

Spinoza's Authority Volume II:  
Resistance and Power  
in the Political Treatises

Edited by  
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# Preface

A. Kiarina Kordela and Dimitris Vardoulakis

Just as in the 1960s the pessimism about dialectical materialism was giving way to a new hope that Marxist dialectics can be amended or augmented by Spinoza's anti-teleological philosophy, a new, seemingly intractable problem arose. Namely, the problem that the more one opposes regimes of power, the more this opposition strengthens the structural system that makes such regimes possible. As Foucault puts this point somewhere: "Anyone who attempts to oppose the law in order to found a new order ... will encounter the silent and infinitely accommodating welcome of the law. The law does not change: it subsided into the grave once and for all, and each of its forms is only a metamorphosis of that never-ending death." This problem is even more acute in neoliberal governmentality, where it becomes increasingly difficult to identify even a target to oppose or resist, given that executive government cedes a lot of its power to capital.

This may suggest that optimism of the will in the face of the pessimism of the intellect is even more urgent today—and yet such a stance is precarious for a Spinozist who would be suspicious not only of any concept of the will but also of the very idea of hope, given what Spinoza has to say about the will and about hope in his works.

The wager of the present two collections is that we may be better served by paying close attention to what Spinoza says about authority. Examining Spinoza's authority in the full range of its significations—as prophetic authority or as sovereignty, as power or as authoritative process of interpretation—we may be able to evade the dilemma between pessimism and optimism. In fact, we may be able to steer a path that shows how resistance is possible because authority is ever present as obedience or as the sad emotions that decrease our power.

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# Reference Guide

## References to Spinoza's works

The various translations of Spinoza's works offer often significantly different interpretation of the meaning of his original Latin text. For this reason, the contributors have been free to choose their preferred translation, or to translate themselves the Latin from the established text of Spinoza's works in the Gebhardt edition of the *Opera*.

The following abbreviations of specific works have been used:

*E* = *Ethics* [*Ethica*]

The Roman numeral in capital following *E* indicates the part of the *Ethics*. For example, *E* I is *Ethics*, Part I, *E* II is *Ethics* Part II, and so on. The following abbreviations have been used here:

A = Axiom

Ap. = Appendix

C = Corollary

D = Definition

L = Lemma

P = Proposition

Pr = Proof

Pref = Preface

S = Scholium

So, for instance, *E* II, P7 refer to *Ethics*, Part I, Proposition 7. And, *E* IV, P34S refers to *Ethics*, Parts IV, Scholium to Proposition 34.

### Other abbreviations to Spinoza's works:

*TIE* (Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect): cited by paragraph number.

*Ep.* (The Letters): cited by letter number.

*PC* (Principles of Cartesian Philosophy)

*ST* (Short Treatise)

*TP* (Tractatus Politicus): cited by chapter followed by paragraph number.

*TTP* (Tractatus Theologico-Politicus)

The contributors indicate in each chapter which edition of the above works they prefer to use.



# Spinoza's Authority in the Treatises: An Introduction

Dimitris Vardoulakis

Any discussion of authority in Spinoza's political treatises—both the *Theological-Political Treatise* and the *Political Treatise*—needs to start by explaining what “authority” means in this context. There are at least three words in Latin which cover the semantic range of the term authority in English. They are “auctoritas,” “imperium” and “summa potestas.”

“Auctoritas” traditionally refers to a personal authority. Since the Roman Republic, one is understood to have “auctoritas” when his or her authority is not only unquestioned but moreover unquestionable. One can imagine here elderly wise figureheads, or figures whose office puts them in a higher and untouchable position. Spinoza's primary example of figures of auctoritas are the prophets, whose revealed knowledge cannot be questioned. One good way to understand auctoritas is to consider what it is that resists it. Traditionally, the answer to this question is laughter. Thus, the function of the court jester had been to laugh at the authority of the king—and by virtue of being the only figure who could perform that function to reinforce that authority. Maybe Spinoza's transgression, which earned him the unwanted honor of the greatest atheist in the modern philosophical tradition, was to laugh at the auctoritas of the prophets in the *Theological-Political Treatise* by showing the absurdity, for instance, of holding their laws as inviolable. The humor of the *Theological-Political Treatise* is linked to the strategy to undermine the authority of the prophets.

By contrast, one cannot laugh at “imperium.” The word in Latin points to the limits of the authority's exercise of power. Thus, the imperium of a sovereign would be the territory within which the sovereign can exercise power. Synecdochically, imperium contains a legal aspect as it points out how far a legal system extends, or who is covered by certain laws. There is something less personal and more abstract in the term imperium in comparison to auctoritas.

