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Agonistic Equality in Rancière and Spinoza

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Abstract

Jacques Rancière's conception of equality as an axiomatic presupposition of the political is important, because it bypasses the tradition which defines equality in terms of Aristotle's conception of geometric equality. In this paper, I show that Rancière's theory both espouses a monism, according to which inequality implies equality, *and* relies on a concept of the free will, which is incompatible with monism. I highlight this tension by bringing Rancière's theory into conversation with the great monist of the philosophical tradition, Baruch Spinoza.

Equality, ontology and monism

The Western philosophical thinking of equality has been marked by the Aristotelian conception of geometric equality.¹ I will not to discuss here this tradition —I do so elsewhere.² I will discuss, instead, a philosopher, Jacques Rancière, whose political thinking is premised on a critique of Aristotle's conception of geometric equality.³ Rancière propounds a theory of axiomatic equality as the basis of his conception of agonistic politics.⁴ At the same time, I will be putting Rancière in conversation with Spinoza to help us evaluate Rancière's conception of equality as axiomatic for politics and its relation to agonistic democracy.

A question might arise at the very beginning: Why Spinoza? What does Spinoza have to offer to a think of equality? And why is Spinoza the right —or even the appropriate— philosopher to compare with Rancière? To answer these questions I have to outline two terms, which I adumbrate in various books and articles and which play an important function here. These terms are ontology and monism.

When I refer to ontology in this article, I designate neither properties of being that are immobilised in an abstraction outside experience, nor properties of experience that

are readily available to an agent. I fully share with Rancière —as well as a number of other thinkers, from Nietzsche and Heidegger to the Frankfurt School and French post-structuralism— a distaste for such notions of ontology. It is possible, nevertheless, to develop an ontology which understands being in dynamic terms. Such an ontology takes being as being with —being is relational.⁵ Some of the most important positions of such a relational ontology are the following: 1) The subject can no longer be understood as autonomous, but is rather determined in its relations to others (Vardoulakis *The Doppelgänger*). This entails that the idea of the free will becomes problematic —something that will be crucial later in my reading of Rancière. 2) Sovereignty needs to be defined as the forms of violence which mediate the relation between authority and the subjects (Vardoulakis *Sovereignty*). The reason is that sovereignty's prerogative to use violence determines social and political relations. 3) Democracy can be understood as a different kind of relationality than sovereignty —one that dejustifies violence.⁶ This is not a utopian vision of a universal peace, but rather —to put it in Rancière's terminology— a recognition of the constitutive role for democracy of the part that has not part. Democracy understood in this way is intimately linked to relational ontology and is reducible to neither institutions nor norms. Here, Rancière can be understood to have made a major contribution to such a conception of democracy theory with works like *Disagreement*.

The conception of democracy that exhibits a reliance on ontology —often referred to as radical democracy— owes a lot to Spinoza.⁷ Gilles Deleuze in his *Expressionism in Philosophy* seeks recourse to Spinoza not only to overcome ontological as well as political hierarchies, but also in order to construct a flat ontology, which he expressed as the univocity of being and which amounts to a certain monism. But it is Antonio Negri's contribution which most forcefully places Spinozan ontology within a political orbit, and thereby shows that monism is another name for radical democracy. His central thesis in *The Savage Anomaly* —his reconstruction of the entire Spinozan corpus— is not only that ontology is politics.⁸ In addition, Negri stressed the necessary co-implication of ontological, ethical and political concerns. The embodiment of this is the multitude or constituent power.⁹ In this context, monism is not a metaphysical doctrine but the ontologico-ethico-political articulation of democracy.¹⁰ Or, differently put, democracy is presupposed as the constitution that befits Spinozan monism.

Having established this vocabulary, it is intriguing to return to Rancière, and in particular his thesis of the primacy of equality over inequality as the linchpin of his theory of agonistic democracy. In the terms described above not only is this an ontology in the sense that it describes relations with others. In addition it is monist in

the sense that its ontological commitments presuppose democracy. Thus, it would be instructive to test Rancière's axiom of equality against the relational ontology of radical democracy. I do so in this article by concentrating on Spinoza.

Stasis: Identifying agonistic equality

Given that Spinoza never deals directly with the conception of geometric equality in Aristotle, it is necessary to start by describing what equality from the perspective of relational ontology would look like. The alternative conception of equality, which is incommensurate with what Aristotle denotes as geometric equality, is in fact from the very beginning linked with agonism within democracy and predates Aristotle by a couple of centuries. It emerges in the first democratic constitution, which was prepared by Solon for the polis of Athens. The major source of our knowledge of Solon's reforms is Aristotle's *Athenian Constitution*. However, Aristotle's account of equality in Solon's laws contains a tension, which revolves around the concept of stasis and which is directly linked to the notion of agonism.

