



# SPINOZA ON POWER

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In this article I will focus exclusively on Spinoza's theory of power (potentia) which forms a key element of his theories of natural right and imperium. For the legal theoretical importance of potentia in the areas, see the forthcoming articles NATURAL RIGHT and IMPERIUM, and for the relation to capacity (power) see the forthcoming article POTESITAS. My purpose here is to convey the deep structure of the Spinozan concept of power, rather than become too lost in the geometrico-theological terminology he deploys, or the countless interpretations by which he has been determined.

Following Spinoza, it is necessary to construct a definition. Firstly, Spinoza posits a self-caused something (substance) which is the cause of all things — this is its essence, which follows from its properties (infinity, immutability, capacity to know etc.). Spinoza calls this something 'God'.

Secondly Spinoza now considers what this God is doing, the importance of which question is illustrated by the classical logical distinction between capacity to do and act. For example, Cato is able to walk (property and power) and Cato walks (attribute) are clearly different things. Though this God must be able to do infinitely many things, for human purposes Spinoza can only perceive two properties enacted, namely the attributes of Thought and of Extension.

Thirdly, Spinoza notes that this God is 'unrestrained' save by its own necessity, and being essentially self-caused (so propelled to act, as it were), this God exercises all his properties infinitely; that is, just as Cato, when he walks, is a walking thing, so God is a thinking and extending thing. Spinoza reserves the name God for this thing when it is thinking, and Nature for when it is extending (Deus sive Natura).

Note that because God or Nature is unrestrained save by its own necessity, every attribute is enacted immediately and inexhaustibly: it is eternal. Now, this enactment is perceived as everlasting in the sense that while Cato may get tired of walking, God or Nature does not, but Spinoza wants us to conceive of this enactment as rigorously eternal i.e. not even indefinite duration may properly be ascribed to it.

Equipped with this construction of substance and its attributes, we are now in a position to conceive potentia by literally 'plugging' God or Nature into its attributes. What do I mean? Well, the attributes must be considered as ordering functions — if they are presented with something to function on, they will assign and distribute that something in a single and determinate manner. For example, imagine I took all the letters from this page and jumbled them up into a tiny ball. Now imagine there was a

computer program which, if I fed these same letters into it, would distribute them in such a manner as to recreate this text. The attributes operate in something like this way: on their own they are empty, but if we feed God or Nature into them, God or Nature will be distributed in a single, determinate manner to constitute a completed, well-ordered world.

This is easier to illustrate with an albeit misleading example about Extension, where if we posit the Extension function  $Ext(x)$ , then  $Ext(\text{Nature})$  distributes Nature according to a definite coordinate system, in a manner that evolves Descartes celestial fluid model shown in the diagram above. This would be nothing other than Cartesian space, which is why it is misleading — Spinoza in our view is convinced that Cartesian analytic geometry is quite incapable of grasping the subtleties of the 'infinite series' of things. Likewise, we can imagine a Thought function  $T(x)$ , which explicates God as the infinite understanding (every idea). To underline, while we speak of plugging God or Nature into the attributes, the essence of God is such that God does his own 'plugging': he self-explicates.

This concept of ordered distribution is critical to understanding power, for if it is not already evident, insofar as the attributes explicate the essence of God or Nature, they distribute God's very power with the result that that which appears as distributed (the modes) each express God or Nature's infinite power in a certain and determinate way (hence 'modus'). As Spinoza puts it: 'God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of things'. Consequently, power or potentia is only correctly conceived when we appreciate that it has been distributed according to a certain and determinate order — that if I point at any 'this', it must have a definite degree of power — and that in fact this is the only real characteristic of power that Spinoza is asking us to be interested in. In other words, to the question 'what is power?' we must respond that power has been radically divested of any 'occult qualities' in favour of its determination by reference to its well-ordered distribution. That is, power is defined only by its relation to a whole order as a determinate difference: *omnia determinatio est negatio*. To put this in another way:

All instances of power distributed by the attributes identified above are intense in infinite degree — that is, all the way down — and are continuous everywhere.

I flag for the reader the possibly problematic interrelation between this distribution and the corporeal plenum which constitutes Spinozan extension which follows from the fact that in a plenum we have nowhere to assess these potentials 'alone'. My view is that Spinoza's conception of 'corporeal plenum' is rigorously other than the common sense meaning of the term (see my thesis referred to at the end).

Hegel's criticisms of Spinoza on this very point of determinate negation are well known, but in fact Spinoza demands that we raise the complexity of our understanding multi-fold to really get at the heart of his conception. The problem with the above outline is that despite its liturgical nods to infinite power, it does not quite appreciate what Spinoza's infinity means for the proposed structure. The tendency to distribute infinitely harks to Hegel's spurious infinite which proceeds indefinitely, whereas, as I have shown elsewhere, Spinoza has available another conception of the infinite which is decidedly more concrete. This infinite is obtained by considering the finite case and then passing immediately to the limit, a technique Deleuze revived in his own work.<sup>1</sup> What happens at the limit is inevitably some form of transition: the curve becomes the straight line (Cusanus), motion becomes rest (Bruno), the citizen becomes "a god amongst men" (Aristotle). So what happens when power is raised to the limit?

