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Philosophy's Rarefied Air: On Knox Peden's *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology: French Rationalism from Cavailles to Deleuze*

Steven Swarbrick

Knox Peden, *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology: French Rationalism from Cavailles to Deleuze*. Pp. 384. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014. Paperback, \$25.95 (ISBN: 9780804791342)

Claire Parnet:

What does it mean for you to be on the Left?

Gilles Deleuze:

First, it's a matter of perception. ... Not being on the Left [is] a little like a postal address, extending outward from a person: the street where you are, the city, the country, other countries farther and farther away. . . .

Being on the Left is the opposite: ... the world, the continent—let's say Europe—France, etc., rue de Bizerte, me: it's a phenomenon of perception, perceiving just the horizon.¹

In his lectures on the history of philosophy, Hegel remarks that “thought must begin by placing itself at the standpoint of Spinozism; to be a follower of Spinoza is the essential commencement of all Philosophy.”² Here Spinozism is figured as both a starting point and a terminus: a starting point because Spinoza thinks being as a totality; he thus inaugurates true thinking by placing thinking not in the service of the negative or transcendental reason but in the service of the infinite (“God, or Nature”). By releasing thought from its phenomenological bearings in the philosophy of finitude, be it in the form of Descartes’ cogito or Heidegger’s existential Dasein, Spinoza elevates thought to the status of true universal and lowers thought to one of the common forms of nature (Thought and Extension), thus robbing thought of its finite and anthropomorphic pretensions. According to Hegel, this is why Spinoza is also the most naïve philosopher, indeed, the most childish, since in his philosophy of substance, finitude “has no truth whatever.”³ For Hegel, Spinozism is only the *beginning* of philosophy, and a dangerous one at that. Because Spinoza’s substance is infinite, his philosophy cannot account for the individuality of finite modes. Spinoza’s substance, according to Hegel, is motionless:

The moment of negativity is what is lacking to this rigid motionlessness, whose single form of activity is this, to divest itself of their [the finite modes’] determination and particularity and cast them back into the one absolute substance, wherein they are simply swallowed up and all life is utterly destroyed.⁴

The relation of the infinite (substance) to the finite (the modes) in Spinoza’s philosophy is, in Hegel’s view, one of inertia, passivity, and death. In Hegel’s reading of the *Ethics*, the modes are passively acted upon by substance, leaving no room for “the moment of negativity” which is the engine not only of Hegel’s phenomenology but of phenomenological *possibility* as such. If, after Heidegger, phenomenology becomes *the* philosophy of the possible, that is, of what is possible for finite being to think in the absence of a unifying substance or ground, then Spinoza’s philosophy of substance represents the death of possibility, a philosophy in which, to borrow Gilles Deleuze’s anoxic formulation, “the necessary has completely replaced that of the possible ... [and] from which ‘oxygen’ is lacking.”⁵

No doubt Hegel’s is not the only (or even the most well-known) version of Spinozism in circulation today. For those who split on the meaning of Spinoza’s definition of substance, “God, or Nature,” there is both the theological Spinoza *and* the secular Spinoza. There is the Spinoza of democratic liberalism on the one hand, and the vitalist Spinoza—the Spinoza of affect—on the other. Missing from these discussions, however, is the rationalist Spinoza, the Spinoza who, as Hegel rightly points out, inaugurates philosophy with the idea of being as totality. Clearly it is this version of Spinozism that informs Deleuze’s response to Claire Parnet in the epigraph above, where Deleuze says that for him “being on the Left” is first “a matter of perception,” of beginning with the outermost “horizon” and moving toward the middle, the “me.” This “me”—what Spinoza calls “finite mode”—is for Deleuze an involution of infinity, a fold within being; the “me” is never a starting point. The starting point, rather, is substance, the same naïve starting point that Hegel criticized in Spinoza. Deleuze’s response to Parnet is thus revealing in two ways: first, it begs the question of the relation between infinite and finite (or to use Deleuze’s language, virtual and actual): how do they connect? And second, it tasks those of us who find political import in the Deleuze of desiring-machines

to grapple with the rarefied air of a rationalist Deleuze who went so far in promoting a philosophy beyond finitude (beyond the “me”) that, along with Spinoza, he let out all of the oxygen.