Chapter VIII of the *Athenian Constitution* is framed by two statements that appear to be in sharp contradiction. The contradiction pertains to how equality is operative within Solon's reforms. The chapter opens with the reform of election into office by lot. "For the offices of state he [Solon] instituted election by lot" (VIII.1). This process of election treats every citizen as absolutely equal. Everybody is included in government, and it is only a matter of chance when his turn for office will come. But the chapter concludes with the law of stasis: "And as he [Solon] saw that the polis was often in a condition of conflict [*στασιάζουσιν*], while some of its citizens through slackness were content to let things slide, he laid down a special law to deal with them, enacting that whoever when the city was in conflict [*στασιαζούσης*] did not join forces with either party was to be disfranchised and not to participate in the state" (VIII.5 [trans. modified]). This law seems to introduce at least two senses of inequality. First, there is the inequality between those you engage in politics thereby enacting their citizenship, and those who lose their citizenship and are even expelled from the city when they fail to participate in a public dispute.¹¹ Second, the law of stasis requires an inequality between the two disputants —the two parties between which stasis unfolds— since it precludes the possibility of a compromise: one position will have to prevail in the dispute. So, it appears as if on the one hand Solon institutes reforms that introduce equality into the first democratic constitution, and on the other hand he also retrieves or counterbalances this equality with a radical double inequality.

The stakes for this seeming contradiction are high, since the entire idea of democracy is here in jeopardy. Is it possible to have democracy without equality? The answer to his question hinges on how stasis configures equality. The contradiction between the two statements arises from a semantic ambiguity in the word ‘stasis,’ which is fundamental for an understanding of equality. The ambiguity pertains to ‘stasis’ denoting either constituted power or the state, on the one hand, and the way that power is configured by the ontological, on the other.¹² As a result of this ambiguity, the first statement refers narrowly to constitutional arrangements and thus is confined to the citizen’s relation to the law, whereas the concluding statement of Chapter VIII — ‘the law of stasis’ — also includes the ontological dimension. Differently put, the former refers to politics whereas the latter refers to the political. We need to contextualise the discussion of Chapter VIII of the *Athenian Constitution* to clarify the semantic ambiguity of ‘stasis’ and its implications for equality. ‘Stasis’ is deeply rooted in both the opening statement about equality of access to public office, and in the closing statement of the chapter about the inequality between the citizens who engage and those who do not. This is obvious in the closing statement, since ‘stasis’ is mentioned explicitly. But it is not so for the opening statement. Thus it is necessary to provide some background.

The equality denoted by the election to public office by lot was part of the Solonian democratic reforms. The cause of these reforms was the violent stasis or dispute between the rich and the poor parties (V.2). Due to difficult circumstances, many poor Athenians had taken loans from the rich, which either crippled them financially, or, if they defaulted, the poor were forced into slavery. These deep inequalities between rich and poor had naturally generated huge unrest within Athens. By the beginning of the 6th century, the polis has had enough. Around 594BC, the Athenians turned to Solon — widely regarded as both wise and impartial — to find a solution to these constant struggles that unsettled the polis. Solon instituted three fundamental reforms to promote equality. First, he cancelled the debts and redistributed the wealth. Second, he extended citizenship to all, whereas in the past citizenship was confined only to the rich. And lastly, everyone was expected to participate in public office through a process that relied on chance — election by lot.¹³ In these three reforms, we can discern the three senses of equality that have dominated Western political discourse ever since. Namely, there is the material equality of wealth redistribution (this is the famous reform of *seisachtheia*, the shaking of the burdens); the procedural equality before the law by granting everyone citizenship; and, the equality of worth whereby one is deemed to deserve to hold office. I will return to these three senses of equality in the next

section. Suffice it to say here that the three senses confine equality within the state. They thus configure *state equality*. Overall, the aim of these reforms instituting state equality pertains to the elimination of stasis understood as the internal strife that ravages the city state. And they have dominated the political conception of equality because they ultimately become the three senses of Aristotle's conception of geometric equality, corresponding to his three primary constitutions —that is, oligarchy, democracy and aristocracy.¹⁴

The sense of 'stasis' in the concluding statement of the *Athenian Constitution* is fundamentally different from the sense of an internal division that ravages the city and hence can produce a radically different sense of equality. The 'law of stasis' presents disputes as fundamental, even though this means that they will be inequalities —those who do not participate lose their citizenship, and one party is expected to prevail in the 'stasis.' Let us take these two senses of inequality in turn. Inequality has to do with the necessity of 'stasis' for the polity, where 'stasis' is understood as the agonism that is constitutive of the operation of democracy. The sense of inequality contained in the 'law of stasis' does not directly oppose any of the above senses of equality. It is not against material equality, nor against procedural equality, nor against equality of worth. Instead, it points to a sphere that is different from that of politics, and which delimits the three senses of equality. It points to the ontological dimension, whereby the being of the citizens is never articulated as the being of an individual but rather as a being with others. This being with is expressed in the agonist relation, or 'stasis,' that characterises human interaction. The polis is described with the participle (*stasiázousa*) of the verb *stasiázein*. The participle indicates the way in which the citizens exist as citizens. They are *stasiázontes* —their being consists in participating in conflict. It is crucial to recognise that this ontological dimension introduces another sense of equality, which is not amenable to any of the aforementioned three ways that geometric equality is usually formulated —as material, formal or of worth. This different sense is the equality of the participation in political 'stasis.' Everyone has access to the 'stasis' that characterises the ontologico-political dimension of agonistic democracy. There is an equality of openness to the participation in dispute or 'stasis' —there is an *agonistic equality*.

