

**natural right and the failure to
calculate: the paradox of the
slave in spinoza's *tractatus-
theologico politicus*¹**

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In Chapter 16 of the *Tractatus-Theologico Politicus*, Spinoza provides his definition of natural right: “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” (*TTP*, 195). One’s right (*jus*) is co-extensive with one’s power (*potentia*). This power is continually mediated within the immanent power of Nature as a whole. The radicality of this correlation between *jus* and *potentia* lies in the tripartite imbrication it implies between Spinoza’s metaphysics, ethics, and politics. This has become a key point of departure for writers such as Gilles Deleuze and Antonio Negri. The insistence on this interpretation renders the absolute transfer of natural right inconceivable. Hence it follows that the fiction of an imaginary power is substituted for the actuality of a delimited power. Spinoza’s metaphysics dictates that what one can effectively do, their capacity to act, is either enhanced or diminished within a network of affectual relations.

The right of each individual thing is no more than an expression of its power. But this principle is unthinkable in the abstract. This is because it is inseparable from an anthropological account of how the human effectively engages with its environment. To this, Spinoza grounds human action in a naturalistic understanding of how each individual seeks their own good (*utilitas*). More precisely, this modality of being is firmly inscribed in the effort (*conatus*) of each individual thing to preserve itself; hence it stands or falls on the claim to be common to all, and to

always be in operation. Yet, Spinoza defines a slave (*servus*) in the Chapter 16 of the *TTP* as an individual who ‘cannot see or do what is good.’ The existence of the slave would seem to provide an exception to the rule that everyone pursues his/her interests, therefore undermining the underlying metaphysical claim of Spinoza’s natural right.

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, as well as disclosing the paradox of the slave. In Proposition 65, Part 4 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza explicates the principle through which reason compels each individual to seek their utility: “by the guidance of reason we pursue the greater of two goods and the lesser of two evils” (*E IV*, 65). This principle is prefigured in Chapter 16 of the *TTP*: “of two good things every single person will choose the one he himself judges to be the greater good, and of two bad things he will choose that which he deems to be less bad.” And that this is a “universal law of human nature that no one neglects” (*TTP*, 198).

This principle of active striving, of seeking out one’s 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. The logic of calculating one’s utility can be traced back to Aristotle’s account of ‘phronesis’ in Book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: the form of practical reasoning related to contingent situations.² Yet it is precisely here that Spinoza’s definition of the slave proves disquieting. Let us turn to the passage as it appears in Chapter 16:

Anyone who is guided by their own pleasure ... and *cannot see or do what is good for them* [*nihil quod sibi utile est videre neque agere potest*], is him or herself very much a slave [*servus*]. 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, emphasis added)

Before explicating this passage more closely, it might be helpful to provide a brief overview of how the slave figures in Spinoza’s philosophy. 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 *Tractatus Politicus*.

The invocation of the slave in the Scholium to *E IV*, P66, which immediately follows from the preceding cluster of propositions that identify the calculation of utility, is highly suggestive. It reads:

With reference to the strength of the emotions, we shall readily see the difference between the man who is guided only by emotion [*affectus*] 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. (*E IV*, P66S)

The reference to slavery in this passage is framed around the condition whereby one lacks understanding of the causes that determine him to act, thus being at the mercy of the affects. This is prefigured in the subtitle of Part 4 of the *Ethics*: "On Human Servitude, or the Strength of the Emotions." From the outset, Spinoza's appeal to the slave functions as a figurative model upon which to understand individuals who are in principle 'free,' insofar as they are invested with the capacities to act and think that are common to all, and yet in some sense 'enslaved' because they lack adequate knowledge of their encounters, resulting in sad affects. As a result, they are often compelled to "see the better but do the worse" (Preface, Part 4). This theme is adumbrated in the *TP* where "human freedom is the greater as a man is more able to be guided by reason and control his appetites" (*TP*:), In this way, the figure of the slave is characterised by the inability to organise one's engagement with one's environment.

