

**The Invention of
Nihilism:
Political Monism,
Epicureanism,
and Spinoza**

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Abstract: The article examines the creation of the term “nihilism” in late eighteenth century. Vardoulakis argues that the term is coined to summarize the objection against monism that it is apolitical or that it cannot account for action. This objection is well established in modernity, and it is especially directed against Spinoza. Vardoulakis recounts this history while also showing that, far from being apolitical, monism in fact has the resources for a robust political program that counters its castigation as nihilism.

Keywords: Nihilism, Monism, Spinoza, Bayle, Jacobi, Leo Strauss, Epicureanism

It may be largely forgotten today that the word “nihilism” was invented by Friedrich Jacobi in his public letter to Johann Gottlieb Fichte, the so-called “Green Letter” from 1799.¹ I hold that the reason for this forgetting is the spectacular success of its argument, namely, the rejection of any ethico-political import to monism. This position is so widely accepted that it functions as a presupposition that organizes inquiries without itself being questioned. The idea that political monism is untenable is sedimented in our thinking.²

By monism here I refer to the combination of two positions. First, there is the rejection of transcendence. This is the materialist position according to which there are no entities such as god that are qualitatively different from anything that can be understood in terms of causality. Second, reality is understood as one. Spinoza refer to that single reality invariably as substance, god, or nature. Heidegger refers to it as being. I would show later that there is a third key characteristic of Spinoza’s monism, namely, an understanding of action in terms of utility and instrumentality, which the way in which Spinoza accounts for action and politics. This third element is derived from epicureanism, as argue in *Spinoza, the Epicurean*.

It is worth reconsidering whether monism is indeed devoid of any political motive. And this means that it is worth revisiting Jacobi’s letter and its discourse. It is crucial to note from the beginning that this discourse does not confine the political to governance nor to those who are in power—and I will return in the last section to these two great traditions that dominate Western political thought for two millennia—but rather understands the political as the organized interaction between humans. Monism is supposed to be unable to account for action as

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1 For the context of the composition of the “Green Letter,” Beiser 1987.

2 If political monism is ever questioned, if it is granted that a modicum of the political is still left in monism—for, as the saying goes, “everything is political”—then this is done in order to castigate it and bewail its reactionary propensities. See Gourgouris 2020.

such. Revisiting Jacobi's letter and its context will allow us to entertain again the possibility of political monism. Such a task necessarily passes through Spinoza, who is the most notable monist of modernity and whose philosophy forms the backbone of Jacobi's letter.

Jacobi's connection to Spinoza goes back at least a decade and a half, to the infamous "pantheism controversy" that actually helps reintroduce Spinoza into the philosophical mainstream.³ The earlier controversy, ranging from 1785 for four years, consists mainly of a series of letter between Jacobi and Mendelssohn concerning Lessing's philosophical beliefs. Jacobi claims in the correspondence that Lessing confesses to him, shortly before his death, that he is a Spinozist. What is still absent in the earlier controversy is the clear association of a lack of political and ethical motives in monism. Jacobi forcefully introduces this move in the letter to Fichte using the word *nihilism* to describe this predicament (*J* 519).⁴

Notably, Jacobi's success does not consist in determining the use of the word "nihilism" in the philosophical idiom. The common philosophical use of the term relies on Nietzsche, for whom "nihilism" means almost the opposite. For Jacobi, nihilism is the atheist attitude that understand being as material. It can be overcome by a *salto mortale*, as he says in the record of his conversation with Lessing (*J* 189), which essentially consists in the acceptance that there is something transcendent related to the divine. Conversely, nihilism for Nietzsche is the attitude—moral no less than metaphysical, but always a pathological renunciation of the world—that arises from the supposition of a transcendent beyond.⁵ Differently put, whereas Jacobi's target is an immanent, atheist nihilism, Nietzsche's is a transcendent, theist one. Following this caveat, Jacobi's success consists in seemingly settling the issue of political monism, or, more precisely, of establishing the uncontested position that it is impossible for monism to have any political import.⁶

The success of Jacobi's argument may appear outlandish unless we recognize that, in reintroducing Spinoza into his contemporary philosophy, he was actually following a long polemic against Spinoza, stretching all the way to the initial reception of this work in the seventeenth century, and which consists in rejecting monism as apolitical

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3 For an excellent summary account of the reception history of Spinoza, see Moreau 1996.