From the perspective of agonistic equality, how can we understand the second sense of inequality identified above, namely between those who participate in agonism, and those who do not and who are thereby expelled from the city. Anyone who rejects the transformed sense of stasis that we find in the concluding paragraph of Chapter VIII of the *Athenian Constitution* and thereby excludes oneself from the agonism that

characterises Solon's conception of democracy is to be treated as not equal to the task of being an Athenian citizen and thereby expelled from the city. There is then an agonism against those who do not understand or who do not embrace static equality. More broadly, there is an agonism against the non-agonistic senses of equality that have dominated the western philosophical canon. The expulsion of the non-participating citizen, then, is not simply the disenfranchising of a single individual. Rather, the expulsion is the assertion of the inequality between two conceptions of being with. Or, rather, it is the assertion of the ineliminable operative presence of agonistic equality. The agon is operative even for those who do not participate, since its effects are registered in the punishment meted out by Solon's law. Thus, agonistic equality that takes the ontological dimension of the political into consideration is more primary than state equality that confines equality to politics. Or, agonistic equality implies monism, in the sense that it causes state equality and the three senses of geometric equality are its after-effects.

The will to equality

Jacques Rancière's conception of agonistic politics is also premised on a sense of equality that is both distinguished from and more primary than geometric equality. By positing equality as an axiom of politics, Rancière makes inequality derivative of equality. Thus, Rancière also arrives at the sense of monism implied in agonistic politics, as described above. In order to delineate Rancière's conception of equality and to evaluate whether it presents a persuasive conception of agonistic equality, I will concentrate on his book, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1981), which contains his most explicit and detailed account of equality, with recourse also to *Disagreement* (1995), which is the most comprehensive statement of his conception of politics.¹⁵

I will start by going straight to what I regard as Rancière's most revealing statement about the equality of intelligences. It comes from the end of Chapter 3: "Equality and intelligence are synonymous terms, exactly like reason and will" (*The Ignorant Schoolmaster* 73). The most striking aspect of this statement is that Rancière identifies two conceptual couplets. There is, first, the couplet of equality and intelligence. And, second, Rancière posits a homology between reason and the will. Let us take these two couplets in turn. It will then be possible to examine their relation as well as to question the position about equality and the political that is propounded herewith.

The first couplet will be readily familiar to the readers of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, since the core argument of the book is about the equality of intelligence. Presented as an explication of the educational innovations of Joseph Jacotot, a

nineteenth-century pedagogue, the supposition of the equality of intelligence has clear implications for the learning experience. Every student is assumed to have the same potential to learn. This insight becomes the foundation stone of Jacotot's theory of universal learning. At the same time, Rancière makes it clear that this experience is not confined to the classroom but has wider, political implications. Equality emerges in any and every political arrangement. For instance, Rancière writes in *Disagreement*: "What makes an action political is ... the form in which confirmation of equality is inscribed in the setting up of a dispute" (32). Equality is the condition of the possibility of Rancière's conception of agonistic politics. (I will return to this position accorded to equality shortly.)

The second couplet indicates a radical reworking of the metaphysics of modern philosophy. Rancière, in particular, identifies the homology between reason and the will as a "fundamental turnaround" of Cartesianism. "In place of the thinking subject who only knows himself by withdrawing from all the senses and from all bodies, we have a new thinking subject who is aware of himself through the action he exerts on himself as on other bodies" (54). Whereas Descartes posits a thinking subject, an intelligence, as the basis of his metaphysics, Rancière proposes that acting is more primary than intelligence. This creates a 'new' subject. Now, and this is the important point, this reversal of the account of the subject is linked with the assertion of the equality of intelligence. The will that leads to action is not the will to have equality in every action that one performs. Rancière is not saying that the individual has the free will to be equal. Rather, equality of intelligence requires the will to action. That is the premise forming a political community for Rancière. As he puts it a little further down, italicising the statement for emphasis, "*I have ideas when I like*" (55). The will precedes the intellect and therefore it also precedes equality. Rancière's reversal of Cartesianism can be expressed thus: "I will, therefore I have equality of intelligence." The starting point is the will, and the sameness of intelligence and equality is its consequence.

The two couplets, then, are distinct, and yet they are also related in the sense that reason and the will are what make intellect and equality possible. Let us examine one of the examples that Rancière provides. He asks, what if we have two brothers in the same learning environment with exactly the same means at their disposal? Will they reach exactly the same goals? He infers that it will always be the case that one does better than the other. But their difference is not a matter of intelligence but rather a matter of attention. Attention in this context is a manifestation of the will.¹⁶ The attentive student wills learning. Rancière concludes: "Let's sum up these observations and say: man is a

will served by an intelligence” (51). The intellect —Rancière’s transformation of the Cartesian cogito— serves the will. Or, differently put, the will is more primary than the intellect. Thus, if we return to the statement that we started with —“Equality and intelligence are synonymous terms, exactly like reason and will”— the conjunction is between two couplets that are conjoined by a relation of subservience. The intellect and equality serve reason and the will. It is this relation that I call the *will to equality*.

