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SPINOZA NOW

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Note on References to Spinoza's Works

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

In references to the *Ethics,* the Roman numeral indicates the part of the *Ethics* to which the author is referring, e.g., *Ethics* I is *Ethics,* Part I; *Ethics* II is *Ethics,* Part II; and so on. In addition, the following abbreviations are used:

A	axiom
Ap.	appendix
C	corollary
D	definition
L	lemma
P	proposition
Pr.	proof
S	scholium

For instance, *Ethics* II, P7, refers to *Ethics,* Part II, Proposition 7, and *Ethics* IV, P34S, refers to *Ethics,* Part IV, Scholium to Proposition 34.

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Editor's Note

Spinoza Now attempts to place Spinoza in a contemporary context. This project started in 2005 at the Centre for Ideas of the Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, Australia. A number of the papers published here were first presented at the conference Wandering with Spinoza, held at the Centre for Ideas from September 13 to 15, 2006. The editor would like to thank the director of the Centre for Ideas, Elizabeth Presa, for her unwavering belief in the value of such a project. The editor also thanks Norma Lam-Saw for research assistance.

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Spinoza Now: An Introduction

dimitris vardoulakis

THE TITLE of this collection—*Spinoza Now*—highlights the importance Spinoza places on the present moment for any political or cultural investigation. It also includes contributions that are of the present—attempts to think about, on, and with Spinoza in addressing contemporary issues and that are in response to current directions in Spinoza studies. I will address these two aspects of the title in turn.

"For this much is quite certain, and proved to be true in our *Ethics,* that men are necessarily subject to passions." This statement, from Spinoza's *Political Treatise* (1, §5), encapsulates the importance of the present for his philosophy.[1] Even though Spinoza insists on a knowledge from the perspective of eternity or the infinite, communal living is nevertheless permeated with the affects each one feels while living. A desire is always in the present. Thus philosophy for Spinoza is inextricably linked to life, to the now of existence.

Such a position is not a simple vitalism. The thought in *Political Treatise* that emphasizes the now may be better outlined in relation to what it opposes. Spinoza opens the *Treatise* by treating two opposing positions about human interaction: optimism and pessimism. The optimists are discussed in the first paragraph of the *Treatise.* They are those philosophers who look on the passions as vices to be avoided at all cost. "So it is their custom to deride, bewail, berate . . . or execrate" the passions. Thus they construct political theories that seek to eliminate affects. Spinoza is not simply skeptical about

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such philosophizing because it "borders on fantasy or could be put into effect in Utopia"; he finds such theories so unfounded that they become amusing: "for the most part it is not ethics . . . but satire." The optimist's hope to suppress the present so as to imagine a future that has tamed the passions is entirely devoid of practical significance.

The pessimists are discussed in the second paragraph of the *Treatise.* They are those who are distrustful of politicians. Because politicians know from experience "that there will be vices as long as there are men," they fear people. This leads them to practices that may be construed as cunning or wicked, especially in the eyes of "theologians, who believe that sovereign powers ought to deal with public affairs according to the same moral principles as are binding on the private individual." However, this collapse of the distinction between private and public is yet another unfounded fancy, one that is built on fear—not hope. If past experience points to human vice, there is all the more reason to deal with that fear in contemporary political practice rather than seeking to repress it with moralizing.

As Deleuze has emphasized, Spinoza cannot be understood as a moral philosopher, and this means that Spinoza is mindful of the gap or break between false hope and crippling fear—between a utopian belief in the future and a dread of the past. Between them is located the now. At this space, *ethics* develops.

A brief overview of Spinoza's reception is required to show the second aspect of the title, namely, how Spinoza has emerged as a figure who allows us to think of our contemporary situation.[2] Rejection was the first significant reaction to Spinoza's work.[3] The seed for that reaction was already sown in 1670, when Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* was published. The book contained a sustained argument against revealed religion by questioning, for example, the existence of miracles. From that moment onward, Spinoza was painted as an atheist, and to be perceived as a follower of Spinoza was indeed a dangerous position in which to find oneself. Consequently, even after the *Opera Posthuma* were published shortly after Spinoza's death in 1677, few actually read Spinoza's works. To compound this, twenty years later Pierre Bayle wrote an article on Spinoza in the *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697) that interpreted Spinoza as collapsing the distinction between God and

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nature—a position that was understood to lead to Spinoza's atheism. For years to come, the philosophical community would get their "Spinoza" from Bayle's summary.

The identification of God and nature received a name at the beginning of the eighteenth century: *pantheism*. Spinoza was seen as recognizing God in everything, which only led to the inference that he identified God in nothing. At the same time, interpreting Spinoza as a vehement atheist attracted the attention of those who were keen to challenge the superstitions of religion and the authority of the churches on revealed religion. Thus Spinoza was becoming aligned with Enlightenment, or at least with a polemical and combative strand of Enlightenment, while at the same time the prominent figures of the Enlightenment did not refer to Spinoza and distanced themselves from what they probably saw as opprobrious attacks on religion. This ambiguity erupted into the famous *Pantheismusstreit,* or Pantheist Controversy, at the end of the eighteenth century. Shortly after Lessing's death, Jacobi contested in 1785 that Lessing had confessed to him that he was a Spinozist. Lessing was one of the figureheads of the Enlightenment in Germany as well as in Europe, and Jacobi's claim amounted to an accusation that Enlightenment deified reason. As Frederick Beiser puts it, "the belief in Spinoza's cosmic God seemed to be the religion of science itself."[4] In other words, Jacobi sought to argue that pantheism, or the identification of God with nature, was the position that any system that places reason over belief is bound to adopt. When Lessing's friend Mendelssohn, himself a leading figure of the Enlightenment, responded to Jacobi, suddenly Spinoza emerged as the métier of the Enlightenment project.

If the Pantheist Controversy implicated luminaries of the Enlightenment and thereby exposed its limitations, Jacobi's second public controversy involving Spinoza had a generative effect. This second controversy related to Fichte's philosophy and unfolded in spring 1799.[5] The transcendental idealist notion of the subject had now become Jacobi's target. Jacobi again argued that there are two options, this time articulated in terms of subjectivity: either the subject is absolute, as Fichte argues, in which case the subject is deified, or there is space for belief and the subject is not commensurate with reason. This controversy played a role in Fichte's losing

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his position at Jena University, where his students included Hegel and Schelling as well as Novalis, the Schlegels, and Hölderlin—or, in sum, the figures who would effect the transition to romanticism. Thus they were all exposed to Spinoza as the figure who unraveled their professor, Fichte. Paradoxically, their exposure to Spinoza led to a different interpretation of pantheism, which was now seen as positive because it affirmed the importance of nature or what they referred to as the particular. Novalis's designation of Spinoza as "God-intoxicated man," or Hegel's assertion that the whole of Spinoza can be read in relation to Proposition 7 of Book II of the *Ethics* ("the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things"), should be understood in this context.[6] The next couple generations of philosophers exhibit a positive receptiveness of Spinoza. For instance, Marx ranked Spinoza as one of his formative influences, whereas Nietzsche saw in Spinoza his only genuine predecessor. Thus, whereas the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries viewed Spinoza with suspicion and hostility, in the nineteenth century Spinoza became the secret conversant of romanticism and its aftermath.

