

149. POWER

FROM EARLY IN HIS philosophical career, Spinoza took a central part of his project to involve identifying the nature and scope of **human** power. For, he argues, “The better the mind understands its own powers, the more easily it can direct itself and propose rules to itself” (TIE[40]). Thus, the practical goals of living well, and of building a stable, well-functioning social order, are both intimately connected to the metaphysics of power. This entry provides an overview of Spinoza’s account of power, both in his metaphysics and in his politics.

Two peculiarities of Spinoza’s language when he discusses power should be observed at the outset. First, he uses two distinct Latin terms, *potentia* and *potestas*, to refer to two distinct senses of power. *Potentia* typically refers to causal efficacy or power of **acting**, whereas *potestas* typically refers to the power that political institutions, or representatives of those institutions, have authority to wield (Barbone 1999; Steinberg 2018, 55; Field 2020b, chap. 7). This entry retains the distinction: throughout, ‘causal power’ denotes *potentia* and ‘political power’ denotes *potestas*. A second issue is that Spinoza typically speaks of **causal** power in the singular (*potentia* rather than *potentiae*), with the implication that an entity has one causal power that is responsible for all of the effects it produces. This can sound strained in translation. This entry will occasionally refer to an entity’s causal powers (in the plural) when doing so adds clarity to the discussion.

The term *potentia* is not explicitly defined anywhere in Spinoza’s work. The nearest he gets to defining it is in his third demonstration of the **existence of God**: “To be able not to exist is to lack power, and conversely, to be able to exist is to have power (as is known through itself)” (E1p1d3). This is not an especially informative account of what causal power is. It tells us more about the nature of existence than about power. Fortunately, Spinoza’s claims about causal power do indicate a core set of stable commitments, something like an implicit theory of causal power. It is important to bear in mind, however, that Spinoza himself does not present these claims as part of a single underlying theory about the nature of power. The theory attributed to him here is reconstructed from disparate claims about power in a variety of contexts.

Spinoza’s mature works frequently characterize the power of an entity as constituted by its **essence**. This point is particularly prominent in his discussions of God, as Viljanen (2008a, 99–101) has noted. Early in the *Ethics*, Spinoza writes that “God’s power is his essence itself” (E1p34), a claim that is repeated in the **TTP** (“the divine power is the very essence of God,” TTP6.9). Yet the connection between power and essence is not unique to God’s case. While developing the *conatus* doctrine in the *Ethics*, Spinoza writes:

the power of each thing, or the **striving** by which it (either alone or with others) does anything, or strives to do anything—i.e. (by 3p6) the power, or striving, by which it strives to persevere in its being, is nothing but the given, or actual, essence [*datam, sive actualem essentiam*] of the thing itself. (E3p7d)

We have here something stronger than a mere characterization of an entity's power in terms of its actual essence. The claim is rather that an entity's actual essence constitutes its power; its power "is nothing but [*nihil est praeter*]" its actual essence.

The significance of the term "actual essence" is much disputed, and different pictures of causal power result from different interpretations of this notion. On one prominent view, however, Spinoza means to distinguish an entity's actual essence from its formal essence (Garrett 2009). A particular human being's formal essence, on this view, is something like their humanity – the mental and physical architecture that they share with all and only other humans. By contrast, a particular human's actual essence is unique to them, singling them out from all other entities, including other humans. If that proposal is right, then one consequence of Spinoza's account of causal power as actual essence is that no two entities could have precisely the same causal power. If they did, there would not be two entities, but only one.

Setting aside this debate about the notion of essence, though, it seems that Spinoza accepts the thesis:

Power as Essence. An entity's causal powers are constituted by its essence.

It is tempting to read Spinoza's claim in the other direction, that the essence of a thing is constituted by the possession of certain causal powers. But this is not what the texts say: in each case (for example, in E1p34d, E3d2, E3p7d), power is explained in terms of essence rather than the other way around. This makes "essence" a more primitive concept than "power" in Spinoza's ontology.

