Spinoza's Authority Volume I: Resistance and Power in *Ethics*

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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We are thankful to all of our contributors as much for the final products that appear in the form of these thoughtful essays as for what came before that: their enthusiastic engagement in conference panels and workshops that have helped us all shape our ideas as we were putting them down in essay forms. These events include: the seminar on "Spinoza's Authority," organized by Dimitris Vardoulakis, which took place at the University of Western Sydney, in Sydney, Australia, in August 2012; the thematic stream on "Spinozan Politics" at the *London Conference on Critical Thought*, organized by Filippo Del Lucchese and Dimitris Vardoulakis, which took place at the Royal Holloway, University of London, in June 2013; the seminar on "Spinoza's Authority: Resistance and Power" at the conference of the *American Comparative Literature Association*, organized by Siarhei Biareishyk and A. Kiarina Kordela, which took place at the New York University in New York, in March 2014; and the workshop on "Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise,*" organized by Stathis Gourgouris and Dimitris Vardoulakis, which took place at Columbia University in New York, in November 2015.

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.

Authority in the *Ethics*: An Introduction

A. Kiarina Kordela

Barely a reader of Spinoza's *Ethics* could fail to notice that this work far exceeds the scope of its title. Already by reading the first pages we find ourselves enwrapped first of all in a theology—and one might add, a secular theology—which quickly reveals itself to be simultaneously an ontology and an epistemology, to mention only the most eminent subject matters of Spinoza's rather short book. The first of the two volumes of our collection on *Spinoza's Authority* brings to the foreground another, perhaps less conspicuous, aspect of the *Ethics*, namely, that it is also a work on political philosophy.

The itinerary of the nine essays in this volume could be briefly described as follows. (1) We begin with Dimitris Vardoulakis introducing us to two of Spinoza's many unorthodox positions, and specifically his intertwining of equality and power, and his politicization of the ontological, with which Spinoza opposes the entire Aristotelian tradition of egalitarianism and the assumption of an ante-political space. (2) Spinoza's next heresy concerns his concept of freedom, which, as Aurelia Armstrong argues against its liberal political interpretation as a product of self-perfection, can emerge only as an effect of internal (individual) and external (social) relational interactions. (3) Such interrelations between singularity and the common bring us to the issue of *conatus*, whose interconnections with *potestas* and *potentia* are unfolded in Cesare Casarino's reading of Gilles Deleuze's thesis that resistance (*potentia*) comes before power (*potestas*) through the Spinozan principle that truth is the standard both of itself and of the false. (4) One of the most fundamental concerns of *potestas* and the state is legitimacy, which, as Juan Domingo Sánchez Estop shows, in opposition to the dominant contractual theories of political legitimacy, Spinoza considers to be an effect of the imagination, so that the state has essentially no proper existence. (5) The centrality of the imagination to the political culminates in Joseph Hughes' essay which argues, against Alain Badiou, that Spinoza's method

of proof involves discovery, historicity and the potential of radical retroactive reconstitution of sense, so that neither proof nor the political can be reduced to mathematical logic. (6) Antonio Negri returns to his distinction between *potentia* as constituent power and *potestas* as transcendent sovereignty, and to his critics, to argue that *potentia* is a non-teleological productive engine and a permanent source of laws that builds virtue from below, and that politics is not a mediator but the origin and rupture of society. (7) The same horizontal architectonics of power is also reflected in Spinoza's conception of body and mind, which, as Warren Montag shows, opposes the entire Christian-Cartesian tradition and its conception of the mind as the master and the body as the slave, to raise the question: what can the body do when liberated from the master? (8) James Edward Ford III brings the problematic of the master and the slave squarely within (post)colonial theory to argue that effective resistance can occur not through solitary acts of revenge but through a shared life in the common, just as authority manifests itself in sharing power with the multitude. (9) Lastly, my essay functions as a bridge to the second volume, as its thesis regarding Spinoza's anticipation of hegemony and biopolitics, including the possibility of their radical reconceptualization, is based on both the *Ethics* and the treatises.

Below are summaries of the essays contained in the present volume.

