SPINOZA, THE EPICUREAN

Authority and Utility in Materialism

Dimitris Vardoulakis

Spinoza Studies

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All references to Spinoza's *Theological Political Treatise* are to the translation by Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), cited parenthetically by page number. I have often altered the translation.

For the Latin, I have used the *Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg: Carl Windters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1924). The *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* is contained in Volume 3. All page references to this edition follow after the English edition. If there is only one parenthetical page reference, then it is to the English edition of the *Theological Political Treatise*.

For the translations of all other works by Spinoza except the *Ethics*, I refer to his *Complete Works*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002).

I have used Edwin Curley's translation of the *Ethics* published by Princeton University Press as part of *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. I have used the following system in referring to the *Ethics*:

The Roman numeral in capital following *E* indicates the part of the *Ethics*. E.g., *E* I is *Ethics*, Part I, *E* II is *Ethics* Part II and so on. The following abbreviations are used:

A = Axiom
Ap. = Appendix
C = Corollary
D = Definition
L = Lemma
P = Proposition
Pr = Proof
Pref = Preface
S = Scholium

So, for instance, *E* II, P7 refer to *Ethics*, Part I, Proposition 7. And, *E* IV, P34S refers to *Ethics*, Parts IV, Scholium to Proposition 34.

Preamble

1. Why Does it Matter to Read Spinoza as an Epicurean?

Reading Spinoza's *Theological Political Treatise* as symptomatic of his epicureanism offers both a radical reconsideration of his work and suggests why he is still relevant to our contemporary political predicament. This double gesture – an historicization of Spinoza's argument so as to highlight his political relevance – is not uncommon. For instance, Gilles Deleuze in *Expressionism in Philosophy* reads Spinoza's materialism as a reversal of Platonism that leads to what he calls 'the plane of immanence', the basis of his own political philosophy. Or, Antonio Negri in *The Savage Anomaly* repositions Spinoza in a materialist tradition that privileges the idea of constituent power as a political force that is the linchpin of later writings such as *Empire*.

This historicized repositioning of Spinoza is in a certain sense prompted by the lack of work on the history of materialism. As Negri observes in a note to his *Savage Anomaly*, 'materialism has not been historicized!'[1] There are historical accounts of Platonism, Aristotelianism and Stoicism. There are historical accounts of medieval schools of philosophy such as nominalism. And there are historical accounts of all major schools of modern philosophy – the social contract tradition, idealism, Hegelianism, phenomenology and so on. But there is no authoritative account of materialism from antiquity to the present, with the exception of Friedrich Lange's book from 1864, which is both outdated and inaccessible today.[2]

[1] Negri, *The Savage Anomaly*, 268.

[2] Lange, *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart*. Lange's book, which was first published in 1866, was well known in its day and exerted an important influence on the young Nietzsche. More recent accounts of materialism tend to be introductory and highly selective. See Bloch, *Le Matérialisme*; Wolfe, *Materialism: A*

This lack is both a hindrance and an advantage when writing on Spinoza. It is a hindrance in the sense that, to define the precise sense in which Spinoza is a materialist, we are forced to historicize our reading of Spinoza. As Lange establishes, the core idea of every form of materialism is the rejection of creation out of nothing, or the rejection of transcendence. But this can be understood in many different ways that lead to divergent positions. So scholars writing on Spinoza need to historicize their approach to determine the exact sense in which he is a materialist.

This can also be advantageous because it allows Spinoza's readers to position their reinterpretation of his materialism in such a way as to resonate with contemporary political issues. Materialism has always had an uncanny propensity to resonate with current political concerns. This may explain the flourishing of a number of materialist philosophies – such as affect theory, new materialism and post-humanism – all of which refer to Spinoza with an eye to contemporary issues.

The kind of materialism that I ascribe to Spinoza is epicureanism. Like all materialisms, epicureanism in Spinoza includes the rejection of creation *ex nihilo*. Specifically, in Spinoza this takes the form of the affirmation of a substance outside of which nothing exists, or his so-called monism. But there are two further epicurean themes that are crucial to Spinoza: authority and utility.

In describing Spinoza's epicureanism, I do not simply argue that we should pay attention to two concepts – authority and utility – that are marginal at best in the secondary literature on Spinoza. Moreover, I defend the stronger claim that Spinoza's materialism can be described only when the well-known function of monism in Spinoza is shown to be inextricable from the critique of authority and from the way in which we calculate our utility to decide on how to act. It is this parallel operation of monism, authority and utility that I understand as Spinoza's epicureanism.

Before outlining some key features of Spinoza's epicureanism, I need to plead with the reader to suspend their disbelief that such a quaint concept like authority can be of any contemporary relevance, and, more significantly, to leave aside their assumptions about the calculation of utility as an egotistical feature of human behaviour that is good for nothing other than promoting self-interested modes of conduct that contribute to neoliberalism. I am afraid not only that 'here, no doubt, my readers will come to a halt, and think of many things which will give them pause' (*E* II, P11S), but

Historico-Philosophical Introduction; and Brown and Ladyman, *Materialism: A Historical and Philosophical Inquiry*.

also that, annoyed by the insistence on authority and utility, they will not venture past this Preamble.

I have to confess that this danger has troubled me, and several colleagues have counselled me to find different names to refer to authority and, especially, utility. I tried this for some time, but decided against it for two reasons. First, it felt contrived. Authority and utility *are* the two terms Spinoza himself uses, and part of the exegetical enterprise is to highlight the function of these two terms in his texts. Second, it felt counterproductive. The most significant value of Spinoza's epicureanism is to question our prevalent assumptions about the outdated importance of authority and utility. This requires, of course, that the reader is prepared to put their presuppositions under scrutiny, which is not a small ask. I acknowledge that, and, appealing to Spinoza's authority, I ask the reader 'to continue on with me slowly, step by step, and to make no judgment on these matters until they have read through them all' (*E* II, P11S).

2. Authority and Utility: A Sketch

We have almost forgotten how important the concept of authority had been for close to two millennia. From the Roman republic onwards, authority is determined in a double sense that positions it at the centre of political considerations. First, one has authority when one is impervious to argumentation. For instance, the Pope had authority because his interpretation of the Bible could not be contested, according to Catholicism. The entire Reformation can be seen as challenging this Papal authority, or, which is the same thing, as an attempt to reformulate the concept of authority.

Second, authority always has a double origin, both theological and political. The obedience that is inextricable from authority is not just a pure political fact supported by power – it is not merely another way of saying that 'might is right'. Rather it is also to seek justification for one's actions in something transcendent, such as the glorious ancestors who founded Rome or in revelation according to the Judeo-Christian tradition.

For seventeenth-century philosophers, the paradigmatic figure who encapsulated these two meanings of authority was Moses. His authority derived both from revelation – receiving the Tablets directly from God – and from being the founder of the Hebrew state. We readily note that Moses is the protagonist of the *Theological Political Treatise*, but Spinoza never provides a clear definition of authority's double sense – its imperviousness to argumentation and its double origin in the theological and the political. Why is that?

I think there are two reasons why Spinoza does not give a clear definition of authority in the *Theological Political Treatise*. First, the discourse of authority is so prevalent in the seventeenth century – especially in a context where it is reanimated by the social contract theory, the understanding of the sovereign as one who is authorized to act on behalf of the people – that Spinoza does not feel the need to state the obvious. Second, the title itself succinctly captures authority. The treatise is 'theologico-political' because it is a treatise on authority. Spinoza could just as well have titled his work *Tractatus de auctoritate*.

Maybe Spinoza does not use the word authority in the title because the epicurean tradition he is working in approaches authority critically. This critical stance in early modernity comes from Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things*, which was published for the first time only in the mid-fifteenth century, but quickly had numerous republications throughout Europe gaining a wide readership. Lucretius opens his philosophical poem with a critique of authority. His example is the sacrifice of Iphigeneia. The priests and the head of the army conspire to sacrifice the young maiden to appease the gods. Lucretius sees in this joining of theological and political authorities nothing but superstition that arises from a misinformed fear of the gods.

I show in this book how a critique of authority that distinguishes its theological and political sides is one of the major threads that runs through Spinoza's *Theological Political Treatise*. In fact, we can identify three distinct parts of the *Treatise* by identifying the different ways in which authority is determined. Schematically, the three parts are as follows:

1. The first six chapters of the *Treatise* determine authority as the kind of power that one cannot argue with. This authority is presented primarily in terms of the personal authority of the prophets. The danger of personal authority is that it can morph into authoritarianism or despotism.
2. The concept of authority changes in chapters 7 to 15. Here the emphasis shifts to the apostles, whose authority is a *didactic* (139). This weakens authority, since the fact that it can be taught suggests that authority can be universalized and hence shared.
3. The final chapters describe a further transformation of authority. The focus now shifts to those who have the authority to question those whose power is legitimated by the state. Differently put, the focus shifts to those who have the 'authority to abrogate [*auctoritatem . . . abrogandi*]' (228/245).

The problematic that leads to the contemporary importance of authority is the following: The concept of authority organized so much of the political discourse for centuries. What is at stake when authority has all but disappeared from the contemporary political discourse? Part of the reason is that authority has been substituted by authoritarianism. Would it be of value today to examine our political predicament by asking again questions related to authority? I will return to some effects of this shift in section 3 of the Introduction.

Let us now turn to utility. The main reason that the concept of utility has such a bad name today is that it has been consistently used in the past half century or so to refer to the kind of selfishness or self-interest that is characteristic of neoliberalism. We have all but forgotten that instrumental reasoning was fundamental to the conception of the ethical in antiquity. For example, one of the most influential treatises on morality for centuries was Cicero's *De Finibus*. In the Middle Ages, for instance, this work was one of the main sources for understanding the ethical positions of the various ancient schools of philosophy. And as the title itself suggests, all these schools foreground the question of the ends of action.

The distinctive feature of epicureanism within this tradition is to determine instrumental reasoning in terms of *phronesis* or practical judgement. According to Epicurus, phronesis is the precondition of virtue and the good.[3] This instrumental character is conceived as fundamental to sociality. Or, to put it in a phrasing that will reoccur throughout the book, practical judgement understands one's utility in reciprocal terms with the utility of others. This is why the epicureans hold that one should love one's friends as oneself: the calculation of one's utility includes the other.

Spinoza embraces both the political and the ethical implications of this epicurean conception of phronesis or the calculation of utility. Thus, while discussing the Hebrew state, he refers to 'the calculation of utility [*ratio utilitatis*]' as 'the strength and life of all human action' (198/215–16). A well-functioning state requires this *ratio utilitatis*. At the same time, Spinoza translates the epicurean understanding of friendship into the discourse of neighbourly love. This becomes in the *Theological Political Treatise* the one and only fundamental principle of religion. It also explains why Levinas regards Spinoza as the great betrayer of Judaism. Whereas for Levinas, following Jewish tradition, the other or the neighbour is beyond calculation, Spinoza's politico-ethical reciprocity of utility entails that the other is always included in the practical calculations that we make.

[3] Diogenes Laertius, 'Epicurus', *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, X.132. I discuss this passage in detail in the Introduction.

The instrumental character of phronesis is clear in the most detailed exposition of phronesis that has survived from antiquity, which is contained in Book VI of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Epicurus departs from Aristotle's position on phronesis in a fundamental way. According to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, episteme – the kind of knowledge that is concerned with universals – provides superior wisdom than phronesis. Epicurus reverses this relation. According to epicureanism, every kind of knowledge is inextricable from practical concerns – a point that we may put today by saying that knowledge is power. This point of view is shared by Spinoza. In the *Theological Political Treatise*, he describes the calculation of utility as expressing human nature, and the entire Part IV of the *Ethics* is structured around the initial definition according to which the good is that which is useful.

Why is it that utility gets a bad name? How is it transformed from a moral principle to a supposed justification for immoral conduct? I hold that these questions will remain unanswerable so long as we do not recognize the pivotal function of the calculation of utility in the materialist tradition from antiquity to modernity. For instance, the calculation of utility is pivotal to Marx's *Communist Manifesto*. The aporias about utility and the hesitations that we harbour against it are part of the lack of historicization that plagues the materialist tradition – as I noted at the beginning of this Preamble. In an accompanying volume to the present book, provisionally titled *Neoepicureanism*, I conduct a genealogy of the notion of the calculation of utility from antiquity to the present.[4] Spinoza occupies an important position in such a genealogy.

Let me conclude this sketch of authority and utility with the following observation: There is clearly a potential conflict between authority and utility. If authority exemplifies the stifling of argumentation and if phronesis indicates the propensity to form practical judgements about what actions lead to our utility, then they designate two different routes of human conduct: one through obedience and the other through rationality. The *Theological Political Treatise* fully explores and exploits the tensions between authority and utility.

Spinoza's unique approach to this tension is to hold that both paths – that of obedience and that of reason – can lead to the good and to virtue, so long as the conditions are in place to allow for transversals from one path to the other. I regard this as a unique position in the history of materialism or

[4] The complete working title is *Neoepicureanism: Materialism from Antiquity to Neoliberalism*. A summary presentation of the position I defend in that book can be found in Vardoulakis, 'Neoepicureanism'.

neoepicureanism, and I am not aware of any commentators on Spinoza who notice this move, with the exception of Étienne Balibar.

