

Conflict as the Quasi-Transcendental: Or, Why Spinoza's *Theological Political Treatise* Matters for Transindividuality

Dimitris Vardoulakis

Western Sydney University

ABSTRACT

Vardoulakis explores what Balibar means by designating transindividuality as 'quasi-transcendental.' He does so by turning to Balibar's readings of Part IV of Spinoza's *Ethics*, the Part that is central to Balibar's understanding of the transindividual in Spinoza. Vardoulakis shows that the quasi-transcendental in Spinoza can only be a form of agonistic relations if his political theory in the *Theological Political Treatise* is to account for political change.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 21 December 2017; Revised 12 September 2018

KEYWORDS Spinoza; agonism; authority; utility

We can frame Etienne Balibar's concept of the transindividual as follows: We can start from the recognition that the individual and society are impossible to separate. But what does this mean? We can express this negatively: Neither a theory of the individual as more primary than society (what Balibar calls individualism), nor a theory of society as constituting the individual (holism) are sustainable. This negative formulation is insufficient. We can also express transindividuality in positive terms. This takes, according to Balibar, two forms. First, the ratio or proportionality of the relation between individual and society is always evolving so that the two terms are mutually determinative. Second, there is a reciprocal transformation or mutation, a process of construction and destruction, that characterizes the relation between the individual and society and which is responsible for social and political change.

In Balibar's mobilization of the concept of the transindividual to explore the philosophical anthropology of Marx, Spinoza and Freud, it is crucial to distinguish and at the same to hold together the two aspects of transindividuality but without resolving their tensions. This is what Balibar denotes as their quasi-transcendental quality. The two forms of relation—proportionality and transformation—are not the conditions for understanding the individual's

connection to society. They correspond rather, says Balibar [2018: 24] in the concluding sentence of his essay,

to a quasi-transcendental way of *problematizing both the relation and the variation* as two aspects of the same problem, because they make us question ourselves both as to that which *institutes* the individual or the collective in relation one with the other, and as to that which never ceases to *denature* them, or to make them unrecognizable through the transgression of limits or the invention of modalities which may be original, and for which it remains each time to evaluate their productiveness, or even their liveability.

The two forms of relation are two aspects of the same problem, that is, they are distinct but work in parallel.

Focusing on Balibar's reading of Spinoza, I would like to contend instead that the quasi-transcendental is agonism or conflict because both aspects make sense in Spinoza as conflictual relations that characterize both the differential relation of individual and society, and their mutability and transformation. The comments that follow are, partly, an addendum to the interpretation of Spinoza, and, partly, an attempt to avoid the problem of positing social change while shying away from exploring its causes.

Let me start by summarizing Balibar's presentation of Spinoza's transindividuality. I should first note that Balibar relies predominantly on the *Ethics* [Spinoza 1677]. This will be important later, as I will turn instead to the *Theological Political Treatise* [1670]. In fact, Balibar's interpretation pivots around Proposition 37 of Part IV, which reads: 'The good which everyone who seeks virtue wants for himself, he also desires for other men; and this desire is greater as his knowledge of God is greater.' Relying on his brilliant reading of this Proposition in *Spinoza and Politics* [1985], Balibar shows how this good can be derived in two distinct ways. One finds the good either through—in Spinoza's terminology—the imitation of the affects, or more simply with the exercise of the emotions. Alternatively, one identifies the good through the operation of rationality to the extent that it concerns the calculation of utility. As Spinoza says in Definition 8 of Part IV of the *Ethics*, the good is that which we calculate to be useful to us. Balibar reminds us that this structure corresponds to the parallelism of the mutual determination of mind and body.¹

Balibar's 1993 lecture on transindividuality in Spinoza (see Balibar [1997])—the first time that he uses the concept of the transindividual—relies heavily on Proposition 39 from Part IV that is itself an extension of the central Proposition 37. The individual is presented here as a relation of exchange with others as it is placed within a totality that we can call society or the state. This provides an account of transformation. The exchange allows for transformation that is either creation or destruction, either composition or decomposition.

In order to keep the two forms of relation—proportionality and change—separate, Balibar contends that there is a quantitative difference in how they articulate at the individual and the collective level. This takes two forms. Collectively, there is the drive to preserve the city and avoid civil war, while

¹I will also add here that this structure also relies on an epicurean understanding of *phronesis* that is translated into the idea of the calculation of utility after the rediscovery of Epicurus and Lucretius's texts in the fifteenth century. From an epicurean perspective, the emotive and the rational aspect are inextricable. See Vardoulakis [forthcoming], *Why is Spinoza an Epicurean?, Epoche*.

individually there is a propensity for conflict and decomposition. Further, in Balibar's [2018: 15] words,

in the case of collective individuality, what determines the identity of the composite is first of all the degree and mode of composition of minds, whereas in the case of singular individuality, it is first of all the mode of composition of the body.

