

**THE WORLD AS ACTIVE POWER**  
STUDIES IN THE HISTORY  
OF EUROPEAN REASON



*Edited by*

JUHANI PIETARINEN & VALTTERI VILJANEN

*Series Editor:* A.J. VANDERJAGT

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## The World as Active Power

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# The World as Active Power

Studies in the History of European Reason

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Juhani Pietarinen and Valtteri Viljanen



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*ihmisesä* [*The Philosophy of Joy. Spinoza's Conception of Active Man*] (2001), of *Platonin filosofia* [*The Philosophy of Plato*] (2005) and of numerous articles on ethics, social philosophy, philosophy of science, and early modern philosophy, the co-editor of *Perspectives on Human Conduct* (E. J. Brill, 1988), *Genes and Morality. New Essays* (Rodopi, 1999) and *Philosophy and Biodiversity* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), and the former leader of the project 'European Reason II' supported by the Academy of Finland.

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VALTTERI VILJANEN: Ph.D., Academy of Finland Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Turku. He is the author of *Spinoza's Dynamics of Being: The Concept of Power and its Role in Spinoza's Metaphysics* (dissertation 2007) and of various articles on Spinoza.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- AA Kant, Immanuel. *Gesammelte Schriften* I–XXIX. Edited by the Deutsche (formerly the Königliche Preußische) Akademie der Wissenschaften. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902.
- AG Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. *Philosophical Essays*. Translated by R. Ariew and D. Garber. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989.
- AT Descartes, René. *Œuvres de Descartes* I–XI. Edited by C. Adam and P. Tannery. Paris: Vrin, 1996.
- CSM Descartes, René. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* I–II. Translated by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- CSMK Descartes, René. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* III. Translated and edited by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch and A. Kenny. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- E Spinoza, Benedictus de. *The Ethics*. In *The Collected Works of Spinoza* I, edited and translated by E. Curley. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.
- EW Hobbes, Thomas. *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes* I–VII. Translated and edited by W. Molesworth. London: John Bohn, 1839–1845.
- FT Hobbes, Thomas. *The Elements of Law: Natural and Politic*. Edited by F. Tönnies. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928.
- G Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. *Die philosophische Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz* I–VII. Edited by C. I. Gerhardt. Berlin: Weidmann, 1875–1890 (reprint Hildesheim: Olms, 1960).
- L Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. *Philosophical Papers and Letters. A Selection*. Translated and edited by L. E. Loemker. Second Edition. Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989.
- LS Long, A. A. and David N. Sedley. *The Hellenistic Philosophers* I–II. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

- M Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A. V. Miller. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977.
- MP Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Edited by C. B. Macpherson. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968.
- S Anselm of Canterbury. *Opera omnia* I. Edited by F. S. Schmitt. Edinburgh: Nelson, 1946.
- W Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation* I–II. Translated by E. F. J. Payne. New York: Dover Publications, 1966.
- WF Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. *Philosophical Texts*. Translated and edited by R. S. Woolhouse and R. Francks. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

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PLOTINUS

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THOMAS AQUINAS

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## INTRODUCTION

Juhani Pietarinen and Valteri Viljanen

The explanation of the world in terms of power has been widespread among human cultures. The assumptions concerning such a power or powers differ widely, but most explanatory schemes seem to share the quest for the *ultimate producing factor* that needs no further explanation, and also for something invisible, or otherwise insensible, that nevertheless manifests itself in the world appearing to our senses.

The most common view, all world-cultures considered, has apparently been *power dualism*: what ultimately exist are two kinds of powers, entirely different by nature and opposed to each other. The opposition has predominantly been conceived in such terms as active–passive, rational–irrational, immaterial–material, good–evil, etc. In *power monism* things that appear to us opposite in these ways are explained to be manifestations of just one basic power conceived in itself as insensible, perhaps even fundamentally concealed from us.

The birth of Western philosophy marks a turning point in the history of power-invoking world-explanations. From the time of the ancient Greeks to ours we encounter both power dualism and power monism. The temporal world is explained in terms of active and passive powers; as the Eleatic Stranger of Plato's *Sophist* famously suggests, "I am proposing as a mark to distinguish real things that they are nothing but power". The idea that real existence requires some kind of causal power as its basis—not being causally efficacious implies in a very real sense non-being—has had a wide appeal to Western thinkers, and continues to do so.