3. On Method

I am conducting in this book an immanent critique of the *Theological Political Treatise*. By this I mean that I endeavour to use the terms of the *Treatise* itself to tease out their implications. This explains why I conduct close readings of the *Treatise*, repeatedly turning to the Latin original and often changing the cited translations. It also explains why I avoid – as much as possible – attempting to resolve issues or problems with reference to the *Ethics* or other writings. I refer to other texts as little as possible, attempting instead to resolve the questions raised by the *Treatise* through the resources available in the *Treatise* itself.

I believe that an immanent critique of the *Theological Political Treatise* is the most expedient approach to the text because of a key trope that I call *the ruse of the obvious*. Spinoza presents most of his central arguments as self-evident: as if they are not controversial at all and everyone would agree if they only thought about the issue for a moment. Many a commentator has been seduced by this gesture, taking Spinoza's trope as a justification for not questioning their own presuppositions. Conversely, an immanent critique side-steps the trope and seeks to highlight the implications of terms or arguments that may appear uncontroversial but are, in effect, unfamiliar and radical.

The conceptual framework of the book and its immanent critique are closely intertwined. One of its key contentions is that Spinoza's epicureanism can be understood as the interrelation of three key themes – the production of authority through fear and superstition; the political import of Spinoza's monism; and the function of utility in how he understands the human. The third in particular poses a significant challenge to today's reader, since the translations render 'utilitas' and its cognates variously as 'advantage', 'interest', 'benefit' and so on, thereby failing to underscore the technical use of the term. Consequently, my immanent critique of the *Theological Political Treatise* pays particular attention to the uses of utility by turning to the Latin original.

The overall neglect of the function of utility in Spinoza may be responsible for the lack of a systematic interpretation of Spinoza as an epicurean. Conversely, the recognition of the significance of Spinoza's concept of utility and the politics this entails ineluctably lead to the revision of a number of concepts that have pride of place in the exegetical history of the *Theological Political Treatise* – such as law, right and democracy. In other words, the

emphasis on Spinoza's epicureanism leads to a revisionary exegesis of the *Treatise*.

To provide such an exegesis, I undertake a reading of the entire *Theological Political Treatise* from beginning to end. The aim is to show how Spinoza's epicureanism informs the text as a whole. The usual practice is that interpreters of the *Treatise* focus either on the first six chapters treating topics such as the prophets and miracles, or on the biblical hermeneutics of the middle part of the book, or on the politics of the last part. I am attempting to demonstrate the coherence of these topics and the continuities of the argument when the *Treatise* is read from the perspective of Spinoza's epicureanism. Thus, for instance, I am attempting to show that the treatment of the prophets in the first couple of chapters is important for Spinoza's insights on the Hebrew state in chapters 17 and 18.

At the same time, I want to enable the reader to delve into each chapter on its own. The only thing required is that the reader be aware of the three epicurean themes that I outline in the Introduction. These are used as heuristic principles to guide the reading of the *Treatise*. The aim is that a reader familiar with these three themes should be able to read each chapter independently.

Given that the mutual reliance of the three epicurean themes has not been noted before in readings of the *Theological Political Treatise*, I sought to avoid repeatedly noting this lacuna in the secondary literature. I do of course refer to important arguments or insights that influence my position, but to preserve the coherence of the story I am presenting I avoid interruptions merely for the sake of pointing out the lack of interpretations that accord with mine. Further, to present Spinoza's peculiar epicurean position, I stage a number of conversations or encounters with other thinkers – such as, for instance, Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss and Emmanuel Levinas. This juxtaposition of Spinoza's position to other thinkers highlights its original features while positioning him in the context of current ideas.

In order to emphasize the connections between the three epicurean themes, and in particular the calculation of utility, as an indispensable part of action, I employ examples from recent political events throughout the book. This is not simply to draw attention to how Spinoza's thought can be relevant to contemporary matters. More significantly, it alludes to the genealogy of materialism that I referred to as 'neoepicureanism' in the previous section. Such a genealogy pays particular attention to how instrumental judgement runs through different conjectures of thought as well as historical configurations, even though instrumentality may not be recognized or may even be explicitly disavowed. I include these examples to draw attention to

Spinoza's pivotal position, both as the effect of a materialist tradition that goes back to ancient Greek thought and as prefiguring neoepicureanism in a way that pertains to our current predicament. Isn't genealogy, after all, not simply a reconstruction of the past, but a realignment within which past, present and future coalesce?

I bracket out the question of the development of Spinoza's epicureanism throughout this work so as to focus on the *Theological Political Treatise*. However, it is worth noting in passing the difference between the *Treatise* and earlier works, such as the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*. The Cartesianism of his early work is visible in the centrality of the question of method, while the question of utility is absent there. The opposite is the case in the *Theological Political Treatise*. Here method is discussed only in relation to biblical hermeneutics. The methodological function of doubt is no longer required when the emphasis shifts to utility that contains within itself the imperative to judge and hence to inquire and critique – as I explain in the Introduction.

One final clarification is required. I do not want to be perceived as if I am trying to defend Spinoza in my reading of the *Theological Political Treatise*. Instead, I am trying to outline a position – Spinoza's epicureanism – as it is constructed in the *Treatise*. The disadvantage is that readers who come with a certain discursive baggage in reading my book – for instance, if they are convinced that Spinoza is a liberal, or insist he should be read as a Jewish philosopher, or adopt the Deleuzian approach that essentially ignores as irrelevant a large part of Spinoza's work – are likely to remain unconvinced. The advantage of my approach is that it provides a new way of reading Spinoza that situates his work within a new way of conceiving the materialist tradition. This means that the present book does not provide final answers but rather invites further study of epicureanism as it is articulated both in Spinoza and in modernity more generally.

Introduction: Why is Spinoza an Epicurean?

Spinoza is pointedly silent about his philosophical allegiances. The only time he lets his guard down is in a letter to Boxel from September 1674 in which he positions himself in the epicurean camp (*Ep.* 56). Given this, it is surprising that in the multitude of Spinozas in the reception of his work an epicurean Spinoza is nowhere to be found – with a few exceptions that I discuss in the next section.[1]

I argue that Spinoza is an epicurean because he stages a dialectic between authority and utility. I do not mean a dialectics in the Hegelian sense, since it is not teleological. By dialectic I mean that the two terms, authority and utility, are in conflict but in such a way as to contribute to each other's determination, whereby it is impossible to thoroughly separate them. Like an old couple, they cannot stand each other even though they cannot do without each other.

The dialectic of authority and utility, specifically, stages the following conflict: Authority requires obedience whereas the drive to calculate our utility presupposes that we make our own practical judgements. Thus, under certain conditions, when authority takes over and suspends our judgements,

[1] The multitude of Spinozas that has been generated by the secondary literature shows both the vibrancy of Spinoza's reception and the fractious field. There is a liberal Spinoza and a communist Spinoza, who sit alongside the Jewish philosopher and the biblical hermeneuticist. The historical Spinoza engages in polemics with his contemporaries such as the Calvinists, and the rationalist Spinoza is the critic of Cartesianism. The Enlightenment Spinoza is, needless to say, incommensurable with the Romantic Spinoza, as is the Stoic with the Marxist ones, or the exoteric with the esoteric. And there are also the Spinozas who are relevant to all sorts of contemporary issues – the feminist, the environmentalist, the aesthetician and the critic of neoliberalism. For an overview of interpretative approaches to Spinoza, see Norris, 'Spinoza and the Conflict of Interpretations', in Vardoulakis (ed.), *Spinoza Now*, 3–37.

the result is political submission. But, also, under different conditions, we may calculate that it is to our utility to let someone else – for instance, someone with more knowledge or expertise – calculate our utility on our behalf. We can show the same interdependence by starting with utility: it is impossible to conceive of the human in terms of the calculation of utility without admitting that obedience, and hence authority, are necessary in certain circumstances. There is no such a thing as pure reason in human action. There is no human immune to obedience.

This dialectic is particularly prominent in the *Theological Political Treatise* – in fact, it structures the entire *Treatise*, as I argue in the present study. I am interested in this dialectic of authority and utility because it provides a new lens through which to read Spinoza. This dialectic allows me to conduct a philosophical reading of the politics of the entire *Treatise* – not only of some sections of it, as has been done in the past.

In addition, the dialectic of authority and utility provides us with a lens through which we can view our contemporary political predicament in unexpected ways.[2] In this Introduction, I situate Spinoza in the epicurean tradition and then show how authority and utility are intertwined in relation to what I call the three epicurean themes in Spinoza. Finally, I provide some insights into the relevance of Spinoza's epicureanism for the political today. I will start by showing how none of the three major approaches to epicureanism in the tradition – sensualist, physicalist and naturalist – square with Spinoza's epicureanism.

1. 'The authority of Plato, Aristotle and Socrates carries little weight with me': Spinoza and Epicureanism

Ancient epicureanism is a school of thought active for over half a millennium and highly influential in Rome just as much as Greece. It is, in fact, one of the four major philosophical schools in antiquity, alongside the Platonic, the Aristotelian and the Stoic schools.[3] The first thing that any student of epicureanism notices is the scant resources that have survived to-date, despite the influence of the epicurean school and the large number of epicurean books in antiquity. The reason is that, when Christian dogma is worked out in the fourth century, the Church fathers, turning to philosophical sources to seek conceptual legitimacy, quickly realize that they can mine ideas from

[2] The problematic of Spinoza's current relevance has exercised me at least since editing *Spinoza Now* (2011).

[3] For a synoptic presentation see Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*

the other philosophical schools, but that epicureanism is thoroughly incompatible with Christian metaphysics. Thereafter Christians not only take aim at epicureanism but also stop copying the epicurean manuscripts, leading to their eventual disappearance. As a result, for large periods of time, such as in the Middle Ages, the primary source of knowledge about epicureanism are summaries of epicurean positions, the most prominent of which are Cicero's philosophical dialogues *De Finibus* and *De Natura Deorum* that present epicurean positions in order to dismantle them.[4]

This spawns three basic approaches to epicureanism: the sensualist, the physicalist and the naturalist. It is instructive to note them: they may be reductive presentations of epicureanism, but they nonetheless prefigure some core epicurean positions in Spinoza.[5]

First, there is the interpretation of epicureanism as sensualism. This is the hedonistic interpretation, according to which epicureanism holds that the end of life is pleasure. The influence of this interpretation is enormous. Cicero certainly seems to espouse it in *De Finibus* and it becomes something of a commonplace later with the patristic fathers and medieval theologians who hurl it about without any substantiation from epicurean texts. The fact that it confuses the Cyrenaic position with the epicurean one did little to diminish the influence of this interpretation, and it is still prevalent today. An extension of the sensualist interpretation is the contrast between epicureanism and Stoicism. In the history of philosophy this is also a commonplace, repeated for instance in Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, where epicureanism is said to rely on the senses and pleasure whereas the basis of Stoic ethics is duty.[6]

A closer examination of epicurean texts leaves no doubt that the idea of living one's life guided by the pursuit of pleasure is much more complex than the hedonistic interpretation suggests. Let me quote a long passage from Epicurus's letter to Menoeceus that plays a crucial role in my interpretation of Spinoza's epicureanism:

> When we say, then, that pleasure is the end of action [*ἡδονὴν τέλος ὑπάρχειν*], we do not mean the pleasure of the prodigal or the pleasures of

[4] For an account of epicureanism in early Christianity and Medieval times, see Jones, *The Epicurean Tradition*.

[5] Usually these distorted positions are presented separately, although Catherine Wilson recently made a valiant attempt to synthesize them in *The Pleasure Principle: Epicureanism, A Philosophy for Modern Life*.

[6] Hegel, 'The Philosophy of the Epicureans', *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, vol. 2, 276–311.

> sensuality, as we are understood to do by some through ignorance, prejudice, or willful misrepresentation. By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of anxiety in the soul [*τὸ μήτε ἀλγεῖν κατὰ σῶμα μήτε ταράττεσθαι κατὰ ψυχήν*]. It is not an unbroken succession of drinking bouts and of revelry, not sexual love, not the enjoyment of the fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table, which produce a pleasant life [*τὸν ἡδὺν γεννᾷ βίον*]: it is sober reasoning [*νήφων λογισμὸς*] that calculates the causes of every judgment to do or avoid doing something good or harmful [*τὰς αἰτίας ἐξερευνῶν πάσης αἱρέσεως καὶ φυγῆς*], and banishing those beliefs through which the greatest tumults take possession of the soul. *Of all this the principle and the greatest good is phronesis* [*τούτων δὲ πάντων ἀρχὴ καὶ μέγιστον ἀγαθὸν φρόνησις*]. Wherefore phronesis is more significant [*τιμιώτερον*] even than philosophy; *from it spring all the other virtues* [*ἐξ ἧς αἱ λοιπαὶ πεφύκασιν ἀρεταί*], for it teaches that we cannot lead a life of pleasure [*ἡδέως ζῆν*] which is not also a life of usefulness, the good, and justice [*φρονίμως καὶ καλῶς καὶ δικαίως*]; nor lead a life of usefulness, the good, and justice, which is not also a life of pleasure. For the virtues have grown together with a pleasant life [*συμπεφύκασι γὰρ αἱ ἀρεταὶ τῷ ζῆν ἡδέως*], and a pleasant life is inseparable from them.[7]

This is not simply a passage that blatantly contradicts the interpretation of epicureanism as sensualism. Furthermore, the emphasis on phronesis, or what I also call in this book the calculation of utility, introduces a number of ideas that are crucial to Spinoza's epicureanism.