A crucial reason why Spinoza was never addressed in any thorough fashion by the philosophers of the nineteenth century was that there was not much scholarship on which they could build. This was rectified in the twentieth century, which saw an explosion of Spinoza scholarship. It started in the first decades of the twentieth century with the voluminous works appearing mostly in Germany on the context of Spinoza's philosophy. In America, Harry Austryn Wolfson produced a remarkable account of the sources of Spinoza's arguments,[7] and more recently Yirmiyahu Yovel has provided an authoritative account both of Spinoza's context and its impact on subsequent philosophies.[8] Alongside these works that concentrate on the external circumstances of Spinoza's thought, there is another side to this approach to Spinoza in the twentieth century, one that concentrates on the internal structure of Spinoza's argument and, in particular, on the *Ethics*. Perhaps the most prominent example here is Martial Guéroult's *Spinoza*. The two volumes of exegesis of Part I and Part II of the *Ethics* offer a close analysis of the philosophy that directed one toward grasping the architectonics of the

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book, that is, on presenting the structure or system of the work as a whole.[9] Edwin Curley has attempted something similar, although less voluminous, in America.[10] In sum, this approach as a whole—in its concentration on both the external or contextual circumstances of Spinoza's philosophy and the internal structure of his work—can be characterized as encyclopedic. The impact of this encyclopedic approach has been that it established Spinoza as a topic of study and disengaged the name "Spinoza" from both impassioned renunciations and their correlative, strategic appropriations.

Another approach to Spinoza emerged in the 1960s and can be characterized as an intensification of the romantic fascination with Spinoza. If, in Novalis's already quoted phrase, Spinoza was a "God-intoxicated man" in the sense that he sought the universal in the particular, this focusing on the particular is now further elaborated, showing its implications for a philosophy of power. The two instrumental figures in this new approach to Spinoza were Louis Althusser and Gilles Deleuze. Even though Althusser did not publish a lot on Spinoza, as Warren Montag has shown, his notion of the structure is indebted to Spinoza's notion of the immanent cause, that is, a cause present only through its effects. Thus Spinoza gave the means to Althusser to evade a teleological or scientific Marxism that sought reality in an inexorable and analyzable chain of causal relations of production. At roughly the same time, Deleuze's book *Expressionism in Philosophy* argued that expression in Spinoza undoes traditional representationalism in philosophy. According to Deleuze, the question that motivates Spinoza's ethics is "what can a body do?"; that is, what kind of relations produce and are produced by the individual?[11] Althusser's and Deleuze's interpretations of Spinoza inspired a subsequent generation of scholars, such as their respective students Étienne Balibar and Antonio Negri.[12] Warren Montag and Ted Stolze's edited volume *The New Spinoza,* also published by the University of Minnesota Press, offers the best collection of the rich range of views of this approach.[13] We can summarize this approach by saying that it builds on the encyclopedic scholarship of the previous approach to present Spinoza as a philosopher of power, that is, as a philosopher who concentrates on immanence and particularity. In this sense, Spinoza is mobilized in the move against structures of transcendence

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and universalism—or what has come to be understood as modernity.

In the past few years, a new direction has started developing that could predominate in Spinoza studies in the twenty-first century. This approach assumes the centrality of Spinoza's thought in modernity—not merely as a figure who leads to modernity but moreover as a figure whose thought is modern. Thus Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's influential critique of modern sovereignty, *Empire,* is permeated with Spinoza's influence.[14] This is also evidenced by its sequel, *Multitude,* because the title-term's provenance is Spinoza's *Political Treatise.*[15] Even though Spinoza is not referred to continuously in these two works by Hardt and Negri, still the Spinozan insistence on immanence is utilized in understanding current issues. There are several other examples of this approach. For instance, Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd also use Spinoza's philosophy to address philosophical and political issues of the present in *Collective Imaginings.*[16] In addition, works in neighboring disciplines, such as Antonio Damasio's *Looking for Spinoza,* attempt a theoretical approach to neuropsychology based on Spinoza's theory of affects.[17] This third direction characteristically uses Spinoza to think about issues related to the present. Spinoza's thought participates in current debates. Maybe this new approach is philosophy's way of catching up with other practices, such as literature, which, at least since Alexander Pope and George Eliot, has seen Spinoza as a source of inspiration.[18] There are also important examples of a Spinozan influence in the arts, notably the *Spinoza Monument* by Thomas Hirschhorn (Amsterdam, 1999). There Spinoza becomes a contemporary, a participant in cultural and intellectual production, the figure who allows us to think of our modernity.

The encyclopedic approach to Spinoza that started at the beginning of the twentieth century is still valuable today because it provides a basis for further scholarship. The approach that presents Spinoza as a philosopher of power and hence aligns him with modernity can be seen as setting the foundations of the third approach: only after establishing Spinoza's import for postmetaphysical thought would it have been possible to bring Spinoza to the now. *Spinoza Now* takes the challenges faced by this latter approach seriously. It includes as broad a variety of approaches as possible. All the contributions actively engage with Spinoza, making his thought relevant today. The chapters seek to pursue Spinoza's thought by thinking with Spinoza.

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The two aspects of the title—Spinoza's own emphasis on the now and the new approach in Spinoza studies emphasizing his present relevance—should be seen as interlaced. What characterizes them both is a dynamic conception of production. For Spinoza, the past and the future are both productive of, and produced by, the present. The immutability of the static substance is only a formal principle to guarantee the infinite unfolding of being and thought. The new approach to Spinoza reproduces this dual direction of production in explicating Spinoza. But in so doing, it is also producing a Spinoza of the "now," a Spinoza who participates as a productive force in cultural formation.

The first four chapters offer different ways of understanding the reception of Spinoza's thought as well as forging new ways for thought through an understanding of that reception history. In the opening chapter of the volume, Christopher Norris conducts a critical overview of the way Spinoza has been received by various philosophical traditions. Norris starts by observing the great conflict in the interpretation of Spinoza, namely, that Spinoza has been viewed either as a mystic or as an atheist, either as a spiritualist or as a materialist. Tracing some aspects of this variegated history, Norris argues that its latest incarnation is the divided interpretation of Spinoza between analytic and continental philosophers. Something unites the two approaches, however, namely, the thrust to overcome dualism, either in its Cartesian or Kantian manifestation. From that point of view, Spinozan monism emerges as standing beyond the analytic–continental dichotomy. Norris does not argue that Spinoza bridges the gap between the two philosophical schools but rather that Spinoza's metaphysics necessitates a rapprochement between analytic and continental philosophy that will be mutually beneficial.

Alain Badiou concurs with Christopher Norris about the conflict of interpretation generated by Spinoza, and especially his *Ethics,* and proposes a solution to this problem. Departing from the observation that even though the *Ethics* are written *more geometrico*—in a geometrical order—very little of the literature on Spinoza has actually paid close attention to this mathematical methodology. Examining a single proposition—*Ethics* I, P28—Badiou shows that the way the proof of the proposition is related to previous propositions, definitions, axioms, and so on, is indispensable in understanding the *Ethics.*

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The geometrical order creates a web of relations that structure the *Ethics.* This mirrors Spinoza's insistence in Definition 2, at the very beginning of the *Ethics,* that the distinction between the infinite and the finite is strictly relational. The ratiocination and the order of being are, therefore, correlated. Spinoza, argues Badiou, propounds a mathematics of Being—an ontology according to which thinking or the intellect is action as such.

The implicit targets of Badiou's argument, according to which Spinoza's theory of relations can only be read in parallel with the mathematical nature of proofs in the *Ethics,* are the attempts to read the theory of relations through the theory of passions. Simon Duffy discusses the two most prominent exponents—Gilles Deleuze and Pierre Macherey—in locating the theory of relations in the third part of the *Ethics.* By exploring Deleuze's and Macherey's different interpretations of the relation between active or joyful and passive or sad affections, Duffy shows two ways of constructing a politics departing from the theory of passions. Duffy concentrates on the elusive "joyful passions," which are neither properly active nor purely passive and therefore forge a relation between joyous and sad affections.