However, the definition of the slave in Chapter 16 is provocative. To begin with, it amplifies the account of bondage at work in the Preface to Part 4 of the *Ethics* which, as mentioned, Spinoza elucidates by borrowing a phrase from Ovid (which he cites several times in the *Ethics*); namely, that enslavement to the passions compels one to 'see the better but do the worse.' Yet, the passage in question defines slavery as not only the failure to commit to one's better interest, but the *inability to seek one's interest at all*. This is paradoxical, which is best conveyed through the tension between the principle of natural right, which is connected to the seeking out of means conducive to one's preservation, and the existence of the slave as precluded from seeking its good (*utile*). If the slave reveals an exception to the rule that individuals seek their utility, then it would seem to deeply problematise

Spinoza's claim to *always* preserve natural right. A people will always preserve an ineliminable part of their right: this much is made clear in Letter 50 to Jarig Jelles. More pertinently, to preserve natural right implies that individuals do not cease to look for the means to secure life. Spinoza emphasises this: insofar as the mind contains clear and distinct or confused ideas it "endeavours to persist in its being for an indefinite period of time, *and of this endeavour it is conscious*" (E III, P9, emphasis added). Insofar as Spinoza's coupling of right and power endeavours to speak the language of the universal, it must stand or fall on its claim to be common to all. And yet, how can we understand the *fact* of the slave, which seems to prove an exception to this very rule?

To begin, it is helpful to acknowledge the strategic intervention of the *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670) which, as Spinoza communicates in a letter to Oldenburg, seeks to dispel the prejudices of the theologians and secure the freedom to philosophise. The central political claim that characterises the *TTP*, as Spinoza lays out in the subtitle of the book, will be to convince his readers that the freedom to philosophise is not only compatible with civil authority, but its suppression constitutes a threat to the very stability of the state. Yet, from the outset this project is complicated by the animating question of the entire treatise, laid out in the Preface: how is it possible that a people fight for their servitude as if it were their salvation? This question in mind will allow us to think the paradox between the *principle* of natural right and the *fact* of the slave, that is, between the anthropological principle of active striving and the definition of the slave in Chapter 16 as the failure to 'see or do what is good.' At this point, I believe it is necessary to introduce a term that seems implicit to the question Spinoza poses in the Preface, despite never showing up in his vocabulary; namely, *voluntary servitude*.

To what extent are we justified in using this term? Spinoza's question in the Preface of the *TTP* is rhetorically prefigured in Etienne de la Boétie's *Discours de la servitude volontaire*, published in 1576. The text brings to light a perplexing phenomenon: that tyrannical regimes persist only as long as the many willingly acquiesce their power. As La Boétie writes: "it is unbelievable how people, once they are subjected, fall so quickly into such a deep forgetfulness of freedom that it is impossible for them to reawaken and regain it."³ As a result, it would seem as though "they had not lost their liberty but won their servitude."⁴ What is striking in his analysis is that the very conditions that underpin servitude are indistinguishable from obedience instilled through custom: hence, "men born under the yoke ... are content to live as they were born, without looking any further."⁵

La Boétie's invocation of voluntary servitude is striking. Expressed in a more Spinozist vocabulary: this is because it seems to resist any clear distinction between the immanent powers of desire, which tend towards an expansion of the individual's activity, and the transcendent powers of coercion and control. Such a formulation renders it exceedingly difficult to separate voluntaristic and determinative accounts of subordination. In other words, the paradox between natural right (*jus naturale*) and the existence of the slave (*servus*) would seem to violate the 'active' nature of all striving. Again, individuals never cease to look for means in order to conserve life. What is at stake is that there is another way to think the slave in Spinoza; namely, one that resists any easy clear distinction between reason and the passions.

Conventionally, Spinoza's appeal to slavery is interpreted as coeval with the production of inadequate ideas, and hence concomitant with the passionate life. Susan James, in her article "Freedom, Slavery, and the Passions," defends such an interpretation. Here, she links Spinoza's appeal to slavery in the *Ethics* to Plato's allegory of the charioteer in the *Phaedrus*.⁶ This conception of servitude consists in one's inability to regulate the passions. According to this analogy, an individual dominated by the passions is akin to a charioteer who, being pulled by two horses, fails to control the unruly one which represents the passionate sphere of life.

Her analysis raises this issue of servitude to the political by focusing on the distinction between the 'subject' and 'slave.' Her understanding of the slave is articulated in contrast to a people's capacity to institute a collective or common good that expresses their interest. In this context, obedience to the law does not itself constitute slavery. Spinoza is very clear on this point. Rather, slavery is the condition of being subject to the arbitrary will of an external power, where one's interest is never guaranteed. In contrast, the subject's obedience follows when one "internalises the reasons for obeying the law," and in doing so recognises its inherent utility.⁷ Such an individual will thus act in accordance with their own will. Essentially, James' reading emphasises the distinction between the modality of action specific to the slave and that of the subject.

