

Richard A. Cohen, *Out of Control. Confrontations between Spinoza and Levinas*, SUNY Press, 2016, pp. 370, \$ 95, ISBN 9781438461090

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Out of Control vividly describes the epochal duel between scientific reason and ethics; the former aims to rule over nature and human life, while the latter “anarchically” challenges one to take account of human life. In this masterful work, Cohen analyzes the confrontation between Spinoza and Levinas, and constantly makes reference to the present-day context. The book retains its fresh and seductive style, while pairing the scrupulous reference to the text with the constant confrontation between authors such as Maimonides, Descartes, Kant, Nietzsche and Heidegger.

The volume is the result of several decades of work and gathers different essays and articles on Spinoza and Levinas in order to rethink the link between a philosophy, usually classified as “rationalist” and “pantheist”, and the evolution of an eccentric phenomenology; the former is concerned with understanding “the universe in view of the truth of modern science” (p.xiv), while the latter urges one to strongly reconsider the “significance of *this world*, the world of change temporality, embodiment, language and society” (p.xv). Cohen aims to show that Levinas provides a concrete response to all those elements which escape and avoid the control of Spinoza’s rationalism (or Spinozism). To do so, the Author covers a spectacular itinerary, moving from the birth of modern science to its latest developments in an accurate investigation which is constantly in dialogue with Jewish heritage, kaleidoscopically highlighting all the colors and the dynamics of this debate.

Levinas concludes the first section of *Totality and Infinity* by showing how thought and freedom arise from separation and the consideration of the Other (transcendence) at the antipodes of Spinozism where “the primacy, indeed the totality, of context over terms” is taken to be the systematic and necessary knowledge of modern science (p.34). This conclusion is in line with the central claim of this work: contemporary philosophy must take account of the risk of dehumanization which arises from a blind faith in an all-powerful scientific knowledge. Far from merely addressing Spinoza as a target for critique, Cohen

acutely analyzes the dynamics of a philosophy that keeps everything under control so as to better understand the extreme consequences of such a theoretical position and the answer provided by Levinas.

From the consideration of the end of the era of superstitious religion, Cohen challenges Spinozism on different aspects and achieves an original perspective on the deep structure connecting ethics, politics, religion, and theology: Spinoza's universe is innervated by the violent and subjugating will of an inexorable rationalization of the world.

In homage to Levinas, the inquiry begins with the body. The first chapter takes account of the rejection of Levinasian thinking regarding Spinozism, and of its manifestation in Nietzsche based on the "denial of the metaphysical underpinning of morality" (p.44). If, on the one hand, Nietzsche develops a philosophy of the body which is liberated from the "ascetic abstractions of the mind" (p.46); on the other, Levinas cannot accept the conformity of the embodied subject to nature, whether substance or will, to be our highest vocation (p.55). The body must be the ground from which one can pursue the true nobility that lives up to values and elevates them. The true innovation of Levinasian thought lies in the engagement with the responsibility arising not from a revaluation of the values, but with a concrete revitalization of what is truly valuable.

It is precisely this vivification of philosophy operated by the brute, concrete and sometimes irrational human life – that Spinoza resolutely abhors – which prevents science from becoming "a hammer, indeed a gun" (p.311). Before taking aim to shoot "babies, fools, and Madmen" in chapter 8 (pp. 279-316), Spinoza points the loaded weapon of hyper-rationalization against the prophets. The perspective on the prophetic speech developed in the *Theological-Political Treatise* from the exegesis of Numbers 11:26-29, displays that Spinoza clearly argues against prophets because they alienate truth in favor of their vivid imagination (p.62). Their rhetoric based on signs lacks the mathematical certainty required by knowledge, and it purposes an irrational alternative to the absolute and undistributed political sovereignty of the state (p.61). This is only the first step of the elitist and authoritarian tendency of Spinozism. In fact, prophecy promotes a passive and superstitious approach toward a mysterious God, while, for Spinoza, the philosopher is active in his relation with God: "to

expect any reward from God is to succumb to inadequate ideas, passivity” and to miss the highest purpose of which humans are capable: “actually sharing God’s mind by knowing the truth” (p.87).

