

SPINOZA AND THE PARADOX OF THE SLAVE

Master of Research
Western Sydney University

Michael-Francis Polios
October 2017

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

.....

(Signature)

INTRODUCTION

Natural Right and the Failure to Calculate: The Paradox of the Slave

The aim of this thesis is to draw attention to the paradoxical formulation of the slave in Chapter 16 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*. Spinoza begins this chapter by defining right as co-extensive with power. The right of each individual thing is then an expression of its power, mediated by the power of Nature as a whole. The critical import of this is that no one can renounce their right. This extends to each individual's capacity to calculate their utility. Thus, everyone seeks their own advantage. This principle stands or falls on the claim to always be in operation. However, Spinoza includes the slave as a figure who lacks precisely this capacity. The slave is defined as one who is submitted to an external judgement and thus 'cannot see or do what is good'.

We can begin to extrapolate the slave by noting its historical peculiarity. This can be extracted by understanding what the slave is *not*. Indeed, Spinoza's characterisation of the slave departs from a tradition that stretches back to Aristotle's *Politics*, in which the slave (*doulos*) is defined in relation to a social hierarchy that necessitates its exclusion from citizenship. For Aristotle, the natural slave (as opposed to its conventional counterpart) "is entirely without the faculty of deliberation".¹ The slave is thus naturally predisposed to be ruled because it does not share in the goodness that is conducive to civic participation. This hierarchical model necessitates the exclusion of those considered unfit for politics. Etienne Balibar refers to this as the *ancient* epoch, in which the citizen is "subordinated to anthropological differences".² This is followed by the *modern* epoch, which opens the "right to politics to all humans".³ Has the modern epoch supplanted its ancient counterpart? Balibar suggests that these epochs persist in a "disunified totality, in a non-contemporaneity that is the very structure of the 'current moment'".⁴ Is the slave's failure to calculate coeval with this 'current moment', an ineliminable limit and

¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Ernest Barker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 35.

² Etienne Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx*, trans. James Swenson (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 59.

³ Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, p. 59.

⁴ Balibar, *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, p. 59.

condition of the political? With this mind, let us draw out the significance of this in relation to Spinoza's unique formulation of natural right.

In Chapter 16 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza gives us a definition of natural right (*jus naturale*): "each individual thing has the sovereign right to do everything that it can do, or the right of each thing extends so far as its determined power extends."⁵ In other words, one's right (*jus*) is co-extensive with one's power. This power is continually mediated within the immanent power of Nature as a whole. But to really grasp the radicality of this correlation, between *jus* and *potentia*, one cannot separate Spinoza's metaphysics from his politics. This has become a key point of departure for writers such as Gilles Deleuze and Antonio Negri.⁶ The insistence on this interpretation renders the absolute transfer of natural right inconceivable. In this way, the fiction of an imaginary power is substituted for the actuality of a delimited power. Spinoza's metaphysics thus dictates that what one can effectively do, their capacity to act (*potentia agendi*) is either enhanced or diminished within a network of affectual relations. I refer to this as Spinoza's *immanent politics*.

The capacity to persist and increase one's power is inseparable from the seeking out of means conducive to this end. This takes us to the heart of Spinoza's formulation of subjectivity which, by way of showing itself, will allow us to elicit the heart of the paradox. In Proposition 65, Part 4 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza explicates the principle through which reason compels each individual to seek their utility.⁷ This is prefigured in Chapter 16 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*:

It is a universal law of human nature that no one neglects anything that they deem good unless they hope for a greater good or fear a greater loss, and no one puts up with anything bad except to avoid something worse or because he hopes for something better. That is, of two good things every single person will choose the one which he himself judges to be the greater good, and of two bad things he will choose that which he deems to be less bad. (*TTP*, 198)

⁵ Benedictus de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 195. Hereafter cited in-text with abbreviation (*TTP*).

⁶ See Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1991), also Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1990).

⁷ Benedictus de Spinoza, "Ethics", trans. Samuel Shirley, in ed. Michael L. Morgan, *Complete Works: Spinoza* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), p. 354. Hereafter cited in-text with abbreviation.

This principle is a central tenet in the materialist tradition, and can be traced back to Book 6 of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, in which the faculty of *phronesis* refers to our capacity to judge according to contingent circumstances.⁸ The calculation of utility forms the bedrock of Spinoza's political thought, positioning his metaphysics and politics in relation to an anthropological account of how the human constantly relates to its environment by making judgements as to what can increase its capacity to act. It is a principle that "may be included among the eternal truths that no one can fail to know." (*TTP*, 198)

Yet, Spinoza defines the slave as one who *cannot* see or do what is good for him:

Anyone who is guided by their own pleasure [...] and *cannot see or do what is good for them*, is him or herself very much a slave. The only [genuinely] free person is one who lives with his entire mind guided solely by reason. Acting on command, that is, from obedience, does take away liberty in some sense, but it is not acting on command in itself that makes someone a slave, but rather the reason so for acting. If the purpose of the action is not his own advantage but that of the ruler, then the agent is indeed a slave and useless to himself. (*TTP*, 201)

The paradox of the slave is precisely the juxtaposition of these two seemingly contradictory statements. On the one hand, individuals constantly seek means conducive to their preservation. This is a principle that "no one can fail to forget" (*TTP*, 198). But the slave is defined as an individual who is precluded from seeking their 'good'. The slave is "useless to himself" because he does not calculate *his own* advantage. Indeed, the "purpose of his action" is determined by a command imposed from without. But this raises a paradox: that one's rationality can be retained at the expense of one's *reasonableness*. In other words, the slave is indicative of the possibility whereby what one seeks, what one judges to be useful, merely expresses the utility of something external. If the slave reveals the absence of calculating one's utility, then this deeply problematises the convergence of Spinoza's metaphysics and politics. It would show that natural right is severely limited by precluding the capacity of individuals to act within the political by seeking out their utility.

I think this poses a challenge, and at least deeply problematises, the claim that Spinoza rejects the contractarian tradition. Here, Hobbes will argue that civil society can only be founded on the agreement of mutually consenting subjects, and that this requires transferring one's natural

⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1926), see Book 6.

right to self-preservation. Spinoza is very clear in rejecting this picture. In a well-known letter to Jarig Jelles, Spinoza summarises the key difference between the political theory of Hobbes and his own.⁹ The chief difference, Spinoza adduces, lies in the fact that “I always preserve natural right intact” (Ep50). He continues: “and only allot to the chief magistrates in every state a right over their subjects commensurate with the excess of their power over the power of the subjects.” (Ep50) Spinoza thus explicitly disassociates himself from the contractarian tradition. There is no *pactum* separated from relations of power; no right that transcends an *immanent politics*. But is the figure of the slave the exception to this?

Hobbes also provides an account of individuals constantly seeking out their advantage. But he infers very different results. This is plainly illustrated in Chapter 1 of the *De Cive*: in virtue of the necessity to escape the war of all against all, “it is more rational and *gives more assurance of our preservation* if we make use of our present advantage to build the security we seek for ourselves by taking a guarantee”.¹⁰ It has become almost ubiquitous to view Spinoza’s natural right as either an “eccentric” version of Hobbes’ own, or inversely, to view Hobbes’ natural right as essentially Spinozist had he developed his thoughts consistently. This expresses the same point: that Spinoza discloses the truth of politics; that one’s right can never be surrendered, and everyone actively seeks out their advantage. In this respect, how does one account for the latent possibility of the slave, which seems to suggest reason’s limit?

This paradoxical formulation of the slave has gone largely unnoticed in Spinozist literature. On the one hand, Susan James offers an argument that relies on the distinction, as Spinoza himself articulates it, between the *subject* and *slave*.¹¹ This understanding of the slave is set-up in contrast to a people’s capacity to institute a collective or common good that expresses their interest. In this way, the subject’s obedience is mobilised in accordance with a self-legislating activity. The slave is thereby the condition of being subject to the arbitrary will of an external power, where one’s interest is never guaranteed. Frederic Lordon’s *Willing Slaves of Capital*

⁹ Benedictus de Spinoza, “The Letters”, trans. Samuel Shirley, in ed. Michael L. Morgan, *Complete Works: Spinoza* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), pp. 891-892. Hereafter cited in-text with abbreviation (Ep).

¹⁰ Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, trans. Richard Tuck, ed. Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 30.

¹¹ See Susan James, “Freedom, Slavery, and the Passions”, in ed. Olli Koistinen, *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza’s Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 223-242. See also Susan James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics: The Theologico-Political Treatise*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 122.

addresses the problem of the slave by focusing on the intransitive nature of desire.¹² The whole problem for Lordon is that individuals are defined as constantly seeking out (or calculating) their ‘good’, and yet precisely what they seek out is always ‘given’ through determinate social relations. This approach acknowledges the definition of the slave as being determined to act against one’s better interest. Lordon identifies this as the “passionate automata”.¹³ But what is absent that enigmatic statement; namely, that the slave ‘cannot see or do what is good for him’. In other words, my interpretation of the slave differs in this respect: that the invocation of the slave is not only defined in the context of the intransitive nature of desire, but what Spinoza seems to suggest is that this very condition is indicative of a failure to calculate one’s utility.

There are two lines of inquiry I shall follow. Firstly, there is the claim that natural right can never be renounced, that one cannot surrender their capacity to judge. Yet, the slave would seem to be the exception to this; that there is such a figure that can be precluded from seeking its utility and thus increasing its power. This leads to our second line of thought. The paradox of the slave expresses the problematic situation whereby one conforms to the principle of calculative judgement, yet nevertheless *effectively* fails to seek out their utility. Otherwise put, the slave would seem to show that reason can be *unreasonable*; that what an individual believes to be seeking out as their ‘good’ is already subject to an external utility.

How can one conceive a materialist politics on an immanent political ontology? Raising this question is crucial because the paradox of the slave shows that this *unreasonableness* is an ineliminable condition of the political. The paradox of the slave is a matter of being separated from one’s power, it is the inability to grasp the conditions that allow one to pursue their power, and thus their right. Moreover, if an *immanent politics* denies any source of judgement beyond the here and now, how can a multitude become aware that their very actions are already the effect of an external command? La Boetie theorised the enigma of voluntary servitude in precisely this respect.¹⁴ La Boetie claims that what sustains sovereign authority must ultimately come from below. But what perplexed him was how the enigma of servitude is conterminous with a forgetfulness of one’s subjection. This seems to resonate with the paradox of the slave, which prevents individuals from actively seeking their interest.

¹² See Frederic Lordon, *Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire*, trans. Gabriel Ash (London: Verso, 2014).

¹³ Lordon, *Willing Slaves of Capital*, p. 20.

¹⁴ See Etienne de La Boetie, *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, trans. James B. Atkinson and David Sices (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2012).

The invocation of the slave is contrasted to the free man (*homo liber*) (E4P66s). What underlies this is Spinoza's account of subjectivity, which we intimated at earlier: defined as the capacity to calculate one's advantage within a nexus of determinative power relations. Spinoza will give a more precise name to this: desire (*cupiditas*). Moreover, if one turns to Part 3, Proposition 9: "between appetite and desire there is no difference, except that the term desire is generally applied to men." Here, appetite (*appetitus*) refers to the *conatus*: our capacity for self-preservation. Desire is therefore the conscious application of our *conatus* ("appetite with consciousness thereof") (E3P9s). More precisely formulated, desire is a specifically human capacity that is inseparable from the faculty of judgement, in which we look for what is most conducive to preserve our existence: it is thus a human affair.

The figure of the free man, in contrast to the slave, is characterised by knowledge which enables us to make the transition from passivity to activity, thus overcoming our subjection to external affections that determine us to act against our best interests. Freedom, for Spinoza, does not imply abstracting oneself from the causal order of nature, rather, the condition of freedom is *understanding* what determines one to act: it is a recognition of necessity.