The first point to note is the startling predicate to pleasure that Epicurus provides, namely 'sober reasoning'. The word for reasoning here is *logismos* (*λογισμός*), not logos. If logos is what has come to be understood as Reason, *logismos* in the masculine or *to logistikon* in the neuter is instrumental reasoning – as, for instance, Aristotle makes clear in the opening of Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The life of pleasure requires this kind of instrumental thinking that identifies means and ends.

A distinctive feature of this instrumental reasoning is that it posits the inseparability of mind and body – it is, as Epicurus says, the absence of pain in the body and of anxiety in the soul. This accords with the epicurean insistence that the end of action is the absence of anxiety, or *ataraxia*, as I will explain in more detail in Chapter 1. The point I want to stress here is that this instrumental reasoning coupled with the inseparability of mind

[7] Diogenes Laertius, 'Epicurus', in *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, X.131–2 (emphasis added).

and body is translated into the following Proposition in Spinoza: 'From the guidance of reason, we pursue [*ex rationis ductu sequemur*] the greater of two goods or the lesser of two evils' (*E* IV, P65). Spinoza immediately explains that this calculative or instrumental reasoning is not confined to the present but also includes the future in its considerations (*E* IV, P66). In fact, Spinoza is not unique in expressing the combination of instrumentality with the inseparability of mind and body this way – the same articulation is often employed by other philosophers from the seventeenth century working in the materialist tradition (for instance, we will see in Chapter 7 how Hobbes uses an almost identical formulation). In any case, the point I am making is that this *logismos* is not abstract or theoretical reasoning but rather a practical kind of reasoning that entrains ends and considers action.

When Epicurus writes that this practical reasoning is more significant than philosophy, he is pointing to a reversal of Aristotle's position. According to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, theoretical reason leads to wisdom and virtue more than practical reason. I will return to the details of Aristotle's argument in Chapter 1. I only want to remind us here of the point that Heidegger makes when discussing the priority of theoretical over practical reason in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, namely, that this is the starting point of metaphysics and onto-theology.[8] We see Epicurus here evading that move. For him, the primary kind of knowledge is practical and it is articulated in the form of judgements that are calculations about utility – that is, calculations that combine ratiocination with considerations about the body.

Epicurus designates this practical, instrumental judgement as phronesis. This is the standard Greek name for this practical knowledge that he describes here. What is unusual in Epicurus is that he makes phronesis the precondition of both the good and of virtue. Such a move is indicative of his materialism – of the fact that knowledge is not abstract but rather articulated through its effects and how it impacts on the corporeal. It is the fact that – to use a contemporary formulation – knowledge is power. The suggestion that the good and virtue require phronesis is a bold one. Phronesis is a judgement that arises by assessing – or, calculating – one's given circumstances. Because it is a response to materiality, phronesis can never aspire to a thorough formalization. Materiality is contingent and hence unthematizable. Any calculation in relation to materiality is faced with its ineluctable unpredictability. Spinoza is fully cognizant of this point and he embraces its positive potential. As we will see, the notion of error is constitutive of his understanding of

[8] Heidegger, *Plato's Sophist*.

politics and of history.[9] The seeming deficiency of phronesis – the fact that it has no steadfast rules to prove its validity or that it has to think 'without banisters' – is turned into a positive heuristic principle by Spinoza.

There is one final insight in this passage from Epicurus – an insight that plays a fundamental organizing role for the entire political discourse Spinoza develops in the *Theological Political Treatise*. I am referring to the circularity between phronesis and pleasure. The corresponding idea in Spinoza is that there are two paths to virtue and the good, the path of the emotions relying on obedience and the path of reason relying on the calculation of utility. As I will explain in Chapter 6, Étienne Balibar is the only reader of Spinoza who has really noticed this feature, in a series of writings starting with his exceptional analysis of Proposition 37 of Part IV of the *Ethics* and culminating in his conception of transindividuality.

If Negri's puzzlement about the lack of a historicization of materialism precipitated my historicization of Spinoza's argument resulting in the conception of his epicureanism, Balibar's analysis of the two paths to the good and virtue has been the critical idea that allowed me to discern a thorough argument – not without aporias but nonetheless programmatically pursued – about the political and democracy in the *Theological Political Treatise*. As I explain later, especially in Chapter 9, Spinoza's politics stands and falls with this idea of circularity between emotion and reason. Or, more precisely, the possibility of democracy hinges on how a transversal from one path to the other is possible. This can also be articulated in terms of the dialectic of authority and utility. If the path of the emotions is characterized by obedience as the key effect of authority and if the path of reason entails the calculation of utility, then their dialectic stages a chiasmus between the two paths. How does this chiasmus unfold? To answer that question, 'this is the task, this the toil [*hoc opus, hic labor*]' (187/203).

I have dwelled on this passage from the letter to Menoeceus because it contradicts the sensualist interpretation of epicureanism by bringing to the fore a number of ideas that are critical for Spinoza: the calculation of utility in conjunction with the inseparability of mind and body, the primacy of practical judgement despite the fact that it is fallible, and the two paths to virtue and the good. We will see in due course how these ideas are critical in Spinoza's philosophical program in the *Theological Political Treatise*, and I readily admit the pivotal role that this passage from the letter to Menoeceus has played in my own understanding of Spinoza's epicureanism.

The second significant way in which epicureanism is understood is through

[9] See especially Chapters 2 and 3.

its physics. This is its corpuscularianism that was well-known in antiquity – the main source here is Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*. According to the physicalist doctrine of ancient epicureanism, there is nothing other than atoms and void. Atoms fall through the void – like drops of rain, Althusser writes in a moving essay that searches for the legacy of materialism within the history of philosophy. One question in particular creates difficulties for this doctrine: if all that exists are atoms that fall in straight lines in the void, then how can something be formed? To account for this, epicureans have recourse to the famous doctrine of the clinamen or the swerve: without reason, accidentally, atoms may decline from their straight lines, whereby they collide and create things. Or, differently put, nothing is created *ex nihilo* – there is no need to posit an external force, such as a god, to account for creation; instead, the process of creation is inherent in its own constituent elements. This rejection of creationism is common to Epicurus and the earlier atomists and is fundamental to the entire materialist tradition.[10]

The further implication of this materialism is that, as Lucretius describes it in Book 3 of *On the Nature of Things*, everything participates in a process of creation and destruction: 'one thing never ceases to arise from another, and no man possesses life in freehold – all as tenants'.[11] But then nothing is immortal. No spiritual soul can survive the demise of its body – or, put in positive terms: mind and body, the material and the spiritual, are inseparable. This is why there is no teleology. In the absence of some higher – spiritual – end, in the absence of any 'reason in history', actions can have specific ends as conceived through phronesis, but they lack any ultimate end. This lack of telos due to the interminable process of creation and destruction is also responsible for the irresolvability of the dialectic of authority and utility.

It is within the context of epicurean physicalism that we need to view Letter 56, in which Spinoza aligns himself with epicureanism. His correspondent, Hugo Boxel, is an educated Dutchman with progressive sympathies who remains nonetheless committed to certain superstitious beliefs including creationism. He writes to Spinoza to ask his opinion about ghosts and other supernatural phenomena such that cannot be admitted to exist according to the materialism espoused by the epicureans.[12] The brief corre-

[10] See Lange's *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart* (1887), the most comprehensive study of the history of materialism that takes the rejection of creation *ex nihilo* as the starting point of materialism. Unfortunately, Lange has little to say about Spinoza.

[11] Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, 3.970–1.

[12] On Boxel, see Barbone, Rice and Adler, 'Introduction', in *Spinoza: The Letters*, 43.

spondence with Boxel includes six letters from September and October of 1674, three from each correspondent (*Ep.* 51–6).

Boxel writes to Spinoza to ask his opinion about the existence of ghosts, even though he knows very well that Spinoza's materialism does not admit of any supernatural phenomena. After the first, short letter, Boxel provokes Spinoza in his second letter. He offers a series of arguments why ghosts exist, holding that this 'reasoning will not convince those who perversely believe that the world was made by chance' (*Ep.* 53). Boxel is referring here to the idea of the swerve or clinamen, according to which atoms falling in a void can change direction without external influence – or, by chance. Effectively, Boxel asserts Spinoza's epicureanism. This poses a problem for Spinoza. Even though he shares the epicurean rejection of creation *ex nihilo* and of teleology, as well as the position about the inseparability of mind and body, still current advances in physics refute the epicurean position that there are only atoms and void. Further, Spinoza's own position – both in the *Ethics* and in the *Theological Political Treatise* – about the necessity of Nature is incompatible with the accidental nature of the clinamen. In his reply (*Ep.* 54), the first point Spinoza makes is to deny that the world is made by chance – that is, he denies the clinamen as exemplifying corpuscularianism.

Boxel presses on in a third letter by appealing to the authority of past philosophers (*Ep.* 55). In the final letter of the exchange (*Ep.* 56), Spinoza responds: 'The authority [*authoritas*] of Plato, Aristotle and Socrates carries little weight with me. I should have been surprised if you had produced Epicurus, Democritus, Lucretius.'[13] This is the moment Spinoza affirms his epicureanism as a response to the second provocation by Boxel. He clarifies that despite his rejection of epicurean corpuscularianism in his previous letter, he still holds onto the rejection of creationism as well as the inseparability of mind and body – whereby there are no spirits. The physics according to which only atoms and void exist, and the idea that nothing can be arbitrarily added to nature, can be separated, whereby modern epicureanism can reject the former but retain the latter. Further, the animosity toward Plato and Aristotle is not new. For instance, Spinoza writes in the Preface to the *Theological Political Treatise* that the Church supports 'mysteries' – meaning supernatural phenomena that suppose some kind of separation

[13] Democritus's influence on Epicurus's epistemology is well documented and explains the specific references in Spinoza's letter to Boxel. I am here leaving Democritus, and atomism in general, to one side as I am trying not to complicate the argument. Further, as will become clear later, the strong emphasis I place on phronesis is derived from Epicurus, not Democritus or the atomists.

between mind and body – with recourse to Aristotelianism and Platonism (5). Tellingly – for the argument I will put forward – Spinoza's allegiance to epicureanism of Letter 56 is staged as a gesture that is critical of authority.

Sensualism and physicalism dominate the way in which epicureanism is received in antiquity, and then from the consolidation of Christian dogma in the fourth century all the way through the Middle Ages and early modernity. Hedonism and corpuscularianism are used as terms of abuse by the Christians. The contrast between Christianity and epicureanism is telling. The early Church fathers were keen to incorporate elements of pagan philosophy into their teachings. But the idea of duty and suffering as the basis of morality that they appropriate from Stoicism is incompatible with hedonism. And the neo-Platonic metaphysics that relies on a hierarchy with God at the top is just as incompatible with epicureanism materialism – to say nothing of the epicurean insistence that the soul perishes with the body. Further, the medieval metaphysics that develops with the reintroduction of Aristotle through Islamic sources is incompatible with the stringent rejection of teleology that characterizes epicurean physics. It is true that some attempts are made to rehabilitate some epicurean ideas selectively, for instance by paying attention to how Seneca approvingly quotes moral epicurean maxims.[14] But such examples are the exception that prove the rule of unanimous condemnation of epicureanism. Symptomatic of this disapprobation is the tactic of labelling one's opponent an epicurean, as Luther does, for instance, in his debate with Erasmus.[15]

A third interpretation of epicureanism develops in early modernity – one that we can call the naturalist interpretation. This is implicated in the rise of the natural sciences. Catherine Wilson, who has written the most important book on this topic, goes so far as to argue that 'we are all, in a sense, Epicureans now'.[16] The sense she has in mind is distinct from sensualism and

[14] For Seneca's use of epicurean texts, see Fothergill-Payne, 'Seneca's Role in Popularizing Epicurus in the Sixteenth Century', in Olser (ed.), *Atoms, Pneuma, and Tranquility*, 115–33.

[15] For the Luther and Earsmus episode, see O'Rourke Boyle, *Christening Pagan Mysteries*, 63–95.