4 Jacobi 1994. All references to Jacobi's work at to this volume, abbreviated as *J* and cited in-text parenthetically.

5 Baker 2018 does an excellent job in describing the Nietzschean notion nihilism as the problem of the "two worlds."

6 It is also notable that in everyday language, the word "nihilism," especially as it is used by conservative commentators, approximates Jacobi's use rather than Nietzsche's.

and immoral. This tradition is carried into the twentieth century by Leo Strauss, who introduces one important element, namely, he identifies monism with epicureanism.

I will examine first the reception of Spinoza's monism, then Jacobi's contribution, followed by Strauss's own intervention, before returning to epicureanism and to Spinoza. My aim is to contextualize and thereby challenge Jacobi's widely accepted argument that monism is apolitical. Differently put, I offer a rudimentary genealogy of political monism focusing on key moments that explain the context the precedes and succeeds Jacobi's letter.

1. Monism as the Denial of Reality: Bayle's Dictionary

The initial wave of reactions to Spinoza's works follows upon the publication of the *Theological Political Treatise* in 1770.⁷ The reaction was so fiercely hostile that led to Spinoza's decision to withhold publication of his *Ethics*. The publication of the *Opera Posthuma*, in 1677 led to a second wave of reaction, culminating in various bans of his book.

In this context, a significant event takes place a decade and a half later: the publication of Pierre Bayle's entry on "Spinoza" in his *Historical and Critical Dictionary* from the late seventeenth century (1693–1696). This long entry becomes the *de facto* sources of Spinoza's thought, the substitute for his banned texts for a century and a half, until the Paulus edition of Spinoza's work is prepared in Jena in the first years of the nineteenth century. Thus, for instance, philosophers such as Hume certainly and Kant almost certainly rely exclusively on Bayle.⁸

Significantly, Bayle does not so much summarize the various earlier critiques of Spinoza, as synthesizes them under the banner of monism. Monism is presented as the position in the *Ethics* that there is nothing outside God, and by implication as the rejection of creation *ex nihilo*. Bayle regards Spinoza's monism as untenable because it destroys reality. If there is nothing outside God, then really nothing exists. Or, in Bayle's words, if God and nature are one and immutable, then "they [i.e. the Spinozists] would have to claim that there has not been, and there never will be, any change in the universe, and that all change, the very greatest or the very smallest, is impossible."⁹ Monism is, in this interpretation, the loss of contingency and hence the loss of the possibility of human action, or of praxis, which is not amenable to universal laws of nature.

From this central critique advanced by Bayle, several implications follow. The most important are the following three, all explicitly rejecting

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7 For a detailed account of this early reception, see Israel 2010.

8 On Bayle's rationalist reading of Spinoza, see Ryan 2009, esp. ch. 6.

9 Bayle 1965, 327.

the possibility of the political: First, the one who comprehends divine necessity lacks any motivation for action: “A man like Spinoza would sit absolutely still if he reasoned logically. ‘If it is possible,’ he would say, ‘that such a doctrine might be established, the necessity of nature would establish it without my book. If it is not possible, all of my writings would accomplish nothing.’”¹⁰ There is no politics in monism—there is no desire to act, there is only passivity. Another way to put this, is to say that there is no freedom in monism.

Second, political history becomes an absurdity. As Bayle puts it in his unique rhetoric, “in Spinoza’s system all those who say, ‘The Germans have killed ten thousand Turks,’ speak incorrectly and falsely unless they mean, ‘God modified into Germans has killed God modified into ten thousand Turks,’ and the same with all the phrases by which what men do to one another are expressed.”¹¹ Monism eradicates any basis for differentiation. Thus, there is no history because there is no vicissitude, since ultimately everything refers back to the single, immutable substance. Note the rhetoric of this example, which was to become famous: the eradication of history is also the eradication of the difference between believers and unbelievers. Consequently, monism is not simply a tenuous metaphysical credo, but moreover a deeply, even offensively atheist one.

And, third, monist indifference entails the eradication of singularity: “even when a man is burned alive, no change happens to him.”¹² Whatever we suffer as well as the effects of our sufferings are ultimately irrelevant from the perspective of the one, all-encompassing substance. All this amounts to saying that Spinoza’s monism eradicates particularity and hence politics. Again, this is a loaded example: in Spinozistic monism, there is no heaven or hell, there is no redemption or damnation.