* * *

In "Equality and Power: Spinoza's Reformulation of the Aristotelian Tradition of Egalitarianism," Dimitris Vardoulakis argues that Spinoza gives us an alternative to Western political philosophy and its Aristotelian conception of "geometric equality" which "utilizes a value or merit to determine equality by analogy." In this tradition, authority always privileges one of three types of equality—"procedural, material or desertful"—which are always at odds with each other and therefore cause "bloody conflict that is destructive of the polis." Drawing on Spinoza's axiom in his *Ethics*—"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" (*E*, IV, A1)—Vardoulakis argues that Spinoza "co-posits being and power" and "introduces an inequality of power" that entails that "everyone will be overpowered by an external cause." In its affirmation of differential power relations, this axiom denies absolute authority itself and opens up "a common space where democracy unfolds because of the power interaction of citizens." This is an "agonistic democracy" marked by "an equality in the participation of engagement of contestation."

Vardoulakis' further target is the "oft-repeated move" in Western political philosophy to suppose "an ante-political space of equality" in order to justify some form of sovereign authority. Augustine's Eden, Hobbes' state of nature, and Kant's kingdom of ends—which correspond to the logics of "three types of sovereignty: ancient, modern and biopolitical," respectively—all represent presupposed spaces of absolute equality that help justify their different political frameworks. Spinoza rejects this ante-political space because "the political is not confined to human relations regulated either by formally instituted laws or transcendental laws," since for Spinoza the ontological is itself already political. Therefore, the political "does not require a transcendent authority to supervise over…and regulate" itself, "since it is the immanent unfolding of power relations." In Vardoulakis' conclusion, the "Spinozan position allows for a conceptualization of equality which is not dependent on authority, but consists rather in the equality of access to participation in the differential unfolding of power."

Aurelia Armstrong's essay, "Spinoza's Ethics and Politics of Freedom: Active and Passive Power," critically examines the grounds for the claim made by a number of recent liberal political theorists that Spinoza's conception of freedom belongs to a self-perfectionist tradition of autonomy. This claim easily dissociates Spinoza's freedom from politics since it includes as its constitutive condition that freedom is achievable only by the individual's own intellectual activity. Armstrong argues that this claim mischaracterizes Spinoza's conception of ethical liberation insofar as it fails to account for the impact of the different concrete forms of existence on the way essences exist. While the liberal view invites us to imagine freedom as the self-realization of essential power and, thus, as a function of the internal causal activity of singular essences considered in abstraction from the relations that determine how they operate in existence, the alternative view sketched in this essay emphasizes the centrality of relational interaction to Spinoza's account of activity. Armstrong argues that the degree of freedom and activity we enjoy as existing individuals must be understood as the combined effect of internal causal force and external causes in their interactions. Thus, how we are related to one another, whether through relations of agreement and mutual support or disagreement and opposition, becomes crucial to determining individual and collective prospects for empowerment and liberation. The more we manage to agree, Spinoza suggests, the less subject we are to the arbitrary power of external things, and consequently, the greater our power to act from the necessity of our own natures. In this light, and against the liberal interpretation, Armstrong suggests that if we are freer in a state this is not

just because the state protects us from relationships that threaten our power, but also because a state constitutionally constrained to take the welfare of all citizens into account acts positively as a vector for building relationships of agreement, which enhance individual and collective power and freedom.