Balibar [ibid.: 17] does not posit a separation of mind and body, insisting instead that the fact that reason operates alongside the passion is responsible for the constitutive instability of the state.

There are two questions that arise as soon as we regard this reading of Spinoza in light of transindividuality as quasi-transcendental, that is, as the problematization of the differential relation between individual and the collective, and the relations that enable social change. Does not the relation between mind and body cut across these two forms of relation that Balibar tries to hold apart in his determination of the quasi-transcendental, suggesting instead that the quasi-transcendental is not these two relations as such but rather their common substratum? And, does not the above account still lack an explanation as to why change happens in the first place, or, differently put, what the causes for social transformation are? I believe that Spinoza would have answered yes to both of these questions. Let me outline why.

As Balibar well recognizes in his original analysis of Proposition 37 from Part IV of the *Ethics* in *Spinoza and Politics* [1985], the pursuit of the good is only relevant to the composition of the individual and society but also—in Spinoza's [1677: IV.37.s1] words—'it shows what the foundations of the state are'. In other words, it corresponds to specific political arrangements. I contend that the *Theological Political Treatise* [Spinoza 1670] is structured in such a way as to tackle the question of the distinct political arrangements that correspond to the predominance of the calculation of utility or the predominance of passion in the pursuit of the good.²

Specifically, Spinoza identifies two regimes of power: the one that relies on the emotions is structured around authority and the one that relies on reason is based on the calculation of utility.³ Let me sketch their central features. The key difference is that the former relies on the authority of the law, whereas the latter posits the possibility of a society where the calculation of the mutual utility of its members is sufficient for the cohesion of a community (63/73). The paradigm of a society relying on authority is the Hebrew state. The example of a society without authority is democracy as the most natural constitution (179/195). Finally, Spinoza insists that neither of these two regimes can be pure, they are both, as he puts it, more theory than practice (185/201 and 189–90/206). It is with the recognition that it is impossible to have a regime of power that relies purely on

²This is a central thesis of my book *Spinoza's Promise: Authority and Utility in Spinoza's Theological Political Treatise* [Vardoulakis forthcoming]. The comments that follow rely on more extensive research contained in this book.

³All references to Spinoza's *Theological Political Treatise* [1670] are cited parenthetically by page number. I have often altered the translation. For the Latin, I have used Spinoza [1924]. All page references to this edition follow after the English edition.

emotion or on rationality that the questions of the interconnections of mind and body as well as the causes of political change arise and merge with each other.

In Chapter 19 of the *Theological Political Treatise*, Spinoza discusses a state based on the emotions. His first point is adherence to the erastian principle that the sovereign should have control over both religious and civil law—a position that he shares with all radical political thinkers of the seventeenth century, for instance, with Hobbes. Second, he holds that religious and civil law can work in harmony because they are both based on neighbourly love. The love of one's neighbour is one of the major themes of the *Treatise*. Spinoza designates it as the sole fundamental principle of religion. The principle of neighbourly love is binding both for the sovereign, whose civil laws ought to promote concord, and to the citizens, who ought to refrain from civil unrest that destabilizes a state safeguarding piety (see, e.g. 212/228–29). This creates a schema of an emotive commitment to the sovereign's authority as the foundation of the state.

But Spinoza qualifies this conception of a state based on the emotions:

there is no act of piety towards one's neighbor that is not impious [*nihil proximo pium praestari posse, quod non impium sit*] if it results in harm to the commonwealth as a whole [*totius reipublicae*]. On the other hand, there is no impious act committed toward the neighbor [*nihil in eundem impium committi*] that must not be accounted as pious [*pietati non tribuatur*] if it is done for the sake of the preservation of the commonwealth. (215/232)

The grammar with the accumulation of negations and double negations creates a sense of vertigo, forcing us to slow down and read carefully. Both sentences concern piety, and hence the acts one performs toward one's neighbor. The issue is how the other—as an ethical concern—is also, simultaneously, a political issue concerning the state as a whole and the preservation of the republic. The first sentence can be paraphrased as it is pious to be impious if impiety results in the utility of the state as a whole. This politicization of the neighbor is another way of describing Balibar's idea of the differential relation of individual and society. But there is a difference: the neighbor universalizes the necessity to judge—to calculate one's utility—in the political realm. In other words, the necessity of rationality in the form of the calculation of utility is inscribed in the political regime of authority that relies on the emotions. And this implies that it is impious to follow any laws that—purport to—rely on neighbourly love when they counter the utility of the state as a whole. This is nothing sort of a justification of political change. This justification relies on identifying the causes of social transformation as the calculation that society's utility is not served when adherence to authority is impious. Differently put, in a regime relying on the predominance of the emotions, the ineliminability of reason indicates the conditions of the possibility—I am using this quasi-transcendental language intentionally here—of political change.