What is characteristic, however, for Western philosophy is the interest in the *ordered* features of the world, which, in turn, are thought to presuppose and result from a power that is *rational* in character. Moreover, it is difficult to see how the fundamental power could not be *active* in the sense of being independent from everything else: such power must be capable of being and acting 'in itself', producing effects completely spontaneously, with nothing external affecting it. Given these characteristics, it is understandable that the fundamental active power has so often also been seen as infinite, eternal, indestructible, and unchangeable.

According to the basic claim of dynamistically inclined philosophers, the nature and function of the whole reality, including not only animate 'living' beings but also systems of inanimate bodies, is determined, at least in part, by this kind of active power. And most importantly, it is thought to form the rational essence of human beings, appearing as the ability to rational thought and as striving to achieve freedom and happiness under the guidance of reason.

We can find this idea in full force in Plato's explanation of the world in terms of the world-soul that represents the universal active power of reason (*nous*) in our visible universe and controls irrational passive forces of the material constituents of the world. Plato's ontology is thus based on sharp power dualism, developed most extensively in his *Timaeus*, which turned out to have an enormous influence on the European philosophical tradition. In chapter 1, Juhani Pietarinen considers Plato's dualistic world-explanation 'dynamistically' as an extension of the early Greek idea of *dunamis* as pertaining to the nature or essence of things in virtue of which they exist and act in the characteristic way they do. For Plato, the active power as the capacity of existing 'in itself', in virtue of its own nature alone, was reason, that is, a self-sufficient, eternally existing power that aims at and brings about perfectly good and beautiful order. In contrast to reason's active power Plato introduces the idea of passive power, something essentially receptive and capable of producing by itself only disorder. Plato's enigmatic notion of *chôra* can be understood as a space consisting of receptive powers that form the inherent nature of the purely material reality; the orderly universe, the *cosmos*, is, for Plato, a mixed result of the active power of reason and the passive receptive powers of the space. Plato developed further the notion of soul to explain the interaction between the power of reason and the powers of the space. Pietarinen argues that by interpreting the human soul as a mixture of the active power and the passive receptive powers, both its capacity to everlasting self-controlling actions and its interactions with the material world become understandable.

Interesting developments and changes can be traced in the Platonic world-explanation during its travel through Stoicism, Neoplatonism, and Aristotelian scholasticism to the early modern philosophy. In chapter 2, Håvard Løkke discusses the role of active power in Stoic philosophy. In the materialistic Stoic ontology, the world consists of four material elements: fire, air, water, and earth. These elements, however, are arranged according to two basic principles, one active and

the other passive. Løkke examines the motivation of distinguishing the principles from the elements in the Stoic *cosmogony* and in the Stoic *cosmology*. He argues that in the former two kinds of fire is assumed, the pure eternal one, and the one mixed with air to produce *pneuma*, both fires representing a kind of active principle. As Løkke explains, the former kind of active principle is often neglected and attention is paid mainly to the Stoic cosmology where *pneuma*'s role as the universal causal power in the created world is central. As an active, self-moving power operating in the created world, *pneuma* is called 'the right reason' and 'the law that is common'. Thus, conceived as representing reason and law, the Stoics' materialistically defined active principle still retains the teleological aspect prominent in Plato and Aristotle. This self-moving power, the right reason or common law, causes all changes and qualities in the world by acting on 'the passive' (also called 'the matter' and 'the unqualified substance'), i.e. on something which in itself is without motion and form, without ability to cause anything. Løkke examines in detail the Stoic theory according to which everything that exists, the whole reality, is constituted by a combination of the active and passive principles.

The Stoic theory rejects Plato's idea of reason as something immaterial and develops a view of universal active power within a purely materialistic framework. In this respect it represents ontological monism. Whether it can also be said to represent power monism or dualism depends on how the ontological status of the two basic principles, the distinction between the active and passive powers, is conceived. Although the distinction is made within just one domain, the world of material elements, it does not exclude the possibility of taking the active and passive principles to be ontologically separate. And indeed, this seems to be the case: the material elements of which the active power is said to consist are different from the elements manifesting passive power. Moreover, the material 'bodies' endowed with the former kind of power are capable of existing in itself, independent of anything else. It thus seems justified to take the Stoics to have transferred the Platonic power dualism into a materialist ontological framework.