Is there a way of mediating between the mathematical and the affective approach? Justin Clemens's chapter, in locating the emergence of the political in *in*-action, and in showing that inaction is a matter of the mathematics of Being and of affective disposition, suggests a possible mediation. This chapter presents a genealogy of the Buridan's ass paradox (*Ethics* II, P49S)—the donkey that cannot decide between two equidistant bales of hay. Clemens argues that the paradox has two ostensible targets: Descartes's separation of will and understanding and Hobbes's exclusion from the covenant with the sovereign of all those who cannot decide. As such, Buridan's ass shows the tight connections between Spinoza's ontology, epistemology, and politics. From this perspective, argues Clemens, Buridan's ass demonstrates Spinoza's materialism.

All the different approaches explored in the first four chapters have one thing in common: the insistence that Spinoza's ontology is linked to his politics. This insistence can take another, more specialized guise: the link between theology—broadly conceived to include any notion of universalism—and the political. This link is possible because of the process of interpretation—the biblical exegesis that

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Spinoza proposes in the *Theologico-Political Treatise* or the notion of expression in the *Ethics* that Deleuze emphasizes. The four chapters of Part II deal with this theme.

Like Clemens, Michael Mack also addresses Descartes's and Hobbes's influence on Spinoza, but shows how it is possible to eschew an absolute universalism in favor of an inclusive universalism. Mack shows that Spinoza is not arguing against religion or theology per se but rather against the politics of domination to which Cartesian dualism of necessity leads. The reason for this is that there is a line connecting theology with teleology and anthropomorphism, which only leads to the possibility of one group claiming superiority and domination over another. Mack describes this as a self-destructive or autoimmune process. This is juxtaposed to the intellectual love of God from *Ethics* V, which Mack interprets as instating a communality, in the sense that it describes a plurality of individual minds, an affirmation of singularities. Only this communality, argues Mack, gives us a chance for a nonviolent politics.

Arthur J. Jacobson turns to the *Theologico-Political Treatise* to examine the status of prophets. It is well known that for Spinoza, there are no miracles, and in this sense prophesy is part of natural knowledge, its distinctive characteristic being that it helps in the formation of community. Jacobson further complicates this standard account of Spinoza's prophets by pointing out a paradox, namely, that if prophesy is natural knowledge, then everyone, in principle, even if not in fact, can be a prophet. This structure, as Jacobson demonstrates, can also be found in Maimonides. The effect of this structure in Spinoza is that knowledge, then, is shareable by everyone—there is a democracy of knowledge.

Warren Montag looks at scripture itself to make a related point to that raised by Jacobson. Montag points out the correlation between ontology and politics expressed in "God, or Nature" from the *Ethics* has its equivalent in the *Theologico-Political Treatise,* in which Spinoza writes, "Scripture, or the mind of the Holy Spirit." This indicates that interpretation is also a partner in ontology and politics. But this is only possible, as Montag demonstrates, if interpretation presupposes that any work does not exist prior to its effects. There is no independent space of reason that remains outside a causality that includes the imagination and all the faults that characterize the

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human's mind and actions. This crucial Spinozan insight is missing, argues Montag, from Jonathan Israel's image of Spinoza as the prime representative of "radical Enlightenment" that supposedly demystified knowledge, emptying it of all superstition. Conversely, Montag shows that scripture is equivalent to the *mind* of the Holy Spirit because it is the palimpsest of the interaction, inevitably and invariably at fault, of imagination and reason. Furthermore, if scripture, like Nature, is perfection, then the Bible is, paradoxically, no longer an exemplary or singular text but rather the manifestation of interpretation's role in the interplay between ontology and politics. To recall the distinction about the prophets drawn by Arthur Jacobson, scripture, in principle, has no superiority over any other text; it is more important than other texts only in fact, through the influence it exercised in the conceptualization of law and norm.

Like Montag, Cesare Casarino also departs from a close reading, in this case, a passage that refers to the "concatenation of all things" (*Ethics* I, Ap.). Casarino first points out that Spinoza uses the notion of concatenation to explicate the argument of the first part of the *Ethics*. Such an explication is rare, if not unique, in the *Ethics*. Casarino shows that this is not accidental. Concatenation is interlinked with Spinoza's understanding of interpretation that requires two simultaneous procedures: the positing of a totality, on one hand, and, on the other, the signification and performance of meaning. This dual aspect is precisely what Deleuze has termed *expression* or *sense*. But there is also a second, political consequence of this move. Concatenation and the totality it implies present Spinoza as a genuine theorist of globalization—the *Ethics* appears as a response to capital and its totalizing imperative. According to Casarino's argument, the explication that signifies and performs its meaning is not commensurable with representation in the sense that it activates potentiality in the process of interpretation: the knowledge of an object is not subjective but a feature of the object itself. This allows for singularity. As Marx showed, it is possible to think of the ontological function of God as absolute immanence. But in Spinoza, that absolute immanence is accompanied by the concatenation of all beings, which retains being's singularity. Thus Spinoza emerges as a theorist of capital and globalization who comes—anachronistically and yet all the more poignantly—after Marx.

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Part III takes up the issues discussed in the previous chapters to present them in relation to Spinoza's relevance for the arts. Such an unusual approach aims not only to present Spinoza from a novel perspective that can be illuminating but in addition to demonstrate that Spinoza's thought can be applied to a variety of contexts and issues of contemporary relevance.

Sebastian Egenhofer also tackles the Marxist legacy of Spinoza's thought, concentrating on how the notion of production is indispensable in understanding the art of the twentieth century. There is an increasing shift from the imagistic to the economic aspect of production—from Mondrian's abstractions, whose process of material production is secondary, to Judd's minimalism, which makes the material manifestation the focal point, to Asher's works, operating with and against their own economic genesis. Egenhofer suggests a next stage indicated by the "precarious materiality" of Thomas Hirschhorn's *Spinoza Monument*. Here the two aspects of production are inseparable—or, even more emphatically, they allow for the conceptualization of this inseparability. The work of art is both the experience and the thought that structures that experience. In this way, Hirschhorn's work manifests that the Marxian notion of production unfolds in a Spinozan matrix, as the various ways in which the infinite can be expressed in its finite modes. In other words, only when the Spinozan link between ontology and politics is imbued with the Marxian notion of production can Hirschhorn's originality come to the fore.

Anthony Uhlmann combines issues discussed in earlier chapters—the theory of relations in Badiou and Duffy, the notion of the necessity of a gap in interpretation in Montag, and the concomitance of production and its idea in Egenhofer—to show that it is possible to develop a Spinozist understanding of the arts. Departing from Beckett's fascination with Spinoza, Uhlmann acknowledges that, at first blush, the parallelism between thought and experience, the infinite and finite, or substance and its modes poses a problem for art. But this is only so if art is under the sway of representation. Spinoza, as Uhlmann shows, had already moved beyond representation by insisting that the parallelism does not suggest a lack of contact; rather, infinite knowledge is of necessity related to its finite modes—the first kind of knowledge is implicated in the third kind of knowledge.

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This theory of relations enacts gaps between its different parts. The presence of these gaps is also indispensable for the arts. A work of art does not convey a message; rather, a work of art establishes relations whose message is the (ethical) imperative to fill the gaps that, of necessity, persist. This means that, just as in Spinoza's relation of substance and its modes, modern art is both the unfolding of material relations and the thinking that accompanies them.

Mieke Bal and Dimitris Vardoulakis explore the relation between thought and matter from a different perspective, emphasizing the rupture that makes their relation possible. Spinoza addresses this by drawing the distinction between essence and existence. As Bal and Vardoulakis note, this distinction is drawn with recourse to examples from art. This is not accidental. As an analysis of three different versions of Rembrandt's depiction of Joseph, Potiphar, and his wife demonstrates, Rembrandt's work makes possible a similar distinction between image and words. The complex interpretations that arise when the image is denied an immediate meaning echo Spinoza's insistence that there is no immediate connection between thought and matter, essence and existence. From this perspective, the link between Rembrandt and Spinoza is not based on the fact that they were neighbors in Amsterdam's Jewish quarter but rather is based on adopting a similar attitude to the creation of art and culture. Thus Spinoza emerges not so much as an aesthetician as a philosopher whose ontology reverberates with an understanding of the arts precisely because the distinction of essence and existence allows for creation and production.

