, even if they have different objects and angles of approach. In the case of the TTP, the question is addressed several times from chapter XVI to chapter XIX. The passages quoted use several arguments: one is religious and obliges Spinoza to pronounce on the possible divine legitimacy of disobedience to the orders of the sovereign; another is strictly political and concerns the structure of the State; finally, we shall see that a third argument advances, in connection with the scribe Eleazar and the “*viri honesti*” of the last chapter, yet another type of reasoning. None of them is based on moral considerations or on a supposed natural law.

1. Many passages mention the possibility of a religious dimension in the revolts; in the preface it is said about superstition that it serves to set the crowds against the kings – but one will observe that it is just as much condemned when it serves to legitimize the kings as when it serves to make them hate.<sup>1</sup> In any case, Spinoza, in examining the Bible, cannot help but consider the problem, because in the 17th century, as in the one that preceded it, we saw various forms of challenges to the power of the State in the name of religious principles: civil wars, refusal to recognize the authority of magistrates judged to be impious, assassinations of sovereigns. It is therefore impossible, for anyone writing about politics, not to take a position on the question, and in particular on the scriptural texts which seem to justify the superiority of a religious law over civil law, and thus to authorize the infringement of the latter in the name of the former.

The Bible seems to cite a number of cases of disobedience to authorities that are given as legitimate by the sacred text because they respond to divine inspiration. The TTP cites at least two: the three young men who refuse to obey Nebuchadnezzar's orders in the book of Daniel<sup>2</sup>; the apostles, to whom Christ orders to go and evangelize the world without worrying about the authorities.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted in passing that in both cases, this is not an active revolt, but a refusal to obey. In both cases, Spinoza, rather than refuting the argument, marginalizes it by emphasizing the exceptional, and therefore inimitable, character of the situation. He can hardly do otherwise, since he has taken the position of not questioning the divine character of Holy Scripture – even if it means neutralizing the passages claimed by the opponents he wants to refute, either by interpreting them differently than they do, or by playing one passage against another, or by reducing their application

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<sup>1</sup> Spinoza 2007, p.4-5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.22. The reference is to Daniel 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.248. The reference is to Matthew 10:1 and 28 – but refers explicitly to the example of the three young men in Daniel 3.

to particular or outdated situations.<sup>4</sup> For him it is a question of denying to the ecclesiastics the right to raise the crowd against the Magistrate, or simply refusing the right to the citizens to excuse themselves from obedience to the laws. It is thus necessary for him to establish that the fact cited in the Bible is a singular case which cannot legitimize a norm: it does not have the value of an example.

In the first case, the Hebrew state has disappeared, its citizens have been deported to Babylon and they are now subject to a new authority. But three of them refuse to obey the victorious monarch by worshipping an idol – and God protects them from the punishment that the king inflicts on them: the flames that were to burn them do not reach them. The biblical text seems to encourage refusing the orders of temporal authorities in the name of religious belief. Spinoza does not deny this fact, but he emphasizes its exceptional character, which is due to the singular revelation that must be assumed for the three young men in the furnace; normality is represented, on the contrary, by all the other Hebrews who submitted to the king's order: if they obeyed him, it was because they had no doubt about the fact that, their state having disappeared, the Babylonian king held the *summum imperium*. There is thus a power of the *fait accompli*, which automatically replaces one law by another: the new law can only be disobeyed on the injunction of an indisputable divine order, of which the miracle is the proof (and it must be understood that this is not the case of those who, in modern states, try to stir up the crowds in the name of religious norms). In the same manner, the Apostles received a particular order from Christ, which concerns only them, does not invalidate the general order of obedience to the authorities which emanates from the Bible (as witnessed by a quotation from Solomon, i.e., another biblical reference, which compensates for the scriptural legitimacy of the first<sup>5</sup>).

In short, what appears behind the repression of religious reasons for the disobedience of subjects is the power of the historical *fait accompli*<sup>6</sup> at the end of a state. In both cases, Spinoza recognizes the unquestionable exception of the biblical text, but denies it any value as an example. By singling it out, he neutralizes it. The geographical equivalent is the recognition of the rules of foreign states: as a result, the order given by the Dutch to those who want to trade with Japan to submit to the demands of the Japanese concerning the Christian religion has the same

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4 This neutralization of the letter of the text, notably through the choice of passages intended to enlighten the others, is not peculiar to Spinoza: any interpreter is often obliged to do so, because of the difficulties contained in it. But Spinoza proceeds in a specific way.

5 "That if this word had been spoken for all, the State would have been instituted in vain, and this word of Solomon (Prov., chap. XXIV, v. 21): my son, fear God and the king, would have been an impious word, which is far from the truth", Ibid., p.49.

6 Spinoza relies several times on Jeremiah for this (V 5 and XIX 7).

value as a norm.<sup>7</sup> Religion, as a general rule, does not entail the right to disobey, and even less to revolt.

2. The second kind of argument could be stated as follows: if the rulers are tyrants, is it useful or harmful to eliminate them by overthrowing or killing them? We are now on the political terrain, and it is not a question of a simple refusal to obey, but of a violent action directed against the ruler. There are two instances in the *Theological-Political Treatise* that answer the question, respectively in chapter XVII (§ 30) and chapter XVIII (§ 7-9). We shall begin with the second, which is both the most detailed and – apparently – the most classical one. We will notice that it is not the central point of the chapter, on the contrary: the question only arises as a sort of appendix to the symmetrical problem. In this chapter, Spinoza has learned from the history of the Hebrew Republic. He has just established, on the basis of the biblical accounts, that it is disastrous for a people not used to obeying kings to give themselves a monarch (which is precisely what happened to the Hebrews at the end of the period of the Judges). One might have thought that the lesson would end there, and indeed, that is where the reference to the Bible ends; but the reasoning continues for several more pages, this time on examples taken from other nations (the English, the Romans, and the inhabitants of the United Provinces) and, in these last pages, it is another question that is treated, that of regicide. Spinoza thus suddenly leaves the problematic indicated by the title of the chapter (what can we learn from the history of the Hebrews?) and states a thesis that deals with a symmetrical problematic, first by abstract reasoning, which he then confirms with historical examples. He begins this last section as follows: “But I cannot fail to say here that it is equally dangerous to depose a monarch, even if it is clear by every criterion that he is a tyrant.”<sup>8</sup> This is a classic field, where a long tradition has questioned the conditions, the limits, and the dangers of tyrannicide. We know that in the face of the Catholics, notably the Jesuit treatises, which legitimized the assassination of the tyrant in a certain number of cases, the theorists of the State<sup>9</sup>, especially in the Protestant milieu, tended to condemn it, by underlining its uselessness (one suppresses a tyrant, one does not suppress the tyranny<sup>10</sup>). Spinoza is no exception to the rule. The demonstration is carried out in two stages: a people “accustomed to royal authority and held back by it alone” will not be able to obey a weaker authority – the deposed or murdered king must therefore be replaced by

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7TTP V 13 and XVI 22.

8 Ibid., p.235.

9 Most often when the monarch moves away from the Catholic religion or disregards the authority of the Pope – which is obviously far from Spinoza's problem.

10 One finds this with De la Court, for example.



another king.<sup>11</sup> And the newly appointed king, the one who replaces the tyrant, has only two possible courses of action: either to let the murder of his predecessor go unpunished, in which case he undermines his own power by implicitly recognizing the people's right to judge kings; or to avenge the murder by punishing the murderers, thus starting a new cycle of violence that the subjects will once again perceive as illegitimate. "Hence it has happened that the people have often changed tyrants, but have never been able to find themselves without a tyrant."

One should note that this reasoning does not concern any state in general: as for the tyrant who seizes power in a democracy or an aristocracy, Spinoza does not tell us whether his murder is useful or damaging: he simply does not mention it here. And even the condemnation of tyrannicide does not concern just any monarchy. It is one in which the people are "accustomed" to obeying a king. It is thus a limited and very precise framework - effectively symmetrical to the case of the Hebrew people, as indicated by the participle "accustomed" (*assuetus*, which answers the non *consuevit* of the preceding paragraph). This notion of "*assuetus*" is very important. It systematically indicates the link between a people (or the individuals of this people) and its institutions. A link that is no longer simply external, because habit has made it somehow indispensable. The term is used several times in this sense in connection with the Hebrews in the analyses of the TTP: it marks either the traits that characterize the people and which the constitution will have to take into account in order to be valid, or, once the constitution has been created, the traits that this constitution in turn gives to the people and which are anchored in them and characterize them. For example, when Moses had to give laws to the Hebrews whom he had brought out of Egypt, he had to take into account the habits that had formed them: "And surely it is not to be believed that men accustomed [*assueti*] to the superstitions of the Egyptians, coarse and weakened by the most miserable servitude, have formed sound notions of God, or that Moses taught them anything other than a way of life,"<sup>12</sup> (in other words, he provides them with laws as a legislator, and does not teach them as a philosopher<sup>13</sup>). That implies a certain type of legislation: "finally, so that the people, unable to raise of its own right, was suspended with the word of its Master, it did not allow these men accustomed to the servitude

11 Spinoza and his contemporaries barely distinguish between the two hypotheses - probably because a deposed king is always in danger of starting a civil war to regain power, or of being used as a symbol by his supporters, and experience seems to show that his overthrow almost always has his death as its logical consequence.

12 "Nec sane credendum est, quod homines superstitionibus Aegyptiorum assueti, rudes, et miserrima servitute confecti, aliquid sani de Deo intellexerint, aut quod Moses eos aliquid docuerit, quam modum vivendi, non quidem tanquam Philosophus, ut tandem ex animi libertate, sed tanquam Legislator, ut ex imperio Legis coacti essent bene vivere", TTP, II 15.

13 On the different roles of Moses, cf. Moreau 2019 and Moreau forthcoming.

[*servituti assuetis*] to act in anything with their liking.”<sup>14</sup> Once the system is set up, the habit henceforth plays in favor of its conservation: “This is why, with these men completely accustomed [*omnino assuefactis*] to it, this obedience did not have to appear any more servitude but freedom; what had again as a consequence that nobody desired what was prohibited, but what was ordered.”<sup>15</sup> This is how we explain the ceremonies of the first Patriarchs: they reproduced what they had been used to.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the participants in the pact are not abstract individuals, as contractualist theory seems to require: they are a people marked by certain characteristics, and the state constituted by this people organizes these characteristics into a strong structure that ensures peace and prosperity, by imprinting on its *ingenium* characteristics that are compatible with it and that counterbalance its destructive tendencies (with varying degrees of effectiveness - the latter seems to be particularly great in the case of the Hebrews, at least in the beginning); there is thus a kind of symbiosis between the people and the form of their state. In such a monarchy, the place of the king and the system of relations in which it is integrated (notably the criteria of legitimacy that justify it in the eyes of the people) are more important than his personal action. We find here one of the strong constants of TTP analyses: the structure of the state is more important than the exercise of power.

When Spinoza expresses his opinion on the killing of the tyrant, it is not just any tyrant, but one who occupies a certain place in a certain state, namely a monarchy that has found a point of balance. One might ask: what if the people decide not to stay within the monarchical framework? Spinoza answers elliptically: the people could never “change the monarchical state into another form of state”. He merely notes this, without demonstrating it: it has never happened - whereas for the replacement of one king by another, he first had to resort to a demonstration.

Spinoza thus takes up a classical problem and transforms it: he replaces the question of the exercise of power by that of the nature of the regime. Or rather, he thinks of the exercise of power only under the jurisdiction of the nature of the regime. From this perspective, the three

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14 “Denique, ut populus, qui sui juris esse non poterat, ab ore imperantis penderet, nihil hominibus scilicet servituti assuetis ad libitum agere concessit; nihil enim populus agere poterat, quin simul teneretur legis recordari, et mandata exequi, quae a solo imperantis arbitrio pendebant”, TTP, V 11 p. 224.

15 “Quare eidem omnino assuefactis ipsa non amplius servitus, sed libertas videri debuit: unde sequi etiam debuit, ut nemo negata, sed mandata cuperet”, TTP, XVII 25.

16 “As for the fact that the patriarchs sacrificed to God, I think that they on ceremonies and narratives did so in order to rouse their hearts to greater devotion, for they had been accustomed to sacrifices from childhood. Everyone had been thoroughly familiar with sacrifice from the time of Enoch, which hence stimulated their devotion”, *Ibid.*, pp.71-72.

examples that follow do not repeat themselves – whereas if they only concerned the exercise of power they would be repetitive: people get rid, with violence (death, in the first two cases, war in the third), of a ruler they consider a tyrant. But England, Rome, and the Netherlands present three different structures. The first example, which concerns England during the Great Revolution,<sup>17</sup> comes just after the statement of the thesis and illustrates it in an almost pure manner. Strictly speaking, it is not an assassination of the king by an individual (Charles I was judged by a high court appointed by Parliament) – but Spinoza, placing himself for a moment from the point of view of the loyalist subjects (i.e., those most imbued with the structure of the state), equates the judgment with an assassination. The English people are “accustomed” to monarchical rule: it would be a mistake to see this as a psychological remark: it is indeed the “*forma imperii*” – the structure of the state. That is to say, a strong link between a type of organization of the city, its concretization in the law, its representation in the heads of the citizens, and the distribution of places within this construction; the whole is linked enough to perpetuate itself independently of the will of the individuals: on the contrary, it is the one that shapes this will – chapter XVII and the first paragraphs of chapter XVIII have, as we have seen, shown it on the example of the Hebrew republic. What happens then in the case of the English people? At a certain point in their history, they try to change this structure: not only do they kill the king, but they try to do it under a juridical form - and precisely “*specie juris*”, only an appearance of right; they don’t succeed; once the king is removed, the State remaining with an empty place, one is obliged to change the “*forma imperii*” and it is a failure. Spinoza doesn’t bother to detail the reasons, he just indicates the consequence: a lot of bloodshed - so the new “form” is not one, since it is unable to ensure the minimum that one expects from a State: the security of the citizens. One arrives at a *pejorem statum* and one must return to the *pristinum statum*. In other words, there is an elasticity of the established order, which endures a crisis but reconstitutes as soon as possible the structure which seemed to have been suppressed. There is thus a difference between *forma* and *status*. The *forma* remains in some way underlying the changes in *status*. The *forma* is the lasting structure given to the people by the institutions (those to which it is “*assuetus*”) and to the institutions by the characters of the people. The *status* is the figure that it affects and that a revolution suppresses temporarily. One can indeed change the form, but it remains in reality in depth, provoking the installation of a new illegitimate and costly monarchy (under another name). Why is the old one said to be “legitimate”? Because dynastic descent is one of the components of the

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17 Ibid., pp.235-6.

*forma imperii*.<sup>18</sup> Who establishes another monarchy on the (supposed) ruins of this structure does not have the means to be respected, or rather can only be respected at too high a cost (here the example goes a bit further than the reasoning it illustrates). It then appears simpler to return to the old system. The English example thus analyzed illustrates perfectly the thesis of the danger and uselessness of tyrannicide.

What about the second example, borrowed from early Roman history?<sup>19</sup> It seems at first sight to be rather a counter-example: the Romans, unlike the English, were able to drive out the tyrant Tarquin, abolish the kingship and establish the Republic – and neither Tarquin nor his sons were ever able to regain power. This would be a true *mutatio formae imperii*. Spinoza's answer is twofold: The Romans, unlike the English, were not used to monarchy (“nondum regibus obedire consueverat”) or at least to a stabilized form of monarchy.<sup>20</sup> They had kept the right to appoint the king and his successor (there was therefore no legitimacy assured by dynastic continuity). If they were used to anything, it was violence; this was characteristic of their *ingenium* from the beginning (one can think that Spinoza thinks of the original act, the murder of Remus, or of the way Romulus populated his city by recruiting “factious” – seditiosi and flagitiosi – and then by kidnapping the Sabine; like his readers, he knows all this from Titus Livius); in a sense, their “*forma imperii*” is a regime chanted by alternating elections of kings and murders; a violence that the institutions contain provisionally and painfully more than they suppress it. The only novelty of the Republic is that it establishes (with great difficulty) the civil peace only by expressing this violence in external wars. And in the end, the monarchy was re-established - without violence being suppressed (Spinoza doesn't bother to mention it here, but he says it elsewhere<sup>21</sup>: the imperial successions were chaotic and in the hands of the army. The lesson of Tacitus confirms here that of Livy). Let us summarize: in short they still lived in a kind of original democracy – but a democracy marked by violence; in such a system, the kings are more juxtaposed to the structure of the State than really integrated as they are in the English system (such a juxtaposition makes one think of the case of the Doge of Venice and Genoa, where the Doge is juxtaposed to a system for the most part aristocratic, but there with less dramatic consequences<sup>22</sup>). But in any case the result is the same: the murder or overthrow of the tyrant turns out, this time in the long run, to be useless and dangerous.

18 The TP will take this into account in its reconstruction of what a sustainable monarchy can be.

19 Spinoza 2007, p.236.

20 Of the six kings they previously had, they had already killed three.

21 In the *Adnotatio* XXXV and TP, VII, 14 :two soldiers undertake the transfer from the Empire and succeed. This is a reference to Tractatus 2008, I, 25.

22 Spinoza 2002, VIII, p.729.

The third example, that of the Dutch,<sup>23</sup> is probably the most interesting. For this is a people who rose up against the Spanish king and his representatives, who then briefly had an English governor-general, and who finally became or reverted to a federative republic, where the states of each province and the states-general had sovereignty. Does this successful insurrection invalidate the previous reasoning? No, because everything is in the “reverted”. If they succeeded, it is because in fact they never had kings, and that their States, provincial and general, always kept the sovereignty (*jus imperii, jus supremæ majestatis*). Those who were in power (whatever their title, one must suppose) were only “counts”, that is to say rulers to whom the States entrusted an office and whom they could call back to their duty if they deviated from it. Thus, when they revolted against Philip II, they only restored their imperium, which was threatened by the Spanish usurpation. In other words, this time the solidity of the structure is that of collective sovereignty, and it is the monarchical attempt that is contrary to the structure and condemned in advance. Spinoza adds that states could also “take revenge” (*vindicare*) on counts. Here, then, is a case where tyrannicide appears to be legitimate - for what does “taking revenge” mean? However, the Dutch did not kill Philip II, the Duke of Alba, or Leicester. But, at least for the first two, they made war on them (as for Leicester, he had the good taste to leave the country after his failure); and if the circumstances allowed to kill them, nothing in Spinoza’s reasoning tells us that they would have been wrong. Note that in this case he uses the word “usurp” about the counts, which indicates where he sees legitimacy. It should be noted that in this case, he uses the term “usurper” in relation to the counts, which indicates well where legitimacy lies in his eyes. As if, in this case, he preferred this term to “tyrant”: the tyrant exercises badly a power which is conferred to him by the structure of the State, the usurper questions this structure itself. And there, it seems, the danger would consist in letting him do it, and not in overthrowing him. Similarly, at the beginning of chapter XX, the violent government “usurps the rights of the subjects”<sup>24</sup> Or, the violent government is the one that Spinoza, quoting Seneca, reminds that it lasts little.<sup>25</sup> There is thus a recognition of the necessity and legitimacy of insurrection – that, in this case, which led to the Eighty Years’ War.

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23 Ibid., XVIII, p. 729.

24 “Hinc ergo fit, ut illud imperium violentum habeatur, quod in animos est, et ut summa majestas injuriam subditis facere, eorumque jus *usurpare* videatur, quando unicuique praescribere vult, quid tanquam verum amplecti, et tanquam falsum rejicere, et quibus porro opinionibus uniuscujusque animus erga Deum devotione moveri debeat; haec enim uniuscujusque juris sunt, quo nemo, etsi velit, cedere potest”, TTP, XX.

25 Ibid., p.200.

The condemnation expressed in §7 is thus very limited. It only applies to a monarchical system, and not just to any monarchical system: but, to the one where the king's place is assured by the very structure of the State in a durable way, so that wanting to kill the king means trying to abolish this system, and that this abolition can only lead to an outburst of violence; above all, the one where there is a real monarch, and not a ruler to whom the people or their representatives have given a limited mandate. It is in this very specific situation that Spinoza states the impossibility of tyrannicide. We are therefore very far from a general condemnation of all insurrection. On the contrary, it appears perfectly justified in the case where it is the *forma imperii* that risks being undermined.

Let us return to the other relevant passage of the TTP, in chapter XVII (§30). Here Spinoza considers what happens in the Hebrew Republic once the kings is settled: they move further and further away from the Law which ensured the satisfaction of all, and thus peace and prosperity.<sup>26</sup> Prophets appeared and criticized them, even stirring up a revolt, "but the Prophets themselves could not achieve anything by these means; even if they put an end to a Tyranny, by the effect of permanent causes they only bought a new Tyrant with a lot of Hebrew blood. There was no end to the discord and civil wars, and the causes, always the same, of violation of divine law, which could only disappear with the State itself." Since we are talking about prophets and divine right, we could believe that we are talking about religion. But it is not the case: the "divine right" of which it is about, it is the whole of the laws which maintained peace and are now scorned; and the invectives of the prophets are here more the marks of indignation against tyranny than the fruits of a revelation. One will notice that the effect produced is the same as what the following chapter will say about the English: bloodshed – that is, the opposite of what was sought by constituting the City. One will also notice what is implicit: Spinoza does not say why the prophets failed, he merely observes it; but the explanation is simple: it is the one we will read in chapter XVIII, except that it must be modified: the Hebrew monarchy is certainly a deviation from the primitive structure of the State, and therefore a source of disasters; but the Hebrews had to get used to it, after several generations, no matter how flawed it was. Leaving it became impossible. It thus constitutes within the general structure of the theocracy a source of crises, but at the same time an island until now resistant enough to change to reconstitute itself at each crisis. This again makes tyrannicide ineffective and dangerous. But we have learned in passing something which doesn't contradict what will be said in chapter XVIII, but puts the

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<sup>26</sup> It should be remembered that for Spinoza, the positive effects of the Mosaic Law apply essentially to the period of the Judges.



emphasis on another aspect: the very structure of the badly constructed or altered State permanently generates (“*manebant tamen causae*”) the passions which will lead to tyrannicide. In other words, tyrannicide is not only a punctual fault and a punctual danger: it is also the product not of human folly, but of necessary causes. We thus pass from condemnation to explanation. It is no longer a question of asking whether insurrection or tyrannicide are useful or harmful. This time it is a question of evaluating the causes that make them necessary.

3. However, there are still two cases which do not fit, or do not quite fit, into the patterns mentioned so far. The case of Eleazar is interesting because, under religious appearances, it raises a completely different problem<sup>27</sup>: this Scribe, when the Hebrews are under the domination of the Seleucids, refuses to consume meat forbidden by the Mosaic Law; he even refuses to pretend, as his friends advise him; and he is therefore sentenced to death.<sup>28</sup> One might expect Spinoza to justify him as an individual while marginalizing him, as he did the three children in the furnace, in the name of a singular revelation not susceptible to imitation. But the biblical text makes this solution difficult, for Eleazar explicitly states that he wishes to set an example.<sup>29</sup> It cannot therefore be a matter of a non-universalizable exception, as in the case of a singular divine revelation: there is here an act, admittedly individual, but whose author aspires to have collective consequences. In fact, Spinoza does not consider this act from a religious point of view: he analyzes it in political terms, since he speaks of the “fatherland.” This is not the same case as for the three children in the furnace.<sup>30</sup> But then, is it political in the sense of the examples in chapter XVIII? no, it is not a matter of defending an existing state, since it has collapsed and the Hebrews are now subjects of Greek rulers: it should therefore be clear that peace requires submission to the new ruler. It is, however, a question of right and power – but disobedience is justified in a way that may seem unusual: Spinoza says that Eleazar acted “while the Fatherland still subsisted in some way” (*stante adhuc utcunque patria*). Everything is in the “utcunque.” The power of the *fait accompli* is here beaten down, even though the previous institutions no longer exist. What takes their place, what keeps them going “in some way,” are just rituals (which the rest of

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27 Spinoza 2007, p.207.

28 II Maccabees 6: 18-31.

29 “I will leave the young men an example of firmness, if I suffer joyfully and steadfastly an honorable death for the sake of our most venerable and holy laws”, *ibid.* 6:25; “And thus this man died, leaving his death for an example of a noble courage, and a memorial of virtue, not only unto young men, but unto all his nation”, *ibid* 6:31.

30 While this example is analyzed right after the young people's example – but the sentence starts with “on the contrary” (*contra*).



the population is losing) and the conviction that goes with them. A past that is unraveling day by day, but that remains enough for an action to serve as an example. One might think that we are far from tyrannicide: Eleazar does not kill anyone, he does not lead a riot - he dies alone, refusing any fiction that might save him. But, by his example, he may be preparing a future revolt. Indeed, Spinoza emphasizes that he “wanted to give an example of consistency” – and he deciphers this example as a call to revolt: Eleazar wishes to inspire others after him to endure everything rather than suffer the transfer of their right and power (*jus suum et potestatem*) to the Greeks, and to try everything to avoid being forced to pledge loyalty to pagans” –whereas at the beginning of the sentence, at the beginning of the sentence he followed the biblical text by using the terms “example” and “consistency,” at the end he somewhat over-interprets this text, which does not use such explicit legal-political language. It is therefore precisely here that we must look for the point of his personal intervention. In all the passages of the TTP previously analyzed, we have seen the systematic character of the reference to the past which formed the minds and institutions of the Hebrews, the English, the Romans or the Dutch; here, too, it is certainly present, but the fragility of the remanence (“utcunque”) is compensated by an appeal to what will happen next. What is important here is that one can oppose the apparent weight of the facts with the possibility of an example that will reverse the situation: so this time it is not only in the name of the past but in the name of the future that we oppose the power in place.<sup>31</sup> What Spinoza brings to the surface is an act from which results are expected. Yet the term hope, which should logically come up in such a context, does not appear in this passage, and more generally, this affect does not have a good reputation in the TTP: it is, with its symmetrical fear, one of the factors of superstition.<sup>32</sup> This is probably why this aspect is not developed here. We will see that it appears on the contrary in the PT. As for Eleazar’s refusal to eat the meats forbidden by the religion of the Hebrews, it is easy to see why, in these conditions, it should not be considered as a simple act of superstition, since the religion of the Hebrews is the religion of the Hebrew state: the rite functions here, as the context shows, as a symbol of the national identity of the state which one does not want to see disappear. In any case, we should not believe that Spinoza is inventing an ad hoc solution here, to explain a passage that does not fit with his two previous hypotheses, because we find a similar reasoning at the end of the Treatise,<sup>33</sup> where he speaks in his own name and without biblical

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31 And Spinoza does not mention, but if his reader has the biblical text in mind, he knows that in the book of Maccabees, what follows the episode of Eleazar and another similar episode, is indeed the revolt of Judas Maccabaeus, which restores the state.

32 Spinoza 2007, p.3 § 1 and p.5 §5.

33 Ibid., ch.XX.

references. Faced with the disorder of a city where opinions are punished, men “who know that they are just” accept to walk to the ordeal where they show “the highest consistency” and “expose to all eyes an example of virtue which covers the supreme majesty with shame” and “take glory in perishing for freedom.” We find again the lexicon of consistency and example - but this time without any reference to the past; for it is not to preserve an ancient law or power that one dies, it is for freedom. Perhaps it is to be understood that this freedom was at least implicitly guaranteed by the state as it existed before the ban on dissenting opinions, i.e., that it would be a variant of the Dutch case. But this is not explicitly stated. The emphasis is on the example that is being offered rather than on a previous situation that should be restored. Of course, in these just men too, disobedience is limited to accepting to die unjustly - but how can we interpret the idea that their death is an example if not as a call to establish a free government? However, here too the hope of better days is not explicitly mentioned.

Thus, in all the cases cited, the evaluation of disobedience is different, but it is always linked to the mention of the specific structure of the state and its situation: is it a monarchy or a republic, and of what type it is? Is it stable? What are the people used to? Does sovereignty still exist and in what form? There is, however, one more point to note about state building. Except in the case of Moses and the Hebrews, the TTP only tells us about states, in their specificity, once they have been constructed. It is silent on the original moment of this construction. On the other hand, there are three texts that speak of it non-specifically, that is, as necessary for all men to come together in society, but without it being defined as such a society: chapter XVI, as is well known, describes this origin in contractual terms, the chapters III<sup>34</sup> and V<sup>35</sup> do not need a presentation. But the common point is that the question of who takes the initiative of the political process remains in the shadow: it is each time “the men” who need to protect themselves from dangers or to ensure the division of work.<sup>36</sup> In the case of the Hebrews, the creation of the state, and even of this particular state, with its own constitution, seems to be the work, as an active process, of one man, Moses. The role of the people is passive: it is their characteristics that dictate the conditions that Moses must take into account,<sup>37</sup> but they seem to take no part in the elaboration of this constitution (which is in conformity with the biblical text): they has

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34 Ibid, § 5.

35 Ibid., § 7-9.

36 ChaTPer V does speak of particular men, those who are “vigilant and prudent,” but this is specific to certain states, those that function well.

37 Cf. “Législation mosaïque et anthropologie des affects”, op. cit.

no initiative. As for knowing how one man could have acted in this way, it is not necessary to suppose that he had a science of politics. Spinoza remarks that Moses never made a reasoning – the context clearly means that in his speeches to the people, he never used demonstrations (he gave orders) – but one can suppose that he knew how to use, for himself, in a practical state, the elementary reasoning based on experience which is that of the *Politici*.<sup>38</sup>

If we think together the different historical moments that Spinoza analyzes in the TTP, we realize that his thought on these subjects is more complex than it is usually said and cannot be reduced to the simple classical condemnation of tyrannicide.

There are many passages in which the irrationality and danger of the crowd is described, especially when it is manipulated by the theologians (but one can imagine other manipulations: a victorious general, for example - the PT will consider this<sup>39</sup>). As for the people, it hardly seems that an initiative is attributed to them as such.<sup>40</sup>

The forms of disobedience to the ruler, from simple passive disobedience (where the subject accepts the risk of being punished for implementing his convictions) to overt revolt and the execution or assassination of the ruler, are evaluated according to the structure of the state and the relationship of the ruler to that structure.

The structure on the basis of which the justification of the revolt is judged is most of the time an already existing structure, thus coming from the past. The only two times the future is mentioned (Elazar and the righteous in chapter XX), it is very briefly, and the affect that is linked to the future – hope – is not mentioned.

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38 One might add, what Spinoza does not say, that he must have frequented such *Politici* since he was brought up at the court of Pharaoh; with such an education, his personal destiny, thus his *ingenium*, differed from that of the other enslaved Hebrews. He was thus, alone among them, able to create a constitution since he had some experience in the management of a state.

39 Spinoza 2002, VII.

40 In fact, in the TTP, the term *populus* has a mostly historical and singular meaning, rather than a political one: it designates the Hebrew people in their relations with God, Moses, the priests, the princes, and it is rather a question of their character, of the teaching they are given, of the laws imposed on them, and not of any activity on their part. The passages where the term refers to the properly political notion of people are rare: a few sentences in chapter V, a few pages in chapter XVI – where it appears only at the very end of the paragraphs which concern the pact (§ 10 and 11) but not in the statement of it; and they show this people rather as object of the policy: it is necessary to ensure its salvation. It is used in the modern political sense only in the paragraphs of chapter XVIII concerning tyrannicide and usurpation. It appears only twice in chapter XX, where it is however question of the freedom of the citizens.

What is Spinoza's evolution from TTP to PT? Nothing is thrown away from what was acquired in the TTP, but new elements are added. From the point of view that interests us here, there are three: the situation of the United Provinces; the status of the multitude; the analysis of the causes of insurrections.

As far as the United Provinces are concerned, one may have the impression that at least one passage directly contradicts the TTP. As we have seen, the last paragraph of chapter XVIII of the TTP recognized the republican structure of this country, and considered the attempts of the Spanish and Leicester rulers as usurpations. In the PT, written after the seizure of power by William of Orange and the massacre of the De Witt brothers, the judgment seems to change. Spinoza explained the upheaval that had taken place by the "ill-constituted regime of the State," because the citizens had believed "that it was sufficient, in order to gain their liberty, to depose the count and remove the head of the body of the State," so that their country had become "a county without a count, a body without a head" and so that "the subjects do not know in whose hands the power of the State lies".<sup>41</sup> In fact, he does not criticize their policy of independence from a foreign ruler – it is the Stadhouder that is now being discussed, whereas it was not mentioned in the TTP. The crisis of 1672 was internal, even if the French invasion contributed to its outbreak. Spinoza does not disavow his 1670 positions: he simply considers that the states of the United Provinces had not been able to restructure the set of institutions in such a way as to remove the place of the count. In sum, he criticizes not their struggle against usurpation, but the fact that they did not push it far enough by "cleaning up" the weaknesses of their constitution that made attempts at usurpation possible; one might add (thinking of what has been said of the English example) that if the usurpation by William of Orange was victorious, it was because it came not from a foreigner, but from the heir of a family that was already known for its role in the state and even in the struggle for independence: the people were therefore already "assueti" to his influence, which prepared them to accept his power. The Dutch thus aligned themselves in the same category as the early Romans and Venetians: a non-monarchical structure, which nevertheless established or retained a quasi-monarch of uncertain status. The effect is catastrophic for the Romans and negligible for the Venetians; the Dutch fall between these two extremes: the effect was negligible during most of Spinoza's life, and then, at a critical moment (the French invasion), the potential for imbalance suddenly revealed itself.<sup>42</sup> It should be noted that, in the

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<sup>41</sup> Spinoza 2002, VII. He cites a second cause: the too small number of those who govern, which favors plots.

<sup>42</sup> In fact, at the legal level, the Netherlands did not become a monarchy. It is only in 1806 that the republic becomes a kingdom, by an external intervention (Napoleon installs his brother on the throne) and in 1815 that William I of Orange becomes king of the Netherlands.

Spinozian conception of history, it happens that only the long term puts a cause into action or at least makes its effects visible.<sup>43</sup> The transformation from Spinoza's point of view is therefore, on this point, limited. But, it has the interest of showing that a defect in the structure is not necessarily definitive, since the regime could have been improved. The transformation from Spinoza's point of view is therefore, on this point, limited. However, it has the interest of showing that a defect in the structure is not necessarily definitive, since the regime could have been improved.

But there is another transformation, one that is much more important, to which Toni Negri was the first one to draw attention to.<sup>44</sup> While the analyses of the TTP focused on the population and the crowd, the first understood in a rather historical-descriptive or passive sense, the second envisaged as the place of passions, now a new term comes to the front.<sup>45</sup> In the first chapters of the PT, and especially chapter III, the elements that target the strength and dissolution of the State are now organized around the word: *multitude*. This time, it is about the whole of the citizens, as far as they are active. Hence the key expression, obviously absent from the TTP: *potentia multitudinis*. It comes into play as Spinoza explains that the City is all the more powerful and all the more in control of its own right that it is directed by Reason.<sup>46</sup> In the same way, when he explains that the best State is the one in which men spend their lives in harmony, he adds that by life we must understand "a human life, that which is defined not only by the circulation of the blood and by the other functions common to all animals, but essentially by Reason and by the virtue and true life of the spirit;" and it is again to the multitude that he refers, distinguishing between the free and the subjugated multitude: "But be it noted that in speaking of the state as being established to this end, I meant one established by a free people, not dominion over a people acquired by right of war. For a free people is led more by hope than by fear, while a subjugated people is led more by fear than by hope."<sup>47</sup> We thus find here the multitude associated to freedom and to political initiative

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43 This is also the case with the initial mistake of the second Mosaic constitution (the only one to have been applied): it took a long time for the place granted to the Levites to produce all its negative effects, among which first of all the establishment of a monarchy. The same could be said, *mutatis mutandis*, of what happens in Rome with the re-establishment of a monarchy by Augustus.

44 Cf. Negri 1991.

45 The word *multitude* appeared occasionally in the TTP, but it was not yet charged with the active and positive meaning that it acquires in the PT.

46 "Nam civitatis ius potentia multitudinis, quae una veluti mente ducitur, determinatur. At haec animorum unio concipi nulla ratione posset, nisi civitas id ipsum maxime intendat, quod sana ratio omnibus hominibus utile esse docet", Spinoza 2002, V.

47 "Sed notandum, imperium, quod in hunc finem institui dixi, a me intelligi id, quod multitudo libera instituit, non autem id, quod in multitudinem iure belli acquiritur. Libera enim multitudo maiori spe quam metu, subacta autem maiori metu quam spe ducitur", Ibid., V.

(we speak about it in the active: instituit). We also find, associated with it, hope, finally named, and named positively. Far from being symmetrical to fear, it has now an opposite meaning: whereas fear characterizes the dominated multitude, hope is the characteristic of the free multitude. It is a passion, certainly, but like indignation, it is now to be classified among the passions that contribute to the results of Reason. So there is indeed, in Spinoza, prefigured in hollow in the TTP, and openly assumed in the PT, a thought of the future and the outline of a philosophy of hope, of a hope which is not the simple opposite of fear.<sup>48</sup>

Finally, the third novelty is that from now on the question of whether and when disobedience or revolt is or is not justified is replaced and surpassed by another one, which was only sketched in the TTP: that of knowing what causes such disobedience or revolt and thus makes it necessary. Two kinds can be identified here: one related to the specific faults of the leaders; the other related to the fundamental necessities of the social order.

The first refers to the fact that those who assume sovereignty must be respected by other citizens, who need to think that those who lead them are worthy of their functions. A behaviour that justifies this respect is therefore necessary for the perpetuation of the state. That is why repeated, visible and significant deviations from this rule predict its downfall. Thus, in chapter IV, Spinoza, taking up a theme of the TTP,<sup>49</sup> develops it in a completely new way and asks whether the State can commit a sin: yes, when it commits acts that can be the cause of its ruin – and these acts are not determined only by its power, but also by that of human nature: “One will be able to understand it more clearly if one considers this: when one says that each one can do what he wants of a thing that comes under his right, this power must be defined, not only by the power of the agent, but also by the capacity of the patient.”<sup>50</sup> Now the patient’s capacity, here, is human nature, or more precisely some invariants that mark the limits of what is bearable by the multitude and of what cannot be transferred: freedom of judgment, but also reverence. Whereas the TTP mentioned only extreme violence against citizens as an action of the ruler exposing the State to the greatest dangers, here the list is much broader since it includes “everything that goes against the commandment of Reason” – that is to say, for example, the fact that “those who are masters of the State run the streets in a state of drunkenness, or naked with prostitutes, behave like histrionics, and

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48 On the affects of fear and hope and the emergence of a hope that is not the correlate of fear: cf. Moreau 2021.

49 He distinguishes between the right and the interest of the sovereign. He has the right to commit the worst actions, but it is not in his interest to do so, because they will lead to his downfall, Spinoza 2007, XX 3.

50 Spinoza 2002, IV 6.

openly violate or despise the laws of which they are themselves the authors”; this time violence against citizens is named only afterwards. The behaviors of the rulers that objectively explain the revolts thus imply a whole range of behaviors of a political, ideological and legal nature. Above all, it is they who appear to be responsible, and no longer the multitude that is rising up.

Beyond of these mistakes of the rulers, the first chapters of the TP insist on the naturalness of social life. The necessity to which the social order responds is twofold: to ensure security and to escape misery.<sup>51</sup> In the logic of the TTP, one would say that legislation responds to these two needs (insecurity was described in relation to the contract, and economic necessity in relation to the laws of Moses). But here the approach is different: it is the power of the multitude which determines the *jus imperii*, and this power, as we have seen, is only effective through the union of souls, and this union is itself only possible if the State has as its end what is useful to all (thus security and the escape from misery), that is to say if the multitude is free. If these conditions are not fulfilled, the multitude will turn against the State, which it no longer recognizes as its own: “In the third place, it must be noted that decrees capable of arousing indignation in the hearts of the greatest number of citizens are no longer within the rights of the State. For it is certain that men naturally tend to associate, as soon as they have a common fear or the desire to avenge a common damage; and since the right of the State has as its definition and measure the common power of the multitude, it follows that the power and the right of the State decrease the more the State itself provides a greater number of citizens with reasons to associate in a common grievance.”<sup>52</sup> Here are the reasons why the multitude rightly turns against the State: if security is no longer assured; if misery is no longer overcome, then it forms a new association that threatens the previous association, which it feels to be alien. We read as the other side of the lessons concerning the constitution of Moses: the best constitution is the one that ensures security and equality among citizens. It is therefore not only the punctual attempt to transform the order of the state that will make the ruler a usurper, it is also the questioning of these fundamental needs. It will provoke indignation in the face of poverty or insecurity. Whereas in the TTP, we were rather in the register of the faults of the rulers, here we are in the analysis of the causes which make the State necessarily subject

51 “Ad quod accedit, quod status civilis naturaliter instituitur ad metum communem adimendum et communes misérias propellendum”, *Ibid.*, III, 6.

52 “Tertio denique considerandum venit, ad civitatis ius ea minus pertinere, quae plurimi indignantur. Nam certum est, homines naturae ductu in unum conspirare, vel proTPer communem metum vel desiderio damnum aliquod commune ulciscendi; et quia ius civitatis communi multitudinis potentia definitur, certum est, potentiam civitatis et ius eatenus minui, quatenus ipsa causas praebet, ut plures in unum conspirent.” *Ibid.*, III 9.



to revolt. In this sense, contrary to what one sometimes reads, the TP, at least in its deepest layer of reflection, offers conservative arguments even less leverage than the TTP.

Thus, the question of disobedience to the sovereign, up to the extreme form of insurrection, is not limited to knowing whether it is legitimate or not. It is first of all a question of noticing that it exists and of finding its causes. If it is the combined effect of the errors and injustices of the former rulers and the force of resistance embodied in the affects of the free multitude that constituted the State, then this spontaneity of the multitude can no longer be exercised in the existing institutions, because the dysfunctional functioning of government prevents it. It is thus necessary that it expresses itself otherwise and this power of the multitude, although it affects passionate dimensions, corresponds to the requirements of the Reason. It would remain to ask if and how a citizen guided by the Reason can join it, in spite of the inevitable passionate aspects of this revolt.<sup>53</sup> One might also ask whether the analytical tools developed by Spinoza allow us to understand the revolutions of the modern age, which began in the eighteenth century and which he could not experience. But this is another problem.

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53 Cf. A. Matheron 1994; Moreau 2021.

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Volume 8  
Issue 1



**“Different Times are  
not Simultaneous,  
but Successive”:  
Spinoza between  
Jacobi and Herder**

**Vittorio Morfino**

**Abstract:** With the *Letters to Moses Mendelssohn on the doctrine of Spinoza* Jacobi puts in place an intervention of great importance in the theoretical-political conjuncture of the *Aufklärung*: it lets enter the scene the Spinoza's Ghost by projecting it on Leibniz, Lessing, and Kant. In particular, he will accuse Kant of having proposed, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, a theory of space and time in the "Geist des Spinoza". In this article I reconstruct the reasons that have allowed Jacobi to conduct this operation by putting it in tension with the criticisms of the "transcendental aesthetics" that we find in Herder's *Metacritica*, where a theory of plural temporality inspired by Spinoza is explicitly affirmed against Kant.

**Keywords:** Jacobi, Herder, Kant, space, time, succession, causality

The thesis of the uniqueness of time, or the impossibility of its plurality, has its roots at the origins of western philosophy: both Plato's *Timaeus* and Aristotle's *Physics*, denying the infinity of worlds against Democritus, also deny the existence of multiple simultaneous times. In *Physics* IV, Aristotle writes:

Some assert that time is the movement of the whole, others that it is the sphere itself. [...] Besides, if there were more heavens [οὐρανοί] than one, the movement of any of them equally would be time, so that there would be many times at the same time [πολλοὶ χρόνοι ἅμα].<sup>1</sup>

This is a conclusion which is obviously absurd for Aristotle. Although Spinoza openly takes the side of an ancient materialist tradition including Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius in a famous letter on the question of ghosts, the interpretive tradition has had difficulty identifying this *topos* in Spinoza for several reasons. Spinoza's reference to Lucretius is particularly interesting in this sense, insofar as the Latin poet explicitly references a plurality of times. In book four of *De rerum natura* he writes:

[...] in one time perceived by us, that is, while one word is being uttered, many times are lurking which reason understands to be there.

[...] tempore in uno,  
cum sentimus, id est cum vox emittitur una,  
tempora multa latent, ratio quae comperit esse<sup>2</sup>.

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1 Aristotle 1984, p. 370.

2 Lucretius 1975, p. 339. Translation modified.

'In one time [...] many times are lurking.' For what reason is a Lucretius-Spinoza tradition on the issue of the multiplicity of times simply unthinkable for us? What has constituted this 'internal darkness' of our gaze is undoubtedly the idealist reading of Spinoza, a reading that made time, and with it everything that pertains to the finite, a mere illusion produced by the imagination. However, what is interesting is that wherever Spinozism was not interpreted in these terms, it was read as a theory of the uniqueness of space and time.

### 1. Jacobi's denunciation: Kant as Spinozist

Jacobi's text *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn* provides the trigger for the Spinoza-Renaissance at the end of the eighteenth century, making Lessing's Spinozism declaration public: *Hen kai pan, ich weiss nicht anders*. This statement caused a great scandal in the German 'official' culture. Published in 1785, four years after the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Jacobi proposes a complete summary exposition of Spinoza's philosophy in 44 theses. Theses six and seven present the relation between the infinite and finite as follows:

VI. Hence the finite is in the infinite, so that the sum [*Inbegriff*] of all finite things, equally containing within itself the whole of eternity at every moment [*in jedem Momente*], past, present, and future, is one and the same as the infinite thing itself.

VII. This sum is not an absurd composition [*Zusammensetzung*] of finite things, together constituting an infinite, but a whole [*ein Ganzes*] in the strictest sense, whose parts can only be thought within it and according to it.<sup>3</sup>

In a note by way of explication, Jacobi cites two passages from the Transcendental Aesthetic, claiming that they 'are entirely in the spirit of Spinoza [*die ganz im Geiste des Spinoza sind*]':

One can only represent a single space, and if one speaks of many spaces, one understands by that only parts of one and the same unique space. And these parts cannot as it were precede the single all-encompassing space as its components (from which its composition [*Zusammensetzung*] would be impossible), but rather are only thought in it. [Space] is essentially single; the manifold in it, thus also the general concept of spaces in general, rests merely on limitations [*Einschränkungen*].<sup>4</sup>

.....  
3 Jacobi 1994, pp. 217–218. Translation modified.

4 Kant 1998, p. 175. Cited in Jacobi 1994, p. 218. Translation modified.

The infinitude of time signifies nothing more than that every determinate magnitude of time is possible only through limitations [*Einschränkungen*] of a single time grounding it. The original representation **time** must therefore be given as unlimited. But where the parts themselves and every magnitude of an object can be determinately represented only through limitation, there the entire representation cannot be given through concepts, (<for they contain only partial representations>), but immediate intuition must ground them.<sup>5</sup>

Naturally, Jacobi's use of Kant is anything but naive: using passages from the *Critique of Pure Reason* in order to explain the Spinozist theory of space and time means casting a shadow over Kantian theory, after having accused both Leibniz as well as Lessing of Spinozism. In the last analysis it means claiming that every path of reason leads to Spinozism, that is, to fatalism and atheism. Moreover, what Jacobi simply alludes to was explicitly affirmed in an anonymously published review (the author is probably Andrea Pistorius) of the 'Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek', wherein at the heart of the Pantheism controversy, 'the criticism was advanced that at bottom the conception of the ideality of space and time could be nothing but Spinoza's unique substance.'<sup>6</sup> This attack forced Kant to take a public position in *What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?*. What is interesting here is not so much the misunderstanding of Kant, a risk from which Jacobi clearly distances himself in the second edition of the *Letters* (1789) by modifying his introduction to the passages as follows:

The following passages from Kant can serve to render this concept more clearly. It must not be said to any person of criteria that Kantian philosophy is therefore accused of Spinozism.<sup>7</sup>

What is interesting is the fact that the misunderstanding of Spinoza was possible by ontologizing the pure forms of Kantian perception in order to attribute a theory of the uniqueness of space and time to Spinoza.

## 2. How Jacobi traces a conception of unique space in Spinoza

Beyond the references to Spinoza's texts Jacobi provides later in the same note, I think that the key place for attributing a theory of unique space to Spinoza is proposition fifteen and its scholium in part one of the *Ethics*. In the proposition, Spinoza states that 'Whatever is, is in God, and nothing

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5 Kant 1998, p. 179. Cited in Jacobi 1994, p. 218. Translation modified.

6 De Flaviis 1986, p. 99. Cf. Philonenko in Kant 1993, pp. 25–26.

7 Jacobi 2000, p. 91.



can be or be conceived without God.<sup>8</sup> This proposition, after having demonstrated that no other substance can be given beyond God (pr. 14), follows from the definitions of substance and mode and from axiom one, which reads: 'whatever is, is either in itself or in another.'<sup>9</sup> In the scholium Spinoza focuses on the question of 'extended substance [understood as] one of the infinite attributes of God.'<sup>10</sup> He is particularly focused on refuting those who maintain that extended substance is divisible and composed of parts, and that therefore it cannot belong to the essence of God. Spinoza's main argument is based on the negation of the void:

For if corporeal substance could be so divided that its parts were really distinct, why, then, could one part not be annihilated, the rest remaining connected with one another as before [*inter se connexis*]? And why must they all be so fitted together [*aptari debent*] that there is no void? Truly, of things which are really distinct from one another, one can be, and remain in its condition, without the other. Since, therefore, there is no vacuum in nature [...], but all its parts must so concur [*concurrere debent*] that there is no void, it follows also that they cannot be really distinguished, i.e., that corporeal substance, insofar as it is substance, cannot be divided.<sup>11</sup>

There is thus only one extended substance, whose parts are distinguished modally, but not really. The reason why we are instead inclined to think extended substance as composed of parts resides in the imagination:

If someone should now ask why we are, by nature, so inclined to divide quantity, I shall answer that we conceive quantity in two ways: abstractly, or superficially, as we imagine it, or as substance, which is done by the intellect alone. So if we attend to quantity as it is in the imagination, which we do often and more easily, it will be found to be finite, divisible, and composed of parts [*ex partibus conflata*]; but if we attend to it as it is in the intellect, and conceive it insofar as it is substance, which happens with great difficulty, then, as we have already sufficiently demonstrated, it will be found to be infinite, unique, and indivisible.<sup>12</sup>

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8 Spinoza 1985, p. 420.

9 Spinoza 1985, p. 410.

10 Spinoza 1985, p. 421.

11 Spinoza 1985, p. 423.

12 Spinoza 1985, pp. 423–424.

It is this conception of extension as infinite, unique, and divisible which authorized Jacobi to maintain that 'Spinoza's spirit' is present in the passage from Kant. However, it is worth briefly noting that while the passage from Kant proposes to think the parts in the whole in the form of a static limitation, (which is in line with the key importance Jacobi attributes to the Spinozian proposition *determinatio est negatio*<sup>13</sup>), the passage from Spinoza instead proposes to think a dynamic involvement of the parts in the whole, in which the argument against the void resides.<sup>14</sup> But we can go further.

### 3. How Jacobi traces a conception of unique time in Spinoza

The concept of space cannot be immediately superimposed onto the concept of extension, and as Rousset rightly notes, 'we do not find teachings [in Spinoza] on the specific status of space,'<sup>15</sup> and yet we understand the reasons that led Jacobi to read Spinoza in light of Kant. If we instead shift to the concept of unique time, the question becomes more complicated.

How could Jacobi have been brought to read Spinoza's theory of time in light of Kant, as a theory of unique time? We can first consider Spinoza's lengthiest treatment of the concept of time, which is found in Letter XII to Meyer. In this letter, we find an exposition which is apparently symmetrical with that of proposition fifteen:

Let me briefly explain these four concepts: Substance, Mode, Eternity, and Duration. The points I want you to consider about Substance are: 1) that existence pertains to its essence, i.e., that from its essence and definition alone it follows that it exists [...]; 2) which follows from the former, that Substance is not one of many, but that there exists only one of the same nature; and finally, 3) that every Substance cannot be understood except as infinite. I call the Affections of Substance Modes. Their definition, insofar as it is not the very definition of Substance, cannot involve any existence. So even though they exist, we can conceive them as not existing. From this it follows that when we attend only to the essence of

13 '*Determinatio est negatio, seu determinatio ad rem juxta suum esse non pertinet*. Individual things therefore, so far as they exist in a certain determinate mode, are non-entia; the indeterminate infinite being is the one single true *ens reale, hoc est, est omne esse, & præter quod nullum datur esse*.' Jacobi 1994, pp. 219–220.

14 On this point, and on the way the argument against the void is modified from Descartes to Spinoza and throughout Spinoza's work, see Morfino 2007. The use of the verb *concurrere* with regard to the parts already suggests the positive use Spinoza will make of them. If he in fact affirms the impossibility of dividing the *res extensa* into parts from a static viewpoint, in this way attributing extension to God, it is because he brings the concept of parts in extension back into play from a dynamic perspective. In other words, it is not possible to identify the part statically, but only dynamically.

15 Rousset 2000, p. 127.

modes, and not to the total order of Nature [*ordo totius Naturæ*], we cannot infer from the fact that they exist now that they will or will not exist later, or that they have or have not existed earlier. From this it is clear that we conceive the existence of Substance to be entirely different from the existence of Modes. The difference between Eternity and Duration arises from this. By means of duration, in fact, we can explain only the existence of Modes; while the existence of substance is explained by means of eternity, i.e., the infinite enjoyment of existing, or, in bad Latin, of being [*infinita existendi, sive, invita latinitate, essendi fruitio*].<sup>16</sup>

The first level of Spinoza's argument establishes an equivalence between *substantia* and *æternitas* and between *modus* and *duratio*. The fundamental terms of Spinoza's ontology, substance and modes, are therefore integrally translatable into temporal terms through the pair eternity-duration. However, and this breaks the symmetry with proposition fifteen, in the letter there is a third term, *tempus*:

From the fact that we can determine Duration and Quantity as we please, that is, that we conceive Quantity abstracted from Substance [*hanc a Substantia abstractam concipimus*] and duration outside of the way it which it flows from eternal things [*a rebus æternis fluit*], there arises Time and Measure [*Tempus, & Mensura*]. Time, in other words, is determined in relation to Duration, and Measure in relation to Quantity, because in them we can have as adequate an image as possible. From the fact that we separate Affections of Substance from Substance itself and reduce them to classes [*ad classes redigimus*] so that as far as possible we imagine them easily, there arises number, by which we determine these Affections themselves. You can see clearly from what I have said that Measure, Time, and Number are nothing but Modes of thinking, or rather, of imagining. [...] There are many notions [...] we cannot acquire with the imagination, but only by the intellect, such as Substance, Eternity, and similar; and if someone strives to explain such things by notions of this kind, which are only aids of the imagination, he will accomplish nothing more than if he takes pains to go mad with his imagination. And if the Modes of Substance themselves are confused with beings of reason of this kind, or aids of the imagination [*auxilia imaginationis*], they too cannot be rightly understood'.<sup>17</sup>

.....  
16 Spinoza 1985, pp. 201–202.

17 Spinoza 1985, p. 203.

Here the symmetry with proposition fifteen can be re-proposed: in the same way that quantity conceived in an abstract way leads to a conception of extension 'as finite, divisible, and composed of parts,' so also does conceiving duration in an abstract way and confusing it with time, which is a mode of imagining, lead us to fall into similar paradoxes as those formulated by Zeno against the existence of movement. Spinoza writes:

When someone has conceived duration abstractly [*abstracte*], and by confusing it with Time begun to divide it into parts, he will never be able to understand, for example, how an hour can pass. For if an hour is to pass, it will be necessary for half of it to pass first, and then half of the remainder, and then half of the remainder of this. So if you subtract half from the remainder in this way, to infinity, you will never reach the end of the hour. Hence many, who have not been accustomed to distinguish Beings of reason from real beings [*entia rationis a realibus*], have dared to hold that duration is composed of moments. In their desire to avoid Charybdis, they have run into Scylla. For composing Duration of moments is the same as composing Number merely by adding noughts.<sup>18</sup>

We can thus suppose that Jacobi read Spinoza's theory of duration in light of the Kantian theory of time, conceiving a unique and indivisible duration, which only the imagination divides into temporal parts, just as it divides extension into spatial parts.

#### 4. Kant's theory of unique time

We can now examine Kant's theory of time. As is well known, in the Transcendental Aesthetic Kant thinks space and time as pure forms of sensible intuition, as *a priori* forms which allow 'the manifold of appearance to be ordered in certain relations.'<sup>19</sup> In the 'Metaphysical exposition of the concept of time' (where by exposition, Kant understands a distinct representation of that which belongs to a concept, and by metaphysical, when the exposition contains that which exhibits the concept as given *a priori*), Kant affirms the *a priori* nature of the concept of time, the fact that it does not derive from experience, but on the contrary grounds it. This *a priori* necessity grounds the 'fundamental apodictic principles of relations of time', or 'the axioms of time in general':

[Time] has only one dimension: different times are not simultaneous, but successive [*verschiedene Zeiten sind nicht zugleich, sondern nach einander*] (just as different spaces are not

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<sup>18</sup> Spinoza 1985, pp. 203–204.

<sup>19</sup> Kant 1998, pp. 172–173.

successive, but simultaneous). These principles could not be drawn from experience, for this would yield neither rigorous universality nor apodictic certainty. We would only be able to say: This is how matters must stand. These principles are valid as rules under which alone experiences are possible at all, and instruct us prior to them, not through it.<sup>20</sup>

The proposition which states that different times are not simultaneous, but successive cannot be deduced from a general concept of time, but is rather contained immediately in the intuition of time: 'different times are only parts of one and the same time [...] the infinitude of time signifies nothing more than that every determinate magnitude of time is only possible through limitations of a single time grounding it [*einer einigen zum Grunde liegenden Zeit*].'<sup>21</sup>

In the transcendental exposition (which means explaining the concept as a principle from which insight into the possibility of other synthetic *a priori* cognitions can be gained), Kant notes that the concept of alteration 'is only possible through and in the representation of time' and that therefore the concept of time explains 'the possibility of as much synthetic *a priori* cognition as is presented by the general theory of motion.'<sup>22</sup>

From this, Kant deduces in the concluding section (§6) that time is neither subsistent in itself, nor inherent in things, but rather nothing but the intuition of our internal state. Precisely because this intuition does not provide any figure, we make up for this lack with analogies:

We represent the temporal sequence [*Zeitfolge*] through a line progressing to infinity, in which the manifold constitutes a series [*Reihe*] that is of only one dimension, and infer from the properties of this line to all the properties of time, with the sole difference that the parts of the former are simultaneous [*zugleich*] but those of the latter always exist successively [*nach einander*].<sup>23</sup>

This line constituted of successive parts is the *a priori* formal condition of all phenomena: the immediate condition of internal phenomena, and the mediate condition of external phenomena; it is subjective, because outside of the subject time is nothing, and it is objective in terms of all phenomena presented to us in experience. It is in this that the transcendental ideality of time consists.

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20 Kant 1998, p. 179.

21 Kant 1998, p. 179.

22 Kant 1998, p. 180.

23 Kant 1998, p. 180.

If now we move from the Transcendental Aesthetic to the Transcendental Analytic, we encounter the Kantian concept of 'duration.' This concept emerges in the demonstration of the first analogy of experience, the 'principle of the persistence [*Beharrlichkeit*] of substance,' which states:

In all change [*Wechse*/] of appearances substance persists, and its quantum is neither increased nor diminished in nature.<sup>24</sup>

In the demonstration Kant shows the inseparable link between substance and time:

All appearances are in time, in which, as substratum (as persistent form of inner intuition), both simultaneity [*Zugleichsein*] as well as succession [*die Folge*] can alone be represented. The time [...] lasts [*bleibt*] and does not change; since it is that in which succession can be represented only as determinations of it. Now time cannot be perceived by itself. Consequently it is in the object of perception, i.e., the appearances, that the substratum must be encountered that represents time in general and in which all change or simultaneity can be perceived in apprehension through the relation of the appearances to it. However, the substratum of everything real, i.e., everything that belongs to the existence of things, is substance, of which everything that belongs to existence can be thought only as a determination. [...] [it] is, as substratum of all change, what always remains the same. Since this, therefore, cannot change in existence, its quantum in nature can also be neither increased nor diminished.<sup>25</sup>

The link between substance and time is circular: permanence is a temporal relation, but at the same time it establishes the possibility of temporal relations, just as substance is a relation while at the same time establishing relations.<sup>26</sup> A vicious circle, of course, but one that is foundational for Kantian thought:

Only in that which persists [...] are temporal relations possible [...]; that which persists is the substratum of the empirical

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<sup>24</sup> Kant 1998, p. 299.

<sup>25</sup> Kant 1998, p. 300.

<sup>26</sup> 'Thus this category also stands under the title of relations, but more as their condition than as itself containing a relation.' Kant 1998, p. 303. On this point I fully agree with Enzo Paci: 'on the one hand, Kant tends to resolve substance into relational forms of relative temporal permanence, while on the other hand fails to place himself on the level of relationality, thus returning to the old logic of subject and predicate.' Paci 1959, pp. 195–196.

representation of time itself, by which alone all time-determination is possible (for simultaneity and succession are the only relations in time). [...] Persistence gives general expression to time as the constant correlate of all existence of appearances, all change and all accompaniment [*alles Wechsels und aller Begleitung*].<sup>27</sup>

On this basis Kant defines the concept of duration:

Change does not affect time itself, but only the appearances in time [...] If one were to ascribe such a succession to time itself, one would have to think yet another time in which this succession would be possible [*wollte man der Zeit selbst eine Folge nach einander beilegen, so müsste man noch eine andere Zeit denken, in welcher diese Folge möglich wäre*]. Only through that which persists does existence in different parts of the temporal series [*das Dasein in verschiedenen Theilen der Zeitreihe*] acquire a magnitude, which one call duration [*Dauer*]. For in mere sequence [*bloßen Folge*] alone existence is always disappearing and beginning, and never has the least magnitude. Without that which persists there is therefore no temporal relation.<sup>28</sup>

Permanence thus founds the possibility of determining time as well as determining the quantity of existence in time, that is, duration. The concept of duration is closely linked to the category of substance on the one hand, and on the other to the concept of unique time:

Substances (in appearance) are the substrata of all time-determinations. The arising of some of them and the perishing of others would itself remove the sole condition of the empirical unity of time, and the appearances would then be related to two different times [*auf zweierlei Zeiten*], in which existence flowed side by side [*in denen neben einander das Dasein verflösse*], which is absurd. For there is only one time [*Denn es ist nur Eine Zeit*], in which all different times must not be placed simultaneously but only after another.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Kant 1998, p. 300.

<sup>28</sup> Kant 1998, pp. 300–301.

<sup>29</sup> Kant 1998, p. 303.



## 5. The time and space of interiority

Kant's theory of space and time as forms of order for multiplicity is a transcendental translation of Leibniz's theory of space and time. In his correspondence with Clarke, polemicizing against the concepts of absolute space and time, Leibniz writes:

For me, I have observed more than once that I consider space as something purely relative, in the same way as time: it is an order of co-existences, just as time is an order of successions.<sup>30</sup>

Yet if we look more closely, Kant's theory turns out to be an extension, although original, of that metaphysical tradition which between Descartes and Locke invented the space of interiority. If, however, in Descartes the temporality of the space of interiority, of the *cogito*, is still punctuated by continuous divine creation (although the deepest secret of the instant is actually that of the presence of the *cogitatio*<sup>31</sup>), it is with Locke that the measure of temporality becomes exclusively mental. In chapter fourteen of the second part of the *Essay on Human Understanding*, Locke makes the idea of duration, a complex idea of a simple mode, depend on the reflection of the succession of ideas in our minds:

It is evident to anyone, who will but observe what passes in his own mind, that there is a train of ideas, which constantly succeed one another in his understanding, as long as he is awake. Reflection on these appearances of several ideas, one after another, in our minds, is that which furnishes us with the idea of succession: and the distance between any parts of that succession, or between the appearance of any two ideas in our minds, is what we call duration. For whilst we are thinking, or whilst we receive successively several ideas in our minds, we know that we do exist; and so we call the existence, or the continuation of the existence of ourselves, or anything else, commensurate to the succession of any ideas in our minds, the duration of ourselves, or any such other thing co-existing with our thinking.<sup>32</sup>

Having established the idea of duration on the basis of the reflection on the 'series' or 'chain' of ideas and on the distance that separates two of its parts, Locke defines the idea of the instant and the idea of time: the former is constituted by 'that [part of duration] which takes up the time of

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<sup>30</sup> Leibniz 2000, p. 499.

<sup>31</sup> 'We clearly understand that it is possible for me to exist at this moment, while I am thinking of one thing, and yet not to exist at the very next moment, when, if I do exist, I may think of something quite different.' Descartes 1991, p. 355.

<sup>32</sup> Locke 1997, p. 175.

only one idea in our minds,<sup>33</sup> while the latter is obtained 'by considering any part of infinite duration, as set out by periodical measures.'<sup>34</sup>

What is interesting throughout Locke's entire chapter is the insistence on the primacy of reflection over the observation of motion: 'It is not then motion, but the constant train of ideas in our minds, whilst we are waking, that furnishes us with the idea of duration,' to the point that 'were there no sense of motion at all, we should as well [still] have the idea of duration.'<sup>35</sup> Locke maintains that this succession can constitute an intersubjective measure by means of a conjecture, namely that the flowing of a series of ideas 'varies not very much in a waking man.'<sup>36</sup> Of course, this conjecture is the outright flaw in Locke's entire construction, which Kant attempts to remedy by means of his own theory of temporality, although the deep Lockean stamp of time conceived as a form of inner sense remains. As Kant writes in a note to §7 of the Transcendental Aesthetic,

I can, to be sure, say: my representations succeed one another; but that only means that we are conscious of them as in a temporal sequence, i.e., according to the form of inner sense. Time is not on that account something in itself, nor any determination objectively adhering to things.<sup>37</sup>

## 6. Herder's criticism of Kant

A chapter in Herder's *Metacritique of the Critique of Pure Reason*, published at the end of the century (1799), is directed against the Kantian theory of unique time as a form of inner sense. The theme of Herder's entire work, Kant's lack in considering the 'fundamental "linguisticity" of reason and human experience',<sup>38</sup> is also at the center of the chapter on the 'Metacritique of the so-called Transcendental Aesthetic.' Regarding the question of time in particular, treated in section three ('Genesis of the concept of time, according to the givens of our nature and language'), Herder proposes a reconstruction of the genesis of its concept on the basis of a historical process described by the sequence practice-language-spatialization-number. *Am Anfang war die Tat* – this is the practical relationship of man with nature:

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33 Locke 1997, p. 177.

34 Locke 1997, p. 187.

35 Locke 1997, p. 179.

36 Locke 1997, p. 177.

37 Kant 1998, p. 182.

38 See Tani in Herder 1993, p. xiv.

The natural calendar was therefore the first rule for men [*das erste Regulativ*]; the rhythms of time [*Zeitenweisen*], which they had to observe if they did not want to succumb to time, became an unwritten norm for them, their rhythms of life [*Lebensweise*], their measure of time [*Zeitenberechnung*].<sup>39</sup>

It is precisely this relation with the rhythms of nature which gives place in humankind, 'in the course of times and their changing,' to 'an *intuition* of time, but certainly not *a priori* and not even for metaphysical speculation, but rather on the basis of observations and from looking at the external world for practical purposes.'<sup>40</sup> Man began to perceive himself as a temporal being that 'lives following or preceding time,'<sup>41</sup> and 'little by little, time seized the entire syntax of language.'<sup>42</sup> Further, 'the analogy of space played a more precise designation with times':

The majority of temporal determinations [*Zeitbestimmungen*], for example, sunrise, midday, sunset, and then before, after, half, or between these, etc., are drawn from determinations of place. The point at which the sun rises and goes down, or the midpoint of its course, was the reason for giving, at the moment [*Zeit*] in which it happens, the precise names of sunrise, sunset, and midday, the past as that which precedes, the future as that which follows; the day and time were that which became fixed, established, and wedded. The month signified a lunar cycle, the week indicated the order of days, the year represented a return, a circle. The latter was for all peoples the sensible image [*Sinnbild*] of time that returns to itself and begins again from itself.<sup>43</sup>

Yet these visual measurements do not grasp 'the precise character of discrete or numerical quantity.' Herder emphasizes how much effort it took for men 'to learn to count':

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39 Herder 1993, p. 40.

40 Herder 1993, p. 41.

41 Herder 1993, p. 41.

42 Herder 1993, p. 41. Herder writes: 'the time that governs everything also rules men's thoughts. Since doing and suffering occur over time, and it is never indifferent when something happens or has happened or will happen, time has been added to all of the words that indicate acting and suffering (*verba*). Instead of the infinitive, which in primitive languages was valid for all things, at most with the addition of people, the moods appeared for greater clarity, first of all the indicative with determinate distinctions of time. At first these were few; the past and future were roughly indicated, until gradually more precise moods were introduced for both times; and those of the Greek language were very precise. Furthermore, by means of particles, determinations of both time and place were added to the verbs (*verbis*); adverbs and prepositions were mixed, the entire flow was led and guided ashore with the measure of time.' Herder 1993, pp. 41–42.

43 Herder 1993, p. 42.

Not even the clear, repeated external succession of mutations in things for a long time was effective in causing them to count with real numbers. In the long term, the always repeating series of days and nights caused them to attempt to register, with lines and other imitative symbols, a certain quantity recurring in the days; in short, to count. Much later they learned the measurement of hours from dripping water, and the number of fingers suggested their numerical cycle, the decade. This determination of time by number was held sacred by all peoples of antiquity; it was registered by rites and festivities, kept and celebrated; the wise men, it was said, had gone to get the number in heaven. But how difficult it was already to think of numbers and seasons as such is demonstrated by the flood of incidental circumstances that astrology rained down from heaven together with them.<sup>44</sup>

After explaining the genesis of the concept of time by refuting the Kantian conception of time as the *a priori* form of sensible intuition, Herder emphasizes the deep link between time and change<sup>45</sup>:

In truth, each thing that changes has in itself the measure of its own time [*hat jedes verändliche Ding das Maas seiner Zeit in sich*], which is and remains that measure even when nothing else existed; no two things in the world have the same measure of time [*dasselbe Maas der Zeit*]. The beat of my pulse [*Pulsschlag*], the slow or hurried flow [*Schritt oder Flug*] of my thoughts, are not a measure of time that is valid for others; the flowing [*Lauf*] of a river, the growth [*Wachstum*] of a tree, do not serve as the measure of time [*Zeitmesser*] for all rivers, trees, and plants. The life of an elephant and the life of a fly have a very different duration [*Lebenszeiten*], and how unequal is the measure of time [*Zeitenmaas*] of the various planets.<sup>46</sup>

.....  
44 Herder 1993, p. 43.

45 We could say, in a theoretical language, the primacy of change over time: 'Time', Herder writes, 'is by no means a necessary representation that underlies all intuitions. True intuition forgets time. If everything that is changeable disappears, so also does time, the measure of changes, disappear.' Herder 1993, p. 44. And again: 'I subsume changes under the concept of time insofar as I observe their succession: the model of this is given to me by the succession of my thoughts and all natural phenomena. With this calculation I construct for my intellect a series of concepts that follow one another [*Reihen der Begriffe nacheinander*] (series), just as for space I construct a series of adjacent concepts (*situs*). From this derives an order of things; but the changes would still happen even if there was no one to count and order them.' Herder 1993, p. 45. On this point, Verra's position is quite important. Against Haym and Jöns, Verra rejects every subjectivist reading of the idea of time in Herder: 'In the *Metacritique*, where Herder traces the image of time over the course of natural events, and even when he speaks of this image of man, he does not at all allude to his own inner life, but to an age of development.' Verra 2006, p. 45.

46 Herder 1993, p. 43.

This crescendo, which ranges from the personal experience of the beat of a pulse and the coursing of thoughts to the imaginative vision of life on other planets, leads Herder to the point of heresy, to the frontal opposition with the fundamental apodictic proposition that rules relations of time, which states that different times are not simultaneous, but successive:

We can therefore risk saying that there are in the universe, in a determinate time, innumerable times [*im Universum zu einer Zeit unzählbar-viele Zeiten*].<sup>47</sup>

Here we seem to hear an echo of Lucretius's celebrated verse, 'in uno tempore, tempora multa latent'.<sup>48</sup> Where then does the representation of a unique time arise? Herder writes:

Time, which we figure is the measure of all other [thoughts] is simply a relative measure of our thoughts [*Verhältnißmaas unsrer Gedanken*], just as infinite space was for the set of all the places of singular beings in the universe. In the same way his companion, boundless time [*ungeheure Zeit*], has become the measure and field [*das Maas und der Umfang*] of all times. And just as space was the simple limit of place, such that an infinite continuum could be imagined, so also time – which in itself is nothing other than the measure of duration [*Maas der Dauer*] insofar as it is determinable by means of internal or external changes – by constantly counting to the infinite must become an innumerable number, an unbridgeable ocean of droplets, waves, and currents that flow into it.<sup>49</sup>

## 7. From Herder to Spinoza

As our point of departure, we took up Jacobi's claim that the Kantian theory of unique time is permeated by 'Spinoza's spirit.' I would like to try to maintain, in terms of the path we have followed, that it is precisely Herder's violation of the Kantian prohibition on the plurality of simultaneous times that is permeated by Spinoza's spirit. From the vantage of historical reconstruction, showing the importance of Spinoza's influence on Herder's thought is an extremely easy task: it is a genuine

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<sup>47</sup> Herder 1993, p. 43.

<sup>48</sup> It is interesting to note that Herder establishes a privileged link between time and hearing, which is implicitly present in Lucretius's verse: 'The determinations of time properly belong to hearing, since this extracts the succession of things by listening, as it were. Sound is for the ear what the ray of light is for the eye: this is the most precise description of the line, that is, the most precise description of the moment [*des Moments*], of a point of moments that flow. The entire domain of modulation [*Modulation*], the measurement of movement that is more and less slow or rapid, regular or irregular, is the responsibility of the ear.' Herder 1993, p. 52.

<sup>49</sup> Herder 1993, p. 44.

historiographical *topos*. Not only are there numerous traces of a reading of Spinoza in the letters of the young Herder,<sup>50</sup> but also, above all, there is a work completely dedicated to Spinoza's thought, which was published in an explicit polemic with Jacobi during the years of the Spinoza Debate, entitled *God: Some Conversations*. The book was originally published in 1787, but Herder published a second edition in 1800, the year after the publication of the *Metacritique*: in this new edition, on top of several significant variations from a theoretical point of view (the most important of which is the substitution of the concept of substantial force with the concept of organic force), there is also the addition of numerous notes bearing Spinoza's footprints.<sup>51</sup> It is not therefore hazardous to hypothesize that in the years he was writing the *Metacritique*, Herder had Spinoza's texts on his desk.

If we consider Spinoza's Letter XII (which Herder cites in a note to the second edition, describing it as 'curious' [*merkwürdig*]<sup>52</sup>) – which we have already hypothesized as the place from which Jacobi traced his reading of unique duration, a letter that allowed him to consider the Kantian concept of time as in Spinoza's spirit – what we find is that precisely because of the perfect symmetry Spinoza establishes between the ontological concepts of 'substance' and 'mode' and the temporal concepts of 'eternity' and 'duration,' duration cannot refer to substance.<sup>53</sup> Substance does not last: this means that it is not the common temporal place whose modes are limitations. Only modes last: more strictly we could say that these consist of that 'indefinite continuation of existing'<sup>54</sup> which is duration itself, according to the definition in the *Ethics*. Deprived of substantiality, modes consist exclusively of the duration of the *ratio* that constitutes them as individuals,<sup>55</sup> or of the combination in the action that produces a unique effect as a *res singulares*.<sup>56</sup> Each existing thing therefore has a duration, or better, is a duration, and this is either an individual *ratio*

.....  
50 For a bibliography on the Herder-Spinoza relation, see Morfino 2016, pp. 335–336. It is worth citing this passage from Valerio Verra, which puts Herder's theory of space-time in relation to Spinoza: 'The study of Herder's conception of space and time is particularly interesting, because these concepts are closely connected with his internal philosophical experience, deeply rooted in his conception of history and poetry, and allow us to glimpse the important influence exerted by Spinoza for Herder.' Verra 2006, p. 39.

51 Cf. Bd. XVI in Herder 1967–1968, pp. 401–580.

52 See Bd. XVI in Herder 1967–1968, p. 457 (where it is cited as Ep. 29, Opera Posthuma, p. 465). Cf. also p. 465.

53 Cf. Spinoza's definition of eternity: 'By eternity I understand existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of the eternal thing.' Spinoza 1985, p. 409.

54 Spinoza 1985, p. 447.

55 Spinoza 1985, p. 460.

56 Spinoza 1985, p. 447.

or a singular combination. While Spinoza does not affirm it explicitly, there is no reason to think that his conception of time differs from Descartes', for whom time is nothing other than the measure of multiple durations on the base of a regular duration, the movement of the planets.<sup>57</sup> Spinoza adds to this his own theory of time as a way of imagining, which is where the spatialization of time, its division into instants and numbering, comes from. Time, therefore, is a way of imagining which absolutizes one duration, making it the measure of others.

With Herder, Spinoza could thus certainly affirm that 'in the universe there are, in a determinate time, innumerable times,' and yet he could not repeat that 'each thing that changes has in itself the measure of its own time, which is and remains even if nothing else existed.' Here an important difference enters the picture, which is due to the monad-like character of the concept of organic force at the root of the concept of duration in Herder's *Metacritique*: duration is conceived starting from the persistence of a being, of a force, of a continuous existence which is given as a succession.<sup>58</sup> In Spinoza, what constitutes the status of the mode is precisely its relationality, its non-isolatability. It would not make sense to speak of the duration of a mode taken apart from others, or the duration of its individual rhythm, precisely because the duration of a thing is thinkable not as a succession of states in time, but rather as a *cum durare* – to use a Lucretian term that Spinoza loves, as a *concurrere*. The term *continuatio* which is present in the definition of duration must not be understood in the sense that it would have in Descartes, as a series of discrete and contingent instants, sustained and concatenated by the *concursus Dei*. The *continuatio* of Spinoza's duration is not legible through a linear and serial model, since it is an effect of composition and interchange: precisely to avoid risking that *continuatio* is read in terms of continuous creation, in postulate five of the so-called treatise on physics in part two of the *Ethics*, Spinoza writes that 'the human body, to be preserved, requires a great many other bodies, by which it is, as it were, continually regenerated.'<sup>59</sup> This is not a regeneration at any moment, too close to divine creation, but a *quasi regeneratio*. In other words, its apparent linearity is the fruit of a deeper complexity, of the *ordo et connexio rerum*. This means that every duration is composed of durations, exists in a weave of durations, and composes durations at a superior level, without these durations being able to be thought as founded on a persistence at their root. Persistence is instead the result.

57 '[...] in order to measure the duration of all things, we compare their duration with the greatest and most regular motions which give rise to years and days, and we call this duration "time." Yet nothing is thereby added to duration, taken in its general sense, except for a mode of thought.' Descartes 1985, p. 215.

58 Cf. Herder 1993, p. 55.

59 Spinoza 1985, p. 462.



Indeed, weave is the word which not only marks the difference between Spinoza's conception of temporality with Herder, but also Kant: the simple violation of the Kantian prohibition on the plurality of simultaneous times remains insufficient for thinking plural temporality in Spinozist terms. Finally, a question that opens onto the relation between time and causality: what would the transcendental schematism of the categories of relation be if for time as succession, we substituted the concept of time as a weave, as a *connexio*?

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# **The Specter of Spinozism: Malebranche, Arnauld, Fénelon**

**Steven Nadler**

**Abstract:** Malebranche was accused by his contemporary critics of being a Spinozist for the way in which he introduced matter or extension in God. But very little attention has been paid to the way in which Spinozistic necessitarianism also informs early modern critiques of Malebranche. The charge of Spinozism *qua* necessitarianism is not as prominent or frequent as the charge of Spinozism *qua* divine materialism, and it is certainly more subtle, but, as I show in this article, it is there—in the polemics against Malebranche launched by Arnauld, Bayle and Fénelon. In section 1 of this paper, I review Malebranche's account of God's *modus operandi* and the way in which eternal laws and what Malebranche calls "Order" direct—and apparently determine—the divine will in its creative and causal activities. I also consider the implications of this for Malebranche's understanding of miracles. I then turn, in sections 2 and 3, to the way in which Arnauld, Bayle and Fénelon object to what they perceive to be a latent but easily discovered necessitarianism in Malebranche's philosophical theology, with the implication that Malebranche, no less than Spinoza, renders miracles impossible. However, there remains a glaring and rather puzzling lacuna in these necessitarian charges against Malebranche: namely, the total absence of Spinoza's name. While there seems to be no clear explanation for this lacuna, I conclude, in section 4, with some speculation as to a possible reason for it.

**Keywords:** Spinoza, necessitarianism, Malebranche, Arnauld, Fénelon, miracles

What might a French Bishop, a German Lutheran polymath, two unorthodox Catholic priests—both French, one an Oratorian Cartesian in Paris and the other a Jansenist on the lam in the Spanish Low Countries—and a Huguenot exile in the Dutch Republic, all contemporaries in the second half of the seventeenth century, possibly have in common? The answer is not too difficult to find. François Fénelon, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Nicolas Malebranche, Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Bayle—like so many others in the period—all suffered from Spinozaphobia (although Bayle, at least, had some admiration for the "atheist" Spinoza's virtuous life). Just as the specter of communism united Democrats and Republicans in the rough and tumble world of American politics in the 1940s and 50s, so the specter of Spinozism made room for strange bedfellows in the equally rough and tumble world of the early modern Republic of Letters.

One of the topics which accounts for a good deal of the backlash against Spinoza, and which led some thinkers to accuse others of being—willingly or in spite of themselves—Spinozists, was the perceived materialism of Spinoza's theology. If one of the attributes of God is

extension, as Spinoza claimed, then, it was argued by his critics, matter itself must belong to the essence of God, thereby making God material or body.<sup>1</sup> And anyone whose philosophy even *looks* like it places extension or body (in whatever form) in God must be a Spinozist. Thus, Arnould explicitly invokes Spinoza (a philosopher “who believed that the matter from which God made the world was uncreated”) as he insists that Malebranche’s claim, in the Vision in God doctrine, that something called “intelligible extension” is in God—which is why we are able to cognize material bodies by apprehending their ideas or intelligible archtypes in God—is tantamount to making God Himself extended.<sup>2</sup>

Arnould was certainly not alone in claiming that Malebranche’s theory of “intelligible extension” implies a kind of Spinozism. Dortuous de Mairan, who in his letters to Malebranche is pressing the Oratorian to distinguish his views from those of Spinoza, suggests that “if intelligible extension is in God, then every body is the modification of the divine essence, or the divine essence is the substance of all bodies.”<sup>3</sup>

However, Spinoza’s other, perhaps equal if not greater offense, was his necessitarianism. If all things, extended and thinking, are in God as modes of the one infinite and eternal substance, and if they all follow necessarily from God—if, as Spinoza insists, “the face of the whole world” is but a necessary consequence of God’s power through the divine attributes<sup>4</sup>—then not only is this not the *best* of all possible worlds, but there *are no other* possible worlds. As Spinoza puts it in a series of propositions in Part One of the *Ethics*:

1 As Bayle puts it, “among the absurdities of [Spinoza’s] system” is that “God and extension are the same thing” (*Dictionnaire historique et critique*, “Spinoza”, Remark N, 1).

2 *Défense de Monsieur Arnould, Docteur de Sorbonne, contre la Réponse au Livre des Vraies et des Fausses Idées*, OA XXXVIII.516–518. See also *Des vraies et des fausses idées*, OA XXXVIII.253–258 (although in this instance Spinoza’s name is not explicitly mentioned).

3 Letter to Malebranche, 6 May 1714, in Nicolas Malebranche, *Correspondance avec J.-J. Dortuous de Mairan*, ed. Joseph Moreau (Paris: J. Vrin, 1947). Moreau’s introduction to this volume, “Malebranche et le Spinozisme” (pp. 2–98), is a useful overview of this correspondence. See also Fred Ablondi, “Le Spinoziste Malgré Lui? Malebranche, De Mairan, and Intelligible Extension”, *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 15 (1998): 191–203. Noel Aubert de Versé likewise assimilates Malebranche’s intelligible extension to a Spinozistic materialism; see *L’Impie convaincu, ou Dissertaion contre Spinoza* (1685). Leibniz’s well-known charge of Spinozism against Malebranche, on the other hand, focuses on what he sees as the Spinozistic implications of Malebranche’s occasionalism. If finite creatures have no active causal powers, then they are not true substances—“God would be the sole substance and creatures would be only accidents or modifications of God, such that those who are of this opinion would fall, despite themselves, into that of Spinoza, who seems to have taken the consequences of the Cartesian doctrine of occasional causes the furthest” (*Addition à l’explication du système nouveau touchant l’union de l’ame et du corps, envoyée à Paris à l’occasion d’un livre intitulé Connaissance de soy même*, in G. W. Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften*, 6 vols., ed. C. J. Gerhardt [Hildesheim: Olms, 1965], vol. 4, p. 590).

4 *Ethics* Ip16: “From the necessity of the divine nature there must follow infinitely many things in infinitely many modes, (i.e., everything which can fall under an infinite intellect).” My citations from Spinoza’s *Ethics* use the standard notation of roman numeral (Part) and proposition (p).

In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way. (Ip29)

Things could have been produced by God in no other way, and in no other order than they have been produced. (Ip33)

Moreover, as Spinoza explicitly argues, miracles are therefore impossible. It is not just that, as Hume would later claim, the belief in miracles is never justified. Spinoza's point is not merely an epistemological one. Rather, miracles, understood as divinely caused violations of or exceptions to the ordinary course of nature as this is determined by nature's most universal causal principles, are ruled out on metaphysical grounds. Given the identification of God and Nature and the absolute necessity of the existence and essence of God or Nature, it is absolutely impossible for what follows necessarily from God or Nature to have been or be other than what it is. In Chapter 6 of the *Theological-Political Treatise* (*TTP*) Spinoza insists that

nothing, therefore, happens in Nature which is contrary to its universal laws. Nor does anything happen which does not agree with those laws or does not follow from them ... Thus, from these considerations—that nothing happens in nature that does not follow from its laws, that its laws extend to all things conceived by the divine intellect itself, and finally that Nature maintains a fixed and immutable order—it clearly follows that the term 'miracle' cannot be understood except in relation to men's opinions, and means nothing but a work whose natural cause we cannot explain by the example of another familiar thing.<sup>5</sup>

Spinoza's brand of necessitarianism—not just causal determinism, but the absolute impossibility of the law-like course of nature and anything coming to be in and through nature having been or being other than what it is—rules out miracles *a priori*.<sup>6</sup>

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5 *Spinoza Opera*, 4 vols. ed. Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1925), III.83-84; the translation is from *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 2., ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 155.

6 That Spinoza is indeed a necessitarian has been well argued for in the literature; see, for example, Don Garrett, "Spinoza's Necessitarianism", in Yirmiyahu Yovel, ed., *God and Nature: Spinoza's Metaphysics* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 191-218; and Dominik Perler, "The Problem of Necessitarianism (1P28-36)", in Michael Hampe, Ursula Renz and Robert Schnepf, eds., *Spinoza's Ethics: A Collective Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 57-77. Garrett is responding to Edwin Curley, who argues that Spinoza is merely a determinist; see Curley, *Spinoza's Metaphysics: An Essay in Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), chapter 3, and Edwin Curley and Gregory Walski, "Spinoza's Necessitarianism Reconsidered", in Rocco J. Gennaro and Charles Huenemann, eds., *New Essays on the Rationalists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 241-62. Jonathan Bennett (*A Study of Spinoza's*

Leibniz, Bayle, Arnauld and Fénelon are all opponents of necessitarianism. Some of them were more successful in avoiding it than others.<sup>7</sup> They also, like many of their contemporaries, associated a necessitarian cosmos with Spinoza. Leibniz, for one, confesses that at one point "I found myself very close to the opinion of those who hold everything to be absolutely necessary"—he clearly means Spinoza—but says that he was "pulled back from the precipice" by his discovery of what seemed a workable account of contingency.<sup>8</sup> Bayle, meanwhile, describes the Spinozist view as that according to which "there is no other cause of all things but a nature that exists necessarily, and which acts by an immutable, inevitable, and irrevocable necessity."<sup>9</sup>

What seems to have received insufficient notice, however, is the way in which necessitarianism, like the issue of materialism, also informs early modern critiques of Malebranche that seek to reduce his system to a kind of Spinozism. In other words, the charge of Spinozism against Malebranche had its source not only in the claim that he made God material, but also in the claim that he—perhaps *malgré lui*, perhaps not—made the cosmos and every thing, state of affairs and event in it into an absolutely necessary consequence of God's power. The charge of Spinozism *qua* necessitarianism is not as prominent or frequent as the charge of Spinozism *qua* divine materialism, and it is certainly more subtle, but, as I hope to show, it is there—in the polemics against Malebranche launched by Arnauld, Bayle and Fénelon.<sup>10</sup>

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*Ethics* [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1984]) insists that "the texts on this are difficult and inconclusive" (111). Be that as it may, it is clear that Spinoza's contemporaries, at least, saw his philosophy as necessitarian.

7 Leibniz, for one, can reasonably be read as a necessitarian *malgré lui*; see, for example, Michael Griffin, *Leibniz, God and Necessity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

8 "De Libertate" (1680), in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, Sechste Reihe, Vierter Band (Berlin: Brandenburgerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1999; abbreviated henceforth as "A VI.iv"), p. 1653; "On Freedom", in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 2nd. edition, ed. Leroy Loemker (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1976), p. 263. In the *New Essays on Human Understanding*, Leibniz describes "the Spinozist view" as that which "explains everything through brute necessity" (Book 1, chapter i). On Leibniz as a reader of Spinoza, see Mogens Laerke, *Leibniz lecteur de Spinoza* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2008).

9 *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, "Spinoza", Remark M. Bayle is here describing the way in which (he believes) Johannes Bredenburg exposed the true metaphysical core of Spinoza's system.

10 Antonella Del Prete suggests that, in general, "le rapprochement de Malebranche et de Spinoza est initialement bien plus rare avant la fin du siècle et souvent il est avancé avec précaution: il ressemble en effet à un fleuve souterrain, innervant implicitement certains polémiques de l'époque et ne faisant surface qu'à des occasions bien spécifiques" ("Malebranche-Spinoza, aller-retour: Le parcours polémique de Pierre-Sylvain Régis", in Raffaele Carbone, Chantal Jaquet and Pierre-François Moreau, eds., *Spinoza–Malebranche. A la croisée des chemins* (Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2018), pp. 161-178 (p. 161). I would argue, however, that this is true more of the necessitarian *rapprochement* than the materialism one. In an unpublished paper "Necessitarianism Within Malebranche's Theodicy", Michèle Martin (undergraduate, Concordia University, Montreal) argues, among other things, that Malebranche's theodicy generates a necessitarian cosmogeny.



In section 1 of this paper, I review Malebranche's account of God's *modus operandi* and the way in which eternal laws and what Malebranche calls "Order" direct—and apparently determine—the divine will in its creative and causal activities. I also consider the implications of this for Malebranche's understanding of miracles. I then turn, in sections 2 and 3, to the way in which Arnauld, Bayle and Fénelon, all with excellent anti-Spinoza credentials, object to what they perceive to be a latent but (they would insist) easily discovered necessitarianism in Malebranche's philosophical theology, with the implication that Malebranche, no less than Spinoza and for very Spinozistic reasons, renders miracles impossible—a serious charge indeed.<sup>11</sup>

However, there remains a glaring and rather puzzling lacuna in these necessitarian charges against Malebranche: namely, the total absence of Spinoza's name. While there seems to be no clear explanation for this lacuna, I will conclude, in section 4, with some speculation as to a possible reason for it.

## 1

The central text of Malebranche on the topic of miracles is the *Traité de la nature et de la grace* (*Treatise on Nature and Grace*, henceforth *TNG*), first published in 1680. In this work, Malebranche addresses the problem of evil, that is, the question of why there are imperfections—physical traumas, disabilities and disasters, moral crimes, etc.—in a world created by an all-powerful, all-knowing, wise and just God. The centerpiece of Malebranche's theodicy is his account of the nature of God's causal activity and especially his distinction between different kinds of volitions in God.

Malebranche insists that God is "obliged always to act in a manner worthy of himself, by simple, general, constant and uniform means" (*TNG*, Premier Discours, §43: OC V.49). He puts this in his own terms by saying that God acts only by "general volitions [*volontez générales*]" and (almost) never by "particular volitions [*volontez particulières*]." Here is how Malebranche distinguishes these sorts of volition: "God acts by general volitions when he acts in consequence of general laws that he has established ... I say, on the other hand, that God acts by particular volitions when the efficacy of his will is not determined by some general law to produce some effect" (*TNG*, Premier Elucidation, §§1-2: OC V.147-48). A general volition is a will to do something that is in accordance with or follows from some law or general principle. A law of physics, for example, specifies that if a body of a certain size at rest is struck by a body of a certain size in motion, then it will be moved in a certain way. When Malebranche's God then moves a body in the appropriate

11 For studies of the relationship between Malebranche and Spinoza, see the essays in Carbone et al., eds., *Spinoza–Malebranche. A la croisée des chemins* (Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2018)

way on the occasion of its being struck by another body, God is acting by a general volition. Similarly, if God causes a feeling of pain in some person's mind on the occasion of his body being pricked by a needle, this is done through a general volition, since it is in accordance with the laws of mind-body union that God has established. A particular volition, on the other hand, does not obey any law, but is (relative to the laws) *ad hoc*. If God were to move a body without its having been struck by another body, or if God were to cause pain in someone without anything having happened to that person's body, God would be acting by a particular volition.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Malebranche's God not only institutes the most simple laws when creating the world, but also is bound by His own nature—as a wise, good, immutable, and absolutely simple being who acts with perfect constancy—to follow those laws in the causal operations through which He makes nature function.

Why, then, is there evil in the world? Why are individuals born without limbs, why are there floods and droughts, why is there sin and suffering, and why do virtuous people sometimes suffer while vicious people prosper? And why, especially, are not all human beings saved by the grace of a God who, we are told, wants everyone to be saved? Malebranche believes that it is important, above all, to bear in mind that God does not will any of these evils with a particular volition. God does not choose them for their own sake and regardless of what else happens to be the case.

If the rain fall on certain lands while the sun burns others; if a time that is favorable for the harvests is followed by a hail that ravages them; if a child comes into the world with a malformed and useless head, which rises from his chest and makes him miserable, it is not at all because God wanted to produce these effects through particular volitions. (*TNG* I.18: *OC* V.32)

These unfortunate events occur because God allows them to occur—or, rather, given God's unique and ubiquitous causal role in the world under Malebranche's doctrine of occasionalism, brings them about—as a part of the ordinary course of nature as this is regulated by its most simple laws. General laws have a wide variety of effects. As anyone whose picnic plans have ever been upended by the weather knows, these laws, which on the whole make for an orderly and predictable world, cannot take into account the convenience and wishes of particular individuals or even an

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<sup>12</sup>The recent literature on general vs. particular volitions includes Eric Stencil and Julie Walsh, "Malebranche on the Metaphysics and Epistemology of Particular Volitions", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 54 (2016): 227-55; Andrew Pessin, "Malebranche's Distinction Between Particular and General Volitions", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39 (2001): 77-99; Andrew Black, "Malebranche's Theodicy", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 35 (1997): 27-44; and Andrew Pyle, *Malebranche* (London: Routledge, 2003).

entire species. Birth defects, earthquakes, and other natural disorders are but "the necessary consequences [of laws] so simple, and at the same time so fecund, that they serve to produce everything beautiful that we see in the world" (*TNG* I.18: *OC* V.32). God, who is obliged by His nature to follow the laws of nature, makes it rain on fallow lands as well as on those that are cultivated because that is the meteorological result to which the laws lead. Likewise, "if, for example, one is dropping rocks on the heads of passersby, the rocks will always fall with an equal speed, regardless of the piety or condition, the good or bad disposition of those passersby" (*TNG* I.59: *OC* V.63). Just as the rain falls where it must, regardless of what lies underneath, so the rocks, falling as rocks do, will land on the heads of the virtuous and the vicious alike. In these and other cases, God is simply carrying out the natural consequences of the laws of nature—laws that are so simple that they admit of no exceptions, and that specify that when certain things occur, other things must happen.

God, then, is more committed to acting in a general way and to a nature governed by the most simple laws than He is to the well-being of individuals and the justice of the distribution of rewards and punishments. As the universal cause, God follows those laws, come what may to those affected by them. For this reason, Malebranche says that God "permits disorder, but he does not create it, He does not will it" (*Dialogues on Metaphysics* IX.9: *OC* XII.212; *JS* 161).

Thus, there is sin and suffering in the world, rain falls on the oceans while inseminated soil suffers drought, there are murders, deformities of birth, and tsunamis, and not every individual receives the grace necessary to move him to faith. But none of this happens because God directly wills it. Rather, such things happen as a result of the simple laws of nature and grace instituted by God at creation and which He is committed to carrying out, come what may for many individuals affected by them.

Of course, God can always intervene in these cases and keep the rain from falling, prevent a tornado from hitting a town, or stop a person from committing some sin. But this, Malebranche says, would be for God to depart from the generality of His ways and thus perform a miracle; and we must not expect, much less demand constant miracles from God.

This brings us to our first point. Malebranche—who, like many other philosophers (most famously, Leibniz), is committed to a rationalist conception of God, a God who is an agent that always acts for reasons—is clearly uncomfortable with miracles. Malebranche's primary fealty is to the simplicity, generality, regularity and predictability of God's ways. He believes that God's wisdom, goodness, and power are revealed more by the regular, law-like course of nature than by any unusual supernatural intervention.

Malebranche identifies a miracle with God acting "by a particular volition." "God", he says, "only acts by particular volitions when

he brings about miracles" (*Réponse aux Réflexions [d'Arnauld]* II.1: OC VIII.696). A miracle, he says, in "the most exact and particular [sense] of philosophers" refers to all effects that are not natural, or that are not the consequence of natural laws ...

Thus, whether an effect is common or rare, if God does not produce it as a consequence of his general laws, which are the natural laws, it is a true miracle. If, for example, a thought comes to my mind, or if I have some sensation of pleasure or pain without there being in my brain any disturbance that is its natural cause, this effect will be a miracle, even though there seems to be nothing extraordinary about it. (OC VIII.696)

Every miraculous event—every violation of some “natural law”—is the performance of a particular volition in God; and every practical or effective particular volition in God brings about a miracle.<sup>13</sup>

Now the laws of nature are only one kind of law for Malebranche. In fact, he distinguishes five sets of laws in the cosmos. They are hierarchically ordered, with lower level laws capable of being suspended by God for the sake of a higher order law. The types of law are as follows:

1. Laws governing the communication of motion between bodies. The occasional causes of the operation of these laws are collisions among bodies.
2. Laws governing the union between mind and body. These laws dictate how the body will be moved on the occasion of certain thoughts in the mind; and what sensations will occur in the mind on the occasion of certain motions in the body.
3. Laws governing the union of the soul with God, "the intelligible substance of universal reason." These laws cover the ordinary access that human minds have to ideas in God's understanding in thinking and perception—Malebranche's infamous doctrine of the Vision in God.
4. Laws that provide angels and demons with the power to move bodies.
5. The laws of grace. These govern the distribution of interior grace among souls, and their operation is occasioned by the desires in Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup>

.....  
13 A practical volition is an effective volition in the sense that it is a volition whose intention is actually fulfilled. On the distinction between simple vs. practical volitions in Malebranche, see OC VIII.651. See Jean-Christophe Bardout, *Malebranche et la métaphysique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), 259-63.

14 The laws are detailed in *Dialogues on Metaphysics* XIII.9: OC XII.319-320; JS 252-253.

What is perfectly clear in Malebranche is that if the following two conditions are *both* satisfied, an event is *not* a miracle: (1) the event is the effect of a general volition in God, that is, a volition that is carrying out some law on the appropriate occasion; and (2) the law being carried out belongs to one of the first three kinds of laws. The first three sets of laws are, I presume, all "laws of nature" in a narrow sense for Malebranche, in so far as the occasional causes for the operation of these laws, as well as the consequent effects, are a familiar part of nature: they are all either physical items or events (for example, the collision of bodies) or items or events in the human mind (ideas and volitions). The laws of physics, the laws setting correlations between states of the body and states of the mind, and the laws determining how all human minds regularly have access to ideas in God are all laws that God follows in the ordinary course of nature.

Now it often seems that Malebranche intends *only* these three types of laws to constitute the set beyond which lies the domain of miracles. That is, perhaps a miracle is an event that is brought about by God, even in accordance with a law, but just not in accordance with any of these laws of nature. For example, when God moves a body on the occasion of a desire by an angel (rather than that of a human soul), in accordance with the fourth set of laws, this is a miracle; or the distribution of grace by God on the occasion of desires in the soul of Christ, according to the fifth set of laws, is always a miraculous event.

There is indeed some good textual support for this reading (which I will call the "narrow" definition of miracles). For example, notice that in the text quoted above, from the *Réponse aux Réflexions* [d'Arnauld], Malebranche identifies miracles with "all effects that are not natural, or that are not the consequence of natural laws", and says that "if God does not produce it as a consequence of his general laws, *which are the natural laws*, it is a true miracle" (II.1: OC VIII.696, my emphasis).<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in a note to the *Dialogues on Metaphysics* XII.13, Malebranche states that "by 'miracle' I mean the effects which depend on general laws which are *not known to us naturally*" (OC XII.295; JS 231, my emphasis). On this reading, then, it is a miracle when God suspends the laws of nature to do something that is in accordance with, even demanded by, the laws of grace.

However, the problem with this narrow reading is that it clashes with Malebranche's frequent claim that miracles are equivalent to events caused by particular volitions, and particular volitions are those divine volitions that are *not* in accordance with or the carrying out of *any* general laws, whether it be the laws of nature (in the narrow sense) or the angelic laws and the laws of grace. On the suggested reading, events brought about by God in accordance with the two higher-order sets of general

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15 See also *Dialogues on Metaphysics* VIII.3: OC XII.177; JS 131.

laws—those governing the angelic motion of bodies and those governing grace—would be miracles even though in such cases God is acting by general volitions. But if this were the case, Malebranche could not then say, in the very same works, that "miracles are such only because they never come about according to general laws" (*TNG* I.59: OC V.63). Nor could he say that "anything that God does by a particular volition is certainly a miracle, because it does not at all happen according to the general laws that he has established"" (*TNG*, Elucidation I.13: OC V.160).<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Malebranche also explicitly notes elsewhere that as long as God is following the laws of grace, God is *not* performing a miracle (*The Search After Truth*, Elucidation XV: OC III.221; LO 667).<sup>17</sup>

One could reply that the notion of a *particular* volition is a relative one: relative, that is, to a specific set of laws. A particular volition would then comprise not a divine volition that is undirected by any law whatsoever, but rather a divine volition that is an exception to some specified laws, but nonetheless required by another, higher set of laws. However, this seems to be an especially *ad hoc* solution to the problem. I see no reason for thinking that Malebranche's particular volitions are supposed to be anything but *absolutely* particular—that is, not in accordance with any general laws whatsoever—and not merely relatively particular. Malebranche himself could not be more clear about this: "I have said that God never acts by particular volitions when he is acting as a consequence of general laws" (*Réponse aux Réflexions [d'Arnauld]* I.1.iii: OC VIII.651).

But what, then, are we to do with the above passages and the problematic reading for miracles they seem to support? It seems, in fact, that what Malebranche is doing in these instances is suggesting that many of the so-called "miracles" of the Hebrew Bible, "the Ancient Law", are in fact not, strictly speaking, miracles at all. All those phenomena reported by the authors of Hebrew Scripture that involve God and angels acting in this world are—despite appearances, despite their rarity—not truly miracles. This is because while such events are suspensions or violations of the laws of nature, they occurred as a consequence of higher-order general laws and so were not really brought about by particular volitions. This would be in keeping with Malebranche's apparent desire to minimize the number of miracles in history. At one point in the *Treatise on Nature and Grace* he explicitly notes that the angelic motion of bodies, common in the Hebrew Bible, does *not* count

16 Nor could Malebranche say that "when I say that God always follows the general laws that he has prescribed for himself, I am talking only of his general and ordinary providence. I do not exclude miracles or effects which do not follow from his general laws" (*Dialogues on Metaphysics* VIII.3: OC XII.177; JS 130).

17 As Bardout notes, "des événements qui nous paraissent miraculeux est en fait identique à celui de n'import quel événement naturel", because they too are the function of occasional causes whose secondary efficacy is governed by laws (*Malebranche et la métaphysique*, 263-4).



as a miracle. He says that those things that occurred under "the Law of the Jews" that were "contrary to the natural laws known to us" were *not* miracles because they were not produced by God through particular volitions; to support this he cites the fact that angels have powers in the present world because of general laws unknown to us (*TNG* I.20.addition: *OC* V.34). In fact, Malebranche is emphatic in his debate with Arnauld that "most of the miraculous effects of the ancient Law occurred as a consequence of some general laws" (*OC* VII.489), and so they are not truly miracles but only "miracles" in a secondary sense, as wondrous and unusual events (*des prodiges*), because we do not know the relevant laws. Elsewhere, Malebranche concedes that "the term 'miracle' is equivocal. It can either be taken to refer to an effect that does not at all depend on the general laws known to human beings"—and so, in this epistemological sense (in essence, what I have been calling the "narrow" sense), a miracle is an event that surprises us because of its novelty and natural inexplicability—or it can be taken "more generally, for an effect that does not depend on any laws, neither known nor unknown" (*Méditations Chrétiennes* VIII.26: *OC* X.92; *Réponse aux Réflexions [d'Arnauld]* II.1: *OC* VIII.695-6).<sup>18</sup> The angelic events of the "Old Testament", such as when a person walks on water, are miracles only in the first, epistemological sense, and thus not really *true* miracles. As Malebranche says, "the frequent miracles of the Ancient Law do not at all prove that God often acts by particular volitions" (*Réponse à la Dissertation [d'Arnauld]* XV.6: *OC* VII.593).

It is this latter, "more general" sense of 'miracle', however, that offers a stricter and proper Malebranchian notion of what a miracle is, and it seems *prima facie* to restore their status as products of particular volitions. Thus, according to a second reading of Malebranchian miracles, a miraculous event is one whose occurrence transcends *all five orders of law*: all the laws of nature *and* all the laws of angelic action and of grace. A miracle is an event brought about by a divine volition that is not the carrying out of some law, neither the familiar laws of nature nor the higher-order "laws that are unknown to us." That is, we should take Malebranche at his word when he says that "miracles are such only because they do not at all happen according to general laws" (*TNG* I.59: *OC* V.63). Thus, before the birth of Christ and so without the possibility of his desires functioning as occasions for the operation of the (general) laws of grace, if God distributed grace to the Patriarchs it would have to have been through particular volitions. Such grace would be miraculous, just because "everything that God does by particular volitions is certainly a miracle, since they never happen by the general laws that he has established" (*TNG*, *Elucidation* I.13: *OC* V.160). Similarly, God's creation

18 See Henri Gouhier, *La Philosophie de Malebranche et son expérience religieuse* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1948), 65-6.



of this world had to be a particular volition—in fact, it had to involve an extraordinary number of particular volitions. This is because it includes creating the laws of the world and many members of each of the species of fauna and flora, as well as the initial setting of bodies into motion; and so before the creation of the world there were no laws to follow and no natural substances to occasion their operation (*Réponse aux Réflexions [d'Arnauld]* III: OC VIII.759; *Dialogues on Metaphysics* X.16: OC XII.245-246; JS 190-191). Without laws and occasional causes, there are no general volitions.<sup>19</sup>

It is important to bear in mind, however, that for Malebranche any divine departures from the laws of nature and grace are not rationally unmotivated; God's particular volitions do not happen *ad hoc* or with absolute indifference. Even Malebranchian miracles properly speaking are, in fact, in accordance with a higher set of principles that Malebranche calls "Order". God, he says to Arnauld, "never acts by particular volitions without compelling reasons" (*Réponse aux Réflexions [d'Arnauld]* I.1.vi: OC VIII.661), and those more weighty reasons are found in Order. Malebranche says that "the immutable Order that consists in the necessary relation among the divine perfections is *his inviolable law* and the rule of all his volitions" (OC VIII.753, my emphasis; see also *TNG* I.20: OC V.33). Order is "the Eternal Wisdom" in God Himself, and bears the uncreated principles of truths, beauty, and justice. It dictates that God is more worthy than a creature, that a soul is more worthy than a body, and that a human being is more worthy than a beast. Above all, Order informs God that His wisdom, justice and other attributes are sometimes better honored by an exception to the laws of nature and grace than by following them.

In one of his responses to Arnauld, Malebranche defends himself against the accusation that on his view God *never* acts by particular volitions, and thus never performs miracles. On the contrary, Malebranche replies, he has said many times that God has always acted by these kinds of volitions, when Order demands it and often when Order permits it, since Order is the inviolable law of divine volitions (*Trois lettres*, I: OC VI.267-8). In the *Dialogues on Metaphysics*, Theodore notes that God has "these important reasons" to suspend the laws and depart

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19 One might argue, however, that whatever God does *during* creation—which includes the creation of the laws and the occasional causes that instigate their operation—while it would be carried out by particular volitions, would *not* qualify as a miracle, since God's activity would not be a violation of, to use Malebranche's phrase from the quote above, "the general laws that he has established", since God has not yet established *any* laws. Marie-Frédérique Pellegrin apparently does not agree with the identification of miracles with particular volitions. In *Le Système de la loi de Nicolas Malebranche* (Paris: J. Vrin, 2006), she does say that "toutes les volontés particulières de Dieu sont des miracles" (175); but in communication with me she claims that for Malebranche being a particular volition is only a necessary (but not sufficient condition for being a miracle)—it must also be a violation of an existing law. And since before creation there are no laws, the act of creation, while the product of a particular volition, is not a miracle.

from the simplicity and generality of his ways "when the glory that he derives from the perfection of his work counterbalances that which he receives from the uniformity of his conduct. He has these serious reasons when what he owes to his immutability is equal to or of less consideration than what he owes to another one of his attributes in particular" (XII.12: OC XII.293-4; JS 230-231)—for example, to His justice. God has a necessary and sufficient reason to execute a particular volition and perform a miracle "when he acts as much or more according to his nature by departing from the general laws he has prescribed for himself than by following them. For God always acts according to what he is. He inviolably follows the immutable order of his own perfections" (XII.12: OC XII.294; JS 231).

