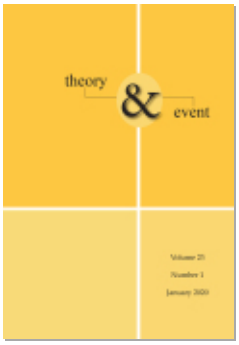
The Politics of Ethics: Spinoza and New Materialisms

William Kujala, Regan Burles



Theory & Event, Volume 23, Number 1, January 2020, pp. 145-165 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

The Politics of Ethics: Spinoza and New Materialisms

William Kujala and Regan Burles

Abstract This paper evaluates the appropriation of Baruch Spinoza's ethical philosophy in new materialist political thought. While Spinoza's *Ethics* figures prominently in this literature, his political works remain marginal. We find that the interpretation of Spinoza that informs William Connolly and Brian Massumi's political ethic of self-cultivation and transformation lacks an engagement with problems of sovereign authority and its limits with which Spinoza was preoccupied in *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and *Tractatus Politicus*. For Spinoza, we show, the transformative potential of the *Ethics* is both enabled and limited by a series of political conditions associated with theories of the early modern state.

Introduction

Over the last several decades, a diverse group of thinkers across the social sciences and humanities, generally grouped under the name "new materialisms," has sought to develop alternatives to modern ontologies developed in seventeenth-century European philosophy. While there is a considerable amount of diversity within this literature, what unites it is a shared emphasis on the significance of materiality, including arational forces such as affect, for political life. As Lundborg and Vaughan-Williams explain, "what binds this diverse literature together is a common attempt to thematize the concept of materiality, its relationship with politics, and how an emphasis on material factors might lead to a refashioning of our understanding of the concept of 'the political.'"[1] This refashioning is aimed at developing conceptions of politics that are not based on modern dualisms, particularly the distinction between nature and culture, but also transcendental/empirical, human/animal, and self/other. This article evaluates the political theories of two prominent new materialist thinkers—Brian Massumi and William Connolly—by comparing how the figure of Spinoza is mobilized in their political thought with the way the relation between ethics and politics is conceived in Spinoza's own work. Though both thinkers ground their political projects in Spinoza's *Ethics*, we argue

Theory & Event Vol. 23, No. 1, 145–165 © 2020 Johns Hopkins University Press

that their lack of sustained attention to Spinoza's political writings results in significant gaps in their political thought. In particular, they ignore the problem of authorization—the problem of how to ground and legitimize human authority in a context in which God and Nature can give at best partial direction. This is a problem that occupied many seventeenth-century European political thinkers (most notably Thomas Hobbes), including Spinoza, yet is notably absent from new materialist political thought.

The lack of theorization of this problem by new materialist political thinkers, we argue, results in two central difficulties. The first is that both Massumi and Connolly attempt to develop a politics directly from their ontology, without attending to the difficulties accompanying such a move. Second, their conception of politics and political action ultimately becomes reducible to ethics and ethical action. These are problems in the context of a Spinozan ontology, because in Spinoza's thought, the ontology and ethics elaborated in the *Ethics* is not disconnected from the politics elaborated in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*TTP*). The first section of the article thus elaborates Massumi and Connolly's respective theories of politics with an eye to the two problems identified above. The second section demonstrates why these are problems in the context of Spinoza's thought through a reading of the relation between the *Ethics* and the *TTP*. We suggest that by not attending to the problem of authority that Spinoza addresses in the *TTP*, new materialist thinkers tacitly accede to liberal modern accounts of political authority grounded in specific conceptions of right, subjectivity, and the state. The paper concludes with a call for greater engagement with the problem of authorization by new materialist political thinkers.

As Fear notes, there is a dearth of critical literature on new materialist thought, and the same can be said of new materialist political thought in particular.[2] What literature does exist tends to focus on the use (or misuse) of scientific evidence by new materialists, who often rely on interpretations of scientific experiments to bolster their arguments.[3] This paper builds on previous critiques of new materialist political thought[4] through an analysis of the relation between the ethical and political thought of Baruch Spinoza. Though a comprehensive review of this literature is beyond the scope of this article, we suggest that the claims we identify with new materialism, though perhaps not characteristic of every thinker who might be grouped under its banner, are certainly indicative of broad trends in the literature.[5] With that in mind, we have focused our analysis on the work of Brian Massumi and William Connolly. These theorists represent a range of new materialist thought, as Massumi's work primarily focuses on affect, while Connolly tends to emphasize complexity science. Furthermore, Massumi and Connolly are the theorists who make some of the most explicit and

substantive attempts to rethink the political within new materialist literature: Connolly by drawing connections between the philosophy of figures like Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Deleuze, and insights gleaned from the burgeoning complexity sciences, and Massumi by showing how affect can produce insights about political processes[6] and act as the ground for an alternative conception of the political.[7] Though the differences between them are not insignificant, Connolly and Massumi are united in their effort to construct an alternative politics from a relational, immanent ontology grounded primarily in Spinoza's *Ethics*.

A Spinozan Inheritance

Though new materialist literature is far from uniform in either its ontological presuppositions or its politics, and in fact comprises "a rather heterogeneous and not always compatible set of theoretical positions,"[8] it is possible to identify commonalities across these literatures that are helpful when evaluating new materialist political thought. One such commonality is that new materialists aiming to rethink the political do so in part by drawing on a different set of thinkers than the canon conventionally taught in political theory graduate classrooms. Massumi calls this tradition "process philosophy," a kind of thinking that takes "the task of philosophy as understanding the world as an ongoing process in continual transformation."[9] Connolly, meanwhile, calls this set of thinkers "a minor tradition of reflection upon nature, memory, thinking, the layering of culture, and an ethics of cultivation."[10] This alternative tradition includes the names Spinoza, Nietzsche, Bergson, William James, Alfred North Whitehead, and Gilles Deleuze. Among these, Spinoza in particular has become a touchstone for much new materialist thought, appearing as a central figure in the work of both Connolly and Massumi.[11] This means that Spinoza's thought and its interpretation are a useful prism through which we can consider the basic political understandings of 'new materialism.' His *Ethics* in particular is a crucial philosophical ur-text for affect theory and new materialism.