Frederic Lordon deals extensively with the issue of slavery in his *Capitalisme, Désir, et Servitude*.⁸ The title of its English translation (*Willing Slaves of Capital*) would seem to belie its argumentative structure. Indeed, Chapter 1 cites La Boétie's thesis only in order to refuse the very possibility of a 'voluntary' servitude. The trouble would seem to begin from a subjectivity that posits an autonomous will as a

spontaneous locus of action. Hence Lordon concludes that voluntary servitude is bound to remain an “insoluble enigma.”⁹ Instead, Lordon frames the problem of slavery by focusing on the intransitive nature of desire. Accordingly, individuals are defined as constantly seeking out their ‘good,’ and yet precisely what they seek out is given through determinate social relations. Lordon identifies this as “passionate automata.”¹⁰

Both James’ and Lordon’s interpretation consign the slave to the passionate sphere of life; that is, as a mode of being characterised by the inability to grasp the ‘real’ chain of connections that determine one’s actions, which is the cause of enslavement. Yet, the decisive issue is that Spinoza’s invocation of the slave in chapter 16 seems to infringe upon the *principle* of natural right, in which individuals constantly look for the means to preserve life. With this in mind, a reformulation is required. How can we reconcile enslavement as the *failure to calculate* with the fundamentally active nature of human striving?

To make sense of this paradox I will draw upon the ideas of Etienne Balibar. In his *Spinoza and Politics*, Balibar interprets Proposition 37, Part 4 of the *Ethics* as offering an account of human relations within political life as doubly constituted: one according to the affects and one according to reason.¹¹ The affective dimension of life, on the one hand, corresponds to what Spinoza refers to as ‘knowledge of the first kind,’ and expresses itself through an imaginary relationship to the world (*E* II, P40S). Reason, on the other hand, is connected with adequate ideas of the laws of one’s nature. It is Balibar’s formulation of ‘reason’ that will allow us to see what is at stake with the paradox of the slave.

The key idea for Balibar is that reason is imbued with a double sense of utility. As he expresses it: “reason is useful, but not instrumental. It cannot be rational without also being *reasonable*.”¹² We can grasp this as follows: the fundamental impulse of reason prescribes the seeking of a common good around which life can be organised by virtue of preserving this very effort within political structures. Otherwise put, reason not only prescribes that individuals seek their advantage, but it “produces this result.” This formula can be grasped in the first sense as an ‘anthropological truth,’ in which a people struggles to conserve their being. In the second sense, it hinges on the imbrication of knowledge with reason. One need only turn to Proposition 26, Part 4 of the *Ethics*: “whatever we endeavour according to reason is nothing else but to understand.” The transition to the rationally ordered community does not expel the passions, rather they become understood

(or, are restructured), such that society is organised on the recognition of the laws of their own nature; that is, on grasping the ‘real’ chain of causal connections (E IV, P59).

Spinoza’s ethical and political writings turn on this idea. As such, it presupposes a level of activity that is proper to the notion of *citizenship* which, as Moira Gatens aptly summarises, implies that states “enforce obedience to fundamental rules of law ... *without removing the possibility of the development of reason*, which includes rational reflection on the utility of these institutions.”¹³ In this manner, what is intrinsic to the notion of ‘reasonableness’ is the extent to which natural right is retained as a constitutive principle within political structures, such that all agree to “act—but not to judge or think—according to a common decision,” and all whilst “reserving always the right to recall their decision whence they should find a better course” (TTP, 257). This idea underpins Spinoza’s characterisation of the ‘free state’ in Chapter 20 of the TTP, where the purpose of the rationally ordered state is not to “turn people from rational beings into beasts or automata, but rather to *allow their minds and bodies to develop*” (TTP, 252).

Balibar’s formula suggests that the ‘rational’ depends on the mobilisation of ‘reasonable’ praxis, which implies human striving after self-preservation. This is where the paradox between the *principle* of natural right and the existence of the slave can be brought to light. Inasmuch as individuals constantly seek the means to secure life (and are continually conscious of this effort) the failure to ‘see or do what is good’ cannot follow from being separated from one’s power to act. Rather, what is required is an inversion of Balibar’s formula: that the ‘rational’ can *appear* to be satisfied, hence precluding the development of reason. In other words, the means through which the body politic is secured would appear satisfied. From this point of view, active striving would do no more than actuate the determinative commands of the community.

This difficulty accentuates the need to think more carefully about how to mediate between the affective and rational constitution of society. This is why—though it never enters Spinoza’s vocabulary—the term ‘voluntary servitude’ retains the locus of an irreducible enigma: why does a people not realise that their very active striving thwarts their better interest? Obversely, what is it that compels a people to recognise (and thus pursue) what is most rightfully their own, namely, their power? Let us establish this as a provisional question, and look more closely at how this idea is developed in the text.