What this account of Divine Order means, however, is that Malebranche inscribes even miracles in the strict sense within a law-like framework.<sup>20</sup> To be sure, divine acts demanded by Order do, in a sense, represent departures from the "the general laws that God has established"; but they do not represent a departure from the "legality" or prescriptive rationality of God's conduct.<sup>21</sup> Miracles, strictly speaking, may transcend all five sets of laws of nature and grace, but they still remain within the domain of divine reason and, more importantly, are still a consequence of general principle—this time the highest-order principle, an *eternal* "law" that can require the suspension of all other laws. So it appears that even here it may be that we are not dealing with absolutely particular volitions—that is, with divine volitions that, while certainly purposive and not capricious, are truly *ad hoc* and do not represent the necessary consequence of some general law.<sup>22</sup>

Are there then, in Malebranche's system, *any* divine actions that are beyond even the rational demands of Order—true and pure miracles in

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<sup>20</sup> As Pellegrin puts it, Malebranche subjects even miraculous events to a kind of "legalité" (*Le Système de la loi de Nicolas Malebranche*, chapter 3).

<sup>21</sup> Bardout puts this nicely: "Dieu se voit cependant contraint de déroger parfois à la généralité de sa conduite. En ce cas, néanmoins, la causalité particulière de Dieu demeure soumise aux exigences de l'ordre" (*Malebranche et la métaphysique*, 264).

<sup>22</sup> Leibniz, whose views on this point really are not all that different from Malebranche's, seems to be more forthcoming. He insists that God's volitions or actions are commonly divided into ordinary and extraordinary. But it is good to consider that God does nothing outside of order. Thus, what passes for extraordinary is such only with regard to some particular order established among creatures ... Miracles conform to general order, although they are contrary to subordinate maxims and to what God wants or permits by a general or particular volition. Since nothing can happen that is not within order, it can be said that miracles are also just as within order as are natural operations that are called such because they conform to certain subordinate maxims that we call the nature of things. (*Discourse on Metaphysics*, §§6-7)

In the *Theodicy* he notes that

I agree with Father Malebranche that God does things in the way most worthy of him. But I go a little further than he does, with regard to "general and particular acts of will." Since God can do nothing without reasons, even when he acts miraculously, it follows that he has no will about individual events but what results from some general truth or will. Thus, I would say that God never has a particular will such as this Father implies. (§206).

the sense that they are the result of absolutely particular volitions and do not follow from *any* law whatsoever, whether the "general laws that God has established" or the eternal law of Order?<sup>23</sup> If there are, there seems to be only one possible instance: God's decision to create something distinct from Himself in the first place. Because God is all-perfect and completely self-sufficient, God's decision to create something outside Himself appears not to be motivated by any law or principle or need. Having decided to create, God's choice to create *this* world rather than some other world was dictated by Order; but the decision to create in the first place was, he says, a matter of "a perfect liberty and complete indifference" (*Dialogues on Metaphysics* VIII.2: OC XII.176; JS 130). Malebranche makes a distinction between those things that Order "demands" and those that Order "permits" (*Réponse à la Dissertation [d'Arnauld]* III.9: OC VII.490). Almost all of the particular volitions that constitute proper Malebranchian miracles—as opposed to the merely apparent miracles of the Hebrew Bible—are exceptions to the laws of nature and grace that Order *requires*. By contrast, God's decision to create something in the first place is not required by Order, although it is not contrary to Order and so is permitted by it. It is, however, in its arbitrariness the exception that seems to prove the rule.<sup>24</sup>

It is precisely this emphasis on the demands that Order makes upon God's volitions that drove at least two of Malebranche's critics, Arnauld and Fénelon, to distraction. Malebranche's shrinking of the number of miracles and his reduction of even true miracles to law-governed events, in effect "naturalizing" them and making them appear to be *necessary* events (because they are demanded either by higher-order laws or by Order itself—that is, by God's nature), seemed to these opponents only to confirm that for Malebranche true miracles were impossible.<sup>25</sup> In fact, it confirmed for them that, in the end, Malebranche's cosmos is, ultimately, a Spinozistic cosmos.

## 2

Perhaps the most subtle insinuation that Malebranche's account of God's *modus operandi* has Spinozistic implications is found in Bayle.

23 Pellegrin believes the answer to this question is "no"; she says "l'idée d'une intervention gratuite de Dieu, c'est-à-dire sans nécessité du point de vue de l'ordre, serait une aberration" (*Le Système de la loi de Nicolas Malebranche*, 177).

24 See Stencil and Walsh, "Malebranche on the Metaphysics and Epistemology of Particular Volitions." Pellegrin wants to deny that creation is a miracle, since, while it is the result of a particular volition, it is not a violation of a law governing occasional causes (since before creation these laws did not exist yet).

25 For Arnauld's critique of Malebranche on miracles, see, for example, *Dissertation de M. Arnauld sur la manière dont Dieu a fait les fréquens miracles de l'ancienne loi par le ministre des anges*, in OA XXXVIII.637-741. See also Pellegrin, *Le Système de la loi de Nicolas Malebranche*, 178-9; Gouhier, *La Philosophie de Malebranche et son expérience religieuse*, 56.

In his typically indirect, even cryptic manner, and without naming either Malebranche nor Spinoza, Bayle draws the two philosophers together in his article on “Bérenger” in the *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (Remark H):

Here is another very shocking dogma, that things that have never been and never will be are not at all possible. This was undoubtedly Abelard’s opinion, and I do not see that those who say that God is determined by his infiite wisdom to do what is most worthy of him can deny, without inconsequence, this philosopher’s doctrine.<sup>26</sup>

The informed reader should have no difficulty knowing whom Bayle is talking about here.

Arnauld and Fénelon are not quite as subtle as Bayle. Though they, too, do not explicitly name Spinoza, they level the necessitarian charge directly against Malebranche’s account of God’s *modus operandi*.

The most problematic aspect of Malebranche’s theodicy, for Arnauld, is also its most central one: the idea that God acts only by general volitions, and never by particular ones. Such a claim, which relieves God of direct responsibility for everything that happens in the universe, is what allows Malebranche to concede—without impugning God’s justice or power—that some elements of God’s handiwork really are imperfect or defective. But as Arnauld explains at great length in his *Reflexions philosophiques et théologiques sur le nouveau système de la nature et de la grace*, it also undermines God’s providence by removing Him from a direct and immediate care for every part of His creation. And this, Arnauld believes, no good Christian can tolerate. Whatever God wills, Arnauld insists, He wills in particular, by a “positive, direct and particular volition.” This applies to everything in the world, no matter how small and insignificant, regardless of its apparent beauty or deformity. Every natural disaster, monster, and failed ambition, every life and every death—and, above all, every soul’s salvation or damnation—is an intended part of God’s plan. As Arnauld puts it, “God makes every drop of rain fall with a particular volition.” To suggest otherwise, as Malebranche does, is to compromise the universality of divine governance. “Nothing happens in the world”, Arnauld insists, “be it a leaf or a fruit falling from a tree, or, more importantly, the birth or death of an animal, except by the will of God applied to each event . . . by the particular commands of His providence” (*Réflexions*, OA XXXIX.197).

As important as the distinction between particular and general volitions is, it is clear that there is something just as deep that is bothering Arnauld. It concerns the notion of Order or God’s wisdom

26 “Bérenger”, Remark H, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, Nouvelle édition (Paris: Desoer, 1820), vol. 3, p. 335.

directing, even compelling God's will. For Arnauld, God does not "consult His wisdom," as Malebranche had said. This is a false and thoroughly improper and anthropomorphic way to think of the relationship among God's attributes and the nature of God's activity.

Did he [Malebranche] really think that this was an expression perfectly conforming to the idea of the perfect being, to say of God that He consults His wisdom? One consults only when one is in doubt; and one consults about how to accomplish one's desires only when there may be some difficulty in achieving what one desires. Neither the one nor the other can be said about the perfect being, whose knowledge is infinite and whose will is all-powerful (*Réflexions*, OA XXXIX.449).

Part of Malebranche's problem, according to Arnauld, is that to distinguish wisdom from will in God and have Order guide His will by providing compelling reasons for its choices is to undermine divine freedom. Malebranche does repeatedly say that "God's wisdom renders Him, in a sense, impotent" by determining Him to choose one world rather than another.<sup>27</sup> Malebranche takes comfort in the "in a sense" qualification, as well as in God's original indifference as to whether or not to create a world in the first place, and so is not particularly troubled by the implications of this for God's freedom. Arnauld, however, *is* troubled. He conceives of God's freedom as consisting in an absolute "liberty of indifference," thoroughly undetermined in the creation and governance of things. God's will is not guided by anything whatsoever external to it, not even by the dictates of His own wisdom.

By following Malebranche in the manner in which he conceives God, I do not see how He can be indifferent to creating or not creating something outside Himself, if He was not indifferent to choosing among several works and among several ways of producing them. For God . . . , according to [Malebranche], having consulted His wisdom, is necessarily determined to produce the work that it [wisdom] has shown him to be the most perfect, and to choose the means that it has shown Him also to be the most worthy of Him (*Réflexions*, OA XXXIX.600).<sup>28</sup>

Malebranche's God, Arnauld claims, cannot possibly satisfy what Arnauld at least sees as Aquinas's authoritative demand that the will of

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27 In addition to the passage cited above, see *Traité de la nature et de la grace*, OC V.180, 185.

28 According to Arnauld, it also generates a problem of consistency for Malebranche because Malebranche does want to say that God *is* indifferent in the initial choice to create a world outside Himself.

God remain perfectly self-determining, never willing anything external to itself *ex necessitate* (*Réflexions*, OA XXXIX.598-99).

Now Malebranche, despite his deterministic language, strives to preserve the ultimate contingency of God's creative act. But—and this is Arnauld's point—Malebranche's account fails miserably; he ends up subjecting God to "a more than stoical necessity" (*Réflexions*, OA XXXIX.599).<sup>29</sup> In fact, Arnauld appears to be saying, how could it be otherwise? In a perfectly rational being, in whom there are no passions exercising a contrary influence, reasons must determine and necessitate the will and render it "impotent" to choose otherwise. When Order or wisdom dictates the creation of one world over all the others, Malebranche's God must obey; He *must* create that world, Arnauld insists, and Malebranche apparently agrees.

As for miracles, because they, too, are demanded by Order, not even they are freely ordained by Malebranche's God.

The only thing free, with respect to God, is to have wanted to create something. But everything else is the result of a more than Stoic fatalism, with the exception of miracles, which He has done by particular volitions. But one does not see how even miracles can be excepted. For He only performs them, according to the author [Malebranche], when order demands it (*Réflexions*, OA XXXIX.599).

As Arnauld sees it, if Malebranche is right, then everything is absolutely necessary. Even miracles are "*les suites nécessaires*" of either general laws or Order.

### 3

Fénelon composed his *Réfutation du système du père Malebranche*, at the urging of Bossuet, probably in 1687-88—some years before he was appointed Archbishop of Cambrai (1696)—but it was not published in his lifetime.<sup>30</sup> He devotes a good deal of his lengthy critique to just the same set of problems that troubled Arnauld.

Fénelon is disturbed by Malebranche's claim that God never or rarely acts by particular volitions. Like Arnauld, his concern is with how this undermines true divine providence and a particular care for all aspects of creation. But Fénelon actually begins his *Réfutation* with

<sup>29</sup> As Robert C. Sleight, Jr., points out, this concern (worded in almost exactly the same way) reappears less than two years later in Arnauld's criticisms of Leibniz; see *Leibniz and Arnauld: A Commentary on Their Correspondence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 45-47.

<sup>30</sup> For the dating of the composition of the *Réfutation*, see Henri Gouhier, *Fénelon philosophe* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1977), 33-40; it was not published until 1820. For an illuminating analysis of Fénelon's critique of Malebranche, see Jean-Christophe Bardout, "La puissance ou la raison: Remarques sur l'anti-Malebranchisme de Fénelon", in *Le Malebranchisme à l'épreuve de ses amis et de ses ennemis*, Elena Muceni and Maria-Cristina Pitassi, eds. (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2018), 57-95.



what he sees as the necessitarian consequences of Malebranche's theodicy. He agrees with Malebranche that "God is absolutely and in every sense incapable of acting contrary to the order that is sovereign reason" (*Réfutation*, 336).<sup>31</sup> But because Malebranche adds to this general principle the claim that order demands that whenever God acts and whatever God does he must do what is absolutely the most perfect, Fénelon says that "it follows ... that whatever is beneath what is the most perfect is absolutely impossible" (*Réfutation*, 336). What God cannot possibly do is not, in fact, really possible at all. But if this is so, then, of course, whatever God does do must therefore be absolutely necessary. "Supposing that God acts", Fénelon argues, then on Malebranche's account "it must be the case that He produces whatever is the most perfect among possible beings; order invincibly so determines Him" (*Réfutation*, 329). If Order "invincibly" determines God in this way, then it is impossible for God to produce other than what he produces. The world that God creates is the only world He can create.

Fénelon takes things one logical step further. If God can create only one among the many possible worlds, then not only is it the case that other possible worlds cannot possibly exist, but, Fénelon insists, there are not many possible worlds at all; there really is in fact only *one* possible world. Here is how he puts it:

If the least perfect work is impossible, it is false that God chose from among many possible designs the most perfect to do his work. God could see as possible only that which was truly so. The only thing possible is that which immutable and necessary order permits ... What is less perfect has no objective possibility ... If [God] could do only what is the most perfect, the world taken as whole is not only the most perfect work, but it is the only work that God could produce. ... This infinity of plans reduces to a single one, since one cannot choose among impossible plans" (*Réfutation*, 341-2).

These other allegedly possible worlds are not only (existentially) impossible relative to God's determined choice, but, if everything Malebranche says is true, they are not even possible "in themselves", at least as Fénelon sees it. (Here Fénelon removes from Malebranche's grasp one of the strategies used by Leibniz for preserving the contingency of the actual world and the possibility of other possible worlds.<sup>32</sup>) This is because these other worlds must be, absolutely

31 Citations from the *Réfutation du système du père Malebranche* are to the text in volume 2 of François Fénelon, *Oeuvres*, 2 vols., Jacques Le Brun, ed. (Paris: Gallimard [Pléiade], 1997).

32 The "possible in its own nature [*possibilie sua natura*]" strategy appears, for example, in "De Libertate", A VI.iv.1653-59; and G. W. Leibniz, *Textes Inédits*, ed. Gaston Grua, 2 vols. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948), I.287-91.



speaking, "nothing." What God cannot possibly create, Fénelon insists, God cannot know as possible, and thus cannot possibly conceive. "The conclusion must be that no other plan can be known by God, since what has neither existence nor possibility is so purely and absolutely a nothing that God cannot even have knowledge of it" (*Réfutation*, 348). Still assessing Malebranche's schema, Fénelon compares such alternative, less perfect worlds to a "square without angles or a mountain without a valley" (*Réfutation*, 348). All such impossible things are non-entities. "Everything that is absolutely contrary to order is contrary to the essence of God. Everything that is contrary to the essence of God is bad, and absolutely impossible" (*Réfutation*, 347).

Malebranche's system, Fénelon insists—and here he precisely echoes Arnauld's complaints—not only destroys God's freedom, but makes everything that ever happens in the cosmos absolutely necessary. Indeed, even Malebranche's attempt to preserve God's presumed absolute freedom as indifference in choosing to create anything at all outside of himself is undermined. Once Malebranche grants that it is more perfect to create something than not to create something—which, Fénelon insists, he must grant lest he admit that nothingness is just as good as the most perfect work—God cannot be indifferent as to whether or not to create, and is forced by Order to create a world (*Réfutation*, 352). Thus, that a world exists at all is just as absolutely necessary as whatever takes place in that world once it is created.

The implications of Malebranche's philosophy for miracles, understood as particular volitions in God, is clear: there can be none. Not even the event that Malebranche grants is truly miraculous—creation itself—escapes the apparent necessitarianism that Fénelon finds in his system. As Fénelon reads Malebranche, the world is a necessary effect of God; or, as he dramatically puts it, "*voilà le monde nécessaire et éternel*" (*Réfutation*, 498).

#### 4

I promised that this article would culminate with something of a puzzle, an inexplicable lacuna, so here it is. Anyone reading through the attacks by Bayle, Arnauld and Fénelon on Malebranche's account of God's *modus operandi*, and especially their common accusation that that Oratorian's philosophical theology leads inexorably to a necessitarian cosmos where miracles, understood as free, particular acts or interventions by God, are impossible, should notice that a certain name is never mentioned in the relevant texts. As I have mentioned, nowhere, in none of these critiques—not in Bayle, not in Arnauld and not in Fénelon—does the name 'Spinoza' or the term 'Spinozism' appear in the context of this particular set of topics. And that should seem rather odd.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>There is at least one seventeenth-century writer who explicitly links Malebranche's occasionalism

It is not that Spinoza was not on their respective radars. Arnauld and Fénelon, in particular, in other contexts explicitly attack Spinoza and/or use Spinoza as a bogeyman to cast aspersion on an opponent. In Arnauld's case, as we have seen, the object of his irascibility is, as usual, Malebranche. Arnauld tells one of his correspondents that "I have not read any of the books of Spinoza [*sic*]. But I know these are very evil books."<sup>34</sup> This denial, however, cannot be taken at face value. After all, Arnauld explicitly invokes and names Spinoza—appealing to his making extension an attribute of God—when he criticizes Malebranche for having placed extension "formally" (and not just "objectively" or "ideally") in God.<sup>35</sup>

Fénelon, for his part, embedded what a later editor labeled a "Réfutation du spinozisme" as a chapter in Part Two of his treatise *Démonstration de l'existence de Dieu*, probably written a short time after his refutation of Malebranche.<sup>36</sup> In this relatively brief refutation, Fénelon, without explicitly naming Spinoza, rebuts the very Spinozistic notion that infinite perfection might pertain to nature itself—that is, that "the multitude of beings the collection of which bears the name 'universe'" might be the infinite (divine) being of which he has an idea. Fénelon argues that, on the contrary, God or the infinite being must be "an incomprehensible nature", an immutable, simple and indivisible being of "sovereign unity" distinct from this chaotic, "perpetually changeable" universe. We also have from Fénelon a letter to the Benedictine François Lamy regarding the latter's *Le nouvel athéisme renversé, ou Réfutation du système de Spinoza*. In this letter, which was published in 1696 as an appendix to Lamy's work, Fénelon, again without explicitly naming Spinoza, presents a demonstration that created things are substances in their own right and not simply modifications of a single substance.<sup>37</sup> In a similar vein, but this time expressly mentioning the target of his attack, he elsewhere proclaims, in reference to the idea that finite things are all together but "one and the same indivisible Being", that "the system of Spinoza is not at all difficult to refute ... The sect of Spinozists is thus a sect of liars, not philosophers."<sup>38</sup>

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with Spinoza's denial of miracles. Pierre-Valentin Faydit, in his *Lettres theologiques sur nouvelles opinions du temps, à Madame La Marquise d'\*\*\**, "Première Lettre: La Presbyteromachie" (n.p, 1699), says that "Le Pere Malebranche ... ne veut point qu'on admette aucunes volonte particulieres en Dieu, hors le cas des Miracles, qui sont presqu'aussi rares selon lui, que selon Spinoza, dont il a emprunté la definition du Miracle" (p. 2).

<sup>34</sup> To Louis-Paul du Vaucel, 1691, OA III.406.

<sup>35</sup> *Défense de Monsieur Arnauld, Docteur de Sorbonne, contre la Réponse au Livre des Vraies et des Fausses Idées*, OA XXXVIII.516-518.

<sup>36</sup> *Oeuvres*, II.623-631. Fénelon himself did not give the chapter that title.

<sup>37</sup> *Oeuvres*, II.685-689.

<sup>38</sup> "[Lettre] sur l'existence de Dieu, sur le culte digne de lui, et sur la véritable église", *Oeuvres*, vol. 2, 794-5.

Fénelon, then, rarely mentions Spinoza's name, and does so only when it is a question of the philosopher's monism. Nowhere in his discussion of Malebranche's necessitarianism, on the other hand, does Fénelon explicitly accuse Malebranche of being a closet Spinozist. There is one point in the course of his *Réfutation du système du père Malebranche* that Fénelon does refer to "Spinoza who, under the pretext of reasoning with geometric exactitude on evident metaphysical principles, composed dreams that combine extravagance and impiety", but again, it is not in a context that has anything to do with his worries over Malebranche's alleged necessitarianism.<sup>39</sup>

To many thinkers in the second half of the seventeenth century, necessitarianism was Spinozism. We have seen that Leibniz and Bayle make that association, and it was practically a commonplace. As Spinoza's friends Lodewijk Meijer and Jarig Jellesz note in their preface to the collection of Spinoza's writings they published just after his death, "several men brought forth difficulties against his *Theological–Political Treatise*: first, that the author mingles God and nature together, or that he takes them for one and the same (as they pretend) and, second, that he establishes the fatal necessity of all things and actions."<sup>40</sup>

So, why do Arnauld and Fénelon avoid accusing Malebranche explicitly of falling into the Spinozistic vortex, right where they see Malebranche crossing the line into necessitarianism and what is basically a practical, and possibly principled, denial of miracles?<sup>41</sup> It would seem an easy and natural, even (in the context) obligatory and certainly anticipated accusation to make, and one could be forgiven for thinking that they go out of their way *not* to make it. Both Arnauld and Fénelon are deeply concerned to preserve divine freedom and divine providence, including miracles, all of which they see as betrayed by Malebranche's system. Why do they hesitate, then, to tarnish Malebranche with the most available and damaging label one could employ in the intellectual world of the late seventeenth century?

While I do not have a certain answer to this question, let me conclude with some brief speculations. Neither Arnauld nor Fénelon would have liked to see curiosity raised among their contemporaries for the heretical and scandalous writings of the Jew from The Hague. Thus, while on occasion they were not above using the specter of Spinozism to tar an opponent, the last thing they wanted was to bring any unnecessary attention to Spinoza and his ideas. To their minds, the author of the *Ethics* and the *Theological–Political Treatise* was, in effect, "He who—for the

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39 *Oeuvres*, II.419.

40 "Praefatio", in B.D.S. [Benedictus de Spinoza], *Opera Postuma* ([Amsterdam,] 1677) no pagination, but p. v.

41 Denis Moreau notes that "'l'ombre de Spinoza" hovers over Fénelon's "Réfutation", especially chapter 14; see *Deux Cartésiens: La polémique Arnauld-Malebranche* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1999), 246 n. 3.

most part—shall not be named." So perhaps the absence of Spinoza's name—even in Fénelon's writings that are devoted to refuting Spinoza's doctrines—are a reflection of their reluctance to add to this heretic's renown ... or, better, his notoriety.

Not a very satisfying answer, I admit. Another possibility is that, while Arnauld and Fénelon see in Malebranche a Spinozistic kind of necessitarianism, it is a necessitarianism divorced from the Spinozistic God. After all, Malebranche's God, whose will is distinct from His understanding, is, like Leibniz's God, a rational being, one endowed with an agency not that unlike human agency. Arnauld, for one, is severely opposed to seeing God in such anthropomorphic terms. He prefers a more Cartesian God, a divinity in which will and understanding are one and the same; and much of his general critique of Malebranche's philosophical theology is directed at Malebranche's all-too-human conception of God.<sup>42</sup> Still, at least Malebranche's God, as problematic as it may be in Arnauld's eyes, remains a transcendent being distinct from Nature who is endowed with volitional agency—it is not Spinoza's *Deus sive Natura*. Thus, perhaps Arnauld resists the Spinozistic label here just because, strictly speaking, Malebranche's alleged necessitarianism is not completely identical to that of Spinoza, at least in its theological foundations.<sup>43</sup>

However, this kind of rhetorical restraint does not strike me as Arnauld's *modus operandi*. Arnauld is not one to shy away from name-calling, especially on the basis of fine and subtle distinctions. I find it hard to believe that he would resist the opportunity to hit Malebranche with the most damning label in the period just because, technically, Malebranche's necessitarianism is not exactly the same as that of Spinoza.

And so, the puzzle remains.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

JS = *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*, translated by Nicholas Jolley and David Scott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997)

LO = *The Search After Truth*, translated by Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1980).

OA = *Oeuvres de Messire Antoine Arnauld*, 43 vols. (Lausanne: Sigismond D'Arnay, 1775).

OC = *Oeuvres complètes de Malebranche*, 20 vols., edited by André Robinet (Paris: J. Vrin, 1958-76).

[All translations of passages other than those from *The Search After Truth* and the *Dialogues on Metaphysics* are my own.]

42 See Steven Nadler, "Arnauld's God", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 46 (2008): 517-538; and *The Best of All Possible Worlds: A Story of Philosophers, God and Evil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

43 My thanks to Don Rutherford and Clinton Tolley for, independently, suggesting this possible explanation.



# **Spinoza, a Democrat or a Republican?**

**Charles Ramond**

**Abstract:** Whatever the rational and argumentative dimension of his whole philosophy, Spinoza can in no way be considered as a theorist of the “justification” of political action by reference to “values” that could reach an “enlightened conscience” or “morals”, or by the “law” or even the “Constitution” of the Republic. Spinoza is thus republican in a vague sense, but democratic in a very radical sense. In fact, it completely submits the just and the unjust (like the pious and the impious) to the legal and the illegal, that is to say, morality (just like religion) to politics, to the exteriority of accounts and behaviors rather than the interiority of beliefs and intentions. In the immanence of the accounts, nothing can override the preferences of the people. The real name of politics in Spinoza, as in Rancière, is thus “Democracy” much more than “Republic”. To oppose republican “values” or “constitutions” to the democratic “preferences” of peoples would be to bring theology back into politics, when Spinoza’s first and constant effort was to separate them.

**Keywords:** Spinoza; politics; democracy; republic; law; number, count, vote; immanence; justifications; preferences.

### Introduction. Country Names: the Names.

Is Spinoza a “Democrat” or a “Republican”? Although at first sight anachronistic, this question can be justified with the fact that Spinoza, by making constant use of the term “republic” and paying homage to Machiavelli<sup>1</sup>, is considered a “republican” by a certain number of theorists of political philosophy<sup>2</sup>, while in the meantime having been acknowledged in the history of philosophy as a prophet of “democracy” – his last work (The *Political Treatise*) culminating with an evocation of democracy as an “absolute regime” *<imperium absolutum>*<sup>3</sup> which would accomplish and complete politics in that it would best correspond to “human nature”<sup>4</sup>. Contemporary history, whatever its convulsions, has given reason to the Spinozist prophecy (later reaffirmed by Tocqueville) since democracy, always desired although always decried, has continued to spread

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1 TP 5/7 [= *Tractatus Politicus* (*Political Treatise*), chapter 5, paragraph 7]; see SAINT VICTOR and BRANTHÔME, *Histoire de la République en France*, p. 77 and following ; cf. ROUSSEAU : « Le Prince de Machiavel est le livre des républicains » (*Contrat Social* III 6, p. 409). The complete references of the works cited in the notes are given below in the Bibliography.

2 For example Blandine KRIEGLER, in *Philosophie de la République*, and also in *Spinoza, L'autre voie*; Christophe MIQUEU in *Spinoza, Locke et l'idée de Citoyenneté – Une génération républicaine à l'aube des Lumières*; Jacques de SAINT VICTOR and Thomas BRANTHÔME in *Histoire de la République en France*, p. 103 sq. On the other hand, it is true though that one does not find a mentioning of Spinoza in *L'idée de République* of Juliette GRANGE, and only one brief mention (as a “democrat” rather than as a “republican”) in *Les théories de la république* of Serge AUDIER (p. 25).

3 TP 11/1: “I come, finally, to the third, and *completely absolute state*, which we call Democratic.”

4 See § III below, and in particular notes 36 to 38.



everywhere in the surface of the Earth over the last centuries.

This double Spinozist determination (“Democrat” and “Republican”) can invite us (such will be the proposal of the present study) to take up for itself, on a precise and elaborate philosophical example, the question of the relations between these two notions. Today, most countries name or entitle themselves as “republics”. This fact deserves to be taken into consideration, because these names (in their “complete form”) stem from thorough reflections which in turn have culminated in the historical syntheses of proclamations and claims of belonging. Therefore, the “ordinary language” method of analysis, which consists in taking into account as much as necessary the linguistic uses (“what do we say when?”), finds here its full legitimacy.<sup>5</sup>

There are approximately 196 states in 2021. Of this number, 158 (over 80%) refer to themselves as “Republics”. Then we find, by decreasing number, 17 “Kingdoms”<sup>6</sup>, 16 States which simply carry their name without further qualification<sup>7</sup>, then 13 States calling themselves “State”<sup>8</sup>, 4 “Federation”<sup>9</sup>, 3 “Commonwealth”<sup>10</sup>, 3 “Principality”<sup>11</sup>, 1 “Grand Duchy”<sup>12</sup>, 1 “Holy See”<sup>13</sup>, 1 “Sultanate”<sup>14</sup> and 1 “Union”<sup>15</sup>.

Although the vast majority of states give themselves the name or title of “Republic”, none of them designates itself primarily as “democracy”, which in fact and in practice indicates the instinctive and universal perception of a strong categorical difference between the two terms, and not at all of their equivalence, not even of their proximity in usage. This categorical distinction seems to be coupled with a hierarchy,

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5The present study, in some ways, therefore follows on from our *24 Études de philosophie du langage ordinaire* (to be published in Limoges: Lambert-Lucas, 2021).

6 “Kingdoms” of Saudi Arabia, Bhutan, Spain, Bahrain, Belgium, Cambodia, Denmark, United of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Hashemite of Jordan, Lesotho, Morocco, Norway, Sweden, Thailand, Netherlands, Swaziland, Tonga.

7 Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, Canada, Grenada, Hungary, Cook Islands, Solomon Islands, Jamaica, Barbados, Mongolia, New Zealand, Romania, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Tuvalu, Ukraine.

8 “States” of Kuwait, Qatar, Independent State of Papua New Guinea, Independent State of Samoa, Japan, Plurinational State of Bolivia, Federated States of Micronesia, United States of America, United Mexican States.

9 “Federations” of Malaysia, Russia, Saint Kitts and Nevis, United Arab Emirates.

10 “Commonwealths” of Dominica, Bahamas, Australia.

11 “Principalities” of Andorra, Monaco, Lichtenstein.

12 “Grand Duchy” of Luxembourg.

13 “Holy See”, or “Vatican State”.

14 “Sultanate” of Oman.

15 “Union” of the Comoros.

insofar as the term “democracy” appears in the names of certain States only in the form of the adjective “democratic”, as if “democracy” were a sub-category or species of “republic”: “*Democratic People’s Republic of Algeria*”, “*Democratic Republic of the Congo*”, “*Democratic People’s Republic of Korea*”, “*Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia*”, “*Democratic People’s Republic of Laos*”, and a few others.

Undoubtedly the claim of the “democratic” status of certain “republics” has a function of display and compensation for an absent reality: one can think of Algeria, China, North Korea, or Vietnam, similar to the old “East Germany” which called itself “German *Democratic Republic*” by antiphrasis in the eyes of Western democrats. Nevertheless, the presence of the term “democratic” in the official name of a country indicated and always indicates a reference, an aspiration, a horizon. “Democracy” is moreover a matter of degrees rather than nature in the various “republics” of the world today – even assuming that there is a reliable scale for measuring these “degrees of democracy”. Yet, we do not know of a “Republic” which proclaims itself “anti-democratic” or “non-democratic”, even when they indicate in their name their state religion (for example the “*Islamic Republics*” of Afghanistan, Iran, Mauritania and Pakistan), or other characters they wish to distinguish<sup>16</sup>. Ultimately, in usage, “democracy” never appears as a subspecies of “republic”, since that would suppose that there are two kinds of “republics”, the “democratic republics” and the “non-democratic republics”, which is not the case.

### **I. The *Theological-Political Treatise*: a Treatise of “the” Republic.**

In Spinoza, the term “republic” is used as in most of the names of countries that we have just mentioned, that is to say in a neutral way, very close to the etymology “public thing”. “Republic” for Spinoza designates not only any form of state or political power, but more broadly all form of human association. The subtitle and preface of the *Theological-Political Treatise* (published in 1670) clearly indicate this versatility or neutrality in Spinoza’s use of the term “republic”. In fact, the subtitle of the work specifies that it will be a question of showing “that the *republic* can grant freedom of philosophizing without harming its peace <*reipublicae pax*> or

16 In alphabetical order of the adjectives specifying the nature of the “republics”: “Syrian Arab Republic”, “*Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela*”, “*Cooperative Republic of Guyana*”, “*Democratic Republic of Congo / Sao Tome and Principe / East Timor*”, “*Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia / Nepal*”, “*Democratic People’s Republic of Algeria / Korea*”, “*Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka*”, “*Federal Republic of Germany / Nigeria / Somalia*”, “*Federation of Brazil*”, “*Islamic Republic of Afghanistan / Iran / Mauritania / Pakistan*”, “*Eastern Republic of Uruguay*”, “*People’s Republic of Bangladesh / China / Laos*”, “*Socialist Republic of Viet -Nam*”, “*United Republic of Tanzania*”, “Republic of the *Union of Burma*”.

piety, and cannot deny it without destroying its peace and piety”<sup>17</sup>. Spinoza does not specify here what he means by “republic”. One could suppose that he designates by this term a “republican” regime (as opposed to a despotic regime), and more precisely the “republic of Holland”, since he addresses the entire work to this “republic”, in thanking her for having made it possible and thereby offering empirical proof of the validity of the theses he defends there, namely that “freedom of thought” can be granted “without damage to the republic”.<sup>18</sup> Reading the *Theological-Political Treatise*, however, leaves no doubt as to the fact that Spinoza uses the term “republic” in it in a much broader sense than that of “republic of Holland in the 17th century”. Despite his opening and concluding statements on his “submission” to the Sovereign of his homeland, Spinoza had indeed shown some mistrust during the publication of the *Theological-Political Treatise*. He had published the book without the author’s name, with a false indication of location (Hamburg instead of Amsterdam). The “prudence” which served as his motto<sup>19</sup> had decidedly made him guess what scandal his book was going to cause throughout Europe, and he could definitely not be sure that the freedom of thought was already sufficiently present in the Republic of Holland for it to be tolerated there. Moreover, he had written and published it in Latin, refusing a Dutch translation. Holland cannot therefore be considered as the unique model of the republic, much less as its paragon, in the *Theological-Political Treatise*.

In fact, the term “republic” throughout the book refers to much more than just the republic of Holland. Chapters 17 and 18, for example, deal with the “republic of the Hebrews” <*respublica hebraeorum*>, from the history of which Spinoza intends to draw general lessons in matters of politics <*dogmata politica*>. But the term “republic” in the expression “republic of the Hebrews” does not refer to anything that we would call today “republic”, nor even to what was called by that name in Spinoza’s time. This is an extremely vague and general meaning, equivalent to “state”. The French translators of the *Theological-Political Treatise* translate *respublica* sometimes by “République”, sometimes by “État”<sup>20</sup>;

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17 Highlights by CR in all the cases unless otherwise stated.

18 See the end of the *Preface* and the last lines of chp. 20, also the last lines of the book, which practically retake the same text. See also, in *TTP* 20, 351-352 [= *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*Theological-Political Treatise*), chapter 20, page 351-352], the homage to the “city of Amsterdam” <*urbs Amstelodamum*>, this “most flourishing republic” <*haec florentissima respublica*>, and “most outstanding” <*praestantissima*>, in which “all men live in the greatest harmony”; and in *TP* 8/3: “The Republic of Hollanders <*hollandorum respublica*> on the other hand takes its name from a whole province, with the result that the subjects of this state enjoy a greater liberty”.

19 Spinoza’s motto was indeed “*Caute*”: “with caution”. Jean-Claude MILNER, at the beginning of his book *Le sage trompeur*, offers a fine and in-depth analysis of this motto.

20 *TTP* 4 128 25-28, Curley: “But what these means are, and what principle of living this end requires, and how the foundations of the best republic and the principle of living among men follow from this

and Spinoza himself sometimes considers the two terms *respublica* and *imperium* to be synonymous, since he happens to redouble one by the other as if they were equivalent.<sup>21</sup>

Although he designates it by the generic term of “republic”, Spinoza considers, in chapter 17 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, that the State of the Hebrews under Moses had been “rightly” called the “kingdom of God”.<sup>22</sup> A few lines later, Spinoza believes that we could legitimately also call this state “theocracy”, “since its citizens were not subject to any law other than that revealed by God”<sup>23</sup>. He subsequently shows that this was only an appearance, and that in fact this State, this “republic of the Hebrews”, had been instituted “like a democracy”, by an equal renunciation of each one of his right which had left everyone, “by this covenant”, “completely equal”.<sup>24</sup> Spinoza therefore suggests, in these few lines, a possible justification for his recourse to the term “republic” to designate this “kingdom of God” instituted in the manner of a “democracy”. Continuing his account of the history of the Hebrews, Spinoza, however, closes this barely open door. After the direct encounter with the voice of God, the Hebrews, “terrified and frightened” <*peterriti et attoniti*>, had in fact transferred their right no longer to God but to Moses, thus becoming “the supreme judge” <*supremus iudex*> of their state. Thereafter, Moses, explains Spinoza, ruled with such authority that the only name that actually suited the state of the Hebrews was “theocracy”.<sup>25</sup> Spinoza therefore calls “the republic of the Hebrews” a state which he himself judges, after analysis, to be theocratic in its essence. This is to say if the political content of the term “republic” matters little to him.<sup>26</sup>

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<*quomodo hunc optimae reipublicae fundamenta sequantur*>, these matters all pertain to a universal Ethics”; Moreau / Lagrée: “ce que sont ces moyens, quelle est la règle de vie exigée par cette fin, comment s'ensuivent les fondements de l'État le meilleur, et quelle est la règle de vie entre les hommes, cela concerne l'éthique universelle”. In chapter 5, the 12 occurrences of the Latin *respublica* are rendered in French sometimes by “république”, sometimes by “État”; the same goes for the 2 occurrences of chp. 14.

21 See for example *TTP* 16 288-289: “But in a Republic, and a state <*at in reipublica et imperio*> where the supreme law is the well- being of the whole people, not that of the ruler, someone who obeys the supreme power in everything should not be called a slave, useless to himself, but a subject”.

22 *TTP* 17 302 7-8 <*Imperium hebraeorum [...] regnum Dei jure vocabatur*>.

23 *TTP* 17 302 18 <*Et hac de causa hoc imperium theocratia vocari potuit*>.

24 *TTP* 17 303 24: “The Hebrews didn't transfer their right to anyone else, but everyone surrendered his right equally, as in a Democracy <*ut in democratia*>, and they cried out in one voice “whatever God says” (without any explicit mediator) ‘we will do’. It follows that everyone remained completely equal by this covenant”.

25 *TTP* 17 304 [41]: “Moses [...] left the state to be administered by his successors in such a way that it couldn't be called either popular, or aristocratic, or monarchic, but Theocratic” <*ut nec populare nec aristocraticum nec monarchicum, sed theocraticum vocari potuerit*>. Passage repeated verbatim in *TTP* 17 308 28-29.

26 When Spinoza, in *TTP* 17 319 31-32, envisages the possibility that “the republic” could have been

The history of France still prompts French people today to consider the term “republic” as exclusive of that of “monarchy”. However, Spinoza did not hesitate to call a “republic”, that related to the Hebrews, the pure theocracy of Moses.

The use in the singular of the term “republic”, starting from the subtitle of the *Theological-Political Treatise* (“the peace of the republic” <*pax respublicae*>), goes well with the Spinozist intention of drawing universal, even timeless lessons, from the history of certain nations.<sup>27</sup> What holds for the “republic of the Hebrews” (that is, for a theocracy) will hold in his eyes for “the republic” in general. If there were no homogeneity of the notion of “republic”, Spinoza could not draw lessons from the history of the “republic of the Hebrews” for “the republic” in general, that is to say for any form of political human association. And if a theocracy can be a form of “the republic”, so will a monarchy. At the end of chapter 18 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza declares that one should not follow the example of the Romans and the English, who overthrew “kings”: because most often, we see it, a tyrant comes to replace the overthrown king. Rather, the aim of politics must be to “retain the form of any state, whatever it is”<sup>28</sup> – even when it is a monarchy. This conservatism is the political version of “the striving <*conatus*> to persevere in one’s being <*in suo esse perseverare*>”<sup>29</sup> which forms the basis of Spinozist anthropology and its ontology, and which will find its full development in the *Political Treatise*. Therefore, there will undoubtedly be a preference of Spinoza for “democracy” understood as one of the possible forms of the “republic” or of the “state” – but certainly not for a “republican” regime in the sense of “non-monarchical”.

## II. The Political Treatise:

### Multitude, Primitive Democracy, Natural Republic.

The reading of the *Political Treatise* confirms these conclusions. The term “republic” appears from the first paragraph of the book, in the singular and in the most general way possible. Spinoza recognizes at the outset that there are “no men less able to govern the republic <*regendae respublicae*> than the theorists or the philosophers”.<sup>30</sup> The term “republic”

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“constituted in accordance with [God’s] first intention”, he designates, by the expression “the republic”, “the State of the Hebrews”. Likewise, in *TTP* 18 323-31-32, when he states that his “intention” was not “to treat a Republic in detail”, he also speaks of the “republic of the Hebrews”.

27 *TTP*, chp. 18, title: “Certain Political doctrines are inferred from the Republic and history of the Hebrews” <*Ex hebraeorum republica et historiis quaedam dogmata politica concluduntur*>.

28 *TTP* 18 331 12-13: “The form of each state must necessarily be retained and [...] it cannot be changed without a danger that the whole state will be ruined” <*uniuscujusque imperii forma necessario retinenda est absque periculo totalis ipsius ruinae mutari potest*>.

29 *Ethics* III 6 sq.

30 *TP* 1/1.

does not here designate any form of power or government in particular. "Politics" in general is considered by Spinoza to be the art of "governing the republic", or "a republic", that is, any republic. This very broad use of the term is found throughout the entire book. In chapter 2/17, Spinoza thus considers "democracy", "aristocracy" and "monarchy" as the three possible options for distributing the "charge of the republic" <*reipublicae cura*> over everybody, a few, or just one. The term "republic", here as elsewhere, is used by Spinoza in the singular, as designating an invariant background under the variety of political regimes. Monarchy, aristocracy and democracy are then only quantitative variations on the same republican theme.

Spinoza does not distinguish "republic" and "city", thus conforming to their ordinary usage. It is said that there are "citizens" in a "republic", as in a "city". But there is no such thing as a specific term for the inhabitants of a "republic". We do not say "a republican", who could have been forged as an "academician" is from "academy / academic", nor "a republicanist" who could have been formed in the image of "publicist". In the absence of a noun denoting a member of a "republic", the adjective "republican" nowadays denotes a certain way of thinking or behaving. This way it is very close to the adjective "citizen": to have a "citizen behavior" or a "republican behavior" or a "republican attitude" are synonymous expressions, additional indication of the proximity of the terms "republic" and "city" (in Greek "*polis*", hence "political", a vague and generic term just as much as "republic"). Just as Spinoza happens, as we have seen, to redouble "republic" by "State" (*respublica* by *imperium*)<sup>31</sup>, so it happens to him to redouble "republic" by "City"<sup>32</sup>. It has become customary to capitalize both "City" and "Republic", to underline the generic dimension of these terms responsible for designating (most often indifferently) any "city" or "republic". It is therefore legitimate, as Christophe Miqueu suggests, to move freely from the notion of "republic" to that of "citizen", and to consider that each of the two implies the other.<sup>33</sup>

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31 See n. 21 above.

32 TP 8/3: "The Patricians are commonly citizens of one city, which is the capital of the whole state, so that the *Commonwealth or Republic* <*civitas sive respublica*> takes its name from that city, as the Roman republic once did, and as the Venetian, Genoese, etc. do now".

33 Christophe MIQUEU, *Spinoza, Locke et l'idée de citoyenneté – Une génération républicaine à l'aube des Lumières* [Spinoza, Locke and the Idea of Citizenship – A Republican Generation at the Dawn of the Enlightenment], Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2012. The "citizenship" of the title is made explicit by the "republican generation" of the subtitle. Miqueu goes so far as to suggest translating, in Spinoza's work, *civitas* by "republic" (and not, as is usually done, by "city" – a "traditional" choice according to the author), and explains this (p. 316 n. 4) by the fact that according to him "there is no major difference in meaning between the two words" – which we also maintain here. This overload of republicanism obviously goes in the direction of the author's general thesis, at the cost, however, of a certain forcing (because the two terms exist in Spinoza) which obliges him to "slightly modify" the existing translations which render *civitas* by "city" (cf. p. 378, 384, 392, 486, 491, 503), so that the reader who does not have the Latin text may believe that Spinoza speaks only of "Republic" even when he sometimes speaks of "City". And if we see "citizen" everywhere, why not instead translate *respubli-*



The term “republic” is so generic in Spinoza that he comes to designate “primitive democracy”, this first state of society imagined by Spinoza immediately after the state of nature. Spinoza indeed thinks, unlike many political theorists, and contrary to common sense, that democracy is the “most natural” of political regimes. We would spontaneously think that democracy or the regime of equal rights is the furthest of the regimes, and not the closest, to the state of nature, since only the law of the strongest seems to reign in the state of nature. Yet Spinoza is constant on the “natural” and original dimension of democracy, due to several arguments, the first of which is very unexpected and paradoxical. Spinoza indeed asserts, contrary to the most spontaneous and generally accepted opinion, that democratic regimes are even more hereditary than aristocratic regimes.<sup>34</sup> This argument is unexpected to the extent that it has troubled the commentators of Spinoza themselves. We spontaneously think that aristocracy is linked to heredity (therefore to nature) while democracy is the place of merits and could therefore in this respect to some extent be freed from natural constraints. Yet Spinoza thinks the opposite:<sup>35</sup> he (rightly) associates aristocracy with the notion of “choice”, and democracy rather with “heredity” and the universality of law. The accuracy of this analysis is striking. French citizenship, for example, is hereditary, and is not the object of a choice either on the part of the citizens concerned or of any other citizen or group of citizens. Democratic citizenship then turns out to be a sort of fatality, which one acquires by birth, or by “fortune” as Spinoza says, for example when one is born in a country like France which practices the law of the soil.

This naturalistic dimension of democracy is extended by Spinoza to the “republic” itself in several passages of the *Theological-Political Treatise*<sup>36</sup>, the *Correspondence*<sup>37</sup>, and the *Political Treatise*. Spinoza

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ca, everywhere, by “City”? But there is no substantive which is to “city” what “republicanism” is to “republic” (no “citizenism” in ordinary usage), which turned out to be annoying for a thesis which intended to emphasize the importance of the “republicanism” of Spinoza and Locke.

34 *TP* 8/1.

35 Spinoza in fact reaffirms in *TP* 11/1 this thesis of a democracy distinguished from aristocracy by its more fundamentally “hereditary” character.

36 *TTP* 16 289 15-21: “With this I think I have shown sufficiently clearly what the foundations of the democratic state <*imperium democraticum*> are. I preferred to treat it before all others, because it seemed the most natural state <*quia maxime naturale videbatur*>, and the one which approached most nearly the freedom nature concedes to everyone. In it no one so transfers his natural right to another that in the future there is no consultation with him. Instead he transfers it to the greater part of the whole Society, of which he makes one part. In this way everyone remains equal, as they were before, in the state of nature ». Same thesis in *TTP* 17 303 23-31.

37 Spinoza, *Letter* 50 to Jarig Jelles, June 2, 1674. Spinoza explains the difference between Hobbes and himself as regards politics: This difference, he writes, “consists in that I always preserve natural Right <*naturale jus*> unimpaired, and I maintain that in each State the Supreme Magistrate has no more right over its subjects than it has greater power over them. This is always the case in the state of Nature <*in statu naturali*>”. What might seem a pure definition of “the law of the strongest” is in



imagines the first human organizations there as kinds of nomadic tribes, paradoxically egalitarian and democratic: “When a multitude <*quaedam multitudo*>, seeking a new place to live, found it and cultivated it, the whole multitude retained an equal right to command. No one willingly gives the rule to another.”<sup>38</sup> He then imagines a gradual degradation of this primitive egalitarian democracy, which step by step transforms it into an aristocracy and then into a monarchy. The terms “citizen” and “republic” immediately appear where we previously only had a “multitude”: “While the number of the immigrants grows daily, the number of citizens <*numerus civium*> is for many reasons diminished. Indeed, often clans die out; some are excluded because of crimes; and many neglect Public Affairs <*republicam negligunt*> because of a difficulty in their domestic affairs. In the meantime, the more powerful desire nothing more than to reign alone. So gradually the rule is reduced to a few, and finally, because of factions, to one”.<sup>39</sup> So, in Spinoza’s writing, the most basic and the most original of political organizations immediately takes the name of “republic”.

This natural aspect of the republic is finally underlined in a passage of the last chapter of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, where Spinoza compares the loyalty that we must show to the “republic” and that that we must show towards God: “the loyalty <*fides*> of each person to the Republic, like his loyalty toward God” <*erga Rempublicam, sicuti erga Deum*>, Spinoza writes, “can be known only from his works, from his loving-kindness toward his neighbor” <*ex charitate erga proximum*>.<sup>40</sup> The formula “*erga Rempublicam, sicuti erga Deum*” is very striking. The philosopher who enunciates *Deus sive Natura*, that is, the equivalence of “God” and “nature”, could not more clearly express the naturalness of the republic.

### III. Fifty Shades of Republicanism.

In Spinoza, the “republic” is thus only the first – still formless – form of the “multitude”, before the respective democratic, aristocratic, and monarchical specifications. However, and even if the ordinary use of the term “republic” is also very plastic and vague, the feeling of a specificity of the “republic” remains present, even if it is difficult to define it.<sup>41</sup> The

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Spinoza’s eyes the very definition of the law of democratic states, which are in fact more powerful in his eyes than any other form of state.

<sup>38</sup> TP 8/12.

<sup>39</sup> TP 8/12.

<sup>40</sup> TTP 20 348 5-7.

<sup>41</sup> As evidenced by the famous article by Régis DEBRAY « République ou Démocratie » (1992). This article, first published in 1989 in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, questioned republicanism on the occasion of the commemoration of the bicentenary of the French Revolution. Debray sought to clarify, with great

initial argument could, moreover, be turned around: if most of the countries of the world wished to take the name of “republic” themselves, would it not be because there is nevertheless something specifically attractive in this term, in this political construction?

Several authors have attempted to characterize the “republic” positively in relation to other forms of political organization. But these descriptions, especially when confronted and interrelated with each other, paradoxically suffer from an excess of richness, and sometimes of subtlety, which leads again and always to the idea that the notion of “republic” is so welcoming and protean that it becomes impossible to specify it. In her *Philosophy of the Republic* of 1998, Blandine Kriegel thus identifies several layers under the notion: the “republic” would envelop an ancient, philosophical and religious source, then several types of superimposed “rights”, sometimes intertwined and confused: the “right of the state”, “human rights”, “citizen’s rights”, and “people’s rights”. Moreover, Blandine Kriegel grants a very special place, in this description, to the philosophy of Spinoza, which represents in his eyes an “other way”<sup>42</sup> of modernity, that of the “republic” against that of subjectivity and the “empire”.

In *Theories of the republic* (2004, then 2015), Serge Audier ignites a firework of republican conceptions, none of which has exactly the color and nuance of the others. To the ancient republicanisms of Aristotle, Cicero, Polybius, succeed the republicanisms of the Renaissance, in Florence with Machiavelli; then those of Venice, Bodin, Althusius; then the “*commonwealth*” of Harrington, the “conflicting republicanism” of Sidney, the “liberalism” of Montesquieu, the “contractualism” of Rousseau, the “Girondin” model of Condorcet (a republicanism stemming rather from the “Radical Enlightenment”) which would oppose the “Jacobin” model of the Robespierrists (a republicanism rather from Rousseau), the “cosmopolitical” republicanism of Kant, the “egalitarian” republicanism of Babeuf, the “liberal and decentralizing” republicanism of Carrel, the “paradoxical” republicanism of Tocqueville (best known for being indeed a theorist of “democracy”), the “eclectic” republicanism of Vacherot, the “spiritualist” republicanism of Jules Simon, the “republican

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brío and accuracy, the vague feeling according to which, like the two great parties which structure the politics of the United States, to be “republican” is something other than to be “democratic” – but what exactly? This developed and rich text contains remarkable formulas (“Democracy, shall we say, is what remains of a Republic when the Enlightenment is extinguished” – p. 18) and at least one deep intuition with which we are in full agreement (“The Republic is interior or is not: it requires a personal ethics. In Democracy, the exterior may suffice: we only require laws” – p. 26), even if it is for us – with Spinoza – one of the main arguments to defend democracy and its immanent legalism against the remains of moralism and transcendence always present, with the sacrosanct “interiority”, in the idea of the Republic, and even if generally speaking we do not put “republic” and “democracy” as symmetrical as Debray does.

<sup>42</sup>To use the title of his work published in 2018 by Éditions du Cerf. We will return to Blandine KRIE-  
GEL’s interpretation in the conclusion of this study.

solidarism” of Léon Bourgeois and Célestin Bouglé, the “republican socialism” of Jaurès, the “democratic republicanism” of Mendès-France, the “American” republicanism and the “French” republicanism distinguished by Hannah Arendt... As it should be, the final bouquet in Technicolor is American, with cherished admiration mainly towards the “neo-republicanism” of Pocock, the “instrumental” republicanism of Skinner, the “communitarian” republicanism of Sandel, the “liberal” republicanism of Rawls, the republicanism of the “spheres of justice” of Walzer, the “multiculturalist” republicanism of Taylor, the “deliberative” republicanism of Fishkin, the “associative” republicanism of Robert Putnam and the “participatory” republicanism of Barber... Recognizing the “multifaceted” side of republicanism, Audier concludes his work by attempting a synthesis of the main conceptual distinctions which he believes structure “republicanism”. Thus, it would be necessary to distinguish between (1) a “consensualist”, sometimes “authoritarian” republicanism, and a “pluralist and conflictual” republicanism; (2) a “democratic” republicanism and an “oligarchic and authoritarian” republicanism; (3) a “social” republicanism and a “socially conservative” republicanism; (4) an “individualist-ownerist” republicanism and a “post-ownerist” republicanism; (5) a “national – sometimes nationalist” republicanism and a “cosmopolitan” republicanism; and finally (6) a “productivist” republicanism and an “ecological” republicanism, that the author proposes to name “eco-republicanism”, through which republicanism would of course be a way of the future ... The specialists of “republicanism” can rub their hands: nothing human is foreign to them.

From the first page of their grandiose *Histoire de la république en France, des origines à la Ve république* (2018), Jacques de Saint Victor and Thomas Branthôme take into account the possibility that by dint of having passed through abused metamorphoses, the term “republic” could well be “an empty word”, “worn to the rope”. The authors therefore do not seek so much to determine a “philosophy of the republic” (in the manner of Blandine Kriegel) or an “idea of the republic” (in the manner of Juliette Grange), or to synthesize the “theories of the republic” (in the manner of Serge Audier), as to propose a “history of the republic in France”, taking into account by definition the variations and the self-designations of the successive actors of french political life, who have not for horizon a global or essentializing coherence. However, the authors do not escape, in their preface, the task of defining, at least minimally, this “republic” which is their object. But immediately, and even though the historical point of view is not entirely abandoned, the protean character, almost elusive by dint of variety, of the notion reappears. Is the “republic” a “French singularity”, is it “exclusive” of the monarchy, or can we make a genealogy of it that goes back well before the end of the 18th century (p. 7)? On this fundamental

point, discussions remain intensive.<sup>43</sup> The authors come to an attempt at a “typology” of “republican sensibilities” only after multiple warnings on the “delicate” side of an approach requiring “caution” in the face of constantly evolving “sensitivities” if it does not want to lead to “simplifications” or “confusions” (7-8). The four “republican sensibilities” finally identified, richly illustrated and convincing, are “liberal sensibility”, “Jacobin sensibility”, “plebeian sensibility”, and “conservative sensibility”. It should be remembered that what is at stake is a history of the republic “in France”. But these four French “republican sensibilities” already cover an extremely broad, complex, and rich definitional field. If we added to it the other “republican sensibilities” that one can imagine existing in other countries, one would find this profusion, this swarming of republican forms and sensibilities, which seem again and always to discourage the possibility of forming a clear idea and distinct, or adequate, of the republic.

#### IV. The Republic and the “Common Good”.

The only characterization of the “republic” which is found in all the works which attempt to define or characterize it dates back to Aristotle. The Philosopher distinguishes, in *Politics*, the constitutions “which have as their goal the common interest” from those which “on the contrary” “have in view only the personal interest of the leaders”. The first would be “republican”, the second “despotic”.<sup>44</sup> The “republic” would thus be the form of power which has in view not only the “public thing”, but the “common good”, or “the general interest”. Two other global characterizations and everywhere present derive from this main characterization: the republic would be a power where “law” and “morality” reign.<sup>45</sup> Reading Spinoza, however, helps us to understand that

43 Juliette GRANGE argues, for example, in *L'idée de république* that the Republic essentially comes from the French Revolution: “The republic does indeed date from September 21, 1792”, it is essentially anti-monarchical and “specifically French” (48). The lowercase “r” to “republic” underlines the definitional dimension of the statement: there is no “republic” until after this date. “The short-lived English Republic of Cromwell” will be “left out”, as will the “Republic of Venice”, its “potentates” and its “oligarchy” (47-48). Blandine KRIEDEL, strangely ignored by Juliette GRANGE (a single note p. 170), on the contrary supports with very strong arguments, in *Philosophie de la République*, the idea of a republican constant throughout our history. This is the overall position of the authors that we discuss in this text.

44 Aristotle, *Politics* III 6, 1279 a 16-21.

45 Juliette GRANGE, in *L'idée de république*, takes up the Aristotelian distinction (28), sees in “the idea of public interest” and in that of “legitimate laws” the “only characteristics” of the republic (29), considers that “the affirmation of the *Law* [...] as expressing the common Good” (italics and capital letters of the A.) “unites all the uses of the word ‘republic’” (29-30), grants to “republican institutions” the capacity to “moralize” the government (37), relies on the “moral” conception of the “Kantian republic” (66-67), calls for republican “virtue” (184), to which she associates the “public Good”, the “modern ideal of justice”, and, with Balibar, “the triumph of the good principle over the bad” (255). Blandine KRIEDEL, in *Philosophie de la République*, also quotes Aristotle (31-32), and closely associates the notion of “republic”, in all its aspects, with that of “political law” or “the rule of law”, while she masterfully reinterprets Aristotelian “despotism” as the modern temptation of “empire”. Serge AUDIER, in *Les théories de la République*, quotes Aristotle (8), recalls the Machiavellian thesis of the

none of these three main characterizations can be retained.

We must recognize that Spinoza himself evokes, from two different angles, this distinction between a power which concerns “all” citizens, and a power which concerns only a part of them. To characterize the republic, he in fact repeatedly uses the expression “*whole body of the state*” <*integrum imperii corpus*><sup>46</sup>, which means that the republic has to do with “all” of its citizens, and not only with part of them. Moreover, Spinoza distinguishes the power which is exercised for the benefit of the one who exercises it from the power which is exercised for the benefit of the one who undergoes it, which allows him to distinguish the three figures of “the slave”, of the “son” and of the “subject”: “a *slave* <*servus*>”, writes Spinoza, “is someone who is bound to obey the commands of a master, which are concerned only with the advantage of the person issuing the command; a *son* <*filius*> is someone who does what is advantageous for himself, in accordance with a parent’s command; and a *subject* <*subditus*>, finally, is someone who does what is advantageous for the collective body – and hence, also for himself – in accordance with the command of the supreme power”.<sup>47</sup> Spinoza therefore seems to renew here, roughly, the Aristotelian distinction.

This famous text is, however, an exception to the main theses of Spinozist politics. The *Theological-Political Treatise*, in fact, is a treatise on salvation through obedience.<sup>48</sup> This deep, paradoxical and skeptical thesis is put forward by Spinoza to deliver the Republic from the seditions fomented by priests of all kinds. What is more, according to him, it is the unique message of the Scriptures: the ignorant will be saved by obedience to the true rule of life, which makes it possible not to despair of humanity. Because if very few can understand, all can obey.<sup>49</sup> From this point of view, distinguishing between degrees of obedience, or obediences that are qualitatively distinct by the effects they produce

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“superiority of the republics” which “aim at the common good”, the Rousseauist distinction between “government of the law” and “government of the men” (34), the presence of the themes of the “common good” and of the “ethics” in Pocock (78), and specifies that “the equality of all citizens before the law” is part of the “republican ideals” (92). The limits and the difficulties of relating republicanism to the Aristotelian position of a virtuous man concerned with the “common good” are underlined in the conclusion of the work (107), but this is to immediately evoke a history of republicanism “to do” (108) – therefore not yet done –, and throw oneself into the infinite conceptual fragmentation that we have noted above, which already does not seem to have convinced Christophe MIQUEU for whom, in *Spinoza, Locke et l’idée de citoyenneté*, the “search for the common good”, “today as yesterday”, is “the alpha and omega of republican citizenship” (522).

46 *TP* 4/2 525 9. Spinoza uses this same expression in *TP* 3/1 517 19 to define the “city” <*civitas*>: this is normal, since, as we have seen, the terms *civitas* and *respublica* are quasi-equivalents at Spinoza.

47 *TTP* 16 289 10-14.

48 As Alexandre MATHERON magnificently brought to light in *Le Christ et le salut des ignorants chez Spinoza*, Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1971.

49 *TTP* 15 281-282.

turns out to be impossible, and above all illogical. The title of chapter 19 of the *Theological-Political Treatise* is particularly significant in this regard. In it Spinoza sums up the thesis of the whole work by declaring that “the outward worship of religion must be in accord with the peace of the republic, if we *want to obey God righteously*” <*si recte Deo obtemperare velimus*>. Spinoza shows here the knot of consent and obedience. No one can be completely forced to obey. A citizen, a subject, but also a slave and even a child may prefer to die than to obey. Spinoza himself often repeats that the transfer of natural law can never be total.<sup>50</sup> So, there is always consent in obedience, just as there is always obedience in consent. They are not separate realities. And insofar as politics is in itself the locus of the knot of consent and obedience, it is futile to try to distinguish there between actions performed freely and actions performed without freedom. In a democracy in particular, everyone is both subject and object of the law, the one who makes it freely and the one who obeys it.

This same knot is found between egoistic action and altruistic action, or, to use the Aristotelian distinction found in all the theories of the “republic”, between action performed in the name of the “common good” or “general interest” and action done in the name of a personal or selfish interest. This distinction may well be satisfactory, even flattering for the mind, however it remains strange that in the absence of a single convincing example in the immensity of human actions we continue to take it up for centuries as if it went without saying. Who doesn't know that altruism is the best investment, the best strategy in a selfish world? What political power does not claim to act in the “public good” or “general interest”? We will say: some lie. Yes, but which ones? The communist regimes claimed higher and stronger than all the others to act according to the general interest (it was even their *raison d'être*), while their critics denounced the privileges of the “*nomenklatura*” and the daily terror. The most liberal regimes, too, claim to act in the name of the “common good” or “general interest”, even if they are based on quite other psychological and economic principles. The theory of the “invisible hand” and of financial markets is justified by the idea that the addition of selfishness will bring general prosperity. The facts have not always proved them wrong, even if we can denounce many flaws in these regimes. The difficulty here is structural: no one can claim to know “the general interest”, any more than the “just” and “unjust”. Are nuclear power plants of general interest? Some think so, others do not. Is the construction of motorways of general interest? Yes, for some, no for others. Without even looking for self-serving objectives, on the one hand for EDF, on the other hand for the now private motorway companies, we simply do not know what is this “general interest” that is invoked everywhere. On each subject, the conflict and the uncertainties return: retirement by funding or by pay-as-you-go? Do we

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<sup>50</sup> See for example *TP* 3/8.



go for public or private schools? Do we go for the construction or not of airports, dams, and wind turbines? Are we for intensive agriculture or not? Are we for large distribution or not? Are we for Amazon or not? Are we for State sale of drugs, lottery, alcohol, or not? Are we for housing subsidies or not? Are we for subsidies to art or not?... In any case, the discourse of “general interest” or “common good” can legitimately be held in favor of each of the opposing positions. And we must avow that even the kings of the past centuries, and often even the worst of despots and tyrants, cared for the good of their country, it would be absurd to deny it. Wasn't Napoleon acting in the “general interest” of France? And Robespierre – wasn't he as well? In fact, waging a war isn't part of the “general interest” of a country? Both warmongers and pacifists will invoke “the general interest”. The more we seek, the less we find to illustrate this distinction, which therefore appears to be hollow and inoperative to analysis, and on which consequently we cannot rely to distinguish “republics” from other forms of power.

Spinoza's philosophy helps us perceive the vanity of such distinctions. Politics is much more, according to him, the place of a kind of “physics”, of a result of power struggles, than that of a morality, or a display of intentions. Power can only be obtained by fulfilling a number of conditions, one of which is the display of “concern for the common good”. The latter will therefore necessarily be present in any political regime whatsoever, and not just in a “republic”. Conversely, certain behaviors are incompatible with power, regardless of the intentions and discourses displayed. Spinoza insists on this with particular force in the *Political Treatise*: “it's as impossible for one who holds political authority (or those who do so) to run, drunken or naked, through the streets with prostitutes, to play the actor, to openly violate or disdain the laws he himself has made, and at the same time to preserve his authority, as it is to both be and not be at the same time”.<sup>51</sup> All politics are subject to a paradoxical logic, according to which one must pay attention to the “general interest” as long as one wishes to remain in power<sup>52</sup> – a conclusion which one may find cynical, or Machiavellian, but that has never been refuted.

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51 TP 4/4.

52 TP 7/4 (repeated in 8/24): “Everyone is most strongly disposed by his affects to seek his personal advantage, judges those laws most equitable which are necessary to preserve and advance his own interest, and defends another person's cause just to the extent that he believes it makes his own situation more stable”. Selfishness and altruism are inseparable, although everyone would like to be able to separate them clearly.



## Conclusions. The Majority or the Law: Republican Justifications and Democratic Preferences.

Whatever the rational and argumentative dimension of his whole philosophy, Spinoza can in no way be considered as a theorist of the “justification” of political action by reference to “values” that could reach an “enlightened” or “moral” conscience”, or by the “law”, or even the “constitution” of the Republic. Spinoza is thus republican in a vague sense, but democratic in a very radical sense. In fact, it completely submits the just and the unjust (like the pious and the impious) to the legal and the illegal, that is to say, morality (just like religion) to politics, to the exteriority of accounts and behaviors rather than to the interiority of beliefs and intentions: “justice depends only on the decree of the supreme powers. So no one can be just unless he lives according to the decrees received from them”.<sup>53</sup> In the immanence of the accounts, nothing can override the preferences of the people.<sup>54</sup> The real name of politics in Spinoza, as in Rancière, is thus “democracy” much more than “republic”. To oppose republican “values” or “constitutions” to the democratic preferences of the people would be to bring theology back into politics, when Spinoza’s first and constant effort was to separate them.

With regard to this, we find in Spinoza something of the skepticism characteristic of the Pascalian attitude towards the laws. The ignorant obey the law because they believe it to be good; the half-skilled resist the law when they believe it to be bad; scientists (or sages) obey the law even though they know (or because they know) that it is neither good nor bad, but only necessary. These three conceptual characters do not designate distinct individuals. They coexist and struggle in each of us, depending on the occasion and the moment. The ignorant and the semi-skilled, in each of us, are still in the theological-political, because they regulate their obedience or their disobedience to the law on their appreciation of the law as “good” or “bad”, “fair” or “unfair”. They are still Republicans. Only the clever in us (or the sage, to use the Spinozist term), who obeys the law without subjecting it to a work of external “justification”, theological or moral, from time to time achieves the liberation engendered by separation of the theological and the political. He is a Democrat.

In many ways, Spinoza’s political philosophy is indeed quite striking and significant in regard to the justifications we might be tempted to give to our opinions or preferences. Spinoza affirms the anteriority of the political over the moral or the theological: “like sin and obedience <*peccatum et obsequium*>, taken strictly, so also justice and injustice

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53 *TTP* 20 347 1-3.

54 We therefore fully share the judgment of Didier MINEUR, in *Le pouvoir de la majorité* (267 n. 12) according to which the question of whether politics is a matter (or not) of “addition of preferences” is a “fundamental” question.

can be conceived only in a state”.<sup>55</sup> In other words, one can never submit laws to a moral assessment which pre-exists them – which amounts on Spinoza’s denial of any transcendence of the moral in relation to the political, and therefore any subordination of the political to the moral. This declaration of the *Political Treatise* echoes the famous declaration of *Ethics* III 9 *scholie*: “we neither strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary, we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it” – a statement which could otherwise be the slogan of a theory of democratic preference.

Even more radically, Spinoza does not hesitate to subsume law under power, and power under numbers: “the power of a state, and hence its right, are to be reckoned by the number of its citizens”.<sup>56</sup> The quantitative obsession, present everywhere in Spinoza in the doctrine of “singular things”, and at the highest point in the *Political Treatise*, is concentrated here explicitly in the equivalence of the power and the law of the State to the “number” of its citizens, in an entirely immanent conception, indifferent to any question of “good”, “bad”, or “better regime”, a conception in which the number alone makes law, without even being mentioned the nature of what this number, that is to say this count or these votes, could relate to. The Spinozian formula that democracy should be regarded as *imperium absolutum*, that is, “absolute regime”, can only be appreciated from the point of view of such digital radicalism.

The formal law of the “majority” thus envelops a skepticism with regard to the contents of the law: “in a democratic state (which comes closest to the natural condition) everyone contracts to act according to the common decision, but not to judge and reason according to the common decision. Because not all men can equally think the same things, they agreed that the measure which had the most votes would have the force of a decree *<id vim decreti haberet, quod plurima haberet suffragia>*, but that meanwhile they’d retain the authority to repeal these decrees when they saw better ones”.<sup>57</sup> This indifference to content was already Archimedes’ point of the *Theological-Political Treatise*. To argue, as Spinoza did, that in matters of religion beliefs are irrelevant as long as citizens behave correctly, was in effect playing the winning move which took away their power to the priests. This same indifference to the content, that is to say to the justification, the ends or the values of political action, is very striking. It is consonant with the most famous declaration of the *Political Treatise* (1/4), a true manifesto or philosophical testament (“*I took great pains not to laugh at human actions, or mourn them, or curse them, but only to*

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<sup>55</sup> TP 2/23.

<sup>56</sup> TP 7/18: *Imperii potentia et consequenter jus ex civium numero aestimanda est.*

<sup>57</sup> TTP 20 351 24-29.

*understand them.*") by which Spinoza rejected any astonishment, mockery, or detestation, and consequently any *a priori* devaluation of any human action whatsoever.

There is something in this that is common to the very functioning of democracy and to other models of immanence. In the Darwinian theory of evolution, for example, all natural and genetic innovations are initially open and equally legitimate, before an immanent selection takes place, making disappear the species unsuited to their environment or subjected to too strong predatory pressures. In Popper's epistemology, all hypotheses are initially equally legitimate and favored, even the wackiest ones, before being selected by crucial experiments. Likewise, from a Spinozist and radically democratic point of view, all opinions are first and foremost equally legitimate and respectable, none deserves contempt or *a priori* prohibition; the majority (that is to say the count of preferences) then identifies the opinions which will prevail, and which the citizen will have to obey on pain of becoming the enemy of his country. But this democratic "political selection" does not confer on the laws passed any kind of moral superiority or justice over those which have not been. In Spinozist democracy, the majority cannot be subject to a prior right (any more than to a morality or a religion), because it makes the law and can therefore change it. There lies within this an intrinsically revolutionary dimension of democracy that no legal or moral framework, not even republican, can claim to contain. The majority of votes, however precarious it may be, remain in excess of law and morality, which can be neither self-founded nor self-legitimized.<sup>58</sup>

The very formalist democracy proposed by Spinoza, this pure law of counting, has always aroused concerns and criticism from supporters of a republicanism in which and through which morality and law would function to limit the vagaries of popular votes. Democracy has never had a great press in philosophy, or even under "republican" regimes.<sup>59</sup>

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58 Didier MINEUR, in *Le pouvoir de la majorité*, therefore quite rightly points out (p. 214 n. 23) that article 89 of the constitution of French Fifth Republic ("The republican form of government cannot be subject to a revision") is an illusory protection against the power of the majority (and even comical, we would allow us to add, thinking of the Baron of Münchhausen who had tried to extricate himself from the quicksand by pulling his own hair towards the top), because a democratic power can always "overturn the limits which it has given itself", even "to turn against itself and put an end to democracy". To carry out a "revision" of the "republican form of government" of the French Fifth Republic, it would suffice to carry out a first constitutional revision by which this sentence would be deleted from article 89. And if, to ward off this blow, the Constitutionals demanded that an article be inserted in the constitution prohibiting the revision of article 89, it would suffice to revise this article first, then article 89, then the "republican form of government", and so on.

59 In *Toward Perpetual Peace*, KANT opposes on the one hand "republicanism" <der Republikanism>, the principle of which, according to him, is "the separation of executive power and legislative power"; and on the other, "despotism" <der Despotism>, in which this separation of powers does not exist. From this point of view, "democracy" <die Demokratie> is a despotism in Kant's eyes, since "all" in it "decide about one and, if need be, against him" <da alle über und allenfalls auch wider Einen [...] beschließen>, which puts the "universal will" "in contradiction with itself and with freedom".

Pure immanence, in the absence of any reference to pre-established and transcendent “values”, always makes people fear the worst on the part of a “people” always ready to return to the “crowd” or to the “multitude”, to these “large animals” sometimes full of fury and devoid of reason, which Spinoza, long after Plato, was wary of having seen them at work in the appalling lynching of the DeWitt brothers on August 20, 1672.

It is therefore quite legitimate to have seen Spinoza as a republican philosopher, worried about the irrationality and violence of crowds and irrationality in general, knowing better than anyone that it happens to men to “see the best, to approve it, and to do the worst”.<sup>60</sup> Blandine Kriegel thus offers a striking confrontation, in *Philosophie de la République*, between the philosophies of Descartes and Spinoza, and their political posterity. Descartes represents the first way of modernity. This is the path of triumphant subjectivity, of infinite will and therefore irrational, of decision, of man “master and possessor of nature”. Its political posterity will therefore be found in the theories of “empire”, in every sense of the word: self-control, but also domination of the world, by modern “empires”. Paradoxically, the political posterity of the most French of philosophies would thus have developed in Germany, mainly through Fichte, Carl Schmitt and Heidegger. Spinoza, from this point of view, represents the “other way” of modernity, completely opposed to that of Descartes. He develops a philosophy of nature (and not of the subject). For him, man is not “an empire within an empire” *<imperium in imperio>*<sup>61</sup> but is subject to the same natural laws as any other “singular thing”. Spinoza also rejects as absurd not only the idea of “infinite freedom”, but quite simply the idea of free will, just as much as the idea of “mastery” or “training” of oneself. And for him, “individuals” are not the ultimate ontological realities, quite the contrary: each individual is composed of individuals of lower rank, and component of individuals of higher rank.<sup>62</sup> Individuality is thus strongly relativized.

For all these reasons, Descartes (who for his part speaks very little of politics) would have had for posterity at the same time the theorists and the practitioners of “the empire” in its most terrifying forms, but also the contemporary democratic peoples, drunk with their individuality and their freedom, almost as disturbing as the first. The rapprochement between “democracy” and “empire” may be startling. But it is globally legitimate in the reference to “mastery” and to individual freedom. The reading of modern contractualism as aggressive virilism, on which

60 In *Ethics* IV 17, Spinoza takes up Ovid's famous verses (*Metamorphoses* VII, 20-21): *video meliora proboque / Deteriora sequor*.

61 Spinoza, *Ethics* III, *Preface*.

62 See *Ethics* II 13, *Scholie* after *Lemma 7*; and *Letter 32* to Hudde.

Blandine Kriegel and Carole Pateman meet,<sup>63</sup> completes this picture of democracy as irrational, unstable, violent, ready for conquest as well as suicidal. The spinozist posterity, according to this point of view, could on the contrary be characterized as globally “republican”. Spinoza not only rejects the primacy of the subject, individualism and the infinite freedom characteristic of cartesian modernity, but grants less and less space, in his political philosophy, to the moment of a “social contract”. Whoever says “social contract”, in fact, necessarily says capacity to decide, control, will, exit from the state of nature. But Spinoza, as we have seen, naturalizes politics as much as it is possible for him to do so. For all these reasons, one could indeed attribute to Descartes the paternity of “democracy” as well as that of “the empire”, and to Spinoza the paternity of the “republic”, and more generally that of a more global relation to the world, a more peaceful, a more fluid one than that of Descartes – this is perhaps why Bruno Latour and a few others, deeply concerned with establishing new relationships between man and nature, were able to find in Spinoza the resources to a conception of modernity different from that of Descartes, even though the latter still reigns very widely today on the whole planet.<sup>64</sup>

On this particularly powerful and interesting reading, however, one could, it seems to me, make a number of responses which would show that the very nature of Spinozism and its conception of democracy does not necessarily require republican compensation. On the one hand, there is no reason to deny that a democracy could move towards extreme actions, either that it engages in an imperial way (this is the case of several contemporary democracies, like The United States, Russia, Turkey, it was also the case of France and England in the 19th century), either that it engages in a suicidal path (one can think of certain decisions of secession or of independence). As Didier Mineur rightly writes, “any power can commit suicide, without there being a logical contradiction”.<sup>65</sup> And especially democracy: how could we prevent it? Derrida had particularly insisted on this in *Voyous*: democracy is a “loop” regime, where everyone is both the origin and destination of the law, a regime that as such does not go without “circularity”, “revolution”, or “globalization”. But as a result, democracy, more than any other form of power, turns against itself. For this reason, Derrida underlined the kinship between “democracy”,

63 See Carole PATEMAN, *The Sexual Contract*.

64 See for example Bruno LATOUR, *Face à Gaïa : Huit conférences sur le nouveau régime climatique*, Paris : La Découverte, 2015 [*Facing Gaia : Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017]. See also the conference of Bruno LATOUR : « Portrait de Spinoza en co-enquêteur du projet sur les modes d'existence » [“Portrait of Spinoza as co-investigator of the project on modes of existence”], may 2, 2016 (online [here](#)), as part of the Seminar *Spinoza à Paris 8*.

65 Didier MINEUR, *Le pouvoir de la majorité*, p. 379.

“auto-immunity” and “deconstruction”.<sup>66</sup> Democracy is indeed essentially self-critical (because it envelops, as Spinoza argues, the freedom to think and to say what one thinks), a return that weakens and not only strengthens oneself. It lives / dies from this paradox: “democracy has always been suicidal”.<sup>67</sup> This critique of democracy can indeed go as far as to question democracy itself: “the *alternative* to democracy can always be represented as a democratic *alternation*”.<sup>68</sup> Democracy is thus the result of a contradictory “turn” or “return”, which Derrida sometimes calls the auto-immune or democratic *double bind* (double contradictory injunction).<sup>69</sup> This instability consubstantial with democracy, which can be expressed as well in imperial expansion as in suicidal retraction, comes from the fact that democracy, all in immanence, shows more than any other regime its lack of foundation, that is to say of legitimacy.

We can therefore understand the concern aroused by democratic governments, and the almost irrepressible temptation to frame them, to contain them within a republican framework where constitutional values and laws prevail, as secularized forms of transcendence. But the most procedural and immanent democracy actually envelops an ethical dimension, like artistic and scientific activities. Didier Mineur has clearly shown the forced dimension of the opposition between “procedural democracy” and “substantial democracy”.<sup>70</sup> The procedural or formal dimension of democracy, that is to say the law of the count to which Spinoza has become more and more exclusively attached in his politics, supposes the strict numerical equality of the citizens. A “principle of equality” (therefore a “substantial dimension”, a “content”, a value) is therefore enveloped by the very procedure of democratic additions. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons why Spinoza’s philosophy, written *more geometrico*, “in the manner of geometers”, therefore in the most “formal” way possible, is nevertheless entitled “*Ethics*”. We are therefore not surprised to see the very rich demonstration of Didier Mineur ending with a reference to Jacques Rancière, who makes “equality of intelligence” the condition of possibility of politics in the sense in which he understands it, that is to say democracy, even if Rancière favors a democracy of the drawing of lots while Mineur favors a democracy of the majority.<sup>71</sup>

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66 Jacques DERRIDA, *Voyous*, p. 130.

67 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

68 *Ibid.*, p. 54 : “L’*alternative* à la démocratie peut toujours être *représentée* comme une *alternance* démocratique”.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

70 Didier MINEUR, *Le pouvoir de la majorité*, p. 340, 372-373. We only regret the absence of a reference to Spinoza, which would have offered a perfect illustration of the theses defended in the work.

71 Didier MINEUR, *Le pouvoir de la majorité*, p. 383 and last, last note (n. 2, p. 383-384). Mineur refers to Rancière’s formula “community of equals” but reintroduce in the very last lines (by reference to the



Moreover and finally, Spinoza's vision of democracy as a count of preferences is very far, despite appearances, from the Cartesian posterity of the modern subject, drunk with his infinite freedom, capable of all irrationalities as well as of all violence (despotism or empire), and which should therefore as much as possible be bordered, limited, contained by fundamental laws and moral values, that is to say by a republican framework. Indeed, democratic preferences (in matters of manners, customs, laws, organization of public space, etc.) have nothing to do, despite appearances, with the actions of a free subject. We do not choose our preferences but experience them or see them passively. Our food, clothing, sexual preferences, etc., our "vocations", are in no way decisions or choices that we could make freely. In most cases, Spinoza had insisted on it long before René Girard, our preferences or our desires are moreover mimetic and in this are in no way the sign of subjectivities or individualities that are masters of themselves and absolutized as such. As a result, a democracy conceived in the Spinozist manner as the ceaselessly renewed account of majority preferences undoubtedly produces collective decisions. But these are passive decisions, if one can dare such an oxymoron, reflecting the stable contours of a historical and civilizational heritage much more than the activity of subjects or individuals free of their choice, which should therefore be subject as a precaution to a "republican" framework.

Translated by: Esterina Celami

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work of Catherine COLLIOT-THÉLÈNE *La démocratie sans 'demos'*) the reference to a legal dimension that we do not find in Rancière. Mineur criticizes the drawing of lots p. 332 n. 33 (rightly, in our opinion: see Charles RAMOND, *Jacques Rancière – L'égalité des intelligences*, 2019, chp. 13, p. 104). But Rancière defends it for example in *La haine de la démocratie* (p. 48-56), and in *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués* [*And too bad for tired people*] (p. 466).



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# **Preemptive Strike (of a Philosophical Variety): Marx and Spinoza**

**Jason Read**

**Abstract:** This paper examines the intersection of Spinoza and Marx by looking at their practice of philosophy, arguing that despite the apparent differences of their methods Spinoza and Marx both engage in a preemptive critique of the their readers' objections. This can be seen in their most famous passages, the Appendix to Part One of the *Ethics* and the Chapter on Commodity Fetishism. In these sections Spinoza and Marx engage in a critical engagement with oppositions to their argument that gets ahead of the argument of the text. This preemptive critique reflects Spinoza and Marx's materialism, where materialism is understood as the priority of action, of habits and relations, over thought.

**Keywords:** Spinoza, Marx, Critique, Commodity Fetishism, Ideology

The relation of Spinoza and Marx which has become so productive to contemporary philosophy and theory cannot be reduced to the standard relations of influence or opposition that dominate scholarship in philosophy. Spinoza's influence on Marx is too diffuse, mediated through Hegel and the general philosophical atmosphere to merit study; and Marx and Spinoza's philosophies are apparently too different, in terms of object and articulation, to be drawn into an argument or opposition. Without such lines of descent or difference any such relation has to be invented, not ex nihilo, but from points of contiguity and overlap. One such point of articulation is their shared materialism, materialism understood as the primacy of action to thought, of the order of bodies and relations to consciousness.<sup>1</sup> This perhaps seems obvious in the case of Marx, whose formulation "Life determines consciousness, consciousness does not determine life" can be understood as one fundamental articulation of materialism.<sup>2</sup> Matter, practical activity, is prior to and constitutive of consciousness, even if, as Marx goes on to argue with respect to ideology, consciousness, thought or philosophy, fails to recognize this, positing itself to be autonomous from its social conditions. This autonomy is nothing other than a distorted reflection of the division of mental and manual labor. As Marx goes onto write, "From this moment onwards consciousness *can* really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it *really* represents something without representing something real." Such a primacy is perhaps less obvious in the case of Spinoza, given that he asserts the identity of the order and connection of thought and extension, of ideas and things, as two expressions of the infinite power of substance. However, Spinoza's materialism is not just to be found in his understanding of the ultimate

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1 Fishbach 2005, p.29.

2 Marx and Engels 1970, p. 47.

constitutive order of the universe, but in the secondary status he ascribes to consciousness with respect to grasping our material conditions. We are, as Spinoza, argues, “born ignorant of the causes of things...and conscious of our appetite” (EIApp). Moreover, as Spinoza argues the causes of our appetite is one of the first things that we are ignorant of, we think that we desire something because it is good, unable to grasp the experiences, the relations that cause us to call one thing good and another evil. As Spinoza writes, “...the drunk believes it is from a free decision of the mind that he says those things which afterward, when sober, he wishes he had not said” (EIIP2schol). There is in both Spinoza and Marx, a priority of activity to consciousness, thought is not the act of subject mastering a world, but a secondary and derived effect of practices and relations, originally unaware of its conditions. Knowledge, true knowledge will then have to be actively produced through a practice.

This basic materialist principle, “the priority of action to consciousness,” can be found not just at the level of their specific formulations, their ontologies and politics, but at the level of their particular practice of philosophy. While Spinoza's and Marx's philosophical practice, their particular way of doing philosophy could not be more disparate on the surface: Spinoza's *Ethics* proceeds *more geometrico* unfolding in a rigorous and timeless order of propositions, contemplating the nature of the universe *Sub specie aeternitatis*, while Marx's writing, even his magnum opus, *Capital*, is constantly shifting and responding to the exigencies of politics and economics, crisscrossing history with economics to grasp the conjuncture. Despite this difference their philosophical practice converges or at least overlaps, in the attempt to confront the biases, prejudices and ideologies, to use the words Spinoza and Marx coined, that their thinking confronts. This confrontation shapes two of their most famous passages; namely, the end of the first chapter of *Capital*, the famous passage on the “Fetishism of Commodities and its Secret” and the Appendix to Part One of the *Ethics*. These texts are well known. The first has given us the concept of commodity fetishism, reification, and various criticisms that extend far beyond its specific engagement. The latter has been described by Louis Althusser as the matrix of every possible theory of ideology, offering a critical perspective not just on an anthropomorphic god, but on an anthropocentric concept of the universe and the fiction of the subject.<sup>3</sup> Their influence cannot be ignored, separately and together they have formed the backdrop of much of the intersecting concepts of reification, the imaginary, and ideology. Beyond the influence of these two passages, or rather prior to it, there is the specific role that they play not just in the articulation of their specific arguments, but in each texts particular practice of philosophy, its way of making claims and countering opposing arguments.

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3 Althusser 1997, p. 6.

Both texts can both be described as preemptive, preemptive in the sense that as much as they are situated within their particular arguments, discussing the particular problems of the commodity form and of the anthropological-theological imaginary, they necessarily come before the necessary philosophical conditions to address these problems. Spinoza's text begins to expound something of the human tendency to see ourselves as a kingdom within a kingdom, before developing the fundamental propositions detailing knowledge, affects, and desire, which make up Parts III and IV of the *Ethics*. It introduces Spinoza's anthropology before the conditions of that anthropology are developed. Marx text presents Robinson Crusoe, the medieval world, and the famous (but cryptic) free association of producers before developing the very idea of a mode of production, the concept that connects economic activity to social relations. This preemptive strike is in each case necessary: both Spinoza and Marx recognize that what they have asserted in the opening sections of the *Ethics* and *Capital* goes against the prevailing common sense, the prevailing sense of God and man, in the case of Spinoza, or the economy in the case of Marx. They also recognize that the causes or conditions of this "spontaneous philosophy" are not ideas and propositions, not argument but life, at least life in its current articulation and organization, understood as causes and conditions for viewing a world in a determinate way. They are the point where each philosophy confronts its absolute opposition, its absolute outside, whether it be in the form of the entire anthro-po-theological imaginary of a free subject and a teleologically oriented God or in the reified and ahistorical acceptance of the value form. They are the point where the concept intersects with polemic, where an argument confronts the world and world view which is opposed to it. They are preemptive strikes in two senses: they are the point where the criticism, perhaps even the polemic, exceeds the philosophical articulation, getting ahead of it; they are also an attempt to anticipate and interrupt objections before they form. They are the priority of practice to thought within philosophy itself.

### **Subjects and Objects: The Genealogy of Value**

What is confronted by each of these texts is less a specific philosophical position, or a figure from the history of philosophy, than an entire common sense or way of thinking. Spinoza's target is not a specific theological or even anthropological concept as articulated by a philosopher, despite the fact that many have written about God's end or man's freedom, but the more or less spontaneous tendency to believe oneself to be free, and the way that such a freedom is reflected in a understanding of God as acting as we do, freely and pursuing or aiding our ends. In a similar manner the fetishism of commodities is less something a specific economic theory, than what economic theories fail to see, the specific form that value takes or appears. In each case the critical target is less a philosophical doctrine

or position, but the way in which a particular way of thinking has become a common sense.

Despite this convergence it is possible to see a strong divergence in terms of their objects of criticism in two senses of the term. First, the objects refer to their different critical targets not just in the sense that religion and political economy are different imaginaries or ideologies, to use terms associated with either Spinoza or Marx, but relate to different practices and activities. Spinoza's critical target is less religion than the two theoretical objects that sustain religion, free will and God. These two objects are understood to be mutually constitutive, the supposed freedom of the individual is the basis of the image of god, an image that reinforces the individual. As Warren Montag writes, "The God who lies beyond the (material) world and is free to direct it according to his unconditioned will is thus the mirror image of the man who transcends the physical world and governs his own body with absolute mastery, itself a mirror image of God: a vicious theological anthropological circle."<sup>4</sup> The mutual constitutive relation between man and god is also sustained by two different figures of belief, what Spinoza refers to as prejudice (*praejudicia*) and superstition (*superstitio*). The first of which defines this initial ignorance of the causes of things, while the second refers to this ignorance as it is reinforced by its social dimension, by a doctrine of ignorance and a practice of belief.<sup>5</sup> Prejudice is transformed into superstition once the social dimension enters this horizon of ignorance and desire, once this belief in final causes becomes something that people try to exploit and develop, convincing others of their interpretation. The relation between these two is less a chronological one, positing a kind of natural prejudice prior to superstition, than a logical one. Superstition presupposes and sustains the ignorance of the causes of things that defines prejudice. What connects the two is the not just ignorance, a fundamental misunderstanding of the causes and connections of the world, but also the striving to survive and thrive that animates them. Prejudice is an attempt to make sense of the world with the only thing that we know, our own desires, superstition is an attempt to organize the striving of individuals in order to gain power. In the first case, that of prejudice, this striving is defined primarily in terms of natural conditions, a striving to survive in the world, while in the second it is a striving in and among others, among relations of domination and subordination. It is with respect to the second that we get the political role of superstition, that will play such an important role in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* as the basis of political power.

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4 Montag 1999, p. 39.

5 As Pierre Macherey argues, The Appendix can be understood as something of a practical demonstration of the implications of EIIP36 'Inadequate and confused ideas follow with the same necessity as adequate or clear and distinct ideas.' Macherey 1998, p.206.

Marx's target is political economy, but as with Spinoza's criticism of religion the object extends beyond the confines of a specific doctrine or discipline. The fundamental error of political economy, seeing value as an attribute of objects rather than a product of relations is already present in everyday consciousness under capitalism. What classical political economy fails to grasp is the indifference of this error to theoretical articulation or rectification. Commodities appear to have value whatever theoretical perspective one takes on the matter. In fact the understanding that labor is the source of value does nothing to dispense with this illusion. Just as the chemical analysis of the properties of air has done nothing to change its appearance, the discovery of labor as the source of value does not alter how commodities appear. As Marx writes, "The belated scientific discovery of the parts of labor, insofar as their values, are merely the material expressions of the human labor expended to produce them, marks an epoch in the history of mankind's development, but by no means banishes the semblance of objectivity possessed by the social characteristics of labor."<sup>6</sup> As with Spinoza's criticism there is an interplay between what could be considered a spontaneous ideology and its explicit formulation. The fetishism of commodities is not a natural condition, it is the way that commodities cannot but appear under the isolation and separation of labor under capital. Political economy extends this spontaneous philosophy by making these distortions a doctrine. As Marx writes of political economy "they are forms of thought expressing with social validity the conditions and relations of a definite, historically determined mode of production."<sup>7</sup>

The objects differ not just in the sense that Spinoza is a critic of religion and Marx is a critic of political economy, but in the sense that Spinoza is examining the spontaneous philosophy of the subject and Marx is examining the spontaneous illusion attached to the commodity, to the object. In Spinoza's text the first illusion is that of individual autonomy. We are born ignorant of the causes of things and conscious of our desires. From that original ignorance it follows "that men think themselves free, because they are conscious of their volitions and do not think, even in their dreams of the causes by which they are disposed to wanting and willing, because they are ignorant of [those causes]." (EIApp). In Marx's text the constitutive illusion is that of a world of objects, the way value appears as an attribute of things, rather than as the product of a social relation. As Marx writes of commodity,

A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an

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<sup>6</sup> Marx 1977, p. 167.

<sup>7</sup> Marx 1977, p. 169.



objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. This is the reason why the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible.<sup>8</sup>

Or, to put it in Spinoza's terms, for Marx we are ignorant of the production of things, but conscious of their value. What we perceive or are aware of, is the value of the commodity, what is effaced or obscured is the process of production. Value is an inadequate idea, an idea that obscures rather than reveals its causal connections. The effect becomes a cause as value shapes and determines how we act and relate to commodities, including the commodity of labor power that is integral to our very survival and existence. The critical and polemics texts have different objects of criticism: for Spinoza we are ignorant of ourselves, of the subject, while for Marx it is the world of objects that mystify us.

Such a distinction between subject and object certainly captures the polemic focus of Marx and Spinoza's argument, but overlooks the more general materialist dimension of their specific philosophies in which subjects and objects are situated in the practices and relations that affect and determine them. What Spinoza refers to as "consciousness of our desires and ignorance of the causes of things" might begin with a subject that sees itself as free, but this free subject becomes the basis through which an entire sensibility is imposed on the world. As Spinoza argues the consciousness of our desires becomes an entire imaginary, which situates and filters everything according to how it affects us. What serves our interests and desires is good and what is easy to remember is called order; while what harms us is called evil and what is difficult to remember is called disorder. Our desires, our affects, and our imagination become a way to misrecognize the world. As André Tösel argues, "Before the fetishism of the commodity that Marx has analyzed, and which corresponds to an industrial capitalist society, Spinoza criticized the fetishism of the object of utility, which corresponds to a society dominated by simple instrumental activities."<sup>9</sup> Tösel's assertion draws a direct connection to Marx. In each case what is in some sense a relation is misrecognized as a quality of the thing in question. Only in this case the relation is not the social relations of production but the more idiosyncratic relation that shapes our perception or encounter of a thing. What pleased us, or was perceived to please us, is seen to

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<sup>8</sup> Marx 1977, p. 164.

<sup>9</sup> Tösel, 1984, p. 33.

be good and what is perceived to harm us is seen as bad. The relations that shape and form our encounters are misrecognized as qualities of the object. What begins is an awareness our desires and ignorance of the cause of things becomes the basis for an entire imaginary made of attributes and qualities attributed to things as essential characteristics rather than the product of encounters and relations.

The centrifugal movement from the subject out into the world is coupled with a centripetal movement from the world to the subject. The imaginary qualities that we attribute to things becomes the basis for an entire misunderstanding of our own desires. The imaginary significations by which grasp the world, fetishizing the relations into supposed qualities, leads to the supposition that those qualities are the cause rather than the effect of our desires. This is the fundamental error of the imagination according to the Appendix, it transforms effects into causes and vice versa. The imagined qualities of objects, the things that make them good or bad, are seen as causes of our desires and appetites rather than as effects of our encounters and relations. As Spinoza writes, "From all this, then, it is clear that we neither strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it" (EIIIP9Schol). Conscious of our desires, we see them as something freely chosen, as stemming from our will, or we understand them to reflect the actual qualities of the objects. Caught between the illusion of the free subject and a meaningful world we overlook the relations, the causal conditions, that shape both our desires and sense of the world. Alexandre Matheron describes this as a "double alienation." As Matheron describes this alienation,

The progress of consciousness is subject to a double alienation. On the one hand there is an 'social alienation' [aliénation mondaine], that can be called economic, provided that we give this word the largest possible sense: by which we unconditionally attach value to particular objects that surround us, valuing them as positive or negative, which we consider to be 'goods' (worldly goods) or as 'bad,' and which we will now devote our lives to pursuing and fleeing. On the other hand an ideological alienation, both cause and effect of the first: that by which we transpose our passions and beliefs into an ontology, developing an inverted vision of the world, a vision outlined by the traditional view of the cosmos: a universal teleology and hierarchy of goods, which gives a privileged to man, and, as the keystone of the system, an undefined God. It is this double alienation, which will control the whole course of our emotional life.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Matheron 1969, p. 112. [My translation]

An imaginary, or an ideology, that begins with the subject as free, as conscious of its desires, ends with a world imbued with value, with objects seen as good or bad, ordered or disordered, a world which itself is ordered by a hidden cause, or God.

While Spinoza's Appendix indicates in its own provisional and partial way how a particular constitution of subjectivity, a particular way of acting and comprehending the individual, becomes a particular constitution of objectivity, a particular way of understanding the world. A similar but opposed trajectory can be traced in Marx, as qualities of the world understood as made up of commodities possessing bearing value turns back on the subject as bearer of labor power. The lynchpin for such a transformation is the fact that labor power is a commodity, so that the perception of commodities as possessing value, necessarily falls back on how the individual begins to perceive their own qualities and activities. To some extent part of the fetish nature of commodities is not to recognize labor as the source of value, but to constantly see it displaced onto commodities. As Marx writes,

The private producer's brain reflects this twofold social character of his labour only in the forms which appear in practical intercourse or in the exchange of products. Hence the socially useful character of his private labour is reflected in the form that the product of labour has to be useful to others, and the social character of the equality of the various kinds of labour is reflected in the form of the common character, as values, possessed by these materially different things, the products of labour.<sup>11</sup>

Labor, whether concrete or abstract does not occupy the minds of people, it only appears in the form of commodities, it is the commodities that possess value. However, there is still a sense in which individuals cannot but adapt themselves to the dictates and demands of the labor market. Labor power is a commodity, and like all other commodities its value appears to be set, to be a fact of life rather than an effect of relations. Every worker in some sense adapts to these demands of the labor market, as Marx writes, "They do this without being aware of it." Individuals selling their labor conform to the demands of capital, making themselves into useful and exchangeable commodities, but this adaption is to some extent disavowed. To acknowledge it would in some sense be puncture the illusion of commodity fetishism, would be a matter of recognizing that it is labor, and the relations of labor, the determines the appearance of commodities. As Georg Lukács describes this process of the constitution of a different kind of estrangement, "*Subjectively* - where the market economy has been fully developed - a man's activity becomes

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<sup>11</sup> Marx, 1977, p. 166.

estranged from himself, it turns into a commodity which, subject to the non-human objectivity of the natural laws of society, must go its own way independently of man just like any consumer article.”<sup>12</sup> The social constitution of objectivity becomes a social constitution of subjectivity.<sup>13</sup>

Spinoza's and Marx's preemptive and partial critiques, are thus surprisingly thorough, perhaps even total in their implications. In Spinoza's case it is a matter of demonstrating how a particular constitution of subjectivity, individuals conscious of their desires but ignorant of causes, kingdoms within a kingdom, also leads to the constitution of a world made up of values and meaning, values that stem from an invisible creator. While in Marx's it is a matter of demonstrating how a constitution of the world, objects seen as bearers of value, also leads to a transformation of subjectivity, to an individual who adapts his or her existence to the selling of labor power. It is a picture, however, partial and provisional, of the constitution of a totality or world. Framed in such a way, more or less abstracted from the specific histories of seventeenth century religious sensibilities or nineteenth century political economy, it is possible to ask again to what extent Spinoza and Marx's particular visions are compatible. Such a question returns us to what extent the image or the idea of the free subject, the isolated individual, is not only consistent with a world constituted by the fetishization of commodities, but a necessary condition of it. Marx's own writing returns to this theme again and again in various forms, criticizing the Robinsonades of political economy, or the isolated individual, but while this is a theme it is, like so many of Marx's philosophical arguments, more of a recurring set of ideas than an developed argument.<sup>14</sup> It is perhaps for this reason that Althusser in his famous essay on ideology more or less turns to a Spinozist theory of the individual subject, as a necessary supplement to the ideological reproduction of the relations of production.<sup>15</sup> The subject, agency and individuality, what Spinoza calls a kingdom within a kingdom, is a not the opposite to subjection, but is its necessary precondition. As Dimitris Vardoulakis writes, “There is no more effective tool for the implementation of obedience than the illusion of the free will.”<sup>16</sup> The free subject and the world of reified values reinforce and augment each other.

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<sup>12</sup> Lukács 1971, p. 87.

<sup>13</sup> Balibar 2017a, p. 199.

<sup>14</sup> Read 2016, p. 80.

<sup>15</sup> Balibar 2020, p. 37.

<sup>16</sup> Vardoulakis 2020, p. 275.

## Hidden Abodes for All Eternity

Despite its preemptive status, the sketch that Spinoza and Marx each offer, in which world and subject constitute and reflect each other, gestures towards a kind of totality. No one is outside of the anthropomorphic/anthropocentric world view and no one is free of the fetish character of commodities. This raises a new question, not why do people believe in the free subject or the world of values, but how is it possible to think otherwise to escape these illusions. How is it possible to puncture the distortions, or, more specifically how is it possible to do so without asserting the primacy of consciousness above its material conditions, to lapse back into the idea of individual genius. Spinoza and Marx's preemptive criticisms are not just materialist in how they understand the limits of knowledge, but also in how they understand the transformation and liberation of knowledge. One does not break out of these illusions through the simple act of will, or through some kind of individual genius, there are necessary conditions for the transformation of knowledge just as there are necessary conditions for its limitation. In each case there is a practical dimension that is irreducible to thought or intentions. The transformation of knowledge requires causes and conditions, provocations and conducive environments. Spinoza and Marx are both in some sense effects of transformations in knowledge even as they endeavor to become causes, to transform existing knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

In the Appendix Spinoza offers a brief reference to the conditions that have in some sense made the writing of the Ethics possible. As Spinoza writes regarding the way in which final causes dominate individual and collective life,

This alone, of course, would have caused the truth to be hidden from the human race to eternity, if mathematics, which is concerned not with ends, but only with the essences and properties of figures, had not shown men another standard of truth. And besides mathematics, we can assign other causes also (which it is unnecessary to enumerate here), which were able to bring it about that men would notice these common prejudices and be led to the true knowledge of things (EIApp).

The role and centrality of mathematics, specifically geometry, in creating another standard of knowledge is fairly clear. It is the basis for thinking causality and relations outside of the final causes that dominate human existence and theological imaginaries. Mathematics is an event in thought that extends far beyond calculation in figures to open a space of liberation

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<sup>17</sup> Sharp 2011, p. 73.

from the imaginaries of anthropology and theology.<sup>18</sup> It is unclear from a reading of the Appendix what these other unnamed causes might be, however, it is possible to speculate by cross referencing the *Ethics* with the critique of superstition in *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Superstition is not just an inadequate idea of nature, human striving, and god, but one that ultimately maintains and reproduces political domination. One of the central aspects of superstition, is not just that god acts towards an end in view, towards final causes, but these ends can be known by the priests who interpret his wills and actions. It is precisely this anthropomorphic image of God that Spinoza undermines, first through an ontological argument regarding power and substance in the axioms and propositions and then in the appendix through an ontological argument. As Gilles Deleuze writes, "One of the basic points of the *Ethics* consists in denying that God has any power (*potestas*) analogous to that of a tyrant, or even an enlightened prince."<sup>19</sup> Thus it is possible to argue that these unnamed other causes are to be found in the political contestation of the specular reflection; it is not a matter of God and man that defines the epistemological anthropocentric-anthropomorphic doublet but of God and king that defines its political manifestation. The causal conditions that lead to the true knowledge of things, that break with prejudice, are mathematics and the political contestation of monarchy.<sup>20</sup>

To the extent that Marx reflects on the causal condition of his knowledge in the section on commodity fetishism it is only in the assertion that the very notion of the fetish points to a limit in classical political economy. This limit refers to a question that political economy does not ask, "why this content has assumed that particular form...why labor is expressed in value.." Part of the reason that this question is not asked is because its answer goes beyond the confines of political economy. It requires a fundamental historicization of the categories and concepts of political economy. As Marx writes, "[the concepts of political economy] are forms of thought expressing with social validity the conditions and relations of a definite, historically determined mode of production."<sup>21</sup> Moving beyond these concepts means moving beyond

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18 Macherey, 1998 p. 234.

19 Deleuze 1988, p. 97.

20 Such an assertion is speculative and contestable as an interpretation of Spinoza, but it is less dubious that Spinoza has been read this way. Louis Althusser argues that philosophy is situated between transformations in science and politics. As Althusser writes, "This 'overdetermination' of philosophy by these two events obeys the following law: the determination in the last instance of philosophical events by ideological events (the *ideological revolutions* of the class struggle), determination by scientific events (the breaks) only in the second instance." [Althusser 1995, p. 308. My translation] For more on this history of philosophy, and its relation to Spinoza see Jason Read "The Althusser Effect: Philosophy, History, Temporality. Forthcoming in Jason Read, *The Production of Subjectivity: Between Marx and Poststructuralism*, Forthcoming.

21 Marx 1977, p. 169.

the historical horizon of capitalism. Marx gives three sketches of the conditions of production outside of capitalism: Robinson Crusoe on his island; the medieval world, and “an association of free men working with the means of production held in common.” This are in some sense preemptive sketches of different modes of production. Aside from the quasi-communist aspect of the “free association of producers” these modes are not utopian, not ideals, but different articulations of relations and forces of production; there is nothing to long for in medieval society nor is there much to miss in Crusoe’s island, but in these social relations there is no confusion between the domination of people and relation between things. Their primary point is to underscore that commodity fetishism is neither a deception perpetuated by a group of people nor is it some kind of transcendental illusion, it is how social relations appear under the separation and isolation of production under capitalism.<sup>22</sup>

Spinoza and Marx both break with the image of isolated thinker, the lone genius that is capable of seeing through the illusions of society by giving the conditions of their own discoveries. These conditions are different, primarily mathematics for Spinoza and history for Marx, but in some sense they converge with respect to political conflict as the ground of not only transforming social relations but the conditions of knowledge as well. These radical transformations alter the conditions of thought, but beyond, or rather before them, inadequate knowledge and the distortions of fetishism contain the seeds of their own dissolution. These false ideas or distortions are products of this world, and thus necessarily reflect it even in their distortions. There is truth in the false. When Spinoza states that we are born “conscious of their appetite” this is in some sense an inadequate idea, especially as that consciousness takes itself as a cause, as free will. Later in the *Ethics*, however, Spinoza will argue that desire, that is to say consciousness of appetite is “man’s very essence”(EIIIAFFD1). Desire, striving, or conatus is mankind’s very essence. The inadequate idea, the consciousness of appetite is in some sense the precursor to the adequate idea. The difference is one of understanding the causal conditions underlying desire. In a similar manner the commodity can be considered an inadequate idea especially as it is seen as expressing value. However, even this “social hieroglyphic,” as Marx describes it, can be decoded to reveal something of the nature of value. This can be seen in the section preceding “commodity fetishism” in which Marx goes to great, even absurd pains, to show us that the value of any commodity can only be expressed in terms of other commodities, coats into yards of linen and vice versa. Commodity fetishism may be the social characteristics of labor reflected as the objective characteristics of the products of labor, but even in this distortion has a rational, which is to say relational kernel. This kernel

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22 Balibar 2017, p. 64.



is not internal to the commodity, but external; the fact that the value of every commodity can only be expressed in terms of the value of other commodities. This reification of value is undermined by the relational nature of its expression. The relations of commodities as expressions of value is the precursor of grasping value as itself a particular appearance of social relations. False ideas, ideas of human beings as kingdom within a kingdom or objective values embodied in commodities, are, by the very fact that they are produced by actual social relations, not entirely false. The alluded to the conditions that produce them even in obscuring them.

For Spinoza and Marx both false ideas and true knowledge have material conditions is produced not just by minds and ideas, but by practices and transformations of social knowledge. This assertion is given in a preemptive and provisional manner. The full extent of how practices and relations shape and transform knowledge is not developed here, expanding beyond it to extend even beyond the *Ethics* and *Capital*. However, that such an idea is included in such a preemptive sketch underscores one important and shared point, any fundamental transformation of knowledge will require a transformation of social relations (and vice versa).

### **Conclusion: Rerum Concatenationem**

Given that Spinoza and Marx's critique is directed alternately at anthropocentrism as much as teleology, the objectivity of value as much as its subjectivity, to what extent could even their materialism be considered similar not at the level of what it critiques, but what it proposes? To what extent can Spinoza's common notions, and a society founded upon the idea that nothing is more useful to man than man be the precursors of communism. Conversely to what extent can Marx's communism, the free association of producers, be considered a realization of Spinoza's project of ethical transformation of becoming more active.<sup>23</sup> Cesare Casarino has offered something of a response to this question by focusing on a not inconsequential terminological similarity between Spinoza and Marx regarding the connection of all things.<sup>24</sup> In the Appendix, Spinoza writes of the way in which the prejudices of anthropocentrism and teleology present an obstacle to men's understanding of the "concatenation of all things [rerum concatenationem]." Casarino argues that this idea of immanence, or immanent causality, as the connection of all things, a connection without a privileged subject, object, or God at its center, matches both the spirit and the letter of Marx's thought. To the letter, Casarino indicates Marx's use of the phrase nexus of all things [nexus rerum] to describe exchange

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<sup>23</sup>Tosel 1994, p. 28.

<sup>24</sup> Casarino 2011, p. 180.

value in the *Grundrisse*. As Marx writes, “In antiquity, exchange value was not the *nexus rerum*.”<sup>25</sup> Beyond this invocation of the letter, of the same phrase, *Capital* tends towards a description of capitalism as not just an economy acting on society, but as the concatenation of various transformations at the level of politics, culture, and technology. The most striking assertion of this concatenation can be found not in the section on “commodity fetishism” in the opening sections of *Capital*, but in the end, in the description of capitalism’s emergence through primitive accumulation. As Marx writes,

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of indigenous population of a that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of early capitalist production...These different moments are systematically combined together [*systematisch zusammengeßt*] at the end of the seventeenth century in England; the combination embraces the colonies the national debt, the modern tax system, and the system of protection.<sup>26</sup>

This combination of multiple elements, of multiple effects becoming causes is not limited to the conjuncture in which capitalism is formed, but is integral to its existence and reproduction This is why Althusser argued that only Spinoza’s concept of an immanent cause was the necessary precondition for understanding *Capital*. The connection of all things can only be thought as an immanent cause, as a cause which exists only in and through its effects As Althusser writes, “...it implies that the structure is immanent in its effects in the Spinozist sense of the term, that the whole existence of the structure consists in its effects, in short that the structure, which is merely a specific combination of its peculiar elements, is nothing outside its effects.”<sup>27</sup> Spinoza and Marx are able to critique the seemingly disparate philosophies of anthropocentrism, teleology, and reification, because all of these fail to think the *nexus rerum*, the connection of things, in other words, immanence, by positing the subject, God, or the law like functioning of the economy as a transcendental cause, as a cause which stands above our outside of social relations because it is not also an effect.