Power as Essence is a surprising thesis in that it implies there are no non-essential powers. If it is understood to apply across the board, without any restrictions, then it implies that (for example) a hammer's power to drive a nail into wood is somehow essential to the hammer. This sounds bad: if a small child wields the hammer, it probably won't be able to drive a nail into wood, but surely the hammer's essence is unaffected by that. One plausible way that Spinoza could reply is by treating cases like that of the hammer as cases in which the **individual** in question is only a partial cause of the resulting effect. The hammer has the power to drive a nail into wood if it is wielded by someone who can apply a certain amount of force. So, both the hammer and the person wielding it are partial causes of the resulting effect – that is, the effect is partially explained in terms of both of their essences and not fully explained in terms of either essence alone.

Power is directly connected not only to essence, but to existence. Spinoza embraces what contemporary metaphysicians call an 'Eleatic principle,' according to which existence requires producing effects. Something that makes no causal difference to the world does not exist. Perhaps the clearest statement of the view comes at E1p36: "Nothing exists from whose nature some effect does not follow." The implication is that whatever exists must cause some effect. Now, when an entity produces effects, this is a manifestation of its causal powers, which, as we have seen, are constituted by its essence (hence Spinoza's claim that the effects produced follow from the entity's "nature"). So, Spinoza is also committed to:

Existence as Manifest Power. If an entity exists, its powers actually produce some effect.

If an entity's powers never manifested in any effects – that is, if every effect it would produce were thwarted or prevented from occurring – that entity would not exist. And the reverse claim

is trivial. (How could an entity's causal powers produce an effect if there were no such entity?) More interesting is a further set of claims Spinoza makes about the direction or character of causal power: they always tend toward that entity's continued existence.

The idea that an entity's powers are inevitably directed away from its own destruction, and toward the preservation of its existence, appears quite early in Spinoza's writing. As early as the KV, he asserts that "no thing through itself seeks its own destruction" (KV1.1[9]), and later that "no thing, considered in itself, has in itself a cause enabling it to destroy itself" (KV2.26[7]). A more well-known restatement of this claim appears in the *conatus* doctrine of the *Ethics*: "No thing can be destroyed except through an external cause" (E3p4). The language of the KV is more psychologistic – it seems to express the claim in terms of the goals that an entity seeks to fulfill when it exercises its powers. However, the version of the thesis that appears in the *Ethics* makes clear that Spinoza does not intend it to apply only to entities capable of formulating goals. Even entities such as rocks, icebergs, and stars can only be destroyed by external causes, on Spinoza's view.

This proposition figures prominently in the argument that Spinoza offers for the central claim of the *conatus* doctrine, that "Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being" (E3p6). That is, if we set aside the effects produced either partly or wholly by the power of other things, the effects an entity produces will not include the destruction of that entity but will aid in the preservation of its existence. These points might be jointly expressed as the thesis:

Power as Self-Preserving. The causal powers of an existing entity, considered on its own, produce only effects that preserve and do not destroy that entity.

Several extraordinary philosophical difficulties attend this claim, and many have been skeptical about Spinoza's argument for it (Bennett 1984, 234–46; Della Rocca 1996a but cf. Garrett 2002 and Lin 2004). For example, some have suggested that the claim is inconsistent with the possibility that **suicide** could ever be rational (see, e.g., Matson 1977), though some recent scholarship has pushed against that position (Nadler 2016; but cf. Grey 2017).

Causal power is also connected with Spinoza's understanding of activity and **passivity**. Most often, individuals are only partial causes of the effects they produce. When someone sees a donut and reaches for it, overwhelmed with temptation, they are only partly causally responsible for what they do; the donut's causal power is partly responsible as well. Perhaps thinking of such cases, Spinoza takes us to be passive with respect to a given effect whenever our individual power alone does not suffice to produce that effect. He writes:

we act when something happens, in us or outside us, of which we are the **adequate** cause, i.e. (by 3d1), when something in us or outside us follows from our nature, which can be clearly and 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. (E3def2)

This thought in turn explains how Spinoza draws the line between active emotions, such as intellectual **love**, and passions or passive emotions, such as lust. The former emotions are explained by our own power (or essence), while the latter "are not defined by the power by which we strive to persevere in existing, but by the power of an external cause compared with

our own” (E4p5). In general, Spinoza seems to identify activity with an individual’s degree of causal self-sufficiency:

Activity as Causal Sufficiency: An entity’s degree of activity is the degree to which its causal power is sufficient to produce effects on its own.