There is one further, fundamental element in Rancière’s extrapolation of the will to equality. This has to do with the positing of a totality within which the will and the equality of intelligence can unfold. This totality is articulated most extensively in Chapter 2 of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* under the rubric of the expression “everything is in everything” (19 and passim). This totality is not transcendent but rather rooted in materiality. For instance, Rancière insists that “the materiality of everything the student says” must be contained in the text he is studying (20) and he insists on the “material ideality of language” (37). This material totality is also explicitly linked to power: “everything is in everything means: the tautology of power” (26). Within this totality, things in common function as the “gauge to equality” (32). Thus the totality is constitutive of the creation of a community. This idea of a totality as the material interconnectedness of beings is familiar enough from romanticism, especially Jena Romanticism. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy refer to this totality as the “literary absolute.” And it is also well known that one of the main sources of these ideas is Spinoza’s notion of God, substance, or nature.¹⁷ This totality forms the ontological basis of both equality and the will in Rancière’s reconstruction of Jacotot’s theory of universal teaching.¹⁸

So we can summarise Rancière’s will to equality in four positions. First, there is an equality of intelligence. Second, the will precedes the intellect. Third, the will is served by the intellect, or the will precedes the equality of intelligence. And, fourth, this takes place within a materialist totality. These four positions lead to a significant inference. Namely, that equality is more primary than inequality. This is a direct inference from the material totality that Rancière has established. If that material totality is presupposed in any political discourse, and if it is also responsible for the equality of intelligences, then it follows that anything that contradicts that equality, any manifestation of inequality, is an after-effect of the material totality. Rancière works out this position in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, and then repeats it in various other publications. For instance, in *Disagreement* we find statements like the following: “In the final analysis, inequality is only possible through equality” (17). Or, in a paper that summarises the argument of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* while also speculatively

drawing some of its implications, Rancière writes: “the presupposition [is] that equality is ultimately the condition of the possibility of inequality itself” (“On Ignorant Schoolmasters” 14). Differently put, the equality of intelligence is a direct result of the presupposed material totality. And inequality is nothing but an after-effect of this equality and the “everything is in everything.”

I underscore here the monist ontology of the assertion that equality is the condition of the possibility of inequality. Rancière makes abundantly clear that we encounter inequality in our everyday life, and in fact it is the predominant mode of being. So his claim about equality is not a descriptive one. Rather, it is an ontological one that arises directly from the assertion of a material totality. There is one material totality that forges an interconnection of everything with everything else, and within that totality intelligences are equal with each other. It is subsequently within the social that equality is articulated as inequality. But, within the ontology of the “everything is in everything,” there is only equality. The will to equality is then premised on a monism and, as I will show forthwith, the problem for Rancière is how to retain this monism alongside the will to equality without lapsing into paradoxes and self-contradiction.

The monism of agonistic equality

We seem to have arrived at a position that is very close, if not aligned with Spinoza. I have already indicated that the material totality has a Spinozan provenance. And the translation of the monist ontology into a politics—a being with—premised on a single kind of relation also appears Spinozan.

I will argue that there is one, fundamental difference between Spinoza’s and Rancière’s positions. This difference accounts for their divergent positions on equality. The difference arises at the point of connection between the notion of material totality and the will. Just like Rancière, Spinoza argues in the Corollary to Proposition 49 of Part II of the *Ethics* that “The will and the intellect are one and the same.” And just like Rancière, this statement is motivated by a critique of Cartesianism, and in particular by Descartes’ assertion of the primacy of the intellect over the will. Spinoza’s graphic illustration of his anti-Cartesianism in relation to the will is Buridan’s ass, the starving and thirsty donkey placed at an equal distance between hay and water. With his idiosyncratic irony, Spinoza’s donkey personifies the primacy of the Cartesian *cogito*. If the donkey finds itself in such an absolute equilibrium precipitated by the rational excogitation of the equidistance between hay and water, the donkey is bound to perish since it will not be in a position to decide whether to quench his hunger or his thirst first.¹⁹ The donkey cannot decide because rationality dominates the will.

Rancière would nod approvingly at Spinoza making an ass of the Cartesian cogito. But he parts ways with Spinoza in the relation of the will to the material totality. For Rancière, it is the individual will that is homologous with reason. His overturning of Cartesianism produces, as he was quoted saying earlier, “a *new* thinking *subject* who is aware of himself through the action he exerts on himself as on other bodies” (54, emphasis added). The homology between intellect and the will suggested by the Corollary to Proposition 49, on the other hand, is never attainable for a human being. Ultimately, this is a homology between the two attributes of extension and thought — the so-called Spinozan parallelism— but as Spinoza makes clear in Chapter 4 of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, it is only God who personifies that equilibrium between intellect and the will. And by this, as Spinoza further clarifies, he means that he rejects the absurd vulgarities of attributing a free will to God or of thinking him as a law maker in heaven who imposes laws on earth according to his every whim. Rather it only makes sense to talk about divine will as a law that involves “eternal necessity or truth” (*Theological Political Treatise* 430). Differently put, within a totality it is impossible to personify the will. And this entails that the will can be the same as the intellect only so long as it is not subjective because no subject can be necessary. This is an important point that I will return to in relation to Spinoza’s discussion of Adam and the Fall.