The “connection of all things,” the immanent order of the world is precisely what the seemingly opposed philosophical positions of

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25 Marx, 1973, p.223

26 Marx, 1977, p.915.

27 Althusser 2015, p. 344

subjective volition, theological transcendence, or economic necessity, cannot grasp. Thus, the connection of all things appears negatively, as the dark spot overlooked by these various philosophical perspectives. That is not its only appearance, however: in the opening section of *Capital* Marx's meditations on the expanded form of value in *Capital* argue that value has to be thought of as nothing other than the relation of every commodity with every other commodity, of everything with everything. In a similar way Spinoza ends the first part of the *Ethics* with the proposition, "Nothing exists from whose nature some effect does not follow" (EIP36) a proposition that offers one of the multiple implications of immanent causality. These assertions are only glimpses, only a figuration of the connections of everything with everything. In the first case, that of Marx, value even in its expanded form does not yet get us to the fully developed thought of the interconnections of everything, of immanent causality, a concept which only appears symptomatically as it were in those passages where Marx discusses capitalism as a product of the entire history of mankind down to the present. Similarly we could argue that the full effects, for lack of a better world of Spinoza's assertion that there is nothing that does not produce effects, that everything is a cause as much as it is an effect, does not fully work its difficult logic out until we get to the affects and vicissitudes of the striving a finite conatus. An immanent ontology cannot just be uttered as a concept, but must be produced. *Capital* and the *Ethics* are two instances of this of this production.

To answer the question posed at the beginning of this section: we could argue that what we are offered by both Spinoza and Marx is a gesture towards what we could call a communist ontology, an ontology of immanence and relations. However, this ontology is not yet a politics, or is not immediately given as such. What these two texts underscore is that the immanent ontology must be thought of as not only the condition of our thought and action, but as a condition which as cause is transformed, masked through its effects. The connection of things that is the capitalist mode of production, in its global origin and everyday effects, appears not as social relation, or as a relation at all, but as the value of things. Or, as Spinoza argues, God as nature, God as the immanent cause must be understood as itself the necessary cause of the image of God as a transcendent cause, standing above the world. The immanent relations of causality must themselves be understood as the cause of the human tendency to view oneself as a "kingdom within a kingdom." There is no surer guarantee of capital's functioning than its appearance as something necessary and timeless. Capitalism reproduces itself not just at the level of the economy and politics but also and most importantly at the level of subjectivity.

Despite the differences we can see that Spinoza and Marx's respective critiques are not only similar in their preemptive form, but in their object as well. The object of their critique may be fundamentally

different in its structure and history, from theology to the economy, but it is fundamentally the same in its function. The object of the preemptive critique is not this or that idea, or even ideology, but it is the point where the existing division of powers becomes not just an idea but also an entire subjective comportment, a way of life. If these texts get ahead of themselves, expounding a critique that demands concepts and relations that have been not yet developed, they do so only because the ideas, concepts, and world views that they critique are precisely that which blocks thought and action. Such a preemptive strike is necessary in order to be understood at all.

Beyond this overlap, this similarity of the method and object of critique, what might this conjunction of Marx and Spinoza offer for thinking about philosophy about the world and the present? First, we can isolate in the two elements of the critique a general problematic that cuts through several critical terms. First, we have what is referred to as the "connection of all things," nature, capital, or the entire profane history of the world, an object that exceeds any attempt to represent it, to bring it under the concepts of subjective intention, transcendent order, or necessary laws. This is in different cases what both Marx and Spinoza are trying to think. We could call this "the common" only in that it exists only in and through its constitutive relations. The objects of Spinoza and Marx's critique are not entirely misguided: God and Capital posit the absent totality as the necessary condition of thought and action, but they do so by representing it within the existing imaginary, subordinating it to subjectivity, transcendence, and law. It is not something that can be immediately given or celebrated. Grasping this connection of all things, or absent cause, means taking on the way in which it is represented, as God or the fetish of value, recognizing that these representations or ideas are nothing other than effects of the structures, its modes or necessary appearances, effects that are also simultaneously causes, necessary conditions of its reproduction. Finally, all of this, the connection of things, its representations in Gods and fetishes, and the relation between the two, as cause and effect, can only be developed through a practice of philosophy that I have awkwardly identified as "preemptive." This practice does not see a critique of the existing ideas and representations as something secondary, as a subordinate activity best left to popularizers and pedagogy, but as a constitutive condition of philosophy itself. Philosophy only exists through its engagement with what could be called, for lack of a better word, ideology, the collection of thoughts, representations, and affects that reproduce the world and its structures of domination.

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# **Perseverance, Power, and Eternity: Purely Positive Essence and Spinoza's Naturalism**

**Michael Della Rocca**

**Abstract:** By offering a new analysis of Spinoza's doctrine that each thing not only strives to persist, but also strives to increase its power of acting, this paper aims to show that Spinoza's conception of the essence of a thing is purely positive. A coherent essence can contain no negation. The paper then argues, on this basis, that Spinoza's definitions of substance and mode at the beginning of Part 1 of the *Ethics* reveal that the essence of a mode contains a negation, in a way that the essence of substance does not. This insight is then deployed to support, in an unexpected fashion, the interpretation of Spinoza's modes as not real. The paper closes with some new illumination of Spinoza's third kind of knowledge and of his views on the eternity of the mind.

**Key words:** Essence, Eternity, Perseverance, Positive, Power

The alignment of affirmation, essence, and the absence of negation is evident very early in Spinoza's *Ethics*. In explicating his definition of God, Spinoza says "if something is absolutely infinite, whatever expresses essence and involves no negation pertains to its essence" (1def6expl).<sup>1</sup> Here Spinoza makes clear that the essence of God contains no negation or is—as I shall put it—purely positive. My aim in this paper is to show how the purely positive character of essence is a feature not only of God's essence but also, in some way, of the essences of things in general. Because negationlessness characterizes the essences of things in general, including those of God and of human beings, the absence of negation in essences is a manifestation of—perhaps the most fundamental manifestation of—Spinoza's naturalism which, in general terms, I understand to be the view that everything, as it were, plays by the same rules.

I will begin by drawing on some of my earlier work on Spinoza's conatus doctrine and on the way in which Spinoza's notion of essence as purely positive, together with the principle of sufficient reason (PSR), generates Spinoza's famous claim that each thing strives to persevere in existence. I will then deploy this conception of essence again—and do so again with the assistance of the PSR—to show in a new way how Spinoza argues that each thing not only strives to persevere, but also strives to increase its power of acting. This thesis about increase in power has puzzled commentators as much as the general thesis about striving to persist, and I will try to show that the conception of essence as purely positive is the key to the solution of both puzzles. I will then argue that appreciating the roles that Spinoza's conception of essence as purely

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<sup>1</sup> "quod...absolutè infinitum est, ad ejus essentiam pertinet, quicquid essentiam exprimit, & negationem nullam involvit." Unless otherwise noted, all references to works of Spinoza will be to the *Ethics*. I use a more or less standard method of referring to passages from this work.



positive plays in Spinoza's conatus doctrine offers us a wholly new way into and a wholly new way of defending a reading of Spinoza according to which modes—things that are dependent on God—don't really exist. This surprising path to the thesis of the non-reality of modes also provides us with new insights into Spinoza's third kind of knowledge and his notorious doctrine of the eternity of the mind, a doctrine that might seem at odds with a naturalistic conception of the world.

## I. Striving for Perseverance

Let's begin then with the universal striving for self-preservation and let me give a streamlined version of an interpretation I have offered elsewhere. The doctrine is expressed in 3p6:

Each thing, insofar as it is in itself, strives to persevere in its being  
(*Unaquaeque res, quantum in se est, in suo esse perseverare conatur*).

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Here Spinoza seems to say—in good naturalistic fashion—that nothing can seek or tend towards its own destruction. Before we turn to the obvious potential counterexamples, I would like to clarify two aspects of the crucial term “strives” (*conatur*). First, the term is not an inherently psychological term. For Spinoza, things insofar as they are extended strive to persist in existence as well as things insofar as they are mental. Rocks and tables can be said to strive as well as dogs and human beings. Spinoza is, as many would argue, a panpsychist: for him, each thing is animate to some degree (2p13s), and each body is one and the same thing as an idea or mode of thought (2p7s). Thus a striving table is an animate things that strives. But the fact that a table strives does not, for Spinoza, by itself presuppose that it has mentality. Spinoza's attribution of striving to all things is, in this respect, independent of the considerations that lead to his panpsychism. In using “striving” in this general, attribute-neutral way, Spinoza is following in the footsteps of Descartes who also attributes striving (or, as Descartes often says, tending) to bodies insofar as they are bodies (*Principles* III 56). This striving is a naturalistic element in Spinoza's system, not something that applies only to active mental things.

The second aspect of Spinoza's notion of striving also derives from Descartes. I believe that Spinoza has a stripped-down, merely conditional notion of striving which can be summarized in this way: A thing strives to do what it will do unless prevented by external causes. Descartes employs such a stripped down account of striving in his account of bodily motion in the *Principles*. Spinoza captures this notion of striving perfectly when in his *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy* he summarizes and represents Descartes' views (see 2p17 of that work). Further, Spinoza clearly invokes the Cartesian notion of striving—but without using this term—earlier in the *Ethics* in his account of the motion of the simplest bodies: such a body,

if moving, will continue to move “until it is determined by another body to rest” (2lemma3c).

Thus, for Spinoza, striving is a function of what the thing on its own, independently of external causes will do. It is this “on its own” feature of striving that Spinoza calls attention to with the phrase “insofar as it is in itself”—“*quantùm in se est*” which appears in 3p6. The notion of “*in se*” is, of course, a term familiar from the definitions in Part I where substance is defined (in part) as that which is in itself (and where, as I’ll emphasize later, modes are defined as in another). One aspect of the meaning of being “in itself” is that a thing that in itself (*in se*) is independent of external causes.<sup>2</sup> Something in itself is not caused or acted on by other things. (Thus, the substance is cause of itself, for Spinoza.) And so the phrase “*quantùm in se est*” indicates that we are focusing on the extent to which a thing is independent of external causes; we are considering the thing by, as it were, bracketing any external causes and seeing what follows. So, in saying that a thing *quantùm in se est* strives to persevere, Spinoza emphasizes that, bracketing external causes and considering just the thing itself, we can conclude only that the thing continues to exist.

But when we are considering the thing *quantùm in se est* and independently of external causes, what exactly is it we are focusing on? With the term “*quantùm in se est*” and the notion of striving, Spinoza is not only directing us to consider this thing as it is independent of external causes, but he is directing us to focus on *x*’s essence alone. To consider *x quantùm in se est*, is for Spinoza, to focus on *x*’s essence alone and to see what follows from the essence alone.

This emphasis on essence in this context is most apparent in 3p4 which is the crucial claim supporting 3p6. 3p4 states somewhat cryptically:

No thing can be destroyed except through an external cause [*Nulla res, nisi à causâ externâ, potest destrui*]

The connection between 3p4 and essence is obvious from 3p4d:

This proposition is evident through itself. For the definition of any thing affirms, and does not deny, the thing’s essence, or it posits the thing’s essence, and does not take it away. So while we attend only to the thing itself, and not to external causes, we shall not be able to find anything in it which can destroy it.

Spinoza exhorts us in 3p4d to “attend only to the thing itself.” The previous sentence of 3p4d makes clear that to attend to a thing itself is to attend to the *essence* of a thing, what is affirmed by the definition of a thing. (Spinoza accepts the traditional view that the definition of a thing states

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<sup>2</sup> For helpful discussions of the in-relation in Spinoza, see Carriero 1995 and Melamed 2018.

its essence.)<sup>3</sup> Thus Spinoza's point in 3p4d is that if we focus on the essence of a thing (and not on things external to the essence, including external causes), then we should not be able to find anything that can destroy the thing. On the basis of this claim in 3p4d, Spinoza then brings in his stripped-down notion of striving to conclude in 3p6 that each thing *quantum in se est* strives to persist.

3p4's focus on essence is also, I believe, at work in 3p5 where he says, "Things are of a contrary nature, that is, cannot be in the same subject insofar as one can destroy the other." His point is that the essence or nature of a thing cannot contain within it something contrary to the thing, something that can destroy it.

In effect, Spinoza appeals here to the PSR:<sup>4</sup> if, insofar as a thing's essence alone is concerned, the thing goes out of existence, there would be no way to explain this fact of destruction. Given Spinoza's view that the definition of a thing merely affirms that thing's existence, the self-destruction of a thing—its going out of existence because of its nature alone—can only be a brute fact. Nothing in the essence could explain the thing's non-existence.

This focus on essence in 3p4 and 3p6 can help us to avert what might otherwise seem to be obvious counterexamples to Spinoza's claim that each thing strives to persevere. Thus, to take one potential counterexample, consider a burning candle. This poor object certainly seems to be something that, if left to itself, will bring about its own destruction. But, for Spinoza, insofar as it is in itself, i.e. just focusing on the essence of the thing and, in particular, bracketing external causes, the candle's non-existence or destruction does not follow. To explain the destruction of the candle, one needs to appeal to the fact—which is beyond the essence of the candle—that the candle was *lit*.

Similarly, a suicidal person can—in a way—be said to destroy himself. But for Spinoza the destruction doesn't follow "from the necessity of his own nature"—i.e. from his essence—but rather from external causes that compel him to act, that—literally or figuratively—force his hand (4p20s).

In a similar way, we can handle the example of a time bomb, a ticking device that apparently of its own accord eventually destroys itself (along with other things). The Spinozistic point here is that the bomb has to be *set*, and the setting of the bomb doesn't follow from the essence of the bomb alone. The bomb's hand has to be forced, as it were.

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3 See *Cogitata Metaphysica* I 2 (G I 239); *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, section 95, 1p8s2: "The true definition of each thing neither involves nor expresses anything except the nature of the thing defined", Letter 9: "A definition is concerned solely with the essences of things or their affections" (G IV 43).

4 Spinoza expresses a version of the PSR in 1p11d2: "For each thing there must be assigned a cause or reason both for its existence and for its nonexistence." See also 1ax2 and Lin 2018.

These essence-focused responses to the obvious potential counterexamples may be helpful, but they don't by themselves give us insight into the reasons for Spinoza's claim that a thing's essence by itself cannot lead to its destruction, for we are still inclined to ask: why can't there be a thing whose essence dictates that it goes out of existence at a specific moment, that it endures only for exactly 15 minutes or 15 years or whatever. Why can't there be—to invoke an example I've used elsewhere—an essential time bomb which is like a regular time bomb in that it goes out of existence at a specific time, but is unlike a regular time bomb in that the essential time bomb doesn't need to be set by something external to the time bomb's essence. Unless Spinoza can give us a reason to rule out the essential time bomb, his claim in 3p4 (and 3p6) that the essence of a thing by itself cannot lead to its destruction would be without justification. So what can Spinoza do to rule out the essential time bomb?

One might be tempted to make a simple appeal to the PSR: Let's say that the essence of the time bomb dictates that it goes out of existence after 15 minutes. The worry based on the PSR is this: why should 15 minutes be built into the thing's essence instead of 5 minutes or 25 minutes? Any particular number of minutes seems arbitrary and perhaps a brute fact.

I think that this appeal to the PSR is on the right track, but it is not subtle enough. For the opponent of Spinoza could come right back and say: the fact that, because of its essence, a thing exists only for 15 minutes is not a fact in need of explanation. When we reach the essence of a thing, the explanatory buck stops—we reach something that is not in need of, not apt for (as Dasgupta puts it)<sup>5</sup> explanation. I have worries about treating the essence of a thing as a place where the demand for an explanation is no longer apt, but I don't want to press that worry here. Instead, I want to appeal to the PSR in a different way to show what, for Spinoza, would be wrong with the very notion of an essential time bomb. For consider: can a thing have an essence which by itself dictates that the thing goes out of existence after exactly 15 minutes? For this to be possible it would have to be impossible for there to be an external sustainer that extends the thing's existence beyond the 15 minutes. That there could be such an external sustainer is suggested by Spinoza's view that for each finite thing, there is always a more powerful finite thing:

There is no singular thing in nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger. Whatever one is given, there is another more powerful by which the first can be destroyed. (4ax)

Thus, if finite thing *x* is tending towards its own destruction, then there can be another, more powerful finite thing which, as it were, countermands

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5 Dasgupta 2016.

this tendency of *x* and makes it the case that, contrary to *x*'s own tendency, it exists beyond its 15 minutes of fame.

Although Spinoza does not argue for the axiom of part IV, one can see it as grounded in the PSR: Each finite thing has a certain limited degree of power (1p36). For a thing with a certain degree of power, it seems that there is no bar to there being a finite thing with a greater degree of power. The lack of such a more powerful thing would seem, for Spinoza, to be a brute fact. Thus, a presupposition of this purported counterexample—namely that a thing bent on its own destruction is, for a time, impervious to any other finite thing—is one that would be rejected by Spinoza on rationalist grounds.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the notion that a specific period of endurance is built into the essence of a thing is incoherent for Spinoza. And he indicates as much in 3p8:

The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being involves no finite time, but an indefinite time.

What I have argued here, in effect, is that the source of this incoherence in the notion of an essential time bomb or a definite period of striving is Spinoza's rejection of brute facts, his PSR which dictates that there can always be something more powerful than a given thing.

This account of the striving to persist in terms of essence can help us understand the basis for Spinoza's claim in 2lemma3c that a moving body continues to move unless external objects interfere and that, similarly a body at rest continues to be at rest absent external interference. Although Spinoza doesn't use the term "strive" in this stretch of Part 2, it's clear that—given his understanding of what a thing strives to do as what it will do unless prevented by external causes—a moving body strives to keep moving, etc. (Spinoza does use the term "strive" when he expresses Descartes' similar views on the continuance of motion. See Spinoza's, *The Principles of Cartesian Philosophy* 2p17, 3def3). Further, not only can we see the continuance of motion as a kind of striving, we can also see it as a manifestation of the striving to persist, to persevere in existence. This might seem wrong because whether or not a body keeps moving may not seem necessary for its continued existence. However, it's important to recognize that Spinoza's claim about the tendency of moving bodies to keep moving and the tendency of bodies at rest to stay at rest explicitly concerns only *corpora simplicissima*—the simplest bodies. There is much unclarity as to what exactly the simplest bodies are in Spinoza, but he does say one helpful thing about them: they "are distinguished from one another only by motion and rest, speed and slowness" (comment after

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<sup>6</sup> Similarly, because there are always more powerful things, a thing's essence by itself cannot dictate that it lasts for as long as 15 minutes: there can always be something that destroys it before any specific time limit.

2a2"). This suggests that such a body—if it is moving—is individuated by this motion and thus if it were to stop moving it would cease to exist. Thus, in this case—unlike the case of more complex bodies, perhaps—its striving to keep in motion is literally a striving to persist: if the essence of such a body were to dictate that it stop moving, then the essence would lead to the thing's destruction and this would be incompatible with 3p4 and the doctrine of the striving to persevere in general.

Spinoza's ban on self-destruction, his rejection of the essential time bomb and his insistence that the striving of a thing—what it does *quantum in se est*—involves no finite time are all manifestations of what I have called Spinoza's conception of essence as purely positive: the destruction of a thing—its coming *not* to exist—cannot be built into the essence of a thing; the essence cannot dictate that the thing's existence goes this far and no further. Such limitations, such negations built into the essence of a thing would, as we have seen, be brute facts, violations of the PSR, and on this basis Spinoza comes to insist that the essence of things be purely positive, that it contains no negation. Thus, for Spinoza, the essence of things in general—like the essence of substance or God—is purely positive.

## II. Increase in Power of Acting

Spinoza draws a curious consequence from 3p6 in 3p12:

The mind, as far as it can [*quantum potest*] strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the body's power of acting.

As the demonstration and the context make clear, Spinoza has in mind specifically the striving of the human mind, the human mind's striving to increase its power of acting. (There would be a corresponding claim about the body's striving to increase its power of acting). Striving to imagine an increase in the body's power of acting is, for Spinoza, the mind's striving to increase in its own power of acting.

Here, I will argue, we have an initially quite implausible claim that can be seen to be a reflection of Spinoza's conception of essence as purely positive and a reflection ultimately of the PSR.

To explain how all this is so, we need to elucidate what Spinoza means by "power of acting" (*agendi potentia*) and by the increase in this power. And to elucidate the notion of power of acting, we need to present Spinoza's notion of adequate cause. Spinoza says "I call that cause adequate whose effect can be clearly and distinctly perceived through it. But I call it partial or inadequate if its effect cannot be understood through it alone" (3def1). Because, for Spinoza, to perceive an effect through its cause is to explain it,<sup>7</sup> we can say that for Spinoza an adequate cause is a complete or sufficient explanation of it.

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<sup>7</sup> See 2p7s and Della Rocca 1996, p. 3.

The notion of adequate causation is crucial to Spinoza's notion of acting:

I say that we act when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the adequate cause, i.e. (by 3def1), when something in us or outside us follows from our nature, which can be clearly distinctly understood through it alone. On the other hand, I say that we are acted on when something happens in us, or something follows from our nature, of which we are only a partial cause (3def2).

This definition indicates that something acts or is active to the extent to which it is an adequate cause of some effect. Correspondingly, something is acted on or is passive to the extent to which it is only a partial cause of some effect.<sup>8</sup>

Activity and passivity, so defined, are matters of degree. Consider, e.g., a stone that, at  $t_1$ , is held in a moving sling. The stone's motion at  $t_2$  is a function of its motion at  $t_1$  together with the motion of the sling at  $t_1$ . Let us say that at  $t_2$  the sling drops away and so it no longer plays a role in determining the stone's motion. The motion of the stone at  $t_3$  will then be solely a function of the stone's motion at  $t_2$  (on the assumption that at  $t_2$  no other object interferes with the stone's motion). In this case, we can say that initially (at  $t_1$ ) the stone's motion is determined to a large extent by something apart from the stone (viz. the sling). However, because at  $t_1$ , the sling is no longer determining the stone's motion, the stone itself becomes more nearly the complete cause or explanation of the stone's motion. To this extent, the stone is more active at  $t_2$  than at  $t_1$ .

Of course, there is a sense in which the stone at  $t_2$  is not completely active. Although the stone's state at  $t_2$  may suffice for its being in another state of motion at  $t_3$ , that state at  $t_2$  is due in part to external causes that were operative before  $t_2$ . Thus, the explanation of the stone's motion at  $t_3$  will, at some stage, have to appeal to outside causes. However, this undeniable passivity in the stone does not alter the fact that at  $t_2$  the stone is less subject to outside forces and relatively more independent than it was previously.

Given this account of degrees of activity, we can characterize an increase in power of acting in the following way: An object comes to have a greater power of acting to the extent to which it comes to be able to be active to a greater degree with regard to a certain effect. In other words, something's power of acting increases to the extent to which it becomes less dependent on external things in the production of some effect. A decrease in power of acting can be defined in a corresponding fashion, and of course destruction or death can be seen as a decrease in the power of acting of a thing to zero.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> It appears from this definition that changes of which one is not even a partial cause are ones with regard to which one is neither active nor passive.

<sup>9</sup> For Spinoza, the notions of increase and decrease in power of acting are equivalent to the notions of



Return now to 3p12: “The mind, as far as it can [*quantum potest*] strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the body’s power of acting,” In the background of this claim is Spinoza’s statement in 3p11 that “The idea of anything that increases or diminishes, aids or restrains, our body’s power of acting, increases or diminishes, aids or restrains, our mind’s power of acting.” 3p11 in turn follows from Spinoza’s parallelism between ideas and things that is most famously expressed in 2p7: “The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things.” In this light, we can see that in asserting in 3p12 that “The mind, as far as it can, strives to imagine those things that increase or aid the body’s power of acting,” Spinoza’s point is that the mind strives to imagine an increase in its power of acting, i.e. the mind strives to be less dependent on external causes in the production of some effect.

Three questions arise here: (1) Is this thesis restricted to the human mind or is it a general truth about the striving to increase in power of acting, a claim that would apply to rocks and chairs as well as to human beings? (2) A question subsidiary to the first is this: if the striving for increase in power is specific to the human case, then how is Spinoza able to avoid the threat to naturalism that would arise from the claim that only some things strive to increase in power? Isn’t such a claim an instance of different things playing by different rules and wouldn’t that conflict with Spinoza’s naturalism? (3) The final question raised by 3p12 is this: does this claim follow, as Spinoza indicates in 3p12, from 3p6, from the universal striving for self-preservation?

In previous work, I answered these questions in tandem, but in a way that may not have done justice to the conception of essence as purely positive. Here is the old answer in outline:<sup>10</sup> Only human beings and similarly complex entities strive to increase in power; less complex entities such as rocks and tables don’t. Human beings strive for increase in power because—in light of their complexity—they can anticipate future events and, in particular, future decreases in their well-being or power of acting. Because such anticipation of decline in power is itself painful, a being that is capable of anticipation will do all it can to avert this future decline in power of acting, to neutralize these threats to its well-being and ultimately to its existence. To best be able to avert these declines which are, of course, potentially many and various, the individual who can anticipate will see the need to amass as much power as it can. And so, on this reading, it is ultimately because of the universal striving for self-preservation in 3p6 that a relatively complex being capable of anticipation will not only strive to persevere but will also strive to increase its power.

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increase and decrease in perfection. See 3da3ex and 4preface.

10 Della Rocca 2008, p. 172.

This account is fine as far as it goes, and it offers answers to the three questions I raised about 3p12, but, again, I don't think that it goes far enough. This is in part because—although the claim in 3p12 seems to be just about the human mind—there is nothing about the notions appealed to in the demonstration of 3p12 that would preclude the application of this demonstration to things in general. Further, there is an indication in the *Short Treatise* at least that Spinoza sees his thesis about increase in power as completely general: “each thing in itself has a striving to preserve itself in its state, and bring itself to a better one” (*Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being* I 5; G I 40).<sup>11</sup> So there is good reason to try to see 3p12 as having general import.

I believe that we can see 3p12 in this general way and also see it as following from 3p6 if we focus, as before, on what follows from the essence of a thing considered on its own. This focus is evident in the summarizing claim in 3p12d that “the mind, as far as it can [*quantum potest*] strives to imagine” certain things. The use of this locution—like the use of “*quantum in se est*”—suggests a focus on the essence of a thing. Spinoza's point then is that, to the extent that external things don't interfere, the essence of a thing always leads to an increase in the power of that thing. Thus, although there may be “lazy” objects that don't increase in power of acting, their laziness is due in part to the external forces which drag them down or force their hand, just as – as we saw – there may be apparently self-destructive individuals but this destructiveness is always in part due to external things and not fully explained by the essence of the thing in question.

But what reason does or would Spinoza have to regard such a claim as true? Why, in other words, can't there be—like the essential time bomb—an essentially lazy object whose essence dictates that it does not increase in power?

Earlier we saw that—properly understood—3p6 derives from the PSR: given the PSR, it must be the case that each thing, as far as its essence alone is concerned, strives to persist. If the essence of a thing—by itself—leads to a thing's destruction, then one would have to deny that there could be a more powerful external thing, powerful enough to sustain the thing in question. To deny that there could be such an external sustainer would be, as we saw, an arbitrary limitation and so would be precluded by the PSR. Thus, it is because of the PSR that the destruction of a thing can never follow simply from the thing's nature.

Similarly, I now want to argue, a thing's failure to increase in power of acting can never follow from the nature of that thing alone. For consider: if a thing fails to increase in power of acting, then what is holding it back? What is preventing it from such increase? Given a minimal application of

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<sup>11</sup> See also *Short Treatise* II 7, G I 68: “everything we do must tend toward advancement and improvement.”

the PSR, there must be an explanation for this failure to increase in power of acting. Keep in mind here that we are considering the thing *quantum in se est*, insofar as it is independent of external causes, insofar as its essence alone is concerned. The explanation of a thing's failure *quantum in se est* to increase in power of acting cannot be external things, things outside of *x*'s nature. Can the explanation for the failure to increase be the thing's nature itself? It is hard to see how. If this nature could prevent an increase in power, then why could it not also cause a decrease in power? Causing a decrease in power is not different in kind from causing a failure to increase—both are ways of causing the power of acting to be below a certain level. But if the nature of a thing could cause it to decrease in power, then what could prevent the nature of a thing from causing a decrease to zero power of acting, i.e. what could prevent the nature of a thing from, on its own, destroying the thing? There would be no principled way to draw the line here between causing a failure to increase in power of acting, on the one hand, and causing a decrease in power of acting and destroying a thing, on the other. And so, the PSR which rejects unprincipled lines dictates that there is no such line to be drawn. If this is the case, then as long as we allow that a thing's nature can, on its own, cause a failure to increase, then a thing's nature can cause that thing's destruction. But, as we have already seen, a thing's nature—by the PSR—cannot cause its own destruction. For the same reason—i.e. because of the PSR again—a thing's nature cannot cause a failure to increase. Thus, just as a thing *quantum in se est* must strive to persist, so too a thing *quantum in se est* must strive to increase in power.

In this light, we can see that Spinoza is committed to an analogue of 3p8, one that concerns increase in power of acting. As we saw, in 3p8 Spinoza says that “The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being involves no finite time, but an indefinite time.” I would say that similarly and for the same reasons the striving by which each thing strives to increase its power of acting involves no finite, determinate increase, but indefinite increase.

Notice that this account of increase offered here is fully general. It applies to *any* object whatsoever. Thus, this interpretation does a better job than my previous interpretation of respect the generality of the notions that Spinoza uses in articulating his thesis about increase.

Spinoza's ban on essentially lazy objects—like his ban on self-destruction—is a manifestation of his conception of essence as purely positive. The failure of a thing to increase in power—its *not* being above a certain level of power—cannot be built into the thing's nature: the nature or essence of a thing cannot dictate that its power extends this far and *no* further. As before, such negation, such limitation built into the nature of a thing, would be a brute fact, a violation of the PSR, and would also thus conflict with Spinoza's conception of essence as purely positive. Thus, we can see another manifestation of Spinoza's naturalism: not only does

each thing strive to persist, but also each thing strives to increase its power of acting.

Before turning to how the notion of essence as purely positive should affect our understanding of the definitions of substance and mode, I want to consider two potential problems that my interpretation of the doctrine of increase may generate.

First, the notion of striving to increase in power—understood as a general phenomenon grounded in the PSR and Spinoza's conception of essence as purely positive—may seem to be in conflict with Spinoza's account of the tendency of the simplest bodies to continue in their state of motion and rest. If these bodies are, by their nature (*quantum in se est*) striving for more power of acting, then shouldn't moving bodies—by their nature—strive not just to keep moving but to move faster, to accelerate? Yet Spinoza never says any such thing about the tendency to keep moving. This might seem to cast doubt on my understanding of Spinoza's account of the striving to increase in power as a general phenomenon.<sup>12</sup> In response, I point out, first, that it's not clear why increase in motion should in general go along with increase in power. I point out, second, that it is important to recall that Spinoza's claims about the continuance of the state of motion (or rest) are made for the simplest bodies which are, in effect, individuated by their motion or rest, bodies whose motion or rest is, as it were, essential to them. In this case, it is not possible for the simplest bodies to increase in power if increase in power means altering (increasing) their degree of motion. However, it may be that even the simplest bodies can increase in power if such increase can be understood as something other than mere acceleration.

The second remaining worry I want to discuss concerns why increase in power is to be preferred to decrease. As I have stressed, each thing, for Spinoza, strives to increase indefinitely because any finite, determinate failure to increase which is dictated by the thing's nature would be a brute fact. Thus, Spinoza sees indefinite increase as built into a thing's nature. I can see then that there are rationalist reasons for preferring indefinite increase over definite increase as built into a thing's nature. And I can see how there is good reason to prefer indefinite increase to definite decrease in power. But what reason is there to prefer indefinite increase to indefinite decrease in power? That is, why isn't it the case that a thing's nature dictates that—if left to itself—it will decrease in power indefinitely? Of course, a thing's nature cannot dictate that its power of acting go down to zero—that would be to allow for self-destruction. But why can't indefinite decrease be built into a thing's nature instead of indefinite increase?

Spinoza does not take up this problem directly, but—in light of his general inclination towards purely positive essence—we can see how he

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<sup>12</sup> I am indebted to Zachary Effman here.

would answer this challenge. The problem with indefinite decrease is that if a thing's nature could dictate that it keeps going down in power, then there doesn't seem to be any reason why a thing's essence could not take the thing all the way down to zero, down a path of self-destruction. But, as we've seen, Spinoza rules out the tendency to go to zero power of acting on the ground that such a tendency would be a brute fact. So, I think that an indefinite tendency to decrease is problematic because there is no principled way to distinguish it from a tendency to go down to zero power of acting which is certainly illegitimate in Spinoza's eyes.

But, if we argue in this way, can't we make a parallel argument in the reverse direction? Thus, if indefinite increase is built into the nature of a thing, why not an increase all the way to infinite power, an increase all the way to substance or God? Would a thing's inherent tendency to have infinite power of acting be problematic in the way that Spinoza sees as problematic a thing's inherent tendency to decrease in power and decrease down to zero? I think that, for Spinoza, the answer to this question is "no": it is not problematic for a thing to tend not only to increase in power, but also to have infinite power, to be God. Indeed, I think Spinoza embraces the view not only that each thing strives to be God, but that each thing is God. We'll begin to see how this is so in the remaining section of the paper by reading what Spinoza says about essence in his conatus doctrine back into his basic ontology of substance and mode as it appears in the opening definitions of Part I of the *Ethics*. This reading-back seems entirely natural and appropriate in light of the fact—noted earlier—that a crucial notion in the conatus doctrine is the notion of being in itself (*in se*) which is a notion also prominently at work in the definitions of substance and mode in Part I. Just as we've found the concept of essence in the conatus doctrine to be purely positive, so too we would expect the concept of essence at work in these early definitions to be purely positive. But here a surprise may lurk.

### III. Purely Positive Essence and Modes

Let's turn to the definition of substance first, keeping in mind that, for Spinoza, as is traditional, the definition of a thing states its essence. So what insight does the definition of substance provide concerning the essence of substance? A substance is—according to this definition—in itself and conceived through itself.

As we saw at the beginning, *in se* can be seen in terms of independence of external causes. Although this characterization with its mention of external, outside causes might seem to import something negative into the definition (or essence) of substance, this negative element appears after a "not": the apparent negation is itself negated. The substance in *not* dependent on outside causes, on causes that are *not* itself. The multiple negation is explicit in the case of being conceived through itself, for Spinoza offers a helpful gloss on this notion: "that

whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed" (1def3). Here again, we have a negative element, an "other," appearing after a "not." The idea of substance does *not* depend on the concept of something *e/se*. Here again, the purely positive character of essence is preserved. So far, so good.

But when we turn to the definition of mode, matters look quite different. The definition reads:

By mode I understand the affections of substance, or that which is in another through which it is also conceived. (1def5)

Here, as in the definition of substance, there is mention of another, but notice that in this case the term "other" does not appear after a "not." The negation remains un-negated. The other thing through which modes are conceived is, of course, the substance itself (though it's worth pointing out that Spinoza is also happy to speak of modes as conceived through other modes, e.g. 1ax4, 2p16, etc.). So, unlike substance, a mode—by its very nature—is limited in its being, and this limit built into the nature of a mode is the other that a mode, as it were, bumps up against the other that is mentioned in the definition. This mention of an other is not cushioned by or insulated by another negative term.

Given this limitation—its being dependent on and not the other—it seems that the being of a mode goes *this* far and no further. The mode, as such and by its nature, is limited by the thing that is unrestrictedly in itself. And so the mode is in itself only to some degree. Thus, Spinoza speaks in 3p6 of its striving "*quantum in se est*." The being of a mode is defined, determined by, the substance.

Earlier, in connection with the conatus doctrine, we saw that, for Spinoza, the essence of a thing—with regard to the perseverance of the thing or the increase in its power—would go only so far, but no further if it brought with it an uncushioned, uninsulated, unnegated negation, a definite limit. In that case, as we saw, there would be something problematic, unintelligible, a brute fact. And, for that reason, we saw that, in his conatus doctrine, Spinoza denies that the persistence or increase in power of a thing is limited in this way; he denies that there is in this context an uncushioned negation.

But now with the uncushioned negation in the very definition of a mode, this definition of a mode, its essence, turns out not to be purely positive after all. And, just as there *would be* a problematic brute fact in the case of definite limits to perseverance or increase, so too there *is* a problematic brute fact or brute facts, something unintelligible, in the case of the actual uncushioned negation in the essence of a mode.

To explain what these brute facts are would be a large undertaking which I cannot carry out here.<sup>13</sup> The basic idea is that the other in the

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<sup>13</sup> See Della Rocca 2019.



definition of modes involves a notion of numericality—of one thing and one thing being *two*. And I believe that Spinoza regards conceiving of things numerically as unintelligible because such conceiving brings with it brute facts: there is nothing in virtue of which a thought of an object as one or as one among many can intelligibly be said to be *of* a particular object. Here we can see that the underlying difficulty—a reliance on brute facts—is behind the difficulty both with conceiving of something in terms of an other as well as with essential limits on perseverance or on increase in power.

The upshot of all this seems not to be good: it seems that in his conatus doctrine, Spinoza operates—for good, rationalist reasons—with a conception of essence as purely positive. But when we look back at Spinoza's basic definitions and at his fundamental ontology, it turns out that—by Spinoza's own standards—the essence of a mode is not purely positive and so the essence of modes seems to bring with it the brute facts and unintelligibility that Spinoza seems to have avoided when he spoke of the essence of modes in his conatus doctrine.

What I believe that the concept of essence as purely positive—to which Spinoza is wedded—shows is that, by Spinoza's own lights, there is something incoherent in what it is to be a mode. This concept shows that modes—as such—do not really exist, for the existence of modes—as such—would involve a brute fact.

Now you *could* take this upshot instead as evidence that my reading of the conatus doctrine is wrong, or that I've gone wrong in the application of this doctrine in order to show that the nature of modes is incoherent by Spinoza's own lights. You could do that. But that's obviously not the path that I want to take. Instead I take the conatus doctrine and the concept of essence at work there (as purely positive) as giving new, indirect support to an interpretation which I (and perhaps some others) have—in a kind of Hegelian or even Eleatic spirit—recently been advocating, viz. the interpretation of modes as unintelligible and not existing. Following in the tradition of Hegel and Harold H. Joachim and others, I have offered evidence for this kind of reading in Letter 12, 1p15s, and other fun passages (such as Spinoza's claims about number in Letter 50 and in his talk of the free man).<sup>14</sup> What I'm now arguing is that we see—perhaps unexpectedly—new evidence for such a reading coming from Spinoza's conatus doctrine and the way in which it is underpinned by Spinoza's commitment to the PSR.

I should say that even with this new, perhaps unexpected evidence for a Hegelian or Eleatic interpretation of Spinozistic modes, I do not deny that some passages may point in the direction of a commitment on Spinoza's part to the reality of distinct modes. I'm aware of that. What I aim for in this paper is a new way of showing that the Hegelian strand

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<sup>14</sup> Another suggestive passage which I have not cited previously is the following: "God alone has being, and all other things have no being, but are modes" (*Short Treatise* II 5 (G I 64)). I am indebted to Josefine Klingspor here.



is one strand of thought at work in Spinoza's system. I don't deny that there may be other, perhaps incompatible strands. But I do think that at least some of the passages adduced in support of the non-Hegelian interpretation are not as definitive as some of the supporters of the non-Hegelian interpretation have suggested. We can begin to see how this is so by exploring what kind of account we can offer of Spinoza's third kind of knowledge and of his doctrine of the eternity of the mind in light of the insights I have offered so far.

#### IV. The Third Kind of Knowledge

I have argued that the notion of a mode is somehow incoherent in that the very essence of a mode involves limitations—otherness—in a way that is incompatible with Spinoza's commitment to the PSR. However, it is crucial that the idea of a mode— incoherent though it may be—does involve or does have at its heart some positive content. What is this positive content?

Recall that a mode is conceived through another—through God. So the concept of a mode is the concept of the mode as dependent, explained by, God. Again, because otherness is problematic, for Spinoza, the aspect of the idea of a mode that involves dependence on another is illegitimate. But there is another aspect of the content of this idea (or purported idea) of a mode: God. Recall that the idea of a mode is the idea of something dependent on God, so the idea of this mode already involves—as an aspect, perhaps—the idea of God. Spinoza famously says that the idea (or knowledge) of the effect depends upon and *involves* the idea of the cause (1ax4, my emphasis). God is, of course, the cause of the mode, so the idea of the mode involves the idea of God. And even if this idea of the mode is somehow incoherent, this idea involves the idea of God, again perhaps as an aspect. And the idea of God is, of course, completely coherent, for Spinoza. As we saw, the essence of God is purely positive. So, the positive content in the purported idea of a mode just is the content “God.” That is, whatever is positive in the alleged idea of a mode just is the idea of God. And the same point would apply—in naturalist fashion—to the purported idea of any “other” mode: the positive content of any idea of any mode is the same, viz. the idea of God.

This understanding of the positive content of the idea of a mode sheds light on Spinoza's third kind of knowledge. This kind of knowledge—*intuitus*—is the adequate idea of the essence of a particular thing. The fact that—according to Spinoza—there are adequate ideas of the essences of particular things has been invoked as evidence against a Hegelian (Eleatic) interpretation of Spinoza.<sup>15</sup> After all, if there are different ideas of different essences, and these ideas are adequate—and, hence, true—then there must really be different essences and hence different things that have those essences. However, if the positive content of such allegedly different

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15 See in particular Melamed 2013.

ideas is the same—viz. the content “God”—then it is no longer clear that Spinoza’s commitment to there being cases of the third kind of knowledge provides evidence against the view that the notion of modes is somehow incoherent and that modes don’t exist as modes. Instead the doctrine of the third kind of knowledge may be completely compatible with—and may indeed support—this view that modes don’t exist as modes. The intuition that is had in intuitive knowledge of any thing may be simply the intuitive knowledge of God.<sup>16</sup>

## V. Eternity

Finally, we can apply these insights about the third kind of knowledge—insights which are, in turn derived from the interpretation of Spinoza’s conception of essence as purely positive—to the vexed topic of the eternity of the mind in Spinoza. I can’t hope to deal with all the puzzles emerging from this most confusing doctrine, but we are, I believe, in a position to make some progress. Thus, for Spinoza, a part of the mind remains—or may remain—after the destruction of the body (5p23). This part of the mind is eternal, and it is the idea of the (eternal) essence of the body. Just as the essence of this body is eternal, so too the idea of this essence which is in the mind is eternal.

Again, there are tons of difficulties engendered by this view, but Spinoza seems to be committed to something like it. What I want to focus on here is a potential problem that this commitment to the eternity of the mind poses for my interpretation of Spinoza’s modes as incoherent because their essence is not purely positive.

If, as I am arguing, the essence of modes is incoherent, then how can a part of the mind—its essence—remain after the destruction of the body? I think that the thing to do here is to focus again on the positive aspect of the idea of the essence of the body. If something remains of my mind, then this something must be positive (and not negative) and this positive something in the mind—in the idea of the body—can only be the idea of God. So, some part or, perhaps, aspect of my mind does remain after the death of my body, but this part or aspect is just the idea of God that the idea that is my mind involves. And this idea of God is what remains after the destruction of any other mode. I *do* survive death, but I survive death, we might say, as God: all there really is to me is God.

Additional support for this reading of the eternity of the mind comes from at least two passages.

First, consider 2p44c2: “It is of the nature of reason to perceive things under a certain aspect of eternity.”<sup>17</sup> In the demonstration of this corollary, Spinoza says: “this necessity of things is the very necessity of God’s

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<sup>16</sup> For extremely helpful discussions about intuitive knowledge, I am indebted to Kristin Primus. Her position with regard to the third kind of knowledge is insightfully presented in Primus 2017.

<sup>17</sup> “*De naturâ Rationis est res quâdam aeternitatis specie percipere.*”

eternal nature.”<sup>18</sup> More generally, it seems that Spinoza is committed to the view that the necessity of a given mode is the necessity of God’s nature; the necessity of me just is God’s necessity, etc. Given the association in Spinoza between existence and necessity,<sup>19</sup> Spinoza is saying that the existence of the modes—of even a particular mode—just is the existence of God. And that is basically what I have been saying throughout this section and previous one: the positive content of the idea of a mode just is the content “God.”

Another suggestive passage is 5p36: “The mind’s intellectual love of God is the very love of God by which God loves himself, not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he can be explained by the human mind’s essence, considered under an aspect of eternity.” Spinoza seems to be saying here that the love that I have for God—to the extent that it’s real or considered positively or without limitations—is just God’s love of himself. I’m making the more general point that my existence—to the extent that it’s real—just is God’s existence. In both cases, a feature that might seem to be proper to me—*my* love of God, *my* existence—turns out when considered positively to be really a feature of God. The specific claim Spinoza makes about intellectual love in 5p36 is an indication that Spinoza is committed to—and perhaps sees himself as committed to—the general thesis that I am advancing in this section and the previous one.

Finally, let’s return to striving, the notion that has, in many ways, guided my inquiry in this paper. Earlier we were led to the possibility that, for Spinoza, modes in general not only strive to persevere in their being, but also strive to have infinite power, to be God. We can now see how this is indeed the case for Spinoza: since the being of a mode really is just the being of God, in striving to be, modes are really striving to be God. Indeed, modes not only strive to be God, but also—because the positive content of the ideas of modes just is the idea of God—the modes are God. The modes exist, but not as modes. Instead, the modes exist as God. This result is, perhaps, the ultimate expression of naturalism: all things play by the same rules in virtue of the fact that modes and substance alike exist simply as God or Nature.<sup>20</sup>

18 “*haec rerum necessitas est ipsa Dei aeternae naturae necessitas.*”

19 See, e.g., 1def8: “By eternity I understand existence itself, insofar as it is conceived to follow necessarily from the definition alone of the eternal thing.”

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# **Towards a Revolutionary Science**

**Natalia Romé**

**Abstract:** The article seeks in Louis Althusser's writings from the sixties and seventies, elements that would allow us to read Spinoza's gravitation in his reading of Marx, concerning a question about the links between philosophy, science, and politics. The work is organized around the so-called "moment of self-criticism" in Althusser's writing, in which the definition of philosophy widens in order to investigate the possibilities and tensions of a materialism that is capable of simultaneously accommodating the concern for objectivity and the assumption of the inherent politicity of philosophy. In this sense, the essay sets out to develop some of the possibilities opened up for materialist thought by the insistence of the paradoxical figure of a "revolutionary science", focusing on two principles that take force in the early Althusserian reading of Marx but unfold its consequences in his movement of self-criticism: the epistemic criterion of the interiority of theoretical practices and the historical principle of the primacy of the relations of production over the productive forces. The aim is to connect some dispersed developments in order to contribute to a collective and long-term work of reflection on the possibilities of a materialist dialectic for the 21st century, as a conflictive ontology capable of taking contradiction as a *real* contradiction.

**Keywords:** Althusser, Spinoza, Materialism, Overdetermination, Transindividual

### Materialism I. Primacy of practice

The renewed interest in Louis Althusser's thought, that has been sparked by the posthumous publication of his numerous manuscripts since 1990, has found a significant impetus from various readers in the field of Spinozist studies.<sup>1</sup> This can be attributed, to some extent, to the relevance of several of his former disciples, including Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey, in the development of a materialistic reception which, as Warren Montag and Diego Tatián points out, in his Prefaces to the Spanish edition of *Spinoza and Politics* (Balibar, 2011), together with the decisive contributions of philosophers from other intellectual backgrounds, such as Alexandre Matheron and Martial Gueroult, who gave rise to an important philosophical tradition, which also includes Gilles Deleuze, Miguel Abensour, Jaques Rancière, Alain Badiou, among others. This theoretical alliance can also be read within the broader framework of the Marxist tradition, which finds its antecedents not only in Marx's notebooks devoted to studying Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*, written in 1841, but also in figures such as Plekhanov in his

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\* A Spanish preliminar version of his essay was published with the title "Althusser con Spinoza. Hacia una ciencia revolucionaria" In *Nuevo Itinerario. Revista de Filosofía*, N° 16 (1). Mayo 2020.

<sup>1</sup> Among others, W. Montag, V. Morfino, J. D. Sánchez Stop, G.M. Goshgarian, M. de Gainza.

*Fundamental Problems of Marxism* (1978). Warren Montag warns in the preface to the English edition of Balibar's book, that in each successive crisis within Marxism, brought about by the stabilization and expansion of capitalism following an economic or political crisis that was hailed as the last one – as in the 1890s, 1920s, 1970s or 1980s – many Marxists turned to Spinoza's philosophy." (Montag, 2008, p.ix). Thus, we can read the "Althusserian moment" of the Spinozian inheritance as the effort to traverse from the most persistent crisis which, since the last decades of the last century and up to the present day, has captured critical thought in a process of impoverishment of that singular conjunction of theoretical force and political power that was known as "Marxism".

It is interesting, in this sense, to return to the crossroads of Althusser's intervention in the agonal field of twentieth-century Marxism, in order to pursue therein some of those elements which shaped the encounter between Marx and Spinoza, at the dawn of that last "crisis of Marxism" – loudly proclaimed by Althusser in 1977<sup>2</sup> – and to explore the gaps and tensions of that heritage in what it still has to offer, as an enigma and therefore as a task. In his words: "We have reached a point such that it depends on us, on our political and theoretical lucidity, whether the crisis in which Marxism has very nearly perished culminates not just in its survival, but in nothing less than its liberation and rebirth" (2006, p.12). The recommencement of Marxist theory demands, according to Althusser, the assumption of a limit position: "Marx said, on at least one occasion, 'I am not a Marxist'." (p.14).

The truth of the matter is that Marx was profoundly convinced – let us, rather, say absolutely convinced, without the least inner hesitation – that he had inaugurated a new form of knowledge, pitted, as the only true one, against all the others that had been advanced in this domain: the knowledge of the conditions forms and effects of the class struggle, at least in the capitalist mode of production.

(...)

However, in affirming that he was 'not a Marxist', Marx was protesting in advance against any interpretation of his work as a philosophical or ideological system or vision, and, in particular, as a reworking of the 'philosophies of History'. He was protesting, above all, against the idea that he had at last discovered the 'science' of the 'object' which, in the bourgeois culture of the time, bore the name Political Economy. Marx was thereby protesting in

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<sup>2</sup> It was in 1977 that Althusser delivered for the first time, in the lecture entitled "Finally the crisis of Marxism! this expression, but the realization of this crisis percussed Althusser's thought since the beginning of his reading of Marx up to his last days, not only in terms of a political analysis, but especially as the productive pulse of his philosophical writing. And its marks can be read from the philosophical interventions in *La Pensée* to his last writings of the 1980s.



advance against the idea that his thought could lay claim not only to presenting but also to possessing a total or totalizing unity, constituting a body of thought that could then be labelled 'Marxism', and that this 'unified' *oeuvre* could have been produced by 'an' author... (Althusser, 2006, p.15)

Five years earlier, in his *Essays of Self-Criticism*, Althusser proposed this task in the certainly audacious terms of defending the theoretical condition (and therefore, the limits) of Marxism based on thinking from "dialectical-materialist (therefore non-speculative and non-positivist) positions, trying to appreciate that quite extraordinary, because unprecedented, reality: Marxist theory as a revolutionary theory, Marxist science as a *revolutionary science*" (1976, p.115).

It is also in this essay where he explicitly confesses the guilt of his Spinozist passion (p.126). The "self-criticism" consists there in a reflexive movement problematizing the Bachelardian gravitation of "epistemological break" that inspired him, starting from the consideration of those extra-theoretical historical aspects that it does not allow him to conceptualize:

...it was therefore necessary to "prove" that there is an antagonism between Marxism and bourgeois ideology, that Marxism could not have developed in Marx or in the labor movement except given a radical and unremitting break with bourgeois ideology, an unceasing struggle against the assaults of this ideology. This thesis was correct. It still is correct. But instead of explaining this historical fact in all its dimensions – social, political, ideological and theoretical – I reduced it to a simple theoretical fact: to the epistemological "break" which can be observed in Marx's works from 1845 onwards. (1976, pp.105-106)

His thought opens in this gesture to a practical movement that will give rise to a process of reformulation of the very definition of philosophy: from its "theoreticist"<sup>3</sup> conception of philosophy as "Theory of theoretical practice", towards a definition of (the materialist position in) philosophy as a practice of polemical intervention (of *taking sides*) in the field of theory – that is, of Philosophy, with capital letters (cf. Althusser, 2006, 251-289). This displacement occurs together with the assumption that "practice" is not the object of materialist philosophy, simply because

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<sup>3</sup> Against Althusser himself, it is possible to identify the political sense of his approach to the link between philosophy and science in his "theoristic" moment, as Sánchez Stop does, by pointing out that the emphasis on the autonomy of scientific practices and of the second nature of philosophy in relation to them, has as its background the discussion with the Stalinist interpretation of Diamat as a "general science of matter in motion" of which the sciences (biology, linguistics, history) would be nothing but the application to fields of its general principles (2018, 543, my translation).

it – unlike the sciences – has no object. It will no longer be a matter of “reconstructing from a philosophy ‘in a practical state’ an authentic theoretical philosophy, but of understanding, with all its consequences, philosophy as a practice” in which “Althusser’s main ally will be Spinoza” (Sánchez Stop, 2017, pp. 543-544, my translation).

Hasty readings, bent on establishing periodization, turns or radical cessations, have resolved the tension of this twist in Althusserian thought by managing its “stages” between early theoricism and a sudden preoccupation with politics in the aftermath of the events of ‘68. In this rough sketch, some of the most luminous gestures of his reading of Marxist theory are neglected; among them, the question of the possibility of a critique of epistemology capable of accommodating a politicized conception of objectivity, to render thinkable, the *aporia* of a “revolutionary science”.

This revolutionary condition can be read there in two ways, the first relating to the radically new circumstances of this science which implies a “revolution” in the field of the problem of knowledge; a revolution which, in his writings of the 1960s, Althusser identifies as a radical rupture and as the rise of radically new terms that open a new continent to science, that of the theory of history. This has an impact on the concept of ideology, while reformulating the question of the production of knowledge and the challenges that this new science poses to philosophy and to its relationship with science, understood in materialist terms. But “revolutionary science” is also here an indication of a redoubled problem, opened within the operation of “self-criticism”: if this Marxist science intervenes in a revolutionary way in the field of epistemology, it is because it involves a radically new way of thinking the complexity and multiplicity of the relationship between science and revolution.

It could be said that in the absence of the “and” that struggles between science and revolution, the aporetic power of the idea of a “revolutionary science” is indicated. It is there that the wedge of the question of materialist dialectics is placed. Between science and revolution, the movement of materialist thought is played out not as a pure discontinuity, but rather as a *continuous rupture*, placing a dilemma that constitutes one of the crossroads of the Althusserian problematic in which Spinoza and Marx meet.

The Spinozian formula, *verum index sui et falsi* (E, II, P 43, sc.),<sup>4</sup> frequently mentioned in Althusser’s writings, allows him to approach

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4 “What can there be which is clearer and more certain than a true idea, to serve as a standard of truth? As the Light makes both itself and the darkness plain, so truth is the standard both of itself and of the false. (...) Finally, as to the last, namely, how a man can know that he has an idea which agrees with its object? I have just shown, more than sufficiently, that this arises solely from his having an idea which does agree with its object -or that truth is its own standard. Add to this that our mind, insofar as it perceives things truly, is part of the infinite intellect of God (by P11 C); hence, it is as necessary that the mind’s clear and distinct ideas are true as that God’s ideas are. (Spinoza, 1994:142-3)

the complexity of this cut, in the double dimension indicate above. For, although Spinoza's gravitation becomes more explicit at the very moment in which Althusser broadens his definition of philosophy in order to conceptualize its connection with politics and consequently abandons the pursuit of an "object" of philosophy that homologized it with scientific practices, Althusser maintains the principle of practice as the criterion of the true. And it does so by insisting on the legacy of Spinoza.

Firstly, in terms of the activity of knowing, the idea of the true indicating itself and what is false, accounts for the criterion of the radical interiority of theoretical practices and the retroactive temporality of their demarcation in respect to an ideology which becomes, in that very gesture, its "prehistory". Althusser starts posing that Spinoza discarded the problem of the "criterion of Truth" (1976, p. 137) in order to specify that the main question is not a rejection *in toto* of the true but to warn that a juridicist or extra-theoretical conception of the criterion of truth (whether it comes from the Aristotelian tradition of adequacy, or from the Cartesian tradition of evidence) turns philosophy into a legislator and judge of scientific practices. In this sense, he recalls the Spinozian idea of the true indicating itself " ...not as a Presence but as a Product, (...) this position is not unrelated to the "criterion of practice", (...) this Marxist "criterion" is not exterior but interior to practice, and since this practice is a process (...) the criterion is no form of Jurisdiction" (1976, 137).

As Juan Domingo Sánchez Stop suggests, the true appears not as an unveiling but as the effect of a polemical activity, of a production-demarcation which is immanent to the totality in which philosophy itself is rooted and from which it does not distinguish itself *a priori*, but as the result of a practical and continuous intervention of separation and adjustment (Sanchez Stop, p.549). Insofar as philosophy is in the whole, it is part of the very conjuncture in which it intervenes, so it cannot maintain a speculative distance (of pure knowledge) with that conjuncture. "From this comes that a Thesis does not have an 'object' but a field of intervention (*enjeu*).” (Sanchez Stop, 2018: 549, my translation). It is key to understand that the struggle in the philosophical *kampfplatz* – which is the mark of politics *in* philosophy and the exercise of its critique of the theoretical pretensions of the imagination – is a clue condition for the production of a rigorous thinking of politics.

The difficulty with Althusserian philosophy, which explains both the forced readings that have been made of it and its tenacious vitality, lies in the fact that the clause of politicity, which is taking shape in his thought, coexists with a resistance to the abandonment of a criterion of the true. This conjunction offers all kinds of problems and tensions, but at the same time, it functions as a safeguard against the inevitable prejudices and simplifications that creep into any reading exercise.

This opens what we have recognized as the redoubled meaning of the expression "revolutionary science", which evokes not only the

idea of a radical cut, but of a kind of *fold*. This second reading will also have Spinozian thought as an “ally”, but it will have it after a long detour which, we could say, consumes all of Althusser’s writing effort and exceeds it, placing before us the task of unfolding his theory beyond itself. This form of unfolding is itself an exercise of the continuous cut, because it presents itself not only as the pivot for turning Marx against himself (the humanist “young Marx” dethroned by the mature Marx), but to set Althusser against himself, pushed to deploy the most radical consequences of a politicized practice of philosophy, as the key to materialist objectivity, without surrendering to the temptations of the false dichotomy between politicism and positivism. This unfinished task, which has no end, is one of the most vital lines of his active legacy.

In order to locate this second dimension of the dilemma, we can start from Carlos Casanova’s essay on the Marx-Spinoza concept of the political (2007), whose main ideas with respect to the way in which the Spinozian figure that we have already referred to operates in the thought of the young Marx are taken up by Diego Tatián (2012). The axiom *verum index sui et falsi* is taken up by Marx in 1842, in his “Comments on the Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction” (2010: 112), in the framework of a political interpretation of Spinozist theory of truth and then, in his *Critique of the Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, as Casanova points out, the Spinozist expression appears already with the force of a political manifesto: by recognizing democracy as the truth of monarchy, in order to give an account of the immanent principle of the *demos*. The critique of the State – emphasizes Diego Tatián – “is a critique of all ‘form’, in favor of the *demos*, whose life is presented as an unrepresentable multiplicity and as radical excess”. Democracy against the State, that is Spinoza against Hegel” (2012, p. 177, my translation). “The *demos* is thus thought of as the ultimate background from which the foundation of politics, its own constitution, is sustained” (Casanova, 2007, p. 361, my translation). Such a link between truth and democracy, Casanova poses, allows us to think that what is truth for knowledge, is democracy for politics. And that political link with truth would persist in the form of communism, the true “secret of history deciphered”, in the *Manuscripts of 1844* (*ibid.*).

Revisited in *The German Ideology*, the political reading of the Spinozian idea of the true as an *index sui* and of the false is, at the same time, *displaced* from a certain autonomy of the political to its superstructural condition, based on social relations of production that shape the material life of men and women. For Casanova, this opens up a decisive gap with respect to the relationship between truth and politics, and therefore between Spinoza and Marx’s *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1971):

It seems that an essential question is at stake in the way in which these “social relations” are understood. Either they are conceived in

the sense of the ensemble, (...) as the only effective reality of human beings, that which is played out between individuals and between these and nature, as a result of their multiple practical interactions. Or they are conceived in reference to the development of the productive forces, whose first premise is man's biological needs (Casanova, 2007, p. 364, my translation).

Casanova locates a crucial question regarding the nature of Marxist materialism, which opens as a kind of dilemma between political immanence and material objectivity, in the form of a tension between the primacy of the relations – which the emphasis on the French term *ensemble* implies – and that of the development of the productive forces. This dichotomy is further reinforced in his view by the teleological substratum that assumes the axiom of economic determination. He thus assumes that the materialist premise of historical necessity presupposes mechanistic and positivist materialism: “a prioritization of the reality of man's physical forces with respect to thought, which is, in the last instance, subordinated to the conditions of the ‘natural process’ of history” (Casanova, op. cit., p. 365). Here one can infer a depoliticization of Marx, in the sense of a shift from the political foundation to its “absorption by the social” (*ibid.*), during the very transition that Althusser would recognize as an *epistemological break* towards the beginning of his theoretical maturity.

The question is not a minor one, if we consider that Althusser's thesis organizes Marx's writing in a reverse way. Spinoza allows us, in his opinion, to read, from 1845 onwards, the beginning of Marx's very materialism by means of a *radical break* (2004a, pp.187-191) against that moment that Casanova identifies as Marx's Spinozian political moment. In other words, where Casanova reads Spinoza's gravitation in Marx's conception of politics, Althusser reads a Marx still entangled in idealist-humanist jargon (rationalist and liberal until 1841, humanist-communitarian in his Feuerbachian moment, between 1842 and 1842) (Althusser, L. 2004a, pp. 184-185).<sup>5</sup> And where Casanova reads a Marx distanced from Spinoza along the lines of a mechanistic and economic positivism, Althusser finds the materialist Marx separated from the Hegelian philosophy of history, whose rejection is assisted by the reading of Spinoza.

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5The humanist trace that survives in Marxian writing prior to 1845 can be clearly seen in the relationship between demos as truth - in the idea of the “real man as foundation”, in the “real man as foundation” and in the relation between demos as truth - in the idea of the “real man as foundation”, in the fragments taken up by Casanova and Tatián: “La democracia es el enigma resuelto de todas las constituciones. Aquí, la constitución no es solamente en sí, en cuanto a la esencia, sino en cuanto a la existencia, en cuanto a la realidad, en su fundamento real, el hombre real, el pueblo real, estableciéndose como su propia obra” (Marx, 1987, pp 342-343; citado en Tatián, 2012, p. 176).

The question is trapped in a scheme of alternatives that requires us to opt for the autonomy of politics or for the materialist clause of objectivity, redistributing once again philosophy's relation with science and politics in a new dichotomy. This dilemma is in some way noticed by Tatian, in his reading of a new formulation of the idea of truth as a production and as a criterion of itself in "*Eléments d'Autocritique*" ([1974] 1976) and "*Est-Il Simple d'Etre Marxiste en Philosophie?*" ([1975] 1976), where Althusser relates it to another idea, from the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* where Spinoza poses that, because we hold a true idea and only because of it, we can produce others according to its standard. And indeed, for Althusser, it is "because we have a true idea that we can know that it is true, because it is *index sui*". (Althusser, 1976, p. 188) From this statement, Tatian underlines the "anti-Cartesian anomaly" of a discourse that is not "of the method" and that dismisses any transcendental consequence of the fact that man thinks: "Spinoza refuses to start from objectivity" (Tatían, 2008, p. 56, my translation).

The question we are interested in is sketched out here regarding the rejection of an *aprioristic* criterion of objectivity. Can this imply the absolute rejection of a criterion of objectivity?

An approach to this question, which seems to be a concern that emerged around Althusser's moment of "self-criticism", is anticipated, as we have pointed out, in his canonical writings of the 1960s, within the framework of the development of the *criterion of the interiority of theoretical practices* as a criterion of the true which, under the condition of strict materialism presupposes, a theory of historical totality.

But there can be no scientific conception of practice without a precise distinction between the distinct practices and a new conception of the relations between theory and practice. We can assert the *primacy of practice* theoretically by showing that all the levels of social existence are the sites of distinct practices (...) We think the relations establishing and articulating these different practices one with another by thinking their *degree of independence* and their type of 'relative' autonomy, which are themselves fixed by their *type of dependence* with respect to the practice which is 'determinant in the last instance': economic practice. (...) To speak of the criterion of practice where theory is concerned, and every other practice as well, then receives its full sense: for *theoretical practice* is indeed its own criterion, (...) i.e., the criteria of the scientificity of the products of scientific practice (Althusser and Balibar, 1970, pp.58-59).

This excerpt enables us to notice that a criterion of the true which is immanent to theoretical practices very close to the Spinozian problematic, coexist in this "theorist" Althusser, with a criterion of



historical objectivity that reads the primacy of the practice in terms of a complex totality of different and unequally articulated practices – or an overdetermined social practice – among which, theoretical practice is woven.<sup>6</sup>

This allows us to explore the density of the problem in order to find a certain caution in Casanova's essay. It seems to be just a nuance of his argument, but it is crucial for us: a crucial question – Casanova says – is played out in the way in which "social relations" are defined: whether it is with emphasis on the primacy of the relational condition, understood as a specific modality of combination – where the French term *ensemble* is required – or from the point of view of a primacy conferred to the terms in relation, in this case, to the productive forces in their development.

We are now in a better position to anticipate, at least roughly, that if the key to Althusser's wager in philosophy consists in sustaining "the two ends of the chain" (Althusser, 2004a, p.91) in order to precisely avoid the false choice between objectivity and politics, the question pivots precisely on "the way in which these social relations are understood", as Casanova underlines.

The writing in which this metaphor of the chain is put into play is precisely the one in which the Freudian category of *overdetermination* becomes a figure capable of rendering thinkable the specificity of Marxist apodicticity – that is, its "problematic" – in two senses. On the one hand, as the philosophical consideration of the specificity of materialist practice of theoretical thought and, on the other, but imbricated with it, as a theory of the social totality capable of accommodating in a unique rationality, the thesis of determination 'in the last instance' by the economy, and the formula of a relational immanence in the conception of State Power, which finds its development in the theory of Ideology (cf. Althusser, 2015a).

An ambitious program of thought opens out of this unsettled crossroads which is the basis of the Althusserian operation in his singular way of inheriting Spinoza in Marx. Theory and politics consist of a body of thought that points in the direction of the paradoxical relational and processual ontology that Etienne Balibar has identified

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6 It should be added that Althusser insists that his position aims to take up the Marxist axiom of the primacy of practice (over theory) without thereby drowning in an egalitarian conception of practices, the specific mode of intervention of a given practice. In this connection, he writes: "Taking Marx as an example, we know that his most personally significant practical experiences (his experience as a polemicist of 'the embarrassment of having to take part in discussions on so-called material interests' in the *Rheinische Zeitung*; his direct experience of the earliest struggle organizations of the Paris proletariat; his revolutionary experience in the 1848 period) *intervened* in his theoretical practice, and in the upheaval which led him from ideological theoretical practice to scientific theoretical practice: but they intervened in his theoretical practice *in the form of objects of experience, or even experiment*, i.e., in the form of new thought objects, 'ideas' and the concepts, whose emergence contributed, in their combination (*Verbindung*) with other conceptual results (originating in German philosophy and English political economy), to the overthrow of the still ideological theoretical base on which he had lived (i.e., thought) until then. (Althusser, 1970, p. 60).



as the *transindividual* (2000, 2019), and which opens the way for thinking a “conflictual objectivity” capable of sustaining the idea of an aporetic *science of class struggle*.

## Materialism II. Primacy of relations

Casanova's dilemma regarding the nature of social relations – with emphasis on a relationality whose background would be political or subordinated to the social-economic development (of the productive forces) – is worked out by Althusser in another way, regarding the problem of *social reproduction* within a processual conception of existence as *duration*.

In the posthumous volume, *Sur la reproduction* (2011) which appeared in the months after the events of 1968, Althusser warns of the politicistic detour which, under the generic term of “domination”, simplifies the materialist overdetermination while subsuming economic exploitation, and therefore erases the contradictions and struggles within political and ideological field. Against this impoverishment of historical totality and materialist causality, Althusser proposes a rigorous materialist reading of social reproduction, assuming as its central principle the *primacy of the relations of production over the productive forces*.

In a social formation there is not just *one* mode of production, but one that functions as *dominant* in a historical whole in which, conditioned by its dominance, heterogeneous residual or incipient productive forces and relations survive in a complex and contradictory unity. In this sense, a given social formation is, in its objective unity, a contradictory and unequal combination of temporalities.

Thus considered, the “point of view of reproduction” is crucial to account for any concrete situation, in which the capitalist relation of production – as a structural relation of dispossession and separation of labor-force from the means of production – is *abstract* with respect to this concrete and contradictory complex of relations of a social formation in which its reproduction takes place – as *duration* and therefore, as *existence*.

From the point of view of reproduction, the concept of relations of production is not to be confused neither with the technical organization of labor nor with the juridical notion of property: the social division of labor is neither technical division of labor nor the legal forms of its organization, but it must be placed in terms of the complex *ensemble* of concrete relations in which the historical existence of a social formation lasts.

The ambivalence of duration is the core of the concept of overdetermination with which Althusser conceives the materialist causality that presupposes in the very structure of the historical totality a duplicity of relations, a *relation of relations*, which exists only overdetermined in its temporal complexity and contradictory materiality.

Marx can write: 'the characters who appear on the economic stage are merely [juridical] personifications of economic relations; it is as the bearers of these economic relations that they come into contact with each other'. Economic agents (capitalists, wage-workers, merchants, etc.) never meet (*gegenübertreten*) in the original nakedness of simply 'living' human beings. They can meet usefully, which is to say socially, only if they have (in advance) become autonomous, individualised persons, recognised as such, and if, therefore, they cannot be confused with 'things'. In Marx's problematic, this means that the juridical forms which liberate the individual for exchange (and, where applicable, for exploitation) constitute a second level of alienation, at one and the same time original and correlative to the preceding one, into which it is in practice inserted to ensure its realisation. The economic informs the juridical and the juridical activates the economic. It is this complex form, precisely this *double structuring, at once reciprocal and dissymmetrical, that I propose to consider the new, developed concept of the 'transindividual' in Marx's theory*. (...) these terms, which push the idea of an *objective imaginary* inherent in social relations to the extreme, are precisely what makes it possible to understand (beyond a problematic of transcendental illusion with which, however, they have an undeniable affinity) in what sense the transindividual must present itself to individuals in an inverted form (not as what constitutes them structurally into subjects, but as what they could decide to institute or not to institute) (...). Social reality must take on a hallucinatory character, or be woven from fantasy, in order to exist as such, in history and in practice. It is at this point that, without a doubt, the 'detour via Spinoza' can become illuminating again. (Balibar, 2020, p.154)

The problem of ideology becomes relevant for philosophy and thinkable in terms of an "objective imaginary" by means of a philosophical *materialism of the imaginary* coherent with the principle of the primacy of class struggle over classes and of the unconscious over conscience – as Michel Pêcheux (1975) posed it. Ideological dimension of social formation is considered within an objective complex of contradictory processes and not as an operation of pure domination nor as a failed ideal universalization, neither as a sociological opposition between two "worlds" of meaning; but rather as a complex of formations with dominance: form and effect of an *ensemble* of relations. Balibar (2006 [1993], 2020) underlines the philosophical relevance of this idea in Marx, in the terms of a *transindividual ontology*, with a double consistency, both material and imaginary.

Balibar reads in Marx, a singular relational materialism that finds its antecedent in Spinoza, since "from the ideas sketched from the sixth

‘Thesis on Feuerbach’ onwards, his theory incontestably maintains this central philosophical intuition: the double rejection of individualist and holistic (organicist) ontologies and their socio-political consequences, in favor of giving primacy to the relation, or to a constituent relation.” (2020, p.154) And a key word is underlined by Balibar in his reading of *Thesis VI*:

It is significant that Marx (who spoke French almost as fluently as he did German) should have resorted to the foreign word ‘ensemble’ here, clearly in order to avoid using the German ‘*das Ganze*’, the ‘whole’ or totality. (...) we have, in fact, to think humanity as a *transindividual* reality and, ultimately, to think transindividuality as such;” Not what is ideally ‘in’ each individual (as a form or a substance), or what would serve, from outside, to classify that individual, but what exists *between individuals* by dint of their multiple interactions. (Balibar, 2006, p. 30-32)

The idea of the transindividual as an ontological position supposes the replacement of the classical essence/individual controversy by an enquiry into the multiplicity of relations that connect individuals and community in a materialist and complex way. Not in terms of an emanative causality, nor in terms of empiricist schematizations – which, as Althusser has shown, are ultimately equally idealist – but as an open-ended set of transmissions or passages in which the link between individuals and the community is made and unmade and which, in response, constitutes them (*ibid.*). This opens up a series of considerations about a kind of singular structural *necessity* that can only be conceived as working in an increasingly complex relationship of relationships in which the imaginary is part of the concrete materiality (cf. Balibar, 2018).

From a strongly structuralist approach, Jean-Claude Milner recognizes it with the aporetic expression of a *thesei*-objectivity which allows us to think about the possibility of a “political science” that inhabits in Marx’s enterprise, his reading of Democritus or Hegel, up to his developments on political economy (2003).

Althusser had touched Marx (...) to touch Marx was to open a crisis in thought; at that moment it was also to encounter the structure. The question of necessity and the way in which it is affected by the physei/thesei dichotomy had constituted one of Marx’s major objects. (...) At last Marx found posed there, in terms of positive science, the question that only Hegelian dialectics had seemed to articulate until then in terms of speculative logic: the existence of a necessity freely created by men. (...) it was no longer a question of convention but of history and politics. (...) Marx’s dispositif is paradoxical. If the whole of *thesei* is understood as the whole of what depends on man, then it is also understood as the whole

of what can be transformed by man. Social relations are *thesei*. They are therefore not immutable. (...) they are modifiable by men because they are imposed on them (Milner, 2003, p.224, my translation).

Social relations impose themselves with the force of inexorable laws on the isolated individual *for the very reason* that they are transformable by the whole. For Milner, therefore, it is necessity that opens the way to political thought: social relations “impose themselves on each individual to the exact extent that they can be transformable by the union of all (...) a political doctrine is derived from necessity” (2003, p. 224).

The “political” structuralism that Milner finds in Althusser’s reading of Marx dialogues with Marilena Chaui’s readings of Spinoza, where she finds an ontology of the immanent relations between potencies which, by rejecting all theological association between contingency, possibility and will, enables ethics and politics to recover the foundations of a demonstrative discourse which “since Aristotle had been denied to them” (Chaui, 2004, p.160, my translation). In this sense, Montag (2008) also underlines that it is against classical political philosophy, based on the distinction between speculative and practical philosophies, where Althusserian reading of Spinoza is placed.

Spinoza approaches the affections in *more geometrico* “after having criticized the distance that philosophers had placed between political theory and practice. Political discourse (contrary to political theology) speaks of an ‘order of things’ that is not (...) but a logic of concordant and contrary forces that institute the logic of power and the exercise of freedom” argues Chaui (op cit., p. 160.).

“Love of things and pursuit of the common good: not one thing next to the other but one thing for the other, cause of the other. The more we understand the singular res, writes Spinoza, the more we understand God...” says Tatian (2012, p.41, my translation).

Spinoza’s notion of *individuality* is considered by Chaui in terms of the theory of common notions, as a “constitution of parts”. Based on the Definition 7, Part II of *Ethics*, she deduces that, by presenting singularity as a composition of individuals who concur in the same action, Spinoza assumes that “individuality means causal unity” (2004, p.140).<sup>7</sup> Such a theory of transindividual individuality goes beyond the ontic dimension allows Spinoza to formulate, in a subversive way, the conception of *essence*:

.....  
7 “By singular things I understand things that are finite and have a determinate existence. And if a number of individuals so concur in one action that together they are all the cause of one effect, I consider them all, to that extent, as one singular thing.” (Spinoza, 1994, p.116)

... “essence” does not refer to a general idea of humanity, an abstract concept under which all individuals are subsumed and their differences neutralized. On the contrary, it refers precisely to the power that singularizes each individual and confers on him a unique destiny. Thus, to affirm that desire is the essence of man is to affirm that each individual is irreducible in the difference of his own desire. We could say that this is a form of “nominalism” since Spinoza considers that the human species is an abstraction. Only individuals exist in the strong sense of the term. But this nominalism has nothing to do with atomistic individualism (...) It is the relation of each individual to other individuals and their reciprocal actions and passions that determines the form of the individual’s desire and drives its power. Singularity is an individual function (Chauvi, 2004, p.125).

### **Materialism III. The Real of History**

The question of individuality brings us closer to the paradoxical thinking that connects ontology with politics: a thought of singular essences, a relational nominalism. *Ensemble*, we read in Marx; relational ontology or transindividuality, formulates Balibar; the primacy of relations over elements we read in Althusser’s *Sur la Reproduction* (2011) and of encounter over form, interprets Morfino (2012) in his recent writings on aleatory materialism, as a philosophy of the constatation of the encounter or of the fact:

...the fact is not the Faktum in the transcendental sense, it is not a question of a priori conditions of possibility, but of material conditions of existence. To take the fact in its accomplishment or in its being accomplished means to show its contingent foundation, the fluctuation of elements that originated or can originate the encounter beyond all pre-established harmony. (Morfino, 2014, p.81, my translation).

We find this relational ontology now deployed as a strange metaphysics of the “case”, in Althusser’s late texts:

This superb sentence says everything, for, in this world, there exists nothing but cases, situations, things that befall us without warning. The thesis that there exist only cases - that is to say, singular individuals wholly distinct from one another - is the basic thesis of nominalism. (...) I would go still further. I would say that it is not merely the antechamber of materialism, but materialism itself (Althusser, 2006, p.265)

It is worth recalling here the formulas that early on insisted on the rejection of “simplicity” as an original category, making this idea the key to the confrontation with Hegel’s idealist dialectics. As a reader of Marx and Mao, Althusser pointed out in the early sixties that the real complexity of social life could not be reducible to simple elements (even to a simple contradiction) but must be assumed in the complexity of the *overdetermined* structure.

... the simple only ever exists within a complex structure; the universal existence of a simple category is never original, it only appears as the end-result of a long historical process, as the product of a highly differentiated social structure; so, where reality is concerned, we are never dealing with the pure existence of simplicity, be it essence or category, but with the existence of ‘concretes’ of complex and structured beings and processes (Althusser, 2005, p.196-197)

The nominalism of aleatory materialism, as well as its various and vague references to the void, find a clearer and more coherent channel in this reading hypothesis. Various readers have shown that aleatory materialism is not an ontology of the “void”, nor of the “atoms”, but rather a materialism of the encounter of atoms of the reciprocal consistency of the world and of the retroactive constitution of its laws (cf. Matheron, 1998; Montag, 2010). It is not about, nor can it be about, a surrender of all legality to the benefit of pure chance. Rather, it is a question of sustaining from an ontological questioning, the idea of a structurality which modifies the very definition of law, regardless juridical formulas, replacing them with a conception of *tendential* and *processual* legality, immanent and open to contradictory tendencies - not to the “future”, but to the actuality of the political moment which pulsates in every plexus of relations as a *determined* contingency. In this sense, Montag points out that it is in the reading of Marx, whose historical observations are just a “prelude”, that it becomes clear what is at stake in the materialism of the encounter. To state that in the beginning was nothingness is different from adopting an aprioristic position to any assemblage, but it is to placing alongside a theory of the dialectical progression of the modes of production – of history as order – a second theory, of modes of production as effects of contingent encounters, irreducible to the former. A theory of the commencement that results from an encounter that might not have taken place, supposes that capitalism might not have come into existence (Montag, 2010) A problem “ besides the other “gives us but a single problematic, as Althusser warns in his reading of Marx and whose unification is the pulse that drives the Althusserian problematic

itself.<sup>8</sup> Its result is a theory of structure as the effect of an encounter: a “structuralist” theory of transformations.

... we find it very hard to grasp (for it does violence to our sense of ‘what is seemly’): that laws can change – not that they can be valid for a time but not eternally (...), but that they can change at the drop of a hat, revealing the aleatory basis that sustains them, and can change without reason, that is, without an intelligible end. This is where their surprise lies (there can be no taking-hold without surprise) [*il n’est de prise que sous la surprise*] (Althusser, 2006, pp.195-196).

The category of the encounter becomes a matrix for interrogating the logic of politics itself, its immanent thinking, its condition of an activity *ordered in itself*. And not only in an ontic sense, but in the sense of rendering thinkable objectivity’s inherent politicity.

Two decades before writing his theses on aleatory materialism, Althusser was already pursuing this *real of politics* in his theory of the whole as a relational and historical complex of articulated practices.

The first of Marx’s *Theses on Feuerbach* is thus revisited when the question concerning the real of politics forces us to go back to our understanding of materialism regarding a conception about knowledge as an activity.<sup>9</sup> Althusser reads this question in his controversy with French phenomenology, which he homologizes to humanism in the Feuerbachian tradition: “You can stay indefinitely at the frontier line, ceaselessly repeating concrete! concrete! real! real! This is what Feuerbach did,” (Althusser, 2005, p.244). For us, the ‘real’ is not a theoretical slogan; the real is the real object that exists independently of its knowledge, but which can only be defined by its knowledge (p.246).

This real is an *incognita* that cannot be solved by appealing to the immediacy of a brute empiricity of Nature (“biological necessities”, for example) which is the specular partner of the idealist image of Truth. Nor is it a question of calling History in our help, by means of the genetic

8 “This attitude may be paradoxical, but Marx insists on it in categorical terms as the absolute condition of possibility of his theory of history; it reveals the existence of *two problems*, distinct in their disjoint unity. There is a theoretical problem which must be posed and resolved in order to explain the mechanism by which history has produced as its result the contemporary capitalist mode of production. But at the same time there is another absolutely distinct problem which must be posed and resolved, in order to understand that this result is indeed a *social* mode of production, that this result is precisely a form of *social* existence ...” (Althusser, 2005, p. 65)

9 “The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object* (*Objekt*) or of *contemplation* (*Anschauung*), but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the *active* side was developed abstractly by idealism – which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such. Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from the thought objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as *objective* activity (*gegenständliche*)...” (Marx, 1969., p. 13).



mode of a historicist question for the Origin or the foundation, which pretends to be historical but is, like the previous one, metaphysical. They both constitute, in fact, a false alternative.

The genetic question, which is the price that idealist philosophy has paid to occupy the places of theology, leads philosophies back to the myth of the State of Nature, and for Althusser, this demonstrates the profound solidarity between epistemological empiricism and liberal political philosophies (cf. 2014). A rigorous materialist development requires instead to discard any temporal evocation of the *genesis*, which is in solidarity with empiricism and humanism, in the sense of the philosophies of Natural Law, whose attempt fails to pierce the essentialist circularity and, therefore, is never produced as a thought of the beginning, but rather, as its ideological obturation. (Althusser, 2014).

As Althusser puts it in his *Cours sur Rousseau* (2012), the essence of State of Nature's philosophies consisted in an assumption that was in itself a retrospective projection of the Civil State. To appeal to the State of Nature appears, then, as a circle, since the result, namely, the Social State, the Civil State, is projected at the origin in order to better *engender* the result; when in fact, it has already been presupposed in the form of an Origin. In this way, this Social State very easily becomes the *cause* of itself, the legitimization of itself.

Against Political Philosophy, entangled in this circular exercise, the Althusserian materialism opens a window to think politics as *real thought*; paying the price of assuming that this real thought takes its singular shape in the dispute (itself *real*) with Philosophy "as such". We could say that the only way to access the thought of politics is by facing the politicization of thought: by thinking within that rupture. Less a "new thought" that follows a rupture, but more sharply, a thought that exercises the rupture insofar as it pursues a rationality that is immanent to its very political nature. In Spinozian philosophy this rupture has already begun as a rupture against the theological component of philosophy, against all moralization and utopianism.

Only in this way does political experience become thinkable as an *ordered experience in itself*,<sup>10</sup> by taking the human individual as "parts of Nature" and not as its metaphysical centre, the shape and measure of all things. Thus, a thought capable of pointing to *the real of politics* takes shape in the dispute with the Political Philosophy grounded on a jusnaturalistic anthropology, conceiving man as an Empire within an Empire and renders political practice an object of judgment.

Althusser repeatedly confronts Natural Law philosophy's theological affiliation, even in its modern formulations, since they are

.....  
<sup>10</sup>The expression corresponds to Claude Lefort's reading of Machiavelli. Cf. Lefort, C., Machiavelli. *Le travail de l'oeuvre*, Gallimard, Paris, 1972., p.358. And it should be noted that Althusser takes into consideration and pays homage to this interpretation of Lefort (Althusser, 1988)

also characterized by the effort of dealing with the problem of politics by means of a philosophical discourse on the Origin – as the genesis of social life. It thus shows that invocations of politics may well leave us once again trapped in the realm of the most idealistic empiricism, which is nothing other than that of the biblical myth of self-manifesting immediacy.

Reading Rousseau, Althusser (2012) describes Origin as the projection of the titles of Right in the evidence of Nature. Both, the titles of Right of the Truth and of Right of all Essence and, in particular, the essence of civil law and of political law. Such is the case in the philosophy of Natural Law, for the simple reason: the thought that identified Origin with Nature and made it evident to a subject of law was, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the form par excellence of philosophical thought. That is to say, the founding form of philosophical thought and therefore, that which confers on it the role of founder, justifier, legitimizer of an order of things.

It is, in short, the circular, or doubly-specular model of ideology as an imaginary circle of evidence. Thinking the real of politics requires political thinking in the sense of operating a process of *continuos-rupture* in the imaginary. The very possibility of theory depends on a real struggle, insofar as it is a “science of ideology” and only in this way does it manage to grasp the real of the struggle. The kind of connection that Spinoza draws between ontology and politics, based on an immanent causality, makes possible the development of a conception of politics adequate to the historical materialism inaugurated by Marx in theory and by the revolutionary practice of the workers’ movement, in effective politics. And it is this that Althusser sets in motion, in an exercise of reading that gathers the encounters that were already there. He is not the only one in doing so, but he is undoubtedly the one who has most extended its possibilities in understanding what was at stake.

#### **Materialism IV. Primacy of the process**

In order to move forward in the specificity of a thought capable of grasping the real of politics, it is necessary to go back to Marx’s relationship with Hegel, to whom Althusser acknowledges owing the precious concept of history understood as a dialectical process of production of figures (1970). This is a big challenge while the Hegelian dialectic is teleological in its structures.<sup>11</sup> The task then consists retaining the concept of process (without Subject) by transforming it in such a way that its structure does not respond to the formula of the *negation of negation*, which exists only to

.....  
11 “...”...what irremediably stains the Hegelian conception of history as dialectical process is its teleological conception of dialectics, inscribed in the very structures of Hegelian dialectics, at an extremely precise point: *Aufhebung* ( overrunning-that-preserves-rebased-as-rebased-interiorized) expressed directly in the Hegelian category of the negation of negation (or negativity) (...) teleological because from its origins it pursues a goal (the realization of Absolute Knowledge)...” *Ibidem*, 1970a, p.104, my translation.

recover under the figure of Telos what had been denied (affirmed-denied; that is to say, crossed out) as Origin.

What is that which can be retained, that which endures as a concept, once the teleological element has been removed?

In a note that, according to Althusser, only exists in the French edition of *Capital*, he finds the a path: the word *process*, which expresses a development considered in the whole of its real conditions, has long been a part of the scientific language... (1970, p.103). Hegel's productive legacy has a formal character so, in order to reformulate it in materialist terms, a fundamental question about the *conditions* of the process of history must be addressed. The very elaboration of this question -which brings something that has no precedent – gives rise to properly Marxist dialectics:

There is no other process than under relations: the relations of production (to which Capital is limited) and other relations (political, ideological). We have not yet fully pondered this discovery (...) Marx's *Verbindungen* release us from a "combinatory"! (...) The continent has been open for more than a hundred years. The only ones who have been able to penetrate it are the militants of the revolutionary struggle (Idem, p. 109, my translation).

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"Conditions" has the status of a concept that can only be weighed with the necessary rigor in the real political struggle. Only militants, in their political thinking and practice, have put Marxist dialectics in motion, writes Althusser in 1963 (cf. 2005, pp.87-119).

The product of this intuition is the implementation, in 1964, of the Freudian notion of *overdetermination*, which takes shape as a concept of the materialist dialectics in the framework of the effort of thinking about history in terms of positive processes of material complex articulation, where the points of rupture – or of reproduction – are conceived in terms of a displaced-condensation of material and imaginary elements. This renders historical processes thinkable as movements of a non-concentric complexity; or, in other words, as a *processual and contradictory objectivity* of history that is produced as a continuous exceptionality and requires a legality of the exception (2005, pp. 87.119). That processual necessity of contingency that Althusser places in the core of materialist dialectics, is named with the Freudian category of overdetermination with which he points towards the complexity of the historical totality.<sup>12</sup> And "conditions" is a theoretical concept grounded in the very "essence" of this theoretical object: the concrete-complex-whole.

.....

12 A (complex, real, structured) whole different from a (concentric, ideal, expressive) totality; but also different from an additive multiplicity of plural elements. A whole that is a relation of relations and not an empirical multiplicity of dispersed elements.

These *conditions* are, in fact, “these conditions are no more than the very existence of the whole in a determinate ‘situation’, the ‘current situation’ of the politician, that is, the complex relation of reciprocal conditions of existence between the articulations of the structure of the whole” (2005, p.207). *Overdetermination* is the concept of structural causality which makes it possible to think of these “conditions” as both existing conditions and as conditions of existence; this is to say, that the actual existence of the whole inhabits in them, not by an expressive connection with “Truth”, but as the absent cause that works in the “displacements” and “condensations” that constitute the complex and real condition of that whole. In this sense, the efficacy of politics is not an accident but the deductive consequence of the axiom that poses the primacy of the relations of production over the forces of production and by virtue of the primacy of relations, superstructural relations must be considered *not* as phenomena of the structure but as its “conditions” of existence (*id.*, p. 208).

The reference to the work of “condensation” and “displacement” as an inherent activity of every “formation” and as its mark in the conjuncture, is read by Althusser in de Mao, just as he develops in “On the Materialist Dialectic” (cf. 2005, pp.161-218), but it reveals the trace of his reading of Freud, who recognizes these operations in the oneiric work, as a ciphering mechanism of dream’s formations (1994).

A path could thus be opened to approach to what we call here the *real of politics*, as was suggested by Althusser in his interview with Fernanda Navarro (2005), where history appears as the *unconscious* of philosophy. This means that “the real” is neither a “given” nor an Origin, but both an effect and an activity of resistance to the constitutive repression of the mythical condition that actively participates in every social “reality”, in the form of its historical experience.<sup>13</sup>

“Conditions,” Althusser affirms, does not indicate a series of “empirical concepts” that would result from a “verification of what exists”; rather, it is the mark of an apodicticity that makes from the thought of what exists (delimited as thought of the real, by the real of thought) its own theoretical horizon. The real of history is not a “state of affairs”, but the effect of the repression of the historical relational complex by (hegemonically idealist) theory and the activity of resistance to it. An open objectivity capable of taking seriously the transformative efficacy of politics – as practice and as thought. A legality of history characterized by its tendential and non-judicial condition.

To move forward, even if only by tentatively, it is interesting to follow the Spinozian trail in Althusser’s thought, towards his last writings, where the relationship with Hegel -and therefore with Spinoza- is taken

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<sup>13</sup> In this sense, it marks the working relationship proposed by the Marxist conception of science, such as the distance between experience and experimentation. In this regard, Pêcheux, 2015.

up again: "Certainly a Marxist cannot carry out the detour through Spinoza without regretting it. For the adventure is dangerous and no matter what is done, Spinoza will always lack what Hegel gave to Marx: contradiction" (1975, p. 55). In this regard, Mariana De Gainza stresses the old criticisms launched by Pierre Bayle (1647 -1706) to Spinoza who "would have performed the monstrous prodigy of making contradiction the very principle of reality" (Gainza, 2007, pp-41-42).<sup>14</sup> This discovery of a form of contradiction in Spinoza, which de Gainza points out in Bayle, converges with Balibar, who finds a sort of "logic of *coincidence oppositorum*" in Spinoza's philosophy (2009, p. 146).

Althusser fails to perceive contradiction in Spinoza's philosophy when he interrogates it in relation to science, even though he puts it to work when he thinks about politics through Spinoza. But the Althusserian reading of Spinoza, with Althusser and beyond him, aims to take for materialism, the place of contradiction. The immanence proposed by Hegel's philosophy, processual and anti-subjectivist, remains trapped in the circle of teleological unfolding and does not allow us to think the real of overdetermined contradiction; Spinoza's, on the other hand, clears the way for it.

Balibar enables us to move forward into the analysis of this critical condition, with his characterization of psychoanalysis and Marxism as "conflictive" sciences. The key to understanding the type of relationship established between objectivity and conflict that the Althusserian problematic seeks to make visible, is found in them.

"schismatic sciences", that is: determined in their very constitution by the way in which they are inscribed in the conflict whose knowledge they represent. Sciences that, far from subscribing to the subjectivist figure of contemplation, are not spectators of an object, but rather parts in play in a conflictual process. (Balibar, 1991, p.79).

When Althusser develops his conception of reproduction, he reaches an idea that assumes a sort of contradiction, according to Balibar (1991, p.71) which assumes that all structural continuity is the necessary effect of an irreducible contingency in which, at every moment resides the latent possibility of a crisis. This movement describes a sort of contradiction or paradox because, on the one hand, it sustains an invariance: the conditions of production are themselves incessantly reproduced in such a way as to ensure the structural continuity of the mode of production. But to the extent that Althusser develops the complexity of the Marxist topic -of which he recognizes its descriptive value, but points out its explanatory insufficiency – and advances in the

.....  
14 "Spinoza's God is, therefore, a being opposed and contrary to himself, who feels at the same time love and hatred, joy and sadness, who affirms and denies at the same time the same things and is responsible for the most sublime that man realizes and, at the same time, for the most perverse and evil. A God who 'thinks believes and wills one thing in me, but believes, thinks and wills the exact opposite in another.'" De Gainza, 2007., pp.41-42, my translation)

superstructural relations, to rediscover in them the space of the class struggle (for the power of the state and its apparatuses), the argument is transformed, turns on itself, by virtue of the primacy of the relations (of the relations of production over the productive forces and of the superstructural relations as conditions of existence of the infrastructure). Instead of grounding historical variations in an invariance, he assumes that all (relative) invariance presupposes a relation of forces. Thus, the paradoxical condition Balibar finds operating in the problem of reproduction is that of a *conflictual objectivity*:

...the specificity of the Althusserian concept of social reproduction (...) produces for us the ambivalent effect of an opening of Marxist theory at the very moment in which, literally, Althusser does nothing more than reveal its limits. (...) this specificity immediately communicates with what is undoubtedly Althusser's fundamental ontological proposal, that which identifies in general and at all costs, the notions of "struggle" and "existence" (Balibar, 1991, p.73, my translation).

This idea refers to the expression repeated by Althusser in various writings: the class struggle is not an effect (derived) from the existence of social classes, class struggle and the existence of classes are one and the same thing (cf.1973). Class struggle is at the very core of Marxist theory because it allows us to understand the "fusion" between the workers' movement and Marx's theory, according to Althusser, because Marxist theory is fully involved in this struggle, in its discoveries and in its gaps and contradictions (cf.1978). This phrase, which is often identified as a mark of the abandonment of Althusserian theoretician deviation, after the episodes of '68, and that refers to another expression from the seventies, that I have already quoted (*vide supra*, Part IV), can be found in the early pages of *Lire le Capital*: "What philosophers who are able to pose *Capital* the question of its object and of the specific difference that distinguishes Marx's object from the object of Political Economy, classical or modern, have read *Capital* and posed it this question? The only philosophers ready to take *Capital* for an object worthy of a philosopher's concern could long only be Marxist militants" (Althusser and Balibar, 1970b, pp. 76-77).

### Concluding remarks

From the critique of epistemology to philosophy as an intervention in a field of struggle, the question of politics thus brings us back to the problem of the theoretical: how could this happen other than in a circular sense?



To get out of the circular space, it is necessary to note that, in the Althusserian problematic, such as it is read and developed by Balibar, the concept of class is in itself the bearer of an ambivalence and must be conceived simultaneously in the two meanings with which Althusser plays it out: as a historical concept and standing for the philosophical name for identity (the *idem est ac*, or the *tauton gar esti* of the philosophers) which is the equivalent of saying that identity is division, poses Balibar (1991) in a footnote: “...*pugnare idem est ac existere*, the ideal Spinoza would have said.” (1991, not2 21).

In “Marxisme et lutte de classes” (1976), Althusser puts it with an axiom that organises both his materialist position in the philosophical field, and the materialist principle underpinning his theory of reproduction: “Althusser states it with an axiom that organizes both his materialist position in the philosophical field and the materialist principle that sustains his theory of reproduction: class struggle is not an derived effect from the existence of classes: class struggle and the existence of classes are one and the same thing. And according to him, this is the decisive clue to understand *Capital*. When read “from the point of view of the class struggle” *Capital* ceases to be a theory of political economy: Marx gave back in scientific theory what he had received in political experience ( (Althusser, 1976).

As Vittorio Morfino (2014) has shown, the thesis of the primacy of class struggle over the existence of classes can be translated in abstract terms into the thesis of the primacy of relations over their elements. But this endows the concept of “relation” with a constitutive conflictuality – which means that *relations* cannot be conceived, in this framework, in the classical sociological terms of “social bonds”. Consequently, the entire philosophical tradition that bases the question of politics on the antecedence of the social bond – whether this is perceived as a natural anthropological tendency or as the artificial sociability of the institution – remains in crisis; and so is the identification of economic determination with a new essentialism and an “absorption of the political in the social”, as we read in Casanova (*vide supra*, Part I).

In the paradox of this relational, historical and conflictive objectivity whose path of exploration Althusser opens up, Balibar develops the gravitation of Spinozian philosophy, in which the classic alternative “of ‘nature’ and ‘institution’ is displaced, which forces us to pose the problem of the social relation differently.” (2008, p.77) Wherein does this “problem” consist? In that both “natural sociability” (of Aristotle, Bossuet or Marx) and in the “sociability of the institution” (of Hobbes, Kant or Rousseau), sociability is understood in the same way, despite opposing anthropological considerations: “...it is the assumption that sociability is a bond which ‘unites’ men, expressing their reciprocal need, and their ‘friendship’ (...) and that society is the order through which they live out this bond made good” (*id.*, p.78 ) With Spinoza, on the



other hand, the possibility of thinking an aporetic sociability opens up: rational-passional, of obedience and freedom, a process in permanent transformation and equilibrium of combination and struggle.

Sociability is therefore the unity of real agreement and imaginary ambivalence both of which have real effects. Or to put it in another way, the unity of contraries *la unidad de los contrarios* – of rational identity *and* affective variability but also of the irreducible singularity of individuals and the “similarity” of human behavior – is nothing other than what we refer to as society. The classical concept of social bond” and the alternative between nature and human institutions are thus rendered wholly inadequate (Balibar, 2008, p. 88).

In what way, by means of what concepts can we deploy the thesis that the class struggle is the midwife of history? Or, of what use is Marx for us today?

What this long lucubration allows us to think is that when theory confronts politics, it confronts its own limits. And from there, the development of this connection-disjunction of theory and politics, calls for philosophical reflection, producing theoretical critique and the vacillation of metaphysics; and triggering, once again, renewed theoretical processes in their complexity. To think politics can only be, Althusser will say, reading Machiavelli, to think politically; that is, in the crisis of thought. Marxist theory is not, strictly speaking, a “Social Science” although it allows us to think about social processes, but neither is it a “Political Philosophy” although it allows us to think about the inherence of conflict in the social fabric. Rather, it is a “schismatic science” of history, where politics is not an object of science but a force in science, based on persevering in the question of the possibility of a social objectivity; a field in which the critique of metaphysics and politics meet; a “revolutionary science” and a theoretical thinking in torsion with it.

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**Ultimate Grounds,  
Political Power,  
Philosophical  
Intervention:  
Inheriting the  
Tractatus  
theologico-politicus**

**Martin Saar**

**Abstract:** Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus* was written during an interruption of the writing of the *Ethics*. The book reacts to immediate political problems of the time in a radical philosophical way. This change of registers or of the mode of writing, from pure theory to intervention, provides an occasion to rethink the relation between politics and philosophy. It might even contain a model still valid today for understanding philosophy in general as a critical practice.

**Keywords:** Enlightenment, knowledge, plurality, power, religion, Spinoza, state.

My favorite feature of Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, published clandestinely and anonymously almost exactly 350 years ago, first in 1669 (the covers say 1670), is how it came into being; its status as an interruption of the *Ethics*. According to the biographical evidence available, around 1665 Spinoza felt that his own philosophical system that was about to emerge from his manuscript that was to become the *Ethics* could wait, and that the times called for a different and more focused philosophical intervention.<sup>1</sup> Could we imagine other 'great' philosophers, fully aware of the significance of their main work, setting aside a manuscript of this ambition and scope, in order to intervene into the much more contextual and restricted political and theological debates of the time? Could we imagine Descartes, Hume or Kant bringing their main philosophical work to a halt for the sake of a more direct engagement?

But then we can easily imagine Wittgenstein, Sartre, or Arendt, doing this, setting aside the purely theoretical in favor of the occasional and urgent. Because this is what Spinoza must have felt, the urgency not only of a theoretical project but also of the form and the specific terms of engagement of a philosophical contribution; the task of shedding some light on questions that haunt the present. And this is where philosophy is needed most, in clearing a path, dispelling illusions and mystifications, maybe even attempting to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle.

For Spinoza, attacking some untruths for a few year interlude seemed more urgent than establishing the other and more eternal truth of his own philosophy. Which were these untruths and which mystifications did they imply? And did their critique lead to solutions or reassurance, or to new worries and concerns? And on what grounds could they be addressed? Let me recapitulate, briefly and carelessly, some of the steps of the arguments in the first and the second part of the *Treatise* and let me suggest some broad gestures concerning the question why this still matters and whether these concerns continue to haunt us and our present, maybe similarly in need of philosophical intervention. So

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<sup>1</sup> Nadler 2011.

these remarks will refer, first, to theology, second, to politics, and third, to their point of conjuncture, what has been called the theologico-political complex which might be just another name for what constitutes, in any given period, the reigning politics of knowledge.

### **Theology, or ultimate authority**

The first and much longer part of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* famously deals with the strained relationship between theology and philosophy, and the claims to know proponents of both raise. Since Protestant Christianity, and particularly Calvinism, the dominant confession in the social world Spinoza was sharing, is a religion of the Book and of the authority of scripture, Spinoza has to address the authority and status of the Bible and its interpretation, and he has to comment on the nature and the grounds of the Christian tenets of faith.<sup>2</sup> Asking what we know when we read the Bible faithfully, also means to ask how we can know what the Bible talks about even when we don't know these events and phenomena themselves, let alone first-hand: prophecy, wonders, direct communication with God.

The general answer to the question, what is the relationship between theology and philosophy, or theology and reason, is simple, even if the specifics and the logics of Spinoza's argument are highly complex. The answer is that they are separate forms of activity, and even if it seems that they share a realm of themes and that they raise competing claims to knowledge in it, they do not. Theology is not metaphysics, religious teaching is not philosophy. The one is based on moral certainty and uses the images, metaphors and tropes to reinforce obedience to the law of God, the other tries to establish intellectual certainty with the means of the light of human reason. Where there appears to be conflict or rivalry between the teachings of theology and the teachings of philosophy, there in reality is none, since theology cannot even claim to know things in the way a philosophical doctrine tries to. The practical dimension of theology aiming at obedience and its foundation on revelation does not even make it a candidate for metaphysical truths, even if most theologians at the time thought otherwise.

The apparent conflict of truths appears to be an effect of a misunderstanding from the side of religion. The strategy of isolation and differentiation carves out a space for both activities. This operation secures, and this is might very well be the ultimate goal of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, a safe space, a right to and legitimacy of philosophical knowledge or philosophizing, also implying the right to live and to teach for an intellectual dissident or heretic like Spinoza himself.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> James 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Laerke 2020.



Let me leave out all the rather difficult questions about the alleged scope of both activities, especially in moral issues, and about the priority Spinoza sometimes seems to attribute to philosophy (in epistemic terms) sometimes to theology (on the issue of salvation). What I want to rather focus on and highlight is the methodological or metatheoretical form of Spinoza's argument. The quarrel between faith and reason is not only an age-old topos of the history of Christianity, it is a political and pressing social problem.<sup>4</sup> And it seems to lead to a full-blown conflict or war of interpretations and authorities, a sort of epistemic civil war. Theologians claiming knowledge and condemning secular or heretic views, appeal to a form of epistemic authority that would grant them a foundational, non-disputable position. But even if Protestant theology of his time invests enormous energy to establish this stance, Spinoza holds that neither the biblical teachings nor the status of Bible interpretation can accord or justify it. By dissecting these arguments or claims to authority as misleading, Spinoza can establish in a sort of immanent critique that the ambitions of theology have to be restricted to its practical side, making it a sort of important moral authority without any right to claim epistemic dominance.

Let me describe this theoretical operation in a slightly different language: Spinoza's strategy rests on a conception of the logics or forms of discourse, it analyzes and dissects epistemic claims and refers them back to their practical, pragmatic contexts and functions. This is, in a way, a discourse analysis, or even ideology critique of sorts. What it does is situating theories in their practical contexts, unmasking the non-purity, non-neutrality of supposedly objective knowledge, but not debunking the ideological or world-view dimension of certain discourses but showing this to be their main function.

For current philosophizing, following such a model might mean to be similarly critical, similarly reflexive (about one's own grounds to know) but also similarly relentless in attacking false claims to knowledge. Spinozists are non-foundationalists or anti-foundationalists in that they think that the alleged possession of ultimate foundations is not a part of the epistemic game named philosophy but something else, and worthy of philosophical rebuttal. Apply this to esotericism, conspiracy theories, but also to scientism or positivism, the wrongful invocation of neutral scientificity in areas where there is none to be had. Spinozism as applied philosophy is the systematic critique of non-epistemic claims to knowledge, of semblances of knowledge, of pseudo-knowledge.

### **Politics, or factual power**

The chapters 16 to 20 of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* are explicitly political, a contribution to political philosophy in the Hobbesian fashion, a

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<sup>4</sup> Habermas 2019.

contribution to natural law theory and to the question of the rights and the limits of the state. But also the proposals in this part still concern religion and theology, but now from a different angle, namely seen as forces that condition political rule. Again, Spinoza is taking up an issue that is ultra-relevant for the political culture of his time, namely the question whether state authorities should model themselves after religious leaders who execute the will of God. This is why ancient Jewish history is the theme of the lengthy chapters 17 and 18, but it is preceded by a free-standing, we might even say 'secular' image of the state as arising out of collective will in chapter 16. This is where Spinoza sounds like a faithful Hobbesian, with some slight differences, the most important being to call democracy the "most natural" form of state, something that comes naturally to beings with given natural powers and liberties and an inherent interest in preserving them.<sup>5</sup>

The philosophical analysis of the structure of the state makes clear that it is nothing else than a product of the joining of forces of a collective of limitedly powerful subjects, sharing and therefore increasing their overall power, as it were. This end and the need to preserve this collectively born power, constraints the state to do nothing to weaken its citizens' power and well-being. This thought is the result of a long and difficult line of arguments and leads rather directly to the demand to restrict the religious powers in their influence on politics, and it leads to a certain freedom of speech, religious belief and practice and to a certain kind of general toleration (with all the well-known disputes whether this makes Spinoza a 'liberal' in the classic sense or not).

Again, let me rephrase and highlight some elements of this philosophical construction that to me seem far-reaching even beyond their immediate application to certain religious and political discussions at the time. Spinoza is, first, a constructivist about the state, disassembling it into acts of founding and forms of establishing an order that derives from natural impulses but gains a new, completely artificial form that is in need of constant legitimation and constant affirmation by its members – there is nothing given, nothing natural, nothing self-understood about political rule and domination. Spinoza is, second, thinking from below, from the formless mass of subjects that form into a state, conceptually prioritizing what in the later *Tractatus politicus*, published right after his death in 1677, will be consistently called the *multitudo*, but the still quasi-contractualist picture of the earlier *Tractatus theologico-politicus* already contains all of its elements (this is what many call Spinoza's affirmation of 'radical' democracy).<sup>6</sup>

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5 Spinoza 2007, XVI, 11, p. 202; Lazzeri 1998.

6 Balibar 1998; Negri 2004; Israel 2009; Saar 2014.

Spinoza is, third, at the same time respecting and limiting political difference. He knows that the people forming a state or a political community *are* different, in their identities, powers, capacities (both bodily and intellectual), in their desires, urges, and interests. The process of founding a state or a community makes use of all of these differences without denying them, every power joining others adding something useful into the ultra-powerful machinery that is to emerge. But after the formation of the state, nothing would be more harmful than to hand over this machine to some with a particular creed or interest and allow them to crush the differences they take to be aberrations or heresies. Building on difference and preserving difference but within the unitary functional form of the state, this seems to be the imperative of Spinozist statecraft, and this is why the state has to treat the true-believers and the heretics alike, so that all can strive, in a whole that increases its overall power by allowing for difference in its many parts and on the many (maybe a thousand) levels and plateaus of the social.

It might have become evident why such a line of thought might still be of use today. Recommending a politics of plural constitution, of multiplicity and difference, as Spinoza does, seems astonishingly apt to describe the structure and life of hyper-differentiated, diverse societies as ours, and to recognize their main danger, namely the hegemony and privilege of some. Attacking certain ideas about the state, as he does in the chapters 16 to 20, amounts to attacking a certain ideology of homogeneity and natural order, and it means reminding the polity that its base is comprised of the many who are not one and cannot be made one except by force.<sup>7</sup> A political order capable of granting liberties and of accepting dissensus, however, will remain dynamic and processual, and this might be an endless source for individual and collective human flourishing. It is hard not to be seduced by the promise of this formula and dream of a society to come, maybe not confined by the form of the nation any more, that might live up to this aspiration.