In "Grammars of *Conatus*: or, on the Primacy of Resistance in Spinoza, Foucault, and Deleuze," Cesare Casarino illuminates Gilles Deleuze's formula that "the final word on power is that *resistance comes first*"—that is, before power—by tracing the relationship between resistance and power in the *Ethics*. Just as "truth is the standard both of itself and of falsity," "resistance," Casarino argues, "is the standard of itself and of power." To locate the concept of resistance in Spinoza (since it is not explicitly stated), Casarino turns to *conatus,* "the striving to persevere *in one's being*." The question then becomes: "What being is at stake in such a perseverance?" In Spinoza, being has two facets, essence and existence, and because on the level of modes, the two do not coincide, being is the non-identity of essence and existence. *Conatus* is the striving to persevere, "against all odds," in the non-identity of essence and existence, and it is this striving that invests and constitutes the realms of the ethical and the political. Further, Casarino argues, "*essence is singularity*"—hence "to each its own *conatus*"—while existence is common—"we can never bring it about that we need nothing outside ourselves to preserve our being"—so that *conatus* has also always "included the outside and the common as its own condition of possibility." Having established the above, Casarino is then able to describe the three aspects of *conatus*. (1) The first is the "form of relation," in other words, "the historical formations, or 'social field,' which in this case bear the name of mercantile capital." (2) The second aspect of *conatus* involves a "relation of force expressed as power," or *potestas*, which aligns with "capitalist exchange relations," relations among "modes of thought and modes of extension." (3) Finally, c*onatus* involves a "relation of force expressed as resistance," or *potentia,* the singular essence which always "comes first" insofar as it operates on the level of the "entire plane of immanence," or the "absolute outside." This third aspect of *conatus*, or resistance, is realized via Spinoza's third kind of knowledge, "intuition," which is "knowledge from the standpoint of eternity," that is, outside of time, so that here "the striving to persevere in one's being turns into the striving to resist." Thus, resistance (*potentia*), operating under the species of eternity, is *both* first *and* last in the formula of power.

In "Beyond Legitimacy: The State as an Imaginary Entity in Spinoza's Political Ontology," Juan Domingo Sánchez Estop takes as his starting point Antonio Negri's distinction between two lines in modern political philosophy,

the one being predicated on a transcendent conception of legitimacy, the other viewing legitimacy as an imaginary effect of real power. The former constitutes the "mainstream tradition of Western political philosophy, from Hobbes to Hegel, through Locke and Rousseau," which "sought to produce a consistent theory of legitimate power and legitimate obedience based on the concepts of consent, legal power, authority and legitimacy." Spinoza, belonging to the other line of thought along with Machiavelli and Marx, can be seen as a reversal of this logic, in his claim that "authority is not the basis for legitimate *potestas*, but an effect and a means of the actual exercise of *potestas*, that is, of the production of obedience." Drawing further on Louis Althusser, Sánchez Estop argues that for Spinoza, "the most effective power is the one founded on the subjects' inner obedience," and that "power generates its legitimacy not by means of its action on subjects but through the production of subjects." Crucial to the production of subjects is the imaginary, a concept which in Spinoza is intimately tied to the political insofar as "law, power and obedience" are "needed in order to correct the effect of human passions" which are "rooted in imagination" rather than reason. In Spinoza, Sánchez Estop concludes, political legitimacy is the "product of imagination, as a necessary illusion produced by political power, as a means to reproduce its constitutive relations of force." Concomitantly, the state is not "constitutive of the political community," rather it is the "result of the imaginary transformation of a social relation into a substance through the common mechanisms of imagination," and therefore "has no proper existence"—a position that, as Sánchez Estop shows, Spinoza shares with Marx.

In "The Cold Quietness of the Stars: Proof, Rhetoric and the Authority of Reason in the *Ethics*," Joe Hughes engages with and critiques Alain Badiou's "movement from a mathematics of proof to a logical politics," that is, the intention "to perform a transfer of the authority of reason from the sphere of mathematical rationality to that of practical and political rationality." While Badiou, following Descartes' interpretation of the geometrical method, claims in his "What is a Proof in Spinoza's *Ethics*?" that "a proof explains the proposition in terms of what has gone before," that is, what is already known, Hughes argues that to attend to a proof is "to notice that it is not merely a recuperative gesture which becomes clear only after everything is already known." Rather, for Spinoza, attending to a proof requires "an inescapable apprenticeship through which thought learns *to create*." Hughes grounds his thesis on an attentive comparison of Spinoza's conception of method to its respective conceptualizations by the two major figures between which he is historically situated, Descartes and Leibniz. This comparison reveals that Spinoza's concept of proof exceeds the "merely