Now, this may appear as a minor, even obvious and insignificant difference —the “god intoxicated” Spinoza removes the subject from the totality, while the Marxist theorist retains a notion of subjectivity as the motor of historical materialism. Contrary to appearances, I submit that this difference leads to radically divergent positions about equality and about agonism. In particular, the difference pertains to whether a consistent monism can be maintained.

The monism of Rancière’s position manifests in the conception of equality as the condition of the possibility of inequality. To hold a consistent monism, he would have to argue that this equality of intelligence or the will to equality is the condition of the possibility of any politics. But that is not the case. The reason is that, precisely because he has described the will in subjectivist terms, he is constrained to place human agency as the pivot between the politics of equality and the politics of inequality. I will show this move by first turning to Chapter 2 of *Disagreement*, where Rancière develops his well-known distinction between politics and police. I am not concerned here with a description of these two concepts in Rancière but rather solely with the way they related – and in particular whether that relation sustains the monism posited by equality as the condition of the possibility of inequality. Clearly, this is not the case.

Rancière introduces the distinction between police —which he has already described— and politics as follows: “I now propose to reserve the term politics for an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing.” This activity consists in “whatever breaks” with policing (29). And he continues a bit later that this “break is manifest in a series of actions” (30). The emphasis on the break as an activity is premised on the actions of a free willing subject. This is consistent with the will to equality —that is, Rancière’s argument that the will precedes equality. It is the free individual that can effect the transition from police to politics. But if that is the case, then how can equality be the condition of the possibility of inequality? There is something manifestly self-contradictory in premising equality on the will, since then it is no longer possible to define equality without recourse to subjective acts of the will —to acts as breaks— that constitute the monism of equality. In this case, ontology is transmuted into anthropology and we are no longer in the region of monism, but rather in the domain of egoism.²⁰

The will to equality combined with the totality posited by Rancière is incompatible with monism because it relies on a Christian logic which is of necessity dualist. This becomes clear through Rancière’s idiosyncratic anarchy.²¹ I will show this with reference to a passage that occurs shortly before the statement that we started with, namely that “equality and intelligence are synonymous terms, exactly like reason and will,” in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. The anarchic moment is clearly connected with the notion of the will: “People who obey the dictates of reason have no need of laws and magistrates” (72). Those who obey the dictates of reason are of course those for whom reason and will are the same. And the will is the precondition of equality —there is a will to equality. Or as Rancière puts it: “Reason begins ... where equality is recognized: not equality decreed by law or force...but equality in act” (72). So the anarchy of those who reason and act is directly linked to the will to equality. Rancière traces this idea back to Stoicism: “The Stoics knew that already: virtue that knows itself, the virtue of knowing oneself, is the guiding power of all other virtues” (72). Let us recall here that it was the Stoics also who posited a totality, the single, all-encompassing God. And it was this idea that lead to the difficult problem of evil. As Cicero expresses it in *The Nature of Gods*, “Either God wishes to remove evils and cannot, or he can do so and is unwilling” (3.65). In other words, if God is omnipotent, then how can we account for the presence of evil? This problem was solved by Augustine in *The City of God Against the Pagans*. The *locus classicus* is his recounting of the story the Fall. Evil is not a property of the divine but rather the prerogative of the free choice of the individual. The free will creates good and evil (chs. XII and XIII, *passim*). A structurally equivalent

argument about the will deciding between equality and inequality animates Rancière's account of the will to equality. Rancière continues immediately after the reference to the Stoics: "There are no madmen except those who insist on inequality and domination, those who want to be right" (72). The 'except' introduces an ontology of good and evil that is premised on the idea of the will. The word 'except' is a Christian word. Either one wills the 'good' equality or one is mad to will the 'bad' inequality. This politics of the exception with deep Christian roots departs from the monism of the statement that equality is the condition of the possibility of inequality. It is no longer a monism but a dualism of us versus them —the enemies who are excepted.²²

If Rancière retorts that the will is not a subjective act or if somehow the conception of the will is refined or amended, still Rancière cannot maintain the monism that is implied in the assertion of equality as the condition of possibility of inequality. We can return to the distinction between police and politics in *Disagreement* in order to demonstrate the same self-contradiction in Rancière's argument in terms of regimes of power, without recourse to the will and to the subject. Strictly speaking, the monism of equality can only mean that there is one political regime —the regime of equality— and that all other regimes are derivative. A little later Rancière refines his description of the antagonism between police and politics thus: "Politics occurs when there is a place and a way for two *heterogeneous* processes to meet. The first is the police. ...The second is the process of equality" (*Disagreement* 30). Agonistic politics for Rancière is then the confrontation between the police and equality. But this agonism is no longer monistic. It concerns two heterogeneous processes.²³ The moment the opposite of equality is heterogeneous to it —the moment it has a different origin, a different ontology, and a different articulation— equality is no longer the condition of possibility of inequality. In fact, the agonism in this instance has become dualistic. Ultimately, Rancière has no other means of bridging this dualism other than reverting to the will, which is called upon to choose between equality and inequality.