This is possible because Spinoza's political ontology is thoroughly materialist. As Spinoza informs us in the introduction to the *Political Treatise*: "I have taken great care not to deride, bewail, or execrate human actions, but to understand them." And this is possible because they are "inevitable, and have definite causes."¹⁵ This is what is presupposed by the coupling of right and power. It is tantamount to collapsing the difference between one's sovereign right to act and their existence (that is, desire). Spinoza's God/Nature thus radically disposes with transcendence and teleological conceptions of the human; that is, anything that points beyond the here and now. Consequently, this displaces the original intention to exclude transcendence back toward the subject. The horizon of the political now becomes a matter of how subjects constitute themselves. Right (*jus*) being reduced to the effectuation of one's power (*potentia*) within a network of relations that determine what one can *do* in a given situation. Otherwise put, it substitutes the imperative to uncover a natural basis of how one *ought* to act (or how civil society *ought* to be constituted) for a hermeneutics of how power is transposed, configured and re-configured, across an immanent plane. Calculative judgement is thus linked to knowledge of the causal order of nature.

¹⁵ Benedictus de Spinoza, *Political Treatise*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000), p. 34. Hereafter abbreviated in-text with chapter and paragraph: (*TP:1.3*).

The slave, however, is “led solely by emotion or opinion”, and “performs actions whereof he is entirely ignorant” (E4P66s). Here, Spinoza imports two traditions. Firstly, the slave is closely associated with the *akratic* [ἀκρασία] figure, as one who acts against their better judgement; indeed, as one who is, literally, powerless (ἀκράτος). Secondly, the faculty of calculative judgement, in conjunction with the knowledge of Nature, draws upon the Epicurean rendition of *phronesis*: the form of practical reasoning related to contingent situations.¹⁶ The problem that arises is the seemingly asymmetrical alliance between a political theory founded on a naturalistic conception of the cosmos. This question has been brought to my attention precisely because the slave discloses an indeterminacy concerning natural right. Spinoza will tell us that we seek objects not because they are ‘good’, but because they are useful, and therefore they are ‘good’ (E3P9n). But insofar as one judges that an action is to their interest, it seems that Spinoza requires an external criterion in order to judge the slave as an *akratic* figure. Thus, would it not seem that Spinoza has assumed a detached standpoint in order to devalue the slave from the outset? That Spinoza can judge the slave *qua* slave at all would seem to privilege knowledge for a few wise: those who know better. Who determines that the actions of the slave are not in accordance with his or her best interests? Moreover, can we take Spinoza’s preference for the statesman over the philosopher in all sincerity if the statesman shares in the prejudices of the people, and *vice versa*? Indeed, the statesman acts on what is expedient. Thus, there seems to be a schism between what Spinoza would have us believe, regarding his implicit devaluation of the slave, and the effectual reality, in which the slave judges – *a la* Hobbes – that it is in one’s interest to rescind judgement, precisely in order to secure the preservation of life.

If the slave is part of the constitutive framework of natural right, then it would seem we are trapped in a circle. The possibility of the slave cannot be refuted without presupposing a model of conduct, which is already given through Spinoza’s intrinsic devaluation of the slave: a judgement of judgement. This leads me to the second line of inquiry; namely, the role of *phronesis*, which is precluded for the slave. This can be traced back to Book 6 of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, in which the faculty of *phronesis* designates the type of wisdom dependent on contingent circumstances. The privileging of practical reason constitutes the backbone of the materialist tradition. But this tradition had indeed come very far; it was

¹⁶ For an analysis of Spinoza’s principle of the calculation of utility and its connection to the Epicurean *phronesis* see Dimitris Vardoulakis, *Authority and Utility: Democracy in the TTP* (forthcoming).

Machiavelli, above all, who transformed it into a political principle: a far cry from its original meaning as the pursuit of *ataraxia* (peace of mind).¹⁷ The chief obstacle to the fulfilment of peace of mind, according to the teaching of Epicurus, is the fear borne of the gods, and in order to overcome this fear it is necessary to realise that they are wholly detached from our worldly affairs. This implies that the world of the here and now can be explained naturally, for if this were not the case, if the gods could intervene at any moment, the mind would be in a constant state of perturbation. In order to achieve *ataraxia*, one must reject creationism.

But the pursuit of *ataraxia* entails that one escapes the burdens of public life. It is, in other words, essentially apolitical. One is led to ask: insofar as overcoming the fear of nature is possible for the individual, or for the followers of Epicurus in his ‘Garden’, how does one understand its viability as a political theory, indeed, when it extends to the multitude as a whole? In other words, the slave poses a challenge in how to conceive right and power as co-extensive upon an immanent political ontology.

Spinoza’s conception of natural right, designated by the co-extensivity of right and power, has the status of a univocal statement, that is to say, it expresses the ineluctable truth of politics. And yet, the explicit identification of the slave in Chapter 16 of the *TTP* interiorises the possibility of calculative judgement overcoming itself. This is both astounding and profoundly ambiguous. It is tantamount to internalising the slave as an ineliminable tendency. Indeed, if the slave precludes one’s capacity to seek out their utility by transforming their own conditions, how is one to understand Spinoza’s claim to preserve natural right?

Our investigation hitherto can be summarised as such. Firstly, the slave signifies a rupture of Spinoza’s account of desire and thus natural right. Yet, this would belie what is most paradoxical, for Spinoza’s account of desire stands on its claim to universality. In virtue of this claim, however, the figure of the slave must already be in conformity with its logical premise; it is already included in the definition of natural right, and thus cannot signify an aberration.

Chapter 1 will develop this problem through reading Leo Strauss. I will show that the paradox of the slave can be understood as the limitation of reason. For Strauss, the political question *par excellence* is whether human life can be ordered according to the unaided powers of reason, or whether there remains an intractable dependency of being ‘revealed’ the ‘good’ life. This is

¹⁷ Alison Brown provides an analysis of the Epicurean revival through Machiavelli. See Alison Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010).

the alternative between reason and revelation, but this alternative is coeval with difference between philosophy and the politics. According to Strauss, the philosophical life can only serve a critical function; it is essentially destructive. For this reason, philosophy *alone* cannot ground the properly human life because it cannot sustain a basis for commitment. Strauss never explicitly refers to the slave. However, if the paradox of the slave poses the limit of reason, then it would seem to confirm Strauss' position.

Chapter 2 will focus on the *threat of the slave* as a positive function. Here, I will advance the thesis that the slave's failure to calculate, his unreasonableness, is the threat of destruction that motivates individuals to act in the political. In this sense, commitment does not presuppose a dependency on faith, but arises from the precariousness that the slave imposes on the political from within. The key to understanding this is the role played by fortune.

CHAPTER 1

Leo Strauss and the Limits of Reason: The Paradox of the Slave and the Necessity for Revelation.

Although Leo Strauss never explicitly refers to the slave, his thesis cannot do without it. What concerns Strauss is the modern break with what he understands as the classical natural right tradition. This begins with the ascendance of nonteleological natural science, which expels any ultimate reference beyond the here and now. The political is thus guaranteed through the means of an unassisted reason. However, Strauss avers that reason is limited because it cannot sustain what is proper to human life without a dependency on faith. Does the slave's failure to calculate, his *unreasonableness*, confirm Strauss' suspicions? Let us return briefly to the description of the slave in order to draw out its connection to Strauss.

In Chapter 16 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza's formulation of natural right (*jus naturale*) is coeval with the exercise of the calculation of utility. This principle is fundamental to conceiving human action within the political. Spinoza gives us an example of how this principle operates with the case of the highway robber:

Imagine that a highwayman forces me to promise to give him all I have, at this demand. Since my natural right is determined by my power alone, as I have already shown, it is certain that if I can free myself from him by deceit, by promising whatever he wants, I

may by the law of nature do so, i.e., I may fraudulently agree to whatever he demands.
(*TTP*, 198)

In this context the calculation of utility is framed in terms of its capacity to break an agreement. It does not matter whether the judgement in question emanates from “certain reason” or “out of mere belief”, what matters for Spinoza is that individuals are continually seeking out their advantage; seeking out, that is, means conducive to increasing their power to act. The word ‘continually’ must be taken in the strongest sense: “the mind, both in so far as it has clear and distinct ideas and in so far as it has confused ideas, endeavours to persist in its own being” (E3P9). And this it does over an “indefinite period of time”.

The extrapolation of this principle, the calculation of utility, is thus a fundamental political precept. To pursue one’s advantage is to modulate one’s power. This principle of human action is then eminently political; it presupposes the possibility of transformation and social upheaval in all its ambivalence. But this very general illustration is rendered problematic from the point of view of the slave; that is, when the calculation of utility is denied; when one cannot see or do what is good for oneself. More precisely stated, the condition of slavery pertains to an action for which the utility gained is external to the individual. The slave is literally “useless to himself” because the reason for its action is not sought out in terms of its own advantage.

But to acknowledge the full extent of what is at stake one must draw attention to Spinoza’s opening remarks in Chapter 17. This is where the paradox of the slave is given its full significance. The chapter opens with what experience teaches very clearly: that “no one will be able to transfer his power and (consequently) his right to another person in such a way that he ceases to be a human being” (*TTP*, 208). Yet, what emerges is a notion of state power that wields an enormous influence over individuals. Indeed, even though a people will retain their natural right, “which therefore depend upon no one’s will but their own”, their actions nonetheless conform to the commands of the sovereign power. As Spinoza tells us:

There are numerous reasons why someone decides to carry out the commands of a sovereign power: fear of punishment, hope of reward, love of country or the impulse of some other passion. Whatever their reason, they are still deciding of their own volition, and simultaneously acting at the bidding of the sovereign power. Just because someone does something by their own design, we should not immediately infer that they do it of their own right and not that of the state. Whether moved by love, or compelled by fear,

to avoid some bad consequence, they are always acting under their own counsel and decision. (*TTP*, 209)

Here, Spinoza shows that it is possible to act from one's volition and exercise one's own judgement, and yet "simultaneously" act perfectly in accordance with what the sovereign power decrees. This is precisely the paradox of the slave. One will always retain their faculty of judgement, but in this case without the presupposition of *praxis*; that is, without *reasonableness*. In other words, the calculation of utility is deprived of its capacity to break agreements. Spinoza uses the Hebrew State as an example. Through the daily practice of ritualised obedience, the Israelites could not distinguish freedom from slavery. Indeed, "to people wholly accustomed to this [...] surely no one could have desired what was forbidden, only what was prescribed." (*TTP*, 224)

The figure of the slave then precludes the possibility of increasing one's power. Spinoza hints at this in the Preface to the *Theological-Political Treatise*, asking why people fight for their servitude as if they were fighting for their liberty (*TTP*, Preface, 6). It seems to show that reason can be *unreasonable*. This accounts for the seemingly contradictory statements in the beginning of Chapter 17: that one exercises their judgement and yet the *good/utile* sought is always already mobilised within the framework of obedience. This makes it difficult to separate the immanent powers of desire, which tend towards the expansion of the individual's activity, and the transcendent powers of coercion and control. Instead, the slave poses the question of the *limits of reason*, that is, of how individuals maintain their own subjection: acting *as if* the purpose of their action is to their advantage, and hence *useless* to themselves.

This dilemma is the focal point in Chapter 5 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, where Spinoza discusses the purpose of ceremonies and historical narratives. The example of the Hebrew State enables Spinoza to show how the appeal to myths and imaginary narratives strengthens obedience to the sovereign power. Thus, these institutions are framed in terms of their utility. But they do more than this: their effectiveness lies in the production of compliant subjects; that is, to ensure individuals are not simply coerced, but subordinate themselves. As Spinoza explains in the context of Moses' founding of the Hebrew State:

This then was the purpose of the ceremonies, that they [i.e. the people] should do nothing at their own discretion and everything at the command of another, and should confess by their every action and thought they did not exist in their own right at all but were entirely subject to someone else. (*TTP*, 75)

Are the production of myths, historical narratives, or rituals, necessary to inculcate obedience? Chiara Bottici points out that these are necessary insofar as the many are not capable of submitting themselves to the public good on rational grounds.¹⁸ What is required is supplement that can secure life and preserve the body politic. Indeed, Spinoza consistently reminds us that most people are devoid of reason: “men are led by blind desire more than be reason” (*TP* 2.5) And to ensure maximum obedience these institutions must be imagined as omnipotent.¹⁹ This is the “highest secret” that Spinoza speaks of in regard to monarchical government (*TTP*, Preface, 6).