The Neoplatonist Plotinus develops, apparently as the first Western philosopher, a full-blooded power monism. He rejects Plato's notion of ontologically independent 'material' power and explains the world solely in terms of a unitary and simple immaterial active power ('the One') from which all other aspects or 'levels' of the reality, all possible



forms of things as well as their temporal realizations (including material bodies), necessarily follow in a special manner usually called ‘emanation’. In chapter 3, Eyjólfur Kjalar Emilsson discusses Plotinus’ hierarchical model of reality, focusing on the order of causal dependence between the different levels. He argues that when ‘lower’ levels are said to be constituted by ‘emanation’ (or ‘illumination’ or ‘outflow’), this is just a metaphorical way to refer to an aspect of a view of causation called the ‘double act doctrine’, according to which any higher level is constituted by an internal activity (*energeia*). In point of fact, Emilsson argues, each level *is* its internal activity; this is what constitutes its substance. At the same time, the inner activity brings about an external activity that constitutes the level below. As the cause of the lower level, it is properly called a power or potentiality (*dunamis*) of the lower. The nature and importance of this kind of double activity, as well as the nature of power involved, is discussed by Emilsson.

The Plotinian brand of power monism has to face the problem of explaining the passivity that so obviously pertains to the nature and existence of material things. The medieval discussion about the active and passive aspects of the world was dominated by Aristotelian hylo-morphism, the doctrine according to which natural substances consist of form and matter—arguably a development of Plato’s dualistic power ontology. Also the Plotinian idea of emanation led to a lively debate among the medieval philosophers. If God’s creation is regarded as a necessary process, an emanation, what should we think of his freedom? Does God’s unlimited power imply that he can create any kind of world, or does his freedom merely consist in the fact that the world necessarily follows from his unlimited power so that God can only do what he in fact does? Another cluster of problems in the medieval discussion, stemming from the ethical concerns of the Christian tradition, is concerned with the will of human beings. What can we do with the active power of our souls? How is it related to God’s will and power, and how should we understand the relation between the will and the intellect?

The latter set of issues is addressed by Tomas Ekenberg in chapter 4. He explicates the way in which concept of will figures in Peter Damian’s, Anselm of Canterbury’s, and Peter Abelard’s discussions of divine and human power. In particular, Ekenberg unearths the theory of powers underpinning Anselm’s central ethical idea, moral goodness as the rightness of the will. In chapter 5, Andreas Schmidt throws light to the former cluster of problems by discussing Thomas Aquinas’ view of God’s

active power in terms of a modal theory in which logical possibilities are conceived as being grounded on God's omnipotence. Schmidt defends this kind of modal interpretation of Aquinas and argues that it unlocks problems pertaining to Aquinas' view of God's possibilities and freedom. The idea of conceiving 'possible worlds' in terms of God's power was rejected later by Duns Scotus, leaving however, Schmidt argues, the ontological status of logical possibilities entirely open.

These questions, so prominent in medieval discussions, arise again in the seventeenth-century metaphysics, most notably in the works of René Descartes, Benedict de Spinoza, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. In the metaphysical systems of the early modern rationalists, the idea that all being is constituted by some kind of active power, active in the sense of being self-causing and self-operating, obtained a central place. However, the traditional idea encountered a new challenge: the Aristotelian explanation of motion was displaced by the Galilean laws, and philosophers were forced to find metaphysics squaring with the new conception of natural science. According to the ordinary scholastic explanation, God as the universal rational power makes things move towards a rational order: all motion is directed towards the perfection of the universe. This kind of teleology, however, went against the new conception of natural laws, especially against the Galilean law stating that the motion of a body, if not resisted by other bodies, continues with the same constant velocity. In other words, bodies seem to have a tendency or striving not to a perfect order but simply to maintain their actual motion or in general their actual state. The philosophical challenge was to explicate the nature of this striving.

Interestingly enough, many of the prominent seventeenth-century thinkers, Descartes and Spinoza among them, retained the traditional view that the tendencies or strivings of bodies should be understood as expressing active power, ultimately the power of God. But this raises the question, how does this take place? The relation between the activity of reason and the passivity of matter came once again to the fore. To explain motions and interactions of physical bodies in terms of *active* power, one had to accept either that the active principle comes from somewhere else than the material or extended properties of the bodies, or to think of physical things as intrinsically active. The idea of an ontologically independent universal passive power was generally rejected, and different kind of theories of the nature of the active power and its working in the world were suggested. Descartes

is a good example of the difficulty: he could not attribute any active power to matter and had to conclude that God is the ultimate cause of all motion. Spinoza and Leibniz, for their part, argued that bodies are inherently endowed with active power. One important traditional feature of these new developments was that the Platonic idea of reason as active power was retained.