Rancière's anarchy, which ineluctably leads to dualism, is in sharp contrast to Spinoza's "nomophilia." Spinoza's discussion about the intellect and the will coinciding in God in Chapter 4 of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* is propounded within the context of the distinction between the divine law, which is necessary, and the human law, which relies on obedience. Immediately after showing that the necessity of the divine law cannot be reconciled with the idea that God has a free will, Spinoza turns to the story of the Fall. How is it possible, he asks, that Adam willed to eat the forbidden fruit, if he knew that it is forbidden by the necessity of divine law? Spinoza's answer is both humorous and revealing of this philosophical position. He writes: "Adam

perceived this revelation not as an eternal and necessary truth but as a law, that is to say, an enactment from which a good or ill consequence would ensue not from the intrinsic nature of the deed performed but only from the will and absolute power of some ruler" (*Theological* 430). The Fall was a complete misunderstanding. Poor Adam, clearly not attentive enough, mistook God's command for human law, for it is only human law that can include the will. But Adam was mistaken, since this was a command from divine law, which holds no exceptions. Differently put, God is not a ruler, as is the wont of those who separate his intellect from his will to conceive of him. Rather, God is a totality. There is nothing outside the totality of the single substance. This recounting of the Fall as a farcical misunderstanding has, nevertheless, a poignant message. It flatly contradicts the Augustinian account, according to which the free will of Adam leads to the choice between good and evil and hence to a metaphysical dualism. Whereas for Augustine the creation of good and evil is the result of the operation of the free will, Spinoza describes the free will of an absolute and arbitrary law-giver as being created in Adam's imagination by mistake. Spinoza's riposte to the dualism generated by the free will is consistent with his monism, which can refer every human law to the pure necessity of the divine law.

This monism is presented in decidedly political terms in Chapter 16 of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and, moreover, as a monism that affirms agonistic democracy within the purview of agonistic equality. The whole argument of Chapter 16 culminates in the assertion that democracy is the primary constitution which is the monist moment from a political perspective. But the argument will be totally missed if it is understood in terms of free will. The key position Spinoza defends in the chapter is that "Nature's right is co-extensive with her power [*potentia*] (*Theological* 527)." I cannot expand upon all the different aspects of this statement, so I will only concentrate on three that are relevant to the argument.

First, this co-extensivity of right and power imbues equality with ontology. As Spinoza himself expresses it, it is "by natural right that ... the big [fish] eat the smaller ones" (*Theological* 527). Natural constituent power is not equally distributed. This ontological dimension of inequality is important for the political. This means that no one can hold such a constituted power that is immune to external influences which have the potential destroy that power.²⁴ Spinoza's conception of agonistic equality entails that the small fish, under certain conditions, can also overpower the big fish. Equality then leads the possibility of agonism —to the possibility of a conflict about right and power.

Second, this co-extensivity has an ethical dimension as well. Right is co-extensive with power because they refer to the totality of nature. This totality determines everything. Or differently put, there is no outside that totality —there is no law that contradicts it. In Spinoza's words: "It is from the necessity of this order alone that all individual things are determined to exist and to act in a definite way." But this means that actions within this totality can be neither good nor bad. More emphatically put, no one has the choice, afforded them by a free will, to break out of the co-extensivity of right and power. As if referring back to his account of the original sin, Spinoza adds: "that which our reason declares to be evil is not evil in respect of the order and laws of universal Nature, but only in respect of the laws of our own nature" (*Theological* 528). Thus, the agonism that the co-extensivity of right and power makes possible does not afford choices between an essential good, such as equality, and an essential evil, such as inequality. Rather, the agonism is the struggle to exercise power without any secure criteria that determine the correctness or otherwise of that struggle. Differently put, politics is not a matter of the exercise of a free willing individual. Rather, the political unfolds when the free will disappears in the multitude, which is the site where rights are shared.

Third, the agonistic politics that arises out of this conception of equality is decidedly democratic. For Spinoza, agonism is synonymous with agonistic democracy. Spinoza first describes democracy in terms of transference of right, as is customary in a contractarian argument. But this right is said to be transferred to a community, not to an absolute monarch. At this point Spinoza defines democracy: "community's right is called a democracy, which can therefore be defined as a united body of men which corporately possesses sovereign right over everything within its power" (*Theological* 530). Democracy is the incorporation of the co-extensivity of right and power. Spinoza draws two inferences from this. The first can be understood as the inference which provides advice to government, following the tradition that had been prevalent for centuries. According to Spinoza, it is in the advantage of constituted power to conform to democracy, since it will then be better aligned with natural power and it will have a better chance to govern smoothly (*Theological* 530-31). The second inference aligns democracy with agonistic monism. The democratic state is "the most natural form of state." Therefore, says Spinoza, "I omit the discussion of the basic principles of other forms of government" (*Theological* 531). This subversion of traditional political philosophy is due to the fact that what is said about democracy suffices to show how the other constitutions also arise. In other words, all other constitutions are

subversions or after-effects of democracy, and thus the primary philosophical task consists in describing democracy.