The last three chapters provide encounters between Spinoza and other philosophers. These encounters are not primarily comparative analyses, nor are they merely the impetus for exploring current philosophical issues; rather all three encounters stage the importance of the Spinozan ontology's privileging of life over death.

Antonio Negri begins his analysis by pointing out that modern philosophy is characterized by the Hegelian move to unite essence and existence. As Bal and Vardoulakis discussed in the previous chapter, and as Negri emphasizes here again, essence and existence are never united in Spinoza. Negri further observes that Heidegger's ontological difference rests on the same premise. The disjunction between essence and existence makes Heidegger and Spinoza both

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antimodernist philosophers, yet here the similarities end, for ultimately they construct contradictory, even antithetical, ontologies. Heidegger proposes an ontology of the void, emphasizing the nothingness of being, which is achieved through the projective aspect of care, the destiny that subjugates being in being-toward-death. This is, argues Negri, a totalizing move, whose reactionary political overtones are clear to see. Conversely, Spinoza's ontology understands being as plenitude, and instead of an emptiness, there are relations of power. The result is radically different from Heidegger, Negri insists. Instead of the totalizing impulse of death, we have in Spinoza the singularity of life, which articulates itself in love, the construction of being through affect. This constructive aspect makes the escape from destiny through freedom possible and, consequently, is a genuinely democratic impulse.

A. Kiarina Kordela shows that the way that death is conceived is crucial for Spinoza's political stance seen from a psychoanalytic perspective. For this to come to the fore, argues Kordela, it is important to avoid two interrelated premises that structure Antonio Damasio's interpretation of Spinoza. These are, first, that Spinoza performs an inversion of Cartesian dualism by privileging the body over the mind, and second, that consequently Spinoza's is solely a philosophy of life, one that indicates homeostasis, self-preservation, and the pleasure principle. Kordela shows that such an inversion of Cartesianism only leads to a new dualism—a dualism that can only conceive of death as a biological occurrence. As Kordela demonstrates, however, death is never solely biological for Spinoza. Instead, as the discussions of suicide evidence, Spinoza's conception of death is indispensable in social and political critique. Thus Spinoza emerges as having recourse to the death drive alongside the pleasure principle. This political dimension, then, allows Spinoza's ontology to reverberate with psychoanalysis. Like Negri, Kordela shows that this dimension emerges in Part V of the *Ethics,* in the discussion of the intellectual love of God.

Alexander García Düttmann explores the relation between life and death by staging a dialogue between Spinoza and Derrida. Düttmann begins his chapter with Spinoza's assertion that a free man fears death least of all. This entails that freedom requires a liberation from the affect of fear and, more generally, liberation from the

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bondage of affect—which also means the attainment of wisdom. In Spinoza's construal, freedom as an affirmation of life is nothing other than the acceptance of the law's necessity—a freeing oneself from that necessity even though that necessity persists. Derrida's notion of the law is never articulated in terms of necessity but always in terms of indecision. The absence of certain or adequate criteria precludes any certainty of the law's validity. Derrida also sides with life, but here life is understood as the infinite deferral of the law, as the suspension of its necessity. From that perspective, the Spinozan position about freedom being the acceptance of the necessity of the law appears thoroughly incompatible with Derrida. Yet the matter is not as simple as that. For though Derrida can refute Spinoza on the grounds that it is merely idealism to impute the liberation over affect—that is, to tame being or reality by subsuming it to the law of the substance—still Spinoza can respond that Derrida's own assertion of the impossibility of grasping necessity can be conceived as a law in itself, as the ultimate affirmation of necessity. Despite their differences, their mutual affirmation of life makes it at least possible for them to say that they understand each other.

Janouch mentions the following comment that Franz Kafka made to him:

> "Accident is the name one gives to the coincidence of events, of which one does not know the causation. But there is no world without causation. Therefore in the world there are no accidents, but only here . . ." Kafka touched his forehead with his left hand. "Accidents only exist in our heads, in our limited perceptions. They are the reflection of the limits of our knowledge. The struggle against chance is always a struggle against ourselves, which we can never entirely win."[19]

Kafka unwittingly expresses himself as a true Spinozist here. There is, on one hand, an unshakeable necessity. However, on the other hand, that necessity is not subject to a law, or at least to a law that can be discovered. This necessity persists despite us—and yet, simultaneously, it can exist only because of us, because of our struggles to bridge the gap that separates us from that necessity.

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The insistence on the now in Spinoza's philosophy is about this gap and this struggle. Their effects are so deep that they bring disparate categories into contact, from ontology to politics and from ethics to aesthetics. What has to be remembered, however, is that the gap can never be filled, the struggle can never completely succeed or, in Kafka's words, "we can never entirely win." This must apply to Spinoza himself. Thus "Spinoza now" is not so much a statement about a truth that Spinoza's writings can reveal to us in our present situation; rather, it is the injunction to adhere to the attitude that affirms both necessity and its impossibility. It is hoped that this will lead to an engaged thought that strives to rediscover that struggle in the past and to ensure that it continues in the future.

Notes

1 Baruch Spinoza, *Political Treatise,* in *Complete Works,* trans. Samuel Shirley, ed. Michael L. Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 1, §5.

2 Given that Spinoza's biographical details are well known, I will mention here only the nodal points. Spinoza's family had emigrated to Amsterdam, the most liberal city of its time, from the Iberian Peninsula owing to the persecution of Jews. He was born there in 1632. Spinoza's life changed dramatically when he was excommunicated in 1656 and was forced to leave the Jewish community of Amsterdam. Nobody knows the exact reason for the excommunication, but it is certainly related to Spinoza's free thinking and his study of philosophy. These endeavors led to the publication of Spinoza's first book, *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy,* in 1663. By then, Spinoza was leading a relatively quiet and solitary life, although he had faithful disciples or admirers in the Netherlands and was in correspondence with the best minds of his time in Europe, including Leibniz. Responding to contemporary political events, Spinoza stopped writing his magnum opus, the *Ethics,* to compose the *Theologico-Political Treatise,* which was published anonymously in 1670. The reaction was ferocious, and it meant that Spinoza was not confident enough to publish anything else in his lifetime. After his death in 1677, his friends collected and published his writings, including the *Ethics,* his unfinished *Political Treatise,* and his

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correspondence. The best biography of Spinoza is Steven Nadler's *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

3 The best overview of Spinoza's reception up to the beginning of the twentieth century is Pierre-François Moreau's "Spinoza's Reception and Influence," in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza,* ed. Don Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 408–33. I refer the interested reader to Moreau's essay for a more detailed overview.

4 Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 60. See also Beth Lord, *Kant and Spinozism* (London: Palgrave, 2011).

5 See Anthony J. La Vopa, *Fichte: The Self and the Calling of Philosophy, 1762–1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

6 For the complex relation between Spinoza and Hegel, see Pierre Macherey's classic *Hegel ou Spinoza* (Paris: Maspero, 1979); published in English as *Hegel or Spinoza,* trans. Susan M. Ruddick (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

7 Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza: Unfolding the Latent Process of His Reasoning,* 2 vols. (New York: Schocken, 1969 [1934]).

8 Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics,* 2 vols. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989).

9 The first volume of Guéroult's book *Spinoza* was titled *Spinoza I: Dieu,* and the second was titled *Spinoza II: L'Âme*; they were published in 1968 and 1974, respectively. A third volume that was going to treat Parts III–V of the *Ethics* was barely started at the time of Guéroult's death.

10 Edwin Curley, *Behind the Geometrical Method: A Reading of Spinoza's* Ethics (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988).

11 Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza,* trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1992).