What we find curious about this resurrection of Spinoza, especially in relation to efforts to develop novel forms of politics, is the lack of attention given to Spinoza's explicitly political writings. While references to Deleuze's reading of Spinoza, and to the *Ethics* itself, abound in new materialist work, far fewer are made to Spinoza's two major political works, *The Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*TTP*) and *The Tractatus Politicus* (*TP*). What is notable in this context is the way that Spinoza's political thought grapples with the same problem—which we call the problem of authorization—that other seventeenth-century philosophers, such as Hobbes, are grappling with at the same time. Thus, while Spinoza's *Ethics* might provide a radically different

ontology from that of the conventional political theory canon, the central political problem (and, to a large degree, the answers he provides to this problem) addressed in Spinoza's *oeuvre* arguably does not differ substantially from that found in other canonical seventeenth-century political thinkers in terms of its guiding problematic. In short, though many new materialist thinkers draw powerfully on Spinoza's ethics to develop alternative politics, they fail to consider the relation between Spinoza's ethics and his politics. They risk ignoring the ways in which the account of the good life, true knowledge, and self-transformation found in the *Ethics* is nested in a basically conventional account of the authority of the early modern state. The *Ethics* already presumes certain answers to questions about the nature and limits of political authority and political space that may implicitly limit the ethical self-transformation implied in what affect theorists take to be Spinoza's philosophy.

Before turning to a consideration of new materialist political thought and Spinoza's explicitly political works, we here provide a brief account of the lineage of the new materialists' Spinoza, which emerges primarily from Gilles Deleuze's reading of Spinoza in his *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*. In that text, Deleuze is concerned with "the practical theses that made Spinozism an object of scandal."[12] This "scandalous" reading of Spinoza is what theorists such as Connolly, Massumi, and Bennett take up in their creative appropriation of Spinoza. The first of these theses is Spinoza's claim that "Nobody has yet determined the limits of the body's capabilities: that is, nobody as yet has learned from experience what the body can and cannot do, without being determined by mind, solely from the laws of its nature in so far as it is considered as corporeal."[13] What in Spinoza's text is an admission of finitude (the fact that we cannot understand bodies themselves, but only bodily affections as they express themselves as ideas in the mind, becomes a slogan of transformative possibilities, in Deleuze: "We do not even know what a body can do."[14] Deleuze links this ignorance of the body to what he calls Spinoza's "parallelism," his account of substance. Against thinkers like Descartes, who had argued that the world is made up of two substances, mind and extension, Spinoza argued that the impossibilities and absurdities to which one was led to connect the two substances should be rectified by asserting that there is simply one substance (God, or Nature). Instead of two substances, mind and body were simply two different, separate yet "parallel" attributes of one eternal and infinite substance.[15] The mind parallels the affects of the body. Indeed, as Spinoza puts it, "The object of the idea constituting the human mind is the body—i.e., a definite mode of extension actually existing, and nothing else."[16] Deleuze argues this parallelism implies first, that the body and mind are equivalent, neither having priority over the other, and second, that "the body surpasses the knowledge we have of it, and that thought likewise

surpasses the consciousness we have of it." For Deleuze, what we call "consciousness" is simply a limited train of thoughts and knowledges. The mind can find powers that "exceed our knowledge" in the body, of which we still do not know the limits. On this specific reading of Spinoza's ontology, the body is a site of excess and escape from the limits of our current conditions of consciousness, because by finding the excessive possibilities of the body we return those possibilities to the mind as well, "in a parallel fashion."[17]

This reading of Spinoza and his *Ethics* is crucial for the new materialists. Parallelism has a clear descendant in Massumi's distinction between *affect* as the excess of bodies relating to each other, as an "incipiency" characterized by a wide virtual potential and *emotion* as the personalization, limitation, and re-ordering of intensity in narrative sequence.[18] Affect—bodily relation and intensity—becomes the way in which we access possibilities beyond the limits of our personalities, narratives, and histories. For Connolly (who quotes Spinoza's dictum approvingly as well)[19] this excessive, unknowable body becomes a site for oblique exercises that operate on what he calls the "Body/brain" complex. This complex, like Spinoza's "body," is a site of simultaneous unknowability and possibility. We cultivate new possibilities for thought, on Connolly's account, by operating obliquely on our bodily habits, which will recursively change our patterns and habits of thought.[20] From Spinoza, therefore, Connolly derives his "immanent naturalism" and a parallel ethics of self-transformation. By working slowly and meticulously on our bodily habits, we become more attentive to the ways in which affective excess and intensity is captured in cultural, racial, emotional, and political orderings of perception.[21]

New materialist theorizing thus taps into a radical re-reading of Spinoza's *Ethics* to propose an ethic of self- and collective transformation by gesturing toward the excessive, productive possibilities of embodiment and affectivity. Attentiveness to radical immanence and worldliness rightly leads Connolly to assert that the new materialist account of political creativity "does not mesh well with the quest to find sufficient, eternal banisters of moral authority and judgment."[22] New materialism does away with the idea that there are natural, rationally accessible foundations for political action and judgment. However, this lack of natural standards does not self-evidently give way to an ethic of radical transformation and creativity. In the history of political thought it instead opened the abyssal modern problematic of the relationship between force and right: if there is no natural foundation for authorized force and power, what founds or holds together the political? This is the problem that Spinoza, alongside other theorists of political foundations, takes this up in his *TTP*, a text often ignored in the new materialist focus on the transformative immanence of the *Ethics*.