But the slave raises the stakes. The failure to calculate one’s utility, reason’s *unreasonableness*, brings to fore the *non-contemporaneity* of reason’s limit. In order to develop the implications of this, it is necessary to identify the problem of the slave as coeval with Spinoza’s political immanence. If the production of myths and imaginary narratives are essential for the ordering of the passionate life, then does Spinoza’s metaphysical rejection of the transcendental, which dispels of any standard of judgement beyond the here and now, presuppose that individuals are already capable of seeking their own good/utility? It presupposes that the slave, which suggests the limit of reason, is already excluded.

This would seem to render Spinoza’s philosophy as something very distinct from his politics. In other words, while his philosophy is content in divulging the illusions of a hierarchical world, his politics is contemptuous of many, who require reassuring myths. Is Spinoza’s philosophy “elitist” in contrast to his “politics”, which aims only at the bare minimum of preserving the State against the passionate life?²⁰ But most importantly, is the slave the *concealed fulcrum* of this structure?

This question assumes centre stage in Leo Strauss’ project of reawakening the perennial tension between reason and revelation. This dichotomy persists throughout Strauss’ career, culminating in the metaphorical alternative between ‘Athens’ and ‘Jerusalem’: between the life guided by the unaided effort of reason and the life in faithful obedience the revealed Law.²¹ Strauss is compelled to raise this dichotomy because he understood Spinoza’s philosophy as

¹⁸ Chiara Bottici, “Another Enlightenment: Spinoza on Myth and Imagination”, *Constellations*, 19 (2012), p. 599.

¹⁹ See Etienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, trans. Peter Snowdon (London: Verso, 2008), pp. 88-91.

²⁰ Nancy Levene, *Spinoza’s Revelation: Religion, Democracy, and Reason*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 10.

²¹ Marco Menon, “Leo Strauss and the Argument of Natural Theology”, *Ethics & Politics*, 18 (2016), p. 573.

representative of reason's failure to refute the central tenet of orthodoxy. Reason could not refute revelation because it could not justify itself. The philosophical account, according to Strauss, is no more demonstrable than the life ordered on the basis of the revealed Law.²² It is out of this basic posture that Strauss will argue for the failure of an immanently conceived politics, that is, a materialist politics. But the failure to refute revelation means, for Strauss, that there persists in irreducible tension between ways of ordering life: unaided reason and faithful obedience. This tension cannot be resolved because they are in perpetual conflict. For Strauss, human life presupposes commitment that can only come from a relation to faith. Spinoza's immanent politics thus poses a challenge insofar as it denies this necessary framework. The crux of the problem, for Strauss, is that Spinoza must presuppose that individuals are already capable of mastering their affairs on the basis of an unaided reason. But the slave would seem to question this. Is the repression of the slave indicative of an intractable dependency on faith?

This ambivalence stems from the narrative that stresses the ontological domain of immanence. The consequence of this is clear enough: insofar as reality does not exhaust one substance, no order can reside outside of its causal network. Without a transcendental basis, and the production of finality that it supports, the whole structure of religion is called into question. Jonathan Israel is one such author who has forcefully acknowledged the implication of Spinoza metaphysical presuppositions. The thrust of Israel's argument, laid out in his revisionist tome *Radical Enlightenment*, insists on reevaluating the Enlightenment era on two planes. Firstly, he asserts a key distinction between two strands of Enlightenment thought. On the one hand, there stands the restrained, 'moderate' Enlightenment which, although driven by the aspiration to "conquer ignorance and superstition" through means of philosophy, nonetheless deemed it necessary to "preserve and safeguard what were judged essential elements of the older structures."²³ In other words, it was a matter of retaining the fundamentals of Christian orthodoxy by limiting reason's destructive impulse. In contrast is the 'radical' Enlightenment, which "rejected all compromise with the past and sought to sweep away existing structures entirely."²⁴ It was this faction alone that espoused democratic values, prescribed the wholesale rejection of theological superstition and supernaturalism, and proclaimed reason as the only guide in human life.

²² John G. Gunnell, "Strauss Before Straussianism: Reason, Revelation, and Nature", *The Review of Politics*, 53 (1991), p. 62.

²³ Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity: 1660-1750*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 11.

²⁴ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 11.

Although Israel acknowledges the existence of a double Enlightenment, divided on the question of what role reason ought to play in the social sphere, his analysis is also underscored by a conviction that the Enlightenment period was fostered, above all, by philosophical concepts rooted in the emerging mechanistic world-view of the seventeenth century. And at the heart of this lies Israel's Spinoza. As the key progenitor of the Radical Enlightenment, "no one else [...] remotely rivalled Spinoza's notoriety as the chief challenger of the fundamentals of revealed religion".²⁵ Although it is not Israel's intention to reduce the enormous intellectual and cultural shifts of the Enlightenment to the systematic philosophy of Spinoza, for these "no doubt originate in vast social forces".²⁶ But the argument that Israel implicitly presents is that philosophy *itself* had become a veritable tool of social transformation.

But the Spinozist camp was subject to criticism, not only from the pulpit of ecclesiastical authority, but from within philosophy itself. The 'moderate' Enlightenment also saw the extreme anti-religious strictures of the radical exponents as dangerous to public morality. While the radicals rejected any compromise that sought to accommodate the new sciences to the principles of revealed religion. Indeed, they had no intention of curtailing intellectual probity for the sake of retaining the socially cohesive function of religious dogma. Indeed, the "rigorous mechanism" of the new sciences "entailed the subordination of theology and Church authority to concepts rooted in a mathematically grounded philosophical reason."²⁷

It is this uncompromising attitude, drawing its support from a materialist lineage dating back to Epicurus, that amounts to a wholesale repudiation of the supernatural, revealed knowledge, superstition, in effect, it threatened the very foundation of Christian theology. Thus, Israel clearly recognises the fundamental antithesis between reason and faith that is born of Spinoza's ontological presumptions.

While Israel's reassessment of the Enlightenment narrative has the intention of unearthing its neglected grounding in the philosophy of Spinoza, one wonders: on what basis does Israel assert the superiority of the radical Enlightenment over its moderate variety. On the one hand, there is the Spinozist camp and its unrelenting critique of religion and theological dogma as the suppressed engine room of the Enlightenment. On the other hand, there are the representatives of the moderate camp (namely, Montesquieu, Locke, Voltaire), who attempted a viable synthesis of reason and faith. But can one unambiguously justify a preference for the

²⁵ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 159.

²⁶ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 160.

²⁷ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 14.

radicals? Indeed, can a justification be sustained without ineluctably privileging the modality of immanence? It would seem that the answer to this is already given in advance: one should merely accept Spinoza's metaphysical assumptions. But can we accept these principles unproblematically, or does the challenge of the slave – of reason's unreason – call into question such an enterprise?

Israel clearly recognises the centrality of Spinoza's interpretation of the Scriptures for his broader critique of religion. Indeed, "no other part of Spinoza's assault on authority, tradition, and faith proved so generally disquieting as his Bible criticism."²⁸ But what proved so unsettling? One would have to turn to the *Tractatus*, where Spinoza links his broader objective – which is to "extricate ourselves from [...] theological prejudices and the blind acceptance of human fictions as God's teachings" – to his method of interpreting the Biblical Scriptures (*TTP*, 98). Spinoza proposes something which had never been suggested before: he defines his method as analogous to the interpretation of nature. That is, he proposes a naturalistic understanding of the Bible that can trace its meaning and origin to humanly comprehensible motives. As Samuel Preus points out, the crucial step in this is to "dispense with the fiction of divine authorship and to treat the Biblical authors and editors as real authors".²⁹ As Spinoza himself affirms: the rule of interpretation must proceed from the "natural light of reason which is common to all men, and not some light above nature or any external authority". (*TTP*, 117) Returning to Preus, Spinoza's point of departure is thus to deny the "dogmatic fictions about divine authorship and textual infallibility".³⁰ In this way, Spinoza's ontological monism severely delimits revelatory knowledge by subsuming it within a naturalistic apparatus.

Thus, turning to Chapter 2 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*: the prophets had "only a more vivid power of imagination". (*TTP*, 27) What is implicit in this definition is the erasure of the distinction between 'revealed' truths that exceed the scope of human intelligence and scientific truths that are ascertained through the light of natural reason. Israel imports the full significance of this revolutionary understanding of the Bible, which "redefines Bible exegesis as a science", reducing it to the order of Nature, that is, to the realm of philosophy.³¹ Thus, Spinoza does not so much deny the reality of revelation as to devalue its epistemological claim as the prophets themselves understood it. By rendering such knowledge explicable through natural causes, the

²⁸ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 447.

²⁹ Samuel Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 157.

³⁰ Preus, *Spinoza and the Irrelevance of Biblical Authority*, p. 159.

³¹ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, p. 449.

immutable character of the truths ascertained through revelation are thus stripped of their sacred value, and reconfigured as a product of the imaginative-passionate life; that is, superstition. Gilles Deleuze's thoroughly immanent reading of Spinoza recognises the full significance of this move. Thus, Spinoza's philosophy replaces the transcendent values, which underpin revelation's moral imperative, with the "qualitative difference of modes of existence".³² Which is to say, the professed knowledge of the prophets can only be understood as an *inadequate* form of expression within an already immanent, naturalistic framework.

Let us return to the question we posed earlier; namely, on what basis can one justify a preference for the radical dimension of Spinoza's thought without implicitly reiterating his metaphysical presuppositions. Insofar as one privileges the ontological modality of immanence it would seem that one cannot but come to a critique of religion. The difficulty stems, not from Israel's historiographical method, but from the distinction between a 'radical' and 'moderate' strain of Enlightenment. The distinction represses the slave. It conceals the possibility that reason can function perfectly well, but be simultaneously deprived of its most *radical* capacity; namely, its *reasonableness*, its *praxis*. Otherwise put, the slave's mode of judgement is nothing but what the sovereign power decrees, it thus lacks the capacity to break agreements. This is far from radical, it is pacifist.

Catherine Malabou is clearly attuned to the instability of this distinction.³³ Focusing, rather, on Deleuze's *expression/impression* bifurcation, she questions the rigid privileging of the rationality that is implied in the former over its fundamental other; that is, revelation.³⁴ Indeed, the concept of *expression*, and its relation to *impression*, is tacitly accepted in Israel's preference for the radical strain of Enlightenment thought. Expression denotes the mode of knowledge that renders the prophets susceptible to interpreting Nature as an immutable 'truth'. It is this knowledge through revelation that is systematically devalued in accordance with Spinoza's metaphysical principles; thus "while expression is adequate, revelation is inadequate."³⁵ Malabou thus clearly understands the "unequal regimes of representation" that characterise the antagonistic relationship between philosophy and religion. This is something

³² Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, trans. Robert Hurley (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1988), p. 23.

³³ Catherine Malabou, "Before and Above: Spinoza and Symbolic Necessity", *Critical Inquiry*, 43 (2016), p. 84-109.

³⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1990).

³⁵ Malabou, "Before and Above", p. 86.

implicit in Deleuze's thesis, while adumbrated in Israel's own position. Malabou thus raises an important question: whether one can sustain a rigid demarcation between the 'truths' of philosophy and revealed religion, with the subsequent devaluing of the latter, without erasing the ontological fact that revelation is a "divine necessity". It must be so, otherwise it could not have happened as it did. Thus, insofar as revelation is inextricably a part of the divine order of God, Malabou questions the thesis that the origin of the sacred can be legitimately attributed to a lower-order mode of human intelligence, for "Spinoza missed the immanent dimension of transcendence".³⁶ The general problematic that is brought to light helps to inform our own critical inquiry; namely, whether one can unambiguously accept the radical dimension of Spinoza's thought, that is, his metaphysical principles which are the precondition of his critique of religion, or is there an undisclosed fissure located in the very fabric of Spinoza's immanence. In other words, and moving beyond Malabou's thesis, has Spinoza neglected the immanent unreasonableness of the slave; that is, the inability to calculate one's utility?

Indeed, as I have already intimated, the problematic figure of the slave exposes a profound ambivalence hitherto concealed within the ubiquity of Spinoza's metaphysics; that is, it discloses the ineliminable threat of reason's indispensable relation to faith.

