

## Philosophy in Review



# Alexandre Matheron, "Politics, Ontology and Knowledge in Spinoza." Trans. David Maruzzella and Gil Morejón. Filippo del Lucchese, David Maruzzella and Gil Morejon (Eds.)

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**Alexandre Matheron.** *Politics, Ontology and Knowledge in Spinoza.* Trans. David Maruzzella and Gil Morejón. Filippo del Lucchese, David Maruzzella and Gil Morejon (Eds.). Edinburgh University Press 2020. 424 pp. \$110.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781474440103).

Alexandre Matheron is known as one of the greatest interpreters of Spinoza's philosophy from the 20th century. Matheron's position can be better understood by contrasting it with two other influential interpretations of Spinoza's political philosophy in France, namely Louis Althusser and Antonio Negri. Instead of investigating how geometrical logic can be used to conceive the intuitive knowledge of political bodies, Althusser tried to conform Spinoza's philosophy to his understanding of dialects (in which the concept of *surdétermination* plays a capital role). Negri, in his turn, refusing any kind of logical mediation, tried to adapt some of Spinoza's theses to his own postmodern philosophy, without any investigation of the uses of mathematics in Spinoza's writings. Alexandre Matheron, by contrast, couldn't conceive the past and the future of Spinoza's political philosophy without the logical geometry.

The commitment to geometrical logic makes Matheron's approach one of the most suitable for new generations who want to establish bridges between contemporary applied social sciences and what Spinoza called the 'intuitive science.' Thinking only about France, for example, no one can understand the philosophical grounds of Pierre Bourdieu's sociology if they refuse to think with the mediation of statistics and mathematics. The same can be said about contemporary formulations of political economy or about applied social sciences in general, that is, social sciences that are useful to decision-making in states around the world.

After the publication of his main work *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* (1969), Alexandre Matheron started to develop his research in the form of essays. The edition published by Edinburgh University Press, the first existing translation into English of these texts, collects some of Matheron's essays on Spinoza published some years ago in Lyon by ENS Éditions (2011). The English edition divides the articles in two parts and gives an accurate picture of how Matheron used to formulate questions of practical philosophy in Spinoza: that is, by producing rational and intuitive knowledge of human actions, social structures and political institutions, mainly by mediation of mathematical logic. If someone wants to think ethical and political phenomena with Spinoza's philosophy, namely by rational and intuitive knowledge, then they must understand the use of mathematics and geometrical logic in Spinoza's ontology.

Part I, 'Spinoza on Ontology and Politics,' takes us into the foundations of Matheron's structuralist approach in his fruitful dialogue with Martial Gueroult. Through the historical reconstitution of Spinoza's philosophy, a structuralist interpreter like Matheron or Gueroult understands the intrinsic logic of Spinoza's philosophical language. Instead of adapting it to some contemporary artificial logic, they rather try to understand the immanent logic of Spinoza's writings themselves. Matheron makes comparisons with modern calculus, but, like Gueroult, he lets readers know that Spinoza's logic was elaborated under the inspiration of Euclid's theory of proportions and geometrical definition, rather than the analytical geometry that was at the foundation of calculus in Newton and Leibniz.

The last article of this section, entitled 'Intellectual Love of God, Eternal Part of the Eternal *Amor erga Deum*,' gives a very good example of how Matheron understands the formative process of intuitive science. The main use of geometrical logic is not to build representations or mechanical pictures of the world, but to measure the power of the passions in order to free oneself from servitude and reach freedom by producing peace of mind and intellectual love of good. Spinoza's logic is useful to people willing to form intuitive knowledge of themselves and others. So, what kind of

things can Spinoza's propositions measure in ethics and politics? Simply put the essence or *conatus* of human beings, as well as their different degrees of power.

Part II, 'Spinoza on Politics and Ethics,' deals with the essence of human beings in relation to their social and political life. Take, for instance, the essay 'Is the State, According to Spinoza, an Individual in Spinoza's Sense?' If the state is an individual *conatus*, it is a singular essence and we can form intuitive knowledge of it, but if it is not and has no singular essence, then our knowledge of the state will be restricted to imagination and common notions. Interpreters that are comfortable with anachronistic uses of Spinoza's word for state (*imperium*) can solve the question very quickly and superficially: taking the state *in abstracto* as a set of institutions, they assert that it has no individuality or singular essence. Matheron, however, cared about the meaning that Spinoza asserted in his Latin writings and took the institutions of the state in relation to the social power that constitutes its immanent cause. From that perspective, there is no easy solution, and the intuitive science of social structures and institutions is possible, even if very difficult to achieve.

In his *magnum opus*, *Individuality and community in Spinoza* (Éditions de Minuit 1969), Matheron was the first thinker to recognize the necessity of teleology in Spinoza's political philosophy, showing that in the *Ethics* the passion of love is itself teleological. Human beings organize their behaviors by pursuing the objects of their love, even if this passion is first and foremost an alienated one. But imagination and passion have an ontological reality that we have to understand, not to blame. Therefore, in Spinoza's practical philosophy, we must deal with teleologically oriented actions. After Matheron, the question gained momentum in the United States in a discussion between Edwin Curley and Jonathan Bennett. In France, it was put forth by Laurent Bove's analyses of *conatus*. Today, it is not a taboo anymore to talk about teleology in Spinoza's philosophy. Indeed, new works have even started to show that maybe, the anti-teleological interpretations of Spinoza's practical philosophy are the inaccurate ones.

To go further into the question of teleology, it is worth reading the last article of this collection, 'Spinoza and the Breakdown of Thomistic Politics: Machiavellianism and Utopia,' in which Matheron analyzes Spinoza's *Political Treatise* in contrast with Thomism and Machiavellianism. Avoiding any superficial identifications, Matheron analyzes what kind of Thomism and Machiavellianism was usual in the mainstream politics of courts in France, England and the Netherlands. The political philosophy of Spinoza clearly appears in a new light, very distinct from the Thomism of counter-reformation, but also from the Machiavellianism of Cardinal Mazarin. Like Machiavelli, Spinoza anchors politics in the human passions, recognizes conflicts, and searches for republican solutions. Unlike Machiavelli, he does not deal with it by a rhetorical approach; instead, Spinoza tries a logical geometrical approach. Like Aquinas, Spinoza conceives one state as the best for human beings living under rational liberty and asserts it as a 'model' to achieve and perfect, but unlike Aquinas, he does not accept theological premises or endorse theocracies. Instead, Spinoza advances ontological premises to conclude that the democratic state is best suited for human rational life and that it constitutes the finality of political philosophy. In other words, Spinoza's *Political Treatise* appears as a critical synthesis of different political doctrines, rather than as an external negation of some of them. We can follow the same treatment in the field of ethics in another article by Matheron about the concept of *prudence* which, unfortunately, remains in French only, but that hopefully will be translated and joined to new versions of this English edition in the future. Of course, too, readers will go deeper into the questions of teleology in ethics and politics, if they can read these articles after knowing how Matheron presented teleology as a necessary illusion of the alienated passions in *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza*.

Everyone can doubt whether many of Matheron's solutions are definitive or not. For example, I have serious doubts about mechanistic interpretations of Spinoza's necessitarianism. Although such questions are still open, no one can ignore that the way of understanding Spinoza's ethics and politics through their mathematical and ontological foundations was put forward originally by Matheron in the last century. Therefore, if someone wants to read Spinoza by searching for the ontological foundations of social structures and human actions, whether to understand the contemporary world we live in, or simply to amplify the scope and intensity of their own intuitive science, it would be wise to consider the articles of this book and understand how Matheron originally formulated the questions. This collection is a most welcome translation into English.

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