[16] Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity*, 3. I should note the limited scope of Wilson's interpretation of Spinoza. She readily acknowledges his epicureanism in 'recognizing only physical causes' and in rejecting superstition. Nonetheless to account for other aspects of Spinoza's philosophy, such as his ethics, she simultaneously needs to argue that Spinoza has recourse to what she calls 'Plato's theory of the transcendence of mundane reality' (Wilson, *Epicureanism*, 125). Constraining epicureanism to scientific pursuits prevents Wilson from discerning how it influences Spinoza's ethics and politics. This is anything but unusual in the naturalist interpretations that seek to present Spinoza's epicureanism, as we will see shortly.

physicalism and it consists in the influence of epicureanism in the development of empiricism and its repercussions for the physical sciences. The influence is a double one. A different way of expressing the rejection of creation *ex nihilo* is by saying – to put it in Spinozan terms – that there is nothing outside nature. This means that – to put it in terms of natural science also employed by Spinoza – the laws of nature cannot be broken. Nature has no master and acts on its own, as Lucretius puts the same point.[17] This becomes the fundamental methodological foundation of modern science that allows it to conceive nature in mechanistic terms, or as a series of causes and effects, thereby overcoming the teleological epistemology of medieval philosophy. In addition, this methodological foundation from epicureanism is augmented by the also epicurean idea that knowledge can be derived from observation. Sense perception and experimentation can help us discover the chains of causes and effects that are regulated by natural laws. This approach is the foundation of empirical science.

The naturalist interpretation of epicureanism is crucial for the few attempts to read Spinoza as an epicurean – but also restrictive because it fails to account for the ethical and political motives of his philosophy.[18] In particular, it remains blind to the function of phronesis or the calculation of utility.

The only book-length study that examines Spinoza's epicureanism, Leo Strauss's *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, is a reading of Spinoza as a stringent naturalist. Critical in this reading is Spinoza's naturalist position that the laws of nature cannot be broken, which leads to his refutation of miracles in chapter 6 of the *Theological Political Treatise*. Departing from this, Strauss presents Spinoza in the context of the great debate between religion and philosophy, or faith and reason, that torments modern thought since the rise of empiricism. Spinoza is an epicurean in the sense that he defends 'a fundamental cleavage between science and religion', write Strauss.[19]

Such a naturalist interpretation of Spinoza's epicureanism means that Strauss explicitly denies any political import to Spinoza's epicureanism. The bracketing out of ethical and political concerns is all the stranger, since

[17] Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, 2.1091–3

[18] It seems to me that naturalism is one of the very few areas where there seems to be a philosophical consensus between the so-called analytic and continental traditions. Post-war philosophy in both traditions veers toward naturalism in various ways. In this sense, Spinoza, who has been embraced by both traditions, may function as an important conduit of a rapprochement of the fractured philosophical landscape. But this will only ever be possible if naturalism is not confined to its epistemological dimension but rather embraces the materialist political tradition from which it arises.

[19] Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 56.

Strauss relegates such concerns to Spinoza's averroist and machiavellian influences, which, on the one hand, he admits are intertwined with epicureanism in modernity, and, on the other, he insists on methodological grounds on their separation from Spinoza's epicureanism.[20] In this ambiguous – even strained – gesture, Strauss avows Spinoza's epicureanism by disavowing its materialist politics.

This allows Strauss to ascribe a political agenda to Spinoza that is thoroughly separated from materialism. The most explicit, even blunt, articulation of this move is recorded at the beginning of Strauss's 1959 lectures on Spinoza's *Theological Political Treatise*. Strauss mentions that Spinoza follows the epicurean tradition because of his naturalism. This leads to two inferences: first that, unlike Spinoza, the epicurean tradition was not political because it had no conception of power; second, as a consequence of not having to account for a materialist politics, Strauss is free to position Spinoza as 'the first philosopher of liberal democracy'.[21] As I will explain in Chapter 4 where I will look at Strauss's reading of Spinoza in detail, the premise of an apolitical naturalism – as if Spinoza's 'critique of religion' can be separated from his political materialism – is untenable.

Even though Gilles Deleuze does not explicitly tackle Spinoza's epicureanism but rather positions Spinoza within his naturalist reading of Lucretius, his approach opens up ways of addressing the deficiencies of Strauss's interpretation. Deleuze's essay 'Lucretius and Naturalism' was originally published in 1961 and then republished with changes in the appendix to *The Logic of Sense* in 1969 as 'Lucretius and the Simulacrum'.[22] Although Spinoza figures

[20] Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 48–9. Strauss is following a long tradition that regards epicureanism as unconcerned with politics. This arises from Epicurus's own advice that the wise person should not indulge in public speaking and should avoid politics (see Diogenes Laertius, 'Epicurus', X.118 and X.119). Besides the fact that this is an oversimplification about *ancient* epicureanism that has been contested – see Brown, 'Politics and Society', in Warren (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism*, 179–206 – more importantly, Strauss simply assumes that *modern* epicureanism is also apolitical. In fact, epicureanism's connection with averroism and machiavellianism prove precisely the opposite of what Strauss's wants to argue, namely, the *political* motivations of *modern* epicureanism. On this point, Strauss simply takes for granted the accepted dogma that epicureanism *tout court* is apolitical.

[21] Strauss, *Spinoza: Seminar on the Theological Political Treatise, University of Chicago 1959*, 2 and 1. Strauss repeats his position that Spinoza 'was the first philosopher who was both a democrat and a liberal. He was the philosopher who founded liberal democracy' in the 1962 Preface of his *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 16.

[22] There are, nonetheless, significant differences between the two versions and they are connected to the introduction of Spinoza in the second one, as Warren Montag

only fleetingly in the essay, if it is placed within the context of Deleuze's significant *Spinoza et la problème de l'expression* from 1968, then the affinities are clear. Lucretius's naturalism is situated within the project of 'reversing' Platonism, thus having a similar position to that of Spinoza in the book on expressionism. This suggests that materialism is an alternative philosophical tradition that leaves metaphysics behind: 'To distinguish in men what amounts to myth and what amounts to Nature, and in Nature itself, to distinguish what is truly infinite from what is not – such is the practical and speculative object of Naturalism. The first philosopher is a naturalist.'[23] And yet, when it comes to the quandary 'faith or reason', Deleuze ultimately does not venture much further than Strauss, as is indicated by the rejection of religion as superstition that the increase of one's power through the operation of reason is to overcome. Leaving aside the fact that Spinoza explicitly ascribes positive *political* functions to religion in the *Theological Political Treatise* – a book about which Deleuze has little to say – the political project that consists in the increase of power through the operation of reason simply restages the separation of faith and reason that Lucretian naturalism was supposed to have overcome.[24] As a result, Deleuze is laconic about Spinoza's politics. He cannot say much because the notion of phronesis or utility – the centre of Spinoza's epicurean politics – is absent from Deleuze, which is symptomatic of his highly selective reading of Spinoza.

Louis Althusser's late essay 'The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter' is the most promising engagement with Spinoza's epicureanism because it connects naturalism with the political import of the materialist tradition. Althusser notes a materialist philosophical tradition in modernity that is affiliated with epicureanism. A key figure in this tradition is Spinoza – alongside others, such as Machiavelli, Hobbes, Rousseau and Marx. This materialism denies both origins and an end to actions, and hence any occurrence is contingent or aleatory, which has significant ramifications in how political action is to be conceived: 'One reasons here not in terms of the Necessity of the accomplished fact, but in terms of the contingency of the fact to be accomplished.'[25] In other words, what is, is not a fait accompli; rather, what is, is produced by the process of reasoning that inserts itself in a

explains in 'From Clinamen to Conatus: Deleuze, Lucretius, Spinoza', in Lezra and Blake (eds), *Lucretius and Modernity*, 163–72.

23 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 278.

24 Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 279.

25 Althusser, 'The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter', *Philosophy of the Encounter*, 174.

network of calculation that determines how one exists by performing actions that aim toward something. This is not to say that being implies an ultimate end, but is rather to say that ends are posited in the process of reasoning – or, in Althusser's words, 'although there is no Meaning to history . . . there can be meaning *in* history'.[26] Without realizing it, Althusser is describing here Epicurus's conception of the function of practical judgement as phronesis, which I outlined in the first interpretative approach to epicureanism. Althusser comes tantalizingly close to recognizing the political and ethical function of practical judgement as phronesis as central to the epicurean tradition. Unfortunately, the lack of thematization of this function is a missed encounter that we will never know how it could have resulted.

Althusser's reading of Spinoza as a materialist and naturalist profoundly shapes the readings of Spinoza in France, where a number of his students conduct significant research on Spinoza – I am thinking of scholars such as Balibar, Macherey and Moreau. This influence extends beyond France and has resulted in some publications that explicitly address Spinoza's epicureanism, such as works by Warren Montag in America and Vittorio Morfino in Italy.[27] The other significant work on Spinoza and materialism is Antonio Negri's *The Savage Anomaly*. Negri's central thesis of the two modernities is reminiscent of Althusser's thesis about the alternative or 'underground' current of materialism in philosophy, despite significant differences, and in fact predates Althusser's written work on the subject – *The Savage Anomaly* was first published in 1981.[28] Again, however, just like Althusser, the kinds of materialism that all these thinkers outline fail to thematize the function of phronesis.

The only interpretation of Spinoza as an epicurean that emphasizes phronesis can be found in Jean-Marie Guyau's largely forgotten *La morale d'Épicure* from 1878.[29] Guyau delineates a genealogy of epicureanism from

[26] Althusser, 'The Underground Current', 194.

[27] See in particular Montag, 'Lucretius Hebraizant: Spinoza's: Reading of Ecclesiastes', and Morfino, 'Tra Lucrezio e Spinoza: La "filosofia" di Machiavelli', in Visentin et al. (eds), *Machiavelli: immaginazione e contingenza*.

[28] Even though the essay is written around 1982, its main points are already contained in discussions between Althusser and his circle – exchanges that have Deleuze's essay on Lucretius as a point of reference. For instance, Montag describes how Macherey mobilizes Deleuze's essay on Lucretius in his correspondence with Althusser in 1965, to critique his teacher's notion of structure. See Montag, *Althusser and his Contemporaries*, 75–6.

[29] Guyau, *La Morale d'Épicure et ses rapports avec les doctrines contemporaines*. For a translation of the chapter on Spinoza as well as an introduction to Guyau's work, see Guyau, 'Spinoza: A Synthesis of Epicureanism and Stoicism'.

antiquity to the present, concentrating on the calculation of utility. This is the red thread that connects the thought of Epicurus and Lucretius with the ethical and political concerns of modern epicureanism.[30] Despite this significant insight, Guyau's account of Spinoza is surprisingly meagre. He presents Spinoza as caught up in the familiar contrast between epicureanism and Stoicism. This is the old opposition characteristic of the first interpretation of epicureanism (that is, sensualism vs duty) refashioned from the perspective of Guyau's ethical epicureanism as the alternative between utility and duty. Thus Spinoza is presented as caught in a double bind, and consequently of limited import.

How can we retain Guyau's insight about the centrality of the calculation of utility and develop it so as to demonstrate Spinoza's epicureanism?

2. The Three Themes of Spinoza's Epicureanism: Authority, Monism and Judgement

Of assistance to answer the above question is a book in which the name 'Spinoza' does not even appear. Alison Brown's recent *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence* traces the historical context in which epicureanism re-emerges in early modernity. She highlights the importance of the discovery of Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things* by Poggio Bracciolini in 1417 and Tavesari's Latin translation of Diogenes Laertius's *The Lives of Philosophers* – the book that contains the only extant texts from Epicurus.[31] Both were published in Florence within a few years of each other, or, as Brown puts it, 'Lucretius and Epicurus returned to Florence in the 1440s'.[32] Brown examines the writings of a number of Florentine humanists such as Bartolomeo Scala from the mid-fifteenth century to Marcello Adriani at the end of the century, culminating with Niccolò Machiavelli in the sixteenth century, to show how they are influenced by the newly published epicurean texts. Brown is concerned to show the initial impact in Florence of the publications of Epicurus's and Lucretius's writings, which is at the roots of modern epicureanism. She describes this alternative humanist discourse, which does not conform to the Platonism of the majority of the humanists. Eventually

[30] Guyau sees the endpoint of this development in nineteenth-century utilitarianism – as the sequel to the book on Epicurus's moral theory, *La morale anglaise contemporaine: Morale de l'utilité et de l'évolution* from 1879, shows. I discuss the differences between utilitarianism and Spinoza in the following section.

[31] Specifically, it contains three letters – to Herodotus, to Pythocles and to Menoeceus – as well as the so-called 'Principal Doctrines', a list of key Epicurean positions.

[32] Brown, *The Return of Lucretius to Renaissance Florence*, 16.

other humanists outside Florence are influenced by epicureanism, such as Pietro Pomponazzi in Padua and Bologna, leading all the way to Pierre Gassendi in France in the seventeenth century.