Correctly speaking Spinoza does not ask this about power because of its nature; rather he asks it about the 'things' of the type that we have been constructing: things that operate in a certain determinate manner. In other words, he asks it about machines. Spinoza is asking what happens when we raise a finite machine to the limit. What happens when we have a machine that operates at the concrete infinite? What can this 'body' do? We have already encountered a key aspect of the answer above, though we only applied its meaning spuriously. Such a machine would operate without restraint save in accordance with its own laws of operation. We initially applied this idea of non-restraint to conclude that the attributes distribute the operations of the machine 'everywhere', but even if we do assign power to every point of a notional space, however extended, can we be satisfied that every possible operation has been accounted for? Difficult as it may seem, we cannot. A distribution of power across infinitely many finite machines is just an indefinitely large aggregate of finite powers.

Furthermore, and I believe this to be Spinoza's thought process, considered as the whole face of the universe — the aggregate of all the finite machines connected together in a plenum — all this power would have one effect and one alone: it would hold the universe together as a One, as one divine machine, but there would be no events. The machine would be like a lever in a void, held together by power, completely packed with as much potentia as it could ever need, but completely static. Even if we conceived that this lever was mobile — that it was moving at 1 ft/s downwards, say — this kinematic fact would suggest a constant motion, that is, a change which simply repeated itself to remain the same. People tend to trip up here, because they equate motion with dynamism, and read Spinoza's theory in particular as dynamic because machines move about indefinitely (this is their conatus, or endeavour to persist). The confusion is understandable, but leads to brutal, flattening misreadings of Spinoza, in which he is collapsed into a kind of eccentric Hobbesianism in which all are choked by the bonds of fate.

Spinoza realised there is a very real physical need for another machine to be posited which would literally upset the balance — a machine which additionally, once it had acted, must necessarily not have exhausted itself just so it can continue to force further impulsions into the finite mechanical system. It is this capacity which is provided by power taken to its limit. Thus Spinoza dynamises the universe and teaches us what dynamics is: it is not the motions of the spheres, it is not even change; it is the change of motion and so the variation of change. These variations of change he terms 'transitions' and they have their sources in the determinate distributions of God or Nature's infinite that is inexhaustible power.

The infinite divine machine not only constitutes a (spuriously) infinite world of finite machines all running in a certain and determinate manner, but in addition it overlays (as it were) an order of (truly) infinite power which disrupts the settled concrescence of things. Accordingly, in addition to the appearance of actual power in the world, which Spinoza calls the 'actual essence' of things, we must also be attentive to a second critical category, viz. the 'formal essence' of things which is nothing other than the distributed power of God or Nature insofar as it constitutes potential 'forms' into which existing machines may coalesce and produce new effects. God or Nature not merely determines the world, but 'over-determines' the world into a foment of creation, though it is my view that this over-determination is perceptual and once all aspects of 'time' (eternity, duration, and time) are reintegrated into this model the augmented system returns to complete determination. The study of power now takes on the aspect of studying the distribution of formal essences and thus falls within the preliminary ambit of transcendental empiricism.

In addition, however, it is necessary to re-fold this notional formal overlay into the immanent structure of the world. By simply positing an additional realm of essences have we not returned to a kind of Platonism, to the transcendence which Spinoza explicitly ruled out? Our questioning consequently devolves on how this truly infinite power is integrated in the world at the same level as its finite content. In physical terms I have undertaken research attempting to piece together Spinoza's thinking regarding this infinite Natural power which I will not repeat here, but it is his arguments and studies in the physical realm which, like all classical materialists, inform his explicit response in the field that concerned him most of all viz. ethics.

Spinoza's insight is this: that insofar as the human is a thinking thing she is the vehicle, or better, source, of God's infinite power in the thought world, a fact which indirectly follows from Spinoza's reworking of the Cartesian cogito in which certain ideas transit into the substance of thought.<sup>2</sup> Applying our

knowledge, we realise that not only therefore does each human machine express finite power in its having this or that thought within the determinate chain of conscious duration, but in addition each human expresses infinite power as an inexhaustible power of thought intervening as the condition of thinking, and in particular as the condition of thinking the infinite idea Dei (the goal of all thought to which we must turn once thought).

For Kant this difference in the mind appeared as a difference between a determinate world of desires and a completely free, but empty, will that reigned over inclinations. Spinoza, on the other hand, has derived a necessary and determinate power which is nevertheless free because it is inexhaustible and can pass across the realm of formal essences in an instant (I call this an homological power). To adopt anachronistic language, the will is completely and materially determined as to its ethical content — it is this infinite will here being acted upon by other infinite wills (the acts of the virtuous) — but it freely gives that content to determinate desire and further determines this latter without negating or alienating its own power: in short, it negates negation.

It is wrong, however, to assume that a human is to be considered an atomic building block of this world. The very nature of Spinoza's conception requires us to consider the human itself as constituted by a determinate series of machines coalescing around a formal essence, this latter itself determined by its relation to all essences. There is no foundational element: the essence does not justify some vulgar essentialism for the simple reason that it is mute form — it is the condition of meaning but has no meaning. The formal essence rather may be said to form a 'hospitable zone' in which an inexhaustible variety of lives may be lived, human and otherwise. In this idea we see aspects of Deleuze's larval subjects, and Balibar's transhuman individuality.

With this briefly outlined movement, Spinoza enters the sphere of legal theory armed with a conception of power which imputes into the overbearing 'force' theories of legal power of the Early Modern power an additional, subtly integrated structure of infinite power which rises up from every free-thinking individual. We will treat of these practical matters in our articles on NATURAL RIGHT and IMPERIUM.

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The featured image shows, "The Rage of Achilles," by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, painted in 1757.