The thesis that the Enlightenment is divided into two strands, radical and moderate, with the former eagerly defended by Israel, is a programme that is anticipated by the early work of Leo Strauss.³⁷ Strauss' interpretation of his own '*Radikale Aufklärung*' is wedded to his analysis of Spinoza's Bible science, and more broadly, the theoretical juncture of what he identifies as the 'theological-political predicament'. Continually returning to this theme, Strauss is keenly alert to the structural shortcomings of the modern Enlightenment project that sought to emancipate humanity from the clutches of theological prejudice. Like Israel, he recognises the fundamental dislocation of religious authority that emanated from Spinoza's metaphysics and disseminated through the disciples of the radical Enlightenment. Central to Strauss' oeuvre is thus the perennial conflict between reason and revelation. But unlike Israel, Strauss is hesitant: he is deeply suspicious of whether the modern critique of religion can plausibly justify its claims, and more pertinently, whether such claims are politically sustainable.

~~~

---

<sup>36</sup> Malabou, "Before and Above", p. 96.

In order to understand the profound challenge posed by the figure of the slave, I will turn to Strauss' project that seeks to question the roots of modern liberalism, and how it was shaped by the modern critique of religion. Although Strauss consistently returns to the eternal struggle between reason and revelation (which he also designates under 'Athens' and 'Jerusalem'), he is primarily concerned with how the insoluble nature of this tension exposes the profoundly unstable ground upon which the inherited ideas of the Enlightenment are constructed. More precisely, Strauss contends that the value assigned to reason, its elevation to the highest form of knowledge, which excludes any reality beyond it, has furnished modern rationalism with a self-destructive impulse. But how could it be that the path of reason, advocated by the radical Enlightenment, and so ardently defended by Israel, would be so disturbing for Strauss?

Turning to the Introduction of his *Natural Right and History*, Strauss discerns the momentous decision of early modernity to found a political theory and model of human action in a mechanical conception of the universe. But this decision, the "naturalistic solution", Strauss writes, found itself at an impasse: it could not "give an adequate account of human ends by conceiving of them merely as posited by desires or impulses."<sup>38</sup> For Strauss, this is the inevitable consequence that is borne of conceiving political action upon a strictly immanent ontology, which denies any value beyond the here and now. What results is a dissymmetry: can a political/ethical programme that seeks to break the cycle of fear and superstition be viably conceived on an immanent plane? In other words, does the slave posit the necessary limit of reason; that is, an intractable dependency on faith?

These questions are crucial precisely because Spinoza invokes the figure of the slave, which raises the issue of reason's limitation through the failure to calculate one's utility. It raises the suspicion that, in stark contrast to the conclusions drawn by Israel, modern rationalism cannot extricate itself from the primordial struggle between reason and revelation. According to Strauss: "the more we cultivate reason, the more we cultivate nihilism."<sup>39</sup> If the slave shows the limitation of reason (that is, reason without the presupposition of *praxis*), is this already imbedded in the effort to secure to secure life in faith? This is the question that I want to focus on by way of the conclusion drawn from Israel.

But to make this clearer, it is necessary that we investigate the roots of Strauss. When he says that the "contemporary rejection of natural right [...] is identical with nihilism"<sup>40</sup>, this reveals

---

<sup>38</sup> Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 8.

<sup>39</sup> Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 6.

<sup>40</sup> Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 5.

a theoretical lineage that can be traced back to Jacobi's critique of Spinoza and the broader Enlightenment movement, resulting with the pantheism controversy in the late eighteenth century. Despite its almost trivial beginnings – Lessing's Spinozism – the effect of this controversy was far-reaching. According to Frederick Beiser, the pantheism controversy inflicted a severe blow to the hegemony of reason. Indeed, it was Jacobi who single-handedly “succeeded in casting doubt upon the central dogma of the *Aufklärung*: its faith in reason.”<sup>41</sup> It was Jacobi who foresaw, lurking beneath the hegemony of reason, a destructive impulse. Put simply: reason can not guarantee itself because it has no necessary stake in-itself.

In his *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, Strauss provides us with only a single reference to Jacobi. However, it is particularly revealing:

Even if all the reasoning adduced by Spinoza were compelling, nothing would have been proven. Only this much would have been proven: that on the basis of unbelieving science one could not but arrive at Spinoza's results. But would this basis itself this be justified? It was Friedrich Henrich Jacobi who posed this question, and by so doing lifted the interpretation of Spinoza – or what amounts to the same thing, the critique of Spinoza – on to its proper plane.<sup>42</sup>

I have included this passage in its entirety, not only because it explicitly details his indebtedness to Jacobi, but by way of this connection it adumbrates the issues we have hitherto raised; namely, that Israel's privileging of the ontological modality of immanence by definition excludes any reality beyond reason. But can this claim be legitimately adhered to within the logical constraints of ratiocination. This is the question Strauss imports from Jacobi – but to what extent? There is his 1921 doctoral dissertation, entitled *The Problem of Knowledge in the Philosophical Doctrine of Friedrich H. Jacobi*, which gives us a clue to his indebtedness to Jacobi. However, a closer investigation of this link requires us to bring to light the motive that undergirded Jacobi's critique.

Jacobi's critique of the authority of reason emerges out of his notorious accusation of Lessing's apparent Spinozism. This was an affront to Moses Mendelssohn who, being an ardent supporter of the moderate Enlightenment and personally acquainted with Lessing, was well-aware that such a claim was akin to a moral indictment. Indeed, Spinoza had been anathematised for over century, his name was inextricably linked to the fowl tone of 'atheism'. Thus, the accusation that Lessing may have been a secret admirer of Spinoza would have grave ramifications for the

---

<sup>41</sup> Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 46.

<sup>42</sup> Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, p. 204.

reputation of Lessing. The debate that emerged gave Jacobi a platform to voice his concerns that the Enlightenment's universalisation of reason is fundamentally flawed.

As Steven B. Smith points out, Jacobi was concerned with the Enlightenment fixation with the principle of sufficient reason.<sup>43</sup> This principle dictates that every situation can be made explicable through a chain of causation. To highlight this, Jacobi sets his sights at the key materialist principle, *nihil ex nihilo est*: "for if a series is not to arise from nothing, it must be infinite absolutely."<sup>44</sup> It is this system, elevated to an ethical and political schema, that underlies Spinoza's philosophy. However, what is profoundly defective, according to Jacobi, is that all rationalistic systems of metaphysics (Spinoza's representing its most consistent application) commit a fatal *petito principii*, for they cannot establish their own premise: "Pure reason is a taking hold that only takes hold of itself."<sup>45</sup> Indeed, anything that exceeds human rationality is "changed into nothing" and reflected back, absorbed, by the subject; "Thus, the Human spirit, since its philosophical understanding will simply not reach beyond its own production, must, in order to penetrate into the realm of beings and conquer it with its thought, become world-creator."<sup>46</sup>

Strauss reiterates this line of argument in *Natural Right and History* when criticising modernity's attempt to "replace opinions about the whole by knowledge of the whole", thus leading "to the dogmatic disregard of everything that cannot become an object [...] for the knowing subject."<sup>47</sup> These objections raised by Jacobi appear in his *Letter to Fichte* (1799). Criticising the latter's idealism, which seeks to reunify reason following Kant's antinomies, Jacobi describes Fichte's idealism as a "materialism without matter", indeed, an "inverted Spinozism".<sup>48</sup> Fichte had confirmed, according to Jacobi, the inevitable consequence of an unaided reason that can not ground its own assumptions.

This poses a fundamental dilemma. The philosopher is concerned with examining and speculating upon the enduring principles that justify our place in the world; whether it be politics, religion, morality, and so on. But rational inquiry, at the same time, gives rise to

---

<sup>43</sup> Steven B. Smith, "On Leo Strauss' Critique of Spinoza", *Cardoza Law Review* 25 (2003), p. 744.

<sup>44</sup> Friedrich Jacobi, "Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn", in ed. George di Giovanni, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), p. 187.

<sup>45</sup> Jacobi, "Jacobi to Fichte", in ed. George di Giovanni, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), p. 507.

<sup>46</sup> Jacobi, "Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza", p. 508.

<sup>47</sup> Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 31.

<sup>48</sup> Jacobi, "Jacobi to Fichte", p. 501.

scepticism. There is thus a conflict between the principles that govern life, and the philosophical attitude which inevitably undermines the foundations of these principles. Frederick Beiser aptly summaries this: “What we find necessary to believe in order to act within our world often proves to be unacceptable when we examine it according to our critical reason.”<sup>49</sup> This consequence of this is clear: if we do not sincerely believe in the principles that we hold high above us, we will not act on them. As Jacobi writes: “If there are only efficient, but no final, causes, then the only function that the faculty of thought has in the whole of nature is that of observer”.<sup>50</sup> The result is that one must choose between affirming a source of vitality that exceeds the here and now or accept the treacherous path of nihilism; as Jacobi tells us: “Man has this choice [...] and this choice alone: Nothingness or a God. If he chooses nothingness he makes himself unto a God”.<sup>51</sup>

The dilemma that Jacobi thus recognises, and that would remain quintessential for Strauss’ perspective, is the insoluble tension between two antithetical codes of life: faith and philosophy. However, because the life of reason cannot establish its own ground, anymore than a life that recognises a transcendent God and final causes, it must presuppose an act of faith; that is, a decision that cannot be brought to light within reason. Jacobi’s answer is the concept of a *salto mortale*, which he addresses in conversation to Lessing, and amounts to a leap out of the irrationalism that stems from reason’s unevident presupposition into faith.<sup>52</sup>

This argument plays a vital role for Strauss’ critique of Spinoza. The new philosophy that emerged in the seventeenth century, adopting the mechanistic world-view of Newton and Galileo, alongside the materialist thesis that rejects creationism, would impart a radical reconfiguration of man’s place in the world. The denial of a teleological conception of the human means the effort to conceive a model of human action is invested in reason: “man’s end is not natural, but rational”.<sup>53</sup> Thus, by importing Jacobi’s reproach against the Enlightenment’s universalisation of reason, Strauss remains sceptical of whether man’s denouncement of the otherworldly was altogether justified, for “philosophy, the quest for evident and necessary knowledge, rests itself on an unevident decision, on an act of will, just as faith does.”<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 81.

<sup>50</sup> Jacobi, “Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza”, p. 189.

<sup>51</sup> Jacobi, “Jacobi to Fichte”, p. 524.

<sup>52</sup> Jacobi, “Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza”, p. 189.

<sup>53</sup> Leo Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, p. 16.

<sup>54</sup> Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, p. 29.



According to Daniel Tanguay, if our allegiance to reason is an act of faith, then that would amount to a “death sentence” for the Enlightenment project. Indeed, the entire effort of Strauss’ later writings is an attempt to think through this fundamental dilemma.<sup>55</sup> Thus, for Strauss, the modern project to liberate man from theological prejudices is held in a state of permanent abeyance insofar as it cannot refute the orthodox premise on its own grounds. Only through means of “laughter and mockery” could philosophy succeed in the refutation of orthodoxy.<sup>56</sup> By recognising Jacobi’s critique of the groundlessness of reason, Strauss goes a step further by importing its full ethical and political consequences. The conflict between reason and revelation – or, faith and philosophy – is in the first instance political. This is because it bears its significance on the question of how to erect a just social order. Thus, the fundamental question for Strauss is this:

whether men can acquire that knowledge of the good without which they cannot live their lives [...] by the unaided efforts of their natural powers, or whether they are dependent for that knowledge on Divine Revelation. No alternative is more fundamental than this: human guidance or divine guidance. The first possibility is characteristic of philosophy or science in the original sense of the term, the second is presented in the Bible. The dilemma cannot be evaded by any harmonisation or synthesis. For both philosophy and the Bible proclaim something as the one thing needful, as the only thing the ultimately counts, and the one thing needful proclaimed by the Bible is opposite of that proclaimed by philosophy: a life of obedient love versus a life of free insight.<sup>57</sup>

By importing Jacobi’s thesis that reason rests on an unevident ground, thus necessitating an article of faith, Strauss is able to construe two antinomic roots at the heart of the Western tradition. Strauss is adamant on this point. In a series of lectures given in 1952, published under the title *Progress or Return*, Strauss reiterates the insoluble nature of the conflict: “no one can be both a philosopher and a theologian”. Indeed, the “very life of Western civilisation is the life between two codes, a fundamental tension.”<sup>58</sup> But for Strauss there is no reprieve for reason’s ‘death sentence’. Despite its self-inflated significance, reason cannot demonstrate its first principles, for this would require a standpoint beyond ratiocination. Strauss is thus sceptical of whether the autonomous rational faculties of a multitude is capable of justifying

---

<sup>55</sup> Daniel Tanguay, *Leo Strauss: An Intellectual Biography*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 43.

<sup>56</sup> Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, p. 29.

<sup>57</sup> Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 74.

<sup>58</sup> Leo Strauss, “Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization”, *Modern Judaism*, 1 (1981), p. 44.

political authority. This deep suspicion remains central to his writings. Thus, in the 1951 preface to the *Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, he proclaims:

I had seen that the modern mind had lost its self-confidence or its certainty of having made decisive progress beyond pre-modern thought; and I saw that it was turning into nihilism, or what is in practice the same thing, fanatical obscurantism.<sup>59</sup>

For Strauss, the emergence of the “modern mind” is coeval with the Enlightenment critique of religion, heralding the distinctly modern phenomena of “political atheism”.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, “No premodern atheist doubted that social life required belief in, and worship of, God or gods.”<sup>61</sup> By ‘premodern’ Strauss is implicitly referring us to the Ancients – which he will come to be known as ‘orthodoxy’. Both Greek philosophy and the Bible agree as to the overall need for morality in social life. The Ancients, according to Strauss, did not believe that a solution to political philosophy could be sought solely on the basis on unaided human effort; that is, morality required a *transcendent guarantee*. It is this recognition that was repressed by modern rationalism.

According to Strauss, modern political atheism arises in response to its inability to refute the orthodox position. As Heinrich Meier points out, Strauss’s revival of the insoluble opposition between faith and philosophy discloses the “truly Napoleonic strategy” of the Enlightenment project which suppressed the impregnable fortress of orthodoxy.<sup>62</sup> Thus, for Strauss, the modern Enlightenment project substitutes the primacy of the otherworldly for a stable mechanism that can ensure the actualisation of the State. Modern political atheism makes man a clay to be moulded upon. Indeed, by “deliberately lowering the goal of politics”, it is possible to transform man as he is simply given through the right institutions. Thus,

What you need is not so much formation of character and moral appeal, as the right kind of institutions, intuitions with teeth in them. The shift from formation of character to the trust in intuitions is the characteristic corollary of the belief in the almost infinite malleability of man.<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. xix.

<sup>60</sup> Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 169.

<sup>61</sup> Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 169.

<sup>62</sup> Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theological-Political Problem*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 14.

<sup>63</sup> Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy and Other Studies*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 43.

This “trust in institutions” is concomitant with the general lowering of standards. Indeed, the effectual realisation of the State takes precedence over the hypothetical improvement of the human condition. For Strauss, this means overturning the original intent of philosophy, which was open to the “humanising quest for the eternal order.”<sup>64</sup> This point is crucial for it adumbrates the nihilist consequences, drawn from Jacobi, that Strauss foresees when political authorship is invested in the rational capacities of a multitude.

The consequence of this, and this is the essential point that Strauss takes from Jacobi, is that life requires commitment. But the possibility of commitment is eroded insofar as its grounding in faith is uprooted. For Strauss, the modern solution of this insoluble tension – between reason and man’s dependency on faith – is displaced into the role of institutions. It is these institutions that are invested with the “teeth” necessary to grapple with the “infinite malleability of man”. And it is here that the slave reaches its highest pitch in confirming Strauss’ thesis. If the slave reveals the limit of reason, that is, reason without *practical reasonableness*, is this already an effect of the lowering of the goal of politics. In other words, not only does the slave pose the question of the limits of reason, but this dependency would seem to be already at work in institutions that deprive individuals of the capacity to seek their advantage.

As Steven B. Smith suggest, Strauss’ concern is not so much to affirm the necessity of a *salto mortale* as to defend the claims of orthodoxy: the most pertinent of which being the “immutability of the Law” as communicated through revelation.<sup>65</sup> Thus, while Spinoza represents the effort to enact a “wholesale repudiation of the very pillars of the Law”, Strauss is committed to the insoluble opposition between reason and revelation, for philosophy itself rests on an “unevident decision”: the life of free insight is thus no more necessary than a life guided by faith in the truths ascertained through revelation.