The development of this idea implies a servitude that cannot be reduced to a wilful striving or the result of external constraint. Rather, it is their point of convergence that concerns us; where heteronomy *appears* like autonomy. It seems to me that the paradoxical definition of slavery is projected directly onto the proceeding discussion of Hebrew theocracy in chapter 17, where it anticipates Spinoza's analysis of how, and under what conditions, the body politic is effectually realised.

Firstly, Spinoza's discussion of the 'foundations of the state' in chapter 16 is grounded by the consideration that "any agreement can have force only if it is in our interest" (*TTP*, 199). Again, this is how democracy comes to be 'properly' defined, as "a united gathering of people (*coetus universus hominum*) which collectively has the right to do all that it has the power to do" (*TTP*, 200). In other words, every civil body contains within it the reality that the order of nature "prohibits nothing but what no one desires, or no one can do" (*TTP*, 197). Spinoza is certainly no utopian. On the one hand, there would be no need for laws if "human beings were so constituted by nature that they desired nothing but ... true reason" (*TTP*, 72). On the other hand, "Each person's natural right is ... determined not by sound reason but by desire and power." And human desire is determined by "numberless other things that concern the eternal order of the whole of nature" (*TTP*, 197). Hence, "no society can subsist without government and compulsion, which moderate and restrain desires" (*TTP*, 73).

Yet, this leads to a profound consideration: "No one will ever 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; and there will never be a sovereign power that can dispose of everything just as it pleases" (*TTP*, 208). This is why fear alone is not enough to *effectively* secure the body politic. Obedience secured through compulsion produces subjects that have "no reason of interest or necessity for doing what they do" (*TTP*, 73). An additional mechanism is required to ensure the actualisation of the state. Hence, "those exert the greatest power who reign in the hearts and minds of their subjects (*eum maximum tenere imperium, qui in subditorum animos regnat*)" (*TTP*, 209). What emerges is a notion of state power that wields an enormous influence over individuals. In a word, it is the efficacy of institutions in moulding subjects to desire the determinative commands of the community: subjects must be made to subordinate themselves. To put it differently, it is by virtue of the fact that natural right cannot be forfeited that, in order that the state can effectively guarantee the durability of its form, it must ascertain the "loyalty of its subjects, their virtue and their constancy in executing

commands” (*TTP*, 210). The argumentation here implies a crucial corollary: it is the masses that constitute the most potent threat to the preservation of any body politic, yet it is only from within the masses that a guarantee for the preservation of the state can be sought.

This problem is the key to grasping Balibar’s article “*Jus-Pactum-Lex: On the Constitution of the Subject in the Theologico-Political Treatise*.”¹⁴ For Balibar, the articulation of the pact corresponds to the necessity of this ‘additional mechanism’ imposed on every singular state. According to Balibar’s reading of Spinoza, the pact does not signify a ‘metajuridical’ theory that governs from above the particular instantiation of civil bodies: hence it differs radically from traditional social contract theories. Rather, it stipulates the “complex of causes that permits a given state to preserve its form.” That is why “there are as many real states as there are forms of pacts.”¹⁵

In this manner, the ‘pact’ signals no more than the formal ‘working out’ of the fact that every mass must constitute itself as both subject and object of politics. Or, as Balibar would have it, every political order is the convergence of human natural right that is simultaneously represented in a collective imaginary. As a result, theocracy is then not merely a particular constitutional form, but the very expression of the kind of political authorship specific to human natural power. Hence, as Balibar writes: “Theocracy is the *imaginary* institution of society as democracy, that is, as the collective transfer of power of individuals to an *imperium* that is itself only their collective projection.”¹⁶ Differently put, the rational impulse to stabilise the body politic coincides with an imaginary guarantee. This works to justify political institutions, such that they appear as what is necessary for the security and preservation of the polity.

Spinoza illustrates this idea in an extraordinary passage. Indeed, even though a people will retain their natural right, “which therefore depends upon no one’s will but their own,” their actions nonetheless conform to the commands of the sovereign power. As Spinoza writes:

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)

These statements are paradoxically ordered for a reason. To recapitulate, it manifests the imperative by which any mass must constitute itself as both subject and object of politics. Hence, it is possible to act from one's volition and exercise one's own judgement, yet "simultaneously" (without logical contradiction) act perfectly in accordance with what the sovereign power decrees. The institution of the Mosaic Law associated constant observance of the Law with the means necessary to preserve the body politic, and hence its correlate: disobedience was identified with the necessary destruction of the state. As Spinoza writes: "nothing else is promised in the Bible in return for their obedience but the continued prosperity of their state" (*TTP*, 47). Moreover, the mobilisation of obedience was reinforced through material practices. Hence, in a striking passage one sees the repetition of *servitus* in the context of the discussion of the Hebrew state:

But the most potent factor was the *strong discipline of obedience* in which they were brought up. Every single thing they had to do according to a specific precept of the Law. They could not plough as and when they pleased, but could only do so at certain times and in particular years, and with only one kind of beast at a time; they could sow and reap only in a certain way and at a particular time; their lives without exception were a continual practice of obedience. To a people wholly accustomed to this, it must have appeared [*videri*] to be freedom [*libertas*] rather than slavery [*servitus*]; surely no one could have desired what was forbidden, only what was prescribed.

(*TTP*, 224, emphasis added)

It is here that the echo of La Boétie's thesis of voluntary servitude reaches its highest pitch. To reiterate, such a formulation of enslavement resists any easy distinction between the rational and affective modes of being. The difficulty is not that a people 'willingly' strive towards their own enslavement, but that the channelling of desire into static modes of existence immobilises the praxis of natural right while simultaneously *appearing as an immanent demand*. Which is to say, the investment of human active striving into an imaginary agreement beyond the here and now, along with its reinforcement through material practices, fosters the appearance

of satisfying the means necessary to secure life and the body politic. While it is to be admitted that the Hebrew masses were profoundly ignorant of the causes that determined and shaped their desires, this will always in some sense remain within the purview of theory. Indeed, the purpose of the theocratic injunction (the Law revealed by God), as well as the institution of collective practices, was solely to inculcate obedience. And although, as Spinoza writes, “all these things were more of opinion than reality” (*TTP*, 214), from the point of view of the Jewish masses, these instruments of transcendence that guaranteed obedience were unthinkable beyond their active striving toward the common good.¹⁷ Indeed, desire did not know itself beyond what the Law prescribed. In other words, there was no world beyond the permitted.

With this in mind, let us now return to the question that was provisionally laid out early; namely, how do a people recognise what is most rightfully their own (that is, their power)? We can now determine more precisely what is at stake. To the extent that the effectual realisation of the body politic coincides with a channeling of desires, ensuring that individuals are not simply coerced but subordinate themselves, how can we think the political as something other than a static being? The invocation of the slave in Chapter 16 provides a locus for thinking this problem, insofar, as we saw, that active striving can be pacified and yet simultaneously appear to satisfy the conditions of a ‘rationally’ ordered state. This is the point where institutions and desire converge, where active striving does no more than reproduce the determinative commands of the community. Hence one cannot ‘see’ beyond what is permitted. Out of this, how can a space for political action be thought?

Balibar hints at this: that the enunciation of the ‘pact’ reinforces obedience to the law at the same time that it “permanently opens up the possibility of a contestation: a questioning of the legitimacy of power.”¹⁸ Or, as he puts in *Spinoza and Politics*, in the context of theocracy: “fiction itself determines praxis and acts as an immanent cause within reality.”¹⁹ Yet, it is not enough to explain this process by way of the natural variations of human power, since the intrinsic utility of the ‘pact’ is always to avoid the inherently unstable affects of the masses. What must be thought is an *immanent mechanism* that can account for this process. My contention is that the definition of the slave in Chapter 16, as the *failure to calculate*, not only discloses a limit point to think Spinozist politics, but simultaneously provides a condition in which this possibility of praxis can be thought.

Unravelling this position will require acknowledging the core of Spinoza's version of freedom. A clue is provided in the *Tractatus Politicus*: "freedom does not remove the necessity of action but imposes it" (TP, 2.1). One could reduce this to mean the difference between a positive and negative freedom, anticipating Isaiah Berlin's well-known distinction. But this would belie a much stronger claim; namely, that freedom is inseparable from an ineliminable precarity, through which the human is invested with the capacity to respond and increase its power to act. Only by way of inserting the political with a latent instability can the possibility of freedom arise. In other words, precariousness *imposes the necessity of action*. As Spinoza puts it: "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 is where the phenomenon of voluntary servitude must be thought of as intensifying this intrinsic demand of ethical and political life. If the instrumentality of knowledge appears to be guaranteed, this must be thought of as producing *real* effects that *as such* impose the necessity of action. Otherwise put, the inability to 'see or do what is good' precludes effective engagement with the contingencies of political life. And yet, this very failure to mobilise praxis produces real effects, which are none other than the very need to secure the means to preserve the body politic. This double function can be stated otherwise: the definition of the slave in Chapter 16, as the failure to calculate, implies an existential threat that *itself* augments the necessity to commit to one's surroundings, that is, to seek means conducive to one's preservation. This dynamic allows us to posit an *immanent mechanism* that can account for processes of construction and destruction, for it is always the same causes that explain the rigidity of a state (and for that matter the astonishing stability of the Hebraic constitution) and its necessary dissolution. In order to develop this hypothesis, we need to understand how the aleatory (or, fortune) functions as a concealed centre of freedom.