### **The Theologico-political, or knowledge/power**

The philosopher, in 1665-1669, intervening into the religious and political debates of his time is fighting on two frontlines. Against dogmatic theology, the claims of reason and philosophy are defended. Theology's teachings are practical, not theoretical, and they are no basis for the regulation of what everyone should think. Against political rulers who take themselves to be exempt from critique, the denaturalizing analysis of the state as a composite being is another effective demystification. Political authority arises from the popular basis of the entire polity and must never be a weapon in the hands of some. A fine balance of plural freedoms and liberties, combined with a strong and functional state

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<sup>7</sup> London 2013.

apparatus that is not in the service of one group, and an encouragement of productive civil encounters is what the philosopher can propose.<sup>8</sup>

But this rational vision of politics is, now as ever, obscured by half-truths, errors and ideologies. To fight them is a war of ideas, struggling with knowledge against knowledge. In this epistemic warfare, the political realist Spinoza reckons, all parties will also rely on and use imaginary means and they will be bound by fantasies about themselves<sup>9</sup>. Philosophy as a form of critique, or a public practice of reasoning, will not deny or delegitimize these affective resources and imaginary motivations but it will deny them any unchallenged claim to generality and hegemony. It will neither justify nor respect attempts to ground the structures and rules of social life in undisputable claims to ultimate truths or in appeals to mere factual power.

Understood in this way, philosophy as an epistemic practice always already exceeds the realm of the merely academic. By methodically examining the grounds of what we know, it already intervenes into the orders and powers of its time, since claiming to know and taking the right to rule are their basis. Questioning these claims and rights is philosophy's eternal task. Putting down the manuscript containing 'his' philosophy and addressing problems within the ideological and rhetorical registers of his time, Spinoza was not leaving philosophy proper behind. He was merely using a different pen, different paper, a different style.

For philosophy today, this example can only be inherited, not imitated. At first sight, it might seem unclear what in any meaningful sense might be seen as the theology of our time, and it might even be more unlikely to think that there is a ruling ideology granting absolute legitimacy to factual political authorities. But on second thought, the parallels impose themselves. Even our modernized, rationalized and scientificized world contains pillars of absolutist and foundationalist claims to authority, as well in the realm of knowledge as in the realm of politics, many of them solidified and fortified in institutions and powerful discourses (science, the university, education, law, borders, prisons), others dispersed and ubiquitous like any real ideology (racism, sexism, exploitation, hypocrisy). Maybe now as ever, philosophy's responsibility lies with unsettling and undermining what just seems to be true, logical, natural, normal.

Philosophy, then, combats false universalities and pseudo-legitimacies. It will, rather, call for a constant collective negotiation of the universal, confronting politico-epistemic subjects with something they not already feel and know about themselves. Philosophy or public reasoning is offering them perspectives that might help them

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8 James 2020.

9 Gatens/Lloyd 1999; Sharp 2007.

overcome some of their own limitations. But this de-centering, possibly emancipatory experience has to be made, if possible, by all citizens willing and daring to enter the space of the public, or of politics proper. Here, the philosopher will have one voice among many, and s/he will try to help others finding theirs. For Spinoza, this was the moment when philosophy had to leave the study room. This is what a century later will be called ‘enlightenment’.<sup>10</sup>

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10 A first version of these remarks were presented as an introduction to a roundtable discussion on “democracy, public reasoning and the imagination” with Mogens Laerke during the online conference “Spinoza’s *TTP*: Politics, power and the imagination”, organized by Dan Taylor and Marie Wuth, Open University, London, March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

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# **“I do not utter a word”: Speech and Political Violence in Spinoza**

**Hasana Sharp**

**Abstract:** This paper examines the relationship between violence and the domination of speech in Spinoza's political thought. Spinoza describes the cost of such violence to the State, to the collective epistemic resources, and to the members of the polity that domination aims to script and silence. Spinoza shows how obedience to a dominating power requires pretense and deception. The pressure to pretend is the linchpin of an account of how oppression severely degrades the conditions for meaningful communication, and thus the possibilities for thinking and acting in common. Because it belongs to human nature to desire to share our thoughts with others, Spinoza believes that most people experience efforts to control our communication to be acutely intolerable. As a result, such unbearable violence threatens the political order that deploys it. I conclude with some speculative remarks about why, in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza consistently deploys the superlative form of the adjective *violentus* in reference to the domination of thought and speech rather than to other modes of political violence.

**Keywords:** Spinoza; Speech; Freedom; Violence; Epistemic Violence

Spinoza knew all too well that membership in a particular community is conditional upon respecting certain discursive norms. There are some things that one cannot say. There are other things that one must say. At the age of 23, several of his peers reported to the authorities of Amsterdam's Portuguese Jewish congregation that Spinoza expressed "evil opinions" and committed "monstrous deeds." We do not know whether those prohibited acts were anything other than sharing his heterodox ideas with other members of the "Talmud Torah" community. However, we can be confident that he communicated in ways that were believed to threaten the recently established immigrant community in some significant way.<sup>1</sup> After refusing to "mend his wicked ways," Spinoza was expelled from the people of Israel. Jews were forbidden from communicating with him, reading anything that he wrote, or offering him material support of any kind.<sup>2</sup> Those who were banned from the Talmud Torah were given a few hours to say goodbye to their family members and the tight-knit community into which they were born. The refusal to comply with the terms of membership resulted in a symbolic exorcism from the group, a kind of social death. As Malcolm X observes

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<sup>1</sup> On Spinoza's excommunication, see Nadler 1999, Ch. 6 and 2001. Nadler argues that Spinoza's views may have been, first and foremost, a political threat to the community, which needed to remain in the good graces of local authorities. The excommunication was a disciplinary tool that safeguarded the (conditional) toleration the 17<sup>th</sup> century Amsterdam Jews enjoyed.

<sup>2</sup> On the interpretation of the significance of Spinoza's excommunication for the people of Israel today, see Cooper 2020.

in his autobiography, “The Jews read their burial services for Spinoza, meaning that he was dead as far as they were concerned.”<sup>3</sup> The social and economic costs of excommunication were sufficiently grave to secure the compliance of most people. But Spinoza, for reasons about which we can only speculate, could not obey.

Someone whose words and writings were cast out and cursed would, as we know, proceed to write a treatise that defends the virtues of a political and social order in which “everyone is permitted to think what he wishes and say what he thinks.”<sup>4</sup> He would not only defend the value of free expression, however. Spinoza declares that the harsh suppression of human communication represents the apex of political violence. As Mogens Laerke points out in his recent study, “Spinoza repeats it again and again: ‘rule over minds is considered violent;’<sup>5</sup> ‘that government which makes it a crime to hold opinions... is the most violent of all;’<sup>6</sup> ‘a government which denies everyone the freedom to say and teach what he thinks will be most violent;’<sup>7</sup> ‘the less we grant men this freedom of judgment, the more we depart from the natural condition, and the more violent the government.’<sup>8</sup>”<sup>9</sup>

It is not as though Spinoza fails to acknowledge the more obvious brutality that rulers may visit upon their people. He notes that a ruler may flagrantly disregard his own laws, “slaughter and rob his subjects,” and “rape their women.”<sup>10</sup> Why aren’t these examples of political violence in the superlative? Is the claim that repression of free thought and speech is the most acute form of state violence an uncharacteristic example of rhetorical extravagance on Spinoza’s part? Certainly, harsh censorship can land subjects on the scaffold.<sup>11</sup> But, given that human history is drenched in blood, the claim that the greatest violence a state can exercise consists in the effort to dominate minds and control tongues is a strong one.

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3 Malcolm X 1973, p. 275.

4 Spinoza 2016, p. 344. *Theological-Political Treatise* (hereafter *TTP*), Ch. XX. This is an allusion to Tacitus’ *Histories*: “rare are the happy times when we may think what we wish and say what we think.” I will proceed to cite Spinoza’s writings from *The Collected Works* vol. 1 (1985) and vol. 2 (2016). I will indicate from which work the passage is cited. For the two political treatises, I will indicate the chapter; and, for the *Ethics*, I will use the standard notation to indicate the part, proposition, demonstration, scholium, etc.

5 Spinoza 2016, p. 344. *TTP*, XX.

6 Spinoza 2016, p. 327. *TTP*, XVIII.

7 Spinoza 2016, p. 346. *TTP*, XX.

8 Spinoza 2016, p. 351. *TTP*, XX.

9 Laerke 2021, p. 90.

10 Spinoza 2016, p. 526. *TP*, IV.

11 Spinoza 2016, p. 350; *TTP*, XX.

In what follows, I will define violence according to Spinoza. With a particular understanding of violence in mind, I will outline the manifold and profound harms that follow from the domination of speech through the threat of deprivation, punishment, and death. Spinoza describes the cost of such violence to the State, to the collective epistemic resources, and to the members of the polity that domination aims to script and silence. Spinoza shows how obedience to a dominating power requires pretense and deception. The pressure to pretend is the linchpin of an account of how oppression severely degrades the conditions for meaningful communication, and thus the possibilities for thinking and acting in common. Because it belongs to human nature to desire to share our thoughts with others, Spinoza believes that most people experience efforts to control our speech as acutely intolerable. As a result, such unbearable violence threatens the political order that deploys it. I will conclude with some speculative remarks about why, in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza consistently deploys the superlative form of the adjective *violentus* in reference to the domination of thought and speech rather than with respect to other possible examples of political violence.

### Violent Forces

Before looking closely at Spinoza's political writings, let us briefly take note what "violence" means in the period and how Spinoza uses it. Similar to English, the word *violentia* in Latin implies a kind of transgression, a harmful breach of limits. Although it is often used to refer to an injustice in the early modern period,<sup>12</sup> Spinoza uses the adjective *violentus* in a broad sense to refer to potent, disruptive forces. If what makes a force violent and not simply powerful is its destructive and contrary character, it is helpful to identify, in any given deployment of the term, what it is that such a force transgresses, violates, or opposes.

We will see that, for Spinoza, a violent force is one that opposes a being's "nature." The nature of any being whatsoever, according to Spinoza, is its *conatus*, its striving to persevere in being as the kind of thing that it is.<sup>13</sup> Being tiny parts of nature, we are often subject to violence. We are inevitably and universally moved by external forces, for better and for worse. Often ambient forces act upon us in ways that sustain and amplify our power, such as when a person inhales clean

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12 For a helpful discussion of the Roman vocabulary of violence, see Winter 2018, pp. 26-29.

13 Spinoza notes that he derives his political principles from "the supreme law of nature [which] is that each thing strives to persevere in its state, as far as it can by its own power" in the *TTP*, XVI (Spinoza 2016, p. 282). Similarly, in the *Political Treatise* (hereafter *TP*), he affirms that he has "demonstrated all these conclusions from the necessity of human nature...the universal striving all men have to preserve themselves" (III/18) (Spinoza 2016, p. 524). It is clear in the *Ethics* that this principle of the *conatus*, far from being exclusive to human beings, defines the nature of anything whatsoever (EIIIp6) (Spinoza 1985, pp. 498-499). For an analysis of how the *conatus* grounds Spinoza's thought, see Bove 1996.

air or enjoys an excellent comedy. Nevertheless, it is far from rare that we undergo encounters with external agencies that contradict our striving to develop and exercise our characteristic powers. For example, someone might inhale some debris that interferes with her breathing or he might encounter a police officer who interprets his benign gestures as threatening. Encounters that interfere with one's striving to persevere in being can be described as violent, but they may be more or less distressing. Someone is unlikely to be especially angry about the particle that threatened his breathing, but he may be indignant about being treated as a threat by an agent of the state, especially if this were to occur repeatedly. The affects produced by such experiences, then, will vary in intensity depending on social patterns and the meaning we attribute to them. What is important for our purposes is just that a force can be called violent when we experience it to oppose – palpably and strongly – our particular natures. The more something is experienced as an obstacle to our fundamental striving to persevere and to exercise our characteristic powers, the more violent it will seem, and the more violently we will be inclined to oppose it.

Any affect that opposes our striving opposes, at the same time, our physical and our mental power.<sup>14</sup> The *conatus* that animates each of our minds, according to Spinoza, aims at nothing but understanding.<sup>15</sup> Our minds do not exist for the sake of our physical survival. Considered in themselves, our minds aim to amplify their thinking force, to become as capable and powerful as their natures allow. This may be why Spinoza describes even the distress provoked by the lack of a clear method as violent. He refers in the dedicatory letter to *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy* to the pain of a mind “tossed about on a violent sea of opinions.”<sup>16</sup> In the *Ethics*, he observes that “Desires which arise from affects by which we are torn are also greater as these affects are more violent.”<sup>17</sup> Violent affects torment us when they provoke strong ambivalence or confusion. We are moved this way and that, such that we feel out of control and unable to determine ourselves. Violent affects can also be unambivalent: they can be very powerful forces that push in a direction that tears us away from the ability to pursue what is genuinely to our advantage. For example, Spinoza considers a delirious experience of lust violent if the object of our desire consumes us to the point that we are unable to think of anything else.<sup>18</sup>

14 Spinoza, as is well-known, maintains that the mind and the body are “one and the same thing, but expressed in two ways” (EIIp7s; see also EIIp13). Spinoza 1985, p. 451 and p. 457.

15 Spinoza 1985, p. 559; EIIIp26.

16 Spinoza 1985, p. 225.

17 Spinoza 1985, p. 554; EIVp15s.

18 Spinoza 1985, p. 571; EIVp44s.

Love is often an enabling passion that attaches us to those things that contribute to our perseverance and thriving, as when we love our caregivers, teachers, and friends. But obsessive love, Spinoza observes, can lead to profound distortions of reality: “For we sometimes see that men are so affected by one object that, although it is not present, they still believe they have it with them.”<sup>19</sup> The same principle animates Spinoza’s description of manic passions that sustain intense attachments to superstitious doctrines. Very intense passions provoke distortions in perception, such that reading can alter one’s consciousness in a detrimental way. In Spinoza’s words:

They dream that the most profound mysteries lie hidden in the Sacred Texts, wear themselves out searching for these absurdities, neglecting the rest, which are useful. Whatever they invent in their madness they attribute to the Holy Spirit, and strive to defend with the utmost force and violent affects.<sup>20</sup>

Note that the fugue state brought about by violent affects prevents the theologians or clergy, in this example, from discovering the useful, advantageous features of the text immediately before them. Importantly, the problem with violent affects violent is not that they are passions and thereby external to our natures. Many passions are what Spinoza would call “God’s external aid.”<sup>21</sup> They come from outside but guide us toward what benefits us. A passion is only violent if it prevents us from apprehending the various forces and ideas in our milieu that contribute to our striving and the development of our powers.<sup>22</sup>

Because, according to Spinoza, it belongs to our essence to desire our own perseverance, passions that press us away from what is good for us will be volatile and unstable. Insofar as our passions do not give rise to mental and physical vitality, we will feel torn from ourselves and from each other. As Spinoza declares in the *Ethics*, “Men can disagree in nature insofar as they are torn by affects which are passions; and to that extent the same man is changeable and inconstant.”<sup>23</sup> When we are changeable and inconstant, two things become especially difficult. First, our confusion prevents us from acting in a wholehearted way, which makes us less effective and more vulnerable to fortune. Second, our changeability and volatility interfere with our ability to unite with

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<sup>19</sup> Spinoza 1985, p. 571; EIVp44s.

<sup>20</sup> Spinoza 2016, p. 170; *TTP*, VII.

<sup>21</sup> Spinoza 2016, p. 113; *TTP*, III.

<sup>22</sup> Spinoza claims that an “affect is only evil, or harmful insofar as it prevents the Mind from being able to think” (EIVp9d); Spinoza 1985, p. 601.

<sup>23</sup> Spinoza 1985, pp. 561-562; EIVp33.

others and to coordinate our powers. If a passion divides us from others or makes us feel torn, tossed about, and unable to determine ourselves, it moves us away from being able to intelligently, joyfully, and collaboratively persevere in being. Such a passion may merely be sad and debilitating, but if it's intense, vigorous, and palpably harmful, we will experience it as "violent."

We see, thus, that affects, for Spinoza, are violent insofar as they "carry us away" or "tear us apart." It should be clear by now that what we are carried away from are the means to realize our power, our given striving to act guided by fortitude, which is intelligent action that preserves us and unites us to others.<sup>24</sup> Spinoza explains that if human beings were free and guided by reason, we would require neither moral nor civil laws. We would spontaneously and wholeheartedly do what is best for ourselves and for others. But, Spinoza maintains, human beings are not typically like that. We pursue our desires often in confused, misguided, and immoderate ways, "carried away by affects of mind which take no account of the future and of other things."<sup>25</sup> Violent passions distort reality and obscure the true sources of our own power all around us. In our madness, we might not know what is present or absent; we might mistake friends for enemies, and enemies for friends; we may see harmful doctrines as beneficial, and neglect teachings that are useful.

On an epistemic level, we can observe that violent affects distort perception such that we are easily deceived about what benefits and what harms us. Violence, therefore, harms our bodies and minds at once. It diverts us from the means to preserve and enhance our power. The most important means to preserving and enhancing our being are our relationships with other people. As Spinoza remarks, "To man, then, there is nothing more useful than man."<sup>26</sup> From reason, we want nothing more than to "join forces," mental and corporeal, with others.<sup>27</sup> Spinoza notes in the *Political Treatise* that political life follows from our universal fear of solitude, and thus we all necessarily desire sociality over isolation.<sup>28</sup> A fundamental way that beings such as ourselves join forces and assuage our basic fear of solitude is to communicate to one another through speech and other means. Thus, speech, writing, and communication form the fabric (and the barriers) of political life.

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24 On the importance of fortitude for Spinoza and political life, see Stolze 2014.

25 Spinoza 2016, p. 144; *TTP*, V.

26 Spinoza 1985, p. 556; *EIVp*18s.

27 Spinoza 1985, p. 564; *EIVp*35s.

28 Spinoza 2016, p. 532; *TP*, VI. I examine this claim in depth in Sharp 2022.



## Political Violence and Human Nature

Spinoza's well-known conclusion to the *Theological-Political Treatise* exhorts his readers to appreciate the virtues of granting everyone the freedom "to think what he wishes and to say what he thinks."<sup>29</sup> Whereas Hobbes endorsed restrictions on speech to prevent civil conflict, Spinoza defends much greater latitude for the same reasons. Both thinkers were deeply concerned about the violence that religious institutions and popular mobs might incite against members of the commonwealth who communicate unorthodox or heretical views.<sup>30</sup> Hobbes advocated empowering the State with not only a monopoly on violence but a monopoly on meaning, in order to protect individuals from the chaotic violence that could erupt from any direction by virtue of intense disagreement.<sup>31</sup> Spinoza surely also worried about the civil strife and popular violence that might be aroused by superstitious enthusiasm and inflamed by zealous and power-hungry clergy. Hence, Spinoza asserts that when a government seeks to hold subjects accountable for thought crimes, "what rules most is the anger of the mob."<sup>32</sup> Yet, he rejected the solution of strictly proscribing thought and speech. The solution to popular violence prompted by doctrinal deviance, in other words, is not State violence targeting thought and speech. He promises that the effort "to make men say nothing but what [the supreme powers] prescribe" will be universally regarded as an intolerable violence and yield "the most unfortunate result."<sup>33</sup>

There are three principal ways in which the strict control of speech constitutes violence, which I will proceed to discuss in order. First, because, according to Spinoza, "men have nothing less in their power than their tongues,"<sup>34</sup> it commands humans to act contrary to how their nature compels them to be. Requiring humans to exercise control over what they say so as to say only what is prescribed is tantamount to obligating a table to eat grass.<sup>35</sup>

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29 Spinoza 2016, p. 344; *TTP*, XX.

30 As Hobbes writes in *Leviathan*, "[I]t is to be annexed to the Sovereignty, to be Judge of what Opinions and Doctrines are averse, and what conducing to Peace; and consequently, on what occasions, how farre, and what, men are to be trusted withall, in speaking to Multitudes of people; and who shall examine the Doctrines of all bookes before they be published" (L XVIII, 9); Hobbes 1996, p. 124.

31 See Abizadeh 2011. Of course the phrase "monopoly on violence" is an allusion to Max Weber's famous discussion of the State in "Politics as Vocation." Although I cannot discuss this here, Balibar rightly implies that Spinoza does not belong in this tradition, which regards violence as "asocial, illegal, and extrapolitical" (2015, p. 2).

32 Spinoza 2016, p. 327. *TTP*, XVIII.

33 Spinoza 2016, p. 345. *TTP*, XX.

34 Spinoza 1985, p. 497; *EIII*p2s.

35 Spinoza 2016, p. 526; *TP*, IV.

Second, as I will discuss in the following section, insofar as subjects manage to obey and thereby succeed at appearing to think and say only what is prescribed, they participate in a culture of pretense, deception, and falsity. When obedience and conformity are rewarded and dissent and honesty are punished, social mistrust is inevitable. A society of mistrust not only lacks the kinds of institutions that allow people to communicate freely. Mistrust is also an inevitable outcome for any collective life structured by domination. Such domination produces patterns of epistemic violence, such that those without social standing will typically be and will be targeted for repeated interrogation and, concomitantly, their testimony will also be disregarded.

Finally, I will conclude with a brief account of how the domination of thought and speech by the State also constitutes violence against itself. State action contrary to the striving of one's subjects necessarily provokes indignation. Indignation is, according to Spinoza, an inevitable collective response to violent rule, and is expressed in the desire that the rulers suffer "all sorts of bad things."<sup>36</sup> When a commonwealth is afflicted by such violence, according to Spinoza, this contradicts its own striving to persevere in being, since "it does, or allows to happen, what can be the cause of its own ruin."<sup>37</sup>

That it is contrary to human nature to expect us to exercise control over what we say, and that, therefore, the suppression of thought and speech is violent, has been widely discussed in the literature.<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, it is important to lay out the steps of Spinoza's argument. The basis lies in Spinoza's anti-voluntarism about beliefs. He maintains that humans do not have voluntary control over their beliefs and that, therefore, it is impossible to "prescribe to everyone what they must embrace as true and reject as false."<sup>39</sup> What each of us maintains as true and false – as well as our feelings of love and hate, our attachments and our aversions – follow necessarily from our particular histories of experience. Our judgments are simply the ideas that are most vivid and compelling in our minds.<sup>40</sup> Since each of us has a unique experiential history, it follows, according to Spinoza, that "men's minds differ as much as their palates do."<sup>41</sup> Human mentality and judgment is inevitably diverse and simply cannot be forced into a single mold.

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36 Spinoza 2016, p. 144; *TTP*, V.

37 Spinoza 2016, p. 527; *TP*, IV.

38 See, for example, Cooper 2006; Pitts 1986; Rosenthal 2008; Steinberg 2010. Laerke (2020) provides the most comprehensive discussion to date of the philosophical issues surrounding the freedom to philosophize.

39 Spinoza 2016, p. 344; *TTP*, XX.

40 For a rich discussion of political judgment in Spinoza, see Skeaff 2018.

41 Spinoza 2016, p. 345; *TTP*, XX.

Importantly, since we cannot but feel love toward whatever benefits us and hate toward what we perceive as a source of harm,<sup>42</sup> we cannot obey laws that command us otherwise. It belongs to the nature of finite experience to think this or that by virtue of the psychological laws of association and memory, laws that Spinoza analogizes to laws of motion. Like a physical law, our patterns of association cannot be superseded by human decision, or legislation.<sup>43</sup> In Spinoza's words:

Even though we say that men are not their own masters but are subject to the Commonwealth, we don't mean that they lose their human nature and take on another nature. Nor do we mean that the Commonwealth has the right to make men fly, or (what is equally impossible) to make men honor those things which move them to laughter or disgust.<sup>44</sup>

Institutions might aim to encourage positive associations with beneficial social practices, doctrines, or civil offices, but ruling powers cannot effectively command what is not subject to voluntary control. Efforts to strictly prescribe opinions, judgements, and affects will necessarily be experienced as opposed to our particular strivings, and thus as violent.

The notion of human nature in Spinoza is necessarily controversial. His arguments from human nature may make the reader conscious of nothing so much as the remoteness of Spinoza's thought from our own. But whatever human nature is, for Spinoza, it certainly does not entail that we all honor, admire, or detest the same things; it entails precisely the contrary. Spinoza's claim about how humans retain their nature serves to endorse a context-sensitive understanding of political rule, à la Machiavelli, according to which one must recognize the habits, customs, values, and collective modes of thinking proper to a particular group in order to avoid arousing their acute resentment.<sup>45</sup>

Nevertheless, humans do have characteristic powers, which include the power of the mind to exercise reason, to understand things as they really are. Because it belongs to our minds to strive for reason, to aim to see things in terms of their relationships and their common properties, we will also resist doctrines that contradict our understanding.<sup>46</sup> So, even if it is rare to act primarily from reason, and even if our understanding is necessarily partial, we cannot but strive to improve it as much as

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42 Spinoza 1985, p. 507; EIIp22s.

43 Spinoza 2016, p. 126; *TTP*, IV.

44 Spinoza 2016, pp. 526-527; *TP*, IV.

45 On Spinoza and Machiavelli, see Del Lucchese 2011 and Morfino 2018.

46 On reason, see Spinoza 1985; EIIp29 and EIIp38-40. Sangiacomo provides an interesting recent discussion of reason 2020.

our powers and circumstances allow. Thus, commands to adopt certain doctrines will necessarily produce intense conflict in our minds, if those doctrines do not cohere with what we think we understand about the nature of reality and human life. If there are forces that seem systematically to interfere with our ability to understand and to strive toward what we consider to be in our vital interest, we will experience this, too, as violent. The more vehemently norms, rules, and laws block our efforts to understand, to join our minds to those of others, and to desire in a wholehearted and constant way, the more violent we will find them.

More unusual and perhaps contentious than his anti-voluntarism about beliefs and affects is Spinoza's anti-voluntarism about speech. Spinoza argues that, if it is very difficult to command beliefs, it is even more difficult to control speech. Humans are just not the kind of beings that are skilled at secrecy.

Not even the wisest know how to keep quiet, not to mention ordinary people. It's a common vice of men to confide their judgments even when secrecy is needed. So a government which denies everyone the freedom to say and teach what he thinks will be most violent. But when a government grants everyone this freedom it will be moderate.<sup>47</sup>

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza associates the inability to keep quiet with drunks and gossips, but we see in the *Theological-Political Treatise* that neither are the wise able to avoid communicating their judgments. Indeed, the wise and honest, according to Spinoza, find it *most intolerable* to conceal or misrepresent their judgements. Underlying our inability to keep our thoughts, judgments, and feelings to ourselves is, I think, not only our incontinence but the potency of our desire to teach others. It belongs to human thinking to strive to share our thoughts, to join the thinking of others, and to make our point of view shared rather than isolated or anomalous. Both the *Ethics* and the *Political Treatise* point to how we desire from reason "to compose, as it were, one Mind"<sup>48</sup> and "wishes to be led, as if by one mind,"<sup>49</sup> so that together we can pursue the common advantage.

Political efforts to dictate our thoughts and words are predicated on a faulty understanding of human self-control. Our feelings and opinions escape us. Even when we live under an acute threat of State or popular violence, we inevitably expose our points of view and encourage others

47 Spinoza 2016, p. 346; *TTP*, XX.

48 Spinoza 1985, p. 556; *EIVp18s*.

49 Spinoza 2016, p. 532; *TP*, VI/1. Variation on this phrase appear several times in the *Political Treatise*. For an excellent discussion of the "one mind" in Spinoza, see Balibar 2005.

to share them with us. Of course, the Jewish community into which Spinoza was born spent generations practicing their faith in secret in full awareness that this could result in family separation, exile, torture, or death. Spinoza exposed his views and refused to recant them, even though it cost him his relationships to his surviving siblings and most everyone he had ever known.<sup>50</sup> Spinoza and his circle wrote and circulated texts at significant risk to themselves. Famously, Adrian Koerbagh paid for his inability to keep his judgments private with his life.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps especially when we are animated by a desire to communicate the means to salvation and happiness, humans will teach what we believe no matter what the cost.

The desire to persuade is part of what makes us experience the regulation of thought and speech as oppressive and violent. Spinoza makes clear that the pain of being forced to conceal one's thoughts is a violence that no one should have to endure. Yet we can also see how the desire to persuade and encourage ideological conformity is both an inevitable feature of social life and a source of political violence. In other words, the violent contradiction of our natural striving itself follows from a tendency of human nature. Oppressive and violent rule expresses the ambitious and, according to Spinoza, universal desire to have others think like us, to approve and disapprove as we do.<sup>52</sup> But since our minds are inevitably diverse and our desire to share them is universal, a conflict resides at the heart of human nature. As Laerke emphasizes in his recent study, our diverse complexions and our universal desire to join others to us entails that we require institutional means to manage, at the same time, our expressive/ persuasive needs and our inevitable disagreement.<sup>53</sup> But if a State – or another common institution, such as the church or the family<sup>54</sup> – does not allow dissent and complaint, it leaves them only two choices: pretense or punishment. Spinoza tries to persuade his reader that either option is disastrous.

### Domination and Deception

At a crucial moment in the famous concluding chapter to the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza alludes to a line from Terence's comedy *Andria*. Spinoza invites his reader to imagine that the freedom to think and speak

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50 Nadler 1999 suggests that Spinoza likely welcomed being liberated from the family business, but it is difficult to imagine that being severed from all of his remaining family and everyone else he had known until that point was not a tremendous cost to pay for being able to speak his mind.

51 See Nadler 1999 (Ch. 7) and Montag 2002.

52 See the various remarks on ambition in the *Ethics*. For an analysis of how ambition is a source of both conflict and collective power, see Cooper 2013, Ch. 3.

53 Laerke 2021.

54 I discuss Spinoza's praise of family quarrel at length, in Sharp 2018.

would be subject to command so effective that no one would “dare mutter anything except what the supreme powers prescribe.”<sup>55</sup> Spinoza, here, alludes to an exchange between a *paterfamilias* and a slave charged with serving his young adult son.<sup>56</sup> Simo, the paternal authority, suspects that his slave is engaged in some kind of plot on behalf of his son, and threatens the slave with punishment and death if he discovers the scheme. A sincere explanation of the son’s desire to evade the marriage plans his father has arranged, however, could yield punishment or death for his young master to whom the servant is devoted. Davus, the slave, has no good options and must navigate a complex terrain of dangers. Davus, as Terence draws the character, aims to serve faithfully the family with whose reproduction and care he is charged, but the relations of domination do not allow him to enlist others openly in bringing about desirable ends. Thus, in response to Simo’s efforts to extort a confession that he is lying, a confession that would be his doom, Davus speaks the line to which Spinoza alludes: “I dare not utter a word.”

Terence is presumed to have been a slave himself, and part of the comedy of the *Andria* follows from how the master cannot know what to believe as a consequence of how the enslaved person’s speech is constrained.<sup>57</sup> Terence, in this exchange, represents the futility of demanding the truth with threats to the other’s freedom or life. The slave’s speech is always, by virtue of his station, heavily burdened by the strategic context, which is easily recognizable by everyone involved. Words become instruments for satisfying or diverting the master. Under threat, speech is not communicative; it cannot be the means by which two minds are joined to one another.

In the comedies of Plautus, an especially successful Roman playwright, the trickster slave is a stock character. A classic example is the play *Pseudolus*, meaning liar, named after the deceptive enslaved protagonist. In Plautus’s comedies, the trickster slave allows the audience to laugh at the temporary and carnivalesque subversion of power relations. The audience can enjoy the foolish master and even root for the subordinate, especially since the comedy form promises a happy ending that preserves rather than threatens the Roman family. The trickster is a kind of *deus ex machina* whose masterful art of deception makes anything possible.<sup>58</sup> Terence modifies the conventions of domestic comedy, however, to represent the slave more naturalistically, and to

55 Spinoza 2016, 349; *TTP*, XX.

56 As Curley points out in his editorial notes, it is a reference to line 505 of *Andria*: “*itaque hercle nil iam muttire audio.*”

57 Terence 1992. Like many Roman plays, *Andria* is a translation, with some adaptation, of a Greek original. Interestingly, Machiavelli also translated this play into the vulgate Italian.

58 On Plautus, see Hunt 2017, Ch. 11.

convey some of the difficulties that belong to a life in servitude to the Roman family. In contrast to Plautus, Terence's slaves are not effective deceivers. The happy outcomes are credited not to the supernatural powers of the trickster slave, but instead to the invisible forces of fortune. The domestic slave is portrayed as inhabiting an ambiguous and nearly impossible position. On the one hand, the slave is entrusted with a family's secrets and charged with its care. On the other hand, the shadow cast by the master's arbitrary power makes trust impossible to establish. Someone enslaved may need to conceal anything that displeases a master, in order to preserve her or himself.<sup>59</sup>

Spinoza's allusion to Terence appears at precisely the point in his argument where he is explaining how speech burdened by domination leads to widespread deception. Spinoza points to how practices of political domination and efforts to severely restrict speech yield pervasive mistrust and force the dominated to conceal their judgments, motives, and aims. Speech constrained by threats of deprivation, punishment, or death yield a corrupt social world, replete with treachery: "the necessary consequence would be that every day men would think one thing and say something else."<sup>60</sup>

Spinoza, like other republicans, points out repeatedly that arbitrary and oppressive rule contribute to treachery, deception, and sycophancy.<sup>61</sup> Like the master of a slave, a ruler cannot trust his advisors when they operate under the weight of severe threat. Beneath the thumb of capricious rule, the safest route is to flatter, reassure, and endorse whatever the ruler already thinks. There is an epistemic cost to a ruler, since they will not benefit from the knowledge of their advisors or servants. Spinoza underlines in both of his political treatises how rule is solitary and precarious when others fear sharing what they really think with those in power.<sup>62</sup>

Spinoza seeks to persuade his readers that sovereign power is less secure when it is hostile to frank speech. There is no truth in a commonwealth of pretenders, which can only be a theater of pretense, flattery, and deception. The conditions for the collective production of adequate ideas are weak. At the same time, Spinoza acknowledges that the cost is not only to those in power. Part of what is violent and ruinous about burdening speech with the threat of deprivation, punishment, and death is that, under such oppression, subjects' livelihood and lives depend upon knowing "how to pretend to be what they're not." Under such circumstances, communication is arguably not performing

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<sup>59</sup>These brief remarks on the *Andria* draw upon the analysis of McCarthy 2004.

<sup>60</sup> Spinoza 2016, p. 349; *TTP*, XX. See also Laerke 2021, Ch. 6.

<sup>61</sup> Skinner 1998, pp. 88-93.

<sup>62</sup> For more on this, see Sharp 2022.



an epistemic function at all. Strict censorship is a demand for verbal expressions of obedience. If speech directed at political or other authorities is constrained by a short menu of possibilities, the speaking subject occupies a tactical situation that renders her literally incredible. The experience of being confronted and required to comply in words is especially common among groups that are marginalized or dominated. In 17<sup>th</sup> century Amsterdam, if you belong to a minority religious group, a recent immigrant community, or you associate with free thinkers, you will find yourself more often under suspicion from the State and other authorities. The ability to navigate the social context to avoid punishment, Spinoza laments, demands that you know how to pretend. Clearly, Spinoza thinks this is repugnant to a virtuous and honest person whose beliefs are constant and firm. Spinoza also claims that the more we enjoy the power to reason, the more we desire to participate in a community of thought with others.<sup>63</sup> Thus, the demand to keep quiet will be particularly unbearable to those whose thoughts are clear and powerful, by virtue of which they cannot but desire to join their minds to those of others.

Many thinkers reflecting upon oppression have emphasized how profoundly diminishing it is to be constantly suspected of dishonesty, to be addressed as someone whose thoughts and testimony are suspicious or invalid. The relation between a master and a slave or between a despotic ruler and a subject is one of domination; it involves an acute power differential that explicitly and radically constrains the possibilities of communication. Gayatri Spivak famously names systematic barriers to being heard and believed, which can be severe for the least powerful, “epistemic violence.”<sup>64</sup> Histories of domination, Spinoza helps us to see, produce the epistemic violence that leads to phenomena such as what Kristi Dotson calls “testimonial smothering.” Extending Spivak’s notion of epistemic violence, Dotson focuses on how frustrating and dangerous communicative contexts produce patterns of silencing and self-silencing among disadvantaged groups. On the one hand, if you are a member of a group that has been stereotyped as ignorant or unreliable, your expertise and experience are less likely to be sought and more likely to be dismissed. On the other hand, as a member of a marginalized group, you may withhold your own knowledge due to the perceived dangers burdening your speaking context. Dotson describes how women of color, aware of how racism and sexism structure their credibility as speaking subjects, will sometimes smother their own testimony in anticipation of the costs of frank speech.<sup>65</sup>

Importantly, these situations of epistemic violence reflect social

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<sup>63</sup> Spinoza 1985, pp. 529-530; EIIIp59s.

<sup>64</sup> Spivak 1988.

<sup>65</sup> Dotson 2011.

and political conditions, past and present practices of domination. Epistemic violence does not follow from mere prejudice or ignorance; it is a property of domination. Dominating social conditions – understood as conditions in which groups or individuals are subject to the arbitrary, uncontrolled power of others – practically and logically require distrust.<sup>66</sup> Spinoza refers to the enslaved person who dare not utter a word to a suspicious master, and to the political dissident whose honest advice may land him on the rack. But there are numerous examples in social and political life, past and present, in which the acute vulnerability of the speaker to violence or deprivation radically undermines the possibility of genuine communication. Imagine being questioned at the end of a soldier's rifle, or on the other end of a police officer's gun. Think of the many employees who can be fired at will for criticizing their employer or for communicating their genuine opinions or feelings to a customer. Consider an early modern bourgeois woman who must marry or join a convent for the material means to survive. In marriage, Mary Astell observes bitterly, it is considered "a Wife's Duty to suffer everything without Complaint."<sup>67</sup> In the convent, of course, one's words and deeds are carefully proscribed. There are many social circumstances in which one risks a great deal by complaining, objecting, or even reacting in a sincere way to something unpleasant or terrifying. But it is not a coincidence that those with lower social status or less social power will more often find themselves in a context where they are asked to use their words or gestures to communicate their compliance rather than their thoughts. And it is precisely their lack of status and power that defines the risks entailed by their honesty. They are asked to affirm those in power, to "bow and scrape,"<sup>68</sup> or else to suffer the consequences. It is thus not everyone equally but especially the less powerful who will be regarded as sneaky, wily, deceptive, or frivolous.<sup>69</sup>

When Spinoza describes liars and sycophants, he most obviously points to ambitious men "contemplating money in their coffers and having bloated bellies." He suggests that those in power will not be served by their own laws, because their courts will be populated by those without integrity, who treat words as mere instruments to secure

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<sup>66</sup> I am drawing upon the understanding of domination current upon neo-Republicans, such as Petit 1997. There are features of this discourse that are not compatible with Spinoza but discussing them is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>67</sup> Astell 1996, p. 18.

<sup>68</sup> This a common allusion to Wollstonecraft 1796.

<sup>69</sup> Bettcher 2007 offers a compelling analysis of how transphobia often takes the form of regarding transgender people as dishonest, "evil deceivers." In this case, it is not only one's words but one's social appearance that is understood by some to violate accepted terms of signification. Transphobic demands to dress to signify sex in a particular way is likewise an intolerable form of epistemic violence that contributes to other expressions of violence. Of course, transphobic laws and norms are also an oppressive demand to pretend, to appear in a way that contradicts one's self-understanding.

comfort and influence. He warns that “flattery and treachery would be encouraged,” since the vicious will simply say whatever will bring them the most profit.<sup>70</sup> But it is the powerless who have the most to lose if they “don’t know how to pretend what they are not.” And when one is a member of what we might anachronistically call an “over-policed” community,<sup>71</sup> one is more often confronted and required to engage in such pretense. In particular, members of less powerful groups are forced to make respectful gestures to the powers that dominate them. And they are admonished not to complain even as they are beaten or threatened with exile, death, or imprisonment.

Spinoza warns those in power that demanding such intolerable servility will be a danger to the State, because the people cannot help but admire those who refuse to engage in such debasing rituals. Spinoza argues that someone who enjoys strength of mind will find pretense especially painful and will also be less likely to fear punishment, including death. This claim coheres with his claim in the *Ethics* that “a free man” does not act deceptively insofar as he is free. If a free person were to save himself from present danger through deceit, he would agree with others only in word but not in fact.<sup>72</sup> Steven Nadler interprets this passage to explain why Spinoza would endorse such a counter-intuitive claim. If it belongs to our essence to strive to persevere in being, why wouldn’t it be rational to lie to escape a dangerous situation? He argues that freedom, for Spinoza, does not only follow from the striving to preserve our being. Freedom entails striving to preserve a particular kind of nature, one which is defined by our desire for intellectual perfection. Importantly, developing this power depends upon being able to forge commonalities with others, which Spinoza describes as “agreements in nature.” Therefore, since deception involves agreeing “only in words” while opposing one another in fact, it contradicts the possibility of agreeing in nature. The free person, according to Nadler, will not deceive, since the free person strives not just for duration but for perfection. And perfection depends upon being able to join together with others.<sup>73</sup>

Nadler is right that, according to Spinoza, humans strive not only to live but to perfect their natures, the powers characteristic of their being. Likewise, he rightly observes that deception is a form of separation, which is antagonistic to the project of joining together that reason recommends. But notice that, if one is confronted with the “the present danger of death” that could be avoided only by a lie, one is likely in a

70 Spinoza 2016, p. 349; *TTP*, XX.

71 Nadler 2001 suggests that it is precisely the Talmud Torah’s worries about scrutiny and sanctions from Dutch authorities that motivated their excommunication of Spinoza.

72 Spinoza 2016, p. 586; *EIVp*72.

73 Nadler 2016.

situation in which someone is threatening your life with the exercise of arbitrary power. This describes domination rather than freedom. There is little to no possibility of using words to join the mind of the person threatening you. You are opposed in fact, and words cannot align you. Situations in which it is very difficult, if not impossible, to come together with words due to pervasive dangers are not uncommon in social and political life. And no amount of virtue can reliably rescue us from them as long as domination is unchecked. Spinoza's only assurance is that unchecked domination will turn the scaffold into a stage, where the exceptionally honest will perform their virtue by accepting death rather than dishonesty. He claims that such a display of sovereign power can only be regarded as antagonistic to the common welfare and thus as violent. And he promises, "no one has sustained a violent rule for long."

### Uncontrolled Power

Finally, let us reflect briefly on Spinoza's suggestion that the State exercise of intolerable violence is self-defeating, and thereby a kind of violence against itself. Spinoza seems to accept the need for institutions that are upheld by force and to acknowledge that the establishment of civil order often occurs through bloody violence. He does not treat violence as some kind of unnatural eruption that might be overcome by reason, or which might be monopolized and controlled exclusively by a State's repressive apparatus. Nevertheless, when he acknowledges that the State necessarily relies upon force, he also reminds his reader that "human nature does not allow itself to be compelled in everything." He proceeds to issue the warning mentioned above, citing Seneca's tragedy, *Troades* (*The Trojan Women*): "no one has sustained a violent rule for long; moderate ones last." Even if a State must have recourse to force, those who rule by terrorizing their subjects, motivating obedience with threats of deprivation, punishment, or death, will themselves live in fear. Their subjects "can't help wanting bad things to happen to [them]; when they can, they help to bring [them] about."<sup>74</sup> When he alludes to Seneca another time in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, he maps this same line directly onto his declaration that the suppression of speech is the greatest possible expression of violent rule. "[A] government which denies everyone the freedom to say and teach what he thinks will be most violent. But when a government grants everyone this freedom, its rule will be moderate."<sup>75</sup>

In Seneca's play, the line is spoken by Agamemnon. His men have decisively conquered Troy, and yet there are further demands for Trojan blood. The Trojan men have died in battle or fled, but the women and

74 Spinoza 2016, p. 144; *TTP*, V.

75 Spinoza 2016, p. 346; *TTP*, XX.

children have been distributed among the Greek victors for destinies that will be chosen for them.<sup>76</sup> Achilles, from the grave, demands the sacrifice of a young Trojan woman who was promised to him when he was alive. Calchas, a Greek prophet, advises the death of the young heir to the Trojan throne so that he does not grow up and seek revenge. The play features the grief of the surviving Trojan women, and their pleas for mercy as they are about to be absorbed forcibly into Greek society. Agamemnon agrees with the Trojan women and warns his countrymen against abusing their advantage through further, unnecessary killing: “*violenta imperia continuit diu, moderata durant.*”<sup>77</sup> He tries, thus, to persuade his fellows that drenching an already blood-soaked sword is madness.<sup>78</sup> They are not persuaded. Instead of moderation, the tragedy unfolds with the crushing triumph of violent, uncontrolled power.

Spinoza thus compares the restriction of thought, speech, and teaching to the brutal overreach of a conquering power. Like a people at war, a State must exert force to establish the necessary conditions to avoid being destroyed by opposing powers. But if a commonwealth is to establish a form of rule that lasts, Spinoza warns that it must avoid excessive oppression. It must not strike at what matters most to its constituents. Seneca’s play suggests that the most agonizing form of political violence is not necessarily the loss of life or the physical suffering involved in war. Rather, it is the attack on kinship and on hope for the future. In *The Trojan Women*, this perspective is voiced by Andromache who, in effort to draw attention away from the child she is hiding from the conquerors, proudly declares that she is willing to suffer any form of torture the Greeks wish to visit upon her: “Bring on thy flames, wounds, devilish arts of cruel pain, and starvation and raging thirst, plagues of all sorts from every source, and the sword thrust within these vitals, the dungeon’s pestilential gloom.” Because the anguish of seeing her child killed would be greater than her own physical torment, she declares that her “dauntless mother-love knows no fears.”<sup>79</sup> She implicitly accepts torture and death as part of political conflict but she will say anything to avoid seeing her child killed. Once her child is under threat, nothing could make her obey. She has neither respect nor fear for her conquerors.

Andromache’s child is not only the being she has nursed and

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76 The women seem to treat marriage and slavery as interchangeable. Either possibility would be arbitrarily determined by their new lords.

77 The Loeb edition translates this as “ungoverned power no one can long retain; controlled, it lasts.” Seneca 2002, 143.

78 Seneca 2002, pp. 143-145. Because Spinoza’s teacher, Franciscus Van den Enden, had his students perform this play, Spinoza likely knew the tragic poem well.

79 Seneca 2002, p. 173.

raised, but he is also someone in whom the Trojan people had invested their hopes. The entire play is a protracted negotiation over whether the maiden and the child must die. They are symbolic sacrifices designed to undermine any hope for self-determination or independence among the survivors. Further violence establishes not the defeat of the Trojans, for that is already secure. It serves to convey to the Trojan women and their children that they should expect enduring subordination to the whims of their new rulers.

It is hard to see how subjecting women and children to slavery, sacking a city, and destroying a generation of men is not the apex of political violence. Yet, States are typically established through such violence, rather than through mutual agreement of subjects. Perhaps founding violence is simply not under consideration in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. Perhaps Spinoza is appealing to those States, like his own, that do not imagine their own government as an effort “to dominate, restraining men by fear, and making them subject to another’s control.”<sup>80</sup> Spinoza aims to outline how an established commonwealth ought to be constituted so that its practices and laws do not “turn the civil order into a state of hostility.”<sup>81</sup>

Spinoza’s experience and his study of history support the idea that, even if thought can be dominated in subtle and sometimes impressive ways, people will reject constraints upon their speech. Many will say what they are moved to say, even if it costs them their lives, their security, or their livelihood and possessions. Even when confronted with the gravest punishments, they will speak clandestinely and find others with whom they hope to join thoughts.<sup>82</sup> The impulse to speak, teach, and communicate is such a strongly felt desire that efforts to repress it will erode the fear and respect among subjects that are necessary for any commonwealth to persist. Without fear or respect, subjects will speak overtly and critically, winning the admiration of others. If resistance comes to be admired, the State risks becoming a shared object of indignation and vulnerable to conspiracies.<sup>83</sup> Like the Greeks who could not moderate their violence, those powers that strive to dominate minds and tongues will become their own enemies. Political power, Spinoza implies, neglects at its own peril the “law of nature” that drives us inevitably to seek mental community. He warns that efforts to isolate subjects from one another through political and epistemic violence cannot but yield “the most unfortunate result.”

80 Spinoza 2016, 346; *TTP*, XX.

81 Spinoza 2016, 527; *TP*, IV.

82 They will form a kind of fugitive, maroon community, as Ford 2018 suggests.

83 On indignation, see Del Lucchese 2011 and Matheron 2020, Ch. 9.

Spinoza's invocation of Seneca – “no one continues violent rule for long” – may seem overly optimistic. Spinoza himself remarks that “[n]o state has stood so long without notable change as the Turks,” whereas democracies are especially susceptible to rebellion. Nevertheless, he observes, “if slavery, barbarism, and desolation [*solitudo*] are to be called peace, nothing is more wretched for men than peace.” Peace consists, he proceeds, not in the absence of war but in “a union or harmony of minds.”<sup>84</sup> Certainly, there are enduring oppressive and violent regimes. Political and epistemic violence target our ability to communicate, to bring together our minds, and to mitigate the solitude or desolation that we cannot but resist. In every society, laws and social norms impose more or less severe costs upon unfettered communication of our judgments, feelings, complaints, and thoughts. These costs are distributed unevenly and some experience much more acutely the violence of being scripted or silenced. Yet, Spinoza observes, for most people, being asked to pretend, to keep our mouths shut, or to say only what is prescribed is intolerable. It contradicts our natures, our desires to share mental and corporeal power. It is an excessive exercise of violent power, a violence that we cannot but wish to see destroyed.<sup>85</sup>

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84 Spinoza 2016, p. 533; *TP*, VI.

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***Un homme ivre  
d'immanence:***  
**Deleuze's Spinoza  
and Immanence**

**Jack Stetter**

**Abstract:** Although Deleuze's work on Spinoza is widely known, it remains poorly understood. In particular, Deleuze's interpretation of Spinoza's immanentism has not been treated sufficient care; that is, with an eye to the context of its elaboration and the way in which it gradually takes on different characteristics. With this paper, I offer a synoptic analysis of Deleuze's views on immanence in Spinoza and examine how these change over the course of Deleuze's career. There are three ascending stages here: a first one, where Deleuze's attention is drawn to more recognizable issues in understanding Spinoza's views on the deep metaphysical structure of reality; a second, more experimental one, where Deleuze questions what it means to be a reader of Spinoza in light of Spinoza's theory of the body and affects; and a third, particularly iconoclastic stage, where Deleuze develops the theory of "the plane of immanence" as a way of articulating a meta-philosophical story about the place of non-philosophy at the heart of all philosophy. I trace each of these accounts, tie them together to tell a coherent and comprehensive narrative, and show what may be learned from this Spinoza that Deleuze portrays as drunk on immanence.

**Keywords:** Deleuze; Spinoza; immanence; affects; meta-philosophy; non-philosophy.

## Introduction

The poet Novalis' well-known evocation of Spinoza as "*ein Gott-trunkener Mensch*" is said to capture a noteworthy aspect of philosophical interpretations of Spinoza during the post-Kantian era of German philosophy.<sup>1</sup> What I would like to offer here is a detailed analysis of Spinoza as *un homme ivre d'immanence* — that is, Gilles Deleuze's interpretation of Spinoza. Recent Spinoza literature often engages with Spinoza's immanentism, especially but not exclusively in the European context,<sup>2</sup> while Deleuze's relation to Spinoza continues to receive

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1 A point emphasized as early as 1893 by Delbos (1893), 317-330. Novalis' quote is from his *Encyclopedia* (Novalis 1802, vol. 1, p. 338). Novalis' talk of Spinoza as "a man drunk on God" foreshadows in a pre-philosophical mode the interpretation provided by Hegel: inasmuch as substance is indeterminate immediacy from which no finite content can be deduced, Spinoza's system is a variant of acosmism or ancient Eleatic monism. I.e.: Spinoza is drunk on an idea of God *sans* determination. See Hegel in §151, vol. 1 ("The Science of Logic") of the *Encyclopedia* of 1830: "[Spinoza's philosophy] is, indeed, pantheistic precisely on account of its acosmism. [...] Substance, just as it is immediately construed by Spinoza without the prior dialectical mediation, is, as the universal negative power, only this dark shapeless abyss [...]" (Hegel 2010, 225). For recent discussion of Spinoza's reception in the era of Novalis, see the collection of papers on Spinoza and German Idealism, ed. Förster and Melamed, (2012). For a recent reply to Hegel's "acosmist" charge, see Melamed (2013), esp. 66-82.

2The list of recent Spinoza works written in the broadly continental European tradition where "immanence" is a central concern is long. *E.g.*: Ramond (1995), Negri (1982 [1981]), Yovel (1989). Post-Deleuzian variations on the theme of immanence in Spinoza are also widespread. Consider, for ex., Badiou, for whom Spinoza proposes a "closed ontology" (Badiou 1998) or attempts (and, instructively,

sustained scholarly attention.<sup>3</sup> Yet to my knowledge there has been no thorough attempt at crafting a comprehensive image of the stakes of the discussion that Deleuze engages with Spinoza regarding the notion of immanence. I will show that, in fact, we must account for three stages in Deleuze's interpretation of Spinoza, each of which corresponds roughly to a decade of Deleuze's career and constellates around one work of philosophy he published.

In three ascending experimental and iconoclastic stages, the Deleuzian reading of Spinoza *qua* quintessential philosopher of immanence involves: a presentation of Spinoza's metaphysics of causality and the theory of the univocity of being; a discussion of what it is to be a reader of Spinoza in light of Spinoza's theory of the affects; and, last but not least, a bold bird's-eye account of how Spinoza's philosophy toys with a tension in the relation between philosophy and non-philosophy. Upon analysis, it will be clear that Deleuze's immanence-drunk reading of Spinoza does not content itself with repeating the facile remark that Spinoza identifies God and nature. Although this foundational claim in Spinoza may constitute the sounding board of very many immanence-inclined readings or interpretations of Spinoza — along with, perhaps, the way that Spinoza's naturalism yields an uncompromising critique of doctrines of personal immortality — Deleuze's own interpretation takes "immanentism" to designate a wide swath of Spinoza's commitments and conceptual moves that do not remain strictly localizable at the level of Spinoza's onto-theology. The breadth and creativity of Deleuze's immanence-drunk reading of Spinoza deserves the attention it requires if we are to salvage this Spinozist immanentism from the risk it has of being overwhelmed by simplistic rejoinders. I will, when possible, show what I think to be the limits of Deleuze's reading and where it runs into considerable difficulties, but my principal aim is not to do more than reconstruct the reading as Deleuze presents it. I take it that a clear understanding of precisely how Deleuze ascribes to Spinoza a form of extreme immanentism is a precondition for critical work on Deleuze's Spinoza.

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fails) to "ontologically eradicate the void" (Badiou 1988, 137). One can understand this as Badiou's reply to Deleuze's Spinoza — where Deleuze talks of Spinoza's doctrine of immanence, Badiou talks of Spinoza's attempt at a foreclosure of "the void" from substance.

3 E.g. the many contributions included in the volume *Spinoza-Deleuze: Lectures croisée*, ed. Sauvagnargues and Sévérac (2016).

## Immanence as Fundamental Metaphysical Structure in *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression*

The gradual development of Deleuze's view on immanence in Spinoza commences in earnest with the publication of his 1968 work, a secondary thesis written under the direction of Ferdinand Alquié and defended at the Sorbonne, *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression* (hereafter "**SPE**").<sup>4</sup>

When looking to Deleuze's earliest text on Spinoza and his treatment of Spinoza as a thinker of immanence, we may legitimately ask: What led Deleuze to attach such importance to the concept of immanence in the first place? Perhaps, we might hope, it is a term of art bequeathed to Deleuze by the philosophical community to which he belonged, the postwar community of practitioners of *l'école française de l'histoire de la philosophie*. For many of these historians of philosophy, Spinoza is a central figure of interest; Spinoza scholarship was far from being a poor state prior to Deleuze.<sup>5</sup> Thus we are led to see if earlier Spinoza literature makes strong case(s) for Spinoza as a thinker of immanence. A brief survey of the literature suggests, however, that this was not the case. The term is absent from Ferdinand Alquié's published lectures on Spinoza, given at the Sorbonne in 1958 and 1959.<sup>6</sup> Sylvain Zac makes no use of the notion in either of his commentaries from 1963 and 1965 on the idea of life in Spinoza and Spinoza's interpretation of Scripture, respectively.<sup>7</sup> The Spinoza's collected works *Pléiade* edition, prepared by Roland Caillouis, Madeleine Francès, and Robert Misrahi, published in 1955, does not include the term "immanence" in the otherwise ample *index rerum*.<sup>8</sup> Looking further back still to Charles Appuhn,<sup>9</sup> Victor Delbos,<sup>10</sup> Victor

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4 Deleuze (1968a). Translations my own.

5 See Peden (2014) for an informative history of French Spinozism in the years leading up to Deleuze. See also Lærke (2020). Gueroult (1968) and Matheron (1988 [1969]) publish their groundbreaking Spinoza monographs at roughly the same moment. Macherey (2011) emphasizes, I do not believe accurately, that Spinoza literature in 1968 would have been "*carrément en panne*" (293), were it not for the contributions of Zac (1963), (1965).

6 Alquié (2003 [1958-1959]). Alquié (1981) will however later maintain that "on a toujours considéré que Spinoza était parti d'une intuition fondamentale, celle de l'immanence de Dieu" (159), an intuition which he disputes led Spinoza to successfully ban any trace of immanence from his philosophy.

7 Zac (1963) and Zac (1965).

8 Spinoza (1955).

9 Appuhn (1927).

10 Delbos (1893), Delbos (1983 [1912-1913]).



Brochard,<sup>11</sup> Émile Lasbax,<sup>12</sup> Alain,<sup>13</sup> Léon Brunschvicg,<sup>14</sup> Jules Lagneau,<sup>15</sup> and Émile Saisset,<sup>16</sup> leading figures of more or less traditional academic French scholarship on Spinoza in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, one finds no *sustained* discussion of immanence in Spinoza. Nor does the outlier Romain Rolland (whose essay *L'éclair de Spinoza* Deleuze refers to approvingly in later works) appeal to immanence in Spinoza as a way of articulating what makes Spinoza's philosophy so attractive.<sup>17</sup>

The exception that makes the rule is provided by Paul Vernière. In his 1954 *Spinoza et la pensée française avant la Révolution* the term "immanence" is indexed 12 times.<sup>18</sup> The references involve Vernière's presentation of Spinoza's reception by: Richard Simon<sup>19</sup>; François Fénelon (for whom, claims Vernière, the thesis of the immanence of God to the world is at the center of his theodicy)<sup>20</sup>; Pierre Bayle (who disputes, claims Vernière, that Spinoza's philosophy is a philosophy of immanence, as God does not penetrate all things but is all things)<sup>21</sup>; Henry de Boulainviller<sup>22</sup>; Languener<sup>23</sup>; Julien Offray de la Mettrie<sup>24</sup>; Denis Diderot (who believes, writes Vernière, that any consistent philosophy of immanence such as Spinoza's must lead us to think that Nature is capable of anything whatsoever and thus that ghosts, demons, hellfire, etc., are all conceivable)<sup>25</sup>; Jean-Baptiste Robinet<sup>26</sup>; and François Hemsterhuys.<sup>27</sup>

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11 Brochard (2013 [1912]).

12 Lasbax (1911).

13 Alain (1996 [1900]).

14 Brunschvicg (1951 [1894/1906]).

15 Lagneau (2020 [1882/1898]).

16 Saisset (1860).

17 Rolland (1931).

18 Vernière (1981 [1954]), 766.

19 *Ibid.*, 234.

20 *Ibid.*, 277.

21 *Ibid.*, 303, 336.

22 *Ibid.*, 374.

23 *Ibid.*, 399.

24 *Ibid.*, 545.

25 *Ibid.*, 592.

26 *Ibid.*, 650, 652.

27 *Ibid.*, 670, 671.

It is immaterial to our purposes here whether Vernière is correct to attribute a worry about Spinoza's immanence to so many thinkers. What *is* important is that the interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy as a philosophy of immanence is circulating at the time of Deleuze's writing. In drawing sustained attention to Spinoza as a thinker of immanence in his **SPE** Deleuze builds on a view for which there is prior support, but which does not represent as standard fare in Spinoza commentary in French.<sup>28</sup>

The central point of analysis in **SPE** is not immanence itself but the notion of expression in Spinoza. The discussion of immanence is subordinated to the latter. Although there is an entire section of the book entitled "Le parallélisme et l'immanence,"<sup>29</sup> it is simply not the case that Deleuze will develop an interpretation of immanence in that entire section.

The most interesting discussion we find in this early text regarding what it means for Spinoza to be a thinker of immanence is presented in Chapter 11, "L'immanence et les éléments historiques de l'expression," where Deleuze develops a discussion of how doctrines of immanence differ from doctrines of emanation, and not, as might be expected, from doctrines of transcendence.<sup>30</sup> On Deleuze's telling, there is a conceptual proximity between doctrines of emanation and doctrines of immanence. It is this conceptual proximity that masks their genuine difference. Both are concerned with making sense of the Platonic theory of participation. That Platonic theory responds to a guiding worry in

28 Admittedly, there is an attractive and simpler explanation on hand for Deleuze's preoccupation with immanence here, *viz.* the Husserlian influence on Deleuze. Husserl will occupy a non-negligible place in Deleuze's *Logique du sens* (1969a), where Husserl's conception of the phenomenological method as the interrogation of consciousness' immanence to itself is questioned. Moreover, both Jean Cavaillès and Jean-Toussaint Desanti already draw attention to the role of immanence in Spinoza's philosophy, and this because of the Husserlian influence. See Peden (2014) for more on their respective relations to Spinoza. It is doubtful whether Deleuze himself read Cavaillès and Desanti's writings on Spinoza. Zourabichvili (2003), 65-66, denies that Deleuze's usage of immanence is a Husserlian derivation. For a book length study of Deleuze's debt to Husserl see Hughes (2008). Last but not least: One should note that in the important philosophical dictionary by Lalande et al. (Lalande (1932) [1902-1923]), the term "immanence" (along with "immanentism") is indexed and amply discussed (vol. 1, 342-347). In connection to that discussion, mention is made of Spinoza's discussion in *Ethics* I, Proposition 18, as exemplifying how *immanent causes* are opposed to *transitive causes* — rather than as exemplifying the opposition to transcendence that is ostensibly built into the definition of "immanent" as either: (a) meaning that which is comprised in a being and does not result from an external action; or (b) meaning that which belongs to a being and structures its or tendency to certain outcomes; or (c) meaning, in its Kantian application, that which is enclosed within the limits of possible experience.

On an aside, the André Lalande dictionary was highly regarded by peers, earning as it did the prize of the *Académie française*, and remains indispensable for assessing the state of philosophical research in early-twentieth-century France. Historians of European modern philosophy will recognize this work as belonging to the generation of commentators like the Fichtean Xavier Léon, the Leibnizian Louis Couturat, and the Spinozist Victor Delbos, along with more well-known figures like Henri Bergson. In its indexing and scholarly work, it is reminiscent of Scholastic handbooks by schoolmen like Saint Eustachius.

29 Deleuze (1968), 87-169.

30 Deleuze (1968a), 153-169.

Plato's late work: How is the multiplicity of changing empirical objects grounded in the immutability of Forms? What explains how the manifold of apparent objects depend on the Forms for their reality? Deleuze is taking up a familiar trope in Western metaphysics, seeing how Spinoza's immanentism response fits into while repudiating a tradition of accounts of the basic metaphysical structure of reality as hierarchically tiered, where at the ground level of reality there is enjoyed by whatever being can be said to occupy it a fundamentality and priority not enjoyed at other, lesser, and derived levels of reality. The Platonic worry, at least as early as Aristotle, becomes coded in terms of causality. What kind of causal power is exercised by the Forms, or at the level of fundamental reality that Plato thinks is peopled by the Forms, that might secure the participation relation of the manifold of apparent objects in the Forms?

Here's where the Neo-Platonists show up with what *seems* like a Spinozist response if we mistakenly consider Spinoza's substance or God to exercise its power remotely over *created* beings. Thus, on Deleuze's presentation, the point of resemblance between the emanative cause and the immanent cause would be that "[such causes] *remain in themselves* to produce."<sup>31</sup> However, the difference would be more significant still: "If the emanative cause remains in itself, the effect produced is not in the cause and does not remain in the cause."<sup>32</sup> The Neo-Platonists are hence led to emphasize the first hypothesis of Plato's *Parmenides*: the One is superior to Being itself; the cause "produces according to what it gives, but remains beyond what it gives."<sup>33</sup> Deleuze wants us to consider how the Neoplatonic metaphysical account of the emanation and procession of lower-level and degraded beings out of the One superior to all Being portrays an infinite cascade of declines in hypostases of reality. Neoplatonic ontology has a tiered, hierarchical structure articulated in terms of the remoteness of the effect from the emanative cause that is the One.<sup>34</sup>

Spinoza's doctrine of immanence, on the other hand, implies the *equality of being* between the underlying, principle cause and its consequences, between the radical ground of things and the many things which are its effects. For Deleuze, what is most important here — and, on my view, central to the project of understanding Spinoza's immanentism that Deleuze sets himself in **SPE** — is that the fundamental metaphysical

31 *Ibid.*, 155.

32 *Ibid.*, 155.

33 *Ibid.*, 156. The first hypothesis in Plato's *Parmenides* is discussed in 137c4-142a8. The importance of the first hypothesis to the Neoplatonic thinkers is historically well-documented. See Forrester (1972).

34 By Neo-Platonists, it is fair to assume that first and foremost Deleuze means to designate Plotinus. On the problem of the "procession" of hypostases out of the One, see for ex. *Enneads* Volume VI, Treatise 9, "On the Good or the One" (Plotin, 1994). See also the discussion in Bréhier (2008 [1921-1938]), 53-62, which may have influenced Deleuze's own account.

structure of reality is one of the *immanent causal dependence* of all things on substance, and that, what is more, there is *no fundamental hierarchy* in being, since no scale of superiority and inferiority in being can be established between an immanent cause and its effects:

“That which defines the immanent cause is that the effect is in the cause, no doubt as in another thing, but is and remains it in. The effect remains no less in the cause than the cause remains in itself. From this point of view, the distinction in essence between cause and effect will never be interpreted as a degradation. From the point of view of immanence, the distinction in essence does not exclude, but implies an equality of being: it is the same being that remains in itself in the cause, and in which the effect remains as in another thing.”<sup>35</sup>

Spinoza’s immanentism, we may say, has to do with Spinoza’s metaphysics being a “pure ontology” — that is, it establishes the pure affirmation of Being:

“Immanence implies a pure ontology, a theory of Being where the One is only the property of substance and that which is. What is more, immanence in its pure state demands the principle of the equality of being or the position of Being-equal: not only is being in equal in itself, but being appears equally present in all beings. And the Cause, equally close everywhere: there is no remote cause. Beings are not defined according to their rank on a hierarchy, are no more or less removed from the One, but each depends directly on God, participating in the equality of being, receiving immediately all that it can receive according to the aptitude of its essence, independently from all proximity or remoteness. [...] Immanence is opposed to any eminence of the cause, any negative theology, any method of analogy, any hierarchical conception of the world. Everything is affirmation in immanence.”<sup>36</sup>

Spinoza’s doctrine can be qualified as a form of immanentism in light of the anti-hierarchical way he construes the fundamental metaphysical

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 156. This has recently been referred to as the immanent cause being the “metaphysical subject” of its effect. See Zylstra (2020).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 157. Cf. *ibid.*, 51: “The philosophy of Spinoza is a philosophy of pure affirmation. Affirmation is the speculative principle on which all of the *Ethics* depends.” Deleuze’s suggestion that “everything is affirmation” for a philosophy of immanence is likely intended to resonate with Spinoza’s conatus doctrine, according to which no negation belongs to the essence of a thing. On Deleuze’s reading in **SPE**, the conatus of a finite thing, the degree of power that circumscribes the essence of the thing, is an individuating “quantitative intensity” (178-180). For replies, see Ramond (1995), 194-205. (See also discussion in Section 2.)

structure of reality.<sup>37</sup> On an equal basis (but, with the caveat, “according to the aptitude” of their essences), all things express the causally powerful and fundamentally divine, prodigious, and creative character of Nature. That is, all things are “affirmations” in Spinoza’s ontology, and *this* is the bedrock of what it means to ascribe to immanentism in metaphysics. At this early and yet still quite “academic” point of his career, for Deleuze, the deepest facts about metaphysical structure in Spinoza are causal in character.<sup>38</sup>

What does “affirmation” mean for Deleuze? In common philosophical usage, the term designates the logical act that unites a proposition to a subject but also some propositional attitudes that are brought to bear on propositions (“The door is closed” but also “I believe the door is closed.”). Surveying Spinoza, we find the controversial epistemological stance in Ethics Part 2, Proposition 49 and Scholium, where Spinoza examines the untenability of the distinction between the understanding and the will. That is, for Spinoza, propositions always present themselves burdened with propositional attitudes. To form or conceive an idea in the understanding is already to affirm what we conceive, or judge it with the will, as a function of the self-positing power of the idea itself. One can see how, at least in this regard, “everything” for Spinoza — that is, everything insofar all things are modes of thought — is truly an affirmation.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, in Deleuze, we may say that “affirmation” connotes something akin to a position in existence or a self-positing

37 Regarding the equality of all creatures or finite things compared to God or substance, see also Ep. 54 (G IV 253, l. 5-20), where in discussion with Hugo Boxel Spinoza writes: “Your second argument [on why spirits exist] is that because spirits are more like God than the other, corporeal creatures, it is also probable that God created them. Truly, I confess I still don’t know in what respect spirits are more like God than other creatures are. I know this: that there is no proportion between the finite and the infinite; so the difference between the greatest, most excellent creature and God is the same as that between the least creature and God.”.

38 This interpretation finds additional support in both Curley (1969) and Gueroult (1968). It is commonly (and wrongly) asserted that the metaphysical grounding of mode in substance is the central component of immanentism for Deleuze *tout court*. Thus, Frim and Fluss (2018) argue in conclusion to a recent study that Spinoza “accepts immanence” (read: Deleuze is correct) if by which we mean “modes inhere in God” but not if by which we mean “Spinoza precludes all notions of emanation or hierarchy, as the procession of infinite modes suggests” (214). They are right to think that *in SPE* the problem of immanentism is posed at the level of the relation of modes to God, but the inherence relation, for Deleuze, receives little attention compared to the causal one. What is more, Spinoza’s ontology of infinite modes does not, I take it, lead to the hierarchization of being in a way that poses problems for Deleuze’s reading. To follow Deleuze, it would be nonsensical to think of infinite modes as more eminent or closer to God than any finite mode. Take the laws of motion and rest that follow immediately from the attribute of extension and are infinite in this respect. The laws insofar as they are determined as finite quantities of motion and rest in the form of finite modes of extension are not any *less* affirmations of being than the laws insofar as they are determined as immediate infinite consequences of extension. *However*, if we consider that between any two modes, that one mode can be more perfect or contain more reality than another mode, by virtue of the fact that no two finite modes will have the same amount of power to persevere in their being, it is fair to say that here we have to seriously wonder whether Deleuze’s interpretation can do the job. (See fn. 49 and *infra*, Section 2 of paper, for the discussion of “intensive magnitudes”).

39 For more on this point, see Della Rocca (2012) and Ramond (1998).

in the world, a positivity, or (to think in broadly Spinozist terms) an expression of power and perseverance in being or *conatus*.<sup>40</sup>

We may in any case say that at this early stage of Deleuze's work, Spinoza's immanentism is hence primarily, if not exclusively, a metaphysical commitment. As seen, Deleuze's reading taps into broad implications of the nature of the causal relation between God and God's effects in Spinoza's philosophy. Let us examine Deleuze's reading of Spinoza's metaphysics of causality a bit more and see how it stacks up with other aspects of his reading along with other aspects of Spinoza's own text.

Looking to Spinoza, we find in *Ethics* Part 1 Proposition 18 and Demonstration that he equates God's being an immanent (or "indwelling") cause with, as Spinoza writes, the fact that "*Deus rerum, quae in ipso sunt, est causa*" — "God is the cause of things which are in it". Therefore, in consequence of the fact that there is no other substance nor any thing not "in God", God is the immanent and not the transitive cause of all things. God could be a transitive cause only if what God caused was not in God, if God overlooked their Creation, as in the vulgar imagination of God as kinglike. It is not straight-away clear whether this point of causal metaphysics grounds the equalizing of things' "affirmations" of reality, as Deleuze stipulates it logically must. However, as Deleuze rightly emphasizes, considered in terms of their ontological position, their "remoteness" or "proximity" to God *qua* substance, all things are equally situated and participate equally in divinity or nature.<sup>41</sup>

Following Deleuze, Spinoza's view here echoes the anti-Aristotelian (and, for Deleuze, anti-theological) doctrine that being is univocal or only admits of one meaning, that "to be" can be said in one way only. In the chapter on "the Names of God" in **SPE**, Deleuze explicitly connects the two doctrines in discussing Spinoza's distinction of the attributes in God in terms of Duns Scot' theory of the formal distinction. The attributes would be distinct by virtue of a real distinction, that is not a mere distinction of reason, yet this formal distinction remains non-numerical.<sup>42</sup> The Scotist formal distinction provides us with

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40 The connection of "affirmation" with the *conatus* doctrine is explicitly made by Spinoza himself, when he writes in *Ethics* Part 3 Proposition 4 Scholium that: "The definition of a thing affirms, and does not deny, the essence of the thing; in other words, it poses the essence of the thing and does not suppress it."

41 See fn. 37, *supra*.

42 Deleuze (1968a), 54-57, esp. 56, *in fine*: "All attributes formally distinct are related by the understanding to an ontologically unique substance [*une substance ontologiquement une*]. But the understanding only reproduces objectively the nature of forms that it apprehends. All formal essences form the essence of a single substance which is absolutely singular [*une substance absolument une*]. All the substances qualified form a single substance from the point of view of quantity. Thus, the attributes themselves have an identity in being and a formal distinction; ontologically one, formally diverse, this is the status of attributes."



an “absolutely coherent conception of the unity of substance and the plurality of attributes,” yet unlike his illustrious predecessor, Spinoza does not shy away from the pantheistic implications: “In Spinoza, univocal Being is perfectly determined in its concept as that which is said in one and the same way about substance which is in itself, and about modes which are in another.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, with Spinoza, “univocity becomes the object of pure affirmation,” and it is the burden of the “idea of the immanent cause” to take up the challenge and carry the charge of univocity, “liberating it from the indifference and neutrality where it had been maintained by the theory of divine creation” — it is “in immanence that univocity finds its properly Spinozist formulation: God is said cause of all things in the same way (*eo sensu*) that it is said cause of itself.”<sup>44</sup>

This implicit appeal on Deleuze’s part to *Ethics* Part 1 Proposition 25 Scholium is elucidatory. In that scholium, Spinoza argues that it follows from Proposition 16 that God is the efficient cause of the existence of things as much as God is the efficient cause of the essence of things. Proposition 16 itself tells us that infinitely many modes necessarily follow from the nature of God. Hence, Spinoza effectively rides together the view that given God’s nature infinitely many things must follow (and that these things depend on God both regarding their essence and existence), and the suggestion that God causes itself in the same way that it causes all things, that is by virtue of efficient causality. It is reasonable to agree with Deleuze that a Spinozist account of being’s univocity is at play here, one that *does* involve a move to a theory of causation. The causal relation between God and any other being is the same causal relation that God entertains with itself, and *this* is meant to secure the univocity (and unicity) of the self-causing substance. But how does immanent causation relate to the doctrine of efficient self-causation? That is a puzzling problem that oversteps the bounds of our discussion. To venture a guess, one might think that, for Deleuze, at the level of ultimate reality, efficient self-causation is actually conceivable in light of the fact that the causal schema in play is one where the effect remains as much in the cause as the cause itself does. In this way, the apparent nonsense involved in thinking of a cause that would pre-exist itself dissipates, since the cause remains “within itself” when causing its effects, which also remain in it.<sup>45</sup>

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43 *Ibid.*, 58.

44 *Ibid.*, 58.

45 In Deleuze (1969b), a review of Gueroult (1968), Deleuze returns to this theory of the univocity and unity of God’s causal act in connection with his exposition of Gueroult’s “genetico-structuralist” method. Here, the immanence of God’s causal work clarifies a methodological point in Gueroult: “[If] one and the other are said *in one and the same way* (God, cause of all things in the same sense as cause of itself”, it is because the genesis of modes is in the attributes, and would not be immanent if the attributes themselves were not genealogical elements of substance. In this manner appears the methodological unity of all of Spinozism as a genetic philosophy” (432).



In reading Deleuze, however, we should be careful not to confuse this understanding of Spinoza as a thinker of the univocity of being with the Hegelian interpretation of Spinoza's acosmism.<sup>46</sup> There should be no question that Deleuze does not conflate the two positions. In *Différence et répétition* (the *thèse d'État* complementing the secondary thesis **SPE**), Deleuze writes that what is most fundamental to the fecundity of the theory of univocity of being is not simply that being is said in one and the same way, for a further consideration is involved that bears on the nature of difference in being or between beings: "Being is said, in one and the same way, of all individuating differences or intrinsic modalities. [...] It is of the essence of univocal being to relate to individuating differences, but these differences do not have the same essence, and do not vary the essence of being."<sup>47</sup> In Deleuze's happy turn of phrase, "Being is said in one and the same way of any thing of which it is said, but that of which it is said differs: it is said of difference itself" ("*L'Être se dit en un seul et même sens de tout ce dont il se dit, mais ce dont il se dit diffère : il se dit de la différence elle-même*").<sup>48</sup> The metaphysics of *Difference and Repetition* congenially maps onto the reading of Spinoza in **SPE**, which we may presume was being executed at about the same moment. The ant is extended in the same way as the cosmos is extended, which is no different than the way that God is extended as *Natura naturata* or God is extension as *Natura naturans*. To be extended means to express an irreducible aspect of God, which all things do equally, even when all things remain distinct; it is nonsense to say the ant *is* more, or *is* differently, or *is* inferiorly extended than any other thing, that it "affirms" extension any less or any more than any other thing. We needn't try to clear up here how Spinoza's concept of "expression" is inseparable from the doctrine of immanence on Deleuze's view. Nor should we proffer a further complication for Deleuze's reading by introducing, as Spinoza himself does, a quasi-hierarchical ranking system for finite modes, as finite modes have "more" or "less" powers to act and exist. (A point which Deleuze does not entirely overlook, specifically insofar as he characterizes Spinozist essences of finite things as "quantitative" (that is *greater* or *lesser*) "intensities" — thereby providing an implicit scale for their ranking and evaluation.<sup>49</sup>) It is sufficient for our purposes that we

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46 See fn. 1, *supra*.

47 Deleuze (1968b), 53.

48 *Ibid.*, 53. In *Logique du sens*, Deleuze substantially develops his (Spinozist) notion of the univocity of being and resolutely contrasts it with the kind of acosmism that has haunted Spinoza literature since the German *pantheismsstreit*. E.g. Deleuze (1969a), 210: "The univocity of being does not mean that there is only one and the same being. On the contrary, beings are multiple and different, always produced by a disjunctive synthesis, themselves disjoined and divergent, *membra disjuncta*." For more on the "disjunctive synthesis" see Zourabichvili (2003), 78-80.

49 Interestingly, the hierarchical character of being further forms a crucial part of Deleuze's own

have shown how, at this early stage of his reflection on Spinoza's doctrine of immanence, the central aim of Deleuze's interpretation is to emphasize the anti-hierarchical impulse underpinning the building blocks of Spinoza's metaphysics. In 1968, it was Spinoza's refusal to countenance an account of reality as ontologically tiered that underpinned Deleuze's empathy for his philosophy.

### Immanence in *Media Res* in Spinoza, *Philosophie Pratique*

Deleuze's second work on Spinoza, *Spinoza, Philosophie pratique* (hereafter "**SPP**"), was published twice. Only in the second edition of 1981 does one find the decisive conclusion, "Spinoza et nous", written originally in 1978. Thus, it is the second edition that will be of interest to us here. Deleuze's Spinozism has sensibly matured in the intervening years. A new and pivotal term in Deleuze's vocabulary will be put forward in **SPP** to articulate the meaningfulness of immanence not only in Spinoza but in philosophy in general: "the plane of immanence". No doubt the swelling of creativity here has something to do with the philosophical fecundity of those intervening years spent working on *Capitalisme et schizophrénie* with Félix Guattari and teaching at the newly founded Université de Vincennes. And the image of a "plane" or flat, smooth surface, naturally resonates with the image of the "plateau" informing their masterwork, *Mille plateaux*.<sup>50</sup> There is one final resonance of the term. In the famous prologue to the *Tractatus de intellectus emendatione*, Spinoza's narrator writes of their need for a fixed "plan of life" or *novum institutum*.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, the "plane" of immanence is something of a "plan" — a sort of orientation or disposition, a Spinozist arrangement (or assemblage, "*agencement*")<sup>52</sup> with and/or of what we have now, following Deleuze in **SPE**, accustomed ourselves to calling "being" — Nature or God. Spinoza's practical thought, that is Spinozism itself, is more than

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ontology, as well as being emphasized in various other historical works, such as in his first work on Nietzsche. See Deleuze (1962), esp. regarding Nietzsche's doctrine of the eternal return of the same and its signifying that "being is selection" (217). For its role in Deleuze's ontology, see Deleuze (1968b), esp. 54 *in fine*.

50 If one listens carefully enough, one can discern how "*le plan*" distantly echoes "*la plaine*" and "*le plein*" — that is, the term evokes a flat space conducive to "*nomadism*" in addition to the plenitude of being and its affirmatory character. Musical imagery inhabits Deleuze (e.g.: "*la ritournelle*" or, more central for our purposes here, the "rhythms" that characterize the way Spinoza's finite things enter in relation with one another) and it should come as no surprise that he would himself attempt a kind of musicality of concepts.

51 *TIE* §3.

52 The typical translation of *agencement* as "assemblage" is very odd, despite its pedigree. A bit of etymology might help here. The verb *agencer* is derived in the 13<sup>th</sup>-century from \**gent*, from the Latin \**genitus*, "born". Thus, the original meaning of *agencer*: to embellish, as in make noble (or high-born). From there it takes on the modern meaning: to arrange or put into order. See Bloch and Wartburg (1932), 292. *Un agencement* is an *arrangement*, of furniture in a living room or flowers in a vase. It connotes things being well-disposed to achieve a desired higher purpose.

just a view on how God causes its effects. **SPP** thus opens a new horizon for interrogating Spinoza's philosophy and understanding what it means for us to be readers of Spinoza.

**SPP**'s conclusion, "Spinoza et nous", is a very difficult text. This is somewhat ironic as Deleuze's overall aim is to emphasize how there is a way in which we can read Spinoza without any philosophical training or preparation, letting the affective dimension of the text instruct us, and come away a bona fide Spinozist. Deleuze's interpretation of Spinoza as constructing a "plane of immanence" in **SPP** is, we may say, meant to respond to a serious existential worry in the interpretation of Spinoza: How do we live as Spinozists? What does it mean to read Spinoza? Better yet: How is it in reading Spinoza that we learn what it is to live meaningfully in the hurly-burly world of encounters, affects, and multiplicities? In asking this question, the Spinozist text has already been reframed. Since we come to Spinoza *in media res*, so we must take up Spinoza *in media res*, not from "the first principle" but in the middle.<sup>53</sup>

Any reader of Spinoza confronts the difficulty Deleuze's approach means to untangle. Spinoza's *more geometrico* forces the commentator to move backward while moving forward, like a crab, as it were; the need to reiterate and recall basic positions in Spinoza's metaphysics as a way of justifying any later position means repeating *ad nauseam* the same old story. (In *Ethics* Part 2, in the scholium to Lemma 7 after Proposition 13, Spinoza himself seems to hint at the "prolix" or verbose and long-winded character of his *more geometrico*.) The consequences for the understanding of Spinoza are quite unfortunate. We dull the affective edge of the philosophical text.

This explains a second point in connection with Deleuze's interpretation. For Deleuze, the *Ethics* does not exist. Rather, there are multiplicities of *Ethics*. In **SPP** (as was already the case in the appendix to **SPE**),<sup>54</sup> there are two *Ethics*: the slow geometric unfolding of concepts above, and the lava flow of explosive scholia and polemics, the affective intensities underneath.<sup>55</sup> In his short and final work to be published on Spinoza, "Spinoza et les trois *Éthiques*,"<sup>56</sup> Deleuze maintains there are three *Ethics*, a point which he anticipates in the Conclusion to **SPP**. *Ethics* "Book V" is truly a work apart, not because of its difficulty, but because

53 Deleuze (2003 [1981]), 164. Translations my own. Cf. 166.

54 The earliest formulation of the view is in Deleuze (1968a), 313-322.

55 Deleuze (2003), 174-175. See also the footnote on 159-160: "The greater part of the *Ethics* is written from the point of view of the common notions and the second kind of knowledge; Spinoza explicitly recalls this in E5p36s and E5p41d. The third kind of knowledge only appears in Part 5, whence its difference of *rhythm* and movement." (Our emphasis). Strangely in **SPP** Deleuze seems to have forgotten the lesson of the appendix to **SPE**: the scholia are "independent" with respect to the propositions that they "double" (317).

56 Deleuze (1993).

it is so fast. The theory of textual velocities will prove fundamental to Deleuze's general interpretation:

"[...] It is Book V, which is not at all the most difficult, but the fastest, of an infinite speed, that the two, the philosopher and the non-philosopher, are reunited as one and the same being. What an extraordinary composition this Book V, and how it makes for the encounter [*rencontre*] of concept and affect. And how this encounter is prepared, and made necessary by the celestial and subterranean movements that together compose the preceding books."<sup>57</sup>

Spinoza's "plane of immanence" is also called the "common plane of immanence"<sup>58</sup> or the "plane of consistency."<sup>59</sup> One of its defining features is to give rise to the continual re-composition and de-composition of whatever populates it; hence, for Deleuze, the principal relation between beings in Spinoza's ontology of singular things is one of composition. A plane of immanence thereby involves that which is common, insofar as it is a realm of relationality and communication. Communities are continually established, communities which also provide room for "intensities", and which outwardly extend into ever-new communal or social relations.<sup>60</sup>

Deleuze is at pains to emphasize that any singular thing, for Spinoza, just is a relation of relations with no bottoming out in sight, a composition or play of forces localized on an infinite field of forces — a reading which conjures an image reminiscent of the *facies totius universi* evoked in Spinoza's July 1675 letter to G. H. Schuller.<sup>61</sup> The Spinozist intuition of the irreducibly relational nature of what appear to be discrete beings calls for a novel language of analysis:

"In short: If we are Spinozists, we do not define a thing by its form, nor by its organs and functions, nor as substance or subject. To borrow terms from the Middle Ages, or from geography, we define it by its *longitude* and *latitude*. A body can be whatever, it can be an animal, it can be a sonorous body, a linguistic body, it can be a social body, a collectivity. We call the longitude of the body the totality of relations of speed and slowness, or rest and movement, between the

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<sup>57</sup> Deleuze (2003), 174.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 164, 168.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>61</sup> Ep. 64.

particles that compose it from this point of view; that is, between *unformed elements*. We call the latitude of the body the totality of affects that fill up the body at every moment, that is to say the intensive states of an *anonymous force* (force of existence, power to be affected). In such a way we establish the cartography of the body. The totality of longitudes and latitudes constitutes Nature, the plane of immanence or consistence, always variable, and which does not cease to be reworked, composed, recomposed by individuals and collectivities.”<sup>62</sup>

The *Ethics*, like any other book for that matter,<sup>63</sup> is a singular thing, “*un corps quelconque*”. It too is just a “*agencement*” or a batch of relations with Being, a bouquet of variable compositions (it has a longitude), and it too is shot through with an affective “anonymous force” (it has a latitude). Like any other singular body, the relations are rhythmic in character; the motion of the text, the movement of Spinozist thought occurs here faster, there slower. We readers of Spinoza selectively embrace those rhythms in our encounter with Spinoza.<sup>64</sup> While Deleuze himself posits that there are two rhythms in the *Ethics* that structure its organization (and later three), Deleuze’s ear for the myriad *Ethics* ties into the broader theory of the plane of immanence as a field of relational and centrifugal compositional processes. The plane of immanence distributes multiplicities.

Further involved in Spinoza’s “plane of immanence” is what Deleuze calls the “typology of immanent modes of existence” or the “ethology”.<sup>65</sup> Bodies are interrogated in terms of how their intensive affect-grounding character is expressed in extensive compositions, that is, in terms of their complex manner of existence.

62 Deleuze (2003), 171.

63 In the introduction to *Mille plateaux*, Deleuze and Guattari explicitly elaborate a theory of “the book” as one kind of “*agencement*”. See Deleuze and Guattari (1980), 9-37. As interesting as it is, I will not discuss here the famous passage in *Mille plateaux* where Spinoza *Ethics* earns the title of “being the great book on the BwO (CsO = *corps sans organes*)” (190), despite the fact that the “BwO” is explicitly connected to the “plane of immanence of desire”. For discussion, see Negri (2020).

64 Deleuze (2003), 166. The idea of “rhythms” of fast and slow motion is a translation, as it were, of Spinoza’s talk of the “certain and determinate *ratio* of motion and rest that characterizes the essence of a body. See the “physical interlude” after *Ethics* Part 2 Proposition 13 Scholium.

65 One can consider the entirety of Deleuze (2003), Chapter 3 (“The Letters on Evil”), a development on this theme. Cf. the succinct summary of “ethology” on Deleuze (2003), 168. Sharp (2011) argues that the “ethological” turn in Deleuze’s **SPP** renews the anti-hierarchical and horizontal constitution of a flat ontology by means of the renaturalization of the human being. I have shown that the anti-hierarchical impulse lies at the heart of Deleuze’s interpretation in **SPE**. I am therefore sympathetic to Sharp’s interpretation although I do not think that the originality of **SPP** lies in the anti-hierarchical turn; rather, its originality lies in its theorization of the plane of immanence as such. This moves the center of gravitation in Deleuze’s discussion of Spinoza away from the ground-level talk of deep metaphysical facts about substance, attribute, and mode, towards a more applied (“practical”) concern with the way that we as readers embody Spinoza’s thinking and fulfill Spinoza’s philosophical project.

Spinoza conceives of any body as a multiplicity of bodies — a certain and determinate *ratio* of motion and rest relates a multiplicity of bodies as one single body.<sup>66</sup> This multiplicity in nature implies that the one and the same body can be pulled in several directions at the same time, and is what makes for the complexity of the body and its rich ray of affects. For instance, we can be both gladdened *and* saddened by the sight of a friend, as one part of the body can enter into one motion while another part into a contrary motion.<sup>67</sup> In building on this, Deleuze wants to show us that Spinoza's account of our being's multi-rhythmic nature draws on a further fundamental feature of Spinoza's immanentism and the ethological project, namely that that the essence or nature of any finite mode is intrinsically individuated from any other finite mode by virtue of its degree of intensity.

The notion of “intensity” (and/or “intensive magnitude”) is certainly a term of art.<sup>68</sup> Though it figures in the systems of both Kant and Hegel, it is perhaps Bergson who drew Deleuze's attention to it.<sup>69</sup> For Bergson, the term “intensive” contrasts with “extensive” or that which has the property of being in space (In contemporary jargon, this broadly maps onto a familiar distinction between internal or subjective first-person *qualia* and material states.). Yet “in the idea of intensity, and even in the word that translates it, we find the image of a present contraction and consequently a future dilation, the image of a virtual extension and, if we can speak this way, a comprised space.”<sup>70</sup> For Bergson, the way that we employ quantifying or numerical language for talking about feelings, pains, pleasures, and other subjective states is fundamentally based on a psychological (and metaphysical) illusion, where we incorrectly import familiar trains of thought about extensive reality into our discussions of our inner reality. Thus, we find Bergson critiquing the notion of intensive magnitudes. A so-called “degree of intensity” is demonstrably

66 This is the definition of “*individuum*” given in the “physical interlude” of *Ethics* Part 2 following Proposition 13 and Scholium.

67 For Spinoza, insofar as we conceive ideas of bodily states as caused by externally present objects, that is, insofar as we imagine our affective states, we are necessarily subject to these kinds of conflicts in our nature, or “fluctuations of the soul”. See *Ethics* Part 3 Proposition 17 Scholium.

68 Lalande (1932) gives a clear rendition of what “intensity” may have meant for many in Deleuze's day: “term. ‘Intensity’: character of that which admits greater or lesser states, but in such a way that the difference between two such states is not itself a degree of that which is susceptible of augmentation or diminution; for ex., a feeling of pain can be greater or lesser, but the difference between a light pain and a stronger pain is not a degree of pain that can be compared to others, unlike the way that the difference between two lengths or numbers is itself a length or number which has its place on a scale of magnitudes” (v. 1, 390).

69 Cf.: Kant's discussion in chapter 2 of the *Analytic of Principles* in his *KRV* (Kant, 1998, 290-295); Hegel in §103, vol. 1 (“The Science of Logic”) of the *Encyclopedia* of 1830 (Hegel, 2010, 162-164); and Bergson (1927), chapter 1. See also Ramond (1995), 194-205.

70 Bergson (1927 [1888]), 3.



inconceivable. It is a notion in the employment of which we wish to quantify things (read, for Bergson: subjective *qualia*) that, in fact, we do not know how to quantify (read, for Bergson: that are not extended in space).

In **SPP**, Deleuze's understanding of how variable and quantitative determinations of our intensive character stand as the intrinsic markers of our being is knotted up with the way that Spinoza's plane of immanence sets the stage for the unfolding of the account of the affects.<sup>71</sup> On the plane of immanence, where multiplicities are always redistributed, and where our own multiple natures are always open to redistribution, our own personal passage from a lesser to a greater intensive state results from the recomposing of our nature in the extensive relations through which we present exist in duration.<sup>72</sup> In this way, Deleuze believes, all of existence becomes for Spinoza a "test" or "trial"<sup>73</sup> — an examination of whether our intensive and eternal or singular nature effectively expresses itself in contemporaneity with our present existence, that is insofar as some relation *x* of extensive parts instantiates in duration, grounding our present existence. But the affects become the only available guideposts here. Only the experience of our active affects can reliably testify to the truth of our natures as degrees of intensity, that is expressions of being's self-affirming power. One is thus presented with what is effectively a theory of the point of contact between the un-extended and the extended, quality and quantity, *pace* Bergson.

To further understand the stakes of Deleuze's interpretation here, it bears underscoring that, for Spinoza, the "affect" (*affectus*) *does* seem to involve two poles of a person's being. Any affect is the idea of the body's "transition" or "passage" (*transitio*) from between states of perfection; hence we may say, with Deleuze, that it effectively designates a relation between states of perfection. The greater perfection gives way to the lesser perfection, or the lesser perfection gives way to the greater perfection. In both cases, the mind forms a corresponding idea or affect. Joy, *laetitia*, is an idea of the body's passage from lesser to greater perfection, that is, the body's flourishing, whereas sadness, *tristitia*,

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71 Actually, it seems there is some equivocation or evolution in the meaning of "intensity" in Spinoza, for Deleuze. In **SPE**, the "intensity" of a mode was strictly identified with the intrinsic principle of individuation of that mode, i.e. its eternal essence included in the attribute. Deleuze emphasizes there that "the difference of beings (essences of modes) is both intrinsic and purely quantitative, as the quantity here is an intensive quantity. [...] [E]ach finite being must be said to *express the absolute*, according to the intensive quantity that constitutes its essence, that is according to its degree of power" (Deleuze, 1968a, 180).

72 In the earlier **SPE**, Deleuze carefully documents this Spinozist position on the theory of the finite mode as consisting in the claim that "to exist is to presently have a very great number of parts" where "these compositional parts are exterior to the essence of the mode and exterior to one another: these are extensive parts" (Deleuze, 1968a, 183).

73 Deleuze (2003), 58.



implies the passage from a greater to a lesser perfection.<sup>74</sup>

It should be no surprise, then, that Deleuze considers the Spinozist theory of the affect to be a fine candidate for the mantelpiece of his interpretation of Spinoza's immanentism in **SPP**. Affects are relational in nature, too; and insofar as the mind is the idea of the body, we find ourselves "in the middle" of an affective bath or network of emotions from our first to our last days. Affects are the way the mind conceives the degree or amount of perfection of the body; the affect is conceived when our being *intensifies* and *enriches*, or when, conversely, it is distended and washed away by external forces. For Deleuze, the affect involves a relational "arrangement" (*agencement*) of intrinsic capacities and powers, and it invokes the way that the mind is always relating two poles of its body's nature, lesser and greater reality or perfection, in its "encounters" with other bodies:

"Studies that define bodies, animals, or people in terms of the affects of which they are capable have founded what today we call *ethology*. This is as true of us, people, as much as it is true of animals, as nobody knows in advance the affects of which they are capable. It is a long affair of experimentation, a long prudence, a Spinozist wisdom that implies the construction of a plane of immanence or consistence. Spinoza's *Ethics* has nothing to do with a morality; he conceives it as an ethology, that is to say a composition of speed and slowness, of powers of affecting and being affected on this plane of immanence. Spinoza cries out: You do not know what you are capable of, for better or worse, you do not know in advance what a body or a mind can do, in such an encounter [*rencontre*], in such an arrangement [*agencement*], in such a combination."<sup>75</sup>

The plane of immanence is a plane of affirmative conjunction and the embracing of rhythms of motion, of immersion into relations. The relation is a compound of relations, but it is only ever a disjunctive synthesis. On the plane of immanence, where being is univocal, each being affirms its own character as a multiplicity, an opening onto a surface of relations and encounters which it learns to ride, to glide over ("*planer*") without being dissolved. Following Deleuze, a finite individual body might be best described as a para-consistent set of affective relations, a pattern of affective capacity and power. This is why the plane of *immanence* is also called plane of *consistency*. Spinoza's ontological units, the *quanta* of motion and rest that correspond to eternal truths, are the standard-

74 See esp. *Ethics* Part 3 Proposition 11 Scholium.

75 Deleuze (2003), 168.

bearers of the theory of immanence as a whole, where what it is to be a thing is to consistently affirm a nature in an outward expansiveness, a capacity for affects and a power of composition. How consistent, or consistent up to what point? “*Nul ne sait ce que peut un corps*” – that is, nobody knows in advance when the composition becomes a decomposition.<sup>76</sup> For that, there is, again, *l'épreuve éthique*; it's a matter of a “long affair of experimentation” — it is a question of successfully selecting against “*des mauvais rencontres*,” “bad encounters,” conceived by Spinoza along the model of poisons and intoxicants.<sup>77</sup>

It is crucial that the plane of immanence remain *sans* supplementary dimension of meaning or interiority. Yet it would seem that Deleuze's reading is strained on account of the central role that he thinks intensive states occupy in Spinoza. Transcendence inevitably suggests a place “beyond” the mundane, a higher realm, God on a throne, Providential oversight... It needn't, as talk of transcendence might also refer to something contained within and squirreled away on the inside as it were, a subtracted space untouched by the commerce of all things. But what is an “intensity” if not a qualitatively enriched inner world, a thickening and deepening development? Hence, a major difficulty for Deleuze's reading in **SPP** would be why these “intensities” do not preserve an element of transcendence in Spinoza's immanentism.<sup>78</sup>

The wrinkle in Deleuze's articulation of Spinoza's “cartography” aside, Deleuze emphatically underlines how Spinoza leaves no stone unturned in the hunt for transcendence. The extirpation of the Cartesian subject, of a mind that exists somehow outside of its faculty for thought, of a body that exists somehow underneath its capacity for affects, is just the polemical component of an irreducible drive in Spinoza *qua* thinker of immanence to abolish the meaning of the distinction between interior and exterior:

“Never is an animal, a thing, separable from its relations with the world: the interior is only a selected exterior; the exterior, a projected interior; the rapidity or slowness of metabolisms, perceptions, actions and reactions link up one after the other to constitute such or such an individual in the world.”<sup>79</sup>

The abolition of the interior/exterior division echoes Deleuze's recurrent talk of “surfaces” and the way in which meaning only dwells at the level

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76 A point which already surfaces in Deleuze (1968a). See 193 *et sq.*

77 *Ibid.*, 61, for the account of “bad encounters” as poisons. Zourabichvili (2002) further develops the Deleuzian understanding of the notions of sickness and intoxication in Spinoza.

78 A point similarly underlined in Ramond (1995), 203-204.

79 Deleuze (2003), 168-169.

of surfaces as a fragile effect of their interplay. Spinoza's ostensibly flat ontology thus serves as a sounding bar for the intuition that Deleuze also finds at work in Lewis Carroll or in the Stoics in his 1969 *Logique du sens*. Depth is only an illusion of perspective.

Admittedly, the older interpretation of the meaning of "immanence" in Spinoza has not been totally discarded in **SPP**, as we see if we turn to the "Index of principal concepts in the *Ethics*".<sup>80</sup> The index dates from 1970, however. The book presents us with multiple strata in Deleuze's thinking on immanence in Spinoza. If the earlier emphasis on Spinoza's metaphysics of causality is residual, the emphasis on Spinoza's "ethology" as a project for living on and thinking through the plane of immanence will dominate the character of Deleuze's final meditations on Spinoza and immanence.

### Spinoza & the Purest Plane of Immanence in *Qu'est-ce que La philosophie ?*

With the late text *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* (hereafter: "**QQPH?**"), Deleuze — accompanied by Félix Guattari — provides us with a third and final version of the story of Spinoza's significance as a thinker of immanence.<sup>81</sup> Furthering the earlier development in the conception of Spinoza's immanentism we find at work in **SPP**, Deleuze and Guattari eschew any facile conception of immanence in favor of a very idiosyncratic one. Indeed, the term "immanence" now has a particularly restricted, technical meaning, as involved in what Deleuze and Guattari call "the plane of immanence." As we have seen, this mutation in conceptual terminology was also anticipated and prepared by the earlier works. Although not exclusively spoken of in connection to the plane immanence, the plane of immanence plays *the key role* in the final story here of Spinoza's philosophy's enduring meaningfulness as a philosophy of immanence. Spinoza, we are told, conceives "the best" or "the purest" "plane of immanence."<sup>82</sup> If we are to understand what Deleuze and Guattari mean, we have to begin with this lengthy detour, and figure out what "the plane of immanence" is on their view — and why, for that matter, Spinoza's grappling with it in his illustrious fashion is important to the nature of philosophy in general.

The first aspect of this meta-philosophy we must grapple with is why "the plane of immanence is not a concept, nor is it the concept of all

80 If we look up the term "immanence" in that index, we find the following: "Cf. Attribute, Cause, Eminence, Nature." Not especially helpful... But if we then look up Cause, we are confronted with a summary on immanent causation similar to the one provided by **SPE**. (Discussed above). See esp. *ibid.*, 79.

81 Deleuze and Guattari (2005 [1991]). Translations my own.

82 *Ibid.*, 62.

concepts.”<sup>83</sup> If it is not a “concept”, what is it? What kind of speculative function does it have, according to Deleuze and Guattari? One inviting approach here, therefore, is to begin by contrasting their theory of the concept with their theory of the plane of immanence, both of which form essential components of their overall meta-philosophical theory.

“Philosophy is the art of forming, inventing, fabricating concepts.”<sup>84</sup> This is the first hard response we get from Deleuze and Guattari to the question: What is philosophy? When interpreting this position, some charitability is called for, of course, but *this* meta-philosophical claim at least is *prima facie* intuitively straightforward: Hegel *creates* a (Hegelian) concept of contradiction (contradiction which is surpassed); Nietzsche *creates* a (Nietzschean) concept of difference (difference which is affirmed).

The plane of immanence, in contrast with the definition of philosophy, defies common-sense. It is, we are told, the “image of thought”: it is the image thought gives itself of what it means to think, and hence what thought claims for itself by right as thinkable in the first place.<sup>85</sup> If concepts are fragmentary, “and born from a dice-throw,” they “resonate” on a plane.<sup>86</sup> If concepts are “events” of thought, the plane of immanence is the horizon of all events that are conceptualized, their “reservoir”.<sup>87</sup>

.....  
83 *Ibid.*, 39. See also 43, *inter alia*: “It is essential not to confuse the plane of immanence with the concepts that occupy it.”

84 *Ibid.*, 8.

85 *Ibid.*, 41.

86 *Ibid.*, 39.

87 *Ibid.*, 39. An entire chapter of **QQPH?** gives a reply to the question: what are concepts? Among much else, we learn that they are *not* discursive in nature (and, consequently, philosophy itself is not a “discursive formation”). “It is the confusion of concepts and propositions that makes us believe in the existence of scientific propositions, and that considers the proposition as a veritable “intension” (that which the sentence expresses) [...] whereas the philosophical concept most often appears as a senseless proposition (*une proposition dénuée de sens*). This confusion reigns in logic and explains the infantile conception it makes of philosophy. [...] The concept is not at all a proposition, it is not propositional, and the proposition is never an intension” (*ibid.*, 28). Meanwhile, the intentional character of concepts comes up in connection with their relation to the rules of logic — unsurprisingly, since the rules of right reasoning are said to ensure truthful access to reality via concepts. This responds a natural epistemological concern: What use do we make of concepts when we make *valid* judgements? Yet what Deleuze and Guattari understand by concept is somewhat orthogonal to the epistemological concern: “It is true that the concept is fluid, vague, but not because it is without a contour: it is because it is vagabond, non-discursive, in movement on a plane of immanence... [The concept] is not at all a reference to lived experience (*le vécu*) or the states of things, but a consistency defined by its internal components; neither denotation of the state of things nor signification of lived experience, the concept is the event as pure meaning [...]. The concept is a form or a force, never a possible function in any way. In brief, there is only a philosophical concept on the plane of immanence, and scientific functions or logical propositions are not concepts” (*ibid.*, 144-145). Note that Deleuze and Guattari are implicitly denying the broadly post-Fregean consensus of seeing concepts as subject only to the laws of logic.

The intimacy of the “concept” and the “plane of immanence” should not lead us to think philosophers deduce their concepts from their plane of immanence; the relationship between concepts and the plane of immanence is one-of-a-kind. This is true *despite* the fact that the same “elements” can be present on the plane and in the concept, even though they will not have the same “traits”.<sup>88</sup> It is essential in fact that the relationship between the plane and the concepts that people it not be misconstrued as a deductive one. Philosophy “creates” concepts and does not “deduce” them from prior conceptual commitments.<sup>89</sup> And the plane of immanence is just not the right kind of thing to allow for the deduction of concepts. It is the *image* of thought that thought draws out or traces of itself on its own. Last but not least, although the plane is that which inaugurates a philosophy, it is not itself a philosophical position, but, as we shall see, an instance of what Deleuze and Guattari want to think of as the non-philosophical as such.

Deleuze and Guattari can however affirm that their theory of the plane of immanence confirms the “grandiose” Leibnizian and Bergsonian view on philosophy as “depending on an intuition that concepts do not cease to develop through slight intensive differences”. This Leibnizo-Bergsonian meta-philosophical view is allegedly supported by the Deleuzo-Guattarian suggestion that the “intuition” here be thought of as “the enfolding (*l’enveloppement*) of infinite movements of thought that ceaselessly pass over a plane of immanence.”<sup>90</sup> True thought is always, for Deleuze and Guattari, claiming for itself “infinite movements” or “movements of infinity” — movements which compose the plane of immanence, like the waves of an ocean. Fundamentally it would appear the plane of immanence testifies to how philosophy, “the art” of concept creation, is always supplemented and underpinned by some necessary non-conceptual inaugural or founding gesture: thought claiming infinite movements for itself,<sup>91</sup> staking out an “*Un-Tout illimité*”.<sup>92</sup>

Philosophy is the art of the creation of concepts. Perhaps the only analogous faculty in us to our philosophical faculty is the artistic faculty, the creative drive or skill whereby we imbue meaning into things. What is more, a philosophy will pose the problems raised by the concepts that people the plane of immanence it has traced or claimed. “Philosophy is

.....  
88 *Ibid.*, 44.

89 Furthermore, genuine philosophers necessarily conceive for their philosophies “conceptual persona” (Plato has Socrates, Nietzsche has Zarathustra...) who bring the philosophy to life, the correspondence between planes and concepts is not a matter of a mere logical implication or even one-to-one resonance. See esp. *ibid.*, 76-79.

90 *Ibid.*, 44.

91 *Ibid.*, 41-42.

92 *Ibid.*, 39.

a constructivism,"<sup>93</sup> and "one must make planes and pose problems, just as one creates concepts."<sup>94</sup> This helps explain why philosophers are said to "abhor discussion"<sup>95</sup> — a vulgar activity if there ever were one. Deleuze and Guattari form a multitude of creative voices, not a panel of critics. Each philosopher (or, to be precise, philosophy) has to draw up their own plane and the concepts which "people" it. What sense is there in having an opinion of some other concept, if one has not created it for oneself? And if one imports it onto a different plane, as one inevitably does, it withers and dies on this foreign soil. "One is never on the same plane."<sup>96</sup> The art of philosophy is profoundly solitary, motivated by an aristocratic ethos of lone heroism, if not precariously solipsistic — or schizophrenic. Greedy gregariousness destroys concepts, and "all thought is a fiat, and emits a dice throw."<sup>97</sup> Because philosophy is a constructivism, we cannot know whether philosophical activities will pose the right problems and provide the right solutions until we undertake them for ourselves: we must create our own concepts and build our plane of immanence. Mere critics chew on old bones; nothing is more pitiful than a historian who refuses herself or himself their philosophical prerogatives.<sup>98</sup> But when did the creative process begin, we may reasonably ask? Certainly, philosophers work with hand-me-downs; Hegel inherits if not *his* dialectical concept of contradiction the term 'contradiction' (*Widerspruch*). There is something in circulation provided by ordinary, natural language. The philosopher's act of creation cannot match a divine being's *ex nihilo* act of creation, unless these shadow concepts are, like the *tohu wa-bohu* of Genesis, primeval with the act of creation itself. It may be an impossible request for Deleuze to tell us how creation of

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93 *Ibid.*, 39.

94 *Ibid.*, 32.

95 *Ibid.*, 34.

96 *Ibid.*, 33.

97 *Ibid.*, 77.

98 *Ibid.*, 85. The meta-philosophical commentary on philosophical constructivism and the impossibility of philosophical discussion properly speaking echoes Gueroult (1979). For Gueroult, too, any philosophical "doctrine" or "system" essentially posits its own philosophical reality. Gueroult's philosophy of the history of philosophy is neo-Kantian in nature, but with a twist. As Gueroult sees it, the transcendental conditions of philosophy — that to qualify as a philosophy a thought must be systematized, because all though fundamentally strives to posit an explanatory framework for all reality — disbar many otherwise "philosophical" practices from consideration by the historian. In this respect, too, Deleuze resembles Gueroult. For recent discussion of Gueroult's "dianometrics" ("theory of doctrines"), see Lærke (2019) and (2020).

Unlike Gueroult, however, Deleuze seemingly ascribes to the view espoused by his mentor Alquié (2005 [1956]), for whom to "understand" a philosophy (read: a historical doctrine) means to *empathize* with it, which one does by performing or following the guiding "intellectual intuition" for oneself. In this way, Deleuze, we may say, makes a common ground of Gueroult and Alquié, despite their famously acrimonious opposition. See further Deleuze (1969b), on Gueroult's "genetico-systematic" method, and Peden (2014), on the Alquié-Gueroult debate.

philosophy began, even though the question is particularly pressing in the case of *historical* work. I suppose we may however find attractive the more watered-down suggestion that philosophers find themselves always already immersed into a world imbued with meaningful concepts, some of which they take up and retool in their own acts of creation.