~~~

The basic problem of the slave forces us to re-examine whether Spinoza’s radical immanence can viably achieve the underlying motive in the *Tractatus*; namely, to liberate philosophy from its subordination to faith. This is because, according to Strauss, philosophy cannot justify its own necessity. It thus rests on a *petito principii*: it presupposes, using Malabou’s language, that the “ontological fact” of revelation is already excluded. In other words, Spinoza’s ethical

⁶⁴ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, p. 34.

⁶⁵ Steven B. Smith, *Reading Leo Strauss: Politics, Philosophy, Judaism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 71.

programme stands or falls on the claim to have secured the rational capacities of a multitude. But if the slave follows from Divine necessity it would seem to equally justify the renouncement of one's rational faculties in favour of obedience to the Law. If this is true, the theoretical circularity that pertains to the slave would seem to corroborate Strauss' scepticism that reason cannot extricate itself from its dependency on faith. In order to further understand this, I propose turning to Chapter 9 of *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. Here, Strauss pronounces the implications of this circularity.

According to Strauss, this circularity, in its most basic formulation, stems from the fact that Spinoza's politics and his metaphysical assumptions (that is, his radical immanence) are inseparable. In other words, natural right is equally afforded to reason as well as the passionate life. Hence: "Each person's natural right therefore is determined not by sound reason but by desire and power." (*TTP*, 196) Otherwise put, the form of obedience that pertains to the slave, such that it precludes the possibility of calculating one's interest, is not excluded from the constitutive apparatus of natural right: it remains as an ontological fact. Thus, what becomes clear for Strauss is that there is "no immediate bond of union between his moral theory and his theory of natural right: he must refrain from enjoining the precipitous path to his goal in life on the common run of men, or even considering it as open to them."⁶⁶

Indeed, if Spinoza's "moral theory" consists of securing the freedom to philosophise from its subordinate position to theology, then Strauss is implicitly alluding to the slave; for it follows from Spinoza's radical immanence that the path of reason is no more necessary than the unqualified obedience to the Law; that is, the very renouncement of one's rational faculties. Moreover, that the "precipitous path" to sound reason is denied to the many follows from Divine necessity. Which is to say, Spinoza cannot avoid ascribing to the masses the fate of the imaginative-passionate life. Thus, according to Strauss, insofar as natural right begins, not from considering the human condition as it is given, but from the God, he cannot but fall into a circularity. Indeed,

The fundamental assumption on which Spinoza's political theory is based has not yet been reached. There are two ways of human striving after self-preservation: the way of the multitude guided only by their passions and the way of the wise who are led by reason. Both ways have the same natural

⁶⁶ Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, p. 230.

right. Politics, however, in so far as it is not prepared to start from Utopian assumptions, may take only the first way into consideration.⁶⁷

That the politician must take the first way into consideration – that is, man as he is given – is conterminous with the effort of modern political atheism to “deliberately lower[ing] the goal of politics”. In order to effectually realise the State, the politician must arrange civil society upon that part of human striving that can be reproduced with a reasonable degree of certainty. Thus, according to Strauss, “Spinoza becomes the equal of Hobbes”, for whereas Spinoza’s “doctrine of natural right is primarily metaphysical or cosmological [...] Hobbes is throughout positive or limited to man.”⁶⁸

Spinoza becomes the equal of Hobbes because he must affirm that the substratum of human life is the passionate life. The basic order of human conduct is determined by our primary relation to world; namely, our “deficiency of knowledge”. (*TTP*, 63) The inability to acquire knowledge of the total causal whole develops a mode of knowledge that is fundamentally inadequate: partial, confused, and fragmented. It puts one at the mercy of chance encounters. It is this which begets fear of nature’s incessantly fluctuating order. From this “fear is the root from which superstition is born, maintained and nourished.” (*TTP*, Preface, 4) Moreover, the unstable ordering of life that is born of superstition then requires a mechanism to secure itself. It is this that accounts for the function of religion, which “teaches people to despise reason”. (*TTP*, 98)

Spinoza thus states what is required. His aim is to divulge the theological illusions which create the very condition of slavery. But all his work is still ahead of him. Otherwise put, it begs the question: how can the figure of the slave, trapped in the nexus of superstitious thoughts, be overcome? Following Strauss’ line of argument, Spinoza’s “moral theory” can only be made to conform with his radical immanence on the presupposition that the slave is already excluded. But the ontological fact remains. Only until, as Strauss writes, the “abstract opposition between the multitude and the wise is relinquished”, and only when it “proves possible that the people can free itself from superstition”, only then can the free State become an effectual reality.⁶⁹

By reading Strauss in conjunction with the slave, the question that seems to force itself upon us is how to escape this circularity. This is precisely where a critique of Strauss becomes

⁶⁷ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, p. 232.

⁶⁸ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, p. 244.

⁶⁹ Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, p. 243.

necessary. Ivan Segré's recently translated *Spinoza: The Ethics of an Outlaw*, provides such a criticism. Its original title, *Le manteau de Spinoza*, refers to the hole in Spinoza's hooded coat, a physical vestige of an attack on his life. But more than that, a reminder of the hatred his philosophy inspired against him. The basic premise of text is then to uncover the motives behind this hatred. According to Segré, it stems from the fact that Spinoza advocates the "original sin" of "raising man above the Law".⁷⁰ What is asserted here is the tacit identification of the slave; for the slave's obedience arises, not from the ability to 'see' what is good (or, useful) in a command, but from an affection that has already determined the necessity of obedience. This is the implied difference between the 'subject' and the 'slave' in the Chapter 16 of the *Tractatus*; hence, for Segre:

There are people who are virtuous through their obedience toward the Law – men dominated by emotions – and there are others – philosophers – who are virtuous not because that is the Law, but because they love virtue and are *able to recognise what is best about it* (my italics).⁷¹

The philosopher is 'above the Law' (not contrary to the Law) because he is guided by reason, thus recognising the utility in obedience. Or, using Spinoza's language: "any agreement can have force only if it is in our interest, and when it is not in our interest, the agreement fails and remains void." (*TTP*, 199) Thus, the 'subject' – or, the philosopher – is guided by autonomous insight, which implies an understanding of the necessity of any obedience.

In Segre's text, Strauss becomes the subject of consistent methodological criticism. Segre opposes the exegetical method that Strauss employs in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. It is supposed, according to Strauss, that the act of 'writing between the lines' is indispensable for philosophers living under the threat of persecution; that is, societies which do not guarantee independent thought. It gives rise to a literary technique that is "addressed, not to all readers, but to trustworthy and intelligent readers only."⁷² This is the interior, or implicit (*esoteric*), meaning of the text; it can only be brought to light by the attentive reader, and only "thoughtful men are careful readers."⁷³

But why does Strauss resort to an exegetical method that, according to Segre: "introduces the possibility of making the text say what you really want it to say"? Assuming this is true, that

⁷⁰ Ivan Segré, *Spinoza: The Ethics of an Outlaw*, trans. David Broder (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), p. 64.

⁷¹ Ivan Segré, *Ethics of an Outlaw*, p. 64.

⁷² Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 25.