For Spinoza, the knowledge of the truth in its necessity also entails a reflection on justice and the state that Cohen brilliantly summarizes in chapter 4, *Levinas and Spinoza. Justice and the State* (pp.103-118) and in his extremely acute analysis of *Spinoza’s Prince* (pp.119-187). These two chapters provide an immersive understanding of the conception of political power developed in the *TPT* and in the *Ethics*. If, at first glance, Spinoza seems to manifest some Levinasian traits when he affirms that those who practice justice and charity fulfill divine law and mirror God’s kingdom, and when he states that only where a just man may reign there is the sign of divine justice, the motivation behind such statements is, on the contrary, profoundly non-Levinasian. According to Spinoza “the state rules religion” and “ruling is primarily and merely a political affair” rather than an ethical one (p.104). As a private affair, religious morality must be subordinated to the dictates of the state, the final arbiter of justice (p.110). Therefore, even if both Spinoza and Levinas support justice and equity, Spinoza’s position is driven by a prudential choice: justice is required in order to rule a civil society not based exclusively on the *conatus* of each thing, and the reason of state is a way to escape the disordered brutality of natural being. “Any order, just or unjust [...] is better than no order” (p.115), and so every state must preserve its form. The “prince”, then, is the one who preserves order and guarantees freedom: Cohen argues that there are two types of freedom in the Spinozian world: the political one, pertaining the individual submission to the state, and the *philosopher’s freedom to philosophize*, which is the one that Spinoza’s political design aims to protect (p.129).

The elitist gap appears again through this thesis and it divides the masses from the few. The prince and the governors are *daimonic* figures, close to Plato’s Alcibiades (p.170), “sensible people” that must remain just “potential philosophers” who secure public peace and preserve the true freedom of philosophers from the assaults of the irrationality of the common people. The *TPT* represents the effort to solve the problem of the death of Socrates, the sage “exposed in the public arena to the

perennial and inevitable misunderstanding and irrational emotion of the masses” (p.179).

The despotism of Spinoza’s thought has a strong impact on the idea of death articulated in the *E. Death*. It is a quantitative shift in the proportion of motion and remains sufficient to undo the ratio of an identity: a reconfiguration of an enduring ratio excluding every possibility of Heideggerian appropriation of my death. The change in identity operated by death pertains to the realm of contingency, true life is the life of permanence and necessity, of perfectly clear ideas and the idea of death provoking fear is merely related to human imagination.

Far from the popular irenic picture of the serene and sage Spinoza, Cohen paints an original portrait of a philosopher “demanding nothing less than a fully adult intelligence at full speed” (p.298), considering babies, women and fools to be more animal than human. The paradise of the totality of One Substance, of the all-embracing unity and of the pure ideas should raise us to see science as a liberating form of knowledge, but “Spinoza had turned this aspiration to a monomania and this liberation to a fanaticism” (p.311) against the humanity of the human (ignorance, deficiency and weakness).

The chance to redeem this totalizing world is embraced by Levinas, who seems to recover all those elements spurned and swept away by Spinozism in order to go beyond knowledge toward the surplus of ethics. Indeed, it is precisely in the task of taking care of this anarchic “surplus” (widows, orphans and the poor: the disturbing other man) that Levinas finds a way to escape the hegemony of knowledge. This path redefines the limits of science “from the orientation of ethics, the height of moral imperative, the call to alleviate another person’s suffering” (p.9). It uncovers a new notion of freedom and justice grounded in the responsibility for the other person, outside the “geometric” realm of science and aimed at a different idea of peace.

Levinas rejects the kind of peace established by the imposition of power as superficial and provisional: rather than blindly genuflecting before the good, it would be better to “admit the primacy of the good, the superiority of the genuine peace to the imposed peace of war” (p.66). Such a notion of peace is based on a justice that, as for Spinoza, must abhor superstition and fanaticism. Levinas recognizes that the most important issues are precisely those on which it is possible to debate and have no

demonstrative conclusion (p.75). Close to the Saying in *TI* and far from miraculous predictions, prophetic speech teaches the humbling responsibility provoked by and responding to the other person, and characterizes the inauguration of all speech: “such is the glory or holiness of prophecy, humanity’s highest elevation”: the *shema* (hear, listen) which is not heard, but which awakens all hearing (p.81).

A different elaboration of Jewish heritage is at work in Levinasian philosophy, as Cohen argues in chapter 6, *Levinas on Spinoza’s Misunderstanding of Judaism* (pp.189-236). Levinas expounds a critique against Spinoza’s intellectualism, a monism based on “the essential pluralism of the Torah” which reflects the irreducibility of human expression to mere opinions; Revelation requires multiple readers and interpretations. Here, truth enriches itself “reflecting rather than suppressing its actual conditions, including moral birth in the saying of the said” (p.229).

Cohen shows that Spinoza’s worst nightmare, anarchy – when everything runs *out of control* – becomes the only chance to respond the actual world. Levinasian philosophy, through its patient work of taking account of the ever-changing “humanity of human”, overcomes the aseptic perfection of totality and takes up the infinite challenge of the “unchosen *election* to service – humanity as service to others” (p.29). One of the tasks of this book is to launch an unsettling appeal to contemporary philosophy to fight against the dehumanization produced by a “rationality oblivious or indifferent to its own limits” (p.313). Other tasks are: to become an outrage to scientism and plutocracy, and to oppose the saturation of the world of spectacle with the transcendence of the responsibility to and for the other before oneself. The demand of justice and the mission of alleviating the other’s suffering at the heart of morality disclose a dimension where “caring is better than conatus” (p.16.)