One might imagine that it is precisely the conventionality of Spinoza's political texts that causes them to be justifiably ignored by new materialist thinkers in favor of the ontology developed in the *Ethics*. After all, the model of politics presented in Spinoza's work, insofar as it relies on a conception of political authority which is unified and sovereign, is in large part the object of new materialist political critique. If the goal is to move away from such a model, it makes sense to privilege Spinoza's ontology, which for these thinkers, as for Deleuze, has more radical political potential. Furthermore, the works of canonical theorists, as Deleuze might say, are best treated as toolboxes, full of concepts to be picked up and used for practical purposes, rather than totalizing systems of thought whose meaning is fixed and discoverable through a direct and unmediated engagement with the text.[23] Yet our goal is not to affirm Spinoza's specific political program, or to critique the politics of relationality, complexity, and affect in favor of modernist assumptions about nature, the subject, and the state. Rather, we wish to point to the particular *problem* that Spinoza's political thought is concerned with, a problem that, in our view, is broadly shared by other political thinkers of Spinoza's time. It is this problem that is left behind by new materialist attempts to reconceive politics.

The politics of becoming

From ontology to politics

The move from ontology to politics is made frequently by advocates of complex ontologies.[24] As Bonnie Washick and Elizabeth Wingrove explain, "various commentators present the argument that the ethical insights fostered by the ontology of new materialisms enable better, more compassionate politics and action with(in) the world."[25] In these accounts, new scientific insights about the complex, self-organizing capacities of physical and biological systems can provide clues to the optimal form of human political organization. Stuart Kauffman, who is a touchstone thinker in Connolly's work, argues, for example, that "the emerging sciences of complexity… offer fresh support for the idea of a pluralistic democratic society, providing evidence that it is not merely a human creation, but part of the natural order of things."[26] In this model, by reproducing the organized complexity of the world, political systems can become more democratic, more free, and more just. For Kauffman, the complexity of natural phenomena provides the ideal model for human social and political systems, and evidence of the natural rightness of political aspirations such as pluralism, democracy, and freedom.

Though Connolly and Massumi are far more sensitive than Kauffman to the difficulties of moving from complex ontologies to

particular political programs, they make the same basic move. Their respective political projects theorize politics from an ontology of relationality, becoming, and event that builds on that developed in Spinoza's *Ethics*. These accounts articulate a form of politics based on a "radical empiricism"[27] in which the ethical subject is enjoined to work on itself in order to become more responsive and attuned to the complexity that constitutes and surrounds it. Yet there is no direct, necessary, or self-evident link between a particular ontology and a particular form of political life. In the words of Washick and Wingrove, "that the new materialisms' ontology entails relationality is clear, but why relationality dictates a particular ethical position is not."[28] As we demonstrate in the second section of the paper, Spinoza's political theory is developed as a response to this precise problem. He rejects the view that nature provides any particular guidance regarding how human beings ought to live. This means that the question of the grounds on which such decisions should be made, and who should make them, is left open.

The core of Massumi's political ontology is Spinoza's definition of affect: the "affections of the body" in which the body's power increases or decreases.[29] This insight is for Massumi the key to the relation between affect and politics; it is what makes affect political. "The immediately political dimension" of affect, he explains in an interview, is "built into the base definition of affect informing process approaches… This definition, deceptively simple, was formulated by Spinoza: affect is the power to 'affect and be affected.'"[30] The political dimension of affect is twofold: First, it is linked to affect's relational character and its participation in the temporality of the event. Massumi explains that, "the emphasis on embodiment, variation, and relation gives [affect] an immediately political aspect."[31] In place of a modern politics that aims at the mastery and control of the world by a sovereign, self-identical subject, Massumi elaborates a vision in which "politics, approached affectively, is an art of emitting the interruptive signs, triggering the cues that attune bodies while activating their capacities differentially."[32] Such an approach requires attention to the evental character of any given situation, where 'situation" means a confluence of affective forces, bodies, movements, and tendencies whose utterly unique configuration contains a set of immanent potentialities open to activation. Politics here is an ethico-aesthetic practice geared toward exploring the potentials immanent within the infinite relations of differentiation of life. This approach suggests that "the political question, then, is not how to find a resolution, it is not how to impose a solution. It's how to keep the intensity in what comes next."[33] Spinoza's definition of affect, then, and the immanent, relational ontology that accompanies it, works as the ground of Massumi's political project, and much new materialist politics.

For Connolly, too, it is an ontological re-orientation that is crucial for contemporary politics. He argues that in "an era when hegemonic nature/culture bifurcations, secular/sacred divisions, life/nonlife dichotomies, center/periphery relations, and science/faith struggles historically inscribed in Euro-American life are rattled by the advent of the Anthropocene,"[34] an ontological position that privileges "the primacy of forces over forms" and that takes the world "as neither our oyster nor our servant" but rather as a place in which "we inhabit… and are inhabited by its multiple stabilities and volatilities"[35] has the greatest potential to counter the twin threats of the politics of blame and the changing climate. This ontological position is one that Connolly elaborates in earlier work with reference to Spinoza's philosophy of "immanent naturalism,"[36] which, in Connolly's view, can provide a way through the stifling binary distinctions of modern political thought toward an ontological position that is capable of attending to the vitality and creativity of life. He writes that

> [T]he reason cultural thinkers as diverse as Spinoza, Whitman, Nietzsche, Proust, Merleau- Ponty, Deleuze, Whitehead, Malafouris, Massumi, and Bennett were primed to anticipate some such powers even before this research in neuroscience emerged is that the poetic experience of human receptivity to culture and nature they have tested in live experiments leads them to project some such mode of reception and self-organization"[37]

In short, the ontology of immanence and becoming which he proposes, and takes in large part from Spinoza, can produce an awareness of heretofore unacknowledged qualities of the world that have the potential to produce an alternative to the limits of early modern European political thought.