Knox Peden’s *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology: French Rationalism from Cavallès to Deleuze* is now the definitive statement on what it meant for some of French philosophy’s most influential 20th century thinkers to begin, in Hegel’s words, “at the standpoint of Spinozism,” that is, at the standpoint of phenomenological impossibility. Setting the stage for his historical dramatization of le Spinozism in France, Peden begins with a quotation from France’s leading phenomenologist, Jean-Luc Marion, who claims that “It is above all the *Ethics* ... in its ahistorical extraterritoriality, its splendid abstraction and its unbridled ambition, that fascinates us because it poses the question of the power and limits of philosophy itself” (qtd. in Peden 1). In other words, Spinoza’s commitment to a rationalist philosophy of infinity, that is, to a rationalism *without* limits, raises for Marion the very problem of philosophy’s overweening ambition. As Peden points out, Marion’s reserved fascination for Spinoza’s “unbridled ambition” belongs to a long tradition, beginning with Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, of skepticism toward the “abstraction” showcased in the *Ethics*: “The critique of reason assumed many guises in the nineteenth century, from Marx’s historico-political approach to Darwin’s naturalism on to Nietzsche’s ‘transvaluation of all values’” (3). Yet “it was only with the political catastrophes of the twentieth century ... that the philosophical rejection of rationalism acquired a new ethical and political force” (3). Here we arrive at the geographical focus of Peden’s study:

In France, the main vehicle for the critique of reason was the reception and reworking of German phenomenology over a period of decades, from the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre to the deconstruction of Jacques Derrida. Consequently, when France’s leading phenomenologist [Jean-Luc Marion] reiterates the critique of Spinozism in the pages of *Le Monde*, he evokes something more than Kant’s foundational concerns. His comments are also reflective of the manner in which Spinozism and phenomenology came to be regarded as antagonistic approaches to philosophy in France (3).

More than just a title, *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology* represents the essential agon of 20th century French philosophy. In Peden’s words, his “book is a history of a countervailing strand of development in which a series of French thinkers sought to salvage rationalist philosophy from its phenomenological denigration by reconfiguring it in Spinozist terms” (4). The principle actors in this history are Louis Althusser and Gilles Deleuze, and for good reason: “the rationalist resistance to phenomenology . . . reached its pinnacle,” Peden argues, “in the 1960s with [their respective] philosophical projects” (5). For Althusser and Deleuze (the main foci of chapters 4-7), along with the Jean Cavallès, Martial Gueroult, and Jean-Toussaint Desanti (the subjects of chapters 1-3), “the travesties of modern life were not instances of rationalism run amok” (*pace* Marion); “they were instead consequent upon a dearth of rationalism, to the profit of myth” (4).

Here “myth” is meant to evoke the perceived failures of phenomenology, that is, its solipsism, anthropomorphism, and above all its collusions with Nazism in the case of Heidegger. And yet, if phenomenology is the foil to Peden’s history, it serves nonetheless as a touchstone for him and his subjects who circle back to phenomenology in order to test the political merit of Spinoza’s rationalism. Althusser sought via Spinoza to purge phenomenology by adopting the science of structures, whereas Deleuze (according to Peden) sought an uneasy rapprochement between Heidegger’s ontological difference and Spinoza’s substance. In both cases, phenomenology provided the touchstone, or better still the whetstone, for a radical politics of the *ratio*: of structures in the case of Althusser, and of the virtual (in opposition to the possible or the merely habitual) in the case of Deleuze.

Likewise, for Peden, if Spinozism is the point of departure for his history, then it is phenomenology that provides his history’s “driving tension” (14). This “tension” is best summarized in the form of a question: how to derive a politics from a philosophy bent on being true, not useful in the sense of organizing a *praxis*? As Peden states early on in *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology*: “using Spinozism to identify the troubling political consequences of phenomenology—which are deemed to be consequential to its philosophical inconsistencies—winds up producing no positive alternative of its own” (14). From this Peden spells out the consequences of 20th century French rationalism, and of Spinozist rationalism in particular: “If Spinozism is regarded by these thinkers as the most compelling rationalism available, and if it generates no politics, it suggests that a compelling rationalism is not equipped to generate a politics ... [W]hen it comes to Spinozism, it is evidently unnecessary to shield philosophy from its political instrumentalization; the philosophy does it for us” (14-15).

This is the central argument of Peden's study. It is the guiding thread that unites each exhilarating chapter. Consequently, Peden's history owes as much to Hegel's history of philosophy as it does to contemporary efforts to undermine the "variously liberal and emancipatory" images of Spinoza that proliferate today.⁶ However much Peden admires and takes seriously the power of thought generated by Spinoza's rationalism (and let it be said that Peden's book showcases the very highest admiration on every page), he also wants to show us how hard it is to breathe this philosophical air, much less *act* in it. Whether or not one accepts Peden's argument is another matter, one that I will return to at the end of this review. For now, the stakes are set: *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology* is not only the most comprehensive and engaging study of 20th century French rationalism but also the most surprising insofar as it challenges our habitual ways of drawing lines between rationalism and vitalism, being and event. In this sense, it is perfectly Deleuzian.