logical proof" because it includes an *inventive* dimension, an aspect of thought "which constituted for a long time the zone of indiscernibility between rhetoric and philosophy." For Spinoza, true ideas "can only be *discovered*, in so far as they are *invented*, and once invented they will ground, at a later stage of history, the discovery of still more." This means, Hughes continues, that for Spinoza, (1) method "has a history which is the history of invention," (2) "science must be invented," (3) both reading and demonstrating are "discovery," and—what is presupposed for the above three—(4) "there is a temporality to the process of demonstration," because of which "there always persists, in any given utterance, a horizon of potentiality, specifically the potentiality for radical, perhaps savage, future specification." In short, Hughes historicizes proof and method in the most Spinozan and psychoanalytic sense, that is, he shows that the temporality of demonstration is not linear—proceeding from one known to the next—but rather involves retroactivity—bringing a present known back to a past unknown so as to render it known and available to future specifications. This is why "the movement of proof is never only repetition" of the known—as is conceived in canonical logic, Descartes and Badiou—"but difference as well." Against the mathematizing "fantasy that the proof can be formalized" in the form of letters or other symbols "and clarified by virtue of deductive relations between them," Hughes proposes that a Spinozan "practical and political rationality" should embrace the inventive dimension involved in its demonstrations.

In "Spinoza: A Different Power to Act," Antonio Negri begins with five theses which attempt to differentiate Spinoza's conception of constituent power (*potentia*) from the traditional notion of transcendent power (sovereignty/*potestas)*, especially in its political application. First, Negri argues that "it is impossible to reduce Spinoza's concept of power to the individual, or to the individual power to act," so that Spinozan power differs in that "it is socially constituted, and innovates on simple interaction**,** being always oriented toward the common." Second, this constituent power cannot be analyzed with the "various forms of transcendental understanding of power," but rather falls into the "excessively monistic perspective" of accumulation. Thus, the "*positive* identity of [constituent] power and right can't be reduced to a *positivist* perspective," because, unlike an actualized legal system, power as *potentia* is productive. Third, Spinozan power is non-teleological despite the fact that "the defence of freedom […] represents the *telos* for [Spinozan] thought and politics." Fourth, *potentia* is different from *potestas* in that it is marked by an excess of "the rational expression of amor," which itself is produced by the movement from *conatus* to *cupiditas* (desire); *cupiditas* is the core of this movement in that it

produces the imagination, which, in turn, "leads the singularity from resistance to the common." Lastly, Negri concludes, "politics is not the mediator of society, but its permanent origin as well as its continual rupture" because of a consistent surplus of constituent power which perpetually "opposes nothingness and builds the common." Negri's description of *potentia* (and politics) is followed by his responses to past and anticipated criticisms. First, he responds to the critique that he has "created an absolute antinomy between *potentia* (ontologically creative) and *potestas* (fixed and/or parasitical)," claiming that their relationship is rather "a continuously produced struggle, a conflict that keeps being posited and resolved," and in which "*potentia*, as *cupiditas*, is never bad, and is always excessive." Next, Negri responds to the criticism that his advocated program of absolute democracy would be an "undue interruption of the continuous process of conflict among singularities," as postulated by Spinoza. Rather, absolute democracy is necessarily constituted by *potentia* insofar as "a constitution is an engine and not a result, it is a 'constituent power' as permanent source of laws." Negri further avoids teleological guarantees by rejecting a utopian destination for the common and arguing, instead, that "the multitude, and not us, has to decide what it wants to be." Thus, Negri is able to conclude that what differentiates Spinozan *potentia* from theories of sovereign power is that "it builds virtue from below."