This extreme Deleuzo-Guattarian ecumenicism will have to be moderated, however, in light of a further characterization of the plane of immanence that bears directly on the exceptional place of Spinoza in their late meta-philosophical theory.

Insofar as the plane of immanence is not a concept, it is not the creation of philosophy, since philosophy consists in the creation of concepts. It is thus “pre-supposed,” argue Deleuze and Guattari, *not* in the way that a concept relies on another concept, but in the way that concepts themselves rely on a “non-conceptual” or “intuitive” comprehension.<sup>99</sup> The plane of immanence stands in a paradoxical relationship to philosophy: it is “pre-philosophical” yet it also constitutes “the internal conditions” of philosophy.<sup>100</sup> “Non-philosophy,” Deleuze and Guattari write, “is perhaps more at the heart of philosophy than philosophy itself, and signifies that philosophy does not content itself with being understood only in a philosophical or conceptual manner, but addresses itself in its essence to non-philosophers as well.”<sup>101</sup>

Deleuze and Guattari are not the first to draw sustained attention to non-philosophy, nor even the first to maintain that understanding non-philosophy as dwelling at the heart of philosophy can clarify the nature of philosophy itself.<sup>102</sup> We must recognize the priority of the non-philosophical. Moreover, because the plane of immanence is “pre-philosophical”, “non-philosophical,” or involves non-conceptual “intuition,” write Deleuze and Guattari, forming the plane of immanence “implies a sort of hesitant experimentation” on the part of thought; it relies on means which are difficult to avow: dreams, pathological processes, esoteric experiences, drunkenness, and excess.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, it is on the plane of immanence, or rather, it is in continually drawing up the plane of immanence as an infinite movement of thought, that philosophy toys with chaos, *that is* non-philosophy.

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99 Deleuze and Guattari (2005), 44.

100 *Ibid.*, 45.

101 *Ibid.*, 45.

102 This project of situating non-philosophy at the foundation of philosophy resonates with post-Kantian German thinking about the Kantian *ding an sich*. Thus, in Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, for instance, the Kantian *ding an sich*, which for Kant remains non-philosophical or beyond the grasp of concepts, becomes the Fichtean I, that is, the non-philosophical *ding an sich* is reconceived as practical reason's demand to subordinate the Not-I under the unity of the I. For more on this trajectory, see Delbos (1992 [1909]).

103 *Ibid.*, 45.



In the pre-conceptual gesture of instauration, the philosopher grapples with the extremely difficult task of selecting a cut of chaos on which their philosophy — their art of concept creation — can be undertaken. “The problem of philosophy is to acquire consistency without losing the infinity into which thought plunges.”<sup>104</sup> As a matter of fact, it is only insofar as philosophy is constituted by a selection of chaos that philosophy always takes place on planes of *immanence* — whereas *transcendence* remains derivative, a deleterious side-effect of the way thought claims for itself infinite movement as a plane of immanence. The “claiming” or seizing of infinite movements of thought, which is built into the very foundation of philosophy as its internal and non-philosophical condition, is a claiming of “*une coupe de chaos*.”<sup>105</sup> This is what makes thought “dangerous,” disruptive, and hostile to transcendence: “*la part d’immanence*” is really “*la part du feu*.”<sup>106</sup> And it is what Spinoza knew to embrace, at the cost of shattering the wall between philosophy and non-philosophy.

For Deleuze and Guattari, understanding chaos is a fraught affair. This is due to the nature of chaos: “chaos chaotizes,”<sup>107</sup> that is to say, unravels and undermines the consistency that thought gives to concepts, pushing thought to an *unstable* infinite variability. And yet, it is unavoidable, as it is involved in the very movement of infinity that thought gives as its own image when laying claim to its plane of immanence. Hence, we are all, think Deleuze and Guattari, plagued by the problem of the chaos of thought. “Nothing is more painful, more anguishing than a thought that escapes itself, fleeting ideas, ideas that disappear having been hardly sketched out, already worn away by oblivion, precipitated into others we do not master any better.”<sup>108</sup>

Transcendence takes form when chaos overwhelms, as it almost inevitably must — *almost* inevitably, since Spinoza will show us that this is not *always* the case, and transcendence can be repudiated once and for all. Thus, chaos is metaphysically prior to transcendence, just as non-philosophy is prior to the conceptual art. Transcendence is the appearance opinion forms of a guard against chaos — an “umbrella,”<sup>109</sup> something static, a cliché, a thought that is made *immobile*. On the one hand, philosophy is at always war with opinion, and it wages that war by borrowing the arms of non-philosophy or chaos. On the other hand, the

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104 *Ibid.*, 46.

105 *Ibid.*, 46.

106 *Ibid.*, 46.

107 *Ibid.*, 46.

108 *Ibid.*, 201.

109 *Ibid.*, 46.

reintroduction of transcendence onto a plane of immanence is “*fatal*”<sup>110</sup>—inevitable, but also deadly, as it stills and “stops” the movement of infinity that thought has claimed for itself as a right.<sup>111</sup> One thus has “the choice between transcendence and chaos.”<sup>112</sup> All philosophers *qua* thinkers of planes of immanence call on chaos, which they both select from and ward off in drawing up their image of thought; and all philosophies are united, and can be stacked up against one another, in this delicate effort to ward off while selectively introducing doses of chaos.

“The plane of immanence is like a cut (*coupe*) of chaos, and acts a sieve (*crible*).”<sup>113</sup> Here is where Spinoza’s immanentism finally comes into its full glory. If all philosophies have their own plane of immanence that they people with their own concepts, what sense is there in asking if one can be better than another? The answer takes up the Deleuzian presentation of Spinozism as the philosophy that shows the way out of philosophy. The best plane of immanence will be the purest plane of immanence, that is, it will have a special “sieve”, one where the infinite movement of thought is never stilled, where the floodgates of chaos remain unclosed. Spinoza therefore provides the solution to the riddle: the “best” plane of immanence is his — because his philosophy surrenders itself to the effort to call on chaos in the war against transcendence. That is to say, his system fully opens onto the non-philosophical or pre-philosophical condition of all philosophy as constituted by a “slice” or “cut” of chaos. Spinoza’s philosophy thus tells us about the absolute horizons of all philosophy:

“He who knew fully that immanence was only immanent to itself, and thus that it was a plane run over with movements of the infinite, filled with intensive ordinates, is Spinoza. Thus, he is the prince of philosophers. Maybe he is the only one to have made no compromise with transcendence, to have hunted it down everywhere. With the third kind of knowledge in the last book of the *Ethics*, he makes the movement of the infinite and gives to philosophy infinite speeds. He reached unheard of speeds, shortcuts so astonishing that one can only speak of music, tornados, wind, and cords. He found the only freedom in immanence. He completed (*achevé*) philosophy, because he fulfilled its pre-philosophical supposition. [...] Spinoza is the vertigo of philosophy from which so many philosophers try

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110 *Ibid.*, 54.

111 *Ibid.*, 50.

112 *Ibid.*, 54.

113 *Ibid.*, 46.

in vain to escape. Will we ever be mature enough for a Spinozist inspiration?"<sup>114</sup>

In the concluding paragraph to the same chapter, we find sketched out in a somewhat fragmented or aphoristic form a second, similar celebration of Spinoza's uniqueness — that is, his uncompromising commitment to bear witness to "the plane of immanence" at the core of all philosophy. Here the Christological undertones become explicit. Spinoza's "completion" of philosophy is the accomplishment of its primordial task as well as the overthrowing of the stricture to which it is normally bound, *viz.* to select a "cut" or "slice" of chaos and not *all* of chaos, not *all* movements of the infinite:

"Perhaps it is the supreme gesture of philosophy: not so much to think THE plane of immanence, but to show that it is there, unthought in each plane. To think about it in this manner, as the outside and the inside of thought, the outside that is not exterior and the inside that is not interior. That which cannot be thought, and yet must be thought, this was thought once, just as the Christ was incarnated one time to show the possibility of the impossible. Thus, Spinoza is the Christ of philosophers, and the greatest philosophers are hardly but apostles, who distance themselves or approach themselves to this mystery. Spinoza, the infinite becoming-philosopher (*le devenir-philosophe infini*). He showed, laid out, thought the "best" plane of immanence, that is the purest one, the one which neither gives itself over to transcendence nor restores any transcendence, the one which inspires the fewest illusions, the fewest bad feelings and erroneous perceptions..."<sup>115</sup>

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As I interpret their view here, Deleuze and Guattari are ascribing to Spinoza the following: that his philosophy circumscribes the outer limits of what *any* philosophy does when it fully turns itself over to the plane of immanence, the plan that *all* philosophies draw on in a kind of pre-conceptual gesture of inauguration. That gesture of inauguration, we have seen, yields "infinite movements of thought" — the moving, swirling, vertiginous ground which philosophy peoples with concepts, the reservoir from which philosophy draws its understanding of that which can by philosophical right be subsumed under a concept in the first place.

For Deleuze and Guattari, perhaps we may say that the ultimate lesson of Spinoza's immanentism is to show us that if we take philosophy's claim to dispose of the infinite movement of thought

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<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-52.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 61-62.

seriously, then philosophy has to accept a certain self-identification with chaos; philosophy, in including all infinite movement of thought in itself, no longer distinguishes itself from non-philosophy. The core meta-philosophical insight to be gleaned from Spinoza is that for philosophy to create maximal concepts, *and to have a maximal rational scope*, philosophy ceases to select against the chaotic character of the movement of the infinite in thought. Returning to philosophy's non-philosophical precondition becomes, in the case of Spinoza, philosophy's purpose. This is the price to pay for the abolition of transcendence — a willingness to discard the “sieve” or “screen” (*crible*) that would otherwise select against an excess of infinite movement or chaos.

Presumably this sounds decidedly exotic and “Continental” to more standard Anglo-centric conceptions both of Spinoza and of the interpreter's job. Nonetheless, it resonates strongly with recent critical work in analytic metaphysics by Michael Della Rocca, for whom the explanatory demand employed at the heart of all philosophy actually instructs us in the ultimate metaphysical insignificance of all rational explanations.<sup>116</sup> The Christological character of Deleuze and Guattari's characterization of Spinoza should not be too off-putting, either. We can, if we are more comfortable with the idea, see them as proffering a kind of neo-Wittgensteinian take on the need for philosophy, once complete, to discard the philosophical ladder it employed to reach completion.<sup>117</sup>

There is no denying of course that immanence in Spinoza has taken on bold and strange hues in the late work of Deleuze. **QQPH?** implies a story of a Spinoza who, having become a philosopher because he found no deep and lasting joy in mercantile dealings, would have seen fit to use philosophy as a way to move beyond mere philosophy. In other words, Spinoza's “immanentism” comes to stand for Spinoza's dream of redemption via philosophy. Here is the rub. Spinoza's unhinged immanentism must appear as sheer chaos, an avenue for non-philosophy to claim philosophical rights. Its liberating force is at stake.

116 See the recent work Della Rocca (2020) for the fullest presentation of this view.

117 A view famously espoused in Wittgenstein (1922 [1921]), 6.5

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# **Reading the Hebrew Bible with Canaanite Eyes: Spinoza on Land, Migration, and Conquest**

**Ted Stolze**

*"Land ... is such a comprehensive symbol in the Old Testament that it could be ranked next to God in importance."*

–Norman C. Habel<sup>1</sup>

*"... [T]hroughout their history, the Jews have navigated between the contesting values of displacement and arrival, uprootedness and land."*

–Peter E. Gordon<sup>2</sup>

*"... [O]ne's perspective on the Exodus story takes on a new different complexion when read with the eyes of the 'Canaanites' ..."*

–Michael Prior<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract:** This article explores Spinoza's discussion of the ancient Israelite conquest of Canaan. Although modern archaeology has cast doubt that this conquest ever occurred, it turns out that the ideology associated with even an imagined conquest is only one of several possible biblical land ideologies. Moreover, taking Spinoza's theory of natural right seriously would require holding the position that the Canaanites, or any indigenous people, had, and still have, the right to resist invaders. There is an *aporia* in Spinoza's political thought, though: the problem of "foreigners." Despite the biblical embrace of immigrants in response to the experience of (at least some) Israelites enduring servitude in Egypt – and the relative precariousness of the Jewish community in the Netherlands – Spinoza disallows citizenship rights for foreigners. Some Spinozist reflections on how to enlarge the scope of civil and political rights follow. The article closes with an overview of Spinoza's little-known mixed influence on the American radical environmentalist Edward Abbey.

**Keywords:** Ancient Israel, Canaan, Biblical Land Ideologies, Spinoza's Political Thought, Edward Abbey, Immigration

In his invaluable "biblical commentary" on the first chapter of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP), Philippe Cassuto seeks to "situate Spinoza's thought and work in its biblical context" and argues that without this Biblical "substratum" Spinoza's ideas would not have attained the "universality" for which they are known.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Cassuto concludes,

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<sup>1</sup> Habel 1993, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon 2021, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Prior 1997, p. 39.

<sup>4</sup> Cassuto 1998, p. 231.

... [I]t seems to us that the study of the Bible and other religious texts to which Spinoza invites us is absolutely necessary, even and perhaps especially today, at a time when fundamentalism is ablaze everywhere to obscure our world and our thought. What better weapon could we direct against fundamentalism than our thorough and meticulous knowledge of these texts in order to demonstrate the great ignorance of those who use them to destroy our humanity? The Bible is part of our thinking; it is better to study it in order to attain the universal that Spinoza proposed and not to reject it in a way that would be just as superstitious as its use for bad purposes.<sup>5</sup>

One could take exception to Cassuto's goal of demonstrating the "ignorance" of those who use the Bible for bad or fundamentalist reasons – or, for that matter, those who try to *ignore* the importance of the Bible. For example, it is arguably better to think of biblical studies, whether in connection to Spinoza or not, as a kind of *intervention* that may or may not assist our theological-political projects. But Cassuto's challenge is admirable: can we take the Bible as seriously today as Spinoza did in his own conjuncture in order to enrich and enliven philosophical and political critique?<sup>6</sup>

My goal, however, is not, as Cassuto does, to concentrate on Spinoza's use of Jewish commentators on the Hebrew Scriptures. Rather it is to focus on how Spinoza discusses the Israelite conquest of the land of Canaan. It is worth stressing from the start, of course, that Spinoza relies on the received biblical narrative and accepts at face value what has come to be called the "Conquest Model" of ancient Israelite entry into Canaan and the subsequent defeat of the indigenous population. Unfortunately, as K. L. Noll remarks, this model "has been abandoned by all competent historians today ... because it is incompatible with the archaeological evidence."<sup>7</sup> This lack of archaeological support doesn't, of course, render the biblical narrative – or Spinoza's reliance on it – useless, however.<sup>8</sup> For example, Noll continues, "the existence of a Biblical tale narrating a single, unified conquest under the leadership of Moses and Joshua is valuable to the social historian who seeks to

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<sup>5</sup> Cassuto 1998, pp. 231-32.

<sup>6</sup> I would like to acknowledge the profound influences of the following teachers for my fidelity to the Hebrew Bible and its liberatory capabilities: Max Polley (in college) and Rabbi Melvin Sands and Rolf Knierim (in theological school). I would also like to thank my comrade Wonil Kim, who for three decades has been my mentor regarding the prospects for, and impasses of, biblical theology.

<sup>7</sup> Noll 2001, pp. 157-58.

<sup>8</sup> Spinoza can doubtless be forgiven for not having had access to archaeological finds in ancient Israel and the larger Near East that both confirm and disconfirm aspects of the received biblical narrative, since "biblical archeology" didn't exist until the nineteenth century! (See Cline 2009, pp. 13-20). For an accessible overview of the challenge that archeology poses for understanding biblical texts and their historical contexts, see Dever 2020. The most in-depth account, however, is Dever 2017.

understand the ethos of a people who liked to tell tales of this kind ... Thus, the biblical conquest is a natural – even predictable – result of folklore; it is not an accurate depiction of Israel's entry into Canaan."<sup>9</sup>

More precisely, though, one should identify this folkloric memory of dimly recalled times as serving an *ideological* function to legitimize not just the ancient Israelite ruling class and dominant institutions in contradistinction to perceived Canaanite threats of cultural and religious resurgence.<sup>10</sup> In particular, the folklore provides a defense of how the *land* came to be acquired. More troubling, as Michael Prior has compellingly argued, from a perspective to which we shall return, the Conquest Model has been appropriated over the course of centuries to justify the process of colonization and subjection of indigenous peoples around the world.<sup>11</sup>

Although, as John J. Collins observes, the “biblical denunciations of the Canaanites cannot be taken at face value ... and tell us more about the purposes of their human authors than the purposes of God,”<sup>12</sup> what persists is not just an archaeological or historical problem of conquest but a distinctly *moral* problem.<sup>13</sup>

Collins has noted that “there is some irony in the way in which these commands of destruction are embedded in the story of the exodus, which served as the great paradigm of liberation in Western history.” Yet, he hastens to add, “the liberation of the Israelites and the subjugation of the Canaanites are two sides of the same coin. Without a land of their own, the liberated Israelites would have nowhere to go, but the land promised to them was not empty and had its own inhabitants. Read from the Canaanite perspective, this is not a liberating story at all.”<sup>14</sup>

Yet there is a curious argument – and one that Spinoza could well have known about.<sup>15</sup> As Eric Nelson has shown, “rabbinic commentators

9 Noll 2001, p. 159. See pp. 159-64 for three alternative models: “Global Infiltration,” “Peasant Revolt,” and Symbiosis” (which Noll himself advocates). Anne E. Killebrew has recently offered a creative synthesis of these models that she calls the “Mixed Multitude” approach (see Killebrew 2005; 2006; 2017; 2018; 2020).

10 For example, the Book of Joshua was likely redacted during the seventh-century reign of King Josiah and supports the latter's monotheizing agenda from above at the expense of Canaanite polytheism and its appeal from below to ordinary Israelites. See Finkelstein 2001, pp. 94-96.

11 Prior 1997.

12 Collins 2004, p. 13.

13 James Barr (1993, pp. 207-19; 1999, pp. 492-94) rightly noted this, and Michael Prior (1997) developed his concern with a rare combination of scholarly insight, theological acumen, and activist passion.

14 Collins 2004, p. 12.

15 As Steven Nadler points out (pp. 103-8), in the early 1650s Spinoza possibly attended the yeshiva *Keter Torah* one of whose popular teachers was Rabbi Saul Levi Morteira, who emphasized medieval Jewish commentators. Moreover, Spinoza had in his library a two-volume copy of the “Rabbinic Bible” edited by the great Christian Hebraist Johannes Buxtorf and published in 1618-19. This “beautiful edition” (Vulliaud 2012, p. 16) included commentary by Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and others.

and their early-modern readers found in the Hebrew Bible a distinctive theory of property, applied with considerable precision to a range of concrete cases.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the great medieval commentator Rashi (Rabbi Schlomo Yitzchaki of Troyes, France, 1040-1105) offered in his remarkable commentary on the Torah<sup>17</sup> a striking interpretation along these lines of Genesis/Bereshit 1:1. Why, he wondered does the Torah not begin with the first commandment given to the Israelites as a nation, namely, in Exodus 12:1 to regard the lunar month of Nisan as “the first of months”? Why does the Torah even include Genesis and the first part of Exodus? Rashi’s answer:

**When God began:** Said Rabbi Isaac: It was not necessary to begin the Torah except from “This month shall mark for you” (Exod. 12:2), which is the first commandment that the Israelites were commanded. Now for what reason did it begin with “When God began”? Because of [the verse] “He revealed to His people His powerful works, in giving them the heritage of nations” (Ps. 111:6). For if the nations of the world should say to Israel, “You are robbers, for you conquered by force the lands of the seven nations [of Canaan],” they will reply, “The entire earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He; He created it and gave it to whomever He deemed proper. When He wished, He took it away from them and gave it to us.”<sup>18</sup>

Eric Nelson has carefully unpacked Rashi’s argument:

[F]or Rashi, the whole purpose of the first book and a half of the Pentateuch is to establish a set of propositions about the nature of property in order to vindicate the Israelite claim to the land of Canaan. It must be demonstrated that (1) God is the creator of the earth, and therefore its owner; (2) God gives possession of his land to certain peoples under certain conditions; (3) when those conditions are violated, he may transfer possession to others; ... (4) in this specific case, land was initially given to the Canaanite nations, who then violated the terms of their occupancy; and (5) accordingly, God transferred possession to the Israelites. Modern commentators would no doubt find it hyperbolic to claim that the defense of these propositions is the sole purpose (or even the most important purpose) of Genesis and the first half of Exodus, but Rashi’s insight is nonetheless worth taking seriously. The vision of

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<sup>16</sup> Nelson 2010, p. 64.

<sup>17</sup> On Rashi’s life in its historical context, see Grossman 2014. On the composition and subsequent influence of his *Commentary on the Torah*, see Lawee 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Levy and Levy 2017, p. 3.

property rights that he articulates is indeed at the very center of the Biblical text, and it explains the distinctive land laws to be found within it.<sup>19</sup>

Nonetheless, as compelling as Rashi's argument is, by any intellectual – including theological – standard, it remains *unsound*. It is likely the case, as Elazar Touitou has noted,<sup>20</sup> that Rashi was intervening in reaction to the First Crusade and trying to undercut Christian exclusivist designs on Jerusalem and the Holy Land. His commentarial strategy can in this regard be appreciated, even admired. Nonetheless, each of the five claims that Nelson presents as underlying Rashi's position is subject to serious dispute. First of all, God could well be the creator but not the "owner" of the earth. This presupposes a divine transcendence that need exhaust the possible ways in which God could create – not least of which Spinoza's conception of *immanent* (as opposed to transitive) causality.<sup>21</sup>

Secondly, what could it possibly mean to say that God "gives possession" of the earth to a specific people? How could one know without begging the question or simply as a justification for land conquest before or after the fact? Moreover, why aren't *all* people, as Spinoza argues, equally elected or chosen by God for some purpose?<sup>22</sup> Moreover, as Spinoza insisted, God (properly understood metaphysically) acts out of necessity not out of the caprice of free will.<sup>23</sup>

Thirdly, how could anyone know what it would mean to "violate" the conditions set by God for a land's possessors? Even if violated, why wouldn't the possessors have the chance to redeem themselves? If irredeemable, though, why must they lose the land by undergoing dispossession by invaders?

19 Nelson 2010, p. 65.

20Touitou 1990, p. 171. See also Sicherman and Gevaryahu 1999. As Levy and Levy write, "In 1096 12,000 Jews were murdered during the People's Crusade, a military expedition to restore Christian access to the Holy Land that swept through the Lorraine region in which Rashi lived. This tragedy prompted Rashi to write a number of penitential prayers (*Selichot*), seven of which still exist" (Levy and Levy 2017, p. xv.).

21 See Spinoza's *locus classicus* of this perspective in E1p18. It goes without saying that Rashi's argument equally fails from the start to persuade self-consciously disbelievers in God or God the creator.

22This is the position Spinoza defends not only in TTP 3, but his critique of election for a specific people or nation is not limited to ancient Israel. In a letter to a former friend and mentee, Albert Burgh, who had dramatically converted to Catholicism, Spinoza argued that "holiness of life is not peculiar to the Roman Church, but is common to all." Moreover, he continued, "whatever distinguishes the Roman Church is completely superfluous, and so has been established only by superstition" (Letter 76; G IV/318). For Spinoza such superstition conflicts with his defense in the TTP of "justice and solidarity" serving as a universal foundation of faith" (TTP 14.11-24). Spinoza's position is essentially that the law of large numbers ensures that there can be found good people in any group, whether ancient Israel or Catholicism – or among the Canaanites.

23 See E1pp29, 32-33.

Fourthly, what independent evidence is there to the effect that a specific people, namely, the Canaanites, “violated the terms of their occupancy”?<sup>24</sup> The Bible offers, to say the least, a one-sided account of Canaanite (unspecified) “iniquities.”<sup>25</sup> But were *all* Canaanites – especially children and those of lower rank and social power – equally culpable and equally deserving not simply of dispossession of their land but outright *extermination*?<sup>26</sup>

Finally, to say that the Israelites were “chosen” by God would not really be a problem if it only concerned their historically unprecedentedly high regard for human dignity and egalitarian social structures.<sup>27</sup> The problem is precisely what God expected to be done with the *land* of Canaan.<sup>28</sup> Should the land be shared fairly between the migrant Israelites and the indigenous Canaanites (the prospect of which the Genesis account of Abraham’s sojourn envisioned)? Or should it become and remain the exclusive domain of the Israelites?

### Land Ideologies in the Hebrew Bible

Norman Habel begins his indispensable book *The Land is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies*<sup>29</sup> with a definition of a “biblical ideology”:

A biblical ideology, I would argue, is a complex and contested set of ideas, values, symbols, and aspirations being promoted with social and political force in a given literary complex to persuade the

.....  
24 This also raises a key question: Who *were* the Canaanites? As Mary Ellen Buck explains, “the term ‘Canaan’ referred to the land along the coast of the Southern Levant, an area occupied today by Syria, Israel, Palestine, and Jordan. The term ‘Canaanite’ therefore was used to refer to any individual or population residing in this region, beginning as early as the start of the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 1800 BCE) until the final appearance of this term in the Roman Period (ca. 400 CE)” (Buck 2019, p. 3). The biblical invective against Canaanites, then, applies to all the peoples residing in the land of Canaan, whether Canaanites proper, Amorites, Girgashites, Hittites, Hivites, Jebusites, or Perizzites (Deut 7:1; 20:16-18). It strains credulity, though, to think that the members of each and very people were so depraved that they deserved not only to have their land taken away but that they be forever *banned* (whether literally or metaphorically).

25 However, see Leviticus 18:3 (in reference to sexual practices and child sacrifice to the Canaanite deity Molech) and Deuteronomy 7:2-5 (in reference to religious practices).

26 If we are to take the references to a “ban” [*herem*], for example, in Joshua 6:21-24 (Jericho); 8:26-29 (Ai); 11:11-15 (Hazor) literally and not metaphorically. Even if the reference is only metaphorical hyperbole comparable to rival Ancient Near Eastern conquest narratives, as argued by Younger 2009, it remains a *morally indefensible* metaphor that has been used innumerable times, especially during the early-modern dispossession of indigenous peoples – from Ireland to the Americas. For discussions of the meaning of *herem*, see Stern 1991; Niditch 1993, pp. 28-77; Bergmann, Murray, and Rea 2011; and Moberly 2013a; 2013b, p. 53-74.

27 As argued especially well by Berman 2008.

28 Failure to answer this question adequately is a major shortcoming of attempts to defend a doctrine election like Kaminsky 2003; 2013; 2016.

29 Habel 1995.



implied audience within that text of the truth of a given ideology.<sup>30</sup>

He goes on to provide a nuanced account of the complex and conflictual nature of biblical ideologies:

Biblical ideologies ... are more than single-minded campaign documents for particular social or political struggles. They are complex patterns of ideas and ideals, many of which may not be systematically integrated but are presented in the text. Moreover, they embrace a cluster of images and symbols that reflect levels of meaning rather than a distortion of reality. It is this complex cluster of images and ideas that is promoted in the biblical text as “the way things should be” in society, whether as nostalgia for the past, a justification of the status quo, a vision for the future, or an intricate combination of these.<sup>31</sup>

In short, Habel reminds us, “most biblical texts push a point. They seek to win over the minds of the implied audience and persuade those who hear the message that the beliefs announced in the texts are authoritative and true.”<sup>32</sup>

Habel distinguishes six distinct – and, in many respects, antagonistic – land ideologies in the Hebrew Bible:

- Royal
- Theocratic
- Ancestral Household
- Prophetic
- Agrarian
- Immigrant

Let us consider these ideologies briefly in order. Basic to the *royal* land ideology “are the concepts of the land as the source of wealth, the divine right of the monarch to appropriate that wealth, and the entitlement of the monarch as God's representative to have dominion over the whole earth as an empire.”<sup>33</sup> Representative texts expressing this ideology are 1 Kings 3-10 and Psalms 2, 72. As Habel summarizes this land ideology:

.....  
30 Habel 1995, p. 11. It is worth noting that in a footnote, Habel discounts Karl Marx's view of ideology as “false consciousness” (Habel 1995, p. 11n.11) and unfortunately does not engage with Louis Althusser's attempt to rework a Marxist theory of conflictual ideological practices (on which see Althusser 2014 and Pêcheux 2015).

31 Habel 1995, pp. 12-13

32 Habel 1995, p. 10.

33 Habel 1995, p. 17.

In the royal ideology, the entitlement ... and possession ... of the monarch are not primarily an appropriation of the land claims of the people. Rather, the monarch has a different mandate. The monarch claims all nations of the earth, not just Israel, as personal entitlement. The monarch claims the whole habitable land, not just Canaan, as legitimate possession. Potentially the monarch owns the whole earth ... as a rightful land, an empire.<sup>34</sup>

What is more,

the people, as a whole, have a right to the land as their entitlement from God. The monarch has a higher entitlement, which extends to the whole earth. The rights of the ancestral families of the land are subsumed under the rights of the monarch to appropriate land needed to increase the wealth of the court. The poor and the Canaanite have no right to land; they can be made slaves of the empire at the will of the monarch.<sup>35</sup>

The next land ideology is what Habel classifies as *theocratic*, and it is prominent in the Book of Deuteronomy. As Habel puts it, within this land ideology,

YHWH is identified as the owner and ruler over the land in which Israel is to live under the polity or torah outlined in Deuteronomy. This landowner is not, however, a local deity – who might be viewed as the divine ruler over Canaan – with which Israel must deal. The image of YHWH promoted in Deuteronomy is that of a universal monarch who controls vast domains, of which Canaan happens to be one.<sup>36</sup>

Understood in this light, Habel continues,

the conquest and occupation of Canaan are not merely the extension of a great ruler's empire, but the basis for recognizing that YHWH is the supreme God of the universe.... The land of Canaan is a test case. YHWH's claim to dominion over all lands is to be demonstrated, it seems, by a capacity to deliver the allocated territory of Canaan into the hands of the chosen people. YHWH's identity and authority as ruler are linked to YHWH's capacity to conquer the land allocated to Israel. ... Within the ideological

.....  
34 Habel 1995, p. 25.

35 Habel 1995, p. 32.

36 Habel 1995, p. 37.

framework of YHWH's claim to absolute dominion, the land of Canaan is relentlessly promoted as a gift or grant. In theological terms, this concept is usually interpreted as an expression of unequivocal divine grace. In social and political terms, however, the continuous reminder that the Israelites who invaded the land have not earned the land is designed to create a sense of total indebtedness and dependency on YHWH as the universal ruler and land-giver. Canaan is YHWH's land grant to Israel.<sup>37</sup>

Divine grace to the Israelites, but assuredly not so for the Canaanites! Habel elaborates:

What is especially good about Canaan as a land grant is the physical domain for which YHWH, as the one ruling over the land and its fertility, can be given credit. The cult, customs, and polity of the Canaanite peoples are all rejected as alien to the new order to be introduced by YHWH. Because the ruler of all the earth has chosen Israel out of all the peoples of the earth, Israel's cult, customs, and polity must be quite distinct. No exchange of cultural ideas is to be tolerated. The Canaanites and their religious culture are worthless; in fact, the polity of the prior inhabitants is to be viewed as evil....<sup>38</sup>

In sum,

the ideology of the land as a grant supports the rights of the invading people to occupy the land by divine sanction. A divine promise to Israel's ancestors, a divine demonstration of conquering might, and a divine gift of the good land – all confirm Israel's entitlement to the land. This right, however, is conditional. Israel must obey the laws of the proposed polity for the land or face losing the land.

These land rights are grounded not in some ancient or sacred affinity with the land but in a treaty that prescribes the conditions for holding the land. The Israelites have no natural right to the land, only a promise of tenure if they are a faithful vassal people. Canaan is territory under treaty; the land grant is conditional.

By contrast, the rights of the original Canaanite inhabitants are totally dismissed and their culture negated. They are supposed to be exterminated. ... This ideology ignores the historical reality that much of Canaan's culture persisted in Israel and that many

.....  
<sup>37</sup> Habel 1995, pp. 38-39.

<sup>38</sup> Habel 1995, pp. 42-43.

of the indigenous people of Canaan became part of the Israelite nation. The vision in Deuteronomy is of a nation purged by trials in the wilderness ... and uncontaminated by the ways – and ideally by any presence—of the indigenous peoples of the land. The Canaanites have no rights to land and apparently no right to justice.<sup>39</sup>

What Habel calls *ancestral household* land ideology may be found especially in the Book of Joshua. According to this ideology,

in the text, the land of Canaan is explicitly identified as a cluster of royal lands to be distributed by Joshua. When Joshua conquers Canaan, he is said to have taken the monarchs “and their land” (Josh. 10:42). It is specifically “their land” that is allotted to the tribes of Israel (12:7). In this land ideology, the ordinary families of Israel receive the royal lands of Canaan as their entitlements. In the distribution, the royal lands of Canaan are transformed into a land of family lots.<sup>40</sup>

In addition, the divine image associated with this ideology is distinctively militaristic:

YHWH is depicted as a terrifying ally, ready to fight the foes of Israel and dispossess those who hold the land that is to be allocated to chosen families (Josh. dispossess those who hold the land that is to be allocated to chosen families (Josh. 13:6, 23; 10:13). YHWH's capacity as a warrior deity is illustrated in the way Joshua wins battles in the early conquest campaigns (Josh. 6 and 10). YHWH is depicted as a frightening deity employing mighty celestial forces. YHWH hails massive stones down “from heaven” (10:11) and halts the sun in the sky to win a total victory (10:12-14). This portrayal of YHWH in military mode reflects an ideology of terror typical of conquest narratives.

What happens to the Canaanites is dire:

In general, the various conquered peoples of Canaan are put under the ban (*herem*) and dedicated to YHWH; their total destruction is required (Josh. 6:21). YHWH expects Israel to show the Canaanites no mercy and accord them no rights. The terror ideology is relentless. Those Canaanites who survive do so by their own initiative and their total acknowledgment of YHWH as the God of the conquest.<sup>41</sup>

.....  
39 Habel 1995, pp. 50-51.

40 Habel 1995, p. 57.

41 Habel 1995, p. 61.

Although the hyperbolic ideal depicted in the Book of Joshua is one of total conquest, the book nonetheless “preserves the reality of Canaanite resistance. The Canaanites are survivors.”<sup>42</sup> Habel then offers several examples of Canaanite survival tactics:

The modes of resistance demonstrated by the Canaanites include cunning, compromise and acknowledgment of the conquerors’ deity, as in the case of Rahab (Josh. 2), maintaining control of strategic fortified cities (11:13; 15:63; 16:10; 17:12-13), and total commitment to the Israelite cause, as in the case of Caleb (14:6-15).

The book of Joshua’s account of the Gibeonites’ survival is a dramatic resistance story (Josh. 9). The Gibeonites use the techniques of cunning, deceit, and diplomacy typical of resistance narratives. They pretend to be aliens from a distant land and hide their true identity as the enemy within. They make a peace treaty with the Israelite leaders and confirm it in the breaking of moldy bread.<sup>43</sup>

The fifth land ideology is what Habel calls *prophetic*. One finds this perspective especially in the Book of Jeremiah. It

promotes what might best be described as a symbiotic relationship among YHWH, the land, and the people of Israel. This ideology, espoused by a group demanding allegiance to YHWH alone, promotes a theology designed to negate a revival of Baalism; this doctrine justifies Jeremiah’s pro-Babylonian politics and an ideal vision for restoration of the land in the distant future.<sup>44</sup>

Interestingly, according to this ideology,

Canaan is remembered as an idyllic land and Israel as a faithful partner. Here there are no allusions to the Canaanites, whose ways presumably polluted the land before Israel’s advent. ... According to the book of Jeremiah, it was not the Canaanites who polluted the land, but Israelites embracing Canaanite fertility rites and establishing Baal as the ruler of the land. Baalism had defiled rather than fertilized the land.<sup>45</sup>

What is the upshot of the defilement of the land by the Israelites?

.....  
42 Habel 1995, p. 72.

43 Habel 1995, p. 72.

44 Habel 1995, p. 75.

45 Habel 1995, p. 79, 82.

... [W]hen God's people violate their relationship with YHWH through cultic or social evils, they pollute the sacred land. The land becomes a tragic victim, suffering at the hands of God's people and God's anger. ... In this ideology, YHWH seems as vulnerable as the land. Yet suffering land loss is necessary if Israel is to have a future with YHWH; the land must also be purified and completely emptied again. Even Jeremiah is removed from the land.

The agent of this purging action is Babylon. In the short term, therefore, a pro-Babylonian politics is demanded. The long-term vision looks beyond Babylon, life in exile, and the empty land to a new beginning created by YHWH alone. In that day the ideology of the implied YHWH-alone party will be vindicated. ... This beginning will involve a "new planting" in the land and a "new heart" in the people of the land to re-establish the intimacy and purity of the original land-god-people relationship. Any new order will involve all YHWH's people, from the least to the greatest, knowing YHWH in a personal way that was once reserved for priests and prophets. And the greatest, under YHWH the shepherd, will know how to execute justice in the land and for the land.

This new beginning is planned for the "emptied" land of Canaan. Those privileged to possess this land – and perhaps participate in emptying it – are the elite Israelites in exile.<sup>46</sup>

In the Book of Leviticus and its holiness codes, one can discern, according to Habel, a fifth land ideology, namely, the *agrarian* one that emphasizes the practices of both sabbath and jubilee. Habel summarizes:

In Leviticus 25-27, YHWH is the one who owns the land. No one can alienate any portion of YHWH's land by selling it, exchanging it, or transferring permanent tenure to others. YHWH controls the use of the land, ownership of the land, tenancy on the land, conditions of land usage, and the seven-year cycle of production. In short, YHWH is the owner and the custodian of the land.

If so, the Israelites are ideologically represented as tenants rather than owners of the land they cultivate. This is made explicit by their designation as *gêrim* and *tosabim* on YHWH's land (Lev. 25:23). These terms are appropriately rendered in the New Revised Standard Version as "aliens" and "tenants." The Israelite tenants owe allegiance to YHWH as their landowner, patron, and benefactor. As tenants, they apparently have no right to permanent tenure or ownership of the land itself. They hold their traditional lands in trust by virtue of the generosity of their divine patron.<sup>47</sup>

.....  
<sup>46</sup> Habel 1995, pp. 95-96.

<sup>47</sup> Habel 1995, p. 98.

As Habel notes, there are distinctive economic implications of this land ideology:

YHWH is not an absent ruler in heaven, but a local landowner who walks through the land and establishes a presence there; the land is YHWH's extended sanctuary. The ideal economy is a landed peasant economy governed by the sabbath principle; every seven years and every jubilee year the tenants return the land to their landowner for rest. Failure to uphold this sabbath-based land economy will result in the landowner ejecting the tenants so that the land will enjoy enforced sabbath years.

The projected land economy keeps the land usage in the hands of traditional peasant families and prevents large landholdings or land control by urban rulers or landowners. The proposed ideology does not promote a general principle of sharing the land, but specifies particular individuals as heads of traditional families, having the right to particular sections of God's land.

The controlling power in this land economy lies with the priests, who are responsible for upholding the sabbath principle; ultimately the priests are the only social group that can progressively accumulate land. The social model implied in this land economy means political power for priests, security for peasants, and dependency for slaves, hired laborers, and immigrant aliens; in short, the reform proposes an agrarian theocracy.<sup>48</sup>

Sixth, and finally, Habel discerns what he calls an *immigrant* land ideology.<sup>49</sup> Habel assesses the distinctiveness of this ideology in comparison with the previous five. In his estimation, "each of the ideologies discussed in the preceding chapters refers to the doctrine of land promised to the ancestors as a justification for Israel's claim to invade, conquer, dispossess, and settle the land of Canaan."<sup>50</sup> In sharp contrast, in the immigrant land ideology, there is

no denunciation of Canaanite worship, no condemnation of Canaanite inhabitants, no rejection of Canaanite rulers as oppressors, and no concern about acknowledging a Canaanite deity. The militant ideology of the book of Deuteronomy, which demanded a cleansing of the land of Canaanite religious culture, does not surface in this ideology. Instead, Abraham fosters a way of life

.....  
<sup>48</sup> Habel 1995, p. 114.

<sup>49</sup> This perspective is clearly the one that Habel himself finds most appealing. In a later reflection, he also regards this ideology as the one that is the most ecologically responsible of the "promised land" biblical texts; see Habel 2009.

<sup>50</sup> Habel 1995, p. 115.



in Canaan that mediates blessing and creates peaceful relations with the owners of the land. Abraham, as the head of an ancestral household, here functions as an ambassador of goodwill among equals. ... Abraham does not play the conqueror. Lives and goods are rescued rather than put to the *herem* of total destruction; the booty is redeemed and returned to its owner. The image of Abraham projected here is of a diplomatic leader respecting the rights of these peoples to their property and their land.<sup>51</sup>

Nor is Canaan to be conquered. Rather it appears as a generous host country to Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants.

The land of Canaan is presented as a host country inhabited by a range of peoples whose rights and cultures Abraham respects. These rights include their right to own, share, sell, and negotiate the use of land in the host country. The land is also portrayed as charted terrain, marked by the journeys of the ancestors and the sacred sites they established at strategic points in the host country. ...

God, who is revealed to Abraham and promises him land, is present at specific sites in the land to which Abraham migrates. This God is identified as both El, the God worshiped under various names by the peoples of the land, and as YHWH, the God who effected the exodus of Abraham from Ur long before the exodus of Israel from Egypt. This God, as owner of the land, assumes the right to promise it to Abraham, Sarah, and their progeny. ... As an immigrant group, Abraham's household will be good for the country. The blessing power associated with royalty is democratized and vested in Abraham as the head of an ancestral household.

The ideology of the Abraham cycle has Abraham formally recognizing the rights of the host peoples to their various territories. This recognition is established through cultic rites, peaceful negotiation, treaty, and land purchase. Abraham's short-term right to land is that of a welcome immigrant, not an invader. In the long term, Abraham's entitlement is grounded in a land treaty announced by YHWH. Abraham's rights and responsibilities are not those of a monarch or conqueror, but those of the head of an ancestral household. These responsibilities involve acknowledging YHWH as the host deity, teaching justice to the Abraham household, establishing peaceful relations with the peoples of the land, and dealing justly with the land itself.<sup>52</sup>

.....  
51 Habel 1995, p. 127.

52 Habel 1995, pp. 132-33.

We shall return to the lost opportunity posed by the immigrant land ideology when we discuss an *aporia* in Spinoza's thought regarding the political status of "foreigners." Before that, however, let us turn to Spinoza's broader analysis of natural right and citizenship. We shall see that Spinoza reads the Hebrew biblical texts as carefully as anyone before or after him. Nonetheless, his hermeneutical perspective evidenced in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP) relies on something like the Conquest Model depicted in the Book of Joshua and its associated ancestral land ideology.

### Spinoza on Natural Right, Citizenship, and Foreigners

Spinoza's conception of natural right can be stated as succinctly as possible with a simple

equation: "right is coextensive with power." But it is worth paying close attention to how Spinoza justifies this unsettling perspective. As Alexandre Matheron has powerfully argued,<sup>53</sup> we can best appreciate the theoretical foundation of Spinoza's politics precisely as his intervention within an early modern debate about natural right. Spinoza takes a received notion of natural right and conceptually turns it inside out.<sup>54</sup>

At the beginning of TTP, chapter 16, Spinoza closely follows what amounts to a Hobbesian treatment of natural right. First, he offers the following claim: the *ius et institutum naturae*, that is to say, objective natural right, consists of the "rules" [*regulae*] or laws of nature in accordance with which individuals exist and operate. Next, he justifies this claim by means of a "two-stage" demonstration.<sup>55</sup>

The first stage concerns the subjective notion of "faculty" [*facultas*] – a concept Spinoza borrowed from the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius.<sup>56</sup> However, Grotius's understanding of faculty as *moral* power becomes for Spinoza nothing but *physical* power,<sup>57</sup> from the level of God to the level of every natural thing. Spinoza begins his argument by invoking God's subjective rights, which Grotius identifies as the basis of property:

.....  
53 Matheron 2011, p. 113.

54 Matheron usefully compares Spinoza's procedure with his reconceptualization in the *Ethics* of the traditional conception of God; see Matheron 2011, p. 113).

55 For my reconstruction of Spinoza's argument in TTP 16 I am indebted to Matheron 2011, pp. 119-21 and Curley 1991, esp. pp. 102-103. All translations from Spinoza are based on Spinoza 1985; 2016 but are occasionally modified.

56 Spinoza does not explicitly use *facultas* in chapter 16 but only at the beginning of chapter 20 as a synonym for natural right: Spinoza insists that "the mind cannot be absolutely subject to the right of another, for no one can transfer to another his natural right, that is, his faculty to reason freely and form judgments about everything, nor can one be forced to do so" (G III/239).

57 As Matheron cautions, "physical" power means not just corporeal power but also psychic power, in short, it is "the capacity to produce real effects in nature" (Matheron 2020, p. 281).

1. God has a sovereign right over all things, that is, the right to do whatever God can do,
2. The power of nature as a whole is identical to God's power.
3. Therefore, nature as a whole has the right to do whatever it can do.
4. But the power of nature as a whole is nothing but the power of all the individuals in nature.
5. Therefore, every individual in nature has a right to do whatever it can do.

In the second stage of his demonstration, in continuity with both Grotius and Hobbes, Spinoza moves from subjective rights to the objective law that determines their limits. Here he begins with his concept of the *conatus*, which Spinoza does not fully refine until the *Ethics*:

6. The highest law of nature for each individual, both human and non-human is to strive "as much as it can" [*quantum in se est*] to persevere "in its state,"<sup>58</sup> taking account only of itself and no other.

The latter half of premise 6 indicates Spinoza's agreement with Grotius and Hobbes that natural law does not require respect for others' rights. Even though subjective rights are a matter of power, no individual has an obligation either to defer to stronger individuals or to refrain from opposing them. As a result, Spinoza agrees with Hobbes that humanity's only ethical norm is that of self-preservation. But the first half of this premise indicates that, unlike Hobbes, Spinoza thinks that the limits natural law assigns to right coincide with those of fact. Spinoza insists on the existence of an objective law that all individuals in nature are determined to follow.

Of course, the limits of right are not narrower than those of fact, since my obligation to use all my power exclusively for self-preservation can never be violated. I cannot in principle perform any action without having the right to do so, even if the action is doomed to failure, even if it would be in my true advantage to refrain from doing so, and even if I wind up weakening or destroying my life. For I always do all I can toward my self-preservation. If I suffer from self-deception in the process, it is because of my own mental weaknesses; but I must never cease to act with all the means at my disposal, "as much as I can." Since all desires are conative, I can have no illegitimate desires.

Similarly, right cannot exceed the limits of fact. If I am capable of doing something but do not want to do it, then in fact I *cannot* do it. In Spinoza's ontology there are only two modalities of existence: the

.....  
<sup>58</sup>This is, of course, Spinoza's early "static" sense of *conatus*.

necessary and the impossible.<sup>59</sup> As a result, I do not have the right to do something that I do not desire.

Premise 6 in turn implies that

7. Natural right consists of the complex interaction of (a) the laws governing an individual's internal nature and (b) the laws governing the external causes acting on the individual.

Whence follows Spinoza's initial claim that objective natural right, which limits human subjective rights, consists of the rules or laws of nature in accordance with which individuals exist and operate.

Spinoza's argument in chapter two of the *Tractatus Politicus* (TP) is similar but not confined as narrowly to the Grotian/Hobbesian problematic.<sup>60</sup> As Spinoza writes,

Every natural thing can be conceived adequately, whether it exists or does not exist. Thus, neither the onset of the existence of natural things nor their perseverance in existence can be deduced from their definition; for their ideal essence is the same after they have begun to exist as it was before they existed. Therefore, neither the onset of their existence nor their perseverance in existence follows from their essence; rather, they need the same power to begin to exist as they do to continue to exist. Whence it follows that the power of natural things, by which they exist, and consequently by which they operate, can be none other than God's external power itself. For if there were some other power that had been created, it could neither preserve itself nor, consequently, preserve natural things; but it would need the same power to persevere in existence as it needed to be created. Therefore, from the fact that the power of natural things, by which they exist and operate, is God's power itself, we can easily understand what the right of nature is. For since God has a right over everything, and God's right is nothing but God's power itself, insofar as it is considered absolutely free, it follows that every natural thing has as much right from nature as it has power to exist and operate; for the power of every natural thing, by which it exists and operates, is none other than God's power itself, which is absolutely free.

And so by the right of nature I understand the laws of nature themselves or the rules in accordance with which all things come to be, that is, nature's power itself. Therefore, the right of nature as a

.....  
59 See E1p33s1.

60 Again, I am indebted to Matheron 2011, pp. 121-22.

whole, and consequently the natural right of every individual, extends as far as its power. Hence, everything human beings do by virtue of the laws of their own nature, they do by the sovereign right of nature, and they have as much right over nature as they have power.<sup>61</sup>

Spinoza begins his argument in these three dense sections of the TP by identifying the individual *conatus* with God's power and right, and thus more clearly expresses that every natural thing is *Deus quatenus*. The power of every natural thing, that is (as in premise 6 of the earlier argument above), the power by which every natural thing exists and operates in such a way as to persevere in its "existence"<sup>62</sup> is God's power itself, which, insofar as it is absolutely free (premise 2 above), is identical to God's sovereign right over all things (premise 1 above).

It follows (premise 7 above) that natural right consists of the complex interaction of (a) the laws concerning an individual's internal nature and (b) the laws governing those external causes acting on that individual. Hence, as Spinoza wants to conclude as before, objective natural right consists of the rules or laws of nature in accordance with which individuals exist and operate. Spinoza goes on to specify that nature as a whole has the right to do whatever it can do (premise 3 above) but also that the power of nature as a whole is nothing but the power of all the individuals in nature (premise 4 above) and that everything in nature has a right to do whatever it can do (premise 5 above).

In short, for Spinoza a right is not a moral but a physical quality: it is a power attached to the (human or nonhuman) individual by virtue of which that individual can actually *do* certain things. Moreover, subjective natural rights and objective natural right coincide.<sup>63</sup> This implies that right considered as a quality of actions is identical to fact. In all circumstances, human beings simultaneously have the right and obligation to do neither more nor less than what they actually can and want to do.

In keeping with such a view of natural right, we can now better appreciate how Spinoza's argument for a transition from individual natural right to collective civil right hinges on his notion of a "composition"<sup>64</sup> of forces or an "aggregation"<sup>65</sup> of powers. For example,

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61 TP 2.2-4; G III/276-7.

62 This is Spinoza's mature "dynamic" sense of *conatus*.

63 Recall Spinoza's formula at the beginning of TTP 4: "that in accordance with which every individual acts and makes use of things in the world, is precisely the laws of its own nature as constrained by external causes."

64 An important, but underappreciated, aspect of Spinoza's project in the *Ethics* is to be found in his analysis of the joining together, assembling, or agreement of parts to form a whole. Spinoza uses such terms as *concatenatio* and *conventio* to express the varieties of ontological, physical, and political composition.

65 To use C. P. Macpherson's apt term (Macpherson 1973, pp.70-76).

If two human beings come together and join forces, then together they can do more, and consequently together they have more right over nature than either alone; and the more there are who join in this way, the more right they will have all together.<sup>66</sup>

This claim recapitulates the one made in chapter five of the TTP to the effect that the natural right of individuals becomes common civil right not through a contractual transfer or *pactum* but instead through a kind of “social physics.”<sup>67</sup> Spinoza has replaced the concept of a *pactum* with that of consensus and shifted his attention from individual to collective existence. In the next four sections of chapter two of the TP Spinoza goes on to demonstrate how the multitude itself becomes a “constituent power” and common civil right can be regarded as the “justice of the multitude.”<sup>68</sup> The upshot is that no *imperium* can exist apart from a continuous—but precarious—process of its own legitimation, delegitimation, and relegitimation. The limits of an *imperium*’s *potestas* derive not from “divine right” but only from the ongoing proves of political legitimation *originating* in the multitude’s *potential*. There are no transcendent norms or guarantees in Spinoza’s political philosophy: the physical constitution, stability, and reproduction of every *imperium* is always subordinate to the radical openness and creativity of the immanent democratizing tendency to be found in the very nature of civil society.

Spinoza proceeds along similar lines when he treats the problem of contractual obligations. In TTP 16 Spinoza considers under what circumstances we are bound by our promises to others. His argument has two parts.<sup>69</sup>

First of all, imagine that I make a promise that, while making it, I intend not to keep. In such a case I am committing a deception: I know from the start that the law of nature now determining me to make the promise will later prevent me from keeping it. However, paradoxically, by this very fact I have *not* really engaged in a deception. As Spinoza remarks in his annotation 32 to chapter 16, this is an instance of what in Roman law was called a *dolus bonus* not a *dolus malus*, that is to say, a “deception with good intention” as opposed to a “deception with malicious intention.”<sup>70</sup> The person to whom I am making the promise must also know that I am trying to deceive him or her, and so should not be deceived. It is common knowledge that in this kind of situation the

66 TP 2.13; G III/281.

67 Negri 1994a, p. 27.

68 *Ibid.*

69 Matheron 2011, pp. 126–28.

70 G III/263. See Garrett 2010, p. 204.

law of nature not only does not forbid but in fact recommends deception. Spinoza considers Hobbes's problem of a thief but reaches a contrary conclusion. Whereas for Hobbes my promise made to a thief is fully applicable from the moment that I have been freed; whereas for Spinoza it is null and void from the start. This is because I can have no desire to keep such a promise once I have regained my freedom, and this is presumably not difficult for a thief to understand. What is more, if I have made a promise sincerely without deception that I later come to believe would be contrary to my interest to uphold, I have every right to change my mind. Anyone with whom I have made a promise should realize that such an escape clause is implicit in the law of nature. Whether or not I am deceived about what is actually in my interest is irrelevant.

Spinoza offers a second response to Hobbes by way of a striking illustration. Imagine that I have sincerely promised, in exchange for some perceived benefit, to undergo a fast for twenty days.<sup>71</sup> In such a case, breaking my fast is both necessary and legitimate as soon as, but not before, its continuation seems more harmful than useful to me. Whereas for Hobbes such an agreement would be invalid from the start because of the risks I face, for Spinoza it is initially valuable. Only after I have changed my mind does the law of nature release me from my obligation to continue the fast.

In each of these thought experiments, then, the deception of which I am the author, or the error from which I have benefitted, winds up invalidating my promise. *Pace* Hobbes, the possibility that I may be scorned by others or risk being mistreated is beside the point. All that counts is my momentary desire – my promissory obligation lasts exactly as long as my motives behind the action that I have agreed to perform. In particular, the person to whom I have made the promise has no right to complain. Anyone ignorant enough to comply without being assured of my desire to do so is out of luck and cannot later on demand restitution or compensation from me for being a victim of either a mistake or deception. Such ignorance would be not just of fact but of right – and ignorance of the law is no excuse!

The second step of Spinoza's argument in TTP 16 is quite simple. Spinoza agrees that for a promise to obligate anyone, something more must be added to the mere assertion of intention. He insists that "no one can be certain of the good faith of another unless his promise is guaranteed by something else" (G III/193) – but this "something" can only be a *transfer* of right.

Yet the word "right" [*ius*] must be understood correctly. To transfer to another person the right to expect a certain action from me means that I am giving him or her the power to constrain me by fear or hope. In other words, to transfer my right is simply to transfer my power; otherwise,

.....  
<sup>71</sup>TTP 16.18-19; G III/192.



nothing would happen. In the TTP Spinoza stops at this point and develops his theory of the *pactum* in chapters 16-18 on the basis of the coextension of right and power, of a transfer of right and power.

However, in the TP Spinoza takes up this question where he had left off in TTP 16 and proceeds to ask what exactly is involved in a “transfer of power.”<sup>72</sup> He enquires into what could be meant by the complete or partial alienation of my property right over my own body once this right has been translated into the language of power.

If I am naturally *sui iuris*, then I own my body (or, at any rate, I have a right to control my own bodily integrity).<sup>73</sup> This implies two things. Firstly, I have the right to require that others respect and not harm my body. Secondly, I have the right to require restitution for all the corporal harms that I happen to suffer from others. In other words, if I am *sui iuris*, then I have the physical power to resist every physical aggression and to force others to compensate me for any harms they happen to inflict on me.<sup>74</sup>

Moreover, if I am naturally *sui iuris*, then I direct my own actions. This implies that no one else has the right to command me. In other words, I am in charge of my own actions without having to take account of anyone else’s will, and so I can live as I please.<sup>75</sup>

However, each of us can become *alterius iuris* in two ways.<sup>76</sup> Firstly, I could be enchained, or disarmed and enclosed.<sup>77</sup> In this case my master becomes the owner of my body and, as a result, has complete control over it. But this is really not a transfer at all, since the power my master has over me has not been given *by me*; rather the master’s power simply exceeds mine.

Secondly, I can be determined to obey someone else through fear or hope.<sup>78</sup> A transfer has indeed occurred, since I have freely put my own power at the disposal of the other person. Yet this transfer is so voluntary that it has ceased to be a transfer at all, since, physically speaking, my power remains my own. In addition, the decision that from one moment to

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72 TP 2.9-12.

73 Matheron (2011, p. 117) suggests that Grotius is the source of what Macpherson called the thesis of “possessive individualism,” or what G. A. Cohen (1995) described as “self-ownership.” However, nothing hinges on the truth of this contentious metaphysical claim about the relationship between mind and body. Arguably, I do not own (or inhabit) my body; rather, as Merleau-Ponty (2012) maintained, I am *embodied*. If Spinoza’s argument were based on a premise of *bodily integrity*, though, it would still work; for I am embodied in a way that *you* are not. Consequently, you have no *prima facie* natural right to interfere with my embodied desires, goals, and actions.

74 TP 2.9.

75 TP 2.9.

76 For simplicity, I group in pairs the four different ways listed by Spinoza in TP 1.10.

77 TP 2.10.

78 TP 2.10.

the next offers my power at the service of another is always mine alone. Even if I agree to obey this person at time T1 (or continue to do so at times T2, T3, etc.), I have no obligation to do so forever. Nothing actually passes from me to the other person. Even if my decision has real effects, I have only alienated my power imaginarily. Moreover, these effects vanish as soon as I cease to believe in their cause. It is not even clear how such a situation could last for long between two isolated individuals, call them, Cain and Abel.<sup>79</sup> It is unlikely that Cain can compel Abel to alienate his power if toward that end Cain has no means beyond those given him by the alienation of Abel's power. Abel will continue to obey only if others also do so. In this collective situation, a common master can inspire fear or hope in each individual thanks to the physical forces whose direction others have left to the master. The fear and hope will again determine each individual to leave the direction of his or her own power to the same master, who will therefore be able again to inspire fear or hope. And so on.

However, even in such a collective situation, the master must continually strive to secure the consent of subjects without any legal guarantee for the future, since the master's right over them is nothing more than the power they allow to be exercised. There is legal alienation to the extent that there is passional alienation, but the former disappears whenever individuals' passions fluctuate. As soon as hope and fear have dissipated, each person again will become legally independent.<sup>80</sup>

The implication for understanding promises is clear. Spinoza concludes that my intention obligates me only as long as it actually *is* my intention. I can regain my power – and my right – whenever I please. In other words, nothing that can be physically alienated can ever be irreversibly alienated. Spinoza pushes the logic of consensualism as far as it will go and winds up transforming this logic into its opposite: what Matheron calls an “instantaneist consensualism.”<sup>81</sup> In short, I remain under no obligation other than a momentary one that results from my own desire and power.

Like any other contract, a “social contract” is, from Spinoza's perspective, nothing but a product of the imagination. Every social contract amounts to nothing more than the “consensus”<sup>82</sup> that all rulers must continually seek to obtain from their subjects through a variety of means ranging from the varied use of ceremonies and symbols to the threat (or measured use) of repression. The fundamental problem of

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79 To echo G. A. Cohen's own thought experiment of a society of two individuals called Able and Infirm (Cohen 1995, pp. 94–102).

80 TP 2.10.

81 Matheron 2011, p. 129.

82 Matheron 2011, p. 130.

political obligation thus becomes for Spinoza not contractual validity but how best to organize those institutional means of governance employed by a state. This is Spinoza's concern primarily in the TP, because in this work he is less worried about writing in a language adapted to his readers. In sum, Spinoza does not abstractly deny the concept of natural right by rejecting it from the outside. Rather, he undertakes an *immanent critique* of this concept by pushing it to its logical conclusion from within.

\* \* \* \*

Let us consider how Spinoza's perspective allows us to read critically the narrative of ancient Israel's "conquest" of Canaan. To be sure, such a conquest was, insofar as the archaeological evidence is concerned, unlikely to have occurred, or at least not to have occurred as recounted. But the historical veracity of the narrative is less important for our purposes here than the following hypothetical questions: *What if the invasion of Canaan by Israel had actually occurred? Would the Canaanites have been justified in resisting that invasion? What about Israel's election, namely, its divinely appointed mission both to leave Egypt and to enter Canaan? Does siding with the Canaanites mean rejecting Israel's "chosenness"? What about the centrality of the land in Israel's covenant with YHWH? Does such a covenant necessitate an exclusive land claim?*

Let us begin with Spinoza's account in the TTP of the Israelites as they found themselves in a *state of nature*, having fled from Egypt:

When they first left Egypt, they were no longer bound by the legislation of any other nation; so they were permitted, as they wished, to enact new laws or to establish new legislation, and to have a state wherever they wished, and to occupy what lands they wished.<sup>83</sup>

Spinoza later returns to, and reemphasizes, this point at length in a passage that is worth quoting in full:

We've already said in Ch. 5 ... that after the Hebrews escaped from Egypt, they were no longer bound by any law to another nation, but were permitted to institute new laws for themselves, as they pleased, and to occupy whatever lands they wanted to. For after they'd been freed from the intolerable oppression of the Egyptians, and were not attached to any mortal by any contract, they regained their natural right to do anything they could. Each of them could decide again whether he wanted to keep it, or to surrender it and transfer it to someone else.

.....  
<sup>83</sup>TTP 5.26; G III/75.

When they'd been placed in this natural condition, they decided to transfer their right only to God, not to any mortal. That was Moses' advice and they had the utmost trust in him. Without further delay they all promised equally, in one voice, to obey all God's commands absolutely, and not to recognize any other law except what he would establish as law by Prophetic revelation. And this promise, or transfer of right, to God, was made in the same way as we've conceived it to be done in ordinary society, when men decide to surrender their natural right. For by an explicit covenant and an oath they freely surrendered their natural right and transferred it to God, without being compelled by force or terrified by threats. To make the covenant valid, lasting, and free of any suspicion of deception, God didn't undertake to give anything to them until after they experienced his wonderful power, by which alone they had been preserved, and by which alone they could be preserved in the future (see Exodus 19:4–5). By the very fact that they believed they could be preserved by the power of God alone, they transferred to God all their natural power to preserve themselves, which previously they perhaps had thought they had of themselves. As a result, they transferred all their right.<sup>84</sup>

The form of state that the Israelites selected was – at least initially – a *theocracy*.<sup>85</sup> As Spinoza describes,

God alone, then, had sovereignty over the Hebrews. By the force of the covenant this [state] alone was rightly called the Kingdom of God, and God was rightly called also the King of the Hebrews. As a result, the enemies of this state [were rightly called] enemies of God, and citizens who wanted to usurp his authority [were rightly held] guilty of treason against God's majesty. And finally, the laws of the state [were rightly called] laws and commands of God.

That's why in this state civil law and Religion (which, as we've shown, consists only in obedience to God) were one and the same thing. The doctrines of Religion were not teachings, but laws and commands. Piety was regarded as justice, and impiety a crime and an injustice. Anyone who failed in Religion ceased to be a citizen. For this alone he was considered an enemy. Anyone who died for Religion was thought to have died for his Country. Absolutely no distinction was made between civil law and Religion.

84 TTP 17.26–29; G III/205–206.

85 That is to say, the initial period in which there existed a tribal confederation under the leadership of charismatic figures or “judges” [as recounted in the Book of Judges]. On the archaeological, historical, and literary evidence for the subsequent rise of a monarchical system in ancient Israel, see Dever 2020, pp. 69–94. Monarchy, needless to say, was often sharply criticized by ancient Israelites. For a discussion of the “biblical assault on kings and kingship,” see Gnuse 2011.

For that reason, this state could be called a Theocracy. Its citizens weren't bound by any law except the one revealed by God. But all these things consisted more in opinion than in fact.<sup>86</sup>

Unfortunately, the implications for the indigenous peoples of Canaan were grave; indeed, they raise the specter of ethnic cleaning and genocide as the precondition for the rise of the Israelite theocracy. Spinoza offers a brief description that depends on the Book of Joshua but ignores the mass slaughter (whether actual or imagined):<sup>87</sup>

Next, an army, formed from the rest of the twelve tribes, was commanded to invade the domain of the Canaanites, to divide it into twelve parts, and to distribute it to the tribes by lots. For this task twelve leaders were chosen, one from each tribe. These leaders, along with Joshua, and the high priest Eleazar, were given the right to divide the lands into twelve equal parts and to distribute them by lot.<sup>88</sup>

What conclusions can we draw from Spinoza's characterization of the establishment of ancient Israel? First of all, it is compatible with his theoretical commitments to the emergence of any civil state. However, this fact alone suggests that if we are to take the narrative at face value, we have to avoid reading it from the standpoint of the Israelites alone. We must, as Michael Prior and others have demanded, also read it "with the eyes of the Canaanites."<sup>89</sup> This is not simply a matter of *historical* accuracy but, even more importantly, it is an urgent *moral* concern, especially given the recurrent appeal by states to Joshua's narrative to legitimize the conquest of indigenous peoples – not least of which occurred in Spinoza's own conjuncture.<sup>90</sup>

The point is this: the Canaanites had the right to *resist* the Israelite conquest. Indeed, as described in the Book of Joshua, the Canaanites *did* resist. Two especially vivid examples of resistance through deception – cases of *dolus bonus*! – may be found in the Book of Joshua: Rahab (a resident of Jericho who survived the Israelite destruction of the city as

86 TTP 17.30-31; G III/206.

87 Doubtless, as Younger's (2009) exacting comparative study has shown, the Book of Joshua has a hyperbolic conquest narrative that is not unlike those of neighboring Near Eastern states.

88 TTP 17.45; G III/208.

89 Prior 1977, p. 39; but also see Said 1986.

90 As Joel Baden (2019, pp. 129-48) has indicated, the Exodus figured prominently in Reformation and post-Reformation thought as especially Calvinists sought to reclaim their imagined status as the "New Israelites." One finds this ideological retrieval notably in the seventeenth-century Dutch "Golden Age," in the English Civil War (and Cromwell's invasion of Ireland), and at the outset of English and Dutch invasion/colonization/settlement of the Americas, on which see Cave 1988 and Warrior 2015.

a reward for hiding two men sent as scouts prior to the attack)<sup>91</sup> and the Gibeonites (who pretended not to be Canaanites and so deceived the Israelites into making a treaty with them).<sup>92</sup>

\* \* \* \*

Despite his advocacy of a radically democratic version of classical republicanism, Spinoza notoriously excluded women, servants, and foreigners from citizenship in every kind and form of state. How are we to explain such an *aporia* in Spinoza's thought? The limitation on civic right could be explained in three possible ways: as a prejudice indicative of the historical period in which Spinoza lived,<sup>93</sup> as a well-considered judgment based on deeper philosophical principles, or as an awkward combination of the two.

Let us begin our own investigation into Spinoza's rationale for these exclusions with his claim in TP 6.4 that in a well-ordered monarchy the king's assembly should include representatives of all categories of citizens. Without argument, though, Spinoza proceeds in TP 6.11 to qualify this broad claim when he restricts who exactly can become a citizen. He excludes the following from political life: foreigners, convicted criminals, mutes, the mad, and servants. Similarly, in 8.14 Spinoza proposes that in a well-ordered aristocratic regime the same persons should be deprived of the right to run as candidates for the assembly of patricians.<sup>94</sup> Lastly, in TP 11.3 Spinoza excludes basically the same inhabitants from citizenship in even the most expansive well-ordered democracy. Although he now adds women and children to his previous list, their exclusion was implicit in the previous two kinds of state. What is interesting, though, is that Spinoza finally argues for this exclusion, and in TP 11.4 does so at some length regarding women.

Matheron has argued that Spinoza's exclusions of women and servants are the most interesting – and troubling – because these two categories constitute the majority of any commonwealth. Let us begin with servants and then move on to “foreigners,” because this latter category is *biblically symptomatic*.<sup>95</sup>

.....  
91 Joshua 2:1-24.

92 Joshua 9:1-27. Of course, the unevenness and incompleteness of the “conquest” depicted in Joshua continues to be a key theme in the remaining historical works in the Hebrew Bible, from the Book of Judges to 1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings.

93 Not only was Spinoza's exclusion of women from citizenship conventional for seventeenth-century political theorists, so too was his exclusion of servants. See Haitsma Mulier 1980, pp. 146-7.

94 His failure to mention mutes and the mad is probably an oversight.

95 Of course, the question of women in the Bible is equally symptomatic! But this is not my concern

The case of servants is simpler than that of women. In fact, the main difficulty for us today is to identify precisely who “servants” were in the seventeenth century. The Latin word *servus* had a wide range of possible connotations and had a broader extension than “slave” or “serf.” Consider Hobbes’s usage.<sup>96</sup>

In the Latin version of *Leviathan* 20 *servus* translates “servant,” as distinct from “slave,” which receives no special translation. However, in *De Cive* 8.2 *servi* are considered the broader category of which *ergastuli* (defined in the same way as “slaves” in *Leviathan*) are considered a sub-category. As a result, the extension of Spinoza’s *servi* could be identical to Hobbes’s “servants,” but we need to scrutinize the former’s linguistic practice.

Let us begin with Spinoza’s chapters in the TP on well-ordered monarchical and aristocratic states. Among native adults of sound mind who are “honest” and male, two categories of persons are excluded from holding citizenship. In 6.11 Spinoza designates the first category by the word *famuli*, which can mean “servants,” often in the sense of “domestic workers,” but does not necessarily refer to a slave’s legal status. Next, in 8.14 we find the expression *qui ... servant*, which indicates both “servitude” and in general and slavery in particular.

Spinoza characterizes the second category in the same way in both chapters six and eight. As he elaborates in TP 6.11, this category includes all who “sustain life through some servile occupation” [*servii aliquo officio vitam sustentant*] (G III/3000). Although this expression could be a simple explanation of *famuli*, in chapter eight the word *denique* suggests otherwise. Here we have another category of persons who may or may not “serve” but nonetheless live on the basis of “servile” employment.

Determining the precise identity of these persons requires that one take a position in a dispute over translation from Latin.<sup>97</sup> Some translators have Spinoza say in TP 8.14 that under the second category are included “innkeepers” [*oenopolae*] and “brewers” [*cerevisarii*]. This turns Spinoza into a kind of “Aristotelian” for whom *servili aliquo officio* would mean those occupations whose “baseness” tends to prevent individuals from attaining basic civic virtues. Spinoza thus seems to exclude from citizenship all those whose livelihood promotes vice. Matheron contends, though, that Spinoza’s Latin unequivocally indicates just the opposite.<sup>98</sup>

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here. On the question of women in the Bible, see Clark-Soles 2020. On Spinoza’s philosophical and political attitudes towards women, see Matheron 2020, pp. 272–77.

96 Matheron 2020, pp. 261–62.

97 Matheron 2020, pp. 263–67.

98 Matheron 2020, p. 264



Spinoza has just written in chapter eight that not only was a hereditary patriciate incompatible with an aristocratic state, but that there is no way to prevent patricians from selecting their children or relatives for the supreme assembly. He then adds that the state will not be able to preserve itself if this fact is not recognized in law and if the “rest of the population” [*reliqui*] is not excluded. A long parenthesis indicates at the same time just who these *reliqui* are. The only inhabitants of the commonwealth who can participate in the assembly are those

who of course have been born in the state [*in imperio*], and speak in the native language [*patrio sermone*], do not have a foreign wife, are not dishonored [*infames*],<sup>99</sup> do not serve [*servient*], and finally [*denique*], no longer live by a servile occupation [*servili aliquo officio vitam sustenant*]<sup>100</sup>—among which must also be included innkeepers, brewers, and others [*oenopolae et cerevisiarii et alii*].<sup>101</sup>

Spinoza’s intention in this qualification of *reliqui* is clearly that even innkeepers and brewers fulfill the required conditions to participate in the assembly. Whatever people may happen to think about the “morally doubtful” nature of certain professions, their members must still be included among those who do not live on the basis of “servile” employment. Spinoza in this passage is simply trying to emphasize that the expression *servili aliquo officio* has no moral connotation.

Consequently, we see that Spinoza thinks of an occupation as “servile” when, without being the same as the various occupations of those who “serve,” it nonetheless resembles them in some way. It has nothing to do with the nature of the specific activity in which one is engaged, however degrading it may turn out to be. If selling alcohol is not an obstacle, then neither are menial occupations. It is not a question of impoverishment as such, for Spinoza proposes that in a well-ordered monarchical state there will be payment in time of war for those citizens who “sustain life by their daily labor” [*quotidiano opera vitam sustenant*].<sup>101</sup> This implies the possible existence of citizens who lack sufficient savings and servants capable of replacing them in their absence, and thus lose all means of subsistence when they cease to work with their own hands on a daily basis. The only basis for exclusion from citizenship, then, is whether or not an individual exists in some state of dependence in relation to an employer.

In Spinoza’s conceptions of well-ordered monarchical and aristocratic states, those who can hope to become citizens (without, of

99TP 6.11 adds the qualification that this dishonor has to do with committing a “crime” [*scelus*].

100TP 8.14; G III/330.

101TP 6.31; G III/305.

course, this being sufficient under the second of these two regimes) are all independent property owners, both rich and poor and regardless of their profession. Those excluded are all those who are “servants” in the seventeenth-century sense of the word, namely, all *wage-laborers*.<sup>102</sup>

This does not mean that the same situation obtains in a well-ordered democracy. But Spinoza offers a precise, if elliptical, argument in chapter eleven for exclusion. His argument applies to servants in the broad sense, whose exclusion he has had not justified. Spinoza offers no reason in chapter eleven for us to think that he intends *servi* in a democracy to have a narrower extension than “servants” in a monarchy or aristocracy. His justification in chapter eleven to explain the conclusions for which he does not explicitly argue in chapters six and eight makes no sense unless these two groups are the same. Even in a democratic state, then, Spinoza seems to exclude wage-laborers from political life.

As Spinoza writes in 11.3, the only inhabitants of a commonwealth who can aspire to citizenship are those who are bound only by the laws of the state [*imperium*] and thus remain *sui iuris* “in all other respects” [*in reliquis*]. This cannot mean the same as Roman jurists did, or else his explanation would make no sense. It would amount to saying that citizenship should be denied to those whose legal status implies, among other things, that they are not citizens – a case of begging the question if ever there were one! As Spinoza later remarks in 11.4 (regarding the status of women), nothing would then prohibit granting anyone citizenship. Changing positive civil laws would suffice. In the absence of any contrary evidence, this circular reasoning would remain the only one possible. Fortunately, though, there is an alternative explanation that relies on the fact that Spinoza had already carefully explained in chapter two of the TP the key term he uses in chapter eleven, namely, *sui iuris*.

I am *sui iuris* insofar as I can repel anyone who attacks me, avenge to my liking the wrongs that have been caused to me, and live as I please. However, I am *alterius iuris* insofar as I am “under the power of another.”<sup>103</sup> This means either (a) I am in chains or confined (the particular case of slaves in Hobbes) or else (b) I have been filled with, and fluctuate between, hope or fear.<sup>104</sup> Having already reconceptualized natural right in

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102 Macpherson 1962, p. 282 initiated a still-unfolding controversy with his contention that “the term servant in seventeenth-century England meant anyone who worked for an employer for wages, whether the wages were by piece-rates or time-rates, and whether hired by the day or week or by the year.” Moreover, the designation was assuredly not an endorsement but intended as a harsh criticism of the practice of wage labor. For criticisms of Macpherson, see Thomas 1972 and Morton 1970, pp. 197-219. In support of Macpherson, see Hill (1996, pp. 57-70). Finally, see Macpherson’s (1973, pp. 207-23) response to his critics.

103 TP 2.9.

104 TP 2.10.

terms of desire and power,<sup>105</sup> Spinoza also retranslates classical Roman legal terminology along these lines. But there is a wide gap between what formal civil laws formally authorize and what the actually existing balance of forces allows to happen. As Spinoza writes in TP 2.15, in the state of nature, in which everyone is permanently afraid of one another, no one can be *sui iuris*. Even in civil society, no one can ever be entirely *sui iuris*, since every individual will at some point confront the collective power of the multitude. But for everything not expressly forbidden by the state – that is to say, “in all other respects” [*in reliquis*] – individual situations can and do vary widely.

Whoever has the actual capability to make decisions whose content is not dictated to them by someone else, remains *sui iuris* in the sphere where common right demands nothing. On the other hand, those who do not have such means are not *sui iuris* under any relationship. Servants in the broadest sense of the word belong to this latter class of persons lacking capability. Since servants lack personal property, their very subsistence is in danger should they displease their employers. This occurs regardless of their status in civil right. Even if the law allows for punishment should a “free” wage-laborer disobey his or her employer (which was not always the case in the seventeenth century), the former will obey because of fear and hope. Because of their personal dependence, servants must always be presumed to behave as if they had no free decision making, even when they publicly express opinions on public matters. As a result, servants cannot share in political power even in a formally democratic regime. They are naturally no less capable than their masters, but given the present socio-historical setting, to count their votes would be to count their masters’ votes several times, and this multiplication of votes would in fact undermine democracy.

Spinoza’s position is that in well-ordered monarchies and aristocracies a continuous process of democratization ensures that the social body is well regulated. Yet even in a democratic state, this process is never an end in itself; for the end of politics is the preservation of the state. This preservation requires institutions that can bring about self-reproduction by determining subjects to accept the decisions of their rulers, and by determining rulers to make decisions acceptable to their subjects.<sup>106</sup> As a result, Spinoza concludes in TP 7.4, these institutions must strive to balance the desires of rulers and ruled alike. Such provisional equilibrium can be obtained either if there exist among the rulers representatives of all the social categories capable of acting according to their own will (in monarchical regimes)<sup>107</sup> or at least if there

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<sup>105</sup>The formulation in TP 2.4-5, 8 is recalled in 11.4.

<sup>106</sup> See TP 1.6; 5.2; 6.3.

<sup>107</sup> See TP 7.4.

are enough of them to extract a rational common denominator from their deliberations (in aristocratic regimes).<sup>108</sup> In democratic regimes, the two methods coincide by definition. If such efforts were to fail, as Spinoza cautions in TP 3.9, 4.4, and 8.12, then the discontent aroused by unpopular policies could generate a faction intent on the seizure of power.

The implication is that extending citizenship to those who are not *sui iuris* would be “pointless,” “ineffective,” and “harmful” to the stability of a commonwealth.<sup>109</sup> *Useless*: servants can never be more than political pawns in the hands of their employers. *Ineffective*: servants who vote at their masters’ behest “would not result in any real enlargement of the popular base of power.”<sup>110</sup> But above all *harmful*: just consider the long-term consequences. By giving additional votes to anyone with servants, inequality among independent property owners themselves would arise. Spinoza’s concern is not that this would be “unjust” but that such inequality would undermine social stability.

It is crucial to admit that Spinoza presumes that servants cannot help but succumb to the pressure of their employers. But the absence of such servants would require either a society comprised exclusively of small property holders<sup>111</sup> or else the collective ownership of goods.<sup>112</sup> States can only distribute goods within certain limits. As we have seen above, a state has complete control over the “immovable good” of land and can do with land whatever it wants:<sup>113</sup> neither nationalize it nor divide it equally among subjects. However, a state has much less control over such “movable goods” as money and tools, for subjects can easily conceal these and potentially flee the commonwealth with them. Most important of all, no external authority can extinguish the human desire to own things. As long as human beings are dominated by their passions, they will necessarily desire to appropriate things for themselves;<sup>114</sup> and only the particular object of their desire will vary.

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<sup>108</sup> See TP 8.6.

<sup>109</sup> Matheron 2020, p. 270. Recall Spinoza’s adage in TTP 20: “He who seeks to determine everything by law will aggravate vices rather than correct them. What cannot be prohibited must necessarily be permitted, even though after that harm often follows” (G III/243). Recall, too, Spinoza’s contention in TP 10.5 that the enactment of sumptuary laws to prevent corruption would be “in vain” (*frustra*).

<sup>110</sup> Matheron 2020, p. 270.

<sup>111</sup> What Macpherson 1977, p. 12 aptly called a “one-class” society, as opposed to either “class-divided” or “classless” societies.

<sup>112</sup> That is to say, a “classless” society proper.

<sup>113</sup> Provided, of course, that by so doing it does not incite popular indignation.

<sup>114</sup> E3p12, 13s.

If humanity were ever to become predominantly reasonable, there would no longer be any need for a state.<sup>115</sup> In the meantime, though, once commerce exists, it cannot easily be eliminated. As we have seen above, Spinoza contends in TP 7.8 that commerce best unites human beings dominated by passions, whereas land divides them. Hence, states should promote commerce as much as possible. Yet commerce has its costs.

The losers in market “competition” wind up having to sell their labor power in order to survive.<sup>116</sup> Moreover, their employers, striving as all human beings do to impose their own views on others,<sup>117</sup> use very means at their disposal to secure and enhance their power over others.

\* \* \* \*

Let us at last turn to the category of the “foreigner,” as Edwin Curley translates the Latin term *peregrinus* that we find in TP 6.32 and 11.3. To begin with, the same arguments Spinoza uses for excluding servants from citizenship would appear to apply with equal force to foreigners. Yet there is, as I already noted a glaring problem: not only does Spinoza turn out to have a less expansive view of the *migrant* (my preferred translation) that appears in the Hebrew Bible, but he and members of the Jewish community in his birthplace of Amsterdam and throughout the Netherlands would thereby be excluded as a citizen even in a well-formed democratic state!

It is ironic – indeed, *symptomatic* – that Spinoza’s democratic state would have excluded as full citizens the members of the Jewish community who were living essentially as *gêrim* in the Netherlands after having fled religious persecution in Spain and Portugal. As Maarten Prak has explained regarding the legal and political status of Jews in the Netherlands,

insofar as tolerant practices existed ... they were the result of pragmatic considerations. Toleration had little chance of prevailing in regions with a low level of urbanisation, in areas where the cities experienced little growth, and in cities where representatives of the citizenry directly influenced the authorities ... However, where cities dominated the social landscape and immigration caused the cities to experience strong growth, and where, moreover, the milieu of wholesale trade held sway—all of which was true of Holland—there

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115TTP 5. See my discussion of a certain Spinozist “communism” in Stolze 2020, pp. 146-52.

116 On the deleterious effects on individual freedom brought about through the forcible *imposition* of market forces and the emergence of capitalism in early modern Europe, see McNally 1993, pp. 5-42 and Wood 2002. For a discussion of the emergence of Dutch capitalism, see Brandon 2016.

117 E3p31cs.

was likely to be a climate of toleration, even though it could never be taken for granted, even in Holland.<sup>118</sup>

Consider the situation in Amsterdam:

Amsterdam ... offered favourable conditions to Jewish immigrants. Although the town council could not grant them formal religious freedom, it nearly always overlooked this technicality and allowed them to practice their faith undisturbed. Jews were not required to wear outward signs of identification, such as special clothing or badges, since the Union of Utrecht permitted freedom of thought. Of great importance was the fact that in 1637 the city of Amsterdam began to allow those who openly professed the Jewish faith to acquire citizenship—subject to certain conditions, that is, because Jewish citizens were expressly forbidden to practise the guild trades, being expected to confine themselves to wholesale trade. Another restriction was that Jews could not pass their citizenship on to their children, as ordinary citizens could. Nonetheless, Jewish inhabitants of Amsterdam could enhance their social standing considerably by acquiring citizenship.<sup>119</sup>

Disconcertingly, though, in the TTP Spinoza celebrates love of one's country and hatred of foreigners! For instance, Spinoza observes that in the ancient Israelite theocracy,

... [t]hey considered it disgraceful even for someone to live outside his country, because they believed that their country was the only place they could practice the worship of God they were always bound to. They considered only that land sacred; they thought the others were unclean and profane. That's why, when David was forced to live in exile, he complained to Saul in this manner: If it is men who incite you against me, they are cursed, because they cut me off from walking in the heritage of God, but say: Go, and worship foreign Gods [1 Samuel 26:19]. What's especially notable here is that it was also for this reason that no citizen was condemned to exile. For one who sins deserves punishment, indeed, but not disgrace.

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118 Prak 2005, p. 220. See also Nadler 2018, pp. 12–18.

119 Prak 2005, p. 217. Steven Nadler notes that Jews in the Netherlands “were ... considered *unwel-*  
*come* resident aliens in many quarters of the Reformed Church” (Nadler 2018, p. 86) and “were not  
fully emancipated and given all the rights of full citizenship until 1796” (p. 86n38). It is not quite clear  
whether or not Spinoza himself was a citizen. Nadler observes that “after his excommunication from  
the Talmud Torah congregation and his voluntary exile from the city of his birth, Spinoza no longer  
identified himself as a Jew. He preferred to see himself as just another citizen of the Dutch Repub-  
lic – and perhaps, as well, of the transnational Republic of Letters” (Nadler 2018, p. xiv.). However,  
Nadler provides no documentation to support a claim of Spinoza's citizenship—especially outside of  
Amsterdam, where he lived for the rest of his life (Rijnsburg, Voorburg, the Hague).

So the love of the Hebrews for their country was not a simple love, but piety. Their daily worship so encouraged and fed this piety, and this hatred of other nations, that [these affects] had to become a part of their nature. For the daily worship was not only completely different from that of the other nations (which made them altogether individual and completely separated from the others), but also absolutely contrary to it. That daily condemnation [of foreigners] had to produce a continual hatred; no other hatred could be lodged more firmly in their hearts than this. As is natural, no hatred can be greater or more stubborn than one born of great devotion or piety, and believed to be pious. And they did not lack the usual cause which invariably inflames hatred more and more: its reciprocation. For the other nations were bound to hate them most savagely in return.<sup>120</sup>

In Spinoza's defense, it could be argued that in this passage he is not defending *all* forms of patriotic fervor or "piety," but only those arising in oppressed nations whose people's "hearts" are thereby strengthened "to bear everything with special constancy and virtue." However, as many biblical scholars have argued, this does not conform with the core ethical obligation to "care for the stranger in one's midst." Israel's covenantal relationship with YHWH is absolutely clear on this matter.

There is, as Richard Elliott Friedman has noted, a tension between the violence toward others – Canaanites and Midianites, for example – extolled in the Hebrew Bible and the notably exceptional manner in which *gêrim* are regarded.<sup>121</sup> Who are such migrants and why do they matter? According to Walter Brueggemann, they are

displaced people who are displaced because of economic, political, or military disruption. They seek life in a new place where they do not belong, because they are no longer welcome or can no longer sustain themselves in their old place. In the new place, such displaced persons may or may not be welcome, but they are clearly outsiders who constitute an otherness in society that is regularly perceived as an unwelcome threat.<sup>122</sup>

Moreover, Friedmann argues, the Exodus event brought the ideas and ethical commitments of a group – the Levites – to a nascent Israel and, in the process, the concept of YHWH was merged with El.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup>TTP 17.78-81; G III/214-15.

<sup>121</sup> Various translations as "sojourner," "(resident) alien," "refugee," "immigrant," or "migrant" (to emphasize group identity in movement). For an important study of the designation *gêr*, see Spina 1983.

<sup>122</sup> Brueggemann 2002b, p. 198. See also Spina 1983 and Miller 2000.

<sup>123</sup> Friedmann 2017, pp. 49-53.



As Walter Brueggemann has well summarized, there were three features of the often tumultuous social and military background to the Hebrew Bible that relate to the importance of the social category *gēr*. First of all, central to the “the memory and self-consciousness” of ancient Israel was the recognition that its people had themselves once been forced migrants “with all the precariousness that such a condition portended.” Secondly, the cultic life of ancient Israel revolved around “the conviction that YHWH rescued Israel as a community of at-risk slaves and fugitives, and gave a homeland to people who were otherwise aliens and outsiders in a land not their own.” In other words, there existed an intimate connection between the idea of the promise of a homeland and covenantal loyalty to YHWH.<sup>124</sup> Finally, at the heart of the Torah is a reminder for Israel to welcome strangers into its midst. Outsiders ought to be treated on a moral and legal par with such other vulnerable persons as “widows” and “orphans.” As Brueggemann reiterates, “the Torah provides toward sojourners a practice of generosity and hospitality that is rooted in YHWH’s own inclination toward needy outsiders.”<sup>125</sup>

Walter J. Houston has added an important nuance to the Israelite emphasis on the obligation to care for *gērim*. “Sociologically speaking,” he notes,

in a lineage-based agrarian society the immigrant from another tribe or even the next village is just as much an outsider. ... It may be that this is the original meaning, but that with the urban decline of the lineage-based system and the development of a sense of popular identity ... the word comes to be mainly applied to foreigners. But in their social marginality and economic need there is no difference.<sup>126</sup>

Houston concludes that despite our “limited our knowledge of [ancient Israelite] social conditions is,” a text like Exodus 22:21-27 “makes sense” as a reminder “that the Israelites so recently delivered from oppression as aliens in Egypt should be reminded, twice, of their responsibility for those similarly at their mercy in the land they are to occupy.”<sup>127</sup>

Notwithstanding this biblical injunction to care for *gērim*, however, Spinoza consigns foreigners to a second-class status. Tragically, citizens even in a democratic state may reject immigrants, despite their obvious benefits to the host society. In such an instance, though, a democracy

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124 On the connection between YHWH’s promise of land and subsequent expectation of covenantal loyalty or *hesed* on the part of Israel, see Brueggemann 2002a; 2002b, pp. 120-23.

125 Brueggemann 2002b, p. 198.

126 Houston 2008, p. 108.

127 Houston 2008, pp. 108-9.

cannot long endure. As Matheron observes,

In fact, the natives absolutely will not grant civic rights to those foreigners that flock to a country for its economic prosperity, and who become more and more numerous; for the ambition for domination and envy are satisfied the more we are *distinguished* from others, the more we are privileged with respect to them. ... *We thus refuse immigrants the right to vote*, who remain excluded from the assembly of the people. ... but, after some generations, the descendants of these immigrants are no longer distinguishable from citizens—aside from, precisely, their non-participation in power.... Democracy thus becomes aristocratic: and it naturally becomes this way, spontaneously, by the simple play of economic growth. ... And its undoing is its lack of fidelity to its own internal principle: democracy withers away by being insufficiently democratic.<sup>128</sup>

Dan Taylor has justifiably criticized a tendency toward “visionary idealism” on the part of those who “reach to a more rarefied view of personal liberation which ... doesn’t explain progressive political change in the first place ... [and] doesn’t address the messiness, ambiguity and risk of facing up to the political as pluralistic, uncertain and mired in difference.”<sup>129</sup> And, we might add mired in *contradiction*. This was as true for Spinoza as for ancient Israel. Indeed, a serious weakness on the part of liberation theologians (and some leftists and Marxists<sup>130</sup>) who have appealed to the Exodus tradition is that they have failed to acknowledge that the Exodus was also an *Eisodus*.<sup>131</sup> “Indeed,” Prior summarizes, “the Exodus-Eisodus motif is not a paradigm for liberation, but for colonial plunder. That is the plain sense of the biblical narrative, and the way the text has been used.”<sup>132</sup> As a result, it is worth bearing in mind Wonil Kim’s hermeneutical caveat that

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<sup>128</sup> Matheron 2020, p. 145.

<sup>129</sup> Taylor 2021, p. 235. I think, however, in my own defense of “self-emancipation” in Stolze 2020, pp. 263–92, I tried to make good on what is missing in an earlier published chapter on fortitude (revised and published in Stolze 2020, pp. 153–73), namely, what Taylor calls the “messiness, ambiguity and risk” of the political.

<sup>130</sup> For example, see Walzer 1985, along with Said’s (1986) withering critique, and the subsequent exchange of letters between the two (Said and Walzer 1986). Also, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri use the concept of “exodus” to designate a “democratic movement” that “involves the multitude breaking the ties that link imperial sovereignty to the consent of the subordinated” (Hardt and Negri 2004, p. 91).

<sup>131</sup> Prior 1997, p. 280n.13, p. 282n.15.

<sup>132</sup> Prior 1997, p. 283.

justice defines liberation and liberation serves justice, not vice versa. For one thing, liberation is required only when justice breaks down. Justice is the goal, liberation the means. Also, liberation unchecked by justice can easily become corrupt and collapse into oppression.... A biblical theology of liberation, therefore, must subject itself to the criterion of the biblical theology of justice.<sup>133</sup>

No doubt the inferior status of foreigners in Spinoza's own political thought must be in part understood as overdetermined not only by the history of biblical interpretation he inherited but also by the balance of social and political forces in early-modern Europe. But seventeenth-century restrictions on citizenship afford us no excuse for a lack of imagination in the twenty-first-century. So it appears that the only conceivable solution to this dilemma would be to find new forms of identity that do not confine themselves to land or national borders but aim at *cosmopolitan* inclusion – a path, in turns out, that was already trod during the Roman Empire by both rabbinic figures and early Christians like Paul of Tarsus.<sup>134</sup> This would be a *landless* ethic<sup>135</sup> or – more positively expressed – what J. Baird Callicott has called an *earth* ethic.<sup>136</sup> But what would it mean not only to *think* like a planet (to use Callicott's expression) but to *feel* oneself and human and non-human others as inextricably part of it? Let us close with some Spinozist reflections.

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It is worth recalling that one of Spinoza's preferred ways to name ultimate reality is *natura*.<sup>137</sup> As Spinoza writes in E2p13l7s, "it is easy for us to conceive that the whole of nature is one Individual, whose parts, that is to say, all bodies, vary in infinite ways, without any mutation of the whole Individual" [*facile concipiemus totam naturam unum esse individuum, cuius partes, hoc est, omnia corpora, infinitis modis variant absque ulla totius individui mutatione*].<sup>138</sup> Yet, as Pierre Macherey reminds us, this does

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133 Kim 2000, pp. 318-19.

134 On the rabbinic critique of a narrow concern for the land and elaboration of a broader cosmopolitanism that "knows no doubt that one may practice the holy way of life anywhere, anytime," see Jacob Neusner's remarks in a symposium in Davies 1991, p. 108; and Hirshman 2000. On early Christianity, see Patterson 2018.

135 On the biblical conception of landlessness that emerged during the experience of exile, see Smith-Christopher 2002; 2015.

136 See Callicott 2013, in which Spinoza's concept of *conatus* is discussed in the context of a formulating forms of biocentrism (see pp. 217-18, 224).

137 For Spinoza's conception of nature, see Collins 1984.

138 G II/102. Spinoza qualifies in this passage that it is easy to *conceive* the universe as one Individual. He does not argue that we directly *perceive* it in this way. Indeed, Spinoza precisely distinguishes

not mean that nature “conserves itself in a self-identical manner as an arrested form, inalterable, immobile, in the manner of the Forms of the Platonists, because it is an infinity that would thus become problematic.” Rather, following Epicurus, the “whole” of nature “is the ensemble of all that exists, outside of which nothing can be thought,’ and so “in itself [is] inalterable, to the extent that it is irreducible to whatever else would be, other than its own sequence of events,” is “perfectly sufficient unto itself,” and “defines for itself alone all that belongs to its reality.”<sup>139</sup>

As is well known, Spinoza considered human beings to be inextricably part of nature. In instance, in his 1665 letter to the English scientist Henry Oldenburg, Spinoza maintains that “every body, insofar as it exists modified in a definite way, must be considered as a part of the whole universe, must agree with its whole and must cohere with the remaining bodies.”<sup>140</sup> So far so good. But Spinoza had another, more radical, thesis: nature itself is internally riven between an active and a passive aspect. In a note to E1p29 Spinoza explains

what we must understand by *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata*. ... [B]y *Natura naturans* we must understand what is in itself and is conceived through itself, or such attributes of substance that express an eternal and infinite essence; i.e., ... God, insofar as he is considered as a free cause.

But by *Natura naturata* I understand whatever follows from the necessity of God's nature, or from any of God's attributes, i.e., all the modes of God's attributes insofar as they are considered as things which are in God, and can neither be nor be conceived without God.<sup>141</sup>

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in his theory of knowledge between *perception* and *conception* as follows: “I say ‘concept’ rather than ‘perception,’ because the word ‘perception’ seems to indicate that the soul [*mens*] is acted on by the object. But ‘concept’ seems to express an action of the soul [*soul*]” (E2d3exp). For helpful commentary, see Macherey 2011, pp. 86–88. The point is that one could be quite *mistaken* that the universe as a whole is one Individual, for we are *part* of the very universe whose overall structure we are trying to formulate – through mathematical and physical laws, for example. We *cannot* step outside of this universe in order to discern its unifying structure. Nonetheless, for practical purposes, we can consistently act as if the universe is one Individual; for we can be content with being “led as if by the hand [*quasi manu ducere*] to know the human soul and its supreme beatitude” (E2pref).

139 Macherey 2011, p. 158. According to Macherey, Spinoza rejects the Stoic conception of a universe construed as “a system of ordered determinations, converging in the constitution of a unique and unified being” (p. 158). In this lemma (as well as in Letters 32 and 64), there may be, as Wolfson (1962, pp. 7–8) has argued, an echo of the macrocosm/microcosm analogy in rabbinic thought and medieval Jewish philosophy, especially the opening line of Book I, chapter 72 of Maimonides’ *Guide for the Perplexed*: “Know that this Universe, in its entirety, is nothing else but one individual being ...” (Maimonides 2004, p. 198). However, Pierre-François Moreau and Piet Steenbakkers warn that although Maimonides makes use of “a whole series of comparisons between the human individual and the universe (life, organization of the body, existence of a principle, directive faculty, finality, etc.), Spinoza rigorously limits himself to the question of mutations of the whole and parts” (Spinoza 2020, p. 535n104).

140 Letter 32; G IV/173a.

141 G II 71; Spinoza 1985, p. 434. In this note Spinoza critically reprises a distinction he had earlier made in his *Short Treatise*, part I, chapters 8–9; see Spinoza 1985, pp. 91–92.

Here we see dramatic confirmation of Louis Althusser's view that philosophy – unlike science – has no object. Rather, the practice of philosophy involves taking positions, making distinctions, and tracing lines of demarcation.<sup>142</sup> One of the most important philosophical lines of demarcation drawn in the *Ethics* is precisely between nature in an active sense and nature in a passive sense: *natura naturans* as opposed to *natura naturata*. Spinoza borrowed and reworked this distinction from Scholastic thought,<sup>143</sup> with the result that he arrived at a thoroughly “naturalized” conception of God.<sup>144</sup>

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But why does Spinoza's distinction matter today? There are at least three reasons. First of all, it illustrates a point regarding Althusser's conception of materialism as a “philosophy of the encounter,” namely, that we must continually be on guard to challenge the idealist closure signified by talk of “origins.”<sup>145</sup> But it is worth noting that Althusser himself failed to grasp that the dialectical interplay between naturing and natured nature is fully compatible with the biblical account of creation as a kind of primal *separation* that is precisely not an idealist origin but a materialist beginning.<sup>146</sup> As the eminent biblical scholar Jon Levenson has stressed, in the opening lines of Genesis/Bereshit we learn not about “the production of matter out of nothing, but rather the emergence of a stable community in a benevolent and life-sustaining order.”<sup>147</sup>

Secondly, Spinoza's distinction between naturing nature and natured nature enables us to reframe the so-called “mind/body problem” along the lines of *panpsychism*, which demarcates the ontological position that all things simultaneously exhibit *both* mental and physical aspects.<sup>148</sup> As Philip Goff has powerfully argued, panpsychism – and not

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142 For a superb discussion of “Althusser's struggle with the definition of philosophy, see Sotiris 2020, pp. 215-45.

143 See Gueroult 1968, pp. 564-68; Ramond 2016; and the entries for “*natura*,” “*natura naturans*,” and “*natura naturata*” in Bunge et al., pp. 270-74.

144 Collins 1983, pp. 26-49.

145 For an overview, see Sotiris 2020, pp. 84-97.

146 Althusser too hastily concluded that idealists have regularly conceived of the origin of the world out of nothingness – whether or not in the religious sense of God's creative act – whereas materialists (Epicurus and Lucretius are his examples) have been interested in the *beginning* of the world; see Althusser 2017, pp. 29-30.

147 Levenson 1988, p. 12. See also van Wolde 2009, pp. 169-200 for a detailed analysis of the Hebrew verb *bara'* – which connotes not “creating” but “distinguishing/separating.” And see Habel 2011 on the ecological implications of such a reading of Genesis.

148 For a history of panpsychism, see Skrbina 2005 (pp. 87-91 are devoted to Spinoza). For Spinoza, of course, mind and body are, despite an infinity of attributes, the only two known to us. As a result, his

idealism, dualism, or forms of reductive materialism – is the theory of mind that is most compatible with an ecological perspective and is best suited for us to respond adequately to the present climate emergency as we envision new ways of being with human and non-human others in the world.<sup>149</sup> An important task – especially for Marxists – is to conceptualize materialism not in terms of the emergence of thought from matter but instead, in Spinozist fashion, in terms of body and mind as coequal attributes that contribute to the constitution of absolutely infinite substance.

Finally, there is an ethical-political imperative that arises from the naturing/natured distinction; for the whole point of Spinoza's philosophy is to enable us to *become active*.<sup>150</sup> Of course, this doesn't mean rushing around doing as many things as possible and exhausting oneself in the process – the peril of the overcommitted militant! Instead, it means seeking to *understand* the world in order better to *act* within the world to *improve* the world's conditions for as many as possible. In this respect, although Spinoza's distinction is certainly not an argument for a simple "return to nature," perhaps it is compatible with emerging arguments for "degrowth."<sup>151</sup> It is not surprising that at the end of his book *Less is More* Jason Hickel invokes Spinoza as a "heretic" of a way not taken in early modern Europe. As Hickel writes, admittedly in simplified terms,

Spinoza's teaching upended the core tenets of religious doctrine, and threatened to pry open difficult moral questions about the exploitation of nature and labour. After all, if nature is ultimately the same substance as God, then humans can hardly claim dominion over it.<sup>152</sup>

Spinoza's distinction between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata* gives us reason urgently to act in the cause of our emancipation, for, despite mounting ecological destruction, there remains the possibility of ecological restoration. However, as Carolyn Merchant reminds us, nature is relatively – sometimes wildly – autonomous from human control.<sup>153</sup> Consequently, there also looms the prospect that the earth's system

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panpsychism is more ontologically robust – for good or ill – than that of contemporary advocates like Goff 2019.

149 Goff 2019, pp. 184-95. Although Sévérac 2019 agrees that Spinoza is not a reductive materialist, he does not consider the "panpsychist" position.

150 Sévérac 2005.

151 See Hickel 2020 and Kallis et al. 2020.

152 Hickel 2020, p. 267

153 Merchant 2016.

will exceed tipping points beyond which a relatively stable climate we have inherited from the Holocene will spiral out of control until it arrives at a warmer Anthropocene set point that would be inhospitable for our species and many others.<sup>154</sup> In Ben Ehrenreich's terrifying expression, we find ourselves "hurtling toward global suicide."<sup>155</sup>

The upshot is that increasingly chaotic *natured* capitalism must be compelled through global collective action from below to yield to a *naturing* movement that can and must transform the existing state of affairs. More than ever, we must strive to bring about an ecologically sustainable society in which human "freely associated producers"<sup>156</sup> and other species may flourish on the earth of which we are all inextricably a part.

### **Desert Addendum: Reading with Moabite Eyes,<sup>157</sup> or a Spinozist-Marxist Encounter with Edward Abbey**

The American radical environmentalist Edward Abbey included Spinoza in his "gallery of great philosophers."<sup>158</sup> Edward S. Twining has added that Abbey "mentally dueled with Spinoza through much of his life."<sup>159</sup> It is not surprising, then, to read the following tribute in his September 1952 journal entry:

You read Spinoza for a long time before you get the feel of that admirable mind: patient, explaining the obvious yet difficult truth to the inert minds of his readers; thorough, repeating again and again the same argument in all possible syllogistic combinations and permutations; kind and gentle, appreciating, understanding and forgiving the lameness, the weakness of the poor minds trying to follow his; firm, too, dealing justly, courteously but mercilessly with his opponents and enemies in all fields, of all shades of learning, in all ways; blessed, aware of, full of love, an intellectual intoxication, a splendid generosity and charity and serenity; an ideal philosopher in almost every way one should be. Almost. (A good man.)<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Angus 2016 remains indispensable on this point.

<sup>155</sup> Ehrenreich 2021.

<sup>156</sup> Marx 1990, pp. 171-73.

<sup>157</sup> Like the ancient Israelites, the Moabites were Canaanite descendants; but the two kingdoms wound up as rivals on either side of the Jordan River (see Buck 2019, pp. 76-78). Moab is also a town in Utah that serves as a gateway to the Arches National Monument, where in 1956-57 Edward Abbey worked as a seasonal park ranger for the U.S. National Park Service. Abbey drew on notes he had compiled during that period when he drafted his 1968 book *Desert Solitaire*.

<sup>158</sup> Abbey 2003, p. 15. For an attempt to ground a deep ecological perspective in Spinoza's philosophy, see especially De Jonge 2004.

<sup>159</sup> Twining 1998, p. 31.

<sup>160</sup> Abbey 2003, p. 105.



In his later autobiographical meditation *Desert Solitaire* Abbey mused that

All men are brothers, we like to say, half-wishing sometimes in secret it were not true. But perhaps it is true. And is the evolutionary line from protozoan to Spinoza any less certain? That also may be true. We are obliged, therefore, to spread the news, painful and bitter though it may be for some to hear, that all living things on earth are kindred.<sup>161</sup>

However, his broad sympathy for Spinoza was not without sharp criticisms. In a 1977 letter to the deep ecologist George Sessions,<sup>162</sup> who had found a Western philosophical system analogous to Asian traditions like Buddhism and Taoism that could “provide us with an adequate and true representation of God/Man/Nature in which each ‘component’ is placed in proper perspective and given due weight.”<sup>163</sup> This Western tradition was, Sessions contended, none other than *Spinozism*. But Abbey was not convinced:

Whether it's safe to base a comprehensive man & nature philosophy on Spinoza's *Ethics* I am not competent to judge, but you make a good case for it. Of course, I have tried several times to get through Spinoza but never could make it: the language, the style, the method, put me off. I admire the man's stand for freedom of expression and political democracy, as he understood it, but his pantheistic “God” struck me as euphemism – no doubt necessary at the time, if he was to avoid Bruno's fate – and his “intellectual love” for Nature-God does not interest me at all. I suspect that Spinoza was not in love with his God-Nature but rather with his own system of ideas, which, whether true, false or somewhere between (as in all systems), seem to be the product of the mind and the library, not of living engagement with persons, places, things, events, all the infinite variety and particularity of the world we actually know.<sup>164</sup>

Abbey admits that he is “a naïve realist, and to hell with it. When I hear the word ‘phenomenology,’ I reach for my revolver.” The problem with Spinoza is that, despite his attempt to “comprehend all, the Whole

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<sup>161</sup> Abbey 1990, p. 21.

<sup>162</sup> Abbey 2006, pp. 77-80. Apparently, Abbey is commenting on an article by Sessions on “Spinoza and Jeffers on Man in Nature” (Sessions 1977). Sessions was also a collaborator with other deep ecologists like Arne Naess, who was a specialist on Spinoza. See, for example, Naess 2010.

<sup>163</sup> Sessions 1977, p. 492.

<sup>164</sup> Abbey 2006, pp. 77-78.

(whatever that is),” he winds up “as subjectivistic as Kant or Hegel and all of their descendants.”<sup>165</sup> After all, Abbey wonders,

What is “intellectual love” but simply the love of intellect?  
I love the intellect, too – but I love my friends, my wife, my children, the trees and rocks and animals, clouds and lizards and rattlesnakes, far more so. ...

All is One? I doubt it. One what, anyway? There may not be any Sum of Things at all, and if there is, how can we ever see it, feel it, know it? Who cares, in any case? – even if God exists, I’m not seriously interested, Let Him go His way, I’ll go mine.<sup>166</sup>

This is precisely why he

gave up systematic philosophy for – things. Not people, but a few persons I happen to know; not the Universe, but the earth, and not much of that either; not the Forest, but these lightning-blasted yellow-pines sitting up here on this mountain with me (wishing I would leave); not Dogginess, but my dog, and so on.<sup>167</sup>

In conclusion, Abbey acknowledges the proper role of philosophy alongside other human endeavors:

... I regard philosophy as being exactly like one of the fine arts, as high an art and high a calling as any other. The power of Spinoza’s work lies in its perfect self-coherence, complete self-consistency, terminological exactitude, mathematical self-sufficiency – not in its pretense at telling us the truth. In its beauty, not its wisdom.<sup>168</sup>

Despite his distancing of himself from what he takes to be Spinoza’s project, it is striking that a key element of that project seems to have stuck. As Abbey cautions from the beginning of *Desert Solitaire*, which remains his most defining work,

this is not primarily a book about the desert. In recording my impressions of the natural scene I have striven above all for accuracy, since I believe that there is a kind of poetry, even a kind of truth, in simple fact. But the desert is a vast world, an oceanic world, as deep in its way and complex and various as the sea.

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<sup>165</sup> Abbey 2006, p. 78.

<sup>166</sup> Abbey 2006, p. 79.

<sup>167</sup> Abbey 2006, p. 80.

<sup>168</sup> Abbey 2006, p. 80.

Language makes a mighty loose net with which to go fishing for simple facts, when facts are infinite. If a man knew enough he could write a whole book about the juniper tree. Not juniper trees in general but that one particular juniper tree which grows from a ledge of naked sandstone near the old entrance to Arches National Monument. What I have tried to do then is something a bit different. Since you cannot get the desert into a book any more than a fisherman can haul up the sea with his nets, I have tried to create a world of words in which the desert figures more as medium than as material. Not imitation but evocation has been the goal.<sup>169</sup>

This passage immediately calls to mind Spinoza's famous distinction of three kinds of knowledge.<sup>170</sup> To use Abbey's example of a juniper tree: knowledge of the first kind consists of mere acquaintance with a juniper tree through the senses or imagination; whereas knowledge of the second kind has to do with an adequate biological classification of juniper trees in general and how they differ from other organisms. Finally, though, knowledge of the third kind concerns "not juniper trees in general but that one particular juniper tree." Abbey's relentless pursuit of this third, *intuitive* kind of knowledge doubtless accounts for the remarkable appeal of the book. Consider Abbey's extraordinary description of the arches themselves:

What are the Arches? From my place in front of the housetrailer I can see several of the hundred or more of them which have been discovered in the park. These are natural arches, holes in the rock, windows in stone, no two alike, as varied in form as in dimension. They range in size from holes just big enough to walk through to openings large enough to contain the dome of the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. Some resemble jug handles or flying buttresses, others natural bridges but with this technical distinction: a natural bridge spans a watercourse—a natural arch does not. The arches were formed through hundreds of thousands of years by the weathering of the huge sandstone walls, or fins, in which they are found. Not the work of a cosmic hand, nor sculptured by sand-bearing winds, as many people prefer to believe, the arches came into being and continue to come into being through the modest wedging action of rainwater, melting snow, frost, and ice, aided by gravity. In color they shade from off-white through buff, pink, brown and red, tones which also change with the time of day and the moods of the light, the weather, the sky.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Abbey 1990, p. xii.