Brown argues that the initial return of epicureanism lacks a unified system, consisting instead in divergent ideas that she organizes into three thematic clusters.[33] First, there is the theme of fear and superstition. Religion exercises its grip by instilling fear of natural phenomena or fear of God. More generally, fear is the way in which a powerful individual can dominate the minds of his contemporaries so as to control them. This can lead both to repression and to the establishment of a secure sovereign reign. It is noteworthy that this theme is absent from the reception history of epicureanism that I outlined in the previous section. Second, there is the theme of naturalism or atomism. The epicureans reject creationism or creation *ex nihilo*. This also entails that mind and body are connected and that there is no remainder after one's death – which is why we should not fear punishment in some putative afterlife or why, as the epicurean motto goes, 'death is nothing to us'. This is the familiar doctrine of physicalism but not necessarily accompanied by strict adherence to the physics of atoms and the void – very much like the position Spinoza outlines in the correspondence with Boxel. Third, there is the theme that Brown calls primitivism and which can be traced to Book 5 of *On the Nature of Things*. Human action and interaction in *ante legem* and organized societies function according to the same logic because human nature is consistent through the ages – in particular, what is consistent is that humans act by calculating their utility. This provides a conception of the formation of society out of 'barbarism'. This theme returns to the importance of phronesis in Epicurus but now it is couched in modern terms as constitutive of the definition of the human – not just as the precondition of virtue. There are various subthemes, but these three themes remain the nodal points of Brown's account, despite the fact – and this is a significant point in Brown's book – that they do not form a systematic whole.[34]

My contention is that Spinoza synthesizes these three themes in a way that determines his epicureanism and marks his politics. More accurately, it is not each theme independently but the *interconnections* of the three themes that demarcate Spinoza's epicureanism. The interconnections operate due to the function of utility in Spinoza's thought. Such an understanding of

[33] Brown, *The Return of Lucretius*, 15.

[34] Alison Brown also summarizes these themes also in her 'Lucretian Naturalism and the Evolution of Machiavelli's Ethics', in del Lucchese, Frosini and Morfino (eds), *The Radical Machiavelli*, 105–27.

Spinoza's epicureanism not only positions his thought in relation to the reception history of epicureanism that I outlined above. In addition, it explains how his epicureanism develops a sharp political edge. Let me take the three themes in turn to show synoptically how they work – as the rest of the book consists in tracing these themes and their implications throughout the *Theological Political Treatise*.

First, there is the theme of authority arising out of superstition. This is the opening theme of Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things* and it is central to the *Theological Political Treatise*, introduced in the opening paragraph of the Preface.[35] Following the typical epicurean move, Spinoza highlights the function of fear in the spread of superstition. This account of superstition is concerned with the production of authority, understood as the structure of command and obedience. Fear and superstition precipitate the establishment of authority. Both Lucretius and Spinoza insist on the political *and* theological sources of authority.

It is somewhat deceptive to speak of authority in English in this context. The word 'authority' in English has such a broad range of signification that it can almost be a synonym of the word power – another word whose elusive range of signification makes it hard to determine. In the *Theological Political Treatise*, the determination of authority is more specific. *Auctoritas* relies on the Roman definition, according to which authority is impervious to argumentation. As Hannah Arendt puts it, authority 'is incompatible with persuasion, which presupposes equality and works through a process of argumentation. Where arguments are used, authority is left in abeyance.'[36] Or, in Alexandre Kojève's formulation, authority resides with someone whose 'action does not provoke a reaction'.[37] Spinoza has direct recourse to the same determination of authority when he asserts, for instance, that 'the authority of the prophets does not permit of argumentation [*prophetae auctoritas ratiocinari non patitur*]' (139/152).

It is easy to discern a tension between authority understood in this Roman sense and democracy. The more authority there is, which means the more one's opinions and actions are beyond dispute, the less democracy finds the right conditions to thrive. Where contestation is stifled because the position of whoever holds authority prevails unchallenged, there democracy is stifled too. Let me present some more details of authority that will also help us understand the anti-authoritarian impulse in Spinoza.

[35] I take this up in detail in Chapter 1.
[36] Arendt, 'Authority', in *Between Past and Future*, 93.
[37] Kojève, *The Notion of Authority (A Brief Presentation)*, 13.

Authority describes the model of command and obedience. Authority commands and the rest obey. As Paul Ricoeur observes, the command and obedience model of authority has a double source, both theological and political.[38] If authority comes from revelation or another religious source such as the veneration of the ancestors, then authority is theological. The political sense of authority is developed in Rome. According to Cicero's famous definition in *De Legibus*, 'supreme power [*potestas*] is granted to the people and actual authority [*auctoritas*] to the Senate'.[39] The people in the Roman republic have *potestas* in the sense that their power is instituted through the tribune. The authority of the senate, on the other hand, is derived from the foundations of the Roman republic, from a glorified past beyond reproach. Cicero's formulation is instructive also in showing the impossibility of separating the political from the theological. Even though Cicero is describing the senate's political authority, the fact that it is derived from the glorified ancestors entails a religious source too. In the seventeenth century, the most obvious figure representing this double origin of authority is Moses – which explains why, for instance, both Hobbes and Spinoza regard him as the most significant prophet.[40]

The theological and political aspects of authority cannot be separated. We know this from linguistics, since Émile Benveniste shows that the root *augeo* of *auctoritas* points to both the theological and the political realms.[41] Mythological accounts of authority also point to its double source, in theology and in politics, as the work of Georges Dumézil makes particularly clear.[42] This is widely recognized in early modernity. Thus, Machiavelli argues in the *Discourses* that, to establish his authority, a lawgiver or a law-reformer always has 'recourse to God . . . because without that they [i.e. the new laws] would not be accepted'.[43] From this perspective, we can see the title of the *Theological Political Treatise* as equivalent to *Treatise on Authority*. By contrast, the theological element recedes in the *Political Treatise* because the concept of *auctoritas* is absent. Instead, the *Political Treatise* is a more 'Greek' work in the sense that it relies on the theory of the three constitutions derived through Plato, Aristotle and Polybius.

So, who has authority? Let me provide some examples. The Pope had

[38] Ricoeur, 'The Paradox of Authority', in *Reflections on the Just*, 91–105.

[39] Cicero, *De Legibus*, 492.

[40] I examine Spinoza's treatment of Moses's theologico-political authority in section 1 of Chapter 2.

[41] Benveniste, *Le Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes II*.

[42] Dumézil, *Mitra-Varuna: An Essay on Two Indo-European Representations of Sovereignty*.

[43] Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius*, 225.

authority in the sense that his was the final judgement in any theological dispute. A judge has authority in the sense that his verdict is not subject to questioning in the court when it is delivered. A general has authority because his orders are not subject to contestation. A sovereign can also have authority to the extent that his political decisions are not subject to debate – an idea that informs Schmitt's famous definition that 'the sovereign is the one who decides on the exception', because a decision is not subject to debate.[44] Authority is also traditionally visually distinguished. The external mark of authority is usually the gown. The gown is nowadays substituted by modern equivalents. For instance, the modern sovereign may no longer have distinctive sartorial markers of authority, but still the head of the executive branch of government retains other external characteristics, such as a distinctive residence – for instance, the White House – or a designated position in the legislative council.

In general, Spinoza develops a position that seeks to undermine personal authority. The immediate *historical context* is important: Spinoza is writing in the aftermath of the Reformation, which influences his discourse. When Martin Luther posts his *Ninety-Five Theses* on the door of the church in Wittenberg on 31 October 1517, he is attacking the authority of the Pope. Protestantism sought to substitute the authority of the Pope with the authority of Scripture, thereby challenging the established sense of authority. At the same time, the *conceptual sources* of Spinoza's critique of authority are just as significant. Intimations of a conception of authority as beyond dispute are present in all ancient schools of philosophy with the notable exception of the epicureans. Its founder, Epicurus, famously admitted women and slaves at his garden – the symbolic centre of his school. Spinoza's epicureanism commits him to a position critical of authority.

Second, while the theme of monism is one of the most discussed topics in his work, it is rarely acknowledged that Spinoza's monism is also linked to his epicureanism – in fact, the only exception that springs to mind here is Strauss. The positing of a totality outside of which nothing exists, and which consequently does not admit of creation *ex nihilo*, has an atomist and epicurean provenance, and it is fully embraced by Spinoza. We learn, for instance, from the Scholium to Proposition 20 of Part IV of the *Ethics* that it is impossible for something to 'come out of nothing [*ex nihilio aliquid fiat*]'. Epicurus's letter to Herodotus, the most influential text on the epicurean theory of science and knowledge, opens with the idea that there is a totality outside of which nothing exists and explicitly rejects

[44] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5.

creationism.[45] Following upon this epicurean tradition, Spinoza's monism develops theological and political insights. It is incompatible with the idea of God as creator in both Christianity and Judaism, as well as with the idea of a divine will analogous to a mortal magistrate – a critique developed most famously in the Appendix to Part I of the *Ethics* but also raised explicitly in chapter 4 of the *Theological Political Treatise*.

Monism is also important for Spinoza's epistemology since it explains how the human is receptive to the world. The totality – regardless of whether it is called God, Nature, or substance – precedes any form of human knowledge. *Knowledge is possible on condition that there is a totality*. That knowledge presupposes a totality has been beyond dispute in Spinoza scholarship. This is the position described in Part I of the *Ethics*, according to which the substance precedes the two attributes of thought and extension. The debate in Spinoza scholarship concerns what this precedence or presupposition of the substance means and what it entails, not the presupposition itself, given how clearly it is stated in the opening of the *Ethics*. My point is that this opening move of the *Ethics* – which explicitly entails that there is nothing outside substance and hence the rejection of creation *ex nihilo* – is the same as the opening move of Epicurus's letter to Herodotus.[46]

Besides monism's importance for epistemology, there is also a significant anthropological implication of the positing of a totality outside of which nothing exists. This essentially means that mind and body are inseparable. This is a cardinal point that we find in both Epicurus and Lucretius, and subsequently in all materialist philosophies. Thus, epicureans hold that 'death is nothing to us' because in perishing there is no spirit or soul that survives the body, either in a heaven or a hell – the spirit perishes too because mind and body are inseparable.[47] According to epicureanism, then, there is no pure body completely severed from thought, there is no what Agamben calls 'bare life'.

Significantly, the inseparability of mind and body entails that there is both thought and emotion in any experience. This is why, for instance, Spinoza says in the first Definition of the Affects in Part III of the *Ethics* that desire (*cupiditas*) is the essence of the human insofar as desire is understood as affection accompanied by consciousness thereof. To put this in a monist terminology, it is not only that totality precedes knowledge; in addition, the human exercises at least a modicum of rationality every moment it is

[45] See Diogenes Laertius, 'Epicurus', X.38–9.

[46] I discuss this further in section 1 of Chapter 1.

[47] See Diogenes Laertius, 'Epicurus', X.126. See also Warren, *Facing Death*.

affected by its environment, that is, every moment it is part of the totality. The inseparability of mind and body means that there is always some reasoning in our experience.

This monist implication about the inseparability of mind and body is enormously significant for Gilles Deleuze's reading of Spinoza.[48] Deleuze's interpretation in its turn has had a profound impact on a number of exciting developments in theory in the past few decades, such as affect theory, new materialism and post-humanism. Deleuze articulates Spinoza's monism as the 'plane of immanence'. This essentially rejects the possibility of any kind of transcendence. The question then becomes what the criterion for human action is in such a plane of immanence. Deleuze's answer is compelling in its simplicity. There are no qualitative distinctions – Spinoza is 'beyond good and evil' – only quantitative fluctuations that indicate the co-implication of mind and body. The more certain actions increase one's power, the more they probe 'what a body can do', the better they are. Conversely, the more they decrease one's power, the worse they are. Further, it is reason, as the second kind of knowledge, as opposed to the imagination, that accomplishes the increase of power. Pointedly, Deleuze relies primarily on Part III of the *Ethics* to develop this interpretation of Spinoza's ethics – or, what Deleuze also calls 'ethology'.[49] This fluctuation of power that combines the mind and body has been central for affect theorists such as Brian Massumi, new materialists such as William Connolly, and post-humanists such as Rosi Braidotti.[50] Thus, it has opened up significant and influential new currents of thought.

The problem is that it is a lop-sided interpretation of Spinoza that ends up being distorting. There are two main reasons for this. First, the way that the quantitate increase of power through the operation of the mind is articulated relies solely on the distinction between imagination and the second kind of knowledge. But when we turn to Part IV of the *Ethics*, utility plays a pivotal role – as I will discuss in more detail later. And it is impossible to reconcile the calculation of utility with either the imagination or the second kind of

48 Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*.

49 Deleuze, 'On the Difference between the *Ethics* and a Morality', in *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, 17–29.