And – since **human** freedom consists in being as active as possible – recent scholars have drawn on Spinoza’s views about causal power to clarify claims he makes about **freedom** in his ethical and political theories. (This tendency is perhaps most prominent in those who interpret Spinoza as a theorist of relational autonomy, e.g., Armstrong 2018; Tucker 2021.)

Finally, Spinoza’s theory of causal power also includes considerations about how the power of a composite whole or collective is related to the powers of its component **parts**. Briefly, the **form** of a composite individual is a pattern (*ratio*) of causal interactions among that individual’s parts (E2def[8], 11/99–100). An individual can acquire or lose component parts, and alter its situation and state of motion, so long as that individual’s form remains unchanged (E2pL4–7). Thus, the particular parts that compose an individual are not necessary to it. How does this pertain to causal power? Since, as we have seen, the powers of an individual are essential to it, it follows that not every power of a part is a power of the whole. With this point in the background, Spinoza sometimes speaks of the parts of an individual as performing duties or functions (e.g., at E4p6od), such that the activity of a well-functioning part promotes the continued persistence of the whole. However, the parts may also be distinct individuals in their own right (as is the case in the human body, per E2post1, 11/102). If so, the parts may have causal powers that are independent of the functional role they occupy in the larger whole.

Stepping back to survey Spinoza’s theory of causal power, the picture is as follows. An entity’s essence constitutes a certain causal power, such that: (i) this power must be manifest whenever the entity exists, (ii) the entity is active to the extent that its manifest power suffices to produce effects on its own, and (iii) insofar as the entity is active, the effects its power produces will tend toward the preservation of its existence.

This theory of causal power informs his view of *political* power or authority (*potestas*). What grounds the **state**’s authority to wield causal power? Correspondingly, what reason does one have to obey civil **laws**? In some respects, Spinoza’s answer to this question is similar to the answer famously developed by Thomas **Hobbes**. Out of self-interest, each of us gives up our individual causal power in order to jointly constitute a unified **sovereign** power. This collective causal power is then used by a governing body to enforce laws and to compel us to fulfill our agreements with one another. Only such an arrangement can ensure that “every contract can always be preserved with utmost good faith” (TTP16.25), and it is a precondition for human beings “to pass their lives harmoniously” (TP5.2).

Unlike Hobbes, though, this collective power is not artificial: Spinoza seems to hold that the state itself is metaphysically on par with any natural composite individual. In the *Ethics*, he claims that a human being “can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of his being than that all should so **agree** [*convenient*] in all things that the minds and bodies of all would compose, as it were, one mind and one body [*unam quasi Mentem, unumque Corpus componant*]” (E4p18s). This suggestion is hinted at also in the TP, which repeatedly describes the state’s causal power as “the power [*potentia*] of a multitude, led as if by one mind [*una veluti mente ducitur*]” (TP3.2).

Yet scholars have debated at some length just how seriously this analogy ought to be taken. When Spinoza describes the state as being unified like one mind and one body, is this to be taken literally or is it merely a metaphor? The most forceful defenses of a metaphorical or anti-realist interpretation of these claims have been given by Rice 1990a and Barbone 2002. For instance, Rice argues that if states really are composite individuals like a human body, there would be natural laws governing human beings in virtue of their composing a political state. That is, there would be “laws of politics” that explain “the laws of human psychology” (1990a, 277), just as natural laws governing a whole organism explain (some of) the activities of its organs. Rice holds that Spinoza did not believe there are any such natural laws of politics, and so the state ought not to be construed as on an ontological par with a human being. There are a number of difficulties with this argument, however, and recent scholarship has tended to prefer a literal or realist interpretation (see, e.g., Matheron 2020; Field 2020b, chap. 8.2; LeBuffe 2021). On the realist view, states really are composite individuals that have as parts their **citizens** or subjects. Treating states as composite individuals allows us to make sense of some of Spinoza’s claims about political power that might otherwise be difficult to motivate, since it permits us to apply Spinoza’s theory of causal power to the state qua composite individual.