<sup>170</sup> For a helpful overview of Spinoza's demarcation of three kinds of knowledge, see Steinberg and Viljanen 2021, pp. 58-65.

<sup>171</sup> Abbey 1990, p. 5.

Yet this passage is immediately followed by an erotic metaphor:

Standing there, gaping at this monstrous and inhuman spectacle of rock and cloud and sky and space, I feel a ridiculous greed and possessiveness come over me. I want to know it all, possess it all, embrace the entire scene intimately, deeply, totally, as a man desires a beautiful woman. An insane wish? Perhaps not – at least there's nothing else, no one human, to dispute possession with me.<sup>172</sup>

Interestingly, such a feminization of the natural world violates Abbey's own expressed desire to avoid anthropomorphism. As he notes only a page later,

The personification of the natural is exactly the tendency I wish to suppress in myself, to eliminate for good. I am here not only to evade for a while the clamor and filth and confusion of the cultural apparatus but also to confront, immediately and directly if it's possible, the bare bones of existence, the elemental and fundamental, the bedrock which sustains us. I want to be able to look at and into a juniper tree, a piece of quartz, a vulture, a spider, and see it as it is in itself, devoid of all humanly ascribed qualities, anti-Kantian, even the categories of scientific description. To meet God or Medusa face to face, even if it means risking everything human in myself. I dream of a hard and brutal mysticism in which the naked self merges with a nonhuman world and yet somehow survives still intact, individual, separate. Paradox and bedrock.<sup>173</sup>

As is well known, Edward Abbey held profoundly contradictory beliefs. For example: Abbey favored (voluntary) population control, and – despite his sympathy with the IWW<sup>174</sup> and longstanding opposition to U.S. militarism and imperialism<sup>175</sup> – later in his life he nonetheless embraced a kind of nativism and encouraged severe restrictions on immigration.<sup>176</sup> On

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<sup>172</sup> Abbey 1990, p. 5.

<sup>173</sup> Abbey 1990, p. 6.

<sup>174</sup> In a 1988 letter to the journal *Industrial Worker* (Abbey 2006, pp. 251-52), Abbey writes that he has been "a life-long admirer of the IWW and its traditions" (p. 251), despite his sharp disagreement over immigration. He nonetheless enclosed a check to renew his subscription.

<sup>175</sup> A sample from the Reagan era: "If we must have one more war let it be a simple and direct encounter between Kremlin and Pentagon, one deft surgical strike removing simultaneously two malignancies from the human body politic. Mankind will not be free until the last general is strangled with the entrails of the last systems-analyst. As my sainted grandmother used to say" (Abbey 1982, p. 88).

<sup>176</sup> For a comprehensive introduction to the contradictory tendencies of Abbey's life, ideas, and

this basis, Marxists may be tempted to dismiss Abbey's thought entirely. That would be a mistake, however. The objective for Marxists should be neither to praise nor to bury Abbey but instead to engage in an immanent critique of his thought (his contradictory personal life will remain what it was to his friends and foes alike). The problem, as Sarah Krakoff observes,

is not *just* that he was sexist, racist, and xenophobic. But also that those views were sewn into his brand of so-called radicalism. They constituted the lenses through which he saw the landscape he aimed to protect.

And yet, she admits, Abbey's nature writing is beautiful"; it "has that dual-quality of inspiring you to visit if you have never been, and evoking waves of longing to return if you have."<sup>177</sup> Consequently, it is worth stressing, with Andrea Ross, that "if we sing Abbey's praises, we must equally highlight what he gets wrong: wilderness is not gendered, and it is detrimental to us all to anthropomorphize nature as a feminine and racialized object to rescue or conquer."<sup>178</sup>

Along similar lines, in the form of an imagined campfire conversation, *Desert Cabal* Amy Levine offers a rejoinder to Abbey's most famous book, *Desert Solitaire*. Levine pointedly challenges what she calls his "rugged individualism." As she elaborates,

By nature, we are a cabal. A group gathered around. A panoramic vision. A group gathered to conspire, to resist. This is vital to our survival, as institutions fail and tyranny threatens. Believe me when I say that our democracy, with its wide but firm embrace of the last best wild places, has never been so jeopardized. I actually prefer the French term *cabale*. The *e* makes it a female noun, and that rings true about now. While *cabale* means political conspiracy and intrigue, it is imbued with spiritual and mystical meanings, too – and I'd say the divine thing we've been given is nature itself – both ours and the land's.<sup>179</sup>

On this *cabbalistic* basis, we might say, Irvine equally interrogates what she regards as Abbey's sexism:

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legacy, see Cahalan 2001.

<sup>177</sup> Krakoff 2018.

<sup>178</sup> Ross 2018.

<sup>179</sup> Irvine 2018, p. 78.

Perhaps this is the way of women: we seek not so much solitude as solidarity, intimacy more than privacy. But it's the way of wilderness, too – in a thriving ecosystem, integration matters far more than independence.

There is the adventure that traverses the land, that excites and restores. But there's also an inner landscape – its fiery furnace of the heart, the natural bridges built between beings. So I say to you, go solo, into the desert. Yes, do this and love every minute. But then come back. Come fall in with the *cabale* that has joined together, to save what we know and love. It will take multitudes to slow the avalanche of apathy. And it will take a lot of devotion.<sup>180</sup>

Spinozists today should appreciate Irvine's use of the term cabal or *cabale* in her critique of Abbey's individualism;<sup>181</sup> for it makes common cause with the reclamation by Antonio Negri and others of Spinoza's concept of the "multitude"<sup>182</sup> and Etienne Balibar's affirmation of Spinoza's "transindividualism."<sup>183</sup>

What is more, for Spinoza substance/nature is not gendered. Superstitious religious traditions have, of course, historically imagined the divine to be masculine, feminine, or androgynous/gynandrous. However, a properly metaphysical understanding of ultimate reality is that it lies beyond gender or, better, is *transgender*. Spinoza's use of the term *causa sui*<sup>184</sup> is precisely of an "it" that resists any temptation to create God in the image of human beings.

Finally, perhaps the most egregious *aporia* in Abbey's thought concerns his opposition to immigration – in particular across the Mexican / U. S. border. Let's look closely at his notorious article "Immigration and Liberal Taboos,"<sup>185</sup> which, even a generous reader must admit, is a noxious

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180 Irvine 2018, p. 81.

181 See Stiles 2019 for a dissenting view regarding Irvine's critique of Abbey.

182 See Negri 1991. For an outstanding collection of critical reflections on the impact of Negri's agenda-shaping book *The Savage Anomaly*, see Moreau and Lavaert 2021.

183 See especially Balibar 2020 and Read 2017.

184 E1d1: "By cause of itself I understand that whose essence involves existence, or that whose nature cannot be conceived except as existing."

185 Rejected for publication by the *NY Times*, published in the *Phoenix Free Press* in 1988, and reprinted in Abbey 1988, pp. 41-45. It would be tiresome and beside the point to detail all the factual errors in Abbey's case against immigration; but see an earlier exchange of letters between Abbey and John M. Crewdson in the *New York Review*; Abbey and Crewdson 1981. It is ironic, as Chris Clarke has noted, that Abbey is (illegally) buried in the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge, just west in the same Sonoran Desert ecosystem of the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument where, as a result of border wall construction, contractors working for the Department of Homeland Security have been damaging indigenous sites, uprooting saguaros and organ pipe cacti, and adversely affecting wildlife. Clarke seems unduly confident that were Abbey alive today "he would have felt the same revulsion many of us feel at the avarice, cruelty, intellectual incuriosity, and ecological rapacity of the current

diatribe against the poor, weak, and vulnerable in the name of the wealthy, privileged, and powerful. Moreover, the article is replete with specious reasoning. The core of Abbey's argument is that

ever-continuing industrial and population growth is not the true road to human happiness, that simple gross quantitative increase of this kind creates only more pain, dislocation, confusion, and misery. ... Especially when these uninvited millions bring with them an alien mode of life which – let us be honest about this – is not appealing to the majority of Americans. Why not? Because we prefer democratic government, for one thing; because we still hope for an open, spacious, uncrowded, and beautiful – yes, beautiful! – society, for another. The alternative, in the squalor, cruelty, and corruption of Latin America, is plain for all to see.<sup>186</sup>

But Abbey then gives away his polemical game midway through the article when he admits that the indigenous peoples of the Americas were themselves originally justified in opposing European settler colonialism:

Yes, I know, if the American Indians had enforced such a policy none of us pale-faced honkies would be here. But the Indians were foolish, and divided, and failed to keep our WASP ancestors out. They've regretted it ever since.<sup>187</sup>

But it scarcely matters that they failed in the past; what matters in the present is that their descendants retain the right of resistance. Moreover, as Abbey admits, the proximate cause of much of the forced migration across the Mexican border at the time of his complaint was U.S. "meddling" in the internal affairs of "our Hispanic neighbors." Indeed, he urged that the people of these countries be permitted "to carry out the social, political, and moral revolution which is both necessary and inevitable."<sup>188</sup> It is not clear, to say the least, then, why Abbey ever thought that the solution to forced migration was to militarize the border as opposed to withdrawing U.S. support for repressive regimes and proxy armies designed to block the emergence of, or to overthrow existing, popular movements and regimes in Central and South America.<sup>189</sup>

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[Trump] regime." See Clarke 2019.

186 Abbey 1988, p. 43.

187 Abbey 1988, p. 43.

188 Abbey 1988, p. 44.

189 This bloody history is compellingly recalled in Chomsky 2021.



At any rate, if one were to take Abbey at his own *anarchist* word, then it should be well understood that

the problem of democracy is the problem of power – how to keep power decentralized, equally distributed, fairly shared. Anarchism means maximum democracy: the maximum possible dispersal of political power, economic power, and force – military power. An anarchist society consists of a voluntary association of self-reliant, self-supporting, autonomous communities.<sup>190</sup>

This is precisely why, he continues,

political democracy will not survive in a society that permits a few to accumulate economic power over the many. Or in a society which delegates police power and military power to an elite corps of professionals. Sooner or later the professionals will take over.<sup>191</sup>

It should be obvious that “the professionals” have taken over! The point is to stop them. In sum, it may well be true, as Abbey caustically remarks, that “the conservatives love their cheap labor; the liberals love their cheap cause.”<sup>192</sup> But one would expect an anarchist like Abbey to envision a more democratic alternative than scapegoating forced migrants and closing national borders.

Fortunately, more democratic alternatives continue to be proposed.<sup>193</sup> Aviva Chomsky, for example, has written,

If we do not want to live in a society divided by status, with large numbers of “illegal” people, what can we do to change the situation? I outline some of the so-called solutions that have been attempted, ranging from deportation to border patrols to legalizations. I argue that current immigration reform proposals do not address the problem of being undocumented in a realistic way, and that only by challenging the contradictions inherent in the category itself – that is, by declaring that no human being is illegal – can the law adequately address human rights and human needs.

When people ask me what I think we should do about immigration reform, I tell them that I think the immigrant rights movement had it right back in the 1980s when we insisted that “no human being is illegal.” If discrimination on the basis of

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<sup>190</sup> Abbey 1988, pp. 25-26.

<sup>191</sup> Abbey 1988, p. 26.

<sup>192</sup> Abbey 1988, p. 42.

<sup>193</sup> See, for example, Chomsky 2014 and Mehta 2019.

national origin is illegal, then we need to acknowledge that our immigration laws are illegal. Human rights – including the right to be recognized as a person equal to other people – apply to everyone: no exceptions. Let's admit that our discriminatory laws are unjustifiable. Let's abolish the category "illegal" and give everyone the right to exist. We would solve the problem of illegal immigration with the stroke of a pen.<sup>194</sup>

Whether for biblical or secular reasons,<sup>195</sup> whether in ancient Israel, in Spinoza's seventeenth century, in Abbey's 1980s, or at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – this seems like a reliable moral principle: *Welcome and care for strangers in our midst.*<sup>196</sup>

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194 Chomsky 2014, pp. 21-22.

195 See Rachels 2002 on how to regard biblical injunctions not simply as appeals to religious *authority*: "If the precepts in the text are not arbitrary, there must be some reason for them.... In the logic of moral reasoning, the reference to the text drops out, and the reason behind the pronouncement (if any) takes its place" (p. 98). See also Collins 2019 on how to identify and cautiously invoke "biblical values."

196 Enns and Myers 2021.

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# **On Damaged and Regenerating Life: Spinoza and the Mentalities of Climate Catastrophe**

**Dan Taylor**

**Abstract:** This essay strategically intervenes in the ongoing climate catastrophe debate by considering how underlying mentalities that either emphasise Promethean technological fixes and individual behavioural change, or which misanthropically claim human extinction is inevitable, rely on capitalist norms of domination established in the early modern period. Amid a period of urgent hazard warnings, it begins with Adorno to explore the 'sickness' that naturalises and not historicises capitalist domination and calmly assents to business (or catastrophe) as usual. It then turns to Spinoza in three substantial ways: 1) in his apparent ontological critique of anthropocentrism, which has roiled the scholarly literature – the essay uses Spinoza's critique of misanthropy and anthropocentrism in ethics and politics to argue for a new democratic, collegial anthropocentrism; 2) in his critical theory of *ingenium* (mentality), which underpins anthropocentric prejudice as well as shared forms of political domination; and 3) in his underexplored argument for democratic, collegial deliberation for overcoming the force of prejudice, fear and servitude. It places Spinoza in opposition to a theoretical Prometheanist line from Bacon to Boyle, Petty and early modern colonialism which emphasised subduing the Earth, indigenous peoples and labour discipline. It concludes with a speculative outline for a desubjectified, post-Anthropocene democratic praxis.

**Keywords:** Spinoza, Adorno, Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Prometheanism, Democracy, Collegiality

Strange times these, when virtually every head of state has recently publicly committed themselves to deal with the problem of climate change, an issue of the most immense existential and geopolitical importance this century. Even Oprah Winfrey, the Pope and Ronald McDonald have issued climate action directives. Major hedge funds like BlackRock have begun in 2021 to divest from fossil fuels, coinciding with the growing market interest and profitability of renewables. Once-sceptical publications like the *Financial Times* and *The Economist* have noisily announced briefings and campaigns around the issue, particularly around opportunities presented by carbon trading and offsetting. Historically a concern of ecological and anti-capitalist leftists, today politicians on the right like Marine le Pen and Viktor Orban are calling for a green nationalism, pitched to conservative voters in terms of protected jobs and borders.

The Covid-19 pandemic, with its temporary grounding of domestic flight traffic in the West, has provided an illusion of system change: IEA estimates found that even in the midst of a viral resurgence in December 2020, global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions were 2% higher than the same month a year earlier, while the world's sixty biggest banks have provided around \$3.4

trillion in financing for fossil fuel companies since the Paris climate deal of 2015.<sup>1</sup> On the day I write, the Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii detected 417.19 ppm of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere – an increase by 0.7% in one year, by 32% since 1958 (when first measured) and by 49% against estimated pre-industrial levels (c.1750).<sup>2</sup> These figures will soon date, yet the gap between rhetoric and action is persistent.

The Paris Agreement declared ‘the need for an effective and progressive response to the urgent threat of climate change’, in agreeably-vague language common to previous summits.<sup>3</sup> Although intrinsically flawed by its reliance on voluntary reductions and soon dispensed with by President Trump, its real shortcoming was the lack of an agent who would act on its urgent calls to “recognise” the problem. The sarcastic entreaty to ‘please recycle’ at the footer of the first page of the draft proposal, which was far plainer about the ‘irreversible threat’ of climate change than the final agreement, is perhaps the most authentic if pessimistic statement in the document.<sup>4</sup> Plutocrats like Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Richard Branson and even Prince William have in recent years deflected scrutiny of their wealth by offering lavish prizes for new technologies that might tackle climate change: William’s “Earthshot Prize” ‘aims to turn the current pessimism surrounding environmental issues into optimism’.<sup>5</sup> Most recently, Bill Gates has written a book announcing that we can avoid a climate disaster through technological solutions, adding that ‘the conversation about climate change has been sidetracked by politics’. What we need instead is ‘the world’s passion and its scientific IQ’ – unwavering obedience to democratically unaccountable corporations. ‘We already have some of the tools we need’, he writes, ‘and as for those we don’t yet have, everything I’ve learned about climate and technology makes me optimistic that we can invent them’.<sup>6</sup> In a post-political era, collective or democratic solutions, or ones that might take hold of the master’s tools (or cease construction entirely) are out of the question. Digital modernity becomes techno-feudalism.

Beneath the rhetoric of urgency or a breezy optimism about technological solutions is a consensus that responses to climate change must not compromise the global economic capitalist system in any

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This essay is dedicated to my friend Terry Woods. My thanks to Agon Hamza and Frank Ruda for their invitation to contribute and support throughout.

1 IEA 2021, np; Rainforest Action Network 2021, p. 4.

2 24 March 2021, using this calculator: <https://www.co2.earth/daily-co2>.

3 *Paris Agreement* (2016), p. 88

4 Conference of the Parties 2015, p. 1.

5 Earth Shot Prize 2021, np.

6 Gates 2021, pp. 4, 18.

meaningful way; that instead, they should present new opportunities for capital return (be it new sources of “green” electricity to sustain continued growth of asset profitability and consumption, or incorporating new swathes of consumers of services and products in the developing world), while absolving investors of political or moral scrutiny. This necessitates that their citizens around the globe view the fossil-based economy as largely as something that can be fixed by new technology (geo-engineering, carbon trading, carbon capture, renewable electricity), or a matter of individual behaviour (diet, air travel, recycling habits), or as something largely impossible to curtail because of the consumption needs of other nations.<sup>7</sup> A recent G7 statement announced it will ‘put our global ambitions on climate change and the reversal of biodiversity loss at the centre of our plans’ while simultaneously ‘champion[ing] open economies and societies’, ‘freer’ multilateral trading and ‘balanced growth’.<sup>8</sup> The same year that the UK hosts COP26, a major UN climate summit tasked with ‘uniting the world to tackle climate change’, it also granted new licences to open a coal mine and allow North Sea oil and gas exploration.

To the radical who today posts on Twitter or publishes an article on the urgency of acting in response to climate change, most of the global capitalist class now (nominally) agrees. On a certain level of opposition to a centuries-long process of unimpeded extraction and consumption of natural resources, climate change has made us all anti-capitalists now.

In this way a remarkable state of cognitive dissonance is achieved, in which contradictory ideas not just about climate change but our underlying relationship to the natural world result in a deeply confused mentality (or what Spinoza would call an *ingenium*), at one paralysed in vacillation between empty hope and fear.<sup>9</sup> On the one, an attitude that focuses on changing individual behaviour, “business as usual” in politics and economics, proffering technological solutions – an attitude of *Prometheus*, the thief of fire. On the other, an attitude focused on the collective behaviour of others but which abandons faith in political (particularly international) solutions, in which climate change reflects an aggressive, greedy but universal human nature whose over-consumption liberalism cannot or should not restrict – a *misanthropic* attitude that refuses to challenge the power of the gods. What is missing is a critical concept of *democratic humanity*. A humanity that collectively acts to not just mitigate or adapt to climate change but also democratically dismantle the capitalist economic structures that have led to such rapid and unprecedented damage to life on Earth in the last seventy-five years. A

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<sup>7</sup>Technological, e.g. Gates 2021, ch.11; individual, e.g. Williamson et al. 2018, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> G7 2021, np.

<sup>9</sup>The Latin term *ingenium* can refer to a natural quality, disposition, temperament, character, but also capacity, talent or genius. In this essay I will generally use the more open ‘mentality’ which incorporates existing dispositions and also the possibility of expansion and rational transformation.

humanity that regenerates and re-establishes social and economic activity in a sustainable, democratic and cooperative fashion, through which the part is valued as much as the whole.

While in recent years important work of a broadly eco-socialist hue has addressed these themes – whose range vastly outspan an essay like this – where I intend to contribute is in two ways. Firstly, by approaching the problem of climate in/under-action through a conceptual problem of mentality; second, by using the philosopher Spinoza to examine how shared narratives or ontological premises about 'Nature' or 'human nature' result in the perpetuation of dangerous political outcomes.<sup>10</sup> Throughout, I will make the case that Spinoza has been overlooked as an ally for approaching environmental problems. Indeed, the apparent difficulties, like his anthropocentrism in politics (certainly not in his metaphysics) are wholly instructive for considering how to establish mass democratic movements for civilisational regeneration over the coming decades.

### Damaged Life

In *Minima Moralia: Reflections From Damaged Life* (1951), Theodor Adorno addresses the 'sickness' of those who have not so much accommodated themselves but become incapacitated by their subordination to authority. Qualities like 'cheerfulness, openness, sociability, successful adaptation to the inevitable' and an 'unruffled calm' have become prerequisites for adaptation and success.<sup>11</sup> This sickness, and its resultant call in the Finale to practise philosophy 'in [the] face of despair', alludes to Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*, for whom despair is a condition of not being oneself.<sup>12</sup> The sickness and despair that characterises life in modern administered societies lies in its docile acceptance, if not ability to thrive in a life thoroughly 'wrong', alienated, 'as normal as the damaged society it resembles', wherein what is damaged or lost has become normalised.

Readers of Adorno will know that this response *from* (rather than *on*) damaged life is in response to a sense of life irreparably harmed by the Shoah, as one barbaric culmination of a centuries-long development of instrumental rationality that had also created the modern capitalist consumer society like that of the United States, to which Adorno and Max Horkheimer, to whom *Minima Moralia* was dedicated, had been forced to seek refuge during the war. During these initial years, the pair had developed this analysis in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), which observes a process of reason being used instrumentally from the early modern period to dominate nature, snuff out universal solidarity and

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<sup>10</sup> Throughout, I will use a realist definition of *Nature* as the material processes and structures that exist independent of human activity and culture.

<sup>11</sup> Adorno 2005, p. 59.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.; 247; Kierkegaard 1989, p. 60.

control humanity within a totally 'administered world'. The pair illustrate the argument with the myth of Odysseus's encounter with the Sirens. In resisting their seduction, he succeeded not just in domesticating himself and his subservient crew, but Nature itself, using deception, cunning, self-discipline and obedience. Odysseus recognised that the 'way of civilization has been that of obedience and work, over which fulfilment shines everlastingly as mere illusion, as beauty deprived of power'.<sup>13</sup> Yet it is remarkable that the figure of Prometheus does not appear at all in this book, one who, in an insightful study by Pierre Hadot, was often invoked in this same period as the founder of experimental science through his subversive, gods-defying wish to 'discover the secrets of nature, or the secrets of God, by means of tricks and violence'.<sup>14</sup> In each case, the discovery of such secrets had left human beings bereft, 'worldless', as Hannah Arendt would write a decade later in *The Human Condition* (1958), subsumed by vastly powerful machines and left infinitesimally small by the new, industrial law of nature: exchange-value.<sup>15</sup>

Adorno's task in setting out his melancholy science is to explore to what extent remained 'the teaching of the good life' – what in classical philosophy was called an *ethics*.<sup>16</sup> Adorno, famously (if deceptively), is pessimistic. 'Our perspective of life has passed into an ideology which conceals the fact that there is life no longer' he demurs. Yet the work's life/not-life or wrong-life distinction relies on a gap between the public performance of assent to the naturalised 'political façade' and a private myopia to the underlying reality of capitalist expropriation and its imprint on popular culture.<sup>17</sup> This gap, and our inability to perceive it (metaphors of the eye abound), defines the despair that Adorno diagnoses as the modern malaise, wherein life's lack of autonomy reflects the 'absolute predominance of the economy'.<sup>18</sup> Sickness becomes normality. Rebellion in bourgeois society is neutered and replaced with an individualised mentality that perceives late capitalism as a natural and not historical culmination, in which the few opportunities for individual agency are in the performance of one's labour (what's now so often mistakenly called one's "career", as if it involved such security, vocation or such clear distinction from one's leisure time), or one's habits of consumption.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, pp. xi, 26.

<sup>14</sup> Hadot 2006, p. 95.

<sup>15</sup> Arendt 1998, pp. 257, 307.

<sup>16</sup> Adorno 2005, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>19</sup> The late, brilliant cultural theorist Mark Fisher called this a process of 'mandatory individualism' (2018, p. 757).

What is required is a new diagnostic, one which evaluates the patient's symptoms (docility, inactivity, irrational calm) by way of a concept of life understood critically. Thus 'only objective way of diagnosing the sickness of the healthy is by the incongruity between their rational existence and the possible course their lives might be given by reason.'<sup>20</sup> The task for critical theory as set out by the melancholy science is to contemplate things as they are and not as we would like them to be, to adapt a tenet of Spinoza. To perceive the world as 'systematised horror' yet with the aim of displacing that world, estranging it, for the sake of the possible.

This imagery of the theorist-as-physician is by no means new – Machiavelli had popularised the image of balancing the humours of the body politic, though we can look back further to Plato, or in the Indian tradition, the 3<sup>rd</sup>-century BCE *Arthashastra*. Some, understandably led by Adorno's own language of alienation and redemption, have concluded that everything in existence in late capitalism is a manifestation of the false or wrong.<sup>21</sup> In reading Adorno amid the Anthropocene, Joanna hZylinska presents a minimal ethics amid the 'impending death of the human population, i.e., about the extinction of the human species', if that were not already clear enough.<sup>22</sup> The task of a minimal ethics is to outline, in both a 'non-systemic' and 'non-normative' fashion, an open-ended outlook that leaves behind human welfare and 'concerns itself with dynamic relations between entities across various scales such as stem cells, flowers, dogs, humans, rivers, electricity pylons, computer networks, and planets'.<sup>23</sup> While her position is admittedly minimal, surrendering politics and ontology entirely in favour of modest experimentation in thought, it relies on a common if instructive misreading not just of Adorno but of the impact of climate change more broadly. On one level, such a perspective involves a peculiarly-eschatological view of humankind's inherently fallen and doomed state, which takes extinction as a given and political resistance all but impossible.<sup>24</sup> The solution (if it can be called that) is to sit back, cease vexatious and futile attempts at resistance, and undertake 'deep adaptation' and grief for the world we are about to lose.<sup>25</sup> In the process, collective agency is surrendered to the forces of fossil fuel capitalism.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>21</sup> E.g. Rüdiger Bittner, "Kritik, und wie es besser wäre", in Whyman (2016), pp. 1-2.

<sup>22</sup> Zylinska 2014, p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>24</sup> Other proponents of this position include Jairus Victor Grove, Jonathan Franzen and Paul King-smorth.

<sup>25</sup> Glossing Bendell 2020.



While such fatalism is obviously self-defeating and self-fulfilling, its problem in relation to Adorno is that the sickness of the individual diagnosed is one symptomatic of being embedded in *the relations of* late capitalism. Drawing on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the sickness of the prototypical bourgeois individual and its conflict-neutered ego is its wholly practical, obedient, 'sacrifice of the present moment to the future'.<sup>26</sup> In regard to climate change caused by CO2 emissions and biodiversity loss, for which scientific forecasts demanding urgent action go back at least to the 1960s,<sup>27</sup> what is remarkable is that this socio-relational sacrifice (labour, consumption) is continually made even as the possibility of the future recedes from view. Ethics must instead widen its scope to include political institutions and socioeconomic relations, or as Rahel Jaeggi puts it, 'the forms of life in which the action of the individual is embedded'.<sup>28</sup> Ethics thereby necessitates historically critiquing the socio-cultural mentalities which rationalise and naturalise the current political and economic order.

Ethics also necessitates reapproaching that initial ontological relationship with Nature that had, by 1951, become so damaged for Adorno and others. Whereas Odysseus had used 'deception, cunning, rationality', and Prometheus employed trickery and violence in stealing fire from Zeus – in each case, involving a dialectic between reason or man (active, cunning) and nature (passive, hostile) – I propose we follow another road of the early modern period, one entirely if understandably missing from Adorno and Horkheimer's survey of bourgeois society. That of Spinoza, whose two major works, the *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670, hereafter TTP) and the *Ethics* (1677), engage in a running battle over the meaning, understanding and value of Nature against theologians, ambitious preachers, repressive monarchs and the wider forces that seek to perpetuate public ignorance and contempt for the natural world in order to shore up their regimes. While Spinoza's remarks will usually come either in the defence of his substance monism (*Ethics*) or in defending the freedom to philosophise (TTP), taken together, they offer a powerful corrective to misanthropic views which surrender or misunderstand political agency as a matter of individual behaviour or technocratic/ technological paternalism in the Anthropocene.

### The Problem of Anthropocentrism

Since 2010, at the behest of the socialist government of Bolivia, the Secretary-General of the United Nations has published *Harmony with Nature*, a series of annual reports that take a holistic view of attempting to

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<sup>26</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer 2002, p.40.

<sup>27</sup> We will consider two examples in the final section on temporality.

<sup>28</sup> Jaeggi 2005, p. 68.

transform our relationship with nature, from one of utility and exploitation to one of living harmoniously. Whereas most international-level discussions of climate change focus on how to reduce harmful emissions and pollution, these reports call for a more ambitious transformation at the level of ethics and education. As its first report argues, 'Education is critical if people are to be motivated and informed to take the necessary actions to mend the damage already incurred and avoid further damage to the Earth and its ecosystem'.<sup>29</sup> Such an education would necessitate a change in mentality 'rooted in respect for Nature and the interdependence of humankind and the Earth'.<sup>30</sup> This mission has continued until the present. As the President of the General Assembly of the UN states in its most recent 2020 report, we must collectively realise 'a paradigm shift from a human-centric society to an Earth-centred global ecosystem'.<sup>31</sup>

In its second report of 2011, we find the figure of Spinoza invoked as an anomalous early modern who challenges historical anthropocentrism, indicating what it calls 'the emergence of the environmental movement'.<sup>32</sup> While Spinoza's work is left unpacked, it's presented in the wider context of challenges to anthropocentrism, and of philosophies which value nature and that recognise human beings as parts of it. While slight on Spinoza, the Reports outline their intellectual debt to deep ecologist Arne Naess in envisioning a 'new economics' that serves nature, abandons a 'domination paradigm' and recognises 'that every living thing, animal and plant, has an equal right to live or flourish'.<sup>33</sup> Over the 1970s-90s, Naess wrote several important essays arguing Spinoza's use to environmentalism. In particular, Naess's analysis hinged on the *Ethics*, pulling together formulations like the startling equivocation 'God or Nature' (*deus sive natura*) or Spinoza's rejection of human nature being a 'dominion within a dominion' as theoretical resources to establishing a sustainable, loving human relationship with Nature.<sup>34</sup> Naess' effort proceeds through two steps:

First, *ontological*: in the *Ethics*, nature is presented as immanent, complete, and equivalent to God (per his reading of *deus sive natura*),

29 UN General Assembly, *Harmony with Nature* 2010, p. 10. Reports hereafter cited *HwN*.

30 *HwN* 2016, p. 3. I am indebted to Moa de Lucia Dahlbeck for making the connection between the Reports and Spinoza (2019, ch1).

31 *HwN* 2020, p. 2.

32 *HwN* 2011, pp. 6-7.

33 *HwN* 2013, pp. 5, 12.

34 From Spinoza 1985, Preface to Part III, and Part IV, respectively, in *Ethics* (hereafter *E*). Citations of *Ethics* follow standard convention: part is represented by Roman numerals I-V; proposition by p, followed by Arabic numerals; d for demonstration; s for scholium; pref for preface; l for lemma. Citations of *Theological-Political Treatise* (hereafter TTP) and *Political Treatise* (TP) indicate chapter then paragraph numbers (Spinoza 2016). Citations of the Letters (*Epistles* = *Ep.*) indicate their number in Spinoza 1985 and 2016.

in that its being is constituted by the activity of its particular modes. In contrast to the early modern mechanistic view of Nature as passive, inert, made for human mastery, instead the 'Spinozan *identification* ... of God with Nature means reinvesting Nature with perfection, value, and holiness'.<sup>35</sup>

Second, *ethical*: the equivocation *deus sive natura* surely entails an intellectual love of nature as we might an intellectual love of God. '*Amor intellectualis Dei* implies active loving concern for all living beings'.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, rational activity in the *Ethics* involves compassion for all living beings and their 'intrinsic value'. The rational is therefore the ecological.

On a straightforwardly metaphysical level, to proceed from one to two seems possible: if human beings have no privileged position in nature, taken from the perspective of nature as a whole, then why should human beings have any more intrinsic worth than any other matter, be they stem cells, dogs, rivers, electricity pylons or planets? Each are, taken in themselves for Spinoza, merely composites of finite modes of the one substance, perceived through the attribute of extension and understood through the attribute of thought. Zylinska's formulation earlier drew on Jane Bennett, a reader of Spinoza whose 'vital materialism' radically explores this kind of possibility, imputing a kind of agency to all nonhuman bodies as well as redefining human agency as involving a plethora of non-human influences, a 'confederate agency of many striving macro or microactants'.<sup>37</sup> This approach, often called new materialism, has been rightly critiqued by Andreas Malm as rendering the concept of agency and intentionality meaningless, diminishing our capacity to recognise the true (human, capitalist) causes of climate change while also, in my view, anthropomorphising nonhuman life.<sup>38</sup>

Yet perspectives like this also involve some theoretical three card monte in their approach to Spinoza. As Genevieve Lloyd and Karen Houle have demonstrated, this kind of reading overlooks the obvious anthropocentrism elsewhere in the *Ethics* where Spinoza argues that human beings have a right to use animals 'at our pleasure, and treat them as is most convenient for us'.<sup>39</sup> For Spinoza, any restrictions on slaughtering animals are founded on 'empty superstition and unmanly compassion', because they involve a category error in confusing animal natures and emotions with human nature and emotions.<sup>40</sup> As our natures

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35 Naess 2005, p. 383.

36 Naess 2008, p. 239.

37 Bennett 2010, p. 23.

38 Malm 2018, pp. 81-82.

39 Lloyd 1980, pp. 295-297; Houle 1997.

40 EIVp37s1

are essentially different, animals share little in common with us. While Spinoza says that the self-contentment and blessedness of the wise might involve the company of green plants and use of animals, it is human friendship and rational association that makes up the collective he champions. Hasana Sharp summarises the problem well when she writes that Spinoza is 'generally not viewed as a friend to [21<sup>st</sup>-century] environmental ethics'.<sup>41</sup>

A more substantial problem, and one that jeopardises even the theoretical foundations of the *Harmony with Nature* reports earlier, is that Spinoza presents Nature in Part I of the *Ethics* as having no special moral regard for the welfare of human beings over any other things; yet the anthropology of Parts III and IV of *Ethics* are clear in outlining an anthropocentric ethics and politics which identifies the conditions for human blessedness and power, through a collective way of life led by reason. For Lloyd and De Jonge, this anthropocentrism invalidates any attempt at a humanization of the non-human world; there is no valid metaphysical basis for a metaphysics of non-human care.<sup>42</sup> There are a number of possible counter-defences: Naess' reply to Lloyd with a new argument that human self-preservation is enhanced by 'generosity, fortitude, and love' to value nature, or that, if Spinoza were alive now amid unprecedented climate change, he would have abandoned his anthropocentric moral theory.<sup>43</sup> But in each, the argument either begs the question or relies on anachronistic grounds. A third option is possible that involves neither abandoning anthropocentrism in politics and ethics (something Spinoza would consider impossible) nor aspiring that all human beings should rise to a lofty, excellent height of serenity of mind whose probability Spinoza discounts.

In another passage where Spinoza argues we should elevate human welfare above animals, Spinoza dismisses the '*melancholici*' (misanthropes) who claim to despise human behaviour and instead choose the company of beasts and solitude in a life 'uncultivated and wild'.<sup>44</sup> This appearance of the *melancholics* is interesting, not just in terms of Spinoza's own project but that of Adorno's 'melancholy science' earlier. It reflects how Spinoza's ethics is concerned with a way of life defined by human power and joyous self-contentment, through the development and teaching of our rational powers with other human beings. It implies a shared exuberance and luxuriation in spaces of collective possibility with friends and strangers. Throughout the *Ethics* and the TTP, Spinoza

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<sup>41</sup> Sharp 2017, p. 159; Lloyd agrees: 1980, p. 294. Cf. Sharp 2011, p. 194.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 295; De Jonge 2004, p. 145.

<sup>43</sup> Naess 1980, p. 315; this second position is attributed (unjustly, I think) by Dahlbeck to Sharp (2019, p. 150).

<sup>44</sup> EIVp35s.

renounces the theologians and others who would denigrate either Nature as imperfect or human nature as flawed.

As Moa de Lucia Dahlbeck argues, such instances of anthropocentrism would mean that we cannot use Spinoza for 'an entirely naturalistic and non-anthropocentric ontological understanding of value and moral theory'.<sup>45</sup> In a careful argument regarding the applicability in international law of 'terrestrial'-wide legislation like that called for in the *Harmony With Nature* or in the work of Bruno Latour, she argues a 'curiously pragmatic' position that the state's laws cannot and should not prescribe a non-anthropocentric relationship with Nature.<sup>46</sup> Human beings are by nature governed by irrational and self-serving passions, and successful laws must be adapted to the cognitively-weakened *ingenium* (mentality) of the people. Therefore, for Dahlbeck, a 'true' or 'adequate' law in terms of Spinoza's anthropocentric psychological and moral theory is one that sets few restrictions on our behaviour and relies on indirect incentives. Hence 'laws cannot prescribe what our relationship to nature should be', she writes, 'rather, they should recognise our anthropocentrism and guide us towards affective relationships among subjects where this care for nature can then arise'.<sup>47</sup>

While based on reasonable grounds of interpretation, the argument itself reflects a wider crisis of liberal political thought in responding to the problem of climate change, in which nation-states, where they have not already *de facto* ceded their executive power or sovereignty to non-elected financial bodies, are loathe to set any restrictions on behaviour, instead presenting the debate as a matter of voluntary choice and technological innovation which indirectly allows fossil capitalism to continue unimpeded. The appeal to a pessimistic anthropology – in this case, the irrational *ingenium*, or the wider fatalism of the misanthropic position – perpetuates the problem. In Dahlbeck's case, the argument is also out-of-step with a sea change in most global citizens' attitudes to the urgency of transforming economies and restricting carbon emissions *now*. It also, curiously, does not go as far as Spinoza himself in outlining what the statesman should do. While the wise statesman's laws (and in the TTP, Spinoza has the prophet Moses in mind) should reflect the shared mentality of the people, they should not either pander or reinforce harmful prejudice. For a shared mentality is never fixed but dynamic and constantly moulded, empowered by living according to reason or disempowered by living under the rule of fear.

But the wider Spinoza and environmental ethics debate is highly instructive. What our interlocutors have unexpectedly ended up agreeing

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<sup>45</sup> Dahlbeck 2019, p. 159.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 170-174.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 173.

on is the problem of anthropocentrism for environmental ethics. With Naess, Bennett, and a lesser extent Sharp, the issue is addressed by using ontology to outmanoeuvre the veil of anthropocentrism. But this only a problem insofar as anthropocentrism is conceived pessimistically as something inherently rapacious, destructive, aggressive and irrational. Such a misanthropic perspective can be overturned if we accept that collective self-preservation, in the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, necessitates transforming our relationship with a profoundly damaged natural world, so that we as human beings can regenerate biodiversity and mitigate worsening climate change and pollution through rapid and immediate cessation in fossil fuel activity. In other words, that we reclaim human survival (not to speak of self-contentment or blessedness) in terms of regard and protection for the natural world upon which human survival depends. And, with the ethical imperative that as rates of extinction and human and nonhuman habitat loss accelerates, as they will over the next few decades, that we act and react neither with the tragic mentality of the misanthropes, nor with the cunning mentality of Prometheus, by means of geoengineering *tekhne* and financial trickery.

### **This Capital Material**

Screeds against the Anthropocene usually agree in vilifying one early modern as the founding father of a war against the natural world. 'Descartes provided a general philosophy of the irrelevance of ethics to the relationship between man and nature', thunders the second *Harmony with Nature* report, inferring that Cartesian mind-body dualism and the mechanistic view of animals implies a disregard for Nature.<sup>48</sup> Such accounts often quote the *Discourse on Method*, in which Descartes speculates on the aspiration to 'make ourselves, as it were, lords and masters of nature', in order to increase human survival.<sup>49</sup> It is curious that Descartes becomes recast as an establishment villain at a time when the *New Science* sought to democratise human knowledge against the prevailing status quo of, on the one, mediocre and contradictory Scholasticism, underpinned only by the authority of the universities, and on the other, a scriptural literalism that united Reformers and Counter-Reformers in the immolation of freethinkers and persecution of advocates of Copernican science. In any case, Descartes simply reflected contemporary social and Christian attitudes. We can look back to Genesis 1:28, particularly the 1611 King James Version, for one of the most concise outlines of an anthropocentric, domineering viewpoint:

and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over

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48 *HwN* 2011, p. 6. Other proponents include Jason Moore, Claire Colebrook, Bruno Latour, back to Val Plumwood and Carolyn Merchant.

49 Descartes 1985, pp. 142-143.

the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth<sup>50</sup>

While some like Lynn White Jr. have argued that this Providence-based outlook rationalised and justified a coming plunder of the natural world that would coincide with the rise of the New Science, the opposite took place.<sup>51</sup> What the work of Copernicus and Galileo subsequently had done was decentre *Anthropos* in decentring the Earth's place in the solar system, while the achievements of the microscope, telescope and the maritime compass brought Europeans into contact with new worlds that made their own vastly smaller. This process is at work in Sir Francis Bacon, an English natural philosopher and statesman whose influence spans not just over Descartes, Spinoza, Hobbes and Locke but the wider development of English imperialism. In the *New Organon* (1620), Bacon repeatedly invoke the necessity of dominating nature and of extending the 'empire of the human race itself over the nature of things'.<sup>52</sup> For Bacon, this involves establishing new scientific institutions and experimental methods that would sweep aside a 'respect for antiquity' that restrained human judgement like 'the effect of a spell'.<sup>53</sup> For Bacon, the 'secrets of nature' are not freely given but best yielded under the 'harassments' (an alternative translation is 'torture') of experiments.<sup>54</sup>

In a perceptive commentary, Hadot places Bacon at the centre of a Promethean tradition in European thought which seeks to transform, unveil and reveal its secrets using 'violence, constraint, and even torture'.<sup>55</sup> In contrast stands the Orphic, of veneration and protection of a deified Nature that Hadot associates with Goethe (and Goethe with Spinoza). Indeed, Bacon is unusual for his open celebration of Prometheus, who represents a Christianised 'State of Man' and anthropocentric right to domination:

man seems to be the thing in which the whole world centres, with respect to final causes; so that if he were away, all other things would stray and fluctuate ... Thus the revolutions, places, and periods, of the celestial bodies, serve him for distinguishing times and seasons ...; the winds sail our ships, drive our mills, and move our machines; and the vegetables and animals of all kinds either afford us matter for houses and habitations, clothing, food, physic.<sup>56</sup>

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50 Bible 2008.

51 White Jr. 1967; for a critique, see Harrison 1999.

52 Bacon 2000, p. 100.

53 Ibid., 175.

54 Ibid., 81; cf. Hadot 2006, p. 93.

55 Ibid.

56 Bacon 1884, p. 395.



While Bacon's Prometheanism shared conventional Christian providence in important ways, it also outstripped it. By the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, Joseph Glanvill extended Bacon's claim to 'the *Empire of Man over Nature*', while Richard Eburne mobilised the same providence-domination nexus to justify Caribbean slave plantations.<sup>57</sup> William Petty, secretary to Thomas Hobbes in his youth, was a decisive figure in establishing the discipline of political economy, principally through his work cataloguing viciously expropriated property in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century English colonisation of Ireland. He extended this concept to labour discipline. '*People* are therefore in truth the chiefest, most fundamental, and pretious [sic] commodity', he writes, 'out of which may be derived all sorts of Manufactures, Navigation, Riches, Conquests and solid Dominion'.<sup>58</sup> This raw and idle '*capital material*' as Petty tellingly calls it has been committed by God to the 'Supreme Authority; in whose prudence and disposition it is, to improve, manage, and fashion it to more or less advantage'. In each instance, it is not merely that Nature (or idle humanity) is presented as something passive and inert, it is also that the right human disposition to what becomes *naturalised* is an antagonistic (if purportedly self-defensive) mentality of domination, conquest and violence.

Between 1661 and 1663, the pioneering English chemist Robert Boyle engaged in a fascinating, indirect correspondence with Spinoza, characterised by mutual misunderstanding. Boyle, immensely influenced by Bacon, had aimed to demonstrate the new mechanical or 'corpuscular' philosophy, using experiments that he believed demonstrated the chemical conversion of one substance into another. Spinoza disagreed, and conducted his own experiments to demonstrate that what had taken place was merely a physical transformation in the same substance. This complex exchange is fascinating in its underlying premises regarding Nature. For Boyle, knowledge of nature was yielded through empirical observation and experimentation (a road from Bacon to Newton to modern empirical science); for Spinoza, most experiments were misguided and superfluous. 'No one will ever be able to 'confirm' this by Chemical experiments, nor by any others', he writes, 'but only by [rational] demonstration and computations'.<sup>59</sup> The problem with Boyle's inherently-anthropocentric approach is that it only regards Nature in relation to human sense perception or needs, and therefore cannot 'explain Nature as it is in itself'.

Yet the encounter left a lasting impact on each. For Boyle, writing on attitudes to Nature later, there were two sources of its inappropriate

57 Glanvill, *Scepsis Scientifica* (1665); Eburne, *A Plaine Path-way to Plantations* (1624), in Harrison 1999, pp. 98, 101.

58 [Petty] 1680, p. 289. Adorno and Horkheimer: 'The seafarer Odysseus outwits the natural deities as the civilized traveler was later to swindle savages' (2002, p. 39). Both passages should be read alongside the account of primitive accumulation in Marx, *Capital Volume I*.

59 *Ep.6*.

reverence. The first belonged to nameless ‘*Atheists*’ who because they ‘ascribe so much to *Nature*, that they think it needless to have Recourse to a *Deity*, for the giving an Account of the *Phaenomena* of the Universe’. There was only one figure Boyle had in mind.<sup>60</sup> The second is a debilitating respect among the common people, ‘that the veneration, wherewith Men are imbued for what they call *Nature*, has been a discouraging impediment to the Empire of Man over the inferior Creatures of God’.<sup>61</sup> It is unclear whether these inferior creatures refer to other animals, or other humans.

At the root of the divergence between Spinoza and that of Bacon, Descartes, Boyle and Hobbes is a profound shift in humanity’s relationship with Nature, from one of disenchanted mastery or paternal stewardship to one of participation and intellectual veneration. In the TTP, Spinoza insists that true philosophers strive to understand things as they are, according to the order of Nature; accordingly, ‘they are concerned, not that nature should obey them, but that they should obey nature’.<sup>62</sup> Yet obeying Nature necessitates not reducing it to standards of human morality or purpose. In an important passage in the TTP, repeated near-verbatim in the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza emphasises this *distance* and *intellectual regard* between Nature and human nature:

Nature is not constrained by the laws of human reason, which aim only at man’s true advantage and preservation. It is governed by infinite other laws, which look to the eternal order of the whole of nature, of which man is only a small part. ... So when anything in nature seems to us ridiculous, absurd, or evil, that’s because we know things only in part, and for the most part are ignorant of the order and coherence of the whole of nature<sup>63</sup>

On one level, this helps clarify the apparent problem of anthropocentrism earlier: human reason is founded on our own advantage and self-preservation; even if we can regard the laws of Nature as they are in themselves, we cannot overcome our embodied, human condition (nor should we wish to).<sup>64</sup> Yet it also revels in humanity’s participation in Nature as what the *Ethics* will call *natura naturata* – the totality of all finite beings which collectively and immanently constitute the ‘universal power

60 Royal Society archives contain two unpublished pages by Boyle (1670s-80s), “Notes for a paper against Spinoza”, denouncing his critique of miracles.

61 Boyle 1996, pp. 3, 15.

62 TTP 6.34

63 TTP 16.10-11; cf. TP 2.8. I am indebted to Antonio Salgado Borge for highlighting this passage.

64 Cf. EIVp37s2.

of the whole of nature'.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, one of the most subversive challenges of Spinoza's critique of existing ecclesiastical authority, particularly in Chapter 6 on miracles, is the shift in epistemology implied, that God's decrees, commands and providence must be understood as nothing but 'the fixed and immutable order of nature'.<sup>66</sup> The *Ethics* is clear in insisting that human beings are no 'dominion within a dominion' – subtly overturning the language of Genesis and its readers – and the text is replete with a re-visioning of human beings as finite modes of one substance, a totality that proceeds from the most miniscule part up to 'the face of the whole universe'.<sup>67</sup>

In an insightful commentary of the 'physical digression' of EIIp13s, in which this remarkable re-visioning appears, biophysicist and philosopher Henri Atlan has argued that the text provides a 'protobiological theory' of the individual as a 'psychophysical' compound or union of body and mind.<sup>68</sup> This anticipates a now-modern biological understanding of human life, in which living and knowing are products of a 'self-organization' of unconscious, deterministic and non-living parts (e.g. 'mechanical', carbon composition). What Atlan carefully insists is that determinism does not imply what Spinoza's critical contemporaries called 'fatalism'; that an ethics of freedom and knowing is made *more possible* through the recognition of our responsibility for acting *and not acting*. Yet Atlan leaves the social and political consequences of this startling reconceptualization of Nature unpacked.

For what these instances reflect is a criticism throughout Spinoza's mature philosophical and project against the devaluation of nature *and* of human nature. In Part 3 of *Ethics*, where Spinoza decries considering human beings in nature as a dominion within a dominion, he writes that prevailing accounts of the human affects mistakenly view human beings as disturbing the order of nature.<sup>69</sup> Thus such accounts often curse, mourn or laugh at human "vices" instead of rightly understanding human activity within the 'common power of nature', and that human actions and appetites might be approached with the conceptual rigor and naturalistic consistency as geometric 'lines, planes, and bodies'. So too with any attempt to consider Nature itself as imperfect. In a letter to Johannes Hudde, Spinoza writes that 'whatever involves necessary existence cannot have in it any imperfection, but must express pure perfection'.<sup>70</sup>

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65 EIp29s; TTP 16.3.

66 TTP 6.5; cf. 3.7-3.9.

67 Ep.64; cf. 'the whole of Nature', EIIp13I7s.

68 Atlan 2018, pp. 70-75, my translations.

69 EIIIpref.

70 Ep.35.

In disregarding nature as understood as the dynamic, extended totality of God's being, it is implied that God is by definition 'limited and deficient'.<sup>71</sup> It takes a *falsely instrumental perspective*: it judges the perfection or imperfection of a given thing not solely by its nature or power, but to the extent 'they please or offend men's senses, or because they are of use to, are incompatible with, human nature'.<sup>72</sup> The problem with cursing human nature, or viewing nature as either imperfect or necessitating 'harassments' from the colonial emissaries of the 'Empire of Man' [sic], is that each engenders prejudices that become organised by ambitious seekers of authority over the common people into superstitions and phantasmagoria of political domination.

### Collegial Anthropocentrism

Spinoza did not see Boyle's treatise, written in 1666 but published in 1685, but the Appendix to *Ethics* Part I proceeds with an excoriating critique of providence-grounded and domination-based understandings of God, and of Nature, that underpinned Bacon and Boyle's approaches. While out of necessity of its geometric method, the *Ethics* lacks an Introduction, the Appendix should be read not as a coda but as Part I's concealed entrance, through which the reader is stripped of the prejudices that inhibit understanding its radical substance monism. It subtly provides a solution for the gap between ontological and ethical notions of purposeful ecological human activity that troubled us earlier.

Spinoza begins with an anthropological account of human prejudice. The mistaken but universally-arising illusion of acting in terms of ends, and to see the world in terms of final causes and divine providence, arises from the passive pursuit of our appetites – the 'eyes for seeing, teeth for chewing, plants and animals for food' whose natural causes we do not consider. Spinoza adds that because humans come into conflict through the pursuit of these appetites, and because they lacked understanding of one another, they were compelled to 'turn toward themselves, and reflect on the ends by which they are usually determined to do such things; so they necessarily judge the temperament [*ingenium*] of other men from their own temperament'.<sup>73</sup> This same delusion is then applied to God, conceived anthropomorphically as a father-ruler, through this same application of *ingenium*. 'So it has happened that each of them has thought up from his own temperament different ways of worshipping God might love them above all the rest', and 'direct the whole of Nature according to the needs of their blind desire and insatiable greed'. In this way, an anthropological tendency to prejudice becomes the source of anthropocentric superstition.

.....  
<sup>71</sup> Ep.36. Cf. Elp11s; Elp17s.

<sup>72</sup> Elapp.

<sup>73</sup> Elapp.

This early, instrumentalist and self-serving understanding of *ingenium* is complemented by later appearances in the *Ethics*. In discussing ambition (the 'striving to bring it about that everyone should approve his love and hate', another pertinent affect of the Anthropocene), Spinoza adds that 'each of us, by his nature, wants the others to live according to his temperament'.<sup>74</sup> In the TTP however, Spinoza sets out the argument that this *ingenium* is inalienable. 'If it were as easy to command men's minds as it is their tongues, every ruler would govern in safety and no rule would be violent', he writes. 'Everyone would live according to the mentality of the rulers'.<sup>75</sup> But the sovereign cannot have total control of people's inner *ingenium* without destabilising the state, therefore the free republic must allow permission for people to make 'their own judgment about everything according to their own mentality', and speak their minds.

This argument is complemented by others in the text which present *ingenium* as both variable, subjective, often contrary, but one's own ('each person must be allowed freedom of judgment and the power to interpret the foundations of faith according to his own mentality').<sup>76</sup> There is a certain strand of scholarship in the United States, associated with Lewis Feuer, Steven B. Smith and others, which argues that Spinoza is a proto-liberal defender of unfettered free speech. If this is so, then Spinoza will be of little use to the political problem of transforming prejudiced mentalities sketched out earlier. But something more radical takes place. For what the TTP is focused on is not a mere reinforcement of an individual subjective mentality, but an historico-political analysis of how a shared mentality can constitute but also become transformed within an organised public. This is demonstrated by the work's discussion of how prophets have historically taught persuasive lessons of justice, peace and charity foundational for societal harmony by use of the imagination. In the TTP this occurs principally in the account of the shared 'mentality' of the Hebrew people under the leadership of Moses, though later Spinoza speaks of how Jesus Christ accommodated himself to the 'mentality of the people'.<sup>77</sup> Moses' gift as a statesman was his understanding of the 'mentality and stubborn heart of his nation'; he developed historical narratives and customs later authorised in scripture that compelled the people to live according to the dictate of reason, without necessarily understanding what these dictates were.<sup>78</sup>

74 EIIIp31s; EIIIp39s.

75 TTP 20.1, 20.6.

76 TTP pref.28. Cf. TTP pref.12, pref.29, *Ep*.30.

77 TTP 4.33; cf. 4.35; 11.23.

78 TTP 3.41; cf. 4.17; 5.7; 5.27-28.

While Spinoza's Moses has some salutary qualities as a wise statesman, the historical lesson of a failed theocratic Hebrew state was intended as a warning of the dangers of allowing fears, hatred and superstitions to be whipped up by ambitious preachers and political factions. Why were the Hebrews more stubborn, xenophobic or 'stiff-necked' than others, Spinoza asks; '[s]urely nature creates individuals, not nations'? But individuals can indeed adopt shared characteristics through the influence of 'laws and customs' – what Althusser would later call the '*materiality of the very existence of ideology*' – which then lead a nation to have its particular mentality, its particular character, and its particular prejudices'.<sup>79</sup> To understand this problem, we must go back and seriously consider the TTP's aim of defending the 'freedom to philosophise', as Mogens Lærke has recently proposed.<sup>80</sup> What Spinoza has in mind is not merely keeping ecclesiastical power in check, but in conceiving of a public space in which individual mentalities are transformed, from self-seeking members of the private sphere, driven by their fear, anger and frustrated desires towards credulous superstition and 'fighting for servitude as if for salvation' under a tyrant,<sup>81</sup> to active, dissenting citizens with public, democratic values.

This occurs specifically in the TTP's account of democracy in Chapter 16. Here Spinoza presents two arguments for democracy over other political forms. *Naturalistically*, it corresponds most to the equality and freedom 'nature concedes to everyone' in the state of nature.<sup>82</sup> *Epistemically*, it involves large, representative assemblies in which 'collegial' deliberation ensures the wide and free discussion of ideas and testimonies that ensure responsible, reasonable and representative decisions are made.<sup>83</sup> These assemblies are not bound to establish total consensus, rather, they seek to mitigate disagreements so that the people 'can openly hold different and contrary opinions, and still live in harmony'.<sup>84</sup> What matters most is that democracies act in the collective interest, and act with maximal participation and public executive power. In a democracy no-one surrenders their mentality or right to the whole; rather, they act as a part in the whole, and the whole acts through the part.<sup>85</sup> While Spinoza's argument for democracy often invokes naturalism, he doesn't imply that democratic governance inevitably or often arises.

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79 TTP 17.93-94; Althusser 1997, p. 10.

80 Lærke 2021, ch1.

81 TTP pref.10.

82 TTP 16.36.

83 TTP 16.25; 20.2; 5.23; Lærke 2021, pp. 134-142; Steinberg 2010.

84 TTP 20.37.

85 TTP 16.36.

Democracy instead is a civil accomplishment, through which well-designed laws based on common consent ensure that people can collectively act freely, equally and harmoniously, no longer incapacitated by our equally human tendencies to prejudice, hatred, conflict or destructive and selfish expropriation.

In both cases, the republic becomes more powerful, as citizens participate more, increasing the range and quality of public activity, while citizens themselves become more intellectually active and robust, better capable of understanding the order of nature and the causes of their appetites and sad passive affects, and less vulnerable to superstitions or manipulation through what is today called disinformation. 'To prevent all these things, and to establish the state so that there's no place for fraud', Spinoza writes, 'to establish things so that everyone, whatever his mentality, prefers the public right to private advantage, this is the task, this is our concern'.<sup>86</sup> Yet to conclude with a programme of civic education or benevolent paternalism does not advance us far in our problem of democratic power. Because 'public right' is not merely a shared affect or mentality; public right must also be ultimately founded in the democratic public's right or power to act politically. If representative assemblies have little executive power, or if the public are excluded from political participation by non-majoritarian institutions, then democracy becomes meaningless. On one level, it leaves us passively beholden to the power of a Prometheus, or else despising our peers and inhabiting a digital silo 'uncultivated and wild'. To engage in a process of consciousness-raising – to cultivate what Hannah Arendt called an 'enlarged mentality' – necessarily involves the demand to retake political *and* economic power democratically and collegially now.<sup>87</sup>

## The Post-Anthropocene

What kinds of *ingenia* prevail in the Anthropocene?

In 2018 the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned that there was 12 years to act to prevent a climate catastrophe of over 1.5°C in warming.<sup>88</sup> The third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be judged by this warning. But as Bonneuil and Fressoz have argued, we should be deeply suspicious of an apparently recent discovery, 'awakening' or drive for atonement from global capitalists and geopolitical imperialists.<sup>89</sup> In 1956, the UN estimated that by the year 2000, based on current levels of

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<sup>86</sup>TTP 17.16.

<sup>87</sup> Arendt 1992, p. 43.

<sup>88</sup> IPCC 2018, Executive Summary

<sup>89</sup> Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016, p. 76.



fossil fuel combustion, there would be a 25% increase in atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>, compared to 19<sup>th</sup>-century levels.<sup>90</sup> Commenting on this in and other data, the 1965 President's Science Advisory Committee [PSAC] report concluded that there would be 'measurable and perhaps marked changes in climate, and will almost certainly cause significant changes in the temperature and other properties of the stratosphere'.<sup>91</sup> In a 1978 private research paper for Exxon, scientist James F. Black warned that '[p]resent thinking holds that man has a time window of five to ten years before the need for hard decisions regarding changes in energy strategies might become critical.'<sup>92</sup>

The failure of critical and decisive action to date lies not in a misanthropic view of human nature, nor does it in a lack of Promethean efforts at geo-engineering (already mooted in the 1965 Report). It lies in a failure of democracy, understood not merely as the tawdry drama of electoral displays of little executive consequence, nor as the banal performance of empty displays of civic participation that act as mere substitutes for the disappearance of working class representation in the State's deliberative assemblies and mass participation in public life. Instead, democracy as an economic-and-political mentality and praxis founded on the equality and freedom, Spinoza said, 'nature concedes to everyone'.

Despite the pressing and urgent nature of climate change, in this essay I've taken an historical approach, because historical evidence and its sometimes-agonistic relationship to collective memory, particularly that perpetuated by the powerful, has become one of the few ways of comprehending the existential threat around us. It would be tempting to say ahead of us, it would be tempting to repeat the mantras that we must act *soon* (never now). But as Andreas Malm rightly observes of the greenhouse effect, our present moment is always determined by '*the heat of this ongoing past*'.<sup>93</sup> Were human beings even to not only (if only) reduce carbon emissions over the next decade, but collectively dismantle capitalist and geopolitical-imperialist structures of power, the emissions, ocean acidification and habitat loss of the Capitalocene would still wreak havoc on our shared world.

In this sense what the Anthropocene has also produced is a crisis of temporality. Past events disrupt the present like the retribution of Zeus. Yet the present itself, alone, has captivated our imaginations, the final stage in what David Harvey presciently called three decades ago a 'time-

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90 Cf. Kaempffert 1956, p. 191.

91 PSAC 1965, pp. 121, 126-127.

92 Hall 2015, np.

93 Malm 2018, p. 11.

space compression'.<sup>94</sup> Some of the most popular scholarship on climate change is often most pessimistic. David Wallace-Wells argues that 'global warming has improbably compressed into two generations the entire story of human civilization': the first, ours, its Anthropocene destroyers, leaving the next generation to face a 'semi-mythical' (even Promethean) struggle against cascading tipping points.<sup>95</sup> Such a sense of doom makes the future unthinkable, a year zero of civilisational collapse, human extinction or global authoritarian government. And in the meantime, as William Vollmann communicates so humanely his *Carbon Ideologies*, 'gloom-and-doom handwringers like me ... were all outnumbered by ordinary practical folk for whom cheap energy and a paycheck incarnated all relevance'.<sup>96</sup>

Adorno is a fine companion in scenes of darkness. *Minima Moralia* ends with an appeal that we face the despair by contemplating all things 'from the standpoint of redemption'.<sup>97</sup> But the messianism of such a perspective (his dear Walter Benjamin invoked in the passage) necessitates the fashioning of perspectives that 'displace and estrange the world' and reveal its distortions, in a tragic mental striving to glimpse new possibilities. Indeed, faced with the crushing banality of a world in the shape of Bill Gates and Xi Jinping, caustic and mocking negativity is a needed tonic. Never forget Zeus's punishment to Prometheus for the theft of fire: Pandora's box, which when later opened by his hapless brother, Epimetheus, let out into the world the worst of all evils – empty hope.

But Adorno's optical laboratory surrenders the most enchanting lens of all. To consider nature from what Spinoza called 'the perspective of eternity' (*sub specie aeternitatis*).<sup>98</sup> Such a de-subjectified, anegoic standpoint yields a state of temporary ecstasy, a fleeting recognition of the ways in all forces act on each other, objectively, intelligibly, each small part up to the whole face of the universe. Our human bodies, indeed all living bodies, sharing a carbon nature, like that of the oil, gas and coal we once burned to meet our needs. From which, a loving intellectual regard to do everything in one's power to transform those relations that bind us to each other, so that all other human beings now and possibly hereafter – and all the living and non-living Nature upon which their lives depend – may live with greater opportunities than us for peace, security, intellectual inquiry and self-contentment. *Omnia sunt communia*.

In *Narrative After the Genome* (2021), Lara Choksey provides a wonderful survey of how the rise of genomics, DNA-mapping and the

94 Harvey 1989, p. 240.

95 Wallace-Wells 2019, pp. 29, 79.

96 Vollmann 2018, p. 7.

97 Adorno 2005, p. 247.

98 EIVp62, EVp22-p23, EVp29-p31.

shift to neoliberal capitalism and attack on organised labour of the last half-century was mirrored in contemporary fiction and popular scientific canards like Richard Dawkins' 'selfish gene'. Yet the promises of the genome have been unmet, as biologists increasingly emphasise epigenetics, in which the nature and identity of the organism is constituted by its environment and its relations with others. In our new crisis of the subject, in which neither a romanticised nor techno-modernist ecological vision of individual flourishing remains possible, what Choksey envisions is a new understanding of human life-worlds, defined by complexity, permeability and 'enduring fragility'. 'The limits of genomics are in the narratives that its practices have not been able to read', she writes, 'the ways that time does not capture consequences in advance, but proliferates chance.'<sup>99</sup>

In Spinoza, our relations and encounter with each other and with our world always contain the possibility of understanding and of the collective regeneration of democratic, egalitarian power and friendship. As parts of Nature, yet essentially distinct and different from other animals, human self-preservation, flourishing and self-contentment always remain possibilities (if, even in the sense of Adorno, sometimes "impossible" possibilities) but they require acting in the present, and approaching democracy as a critical and not merely descriptive concept. To act now means ending fossil fuel extraction now, and it means dismantling economic activity based on unsustainable levels of consumption. And it means, democratically, establishing conversations everywhere about what a new, post-capitalist, post-extractivist society might be like, and how it will fashion a new web of relations between care, education and work. To proceed from a damaged life, without relinquishing its uncertainty, fragility or impossibility, towards new acts of collective solidarity and regeneration.

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99 Choksey 2021, p. 193.

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Volume 8  
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**A Hedonist  
(and Materialist)  
Spinoza.  
A Cross-Reading**

**Maria Turchetto**

**Abstract:** The article proposes a cross-reading of two texts, one by Paolo Cristofolini (a philosopher), the other by Antonio Damasio (a neuroscientist). The two authors differ in formation but converge in interpreting Spinoza's Ethics in the sense of a hedonism strongly oriented towards sociality.

**Keywords:** Spinoza, ethics, hedonism, search for joy, social feelings

### Readable books

To the curious, and above all to lovers of intellectual pleasure, I suggest cross-reading two texts: two books written at close quarters a decade or so ago, that come from two completely different fields, but which surprisingly converge in the way they interpreted the philosophy of Baruch Spinoza.

The first one, Paolo Cristofolini's "Hedonist Spinoza"<sup>1</sup>, comes from a historian of philosophy who dedicated his life to the study of Spinoza's texts. From the very title, it explicitly suggests a Spinoza contiguous to the Epicureans, rather than one close to the Stoics, as a persistent romantic interpretation would have wanted. The second book, "Searching for Spinoza" by Antonio Damasio,<sup>2</sup> comes from a neuroscientist who considers Spinoza a "protobiologist" and who translates the categories of "The Ethics" into terms of contemporary physiology and neurobiology, using this key to expose his own biologic theory of consciousness.

I will immediately say that both books are very readable. Cristofolini's is a rare and precious text on the history of philosophy, a discipline which – at least in Italy – finds difficulties in having a good dissemination. There are abridged texts, made for the students who must at all costs pass an exam (versions that generally have the effect of diverting them forever from the subject or author treated); and then there are books made for competitions, that are more or less convincing, almost always verbose (the number of pages counts, for competitions of the humanities sector), and inevitably written only for professionals.

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1 Cristofolini 2002. Paolo Cristofolini (Arezzo 1937- Pisa 2020) was professor of History of Philosophy at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa; scholar of Descartes, Vico and Spinoza to whom he dedicated many essays and edited translations and critical editions.

2 Damasio 2003. Antonio Damasio (Lisbon 1944), neurologist, neuroscientist and psychologist, is Professor of Neurology at the College of Medicine of the University of Iowa; he has carried out important studies on the neurological bases of cognition and behavior. *Looking for Spinoza* completes the trilogy begun with *Descartes' Error* (1994) and continued with *Emotions and Consciousness* (1999), in which he proposed his neurobiological interpretation of consciousness against the background of modern philosophy.



Cristofolini intends instead to communicate to anyone interested in the great wisdom lesson offered by Spinoza, which he believes to be fully valid, even more than three centuries after its publication.<sup>3</sup> Readable but at the same time precise – exemplary in proposing and explaining the terminology – “Hedonist Spinoza”, composed of five short essays, has the rare virtue of conciseness.

Damasio’s text is also addressed to everyone and not only to professionals: it offers in a very understandable way the essential notions for following reasoning on a biological and medical level and is an example of that ability to communicate that does not sacrifice precision for clarity. In the scientific field this ability is encountered more frequently, and especially biologists and neuroscientists in recent years, have contributed with high quality popular science. In addition, Damasio’s theoretical reflection is based on his experience as a clinician and his experiments: in *Looking for Spinoza* the exposition of numerous clinical cases serves to exemplify the theoretical passages but also to make the rigorous argumentation easier to understand, with a more narrative vein – a bit like Oliver Sacks, so to speak – which makes reading very enjoyable.

### **Wisdom as a search for joy**

Spinoza’s lesson, it has been said, is a lesson in wisdom: according to Cristofolini, Spinoza’s philosophy is “the latest manifestation in the West of a sapiential ideal, where by wisdom is understood [...] the ideal synthesis between all knowledge available and the pursuit of what is good for us”.<sup>4</sup> And wisdom has joy as its purpose: joy is “movement and purpose of wise perfection.”<sup>5</sup> According to Cristofolini, that of Spinoza is in this sense “the wisest hedonism [...] that Western thought has known after that of Epicurus and before that of Diderot.”<sup>6</sup>

On the other side, Damasio reiterates that “the neurobiology of emotion and feeling tells us in suggestive terms that joy and its variants are preferable to sorrow and related affects, and more conducive to health and the creative flourishing of our beings.”<sup>7</sup> “Seeking joy by reasoned decree”<sup>8</sup> is the sophisticated way in which man pursues a goal common to all living beings, namely homeostasis – otherwise known

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<sup>3</sup>The same approach, with an even more explicit intent, is present in Cristofolini 1993 that I recommend as preparatory reading for those who want to directly address the works of Baruch Spinoza.

<sup>4</sup> Cristofolini 2002, p.71

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.9

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.11

<sup>7</sup> Damasio 2003, p.271

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

as self-preservation.<sup>9</sup> Damasio traces a sort of “tree” of the biological mechanisms responsible for this function: on the lower branches, the metabolism and elementary reflexes (such as tropisms and taxies that in some cases keep organisms away from extreme heat and cold, or that in other circumstances lead them towards light), which we share practically with all living beings; on the intermediate branches, automatic behaviours associated with pleasure and pain, such as reactions that cause approaching or moving away, in which experience has not yet come into play; at an immediately higher level, impulses and motivations – such as hunger, thirst, curiosity and exploration, play and sex<sup>10</sup> – which give rise to spontaneous behaviours modulated by experience and learning; higher up, the real emotions, which we could define spontaneous evaluations, more precisely chemical and neural modifications in response to a given situation, that predispose the central nervous system to deal with it with specific repertoires of actions; and finally, at the top of the tree, the feelings, that is the emotions brought to the level of consciousness, the translation into the language of the mind of the vital state of the organism (in this sense, according to Damasio, Spinoza affirms that “the mind is the idea of the body”).

Consciousness and thought, these superior cognitive abilities of the human, do not in any way represent, in this vision, an “ontological leap”: it is a question of a greater complexity, of a difference of degree that integrates and does not oppose the lower degrees, involved in the same vital function. There is no spirit superior to matter, therefore, since the mind emerges from biological processes and is part of it – Damasio interprets in this sense the first part of Spinoza's *Ethics*, dedicated to the relationship between mind and body. There is no superiority – if not in terms of greater complexity of brain functions – of man compared to other living beings: men “Human beings are as they are – living and equipped with appetites, emotions, and other self-preservation devices, including, including the capacity to know and to reason”<sup>11</sup> which offers wider possibilities to invent effective strategies for survival and well-being outside the stereotyped behaviours suggested by the most elementary devices. There is no “virtue” understood as the dominion of the mind over the body or of reason over instincts and desires, since “the basis of virtue is the very *conatus* to preserve one's own being, and that happiness

9 “The single word homeostasis is convenient shorthand for the ensemble of regulations and the resulting state of regulated life”, *ibid.*, p.30

10 “Spinoza lumped them together under a very apt word, *appetites*, and with great refinement used another word, *desires*, for the situation in which conscious individuals become cognizant of those *appetites*.”, *ibid.*, p.34

11 *Ibid.*, p.171

consists in a man's being able to preserve his own being"<sup>12</sup> making the best use of all the biological devices it is equipped with. Finally, there is no virtue based on fear, this negative passion heralding sadness.

### Against superstition

On this level, the convergence between the biological "translation" of the Spinozian texts proposed by Damasio and the purely philosophical reading that Cristofolini makes of them is truly remarkable. If wisdom is the search for joy, the antithesis of wisdom is superstition, which consists in "judging as good that which brings sadness, and evil that which brings joy" (Ethics, IV, 31). The fourth essay of "Hedonist Spinoza" is dedicated to superstition, and it exposes the most critical part of the Ethics. Three are the points to consider: the criticism of the doctrine of free will, the criticism of the Jewish-Christian dogma of original sin, the criticism of any kind of morality based on fear. These points are actually closely linked.

Free will is rejected, because it implies a contrast between intellect and will, between the "high" decisions of reason and the "low" impulses, in fact between mind and body. It is a direct polemic against Cartesian ethics, but at the same time, as a "truly universal thinker", Spinoza opposes "all those theories of the passions, ancient and modern, which pose the problem of their domination in terms of control."<sup>13</sup> Wisdom is not the dissociation between reason and desire but, on the contrary, "an integrity of powers"<sup>14</sup> – or in Damasio's terms, a harmony in the operation of the biological devices that we are endowed with.

The contradiction between intellect and will is also what makes the dogma of original sin unacceptable: "if the first man, too, had as much power to stand as to fall, and if he was in his right mind and with his nature unimpaired, how could it have come about that knowingly and deliberately he fell?"<sup>15</sup> In other words, if the first man had been perfect and therefore able to use his reason correctly, why would he have acted against his own preservation and in the direction of the corruption of his own nature? "So it must be admitted that it was not in the power of the first man to use reason aright, and that, like us, he was subject to passions."<sup>16</sup> The "fall" thus becomes an error due to ignorance and the story of Adam, underneath the allegories *ad captum vulgi* of the biblical narrative, reveals the very natural story "of man in contact with natural

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<sup>12</sup> Spinoza 2002, part IV, pp. 330-331

<sup>13</sup> Cristofolini 2002, p.58

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.59

<sup>15</sup> Spinoza 2002, p.684

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

phenomena, who by experience learns to know what is useful and what is harmful to him, but always in imperfect forms, and which is always subject to trespassing the borders that he should have learned to respect, with inevitable harmful consequences.”

The idea of original sin, that is, of an original guilty corruption, is the basis of a vision of the world and of life whose dominant note is fear: fear of punishment, of evil, of death. Fear belongs to our nature, but it makes us live badly. Above all, ghosts elaborated from fear – “all the paradises and all the hells of revealed religions” – which constitute the nefarious and cumbersome body of superstition, make us live badly. Spinoza therefore joins Epicurus in outlining “the search for wisdom as a path that passes through the liberation from the super-mundane fears inculcated by religion”: “the task of wisdom is to eradicate or, at least, reduce to a minimum, the fear that is the foundation of superstition [...]. Against superstitious morality the basic principle of Spinozian morality is defined: pursuing good for the sake of good and not for fear of evil.”

This path passes through knowledge: “passions” such as fear, are passive moments in our emotional life. Knowing them, that is, acquiring a “clear and distinct idea” of them, means eliminating them, because an adequate idea is incompatible with passivity. We must essentially tap into the higher level, represented by that sophisticated biological mechanism that is cognitive performance. Once again, it is not a question of “repressing” a low drive with a high feeling, but of making our “powers” collaborate in a harmonious way to live in joy. “How does one come to wise control of the passions? The answer is only one: on the opposite path to all conceptions centred on sadness. Sadness means, for the life of the individual, the diminution of his power; and for social life the ongoing, current violence of fanatical and superstitious religions against the free development of the human personality [...]. Spinoza [...] calls *torva et tristis superstitio* every punitive morality, of sacrifice and senseless maceration, which inhibits the normal pleasures of life [...]. Precisely because repressive individual morality is constantly associated with collective repression, the religious tolerance of which Spinoza is a great and historical supporter is one with the proclamation of a universal, natural, and essential right, the right to joy.”

### **Ethics and social feelings**

One point remains to be explored – and even on this the historian of philosophy and the neuroscientist fully agree. How can the search for one’s homeostasis – for one’s own conservation and well-being – overcome selfishness and establish a morality, that is, rules of behaviour aimed at other men? Here is Damasio’s answer: “how does Spinoza move from oneself to all the selves to whom virtue must apply? Spinoza makes the transition relying again on biological facts. Here is the procedure: The biological reality of self-preservation leads to

virtue because in our inalienable need to maintain ourselves we must, of necessity, help preserve other selves. If we fail to do so we perish [...] The secondary foundation of virtue then is the reality of a social structure and the presence of other living organisms in a complex system of interdependence with our own [...] The endeavor to live in a shared, peaceful agreement with others is an extension of the endeavor to preserve oneself.”<sup>17</sup> Damasio adds that the tendency to seek social agreement is embedded in biological imperatives because of the evolutionary success of populations whose brains expressed cooperative behaviours to a considerable extent and that “Spinoza would have been pleased to know” that these behaviours are embedded in the architecture of our brain, as the chapters dedicated to social emotions and feelings explain clearly and in detail.

Cristofolini comes to a very similar interpretation in the first essay of “Hedonist Spinoza”, dedicated to the fear of loneliness, where he moves by comparison of Spinoza’s position on the origin of civil and political institutions with that of Hobbes. The *metus solitudinis* is an existential and primordial condition of human life and a primary psychological mechanism from which the need for civil institutions arises. “Before Spinoza it was Hobbes who indicated fear as the primitive spring from which the formative processes of civil and political society spring. In Hobbes, it was a question of that fear of violent death from which men are caught in the primitive state of nature, which was of uncontrolled reciprocal violence”<sup>18</sup> (the famous *bellum omnium contra omnes*). But what in Hobbes is “a violent, forced passage to a rationality of submission [...] is instead in Spinoza a coherent development of human nature.”<sup>19</sup> Man is a “social animal” by nature, he desires association with other men and must pursue this through the “active affections”, therefore virtuous, of courage and generosity, which consists in the effort to help other men and to unite them to itself with a bond of friendship. The Hobbesian perspective is thus reversed: instead of a link between fear and submission to force, Spinoza proposes a link between the desire for sociality and the search for peace and civil institutions.

Pursuing the common good, building a peaceful and righteous society, advantageous for all and free from coercion is therefore one of the faces of joy, understood as the full realization of human nature.

Translated by Arbër Zaimi

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<sup>17</sup> Damasio 2003, pp.171-172

<sup>18</sup> Cristofolini 2002, p.17

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.18

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# **The Invention of Nihilism: Political Monism, Epicureanism, and Spinoza**

**Dimitris Vardoulakis**



**Abstract:** The article examines the creation of the term “nihilism” in late eighteenth century. Vardoulakis argues that the term is coined to summarize the objection against monism that it is apolitical or that it cannot account for action. This objection is well established in modernity, and it is especially directed against Spinoza. Vardoulakis recounts this history while also showing that, far from being apolitical, monism in fact has the resources for a robust political program that counters its castigation as nihilism.

**Keywords:** Nihilism, Monism, Spinoza, Bayle, Jacobi, Leo Strauss, Epicureanism

It may be largely forgotten today that the word “nihilism” was invented by Friedrich Jacobi in his public letter to Johann Gottlieb Fichte, the so-called “Green Letter” from 1799.<sup>1</sup> I hold that the reason for this forgetting is the spectacular success of its argument, namely, the rejection of any ethico-political import to monism. This position is so widely accepted that it functions as a presupposition that organizes inquiries without itself being questioned. The idea that political monism is untenable is sedimented in our thinking.<sup>2</sup>

By monism here I refer to the combination of two positions. First, there is the rejection of transcendence. This is the materialist position according to which there are no entities such as god that are qualitatively different from anything that can be understood in terms of causality. Second, reality is understood as one. Spinoza refer to that single reality invariably as substance, god, or nature. Heidegger refers to it as being. I would show later that there is a third key characteristic of Spinoza’s monism, namely, an understanding of action in terms of utility and instrumentality, which the way in which Spinoza accounts for action and politics. This third element is derived from epicureanism, as argue in *Spinoza, the Epicurean*.

It is worth reconsidering whether monism is indeed devoid of any political motive. And this means that it is worth revisiting Jacobi’s letter and its discourse. It is crucial to note from the beginning that this discourse does not confine the political to governance nor to those who are in power—and I will return in the last section to these two great traditions that dominate Western political thought for two millennia—but rather understands the political as the organized interaction between humans. Monism is supposed to be unable to account for action as

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1 For the context of the composition of the “Green Letter,” Beiser 1987.

2 If political monism is ever questioned, if it is granted that a modicum of the political is still left in monism—for, as the saying goes, “everything is political”—then this is done in order to castigate it and bewail its reactionary propensities. See Gourgouris 2020.

such. Revisiting Jacobi's letter and its context will allow us to entertain again the possibility of political monism. Such a task necessarily passes through Spinoza, who is the most notable monist of modernity and whose philosophy forms the backbone of Jacobi's letter.

Jacobi's connection to Spinoza goes back at least a decade and a half, to the infamous "pantheism controversy" that actually helps reintroduce Spinoza into the philosophical mainstream.<sup>3</sup> The earlier controversy, ranging from 1785 for four years, consists mainly of a series of letter between Jacobi and Mendelssohn concerning Lessing's philosophical beliefs. Jacobi claims in the correspondence that Lessing confesses to him, shortly before his death, that he is a Spinozist. What is still absent in the earlier controversy is the clear association of a lack of political and ethical motives in monism. Jacobi forcefully introduces this move in the letter to Fichte using the word *nihilism* to describe this predicament (*J* 519).<sup>4</sup>

Notably, Jacobi's success does not consist in determining the use of the word "nihilism" in the philosophical idiom. The common philosophical use of the term relies on Nietzsche, for whom "nihilism" means almost the opposite. For Jacobi, nihilism is the atheist attitude that understand being as material. It can be overcome by a *salto mortale*, as he says in the record of his conversation with Lessing (*J* 189), which essentially consists in the acceptance that there is something transcendent related to the divine. Conversely, nihilism for Nietzsche is the attitude—moral no less than metaphysical, but always a pathological renunciation of the world—that arises from the supposition of a transcendent beyond.<sup>5</sup> Differently put, whereas Jacobi's target is an immanent, atheist nihilism, Nietzsche's is a transcendent, theist one. Following this caveat, Jacobi's success consists in seemingly settling the issue of political monism, or, more precisely, of establishing the uncontested position that it is impossible for monism to have any political import.<sup>6</sup>

The success of Jacobi's argument may appear outlandish unless we recognize that, in reintroducing Spinoza into his contemporary philosophy, he was actually following a long polemic against Spinoza, stretching all the way to the initial reception of this work in the seventeenth century, and which consists in rejecting monism as apolitical

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3 For an excellent summary account of the reception history of Spinoza, see Moreau 1996.

4 Jacobi 1994. All references to Jacobi's work at to this volume, abbreviated as *J* and cited in-text parenthetically.

5 Baker 2018 does an excellent job in describing the Nietzschean notion nihilism as the problem of the "two worlds."

6 It is also notable that in everyday language, the word "nihilism," especially as it is used by conservative commentators, approximates Jacobi's use rather than Nietzsche's.

and immoral. This tradition is carried into the twentieth century by Leo Strauss, who introduces one important element, namely, he identifies monism with epicureanism.

I will examine first the reception of Spinoza's monism, then Jacobi's contribution, followed by Strauss's own intervention, before returning to epicureanism and to Spinoza. My aim is to contextualize and thereby challenge Jacobi's widely accepted argument that monism is apolitical. Differently put, I offer a rudimentary genealogy of political monism focusing on key moments that explain the context the precedes and succeeds Jacobi's letter.

### 1. Monism as the Denial of Reality: Bayle's Dictionary

The initial wave of reactions to Spinoza's works follows upon the publication of the *Theological Political Treatise* in 1770.<sup>7</sup> The reaction was so fiercely hostile that led to Spinoza's decision to withhold publication of his *Ethics*. The publication of the *Opera Posthuma*, in 1677 led to a second wave of reaction, culminating in various bans of his book.

In this context, a significant event takes place a decade and a half later: the publication of Pierre Bayle's entry on "Spinoza" in his *Historical and Critical Dictionary* from the late seventeenth century (1693–1696). This long entry becomes the *de facto* sources of Spinoza's thought, the substitute for his banned texts for a century and a half, until the Paulus edition of Spinoza's work is prepared in Jena in the first years of the nineteenth century. Thus, for instance, philosophers such as Hume certainly and Kant almost certainly rely exclusively on Bayle.<sup>8</sup>

Significantly, Bayle does not so much summarize the various earlier critiques of Spinoza, as synthesizes them under the banner of monism. Monism is presented as the position in the *Ethics* that there is nothing outside God, and by implication as the rejection of creation *ex nihilo*. Bayle regards Spinoza's monism as untenable because it destroys reality. If there is nothing outside God, then really nothing exists. Or, in Bayle's words, if God and nature are one and immutable, then "they [i.e. the Spinozists] would have to claim that there has not been, and there never will be, any change in the universe, and that all change, the very greatest or the very smallest, is impossible."<sup>9</sup> Monism is, in this interpretation, the loss of contingency and hence the loss of the possibility of human action, or of praxis, which is not amenable to universal laws of nature.

From this central critique advanced by Bayle, several implications follow. The most important are the following three, all explicitly rejecting

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed account of this early reception, see Israel 2010.

<sup>8</sup> On Bayle's rationalist reading of Spinoza, see Ryan 2009, esp. ch. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Bayle 1965, 327.

the possibility of the political: First, the one who comprehends divine necessity lacks any motivation for action: “A man like Spinoza would sit absolutely still if he reasoned logically. ‘If it is possible,’ he would say, ‘that such a doctrine might be established, the necessity of nature would establish it without my book. If it is not possible, all of my writings would accomplish nothing.’”<sup>10</sup> There is no politics in monism—there is no desire to act, there is only passivity. Another way to put this, is to say that there is no freedom in monism.

Second, political history becomes an absurdity. As Bayle puts it in his unique rhetoric, “in Spinoza’s system all those who say, ‘The Germans have killed ten thousand Turks,’ speak incorrectly and falsely unless they mean, ‘God modified into Germans has killed God modified into ten thousand Turks,’ and the same with all the phrases by which what men do to one another are expressed.”<sup>11</sup> Monism eradicates any basis for differentiation. Thus, there is no history because there is no vicissitude, since ultimately everything refers back to the single, immutable substance. Note the rhetoric of this example, which was to become famous: the eradication of history is also the eradication of the difference between believers and unbelievers. Consequently, monism is not simply a tenuous metaphysical credo, but moreover a deeply, even offensively atheist one.

And, third, monist indifference entails the eradication of singularity: “even when a man is burned alive, no change happens to him.”<sup>12</sup> Whatever we suffer as well as the effects of our sufferings are ultimately irrelevant from the perspective of the one, all-encompassing substance. All this amounts to saying that Spinoza’s monism eradicates particularity and hence politics. Again, this is a loaded example: in Spinozistic monism, there is no heaven or hell, there is no redemption or damnation.

This critique of monism due to the purported lack of historical specificity becomes the dominant trope of the critique of Spinoza, who is viewed as the arch-villain espousing this position. This critique culminates in Hegel’s reading of Spinoza as denying reality to anything but the substance: “In Spinoza’s system, God alone is. What is other than God is a being that at once is not a being, and so is show. Thus it cannot be said that Spinozism is atheism. It is rather the exact contrary of atheism, namely, *acosmism*. The world is no true being, there is no world. Rather, God and God alone is.”<sup>13</sup> This rejection of monism on the

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<sup>10</sup> Bayle 1965, 314.

<sup>11</sup> Bayle 1965, 312.

<sup>12</sup> Bayle 1965, 328.

<sup>13</sup> Hegel 2008, 49. The influence of this idea can be seen by noting that Emmanuel Levinas (1999, 69–70) repeats the accusation of *acosmism* even though Levinas’s own reading of Spinoza consists in accusing him of constructing a crude sense of immanence, which is the very opposite of *acosmism*. I discuss Levinas’s critique of Spinoza in Vardoulakis 2020 section 3 of Chapter 5.

grounds that it entails that only the substance is real and the rest is just “show”—a view referred to as “acosmism”—is articulated more famously as Hegel’s accusation that Spinoza lacks determinate negation. History is robbed of its dialectical grounding. The human is trapped within that omniscient and omnipresent substance.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. Jacobi’s “Nihilism”: The Rejection of Political Monism

There are numerous reasons why Hegel’s re-appropriation of the old critique of monism as effecting the loss of reality and hence of the ethical and the political has attracted so much attention, especially in France during the 1960s, culminating in Pierre Macherey’s exhaustive analysis of Hegel’s critique of Spinoza.<sup>15</sup> Hegel’s critique becomes at that point the substitute of dialectics and by implication historical materialism. Radical leftists such as Macherey, who belongs to the Althusser circle, are increasingly dissatisfied with historical dialectics, and they seek refuge instead in the non-dialectical philosophy of Spinoza. Disguised behind Macherey’s highly technical analysis of Hegel’s critique of Spinoza is the question whether a radical politics requires the dialectics or not.<sup>16</sup>

This game of allusion is of no relevance to the early nineteenth century, and hence no particular attention is paid to Hegel’s interpretation that is merely following a well-trodden path. But there is an additional, and more significant reason why in the early nineteenth century Hegel’s interpretation held no much traction. Jacobi’s public letter to Fichte, which eventually lead to Fichte’s resignation from the University of Jena, is much more famous and it is making essentially the same point, tapping into the same tradition of interpreting Spinoza as the exemplary monist who loses reality, and along with it any grounding for ethics and politics. Jacobi gives the name “nihilism” to monism as loss of reality.<sup>17</sup>

Jacobi’s position can be gleaned from one sentence contained toward the end of the letter: “God is, and is *outside me, a living, self-subsisting being*, or I am God. There is no third” (J 524). This proposition sets up a disjunction. The first option is that there is a God that is outside me. This option rejects the possibility of monism. If, according to monism, there is nothing outside God, and if, according to Spinoza, this also means that there is nothing outside nature, then to posit a God that is “outside me,” as the letter puts it, is nothing but another way of

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14 For a forceful refutation of the accusation that Spinoza espouses acosmism, see Melamed 2010 and 2011.

15 Macherey 2011.

16 Some of the intellectual history of the revival of Spinoza in France is provided in the excellent Peden 2014.

17 In what follows, I will refrain from the highly complex textual history of the “Green Letter,” partly because this will distract from the main objective of this paper, and partly because Di Giovanni does an excellent job on this topic in his edition of Jacobi’s *Main Philosophical Writings*.

saying that monism is untenable. This position would have been familiar to anyone who had a scant knowledge of the reception of Spinoza's work, especially since Bayle's critique. Recall, for instance, Bayle's example of the Turks and the Germans. According to monism, holds Bayle, Germans killing Turks is essentially nothing other than God killing himself. This is meant to be an *ad absurdum* refutation of monism by suggesting that the alternative is true, namely, that God is indeed "outside me." This would have been perfectly familiar to readers of the letter. Not so with the disjunct. Why is the alternative to monism that "I am God"? To answer this question will lead us to the heart of what Jacobi means by "nihilism."

The letter starts in a laudatory tone. Jacobi says at the very beginning that "I consider you [i.e., Fichte] the true Messiah" of philosophy (J 501). It soon becomes clear, however, that this praise paves the way to argue that all "philosophy pure through and through" (J 501), or all true philosophy, is a form of Spinozism, which is to say, a form of monism. What characterizes Fichte's philosophy is a "transfiguration of materialism into idealism" that is "realized through Spinoza"—what Jacobi also calls an "inverted Spinozism" (J 502).<sup>18</sup> Spinoza argues that there is nothing outside the substance. In this sense, nothing new can be created that is not part of the substance. There is no creation out of nothing or creation *ex nihilo*. Fichte, following in the footsteps of Kant's transcendental idealism, shows that all condition of knowledge is the I or the self in its encounter with the not-I.<sup>19</sup>

We see at this point why Jacobi says that the highest or purest philosopher will have to admit that "I am God." In Fichte's "inverted Spinozism," it is no longer the substance but the I itself outside of which nothing exists. Differently put, Jacobi understands monism as series of equivalences, which in Spinoza are [substance = rejection of creation *ex nihilo* = God] whereas in Fichte the I is added on [substance = rejection of creation *ex nihilo* = God = I]. If in Spinoza the substance is the condition of knowledge, as we learn in Part I of the *Ethics*, the condition of all knowledge for Fichte is the I—and, notes Jacobi, they are both monists.

This "inverted Spinozism" that adds the "I" to the series of equivalences that characterize monism contains more than a hint that the philosopher is a megalomaniac madman. This hint is taken up by Jacobi's friend, the novelist Jean Paul, who creates a character that goes insane as a result of being Fichte's student. Jean Paul invents a new noun to describe this specific condition of madness, *der Doppelgänger*.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>The argument that all philosophy results in Spinozism or monism is already prefigured in the pantheism controversy. The new element here is to introduce transcendental idealism into this position.

<sup>19</sup> See Fichte 1982.

<sup>20</sup> I explain in detail the invention of the work "doppelgänger" in details in the first chapter Vardoulakis 2010.

Jacobi also invents a name to describe this condition. That name is “nihilism” (J 519). In the Green Letter, nihilism signifies that “nothing is outside the I” (J 509), that is, the I becomes an equivalent of the substance outside of which nothing exists, according to monism. This turn to the I rejects creation *ex nihilo* and hence is created “from nothing, to nothing, for nothing, into nothing” (J 508). Or, differently put, Jacobi suggests that the nothing itself becomes substantialized and incorporated within the I.

This nihilism has two interrelated effects. The first is the determination of monism as naturalism, where naturalism signifies the predominance of scientific knowledge. Jacobi’s critique of Fichte’s “inverted Spinozism” essentially consists in saying that as soon as the nothing becomes part of the substance and the I, then monism both bases itself on epistemology (cf. J 512) and this knowledge needs to include the nothing and is thereby contaminated by, it becomes a knowledge of nothing, an empty vessel of nothingness. Or, in Jacobi’s memorable turn of phrase, it is “a materialism without matter” (J 502). And, in a longer passage: “pure reason only takes hold of itself. The philosophizing of pure reason must therefore be a chemical process through which everything outside reason is changed into nothing, and reason alone is left, a spirit so pure that, in its purity, it cannot itself *be*, but can only produce everything” (J 507). This circularity or *petitio principii* of transcendental idealism as monism results in nothing.

From the beginning of the letter and throughout, Jacobi repeatedly contrasts this “knowledge of nothing” that he proclaims to be the highest possible philosophical achievement, to his own “consciousness of non-knowing” (J 499). Jacobi very soon and very clearly states the result of the difference: nihilism, “insofar as it [is] ... simply scientific or purely rational” leads to atheism since it “abolishes natural faith” (J 500). If there is nothing outside the I as the precondition of natural knowledge in monism, then indeed there is no God outside the I and it is not too much of a stretch to concur with Jacobi, given his premises, that the I becomes God—albeit a God reigning over nothing. In the disjunctive manner in which his argument is presented, Jacobi’s alternative is clear: “I understand by ‘the true’ something which is *prior to* and *outside* knowledge; that which first gives a value to knowledge and to *the faculty* of knowledge, *to reason*” (J 513). Or to state the disjunction more starkly, it is either the atheism of nihilism or the religiosity of any kind of thought that rejects monism.

The second effect follows on from the first, according to Jacobi, and it consists in the impossibility of any possible ethico-political import for monism. “But the *good*—what is that?—I have no answer, if there is no God” (J 515). Unless there is no outside, unless there are moral principles that are independent of the knowing-I, or, which is the same for Jacobi, unless monism is refuted, there is no morality. Strauss, as we will see



shortly, will take this a step further arguing that monism is not simply a lack of morality but moreover resolutely immoral because it consists in an instrumental reasoning that is egotistical and self-serving.

The rejection of the political import of monism is best developed in an important appendix to the letter, in which Jacobi seeks to demonstrate that monism entails the erasure of freedom. Monism turns the human into “a machine, an automaton” because the human is presented as acting “deeds blindly and of necessity, in sequence according to the *necessary* order of cause and effect, i.e. the mechanics of nature” (J 532 and 531). Jacobi follows a long tradition of understanding the free will as the separation of spirit from body and the superiority of the former over the latter.<sup>21</sup> By contrast, monism posits the identity of mind and body, since they are both included in the all-encompassing substance. Thus, they are both subject to the same laws of nature. But, proclaims Jacobi, “the union of the necessity of nature and freedom in one and the same being is an absolutely incomprehensible fact; a *miracle* and a *mystery* comparable to creation” (J 530). Creation *ex nihilo*, a decisive property of the divine in the Judeo-Christian tradition that understands God as the “creator,” is rejected by monism as a mystery and a miracle that is incomprehensible. Jacobi’s rejection of political monism seeks to turn the table on monism. It is the rejection of creation *ex nihilo* that is “a miracle and a mystery” since then it would be totally impossible to conceive of human freedom.

We see then a clear trajectory from the initial reaction to Spinoza as it is crystalized in Bayle’s vehement rejection of monism to Jacobi’s adaptation of the same argumentative strategies to reject transcendental idealism as an “inverted Spinozism.” Monism is nihilism, which essentially means there is nothing ethical or political about it. A monist is trapped inside their own mind, a self-proclaimed God incapable of giving an account of their own deeds. Monism is nihilism because political monism is bankrupt.

### 3. Leo Strauss: Monism as Epicureanism

Leo Strauss’s significant contribution in this construction of nihilism as apolitical through the reception history of Spinoza consists in illustrating the epicurean provenance of Spinoza’s monism. The predominant idea of this reception history from Bayle onward remains unaltered, namely, that Spinozan metaphysics is incommensurable with any politics, but it is both historicized and accentuated through the recognition of the epicurean influence.

Monism as epicureanism is the pivot of Strauss’s book *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft: Untersuchungen zu Spinozas Theologisch-politischem Traktat* from 1930. The influence of Strauss’s interpretation of the *Theological Political*

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21 See Vardoulakis 2016.

*Treatise* extends beyond his book, translated as *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* in 1965.<sup>22</sup> His seminars on Spinoza at Chicago University influenced generations of scholars.<sup>23</sup> In both the book and the classroom, his attack on Spinoza's monism is ferocious and it is not inconceivable that it played a role in dissuading subsequent scholars from further exploring Spinoza's epicureanism.

The entire argument of *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* is framed as a mortal combat between two metaphysical ideas, namely, the epicurean insistence that nothing comes out of nothing and the opposing idea that God can create something *ex nihilo*, which Strauss links to Jewish metaphysics and Biblical faith.<sup>24</sup> The central metaphysical conflict that organizes Strauss' discourse is profoundly indebted to Jacobi, on whose epistemology Strauss had completed his doctorate under Ernst Cassirer's supervision in 1922.

There is only one reference to Jacobi in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, but it is telling: "on the basis of unbelieving science one could not but arrive at Spinoza's results." These results include monism. Strauss continues: "But would this basis itself thus be justified?" In other words, can the mind on its own accord, without support in something external that is not rational, and which thereby inscribes a certain faith in the process, justify this presupposition? Strauss does not explicitly answer this question, saying instead that it "was Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi who posed this question, and by so doing lifted the interpretation of Spinoza—or what amounts to the same thing, the critique of Spinoza—on to its proper plane" (CR 204). Strauss follows Jacobi, whose answer to the above question, as we saw, is a categorical "no."

The two main themes of the Green Letter—namely, the atheism of monism and its lack of ethical and political import—are central to Strauss's account. He insists that Spinoza and other epicurean atheists have failed to show that reason succeeds in undermining faith. "The orthodox premise [i.e., belief in God, revelation etc.] cannot be refuted by experience or by recourse to the principle of contradiction" (CR 29). He expands: "The last word and the ultimate justification of Spinoza's critique is the atheism from intellectual probity. ... Yet this claim ... can not deceive one about the fact that its basis is an act of will, of belief, and, being based on belief, is fatal to any philosophy" (CR 30). Strauss's pivotal argument in his engagement with epicureanism is that monism relies, on the one hand, on the capacity of reason to refute revelation through a complete scientific explanation, but, on the other, epicureanism cannot do so without surreptitiously introducing belief in the capacity

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<sup>22</sup> Strauss 1997. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as CR.

<sup>23</sup> Strauss 1959.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Vatter 2004, esp. 180–82.

of reason. This is *mutatis mutandi* Jacobi's argument, which amounts to saying that the naturalism entailed by monism rests on a *petitio principii*.

Strauss draws a further conclusion: "Philosophy, the quest for evident and necessary knowledge, rests itself on an unevident decision, on an act of the will, just as faith does. Hence the antagonism between Spinoza and Judaism, between unbelief and belief, is ultimately not theoretical but moral" (CR 29). Despite appearances, the monism that Strauss ascribes to Spinoza is not primarily "theoretical," that is, confined to epistemology, but "moral," that is, it pertains to an attitude toward the world. Thus, monism as an attitude is first atheist—and hence "moral"—and secondarily theoretical. Strauss defines this practical or "moral" attitude of monism as epicurean:

Epicurus' criticism of religion is one source, and the most important one, of seventeenth century criticism of religion. Epicurus is conscious of his motive. It is expressly the root first of his criticism of religion and then of his science. Were we not in awe of active and effectual gods, science, according to Epicurus' expressed opinion, would be in essential part superfluous. For Epicurus, the basic aim of knowledge is to achieve a condition of *eudaimonia*, by means of reasoning. This *eudaimonia* does not consist in the scientific investigation itself; science is no more than the indispensable means of attaining the condition. (CR 38)

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This original "moral" motive is peace of mind or tranquility, what Strauss designates as *eudaimonia*. That's the end of the epicurean moral attitude.<sup>25</sup> Scientific knowledge is only the means toward that end. Atheism precedes theoretical knowledge—which is a mark of epicureanism, according to Strauss.

Strauss's next move consists in a frontal assault on this moral attitude of monism. Strauss does so through the qualitative distinction between two senses of morality, the monist/ epicurean one and the religious/ Jewish one. He asserts a "moral antagonism" due to "the Jewish designation of the unbeliever as Epicurean" because "from every point of view Epicureanism may be said to be the classic form of the critique of religion and the basic stratum of the tradition of the critique of religion" (CR 29). The morality that is opposed to a metaphysics of revelation is simultaneously heretical and epicurean. It is worth remembering that the word "heretical" is the same as the word "epicurean" in Hebrew.<sup>26</sup> Strauss wastes no time in castigating the epicurean morality: "Epicureanism can lead only to a *mercenary morality*

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<sup>25</sup> The most usual word to describe the telos of epicurean morality is *ataraxia*, translated into Latin as *beatitudo*. See Vardoulakis 2020, Introduction.

<sup>26</sup> On this, see Montag 2012.

whereas traditional Jewish morality is not mercenary. ... Epicureanism is so radically mercenary that it conceives of its theoretical doctrines as the means for liberating the mind from the terrors of religious fear, of the fear of death, and of natural necessity" (CR 29, emphasis added). Epicurean morality is "mercenary" in the sense that it does not rely on principles but on the calculation of utility. It is mercenary because it consists in the instrumental pursuit of happiness.

Strauss repeatedly returns to the question of miracles because Spinoza's refutation of miracles is the key to the choice between faith and the "mercenary morality" of epicurean monism that rejects creation *ex nihilo*. Strauss thus stages the "moral antagonism" between epicureanism and religion in terms of miracles: "With the doctrine of the eternity of the world the denial of miracles is given, with the doctrine of the creation of the world the possibility of miracles is admitted" (CR 151). There is either the rejection of creation *ex nihilo*, or creation and, if the latter, then there are miracles, because "creation of the world is the pre-condition of miracles" (CR 186). The rhetoric of the disjunction in presenting the core issue is reminiscent of Jacobi. Where Strauss himself stands at this binary is clear as he repeats three times that the epicurean rejection of miracles is an attitude that consists in merely laughing them off (CR 29, 144, and 146).

Let me summarize Strauss's critique thus far. First, Strauss holds that Spinoza cannot assert monism as the fact that there is nothing outside our rational capacity to know, unless a belief heterogeneous to reason is presupposed. Second, Strauss discerns a moral attitude as being more primary than any theoretical contemplation in Spinoza's monism. And, third, Strauss designates this monism as epicurean and disparages its "mercenary morality." The antagonism against the mercenary epicurean morality is insufficient unless Strauss denies it any effectivity whatsoever.

Strauss makes this fourth move by forcefully rejecting any *political motives* to monism. Spinoza's monism is, to use Strauss's words, "not at all political" (CR 227). Strauss justifies this position by indicating that the political motives associated with the tradition of the critique of religion are Averroist and Machiavellian, which are "traditions of very different origin" than epicureanism (CR 48–49). This seems like a weak argument given Strauss grants that "after the rediscovery of Epicurean philosophy by the humanists" these traditions merged (CR 48). Nonetheless, according to Strauss, it is only epicureanism that is monist. Hence, the strong point here is to deny monism any political import.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>The rejection of the political import of epicureanism on the grounds that tranquillity of the mind is not political is a constant theme that runs throughout Strauss's works. For instance, see Strauss 1953, 109–113; Strauss 2011, 67–69; Strauss 1967.

So, where can the political impulse of the *Theological Political Treatise* be located if not in Spinoza's epicureanism? The only possibility of a Spinozan politics in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* arises in Chapter 9 where Strauss argues for the importance of the statesman as the wise man separated from the multitude (CR 229).<sup>28</sup> Strauss can arrive at this position by separating monism from the anti-authoritarianism of epicureanism—of which more in the next section. The result of this separation in Strauss's interpretation is that the authority of the statesman disavows the epicurean "mercenary morality" of Spinoza's monism and atheism. It is as if—to put it differently—Spinoza saves himself from epicureanism by developing a politics that is thoroughly incompatible with his monist metaphysics and the "mercenary morality" they entail. Spinoza saves himself from his own epicureanism, that is, from his apolitical monism.

There is something highly paradoxical—I almost said unbelievable—in this move whereby Spinoza recuperates himself through a spectacular self-amputation. It is surely one thing to say that a philosopher cannot be entirely consistent over a whole oeuvre, and another to impute such a schizophrenic split between Spinoza's ethics—his "mercenary morality"—and politics. It is doubtful that Strauss would have been able to make such a radical claim had he not been following in the footsteps of two and a half centuries of reception of Spinoza's monism as apolitical. Following the line of interpretation popularized by Bayle and enhanced by Jacobi, Strauss simply has to append a politics that is distinct from Spinoza's metaphysics, a gesture that complements the earlier reception history that could not account for Spinoza's obvious interest in politics in the two treatises.

One of the most radical shifts in the reception of Spinoza since 1968 is arguably the insight that his metaphysics and his politics are inseparable. After the work of Gilles Deleuze, we know that Spinoza is critical of the metaphysical hierarchies characterizing Platonism and the political hierarchies that are modelled on them.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps even more significant is the work of Antonio Negri, who has systematically argued that a metaphysics of necessity implies a politics and that it is a political decision to remain oblivious to this fact.<sup>30</sup> Balibar also starts from the premise that Spinoza's politics and metaphysics are inextricable, even though his reading is different from Negri's.<sup>31</sup> Finally, perhaps the most

28 This idea from the 1930 book is further developed a couple of decades later in Strauss 1988. This is the essay in which Strauss develops his thesis about an esoteric and an exoteric reading of the *Theological Political Treatise*. Of the many critiques of Strauss's 1988, the most detailed one is perhaps Levene 2000.

29 Deleuze, 1992; see also Deleuze 1990.

30 See, for instance, Negri 2006, and specifically for Spinoza, Negri 1991.

31 Balibar 1998.

thorough examination of the way in which naturalism is political is Hasana Sharp's *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*. Sharp argues that the concept of nature is not divorced from history and politics because "being natural [in Spinoza] means being situated within a particular time, place, and causal nexus."<sup>32</sup>

Nonetheless, Strauss's claim may still appear convincing if he is correct that Spinoza is an epicurean monist and if epicureanism lacks a politics.<sup>33</sup> We have to turn to the monism peculiar to epicureanism to truly assess whether a political monism is a viable possibility.

#### 4. Epicurean Monism

A key feature of Epicurus's epistemology is the rejection of the separation of theory and praxis that we find in Plato and Aristotle. As a result, practical knowledge, or what Epicurus calls *phronesis*, emerges as the primary form of knowledge. Let us start with Epicurus's letter to Herodotus, his most detailed account of a theory of knowledge, to see why Epicurus places so much emphasis on *phronesis*.

Epicurus begins by stressing that there are two sources of knowledge, either directly through perceptions, or indirectly through words that communicate experiences. But for this empirical conception of knowledge to be possible, Epicurus asserts that it is required to assume regularity in nature. He summarizes this position by saying that "nothing is created out of nothing" (X.38).<sup>34</sup> The rejection of the possibility of creation *ex nihilo* was prevalent amongst the "physiologists" who tried to explain nature in material terms.<sup>35</sup> For instance, the same view was held by Democritus, the atomist who greatly influenced Epicurus (IX.44). Significantly, Epicurus recognizes that the rejection of creation *ex nihilo* can be expressed in terms of totality: "There is nothing outside the totality [*τὸ πᾶν*]*—nothing that can enter the totality in order to change it*" (X.39). The recognition that the rejection of creation *ex nihilo* entails a totality outside of which nothing exists essentially asserts that knowledge is possible on condition that there are no divine interventions that change the laws of nature.<sup>36</sup> Or, knowledge presupposes a complete or unchanging totality. This is the position that centuries later will be given the name monism.

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<sup>32</sup> Sharp 2011, 8.

<sup>33</sup> It is a common accusation that epicureanism lacks a politics. For a critique of this view, see Brown 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Diogenes Laertius 1931. References in-text by book number followed by paragraph number.

<sup>35</sup> Aristotle 1933, 986b.

<sup>36</sup> This is the reason, as Frederick Lange (1866) explains in his monumental history of materialism, that the idea of the rejection of the creation *ex nihilo* played such a decisive role in the development of modern empiricism. This is also why epicureanism is important for the scientific revolution (see Wilson 2008).



