

Dimitris Vardoulakis. *Spinoza, The Epicurean: Authority and Utility in Materialism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9781474476041

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Vardoulakis' *Spinoza, the Epicurean* spearheads a novel interpretation of Spinoza's ethical-political foundations through a radical re-reading of the *Theological Political-Treatise (TTP)*. This is accomplished by showing how Spinoza's materialism draws from Epicurean sources that re-emerge in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, particularly with the discovery of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*. This lays the ground for an alternative genealogy of materialism, one which underscores the centrality of *phronesis* (understood as the calculation of utility) as the crucial undercurrent of Spinozan politics.

The key to interpreting Spinoza as an Epicurean in *Spinoza, the Epicurean* is the mobilisation of *phronesis* toward an understanding of agonistic democracy as fuelled by a dialectic between authority and utility. As Vardoulakis frames it, there is always a potential conflict between these two terms: authority instantiates a model of command and obedience, whereas the calculation of utility points to our capacity to form practical judgements to our advantage.

Vardoulakis points out that the drive to calculate our utility is always inscribed within a nexus of complex relations, which makes our judgement precarious. As Spinoza constantly reminds us, our capacity to act rarely corresponds to sound reasoning. Moreover, to err is human. We are never wholly rational, and never entirely

aware of our utility. The intrinsic fallibility of judgement, its incompleteness, means that there are circumstances where it is useful to suspend this judgement. Authority operates on the basis of substituting the drive to calculate one's utility. As Vardoulakis puts it, "there is no human immune to obedience" (11). The dialectic is that authority and utility are opposed yet mutually dependent.

The argument of *Spinoza, the Epicurean* is woven through an impressive array of readings, including readings of Arendt, Foucault, Levinas, and Leo Strauss. But the argument's stakes are clearest in its challenge to the Spinozism of Antonio Negri and Gilles Deleuze. Instead of privileging the immanent powers of the multitude against constituted power's hierarchical organisation, as one tends to find in Negri, the primacy of *phronesis* forestalls any opportunity to derive a normative criterion for human action. The interplay between utility and authority means no mode of action can be privileged in advance. Vardoulakis' book maintains a chapter-by-chapter exegesis of the *TTP*, centred around three instances of authority and how each is dialectically shaped by the operation of *phronesis* within the unstable relationship between reason and the emotions in the calculation of utility.

The first two instances of authority are personal authority and reformed authority. Chapters 1-5 of Vardoulakis' book bring personal authority to the fore, exemplified by the prophetic figure of Moses. Moses' authority relies on combining authority's political and theological sources through the special gift of revelation, placing Moses' authority beyond contestation. However, as Vardoulakis argues, this authority is not absolute. This is because it depends on a play of errors. For one, Moses' power to communicate with God is premised on the error of misinterpreting nature, and the Hebrew masses, in turn, misinterpret the prophets' communicative power as outside of nature. This renders Moses' authority precarious. While it secures the advantage of the recently liberated Jewish people, if this practical concern for the community fails, Moses' authority is open to contestation.

Reformed authority seeks to stabilise this intrinsic precarity by making the dialectic available to reason, hence extending it beyond the particularity of any given community. This is the role of the apostles, who employ arguments to teach scripture's sole message – neighbourly love. This moral precept, Vardoulakis shows, is a short-cut to the Epicurean doctrine of friendship, which teaches that utility is always shared – calculation must include the other. Vardoulakis argues that this constitutes two means

through which this precept can be actualised: one through the model of obedience that faith demands, the other through knowledge.

Etienne Balibar, in his *Spinoza and Politics*, makes his own case for a dialectic by proposing two routes through which reciprocal utility can be actualised. Balibar draws on Proposition 37 of Part IV of the *Ethics*, arguing that it shows a double constitution of human relations – one grounded in the imitation of the affects and the other through reason (by embedding shared utility in institutions). Both paths are equally viable and strictly non-teleological (211-212).

Vardoulakis acknowledges this, but significantly raises the stakes by showing how the two paths interpenetrate – that is, how reason and the emotions are constantly defined by their transactions. This culminates in the final chapters of the book, where agonistic democracy takes its real shape: a *praxis* defined in terms of crossing between the two paths. The third and final shape of authority – the authority to abrogate – cashes out this transversal. Here, Vardoulakis boldly translates Spinoza's use of *imptienter* as the “unendurable,” relaying the Greek “pathos” into the path of reason, and leading to the “necessary rebel” (309).

These three stages of the dialectic of authority and utility by no means correspond to a natural progression. They are ever-present moments. The impossibility of securing one's judgements with any ultimate certainty means we are always liable to regressing into forms of authority that threaten to forestall the dialectic – what Vardoulakis defines as authoritarianism and its proclivity to reduce people to a state of voluntary servitude, effectively precluding their capacity to judge. Yet, since there is no higher reason that governs the surest alignment of power and strategies, this feature of human striving is what mobilises and intensifies the need to seek one's advantage.

The nexus of utility and authority point to a politics where *praxis* emerges out of the unstable fabric of political life. Ultimately, this is because the function of error remains an intractable condition in any political judgement since no arrangement of power can ever correspond to a natural finality. Every attempt at securing utility is liable to fissures that open a space toward action.

In concluding *Spinoza, the Epicurean*, Vardoulakis recognises the further work needed to delineate a typology of utility. This seems pertinent given that the operation of utility is always embedded in determinative conditions of active striving. The reader might then ask how to reconcile the emphatic assertion that *phronesis* is a “judgement relying on *no predetermined criteria* external to the circumstances” with Spinoza's

insistence on the ever-present matrix of habitual practices, imaginations, and desires that structure any given social setting (33). This is an audacious book. Not only does it stake out a distinct Epicurean materialism, it also provides an important expansion of Spinoza's political thought, as well as mapping out future trajectories for a typology of utility.

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