The imbrication of the ontological, the ethical and the political²⁵ is summarised at this point with reference to equality. Spinoza writes: “in a democratic state nobody transfers his natural right to another so completely that thereafter he is not to be consulted; he transfers it to the majority of the entire community of which he is part. In this way all men remain equal, as they were before in a state of nature” (*Theological* 531). I will not discuss here the differences from someone like Hobbes who demands a complete transfer of right for the institution of the commonwealth.²⁶ I only want to point out that the equality of men as “in a state of nature” which persists in Spinoza’s conception of democracy has a specific meaning. The state of nature here is the state where natural right is co-extensive with power.²⁷ What is equal within such a state is not necessarily equality before the law, since the law of such a state is not man-made law—that was, after all, Adam’s mistake. Nor is it material equality, given that Spinoza is not concerned at all to describe democracy in terms of distribution of wealth. Nor is it, finally, equality of worth, since the entire premise is not worth but power. Rather, it is an equality of access to agonism. Everyone has the power to engage with others within the community where natural right has been transferred. In fact, the transfer of natural right to the community cannot be understood as a single unrepeatable act—like a signature in a contract. The transfer of natural right to the community is instead the practice of the co-extensivity of right and power. This is an engagement without end, that is, both without a telos that defines a horizon of action, and an endless agonistic engagement.

At this point, Spinoza approximates Solon. The Athenian law giver instituted a redistribution of wealth, he freed from slavery those who had lost their citizenship because of debts and extended to everyone access to public office through election by lot. But he also realised that neither material equality nor equality before the law, nor equality of worth is sufficient for an agonistic democracy. That is where the function of the ‘law of stasis’ resonates with equality. The ‘law of stasis’ is not a law in the sense that it institutes a proscription—it does not say what one should not do. Rather, it describes how one should conduct oneself in a democracy. The key is stasis. Democracy relies on stasis. It needs the discords whereby one opinion overpowers an other. That’s what makes democracy agonistic. The only sense of equality that is available here is the equality in the engagement of stasis. And yet, this equality offers quite a lot. It offers an engaged stasis, which affords one an ontology that links individuals to each other in a community. It also makes available an ethics that does not rely on the free will of the

individual thereby lapsing into dualism. And finally it offers the possibility of a democratic politics.

This equality of stasis is only possible within a monist framework. Either democracy is the primary constitution and every other constitution is derivative, or we will be forced to revert to the will of the individual with all the metaphysical as well as political consequences that follow. Rancière develops a theory of equality that is attuned to the need to reformulate geometric equality and he also links equality to this construal of agonistic democracy. He even arrives at monism when he asserts that equality is the condition of the possibility of inequality. He fails however to avoid destructive self-contradictions because the concept of an individual free will is still required for this argument. An equality of stasis is impossible without the freedom from the free will.²⁸ Such an agonistic equality is enacted in common with others, which implies that it is premised on an ontology whereby being is being with. Only by holding the free will in check and by understanding being as being implicated with the political and the ethical is it possible to conceive of equality in monist terms, whereby inequality is the distortion and after-effect of equality as the agonistic interaction between citizens.

¹ The most important discussion occurs in Book V of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

² See ch. 4 of my *Stasis: On Agonistic Democracy*.

³ For an explicit critique of Aristotle's conception of equality, see Rancière, *Disagreement*.

⁴ For reasons of space but also because his conception of politics is less explicitly agonistic, I will not deal here with Alain Badiou, who develops a similar conception of equality as axiomatic for politics. For two excellent comparisons of Badiou and Rancière's positions, see Barbour and Power.

⁵ In using the term relational ontology, I follow thinkers such as Benjamin.

⁶ I develop this position first in *Sovereignty and its Other* and in more detail in *Stasis*.

⁷ For an evaluation of the literature on radical democracy and Spinoza, see Saar, ch. 7.

⁸ The identity of ontology and politics was already developed in his earlier works, such as *The Political Descartes*.

⁹ Negri uses the term "multitude" in the *Savage Anomaly* but since *Insurgencies* the term "constituent power" becomes an interchangeable, if not predominant, term.

¹⁰ See Negri's "*Reliquadesiderantur*: A Conjecture for a Definition of the Concept of Democracy in the final Spinoza" (9-27) and "Democracy and Eternity in Spinoza" (101-112), both in *Subversive Spinoza*.

¹¹ Andreas Kalyvas extrapolates the conception of citizenship contained within the law of stasis in “Solonian Citizenship.”

¹² I examine the ambiguities of the word stasis in “Stasis: Beyond Political Theology?”

¹³ Rancière discusses the Athenian election to office by lot with reference to Plato’s *Laws* in *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 40-1. Opposing the Platonic critique, Rancière describes election by lot as the “scandal [which] lies in the disjoining of entitlements to govern from any analogy to those that order social relations” (p. 41). Thus Rancière presents election by lot to accord with his own conception of democracy as based on the contingent and on the erasure of all hierarchies or “entitlements.” I mention this here since we will be returning later to Rancière. At the same time, I underscore that the Solonian innovation to elect officers of the state by law is far less radical than Rancière wants it to be. In fact, according to the *Athenian Constitution*, election by lot is simply an expression of Solon’s assertion of the virtue of every citizen, which is wholly in accord with the conception of geometric equality that Rancière is critical of.