Connolly builds on this ontological position to develop what he calls a "politics of swarming"[38] which resists the twin alternatives of organic belonging and detached mastery in favor of "the pursuit of reflective attachments to a multifarious, entangled, dangerous world."[39] Aside from the way it moves directly from ontology to politics, one notable element of this passage is that the enemy of Connolly's politics, the primary obstacle to the human flourishing he describes, is capitalism. The state and sovereignty, the customary locus and form of modern political authority, are absent from the passage, and rarely mentioned in the book. That capitalism presents the obstacle to human flourishing that Connolly thinks it does is not in dispute here. However, attention to the problem of political authority, so central to Spinoza's own work, is largely absent.[40]

From politics to ethics

As shown above, both Massumi and Connolly base their respective political projects on the ontology elaborated in Spinoza's *Ethics*. In doing so, they both elaborate a politics that is synonymous with the cultivation of a particular ethical relation to the world. This ethical relation is about awareness and cultivation of the "excess" of life in contrast to the deadening, constraining character of modern categories. Jane Bennett responds to the concern that Washick and Wingrove express regarding the subsumption of politics into ethics by suggesting that "perhaps the crux of the difference between Washick–Wingrove and many new materialists is whether or not one finds it useful to delimit a special realm called 'the political,' with distinctive traits, norms and tasks. New materialisms tend not to invoke the political as (what Washick and Wingrove have called) 'a particular, if not sui generis, dimension of living.'"[41] In other words, new materialist ontologies may not lend themselves to the clear delimitation of a sphere of activity called politics, given that the category of the political is bound up with modern dualisms such as nature/culture and self/other. Yet neither Massumi or Connolly make this claim. Rather, they do the opposite, and develop explicit theories of political action. This is not to say they conceive of politics as utterly discrete from any other domain of knowledge and action,[42] but it is to say that their work at least tacitly implies that "politics" is in some sense different from ethics or philosophy. Even if they did, however, decide that the disappearance of politics in favor of ethics is what was called for given the kind of worlds they envision, they would still have trouble doing so using Spinoza as an ontological base, because Spinoza himself insists that while ethics and politics are distinct, they are not only related, but inseparable.

Massumi's most substantive exploration of what this kind of politics entails comes in *What animals teach us about politics*, in which, drawing on Gregory Bateson, he develops a theory of politics based on the cultivation of life potential characterized by play. Play, writes Bateson, is meta-communicative, in that it demonstrates communication about a form of communication. Massumi describes this element of play as follows: "A wolf cub who bites its litter mate in play 'says,' in the manner in which it bites, 'this is not a bite.'"[43] In this sense, Massumi goes on, "the play statement is one that says what it denies, and denies what it says. It is logically undecideable."[44] Understood in this way, play has two related consequences. The first is that the human and the animal exist in a relation of mutual indiscernibility: "In play, the human enters a zone of indiscernibility with the animal. When we humans say 'this is play,' we are assuming our animality. Play dramatizes the reciprocal participation of human and animal."[45] This undecidability between human and animal, the continual blur-

ring of those categories, without one collapsing into the other, introduces a logic different than that based on the law of noncontradiction, that of the "included middle" which "does not observe the sanctity of the separation of categories, nor respect the rigid segregation of arenas of activity."[46] Second, the undecideable quality of the ludic gesture produces an "excess" that escapes the binary categories of human and animal. "There is a one-word synonym for differential mutual inclusion," Massumi writes: "Life."[47] The affective dimension of existence undoes the categories of human and animal, but without eliminating them entirely. The concept of play thus introduces an "excess," which Massumi (following Deleuze) calls "Life," a dimension of experience that is occluded by the conception of the human (and animal) that are central to modern political thought.

It is in this way that Massumi's conception of politics becomes an ethics, as the infinite movement of affective intensity points the way towards a particular ethical project. He explains that "the implied ethics of the project is the value attached… to the multiplication of the powers of existence to ever-divergent regimes of action and expression."[48] Furthermore, "what we learn from animals is the possibility of constructing what Guattari calls an ethico-aesthetic paradigm of natural politics (as opposed to a politics of nature)."[49] Finally, Massumi makes the same claim in *Politics of affect*, where he writes that an affective politics "would be an aesthetic politics, because its aim would be to expand the range of affective potential—which is what aesthetic practice has always been about… Felix Guattari liked to hyphenate the two—towards an 'ethico-aesthetic politics.'"[50] On this account, politics is a matter of cultivating an ethical attachment to multiplying the powers of life that are immanently given in a situation.

A similar idea is expressed in Connolly's philosophy of "connectionism." This philosophy is related to what Jane Bennett calls "distributive agency," in which the agentic capacities of nonhuman things to influence human affairs is recognized as a limit to liberal modern notions of the autonomous sovereign subject.[51] An acknowledgment of complex agency, on his account, "involves a capacity to deepen sensitivity to others of varying degrees of agentic capacity."[52] This is the task of the "connectionist," to cultivate and create more of the kinds of flows and connections that already make up the world. Recognition of the ontological primacy of becoming over being, means that political action must revolve around an ethical relation to the world that recognizes and cultivates differential modes of action. The ethical subject must ensure that they "attend to the fugitive forces that exceed" representations of the world.[53] What grounds these dispersed, disparate, and mobile micropolitical[54] activities for Connolly, however, is a particular ethical orientation. He calls this "an ethic of cultivation…[that] taps into contingent strains of attachment and presumptive generosity

that are already there, seeking to amplify them and to adjust them to situations that sometimes change significantly."[55]

In the case of both Massumi and Connolly, politics takes the form of an ethics derived from an immanent ontology of becoming at the expense of the problem of authorization. Politics, in this sense, becomes a project of cultivation of and response to the "excess"—whether conceived of as affect or "life" or "emergence"'—that constantly escapes the constraining categories of early modern European political thought, and involves a sensitivity and responsiveness toward this excess. The subject's awareness of the complex world that surrounds them inaugurates ethical life. The ethical subject must work with affective flows to open possibilities previously stifled by the capture of power. Attention to novelty, and an openness directed at the creation and cultivation of further novelty is the form of ethical and by extension political life called for by ontological complexity. An examination of the relation between ontology, ethics, and politics in Spinoza's thought, however, demonstrates that the elaboration of an ethico-political orientation from a materialist ontology is fraught with difficulty.