The signal chapters are those beginning with the historically vexed Spinozism of Althusser. In chapters 4 and 5, Peden describes "the emergence of Althusser's Spinozism as conditioned at once by his hostility to phenomenology and the imperative to salvage Marxism from Stalinism" (129). Peden outlines three stages in this development: the first period, from 1960 to 1965, in which Althusser sought to "isolate what is scientific in Marx's thought" by developing a critical epistemology (129-130); the second period, from 1965 to circa 1968, when Althusser tried "to supplement his epistemology with a historicist ontology," in which "production" in the Marxist sense and "the unconscious" in the psychoanalytic sense served as substitutes for Spinoza's substance, "as the ontological precondition and process that determines all that follows" (130); and lastly, following May 1968 and culminating in the "essays in self-criticism" in the 1970s, the third phase in Althusser's Spinozism, in which Althusser "first publicly argued that what was read as structuralism in his thought ... was in reality Spinozism" (130).

At the end of this itinerary, Peden gestures to a fourth phase in Althusser's engagement with Spinozism, beginning in the 1980s when "Althusser pushes the logic of a philosophy without object to its ultimate conclusion," arguing as it were for an "insubstantial" Spinozism of the void: "Althusser's claim is that for Spinoza God qua Substance is—paradoxically, given the name of the concept—a literally *insubstantial* category and thus a 'void'" (132). Although Peden relegates this fourth phase beyond the parameters of his study, many readers will find noteworthy Peden's assertion that Althusser's major inspiration during this time—the Spinoza of the "void"—is Heidegger: "Heidegger garners Althusser's sympathy in this period precisely to the extent that he is no longer regarded as the phenomenological Heidegger who was a negative condition of his earlier project" (132). Here we begin to see the lineaments of a secret affinity between Spinozism and Heideggerianism, one that will become an open secret in the writings of Deleuze. For Althusser, however, the guiding thread throughout his Spinozist itinerary can be summarized in a single concept: science. Peden details over the course of chapters 4 and 5 an Althusserian Spinozism "predicated upon the progressive eradication of the contents of lived experience as a viable object of philosophical purchase or reflection" (132). What we are left with in Althusser's case is "an interminable confrontation with the 'void,'" a concept, Peden argues, that is both philosophically rigorous in its refusal of any compromise with phenomenology and stultifying in its exhaustion of any "political remit" (133).

If Althusser's Spinozism was meant to eradicate phenomenology on the one hand, and Marxist humanism on the other, then Deleuze's Spinozism can be seen as an effort to read phenomenology (primarily Heideggerian phenomenology) against itself, to make it *more geometrico* in the manner of Spinoza. Deleuze's term for this way of reading, which he derives from the *Ethics*, is "expression." According to Peden:

As soon as it is introduced in Deleuze's argument, the concept "expression" is immediately bifurcated into two senses. The virtue of this concept for Deleuze is that it provides a single name for two heterogeneous processes, *explication* and *implication*. Deleuze argues that in Spinozism the modes, as affectations of substance, effectively explicate substance. But it is equally true that each modal modification implicates substance in turn (211).

To apply the language that Peden will use throughout his chapters on Deleuze, substance (or the virtual) is the active participant in this explicative process, whereas the modes (or the actual) passively receive the former's action. Substance is creative; the modes are merely created. Of course, this is to emphasize only one of the processes of expression: explication. To this Deleuze adds the process of implication. As Peden argues with stunning clarity, Deleuze's insight into the role of implication derives from his reading of Heidegger's philosophy of finite modes: "All that Spinozism needed to make the univocal an object of pure affirmation," Deleuze writes, "was to make substance turn around the modes" (qtd. in Peden 192). In other words, Deleuze's (partial) appropriation of