For example, given that the powers of individual humans have been pooled together to form a state with its own distinctive causal power (*potentia*), are there any limits to the state’s authority (*potestas*) to wield that power? In terms of juridical limits, Spinoza’s answer is no. The state’s political power extends as far as its actual causal power over its subjects. Since the alternative to living in a state or commonwealth is so bad, the state has wide latitude to exercise power as its governing body sees fit. Thus, Spinoza concludes, “we’re bound [*tenemur*] to carry out absolutely all the commands of the supreme power [*summæ potestatis*]—even if it commands the greatest absurdities”, and “no law binds the supreme power” (TTP16.27). If the supreme power enacted a law curtailing its own power, it would have to be self-enforced. So, the supreme power could simply ignore that law with political impunity, if it believed that doing so would be of benefit to the state. This is all in line with Spinoza’s view of power as self-preserving: any individual’s causal powers, insofar as they pertain to that individual’s essence, are directed at the preservation and enhancement of that individual’s existence. The point applies no less to the state than to any other composite individual.

So there is no law or external authority that could prevent the supreme powers from issuing any command they wished. Yet, in practice, Spinoza believes that many facts about human nature set limits on the political power of the state. For instance, human nature may directly conflict with some commands the supreme power might conceivably try to issue. It will simply not work to command one’s subject “to love someone who had harmed him” (TTP17.2), any more than it would work to command that subject to grow wings and fly. Spinoza makes the point clear in the TP: “power [*potestas*],” he writes, “must be defined not only by the power of the agent [*agentis potentia*], but also by the capacity of what he’s acting on” (TP4.4). For this reason, the supreme powers do not have the political power “to make men honor those things which move them to laughter or disgust” (TP4.4). Such commands are metaphysically impossible for subjects to obey, and for this reason the state does not have the causal power – nor, therefore, the political power – to command such a thing.

It must be emphasized that none of these limits on state power are rooted in considerations about morality or **justice**. They are ultimately rooted, one way or another, in the state’s interest in its own continued existence. Spinoza believes that this interest, combined with a rather robust

body of claims about human nature, generates substantive constraints on what the state has the political power (*potestas*) to do. As he puts it, “To look out for their own interests and retain their sovereignty, it is incumbent on [the supreme powers] most of all to consult the common good, and to direct everything according to the **dictate of reason**” (TTP16.29). There is something ironic about Spinoza’s argument for the position. The reason the state must cede these political powers to citizens is that the citizens themselves lack the ability to control their own use of the associated causal powers: “human beings have nothing less within their control than their tongues, and there is nothing people are so bad at as governing their appetites” (E3p2s).

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KEY PASSAGES

E1P11ald; E1P36; E3def2; E3p4–7. KV1.1[9]; KV2.26[7]. TTP16–17. TP2–3.

RECOMMENDED READING

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RELATED TERMS

Action and Passion; Agreement; Cause; Essence; Existence; Hobbes; *Political Treatise*; Sovereignty; Striving; Suicide; Teleology; *Theological-Political Treatise*; Virtue

150. PREJUDICE

THROUGHOUT HIS WORKS, SPINOZA analyzes and seeks to undermine the **power** of prejudice (*prejudicium*) to obstruct knowledge and prevent **human** flourishing and **freedom**.

Concisely defined, prejudices (literally, pre- or prior judgments) are **imaginative** (rather than rational or intellectual) **ideas** that, once **affirmed** by the **mind**, occupy the mind in not only non- but actually anti-rational cognitive and affective patterns. Prejudices both depict or