Spinoza and the Question of the Limits of the Political

The difficult relationship between Spinoza's ontology and his explicit political theory, while overlooked by new materialists, has been a subject of discussion by other interpreters: on the one hand, recent work by scholars such as Lefebvre, James, Del Lucchese, and Williams has brought the question of "the political," "constituent power," and the problem of political foundations in Spinoza's thought to the fore.[56] On the other hand, Marxist appropriators of Spinoza such as Negri and Balibar explicitly engage in detailed discussions of the relationship between Spinoza's transformative ontology of immanence and his account of democracy and political foundations in the *TTP* and *TP*. While ultimately the latter endorse the use of Spinoza's ontology as a "political anthropology" this is only after investigating the relationship between that ontology and Spinoza's account of the political.[57] The central import of the *TTP* and *TP* in this regard, we argue, is that they inaugurate a critique of new materialist political theory: not a criticism, but an explication of the political limits and conditions of possibility for their account of transformative or affective political ethics.

A fruitful way to begin articulating this critique is to provide an account of the critical role the *TTP* plays in Spinoza's corpus. Antonio Negri, paying close attention to the textual history of the *Ethics*, notes the interruption of Spinoza's composition of the *Ethics* in favour of a publishable work on political theology. This "interruptive" character of the *TTP*, for Negri, marks the moment in Spinoza's intellectual development when he recognized that "the world of imagination and

history, or concretely the world of religion and politics, cannot be challenged from the perspective of rational theology and physics."[58] The *TTP*, for Negri, is a "refoundation" of the philosophy of the *Ethics* with a "deepening of the critical function."[59] More conventional interpreters of Spinoza such as Curley see in the *TTP* a "prolegomenon" to the Ethics, a text that not only covers some of the same issues of the *Ethics* but that attempts to argue for an understanding of political authority that will make the knowledge and happiness of the *Ethics* possible as a project in the historical and political world. As he writes, the *TTP* is at least in part an expression of Spinoza's belief that "people needed to be rid of their theological prejudices before they could give a sympathetic hearing to the *Ethics*."[60] Spinoza himself acknowledged such reasons for composing the *TTP*: in a letter to Balling he noted that with the *TTP* he would combat superstition, refute his enemies' claims that he was an atheist, and argue for the freedom of thought in a republic.[61] By, as his subtitle suggests, articulating the ways in which "the freedom to philosophize may not only be allowed without danger to piety and the stability of the republic but cannot be refused without destroying the peace of the republic and piety itself,"[62] Spinoza is simultaneously defending himself against political enemies and articulating the political conditions in which the *Ethics* can be said publicly at all. As Susan James puts it, the *TTP* "is in effect an analysis of the conditions in which the Dutch Republic will be able to sustain a way of life informed by Spinoza's philosophical idea" that works by overcoming the political and philosophical "obstacles" to the way of life articulated in the *Ethics*.[63]

This critical task leads Spinoza to give an account of the state and the limits of political authority—what Negri calls the "constitution of collectivity."[64] Only in doing so can the freedom to philosophize and its relation to the "peace of the republic" be reconciled. It is here, in this task, that we can discern the linkages between Spinoza's transformative ontology of immanence and a conventional politics of contract, consent, and coercion revolving around questions of the relationship between right and force, "liberty" and "security."

Spinoza begins this analysis from the presupposition that to determine the nature and limits of the state's authority, one must begin from an explanation of "the natural right which everyone possesses," namely, "the rules governing the nature of every individual thing according to which we conceive it is naturally determined to exist in a definite way."[65] Natural right is, here, not a transcendental measure of what one can do, but is instead determined and limited only by "desire" and "power."[66] Right is simply identical with what a being can and desires to do. Nature provides no external measure that could prohibit any given action, but only a limit according to what a being is: "each individual thing has the sovereign right to all that it can do;

i.e. the right the individual extends is coextensive with its determinate power."[67] As Gatens and del Lucchese argue, Spinoza's understanding of power as right, *jus sive potentia*, is an expression of Spinoza's thesis that right is simultaneously factual and normative.[68] Spinoza's concept of power, here, demystifies the basis of authority by claiming that "nature" does not justify force but that force is self-justifying—that right stretches to the extent of a body's power. This re-interpretation of natural right from transcendental measure to immanent description opens up the question of how sovereign power can be founded when it "does not and cannot enforce pre-existing natural law for the simple reason that there is no natural law capable of enforcement." Sovereignty, here, does not realize or enforce law but instead makes it.[69] In this, Spinoza appropriates Hobbesian styles of reasoning about the foundations of political communities, even as he engages them in novel and unique ways.[70]

Spinoza uses his account of natural right as power to give an account of the origins of society. He argues that the natural right (or power) possessed by humans leads to inevitable conflict and diffidence because rules of mine and yours, justice, and promises are all impossible when there is no limit (save that of one's capacity) to what one might do. Spinoza uses the example of the promise to give a robber all of one's money, an example he borrows from Hobbes.[71] In the state of nature (by right of nature) one may promise the robber and immediately break that promise if it means keeping one's possessions and life; equally, the robber has as much a right as me to rob, as long as it is in his or her power to do so.[72] The best way to escape the consequences of leaving things to nature is to found a society: the conditions of living securely and peacefully are found not in human nature but in "external circumstances" that are often inscrutable in terms of the necessity of God, or nature. Here "human intervention and vigilance" is necessary "to help us live in safety and to avoid injury."[73] As he writes in his discussion of the Hebrews, "Reason and experience have taught us no surer means than to organize a society under fixed laws, to occupy a fixed territory, and to concentrate the strength of all its members into one body… the body of a society."[74] Society, for Spinoza, exists for the first purpose, of "peace and security of life."[75] Second, only in society is the pursuit of the "arts and sciences" necessary for human beatitude possible.[76]