⁷³ Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, p. 25.

reading between the lines may serve to reflect the intentions of the reader, one would then have to examine Strauss' underlying motives. On the one hand, there is the insoluble conflict between reason and revelation, that is, the conflicting claims of Athens and Jerusalem. 'Athens' stands in as a metaphor for philosopher, whereas 'Jerusalem' refers to the Law as communicated through revelation. In Spinoza's words: the "aim of philosophy is nothing but truth, but the aim of faith [...] is simply obedience and piety." (*TTP*, 184) There is thus no "interaction and no affinity" between these two opposing codes of life. Strauss rejects any attempt to find a synthesis or mediation between the two; for there is "no possibility which transcends the conflict between philosophy and theology, or pretends to be a synthesis of both."⁷⁴

Segre shows, however, that the antinomic relation that Strauss confers in the difference between Athens and Jerusalem – or, the life guided by autonomous reason as opposed to the life in obedience – is deliberately equivocal, for Spinoza already suggests a mediation: the historical arrival of Christianity; since "Christ was not so much a prophet as the mouth-piece of God". Indeed, while the prophets perceived their revelations as "precepts and teachings", emanating from an anthropomorphic conception of God. This is due only to a lack of understanding; that is, the inability to recognise the necessity of what determines us to act. Spinoza identifies Christ as a kind of revolutionary figure, for he communicated "things as eternal truths and not as commandments. Hence, he freed them from servitude to the law and yet in this way also confirmed and stabilised the law, inscribing it deeply in their hearts." (*TTP*, 64) Spinoza is then recognising in Christ a revolutionary project to overcome the condition of slavery, and that this project is analogous (or, a precursor) to philosophy. Following Segre's line of argument: one would then have to introduce a third-term between Athens and Jerusalem; namely, that "Christianity was itself the Trojan Horse for philosophy."⁷⁵ But when we turn to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, the picture is quite different:

But obedience requires that we "know" God to exist as the fount of all justice and mercy, and this "knowledge" is not true but adapted to the mental range of the vulgar, and – this is of major import – indeed runs counter to the real meaning of the philosophic parts of Scripture. The concern of the Scripture as a whole can therefore only be to bring about active obedience to God, and this obedience expresses itself only in works of justice and charity. This obedience may be

⁷⁴ Leo Strauss, "Progress or Return?", p. 44.

⁷⁵ Ivan Segré, *Ethics of an Outlaw*, p. 70.

justified in two ways, which stand directly opposed to each other: philosophically, or vulgarly.

But what counts is not the justification; but the works.⁷⁶

That the Scriptures were necessarily adapted to the “mental range of the vulgar” is the explicit argument presented in the *Theological-Political Treatise*; hence, the “Biblical teaching contains no elevated theories or philosophical doctrines but only the simplest matters comprehensible to even the very slowest.” But both the Scriptures and philosophy promote the same path to salvation as consisting in “works of justice and charity”, for the “entire Law consists in just one thing, namely love of one’s neighbour. This universal ethics is also what a life guided by autonomous understanding obligates: “to defend other people’s rights as their own.” The common root is the fact that our rational faculties can never be surrendered; that natural right is always preserved. The difference pertains to the way in which this ‘truth’ of reason is communicated: The Bible simply asks: ‘what must I know’, where philosophy compels one to ask: ‘what can I know’.

What is perplexing, however, is that Strauss denies any point of contact between obedience justified ‘philosophically’ and obedience justified ‘vulgarly’, for they are “directly opposed to each other”. But there is a mediation; namely, the teachings (as opposed to prophesying) of Christ and his disciples. This is an obedience that is neither the product of autonomous understanding nor subjugation to an immutable Law; rather, one might call it: a ‘step in the right direction’ – an effort. Thus, according to Spinoza, the Apostles communicated the teachings of Christ on the basis of natural knowledge, not on the “basis of divine command and revelation”. (*TTP*, 157) In other words, inscribed within the very economy of the Scriptures is an archive of relations of power: the transition from inadequate to adequate ideas, from passivity to an external law to active affection. Indeed, this is the very meaning of reading the Bible as a continuation of Nature. As André Tosel points out: “The causal history of Scripture belongs, then, to the casual science of Nature.”⁷⁷ Thus, why does Strauss omit the historical rupture of Christianity which, by virtue of imposing itself within the immanent relations of power, sought to embrace humanity by liberating it from the particularistic tyranny of the transcendental Law, hence mediating between Athens and Jerusalem? In other words, as Strauss contends, if Spinoza’s natural right rests on a *petito principii*, in which his “moral theory” cannot be made to conform to his metaphysical assumptions, leading him to beg the

⁷⁶ Leo Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, p. 119.

⁷⁷ André Tosel, “Superstition and Reading”, in ed. Warren Montag and Ted Stolze, *The New Spinoza* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 158.

question, then why does Strauss ignore the implicit suggestion that an answer has already been given, if only in the form of an historical event?

I believe the answer to this is quite clear. And Segre is right to point this out. Strauss' elimination of the third-term is coeval with his setting-up of the gulf that separates the wise few from the multitude. Insofar as this points to a circularity, in which Spinoza's natural right presupposes that the slave is already excluded, then Strauss affirms this only to suspend it indefinitely. In other words, it is Strauss who makes Spinoza the equal of Hobbes by denying the emancipatory potential of reason, that is, of philosophy. This is because Strauss reads Spinoza from the vantage point of the slave. Which is to say, he sees only the limitation of reason. In seeing the limitation of reason, the slave adumbrates Strauss' suspicion that philosophy and politics are driven by contrary impulses. Philosophy is the privilege of the 'few wise' who are able to live in the face of the "naked truth".⁷⁸ They recognise that the myths and narratives that bind society have no solid-grounding other than the purpose of inculcating obedience. For this reason, according to Strauss, society must remain separated from the continuous questioning of philosophy.

If the slave discloses the limit of reason, it is because it reveals the point at which commitment begins. In other words, the failure to calculate to one's advantage is the necessary limit that fundamentally orders the political. This is Strauss' view. Thus, when he invokes the Platonic allegory of the cave in his work *The City and Man*, one can only read it in view of the slave:

The cave dwellers, i.e. the non-philosophers, see only the shadows of artefacts. That is to say, whatever they perceive they understand in the light of opinions sanctified by the fiat of legislators, regarding the just and noble things, i.e. of fabricated or conventional opinions, and they do not know that these their most cherished convictions possess no higher status than that of opinions.⁷⁹

In other words, "they do not know" that the purpose of their actions is already determined in advance by the "fiat of legislators". This is precisely the definition of the slave in Chapter 16 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*. But what Strauss is not attuned to is Spinoza's rejection of the free will and Providence, and thus the need to account for human freedom that is neither

⁷⁸ Shadia Drury, *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*, (London: MacMillan Press, 1988), p. 195.

⁷⁹ Leo Strauss, *The City and Man*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 125.

grounded in a spontaneous will or a finalist view of the world. For this reason, the *TTP* must retain the threat of the slave as the possibility of commitment to the political.

CHAPTER 2

An Interminable Anxiety: The Slave and the Precariousness of the Political

The thesis I want to advance here is an understanding of the slave, not as problematic, but as a presupposition of praxis. That is, as a motivation for individuals to act in the political. This is important for a crucial reason: Spinoza's trenchant disavowal of illusory forms of freedom, that is, the critique of free will. Spinoza's earliest critics attacked the absence of human autonomy that resulted from a cosmos in which all finite things are determined to act and think in a certain way. Strauss is certainly not immune to this tradition, and the slave would seem to adumbrate his criticism. Thus, how can Spinoza retain the possibility of transformation and emancipation in the field of politics while at the same time excluding any conception of an originary moment of freedom? Utilising Spinoza's language: if "freedom does not remove the necessity of action, but imposes it" (*TP*, 2:11), can we conceive the political as something other than a static being. In other words, what concerns us here, is what motivates individuals to engage in practices of collective action.

This is where the slave is indispensable. Spinoza's politics sharply diverges from his contemporaries (in particular Hobbes) in one crucial aspect: that natural right is not excluded from the passionate life. Hence, "we recognise no difference [...] between those human beings who are endowed with reason and others who do not know true reason, nor between fools or lunatics and the sane." (*TTP*, 192) In other words, the "fools", the "lunatics", the passion-ridden multitude, and to that we can add – the slave – all have, by right, a stake in the political. This move allows Spinoza to invest the political with an interminable precariousness and instability.

Moreover, this imbues the calculation of utility, the principle whereby each individual seeks what is conducive to the preservation of their being, with an intractable fallibility. What significance does this pose for the slave? That natural right is afforded to all – which is to say: Spinoza begins, not from a preconceived conception of the human, but from God – implies that the fragility that is inscribed in the calculation of utility cannot be confined to a minimal sphere of action (i.e., methodological individualism), but is inseparable from an economy of social relations that constitute individuals within the broader collective. In other words, the fallibility of judgement (the calculation of utility) presupposes *praxis*: not only in the sense that it is

always already determined within the social, but also in the sense that the very instability it introduces imposes *itself* as a constitutive element within the field of social relations.

And this is the significance of the slave; namely, that it intensifies the dimension of precariousness that Spinoza inscribes in the political. Again, the slave is defined as one who “cannot see or do what is good”. What this suggests is that, not only is the calculation of utility subject to miscalculation – “for to err is human” – but that the absence of seeking one’s advantage is also written into the political; that is, the renouncement of judgement is inseparable from the constitutive apparatus of natural right. To put it in more precise terms, the slave is indicative of the possibility whereby: “if the purpose of the action is not his own advantage but that of the ruler, then the agent is indeed a slave and useless to himself.” (*TTP*, 201) Otherwise put, in this case the ‘good’ that an individual seeks is not sought autonomously, but is determined in advance in relation to passivity: one is ‘revealed’ what is ‘good’. The slave does not ask: ‘what can I do’ but ‘what must I do’.

Following Leo Strauss’ interpretation in his *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, the slave would seem to call into question the extent to which a multitude can be considered the subject of politics. That is, the slave challenges the capacity of a multitude to seek their advantage autonomously, disclosing an immanent dependency on faith; a faith that is as necessary as philosophy. This adumbrates Strauss’ thesis that Spinoza’s materialist politics cannot realise its ethical goals without extricating itself from his radical immanence. Only until it can be proven that a people have an equal share in the calculation of utility, and only until all have the capacity to ‘see or do what is good’, will Spinoza’s political and ethical goals conform to his metaphysical assumptions. Thus, according to Strauss, the gulf that separates the ‘wise few’ from the vulgar masses, which Spinoza is forced to accept, cannot but become the political ‘fact’ *par excellence*. Only the ‘wise few’ have reached the summit of reason, and are able to calculate their ‘good’ autonomously, without a relation to passivity. Thus, the ‘wise’ alone have a stake in the political: it is their right alone to order it from above.

The figure of the slave is thus coeval with what Spinoza identifies in the Preface to the *Theological-Political Treatise* as the “highest secret of monarchical government”, which is to “keep men deceived [...] so that they will fight for their servitude as if they were fighting for the own deliverance” (*TTP*, Preface, 6). However, in contrast to Strauss, the slave does not annul the possibility of a materialist politics founded on a radical immanence. Rather the slave augments Spinoza’s need to account for how the calculation of utility can have any stake in

social transformation and emancipation. This is because the slave is not denied natural right. What this means is that the failure to ‘see or do what is good’ for oneself, and the privation of knowledge it implies, always already has a stake in the political. It is in this sense that the slave reinforces commitment to the political. It compels individuals to intensify their efforts, endowing them with the responsibility to act and engage with one’s surroundings. Since “nothing is more advantageous to man than man”, this form of commitment finds its practical acme through engagement with others.

To put this in more concrete terms, Spinoza’s politics is set apart insofar as the passionate life is not something to be excluded but integrated into the dynamic flux of social relations. It is this irreducible precarity that is necessary to account for a conception of freedom that is construed neither negatively (i.e. absence of constraint),⁸⁰ nor as an originary moment of action (i.e., free will), but as an expansion of powers. On this basis, the slave’s failure to ‘see or do what is good’, as a mode of judgement that is fundamentally passive and thus unstable, is embedded in the constitutive relations of the body politic. Hence, by presupposing *praxis*, the slave amplifies the effort to strengthen the calculation of utility.

In order to understand precisely what is at stake, one must understand that the slave’s passive form of judgement is already woven into the web of social relations that determine its actions. It is in this respect that Etienne Balibar’s concept of ‘transindividuality’ will prove indispensable. Balibar develops this conceptual apparatus as way of intervening between two opposed perceptions of the political. One demands that a notion of individuality be given in advance, such as the ‘atomistic’ individuals in Hobbes’ state of nature, and where society (if it exists at all) becomes a secondary consideration. The other demands that the community be conceived as a pre-established totality, or a functional whole, into which individuals are subsumed. Balibar’s ‘transindividuality’ denies the primacy of one over the other by stressing the irreducible relationality between the individual and the collective. Individuality would then be understood as a *process*, in which singular things do not act from a preconceived matter, but are part of a nexus of interdependent singularities striving to persist; they thus constitute and are constituted by their environment.