The presupposition of a totality for knowledge to be possible leads to the primacy of practical judgment. As soon as we impute a totality of being, a complete theoretical knowledge of that totality appears impossible. Thus, knowledge always begins with a practical purpose. Epicurus designates this end as tranquility. The word that he uses at the beginning of the letter to Herodotus is *γαληνισμός*, which is more commonly expressed in his writings as *ἀταραξία* (*ataraxia*) and its cognates signifying the serenity and blessedness characteristic of the wise person who has phronesis (see e.g. X.83, 85, and 124–125). The letter to Menoeceus says that such a disposition makes the wise person live “like a god amongst humans” (X.135). *Ataraxia* means literally the absence or negation of “anxiety” (*τάραχος*)—and fear of death is singled out as the most detrimental anxiety in our pursuit of blessedness (X.81–82).

As we know from Aristotle’s Book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which is the most detailed discussion of phronesis from ancient Greek philosophy, phronesis signifies a balanced relation between thought and emotion in the process of making judgments about how to act.<sup>37</sup> The mutual support between phronesis and *ataraxia* is clear. *Ataraxia* is the state of mind and body that results from the balanced exercise of thought and emotion characteristic of phronesis (X.132 and X.140). Differently put, *ataraxia* is the state in which we are *free from* the dominance of emotions such as fear of death that curtail our calculative capacity, *as well as* free from the illusion that the mind or the spirit can predominate over the body.

The epicurean refusal of the separation of mind and body combines the materialism of monism—no transcendence and no creation—with the inseparability of thought and emotion characteristic of phronesis. The interconnection of thought and emotion entails that no body is created out of nothing and that no mind contains a transcendent quality. When the body dies, the mind dies with it—there is no immortal soul or spirit that outlives the body. This means that—as Epicurus puts in a phrase that was perhaps his best known in antiquity—“death ... is nothing to us” (X.126). The reason is that, while we are alive, we should concern ourselves with living—as Spinoza puts it in Proposition 67 of Part IV of the *Ethics*, one is free when their activity “is a meditation on life”—and when we are dead, we feel nothing and hence death can no longer affect us. The fear of death, then, is a state in which our knowledge starts from false premises and as such derails our judgment by overwhelming our emotions. In other words, it derails the balance of thought and emotion in phronesis that *ataraxia* requires.

A significant effect of this metaphysics that refuses a separation of mind and body is a stringent anti-authoritarianism that is best known from the opening of Lucretius *On the Nature of Things*. In this epic poem

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37 Aristotle 2003, 1139b.



written to popularize Epicurus's ideas in Rome, Lucretius rails against what he calls *religio* because it generates fear to manipulate people—to ideologically trap them, as we might say today. Or, in the vocabulary used above: *religio* prevents people from exercising their phronesis. In the context of the poem, it is clear that the word *religio* does not mean simply religion, but signifies more broadly both religious and political authority. Lucretius's example is the sacrifice of Iphigeneia.<sup>38</sup> Her father, Agamemnon, does not sacrifice her only because he is ill-advised about the reasons why the winds won't carry his Greek fleet to Troy. In addition, he draws his justification for the sacrifice from the matrix of beliefs and practices instituted as religion. Thus, in *religio*, as the example of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia demonstrates, collude those who derive their authority through theological and through political means. This “evil” of *religio*, as Lucretius puts it, indicates a vehement anti-authoritarianism that characterizes the entire epicurean school.<sup>39</sup>

Let me recap at this point. Bayle and Jacobi are correct to stress that epistemology and metaphysics are connected. But the practical element of epicurean monism contradicts the separation of theory and praxis suggested by Bayle's analysis, and the inseparability of mind and body casts doubt on Jacobi's conception of an “inverted Spinozism” that emanates from an I that conceives of itself as God. Monism is not nihilism. Further, monism can indeed be understood in epicurean terms—Strauss is right. But if Strauss is correct that Spinoza is an epicurean, then Spinoza's politics cannot rely on a purported wise statesman that rises above the masses, as this accords with the figure of *religio* that epicureanism so fiercely opposes.

### 5. The Politics of Phronesis: The Calculation of Utility

And yet, even if these criticisms ultimately miss the mark about monism, the nature of a monist politics is still unclear. How is epicurean monism political? The anti-authoritarian impulse is certainly pivotal, but as I discuss this in *Spinoza, the Epicurean* in detail, I will turn here instead to something that forms its basis, namely, the nature of practical knowledge that we find in epicurean monism. Political monism is inseparable from our capacity to form practical judgments, or to exercise phronesis.

Differently put, political monism signals a tradition of thinking the political in different terms than the two paradigms that predominate in the Occident from antiquity to early modernity. These are the understanding of the political in terms of the statesman or lawgiver, and, second, the paradigm that concentrates on the three forms of government—monarchy, aristocracy and democracy. As opposed to this

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<sup>38</sup> Lucretius 1924, 1.80 ff.

<sup>39</sup> Lucretius 1924, 1.110

double tradition that dominates political discourse in the West, political monism emphasizes the importance of judgment. We find this alternative approach to the political arising within the epicurean school.

Let me quote a long, significant passage from Epicurus's letter to Menoeceus that plays a crucial role in understanding the importance of phronesis for epicureanism. This passage should be seen in the context of the accusation that epicureanism is a sensualist philosophy that privileges pleasure over everything else, which is to say that it is hedonistic and non-political:

When we say, then, that pleasure is the end of action [ἡδονὴν τέλος ὑπάρχειν], we do not mean the pleasure of the prodigal or the pleasures of sensuality, as we are understood to do by some through ignorance, prejudice, or willful misrepresentation. By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of anxiety in the soul [τὸ μῆτε ἀλγεῖν κατὰ σῶμα μῆτε ταραττεσθαι κατὰ ψυχὴν]. It is not an unbroken succession of drinking bouts and of revelry, not sexual love, not the enjoyment of the fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table, which produce a pleasant life [τὸν ἡδὺν γεννᾶ βίον]: it is sober reasoning [νήφων λογισμὸς] that calculates the causes of every judgment to do or avoid doing something [τὰς αἰτίας ἐξερευνῶν πάσης αἰρέσεως καὶ φυγῆς], and banishing those beliefs through which the greatest tumults take possession of the soul. *Of all this the principle and the greatest good is phronesis* [τούτων δὲ πάντων ἀρχὴ καὶ μέγιστον ἀγαθὸν φρόνησις]. Wherefore phronesis is more significant [τιμιώτερον] even than philosophy; *from it spring all the other virtues* [ἐξ ἧς αἱ λοιπαὶ πεφύκασιν ἀρεταί], for it teaches that we cannot lead a life of pleasure that is not also a life of phronesis, honour, and justice; nor lead a life of phronesis, honour, and justice that is not also a life of pleasure. For the virtues have grown into one with a pleasant life, and a pleasant life is inseparable from them. (X.131–32, emphasis added)

This is not simply a passage that blatantly contradicts the interpretation of epicureanism as hedonistic. Also, the emphasis on phronesis introduces a number of ideas that are vital to political monism.

The first point to note is the startling predicate to pleasure that Epicurus provides, namely “sober reasoning.” The word for reasoning here is *logismos* (λογισμός), not *logos*. If *logos* is what has come to be understood as Reason, *logismos* in the masculine or *to logistikon* in the neuter is instrumental reasoning—as, for instance, Aristotle makes clear in the opening of Book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which is concerned with Aristotle’s own analysis of phronesis. The life of pleasure requires this kind of instrumental thinking that identifies means and ends.

A distinctive feature of this instrumental reasoning is that it posits the inseparability of mind and body—it is, as Epicurus says, the absence of pain in the body and of anxiety in the soul. This accords with the epicurean insistence that the end of action is the absence of anxiety, or *ataraxia*, as I pointed out in the previous section. It is instructive to turn to Spinoza briefly. This instrumental reasoning coupled with the inseparability of mind and body is translated into the following proposition in Spinoza: “From the guidance of reason, we pursue [*ex rationis ductu sequemur*] the greater of two goods or the lesser of two evils” (*E IV*, P65). Spinoza immediately explains that this calculative or instrumental reasoning is not confined to the present but also includes the future in its considerations (*E IV*, P66). In fact, Spinoza is not unique in expressing the combination of instrumentality with the inseparability of mind and body this way—the same articulation is often employed by other philosophers from the seventeenth century working in the materialist tradition, for instance, Hobbes often uses an almost identical formulation. In any case, the point I am making is that this *logismos* is not abstract or theoretical reasoning but rather a practical kind of reasoning that entrains ends and considers action while posing the inseparability of mind and body.

When Epicurus writes that this practical reasoning is more significant than philosophy, he is pointing out to a reversal of Aristotle's position. According to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, theoretical reason leads to wisdom and virtue more than practical reason. I cannot digress here into a detailed discussion of Aristotle's conception of phronesis.<sup>40</sup> I only want to remind us of the point that Heidegger makes when discussing the priority of theoretical over practical reason in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, namely, that this is the starting point of metaphysics and onto-theology.<sup>41</sup> We see Epicurus here evading that move. For him, the primary kind of knowledge is practical and it is articulated in the form of judgments that are calculations about utility—that is, calculations that combine ratiocination with considerations about the body.

Epicurus designates this practical, instrumental judgment as phronesis. This is the standard Greek name for this practical knowledge that he describes here. What is unusual in Epicurus is that he makes phronesis the precondition of both the good and of virtue. Such a move is indicative of his materialism—of the fact that knowledge is not abstract but rather articulated through its effects and how it impacts on the corporeal. It is the fact that—to use a contemporary formulation—knowledge is power. The suggestion that the good and virtue require phronesis is a bold one. Phronesis is a judgment that arises

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40 I provide a juxtaposition of Aristotle and Epicurus's conceptions of phronesis in Vardoulakis 2020, ch. 1.

41 Heidegger 1997.

by assessing—or, calculating—one's given circumstances. Because it is a response to materiality, phronesis can never aspire to a thorough formalization. Materiality is contingent and hence unthematizable. Any calculation in relation to materiality is faced with its ineluctable unpredictability. Spinoza is fully cognizant of this point and he embraces its positive potential. The notion of error is constitutive of his understanding of politics and of history.<sup>42</sup> The seeming deficiency of phronesis—the fact that it has not steadfast rules to prove its validity or that it has to think “without banisters”—is turned into a positive heuristic principle by Spinoza.

There is one final insight in this passage from Epicurus. I am referring to the circularity between phronesis and pleasure. The corresponding idea in Spinoza is that there are two paths to virtue and the good, the path of the emotions relying on obedience and the path of reason relying on the calculation of utility. Etienne Balibar is the only reader of Spinoza who has noticed this feature in a series of writings, starting with his exceptional analysis of Proposition 37 of Part IV of the *Ethics* and culminating in his conception of transindividuality.<sup>43</sup> In other words, the theory of judgment as phronesis or as the calculation of utility that we find in Spinoza is not a judgment that relies on the individual, as is the case in Kant, but is rather a kind of calculation of one's utility that includes the other in its calculations. Or, differently put, it is a calculation of reciprocal utility. As I argue in *Spinoza, the Epicurean*, the entire politics of Spinoza's *Theological Political Treatise* revolves around the question of how this reciprocal calculation can be successful.

We see then that far from being non-political, epicurean monism is deeply political. Political monism sidesteps the two great traditions of politics that come from antiquity. The center of its politics is not sovereignty or authority, nor is it a notion of politics that relies on the distinction between different constitutional regime—democracy, aristocracy and monarchy. Rather, political monism pivots around a notion of practical judgment as the calculation of communal utility. This notion of practical judgment is completely elided in the critiques of Spinoza that discern in his monism a renunciation of the political.

## 6. Spinoza's Political Monism: The Use of Miracles

It is time to turn to Spinoza, the figure Bayle, Jacobi and Strauss single out to conduct their polemic against political monism. I will refer to Chapter 6 of the *Theological Political Treatise*, his major political work published in his lifetime, because it is the only chapter of the *Treatise*

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<sup>42</sup> See Vardoulakis 2020, ch. 2.

<sup>43</sup> Balibar 2020.

that argues explicitly from monism.<sup>44</sup> This is the chapter in which Spinoza discusses miracles. Usually Spinoza's argument is presented as a critique of miracles—that's how Strauss, for instance, understands it. I argue it is better to view his argument as asking the question as to how miracles retain a certain utility, despite the fact that monism entails that miracles do not exist. Spinoza is not primarily concerned with whether miracles exist—in fact, he settles that question early on in the chapter. Rather, he is concerned with the *political* implications miracles, and in particular with the kind of practical judgments that pertain to their utility. Spinoza is concerned with the nexus of miracles with phronesis, thereby demonstrating a practical use of political monism.

The argument of Chapter 6 of Spinoza's *Theological Political Treatise* may appear deceptively simple, presented in the disjunction: either monism or miracles—which is not dissimilar from the disjunction that organizes Jacobi and Leo Strauss's readings. Monism is not simply an ontological doctrine for Spinoza. Rather, following Epicurus's insight, monism is *both* an epistemological matter—the fact that knowledge needs to presuppose a totality outside of which nothing exists—and also a political one—namely, the primacy of practical judgment. Thus monism in Spinoza has a distinctly political flavor, one that is inseparable from the calculation of utility.

Spinoza argues for monism in two distinct ways, as is often the case in the *Theological Political Treatise*, namely, using arguments from reason and from Scriptural authority. The latter relies on *Ecclesiastes* that states, in Spinoza's paraphrase, that "Nature observes a fixed and immutable order, that God has been the same throughout all ages that are known or unknown to us, that the laws of Nature are so perfect and fruitful that nothing can be added or taken away from them" (84). It is worth remembering, as Warren Montag reminds us, that this doctrine from *Ecclesiastes* was regarded as heretical in the Jewish tradition.<sup>45</sup> The inference from the monism of *Ecclesiastes* Spinoza draws is that "miracles seem something strange only because of human ignorance [*propter hominum ignorantiam*]" (84/95).<sup>46</sup> If the laws of God and nature are the same and immutable, then miracles, understood as the suspension of natural law, are impossible.

The same argument is pursued also from reason. Thus, Spinoza argues that if the laws of nature are the same as divine laws, then it

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44 Spinoza 2001, hereafter cited parenthetically by page number. I have often altered the translation. For the Latin, I have used Spinoza 1924). The *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* is contained in Volume 3. All page references to this edition follow after the English edition.

45 Montag 2012.

46 Strauss draws attention to *Ecclesiastes*, according to which "nature maintains a fixed and unalterable order, and hence that there are no miracles" to construct the either/or that structures his book: either epicurean monism or miracles and religion (CR 121)

is impossible to interrupt them: “if anyone were to maintain that God performs some act contrary to the laws of Nature, he would at the same time have to maintain that God acts contrary to his own nature—of which nothing could be more absurd [*quo nihil absurdius*]” (72/83). Spinoza further holds that to imagine that God made nature imperfect so that he has to intervene to rectify its faults “I consider to be utterly divorced from reason [*ratione alienissimum*]” (73/83). And, echoing the Appendix to Part I of the *Ethics*, he says that “recourse to the will of God ... is no more than a ridiculous way of avowing one’s ignorance [*ridiculus sane modus ignorantiam profitendi*]” (75/86). Spinoza then infers that to suppose that there is creation *ex nihilo* making miracles possible, far from proving God’s existence, is on the contrary a way to “cast doubt on it.” (74). Differently put, the perfection of nature on the grounds that its laws are the same as divine law cannot accommodate any events such as miracles that suggest a rupture in the completeness of God or nature.

Why does Spinoza need two proofs of monism, both from Scripture and from reason? In a move typical of the *Theological Political Treatise*, Spinoza explains that it is a matter of expediency, since the exercise of reason that enables a conception of God as one and of his natural laws as immutable is a rare capacity for humans. And even if one has such a capacity, still natural or divine laws “are not all known to us [*omnes nobis notae non sint*]” (73/83). Not only are they not known—more precisely, they are not knowable. Spinoza is repeating here Epicurus’s idea of the totality (*to pan*) as it is related to phronesis (X.39). From monism we impute that knowledge is impossible unless we presuppose a totality. This is the epicurean principle of the immutability of natural laws that was so crucial for empiricism and the rise of scientific inquiry in modernity.<sup>47</sup> It is essentially the argument against miracles: if we do not take the laws of nature as perfect but as mutable or as subject to the whims of meddling gods, then no knowledge can be derived as anything we know can change all of a sudden and without warning through miracles. From monism we also need to impute that not everything is knowable. We cannot know everything that happens, nor all the laws of nature—as this would lift our knowledge on a par to the knowledge of God, which is impossible. This is why for Epicurus the primary form of knowledge is phronesis, which is the source of all virtue, as we saw earlier. This is why, in other words, monism requires the primacy of practical knowledge or the calculation of utility. We discover, then, in Chapter 6 of the *Theological Political Treatise* an epicurean strategy of arguing.

It is instructive to notice how the entire Chapter 6 is framed. The multitude (*vulgus*) understands an occurrence to be a miracle when its causes are unknown. Significantly, Spinoza does not stop here. As we saw above, ultimately no one has the capacity to know all causes that

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<sup>47</sup> See Lange 1866; and Wilson 200).



operate within the totality. This entails the primacy of the practical for monism. Consistent with this position, Spinoza adds: "particularly if such an event is to their profit or advantage [*lucrum aut commodum*]" (71/81). The human inability to know all causes necessitates a comportment to the world that consists in starting with the calculation of utility. From this practical perspective, miracles are useful in helping the multitude to form practical judgments. Miracles are not divine interventions that subvert natural laws but rather ancillaries to the exercise of pronesis.

In Chapter 6 Spinoza's aim is not a critique of miracles as such, but rather to show the ways in which miracles can be used for practical purposes; with how miracles can mobilize motives for actions that rely on the calculation of utility, that is, in epicurean terms, on pronesis. This point is reinforced at the end of the chapter. I quote the entire passage that summarizes the discussion about monism and the rejection of miracles:

Consequently [*quare*], on these matters [i.e., on miracles] everyone is entitled to hold whatever view he feels will better bring him with sincere heart to the worship of God and to religion. This was also the opinion of Josephus, for towards the end of Book 2 of his *Antiquities*, he writes as follows: "Let no one baulk at the word miracle, if men of ancient times, unsophisticated as they were, see the road to safety open up through the sea, whether revealed by God's will or of its own accord. Those men, too, who accompanied Alexander, king of Macedon, men of much more recent times, found the Pamphylian sea divide for them, offering a passage when there was no other way, it being God's will to destroy the Persian empire through him. This is admitted to be true by all who have written of Alexander's deeds. Therefore on these matters let everyone think as he will." Such are the words of Josephus, showing his attitude to belief in miracles. (85/96)

Spinoza quotes Josephus here as agreeing with him in the sense that it does not matter whether miracles really occur or not, so long as they are believed to occur in such a way as to motivate the right kind of action. It little matters if the waters parted through divine intervention to let the Jews or the Macedonians through—what matters is that the Jews and the Macedonians believed that there was a divine intervention, which motivated them to achieve their respective ends. Thus, miracles are not concerned with theoretical knowledge about God and the immutable natural laws. Rather, miracles are means that partake in the operation of the instrumental reasoning of those who perceive them as miracles. Miracles are useful to help the people think about their utility.



The invention of nihilism leads to the rejection of political monism. But if monism is positioned within its epicurean framework, not only does it *not* eradicate particularity and history, as the reception of Spinoza following Bayle, Jacobi and Strauss suggests. Rather, monism entails that knowledge does not reside in the subject's mind as it perceives external objects. As such the practical—ethical no less that political—judgments are not trapped within an interiority that denies the world; quite the opposite, judgment is discernible in the effects.

This makes monism political through and through. Thus, to refer to one of Bayle's examples I cited above, epicurean monism is not concerned with the chemical constitution of the body burned at the stake, but rather with the motivations of those who thought it prudent that such an auto-da-fé would be beneficial to the society. In other words, the question for Spinoza is not how the alive and the burnt body both refer to a common substance, but rather how the impossibility of knowing that common substance can lead to chains of reasoning that justify the exercise of capital punishment.

Further, epicurean monism is not a “mercenary morality” that rejects all political motives in the service of personal self-interest, as Strauss contends. To the contrary, epicurean monism shows that any attempt to sideline utility leads to the political affirmation of an authority that “knows better than us” and whom we therefore have to obey—which is precisely what Strauss proposes. Differently put, epicurean monism is political through and through because it provides a matrix of interrogation and critique of any authority or political power.

Central to the political monism is a shift of emphasis in how the political is understood. It is no longer reduced to governance and the statesman, nor is it a politics that relies on principles as universal values beyond dispute. Instead, it focusses on phronesis, the practical judgments that we are called to make by taking consideration of others. As practical judgments that respond to the given circumstances and hence devoid of steadfast criteria, the judgments of phronesis are contestable. This may rob them of a veneer of universality but makes them immanently democratic. Political monism, then, promotes a sense of agonistic democracy.<sup>48</sup>

So why has the idea that monism is apolitical prevailed? If Spinoza's philosophy includes an account of action through phronesis as the calculation of utility, why has the old argument that we trace back to Bayle become canonical? This is a different story that I cannot recount here in detail, but in brief I point out Martin Heidegger's critical role. His conception of being as one and unified is monist in nature,

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48 I made this argument in much more detail in Vardoulakis, 2018.

but he vehemently rejects the epicurean and Spinozist account of action, because he argues that instrumentality blocks the path to the unconcealment or truth of being. Heidegger holds that instrumentality works in the service of technology and science contributing to the enslavement of modern man. This argument entrenches the rejection of the kind of monism derived from Spinoza and the epicureans. The price that Heidegger has to pay by consummating the critique of Bayle and Jacobi is that he ultimately finds it hard to provide an account of action within his own version of monism.<sup>49</sup>

I add Heidegger to this narrative about the supposed apolitical nature of monism so as to suggest that the topic is far from irrelevant today. Any critique of instrumentality inspired by Heidegger can be analyzed in terms of the story that I have sketched above. Given the prevalence and influence of Heidegger’s argument, it is an urgent philosophical task today to revisit and review the construction of apolitical monism. Rather than a footnote in the history of ideas of the seventeenth century, the blind acceptance of an apolitical monism needs to be overcome for a renewal of the political discourse of contemporary philosophy.

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49The idea in this paragraph are a summary of my *The Ruse of Techne* (forthcoming).

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# **Spinoza and the Paradox of Constitutionalism**

**Miguel Vatter**

**Abstract:** This paper discusses the connection between the idea of constituent power and Spinoza's theory of nature as first formulated by Carl Schmitt in the context of the paradox of constitutionalism. The paper argues that Hans Kelsen also employs Spinoza in the confrontation with Schmitt and in order to address this paradox. The paper goes on to suggest a republican conception of constituent power that unites the autonomy of the law with the power of the people that is closer to Kelsen's than to Schmitt's conception of constituent power.

**Keywords:** constituent power, Schmitt, Spinoza, Kelsen, basic norm

## Introduction

The relationship between might and right, power and law, is a perennial problem since at least Plato's polemic against the Sophists over natural right (*nomos phuseos*). Law is both an expression of power, for the powerful get to make laws, and what tempers the use of power, for "a prince who can do what he wishes is crazy" (Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* I, 58, 4). The proper way to understand the relationship between power and law was also at the heart of the polemic between Hans Kelsen and Carl Schmitt. As juridical minds, both agreed that "power proves nothing in law" (Schmitt 1988:17). But they drew entirely opposed conclusions from this insight. For Kelsen it meant that what is "law" can only be determined "legally" in and through an autonomous and autopoietic legal system. For Schmitt, instead, precisely because law has no inherent relationship to power, it receives its effectivity or applicability through an authority capable of establishing "the connection of actual power with the legally highest power"; and this authority is sovereignty (Schmitt 1988: 18). Sovereignty has the task of connecting an abstract complex of norms ("jurisprudence") to a concrete complex of power ("sociology"). This task defines, for Schmitt, the field of "political theology."<sup>2</sup>

Yet, the problem with sovereignty is that, *prima facie* at least, it unites legal authority (or: the "authority" to say what is "law") with the power (and person) of the state, not with the power of the people.<sup>3</sup> It is for the sake of democracy that Kelsen sought to undermine the

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<sup>1</sup> I have presented these ideas in several talks and in the international conference "Images of Sovereignty," KU Leuven, Belgium, June 7-9, 2017. A version of these arguments has appeared in Spanish in (Vatter 2018).

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of political theology in this jurisprudential sense I refer to (Vatter 2017b) from which I draw below in my discussion of the Kelsen/Schmitt debate.

<sup>3</sup> The main counterexample would be Rousseau's conception of popular sovereignty. Yet, for Rousseau a people is constituted as such only through reference to a general law, not to a power complex. It is at least arguable that the autonomy of legal authority seems to be presupposed by Rousseau's idea of popular sovereignty. For the discussion of Rousseau and a democratic conception of constituent power see now (Colón-Ríos 2020).

distinction between state and law on which sovereignty depends. On his view, sovereignty is anti-democratic. Defining republicanism as the doctrine that the rule of law rests on the power of the people, Arendt would make the same point again: sovereignty disempowers the people and denies the autonomy of law all at once. On some readings, Schmitt was acutely aware of the democratic shortfall of his Hobbesian concept of sovereignty. That is why he argued that in a democratic age, the crucial concept capable of unifying the highest legal authority with the supreme power was that of “constituent power”.<sup>4</sup> In so doing, Schmitt appealed to the political thought of Spinoza, rather than of Hobbes. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, scholarly consensus was beginning to form around the idea that Spinoza was to be considered the first modern theorist of democracy, if not liberal democracy, as the superior form of government.<sup>5</sup>

In this article I have two aims: the first one is to show that the connection of Spinoza with the idea of constituent power is not something that is discovered first by Schmitt, but is already formulated at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by authors like Hermann Cohen and Harold Laski. Their recovery of Spinoza is taken up by Kelsen in the confrontation with Schmitt on sovereignty during the Weimar years. The second aim is more theoretical. The problem with Schmitt’s solution is that his “democratic” conception of constituent power is co-terminus with a conception of “dictatorship,” which is the opposite of what is normally understood by democracy (obviously Schmitt disagreed with this piece of common sense, and he thought that revolutionaries of the Left and Right would also side with his praise of dictatorship). In addition, Schmitt’s solution disregards the autonomy of law and ties legal authority to a supra-legal, sovereign “decision” on the “state of exception”. I am interested in examining how Spinoza’s thought may be employed to offer a republican conception of constituent power that unites the autonomy of the law with the power of the people in ways that are closer to Kelsen’s than to Schmitt’s insights.

The concept of constituent power is meant to resolve the “paradox of constitutionalism,” or what Arendt also calls “Sieyes’s circle.” The paradox is that the beginning of a new legal order is not itself law-bound, or, phrased in more political terms, that absolutism is a condition for the possibility (and, equally, for the impossibility) of limited, constitutional government.<sup>6</sup> Schmitt used this paradox to reject the normativist

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4 See (Kalyvas 2005) and (Kalyvas 2009). But Kalyvas does not point out Spinoza as one of the sources for this democratic idea of constituent power; his genealogy passes more through Althusius and Lawson. On the history of term from Sieyes onwards, see now (Rubinelli 2020).

5 For a discussion, see (Smith 1994) to (Cooper 2017), and the collection of European scholarship on this question in (Montag and Stolze 1997), which I address below.

6 As Sieyes said: “a nation is independent of all forms and, however it may will, it is enough for its will to be made known for all positive law to fall silent in its presence, because it is the source and



definition of a constitution as a higher law for law-making. He sought to replace this definition of a constitution by a decisionist one, whereby a constitution is “the concrete, comprehensive *decision* [by a people or its representative/MV] over the type and form of its own political existence” (Schmitt 2008: sect.8, 125). Not surprisingly, the Schmittian definition of constituent power as the sovereign decision that a people makes about its legal form has captured the imagination of populists of the Left and of the Right.<sup>7</sup>

The contemporary scholarly debate on constituent power for the most part concedes that Schmitt had the better of Kelsen on this particular theme. As a consequence there is a widespread assumption, ranging across interpreters from Martin Loughlin to Andrew Arato, that normativism is a dead-end for thinking about constituent power.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately these interpreters side with the Hobbesian belief that *auctoritas non veritas facit legem* and are thus led to fashion accounts of the “authority” of law that have markedly non-republican consequences. These accounts cast into doubt the possibility for the “power of the people,” based on the right of nature, to lay the ground of the legal order through a constitution or higher law that eliminates the absolutist claims made on behalf of state sovereignty. Put another way, these accounts of legal authority privilege the constituted *potestas* of the sovereign state over the constituent *potentia* of the people.<sup>9</sup> I hope to show that my Spinozist interpretation of Kelsen avoids the defect of the Hobbesian strategy, whereby the people is introduced starting from the state and on the mode of the “as if”: as if the state emerges from the “consent of people” (where the pre-existence of the people is a retrospective projection from an already constituted power). In so doing I hope to show that it is possible to reconstruct a **republican** conception of constituent power out of Kelsen rather than Schmitt, and one in which, keeping to Spinozist principles, the “authority” of law has a **rational** rather than a decisionist foundation.

I do not here want to engage the longstanding question of the similarity or difference between Hobbes and Spinoza. As anyone who has read the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of *Theologico-Political Treatise* knows, Spinoza can sound very close to Hobbes, for example when he affirms that “the

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supreme master of all positive law” (Sieyes 2003: 138, emphasis mine). On this paradox, see the essays in (Loughlin 2008).

7 See (Colón-Ríos 2012) and (Arato 2016: ch.6 passim) for some early discussions.

8 See (Lindahl 2007); (Loughlin 2010); (Kalyvas 2009); (Arato 2016).

9 See (Loughlin 2014) and (Lindahl 2015) who argues that the formation of a “we” or a “people” is an unfoundable decision or “initiative,” and thus constituent power cannot be the “cause” of a system of positive law, because it is in reality its retroactive “effect.” “An act succeeds as the exercise of constituent power only if, retrospectively, it appears to be the act of a constituted power” (168).

sovereign power is bound by no laws, and all must obey it in all matters.”<sup>10</sup> My goal here is to shed new light on the key disagreement between Schmitt and Kelsen on sovereignty as a function of how each of them interprets crucial points of Spinozist philosophy. However, since this is not an article on Spinoza's political and legal thought, I must rest content with mentioning Spinozist ideas and try to show how they are put to work in these early 20<sup>th</sup> century debates on constituent power and sovereignty.

As I understand this first Spinoza reception, Cohen, Laski, and Kelsen all employ Spinozist principles and postulates in order to offer critiques of state sovereignty or, more specifically, in order to reject the dualistic theory of sovereignty that splits state from law. Schmitt's considerable effort, of course, is directed at saving this dualism: after all, his fundamental insight is that when “law recedes, the state remains” (in the form of the state of exception). Ultimately, Schmitt sides with Hobbes's construction of sovereignty and opposes Hobbes to Spinoza.<sup>11</sup>

I suggest that this early 20<sup>th</sup> century reception of Spinoza puts to work the famous equivalences of right (*jus*) and power (*potentia*) stated in chapter 2 of the *Political Treatise*<sup>12</sup> in ways that strengthen the internal connection between constitutionalism and democracy, or the rule of law and the power of the people, perhaps more so than the later neo-Marxist reception of Spinoza. This article therefore begins with a quick review of this post-Marxist reception of Spinoza on the question of constituent power. It then moves to a discussion of the connection between constituent power and *natura naturans* that Schmitt pointed out and shows its problematic character. The central part of the article reconsiders Kelsen's challenge to Schmitt on constituent power in light of the Spinozist assumptions behind his denial of the difference between state and law. I suggest that Kelsen's arguments can be used to articulate an entirely immanent conception of constituent power within constituted power.

In the final part of the article, I turn my attention to a second Spinozist motif, namely, the problem of obedience and how it relates to his belief that “it is to men's advantage to live in accordance with laws and *sure dictates of our reason* which aims only at the *true good* of men” (TTP 16, emphasis mine). I show that Cohen and Laski both start out from this motif in rejecting the Hobbesian maxim that *auctoritas non veritas facit legem* and instead approaching the problem of obedience to

10 Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise* (TTP henceforth), chapter 16. The *Political Treatise* (PT henceforth) is also cited from the edition (Spinoza 2002).

11 See (Vatter 2004) and now (Koekkoek 2014).

12 “The natural right of every individual [*individui naturale ius*] is coextensive with its power [*potentia*]. Consequently, whatever each man does from the laws of his own nature, he does by sovereign right of Nature, and he has as much right over Nature as his power extends... their natural power or right [*potentia sive jus*] must be defined not by reason but by any appetite by which they may be determined to act and by which they try to preserve themselves.” (TP 2/4-5)

law as a matter of the public use of reason on the part of those affected by norms. However, I argue that this use of reason is related to truth not in a cognitive sense, but in a sense tied to the reflective judgment or opinions of citizens living in a constitutional government.<sup>13</sup>

### Spinoza and constituent power in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the post-Marxist reception

In *Dictatorship* (1921), Carl Schmitt first advanced the claim that Spinoza's metaphysics of *natura naturans* lies behind the subsequent development of the idea of *pouvoir constituant* or "constituent power." Antonio Negri renewed the discussion of this concept by developing an interpretation of Spinoza, which belongs within the long-standing effort by French and Italian post-Marxist theory in the second-half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to tell the story of Spinoza's recovery for radical democratic political thought. Althusser, Deleuze, Matheron, Balibar (and more recently Del Lucchese) are some of the names that come to mind in this context. To justify my proposal to shift attention from the second to the first 20<sup>th</sup> century reception of Spinoza, I shall briefly indicate how the Schmitt-Kelsen debates frame the background of both Negri's, Balibar's and Del Lucchese's reflections.

In *Insurrections* Negri credits Schmitt with identifying Spinoza as "father" of constituent power.<sup>14</sup> In "*Reliqua Desiderantur: A Conjecture for a Definition of the Concept of Democracy in the Final Spinoza*" Negri mentions *en passant* the first reception of Spinoza in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century under the rubric of a "liberal" reading, which he contrasts with Leo Strauss's intervention. But his focus is on the second reception centred on the French interpretation.<sup>15</sup> Balibar does not mention either Schmitt or Kelsen in his equally famous treatment in "*Jus-pactum-lex: On the Constitution of the Subject in the Theologico-Political Treatise*", but there are evident intimations that it is precisely the Schmitt/Kelsen debate that lies at the background of both interventions. Negri and Balibar

13 See (Vardoulakis 2019) for an attempt to formulate Spinoza's jurisprudence in terms of an Epicurean conception of law. Vardoulakis argues that this interpretation of the conception of law in TTP 4 as *ratio vivendi* (which he translates as "logic of living" and relates to judgments of utility) can overcome the opposition between Kelsen's normativism and Schmitt's decisionism. Although I do not have the space to offer a reading of TTP 4 here, and in particular of the strange duplicity of "divine law" which, on the one hand stands for a synonym to natural laws, and on the other for an ethics (or form of life) whose ultimate aim is knowledge of God *sive Natura*, I share Vardoulakis' conviction that Spinoza sees reason (and hence also truth) rather than authority (and hence command) as the ground of law. This is equally Kelsen's view on my reading.

14 "Carl Schmitt, who, notwithstanding the folly of the results, has posed this question ["the originary radicalness of constituent power"] with extraordinary intensity, refers us to Spinoza. I, too, am convinced that Spinoza's philosophy allows us to construct a first schema of the concept of constituent power and to guard it from misunderstandings and mystifications" (Negri 1999: 24), referred to also in Koekkoek, 337.

15 (Negri 1998: n.4).

share an interest in giving a reading of Spinoza's theory of law and, perhaps even more centrally, in engaging the motif "God and State" that propels Schmitt's political theology of sovereignty as much as it features centrally in Spinoza's *Tractatus* if, as seems to be the case, there is no longer much doubt about the centrality of theocracy in his discourse on democracy.<sup>16</sup>

More specifically, Negri's intention is to read "Deus sive Natura"<sup>17</sup> as a republican formula: "deepening the study of the extent to which Spinoza *belongs to the republican tradition*" (Negri 1998: 223, *emphasis mine*). Negri even suggests that his interpretation of the figure of the *multitudo* (as opposed to Hobbes's contractually constituted idea of "people" as support for monarchic sovereignty) presupposes a republican theory of freedom as *aequus ius* or *sui iuris* status as "the very condition of democratic politics": "a *republican* right [in the *multitudo*/MV].... An *equal right* for all" (Negri 1998: 234, *emphasis mine*). In addition, Negri breaks with Schmitt's decisionism by seeking a new account of Spinozist "legalism," which he parses in terms of the *autonomy of law*: "an absolute conception of democratic power realizes the unity of the formal legality and material efficacy of juridical organization and demonstrates its *autonomous productive force*" (Negri 1998: 226, *emphasis mine*).

Similarly, the Schmitt/Kelsen debate casts its shadow on Balibar's reading of *lex* in Spinoza's *Tractatus theologico-politicus*. Balibar begins in a Kelsenian fashion: why is it that, despite "the fact of power alone establishes a juridical order," does Spinoza nevertheless argue that "it is *necessary to define in general the fundamental law* that is in force in a given state as a *divine law*? Why is it inevitable that obedience appear as a divine commandment?" (Balibar 1998: 188, *emphasis mine*). Balibar's reference to the figure of a "fundamental law" (viz. Kelsen's *Grundnorm*) is striking, especially given that the expression does not have any clear or direct equivalents in Spinoza's text as far as I can tell (but see below my discussion of Del Lucchese). Indeed, Balibar's answer to his own question turns on what he calls "the very *formalism* of law" (Balibar 1998: 188, *emphasis mine*). However, in marked distinction from Negri, Balibar reconstructs this legal "formalism" in Spinoza through the latter's analysis of the foundation of the Hebrew Republic on the basis of divinely revealed law: "this name [of God/MV] would designate quite simply the voices (*vox illa, quam Israelitae audiverent*) that establish a relation of direct interpellation between the I, subject of obedience (*subditus*) and the He, universal of the Law. This is why every political power (every sovereignty) at the same time that it establishes a relation

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16 See the already cited Cooper and (Fraenkel 2017). Balibar himself argues that "theocracy is the imaginary institution of society as democracy" (Balibar 1998: 184).

17 Or, more precisely, the formulation found in TP 2: "from the fact that the power of things in Nature to exist and operate is really the power of God, we can easily see what the right of nature is."

of forces, from the fact alone that it absolutely states its right to be obeyed, must be presented as the interpreter of a superior commandment. Every legislator refers by its very form to an anonymous Legislator, whose only name is God, Person, the one who is" (Balibar 1998: 190-191). Irrespective of whether this is the correct reading of Spinoza, there is no doubt that Balibar is trying to address the question of sovereignty (as a *legal* concept meaning the "highest legal power") in the form that Schmitt poses it, viz., the problem is how factual power joins with supreme right, and the role played by the analogy between God and sovereign in this synthesis. Balibar's answer is that "Spinoza had precisely drawn out from the totality of all narratives a *fundamental norm* (*fundamentum universale, lex divina naturalis, dictamen rationis*) capable at the same time of being completely interiorized by individuals (whether, rationally, they understand that *summum legis divinae praemium esse ipsam legem*) or whether they find in diverse theological opinions the motive of love for the neighbor) and of being referred to a God" (Balibar 1998: 191). Again, irrespective of whether Balibar's use of Spinoza's conception of *vera religio* as civil religion is really the place where one should go to address the juridical problem of political theology (noting that neither Schmitt nor Kelsen refer to this topic in their answers), it remains clear that Balibar's answer rests on a conception of divine law as *synonym* of a Kelsenian fundamental norm. As I show below, this path was already disclosed by Hermann Cohen.

Lastly, one of the most recent approaches to Spinoza within the problem area of political theology is found in Filippo Del Lucchese's article on "Spinoza and constituent power." Del Lucchese also tries to employ Spinoza's monism in order to counter Schmitt's reading of constituent power. However, in his perfunctory rejection of Kelsen's standpoint, Del Lucchese does not mention that the debate on the Spinozist origins of constituent power precedes Schmitt.<sup>18</sup> It is Kelsen who first uses Spinoza's monism to argue against Schmitt's claim with regard to the "transcendence" of constituent power over constituted power, viz., in rejecting Schmitt's assumption that a people can "freely decide" on its constitution. Del Lucchese's suggestion that Spinoza would reject this freedom on the basis of the argument that God's necessity is also His freedom (*Ethics* I, 17, c2) is correct. Equally useful is his claim that, with respect to the identity Spinoza establishes between *jus* and *potentia*, "power cannot be considered ontologically prior or superior to law" (Lucchese 2018b: 32). However, the discussion leaves open many complex issues, *inter alia* related to the relation between divine necessity and divine compacts, in Spinoza's account of constituent power. In the end, Del Lucchese suggests that Spinoza's viewpoint on

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18 Although in (Lucchese 2018a: 193) he does point out to the importance of Adolf Menzel's readings of Spinoza. Menzel habilitated Kelsen.

constituent power can be most productively compared with Constantino Mortati's definition of constituent power as a historical "normative fact" that is both a force yet has "in itself its own law."<sup>19</sup> When one inquires what is this "law" that is "internal" to power, Del Lucchese refers generically to Spinoza's phrase "*jura sunt anima imperii*" (*Tractatus Politicus* 10.9) and the term *jura fundamentalia*, which he glosses as "constituent principles."<sup>20</sup> It would seem that such principles are closer to what Kelsen calls a "basic norm," but since no examples are provided, one is left in the dark of what these "constituent principles" are. I discuss the question of how to understand such principles of constituent power below.

As I hope to show in what follows, all of the above strategies, whether consciously or not, follow Hermann Cohen's earlier development of political theology *within* the question of the autonomy of law and the grounding norm. Kelsen's own idea of a "basic norm" and its relation to constituent power is a development from Cohen's original insights. With regard to the question of "obedience" and its relationship to sovereignty, the fundamental role of religion is precisely what Harold Laski employs to show that the state has no "sovereign" right to demand obedience to its citizens, not more than any other church. These indications motivate the need to move back from the post-Marxist to the first, Weimar reception of Spinoza in legal thought.

### Schmitt on Spinoza and constituent power

The *explicit* connection between Spinoza's thought and the concept of "constituent power" seems to have first been made by Schmitt. For Schmitt, there are only two subjects of constituent power: the prince or the people. It is in the context of arguing how the people can be the subject of constituent power that Schmitt refers to Spinoza's metaphysics (or "political theology") of *natura naturans*. Renato Cristi has argued that Schmitt's development of the idea of constituent power in *Constitutional Theory* was his belated attempt to "democratize" his conception of sovereign dictatorship, or the sovereign as decision on state of exception, found in *Dictatorship* and *Political Theology*. More recently, Andreas Kalyvas has followed Schmitt's indication by arguing that popular sovereignty should be understood in terms of a democratic

19 (Lucchese 2016: 194). Mortati has recently become a popular choice as a source for an alternative solution to the problem that gives rise to political theology, namely, the connection of power to right. See now (Rubinelli 2019) and Colón-Ríos previously cited.

20 It is unclear whether Del Lucchese thinks these *jura fundamentalia* are what Schmitt calls "constitutional principles" internal to a constitution or whether it refers to a supra-legal constituent "principle" of any constitution. In (Lucchese 2018b) he gives a useful list of translations for the key phrase *jura sunt anima imperii*, among which Shirley's "the constitution is the soul of the state", Curley's "the laws are the soul of the state", and Bove's "le Droit est l'âme de l'État". These formulations, at least in spirit, can be seen to match Kelsen's denial of a distinction between state and law.



constituent power and opposed to any idea of dictatorship, although without exploring the Spinozist derivation but instead focusing on a reconstruction of Althusius's federalism.<sup>21</sup>

Schmitt refers to Spinoza the first time in *Dictatorship* when he is proposing his idea of a "sovereign dictatorship" and claiming that it is identical to the idea of constituent power developed by Sieyes. The argument starts from a deconstruction of Rousseau's *Social Contract* which, according to Schmitt, ends up *separating* right from power, legislator from dictator. To resolve this impasse, Schmitt says that the legislator must be given "the power of a dictator.... This relationship will come about through an idea that is, in its substance, a consequence of Rousseau's *Contrat social*, although he does not name it as a separate power: *le pouvoir constituant* [the constituting power]" (Schmitt 2014: 111). The sovereign dictatorship of constituent power "does not suspend an existing constitution through a law based on the constitution – a constitutional law; rather it seeks to create conditions in which a constitution – a constitution that it regards as the true one – is made possible. Therefore dictatorship does not appeal to an existing constitution, but to one that is still to come. One should think that such an enterprise evades all legal considerations, because the state can be conceived of in legal terms only in its constitution, and the total negation of the existing constitution should normally relinquish any legal justification – since, by definition, a constitution that is to come does not yet exist. Consequently we would be dealing with sheer power." There is no solution to the paradox of constitutionalism if law-making is simply collapsed onto power. Here Schmitt simply rephrases Sieyes's circle as Arendt calls it. But the idea of a "constituent power" resolves the paradox when "the power assumed is one that, *without being itself constitutionally established, nevertheless is associated with any existing constitution in such a way that it appears to be foundational to it* – even if it is never itself subsumed by the constitution, so that it can never be negated either (insofar as the existing constitution negates it). This is the meaning of *pouvoir constituant* [constituent power]." (emphasis mine). But how is this possible? How can a constituent power exist both within an established constitution yet outside of it? Isn't Schmitt solution to the paradox of constitutionalism simply rephrasing the problem as a postulate: "there exists the state, whose power is simultaneously legal and above the law, and thus constituent"?

In the famous "Appendix" of *Dictatorship* dedicated to the interpretation of Article 48 of the Weimar constitution, Schmitt explains that the idea of constituent power is particularly "democratic": "The idea of a constituent power that is up to the people – that is, the idea of a

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<sup>21</sup> See the works cited; Del Lucchese contests Kalyvas's reconstruction of constituent power as "democratic."



*pouvoir constituant* – arose from democratic thought as well. This is the source of all constitutionally constituted and therefore circumscribed power – and yet it differs from it by being unlimited and unlimitable. The possibility of a legally unlimited power – such as is up to a constituent assembly after a revolution – is based on some basically democratic reasoning of this sort” (Schmitt 2014: 204). Schmitt will subsequently attempt to determine sovereignty as both within and without the sphere of law in *Political Theology* and its theory of the state of exception.<sup>22</sup> But the addition of the phrase “in such a way that it *appears* to be foundational” suggests that constituent power may in actuality *not be* “foundational”. This is the window that has led Lindahl and Loughlin to argue that the constituent power is always an *ex post facto* retrojection by a constituted power that in this way seeks to legitimate itself.

It is at this point that Schmitt refers to Spinoza in order to resolve the problems of the idea of a sovereign dictator as source of legitimacy of a legal order over which it stands in an extra-legal relationship. The passage is famous and, given its importance, worth citing in full. “Sieyès’ theory can only be understood as the expression of an attempt to find the principle that may organise the unorganisable. The idea of the relationship between *pouvoir constituant* [constituent power] and *pouvoir constitué* [constituted power] finds its complete analogy, systematic and methodological, in the idea of a relation between *natura naturans* [nature nurturing/creating] and *natura naturata* [nature natured/created]. And even if this idea has been integrated into Spinoza’s rationalistic system, this demonstrates even more that this system is not exclusively rationalistic. The theory of the *pouvoir constituant* is incomprehensible simply as a form of mechanistic rationalism. The people, the nation, the primordial force of any state – these always constitute new organs. From the infinite, incomprehensible abyss of the force [*Macht*] of the *pouvoir constituant*, new forms emerge incessantly, which it can destroy at any time and in which its power is never limited for good. It can will arbitrarily. The content of its willing has always the same legal value like the content of a constitutional definition. Therefore it can intervene arbitrarily – through legislation, through the administration of justice, or simply through concrete acts. It becomes the unlimited and illimitable bearer of the *iura dominationis* [rights/legal prerogatives of rulership], which do not even have to be restricted to cases of emergency” (Schmitt 2014: 124).

Schmitt’s incandescent rhetoric is indicative of a slippage in his argument. While he begins from a reference to Spinoza, he quickly veers into theologemes of arbitrary volition and right to command that are clearly distant from Spinozist themes and match up better with medieval ideas of *plenitudo potestatis*, and in general with an omnipotent and radically transcendent personality of God. It would seem as if the

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22 See the discussion in (Agamben 1998).

Hobbesian understanding of the person of the sovereign makes its way back into Schmitt's discussion of Spinoza's God or Nature. In any case, we are far from the identity of necessity and divine action, the denial of freedom of the will, and, last but not least, the idea of *jura fundamentalia* associated with the "*anima imperii*."

This suspicion is strengthened when Schmitt proceeds to assert that constituent power *is* a "sovereign dictatorship" in that it "has not yet been bound to constituted limits; and the constituent assembly can therefore exercise *plenitudo potestatis* at its own discretion.... on the one hand we find here an unlimited legal power that is completely at the discretion of the empowering body (as long as the word 'sovereign' can be used), while on the other hand the constituent assembly is only commissioned, just like a dictator; it is not sovereign like a monarch in an absolute monarchy or in a monarchy based upon the monarchical principle." Schmitt goes on to explain that "the legal plenitude of power of a constituent assembly rests upon its exercise of the *pouvoir constituant*; therefore omnipotence lasts only until the constituting of powers through the constitution's coming into force. The very moment the assembly has accomplished its work and the constitution has become established law, every sovereign dictatorship comes to an end. Moreover, the constitutional possibility of a sovereign dictatorship comes itself to an end. A sovereign dictatorship is irreconcilable with a constitutional form of government.... Either sovereign dictatorship or constitution; the one excludes the other." How is one to read this claim of an either/or between constituent power and constitution?

In light of Schmitt's subsequent texts, and in so far as the concept of constituent power operates under the "democratic principle," it would appear that Schmitt's either/or seeks to establish a permanent dualism between constituent and constituted powers, *as if they could not be given a univocal reading* because, on the analogy with *natura naturans*, constituent power is "absolute" and broaches no legal limits.<sup>23</sup> We shall see below that here Schmitt's "romantic" reading of *natura naturans* as "infinite, incomprehensible abyss of the force [*Macht*]," that "can will arbitrarily" and "can intervene arbitrarily", radically departs from Spinoza's understanding of the divinity of nature. Schmitt's "romantic" reading of Spinoza is used by him to deploy the concept of constituent power as a way to set democracy against constitutionalism and place it entirely within the sphere of dictatorship.

It is true that, in this text, Schmitt opens another option of harmonizing constituent with constituted power by appealing to the principle of representation. Schmitt claims Sieyes took this option. In *Constitutional Theory* he seems to adopt it himself in so far as he argues

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<sup>23</sup>This is the aspect of Schmitt's argument that Negri values most. It reflects the problem that a constitution always "blocks" or puts an end to a "revolutionary movement".

there that no existing constitution can avoid both the monarchical principle and the idea of representation.<sup>24</sup> Koekkoek has claimed that Schmitt may have adopted Spinoza in the 1920s to counter Kelsen (however he fails to recognize Kelsen's own Spinozism). Above all, Schmitt goes to Spinoza in order to justify “an anti-liberal form of dictatorial democracy that he deliberately put in opposition to liberal (or parliamentary) democracy.... The mystical character of Spinoza's pantheism was attractive and useful to Schmitt because it enabled him to bestow upon his conception of (dictatorial) democracy a certain theological vitality and boldness so that it might be able to compete with other “political theories of myth” that did not suffer from the indecisiveness of either political romanticism or parliamentarism. In doing so, Schmitt impudently mobilized Spinoza's mystical pantheism for constructing a mythical nationalism that resembled anarcho-syndicalism and Bolshevism in their critique of liberalism and parliamentary democracy” (Koekkoek 2014: 357) This claim of course begs the question of whether Spinoza's democratic thought lends itself as material for a “democratic political theology” or whether it is not rather a way of escaping the grip of this discourse. The debate is a complicated one that I cannot fully engage in at this point. I would however want to say that, if there is a politico-theological moment that Schmitt projects onto the question of constituent power and its democratic basis, this moment is not tied up per se with Spinoza but rather with Schmitt's reading of *plenitudo potestatis*. But, and this is my point, the construction of a “democratic political theology” is a failed one because the idea of such *plenitudo* is *incompatible* with Spinoza's notion of *natura naturans*.

The key issue that Schmitt's discussion raises is the following: can Spinoza's idea of *natura naturans* be used to describe popular sovereignty or constituent power as an “unlimited legal power” and “legal plenitude of power”? This is *prima facie* problematic since if the idea of *natura naturans* is associated with radical immanence, it is difficult to understand how it could also have the transcendent attributes of the sovereign. On the other hand, the connection is not entirely arbitrary given that Spinoza does speak of God's power as absolute, and he does define democracy as a function of “absolute” government. Schmitt does not hesitate to attribute the medieval idea of *plenitudo potestatis* to the sovereign dictator and thus to constituent power and *natura naturans* as its metaphysical analogue. But is this correct? To answer this question one needs to engage a bit more the medieval genealogy of sovereignty and its relation to ideas of *potentia absoluta*.

Here I follow Francis Oakley's reconstruction of the career of the

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<sup>24</sup> For further discussion I refer to (Vatter 2020a).

distinction between absolute and ordained power.<sup>25</sup> The premise of this distinction is that nature is a creation of God and is thus not eternal and necessary: order is contingent and emerges *ex nihilo*. From here there are two possible ways to understand the distinction. The first one is generally of Thomist derivation, and Oakley claims its background comes from Maimonides. On this model, although the omnipotent God “cannot be said to be bound by the natural, moral or salvational order he himself has established, he is certainly capable by his own free decision of committing himself by covenant and promise to follow a certain pattern in his dealings with his creation” (Oakley 1998b: 445). Absolute power of God is here considered in abstracto, that is, prior to God’s choice of the order of creation, to which God remains faithful afterwards by expressly promising His subjects to do so. According to the second understanding, which begins with Hostiensis and climaxes with Duns Scotus, theologians apply to God the distinction between legal and supra-legal powers that were established in royal sovereigns but especially in the Pope’s *plenitudo potestatis* so that absolute power is understood “as a presently-active power of potential interposition in the established order” (Oakley 1998a: 670). God is said to act *de jure* according to ordained power but *de facto* “he can act apart from and against the law” (Oakley 1998b: 447). In other words, the absolute power of God becomes “a *presently active and extraordinary power* capable of operating apart from the order established *de potentia ordinate* and prevailing in the ordinary course of things” (Oakley 1998b: 447, emphasis mine). With Duns Scotus, God’s absolute power comes to have the characters of what Schmitt will call a “sovereign dictator” or constituent power.<sup>26</sup>

For my purposes, the most important points to be drawn from Oakley’s genealogy of *potentia absoluta* are three. The first one is that

25 The distinction plays an important role in various narratives of modernity and the rise of secularism, from (Taylor 2007) to (Agamben 2011).

26 Mika Ojakangas argues that Schmitt misconstrues the theological traditions associated with the *potentia absoluta* of God by applying them to sovereignty in accordance with the secularization model. In reality, as noted by Oakley, “the point is, however, that it was the juristic notion of *potentia absoluta* applied first to describe papal power that became a theological notion, not vice versa: God can act outside of the order of nature and grace he has already established, like the pope can act outside his own laws” (Ojakangas 2012: 514). This is true, but it does not affect the general point that Schmitt is making. For in these theologemes, Schmitt is looking for a justification for an idea of power that is both entirely legal and yet transcendent with respect to the legal order. Like Cristi before him, Ojakangas also agrees that the concept of representation is ultimately the key to Schmitt’s idea of constituent power, and that, for this reason, its link with democracy is suspect: “Therefore, the Schmittian people whose power appeared to surpass the power of God is ultimately reduced to a mere imaginary product of an act of representation, a fabrication of those who rule—as if the Christian God was a mere invention of the Church by means of which it is able to govern and rule the Christians. Thus, the Schmittian theory of constitution has nothing to do with theological ideas and has no roots in medieval doctrines of God’s absolute power. His theory of constitution is a late modern innovation.” (516) However, Ojakangas here does not consider the theological basis of the idea of representation in Schmitt. He also does not mention the Spinozist background to these questions.

the distinction between absolute and ordained power, with its roots in the notion of Papal *plenitudo potestatis*, cannot fit with Spinoza's idea of *natura naturans* for the simple reason that Spinoza rules out the contingency of the natural order and so also denies the reality of Creation. As Oakley notes, in his commentary on Descartes Spinoza puts into doubt the idea of God's "extraordinary power when he acts beyond Nature's orders" because, following a Maimonidean intuition, "for God to govern the world with one and same fixed and immutable order seems a greater miracle than if, because of the folly of mankind, he were to abrogate laws that he himself has sanctioned in Nature in the best way and from pure freedom" (Oakley 1998a: 679).

The second point that this genealogy shows is that the distinction between absolute and ordained powers was strictly speaking politico-theological and strategic: it was meant to "deflect" the threat to Christianity coming from the Arab-Aristotelian philosophy of necessity, i.e., from Averroism. Oakley does not specify what is the "threat" posed by Averroism, but it is not difficult to surmise. If divine providence is understood only as operation through secondary causes, as "natural" government, then this means that the political body is a purely "natural" body to be governed in view of affections of its members, that is, ultimately in Spinoza's view, of maximizing joyful passions and minimizing sad ones. The leader of this naturalized body politic can be modelled after the prophet as charismatic ruler (which does away with the Christian notion of vicariate and representation, indeed, with the legal edifice of the Church as such), and will also take up a messianic form, either in a Protestant shape of a nation of saints, or in a Islamic and Jewish sense of the holy people without Church. In both cases, one has a rejection of the Church as spiritual leadership of the world, and its being replaced by the philosopher as king and judge. Recent scholarship indicates that Spinoza may be carrying forward such an Averroistic program.<sup>27</sup>

The third point of interest is that Oakley suggests the absolutist use of the dualism of divine powers, such as was made by James I, did not intend to make a claim about political order resting on "the notion of the great chain of being but rather the rival version that was grounded in will, promise and covenant. This vision... though it did vindicate in both its theological and legal variants the ultimate freedom of sovereign choosing and willing, also affirmed the reliably self-binding nature of that sovereign willing and emphasized the degree to which confidence could safely be reposed in its stability" (Oakley 1998a: 686). In short, and apart from all appearances, the distinction between absolute and ordained powers was meant to give to royal absolutism the veneer of an Old Testament

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<sup>27</sup> This Averroistic reading of Spinoza can be found in Fraenkel (Fraenkel 2012); it was anticipated by (Strauss 1997) and developed in an entirely different direction by (Bloch 1970).

covenant theology, and, by the same token, break with the Hellenistic, pagan or imperial derivation of princely sovereignty. In this way, for Oakley the Christian, theological construal of an “unlimited legal power” was part and parcel of the development of modern constitutionalism and not its radical antithesis. At the same time, this understanding of *potentia absoluta* maintains the Schmittian dualisms of ordinary versus extraordinary circumstances and in general the contingency of the establishment of political order as dependent on will not reason. On the one hand, then, Oakley’s argument is anti-Schmittian in the sense that for him the idea of God’s absolute power does not necessarily contrast with constitutionalism, as long as constitutionalism is seen as a reflection of God’s agreement with human beings to be bound by their mutual pact, as shown in the history of the Hebrew Republic. Divine *absoluta potentia* can be self-binding in a way that fits together with a constitutional government. On the other hand, Oakley’s argument is further proof that Kelsen was correct in thinking that western constitutionalism was saturated with politico-theological conceptions ultimately derivative of a distinction between God and Nature and whose ultimate purpose are always anti-democratic.

At this point in the discussion, I can move forward to consider Kelsen’s anti-dualistic reading of Spinoza’s *natura naturans*, and how Kelsen’s Spinozist conception of constituent power may solve the paradox of constitutionalism (viz., that absolutism is at the heart of constitutionalism).<sup>28</sup>

### **Kelsen’s Spinozist Critique of Schmitt’s Decisionism**

Schmitt’s *Political Theology* was principally a rear-guard defence of the absoluteness of sovereignty that was attacked a few years before by Hans Kelsen and Harold Laski.<sup>29</sup> I claim that both attacks on absolute sovereignty are based on Spinozist premises. Kelsen’s critique of sovereignty climaxed in his 1921 article “God and State.” In this text, Kelsen denies the existence of the Person of the Sovereign because he rejects root and branch the theological distinction between a transcendent God and an immanent Nature on which it is constructed. For Kelsen such dualism, and such an idea of legal personhood, was literally anti-scientific; it blocked the path to a scientific approach to law, a “pure theory” of law. To believe in such a Person is the same as if one believed that behind the phenomenon of lightning there stood a bearded Zeus who cast down his rays to earth. The idea that there exists a power that can “decide” either to express itself in a necessary chain of cause and effect, or to express itself by breaking this chain, is entirely absurd,

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28 I do not have the space here to develop a reading of the function of Spinoza’s interpretation of the Hebrew Republic in light of his metaphysics of nature.

29 My discussion here draws from (Vatter 2017b).



a contradiction in terms. In reality, there only exists one Nature as a system of laws, "according to which each individual thing... act in one and the same fixed and determinate manner, this manner depending... on Nature's necessity".<sup>30</sup> In taking up this standpoint, Kelsen explicitly refers to Spinoza and his principle *Deus sive Natura*.<sup>31</sup> Whereas for Schmitt Spinoza's God is "part of the theory of political theology," for Kelsen *Deus sive Natura* spells the end of political theology.

That Kelsen may have been a Spinozist is a hypothesis that has not been often discussed in the specialized literature, as far as I can tell. The suggestion was raised by Negri himself, though he never pursued it. In discussing Spinoza's definition of democracy as *omnino absolutum imperium* ["the completely absolute power"] (TP 11/1), Negri says that "such an absolute conception of democratic power realizes the unity of the formal legality and material efficacy of juridical organization and demonstrates its autonomous productive force."<sup>32</sup> In a footnote he adds: "It is strange that Hans Kelsen, the most important and most coherent theorist of the problems of validity and efficacy in the unity of juridical organization, did not (to my knowledge) see a precursor in Spinoza. This is probably due to the weight exerted by neo-Kantian reductionism (of phenomenalism and formalism) in the evaluation of Spinoza's thought.... In the final phase of his thought, Kelsen adheres in particular to a juridical realism that is extremely fascinating.... Here the unity of validity and of the juridical efficacy, the formative force of executive acts, refers back to a metaphysics of constitution, whose possible Spinozan references it would be interesting to study" (Negri 1998: 245, n.17). Pace Negri, I think that Kelsen *did* adhere to Spinozism, as visible in his article *God and State*. Furthermore, as I show below, the "neo-Kantian" approach that Kelsen inherits from Hermann Cohen turns out to be much closer to Spinozism than previously assumed.

How does Kelsen's use of Spinoza's *Deus sive Natura* help to articulate a republican and constitutional understanding of absolute power? Spinoza argues that Nature can be understood from two perspectives: as *natura naturata* and as *natura naturans*, as passive and as active. Considered passively, Nature is the necessary concatenation of effect and cause, where every effect is both condition of another effect (i.e., is its cause) and is in turn conditioned by another effect (i.e., is also its effect). Kelsen's idea of the authorization of a legal norm by another

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30 TTP, 4; see also TTP, 4: "the actual co-ordination and interconnection of things".

31 In the formulation of the identity given in TP, chapter 2: "Since God has right over all things, and God's right is nothing other than God's power insofar as that is considered as absolutely free, it follows that every natural thing has as much right from Nature as it has power to exist and to act. For the power of every natural thing by which it exists and acts is nothing other than the power of God, which is absolutely free."

32 (Negri 1998: 227).



legal norm in and through the hierarchy of legal norms is structurally analogous to *natura naturata*. The point, however, is that Kelsen's idea of legal autonomy is not merely passive but also dynamic: it should be read not only as *natura naturata* but also as *natura naturans*. For what happens if Kelsen's construal of the "beginning" of a legal order is modelled on Spinoza's *natura naturans*, on his active idea of nature? When Nature is considered actively, then every effect must not be understood merely as the **conditioned condition** of another effect, but as being itself "**unconditioned**" because it is the *direct expression* of one and the same, eternal cause, of Nature as *causa sui*.<sup>33</sup> Thus, everything in Nature is both entirely necessary (because it is caused) and entirely free (because this chain of causation is self-generative or caused by itself). This is ultimately the meaning of the doctrine of *conatus*, but I cannot here explain this further. Thus, to act according to the right of nature as a system of laws is to be free because it means to be subject to a law that, in a sense, one has contributed to make oneself. It is no coincidence that such a conception of the rule of law as condition of freedom also happens to be a fundamental principle of republican theory. I believe it is also the origin of Kelsen's idea of legal autonomy as a system of laws that is self-generative.

What happens when one applies this model of *natura naturans* to the problem posed by the "absolute" character of constituent power? The result is that constituent power is neither "transcendent" to a constitutional order, as its state of exception, nor is it a retroactive projection of a state institution, a constituted power, but rather constituent power is the *immanent* cause of the legal order. Constituent power corresponds here to the *causa sui*, which is necessarily expressed by and through the constitutional order itself when this order is seen as being active or self-creative or, in terms of Kelsen, when the legal system is understood as a dynamic system.

How can one distinguish when a given legal order is "passive" and when it is "active"? Contemporary constitutionalism distinguishes between a "negative" and a "positive" or "affirmative" constitutionalism. Most jurists who employ this terminology are unaware of the Spinozist roots of this distinction. Negative constitutionalism understands every legal constitution passively: as a device to separate the constituted powers of the state, and to establish and safeguard individual natural rights against government interference. However, when viewed from its constituent aspect, its creative aspect, every single moment of a legal constitution, every single link of the legal order, can become expressive or constitutive of the "power of the people." Every part of a constitution becomes "active" or "constituent" not when it safeguards individuals from undue interference, but when it combines their powers [*potentia*],

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<sup>33</sup> Deleuze's reading of Spinoza has emphasized this univocity of being.

when it *empowers citizens*, in order to constitute the power of the people, or democracy.<sup>34</sup> Thus, any constitution that is interpreted merely as a safeguard for individual rights *without at the same time establishing mechanisms that can empower its citizens* is falling short of the idea of a constitution, or, said in terms of Kelsen, of the “basic norm” that underpins any factual constitutional document.

### The Basic Norm as Hypothesis of Constituent Power

Kelsen’s “pure theory” of law stands or falls with the idea of a “basic norm” that “lays the foundation” (*Grundlegung*) of the hierarchy of norms. Additionally, Kelsen’s principle of the autonomy of law states that “law” is only what is legally produced, thereby distinguishing the “ought” of legal validity from the “ought” of morality or justice. Kelsen connects the idea of a “basic norm” and the conception of legal autonomy in the following definition: “The basic norm... is nothing but the fundamental rule according to which the various norms of the order are to be created” (Kelsen 1945: 114). Both topics have given rise to an enormous amount of commentary. Here I merely want to sketch an argument in which a Spinozist reading of Kelsen can explain how the idea of a basic norm is a solution to the paradox of constitutionalism and offers a republican conception of constituent power.

That there is a close correlation between basic norm and constituent power is obvious from the function of the basic norm: “The whole function of this basic norm is to confer law-creating power on the act of the first legislator and on all the other acts based on the first act” (Kelsen 1945: 116, 436).<sup>35</sup> For Kalyvas the basic norm is Kelsen’s answer to the paradox of constitutionalism because “only an external, hypothetical norm confers objective validity on extra-legal constitutional innovations that otherwise, as revolutionary, arbitrary manifestations of force, are not prescribed or sanctioned by any positive juridical order.”<sup>36</sup> Yet, precisely because Kalyvas thinks that the basic norm is merely “external and hypothetical” he charges Kelsen with replicating “classical foundational myths that endow the extra-legal origins of a political order with legality and cover up its factual, arbitrary beginnings” (Kalyvas 2006: 579). But is this a correct reading of the basic norm? Kelsen describes the

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<sup>34</sup>This is somewhat similar to Hauke Brunkhorst’s reading of Kelsen’s monism: “The implicit political message of the critique of the dualism of state and law consisted in the practical idea of a complete juridification of politics. That does not mean that politics withers away as Schmitt and Heller argued concurrently. It only means that in a constitutional regime there is no longer any political action that is not either legal or illegal and... that there is no legal rule that cannot be changed politically” (Brunkhorst 2011: 502).

<sup>35</sup> Or in another formulation: “This Basic Norm empowers the individual or individuals who posited the historically first constitution to posit the norms which represent the historically first constitution” (Kelsen 1991: 255).

<sup>36</sup> (Kalyvas 2006: 578)

*Grundnorm* as a “hypothetical foundation.” Therefore, it stands to reason that one should examine the conception of the “hypothesis” with which Kelsen is working. This point is made by Geert Edel in a famous essay,<sup>37</sup> even though in my opinion even he misses the political and legal meaning for constituent power of this theory of the hypothesis.

Edel shows without a shadow of a doubt that Kelsen understood his pure theory of law to derive from Hermann Cohen’s revision of Kantianism, particularly in his late *Ethik des reinen Willens*.<sup>38</sup> This is particularly interesting for my genealogy because in this work Cohen emphasizes the Platonic and the Spinozist elements of Kantianism. For example, Cohen argues that the activity of the state is captured by a Platonic, dialectical interpretation of the idea of **auto-nomy**. The first meaning of Cohen’s conception of autonomy is that the state can only designate a process through which state law makes itself through law. Only a legal process can produce state law. Next, Cohen interprets the meaning of autonomy starting from the self (**to auto**): he shows that the demand that only law, and not another person, make the law follows from the principle that each “self” is in themselves the “bearer and maker” of what is right for them, that is, each member of the legal state is by nature *sui iuris*.<sup>39</sup> It is only because the self (**auto**) is a bearer of law as natural right (**nomos**) that they cannot accept to be ruled by a person whose commands are law but only by a positive law (**nomos**) that makes itself (**auto**). “In this way legislation becomes the monopoly of society [So wird die Gesetzgebung zum Monopol der Sittlichkeit]. No God can replace it; no nature, no power of history.... Self and legislation form a necessary correlation.” (Cohen 1904: 322). I hope this brief aperçu into Cohen makes it evident why his practical philosophy played such a crucial role for Kelsen’s understanding of the autonomy of the law.

Kelsen admits to borrowing Cohen’s interpretation of the Platonic Idea as hypothesis to develop his conception of the “basic norm” as the “idea” of law itself. As he writes in a famous 1933 letter to Renato Treves: “What is essential is that the theory of the basic norm arises completely from the Method of Hypothesis developed by Cohen. The basic norm is the answer to the question: what is the presupposition underlying the very possibility of interpreting material facts that are qualified as legal acts,

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37 (Edel 2007).

38 For a reading of this text in light of Cohen’s engagement with Spinozism, see (Vatter 2017a). For another interpretation of the Kelsen-Cohen relation, see (Batnitsky 2015). Batnitsky also extrapolates from Edel’s discussion of Kelsen’s debt to Cohen but she links Kelsen’s fundamental norm to Cohen’s conception of God, then argues that Cohen turns from law to theology after his *Ethik des reinen Willens*, and this means that Kelsen’s dependency on Cohen should have led him towards a different political theology but not to its negation. There is no discussion of Cohen’s and Kelsen’s affirmative readings of Spinoza in Batnitsky.

39 On this republican principle of natural right, see (Skinner 1997) and my more recent discussion (Vatter 2019).

that is, those acts by means of which norms are issued or applied?" (Edel 2007: 200). The basic norm explains how an act of a factual power, such as the acts of a first legislator, can become "constituent," that is, qualified as a "legal act" which results in a constitution in accordance to which positive laws are then legally or self-referentially produced. Kelsen's idea is that a factual power can only become constituent in virtue of a hypothesis, the basic norm, that asks of every public coercive act that it justify itself legally before those who are to obey it. The first conclusion to draw is that, for Kelsen, far from being "repressed" as Schmitt charged, the hypothesis of constituent power is literally that in reference to which law is to be made and applied by law. Such a hypothesis explains why a dynamic legal system is not possible in the absence of a legal science.

Clearly, a lot is riding on understanding Cohen's conception of the hypothesis, and, to be frank, Edel does not do a great job in explaining it. Edel's best shot is to say that the basic norm is hypothesis because "qua norm [it] cannot be existent and hidden somewhere in nature, and cannot have fallen from the heavens in some mysterious way either" (Edel 2007: 217). But what Kelsen means is that the "basic norm" is not "basic" in the sense of being a foundation or "first cause" (*Grundlage*) of law (that is why it is not found in nature or in God understood as first causes). Instead, the meaning of "basic" in the "basic norm" is that of "laying of a foundation" (*Grundlegung*) which demands of any factual arrangement of things that it give an account of itself in terms of a system of laws. Cohen employed the distinction between *Grundlage* and *Grundlegung* to illustrate the conception of hypothesis. The "laying of the foundation" signals literally the *absence of ground or first cause* understood as an external cause or reason of something.<sup>40</sup> Cohen interpreted the Platonic notion of the idea as hypothesis in terms of a demand that every concept and judgment not be accepted as "true a priori and in itself, still less is it the final truth; [but] on the contrary, it must undergo the test of its own truth to be decided by this test alone."<sup>41</sup> In other words, the hypothesis is what permits the validity of a concept to be tested; it is the assumption of the fallibility and thus of the changeability of all our knowledge, what makes our empirical knowledge ultimately "scientific".

As hypothesis, the basic norm means that the system of law has no (external) cause, but rather is cause of itself. In Kelsen, constituent power is nothing like a cause or ground that is somehow "external" to the legal order that it gives rise to, on the model of a Creator/Sovereign

40 Edel cites a quote from Cohen's *Ethik des reinen Willens*, 85 which is crucial: "the ultimate foundations [Grundlagen] of cognition are, rather, the laying of foundations [Grundlegungen]" (Edel 2007: 209).

41 "That is why, in order to designate this method of the idea, Plato used another expression: that of rendering account [Rechenschaftsablegung] *logon didonai*" (Cohen 1915: 8). "The idea is so far from being synonymous with the concept [eidos=logos] that it is only thanks to it and to the account it renders that the concept (logos) itself may be verified" (Cohen 1915: 8).

God deciding on its Creation. Instead, constituent power is permanently operative within the legal order as the “hypothesis” that justifies the legal “ought” itself, that is, “the imputation of the legal consequence (the consequence of an unlawful act) to the legal condition. Imputation means that a conditioning material fact (a delict) is necessarily linked to the legal consequence (the sanction), more precisely, ought to be linked” (Edel 2007: 215). The basic norm as hypothesis preserves the idea that a law is both obligatory and necessary, in so far as it is synthetically linked to an act of coercion, and yet is also constitutive of freedom because every law “rests” on the immanent cause of a dynamic legal system that can withdraw the validity of positive law, or change it, or render it null. It in this sense that the hypothesis of the basic norm functions as a constituent power, like *natura naturans*, rather than *natura naturata*.

Kelsen’s idea of the basic norm has often been interpreted as a piece of sophistry, as the reiteration of the principle that might makes right.<sup>42</sup> Even Edel falls into this misinterpretation when he claims that the basic norm connects “the idea of the law with the idea of a highest authority, for purposes of creating law” so that the positive law “is valid only if its claim to validity can also be enforced” (Edel 2007: 219). In point of fact, such reading assumes that Schmitt’s critique of Kelsen is correct, viz., that Kelsen is unable to account for the applicability of valid law because his system has eliminated the “person” who decides of this ascription.

However, Kelsen’s explicit debt to Cohen suggests giving a much more Platonic reading of the basic norm: its function is not to dignify a given *potestas* by granting it law-making attributes, but, on the contrary, it is to establish the principle that only the self-justification of law, its rendering an account of itself, is what “lays the foundations” for the exercise of power. This intuition is both Platonic, in the sense that for Plato knowledge of what is right (viz., a true legal science) is the only thing that gives legitimate access to the exercise of power, but it is also deeply Spinozist, if it is true that the “commonwealth whose laws are based on sound reason is the most free, for there everybody can be free as he wills, that is, he can live whole-heartedly under the guidance of reason.” (TTP 16). Thus, the basic norm as hypothesis shows that the necessarily coercive character of positive law is only the passive side of law which has as its active side, the increase of *potentia* of those who

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42When Kelsen states that “the basic norm confines itself to delegating power to a norm-issuing authority – that is, it sets out a rule – according to which the norms of the legal system are to be created” (Edel, p.218, citing from Second Edition of *Reine Rechtslehre*). Edel cites Kelsen to the effect that: “the basic norm confers on the act of the first legislator... the sense of ‘ought’ that specific sense in which legal condition is linked with legal consequence in the legal norm” (Edel, p. 218 citing from First Edition of *Reine Rechtslehre*); “the idea of lawfulness itself is set down with the Hypothesis. This is the idea that a certain consequence is attached to a certain condition.... The basic norm says that under certain conditions... a certain consequence... is set down as obligatory,” Kelsen cited in (Edel 2007: 219).

subject themselves to the law. That is why the basic norm as hypothesis is what compels the *potestas* or law-making authority itself to change and make new laws whenever the justification of the old laws has given way in the minds of those affected by them – this is the dynamic viz. democratic character of the autonomy of law in Kelsen.

### Constituent Power and the Power of Opinion or the Faculty of Judgment

If, as I have tried to show, Kelsen leveraged the Spinozist conception of *natura naturans* to think about sovereignty and constituent power, then one can say that Laski's critique of sovereignty leveraged Spinoza's intuition that one never relinquishes the natural right or power to judge of one's right (*sui iuris*) as stated in TTP, chapter 17: "nobody can so completely transfer to another all his right, and consequently his power, as to cease to be a human being, nor will there ever be a sovereign power that can do all it pleases". I think this intuition gives us another approach to the idea of constituent power which is best captured by the principle expressed by Arendt that "all government rests on opinion." Arendt, however, never mentions that this formulation of constituent power is Spinozist, and that the first one to recover it in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was Harold Laski in his 1917 book, *Studies in the Problem of Sovereignty*. Laski's radical thesis is that there is no such thing as "sovereignty" if by this one understands an attribute of a state that automatically elicits "obedience" in its subjects: such an idea of sovereignty is a fiction which has never existed historically, and which gives the lie to the Hobbesian (later Austinian and Schmittian) conceit that law is the "command" of an authority. Instead, Laski tries to show that the law depends on the "opinion of the members of the State, and they belong to other groups" (Laski 1968:12). Laski here is taking up Spinoza's notion, against Hobbes, that the effectiveness of all law depends on the judgment of the individual who follows it, not on the person who decides its application: "there is no sanction for law other than the consent of the human mind" (Laski 1968:14). The obedience secured by any government ultimately "depends simply on what measure of resistance the command inspires" (Laski 1968:270).<sup>43</sup>

I think that it is possible to relate this principle that all government rests on opinion to the Spinozist idea of *natura naturans*, namely, the idea that every finite and temporal singular mode is **equally the expression** of the one eternal and infinite substance. Spelled out politically, this means that "the power of the people" is expressed by the equal status of every individual's opinion, no matter how much force they individually exert or how different their interests are. This Spinozist

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43 I do not have space here to explain these claims in relation to Spinoza's complex reading of the Hebrew Republic in TTP 17-19.



idea of constituent power entails that the legitimacy of a law depends on considering every citizen as a thinking individual capable of forming their own opinion by weighing reasons and arguments.<sup>44</sup>

The systematic importance of Laski's Spinozist critique of sovereignty is that it opens another avenue for arguing that the idea of constituent power of a people ought to be allied with a **rationalist** rather than a **decisionist** conception of law (that is, a conception of law based on principles of law, not on decisions of authorities). A republican conception of constitutionalism should reject the Hobbesian formula at the heart of Schmitt's jurisprudence, namely, *auctoritas non veritas facit legem*. But this raises the large and complicated question: what can "truth" mean for such a rationalist conception of constituent power? In conclusion, I can only make a few quick suggestions of the steps to be taken.

The deepest reason why a democracy requires a constitution and a constituent politics is because the constitution (if understood to rest on the basic norm as hypothesis) necessarily opens the question: *what is law?* Given a constitution, this question can no longer be answered as follows: "to know what law is, see what the sovereign (or its representatives) says is law". As Dworkin has argued, the answer to "what is law?" leads to a search for the *principles* that lie "hidden" behind the constitutional laws (Dworkin 1986). I have argued elsewhere that these are principles of what Kant calls **reflective judgment** through which reason seeks to re-order particular laws into a system of freedom, that is, a political order in which the people are free and powerful.<sup>45</sup> They are distinguished from principles of determinative judgment, whereby reason begins from a specific law and applies it to a particular case. For me, the "opinions" on which all government is said to "rest" must take the form of **reflective judgments**, which, since they pertain to the question of "what is law?" can be said to make up the people's constituent power. In this sense, what a constitution "says" is law is never merely determined by those who have the legal competences (*potestas*) to determine law – what Schmitt calls the *auctoritas interpositio* – but also by all those who are affected by the application of law and those who may be excluded from the political process of legislation and yet retain the natural right to reflect publically on the constitution from principles of right.

Several contemporary republican theorists, ranging from Negri to Pettit and McCormick, have followed Machiavelli and Spinoza in arguing that the process of constituent power is one animated by contestation and resistance. But they have understood this contestation

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44 For a recent attempt to work this idea out in relation to Spinoza's *libertas philosophandi*, see (Skeaff 2018).

45 (Vatter 2011) and now (Vatter 2020b).



of constituted power as originating somehow outside of the system of law established by a legal constitution. However, if we follow the Spinozist idea of constituent power as immanent cause of the constituted system of law, then we can see this contestation and resistance at the level of popular opinion and reflective judgment as essential, not merely accidental, contribution to the autonomy of law. Indeed, contestation and resistance go hand in hand with a conception of law as based on truth, not authority, if the reference to “truth” is understood in the sense of the basic norm as hypothesis, in accordance with which every positive law stands open to a process of “testing” that requires that it be able to garner enough of the “settled convictions” of citizens behind it in some sort of “reflective equilibrium,” which in turn depends on the contestability, but not falsifiability, of the convictions at stake. It is in this way that the republican formula that “government rests on opinion” may be understood not simply as a formula whose meaning is cashed out in electoral politics, but first and foremost as a formula for constituent power itself.

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# **On Desire: Spinoza in Anti-Oedipus**

**Daniela Voss**

**Abstract:** Deleuze's and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) brings together politics and desire in an attempt to fuse political and libidinal economy. In this book, they advocate a notion of desire as a productive force or activity, as a striving, which is not conditioned by any particular object (an object that lacks), nor subdued to any prohibitive "law" or symbolic structure. While the impact of Nietzsche on their conception of desire has correctly been highlighted, a more detailed analysis of the importance of Spinoza is still missing. This paper pursues precisely this purpose: it seeks to highlight a particular, especially Deleuzian reading of Spinoza in Deleuze's and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*.

**Keywords:** Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, desire, Anti-Oedipus, semiotics, molecular unconscious, assemblage

Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* brings together politics and desire in an attempt to fuse political and libidinal economy,<sup>1</sup> putting the political analysis of desire and desiring-production at centre stage. The book advocates a notion of desire as productive force or activity, as striving, which is not conditioned by any particular object (an object that lacks) nor subordinated to any prohibitive "law" or symbolic structure. Deleuze and Guattari pay particular attention to the regulation of flows of desire in the capitalist form of social production and criticise psychoanalysis for colluding, intentionally or not, with capitalism in the production of docile subjects. While the book was welcomed by many on the political Left as a continuation of the spirit of May '68, it also elicited a number of critical responses, not surprisingly from psychoanalysts and psychiatrists, but also from philosophers, not least because of its unorthodox, anti-academic style of writing.

The notion of desire that Deleuze and Guattari put forward was generally seen as a blend of Nietzschean elements (by their detractors<sup>2</sup> as well as defenders), as Deleuze's affiliation with Nietzsche through his book *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1962) was well known, and despite his having published more on Spinoza even at that stage of his career. Distinguished Deleuze scholars such as Eugene Holland and Daniel Smith continue to associate the work with Nietzsche and his concepts of will-to-power and unconscious drives.<sup>3</sup> While this is not incorrect, only Holland's commentary points to Deleuze and Guattari's latent Spinozism in so far as they follow Althusser's interpretation of Spinozan

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1 Deleuze and Guattari 1996, p. 333.

2 See, for instance, Descombes 1982, pp. 173–5.

3 Holland 1999, and Smith 2007.

materialism as an alternative to Hegelian teleological philosophy of history.<sup>4</sup> Yet Holland primarily concentrates on the three great materialists of the last century – Freud, Marx and Nietzsche – for the purposes of his introduction to schizoanalysis.<sup>5</sup> While, once again, there is nothing wrong in this, the aim of this paper is to highlight certain Spinozan themes in Deleuze and Guattari's concept of desire. It must be said, however, that if there is a certain kind of Spinoza in *Anti-Oedipus* then it is the product of an idiosyncratic reading that does not claim to reconstruct a historically true figure. *Anti-Oedipus* is arguably even more eclectic than Deleuze's solo works in taking up certain isolated elements from other thinkers and rearranging them to produce something new. This reading of Spinoza, which is certainly not the comprehensive figure encountered in Deleuze's more detailed studies across three decades (in print and in seminars), can nonetheless offer some insight into the continuity of Deleuze and Guattari's ontological and political interests.

Deleuze's engagement with Spinoza's philosophy dates back to his secondary doctoral thesis, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, released in 1968, but composed from the late 1950s onward. In 1970 the first edition of his book *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* was published, which was then reedited in a modified and augmented version in 1981. Deleuze also gave several seminars on Spinoza throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Yet in *Anti-Oedipus*, centred on desire and desiring-production, Spinoza is mentioned only five times.<sup>6</sup> Deleuze clarifies his understanding of desire in relation to Spinoza, however, in an essay called "Dead Psychoanalysis: Analyse," which was published as a joint work with Claire Parnet in 1977. In so far as he contributed certain elements along with Nietzsche and Bergson to a philosophy of immanence, Spinoza was never far from Deleuze's mind, and it would hardly be extravagant to look for more of these elements in *Anti-Oedipus*.<sup>7</sup> Drawing on these Deleuzian sources, this paper seeks to emphasise certain Spinozist features of Deleuze and Guattari's notion of desire and take the comparison further than they themselves do.

The first section will focus on Spinoza's conception of desire, which refers to both mind and body and is conceived as a positive power of action. The next section will elaborate what could be called

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4 See Holland 1999, pp. 109–11.

5 Holland 1999, p. viii.

6 Deleuze and Guattari 1996, p. 28, 29, 276n, 309n, 327.

7 That Spinoza was part of their discussions also becomes apparent from Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus Papers*, in which Spinoza appears sporadically, often with references to Deleuze's book *Expressionism in Philosophy*. Guattari credits Spinoza for being a philosopher of the machine, or machinic composition of powers: "You can say that with Spinoza, there is a machinic assemblage of powers on a global level" (Guattari 2006, p. 263). To explore Guattari's take on Spinoza would still be an important desideratum of research, which unfortunately cannot be accomplished here.



Spinoza's intensive semiotics of signs. Following from this exposition, it will become clear that desire, at least in *Anti-Oedipus*, is always in a relation to an 'outside' and cannot be reduced to an internal drive or intrinsic force of life. In their own conception of desire Deleuze and Guattari formulate this idea of a necessary relation to an outside in terms of assemblage theory, which states that desire exists only as assembled or machined. In addition, they make the point that the creation of desire, even individual desire, always involves collective assemblages, and desire embraces the entire social field. The questions of how individual desires relate to one another and how they can form a composite individual is then discussed with regard to Spinoza's letter to Pieter Balling from July 20, 1664, and further elaborated under the notion of a "communication of unconscious." In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari point to this phenomenon in their analysis of the operations of a molecular unconscious. It will then be shown in what way Deleuze and Guattari's account of the workings of the unconscious—the three syntheses of connection, disjunction and conjunction—resonates with Spinozan ideas, even though it clearly has other sources. Finally, the last section raises the problem of how a politics can be outlined in terms of desire, and specifically asks the Spinozist question: how is it that repression is actually desired?

## I. Desire as the Essence of any Individual

Although the term 'desire' does not figure as prominently in Spinoza as the term 'conatus', it will be given preference here; indeed, it is possible to use both terms interchangeably. According to Spinoza, conatus relates to both mind and body together, and in this function, "when it [the striving] is related to the mind and body together, it is called appetite. This appetite, therefore, is nothing but the very essence of man, from whose nature there necessarily follow those things that promote his preservation" (E3P9S).<sup>8</sup> Importantly, Spinoza adds that "[b]etween appetite and desire there is no difference, except that desire is generally related to men insofar as they are conscious of their appetite. So *desire* can be defined as *Appetite together with consciousness of the appetite*" (E3P9S). Now if appetite can be called the individual's essence and there is no decisive difference between appetite and desire, it is possible to conclude that the very nature or essence of any individual is desire.

What role does consciousness play in the striving to persist in being? The mind, according to Spinoza, can aid the body's power of acting by imagining those things that can increase the power of action (E3P12). Indeed, Spinoza investigates the mechanisms of the mind, for

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8 Spinoza 1994. For citations to the *Ethics*, I follow the standard conventions which include the symbols "E" for *Ethics*, "Def" for definitions, "A" for axioms, "L" for lemmas, "P" for propositions, "C" for corollaries, "D" for demonstrations, "S" for scholia, "Ex" for explications, "Post" for postulates, "Pr" for prefaces, and "Ap" for appendixes.

instance, dissociations from chains of ideas that are connected with sadness, as well as associations with representations accompanied by joy. Yet it seems that in a certain sense the body's power to act can also be exercised on its own terms, without the addition of consciousness. There is a curious passage in which Spinoza refers to the actions of sleepwalkers, in order to illustrate what the body without the aid of a conscious mind can do. It seems that the example points to a non-reflexive activity of mind at the same time as an action of the body.

Although Spinoza does not speak of an unconscious we may invoke it here, since whatever affects the body is simultaneously registered as an idea of affection in the mind.<sup>9</sup> No matter how minute these bodily affections are, there will always be corresponding ideas in the mind. This is so because, for Spinoza, mind and body are the same thing, one considered under the attribute of thought, the other under the attribute of extension. There cannot be any interaction between mind and body; one cannot determine the other. Thus "*the mind cannot determine the body to motion, to rest or to anything else (if there is anything else)*" (E3P2), since the body can only be determined by bodily causes. So in Spinoza there is certainly no supremacy of the mind over the body. What passages like that about sleepwalkers show is that we can therefore conceive of the body as having a kind of agency in its own right, without necessarily referring to self-reflexive ideas at the level of conscious knowledge.

As Spinoza famously states: "No one has yet determined what the body can do";<sup>10</sup> and to those that dismiss the sufficient reasons of the body, Spinoza says that they must "know from experience that a great many things happen from the laws of Nature alone which they never would have believed could happen without the direction of the mind—such as the things sleepwalkers do in their sleep, which they wonder at while they are awake" (E3P2S). Spinoza seems to imply, without quite going so far as to state it openly, that there is a way of regarding behaviour for which sleepwalking is the norm, not the exception. We are all sleepwalkers even when we think, in other words. All actions, including "purposive" and creative actions, are determined at least to some degree by 'unconscious' thoughts that vary with respect to bodily affections and affects; or to put it differently, decisions of the mind and actions of the body are one and the same thing. Spinoza discards the notion of a free will that can arbitrarily make decisions as illusory:

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<sup>9</sup>What cannot be discussed here is the problem of coherence that the example of sleepwalkers poses, namely how to introduce in strictly Spinozist terms a conscious/unconscious distinction into the attribute of thought without violating the identity of the attributes. One would think that thought has to be taken from the start to be a matter of knowledge, univocal, and not subject to different ways of being.

<sup>10</sup> Deleuze cites this remark of Spinoza's over and over again in various texts.

So experience itself, no less clearly than reason, teaches that men believe themselves free because they are conscious of their own actions, and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined, that the decisions of the mind are nothing but the appetites themselves, which therefore vary as the disposition of the body varies. For each one governs everything from his affect; those who are torn by contrary affects do not know what they want, and those who are not moved by any affect are very easily driven here and there [...]. Those therefore, who believe that they either speak or are silent, or do anything from a free decision of the mind, dream with open eyes. (E3P2S)

The idea that our body possesses its own agency without supervenience, that we are determined in our actions by something we are not aware of—we are ignorant of the causes, as Spinoza puts it—is reminiscent of what Nietzsche says about the bodily self and its “great reason.”

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche claims that the body is the reason for our purposes and actions much more so than our conscious mind. He portrays the body as “the leading strings of the ego and prompter of its concepts.” And to the “despisers of the body” he says that “body am I through and through, and nothing besides; and soul is just a word for something on [sic] the body.”<sup>11</sup> The body expresses itself mainly as an aggregate of ‘forces,’ ‘drives’ or ‘instincts,’ in relation to which the conscious subject is nothing but a solicitous servant. According to Nietzsche, the free and sovereign subject is an illusion, since beneath consciousness there is only a struggle of competing drives. The drive that happens to be victorious will determine our ideas, values and actions. For Nietzsche, the victorious drive need not be the one that benefits our perseverance in being.

Anything that lives wants above all to *discharge* its strength—life itself is will to power—: self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent *consequences* of this. —In brief, here as everywhere beware of *superfluous* teleological principles! —such as the drive for self-preservation (for which we have Spinoza’s inconsistency to thank—)<sup>12</sup>

While Nietzsche seems right to dismiss a teleological interpretation of Spinoza’s conatus (which would indeed be inconsistent given Spinoza’s radical criticism of final causes), a more charitable reading would interpret conatus precisely as the continuous expression of one’s power

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11 Nietzsche 2006, p. 23.

12 Nietzsche 2002, p. 15 (chap. 1, para. 13).

of action without presupposing any particular goal.<sup>13</sup> This undirected nature of desire will be discussed later.

What should be noted here is that Spinoza's explanation of the way in which conatus or desire is determined can also be seen to have an advantage over one impression given by Nietzsche's account of unconscious internal drives: Spinoza's doctrine of affects and bodily affections has no need of the concept of instinct (which not only, like all power of action, spontaneously discharges itself, but can seem to do so in fixed ways) because desire is always determined in relation to an outside. The determination of the body occurs through the encounter with other bodies, signs and events. This determination takes the form of a series of external causes as shifting relations between bodily parts expressing at every moment a given intensive degree of power to affect and be affected. Nietzsche is the one who speaks of unconscious instincts and drives that could suggest a natural and spontaneous reality, in so far as instincts are commonly conceived as pre-structured. That said, Nietzsche denounces at the same time the moralisation of desire as directly related to a given social field. His psychological analyses, especially in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, show clearly how desires are motivated and shaped through (for instance) Christian values and moral ideas, which, instead of disclosing universal truths, conceal historical forces of power, at which point Spinoza and Nietzsche are very close indeed.

## II. An Intensive Semiotics of Signs

Desire, for Spinoza, cannot be defined through its relation to a particular object—as becomes apparent in the definition of desire as an individual's very essence. Desire has no definite direction; it is desire without an object.<sup>14</sup> What is it then that determines desire at any particular moment? As we have already seen, affections in which affects are implicated or enveloped play a fundamental role: "Joy and sadness are the desire, or appetite, itself insofar as it is increased or diminished, aided or restrained, by external causes" (E3P57D).

An affect, according to Spinoza, consists of a change in the power of action, either an increase or a decrease of power, depending on whether it is a joyful or sad affect. It always involves a passage from one bodily state to another, and these bodily affections arise from encounters with external causes. Now, it is important to note that these bodily affections or states are also expressed in the form of their corresponding

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<sup>13</sup> It seems that Deleuze had no qualms about reading Spinoza in the light of Nietzsche: he says of the first period of his work, which he dedicated to studies in the history of philosophy, that "it all tended toward the great Spinoza-Nietzsche equation" (Deleuze 1995, p. 135).

<sup>14</sup> As Deleuze discusses in *Expressionism in Philosophy*, an individual's desire does, however, equate to a fixed degree of power of action that is given as the essence of the finite mode. Any change of the power of action must occur within the fixed limits given by the eternal degree to which it participates in the power of God.

ideas. Ideas of affections are *signs*: as such they “indicate” the present constitution of our body and whether its power of action is increased or diminished. In his book *Expressionism in Philosophy*, Deleuze remarks that Spinoza distinguishes three types of signs: “indicative signs,” “imperative signs” and “revelatory signs,”<sup>15</sup> which all make up the first kind of knowledge.

An *indicative* sign marks the effect that an external body has on our own. Spinoza says that it is a confused or inadequate idea, because it does not truly express the nature either of our body or the body that caused the affection. The impression that results from the encounter and is recorded on our body is mixed and indicates the condition of our own body more than the nature of the external body (E2P16). When this indicative sign of natural perception occurs repeatedly, it is turned into a memory-sign. Spinoza claims that the process of recollection is not a purposive action of the mind: “it is not in the free power of the mind to either recollect a thing or forget [...] this decision of the mind which is believed to be free is not distinguished from the imagination itself, or the memory, nor is it anything beyond that affirmation which the idea [...] necessarily involves” (E3P2S).

The central point here seems to be that recollection, for Spinoza, is not a wilful act but rather the involuntary presentation of an idea that necessarily involves its affirmation. Although an idea of memory, like all ideas of imagination, is only partial and hence inadequate, it nevertheless possesses a positive or affirmative nature. In Spinoza’s system one cannot think negation or negativity. What seems false to us (such as inadequate ideas of the first kind of knowledge) is just the result of a limitation—in this case, a limited power of recognition. Thus it follows that indicative signs as well as memory signs have a fully positive nature: the sign is an idea of an affection; it carries its own affirmation with it. This is to say that there cannot be any falsity or negativity involved.

One might want to object as a kind of counter-example the case of a perceptive or imaginative idea, which seems to be proven wrong by a subsequent act of the understanding—Spinoza himself gives as an example the belief that the sun is about two hundred feet away from us—a belief that results from the way our body is affected by the sun. However, when we come to know the truth, that is, the true distance to the sun, the idea of our imagination has not been proven wrong. In fact, we still imagine the sun to be near us, only this imagination is outweighed and excluded by a much stronger idea, in this case the idea of the true distance to the sun. Ideas cannot indicate a negativity, non-being or lack; perceptive or imaginative ideas always express intensive degrees of power as actualised or materialised in bodies. The idea of an affection is not simply a mental image that can be produced at will: it is inseparable

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<sup>15</sup> Deleuze 1992, p. 181.

from the affection itself and necessarily associated with affects – *changes* in intensity or power.

Indicative signs or ideas of affections make up the first type of sign, which comprises perceptive ideas, imaginations and recollections. They all characterise a kind of knowledge that is confused and inadequate, provided by the senses and imagination. Spinoza calls this “the first kind of knowledge.” Apart from indicative signs, this first kind of knowledge also contains *imperative* and *revelatory* signs. Spinoza develops a notion of imperative and revelatory signs in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, published in 1670. There he raises the question of how the Hebrew state was able to stabilise and preserve its power over time. How did it succeed in moving the hearts of the common people to obedience and devotion? His answer suggests that it was a harsh discipline—a culture or cultivation as Nietzsche would say—that moved the Jewish people to obedience: the Hebrew state imposed a grid of rules and regulations that permeated the most private and intimate spaces of a person’s life.

For the people could do nothing without being bound at the same time to remember the law, and to carry out commands which depended only on the will of the ruler. For it was not at their own pleasure, but according to a fixed and determinate command of the law, that they were permitted to plow, to sow, to reap. Likewise, they were not permitted to eat anything, to dress, to shave their head or beard, to rejoice, or to do absolutely anything, except according to the orders and commandments prescribed in the laws.<sup>16</sup>

This discipline of bodies was effectuated and enforced by signs: imperative signs of the moral law and religious signs of revelation. These are signs that are deployed by an authority (the authority of Scripture, the word of the prophet) or by an institutional power (the church, the State). Imperative signs do not reveal any truth; they serve to strike our imagination and inspire in us the required submission. They are order-words or commandments.

Revelatory signs, in turn, serve as a kind of justification or warrant: what the prophet reveals about God’s commandments in Scripture is validated by a revelatory sign miraculously provided by God himself. As Spinoza explains: “No one knows, by nature, that he’s bound to obey God. This knowledge is something he can’t acquire by reason at all, but only by revelation, confirmed by signs.”<sup>17</sup> Imperative signs of moral law and religious revelation do not persuade the mind, they do not appeal to the understanding but to imagination. It is only because we do not know the

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<sup>16</sup> Spinoza 2016a, p. 146 (chap. 5, para. 30).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 292–3 (chap. 16, para. 53).



truth, we have no knowledge of true causes, that is, no adequate ideas, that we hold on to what the signs tell us that we should do. Imperative signs are inscribed on the body as memory-signs, in order to effectuate their rule and coercion. In the Hebrew state, Spinoza says, the Jewish people “were also bound to have on the doorposts, on their hands, and between their eyes, certain signs, which always reminded them of the need for obedience.”<sup>18</sup>

We can find an entire ‘intensive semiotic’ in Spinoza, according to which signs are considered as ideas necessarily associated with affects (changes in intensity or power) and, in the form of affections, with impressions or inscriptions on the body. The body is a *recording surface* of signs or chains of signs. Signs and affects determine relative changes in our conatus or power to act. Spinoza’s intensive semiotics together with his doctrine of affects can provide a more detailed picture of what determines the power of action (which, it needs to be admitted, is for Spinoza the mode of existence characterised by inadequate knowledge). It also helps us understand that Spinoza’s notion of desire is not to be understood as a spontaneous and intrinsic vital force or drive; it arises from the differential relation of signs and affects; it is a function of signs that always relate the individual to an ‘outside.’ We have to remember that at each moment affects and signs are the result of bodily encounters with a material and socio-political reality.

In relation to their own conception of desire, Deleuze and Guattari will say that desire exists only as *assembled* or *machined*: desire flows only within a determinate assemblage, when there is a connection to some external partial object or part-object (connective synthesis). It is the *encounter* that creates desire: something snaps into place and creates a flow, a new functionality or desiring-machine which did not pre-exist the encounter. Deleuze states in *Dialogues*:

We must describe the assemblage in which such a desire becomes possible, gets moving and declares itself. But never will we point to drives which would refer to structural invariants, or to genetic variables. Oral, anal, genital, etc.: we ask each time into which assemblages these components enter, not to which drives they correspond, not to which memories or fixations they owe their importance, nor to which incidents they refer, but with which extrinsic elements they combine to create a desire, to create desire.<sup>19</sup>

.....  
<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 146 (chap. 5, para. 30).

<sup>19</sup> Deleuze and Parnet 2002, p. 97.



Desire, according to Deleuze, is “constructivist, not at all spontaneist.”<sup>20</sup> He rejects the language of internal drives or the notion of the interiority of the subject. It is “the Outside where all desires come from.”<sup>21</sup> It has to be noted that this Outside is nothing transcendent. Desire flows on a plane of immanence. “We can always call it plane of Nature, in order to underline its immanence. But the nature-artifice distinction is not at all relevant here.”<sup>22</sup> Natural and artificial things are both fully part of the plane of immanence, since each thing is equally defined by the assemblage which it enters into, the functionality it sets into place and the flows it triggers. In the next section, I will show in what way this thought of a plane of immanence is at least in part inspired by Spinoza.

### III. The Construction of a Plane of Immanence

It is well known that Deleuze hails Spinoza for having thought the purest plane of immanence, uncompromised by any thought of transcendence. Spinoza upholds a monism of substance: “Except God, no substance can be or be conceived” (E1P14). All there is, is God or nature (*deus sive natura*). The divine substance is differentiated into infinitely many modes that constantly compose and decompose new relations. One might say that nature is a composition of myriad changing part-object relations that create individuals of different complexity. Each individual is composite: “the human body is composed of a great many individuals of different nature, each of which is highly composite” (E2Post1), and so is the human mind (E2P15). Sociabilities or communities can be regarded as individuals, inasmuch as they unite bodies that “communicate their motions to each other in a certain fixed manner” (E2L3Def). Last but not least, “the whole of nature is one individual, whose parts, that is, all bodies, vary in infinite ways, without any change of the whole individual” (E2L7S). “What is involved,” Deleuze states, “is no longer the affirmation of a single substance, but rather the laying out of a *common plane of immanence* on which all bodies, all minds, and all individuals are situated.”<sup>23</sup> Paradoxically, Deleuze argues that this plane of immanence is not simply given but has to be constructed.<sup>24</sup> It has to be constructed in the sense that we need to actively select and create assemblages that will adequately express it, and in doing so take hold of our power of action. Only if we allow for this possibility does a Spinozist ethics make sense.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., pp. 97–8.

<sup>23</sup> Deleuze 1988, p. 122.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 122–3.

The selection and construction of assemblages needs to take into account the kinetic dimension of an individual as expressing its affective capacity. From a kinetic perspective, each individual is “a complex relation between differential velocities, between deceleration and acceleration of particles. A composition of speeds and slownesses on a plane of immanence.”<sup>25</sup> From a dynamic perspective, an individual is defined by its essential capacity of affecting other bodies and of being affected by other bodies. Deleuze refers to the kinetic dimension of an individual as its (extensive) *longitude*, and to the dynamic dimension as its (intensive) *latitude*. Both longitude and latitude lay out the map of a body in relation to other bodies: it is a variable cartography that can constantly be altered, decomposed and recomposed. We cannot know in advance what composition of relations and affects we are capable of. As Deleuze says, “it is a long affair of experimentation, requiring a lasting prudence, a Spinozan wisdom that implies the construction of a plane of immanence or consistency.”<sup>26</sup> In the work with Claire Parinet, he adds that “even individually, the construction of the plane is a politics, it necessarily involves a ‘collective,’ collective assemblages, a set of becomings.”<sup>27</sup>

The political aspect of this is certainly present in Spinoza, in so far as he pursues the question under what conditions individuals enter into composition with one another and form a higher composite individual with a greater capacity or power. The problem remains one of desire: how can individuals connect their desire with other individuals so as to produce a more powerful group-individual or multitude? A group or multitude can of course emerge from some common passions, such as fear, feelings of resentment, or hope for personal benefits. Yet in this case individuals still remain enslaved by sad passions, which are after all what induces divisions among us in the form of exclusive disjunctions. One considers some individuals as similar to oneself (through psychic mechanisms of identification), other individuals remaining excluded. Nietzsche would speak of gregarious aggregates that define themselves through the mechanisms of initiation and exclusion; they are driven by reactive forces such as hate and resentment. In Guattarian terms, we would deal with a subjugated group, and the problem would then be how we can think of a subject-group. Spinoza considers the ideal case of a free and active multitude, which is guided by reason and the goal of a common good. However, given that in the *Ethics* he has demonstrated at length the weakness of reason in comparison to the power of passions, this ideal of a community of wise or rational beings seems very utopian. Spinoza realises that what has to enter the fray in support of reason

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

<sup>27</sup> Deleuze and Parinet 2002, p. 91.

are joyful passions and active affects (E4P37S1). In *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* Deleuze gives a detailed account of the ethical task of how to accumulate joyful passions through positive encounters and how to follow the signs of active affects through the mediation of common notions. In the next section, however, I want to consider the possibility of an immediate coupling of processes of desire, or of a direct communication between unconscious— in Deleuzian terms, the possibility of “becomings.”

#### IV. Communication between Unconscious

In a letter to his friend Pieter Balling from 20 July 1664, Spinoza considers the possibility of a direct yet unconscious communication between different processes of desire. He replies to a (lost) letter from Balling in which his friend tells Spinoza about the loss of his son to a fatal illness and how he seemed to have anticipated the tragic events in his dreams, although his son had still been in good health at that time. Balling asks Spinoza whether these dreams could have been an “omen” of what was to happen afterwards: his son’s illness and death. Spinoza replies that he is inclined to think that the groans Balling believed to have heard in his sleep were “not real groans” but only phantoms of the imaginations.

Surprisingly, he then concedes that “the mind can have a confused awareness beforehand of something that is to come. So it can imagine it as firmly and vividly as if such a thing were present to it.”<sup>28</sup> His explanation reads as follows:

For instance (to take an example like your case), a father so loves his son that he and his beloved son are, as it were, one and the same thing. And since [...] there must necessarily exist in Thought an idea of the affections of the essence of the son and what follows therefrom, and the father by reason of his union with his son is a part of the said son, the soul of the father must likewise participate in the ideal essence of his son, and in its affections and in what follows therefrom.<sup>29</sup>

Spinoza starts from the assumption that there is a special union between father and son, forged by love. Both their minds thus participate in the attribute of Thought in the same ideas and what follows from them. The father participates in the idea of affections that make up the essence of his son. This passage has been cited in secondary literature as quite extraordinary, because it makes the claim for a direct communication, or rather participation, of ideas or desires with one another in the case of love.

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<sup>28</sup> Spinoza 2002, pp. 803–4.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 804.

Spinoza does not take recourse to the affective mechanisms of imitation of affects (*imitatio affectuum*) or partial identification that he explains at length in the *Ethics*. The case of love is quite different from identification, inasmuch as it does not rely on the intermediary of imagination or the mediation of representation. In proposition 21 in Part IV of the *Ethics*, Spinoza explains that “he who imagines that what he loves is affected with pleasure or pain will likewise be affected with pleasure or pain, the intensity of which will vary with the intensity of the emotion in the object loved” (E4P21). There seems to be a direct determination or communication of the intensity of the pain or joy being felt by the beloved. The case that Spinoza discusses in the letter, however, is even more intricate, since the event that affects the son has not happened yet but is anticipated on an unconscious level by his father. The father participates in his son’s essence (i.e. his desire), as if they were one and the same individual.

Michèle Bertrand in her book *Spinoza et l’imaginaire* describes this special relation between father and son as follows:

Spinoza thus distinguishes the compassion resulting from love from that which results from identification. These affects do not differ qualitatively, but with regard to the process that allows them to arise in us. In the case of love everything that affects the beloved person also affects us immediately, to the extent that we form with this being a composite (*une communauté*), a new individual. [...] By contrast, in the case of identification, it is only through the mediation of an imaginary relation with the other that I feel a similar affect to his.<sup>30</sup>

Warren Montag, in his article “Who’s Afraid of the Multitude? Between the Individual and the State,” points to the same passages in Spinoza’s *Ethics* and the letter to Pieter Balling, and argues that there is a kind of affective transindividual becoming between father and son:

[T]he father/son couple possesses an affective unity: each participates in the affect or desire that marks their composition as a single individual whose actual essence is lived by them as desire, and this affect or desire cannot be apportioned to one or the other. Images fluctuate between them without proprietorship or fixed origin.<sup>31</sup>

.....  
30 Bertrand 1983, p. 123 (my translation, DV).

31 Montag 2005, p. 670.

Deleuze and Guattari also mention Spinoza's letter to Balling in *Anti-Oedipus* and suggest reading it as an example of the fundamental phenomenon of "communication of unconscious." <sup>32</sup> The reference occurs in the context of the problem of to what extent social repression penetrates the nuclear family and determines psychic repression, that is, the repression exercised by the Oedipus complex.