The problem immediately arises, however, of the paradox of political founding. If the conditions hypothetically "before" society—the natural right or power of each being—prevent the conditions of promising, prosperity, and community, how can we expect a contractual or consensual beginning to society to occur? How, in other words, is it possible in a situation in which nature "forbids only those things that no one desires and no one can do" that everyone would "pledge"

"to be guided in all matters only by the dictates of reason," curb their appetites, and refrain from harm through mutual obligation?[77] Spinoza determines that this is possible if the agreement is in our interest, using this interest as a criterion for deciding when the "agreement automatically becomes null and void."[78] Yet, as Spinoza has already noted previously in his discussion of the history of the Hebrews, people do not act in accordance with their interest or with "sound reason" but instead are guided by their "fleshly desire" and "emotions."[79] Spinoza writes in his preface to the *TTP* that he is not writing for the multitude, who habitually misinterpret what they read according to superstition and desire. The problem is that precisely because they are guided by irrational superstition, the multitude cannot apprehend this text's critique of superstition and defense of philosophical freedom. Instead, Spinoza might be writing for a philosophical mind that can understand the *TTP*, a "learned reader."[80] Even here, though, if it is only aimed at rational readers or political rulers, the logical circularity of political founding plagues the question of the function of the *TTP*. Balibar notices this problem regarding the ideal state in the *TTP*, one that allows the freedom to philosophize: "a State that could plausibly make a rational calculation as to the benefits of freedom and thus preempt the violence that ideological censorship would provoke is inevitably a State that already operates according to this principle."[81] The conditions under which the *TTP* and the political project it advocates have to work are ones in which it is superfluous or impossible. This is the circularity that emerges from the presupposition that "men are not born to be citizens, but are made so."[82]

What breaks this circle in the *TTP*, ultimately, is force. If humans will not act according to true reason and their interests, political society must be *made* to be in their interest through the violence of sovereign force. As Spinoza puts it, people will not neglect what they think is good for themselves "except through hope for a greater good or fear of greater loss."[83] Because people will always be "carried away by their emotions" which "take no account of the future," mechanisms of enforcement and compulsion are necessary to create an interest in a collective future.[84] Affects and appetites, as Spinoza remarked in the *Ethics*, cannot be combatted by "reason" but only by other affects,[85] such as the fear of violence. Indeed, it is notable that Spinoza not only takes up this analysis of interest and fear as the basis of politics in the political works but also in an interlude on politics in the heart of *The Ethics*, in part VI on "human bondage." On the issue of whether a person who strives for good necessarily strives for the good of all, Spinoza notes that the latter is the case but only for those guided by reason. Aim at the collective good, Spinoza writes, typically needs to calibrated by "a stronger emotion contrary to the one which is to be checked," in other words, by checking one's own personal interest and

deception with "fear of a greater injury."[86] Even in *The Ethics*, then, the problem of interest and political authorization is inescapable as a condition for living according to reason, that is, according to *The Ethics* as such.[87]

As an analysis of political origins, this account sees in the beginnings of society less the leaving behind of nature in favor of society through a contractual moment than the creation of society through the aggregation and assemblage of power, its concentration such that following its commands *becomes* in one's "interest." On this analysis "legal systems serve to formalize an existing balance of power" rather than legitimate its creation beforehand.[88] Here the democratic right of resistance stems less from a principled stand on a defined limit between legitimacy and illegitimacy than on the tendency of oppressive states to create opposing factions that sap their power, in fact, which is then retrospectively translated into right.[89] Therefore, Spinoza's agreement with Hobbes's basic problematic—of the escape from conflict and violence into the peace and security of collective life—is not necessarily an agreement with Hobbes's conclusions. Indeed, as Leo Strauss noted in 1930, Spinoza's naturalism, his identification of right and power, makes the "inner bond between the multitude and the state… questionable."[90] In other words, Spinoza's insistence on the problem of political authorization as a prolegomenon to *The Ethics* and philosophy is not necessarily a conservative *limitation* but could contain the grounds for a set of *critiques* of political orders that overly identify the people and the state. Sharp, for example, has shown how Spinoza's "laws of human nature"—in other words, the striving or *conatus* for self-preservation in all beings—is the font of a critique of governments that fail to at least appear to represent the interests of their subjects, such that Spinoza, if not explicitly calling for revolution, at least admits that revolution is perfectly in line with natural right.[91] What is significant here, however, is not that Spinoza may or may not endorse a specific authoritarian or revolutionary politics, but that he takes the issue of sovereign authority, violence, and the politics of fear as an inescapable problem. Indeed, what is crucial for our argument in this paper is not a final or flawless reading of Spinoza's *TTP* and *TP* but the fact that the possibility of philosophizing, of thinking with others, hinges on precisely the questions these texts ask about the origins of political authority and community, the limits of sovereign power, and the apparent indispensability of violence for the maintenance of collective human life. The political works cannot be ignored by those attempting to appropriate Spinoza's *Ethics* not only because they fulfill the political task of clearing room for the very saying of philosophy but because they articulate the political conditions of possibility for the beatitude of the *Ethics*.