Heidegger's philosophy of finitude enables Deleuze to have it both ways: a rationalist philosophy modeled on Spinoza's absolute creative substance; *and* a philosophy of modal difference modeled on Heidegger's substance-less ontology of time. Peden shows with remarkable detail just how difficult is the task that Deleuze sets for himself, namely, that of "reading Spinoza 'after' Heidegger" (252). For what Heideggerian finitude (stripped of its anthropomorphic attachments to Dasein) offers Deleuze is a way of thinking substance not as motionless and deterministic (as in Hegel's reading of Spinoza) but as primordially constituted by time and difference. Substance, for Deleuze, is surface or exteriority, and the modes (singularities or "folds") are the forms whereby substance affects itself through difference and repetition. In this sense, reading Spinoza "after" Heidegger means temporalizing substance. And yet the reverse is also true. Deleuze reads Heidegger "after" Spinoza by subjecting Heideggerian phenomenology to the very thing it was made to undermine: the category of substance. Peden articulates this move as a "radical involution of Heideggerian Dasein," stating: "For Heidegger, Dasein's utmost imperative is to distinguish itself from the impersonality of *das Man*. For Deleuze, it is this primordial impersonality [of substance] that is the occluded condition of Dasein's or the 'finite mode's' very existence as a phenomenally discrete singularity. Rediscovery of this essential commonality ... is the fundamental aim of Deleuze's rationalist reading of Spinozism" (217).

As I mentioned above, Peden's appraisal of Deleuze's Spinoza shares a great deal in common with recent efforts by Peter Hallward and Alain Badiou to foreground Deleuze's rationalism at the expense of his politics. Thus chapter 7 concludes with Deleuze's comments about what it means for him to be "on the Left," to which Peden responds:

For him [Deleuze], to be on the left meant nothing other than always "becoming *minoritaire*." The paradox is that this was the only tenable position precisely because the minor is that which is untenable, always changing, and never resolving. What is most striking about this injunction is that it is again *purely* formal; there is no content to a Deleuzian "politics" (256).

Chapter 7 is above all things a fascinating and, for this reader, enlightening, discussion of Deleuze's Spinozism of the impossible, that is, of a rationalism brokered between an all-creative substance on the one hand and an impersonal Heideggerianism of the mode on the other. Peden's evaluation of Deleuze's Spinozism is, like all the preceding chapters, "approached sympathetically rather than skeptically" (14). I for one was enthralled by Peden's analysis of a (surprisingly) Heideggerian Deleuze.

Yet, despite the detail that Peden pours into his study, there is a strong argument guiding his project. It runs like this:

[A] politics drawn from Deleuze's philosophy cannot be said to be "meaningful" in any familiar sense of the term. This much is clear from Deleuze's own definition of leftism as always being on the side of the minor. . . . But what of those situations where the "major" position might be deemed superior, or indeed, more just? . . . Deleuze makes it difficult for his philosophy to illuminate such a situation. . . . The ambition of his philosophical insight results in the modesty of its political bearing (257).

Although the target here is Deleuze, we could just as well substitute Deleuze's name with that of Spinoza, that is, the specifically "French" Spinoza whose role in 20th century French philosophy Althusser summarizes as follows: "'bourgeois science, proletarian science'" (qtd in Peden 143). Whereas "bourgeois science" here stands for the philosophical humanism of phenomenology, "proletarian science" stands for all that is radical (and thus out of step with the philosophical humanism of the age) in the rationalist thought of Spinoza. For Peden, however, this belief in the radicalism of Spinoza's rationalism is something of a red herring. We are not, in the end, persuaded by Peden to believe that a politics can or did emerge from these thinkers. The narrative of *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology* is thus circular in at least two senses: as readers, we return to the syllogism that opens the book, that "if [a] ... compelling rationalism ... generates no politics, it suggests that a compelling rationalism is not equipped to generate a politics" (14-15). Second, we learn that the "contra" in Peden's title is itself intractable, and that Spinoza's rationalism does not offer a way beyond phenomenology but rather a *formal* vantage no less dependent upon the *content* of "lived experience"—the very thing that le Spinozism was meant to uproot. I do not wish to challenge the circularity of Peden's argument but to press on its terms.

Are the terms "form" and "content" truly applicable in the case of Spinoza? Absent from Peden's list of protagonists is Pierre Macherey, a thinker whose role in shaping the French reception of Spinoza (Althusser's above all) is outshined only by his remarkable explications of Spinoza's key terms: substance and attribute. In Peden's reading, Spinoza's substance is emptied of any content—"content" here being synonymous with "politics"—and replaced by

a “formalist Spinozist ‘ethics’” (257). Hence we are left with a Deleuzian Spinozism that privileged thought over extension, the virtual over the actual, and an Althusserian Spinozism that privileged science over lived experience. Never mind the fact that Deleuze asked repeatedly what a *body* can do, and that Althusser developed an “aleatory materialism” of the encounter in which structures were replaced by material processes of *structuration* (Macherey’s term). Although Peden devotes considerable time to excavating a Deleuzian Spinozism inspired by Heideggerian finitude, he is at pains to show that being in its ontic sense for Deleuze remains secondary to substance. This despite the fact that Deleuze’s major accomplishment in reading Spinoza after Heidegger was to have made “substance turn around the modes.” Likewise, in the case of Althusser’s “aleatory materialism,” Peden dismisses this “late Althusser” as merely poetic: “Regardless of its philosophical merits, the embrace of this poetically expressed position signaled nothing less than the utter exhaustion of his Spinozism as a philosophy with a political remit” (133). Ultimately, it is the test and challenge of Peden’s book to vanish the “content” of these thinkers in light of a wholesale “investment in rationalism” (6).