The aforesaid raises several questions. If activity is taken to mean self-causation and self-operation, how can anything but an infinite power be said to be active in this way? And how should passivity be explained? Where does the inertial striving in bodies come from if all motions are directed by an active power? Moreover, the concept of force (*vis*) of the new physics no doubt had a profound impact on early modern thought concerning power (*potentia*) and related notions; but what kind of impact? The main task for the early modern philosophers was to develop workable metaphysics that could provide an account of the causal efficacy with which finite things—also finite material things operating according to the Galilean laws of motion—quite clearly seem to be endowed; metaphysics that would not be plagued by the complexities and alleged obscurities of its scholastic predecessors and one that would show how finite powers are related to—in fact, stem from—the ultimate power of God, or of the whole nature.

It is interesting to approach Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz from the viewpoint of these questions and spell out their answers which, despite having common features, differ from each other in important respects. The way in which certain pertinent problems of the Cartesian metaphysics can be approached from the idea of God's active power is discussed by Juhani Pietarinen and Timo Kajamies. Although, as indicated above, attributing causal power to finite things is *prima facie* problematic for the Cartesians, Pietarinen suggests in chapter 6 that when certain Descartes' assumptions concerning God's power are seen to hold not only of the extended world but also of the mental domain, the Cartesian view concerning the interactions between mind and body appear in a new light. This allows us to propose interesting answers to such questions as, how mind and body, being entirely different kinds of substances, can act upon each other; how the fact that our perceptual ideas do not resemble the objects they represent or the brain states causing them is to be explained; how God, whom Descartes claims to be the cause of all motions in the world, and a finite human will can both be regarded as the cause of producing voluntarily bodily

movements; and finally, how the mind's power of acting on the body can be reconciled with the picture of the corporeal world as a causally closed domain? In chapter 7, Kajamies discusses Descartes' pivotal causal reality principle and explicates the cryptic but important idea of eminent inherence in terms of God's active power. Interestingly, from the viewpoint of the ontology of power Descartes appears not as a dualist but as a monist.

A revealing episode in our cavalcade of theories is offered by Thomas Hobbes' attempt to make motion—not power which he sees in the spirit of the mechanistic era as too 'occult' in character—the ultimate basis of world-explanation. Indeed, given Hobbes' 'official' first philosophy, it seems that no room at all is left for a genuine notion of power. However, Juhani Pietarinen argues in chapter 8 that a different kind of picture emerges if we follow certain assumptions Hobbes makes concerning God's role in the world-order: the bodily world might be seen, after all, as a manifestation of God's active power. On this picture, the central notion of 'endeavour' gains new importance, first of all in providing the basis for the crucial *conatus* principle according to which all things strive to persevere in existence by all the power they possess. And even if the notion of endeavour is not taken to be grounded in God's power, Hobbes is led, at any rate, to assume that it represents one kind of active power, namely the power of human reason, as can be learnt from his political theory: it is the active power of reason that leads people, according to Hobbes, to establish commonwealths with sovereign rulers.

Although Spinoza has not always been seen as a proponent of dynamistic metaphysics, Valtteri Viljanen argues in chapter 9 that he should nevertheless be classified as one. In fact, an analysis of some of the key passages of the *Ethics* leads to the conclusion that it is in Spinoza's thought we find a clear rehabilitation of the notion of power (*potentia*), contested as it became in the beginning of the modern era. Viljanen shows how Spinoza's concept of power and such related concepts as force (*vis*) and striving (*conatus*) connect with his rather strong brand of essentialism in which things are ceaselessly causally efficacious, or powerful, in virtue of their essences. This together with Spinoza's necessitarianism and monism leads to an actualist model of power according to which God's—who is the only substantial entity—monistic power necessarily and purely actively realizes all the possibilities. However, in the case of finite things this model faces some notable complications:

God's limited modifications as we are, not all of our power can ever be actively exercised; but the central idea is that as long as any finite thing exists, it always, and in virtue of its own nature alone, uses all of its power. This framework, discarding the traditional potential-actual framework but retaining some of its most important essentialist features, functions as the basis of Spinoza's naturalistic ethical project: human rationality and happiness equal, in the final analysis, active use of one's intrinsic power.