12 See Étienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics,* trans. Peter Snowdon (London: Verso, 1998), and Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics,* trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

13 Warren Montag and Ted Stolze, eds., *The New Spinoza* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

14 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

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15 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

16 Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 1999).

17 Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain* (Orlando, Fla.: Harcourt, 2003).

18 George Eliot even translated the *Ethics.* See Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics,* trans. George Eliot, ed. Thomas Deegan (Salzburg, Austria: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg, 1981). See also Isaac Bashevis Singer's remarkable short story "Spinoza in the Market Street," in *The Spinoza of Market Street and Other Stories, 7–25* (New York: Bard Books, 1970). Another more recent but fascinating example is Norma Cole's poetry collection *Spinoza in Her Youth* (Richmond, Calif.: Omnidawn, 2002).

19 Gustav Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka: Notes and Reminiscences,* trans. Gononwy Rees, with an introduction by Max Brod (London: Derek Verschoyle, 1953), 55.

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part i

Strategies for Reading Spinoza

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1

Spinoza and the Conflict of Interpretations

christopher norris

IF THERE HAS ALWAYS been a "new Spinoza," this is no doubt because his thinking so strongly resists assimilation on any of the terms laid down by every mainstream school of European philosophy from Descartes to the present. Thus his work has very often been taken up by radicals or dissidents—those who approach it with a view to transforming the discourse of ontology, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, politics, or aesthetics—while always leaving something unaccounted for, or something that is consequently thought to require a likewise radical critique.[1] This pattern of response goes a long way back—historically as well as philosophically speaking—to the earliest stages of Spinoza's reception, when his writings became a chief zone of engagement in the struggle for freedom of conscience and belief or for emancipation from the dictates of religious (whether Christian or Jewish) orthodoxy.[2] Later on, it assumed the same kind of salience for the quarrel between idealism and materialism or—at its most extreme—between the romantic (German and English) idea of Spinoza as a "God-intoxicated" mystic and his underground reputation as an out-and-out determinist, materialist, and atheist.[3]

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about this reception-history was that both parties to each dispute could cite chapter and verse from Spinoza's texts and moreover buttress their respective readings with a good show of exegetical care and argumentative rigor. It is the same with those recent or present-day schools of Spinoza interpretation that are often sharply at odds with each other on basic points

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of method, doctrine, and principle yet that likewise manage to put up a strong textual-documentary as well as philosophical case. Thus, for instance, thinkers such as Althusser and Balibar—"structural Marxists," as the label went—could very plausibly appeal to Spinoza by way of support for their rationalist account of the relationship between lived experience, ideology, and the process of "scientific" concept formation,[4] while others, like Gilles Deleuze, could just as plausibly invoke him as the chief source or elective precursor for a kind of radical process metaphysics grounded in the notions of desiring-production and molecular or deterritorialized energy flows.[5] More than that, the impact of his work was clearly visible across a swathe of developments in hermeneutics, critical theory, and the human and social sciences, where Spinoza's philosophicohistorical critique of revelation and scriptural warrant was among the most crucial early contributions to the project of secular Enlightenment thought.[6]

Some years ago, I wrote a book about Spinoza that put the case for his pervasive yet underacknowledged influence and tried to sort out some of these multiple, often closely intersecting, yet sometimes wildly divergent lines of intellectual descent.[7] In particular, I traced the conflict of interpretations that started out with his double role as archheretic or vilified atheist, on one hand, and on the other, purveyor of a knowledge—a mystical-intuitive mode of comprehension—beyond all the limits and endemic shortcomings of plain-prose reason. This conflict has been repeated in various displaced or surrogate forms over the past three centuries of often intense and heated debate around Spinoza's thought. Nowadays it appears in the clash of priorities between those in the analytic camp, who regard him as having some useful (if often misleadingly formulated) things to say about issues in metaphysics, epistemology, or philosophy of mind,[8] and those of a so-called Continental persuasion, who tend more often to emphasize Spinoza's politics or what they see as the basically political nature of Spinozist ethics, ontology, and psychology.[9] Even so, this fails to capture the full complexity of the situation because there is something in common—philosophically if not politically speaking—between the analytic drive for conceptual clarity and precision and Althusser's claim for Spinoza (in company with Marx) as having achieved a decisive epistemological break with

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the currency of commonsense or ideological belief.[10] Indeed, the very fact of his having spawned so diverse and complex a reception-history is one measure of Spinoza's extreme singularity and his way of holding out against classification according to such ready-made categories. French thinkers in the wake of structuralism, Deleuze especially, have on the whole been more concerned to emphasize this aspect of Spinoza's thought as a part of their campaign against the grip of conceptual abstraction or "totalizing" systems of whatever kind, not least Althusserian Marxism.[11] However, it has also left a strong impression among his analytical commentators through their sense of his standing quite apart from—and posing a sizeable challenge to—some of the most rooted assumptions of mainstream philosophic thought.

Thus, for all their marked, even drastic differences of interest, idiom, and dominant agenda, the two traditions are, at any rate, largely agreed in their perception of Spinoza as a thoroughly anomalous and (to say the least) provocative thinker. Though to some, this has been cause for unqualified celebration—in particular those, like Deleuze, who enlist him on the side of radical difference or heterogeneity—in others, it has provoked a very mixed response and sometimes taxed their exegetical patience to the limit and beyond. Here I am thinking chiefly of Jonathan Bennett's approach, in the mode of Russell-style rational reconstruction, whereby he offers a patient, detailed, and often admiring account of Spinoza's *Ethics* until he gets to the "third kind of knowledge"—*scientia intuitiva*—achieved through the "intellectual love of God," at which point, all this patience suddenly runs out and his commentary gives voice to a sense of bafflement and downright exasperation.[12] Thus, picking out a phrase from the more indulgent Stuart Hampshire, "I contend that instead of implying that Spinoza has brought us 'beyond the limits of literal understanding' and that this is acceptable because it is inherent in his chosen topic, we should say openly that Spinoza is talking nonsense and that there is no reason to put up with it."[13] As for Frederick Pollock and his claim that these passages are "among the most brilliant endeavors of speculative philosophy," and moreover, that they "throw a kind of poetical glow over the formality of [Spinoza's] exposition," Bennett is quite unable to contain his indignation. Thus, "when a commentator as shrewd as Pollock is reduced to such babbling by his desire to

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praise the final stretch of the *Ethics,* that is further evidence that this material is worthless. Worse, it is dangerous: it is rubbish that causes others to write rubbish."[14] Still, as I say, even these sharply conflicting valuations bear witness to the sheer singularity of Spinoza's thought and its power to solicit uncommonly intense and deeply felt modes of response, whether as an unprecedented challenge or a scandal to received ideas. In this context, we might recall Derrida's etymologically pointed use of *solicit* (from the Latin *solicitare*) with the sense of challenging and summoning forth but also of shaking to the very foundations.[15] What unites these otherwise disparate approaches is their willingness—albeit very often within certain clearly marked limits—to accept the possibility of a thinking at odds with those dominant conceptions that have shaped the self-image of reputable philosophic discourse.