In "Commanding the Body: The Language of Subjection in *Ethics* III, P2S," Warren Montag argues that the ultimate function of the proposition and scholium in question lies in revealing the very "prejudices" because of which their explicit message had to remain non-apprehensible to Spinoza's contemporary readers. With Montag, Spinoza takes the term "prejudice" in its literal, legal sense, as a judgment already made as the very precondition for everything that follows. Far from being simply errors or purely imaginary, "prejudices" iterate previous judgments that are now materialized within the existing practice of law, and are, thus, co-extensive with each historical society and its specific apparatuses of subjection—in Spinoza's case, the line from Christianity to the seventeenth century. Apostle Paul encapsulates the logic of this apparatus as follows: "do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you and that you are God's and not your own?" Descartes reiterates this dictum in his declaration of the mind as the *dominus* that decrees its *servus*, the body, with benevolent God crowning this cosmic hierarchy. For Spinoza's imaginary interlocutors, the body can no more engage in the work of production without a master than the actual slave seized in Palestine in the first century or in West Africa in the seventeenth. Against this Christian-Cartesian tradition, Spinoza dares to raise

the revolutionary question—what is the body capable of doing when it is liberated from the master's command?—with *E* III, P2: "the body cannot determine the mind to think, nor can the mind determine the body to movement or rest." This statement cuts the Gordian knot of causality between body and mind—in which the lines of individuality, freedom, accountability, guilt, authority and subjection are so entangled as to seem inseparable and inescapable—thereby obliterating the theoretical opposition of command and obedience on both levels, mind and body *and* political authority and people. The "absolute sovereignty" of the mind is impossible, nothing more than a "forensic" fantasy that renders us "absolutely" accountable for affects and actions—including, crucially, (not)remembering—that we cannot entirely control; and the same fantasy conceives of political power as "absolute sovereignty." The demolition of this fantasy constitutes Spinoza's Machiavellianism. The scholium's intertwining of the lexica of natural philosophy, causality, legislation, military and politics, entails a Moebius-strip-type relation among nature, humans and politics, whereby the outside folds back upon itself as its own interior, and thus reminds us that, irrespective of their truth, "beliefs" produce real effects.

In "Interrupting the System: Spinoza and Maroon Thought," James Edward Ford III disputes Antonio Negri's hypothesis that a "certain black and leprous Brazilian" in Spinoza's "unpleasant dream" is Caliban from *The Tempest*. Rather, Ford III argues, the Maroon is "a more effective figure for hypothesizing about Spinoza's dream, his materialist shift, and the global reach of the multitude." The Maroon—"an African who has joined a community of other Africans escaping enslavement in the New World"—complements Spinoza's active immanent materialism, whereas "Caliban symbolizes individual acts of the subordinated that remain mired in what Franz Fanon would call *ressentiment*," and his defiance "works strictly within the confines Prospero [his master] has set." Furthermore, Caliban, a solitary figure, "dreams of but does not pursue a shared life in the common," and "will forego freedom for revenge because, as Spinoza says, revenge is the slave's *modus operandi*." By contrast, the Maroon productively and resolutely reaches for "a new sociability," and his active "remaking" potentiality, like Spinoza's own excommunication, constitutes a historical actualization of Spinoza's ontology. As Ford concludes, "Spinoza's authority manifests in sharing power *with* the multitude, which cannot be fully understood without understanding racial complexity," and, in light of "the resurgence of fascist elements," along with the persistence of global capitalism and its effects, it is an imperative "to rethink authority."

A. Kiarina Kordela approaches Spinoza's conceptualization of political power as a system that negotiates authority and freedom in ways that parallel his theological distinction between fearful obedience to biblical laws and the love for God. She shows that this intertwining of authority and freedom anticipates modern hegemonic and biopolitical forms of power, while, importantly, offering insights into biopower that far exceed its hitherto theorizations. By being predicated on a monistic relation between Body and Mind, as well as on the third kind of knowledge—as the kind of knowledge in which the Mind conceives of itself and the Body *sub specie aeternitatis*—Spinoza's conception of biopower reveals that its object extends beyond the biophysical body (Foucault) or "bare life" (Agamben)—which are modes of substance—to include Body and Mind as attributes of substance and, hence, as eternal. Linking Spinoza's substance to Marx's labor-power (the potential of labor to actualize itself) Kordela suggests that in capitalist modernity it is substance itself that is politicized, as it is commodified, thereby becoming an object of political economy. From then on, biopower can, and must, constitute itself as a form of power that directly intervenes in the relationship of the human being to eternity, while also setting in motion that modern biopolitical mechanism which triggers the slippage from eternity to its distorted underside: the secular fantasy of immortality.