Thus, although the word *imperium* has something of authority, it may be best translated in most cases as state. *Imperium* can be challenged by questioning how far it extends. This strategy to challenge *imperium* came to the fore with the Reformation by questioning the Roman Catholic Pope's *imperium in imperio* (or, state within a state), the idea being that Ecclesiastical and sovereign authorities should not overlap. Or, more simply—but no less problematically—the state becomes separate from the Church. Spinoza's political treatises and his conception and use of the various senses of authority are informed by the debates about the limits of *imperium* which were raging for over a century when he started writing his treatises.

If *auctoritas* points to a personal authority and *imperium* to the limits of impersonal authority, “*summa potestas*” points to the authority that has the greatest power within a realm. By implication, that power is the sovereign. Even if the expression “*summa potestas*” is an established term in Latin legal and political discourse, still it is worth pointing out that “*potestas*” on its own points to the power of the people. Even if *summa potestas* cannot be normally mistaken with the power of the people, still it retains its main characteristic, namely, the possibility that it can express itself in violent ways. Or, differently put, the exercise of violence is inherent in *summa potestas*. Spinoza points to an implication of this idea by noting that the most powerful violence does not actually originate from the sovereign, but rather from the people themselves. Thus, it is the multitude that is most feared, and in that sense, even in a monarchy, as he argues in the *Political Treatise*, the people ultimately hold more power than the sovereign. Hence, ultimately, it is the people who hold power—which is why Spinoza can be understood as arguing that democracy is the most primary constitution.

We have, then, three terms that denote authority: *auctoritas* points to personal authority, *imperium* to the limits of juridico-political authority, and *summa potestas* to the most powerful authority. Both the difficulty and the novelty in Spinoza's position consist in that the three different senses of authority are distinct and yet they overlap. Let me provide one example. The “secular” position according to which the Church should not have *imperium in imperio* is absent from Spinoza's work. Those with *auctoritas* are shown to be lawgivers and to yield political power and this entails that religion and politics cannot neatly demarcate their territories. In addition, Spinoza uses the same vocabulary (for instance, *Ethics* Part III) to indicate the illusion of the free will, or the illusion that humans can free themselves from natural causes. Within this context, the question of authority is transformed into a question about the power or *potentia*

as the capacity of people to act rationally given their emotional circumstances. In other words, the three sense of authority outlined above intersect and interact in a revamped and ontologized notion of power (*potentia*) that Spinoza inherits from Machiavelli and which he develops even further.

The first chapter of this book by Vittorio Morfino explores some of the roots of Spinoza's conception of power in Machiavelli. Despite the fact that Machiavelli is not explicitly named in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Morfino argues that his presence is felt throughout. Morfino starts tracing this influence in the way history is developed within the context of the argument about the Jews as an elected people, showing the presence of Machiavelli's use of the concept of fortune. Then, Morfino goes on to show that this conception of history is materialist since memory has been preserved and transmitted based on the operation of the aleatory. Finally, Machiavelli's insistence on the centrality of conflict for the flourishing of the state in the opening of the *Discourses* is instrumental in Spinoza's deconstruction of the authority of the lawgivers. These are not three arbitrary sites of comparison with the Florentine but rather points with far-reaching implications, for instance about the way in which the social contract and society itself are conceived.

The next chapter by Filippo Del Lucchese also takes as its point of departure Machiavelli's influence on Spinoza to argue that conflict is the productive element that leads to freedom. Drawing on Vittorio Morfino's link between freedom and Spinoza's conception of causality as connection, Del Lucchese proposes to investigate a question that has puzzled many commentators, especially those who seek in Spinoza an alternative revolutionary politics that does not rely on the dialectical materialism of the Marxist tradition. Given that both the idea of a radical break in the course of history and the idea of a cyclical movement between degenerate and good constitutions are ultimately incompatible with the Spinozan account of politics and history, how can we give an account of the revolutionary in Spinoza? Del Lucchese responds by pointing to the confluence of *jus* (law and right) and power and by drawing the implications that this entails for a conception of the state. Ultimately, this leads to the conclusion that the revolution is permanently unfolding in Spinoza's politics, as the relation between law and conflict and in such a way so as to mirror his rejection of the dualism between mind and body.

The idea of the law is further elaborated in Dimitris Vardoulakis' chapter. Starting with the distinction between divine and human law in Chapter 4 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Vardoulakis points out another Machiavellian idea that has found its way into Spinoza's work, namely, that the law is defined

in terms of its utility. The figure of *auctoritas* is important in this context, as it allows Spinoza to draw inferences about history and politics. Of particular importance is the idea that the utility of the law is articulated as obedience. Given that the divine law cannot be disobeyed, as Spinoza's retelling of the narrative of the Fall avers, what does this mean about the genesis of human law? Vardoulakis shows that the radical conclusion entailed in Spinoza's analysis of Adam's action is that human law is premised on its disobedience. Furthermore, Adam as the first prophet, and hence as a paradigmatic figure of authority, also discloses that authority is generated and perpetuated by a miscognition, namely, the confusion between divine and human law.