To begin with, it is worth noting that the relationship between freedom and necessity, in Spinoza's terms, closely resembles Machiavelli's dialectic between *virtu* and *fortuna*, which appears in Chapter 25 of *The Prince*. Here, Machiavelli raises a concern; namely, that his appeal to *fortuna* deprives the possibility of human autonomy. But, as Machiavelli points out: "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."²⁰ What is at stake here is a concept of the aleatory. In Chapter 3 of the *TTP*, Spinoza defines fortune as the "direction of God

inasmuch as he governs human affairs through external and unforeseen causes” (*TTP*, 45). Moreover, the conservation of any singular thing (which includes the particular ‘form’ of any state) relies on “external things and are consequently called gifts of fortune because they depend mostly upon the direction of external causes of which we are ignorant” (*TTP*, 46).

But fortune cannot be attributed to a subjective failure of knowledge, which is what Spinoza seems to suggest. Nor can it amount to mere arbitrariness. According to Machiavelli, fortune is that which is “beyond all human conjecture,” *and yet* “it lets us control roughly the other half.”²¹ In other words, fortune imposes itself on us, motivating us to act, hence enabling *virtu*. The exegetical difficulty arises from Spinoza’s rejection of contingency in the *Ethics*: “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” (*E I*, P29). What relation does Spinoza’s philosophy have to chance, where all things are determined absolutely from God? Making sense of this is the key to grasping the double function of the failure to calculate: as an existential threat that simultaneously amplifies the exigencies of political life, and hence imposing the necessity of action.

To unpack this disguised centre of freedom it is necessary to understand how Spinoza employs the figure of chance, and furthermore, how it functions as an ethical imperative. This requires venturing into Louis Althusser’s “Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter.”²² The posthumously published text introduces the novel conceptual language of aleatory materialism. The critical idea underlying Althusser’s late philosophical writing consists in uncovering a subterranean tradition of materialism that privileges the modality of chance against the logic of necessity and finality.

Within this hidden tradition, Althusser places Spinoza in a lineage that stretches from Epicurus, Lucretius, and to Machiavelli (which also includes Hobbes, Rousseau, Marx, Heidegger, and Derrida). Central to Althusser’s thesis is his appeal to the *clinamen* in Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*, the “infinitesimal swerve” that interrupts the vertical fall of the atoms in the void.²³ According to Althusser, the intervention of the swerve gives rise to the aleatory in every encounter, both in its origins (for no encounter is guaranteed) and its effect (for no *telos* prefigures the effectuality of an encounter). But what place does this understanding of the *clinamen* have in Spinoza’s philosophy, which consistently alludes to the fixed and unalterable laws of nature? In a well-known correspondence with Hugo Boxel,

Spinoza suggests his affinity with the Ancient theorists of the atoms, and thus of the *clinamen*. The admission appears in Letter 56:

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.

(*Ep* 56)

This sole reference to Lucretius is cited against those who have “invented occult qualities, intentional species, substantial forms, and a thousand other trifles.” This is certainly not a cursory remark. It can be read co-extensively with Althusser’s thesis, which grants primacy of the aleatory over the form. Indeed, the letters exchanged between Spinoza and Boxel, upon closer examination, reveal an unacknowledged centre, where chance is concomitant with the very production of freedom.

At first glance the topic of the correspondence seems frivolous: Boxel asks for Spinoza’s opinion on “apparitions,” “ghosts,” and “spectres.” 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” (*Ep* 52). 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” (*Ep* 53). But Spinoza makes it clear that necessity and chance are in fact contraries: for the “world is a necessary effect of the divine nature” (*Ep* 54).

What in fact becomes clear is the notion of chance that Boxel employs is surreptitiously directed against the *absence of providence*, the lack of any free divine will. This production of chance is implicitly alluded to in Spinoza’s critique of finalism in the Appendix to Part 1 of the *Ethics*: “a stone falls from a roof on someone’s head and kills him.” Those who attempt to impute purpose (i.e. the superstitious) to things 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.” This ignorance is quite unlike the one which appears in the context of fortune.