If commentators once joined battle over the issue of Spinoza as atheist and radical materialist versus Spinoza as nature-mystic and proto-Wordsworthian pantheist, they now more often take sides over matters of ontology, epistemology, or philosophy of mind and language. Or again, they divide with respect to the question of whether these are indeed (as analytic philosophers would have it) the core issues in Spinoza's thought or whether—on the dominant Continental view—they must ultimately take second place to his ethicopolitical concerns. Thus, as things stand at present, it is hard to imagine (say) followers of Althusser, Balibar, or Deleuze entering into some kind of constructive dialogue with philosophers whose main points of reference are the commentaries offered by analytic thinkers like Bennett, Donald Davidson, or Alan Donagan.[16] Yet, in truth, the Spinoza who emerges through Althusser's structuralist–Marxist reading bears a closer resemblance to Bennett's Spinoza—the rationalist thinker of "adequate ideas" as opposed to the delusions of imaginary commonsense belief—than to anything that finds room in Deleuze's (for want of any better description) radical–empiricist account. And again, despite obvious differences of idiom, what Deleuze has to say about Spinoza's doctrine of the affects and his notion of *conatus* as the inbuilt drive toward self-preservation and fulfillment on the part of every living organism finds a close parallel in readings from a very different quarter that likewise place chief emphasis on his treatment of the positive and negative emotions

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as the basis for any rational account of knowledge as conducive to human well-being. Among the latter can be counted Antonio Damasio's recent book, which comes at these issues—that is to say, questions concerning the relationship between cognitive and passional components of the human psyche—from a neurophysical and cognitive–psychological angle but which nonetheless adopts a broadly analytic rather than Continental approach.[17] My point is that Spinoza's thinking resists any adequate classification in terms of the standard, textbook account of how philosophy has developed over the past four centuries. For if Spinoza is undoubtedly a full-fledged rationalist who maintains that true wisdom can only be achieved through a reasoned critique of commonsense notions or intuitive, self-evident ideas, then he is just as much a radical empiricist (more aptly, a radical naturalist and materialist), according to whom such wisdom consists in a due recognition of the various physical, causal, and sociopolitical factors that bear on human knowers in their quest for more adequate self-understanding.

Of course, the mere fact that he cannot be placed on either side of these deep-laid philosophic rifts doesn't mean that he manages to bridge them effectively or achieve the ultimate reconciliation between subject and object, mind and world, reasons and causes, or free will and determinism that has eluded philosophers from Descartes down and continues to preoccupy analytic and Continental thinkers alike. However, it does provide a telling reminder of just how anomalous a figure Spinoza must appear by the light of any orthodox historiography or any attempt to assimilate his thought to this or that certified line of descent. Where responses do tend to divide in fairly predictable ways is by reacting to the scandal that Spinoza represents either in downright celebratory terms—as a salutary challenge to the norms and pieties of orthodox philosophic thought—or with various degrees of suspicion, mistrust, or hostility. Thus Bennett, as we have seen, has a high opinion of the *Ethics* just so long as it remains on analytically respectable ground, that is, just so long as Spinoza is concerned with the corrective capacity of adequate ideas when applied to the various confusions thrown up by the realm of sensory appearances or ideas of imagination. However, this attitude switches very sharply to one of disappointment or shocked incredulity when Spinoza moves on, in Part V, to expounding the

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third kind of knowledge, that which involves a direct apprehension of the nature or essence of things somehow conceived as present to thought without any form of conceptual mediation. Such claims can only strike Bennett as amounting to a quasi-mystical doctrine whereby the mind is taken to possess something very much like the power of intellectual intuition that Kant likewise denounced, that is, a capacity to pass beyond the realm of phenomenal appearances where sense data are brought under adequate concepts and thus lay claim to an immediate knowledge of ultimate, noumenal reality.[18]

Yet it is hard to see the point of any rational reconstruction in the analytic mode that adopts so partial or selective a view of those elements in Spinoza's thought that are deemed to merit serious attention by present-day analytic standards. For what drops out of sight in this process is also what constitutes the singular challenge of a thinking that runs directly counter to the whole tradition of epistemological enquiry that began with Descartes, found its systematic high point in Kant, and is still very much a part of the present-day analytic agenda. That is to say, it is the radically monistic approach that typifies not only Spinoza's claims with regard to *scientia intuitiva* but also his entire conception of knowledge or, more precisely, his entire ontology of mind and nature conceived as twin aspects or attributes of a single, indivisible substance.

It seems to me that analytic philosophy has long been striving to escape or overcome this Kantian legacy while in fact coming up with nothing more than a series of minor variations on it.[19] Spinoza alone, among the great thinkers of philosophical modernity, goes so far in his rejection of the dualist epistemological paradigm and his embrace of a radically monist ontological alternative as to provoke bewilderment not only among his goodwilled exegetes but also among those analytic types who are themselves in quest of some such (albeit less radical) alternative. As I have said, this contrasts with the positive, even celebratory response to Spinoza's thinking in the recent Continental—mostly French—reception-history where he has been recruited to a range of philosophical causes whose main (in some cases sole) point of contact is the link they propose between issues of ontology and issues of an ethical or sociopolitical nature.[20]

Not that this dimension is altogether ignored by analytic commentators, forming, as it does, a crucial component of Spinoza's

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case for the role of philosophy in achieving a clearer, more distinct idea of the various factors (causal and social) that operate either to expand or to contract our scope for the exercise of human creative and emancipatory powers.[21] They have also shown some interest in pursuing the relation between Spinoza's more formal or logically articulated procedures of argument in the *Ethics* and the kinds of concern that animate those other portions of that work in which he discusses the affective or passional aspects of human knowledge and experience, along with more overtly *engagé* writings such as the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus.*[22] After all, any serious attempt to make sense of Spinoza's project as a whole will have to find some plausible way of explaining how the exercise of reason may contribute to a better, more enlightened understanding of the factors that make for psychological, social, and political well-being through a wise acceptance of our place in the natural order of things. More than that, it will have to offer an account of this process that ties in convincingly with Spinoza's critique of religious revelation and his arguments concerning the complex background of historical and cultural conditions that alone provide an adequate contextual basis for reading the scriptures in a critically informed and nondogmatic way.

So of course, the broadly analytic reception has included some work on this aspect of Spinoza's thought and on relevant details of his own sociopolitical background as one much involved in the various debates—as well as the frontline struggles for power and influence—within the Dutch Republic of his time.[23] However, it has not shown anything like the commitment of thinkers like Althusser, Balibar, Deleuze, or (most strikingly) Antonio Negri to produce a reading of the new Spinoza that brings these multiple aspects together in a strictly inseparable fusion of politics, life-history, and work.[24] What unites these various Continental approaches—despite their otherwise large divergences of aim—is a shared conviction that Spinoza's thought cannot be understood except through a reading that takes due account of both its immanent ("purely" philosophical) modes of argument and its close imbrication with the various historical, social, and political events that made up its formative background. That is, they start out by rejecting the analytic principle that requires a clear distinction between context of discovery and context of justification, or the kind of strictly second-order research that has to do with

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matters of cultural–historical or psychobiographical interest and the kind of first-order investigation that pertains to the assessment of philosophic claims in accordance with distinctly philosophical criteria of truth and validity.[25] For an *echt*-analytic commentator like Bennett, this distinction is so very basic—so definitive of what properly counts as philosophy rather than intellectual or cultural history—that the worth of Spinoza's intellectual achievement is to be judged solely with reference to the context of justification, which for him means in keeping with present-best ideas of conceptual rigor and precision.[26] For others of a broadly similar but somewhat less hard-line analytic persuasion (among them Alan Donagan), the distinction holds in matters of conceptual exegesis or strictly philosophical content but doesn't prevent such extraneous interests from making some (albeit very limited) contribution to our better understanding of Spinoza's thought.[27] However, this allowance doesn't go so far as to invoke a contingent, that is, historical, geographically specific, and sociopolitically emergent context for his central philosophic concerns, that is to say, his monist ontology and metaphysics, along with whatever implications they might hold for current debates in epistemology, philosophy of mind, or cognitive psychology.