Leibniz, often hailed as the father of dynamistic thought in the modern era, adopted some very important ideas from the tradition, and Immanuel Kant, inspired by Leibniz, developed his own view of the nature and role of active power in the world. In chapter 10, Arto Repo and Valtteri Viljanen give an account of Leibniz's concept of force (*vis*), so important both for his physics (which he himself dubs 'dynamics') and metaphysics. Starting from Leibniz's critique of the Cartesian conception of extension, Repo and Viljanen show how Leibniz's broadly dualistic view of power—there are two kinds of powers, active and passive, the former connected with something akin to scholastic substantial forms, the latter to matter—is transformed into an idealist position according to which the fundamental constituents of the world are mental and non-extended substances, the monads. These monads, in turn, are endowed with power to transfer themselves, completely spontaneously, from one perception to another. Thus, in his monadology Leibniz appears to develop one variant of power monism. However, as the monads of Leibniz's mature metaphysics are not causally interconnected with each other, a peculiar dilemma arises: how should we understand the distinction between activity and passivity in a framework which has *prima facie* no room for passivity at all? Repo and Viljanen also explicate the way in which Leibniz tackles this problem.

In chapter 11, Arto Repo and Hemmo Laiho focus on questions concerning active and passive powers in Kant's so-called precritical and critical writings. The first part of their essay examines certain developments in Kant's view of what is involved in causal interactions between finite substances in nature. The second part deals with the important question of the possibility of free activity of human will. According to Kant's famous argument, it is conceivable to see human beings both as passive receivers of external impulses and as absolutely free agents. Kant sees the possibility of human freedom in the power of actively resisting various inclinations originating from the sensible world. Repo and Laiho end their essay with a discussion on the nature of this power.

From later philosophers of special interest are Arthur Schopenhauer and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who, notwithstanding the fact that they differ from rationalists in many respects, are still immediately relevant for the dynamistic tradition in metaphysics. In chapter 12, Andreas Schmidt examines the way in which the notion of power or force is conceived in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. In keeping with his general project of overcoming traditional metaphysics, Hegel rejects the idea of explaining the sensible world in terms of an infinite power or force as inadequate and offers the notion of Concept as the ultimate principle of activity. The Concept should not be conceived as anything expressing itself in the objects of the world, nor as a power generating things. It is, in Schmidt's words, "a transcendental condition of there being any entities at all". Its activity consists of everlasting conceptual movements that take place through inherent contradictions, and in this sense the power of the Concept can neither be revealed or actualized in the world of finite things nor be something ultimately completed and immutable.

In Kantian spirit, Schopenhauer makes a sharp distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal realms. Valtteri Viljanen argues, in the final chapter 13, that Schopenhauer's conception of both of these domains is inherently dynamistic in character. Most often, Schopenhauer characterizes the metaphysical basis of reality, the thing in itself—or the *will* (*Wille*) as he chooses to call it—as endless and blind striving to produce existence; so in a very real sense, Schopenhauer turns out to be a classic proponent of power monism. With regard to the phenomenal realm, Viljanen interprets Schopenhauer as developing a field theoretical view of the world of our senses: an object of experience is constituted when the spatio-temporal field of causally efficacious matter obtains a specific state, as determined by the contest of natural forces. Schopenhauer has exerted, especially through Friedrich Nietzsche, enormous influence on the intellectual climate of the last century. Thus questioning the rationality of the world does not mean that the view of the world as a dynamic whole would have become obsolete—quite the contrary.

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In brief, this book is a collection of essays that discusses the idea of a universal, rational, and active power and its development in European thought, especially in Plato, Stoicism, Neoplatonism, early and late medieval scholasticism, Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant,

Hegel, and Schopenhauer. The idea for this anthology arose out of discussions in the so-called 'Rationalist Circle', an informal group initiated by Professor Olli Koistinen at the Department of Philosophy, University of Turku. We are deeply grateful to all those who have, over many years, taken part in these discussions. Finally, we would like to acknowledge with gratitude that the editorial work on this volume has been financially supported by the Emil Aaltonen Foundation.