But to comprehend the ‘transindividual’ conditions of existence is also to think human autonomy as commensurate with the materialist axiom *par excellence*: that nothing comes from nothing. The key to understanding this is that the compositions that define individuals, and its

⁸⁰ Neatly encapsulated in Isaiah Berlin’s distinction between positive and negative freedom.

relational dependence on the broader circulation of ideas and affects, is inherently unstable. This is because there is no pre-established harmony that guarantees the *certa ratio* of the parts that compose an individual form (*forma*). It is this precarity and vulnerability which compels individuals to act. And it is in this sense that I intend to understand the slave's passive mode of calculation (as one who awaits, who is revealed what is 'good' as opposed to actively seeking it out) as an intensification of this precariousness.

~ ~ ~

How can we better frame the precarity that the slave's failure to calculate the 'good' imposes on the political? Again: "a man at the mercy [*obnoxius*] of his emotions [*affectus*] is not his own master but is subject to fortune [*fortuna*]". In the Scholium to E5P4, Spinoza tells us that the "majority appear to think that they are free to the extent that they can indulge their lusts". Because of this, they are "ruled by fortune rather than by themselves". The virtuous person, whose life is ordered by rational knowledge, enjoys human freedom because "[he] is more able to be guided by reason and control his appetites" (*TP*: 2.20).

The significance of fortune in this context closely resembles the Machiavellian relationship between *virtù* and *fortuna*; here is what Machiavelli says in the well-known chapter 25 of *The Prince*:

I am not unaware that many have thought, and many still think, that the affairs of the world are so ruled by fortune and by God that the ability of men cannot control them. Rather, they think that we have no remedy at all; and therefore it could be concluded that it is useless to sweat much over things, but let them be governed by fate. This opinion has been more popular in our times because of the great changes that have taken place and still to be seen now, which could hardly have been predicted. When I think about this, I am sometimes inclined, to some extent, to share this opinion. Nevertheless, so as not to eliminate human freedom, I am disposed to hold that fortune is the arbiter of half our actions, but that it lets us control roughly the other half.⁸¹

What is at stake here is the concept of fortune, which is the invisible centre of Spinoza's unique understanding of freedom. In Chapter 3 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, fortune is defined

⁸¹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Russell Price, ed. Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 85.

as: “the direction of God inasmuch as he governs human affairs through external and unforeseen causes” (*TTP*, 45). But fortune is not the same as fate: “*it lets us control roughly the other half*”. The other half is *virtù*. In other words, one cannot separate the capacity to act from “external and unforeseen causes”. *Fortuna* imposes herself on us, motivating us to act, and *virtù* is the skill necessary to seize *fortuna*.

Again, this is the invisible centre of Spinoza’s freedom without the free will. It is not a freedom which treats the individual as a spontaneous locus of action, nor is the individual swallowed into an amorphous whole, which leaves no room for human autonomy. Moreover, just as *virtù* is inseparable from *fortuna* in Machiavelli’s *Il Principe*, Spinoza’s account of the calculation of utility must also contend with “external and unforeseen causes”. But matters are more complicated for Spinoza: there is the slave – who cannot see or do what is good for him; that is, the one who is “subject to fortune” because he is at the mercy of the affects. Before drawing out the full significance of the role that fortune plays as a motivation for action, let us draw out the more precise implications of the slave.

The slave occupies three locations in each of Spinoza’s major texts: (1) Chapter 16 of the *TTP*, (2) the Scholium to Proposition 66, Part 4 of the *Ethics*, and (3) Chapter 2 of the *Political Treatise*. In Chapter 16 of the *TTP*, the slave is defined as one “who cannot see or do what is good for them.” Moreover, Spinoza tells us that the slave indicates an action, the purpose of which, “is not to his own advantage but that of the ruler”, hence, the slave is “useless to himself.” (*TTP*, 201) But the invocation of the slave in the Scholium to E4P66, which immediately follows from the preceding cluster of propositions that identify the principle of the calculation of utility. The announcement of the slave is highly suggestive:

With reference to the strength of the emotions, we shall readily see the difference between the man who is guided only by emotion or belief and the man who is guided by reason. The former, whether he will or not, performs actions of which he is completely ignorant. The latter does no one’s will but his own, and does only what he knows to be of greatest importance in life, which he therefore desires above all. So I call the former a slave and the latter a free man. (E4P66s)

What is at stake here is the imbrication between the slave, judgement, and the circulation of affects. The condition of the ‘free man’, that is, the ability to do what one knows to be of greatest importance in live, is dependent on Proposition 59, Part 4 of the *Ethics*: “In the cases of all actions to which we are determined by a passive emotion, we can be determined thereto by reason without that emotion.” This does not mean that the body and mind are no longer

affected, but that reason is able to engage with the passions: to understand the passions is to displace inadequate ideas for adequate ones.⁸² And acting reasonably increases one's activity: it expands one's capacity to see and do. But: "to act from reason is nothing else but to do what follows from the necessity of our own nature considered solely in itself." What this means is that an increase in activity is commensurate with an increase in autonomy: understanding enables us to act with reference to our own power.⁸³ In other words, one is able to seek their good/utility by asking: 'what can I do' as opposed to 'what must I do'.

This move cannot be understated. It allows us to grasp how, for Spinoza, sociality is not split between the imaginative-passionate life and the reasonable life. There is no gulf that separates the 'wise few' and the 'vulgar multitude'. Here, knowledge is instrumental. The end to which we act is always the *appetite/conatus*. Understanding the passions does not expel the affects, but restructures them into rational affects.⁸⁴

But what is it that the 'free man' does which he "knows to be of greatest importance in life"? The proceeding propositions are paramount. Indeed, in the Proof to E4P67, Spinoza declares that the 'free man' [*homo liber*] "directly desires the good [*bonum directe cupit*]; that is, to act, to live, to preserve his own being in accordance with the principle of seeking his own advantage." I take this to mean that what the 'free man' "desire above all", when guided by the dictates of reason, is to recognise that the one thing most needful in life, the one thing that ultimately counts, is to seek one's advantage. Thus, it is not any particular 'good' that one seeks; rather, the 'good' is to seek out one's utility.⁸⁵

This is the essential difference that contrasts to that of the slave: he 'cannot see or do what is good'. It is the difference between preserving one's being autonomously and submitting oneself to a judgement that is given in advance: again, the slave awaits to hear what is 'good', is revealed, from the superintendent on whose good faith he relies. But this is ultimately illusory

⁸² Genevieve Lloyd, *Part of Nature: Self-Knowledge in Spinoza's Ethics*, (London: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 94.

⁸³ Aurelia Armstrong, "Autonomy and the Relational Individual: Spinoza and Feminism", in ed. Moira Gatens, *Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), p. 57.

⁸⁴ Moira Gatens, and Genevieve Lloyd. *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present*, (Routledge: New York, 1999), p. 50.

⁸⁵ See Brayton Polka, *Between Philosophy and Religion: Spinoza, the Bible, and Modernity*, (Lexington Books: Plymouth, 2007), p. 76.

because the slave, as Spinoza alludes to in the Preface to Part 4 of the *Ethics*, is “subject to fortune”. What is the status of fortune in this context?

~ ~ ~

This is where the precarity of the slave is crucial to understanding how Spinoza can account for a freedom that eschews the illusions of the free will. Instead, Spinoza’s strategy consists in conferring upon the political an irreducible element of instability. Indeed, “if human nature were so constituted that men desired most of all what was to their advantage, no special skill would be needed to secure harmony and trust” (*TP*: 6.3). This vulnerability compels individuals to engage with their surroundings. However, the slave raises the stakes: not only is the calculation of utility fallible, but that one is submitted to fortune without virtue.

Let us examine in more detail the status of fortune. To reiterate Spinoza’s position: fortune is defined as “the direction of God inasmuch as he governs human affairs through external and unforeseen causes”. To understand the meaning of this it would be useful to draw our attention to Althusser’s ‘aleatory materialism’. Here, Spinoza is identified as occupying a hitherto subterranean materialism, a “wholly different mode of thought”⁸⁶, that privileges chance (or, the random) against the logic of necessity and finalism. But in supporting his claims, Spinoza is connected to Epicurus’ defence of atomism and the void, as well as Lucretius’ theory of the *clinamen*. What relation does Spinoza, who argues that all things are determined absolutely from God, have to a theory of chance? Indeed, the difficulty is that *Ethics* rejects contingency: “Nothing in the universe is contingent, but all things are conditioned to exist and operate in a particular manner by the necessity of the divine nature.” (E1P29).

Althusser thus begins with the ‘rain’ of Epicurus/Lucretius. Not any kind of rain, but that of the “atoms that fall parallel to each other in the void”.⁸⁷ For Althusser, this provides the backdrop to conceiving of the “non-anteriority” of meaning. The Epicurean thesis implies that

⁸⁶ Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87*, trans. G.M Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2006), p. 167.

⁸⁷ Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p. 167.

“before the formation of the world, there was no Meaning, neither Cause, nor End nor Reason nor Unreason.”⁸⁸ Just the atoms and void.

It is precisely at this moment that the *clinamen* arrives to interrupt the uniform velocity of the atoms. The intervention of the ‘swerve’, which is found in Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*, is the crucial ingredient that forms the world. Hence,

The clinamen is an infinitesimal swerve, ‘as small as possible’; ‘no one knows where, or when, or how’ it occurs, or what causes an atoms to ‘swerve’ from its vertical fall in the void, and, breaking the parallelism in an almost negligible way at one point, induce an encounter with the atom next to it, and, from encounter to encounter, a pile-up and the birth of a world – that is to say, of the agglomeration of the atoms induced, in a chain reaction, by the initial swerve and encounter.⁸⁹

And from this,

Every encounter is aleatory, not only in its origins (nothing ever guarantees an encounter), but also in its effects. In other words, every encounter might not have taken place, although it did take place; but its possible nonexistence sheds light on the meaning of its aleatory being. And every encounter is aleatory in its effects, in that nothing in the elements of the encounter prefigures, before the actual encounter, the contours and determinations of the being that will emerge from it.⁹⁰

However, one is led to ask: does the *clinamen* have any place in Spinoza’s philosophy? It would seem not. But in a well-known correspondence with Hugo Boxel, one can find Spinoza’s sole reference to the Ancient theorists of the atoms, and thus of the *clinamen*. Here it is:

The authority of Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates, does not carry much weight with me. I should have been astonished, if you had brought forward Epicurus, Democritus, Lucretius, or any of the atomists, or upholders of the atomic theory. (Ep56)

This admission is cited against those who have “invented occult qualities, intentional species, substantial forms, and a thousand other trifles”. Vittorio Morfino suggests that this opposition can be read co-extensively with Althusser’s primacy of the aleatory over the form.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, pp. 168-169.

⁸⁹ Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p. 169.

⁹⁰ Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter*, p. 193.

⁹¹ Vittorio Morfino, *Plural Temporality: Transindividuality and the Aleatory Between Spinoza and Althusser*, (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p.