The discussion of the law in Chapter 4 of the *Theological-Political Treatise* indicates the vital role that interpretation plays in Spinoza's adumbration of authority. By looking at interpretation, James Martel makes a surprising comparison between Spinoza and Hobbes. His argument is that they are both keen to challenge the established norms of authority. Comparing their methods of Biblical interpretation Martel arrives at the conclusion that Hobbes is more radical and democratic in the sense that he leaves the possibility of alternative—or unauthoritative—interpretations more open than Spinoza, and hence invites the demos to participate in the interpretative process. Furthermore, Martel shows that both seventeenth-century thinkers seek to undermine sovereign authority by examining the Hebrew state. In this case, it is Spinoza who appears more radical than Hobbes. But ultimately this comparison is not a matter of measuring the radicality of Spinoza and Hobbes against each other, but rather in demonstrating that resistance to authority can be inscribed in a variety of ways within their texts—and comparisons between the two may better help us see the nuances of their politics of resistance.

The process of interpretation is also linked, as Siarhei Biareishyk demonstrates, also to the way that Spinoza conceives of error. Biareishyk shows that error has both an epistemological and an ontological dimension in Spinoza, whereby it further rises to a political significance. Starting with outlining the relation between error and the three types of knowledge, Biareishyk shows that even though they are all similar in that they misunderstand the nature of cause and effect in different ways, it is nevertheless only the third kind of error, linked to the third kind of knowledge, that can also lead to truth as it has the capacity to demarcate a field of interpretation. Thus, this third kind of error retains the potential of a political realization. Or, to put it differently, the third kind of error leads to truth through its effects. This insight links Biareishyk's analysis of error to Althusser's symptomatic readings and his theory of the encounter.

How can the interpretative process in Spinoza's political treatises be accommodated within his monism? And what are the political implications of this question? These are the questions animating Kiarina Kordela and Joseph Bermas-Dawes' contribution. They are trenchant question because—to use Deleuze's vocabulary—if expression is separated from the sign, does not this lead us back to dualism? To counter this result, the authors insist that there is in Spinoza an immanent relation between expression and sign, one that replicates the relation between truth and error, as the two standards of *truth* in Spinoza's theory. This has implications in how resistance against authority can be conceived. The authors argue that authority lies in interpretation, insofar as interpretation involves decision. But at the same time, the fact that power is natural and that it cannot be confined to the potentate's authority also means that the multitude always also possesses power and hence the authority to interpret. This entails that political interpretation is not confined to the sovereign's decision, as it is in Carl Schmitt and generally decisionism. Instead, Spinoza's political interpretative decision is imbued with the fantasies and ideological processes that make it possible to recuperate truth from the errors of the multitude. Drawing on psychoanalysis the authors show that in Spinoza's work such (secondary) fantasies and ideological processes are modes of some unconscious primal fantasy (*truth*). The authors then trace the relation between the secondary and primary fantasies in Spinoza's own interpretation of the Bible, as the blueprint for similar analyses on the level of politics.

Gregg Lambert is also concerned with the relation between expression and sign. Lambert argues that there are two regions of expression, one that pertains to truth and it corresponds to philosophy, and another that pertains to interpretation that is explicated through prophetic and sovereign authority in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. Drawing attention to Spinoza's point that the sole concern of interpretation in Spinoza's *Treatise* pertains to the production of authority, Lambert outlines a typology of signs, which ultimately demonstrates that expression and expressed do not coincide. This entails that procedures of truth and interpretation are discordant. Given that interpretation is the source of authority, this insight leads to the conclusion that the production of power through the authority of the prophets as well as the sovereigns rests on misapprehension. Lambert explains how this is presented in Spinoza's interpretation of the two covenants that Spinoza outlines in Chapter 17 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, and he links this to a concept of resistance.

At the beginning of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza famously puzzles as to why people fight for their servitude instead of their liberation.

Chiara Bottici and Miguel de Beistegui explore what is at stake in Spinoza asking this question. They demonstrate that it has to do with how authority instills obedience. If, as Spinoza avers, obedience is most effective when it is not coercive but rather when the people willingly obey, what is it that makes us obey? Bottici and Beistegui show how Spinoza explains this through his theory of the emotions. Spinoza describes a technology of government that relies on creating desires of artificial lack that function as a void and hence resemble the operation of the siphon. Obedience is channeled through such emotions. As the authors note, the operation of the siphon of the emotion is also operative in a neoliberal governmentality where desires are siphoned off through the market. Comparing Spinoza's political analysis in the *Treatise* to the theory of the affects in Part III of the *Ethics*, the authors point out that Spinoza provides us with the tool to reverse the effect of desire, so that we can produce a plenitude of being.