Chapter 20 of the *Theological Political Treatise* treats the case of a republic where reason predominates. In such a state, the freedom to express one's opinions is safeguarded by the laws of the state. Thus, one may safely express in public one's opinion that certain laws are against sound reason (224/214). Spinoza insists that such an attitude ought to be regarded as laudable, the act of an exemplary citizen (*optimus civis*) (224/241), so long as any changes to

the laws are left to the sovereign, that is, so long as the rational citizen refrains from sedition. We see here the way that what Spinoza calls the freedom to philosophize provides the basis of a differential relation between individual and community.

But how is change and social transformation possible if the sovereign ignores the rational pleas against the state's irrational laws? In answering this question, Spinoza concedes that rationality is not enough:

Humans in general find that nothing is more unbearable [*nihil magis impatienter*] to them than that the opinions they believe to be true [*opiniones, quas veras esse credunt*] are treated as criminal [*crimine*], and when that which motivates their pious conduct to God and man is accounted as wickedness [*sceleris*]. In consequence, they are emboldened to denounce the laws and go to all lengths to oppose the magistrate [*magistratum*], considering it not a disgrace but most honorable [*honestissimum*] to stir up sedition [*seditiones*] and to resort to any lawless action [*facinus*] to effect this cause. (226/244)

Spinoza outlines here how the rise of emotion in response to irrational government leads to a resistance and even a rise up against sovereignty. He thematizes this emotional surge as indignation in the *Political Treatise* (see, e.g. Spinoza [2002:3.9]). But here, the responsibility for sedition is not with those who rise up against the sovereign. Instead, it is the sovereign who is seditious in *causing* political upheaval by refusing rational political change.⁴

We see, then, three intertwined elements in this—all too abbreviated—examination of the *Theological Political Treatise*. First, the differential relation between individual and society relies on the differential relation between mind and body whose social and political significance is best summarized in Proposition 37 of Part IV of the *Ethics*, as Balibar notes. Second, Spinoza uses the above insight in the political treatise to identify two different regimes of power, and to account for the causes of political change as the rise of rationality in a regime relying on the emotions, and as the surge of emotions in a regime relying on rationality. These two points describe the two key characteristics of Balibar's transindividuality—the differential relations of individuals and society, and social mutability. But they do not describe just yet the quasi-transcendental nature of transindividuality. For this, we need to turn to the third element, namely, the conflictual nature of political relations. Without this possibility of conflict, there is no political change, and hence no differential relations between an individual and others. Thus, what *problematizes* the first two elements thereby making them possible is, according to Spinoza, the possibility of conflict, which is thus the quasi-transcendental implied in Spinoza's conception of transindividuality.⁵

If the above analysis is correct, if the transindividual in Spinoza needs to account for the conflict outlined in the *Theological Political Treatise*, then maybe what Marx calls the midwife of history and what Freud calls the death

⁴Machiavelli expresses a similar sentiment in Chapter 29 of Part III of the *Discourses*.

⁵For the centrality of conflict in Spinoza, see Lucchese [2009].

drive are also indispensable components of transindividuality. But I promised to confine my comments to Spinoza and I intend to keep my promise.

References

- Balibar, Étienne 1985 (1998). *Spinoza and Politics*, London: Verso.
- Balibar, Étienne 1997. *Spinoza: From Individuality to Transindividuality*, Delft: Eburon.
- Balibar, Étienne 2018. Philosophies of the Transindividual: Spinoza, Marx, Freud, *Australasian Review of Philosophy* 2/1: 5–25.
- Lucchese, Filippo del, 2009. *Conflict, Power, and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza*, London: Continuum.
- Machiavelli, Niccolò. 1989. Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius, trans. Allan Gilbert, in *Machiavelli: The Chief Works and Others, Volume 1*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Spinoza, Benedict de 1670 (2001). *Theological Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley, Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Spinoza, Benedict de 1677 (1996). *Ethics*, trans Edwin M. Curley, London: Penguin.
- Spinoza, Benedict de 1924. *Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhardt, Heidelberg: Carl Windters Universitätsbuchhandlung, Volume3.
- Spinoza, Benedict de 2002. *Political Treatise, in Complete Works*, trans. Samuel Shirley, ed. Michael L. Morgan, Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Vardoulakis, Dimitris, forthcoming. Why is Spinoza an Epicurean?, *Epoche*.
- Vardoulakis, Dimitris, forthcoming. *Spinoza's Promise: Authority and Utility in Spinoza's Theological Political Treatise*.