Let us take a closer look at the letters exchanged between Spinoza and Boxel. On first glance, the topic may seem quite frivolous: Boxel asks for Spinoza's opinion on "apparitions", "ghosts", and "spectres". But what is particularly intriguing is its repressed centre. In Letter 52, Spinoza retorts that belief in ghosts are more likely to resemble the "pastimes of children or of fools" and are indicative of the desire to "narrate things, not as they really happened, but as they wished them to happen." (Ep52) However, Boxel's reply in the proceeding letter reveals what is properly at stake. While Boxel claims that the belief in ghosts is proof of the "beauty and perfection of the universe", he proclaims that such reasoning will not "convince those, who rashly believe that the world has been created by chance." (Ep53) But Spinoza makes it clear that necessity and chance are in fact contraries: for the "world is a necessary effect of the divine nature". (Ep54)

But what becomes immediately clear is that the notion of chance that Boxel employs, and which Spinoza rejects, is indicative of an unacknowledged centre; namely, the absence of providence, the lack of any free Divine will. Indeed, the production of chance is implicitly alluded to in the Appendix to Part 1 of the Ethics: "if a stone falls from a roof on to someone's head, and kills him", a religious explanation will attempt to show that the stone was predestined to fall on the man, for they will incessantly pursue the series of causes until they "take refuge in the will of God—in other words, the sanctuary of ignorance". Morfino discovers that this example, of the falling stone matches Aristotle's hypothesis that all teleology may indicate nothing more than a chance concatenation of necessary events, and thus it only seems like a hidden *telos* is at work.⁹²

Pierre Macherey refers to the production of chance in this context as a "necessary accident", in the sense that an encounter can only be "explained by causes [...] that determine it completely without which no part in this sequence appears as the conditions of an internal unity, which links all these causes in the framework of an immanent development between them, that is, a final movement."⁹³ In other words, there is no immanent necessity, no "internal unity", which can anticipate an encounter or guarantee the durability of its form: "Hence it follows that all particular things are contingent and perishable." (E2P31 corollary)

⁹² Morfino, *Plural Temporality*, p. 87.

⁹³ Pierre Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, trans. Susan M. Ruddick (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 174.

On this basis, Althusser will claim that, for Spinoza, “the object of philosophy is the void.” Although the question remains as to whether the void occupies an ontological status⁹⁴, or whether – as Morfino contends – it expresses a rhetorical gesture; that is, as indicating the radical absence of any form that precedes and thus guarantees an encounter. But Spinoza’s example in the Appendix of Part 1 of the *Ethics* would seem to inscribe the void with two possibilities, as Morfino suggests; a “scientific” and “religious” explanation. It seems that the invention of an illusory intention (the “religious” explanation), which is nothing more than a “sanctuary of ignorance”, is the outcome of thought that approaches the void; that is, the radical absence of any guarantee. What cannot be excluded is precisely this precariousness and uncertainty; an interminable anxiety that accompanies the preservation of oneself: a stone falling upon one’s head, a chance encounter that exceeds the instruments of rational calculation.

In this sense, the chance/aleatory encounter manifests an excess of non-totalisable causes. It is not a chance attributable to ignorance, but the impossibility of forming an object of rational calculation. In other words, what confronts individuals is an irreducible casual nexus that both oversupplies and surpasses our instruments of intelligibility.⁹⁵

Indeed, Warren Montag applies this same reading from the Appendix to Part 1 of the *Ethics*: “chance is not used in a negative sense to denote a subjective failure of knowledge”, rather, “the very notion of God’s will and providence arises from an inability or unwillingness to acknowledge the existence of chance encounters”.⁹⁶ Here, Montag draws attention to Deleuze’s interpretation of the *clinamen* in Lucretius: the point of the matter is not contingency or indetermination, but the “impossibility of bringing causes together into a whole”. This is what the *clinamen* manifests, according to Deleuze: “an irreducible plurality of causes”.⁹⁷ And this is why chance, the “necessary accident”, discloses the void, which is nothing other than the absence of any transcendent or pre-existing rule.

The intervention of the *clinamen* is contingent, not because the encounter that is produced is arbitrary, but because there is no pre-ordained direction that guarantees the coming into being of an encounter. In other words, to affirm the primacy of the contingent that underlies the

⁹⁴ See Pierre Macherey “Entre Pascal et Spinoza: le vide”.

⁹⁵ See Yann Moulier Boutang, “Le matérialisme comme politique aléatoire”, *Multitudes*, 2 (2005), pp. 159-165.

⁹⁶ Warren Montag, “Lucretius Hebraizant: Spinoza’s Reading of Ecclesiastes”, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 20 (2012), p. 125.

⁹⁷ Gilles Deleuze, “The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy”, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, in ed. Constantin V. Boundas, *The Logic of Sense* (London: The Athlone Press, 1990), p.

necessity of an “accomplished fact”, means recognising the utter absence of any transcendental apparatus that precedes the initial encounter. And thus, recognising the void that looms over every prospect of a lasting encounter, for no encounter carries its own guarantee. And this is why the establishment and preservation of every ‘form’ presupposes *praxis*, that is, an effort. This is why the slave is “subject to fortune”.

~~~

We have seen thus far that Spinoza draws together freedom and necessity in the absence of providence or Divine order. This is premised on the contingency of the world, that is, the aleatory encounter that compels individuals to act – that “lets us control roughly the other half”, as Machiavelli will say. Hence, as Spinoza’s reply to Boxel suggests: the repudiation of chance discloses the heart of what it means to be free in a world where all finite things are determined necessarily from Nature. Thus, as Spinoza writes in the *Tractatus Politicus*, perhaps inspired by his exchange with Boxel:

Yet the more free we conceived man to be, the more we were compelled to maintain that he must necessarily preserve himself and be of sound mind, as will readily be granted by everyone who does not confuse freedom with contingency. Freedom, in fact, is virtue or perfection; so anything that signifies weakness in man cannot be referred to his freedom (*TP*: 2.7)

As Morfino puts it in the Introduction to *Plural Temporality*: “each encounter[s] is necessary, though a necessity that, if I may be permitted this oxymoron, is entirely aleatory; that is, without a project or a *telos*.”<sup>98</sup> In other words, to necessarily preserve oneself implies, not a negation of contingency as such, but the capacity to recognise the aleatory; that there is no pre-established harmony that guarantees a lasting encounter. Hence, it presupposes a motivation to act, that is, an effort/*conatus* to establish (by seeking out bodies that agree) and maintain a successful encounter. It is this interplay – between the aleatory that “lets us control roughly the other half” and the effort to seek our advantage – that is primarily at stake in Spinoza’s unique conception of freedom. In other words, ethical life requires the admission of contingency; it is

---

<sup>98</sup> Morfino, *Plural Temporality*, 12.

what makes motivates action in the political. As Filippo Del Lucchese frames it: “the absolute negation of the contingent, on the one hand, and its paradoxical necessity for ethical praxis.”<sup>99</sup>

However, it is precisely because of this conception of freedom (forgoing the illusion of a Divine will that has our interests sorted out in advance), that the slave’s failure to calculate introduces a fundamental precariousness into the political. In other words, reason devoid of the instrumental modality of calculation poses an existential threat because it cannot respond to the contingent. Indeed, as Spinoza says in the Scholium to *E4P66*: the slave “performs actions of which he is completely ignorant. He is, in other words, at the mercy of the emotions (or, the circulation of affects), and is thus “subject to fortune”. The slave is the absence of that crucial other half: *fortuna* without the necessary *virtu*.

It is here that one can begin to understand the positive function of the slave. When Spinoza defines the slave as the failure to seek one’s utility, what is being posited is an interminable threat of destruction. To look at this more closely one must acknowledge the transindividual conditions of existence. Conceiving the political in this way avoids structuring the individual either as an enclosed ‘atom’ or as simply an effect of a greater totality. Rather, it places the onus on understanding the irreducible relationality between individuals and their environment. The critical import of this idea is that the political is underscored by ineliminable processes of composition and decomposition. To think of the political in this way accentuates its inherent precariousness. The effort that is required to maintain, what Spinoza calls, the “certain fixed proportion” of bodies is always prone to being ruptured. My contention is that the figure of the slave is precisely what accounts for this threat. The slave is the *interminable anxiety* that presupposes *praxis*. That is to say, the slave is what threatens to rupture social bonds, and it is this intractable reality that intensifies one’s commitment to the political and ethical life.

The notion of ‘transindividuality’, as develop by Etienne Balibar, has its origins in Gilbert Simondon’s work on individuation.<sup>100</sup> Simondon rejects substantialist ethics that conceives the individual as a pre-given matter. This is disposed of in favour of an ontology of relations, in which the individual is always a process of becoming, and is thus fundamentally incomplete.

---

<sup>99</sup> Filippo Del Lucchese, *Conflict, Power, and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza*, (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 20.

<sup>100</sup> For a more detailed exposition of Simondon’s work in relation to Spinoza see Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), pp. 34-42.

In *From Individuality to Transindividuality*<sup>101</sup>, Balibar develops this in respect to Spinoza. There are three key points he draws on. Firstly, that individuality is the “very form of actual existence”, which is to say that every individual is defined by its particular striving or *conatus*. Secondly, that the ‘form’ of an individual is always composed of some parts. And thirdly, that the ‘form’ and its constituent ‘parts’ are in constant ‘communication’. The relation between individuals and broader collective and social forces is thus ‘fluid’ inasmuch as it is maintained by a continual exchange of parts.

Conservation is nothing but this regulated process of “continuous regeneration”. To say that an individual keeps existing is tantamount to saying that it is continuously regenerated or reproduced. An isolated individual, having no “exchanges” with the environment, would not be regenerated, therefore it would not exist. Right from the beginning, what Spinoza implies is that any individual has *a need of other individuals* in order to preserve its form and its existence.<sup>102</sup>

This conservation, however, remains precarious insofar as it demands the effort of individuals to maintain this “continuous regeneration”. Spinoza’s Proposition 39 in Part 4 of the *Ethics* must be read in the context of utility that is implied: “whatever is conducive to the preservation of the proportion of motion-and-rest, which the parts of the human body maintain towards one another [...] is therefore good.” (E4P39) That this is eminently political is confirmed by the proceeding Proposition: “whatever is conducive to man’s social organisation [...] is advantageous.” (E4P40) These statements are all ordered around the fundamental provision that individuals seek their utility, and by doing so – as Balibar frames it in a footnote – “look for the conditions in which the cohesion of the parts is secured or even reinforced.”<sup>103</sup>

This is where the slave is critical. The continuous exchanges of parts necessary to maintain the body is precarious because it forms an “equilibrium which is not fixed, but a dynamic – a *metastable* equilibrium which must be destroyed if it is not continuously recreated.”<sup>104</sup> What is implied is that the political order is intrinsically precarious if it is not “continuously recreated”. But the missing element in this configuration is precisely the figure of the slave.

---

<sup>101</sup> Etienne Balibar, “Spinoza: From Individuality to Transindividuality”, *Mededelingen van-wege het Spinozahuis*, 71 (1997).

<sup>102</sup> Balibar, “From Individuality to Transindividuality”, p. 18.

<sup>103</sup> Balibar, “From Individuality to Transindividuality”, p. 20.

<sup>104</sup> Balibar, “From Individuality to Transindividuality”, p. 22.

The slave's failure to calculate, his *unreasonableness*, is a permanent condition and limit of the political: it is the threat of destruction.<sup>105</sup>

But we can take this a step further. If the slave's lack of calculation is the intractable threat of destruction, then can this hypothesis be connected to the slave's paradoxical formulation; namely, reason without the presupposition of *praxis*? To state this more precisely, the slave is the possibility whereby what one seeks as their utility is already determined in advance, already the utility of something external. In this way, as I have said, the slave is dependent on being 'revealed' what is good. But can the argument be made that this intrinsic threat, the ineliminable risk that our judgements are never *our own* is what motivates individuals to commit to the other, to engage with one's environment?

In a certain sense, what one seeks at their 'good' or 'utility' is never first and foremost their own. As Jason Read illustrates in *The Politics of Transindividuality*, human desire is "by definition intransitive" insofar as it is continually shaped by the dynamic field of affective relations.<sup>106</sup> Indeed: "we do not desire a thing because we judge to be good; on the contrary, we call the object of our desire good". (E3P39) The good/utility any individual seeks is defined by a history of affective relations. To say that our judgement is affected from without is to acknowledge that it gives content to our judgements. In this sense, the calculation of utility is never *one's own*. However, the slave raises the stakes: it is precisely because of this intransitive nature of desire that individuals 'fix' upon a determinate object. This indicates the slave as the threat of destruction. Indeed, the slave's *unreasonableness* is the failure to respond to the aleatory.

---

<sup>105</sup> The slave could also be linked to what Balibar identifies elsewhere as the inconvertible remainder of violence that threatens to collapse the political from within. See Etienne Balibar, *Violence and Civility: On the Limits of Political Philosophy*, trans. G.M Goshgarian (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

<sup>106</sup> Jason Read, *The Politics of Transindividuality*, (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2016), p. 28.