Nor is it surprising that this should be the case, given both the analytic premise that issues in philosophy cannot be reduced to second-order questions of history, politics, or psychobiography and also—reinforcing that belief among his analytic commentators—Spinoza's commitment to the idea of philosophy as aimed toward an order of truth transcending any mere particularities of time and place. Yet, of course, there is another whole dimension of Spinoza's thought that is inescapably rooted in the social conditions and political events of his time and that cannot be understood without reference to those same conditions and events.[28] Moreover, it is one that touches so directly on his chief metaphysical concerns—especially the issue of free will versus determinism that lies at their very heart—that any attempt to apply the two-contexts principle and distinguish clearly between life and work is sure to end up by offering a highly partial, not to say distorted, view of those concerns. This is where his Continental readers have an edge because they reject that principle—at least in its more doctrinaire form—and make a point of relating life to work not just as a matter of more-or-less relevant psychobiographical

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or sociohistorical background but as offering the only adequate means to grasp what is most distinctive and uniquely challenging about Spinoza's project. For it is a main part of that project to explain how we can think of human beings *both* as belonging to an order of causal necessity that allows no appeal to some imaginary realm of purely autonomous agency or choice *and yet* as possessing the capacity to transform passive into active modes of experience. This capacity comes about—so he maintains—through the achievement of adequate ideas, which in turn make possible some measure of freedom from the realm of unknown and hence blindly operative causal forces.

Of course, this way of putting Spinoza's case—like his own formulations in the *Ethics* and elsewhere—is very far from resolving the free will–determinism issue and might well be seen as merely restating it in a sharpened or more intransigent form. Yet it is the merit of readings like those of Balibar, Deleuze, Macherey, and Negri to insist that he alone among the great thinkers of early philosophical modernity faced up to that issue without taking refuge—like Descartes before and Kant after him—in a dualist metaphysics of subject and object, mind and body, or a noumenal domain wherein reason gives the rule for its own autonomous exercise and a phenomenal realm wherein everything is subject to the dictates of causal necessity. Moreover, they do so most often with specific reference to that complex background of historical, political, religious, and sociocultural events that exerted such a crucial formative influence on Spinoza's thinking about issues of free will and determinism. Of course, this may be said to beg the question yet again because, after all, there is a prima facie contradiction—or at any rate, a sharp clash of priorities—between the claim for Spinoza as one who possessed a sufficient degree of intellectual autonomy to think the issues through in a novel, creative, and independent-minded way and the claim that his ideas were crucially affected by the distinctive pressures and specific challenges of the time. Indeed, these commentators might be seen as going out of their way to emphasize the problem and ensure that Spinoza's readers have to face it fair and square rather than seeking a convenient escape route or evasive compromise solution that would purport to bring him out as a moderate determinist and upholder of free will in some likewise moderate, qualified, or compatibilist form.

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Thus the main thrust of interpretations like those mentioned earlier is to insist—contra such face-saving or emollient accounts—that Spinoza's was an outlook radically opposed to any notion that the problem might be assuaged by adopting a sensible line of least resistance midway between those strictly unthinkable extremes. For instance, they stress that he took time off from composing the *Ethics* and before proceeding to those parts of Part V in which, if anywhere, his doctrine of freedom might attain its definitive statement to write the *Tractactus Theologico-Politicus* as an urgent and topical contribution to debates about politics, religion, and the future of the Dutch Republic.[29] That work was primarily concerned with explaining how the supposed timeless truths of scriptural revelation should rather be understood as products of their own historical, cultural, and sociopolitical locale, along with the motives of those various, far-from-disinterested parties who first wrote them down and then engaged in the process of editing, transmission, and selective deployment to overt or covert manipulative ends. That is to say, the *Tractatus* was a thoroughgoing exercise in the mode of materialist, causal-explanatory, sociodiagnostic, protosecular, and demythologizing critique that would emerge to full view only after another two centuries of largely underground, since often forcefully repressed or persecuted, life.[30] Of course, one reason for this, quite apart from its explosive theologicopolitical content, was the fact that Spinoza here seemed to adopt a thoroughly determinist approach that purported to demonstrate the false and illusory character not only of religious truth-claims but also of our cherished, theologically sanctioned self-image as believers whose faith—or lack of it—could properly be ascribed to our own God-given capacity for autonomous belief formation. What the *Tractatus* drives home to painful effect for anyone who wishes to retain such faith is both the logical impossibility of squaring this latter pair of requirements and the extent to which that entire belief system, along with its various doctrinal, scriptural, and institutional props, can be seen to rest on a basis of merely contingent historical events. Thus it leaves no room for such imaginary ideas as those of revelation, divine intervention, or miracles, all of which Spinoza treats (like Hume after him) as resulting from a mixture in various proportion of natural, historical, and psychological causes joined to the effects of ignorance, fear, and predisposed or passive credulity.

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In short, as these commentators acknowledge, the free will–determinism issue is by no means resolved or quietly laid aside but is in some ways rendered all the more intractable by Spinoza's decision to interrupt work on the *Ethics* and devote several years of intensive research under often very difficult personal and social circumstances to composing the *Tractatus.* Their point, like his, is to wean us away from any idea that thinking might achieve a genuine—as distinct from merely notional—margin of autonomy or freedom by claiming to rise above the conditions of its physical or causally constrained, as well as its historically situated, time and place. Yet their commentaries would surely miss something crucial if they didn't all the same make allowance for the strong countervailing tendency in Spinoza's thought, that is, his commitment to a doctrine of adequate ideas that affirms the power of intellect to criticize false beliefs and pass beyond them to a knowledge no longer in the grip of illusory common sense or ideological notions. This is what lends a degree of credibility to the sorts of analytical approach, like Bennett's, that pretty much ignore any background matters of historical, cultural, or sociopolitical context, or again, the attitude summed up by Donagan when he remarks that "generally [Spinoza's] life was of a piece with what he wrote: discoveries about its details—apart from facts about his intellectual exchanges—bear dubiously on disputed questions about what he thought."[31] It is also the aspect of his thinking that most captivated Althusser and the early Macherey when they recruited certain pregnant formulations from Spinoza as a prime exhibit in their structuralist–Marxist case against Hegelian, Lukacsian, or other such "expressive" ways of figuring the link between socioeconomic base and politicocultural superstructure.[32] Rather we should try to conceive it as a complex, decentered, and overdetermined mode of relationship wherein there exist certain "structures in dominance" but wherein economic forces should be taken to predominate only "in the last instance," or just insofar as they are assigned that role by the entire existing conjuncture.

This is not the place for anything like a critical exposition of Althusserian Marxism. It is sufficient to say—in the present context—that Spinoza's influence is often plain to see in its emphasis on structural (as opposed to expressive or totalizing) modes of explanation and on the crucial role of philosophy as a form of theoretical practice

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aimed toward resisting or breaking the hold of intuitive, self-evident, or commonsense (i.e., ideological) beliefs. Thus, according to Althusser and Balibar,

> effects are not outside the structure, are not a pre-existing object, element, or space in which the structure arrives to imprint its mark; on the contrary, the structure is immanent in its effects, a cause immanent in its effects in the Spinozist sense of the term, that the *whole existence of the structure consists in its* effects, in short that the structure which is merely a specific combination of its peculiar elements, is nothing outside its effects.[33]

Moreover, Spinoza should also take credit for having pioneered the mode of critical or symptomatic reading that enabled commentary to go beyond its traditional, fideist attitude in matters of textual (especially scriptural) warrant and thereby reveal those moments of unresolved aporia, strain, or contradiction that signaled the effect of some repressed yet disruptive ideological content. Clearly what Althusser and Balibar have in mind is the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and its precocious combination of textual exegesis with a range of approaches—hermeneutic, source-critical, historical-reconstructive, cultural-materialist in no very stretched sense of the term—that would have to wait a good two centuries before they were taken up and developed. Hence their very striking claim in *Reading Capital*:

> The first man ever to have posed the problem of *reading,* and in consequence, of writing, was Spinoza, and he was also the first to have proposed both a theory of history and a philosophy of the opacity of the immediate. With him, for the first time ever, a man linked together in this way the essence of reading and the essence of history in a theory of the difference between the imaginary and the true.[34]

So there is another side to the recent reception-history, one that has more to do with adequate ideas and with the power of thought to criticize and thereby transcend its own formative context or background conditions than with the need to recall theory to a sense of its own inescapable enmeshment in those same conditions.