50 See, for instance, Massumi's *What Animals Teach us about Politics* and the interviews in *Politics of Affect*, where Massumi admits that the 'way I use it [i.e., affect] comes primarily from Spinoza' (3); Connolly, *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed* and *A World of Becoming*; and Braidotti, *Transpositions*, 'The Ethics of Becoming Imperceptible', in Boundas (ed.), *Deleuze and Philosophy*, 133–59, and *The Posthuman*.

knowledge that relies on adequate ideas.[51] It is symptomatic of Deleuze's discomfort about utility that he has very little to say about Part IV. Any sense of utility or of the epicurean phronesis is totally absent in Deleuze and in the sub-disciplines that depart from his reading of Spinoza. Second, the conception of an ethology that consists in the increase and decrease of power and the subsequent kind of relational ontology that it spawns fails to adequately address the concept of authority.[52] This is why, again, neither Deleuze nor the other philosophers mentioned above have anything to say about the *Theological Political Treatise*. The effect of these readings is – I would not say a misinterpretation of Spinoza, since given their terms of reference all these philosophers provide astonishing insights into Spinoza's thought – rather, it is a missed encounter with the politics of the *Treatise*.

It is also the reason why none of these thinkers can arrive at a conception of Spinoza's epicureanism other than as a form of naturalism. For my determination of Spinoza's epicureanism, the third theme is also required, namely the calculation of utility or phronesis. Given that Spinoza refers to this as characteristic of human nature – for instance, in chapter 16 of the *Theological Political Treatise* – I sometimes refer to it as the anthropological principle. Let me start by showing how the second theme – monism – is related to the calculation of utility before I extrapolate further how this third theme of Spinoza's epicureanism is derived from Epicurus's conception of phronesis.

I mentioned above the epistemological insight derived from monism, namely, that knowledge presupposes a totality outside of which nothing exists. But this means that we can never have a complete knowledge of the totality – something that Spinoza recognizes as early as the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (see paragraphs 100 to 102). This is a critical insight for the *Theological Political Treatise*: 'Universal consideration about fate and the interconnection of causes can be of no service to us in forming and ordering our thoughts concerning particular things. Furthermore, we are plainly ignorant of the actual co-ordination and interconnection of things . . . so for our utility in living it is better [*ad usum vitae melius*], indeed, it is necessary, to consider things as possible' (48–9/58). Given the impossibility of knowing the totality that is characterized by absolute necessity, one necessarily knows first in relation to practical concerns and aims that pertain to what it is possible to do or achieve. If it is impossible to comprehend the

[51] I also take up this topic in Chapter 6.

[52] On this point, see the excellent article by Kujula and Regan, 'The Politics of Ethics: Spinoza and New Materialisms'.

interconnection of causes that constitutes the totality, that means that we need to position ourselves within that totality, something which is possible by focusing on our utility. This impossibility of complete knowledge *and* the necessity to draw on the resources that utility provides for us is constitutive of our human nature.

The fact that we cannot know God as such, or Nature in its totality – the fact that we are human – does not need to lead to a lament about our fallen state or our impotence. To the contrary, it places the onus on us to derive practical knowledge to assist our judgements about how to act in particular circumstances. The fact that we exist in a totality means that we exercise some kind of practical knowledge about how to act in the world. Let me put this point more emphatically. *According to the second theme of Spinoza's epicureanism, the totality is presupposed by knowledge; according to the third theme, the totality necessarily entails practical knowledge in the form of judging about how to act.* These practical judgements do not aspire to universality – they are not necessarily expressed as adequate ideas – they are fallible, precisely because knowledge of the totality as such is impossible.

The transition from the second to the third theme of Spinoza's epicureanism is signalled in a unique moment in Part II of the *Ethics*, when Spinoza makes a rare apostrophe to the reader: 'Here, no doubt, my readers will come to a halt, and think of many things which will give them pause. For this reason I ask them to continue on with me slowly, step by step, and to make no judgment on these matters until they have read through them all' (*E* II, P11S). What is so unfamiliar or potentially upsetting about Proposition 11 that Spinoza feels the need to appeal directly to the readers' patience? The proposition says: 'The first thing which constitutes the actual being of a human mind is nothing but the idea of a singular thing which actually exists [*Primum, quod actuale mentis humanae esse constituit, nihil aliud est quam idea rei alicujus singularis actu existentis*].' One could say that there isn't much that is contentious here. The primary constituent element of the mind is its being in the world. But if that is the case, then mind and body are connected. If anything universal is to be cognized, then we have to start with singularity. *Practical knowledge is more primary than knowledge of universals.*[53]

Spinoza does not stop at this interplay of singularity and universality in Proposition 11. He clarifies in the Corollary: 'From this it follows that the human mind is a part of the infinite intellect of God. Therefore, when we say that the human mind perceives this or that, we are saying nothing but

[53] We saw this move in Epicurus's letter to Menoeceus in the previous section, and I will return to it in the following chapter.

that God, not insofar as he is infinite, but insofar as he is explained through the nature of the human mind, *or* insofar as he constitutes the essence of the human mind, has this or that idea; and when we say that God has this or that idea, not only insofar as he constitutes the nature of the human mind, but insofar as he also has the idea of another thing together with the human mind, then we say that the human mind perceives the thing only partially, *or* inadequately.' The implication is clear: any kind of knowledge of both singularity and universality – all knowledge, both adequate and inadequate – presupposes God as a totality outside of which nothing exists. *The primacy of practical knowledge is a result of the rejection of creation.* The immediate reaction of his readers was – as Spinoza feared – devastating.

Pierre Bayle – whose long entry on Spinoza in his *Dictionary* was for over a century the primary source of knowledge on Spinoza – reflects dismissively on Proposition 11: 'in Spinoza's system all those who say, "The Germans have killed ten thousand Turks," speak incorrectly and falsely unless they mean, "God modified into Germans has killed God modified into ten thousand Turks," and the same with all the phrases by which what men do to one another are expressed.'[54] This is one of the most famous arguments against monism in the early reception of Spinoza's work. What Bayle does not understand – what Spinoza feared that his readers will not understand – is the connection between the second and the third themes of his epicureanism. Monism does not stand on its own, as the first significant response to Spinoza's philosophy assumes.[55] Monism implies the practical kind of knowledge that is imbued in the singular – the knowledge that responds to the given circumstances.

We can describe this practical knowledge in terms of judgement that is understood in instrumental terms or as the calculation of one's utility. This is consonant with one of the major preoccupations of modern epicureanism, namely, Epicurus's use of phronesis. Phronesis as a form of practical judgement that is concerned with action and hence with instrumental reasoning can be found in Book VI of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. But there is a major difference from Epicurus's use.[56] Aristotle argues that there are three forms of knowledge: episteme, which is knowledge of the universal essence of things; poiesis, which is knowledge of how to make things; and phronesis, which is practical knowledge leading to judgements about how to act. Aristotle argues that episteme is superior to phronesis, thereby admitting the

[54] Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, 312.
[55] I return to this early reception in Chapter 4.
[56] I explain this contrast in more detail in Chapter 1.

distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge. In his reading of Aristotle's Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Heidegger notes this distinction as the starting point of metaphysics and onto-theology.[57] By contrast, because the totality in Epicurus's conception necessarily requires practical judgements – because the *primary* act of the mind pertains to singularity, as Proposition 11 puts it – epicureanism asserts the primacy of phronesis over episteme.[58]

Phronesis is a judgement relying on no predetermined criteria external to the circumstances that call for judgement. It is a judgement as a response to the situation that one finds oneself in. Phronesis is always for something – that is, it is an instrumental thinking that precipitates action. As Aristotle already recognizes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, its instrumentality means that phronesis combines thinking and emotion. The inseparability of mind and body in the practical judgement of phronesis is further emphasized in the epicurean tradition. Spinoza expresses an epicurean sense of phronesis in the Scholium to Proposition 9 of Part III of the *Ethics*: 'we neither strive for, nor will, neither want, nor desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary; we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it'. Judgement does not rely on the good as an independent value functioning as the cause of our desires. Rather, a judgement – as phronesis or instrumental rationality – is inextricable from desires and from projected actions.[59]

There are two ways in which the reader can go astray in understanding phronesis or the calculation of utility: either to conflate it with the Kantian account of judgement that has dominated the thinking about judgement since the nineteenth century, or to reduce the calculation of utility into utilitarianism.

The Kantian conception of practical judgement has two distinct requirements: first, the separation of cognitive and aesthetic judgements; and, second, the separation of practical judgement from natural causality so as to identify – or strive to identify – universal moral precepts. An epicurean sense of phronesis is incompatible with both requirements. Phronesis cuts through both cognition and praxis – which explains why Spinoza's epistemology and

[57] Heidegger, *Plato's Sophist*.

[58] Cf. Diogenes Laertius, 'Epicurus', X.132, which I quote in the previous section.

[59] The most important work on Spinoza and judgement is Christopher Skeaff's *Becoming Political: Spinoza's Vital Republicanism and the Democratic Power of Judgment*. Skeaff also recognizes the importance of *E* III, P9S for a theory of judgement in Spinoza. Unfortunately, Skeaff's book was published after my present book was completed, so I could not give it the attention it deserves.

metaphysics are presented within a book on 'ethics'. And, phronesis takes into account one's emotional comportment toward the situation in which one makes a judgement, which entails that a separation between intellection and 'natural causality' is impossible. Differently put, mind and body are mutually determinative for Spinoza. I should note in this context the enormous Kantian influence on how we have come to understand judgement today – and I call upon the reader to be wary of this influence while considering Spinoza's epicurean sense of judgement.

The greatest misunderstandings can arise by confusing Spinoza's conception of the calculation of utility with the utilitarianism that develops in nineteenth-century England. There are two fundamental differences between them. First, the utilitarians seek to develop a way to measure utility. Consequently, the emphasis shifts away from a conception of practical judgement that arises within given contingent circumstances and toward an attempt to discover a *métier* to measure the utility of actions. There is no attempt in Epicurus or Spinoza to ground action on some *métier* determining the calculation of the utility. Thus, for Bentham utility indicates a kind of algorithm that measures how we arrive at felicity, while for the epicureans the calculation of utility is a process that has no secure criteria and whose failures are just as important as its successes – a point that I will return to in the next section. Another way to express the difference is to say that for utilitarianism the end of action is pleasure and the means to achieving it is the calculation of utility.[60] Conversely, for epicureanism, phronesis is not a means but a necessary precondition for any cognitive activity as well as for action, including the pursuit of happiness and virtue.

Second, as a result of the first point, the nineteenth-century utilitarians have to insist on a contrast between the individual and society. How the utility of the individual and the collective are measured are not necessarily the same, and in many cases they may in fact conflict. One example of this may be Mill's treatise on liberty, where freedom is defined from the perspective of the individual – both the one who acts freely and those affected by these actions. Mill holds that we are free to perform any actions so long as they do not harm others. But Mill has no particular interest in considering in his essay on liberty any social or communal setting within which the actions unfold. By contrast, in Spinoza not only does the measurement of one's actions take place within the interplay of the utility of others – in addition, for Spinoza utility is reciprocal, or, as Proposition 35 of Part IV of the *Ethics* puts it, 'there is no singular thing in nature that is more useful [*utilius*] to a

[60] See Guyau, *La morale d'Épicure*.

human being than another human being living according to the guidance of reason'. Thus there is no sustainable contrast between the individual and society in Spinoza. Instead, both sociality and the political field are informed by the calculation of utility. This is consistent with the epicurean tradition arising in modernity. Let me provide one example.[61] Spinoza, following a materialist and epicurean tradition that includes Machiavelli and La Boétie, notes that the sovereign's decisions are always conditioned by their reception by the people. Thus, even the sovereign, the personification of the body politic, is not able to draw practical judgements that are 'autonomous' – that are 'owned' by his individually. Every calculation of utility is conditioned by the material circumstances in which it is made and by how it is communicated.

After these clarifications, let me return to the historical context to explain why the modern epicureans translate the idea of phronesis as the *calculation of utility*. We can suppose that there two reasons for avoiding the common translation of 'phronesis' as 'prudentia', which was the standard Latin rendition. First it could have been confusing, given that prudentia has both Stoic and Christian overtones. Second, and more importantly, given that 'epicureanism' was a term of abuse, primarily because it was seen as inimical to Christianity, the modern epicureans sought a translation that would allow them to hide behind the Bible – and Christ's words in particular: The 'golden rule' from the Sermon on the Mount, which is usually paraphrased as 'don't do to others what you don't want them to do to you', was construed as an expression of the calculation of utility.[62] The modern epicureans' turned to the 'golden rule' to obscure the fact that judgement as a calculation of how one's actions lead to communal utility has its sources in epicureanism.[63]

In this context, Spinoza's own preoccupation with the Sermon on the Mount is symptomatic of his epicurean insistence on the calculation of utility. For instance, Matthew's Gospel is one of the most common New

[61] I derive this example from my book on *Neoepicureanism* that I mention in the Preface.

[62] See Brown, *The Return of Lucretius*, 28; and, Brown, 'Lucretian Naturalism', 112. This 'law' is rendered as follows in the King James translation: 'all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law' (Matthew 7:12).

[63] This justification becomes a commonplace and persists well into the nineteenth century. For instance, John Stuart Mill repeats in his essay on utilitarianism: 'In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility. To do as one would be done by, and to love one's neighbour as oneself, constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality.' 'Utilitarianism', in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 10, 218. This is also a central insight in his book on liberty.