Pierre Macherey refers to the production of chance in this context as a “necessary accident.”²⁴ Otherwise put, there is no “immanent necessity,” no internal unity, to a casual series that predetermines its effectuation. More pertinently, there exists no preordained necessity that can anticipate an encounter or guarantee the durability of its form: “Hence it follows that all particular things are contingent and perishable” (*E II*, P31S). The intervention of the *clinamen* is thus contingent, not because the encounter 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 is to acknowledge the void that looms over every prospect of a lasting encounter.

What is at stake here? The establishment and preservation of every ‘form,’ be it the individual or the body politic, requires continual engagement with one’s environment. Indeed, it is by virtue of the fact that no collective arrangement of human powers corresponds to a natural finality or preestablished harmony that the correlation between human freedom and greater power to act can be thought. This is to say, no masses are ‘elected’ above and beyond nature, but must secure the means to preserve life in the here and now. This amounts to the suggestion that every ‘form’ is constantly traversed by *reasonable* conditions of praxis.

Fundamentally, this also implies that every ‘form’ is from the outset liable to rupture and transformation. This underlies Althusser’s thesis that philosophy has as its object the void, that it begins from nothing and ends in nothing. As Althusser writes, “there is no eternity in the ‘laws’ of any world or any state. History is nothing but a permanent revocation of the accomplished fact by another undecipherable fact to be accomplished.”²⁵ Rather than privileging the primacy of the ‘form’ that takes hold, Althusser shifts the plane of investigation to its “underground current.” It is here that chance reigns, namely, where one “reasons ... not in terms of the Necessity of the accomplished fact, but in terms of the contingency of the fact to be accomplished.”²⁶

This shifting of the plane of investigation cannot be understated. By subordinating the necessity of every ‘form’ to contingency, Althusser furnishes us with the tools to think how the modality of the contingent creates the conditions for a space where ‘reasonable’ praxis can unfold. From this vantage point, the value of the *failure to calculate* is indispensable. On the one hand, it discloses a ‘permanent revocation’ that threatens to undermine the perceived necessity of an accomplished ‘form.’ On the other hand, it is by virtue of this existential threat that

it produces a *real* demand, which itself ‘imposes the necessity of action.’

With this in mind, it is worth turning back to Balibar’s text ‘From Individuality to Transindividuality’. Taking from Gilbert Simondon’s work on individuation, which rejects the notion of the individual as a pre-given matter, Balibar reads Spinoza’s philosophy as a forerunner in acknowledging the transindividual conditions of existence. The concept of transindividuality allows Balibar to understand human relations in such a way that avoids reducing the individual as a self-sufficient entity or merely the effect of a greater totality.

There are three key points Balibar 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. 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 social forces is thus fluid inasmuch as it is maintained by a continual exchange of parts. Differently put, the political is underscored by intractable processes of composition and decomposition. Turning to the text itself:

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.²⁷

However, this conservation remains precarious insofar as it demands the effort of individuals to maintain this “continuous regeneration.” This is the implication that follows from Proposition 39, Part 4 of the *Ethics*, which must be read in the context of utility: “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” (*E IV*, P39). That this statement is eminently political is confirmed by the proceeding proposition: “whatever is conducive to man’s social organisation ... is advantageous” (*E IV*, P40). These pronouncements 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.”²⁸

This is where the invocation of the slave as the failure to calculate is critical. Though its place in Chapter 16 seems at first glance a cursory remark, on closer inspection it reveals a permanent condition and limit of the political. That is, insofar as the continuous exchange of parts necessary to maintain the body politic 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.”²⁹ In this manner, what must be thought is the immanent mechanism that accounts for this process of construction and destruction. How it is that the same causes that allow the body politic to endure contain the seeds of its fracture? What is presupposed within this structure is the slave’s *failure to calculate*: the forestalling of ‘reasonable’ praxis introduces an existential threat, insofar as every ‘form’ requires “continuous regeneration.” And yet, this threat imposes itself as a constitutive element within the economy of human relations, hence ‘imposing the necessity of action.’ Fundamentally, this implies nothing more than the seeking out of means conducive to the preservation of life.

Drawing our threads together, our focus on Balibar provides a reading of the constitutive mechanisms at play in Spinoza’s politics. The central political problem, as we saw in Chapter 17, is the need to effectually realise the state from within the immanent nexus of human powers. Spinoza is keenly aware of the complexities involved, for no civil body can persist through constraining its people. Hence, not compulsion but the *elimination of chance* is required. Spinoza appeals to the role of institutions in channelling desires toward the moulding of compliant subjects. I argued, firstly, that the paradoxical definition of the slave anticipates this development. Indeed, the failure to calculate cannot proceed from being separated from one’s power. Rather, it is the point where political structures and active striving intersect, where transcendental instruments of coercion and control are experienced as an immanent demand. Here, active striving does no more than reproduce determinative commands: hence, one cannot ‘see’ beyond the permitted. This difficulty intensifies the need to mobilise a theoretical strategy that allows us to understand how the power of a mass—from *within this immanent fold*—can come to recognise (and hence pursue) their right.