Deleuze and Guattari comment here that "it is the father who is first in relation to the child." <sup>33</sup> It is through the father and his pre-existing condition of social repression that the child is subsequently affected by psychic repression, and this is what the 'foretelling' of the dream involves. This process, according to Deleuze and Guattari, does not operate through transmission but through a communication of unconscious: "But this communication of unconscious does not by any means take the family as its principle; it takes as its principle the commonality of the social field insofar as it is the object of the investment of desire. In all respects the family is never determining, but is always determined." <sup>34</sup> What Deleuze and Guattari want to point to is a kind of interpenetration or direct communication between singularities (father and son) on the plane of immanence, on a molecular and unconscious level. This molecular and unconscious plane coexists with the social plane of organisation. The interlocking, or even blockages, of flows of desire constitute the field in which the individuation of objects and subjects, or rather ensembles and sub-ensembles of desiring-machines, take place.

Spinoza is very remote from this terminology, of course. From a Spinozist perspective, there is a total co-participation or mutual affection of essences within the attribute of Thought, and the attribute of Thought is nothing but an expression of the essence of infinite divine substance, God or nature. However, in Deleuze and Guattari's reading Spinoza's concept of nature becomes a plane of immanence, which is further specified as a plane constituted by molecular and unconscious relations between desiring-machines. What Deleuze and Guattari promise to do in *Anti-Oedipus* is to provide an account of the workings of this unconscious, of the syntheses of desire that take place on the plane of immanence, and to describe the differences between legitimate and illegitimate uses of these syntheses. Although these three syntheses can be linked to Kant, who delineates a transcendental field for the legitimate uses of the faculties and denounces any use that transgresses the set boundaries as illegitimate, the idea of syntheses that are legitimate and good for us, in contradistinction from those that are not, also connects to Spinoza. It is the latter who explains affective mechanisms according to laws of nature

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<sup>32</sup> Deleuze and Guattari 1996, p. 276.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 275.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 276.

and distinguishes those mechanisms that are most useful for increasing our power of action from those that are harmful and only separate us from what we can do.

## V. Deleuze and Guattari's Three Syntheses of Desire

Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of the different unconscious syntheses of desire, as elaborated in *Anti-Oedipus*, is on the whole very different from Spinoza's account of the mechanisms of affections and affects, and takes inspiration from a confrontation with psychoanalysis, but here I will be content to evoke certain Spinozist themes in the way they unfold.

### Connective Synthesis of Desire

Deleuze and Guattari refer to the first synthesis of desire as a connective synthesis that connects partial objects. The well-known example from the opening pages of *Anti-Oedipus* is the connection between an infant's mouth and the mother's breast.<sup>35</sup> Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the connective synthesis of desire is considerably influenced by Freudian notions of sexual energy, drive, psychic "investment" or "cathexis." However, it is important to note that Deleuze and Guattari do not understand desire as a mental or psychic energy but rather as a productive force of the mind *and* the body, and ultimately as part of the productive forces of nature itself. After citing from *Lenz*, the novella fragment written by Georg Büchner, they claim that the schizophrenic

does not live nature as nature, but as a process of production. There is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other and couples the machines together. Producing-machines, desiring-machines everywhere, schizophrenic machines, all of species life: the self and the non-self, outside and inside, no longer have any meaning whatsoever.<sup>36</sup>

The producing-machines that the schizo connects to during his stroll in nature are of different kinds: celestial machines, alpine machines, chlorophyll- or photosynthesis machines. "Everything is a machine,"<sup>37</sup> Deleuze and Guattari say, and nature is nothing but a process of production in general: "Nature = Industry, Nature = History."<sup>38</sup> In the same vein, Deleuze and Guattari insist that desire and labour are

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<sup>35</sup> As another example we could refer to the film *Claire's Knee* (1970) by Eric Rohmer, which shows us the connection between an eye and a knee, or a hand and a knee (Jérôme's obsession with Claire's knee).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

identical in nature, insofar as they are activities of production in general. Consequently, desiring-production is not categorically separated from social production, nor libidinal economy from political economy. "There is no such thing as the social production of reality on the one hand, and a desiring-production that is mere fantasy on the other."<sup>39</sup> In fact, Deleuze and Guattari will say that it was capitalism that created this split and constantly maintains it. Their endeavour will be to investigate the determinate conditions for this separation of desiring-production and social production and to overcome their difference in regime.

One could draw here a parallel to Spinoza. Not only does Spinoza claim that desire is identical with the power of action (with labour, if you will) but, what is more, that individual desire or *conatus* is part of the power of God or nature; according to Spinoza, there is no human essence that would set itself apart from nature in general. Nor is humankind defined by differences of species or genus that would reserve it a determinate place in a hierarchy of nature. Each human being is individuated by its degree of power; and the desire of each individual differs from the desire of another (E3P57D). Together they all participate in the power of God or nature, and there is nothing beside God or nature in Spinoza's immanent universe. Desire = power (*potentia*) = productive force of nature.

Humankind, as Spinoza emphasises, is an integral part of nature; the human or social world is not "in Nature as a dominion within a dominion" (E3Pre). For this reason, Spinozist ethics has nothing to do with morals, with transcendent laws or a divine election of humankind. "Good" is whatever is useful to us in preserving our being, what increases our power of acting, while "bad" is whatever is harmful to us, what diminishes or restrains our power to act. Finally, "the knowledge of good and evil is nothing but an affect of joy or sadness, insofar as we are conscious of it" (E4P8). Spinoza's analysis of affective mechanisms proceeds without any moral caveats; he promises to deduce human affects from definite causes, from laws of nature: "The affects, therefore, of hate, anger, envy, and the like, considered in themselves, follow with the same necessity and force of Nature as the other singular things. And therefore they acknowledge certain causes, through which they are understood, and have certain properties" (E3Pre). Human affects are themselves properties which pertain to the human condition "– not as vices of human nature, but as properties which pertain to it in the same way heat, cold, storms, thunder, etc., pertain to the nature of the air."<sup>40</sup> For Spinoza, the true object of an immanent ethics is a theory of affectivity, which considers affects as natural phenomena following laws of nature.

.....  
39 Ibid., p. 28.

40 Spinoza 2016b, p. 505 (chap. 1, para. 4).



His theory serves to account for the constitution of individual subjects, the determination of the conatus, as well as the formation and functioning of the social body. Spinoza's "anti-humanist" view can equally be found in Deleuze and Guattari insofar as they consider productive forces of nature as a whole, and desire and labor as derivatives of production in general.

### Disjunctive Synthesis of Recording

Deleuze and Guattari call the partial objects, between which connections are formed and desire flows, irreducible "ultimate elements" or "*molecular functions of the unconscious*."<sup>41</sup> These partial objects or part-objects are "really distinct things"; they are "disparate" meaning that they are not fixed in any pre-given qualifying relation (such as opposition, contradiction, resemblance). In other words, they are independent and not derivatives of one another. The relations between partial objects will in turn come to constitute, in being recorded or retained, what Deleuze and Guattari call the "body without organs." Not the partial objects themselves, but their relations, populate the body without organs as a virtual 'surface' with intensive frequencies and distances of one connection to another that feed back into the actual connections as they continue to be made. "The body without organs is the immanent substance, in the most Spinozist sense of the word; and the partial objects are like its ultimate attributes, which belong to it precisely insofar as they are really distinct and cannot on this account exclude or oppose one another."<sup>42</sup>

The concept of the body without organs (borrowed from Antonin Artaud) is difficult because it appears differently in different texts, as well as serving somewhat different functions. Moreover, in a dialogue with Claire Parnet, Deleuze admits that he and Guattari have often written on the same concept and later realised that they have not grasped it in the same way: a prime example is the concept of the body without organs.<sup>43</sup> In *Anti-Oedipus*, it appears that the body without organs is first of all a virtual plane of immanence that is constructed by means of retention of the connections between partial objects and that in turn regulates, as a kind of 'grid,' the production of desire (first synthesis of connection). In this way it inheres in all production as an immanent recording surface that retains joyful and painful connections for differential repetition.

Eugene Holland, in his commentary on *Anti-Oedipus*, explains the concept of the body without organs with reference to psychoanalytic conceptions: Freud's account of recording processes in the psyche—the

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<sup>41</sup> Deleuze and Guattari 1996, p. 324.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 327, see also p. 309n.

<sup>43</sup> Deleuze and Parnet 2002, 17.

psyche as a “mystic writing pad” on which mental images of previous objects of satisfaction are recorded<sup>44</sup>—and Lacan’s idea of the unconscious as a sign-system, organised as a synchronic differential structure like a language.<sup>45</sup> At the same time Holland points out that the Deleuzian and Guattarian account of “the sign-system constituted on the body without organs is not exclusively linguistic, and therefore not purely differential in the sense that Saussure insisted phonetic language is.”<sup>46</sup> Perhaps one might say that in Deleuze and Guattari’s ontology of semiotics, signs are also directly “material” in the sense that they can be read as impressions or inscriptions on the body without organs. We might think here of Nietzsche as well as of Spinoza, who says in the *Ethics*: “The human body can undergo many changes, and nevertheless retain impressions, or traces, of the objects [...], and consequently, the same images of things” (E3Post2). Recall that Spinoza also explained the impressions and inscriptions on the body as signs. His ethics deals with the question of how to escape or break with those connections that subjugate our power of action, that is, determinations through imagination and sad passions (in other words, indicative signs of pain and sadness, imperative signs, revelatory signs).

In fact, the body without organs has this double function: recording the connections between partial objects by means of signs and sign-chains, as well as breaking with established connections and freeing the body to establish new connections. The body without organs is also a force of anti-production: it not only attracts desiring-machines (i.e., active connections made by productive desire) but also repels them. “Everything stops dead for a moment, everything freezes in places—and then the whole process will begin all over again.”<sup>47</sup> Holland argues that the force of anti-production is Deleuze and Guattari’s transformation of the Freudian notion of the death instinct.<sup>48</sup> Deleuze and Guattari criticise the idea of a death instinct (Thanatos) that is opposed to a life instinct (Eros), manifests itself in compulsory repetition of the same, and finally tends towards inert matter. Death, they say, is not a qualitatively distinct drive opposed to life, and “it is absurd to speak of a death desire that would presumably be in qualitative opposition to the life desires.”<sup>49</sup> Rather, they consider death an internal element of life; death or anti-production is not a transcendent principle coming from without, but is diffused throughout the plane of immanence and involved in becoming as the very reversibility of composition and

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44 Holland 1999, p. 26.

45 Ibid., p. 29.

46 Ibid., p. 31.

47 Deleuze and Guattari 1996, p. 7.

48 Holland 1999, p. 27, 28.

49 Deleuze and Guattari 1996, p. 329.

decomposition. They claim that there is both a model and an experience of death in the unconscious: "The experience of death is the most common of occurrences in the unconscious, precisely because it occurs in life and for life, in every passage or becoming, in every intensity as passage or becoming."<sup>50</sup>

We can discern here a Spinozist theme in Deleuze and Guattari's revising of the Freudian notion of the death instinct, in rendering death an internal moment within life itself as a force of anti-production within production: decomposition, in Spinoza's term. Bertrand in her book on Spinoza develops numerous parallels between Spinoza and Freud but also points to the most decisive difference: in the Spinozist economy of affects there is no place for a death instinct; an opposition between Eros and Thanatos cannot exist.<sup>51</sup> On the contrary, death can be considered immanent to life in as much as relations of parts are constantly composed and decomposed. We can thus find something akin to an internal model of death in Spinoza. This may sound unlikely, given that in Book Three, Propositions 4 to 10, Spinoza emphasises that death and destruction can only result from external causes and never be internal to a mode. It is true that moments of decomposition and destruction of the constitutive relations of a mode have external causes. These causes have immediate effects on a mode's life in the sense that it undergoes a transformation.

However, radical transformation can take place even while the body keeps on living. In fact, the transformation of the human body into a corpse is just one variant. This is to say that the exterior appearance of the body can be maintained, while in reality an internal transformation has taken place: a mutation of the *characteristic form* of relation, i.e., the *ratio* of movement and rest, between bodily parts.<sup>52</sup> As Spinoza puts it in the Scholium to Proposition 39 in Part IV:

I dare not deny that—even though the circulation of the blood is maintained, as well as the other [signs] on account of which the body is thought to be alive—the human body can nevertheless be changed into another nature entirely different from its own. For no reason compels me to maintain that the body does not die unless it is changed into a corpse.

And, indeed, experience seems to urge a different conclusion. Sometimes a man undergoes such changes that I should hardly have said he was the same man. I have heard stories, for example, of a Spanish poet who suffered an illness; though he recovered, he

.....  
50 Ibid., p. 330.

51 Bertrand 1983, p. 89.

52 Moreau argues that what we can find in Spinoza is an "ethics of mutation" (*une éthique de la mutation*). Moreau 2007, p. 7.

was left so oblivious to his past life that he did not believe the tales and tragedies he had written were his own. He could surely have been taken for a grown-up infant if he had also forgotten his native language.

If this seems incredible, what shall we say of infants? A man of advanced years believes their nature to be so different from his own that he could not be persuaded that he was ever an infant, if he did not make this conjecture concerning himself from [NS: the example of] others. (E4P39S)

Everyday experience shows us that there is a becoming-adult of the child, but also the reverse process: the possibility of becoming a child in adult form, to forget one's language and no longer be capable of recognising one's former identity. Is this just a marginal phenomenon, a phenomenon of madness that fascinated Spinoza?

Warren Montag points to the fact that among Spinoza's friends there were two, Albert Burgh and Nicholas Steno, "who, after sharing Spinoza's project of attempting to live according to the dictates of reason alone, suddenly and unforeseeably converted to Catholicism while visiting Italy."<sup>53</sup> Both wrote letters to Spinoza reproaching him for being deceived by the illusion of reason. Spinoza's response to his friend Burgh expresses his astonishment and the fact that he "could hardly believe" Burgh's radical transformation, against which he fears no rational argument will have any effect. Spinoza realised that the person he had once known had vanished and made place for "a fanatic who was motivated not by reason but by fear, who embraced all the mysteries, miracles and supernatural phenomena that the Church served up to the faithful, and who rejected rational demonstration."<sup>54</sup> In short, Spinoza as well as Deleuze and Guattari allow for life-altering processes of becoming, of becoming-other: new connections between partial objects, new assemblages of desiring-production that leave no identity in place. The interruption and suspension of established connections can be liberating and give way to a new becoming, or can ensnare a person in a narrower and more reactionary assemblage of desiring-machines.

The conception of "internal death" and becoming is crucial for Deleuze and Guattari. It provides the answer to the question why capitalism, which essentially seeks to incite desire to invest its very infrastructure, is at the same time maximally distinguished from desiring-production.<sup>55</sup> As Deleuze and Guattari explain in the fourth chapter of *Anti-Oedipus*, capitalism trains us to concentrate only on the productive

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53 Montag 1999, p. 35.

54 Ibid., 36.

55 Deleuze and Guattari 1996, p. 335.

aspect of life and no longer allows us to see death and anti-production as something internal to life itself. In the way that we live our lives we try to enhance our active productive forces and exclude elements of anti-production (the discharge of pleasure, gratification, pure expenditure, excess), or at least we try to subject the forms of anti-production to a rigid self-mastery. Anti-production is subordinated to production and has no other function than to keep the wheels of industry turning. It is in capitalism, Deleuze and Guattari argue, that death as immanent to life is misunderstood and turned into a death instinct: death appears a disaster or tragedy, clearly outside the productive machinery of life. Capitalism clings to a perverted vision of life, where life is shorn of its internal relation to death.<sup>56</sup> At the same time, capitalism sees itself as permanent, not as transient. The unleashing of death becomes a constant threat on the horizon and needs to be repressed. The Freudian notion of the death instinct is thus the natural ally of capitalism:

The death instinct is pure silence, pure transcendence, not givable and not given in experience. This very point is remarkable: it is because death, according to Freud, has neither a model nor an experience, that he makes of it a transcendent principle [...] We say, to the contrary, that there is no death instinct because there is both the model and the experience of death in the unconscious.<sup>57</sup>

### **Conjunctive Synthesis of Consumption-Consummation**

The third synthesis, the conjunctive synthesis of consumption-consummation, accounts for the production of subjectivity. A subject is not simply given (nor are objects), and desire cannot be understood as an intentional relation between a subject and an object. Rather, there is desiring-production and the subject only emerges as an effect—“produced as a residuum alongside the machine, as an appendix, or as a spare part adjacent to the machine.”<sup>58</sup> The subject is constituted through the unconscious syntheses of desire: the connective syntheses that become recorded on the body without organs as a surface of the co-existence of disjunctive ‘options’ are in turn re-selected exclusively, i.e. in ways that include certain connections and exclude others ‘globally,’ to produce a subject (and object). However, this does not mean that the subject has a fixed identity, for the process is ongoing. As Deleuze and Guattari say, it is “*defined* by the states through which it passes”: “the subject is born of each state in the series, is continually reborn of the following state that determines him at a given moment, consuming-

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<sup>56</sup> Holland 1999, p. 96.

<sup>57</sup> Deleuze and Guattari 1996, p. 332.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

consummating all these states that cause him to be born and reborn (the lived state coming first, in relation to the subject that lives it)."<sup>59</sup> Instead of speaking of a subject, it would indeed be more appropriate to speak of processes of subjectivation, of decomposing and recomposing subjectivity in accordance with the connections selected. The idea of a sovereign subject associated with the ideas of a free will and self-mastery is an illusion. As Spinoza says, "men are deceived in that they think themselves free [NS: i.e., they think that, of their own free will, they can either do a thing or forbear doing it], an opinion which consists only in this, that they are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined" (E2P35S).

As we have already seen, Spinoza claims that humans are determined by affects and a regime of signs, always in relation to an 'outside.' While a body continues living, it can acquire a completely different nature. A person can be transformed into another that bears no resemblance to the former. For all these reasons, we cannot say that desire is internal to a subject, but rather that desiring-production determines subjectivity as its effect. Furthermore, desire exists only in a particular assemblage, composed by connections with partial objects and always threatened by decomposition. As Deleuze explains in the dialogue "Dead Psychoanalysis: Analyse," Spinoza conceives a plane of immanence that is populated only by non-personal individuations, singularities or hecceities, that is, relations of motion and rest, speed and slowness (*longitude*) as well as degrees of power or intensity (*latitude*). The formation of subjects and objects is only secondary, an after-effect resulting from the unconscious processes of desire (connections, disjunctions and conjunctions).

Far from presupposing a subject, desire cannot be attained except at the point where someone is deprived of the power of saying I. Far from directing itself towards an object, desire can only be reached at the point where someone no longer searches for or grasps an object any more than he grasps himself as subject.<sup>60</sup>

## VI. Why do People Desire their own Repression?

This comparison between the Spinozist notion of desire and Deleuze and Guattari's account of desiring-production would be incomplete if we did not turn to the problem of the relationship between desire and the social field. Deleuze and Guattari actually call it the "fundamental problem of political philosophy [...] precisely the one that Spinoza saw so clearly."<sup>61</sup>

.....  
59 Ibid.

60 Deleuze and Parnet 2002, p. 89.

61 Deleuze and Guattari 1996, p. 29.

In the *Theological-Political Treatise* Spinoza raised it in the following terms:

The greatest secret of the monarchic rule, and its main interest, is to keep men deceived, and to cloak in the specious name of Religion the fear by which they must be checked, so that they will fight for slavery as they would for their survival, and will think it not shameful, but a most honorable achievement, to give their life and blood that one man may have a ground for boasting.<sup>62</sup>

Spinoza directs his criticism against those authorities (the State, the Church) who under the pretext of religion abuse their power over the hearts and minds of the people in order to conscript them in the assemblage of their own desire. He specifically confronts clergymen driven by a “great desire to administer the sacred offices,” by “sordid greed and ambition.” As a consequence, “the temple itself became a Theater, where one hears, not learned ecclesiastics, but orators, each possessed by a longing, not to teach the people, but to carry them away with admiration for himself, to censure publicly those who disagree, and to teach only those new and unfamiliar doctrines which the common people most wonder at.”<sup>63</sup> While they only pay lip service to Scripture, they disseminate at the same time credulity and superstition, hatred and violence. In the *Theological-Political Treatise* Spinoza suggests as a solution to this situation of social oppression the elimination of ignorance. His proposed solution is less interesting than the problem itself, since he poses the problem of social oppression in terms of desire.

“Why did the masses desire fascism?”<sup>64</sup> Deleuze and Guattari credit Wilhelm Reich with having rediscovered this fundamental problem first raised by Spinoza, yet they claim that Reich failed to answer it appropriately. He maintained the duality between the objective and the subjective, the real and the irrational, and sought an answer “by invoking the ideological, the subjective, the irrational, the negative, and the inhibited.”<sup>65</sup> He fell short of what Deleuze and Guattari call a “materialist psychiatry”, and his main shortcoming was not to have realised that desire is part of the social infrastructure. “We maintain that the social field is immediately invested by desire, that it is the historically determined product of desire.”<sup>66</sup> In other words, desiring-production is

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<sup>62</sup> Spinoza 2016a, p. 68 (Preface, para. 10).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 70 (Preface, para. 15).

<sup>64</sup> Deleuze and Guattari 1996, p. 345.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 29.



always contained in a social infrastructure, either becoming fixated there or liberated as an abstract flow.

It could be said that Spinoza's solution in the *Theological-Political Treatise* suffers from the same weakness as Reich's: Spinoza believes that by attacking prejudice and destroying ignorance he can contribute to the preservation of the Dutch Republic. However, the historical events that were to come—the overthrow of the Republicans and the murder of the grand pensionary Johan de Witt—proved him wrong. It is due to these historical events, which left Spinoza deeply affected, that a decisive shift from the *Theological-Political Treatise* to the *Political Treatise* can be discerned. The Enlightenment view of social change gave way to “the standpoint of the mass”<sup>67</sup> on politics and the state. The concept of the multitude casts off its pejorative sense of the vulgar (*vulgus*), that is, the unlearned, superstitious and savage crowd, which is fearsome if it is not made to fear. Instead Spinoza considers the multitude as a real power in politics, whose power in the state needs to be restored. Perhaps he intuitively that liberation from servitude will be collective or will not be. This is a conclusion that he nevertheless hesitates to draw explicitly.<sup>68</sup>

Spinoza analysed the secret of monarchic rule, or despotism in general, which has to be sought in the regime of desire that it establishes: the despot's ability to make others move and align their desire with his own. Deleuze and Guattari in their final analysis of desiring-production turn to capitalism, a system of despotism that is all the more pernicious in so far as it operates without a despot; it gives free reign to an axiomatic that produces a world of Oedipal subjects separated from what they can do, and a multitude alienated from its supreme power (a subjugated group instead of a subject-group). They, too, perceive the fundamental political problem in terms of desire but they draw the conclusion that Spinoza was hesitant toward: there can be no individual liberation from psychic repression that is not part of a collective liberation from social oppression. In this sense, *Anti-Oedipus* is indeed “a book of ethics”<sup>69</sup> as Foucault states in his Preface—an ethics, however, that does not aim at a community of wise and rational men such as Spinoza envisages in the *Ethics*, but at a becoming-revolutionary.

## Conclusion

This article started by asking what Spinozist themes in Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* there might be. They will not be revisited unnecessarily here. Instead, it can be observed that in a certain sense the argument moved in a circle because the figure of Spinoza that was

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67 Balibar 1994, p. 5.

68 Cf. Montag 1999, p. 36.

69 Deleuze and Guattari 1996, p. xiii.

uncovered emerged from what was already a particular interpretation of Deleuze's, further skewed in view of the nature of the *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* project. The Spinoza that came to the fore in this article was thus not so much the rationalist (or rationalist mystic) who seeks the means to increase adequate knowledge of the singular essences of things and of God, in order ultimately to increase the part of the soul that is eternal, although Deleuze certainly pays great attention to this aspect elsewhere, and it can hardly be dismissed. It rather consisted in a selective amplification of those aspects of Spinoza directed at the level of external parts and their relations, which considers humans as integral parts of nature, driven by desires and affected by signs, always in relation to external forces that compose and decompose bodies. This circularity and selectivity suggests that instead of asking what is Spinoza for Deleuze and Guattari, the question can equally well be posed in reverse: what are Deleuze and Guattari for Spinoza—a Spinoza that would be like a body without organs from which to construct a way forward today?<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> My thanks to Max Lowdin for his valuable comments and suggestions.

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

**Caroline Williams**

**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.<sup>1</sup>

### 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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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<sup>1</sup> Here I will draw upon the some of the arguments presented in Williams, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Macherey, 1998

<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.'<sup>9</sup>

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.'<sup>10</sup> Althusser thus writes of the need for '...every philosophy to make a detour via other philosophies in order

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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].<sup>11</sup> 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'.<sup>12</sup> 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'.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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"*'.<sup>16</sup> 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*.<sup>17</sup> 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.'<sup>18</sup> 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.'<sup>19</sup>

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.

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<sup>16</sup> Balibar 1992, p.37.

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

<sup>18</sup> Balibar 1992, p.50.

<sup>19</sup> 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,<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup> 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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<sup>23</sup> 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.

<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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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<sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> 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.'<sup>27</sup> 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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<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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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<sup>28</sup> 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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# **Interview with Pierre Macherey: Spinoza Today**

**Agon Hamza &  
Frank Ruda**

**Let's begin with a rather personal question. Can you tell us some details about the history of your engagement with Spinoza? Does it date back to the seminars with Louis Althusser at the École Normale Supérieure (ENS), or does it precede it? What was it in Spinoza that affected you?**

**Pierre Macherey:** In October 1960, at the beginning of my third year of study at the École Normale Supérieure, which I had entered in 1958, I went to see Canguilhem, whose classes I had been following diligently for several years (it is from these classes that I owe a large part of my philosophical training), to ask him to direct my master's degree, with the proposed subject "Philosophy and Politics in Spinoza." I had previously spoken to Althusser, who was officially monitoring the work of the ENS students enrolled in philosophy as an *agrégé répétiteur* (or 'caïman' in the jargon used in the establishment): it was he who advised me to direct my work towards the 'political' aspect of Spinoza's work. This topic had not been dealt with by the French commentators of Spinoza, and presented an opportunity for me to explore an almost untouched field, which was particularly exciting for a novice student.

My interest in Spinoza was established, and dated back to my years of study at the lycée, then at the university, where I attended, in 1958, the courses of an extremely energetic, passionate, and convincing person who was a lecturer with Vladimir Jankélévitch, Dina Dreyfus (she was Lévi-Strauss's first wife, the one who had accompanied him on the expeditions recounted in his book *Tristes Tropiques*). As part of the preparation for the certificate of "Moral and Political Philosophy" for the Bachelor of Philosophy, she gave me the first introduction to the demonstrative network of the geometrical structure followed in the *Ethics*; for her, Spinoza was not a more or less well-crafted package of general ideas to be glanced over (that was mainly how it was taught at the time, in a brief and cursory way), but a demanding and rigorous thought experiment, a difficult and complex journey, which needed to be followed word by word, as one later learned to do systematically by following the lessons of Gueroult (whose major works on Spinoza were published in 1968, and they completely changed the way Spinoza was read in France, by paying close attention to the detail of the texts and to the issues of reasoning behind them). Thanks to her, I understood that Spinoza's philosophy is not a doctrine alongside others but rather represents a different way of doing philosophy.

This idea was confirmed by Althusser, who was also convinced of the singular character of the tight dynamic of reflection set in motion by Spinoza, who, in his eyes represented a real turning point in the history of philosophy. During my first years of university studies, I had also been struck by the teachings of Deleuze (then a lecturer in the history of philosophy at the Faculté des Lettres under F. Alquié). These

courses influenced me in a way that I could not have imagined. But at the time he was not teaching on Spinoza (I had unforgettable classes on Nietzsche and Kant), and it was only later, when he published his thesis on Spinoza and the problem of expression, that I learned that he was devoting special attention to him. Spinoza's standout philosophical contribution was, moreover, at the center of the discussions he had with Althusser in 1965, some of which I later witnessed. At first, my proposal for a master's degree was not well-received: Canguilhem, who was known for his difficult character, got angry and told me: "You're making fun of me, I don't know anything [about Spinoza]!" (his official specialization was in the history of science and epistemology). But he finally agreed. I understood afterwards that what convinced him of the merits of my approach and his decision to support it was precisely my insistence on the political aspect of Spinoza's thought, which had been neglected until then. Canguilhem did not expressly adhere to any system of thought. He was neither Platonist, nor Aristotelian, nor Cartesian, nor Kantian, nor anything of that kind, but was interested in all of them freely on the condition that they were "true philosophy."

Behind the name of Spinoza one finds that of Cavaillès. The latter had been at the origin of Canguilhem's commitment during the war against the Vichy regime and the German occupation, and was for him a model of thought and action, as he explained in the commemorative writings he had devoted to him. Yet Cavaillès expressly declared himself to be a 'Spinozist,' including his philosophy of mathematics, which was partly phenomenological. Consequently, it was the phrase "philosophy-and-politics" (whose formulation I owed to Althusser) that caught Canguilhem's attention: he no doubt saw in it a kind of projection or extension of Cavaillès' militant approach, a reference that for him was not formally academic but was at the heart of his own philosophical attitude.

The year during which I prepared this work (which consisted of a hundred-page dissertation) was very studious and was an opportunity for me to cross a threshold in my philosophical training. It was also politically restless; it was the time of the OAS, of the final upheavals of the Algerian War, which were particularly violent during the first years of the Gaullist regime. I was very active, and it was difficult to reconcile research work with this engagement, but I managed to do so as best I could, and, at the same time, I found myself right in the middle of 'philosophy and politics,' in the very heart of the matter, which Canguilhem, on the contrary, had understood and had not disapproved of. It was also in that year that I met Étienne Balibar, with whom I later worked with. He had just entered the ENS and immediately shared my keen interest in Canguilhem's teaching, which he also began to follow closely (two years later, he prepared a master's thesis on "The idea of work in Marx," also supervised by Canguilhem). Canguilhem followed my work quite closely, which at the time was unusual for a 'mandarin' at the Sorbonne: generally, his



colleagues looked down on their students' work from a great distance and were careless and condescending. By contrast, he advised me with increasing benevolence, and was happy with the result I had achieved, which encouraged me very much and was decisive for the continuation of my studies.

I don't remember Althusser particularly helping me in the realisation of this work, for which he had only given me the initial idea: that year he was often absent for health reasons, a chronic problem with him which only got worse later on. I did not enter into a close working relationship with him until two years later, after I had successfully passed the *agrégation* in philosophy (Canguilhem was on the jury): this result, which was far from being a given as it was a particularly selective examination, allowed me to get an additional year of study at the ENS, a year completely free of any obligation and thus devoted to free research. When Althusser was present, he took the enrolled students in philosophy very seriously, he 'prepared' them, he advised them, he gave a few lectures, he corrected essays in his own very original and stimulating way, but that was as far as it went, and I don't remember having any real in-depth discussion with him before the start of the 1962 school year, i.e., at the beginning of my fifth and last year as a student at the ENS, which I left in 1963 to do my military service at the Prytanée de La Flèche (in the very place where Descartes had been a student of the Jesuits!). Étienne Balibar and I had spent part of the summer preparing a translation of Engels' "Outline of a Critique of Political Economy," which was then unpublished in French. At the beginning of the school year, we went to his office to show him the results of our work, and from then on, everything accelerated. We suggested that he organise a cycle of studies on Marx, something that had never been done in France in a university context. He was struck by the fact that a request of this kind was made by students in training, because it coincided with a desire he had had for a long time, but which had never materialised. This led to a series of seminars, one of which in particular was devoted to the young Marx, which launched the collective work which culminated in the two volumes of *Reading Capital*, which was followed in the ensuing years by a "Philosophy Course for Scientists," held at the ENS, which had a very large audience in 1967. At that time, I had thought to prepare a thesis on Marx (I don't remember exactly what subject I had proposed specifically, but it concerned the method of reasoning at work in *Capital*, and therefore dialectics). It would have been directed by J. Hyppolite, the director of the School, who was himself very close to Canguilhem and with whom Althusser had a very close relationship: but this project, which had been accepted in principle, was not followed up. At the time, Althusser advised people who were close to him not to enter the institutional university game, and therefore not to prepare a thesis: he himself did not defend one until about ten years later at the University of Amiens, in accordance with a procedure

known as "*sur travaux*", i.e., without a main subject, a procedure which had just been introduced in France.

I had thus temporarily put Spinoza aside, but he remained in the background of my preoccupations and above all of those of Althusser, who thought that the elements of Marx's philosophy, a philosophy that Marx himself had not elaborated and which remained to be done, were to be sought in Spinoza, provided, of course, that the concepts were reworked and the content nourished with the knowledge later acquired in new fields, essentially in the history of science, psychoanalysis, anthropology, political economy (rethought from a critical perspective), and, first and foremost, with the political experience linked to workers' struggles. Ten years later, I returned to working on Spinoza whereby I prepared, on the basis of lectures I had given at the university where I was then an assistant, my book "Hegel or Spinoza" which, in 1979, was one of the last titles published by Althusser in his *Théorie* collection published by Maspero. At that time, the practices of collective work that Althusser had initiated, and which were one of his main contributions for those who had continued to follow him, were no longer in use: the political and intellectual context had completely changed, with the arrival of the "new philosophers," "les nouveaux philosophes," as well as a renewed interest in the philosophy of human rights from a humanist and legalist perspective. In this context, to be considered 'Althusserian' was not a compliment but rather a stigma.

You ask me if my early orientation towards Spinoza led me to Althusser. This was undoubtedly one of the essential reasons for our agreement, especially when we realised that it was possible to attach it to broader issues, less narrowly doctrinal and academic. Althusser used to say: we must try to do philosophy differently, and he felt that the passage through Spinoza made this possible. I say: "passage through Spinoza," because the goal was never to settle on some closed, or self-sufficient theoretical system, it was, and I take this image from Deleuze, to use Spinoza as an optical instrument through which we could see things in greater detail, a move which had not yet captured the attention of professional philosophers.

**The debate between Spinoza and Hegel is quite overdetermined and charged, especially when it comes to questions of politics and the state. Maybe one way of addressing it is to state that for Spinozists, the division between philosophy and politics can be set out from within philosophy itself, in terms of accepting and identifying the autonomy of politics. Hegelians on the other hand would argue that the very concept of reason forces philosophy to admit that it cannot make normative demands on politics, but that problems are historically posed and solved—to**

**give this Hegel a Marxist twist—by politics itself. This means that politics operates by constantly struggling with the maintenance, as it were, and reconstitution of its own autonomy, without having another instance in view which could do the work for it. It seems to us that the question between these two different emphases does not so much lead to an antagonism in the interpretation of Marx, as it seems to be a matter of relocating the question: from where does one stage and posit or declare the autonomy of (a Marxist or other form of) politics? This is to say that it is either from the side of philosophy or from that of politics itself – or maybe one has to do both, but in very different ways. The question that is at stake between Spinozist and Hegelian forms of political thought seems thus to be the following: from which position does one speak about politics? Would you agree with such a characterization (and please feel free to harshly criticize our account)?**

**PM:** When I prepared my book *Hegel or Spinoza*, the basic source was provided by the many passages in Hegel's works devoted to Spinoza, a philosopher to whom Hegel attributed exceptional importance (Spinoza was the closest to him, but also the one who, as he sensed, challenged certain aspects of his own system of thought). I was surprised by the fact that he never referred to the political aspects of his thought: yet he must have been familiar with the *Theological-Political Treatise* (which he had dealt with in 1802, in Jena, when he had collaborated in the preparation of the German edition of Spinoza's works under the supervision of his colleague Paulus<sup>1</sup>). He was not the only one in his time to make this astonishing omission: it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that importance was attached to this aspect of Spinoza's thought, which had been considered marginal, almost anecdotal, and practically ignored for reasons that remain to be explained. This is very surprising, if only because of the abundance of writings in which Spinoza, in obvious connection with his philosophical positions of a strictly speculative nature, addressed political and social problems (the entire second part of *Theological-Political Treatise*, the *Political Treatise*, not to mention the many passages in the *Correspondence* in which he reacts to the events that marked the history of Holland during the 17th century). One of the characteristic features of Spinoza's approach is precisely his constant concern with questions pertaining to power, servitude, public liberties, community life, and citizenship, which he tackles by using notions that he has put to the test of philosophical reflection, thus giving them a rational

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<sup>1</sup> Lukac 1983, p. 127

foundation. To demonstrate his originality in this regard, we need only to contrast him to Descartes, to whom he owes a great deal in other aspects, but who believed that it is best for a philosopher, for reasons of prudence, to refrain from intervening in any way in matters of this kind. Of course, Spinoza was not the only philosopher of the classical era to think philosophy and politics together, nor was he the only one to have adopted the posture of what could be called a "philosopher in the city," as someone concerned with the formal, and yet to be determined, possibilities of the city's existence. . Hobbes, to name but one, was also a philosopher of this type, though his thought followed a process that was exactly the opposite of Spinoza's (his political thought was isolated to the point of imagining that it was completely self-sufficient, and it took a long time for people to realise or to remember that Hobbes also had a metaphysics, a physics, a logic, a theory of knowledge, a theology, etc.). But it can be argued that, in his time, Spinoza went even further in the effort to link philosophy and politics: he was not content to reflect on politics from a distance, to theorise about it, but rather he invested himself in its practice to the point of assuming on certain occasions, in his own way, an almost militant attitude. In any case, this is how he was seen by a number of his contemporaries, who attributed to him, in an atmosphere of scandal, the figure of a rebel, an opponent, especially after the secrecy was broken that had secured the anonymous publication of the *Theological-Political Treatise* in 1670.

Hegel did not take this into account, and perhaps, even consciously or unconsciously, denied it. This is one of the most singular aspects of his disagreement with Spinoza, for he too had strongly perceived that politics was not an external matter for philosophy, which could at best be considered from a distance, in a disengaged, indifferent, neutral way. Their political positions were undoubtedly at odds: Hegel's conception of the state and its relationship to civil society led him to be a defender, even an apologist, of constitutional monarchy in the more or less liberalized forms offered by the English model; whereas Spinoza, who was extremely original in his time, which made him immediately suspicious of all the dominant tendencies, and thus a thinker of democracy, which was understood by him not as a separate regime, an institutional form subject to particular legal rules, but as a kind of deaf impulse, a "conatus," which is at the origin of all social life that persists in unequal degrees of power within the various formations of state, including those which, in their form, seem furthest from democracy. By schematizing to the extreme, one could argue that Hegel was a thinker of *potestas* (which led him to see in the State "God on earth", the objective realisation of Spirit), whereas Spinoza was a thinker of *potentia*. Its immanent dynamic runs with greater or lesser intensity through every system and organisational mode of state power and, one might say, deconstructs it (from which it follows that the fundamental issues to

which social reality refers are not of the order of the state, but of what Hegel will conceptualise as 'civil society').

In view of this, we are led to thoroughly revise the representation of Hegelian philosophy that persists everywhere: according to this commonly accepted representation, Hegel was the first to introduce into thought the consideration of becoming, and thus to inscribe reason in history, whereas Spinoza was merely the thinker of a de-temporalized substance, the holder of an abstract and inert universality cut off from all historicity. Perhaps it is actually the opposite: the more 'historical' of the two would be Spinoza insofar as he refuses to permanently objectify the dynamic that carries reality in the direction of its permanent transformation, in search of a balance between activity and passivity that never ceases to be questioned or destabilised, which obliges one to reinvent it endlessly, in the absence of formal guarantees of right. In this way, Spinoza would have been the initiator, after Machiavelli, of a practical, and no longer exclusively theoretical, relationship to politics, with the particularity that this practical relationship is no longer posed as an alternative to philosophical rationality but is situated in its wake within the same network of necessities. From this angle, Spinoza is perhaps, and not only for his time, the political philosopher par excellence. For him, political reality was not an object to be examined rationally alongside other objects. He did not make a philosophy "of" politics or "about" politics, but he conceived and practised philosophy as an activity of thought in the strong sense of the word politics. The *Ethics* itself, from beginning to end, and even in its most speculative passages (the first and second parts, which are the only ones Hegel had studied closely, leaving out the other three), is pervaded by a concern with practicality, in which the conditions that make human or non-human collectivities more or less viable are implicated by various means.

So, you are quite right to put the question of the autonomy of politics at the center of the confrontation between Hegel and Spinoza: it is the crucial moment where the tipping point occurs, that makes one lean to one side or the other. For Hegel, politics is something whose limits can be defined once and for all: it is a specific moment in the course of the spirit which, as a moment, is prepared by others and destined to be surpassed, "relieved" as Derrida says. Whereas for Spinoza, the idea of a succession of the political is quite unthinkable: the political is not only a determined moment of the process, it is the process in its entirety. Its reason is not a special reason, legitimate within its limits, but it is, taken at its source, in its fundamental impulse, the natural movement of reality, *Deus sive potentia*, the universal *conatus* which is at the heart of things.

**To follow up on this: Spinoza produced a theory of knowledge, which could account for the distinction between philosophy and politics. Althusser, for instance, argued that the role of philosophy for politics lies less in guiding the latter's action or in intervening in the theory of politics, but rather precisely in preventing ideology from closing the space for practices of indetermination within political activity. Political activity must thus be essentially philosophically undetermined (and consists in undetermining what philosophy thinks about it). Is there a place for a Spinozist theory of political indetermination (as a form of liberation or emancipation from external determinations, from merely heteronomously being determined) for you?**

**PM:** I think I answered your question when I explained to you how, to my mind Spinoza is thoroughly a political philosopher (while Hegel is a thinker who reasons "about politics," as he does about art, religion, etc.). So, I would not agree that Spinoza "produced a theory of knowledge, which could account for the distinction between philosophy and politics." On the contrary, it seems to me that he does everything to abolish their distinction, in the sense that this distinction would create a threshold between politics and philosophy, or to put it differently, would separate theory from practice. When Althusser put forward the concept of 'theoretical practice,' which led him to define philosophy as a 'class struggle in theory,' he was inspired by a profoundly Spinozist concern.

That said, abolishing the distinction between philosophy and politics does not mean merging them and bringing them into the semi-darkness where all cows are grey: rather, this effort makes the permanent passage from one to the other thinkable. Everything "here" is a matter of intensity, and this is where history and its conjunctures are considered. Before Spinoza, there was Machiavelli who was a philosopher or was someone who practiced philosophy in politics, as a practitioner, by raising questions such as "where are we?", "what is happening now?", "what position to adopt at this precise moment?", "how do you get on the passing train, having already left and never having to stop, once you realise that it is not going anywhere, that it is not regulated by a timetable and that it does not have a conductor?", etc.

To put it this way would be to adopt a radically nominalist position in politics; to free it from the mortifying weight of universality; to evacuate the fantasies of power in all its forms, to proclaim "neither God, nor master, nor tribune;" to initiate a liberating process while being aware of the risks involved; to seek to be less and less passive, and more and more active, etc. In short, it amounts to asking the question of how to orient oneself, a question that never ceases to be raised, under the conditions that are always changing, which means there is no ready-made answer



to it. This question relates to all areas of existence, and not only what we have come to call, by giving the word a restrictive and discriminating meaning, "politics," that is to say, strictly political "affairs," a domain reserved for competent professionals, or those deemed to be such.

Politics concerns what is common, not only because it concerns communities, but because it pervades life in all its forms, while avoiding gathering them together to place them under the suffocating cloak of the universal. And let us not claim that to support this conception of politics and its "commons" is to raise the black flag of anarchy, whose blackness does not prevent it from being and remaining a flag, a rallying point whose fixity is deceptive, a ready-made answer that it would be unwise to settle for!

**To remain within Althusser's cosmos for another question: In the previous century and within the context of French Marxism, he undertook quite heroic attempts to revitalise a Spinozist reading of Marx. We all remember how he declared that he and his students were not structuralists, because they were Spinozist. You being his student and collaborator, do you find anything in his work that is worth preserving, that might help us think about the present situation? And if so, may it be linked specifically to what is Spinozist about his thinking?**

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**PM:** In short, you pose the question of Althusser's legacy, which Derrida might have called "the spectres of Althusser" in the sense that he spoke of "the spectres of Marx." The singularity of Althusser, we mustn't forget, is that during his lifetime he was already a sort of spectre, constantly living on borrowed time, like a dead man walking who tried to slip as best he could through the cracks of a collapsing actuality, driven by his own chaos. This explains the ambiguities, the gaps, and sometimes the contradictions of what he left behind and what we must call his "oeuvre," of which it is not easy, and even probably impossible, to examine it in order to identify, as we say, the "achievements." Reading Althusser today is a difficult operation, or at least a very delicate one, so closely was his work associated with what he called "interventions," tirelessly taken up and reshaped in haste, constantly under pressure, doomed to incompleteness, from which they derive both their fragility and their original form of relevance, which must be thought together. To be honest, I have to tell you that, from a distance, in times that are not at all the same, I have a certain amount of trouble getting there now: what I find now in Althusser's texts, which are always to be read between the lines (which is anything but simple and innocent), is first and foremost an overload of interrogations, the indication of unsolvable difficulties, the very opposite of "achievements," but rather a repertoire of appointments, some of which, most of which, perhaps, have been missed; or, to take up a



Derridean theme again, a collection of letters that did not all reach their addressees. But this is precisely what makes it interesting, and in a way unique and irretrievable, in a sense that he had not foreseen, that of what we might call, in contrast to the fantasy of the “Theory” that he cultivated and then abandoned, an anti-theory or a negative theory (in the way that one speaks of negative theology). Let’s not kid ourselves: what remains of Althusser are fragments and sketches – the opposite of a system of thought.

One of his writings that speaks to me most today is the one on the ideological state apparatuses (*Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*), so full of suspension points. The phrase “but let’s leave it at that” comes up again and again and at the same time, it has a sense of urgency that is impossible to escape. It keeps going back and forth, circling around problems that are largely unformulated. One might be tempted to speak of a theoretical unconscious, which plunges into the depths of the void and the absence, or at least the incapacity to settle into a stable position of identity. In her reflections on this text, Judith Butler insists a lot on its religious, almost mystical, background: I think she is right. Althusser has been criticized for his cult of scientificity and his dogmatic conception of philosophy, which would have led him to adopt the authoritarian position of a “master.” This is to forget the feeling of anxiety that constantly haunted his positions. It is no coincidence that he was particularly fond of the phrase that Lenin himself had taken from Bonaparte in campaigns in Italy: “On avance, et puis on voit” (“we move forward, and then we see”). He was constantly going through the motions, not to say blindly, searching for an opening to slip through before it closed, even if it meant changing gears completely when the situation required it. This is why it would be futile to try to extract from the article on the ideological state apparatus, which is itself an extract from a more extensive text on “reproduction” (a question that preoccupied him enormously), which remained unpublished for a long time, the well-ordered elements of a “theory of interpellation”. What he called interpellation, this procedure that constitutes individuals as “always-already-subjects,” evokes a call launched under conditions that determine its success to such an extent that it necessarily fails. It is this failure that mobilises thinking, in the absence of a direction that would be fixed a priori. Althusser’s stances were a succession of sideways steps. This is how he moved forward.

From this point of view, he was clearly the opposite of a “good conscience,” obsessed with certainties, the type cultivated by a triumphant structuralism, which was more so opinion, a journalistic construction, than an approach actually practised by the researchers under this flashy, ultimately misleading name. The analytical grids that Althusser set up were destined to be constantly reworked. Even if they were based on strong intuitions, they had no guarantee of legitimacy.

They were fallible. The theoretical ideal to which they referred ultimately proved to be a mirage. And, in a way, this unsteady form worked, because it forced us to think, to take up the problems at the starting point, to start again and pursue other directions, without any assurance of success. Viewed from this angle, Althusser rather assumes the role of a deceiver, forcing thought to be untangled and to set out on new paths, cultivating a spirit of research that is rebellious to any form of prescription and perpetually unsatisfied: he was certainly not a master of truth. At least, this is how I understand him now, as an enigma that disturbs rather than as the bearer of shattering revelations whose legacy we need only to recover and maintain in order to pass it on to others in identical form, well packaged to ensure its preservation at all costs.

**Let us proceed to the broader French context. The Spinoza who was so influential during the 20th century seems to have been to a certain degree a French invention because the French philosophy of the previous century established a very specific relation to Spinoza. It often pitted him against Hegel and thereby seemed to offer an alternative perspective on what followed after Hegel, from Marx through Sartre, to thoughts on practice, emancipation, and even art. It as if parts of the French tradition share Nietzsche's grand declaration: that there was a precursor to his thought (i.e., to contemporary, anti-religious, Materialism, etc.), namely, Spinoza. Here we are thinking of a diverse group of thinkers, who often opposed each other, like Cavailles, Deleuze, Althusser, Gueroult, Balibar, yourself... Some of the members of this group argued that Spinozism was a position able to oppose the phenomenological, and also religious and conservative tradition, which was often viewed as deriving genealogically from Hegel. The antidote to Hegel and these co-adaptations of Hegelianism was then seen in a different conceptualization of action and belief. It has been claimed that it was effectively the crisis of Marxism that opened up this space for Spinoza. So, was the crisis of Marxism for you a crisis of Hegelian Marxism? Did it allow for a return to Spinoza in a new way? Does this Spinoza owe a particular debt to his French readers?**

**PM:** There was indeed a "French turn" in Spinoza studies in the 1960s. It is also a fact that at the same time, in France, there was, to repeat Lacan's formula when he spoke of a necessary "return to Freud," a kind of "return to Marx," that is to say a reconsideration of the status of Marxism, moving in the direction of its re-actualization; a re-actualization that

was needed at the moment when it had taken on the appearance of an all-purpose vulgate, of an ideological prêt-à-porter. It is still a fact that Althusser placed himself at the junction of these two movements. That all these phenomena were related is indisputable. But one should not hasten to conclude that there was a relationship of strict causal determination between them that would have rigidly bound them together. Rather, there was a crossing between relatively independent causal series, which through intersections, conferred on the intellectual conjuncture of the time. It was indeed a very rich conjuncture. Its thickness was so complex that it prevented this conjuncture from placing itself under any definitive form and even destabilized it from the inside, and objectively opened the perspective of the reactive and reactionary reflux of the eighties. Was this reflux inevitable? This is what we should ask ourselves.

To start from the beginning: at the end of the 1950s, Spinoza studies in France were at a kind of standstill. When I began to work seriously on Spinoza at the very beginning of the 1960s, the Spinozist bibliography was seriously outdated and, as far as the political aspect of Spinoza's thought was concerned, it was completely lacking (with the exception of very specialized studies that remained restricted, such as those carried out by Madeleine Francès): since Georges Friedmann's book on *Leibniz and Spinoza* (Gallimard, 1946) and Lachière-Rey's book on *Les origines cartésiennes du Dieu de Spinoza* [The Cartesian Origins of Spinoza's God] (Vrin, 1950), there had been nothing really outstanding and the most widely distributed edition of Spinoza's works, the one produced in 1954 in the Pléiade collection at Gallimard, was far from satisfactory. When, at the same time, one referred to Marx, it was difficult to free oneself from this obligation at a time when, even after the death of Stalin, the dogma of "the realization of socialism," to which Russia supposedly offered a privileged site, a "homeland," persisted. It was by reducing it to a number of ready-made formulas or quotations extracted from different parts of his work and treated as general maxims, slogans smoothed over, devitalized, and cut off from any grip on the actual, in progress historical processes and their concrete contradictions that, in the margins of this official Marxism, a few original attempts (Lucien Goldmann in the wake of Lukács, whom he had managed to make known in France, Henri Lefebvre who had tried to loosen the stranglehold of the DiaMat, Merleau-Ponty, author in 1955 of *Les aventures de la dialectique*, and not much else that is really salient), managed to subsist in disorder. Marx's writings, apart from *Capital* (in the official translation by Joseph Roy), were only accessible in the precarious versions offered by the Molitor editions, and for some of them in the collection of "selected writings" published in 1934 by Lefebvre and Gutermann with Gallimard. Regarding this decline of Marxist thought, Althusser, who had just published his little book on Montesquieu in 1959, proposed the following diagnosis: on the one hand, Marx had never really been "introduced" in France, for which one of the

reasons was the workers' position adopted by the Communist Party at the time of its creation, which had installed a climate of generalized distrust of anything bearing the mark of intellectuality, which was stigmatized as tendentially "bourgeois". On the other hand, Marx himself, leaving aside, after 1848, the strictly philosophical reflection, had opened the way to a purely economist and formally politicized interpretation of his theoretical work. He had in a certain way made possible this detour of his thought and its recuperation by a catechism of pure propaganda, where there was no more place for the labor of the concept and the labor of the proof. Althusser concluded from this diagnosis that the best way to get Marx out of the hole he had fallen into – whether he had been made to fall into it or whether he himself had unwittingly prepared this fall – was to give him back the philosophy he had lost along the way, and which perhaps he had never even had: and this absent "philosophy of Marx", it was on the side of Spinoza that one had a chance to find it. Hence the necessity to reread Marx with glasses borrowed from Spinoza, and by the same token to go back to studying Spinoza in order to make these glasses. Marx and Spinoza, same fight! Let us note in passing that Althusser was not the first to have brought together the names of Spinoza and Marx: there had been, among others, Max Raphaël, an author who today is practically forgotten and who ought to be rediscovered, and J.T. Desanti, the author of the 1956 *Introduction to the History of Philosophy*, of which the entire second part (which contrasted with the first part in which the alternative "bourgeois science/proletarian science" was justified and presented as gospel of truth) was devoted to a Spinoza who was reinterpreted by means of analytical schemes borrowed from Marx.

Serious work on Spinoza had only just begun again. First, there were two books published in '63 and '65 by Sylvain Zac (whom Canguilhem had discovered in an obscure provincial high school from which he had helped him to emerge): *L'idée de vie dans la philosophie de Spinoza* [The idea of life in the philosophy of Spinoza] and *Spinoza et l'interprétation de l'Écriture* [Spinoza and the Interpretation of Scripture]. From a distance these works, which had then the value of a rediscovery, are still worth it. Then it accelerated until the explosion triggered by Deleuze (*Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*) and Gueroult (the first volume of his *Spinoza*, which remained unfinished) in 1968. Then the following year Matheron (*Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* [Individual and Community in Spinoza], published in the collection "Sens commun" that Bourdieu was directing at the Editions de Minuit). Apparently, fifty years later, it is not yet over. It should be noted that a parallel movement, equally intense, took place around the same time in Italy, where the two currents met in Urbino during a colloquium organized in '82 by Emilia Giancotti, a person who played an important role in the whole affair. To know exactly what happened during this period would require a study of its own. There is no doubt that, on the part of some of those who participated in this

process, there was a political impulse, carried by Marxism or at least by a certain Marxist perspective. But there was also something else: a desire of rigor and analysis, after the emotional and syncretic drifts (or totalizing in the sense, not of the structure and its narrow formalism, but of a universal out of assignable borders) carried by the existentialist current that had dominated the 50s. In this respect, Cavallès, by integrating Spinozist interests into his very precise approach concerning the epistemology of mathematics, played a crucial role (the famous sentence which, in the conclusion of his posthumous work *On Logic and the Theory of Science*, opposes the philosophies of consciousness to the philosophies of concepts, was expressly referring to Spinoza in the author's mind) And then there were personal affinities, a propulsive word of mouth. And all this snowballed.

From the meeting of these two movements (the re-actualization of Marx and the recalibration of Spinoza studies) resulted in the representation of a two-faced Marx: one side of which looked towards Spinoza and the other towards Hegel. Projected in the mirror afforded by Marx's thought, and used as optical instruments to decipher it, Spinoza and Hegel appeared as the terms of an alternative. On Spinoza's side, a rigorous, uncompromising, tendentially "materialist" necessitarianism, completely de-ideologized, immune to any form of return of the religious, and thus re-positivized. On Hegel's side, a rational finalism that exploits the negative placing it in service of Spirit and gives meaning to history, requalified as History with a capital H, mystifyingly taking its movements from its real unfolding. The simplicity, not to say the banality, of this confrontation does not hold when we take into consideration the complex work of thought that is overdetermined and carried through by both of these authors in very different historical environments: it is only when their objective was that of rereading Marx and they intended to justify the taking of sides, and thus to draw clear lines of demarcation, that it was able to function in a situational, in a conjunctural way, while waiting for the readjustments without which it is impossible to respond to new stakes. On examination, the two figures that emerge from this summary face to face are not, taken as such, defensible and are philosophically untenable: it is to do a disservice to both Hegel and Spinoza to limit their approaches by proposing these reductive, abstract images, carried by the logic of "either-or". One must look twice before reducing either of these approaches to a completed system of thought, perfectly coherent and synchronous, closed in on itself, having an illusory stability.

From a distance, I can no longer see things in this artificially simplified form which, in any case, has not made it possible to resolve what you call the "crisis of Marxism", and may even have precipitated its fatal outcome. What does the term "Marxism" mean today? At the very least, things of a very different nature, which are not easy to link together. Perhaps it is even from this dispersion of what remains of Marx,

a Marx whose identity to himself has become highly problematic, that he has a chance to reappear in unpredictable forms, such that in himself the vicissitudes of history will have changed him, a different Marx than the one that was familiar to us and that, it must be admitted lucidly, no longer holds. At the same time, if we still need to come back to Spinoza and/or Hegel, concretely to read and reread them, it is not to find them conforming to themselves, stuck to fixed, labeled philosophical positions, but to release the catalyst of revolutionary transformation, of *Veränderung* as Marx would say, of which their works, through their difficulties, their irregularities, their contradictions even, remain bearers. Just as Negri proposed to take Marx "beyond Marx", I think we should look for a Spinoza "beyond Spinoza" and a Hegel "beyond Hegel."

**Hegel claimed that Spinoza can be consistently read beginning with one proposition from his *Ethics*: "the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things." And it might be quite tempting to read the entire *Ethics* in such a way that we appear to be constantly moving back and forth when Spinoza refers back to, say, a proof that he developed ten pages earlier or in a previous book of the *Ethics*, while at the same time we are not moving at all, we are just enlarging our understanding of the order and connections of things, ultimately of the differential substance. What kind of reading protocol do you think Spinoza demands?**

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**PM:** The notion of a "reading protocol" raises all sorts of problems and must be used with extreme caution. In any case, it can only be used in the plural, not only because we cannot apply the same reading protocol to philosophers as different, both in form and in content, as Spinoza and Hegel for example, but because the authors—and since Foucault we know how equivocal the categories of "author" and "work" are—require different approaches that require a particular lens. In the case of Spinoza, we know that he left a large number of texts unfinished, for very different reasons (the writing of *De intellectus emendatione* was stopped by his own decision, while the writing of the *Tractatus politicus*, whose last words are "Reliqua desiderantur," was interrupted by Spinoza's death). It is clear that these texts, which represent particularly significant moments in Spinoza's thought, cannot be read in the same way as the two books he completed, the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* published anonymously in 1670, and the *Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata*, which did not appear until after his death, but for which we know from his correspondence that in 1675 he sent it to the publisher and then interrupted the printing of the text for reasons of caution. Of these two books, we can say that they are subjectively finished (since they are so by the very admission of the one who wrote them and considered that they could be put into circulation



as they are), which is not to say that they are objectively finished (in the sense that they would be definitively closed on themselves and would not contain any flaw or point of uncertainty).

However, it would be perilous to submit them to an identical reading protocol; the first one is a text of intervention, composed under the light of reason but in what could be called a mixed language. In its first part, The first part is devoted to a philologically and historically informed rereading of the Bible that gives rise to debates that are not all philosophical, whereas the second part is driven by an objective of demonstration, effectively put into practice in the form of a surprisingly complex argumentative network, which gives it an internal rigor, though whose firmness is perhaps not as absolute as one would imagine (Spinoza sometimes drifts, or even contradicts himself, and it is perhaps in these moments that he is the most intellectually stimulating). And then there is the *Correspondence*, of which we have only selected bits and pieces by the editors of the *Opera Posthuma*, to which have been added some documents discovered later. There is also the *Cogitata Metaphysica* appended to the *Principia philosophiae cartesianae*, a hybrid writing in which fundamentally original and caustic ideas are exposed within the framework of a scholastic form of treatise, a particularly explosive mixture. Finally, there is the Korte *Verhandeling*, that was unearthed at the end of the 19th century, which is unquestionably a Spinozist-inspired text, but is perhaps not entirely written by Spinoza's hand (it was a study-text which circulated and must have been enriched on this occasion with various contributions). I am more and more reluctant to take uniform approaches that tend to group contributions in the same way, when in fact they are out of sync, something which makes them interesting, and opens up the space for reflection. Spinoza is a fundamentally plural, polyphonic thinker, whose thinking has developed *in situ* along different lines, which have crossed and uncrossed: and this is largely what characterizes the richness and power of his apparatus of thought, to which we keep coming back to at different times and in different contexts to discover unexpected aspects, as if he had not yet said his last word; in any case, it is not a repertoire of ready-made thoughts, but rather an incentive to produce new ideas.

This is not the case for Spinoza alone: all philosophers worthy our attention and study belong to this situation. Those who suddenly and forever reveal the depth of their thought are also those whose thought has little depth and little to tell us.

To come back to Hegel and the particular way in which he reads Spinoza: the reference you mention is enlightening in this respect. The interpretive paradigm on which he relies, in order to distance himself from the orientation of thought that he attributes to Spinoza, takes as its pretext a unique formula, the one in which the identity of the order of ideas and the order of things is asserted, as if it were self-evident, a



parallelist type of reading (the one that Leibniz had been the first to apply to Spinoza, already in order to refute him). In the perspective offered by this reading, the order of ideas and the order of things are two distinct orders between which there is a one-to-one correspondence. But this reading is quite questionable. On the contrary, Spinoza maintains that ideas and things are linked together within the framework of one and the same order, which is the order of causes. Moreover, if ideas fit into this order, it is because they are themselves, not representations but things, things in their own right which correspond to the way in which the understanding apprehends the world under the attribute of thought and not under that of extent; but it is indeed the same world, and not two parallel worlds, which is seen simultaneously under these two attributes according to an order which consequently must be identical. Now, if Hegel chooses a parallelist reading, which is obviously tendentious since it turns a distinction of reason into a real distinction, it is because, when he reads Spinoza's "order of things," he immediately places on this discursive sequence the sequence "order of bodies." In other words, he wrongly lends Spinoza a "Cartesian" type of dualism (whose imputation to Descartes is itself debatable, since it makes the representation of a "substantial union of soul and body" difficult to understand), which makes thought and extension the terms of an alternative (in obvious contradiction with Spinoza's thesis according to which God is both a "thinking thing" and an "extended thing", without making him a dualist; in being or nature, which is itself divided). From this, everything follows: the tendentious interpretation of Spinoza's formula allows us to evacuate a certain number of important notions in the economy of his thought, like that of *potentia*, of which the *conatus* is the derivation, and Spinoza becomes an "acosmist" philosopher, "weltlos" as Heidegger might say, which is a caricature. But these "misreadings" are not contingent; they carry a strong philosophical meaning: if we pay attention to them, they grant us knowledge regarding Hegel's own orientation of thought. This orientation is revealed when it is projected in the deformed and distorted mirror offered by a faulty, and in any case incomplete, reading of Spinoza's text. Finally, this is explained by the fact that, when Hegel reads Spinoza, what preoccupies him is not Spinoza's thought, which he takes as a pretext, but his own, which finds an opportunity to revive itself by confronting Spinoza's.

This confirms that a reading protocol elaborated from a single formula extracted from an author and taken to be canonically expressive, can only produce partial, tendentious results, which become downright wrong if taken as the basis of an interpretative system. Would Hegel have allowed us to reread the whole of his work light of this formula: "The real is rational, the rational is real," a ritornello in the form of a chiasmus which he actually used in the Preface to his *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, but which it would be imprudent to turn into a key

to deciphering the whole of his thought? Moreover, in order to apply to him the conclusions reached in the previous discussion, would it make sense to use an identical reading protocol vis-a-vis the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, that great philosophical novel in which the unfortunate adventures of consciousness and its failure to reconcile the viewpoints of subject and object and of certainty and truth are recounted, and vis-a-vis the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, the teaching manual that has been handed down to us with the *Bemerkungen* (Hegel's own handwritten remarks that he had to read orally during his lectures) and the *Zusätze* (additions reconstructed from students' notes where improvisations made on the spot were recorded, often unexpectedly illuminating the lesson that could be derived from the written passages in the manual)? It's likely that Hegel would not have appreciated someone doing to him what he himself had done to Spinoza.

**Can we say that Spinoza is the philosopher of Substance, which means that there is no mediation between the attributes? In our understanding, there is a fundamental difference with Hegelian not only as a substance, but also as a subject. We can draw many consequences from this – let's say from Althusser's "history without a subject", to Deleuze's insistence on the univocity of being, and so on. But we wonder, how do you see this, that is to say, how do you read the difference between the Spinozist and the Hegelian notion of substance?**

**PM:** Hegel focused his reading of Spinoza on the first and second parts of the *Ethics*: this is what led him to make of Spinoza a thinker of being and its representation, whose philosophy essentially consists of an ontology accompanied by a theory of knowledge. If he had not skipped the next three parts of the book and the political texts, he would not have been able to argue that Spinoza is the philosopher of a substance destined not to become a subject, cut off, as a result, from the realities of the world and of life. He did not understand, he did not want to understand, he could not allow himself to admit that Spinoza's philosophy is above all, as Deleuze characterises it, a 'practical philosophy,' essentially concerned with the problem of the conditions of liberation. It is not by chance that Spinoza titled the great treatise in which he gathered the different aspects of his philosophy "Ethics," taking this word in its ancient sense, the one given to it by Aristotle, namely a positive art of living ("*bene agere et laetari*") and not the statement of rules of morality which have above all a restrictive and negative value of obligation, and therefore of constraint. The big question that Spinoza keeps coming back to is how to become more and more active and less and less passive, under the horizon of a substantiality that is not massive

and static but dynamically exerts its power in multiple directions and without stopping: in this power one participates to varying degrees of intensity that can be infinitely modulated, giving rise to a whole spectrum of attitudes, each of which negotiates in its own way the relationship between servitude and freedom.

Spinoza's reflection on the notion of the possible is a particularly enlightening testimony to this concern, which is the common thread running through his entire philosophical approach. In the first part of the *Ethics*, it is demonstrated that there is nothing between the necessary and the impossible, and that speculating on the possible is a failure of reasoning; this leads to the thesis put forward at the beginning of the Appendix to the first part of the book: "*omnia praedeterminata*." This is a thesis from which a rigorous necessitarianism derives, i.e. the representation of an order of things whose implacable chains are irrevocably tied up. If we leave it at that, the result is that the ethical project, which consists in intervening in this order in such a way as to introduce modifications to it – changing the world instead of merely interpreting it, as we would say in another language – is as such emptied of its meaning from the start. Now it must be understood that this leading argument is aimed at a precise objective: the evacuation of the ultimate prejudice, which effectively, considered from the absolute point of view of the God-substance, does not hold water. But this is only one stage of the reasoning: in the preamble to the next part of the book, Spinoza explains that he is abandoning this overarching point of view, which leads to a radical ontologism and blocks all practical reflection; he then adopted a new orientation of thought intended to 'lead the soul as if by hand to supreme beatitude,' a project whose dimension is openly axiological. Now, it is by choosing to go down this path that we are led, step by step, to reconsider the notion of the possible: it is consequently redefined, by being distinguished from that of the contingent, at the beginning of the fourth part of the *Ethics*, where the idea of a perfect human life is introduced as an end to be achieved; and the last propositions of this part of the book expose, in the conditional tense—here we are apparently in the middle of a utopia, which is astonishing from Spinoza—what a life of free men would look like (who would think of nothing less than death, would strive to exchange as little as possible with the ignorant, would not form any concept of good and evil, etc.). This makes it possible to envisage a new relationship with finitude: if it has objectively no meaning in the totalising perspective proper to substance, which is and acts by virtue of the necessity of its infinite nature without fixing any goal in advance, in concrete terms this means that nature, considered in and of itself, does not follow any intentional aim, but rather pursues all paths that are open to it, planning nothing in advance, finitude regains vigour when it is apprehended, through the existence of the living, an existence shared with all other forms of modal reality that

are limited expressions to varying degrees of the infinite, and even the infinitely infinite, power of substance. The project of a better life, which in Spinoza's mind is ultimately political because such a life can only be a 'common,' an associative and integrated life, becomes legitimate even though it seemed to have been invalidated at the outset by the damning representation of natural determinism. This relegitimation of the possible does not in any way imply that the principle of the *ratio seu causa*, which has its source in the nature of things, has been abandoned in favour of the representation of a world that is artificially and formally humanised after having been freed from the straitjacket in which the necessity resulting from the infinite power of substance imprisons it: but it raises the problem of the conditions under which, within the global framework set up by this power, certain vital orientations that are evaluated as better according to the criterion of usefulness (usefulness being itself what makes one more active) can be privileged. Otherwise put, the absolute point of view of substance (which affirms that everything is necessary) and the relative point of view of modal realities (which are not causes of themselves, the consequence of which is that they are permanently balanced between passivity and activity) are not opposed term by term, as if they were situated on the same level: once we understand that they are at different levels of power and intensity, we are entitled to ask the question regarding the adjustment of their effects, of which the art of living that is ethics constitutes the implementation.

This extremely simplified summary gives an idea of the complex path followed by Spinoza in the *Ethics*, where a web of necessities is not laid out flat and spread out on a single plane, but where these necessities are highlighted and modulated by being placed successively under different lights, thus opening up the spaces of freedom and action in the absence of which the project of an ethics would lose its meaning. The narrow and restrictive conception of an intransmissible "monism" is responsible for such a flattening, which denies substance any prospect of mobility and change: yet substance is not "one" in the purely numerical sense of "only one," which in the long run, by making it an isolated being, would strip it of its infinity, or, if we want to call it that, of its concrete, mobile, and complex thickness; it is one while being many, plural in all directions, and consequently open to unlimited perspectives of transformation, in a permanent state of overflow relative to its given state, whatever it may be, and not condemned to reproduce itself in such and such a form in an identical, fixed manner. This is what Hegel did not understand because he could not understand it, given the orientation of thought proper to his philosophical position, which, reduced to the essential, consists of placing becoming and history within the framework of a rational teleology informed by the idea of progress, following a momentum that appears to advance straight ahead, whereas in reality it moves backwards as if drawn or attracted by its goal, the definitive

reconciliation of Spirit with itself, the final word of philosophy. The interest of Spinoza's philosophy perhaps lies in the fact that it does not contain the last word: "*Reliqua desiderantur*", "everything is to be done," could be his motto, that is to say, a "practical philosophy." This is at least how I understand the "history without a subject" of which Althusser speaks: if it is without a subject, it is because it is in itself its own subject, as a process that is not predestined to any end and does not cease to go beyond any term and any limit. And it is also in this way that I understand the "univocity of being," i.e. the "plane of immanence" which Deleuze took from Scott: this univocity is multi-directional, just as this immanence is full, in a state of permanent invention, and not fixed, uniform, monolithic, which would be only be so under the condition of having been emptied of its power.

**How do you square the ontological commitments that Spinoza's thought seems to demand from his readers with a more historically informed perspective (with a historical-materialist one even)?**

**PM:** As I have just tried to explain, I think we have to understand Spinoza by removing him from a purely "ontological" interpretation that renders unthinkable what Marx calls the historical "*Veränderung*," or to use a formula that Althusser was particularly fond of, the possibility of "making things happen." Spinoza was not a purely speculative or contemplative philosopher who, in order to see things from a higher point of view, i.e., by adopting the point of view of an ideal and abstract rationality, would have freed himself from the demands of history, and in particular the history of his time, in which, on the contrary, he immersed himself completely. If it had been otherwise, would he risk putting into circulation the theoretically scandalous *Theological-Political Treatise*, the effects of which immediately spread like wildfire throughout Europe? From this point of view, his perspective was as 'historically informed' as it could be in his time. It was particularly original even in form: the trajectory of his life enabled him to accumulate the elements of a diversified culture whose main pillars were the Bible, Machiavelli, and Descartes. To have put these ingredients in the same bottle and to have created, after shaking it, philosophy in the form in which it has been transmitted to us proves that he was definitely not afraid of anything, which his contemporaries knew perfectly well.

That said, I don't see what interest there would be in applying to his work, under the pretext of updating it, a reading grid taken from Marxism, Bergsonism, or any other "ism." Spinoza is perfectly self-sufficient; he is neither an inheritor nor a predecessor. He was modern in his own time and has remained so in other times when different sides of his thought have been revealed, but we have not yet been able to make a

full assessment of him; to make him fit into the established order, which would have nothing new to say about him. We should not look for ready-made ideas in Spinoza, in the form of an intellectual fashion his strength lies in the fact that he continues to make us think, and thus pushes us to go further in new, possibly unforeseeable directions. This is what makes him a 'true philosopher,' in the sense of the 'vera philosophia' that he speaks of in his letter to Albert Burgh: he has never ceased to amaze us.

**At one point you noted: "The truth of philosophy is as much in Spinoza as it must also be in Hegel; that is, it is not entirely in one or the other but somewhere between the two, in the passage that is effected between one and the other." This also seems to inform the title of your monumental book Hegel or Spinoza. In that book, you propose a reverse reading of Hegel, from the standpoint of Spinoza. That is to say, Spinoza functions as a reader-critic avant la lettre of Hegelian thinking. Can you tell us a bit more about what is at stake and why you see it necessary to return from Hegel to Spinoza and (re)read Spinoza with eyes and minds that know Hegel?**

**PM:** The remarks I have just made in answer to your previous question should not lead us to set Spinoza apart, to make him a statuary, as if he were "the" philosopher par excellence, the only one worthy of the name, which would be tantamount to idealizing him: there is no need to call oneself a "Spinozist," and to brandish this sign like a flag in order to be interested in Spinoza. As far as I'm concerned, I don't consider him to be right about everything, and I don't think he's alone in this. I see in him and in his work a kind of thinking machine, which works at its best when put in confrontation with other philosophers. This is what I meant when I suggested that, if there is a philosophical truth, it is neither in Spinoza nor in Hegel that it can be found, but "between" them, in the space of discussion opened up by their encounter, which has produced and continues to produce explosive effects: occupying this interval forces one to think, to confront questions that one would not otherwise remain unexplored.

In this connection, I would like to make a remark concerning the way in which the discipline of philosophy is conceived today. The debate between "analytic" and "continental" bears on the problem of reading philosophers. The former argue that interest in the doctrinal positions taken by this or that philosopher distracts from the real philosophical questions, such as whether coffee is sweet in the mouth or in the cup, a question that should remain the same whether it is asked in Berkeley, Oxford, or Paris, whether it is formulated in the terms used in the Middle Ages, the Classical period, or any other, and whether it is labeled with the proper name of this or that philosopher; and they reproach "continental"



philosophers for having concentrated their reflection on monographic research, focused on the question of knowing what Aristotle, or Descartes, or Hegel "really said and thought" on a given subject, which inevitably has the consequence of reducing philosophy to the level of a tedious and vain doxography, against a background of historicist prejudice.

Reduced to this elementary dilemma, the debate is insoluble because it is distorted from the start. Personally, I think that we must continue to read and reread philosophers, as they themselves have never ceased to do, in order to configure their own philosophical position, which cannot in any case be assumed to be sufficient in itself. One does not do philosophy by oneself, proceeding to a kind of internal examination of one's own thought set up as a universal paradigm, but with others, and, at the limit, with all others. It is not enough to take note of what these philosophers thought, as if one were reading a meter with the aim of recording certain results, as a purely academic conception of reading recommends; but it is necessary to try to think with them, by spotting the singularities, possibly the anomalies and the difficulties that manifest the discursive sites to which their intellectual heritage is consigned, insofar as these sites always contain a part of incompleteness. And the best way to achieve this is precisely to settle in the "in-between", the interval; an interval that can on occasion present the appearance of a chasm opened when one puts them in confrontation with others, being animated by the conviction that the truth is not to be found as if it were ready-made or deposited in this or that philosopher, but constitutes the stake of their confrontation such as it continues in the course of a history which, having never really begun and going nowhere in particular, is destined to never end, to never lead to definitive conclusions, after which, when the show ends, the only thing left would be, as in the theater, to bring down the curtain on the representation and to return for the applause.

To imagine that philosophizing is an operation validated by someone, by whatever name one calls it, and that this person draws the matter (the "grey matter") entirely from himself, by placing himself in the perspective of an absolute beginning of thought, as pure reflection, whose management is assumed entirely by an independent rational subject, is hardly reasonable: eventually, the mention of the external references from which his reflection has been given can be erased from the account of the rumination to of a given philosopher, which, by the effect of a rhetorical procedure, formally confers an apparent generality that can claim a timeless universality. But this does not prevent the reflection in question from having taken place without being supported by others, who provide it with elements that it readjusts in its own way by carrying out a new arrangement from them, and it is this that constitutes its own contribution. Basically, if we think about there is, only one philosophy, or we should say, rather, that there is only one "philosophizing" in the sense of an ongoing activity destined to continue indefinitely, which crosses all



the "philosophies" in which it takes on each time, like a musical variation, a different rhythm: to philosophize is indeed nothing other than to participate in this uninterrupted movement of thought to which, whether willingly and knowingly or not, all philosophers without exception, the great ones as well as the small ones, the established ones as well as the marginal ones, the good ones as well as the bad ones, the true ones as well as the false ones, belong to it, at their own risk and peril, from their singular point of view, of which they only have to exploit the advantages and the disadvantages, the setbacks and the advances. From the fact that this exploitation is singular due to the unparalleled conditions on which it depends, because it must be carried out each time *in situ*, one should not conclude that it is solitary, that it constitutes an independent unit, and that the whole responsibility of it falls to the individual who occasionally assumes the initiative for it, however exceptional he may be, which would place him from the start outside of the norm, set apart from ordinary expectations, and ultimately inapproachable.

The most interesting thing about a philosopher's work is the ability to make something happen: an event occurs that turns thought on its head. Now this event cannot have an isolated meaning: its scope is necessarily unanimous, collective, if only because of the resonance it produces and which spreads beyond the conditions of its manifestation. This is why I consider the opposition often installed between the practice of philosophy and the study of the history of philosophy absurd. It's an opposition sanctioned by their academic constitution as autonomous disciplines. It is with this concern in mind that I have sought to understand what Spinoza became, viewed through the mirror that Hegel holds up to him, which is a particular case of the "between" that I have mentioned. But in my mind, it is not a question of a face-to-face exclusive relationship either. There are many other ways of relating Spinoza's thought to other thoughts. If I had the possibility, I would engage in the preparation of other studies that could be called "Spinoza or Descartes", "Spinoza or Pascal", "Spinoza or Leibniz", etc., which would reveal more and more surprising aspects of his approach. And in the end, if all these studies could be completed, I would gather them in a book entitled "Spinoza or Spinoza," which would highlight within own philosophy all the "in-betweenness" of which philosophizing consists in its infinity.

**In the last chapter of Hegel or Spinoza, entitled "omnis determinatio est negatio," you discuss determination and negation in Spinoza and Hegel, departing from the statement "die Bestimmtheit ist Negation." Here you make a very interesting point:**

"What Hegel read in Spinoza—and all authentic reading is in its own way violent, or it is nothing but the mildness of a

paraphrase—matters just as much as what he actually said, or rather, what counts, is the effect of these two discourses upon each other, because it offers an invaluable insight for each them. From this point of view, whether the famous phrase is Spinoza's or Hegel's, it is the best of symptoms for analyzing the relationship between these two philosophies."

This brings to mind the beginning of Althusser's chapter in your collective *Reading Capital*, where he argues that "the first person ever to have posed the problem of reading, and in consequence, of writing, was Spinoza." Later, in the same text, he proposed the term of "symptomatic reading." Would it be an exaggeration to read your statement from the standpoint of the method of "symptomatic reading"?

**PM:** The best way to approach philosophers from the point of view of what I have just called the "between," which allows us to reintegrate them in the endless movement of philosophizing, a movement without assignable origin and end, is to spot in them what, if one can say this, "makes symptom[atic]": namely tiny accidents of thought which, if we pay attention to them, can be revealing of some of their great theoretical and practical orientations. These accidents, at first sight imperceptible, become graspable when we take into account the relation of what is improperly called the "doctrine" of a philosopher and those of other philosophers with whom he or she has met on such and such an occasion (an encounter which, moreover, can be made only in the mind of a reader, even if it has not taken place historically): these events are bearers of meaning because of the enigmatic dimension that they often contain. I have tried to identify clues of this kind by closely examining what happened to Spinoza when Hegel undertook to read him, in his own way - in a necessarily "twisted" way. Through these twists, which can in some cases take on the character of betrayals, something continues to speak: "it thinks," and what comes out of it doesn't necessarily belong to Spinoza or to Hegel; it is that something "happens" and "takes place" in the interval that separates them.

This kind of reading is indeed "symptomatic," in the sense or in a sense close to the one that Althusser gave to this word. What he calls "symptomatic reading" implies, first of all, a renunciation of looking directly at a theoretical discourse in order to find or receive a "meaning" that would be deposited there from the start; and it is to force this discourse to say more, by applying to it drifting, lateral reading, which proceeds from an angle and takes detours, which leads to partial and provisional results, destined to be constantly revised. Considered in this way, this type of reading notes how, in the discourses it targets, something is happening, things are moving, events are taking place, in the wake of which its own operation of analysis is called to make a place

for itself, by playing, as it were, on lacunae which allow it to sneak in. To take up a metaphor that Althusser used to characterize political action through cross-readings of Machiavelli and Lenin—another way of ploughing the field of the "between"—it is a question of catching a moving train, even if it means missing it. In this sense, one can maintain that true reading must be engaged, it must be conscious of being dragged into a discursive cycle that is confused at both ends.

Does this cycle, which proceeds from discourse to discourse, from slant to slant, and from detour to detour, go perfectly round? Precisely not. This is what the concept of "symptomatic reading" intends to make clear. This method consists in inserting oneself into textual dynamics, not by taking them at face-value as with an external glance which purports to capture its totality, , but rather, this method advances by implicating itself in its failures and by bringing out the impurities, the difficulties. In the discursive sequences that it proposes to treat, symptomatic reading detects what plays and is played by privileging the imbalances that signal an activity which drives it forward, , following an irregular trajectory that continues without having a beginning or reaching a definitive end. The symptomatic reading is an open process, which moves forward by supporting its weak links, as with any historical conjuncture. To account for this singular approach, Althusser takes up the paradigm of vision by trying to subvert its use: the symptomatic reading separates what is visible and invisible, the manifest from the latent. To separate the manifest from the latent consists in unraveling the link that the scopic impulse artificially supports, which grants the gaze full purchase of its "object," as it does when it presents the latent content as manifest in potentiality, and the manifest as latent in action. The latent content that the symptomatic reading aims at has nothing to do with a hidden meaning waiting to be deciphered or interpreted: it is not a pre-existing original meaning, but rather it represents the non-sense, the labour of the negative that, from within, plays a part in the production of meaning, and orients it toward other meanings. To take into account an operation of this kind, forces one to think. A symptomatic reading is necessarily active and creative.

A formula of Spinoza's, that Althusser often referred, "verum index sui et falsi", is a striking illustration of this way of conceiving and practicing the symptomatic reading, insisting each time on the fact that it had to be taken in its complete wording, rather than amputated form, the "verum index sui," which absolutizes truth by constituting it as an isolated entity. This formula means that truth indicates itself only by tracing each time the dividing line that separates it from the false, or rather, one should say, from a false, from its false, there being false only within the framework of the movement in the course of which truth is produced, under partial forms, and not "the truth" considered as a self-sufficient whole: in the same way, in every discursive statement, in so far

as it assumes the active form of an intervention, is carried out and at the same time is given to read the scission between what in it reaches the visibility and what it makes invisible, in search of a precarious balance that has no ideal guarantee. Is the formula "omnis determinatio est negatio," which Hegel criticized, actually Spinoza's? It is his while not being his: it emerges, as a symptom, from the virtual encounter between Hegel and Spinoza, an encounter whose effects has been and still is particularly disturbing, and so, philosophically interesting.

**Althusser wrote: 'We were never structuralists, because we were Spinozists.' How do you relate to this position? In what sense is Spinoza's position always already post-structuralist?**

**PM:** Let us not forget that Marx said: I am not a "Marxist!" It is in this sense that we should take the formula: we have never been "structuralists." Moreover, "structuralism," in the general form it has been given, has never existed, except in the heads of journalists or doxographers who have fabricate fiction for their own convenience. At the very least, we could speak of "structuralisms" in the plural, since those attributed to Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Lacan, or Foucault have little in common with each other. If there ever was an era of "structuralism," it was in the sense of opening up a space for debate that gave rise to permanent confrontations: free-flowing and without final result. What Althusser himself at one point called "Theory" was not, as he practised it, a complete system, closed in itself, but an invitation to carry on a research effort and to wage out a struggle against ready-made ideas: it was ultimately a working programme, or if you want to call it, a form of questioning destined to be endlessly enacted. If there has been a misunderstanding on this subject, which has supports the accusation of "theoreticism," it is because at a certain moment in his career, Althusser used and abused the word "theses" to express philosophical positions: these famous theses were in reality hypotheses, which only had value once they had been put to the test of reality, which engaged them in a process of constant correction, as opposed to definitively established facts. From this point of view, "to be a Spinozist" (and not a structuralist) cannot mean adherence to a system of thought that is supposed to exclusively and triumphantly hold "the truth": it is rather a call for a critical, undogmatic dissatisfied thought, which affords the condition for a revolutionary catalyst. The formula I mentioned earlier, "*Verum index sui et falsi*," applies here with exemplary force: there is no truth in itself, but only truth that only succeeds in asserting itself by tirelessly confronting the false, which it identifies as such because it sheds its light on it, in the context of a struggle that must be endlessly repeated. This being so, the temptation to be an "-ist" of any kind deflates itself. Spinoza was not a "Spinozist": and if he held this claim, it would have precluded the dynamic

of “philosophizing” particular to him. For my part, even if I have worked a lot on the basis of texts signed with his name, in my understanding this does not justify the claim that I should be labelled as a “Spinozist” or as a “specialist” of Spinoza, at least not by choice.

**In the books in which you put forth a materialist approach to literature (we are thinking inter alia of *Theory of Literary Production* or *The Object of Literature*) you propose a renewed and powerful way of approaching of literary texts that thus far has rarely been taken up in contemporary scholarship (with few exceptions, like Warren Montag), somewhat similar to the texts on theater and literature Althusser wrote. Could you tell us in what way your approach is neither hermeneutical nor structuralist? Could one say that you are reading literature the way Spinoza reads biblical texts? What does it mean to read literary works as “expressions”?**

**PM:** If I have been very interested in texts attached to the genre of “literature”—a genre moreover very difficult to define and to contain within precisely fixed limits so much it is heterogeneous and composite—it is by being animated mainly by the concern to widen the field of intervention of philosophy. Too often has philosophy been confined in the field of a pure speculation, which condemns it to sink in a certain formalism; concretely to turn in circle on itself; confronted to literary texts or reputed to be such at levels moreover very different, the philosophical activity is solicited by fundamentally impure forms of thought, either because they are obscure or because they are unaccomplished—not by default but, if one can say, by vocation—which makes obstacle to a conceptual recovery which allows to make them return in the order of the well-known. By confronting itself with literature, philosophy is brought to take distance with the conformism that inevitably generates the temptation of the withdrawal into oneself proper to a uniquely speculative attitude. From this point of view, I was immediately diverted from the project of making what is called a “philosophy of literature”, which would take literature as an external object of reflection, by trying to give it a form to which it is necessarily resistant. My intention was not to track down traces of philosophical thought in writers that could be found in them as if they were on deposit and that it would be enough to extract for example, to try to identify a “Balzac” philosophy, a “Zola” philosophy, a “Mallarmé” philosophy, a “Proust” philosophy, etc. What I tried to do was rather to rework certain literary facts by being mainly attentive to what in their production and the modes of reading that they call for—that is to say, what one can call their reproduction—can lead to thinking in the sense that philosophy gives to this word, with the

double value of awakening and provocation, and thus of inciting to go further.

In 1990 I published the book "What does literature think?" I then regretted this title: literature, insofar as one can speak of it as a whole, does not think; it makes thought possible, which is something completely different. On examination, it appeared to me that literature, or what we attribute to it, can be used as a formidable machine to make people think, if it is made to function in this sense. When my book was reprinted by a different publisher in 2013, I decided to give it a different title: "Philosophizing with Literature." To philosophize *with* literature, and not about it, is to walk alongside it, as if it were an optical device that enables us to see unexpected things, without which would pass us by and from the perspective of pure speculation would hold little value. In the second edition of the book, I have taken up the subtitle that was already in the first: "Exercises in Literary Philosophy." By "literary philosophy" I meant a way of relating to literary texts which, as I have just said, is opposed to a "philosophy of literature": the latter proposes to extract from literary texts a philosophical meaning that is supposedly there, in the name of a meaning that is already there, latent, dormant, awaiting Prince Charming, a philosopher of course! But literature is not a sleeping beauty, but rather, it resembles the formula I take up, that of a machine that propels thought, that is, if one knows how to start it, and if one uses it for exercises in thought. I say "exercises," in the sense of attempts in which one engages without a determined result and in the absence of any guarantee of legitimacy. In a general sense, I think that philosophy should practice this kind of exercise more often.

When one lends ulterior motives to literature to sufficiently flush out the philosophical meaning that it secretly nourishes, one is inevitably led to make a selection among literary works: one categorizes accordingly, holding onto those which have this a particular meaning, and casting aside those that don't, such that they lack interest for philosophy. In such a perspective, there are, on the one hand, writers with an intrinsically "philosophical" dimension, who are considered to be "at the height of thought," which justifies entering into a dialogue with them on an equal level, this is how Heidegger "reads" Hölderlin, by projecting onto the latter's poems his own philosophical preoccupations and by trying to extract from them elements that nourish his own reflections. I don't see things this way at all: if there is something in literature that can make people think, and thus activate a philosophical mode of thinking, it is not in the form of a predisposition that certain authors and works which would immediately set them apart by assigning them an exclusive dignity. The division between great and minor literature, the first being the bearer of a philosophical interest of which the second is deprived, has never convinced me. If literature is considered in a speculative way—as being afflicted, as a deficiency or a sign of impurity, because the imaginary



drifts, dragging with it narrative fiction and the affective impulses which sever the poetic expression from rational control—it can provoke thought, in all of its forms, including those which at first sight appear as withdrawn from a properly intellectual and reflected state; perhaps even these are the latter which, by their defects, their weaknesses, their rejection of what is methodical or conceptual, their irrational spontaneity, exerting a demand on thought thus propelling it toward new directions. When reading Jules Verne or detective novels, one is unlikely to come across speculative sequences that are sufficiently elaborate to make it worthwhile to dwell on them for a long time, whereas sequences of this kind are abound in the so-called literature of ideas, whereby reason figures as primary in the first instance which afford the reader many opportunities to question himself, to take a step back from what is said, to deal with anomalies that can be treated as symptoms, and thus taken seriously, provided, of course, that they are considered anew through the process of questioning.

You ask me if I approach literary works in the way Spinoza reads the Bible. It is obvious that Spinoza, by ploughing through the Holy Scriptures in all directions and in depth, has provided an unprecedented model for reading texts: he has marked out the ground on which a rigorous exegesis takes place, in particular by submitting to the requirement of a historical and linguistic recontextualization of the discursive facts to which it applies; following this path, he has subjected the sacred texts to a method of reading, which he calls, "natural," thus taking the risk of trivializing them, and it is understandable that this approach caused a scandal in his time. This method consists in treating the biblical accounts at face value, as they are stated, without subjecting them to the test of truth, i.e., of the representation that one makes of it in advance: considered from this angle, these accounts constitute an irreplaceable testimony about what he calls knowledge of the first order, that which proceeds from inadequate ideas, beginning with opinion which is the most common practice of thought for both individual and collective form. Spinoza thus came to fathom the obscure depths in which people's lives are immersed, under the pressure of forces they do not fully understand, which tends to place them in a state of servitude and ignorance: the Bible is for him a book of truth, not because it delivers truths to be given without discussion, but insofar as it best informs about this state of unknowing and provides invaluable materials for analysis, which a philosophy that is driven solely by the power of the intellect cannot afford to ignore and pass over in silence, pretending that it does not exist. If the Bible interests reason, it is perhaps because of the content to which it refers, it stands at the furthest distance from reason: this rational deficit is at the heart of what Spinoza calls the "theological-political," a composite and moving reality with hidden aspects he undertook to probe. From this point of view, my attempt to philosophize with literature



is indeed in the wake of Spinoza's reading of the Bible: it does not credit literature with already elaborated philosophies; nor does it treat it as a mausoleum, a creation whose value would be sanctioned by an aesthetic judgment and thus preserved, but rather takes it as a field to be worked on, a raw material that one attempts to transform by looking attentively at some of its singularities that may occasionally present themselves as irregularities, which, and I take up the formula that I used earlier, makes one think. Having said that, I do not believe that we can find in Spinoza a "method of reading" that can be applied to literature, only because, if we follow the rules of a once-and-for-all defined method, we inevitably limit it, we render ourselves inattentive to the text and what could be called an event. In this respect, I refer you to what I said earlier about the difficulties raised by the notion of a "reading protocol:" it is each time, that we must find the partialities that allow us to make texts speak, that is to say, to identify the symptoms that can stimulate creative reflection, that produce new forms of thought.

**In neurosciences, Spinoza is seen as a very important figure. Antonio Damasio, in his *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*, argues that Spinoza has foreseen the discoveries in biology, as well as the neurological vows on the relation between the mind and body. Damasio sees Spinoza as a proto-biologist. How do you see the relation of Spinoza to neuroscience, or even to psychoanalysis?**

**PM:** Spinoza himself was very interested, as Descartes had been before him, in the medicine of his time. It is clear that the thesis stated at the very beginning of the fifth part of the *Ethics* according to which mental and bodily affections correspond to each other *ad amussim*), which formally opens the perspective of a new psycho-somatic medicine. I say "formally," because this idea, which, in breaking with traditional dualism, revolutionized the conception of the relationship between mind and body, which historically did not bear influence on the development of medical ideas: it was not until the 20th century that this way of seeing was taken seriously and that we had, in retrospect, the revelation that Spinoza, beyond the possibility of any kind of objective guarantee, marked the possibility of thinking in this speculative way. We must therefore be careful not to present him in this respect as a precursor, which is only possible as a projection. It is a fact that contemporary biologists such as Antonio Damasio or Henri Atlan, for example, recognize themselves in Spinoza, and seek to bolster their interpretations and results after the fact, by following a non-speculative path, thus delimiting the scope of their research. But, this should not lead one to argue that Spinoza had anticipated and in some way prepared for their scientific approach, for his thinking was in fact on a completely different plane. If Spinoza's

philosophy can be considered as "actual," it is insofar as the ideas and demonstrations found in the text of the *Ethics* set up rational chains which, if not by founding science or substituting it, it occasionally instructs it by allowing a better understanding of the results by using its own means. A *topos* of this kind is, one can say, an *eternactuality*, that breaks with the notion that the past intervenes on the present, leading us to interpret the relation of the first to the second according to the modalities of the "already" and the "not yet," which imply the reference to a finality: it is thus necessary to avoid placing Spinoza's philosophy and neurobiology in the common movement of a history which would unfold on common ground.

If Spinoza's thought has a persistent intelligibility it is because he was careful not to push his philosophy beyond the limits imposed on them by their nature as philosophy, which prevents it from eclipsing the discoveries of science for the simple reason that it [philosophy] is not within their reach. Unlike Descartes, who was convinced that by using a mechanical model one could manufacture a complete knowledge of the laws of bodily nature, Spinoza claimed that "we do not know what a body can do." Today, it seems that we know much more, while scientific experimentation has developed in conditions that are out of all proportion to those available in the seventeenth century: in the light of what we know today, distinctions such as those that Spinoza makes in the postulates of his "little physics" (the set of considerations set out between propositions thirteen and fourteen of the second part of the *Ethics*) between fluid, soft and hard bodies, rightly appear derisory. We certainly know more, which feeds the illusion that, perhaps, as far as life in general and cerebral life in particular are concerned, the veil of Isis is not far from being lifted. Now, what we can find in Spinoza is precisely the critical device that allows to dissipate this illusion which, by its own logic, inevitably leads to a reductionism, whether it is idealistic as it is the case of the finalist theories of intentionality or materialist as it is the case of the mechanical theories of the transmission of information through bodily channels. If philosophy is able to serve science, it is by bringing its investigations within the limits of simple reason, limits that it is naturally exposed to cross: in this respect what Althusser wrote about the "spontaneous philosophy of the scientists" remains enlightening.

As for psychoanalysis, which is above all, , a caring practice enriched by theory in the precise sense, not "applied" theory, it seems that Spinoza's advances present strong analogies with psychoanalysis. For instance, in the first twenty propositions of the last part of the *Ethics*, where the emancipatory project takes on the appearance of a real "cure," in which the body and the mind are simultaneously engaged, against the background of affect, including the primordial affect of desire , which it attempts to manage by progressively widening its scope: rereading Spinoza in the light of Freud's Metapsychology can be justified by this

precise point. But this comparison comes up against limits that must not be crossed: and it is precisely the revelation of these limits that makes it enlightening in its own way. The “cure” of the imagination advocated by Spinoza and the “cure” of the Freudian unconscious differ by way of substance. Briefly, we can say: Freud's analysis tells his stories, and for that he requires the mute presence of the analyst to whom he tells them; whereas the objective of Spinoza's ethical subject is to stop telling himself (imaginary) stories, and for that he doesn't need the affective presence of another to whom he can talk, because he doesn't need to pass through the meditated, symbolic realm of language. The interventions on behalf of the imagination—consist of putting order in the representations directly associated to passionate affects, in order to imagine more and more intelligently (“magis vivide et distinctius”) or less and less “simply” (simpliciter)—the following twenty propositions, which end the journey of the whole *Ethics*, set the emancipatory project on a completely different path where the soul is treated as separate from the body and its accidents, allowing it to “feel and experience itself as eternal,” rising to the level of the pure and ineffable joys of the “*amor intellectualis Dei*” where the affective and the rational are entirely merged: one is then drawn into an almost mystical realm which is situated beyond the plane of medicine and psychoanalysis. Should we give in to this ultimate drive? This is a question that we have every right to ask ourselves.

**In what way does a materialist theory of literature allow us to understand that literature forms and shapes ideology? Can we formulate a theory of why a certain form of what you call “false totality” is unavoidable or necessary, and still learn something about its constitution? Otherwise put, does it[false totality] attempt to account for what internally divides and separates the literary work from itself (whereby it becomes a multiplicity)?**

**PM:** It seemed to me—and this is a working hypothesis—that literature, a complex reality with uncertain frontiers and of which it is impossible to go around (and a fortiori to present a complete theory), can be used as an observer of the mechanisms of ideology: it brings out certain articulations, the limits and the other side of its functioning and possibly the failures or shortcomings. This explains its paradoxical situation: literature is completely immersed in the ideology that constitutes its material surroundings, and at the same time it looks at it from a distance, which allows it to emerge from it and make it emerge from itself. It is both inside and outside, at a subtle turning point where it only takes a little for it to go one way or the other. It can be said that it plays with ideology while at the same time making it play at the risk of making it slip

and sometimes disjoin. It is this equivocal position, between balance and imbalance, between sense and nonsense, that has preoccupied me the most: I have tried to read texts labelled as “literary” in order to identify the points of rupture, the blind spots, where things crack, which forces us to reflect. This approach has nothing to do with the attempt at legitimisation based on the traditional criteria of aesthetics: I have not attempted to distinguish between beautiful forms and others that do not deserve this qualification, which establish a hierarchical classification supported by value of judgments. But neither do I claim that the type of detouring approach I have chosen is exhaustive and invalidates others with which it would compete. To put it bluntly, I am not interested in what literature “is”—which, given the instability of the literary world, is perhaps definitively impossible to know: in this respect, I leave the problem to others—but as to what it ‘does,’ and as to what one can do with it by maintaining a partisan relationship with it, a partnership that combines complicity and refusal; it is a kind of cat-and-mouse game whereby one never knows who is the cat and who is the mouse. In the context of our present discussion it would be difficult for me to go any further on this point: moreover, I am increasingly reluctant to enter a circularity where theoretical statements of a general nature about “literature” are bound to go round and round ; I prefer to devote myself to “exercises in literary philosophy” a practice which savors particularities—of which there are many – where literary texts, carefully approached from certain angles, and not claiming to exhaust their content or, as we say, their “meaning” leads in an often unexpected way, to doing a little philosophy with them, in their company and on their margins, and perhaps leads to doing philosophy differently.

**We are doing this interview in the midst of the pandemic COVID-19. Here one might also be reminded of Spinoza’s “the free man does not think of death.” In the present context, this is not meant to dismiss the real threat of COVID-19 – as right-wingers, truthers and some on the left do, on the contrary. The difficulty to obey Spinoza's dictum seems to lie in the absurdity of thinking about death in any form as a motivational force. What is your take on this Spinozist line? Might we be so unfree and so thinking about death is a symptom of this?**

**PM:** Spinoza does not say that the free man “does not think of death”, but that “he thinks of nothing less than death” (*de nulla re minus quam de morte cogitat*). This strange, roundabout formula, which he decided upon after much reflection, must be taken literally: it means that the free man thinks about death in the mode of “nothing less than,” that is to say that he tries to control as much as possible the affects unleashed

by his awareness of his condition of mortal being—would he be free in the absence of this awareness?—linked to his nature as a finite mode, therefore he exerts himself to support, and to live this perspective as an alternative to being dominated by the fear of the death which makes one passive. One must conclude that it is impossible not to think about death at all, except to escape into a world of pure fiction whose representation is even more dangerous than any fatal accident. Death, one cannot stop thinking about it, one always thinks about it, unless one sinks into unconsciousness: all one can do, or try to do, is to think about it, in a way that brings it into being, which is inevitable in any case, and to its proper measure, thus in the mode, of "nothing less than," as something that is going to happen but does not have the importance that the imagination lends to it by forming an inadequate, mutilated and confused idea of it. In other words, the free man is or would be the one who tries to live his death in a peaceful way, in an atmosphere that has nothing morbid or mortifying about it: this is what he has to do best, and of course it is not easy to achieve this. To think of nothing less than death, consists in understanding and accepting that death is an integral part of life, that it is a necessary moment, that it takes place in its course, to the point that the temptation to escape it is not only vain, but fundamentally harmful: it poisons the whole existence by delivering it to despair and madness.

Following this line of reasoning, Spinoza's project would therefore be to remove death and its representation from the jurisdiction of the negative, and consequently to repositize it. What does it mean to repositivize it? It can only mean to apprehend it more and more from a positive point of view, therefore less and less negatively: it is an effort (in the sense of "conatus"), and therefore a tendential movement that launches itself forward without speculating on its outcome. . From this point of view, death as a condition that accompanies the whole of life is one thing that would be difficult and harmful not to think about at all; and death as an event, that is, as an accident, that puts an end to life and cuts short the momentum of the conatus, is another thing, which should not be confused with the previous one. Becoming aware of this distinction liberates us; it makes us more active and less passive. Death as a condition is a necessary determination of our nature: it is consequently the object of certain knowledge, insofar as its cause is in us. Death as an event necessarily occurs, but its cause, which is certainly not in us, must escape us, which affects it with a certain dimension of contingency. Its cause remains unknown because it is not in reality a cause but an infinite multitude of causes whose meeting does not obey any internal or external finality: this is what Spinoza explains in the Appendix to the first part of the *Ethics*, devoted to a radical critique of finality, in the often commented passage where he uses the example of a banal and disconcerting event (a man leaves his house to go and see his friends; as he crosses the threshold of his door, a tile detached from the roof by a strong wind falls

on his head and kills him); if this event seems indeterminate – it is in the gap freed by this absence of determination that the representation of an end comes to lodge itself, to fill the hole in a way – it is because it is too determined, so determined that it is impossible for a finite understanding to master the totality of the chains of which it is a part; if this is understood, one will grant it less importance, one will avoid feeding fears by drowning it under streams of imaginary preoccupations. From this point of view, yes, we can say that the free man does not think about death: he does not think about the death-event, even though he cannot avoid thinking about death-condition, which has another nature because it cannot be reduced to an event determined by an unlimited number of causes which, because of this unlimitedness, must remain unknowable. To think of nothing less than death is to occupy, as best we can, the interval between these two incommensurable figures of death which are death-condition, of which it is possible to form an adequate idea, and death-event, which can only be represented through inadequate ideas.

The analysis I have sketched invalidates the interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy that has long been imposed: that of an absolute rationalism, which has the last word on everything and ensures the absolute triumph of knowledge over ignorance. In contrast, Spinoza embarked on the enterprise of a practical philosophy for which the dividing line between wisdom and ignorance, between the known and the unknown, is never definitively drawn: as one knows more, which increases the chances of being active and thus of living more freely, the domain of the unknown of which one has a share widens, which makes one fall back into passivity. The world as Spinoza sees it is not deflated and serene, but unfinished, full of traps, disquieting and worrying: the infinitely infinite power of substance engenders it by engaging it from the start in an incessant and multidimensional movement of transformation, the end of which we will never see, which inextricably mixes production and devastation. So, for viruses, not to mention other figures of disaster, war, oppression, climate disruption, and others, the best "solution", in the end, would be to think about them in the mode of "nothing less than" (*de re nulla minus cogitare*), that is, not to think about them while thinking about them.

**One last question: in the last years, the notion of communism re-emerged as an important—we would not dare to call it central—category of thinking not only politics, but also for analysing contemporary capitalism from a standpoint that is reducible to what exists already. Do you accredit a (strategic or conceptual) significance or value to this signifier, to communism as an idea that is worth fighting for?**

**PM:** Is there any other idea worth fighting for? I can't think of any. But let's not kid ourselves: nobody knows what communism is. It's an idea that awaits content; it's a practical idea that we cannot know until it's realised, if it's ever realised at all, which we now have far too many reasons to doubt, but which doesn't mean that we should give up on it. Spinoza can perhaps help us get closer to this, insofar as his thinking is nourished by the idea of the "common," which I would be tempted to spell "as-one", or simply "as one." "Like one" is not "one" in the sense of a totality compressed upon itself and definitively obtained owing to this closure: it is a movement or a tendency that one can engage with in order to unify the infinite order of causes and effects, that is to say, more mastery and control over what happens and does not cease to happen in good and in bad ways. It is to cultivate the schema of the "in between", to take up this quite problematic notion that I had on my mind and which I used to reply at some of your precedent questions.

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# **Spinoza**

## **Christopher Norris**

I have laboured carefully, not to mock, lament, or execrate human actions, but to understand them; and, to this end, I have looked upon passions, such as love, hatred, anger, envy, ambition, pity, and the other perturbations of the mind, not in the light of vices of human nature, but as properties, just as pertinent to it, as are heat, cold, storm, thunder, and the like to the nature of the atmosphere, which phenomena, though inconvenient, are yet necessary, and have fixed causes, by means of which we endeavour to understand their nature. (Spinoza, *Political Treatise*)

No one else during the century 1650–1750 remotely rivalled Spinoza's notoriety as the chief challenger of the fundamentals of revealed religion, received ideas, tradition, morality, and what was everywhere regarded, in absolutist and non-absolutist states alike, as divinely constituted political authority. (Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750*)

I am utterly amazed, utterly enchanted! I have a *precursor*, and what a precursor! I hardly knew Spinoza: that I should have turned to him just *now*, was inspired by 'instinct'. Not only is his over-tendency like mine – namely, to make all knowledge the *most powerful* affect – but in five main points of his doctrine I recognize myself; this most unusual and loneliest thinker is closest to me precisely in these matters: he denies the freedom of the will, teleology, the moral world-order, the unegoistic, and evil. (Friedrich Nietzsche, postcard to Franz Overbeck).

I believe in Spinoza's God, who reveals himself in the lawful harmony of the world, not in a God who concerns himself with the fate and the doings of mankind. (Albert Einstein)

Pure immanence, no thought of worlds elsewhere;  
Mere superstition to think otherwise.  
What price your mind-stuff minus body's share?

Yet I misspeak myself: to say that they're  
Close kin's just two-bit Descartes in disguise.  
Pure immanence, no thought of worlds elsewhere.

Try as you might to reunite that pair  
Still my reproach to his sad ghost applies:  
What price your mind-stuff minus body's share?

Though Platonists dreamed of a matter rare  
Or superfine as soul, their dream-talk lies:  
Pure immanence, no thought of worlds elsewhere.

The trouble is, those crypto-dualists care  
Above all to revile my dread surmise:  
What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?

'Deus sive natura': they can't bear  
To think just what that phrase of mine implies:  
Pure immanence, no thought of worlds elsewhere.

It's why the rabbis and the priests declare  
Me heretic - for venturing to advise  
'What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?'.

They deem this doctrine one that's sure to square  
With thinking soul as well as body dies:  
Pure immanence, no thought of worlds elsewhere.

Still those there are who count it all hot air,  
That soul-talk, yet whose spirits touch the skies:  
What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?

And those there'll be with soulful thoughts to spare,  
Like sage Novalis, who'll soon recognize  
Pure immanence, no thought of worlds elsewhere.

'A God-intoxicated mystic': there  
You have me, Saint Spinoza in his eyes;  
What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?

If truth be told, both parties greatly err  
Though naught's to gain by talk of compromise:  
Pure immanence, no thought of worlds elsewhere.

It's this root principle for which I'll dare  
Disturb the peaceful way of life I prize:  
What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?

'Ultimi barbarorum!': my one flare-  
Up moment when the mob made hackles rise.  
Pure immanence, no thought of worlds elsewhere.

They killed my patron, dragged him by the hair,  
But let's cut all this sin-talk down to size:  
What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?

The elders ask me: which God hears your prayer,  
Christian, or Jewish?, but I'll not baptize  
Pure immanence: no thought of worlds elsewhere.

My revolution's long Eighteenth Brumaire  
Is that which comes around when no one cries  
'What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?'

Fast forward now and witness how *l'affaire*  
*Spinoziste* gives enlighteners their highs:  
Pure immanence, no thought of worlds elsewhere.

Yet it's a curse, this shockwave power to scare  
That every call of kind and kin defies.  
What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?

'Ecrasez l'infâme': fine for bold Voltaire  
A century hence, but I'm the first who tries  
Pure immanence, no thought of worlds elsewhere.

'Of all great thinkers the least doctrinaire'  
They'll say, though here's one tag to memorise:  
What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?

Fast forward again: see how the god-squad snare  
Us with their latest test-of-faith surprise.  
Pure immanence, no dream of worlds elsewhere.

Still, let's not say their tactics are unfair  
When immanence with faith so boldly vies:  
What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?

Almost we'll need a covert nom-de-guerre,  
Us Spinozists, if we're to exercise  
Pure immanence, no dream of worlds elsewhere.

Yet times there'll be when world-reformers swear  
By us and our faith-shaking enterprise:  
What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?

Let their reproaches and abuse run ne'er  
So high, still our composure signifies  
Pure immanence, no dream of worlds elsewhere.

Now I sit low on my lens-grinder's chair  
As shredded lungs my choice of trade chastise.  
'What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?'.

The clerics taunt me like a tethered bear  
Though I think cheerfully of my demise:  
Pure immanence, no dream of worlds elsewhere.

And should you deem it reason for despair,  
This thought of mine, then let me emphasize:  
What price your soul-stuff minus body's share?  
Pure immanence, no thought of worlds elsewhere.



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