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However, it is worth recalling once again how urgent were the social and political circumstances that bore on Spinoza when his main concern—and a chief motive for writing the *Tractatus*—was to stave off the threat of religious dogmatism and the warring factions whose claim to exclusive possession of scriptural truth looked set to destroy the Dutch Republic. Nor is the *Ethics* by any means free of such turbulence, since—as must strike the attentive reader—there is a notable contrast between the order of numbered axioms, propositions, and corollaries with their appearance of impassive, (quasi-) geometrical precision and the various interpolated scholia in which Spinoza finds room for some powerful expressions of positive and negative affect. This is why, as Deleuze puts it, there is need for

> a double reading of Spinoza: on the one hand, a systematic reading in pursuit of the general idea and the meaning of the parts, but on the other hand and at the same time, the affective reading, without an idea of the whole, where one is carried along or set down, put in motion or at rest, shaken or calmed, according to the velocity of this or that part.[35]

Thus it was always very much on the cards that the high theoreticist "moment" epitomized by Althusserian Marxism would at length give way to a reactive trend—in Spinoza scholarship and also in the wider context of post-1980 French philosophical debate—that mounted a vigorous challenge to it. That challenge took shape among thinkers like Deleuze in the name of difference, intensity, "desiring-production," "molecular" versus "molar" forces, "deterritorializing" lines of flight versus "reterritorializing" modes of control, and other such attempts to evoke or connote what lay intrinsically beyond the grasp of adequate conceptualization.[36] Along with this went a drastically changed estimate of Spinoza's significance, one that located the potentially transformative and liberating power of his thought not so much in the process of conceptual critique, whereby confused or imaginary ideas yielded place to their clear or adequate counterparts, but rather in those passages from the *Ethics* that affirmed the priority of positive over negative or joyous over sad affects and emotions. Thus the image of Spinoza that predominates in Althusser's work—that of an elective precursor to Marx who somehow manages to construct

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(or discover) in advance the main theoretical apparatus of Marxist *Ideologiekritik*—now yields place to the image of one who adopted a simulacrum of rationalist method to impart a certain order to his otherwise unmanageably prolix and tumultuous thoughts.[37] What is so remarkable is that both these conflicting accounts find warrant not only in a few, carefully selected passages from Spinoza but on the basis of readings that adduce large amounts of highly relevant textual evidence, and that do so moreover with consistent and well-defined interpretative ends in view.

I should perhaps make it clear that I am not for one moment presenting Spinoza as some kind of textual Rorschach blot into whom various parties can read—or onto whom they can readily project—whatever meanings or messages they choose. On the contrary, as I have said, these variant readings each have a claim to exegetical rigor and fidelity that redeems them from any such charge. More to the point is Derrida's remark that certain thinkers—maybe all great thinkers, or those who have given rise to a significant reception-history—tend to generate sharply opposed interpretations that cannot be reconciled or subject to settlement one way or the other because they can both cite chapter and verse in their own support and can both very plausibly assert their credentials as the authorized version.[38] Very often, these debates fall out between left and right lines of intellectual descent, as can be seen in different ways—so Derrida observes—with philosophers from Aristotle to Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and (not least) Marx. He also provides a useful metaphor by which to think about this curious feature of intellectual history, namely, that of the tape-recording machine with multiple playback heads, such that any given segment of tape (or passage of text) may be decoded in different ways yet without this necessarily entailing any dropouts or distortions (interpretative oversights, errors, or symptoms of gross ideological bias).

Thus philosophers and literary theorists tend to distort the issue by constructing a false *tertium non datur,* that is, by supposing it to fall out between defenders of a strict intentionalist or single-right-reading position and those who adopt an attitude of anything goes or total hermeneutic license. However, this is merely to sidetrack attention from the more challenging question as to *just what it is* about certain passages in certain authors that somehow gives rise

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to such instances of deep-laid scholarly–critical dispute, given that there do exist certain constraints on the range of admissible readings. For if one thing is clear from Derrida's work on thinkers from Plato and Aristotle to Rousseau, Kant, Nietzsche, Husserl, and J. L. Austin, it is that (as he puts it) interpretation cannot develop in just "any direction at all" or "authorize itself to say almost anything" but rather requires "all the instruments of traditional criticism"—of philology, textual scholarship, and a due regard for authorial intent—as an "indispensable guardrail" in the process of critical exegesis.[39] On the other hand—crucially—this guardrail "has only ever *protected,* it has never *opened* a reading," so that criticism has to go beyond "the effaced and respectful doubling of commentary" to reveal how "the writer writes *in* a language and *in* a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse cannot dominate absolutely." And again, "the reading must always aim at a certain relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses."[40]

It is Nietzsche who provides one of Derrida's most striking examples since in no other case have the divergent left and right interpretations run to such extremes and been able to cite such a range of good (or, at any rate, highly plausible) warrant in the text. But there is also a sense in which Nietzsche lends himself too easily to Derrida's purpose because his writings contain such a mass of provocative, willfully extreme, and often downright contradictory remarks assembled with such scant regard for all the normal (to his way of thinking, inertly conformist) protocols of rational discourse. Spinoza offers a more interesting test case insofar as his thinking manifests a high degree of logical consistency, even if his style of reasoning *more geometrico* in the *Ethics* is apt to make it seem more rigorously argued and tightly structured than it is. So where left and right Nietzscheans can always point to different, often conflicting passages in the text that provide support for their likewise divergent interpretations, it is not so easy to explain how Spinoza could have spawned such a multifarious reception-history. This challenge becomes yet more acute when one considers that his was the most resolutely monist and hence—one might expect—most unambiguous, clearly stated, and multiple-reading-proof philosophic system to have appeared in Western philosophy since the great monists of antiquity

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such as (at opposite extremes) a metaphysician such as Parmenides and radical materialists such as Democritus or Epicurus. And yet, as I have said, it is the utterly unqualified or uncompromising character of Spinoza's monist ontology that has given rise to this likewise extreme pattern of contrasting interpretations. Thus his reputation has always been a battleground between those who considered him a pantheist, a mystic, a well-nigh saintly figure, or (in the famous words of Novalis) a "God-intoxicated" thinker and, on the other hand, those—including the vast majority of his contemporaries—who deemed him an out-and-out materialist, atheist, and wicked subverter of every last moral value.

Of course, the terms of this controversy have changed, and one is nowadays unlikely to find Spinoza either praised or vilified for any such reasons. All the same, it is not too hard to discern the legacy of those old battles in the more restrained and philosophically specialized yet nonetheless sharp divergences of view that continue to attend his present-day reception-history. For there is just as great a difference between, say, Althusser's high-structuralist or rationalist reading and Deleuze's take on the prophet of unbridled desiring-production as any that arose in his own time or during the subsequent two centuries when *Spinozism* was a watchword—and a dangerous charge to bring or to face—in various philosophical, theological, and sociopolitical disputes. Or again, there is just as much at stake in doctrinal terms between those who take Spinoza to be offering intimations of a new and radically distinct mode of cognition in Part V of the *Ethics* (where he talks about the "third kind of knowledge," or *scientia intuitiva*) and those, like Bennett, who come at it from a strongly analytic or rational-reconstructive angle and who tend to throw up their hands in despair at just this point.[41] What unites them, all the same, is a strong sense that Spinoza is venturing into strange seas of thought where established philosophical distinctions break down, among them most obviously those between mind and body, subject and object, or self and world. Hence, no doubt, his renewed appeal to philosophers of otherwise diverse persuasion who see in Spinoza's radical monism—or something very like it—the hope of achieving a clean, conceptually unencumbered break with the whole bad legacy of Cartesian dualism and its various, for example, Kantian and present-day (whether analytic or Continental) successor movements.

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