Conclusion

Spinoza, in the *TTP*, confronts what Connolly calls the "paradox of sovereignty," the fact that when nature or God give little direction in political founding, the conditions of politics must themselves be produced by politics in the first place.[92] Spinoza, also in the *TTP*, defends the need for peace and security in a specific kind of state—one that is tolerant and safe from enemies, those who live "outside the state" or do not "recognize its sovereignty."[93] The transformative philosophy of the Ethics cannot be read in isolation from Spinoza's reflections on politics because in his political writings he recognizes that "without a stable state and effective moral community the development of human powers and knowledge is impossible."[94] As reflections on the basic principles of the political, we read Spinoza's political writings as far more restrictive and stabilizing than the empowering and radically transformative reading of Spinoza presupposed by the new materialists. In his political texts, Spinoza discusses the indispensability of sovereign violence, the delimitation of a collectivity from its internal and external enemies, and the appropriation of a territorial space in which politics and philosophy can happen.

This has serious consequences for those who would interpret Spinoza's *Ethics* and his account of the body as the primary site for political thought, and therefore as the source of lessons we might learn from him in the present. The first one is that the philosophy of the body in the *Ethics* cannot be separated from a series of political conclusions, conditions, and limits that include a territorial state with a claim to authority over its citizens and a relationship of potential animosity with other states. The state here becomes an inner locus of freedom, a space of political development and dynamism with clear spatial and political limits. The implication for those drawing on the *Ethics* is that they risk misconstruing an ethic—an account of the possibilities of self-transformation and mutual creation of new bodies, thoughts, and affects—and a politics—an account of the limits and modalities of power, of how community is established and maintained, and of the matrices of inclusion and exclusion. If these questions of foundations and "the political" in Spinoza are left unasked by those appropriating the *Ethics*, they risk leaving intact the limitations of the liberal politics of right, territoriality, sovereign power and the cultivation of fear that they hope to contest. We are left, then, with a politics of self-fashioning and collective transformation that is quintessentially modern in its emphasis on political development in time within spatial limits defined also by strict legal limits on what is politically possible, and in its focus on the priority of security and peace as the preconditions of political freedom. Thinkers of affect and materiality in political life focusing on the micropolitics of emotions and bodies are tapping into

crucial insights from Spinoza's philosophy and putting them to use in the contemporary political world, but they also need to engage with questions of sovereignty, authority, and political foundations that for Spinoza form a crucial element in his account of collective life.

Notes

1. Tom Lundborg and Nick Vaughan-Williams, "New Materialisms, Discourse Analysis, and International Relations: a Radical Intertextual Approach," *Millennium* 41, no. 1 (April 2015): 4.
2. Christopher Fear, "William E. Connolly's Politics of Complexity: A Critique," *Review of Politics* 79, no. 1 (Winter 2017).
3. Fear, "Connolly's Politics of Complexity," 2017; Ruth Leys, "The Turn to Affect: a Critique," *Critical Inquiry 37,* no. 3 (2011): 434–472.
4. Bonnie Washick and Elizabeth Wingrove, "Politics that Matter: Thinking about Power and Justice with the New Materialists," *Contemporary Political Theory* 6 (2015); Lundborg and Vaughan-Williams, "New Materialisms"; Fear, "Connolly's Politics of Complexity," 2017.
5. This includes new materialist scholarship in Europe. Rosi Braidotti, for example, explicitly compares her own politics to Connolly's, and explains that "a neo-Spinozist framework is of great inspiration" in rethinking cosmopolitanism along new materialist lines. See: Rosi Braidotti, "Becoming-World" in *After Cosmopolitanism*, eds. Braidotti, Hanafin, and Blaagaard (New York: Routledge, 2013), 8–27.
6. Brian Massumi, "Fear (the Spectrum Said)," *Positions* 13, no. 1 (2005): 31–48; Briam Massumi, "The Future Birth of Affective Fact: the Political Ontology of Threat," in *The Affect Theory Reader,* ed. Gregg and Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
7. Brian Massumi, *What Animals Teach us About Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Brian Massumi, *The Politics of Affect* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2015).
8. Lundborg and Vaughan-Williams, "New Materialisms," 4.
9. Massumi, *The Politics of Affect,* viii.
10. William E. Connolly, *Neuropolitics: Nature, Affect, Thinking* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 2.
11. Spinoza's relation to Massumi's politics is most apparent in *Politics of Affect*. Connolly's most direct engagement with Spinoza can be found in *Neuropolitics* and *Pluralism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), though references to Spinoza are peppered throughout his work.
12. Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy,* trans. Robert Hurley (San Franscisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1988), 17.
13. Benedictus de Spinoza, *Ethics,* in *Spinoza: Complete Works,* trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 280.
14. Deleuze, Spinoza, 18
15. Spinoza, *Ethics,* 245.

16. Spinoza, *Ethics,* 251.
17. Deleuze, *Spinoza,* 18.
18. Brian Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 30–35.
19. Connolly, *Neuropolitics,* 62
20. Connolly, *Neuropolitics,*102–3.
21. William E. Connolly, "Experience and Experiment," *Daedalus* 135 (2006): 70–74.
22. William E. Connolly, *Facing the Planetary: Entangled Humanism and the Politics of Swarming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 57.
23. See here Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, "Intellectuals and Power," in *Language,Counter-Memory, Practice,* ed. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977).
24. E.g., Paul Cilliers, *Complexity and Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
25. Washick and Wingrove, "Politics that Matter," 72.
26. Stuart Kauffman, *At Home in the Universe: the Search for the Laws of Self-Organization and Complexity* (New York: Oxford Unversity Press, 1995), 6.
27. Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual* 16; Willam E. Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 33.
28 Washick and Wingrove, "Politics that Matter," 73.
29. Spinoza, *Ethics,* 278.
30. Massumi, *Politics of Affect,* ix.
31. Ibid., 51.
32. Ibid., 57–8.
33. Ibid., 68.
34. Connolly, *Facing the Planetary,* 3.
35. Connolly, *Facing the Planetary,* 6–7.
36. Connolly, *Neuropolitics,* 86.
37. Connolly, *Facing the Planetary,* 72; cf. Connolly, *A World of Becoming*, 71–2.
38. Connolly, *Facing the Planetary.*
39. (Connolly, *Facing the Planetary,* 120.
40. Though Connolly does address questions relating to sovereignty and authority in some of his earlier work—see for example William E. Connolly, *the Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Connolly, "The Complexity of Sovereignty" in *Sovereign Lives: Power and Global politics*, ed. Edkins, Shapiro, Pin-Fat (New York: Routledge, 2005); Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005)—it is largely absent from his later work that can be more readily characterized as 'New Materialist.'
41. Jane Bennett, comment in "Politics that Matter," 84.