This leads us to Althusser’s late ‘philosophy of the encounter,’ where the slave’s failure to calculate functions not only as a limit, but as a permanent condition of the political. This failure coincides with the inability to tame the aleatory by organising one’s encounters (the effort required to maintain the “continuous regeneration” of parts), introducing an existential threat that itself ‘imposes the ne-

cessity of action.’ Lastly, what remains to be said of the ‘rational’? Nothing more than the set of determinative relations (the ‘form’) that *appears* necessary only insofar as it lasts. As Althusser frames it:

Once the encounter *has* ‘taken hold’—that is, once the stable figure of the world, of the *only* existing world (for the advent of a given world obviously excludes all other possible combinations), has been constituted—we have to do with a stable world in which events, in their succession, obey ‘laws.’³⁰

In other words, the successful cohesion of the parts, its ‘taking hold,’ banishes from sight the possibility that these determinative conditions not only could have been otherwise, but are liable to rupture. This is why one cannot do without the *failure to calculate*. It prompts us to think, not in terms of a ‘proper’ adequation between ‘form’ and ‘content,’ but in terms of the fissures where a space for action can be pursued.

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NOTES

1. The following editions have been used for Spinoza's texts. For the Latin, see Benedict de Spinoza, *Opera*. Ed. Carl Gebhardt. Heidelberg: Winter, 1925. For the English translations see, Benedictus de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*. Trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Benedictus de Spinoza, *Ethics. Complete Works: Spinoza*. Ed. Michael L. Morgan. Trans. Samuel Shirley. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002; Benedictus de Spinoza, *Political Treatise*. Trans. Samuel Shirley. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000; Benedictus de Spinoza, *The Letters. Complete Works: Spinoza*. Ed. Michael L. Morgan. Trans. Samuel Shirley. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002.
2. 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: On Spinoza's Epicureanism* (forthcoming).
3. Étienne de la Boétie, *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude (or Against One)*. Trans. James B. Atkinson and David Sices. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2012, 13.
4. La Boétie, *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, 13.
5. La Boétie, *Discourse on Voluntary Servitude*, 13.
6. See Susan James, "Freedom, Slavery, and the Passions." *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza's Ethics*. Ed. Olli Koistinen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 223-42.
7. James, "Freedom, Slavery, and the Passions," 231.
8. Frederic Lordon, *Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire*. Trans. Gabriel Ash. London: Verso, 2014.
9. Lordon, *Willing Slaves of Capital*, 18.
10. Lordon, *Willing Slaves of Capital*, 20.
11. Étienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*. Trans. Peter Snowdon. London: Verso, 2008, 76-95.
12. Étienne Balibar, "Spinoza: From Individuality to Transindividuality." Delft: Eburon 1997, 28.
13. Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present*. New York: Routledge, 1999, 120.
14. Étienne Balibar, "Jus-Pactum-Lex: On the Constitution of the Subject in the *Theologico-Political Treatise*." *The New Spinoza*. Eds Warren Montag and Ted Stolze. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 171-201.
15. Balibar, "Jus-Pactum-Lex," 177.
16. Balibar, "Jus-Pactum-Lex," 183.
17. See Catherine Malabou, "Before and Above: Spinoza and Symbolic Necessity." *Critical Inquiry* 53 (2016, 84-109). Here, Malabou investigates to what extent Spinoza misses the immanent dimension within transcendence.
18. Balibar, "Jus-Pactum-Lex," 193.
19. Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, 47.
20. Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*. Trans. Russel Price. Ed. Quentin Skinner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, 85.
21. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, 85.
22. Louis Althusser, "Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter." *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-87*. Trans. G.M. Goshgarian. London: Verso, 2006, 163-208.
23. Althusser, "Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter," 169.
24. Pierre Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*. Trans. Susan M. Ruddick. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 174.

25. Althusser, "Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter," 174.
26. Althusser, "Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter," 174.
27. Balibar, *From Individuality to Transindividuality*, 18.
28. Balibar, *From Individuality to Transindividuality*, 20.
29. Balibar, *From Individuality to Transindividuality*, 22.
30. Althusser, "Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter," 195.