Testament references in the *Theological Political Treatise*; Spinoza explicitly says that the Sermon on the Mount contains the entire philosophical teaching of the Bible; and he also cites the golden rule as an expression of the love of one's neighbour. Thus, the calculation of utility is in Spinoza another way of expressing practical judgement or phronesis. In this Spinoza can be understood as following the modern epicurean tradition that translates Epicurus's phronesis into the calculation of utility. For this reason, I use the terms 'calculation of utility', 'phronesis' and 'instrumental rationality' interchangeably – their difference being only that they designate different routes, conceptual and historical, of arriving at the third theme of Spinoza's epicureanism.

The most sustained meditation on utility in the *Ethics* can be found in Part IV, which is not surprising if we recall that Spinoza completed Part IV after the *Theological Political Treatise*. Let me note some nodal points. The preoccupation with utility is evident already from Definition 1: 'By the good [*bonum*] I shall understand what is certainly known to be useful [*utile*] to us.' Further, Spinoza associates the calculation of utility with the drive for self-preservation, or the conatus. Proposition 19 insists that it is from the laws of nature that one needs to make judgements about what is good for one. And Proposition 20 links this judging capacity both with the calculation of one's utility and with the conatus. As the Scholium succinctly puts it, 'no one . . . neglects to seek their utility [*utile*] or to preserve their being'. The calculation of utility is part of human nature to the extent that it is conjoined with the conatus. This means that the calculation of utility is part of living, it is an active practice. This idea is expressed in terms of neighbourly love in the *Treatise*, becoming a crucial component of its political theory – as I explain in Chapters 5 and 6. Finally, the calculation of utility is situated in the immanence of one's being in the world – which means that it articulates one's power. Spinoza succinctly summarizes this idea in Proposition 65 when he uses the standard formulation of the calculation of utility in the seventeenth century, namely, that one chooses the best of two good alternatives or the least evil of two bad ones.

Before I close this outline of the three epicurean themes in Spinoza, I need to underscore how each of them has a variety of sources and influences other than epicureanism – from Maimonides to rationalism and from averroism to Tacitus, to name but a few here. It would be absurd to argue that each of the three themes on its own is solely epicurean – for instance, that Spinoza's monism is derived only from epicureanism. That is certainly not my contention. Rather, I hold that it is the *interactions* between these three themes that constitute Spinoza's epicureanism.

Thus, for instance, I do not see an incompatibility between Michael Della Rocca's insight on the importance of the principle of sufficient reason in Spinoza and my reading of his epicureanism.[64] However, I hold that Spinoza's rationalism in Della Rocca's account is unconcerned with another – large and important – part of his thought, namely, how the third theme of Spinoza's epicureanism necessitates practical knowledge and judgements that cannot be fitted into the principle of sufficient reason. The effect of Della Rocca's lack of concern with the calculation of utility is the repression of Spinoza's epicureanism. Conversely, in order to foreground Spinoza's epicureanism, I highlight the interconnections between the three themes.

It is important to note in this context that Spinoza himself often highlights these interconnections. For instance, I noted earlier in the present section the function of Proposition 11 from Part II of the *Ethics* in forging the connection between the themes. There are also entire positions that he constructs on the same basis; the rejection of miracles, for instance, is structured around the connection between the three themes.[65] Let me provide here a couple more examples of these interconnections.

They are so important for the *Theological Political Treatise* that they are already suggested in the epigram, which is a quotation from the First Epistle of John. The whole passage in the King James translation reads: 'No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us. Hereby know we that we dwell in him, and he in us, because he hath given us of his Spirit' (John, First Epistle, 4:12–13). Spinoza quotes this passage several times – including in a letter to Alfred Burgh (*Ep.* 76). The most detailed extrapolation can be found in chapter 14 of the *Treatise*. Spinoza insists there on the connection between God understood in monist terms and the practical import this has for us as humans: our love of God, says Spinoza, is expressed through our actions (160).[66] In particular, the love of our neighbour that expresses our connection to God is *simultaneously* of political import, since Spinoza argues that it is for the utility of the state if the citizens adhere to the fundamental principle of religion, namely, neighbourly love, irrespective of how this principle may be appropriated by holders of power to further their authority. Thus, the political dimension of the connection between monism and the calculation of utility as it is also linked to the critique of authority is foreshadowed at the beginning of the *Treatise*, even before the text proper.

[64] Della Rocca, *Spinoza*.

[65] I take this topic up in Chapter 4.

[66] I examine this passage in more detail in section 1 of Chapter 6.

The most striking way in which Spinoza talks about the relation between monism and the calculation of utility is by adopting what we may call the 'cosmic perspective' in chapter 16 of the *Theological Political Treatise*: 'Nature's bounds are not set by the laws of human reason which aim only at one's true utility and his preservation [*utile, et conservationem*], but by infinite other laws which have regard to the eternal order of the whole of nature [*totius naturae*], of which man is but a particle [*homo particula est*]' (174/190–1). We should note first that Spinoza repeats this in almost identical wording in the *Political Treatise* (2.8), as if he is reciting an important, memorized passage. This cosmic perspective makes us realize that we are insignificant in the large scale of things. Such recognition is possible on condition that there is a distinction between, on the one hand, the realm of utility or everything that pertains to our action and preservation, and, on the other hand, the totality of nature.[67] It is instructive to note how the argument proceeds after this distinction. Spinoza asserts that it is to our utility to use our reason in constructing political communities (175). And then he defines human nature in terms of the calculation of one's utility (175–6). Thus monism – the 'totality of nature' – and utility are intertwined in the argument that will soon lead to the determination of democracy as the most natural constitution.

So, the three epicurean themes do not suggest that we should read Spinoza's texts by creating a list of various themes. Rather, my suggestion is that we need to detect the dynamic connections between them, how they interact with and inform each other. No theme on its own is adequate to present Spinoza's position.

3. The Dialectic of Authority and Utility: Spinoza's Promise

What is the dialectic of authority and utility for? Or, which is the same question, what is Spinoza's epicureanism for? The dialectic performs various functions at the same time, which can be summarized under the following three categories: an account of social and political formation; giving us the basis to make judgements about events both in the past and in the present; and, conceiving democracy as a particular way of being with others. Let us take each one in turn.

First, the dialectic of authority and utility provides an account of the formation of society and the state. Using the dialectic, Spinoza explains how

[67] The connection between utility and the totality of nature distinguishes Spinoza's perspective from a Stoic conception of providence.

the state is formed in a way that is distinct from the standard contractarian account that we find for instance in Hobbes. I will provide details of this account later in the book.[68] I would like to note here only that as soon as the genesis of sociality and the state is located in an irresolvable dialectic, then Spinoza's politics rejects any normative certainty that could supposedly determine political action.

As I explained earlier, there is a dialectic of authority and utility because the two terms are in conflict – authority requires obedience whereas utility is the drive to form judgements about how to act in given circumstances. This conflict can also entail that in certain conditions it may be for the utility of the people to defer judgements to someone else, or to authorize the sovereign to act on their behalf. As Spinoza does not tire of reminding us, the multitude is 'fickle' and people miscalculate their utility because 'they see the better but do the worse'.[69] Given this, we can imagine that, for instance, in a security emergency it may beneficial for the citizens to defer to the authority of sovereignty that may have all the necessary information to respond to the situation. Spinoza's own most prominent example is the Hebrew state. In the desert, Moses finds himself leading an unruly people who are, moreover, accustomed to submission to political authority. His strong personal authority is beneficial for the establishment of the Hebrew state.

Spinoza outlines two ways in which this authority can be articulated within this dialectic. On the one hand, the collapse of the operation of phronesis and the spread of superstition contribute to the establishment of the personal authority of those who use fear to strengthen their power. Spinoza consistently castigates this sense of authority that he also calls despotism, and he is unwavering in his showing how it conflicts with utility. His anti-authoritarianism is directed toward authority's attempt to suppress the capacity of the people to calculate their utility. On the other hand, it is possible that obedience to a sovereign authority may contribute to the good of the community. This recognition ensures that Spinoza does not adopt an anti-statist position. The lack of an explicit demonstration of this other side of authority in Epicurus or Lucretius, much more than Epicurus's advice to avoid the political turmoil of the agora, may be responsible for the traditional understanding of epicureanism as apolitical. Modern epicureans such

[68] See especially Chapters 4 and 7.

[69] Spinoza repeats the proverbial 'to see the better and do the worse' several times in the *Ethics*, notably in *E* III, P2S2, in the introduction to *E* IV and in *E* IV, P17S. The saying comes from Medea's character in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* but, as Curley notes, it is a commonplace in seventeenth-century discussions of the free will.

as Machiavelli and Hobbes do not suffer from the same problem. Spinoza belongs with the modern epicureans in this regard.[70]

One may object at this point that there is a fine line between the negative and the positive senses of authority, compounded by the fact that Spinoza does not provide universal criteria to help us identify when it is necessary to authorize someone else to act on our behalf. I hold that Spinoza would not have viewed these objections as a negative critique. Spinoza is not a utopian thinker. His politics does not consist of a set of normative criteria for how to arrive at the good. Instead, as the Definition from Part IV says, the good is that which is perceived to be contributing to our utility. The only 'normative' criterion – although the meaning of the word 'normative' here is stretched – is the persistence of practical judgement or phronesis. But there are no certainties, no guarantees that the dialectic will have a happy outcome. The dialectic indicates the kind of work for the sake of the polity which needs to be undertaken each time anew, each time differently.

Differently put, Spinoza constructs his politics as a *promise* for the good. Just as a promise is liquidated the moment it is fulfilled, the dialectic persists as a promise because it can never be completely realized. Thus, the dialectic of authority and utility does not provide us with any secure guarantees. There are no normative criteria that can help us decide on the relation between authority and utility. Instead, Spinoza's politics places an inordinate emphasis on the exigency to calculate utility or to exercise practical judgement. Spinoza uses an idiosyncratic expression to describe this exigency, namely, the freedom to philosophize.[71] For the true materialist, philosophy or thought is inextricable from the freedom pursued in communal actions and decisions, and for the good epicurean, this pursuit is couched within an interminable, non-teleological dialectic of authority and utility.

Second, the dialectic of authority and utility becomes Spinoza's heuristic device to analyse the Hebrew state. Spinoza uses the dialectic to organize his historical account of the Hebrew state's creation and destruction. The most intriguing feature of this function of the dialectic of authority and utility is that it need not be confined to the analysis of the *Theological Political Treatise*. Spinoza's epicureanism can be used to interpret all sorts of historical, social and political phenomena. In fact, it seems to me that our

[70] I regard this distinction concerning authority that avoids anti-statism as fundamental to the history of materialism, and I discuss it further in my book *Neoepicureanism* that I am currently writing, as noted in the Preface.

[71] I explain at the beginning of the next chapter why Spinoza's use of the expression 'the freedom to philosophize' is idiosyncratic and how it is connected to phronesis.

contemporary political analysis will be enriched by mobilizing this epicurean dialectic. Let me explain.

Authority had been one of *the* organizing political concepts for an exceedingly long period, from the Roman republic, through the Middle Ages and the Reformation, to the social contract tradition. It starts to wane with the French Revolution and the political philosophy that precedes it, but it was still not forgotten.[72] It is only in the twentieth century that authority is substituted by the discourses of totalitarianism and authoritarianism and thereby marginalized in political thought.

The gradual forgetting of authority is not due to the disappearance of authority in politics but rather due to a shift in the vocabulary of power toward its impersonal operation. Very influential in this regard is Max Weber's account of bureaucracy as a distinctively modern form of power.[73] Weber's recognition of the theological roots of this 'iron cage', as he calls it, still gestures toward authority that is, as I argued earlier, both theological and political.[74] But this is obscured by the fact that the term Weber uses is 'Herrschaft', which has in German a wider range of signification than the narrow command and obedience model traditionally defining *auctoritas*. The effect of Weber's shift of signification has been to narrow the use of the word 'authority' to refer only to political authority within an established state so as to function as a near synonym of sovereignty.[75] All work in the past quarter century I am aware of uses the term authority in this way, that is, as a synonym of sovereignty.[76] The rich, two-millennial tradition that determines authority as a figure that cannot be argued with and which is not commensurate with sovereign power has all but disappeared from view.

The push toward the discourse of totalitarianism was provided by Hannah Arendt.[77] This is an intriguing case, since Arendt in fact wrote the most stunning essay on authority in the twentieth century, an essay that predates

[72] See Marcuse, *A Study on Authority*, in *Studies in Critical Philosophy*, 49–155.

[73] See Weber, 'Politics as a Vocation', in *The Vocation Lectures*, 32–94; and *Economy and Society*.

[74] Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 123.

[75] As Sennett puts it, Weber 'identifies authority with legitimacy'. Sennett, *Authority*, 22.

[76] This is the only meaning of authority, for instance, in the most significant recent monograph on the subject: Michael Huemer's *The Problem of Political Authority: An Examination of the Right to Coerce and the Duty to Obey*; for the narrowing down of authority in political theory, see Wendt, 'Political Authority and the Minimal State'; and for legal studies, Raz, *The Authority of Law*; and, Edmundson, 'Political Authority, Moral Powers and the Intrinsic Value of Obedience'.