And yet the absence of Macherey from these discussions proves symptomatic of a larger problem running throughout Peden’s history: the problem of the attributes. As we saw with Hegel, the forms of the attributes are rendered passive and immobile by Spinoza’s absolute substance. Peden follows this Hegelian reading to the letter, treating the relationship between substance and attribute as one of succession whereby the first term cancels the activity of the latter. For Macherey, however, this Hegelian reading could not be further from the truth of what Spinoza says about substance:

In order to present the abstract nature of attributes, Hegel separates the attributes from substance, by presenting their relationship as a relationship of succession: first substance, then the attributes. Thus the identity of attributes and substance, however clearly asserted by Spinoza, becomes altogether problematic: outside of substance and subsequent to it, the attributes are really nothing but the forms through which intellect reflects substance ... But this idea of an anteriority of substance in relation to its attributes, which establishes a hierarchical relation between them, is totally contrary to the letter of Spinoza’s doctrine.⁷

This doctrine, Macherey argues, does not allow for a relationship of succession, since “the attributes are not in the intellect, as forms through which the latter would apprehend them ... but they are in substance itself, whose essences they constitute.” Thus Macherey concludes:

What this signifies, quite simply, is that the terms *form* and *content* are altogether inappropriate to characterize the relation that links attributes to substance.⁸

It would not be an overstatement to say that the entire argument against Spinoza’s rationalism as a political dead end, from Hegel to Badiou to Peden, hinges on the logic of succession between substance, attribute, and mode, the very logic that Macherey would have us discard.

I have said that Peden’s argument is a strong argument. By this I mean that it is skeptical of a politics “defined as always being on the side of the minor” (as in Deleuze’s “becoming *minoritaire*”). But Peden’s book is strong in the conventional sense, too: it is an enviable work of scholarship, both massive in its intellectual scope and nuanced in its attention to detail. For those interested in 20th century French intellectual history, *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology* is sure to become essential reading. And for those who have grown tired or simply complacent with the vitalist Spinoza at large in the humanities today, Peden’s rationalist Spinoza will provide a welcome wake up call.

I found Peden’s book to be a “shock to thought” in the most affirmative Deleuzian sense: a transgression of thought by thought itself. If this overstepping of the *ratio* is precisely what phenomenology, after Kant, feared would “lead [thought] directly to enthusiasm,” then it is above all this enthusiasm that Peden courts in his reading of Spinoza. Without taking sides, Peden asks us to take seriously Spinoza’s final proposition in the *Ethics*, that “beatitude is not the reward of virtue, but virtue itself,” and to consider: is Spinozist virtue enough to sustain a radical politics? Ultimately, it would seem, Peden’s answer is no.

A closing thought: although Peden casts doubt on the value of Spinozism for leftist politics by pointing to its rarefied air, it could be argued that those who experience the exigencies of political life in its barest, most vacated forms, experience it precisely as a lack of air. Peden’s Spinozism that lacks oxygen would thus be—paradoxically, given the author’s stance—the necessary philosophy of our time.

Notes

¹ Gilles Deleuze, with Claire Parnet, “Gauche (Left),” in *From A to Z*. DVD. Directed by Pierré-Andre Boutang (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2012).

² G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Vol. 3: Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, trans. E.S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 257.

³ Hegel, *Lectures*, 281.

⁴ Hegel, *Lectures*, 288.

⁵ Gilles Deleuze, “Michel Tournier and the World Without Others,” in *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 320.

⁶ It is no doubt a sign of the vexed fascination that Spinoza, and now more specifically Deleuze’s Spinoza, elicits that some of the best, most illuminating studies of Deleuze and Spinoza are also the most incendiary. See, for example, Peter Hallward, *Out of This World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation* (London and New York: Verso, 2006), and Alain Badiou, *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). Peden’s own reading of Spinoza follows closely from these studies.

⁷ Pierre Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, trans. Susan M. Ruddick (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 88.

⁸ Macherey, *Hegel or Spinoza*, 86.