42. Indeed, both thinkers have work that could be characterized as political economy. See Massumi, *The Power at the End of the Economy* (2014) and Connolly, "The Evangelical-Capitalist Resonance Machine" (2005b).
43. Massumi, *What Animals Teach us About Politics*, 4.
44. Massumi, *What Animals Teach us About Politics*, 7.
45. Massumi, *What Animals Teach us About Politics*, 8.
46. Massumi, *What Animals Teach us About Politics*, 6.
47. Massumi, *What Animals Teach us About Politics*, 33.
48. Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual,* 4–5.
49 Massumi, *What Animals Teach us About Politics*, 37.
50. Massumi, *The Politics of Affect,* 36
51. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*
52. Connolly, *A World of Becoming,* 26.
53. William E. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 53.
54. The theme of micropolitics has been present in Connolly's work for some time. See for example, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (1995).
55. Connolly, *Facing the Planetary,* 57.
56. See Alexandre Lefebvre, "We do not yet Know what the Law can Do," *Contemporary Political Theory* 5 (2006): 52–67); Caroline Williams, "Thinking the Political in the Wake of Spinoza: Power, Affect, and Imagination in the *Ethics,*" *Contemporary Political Theory* 6 (2007): 349–369; Susan James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion and Politics: the* Theologico-Political Treatise (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012); Filippo Del Lucchese, "Spinoza and Constituent Power," *Contemporary Political Theory* 15 (2016): 182–204.
57. See Etienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics* (London: Verso, 2008), 76–98.
58. Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: the Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics,* trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 91.
59. Negri, *The Savage Anomaly,* 94.
60. Edwin Curley, "Notes on a Neglected Masterpiece (II): the *Theologico-Political Treatise* as a Prolegomenon to the *Ethics,"* in *Central Themes in Early Modern Philosophy,* ed. Dover and Kulstad (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990), 113.
61. Benedict de Spinoza, *The Theologico-Political Treatise,* in *Spinoza: Complete Works,* trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 843.
62. Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, 387.
63. Susan James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion, and Politics,* 2–3.
64. Negri, *Savage Anomaly,* 104.
65. Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise,* 526.
66. Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise,* 527.

67. Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise,* 527.
68. Moira Gatens, "Spinoza's Disturbing Thesis: Power, Norms, and Fiction in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus,*" *History of Political Thought* 30 (2009): 455; and del Lucchese, "Spinoza and Constituent Power," 197.
69. Gatens, "Spinoza's Disturbing Thesis," 461.
70. Noel Malcolm, *Aspects of Hobbes,* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 27–52; Don Garrett, " 'Promising' Ideas: Hobbes and Contract in Spinoza's Political Philosophy," in *Spinoza's Political-Theological Treatise: A Critical* Guide, ed. Melamed and Rosenthal (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Edwin Curley, "The State of Nature and its Law in Hobbes and Spinoza," *Philosophical Topics* 19 (1991): 97–117.
71. For Hobbes' use of the example, see Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive*, edited by Howard Warrender (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1983), 58. We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the importance of this example's common use in both Hobbes' and Spinoza's engagement with the problem of authorization.
72. Spinoza, *Political-Theological Treatise,* 529.
73. Spinoza, *Political-Theological Treatise,* 417–8
74. Spinoza, *Political-Theological Treatise,* 418.
75. Benedict de Spinoza, *Political Treatise,* in *Spinoza: Complete Works,* trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 699.
76. Spinoza, *Political-Theological Treatise,* 438.
77. Spinoza, *Political-Theological Treatise,*528.
78. Spinoza, *Political-Theological Treatise,* 529.
79. Spinoza, *Political-Theological Treatise,* 438.
80. Spinoza, *Political-Theological Treatise,* 393–4; see also on this James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion and Politics,* 245.
81. Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics,* 32
82. Spinoza, *Political Treatise,* 699.
83. Spinoza, *Political-Theological Treatise,* 528–9.
84. Spinoza, *Political-Theological Treatise,* 438; Michael Della Rocca, *Spinoza* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 211–2.
85. Spinoza, *Political-Theological Treatise,* 325–6),
86. Spinoza, *Ethics*, 340–341.
87. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this insight, and the further insight that the question of *utilitas* in Proposition 65—that people guided by reason always follow the greater of two goods or the lesser of two evils—introduces a rubric of judgment into Spinoza's work that is not explicated by new materialists. We would add that it is perhaps here that the question of the relationship between the *Ethics*' vision of reason and beatitude could be linked to the question of political authorization through fear, in that both reason and the fear of punishment aim at "the lesser of two evils," if not necessarily the "greater of two goods." Spinoza, *Ethics*, 354.
88. Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics,* 35.

89. Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics,* 35–6.
90. Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken, 1965 [1930]), 236.
91. Hasana Sharp, "*Violentia Imperia Nemo Continuit Diu*: Spinoza and the Revolutionary Laws of Human Nature," *Graduate Philosophy Journal* 34 (2013): 143–144.
92. Connolly, *Pluralism,* 134–6.
93. Spinoza, *Political-Theological Treatise,* 533.
94. Gatens, "Spinoza's Disturbing Thesis," 460.