¹⁴ For instance, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1131b, Aristotle specifies that “democrats make the criterion [of equality] free birth; those of oligarchical sympathies wealth; ... upholders of aristocracy make it virtue.” At the same time, Aristotle is acutely aware that the link between his conception of equality and the three primary constitutions is problematic (26-29). In fact, in Book V of *Politics*, 1302a, he singles out the dispute about the criterion equality as the “principal cause” of civil war (23-24).

¹⁵ Rancière’s two other important texts on equality are *On the Shores of Politics* and “Ten Theses on Politics.” Still, I regard *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and *Disagreement* as the two most important texts, hence I will focus on them. See also note 18.

¹⁶ Augustine develops the theme of two identical human beings in identical circumstances who nevertheless take different paths because of the operation of the free will. See his *The City of God Against the Pagans*, XII.6. I will not further develop this resonance here, except to remind us that Augustine is the inventor of the free will, and to note that I will soon argue that there is a Christian residue in Rancière’s own position.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Frederick Beiser’s account about how Spinozism was formative for the Jena Romantics in *The Fate of Reason*. Some interesting observations about the connection between pantheism, Spinoza and Romanticism can also be found in Assmann.

¹⁸ Even though Rancière rejects ontology, Bram Ieven shows in “Heteroreductives” that Rancière in fact rejects realist ontology, according to which being is simply given, and its obverse, idealist ontology, according to which being is known. At the same time, as Ieven demonstrates, not only this does not preclude an ontology thought outside the realist and idealist paradigms, but in addition it is necessary for Rancière to return to ontology for his position to make sense.

¹⁹ For a detailed account of Buridan’s ass in *Ethics*, Part II, see Clemens.

²⁰ Jean-Philippe Deranty describes *la logique du tort* in “Rancière’s Contemporary Political Ontology.” This logic enacts a double move. The police “undergoes a kind of ontological ‘wringing’ or ‘wrungness’ in that it distributes unevenly the honours and charges while also presupposing, since it is one community, the equality of all its members. The social order is wrong because it must produce ontological inequality since hierarchy is its basic *arkhe*, while at the same time this inequality is only logically possible on the basis of radical equality.” The logic of the *tort* – the wrong and the twisting that it requires in order to presuppose axiomatic equality

– denotes Rancière’s monism. The problem is how to account for the relation between the wrong and its twist. Does the logic exist without a subject who both recognises the wrong and acts out against it? This acting out is necessary, since for Rancière politics and democracy are not commensurate with institutions, but precisely with this acting out. My argument is that Rancière has no other recourse to sustain this monism other than by turning to the free will; but then it is no longer a monism, since the discourse has surreptitiously moved from ontology to anthropology. The central positioning of the free will is absent in other texts by Rancière, such as *On the Shores of Politics* and the “Ten Theses on Politics,” without however this absence being accounted for, nor with the free will being substituted by another term or its function taken up by another concept –except that the notion of the police is also absent in these later texts.

²¹ On Rancière’s anarchy, see the contributions to the special issue of *Anarchist Studies*, 16.2 (2008). For an elaboration of what such an anarchist politics would look like, see May, *Contemporary Political Movements*. For a critical assessment, see Dean.

²² Jean-Luc Nancy points to a similar problem with Rancière’s rejection or overcoming of metaphysics. At the very moment that metaphysics is excepted, “metaphysics once again awakens and reconfigures itself.” See his “Rancière and Metaphysics,” 92.

²³ The distinction between politics and police has attracted significant attention. The focus of the most interesting contributions to this discussion has been whether politics and police are separated, or whether they need a ground such as the political. May represents perhaps the most significant contribution in thinking of politics and police as separate, which accounts for his distinctly anarchic reading of Rancière’s philosophy. See May, *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière*. The interpretation that the political is the founding mediator is best argued for by Marchant. Samuel A. Champers, both summarises this debate and proposes a third solution, whereby politics and police are not separated, nor need a mediating term. Champers analysis, however, does not avoid the many aporias that arise from the dichotomy of politics and the police, without recourse to the political, which are clearly delineated in Marchant’s article. Nevertheless, in all these debates, however, the question of the relation between police and politics is never discussed in terms of *priority*, even though that’s precisely how Rancière expresses it explicitly on a number of occasions. Politics is the condition of the possibility of the police. The difficulty that Rancière cannot overcome is that he cannot both adhere to this monist position, and also claim that politics and police are heterogeneous.

²⁴ Filippo del Lucchese develops this argument in *Conflict, Power, and Multitude in Machiavelli and Spinoza*.

²⁵ I develop this imbrication as definitive of the agonistic democracy in my book *Stasis: On Agonistic Democracy*. By imbrication I do not mean coincidence: ontology, the political and the ethical are not the same, even though they cannot be separated.

²⁶ See Vardoulakis, *Sovereignty and its Other*, chs. 3 and 4.

²⁷ On Spinoza’s idiosyncratic naturalism, see Sharp.

²⁸ I borrow the idea of freedom from the free will from Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, who write in relation to Spinoza: “freedom fundamentally is the emergence from the illusion of freedom –that is from the illusion of free will” (51).

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