[77] See especially Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

her work on totalitarianism and informs it in complex ways – as I will examine in detail in Chapter 3. Nonetheless, the enormous literature that develops in response to her *Origins of Totalitarianism* does not draw a distinction between authority and totalitarianism. The explicit substitution of authority with authoritarianism as an object of study in political philosophy and theory takes place in the aftermath of the Second World War. Here the Frankfurt School is particularly important because of their monumental *The Authoritarian Personality*. The key influential insight contained there is that authoritarianism is not only not opposed to democracy, but in fact uses the population to prop itself up.[78] The concept of authority is largely – and hastily – absorbed within authoritarianism.

If the narrowing of the meaning of authority to refer to sovereignty has become the canonical and unquestioned use, the substitution of authority by totalitarianism and authoritarianism has positioned itself at centre stage of the political discourse since the rise of populism. Thus, since Trump's election, there has been a renewed interest in Arendt's work on totalitarianism and its contemporary relevance.[79] Or, the rise of populism as a threat to democracy that simultaneously leads to the rise of authoritarianism is customarily interpreted along the framework provided by the Frankfurt School, according to which authoritarianism is possible through the populist manipulation of the people.[80]

I hold that this trend has significant drawbacks that Spinoza's own account of two kinds of authority – a despotic one and one that can collaborate with utility – warns against. Let me provide one contemporary example of why this distinction is important. The chorus of voices who condemn Donald Trump for his authoritarianism fail to see a more interesting fact, namely, that he is a president without authority. I do not mean that he lost authority while being president. More emphatically, part of his electoral success has been the renunciation of personal authority. *Auctoritas* needs to retain a certain *gravitas* to remain impervious to argumentation. Trump's compulsive and transparent mendacity contradicts this feature of authority. As do also his antics, of which there is a plethora of examples, including for instance the video leaked shortly before the 2016 elections in which he expresses himself in crude sexist vocabulary and attitude. But I think the most stunning example of this is the way Trump was laughed at in the General Assembly of the United Nations on 25 September 2018 – and that

[78] Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*.
[79] Berkowitz, 'Why Arendt Matters: Revisiting *The Origins of Totalitarianism*'.
[80] Brown, Gordon and Pensky, *Authoritarianism: Three Inquiries in Critical Theory*.

he was not at all perturbed. As Hannah Arendt observes, authority cannot tolerate laughter, as it eradicates its capacity to avoid any contradiction. Laughter is the reaction that authority, by definition, ought to forestall. As Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940) or the laughter at Trump in the UN show us, authoritarian leaders are often the subject of ridicule because there is an *inverse relation* between authority and authoritarianism. Increased authoritarianism invariably leads to a diminution of authority. It is because of this inverse relation that it is possible to have a laughable sovereign.[81]

A fruitful analysis of this question needs to start with its contextualization. First, as a person in a position of power, Trump may be the first president of the United States who lacks authority but he is certainly not the first instance of such a kind of sovereign without authority. Recall at this point the breath-taking analysis of the rise of Bonaparte to power in Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* – an analysis which can be summarized by saying that Bonaparte lacked authority. As I argue in *Sovereignty and its Other*, Marx's analysis constructs the figure of the sovereign that characterizes biopolitics. Biopolitics and authority appear at odds with each other. For instance, the employment of managerialism and regulation erodes the authority of figures such as the university professor who traditionally enjoyed authority. Symptomatic of this trajectory was the discourse, prevalent prior to 9/11, according to which the globalization characteristic of neoliberalism was taken to pose a threat to sovereignty, with some commentators even speculating about the end of sovereignty.

And yet, the head of the sovereign has not been cut yet – to paraphrase Foucault. What is eroded is authority, even though – significantly – it has not disappeared. Instead, what is stark in recent articulations of sovereignty, such as Donald Trump, is that authority operates through a system of tacit but discernible substitutions. The figure on the Trump executive who holds authority is the vice president, Mike Pence. This authority is not derived, at least primarily, through his political nous, but rather through his allegiances with the religious right. Pence's theological authority is further disseminated through a network of preachers and other leaders of the religious right as his avatars or substitutes – or, is Pence perhaps their avatar authority? This network of theological authority is happy to support Trump so long as his administration serves their interests – that is, their utility – by installing figures in the judiciary, such as Brett Kavanaugh, who may also lack authority, like Trump, but who can represent their positions on issues such as reproductive rights.

[81] See Vardoulakis, 'Was Donald Trump Elected Because He Is Laughable?'

Thus, the dialectic of authority and utility allows for an analysis of the system of substitution or the mechanism of exchange that characterizes the operation of authority in neoliberalism. Spinoza's thought can be useful in this task. For instance, his diagnosis of the reasons for the destruction of the Hebrew state points to one cause whose multiple effects eventually eroded that state, namely, the fractioning of theological and political authority. Is this what is happening in the United States now too? Maybe the *Theological Political Treatise* is much more relevant today than is usually admitted.

Third, Spinoza's conception of democracy arises through his epicureanism. The key here is the connection between phronesis or the calculation of utility and the political. Spinoza's idea of democracy as the most natural constitution in chapter 16 of the *Theological Political Treatise* is premised on the discussion in the same chapter that human nature consists in the propensity of humans to calculate their utility. Further, given the fact that judgement becomes central in his account, and that practical judgement lacks certainty or validity, Spinoza is driven to describe democracy in agonistic terms. These are major themes running through the book so I would like here to indicate briefly the significance of the calculation of utility for our present.

A large section of political philosophy and political theory is squarely opposed to instrumental thinking as a normative basis for the political. The roots of this attitude are surely in Kant's separation of instrumentality from practical reason. The moral attitude, upon which the political is founded according to Kant, is premised on treating others as ends in themselves, that is, irrespective of one's calculation of utility. But Kant's account still does not sufficiently undermine phronesis – or, more precisely, it is an account that is opposed to materialism and it would take a materialist account that is non-instrumental to subvert this entire tradition that goes back to Epicurus. That's Martin Heidegger's contribution.

Heidegger starts his fundamental ontology with the distinction between how we relate to objects, either as present ready for us to use for our projects, or as instituting an entire world or framework of reference for us so long as we do not reduce them to their instrumentality. The former, instrumental approach Heidegger castigates as the onto-theology that needs to be 'destroyed'. This inimical attitude toward instrumentality is first made clear in his interpretation of Aristotle's conception of phronesis in the first three seminars of his course on *Plato's Sophist*, and it culminates in his animosity toward *Machenschaft*.[82] From Heidegger onward, instrumentality is dismissed

[82] I take this topic up in detail in my forthcoming *The Ruse of Techne: Heidegger's Metaphysical Materialism*.

as obscuring the right path to ethics no less than to philosophy. We can see this influence in the entire hermeneutical and phenomenological tradition – in figures such as Gadamer, Blanchot and Derrida. Hannah Arendt's *On Violence* is part of the same trajectory: she draws there a distinction between a politics proper that has power without instrumentality and a politics of instrumentality that is mired in violence.

This rejection of instrumentality culminates in political theory's engagement with biopolitics and neoliberalism. Most significant here is Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos*, which presents instrumental rationality as the key feature of the 'homo economicus', the individual in the era of neoliberalism. The effect of this instrumentality, according to Brown, is to altogether lose the political import of action. The 'homo economicus' is no longer a 'homo politicus'.[83] Bonnie Honig attempts a more nuanced route in a series of publications including *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair*. Honig contrasts the instrumentality of neoliberalism with the possibilities that a productive sense of the use of public things can offer. Such a revamped sense of use can reveal the public importance of objects in our environment. And yet, Honig shies away from analysing this use in terms of instrumentality.

There are two reasons why I find this trajectory unsatisfactory – and, I may add, it is this dissatisfaction that has prompted me to embark upon writing *Neoepicureanism*, a book that conducts a genealogy of phronesis or instrumental rationality from antiquity to the present.[84] First, I find it too defensive to abandon the entire conception of instrumentality in relation to practical judgement to neoliberalism. Effectively, this means that political philosophers and political theorists accept as correct Albert Hirschman's genealogy of self-interest as providing the conceptual foundation of neoliberalism.[85] Instead, it may be useful to consider this as the weak point of neoliberalism because – as Spinoza often repeats in the *Theological Political Treatise* – utility is reciprocal since there is no such thing as an autonomous individual. We do not own our practical judgements. Our judgements are formed in relation to the material reality that we find ourselves in, which includes others.

Second, it seems to me urgent to consider whether it is possible to conceptualize utility in such a way as to mobilize it *against* the very neoliberalism

[83] Brown, *Undoing the Demos*.

[84] The manuscript presently titled *Neoepicureanism: Materialism from Antiquity to Neoliberalism* is still unfinished. See discussion in the Preface.

[85] Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*. Hirschman's book was originally published in the 1970s.

that it is purported to support. Such a way of conceiving the calculation of utility appeared to me urgent in the wake of the financial crisis in Greece. The various political activists resisting the push of neoliberalism and the policies of austerity imposed on Greece were concerned with employing an instrumental thinking to promote their opposition. Examining Spinoza's thought on utility I became increasingly aware that political activists were well served by their lack of 'theoretical sophistication' or, more bluntly, their ignorance of the arguments against instrumentality. They were attempting to do what Spinoza proposes, namely, to use the calculation of utility in the service of a radical political agenda opposed to biopolitics.

I am not suggesting that Spinoza has all the answers or that he can tell us 'what is to be done'. I do believe, however, that the way he frames his political questions in relation to epicureanism allows us to see key ideas, such as power and democracy, in a different way. This is particularly pertinent in how we can conceive democracy today, in the wake of 'populism'. There are essentially two responses to the rise of populism. Some argue that it is necessary to develop a 'left populism'. The most prominent example of this has been Syriza in Greece, even if it is hard to conceive of Syriza as other than a failed experiment, given that it has been unable to implement the policies that characterized its left populism.

The liberal response to populism, and the one that seems to be prevalent in the United States, especially amongst political scientists, is to seek refuge in a perfectionist model of democracy. This is often referred to as a 'Jeffersonian' conception of democracy, according to which democracy requires cultivated citizens who make informed decisions that reflect their voting patterns. The more cultivated the citizens, the more informed their decisions, the better functioning is the democracy. I find this approach problematic on many counts. For instance, it suggests an elitist attitude toward those who voted for Trump in 2016, as if they were totally unable to calculate their utility. Further, I am dubious about the possibility of progress or perfection that is an ideal implicated in the 'dialectic of Enlightenment', whose destructive kind of instrumentality is memorably exposed by Adorno and Horkheimer.

The epicurean dialectic of authority and utility is not amenable to such a perfectionist conception of democracy. The reason is that phronesis, as a form of practical judgement that is a response to contingent circumstances without any steadfast external criteria, is a kind of judgement that is inherently fallible. The 'paradox of phronesis' is that it dictates our actions in the absence of any certainty, or, more emphatically, because it is paradoxi-

cal.[86] That's the reason why Spinoza is fascinated with how judgement fails. He diligently, and often humorously, records the mistakes that lead to the construction of authority, to the conception of human law, and to belief in miracles. I will repeatedly return to the fallibility of the calculation of utility in my reading of the *Theological Political Treatise*.

The fallibility of phronesis means that democracy for Spinoza has the structure of a promise – just like the political, as we saw earlier. There is no telos, no ideal that can or cannot be realized, no certainty of perfection. Instead, there is the commitment to ethically and politically relate to others by putting utility under scrutiny. This *promises* the good and virtue because – as we learn from Epicurus – phronesis is the precondition of good and virtue. But there is no guarantee that we will be successful. Spinoza understands democracy as this ethical and political exigency that is incommensurable with political institutions and yet inextricable from them. If individuals can be excluded from institutions – for instance, from the institution of citizenship – Spinoza's conception of democracy is more egalitarian since everyone can exercise their phronesis, and hence everyone can participate in the democratic ethico-political exigency, despite the limitations posed by institutions.

In the course of the book, I pause from time to time to reflect on how the dialectic of authority and utility informs our political condition today. But the most common way in which I try to demonstrate the current relevance of Spinoza's epicureanism is by bringing him into dialogue with significant figures who determine our thinking of the political. These may be figures who are opposed to Spinoza's epicureanism, such as Arendt, Strauss and Levinas. Or figures who are epicureans themselves but in ways that differ from Spinoza, such as Machiavelli and Hobbes. Or figures who seem to me to grasp the core of Spinoza's epicureanism even though they do not name it as such, like Balibar. I hope that these conversations will help the reader identify some of the uses of Spinoza's dialectic of authority and utility in the current academic conversation, but with a view to understanding it as a promise, that is, as an unfinished – and incompletable – project.

[86] The 'paradox of phronesis' is the central concept of my book on *Neoepicureanism*. For a synoptic view of my position as well as a discussion of the paradox of phronesis, see Vardoulakis, 'Neoepicureanism'.