This critique of monism due to the purported lack of historical specificity becomes the dominant trope of the critique of Spinoza, who is viewed as the arch-villain espousing this position. This critique culminates in Hegel’s reading of Spinoza as denying reality to anything but the substance: “In Spinoza’s system, God alone is. What is other than God is a being that at once is not a being, and so is show. Thus it cannot be said that Spinozism is atheism. It is rather the exact contrary of atheism, namely, *acosmism*. The world is no true being, there is no world. Rather, God and God alone is.”¹³ This rejection of monism on the

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10 Bayle 1965, 314.

11 Bayle 1965, 312.

12 Bayle 1965, 328.

13 Hegel 2008, 49. The influence of this idea can be seen by noting that Emmanuel Levinas (1999, 69–70) repeats the accusation of *acosmism* even though Levinas’s own reading of Spinoza consists in accusing him of constructing a crude sense of immanence, which is the very opposite of *acosmism*. I discuss Levinas’s critique of Spinoza in Vardoulakis 2020 section 3 of Chapter 5.

grounds that it entails that only the substance is real and the rest is just “show”—a view referred to as “acosmism”—is articulated more famously as Hegel’s accusation that Spinoza lacks determinate negation. History is robbed of its dialectical grounding. The human is trapped within that omniscient and omnipresent substance.¹⁴

2. Jacobi’s “Nihilism”: The Rejection of Political Monism

There are numerous reasons why Hegel’s re-appropriation of the old critique of monism as effecting the loss of reality and hence of the ethical and the political has attracted so much attention, especially in France during the 1960s, culminating in Pierre Macherey’s exhaustive analysis of Hegel’s critique of Spinoza.¹⁵ Hegel’s critique becomes at that point the substitute of dialectics and by implication historical materialism. Radical leftists such as Macherey, who belongs to the Althusser circle, are increasingly dissatisfied with historical dialectics, and they seek refuge instead in the non-dialectical philosophy of Spinoza. Disguised behind Macherey’s highly technical analysis of Hegel’s critique of Spinoza is the question whether a radical politics requires the dialectics or not.¹⁶

This game of allusion is of no relevance to the early nineteenth century, and hence no particular attention is paid to Hegel’s interpretation that is merely following a well-trodden path. But there is an additional, and more significant reason why in the early nineteenth century Hegel’s interpretation held no much traction. Jacobi’s public letter to Fichte, which eventually lead to Fichte’s resignation from the University of Jena, is much more famous and it is making essentially the same point, tapping into the same tradition of interpreting Spinoza as the exemplary monist who loses reality, and along with it any grounding for ethics and politics. Jacobi gives the name “nihilism” to monism as loss of reality.¹⁷

Jacobi’s position can be gleaned from one sentence contained toward the end of the letter: “God is, and is *outside me, a living, self-subsisting being*, or I am God. There is no third” (J 524). This proposition sets up a disjunction. The first option is that there is a God that is outside me. This option rejects the possibility of monism. If, according to monism, there is nothing outside God, and if, according to Spinoza, this also means that there is nothing outside nature, then to posit a God that is “outside me,” as the letter puts it, is nothing but another way of

14 For a forceful refutation of the accusation that Spinoza espouses acosmism, see Melamed 2010 and 2011.

15 Macherey 2011.

16 Some of the intellectual history of the revival of Spinoza in France is provided in the excellent Peden 2014.

17 In what follows, I will refrain from the highly complex textual history of the “Green Letter,” partly because this will distract from the main objective of this paper, and partly because Di Giovanni does an excellent job on this topic in his edition of Jacobi’s *Main Philosophical Writings*.

saying that monism is untenable. This position would have been familiar to anyone who had a scant knowledge of the reception of Spinoza's work, especially since Bayle's critique. Recall, for instance, Bayle's example of the Turks and the Germans. According to monism, holds Bayle, Germans killing Turks is essentially nothing other than God killing himself. This is meant to be an *ad absurdum* refutation of monism by suggesting that the alternative is true, namely, that God is indeed "outside me." This would have been perfectly familiar to readers of the letter. Not so with the disjunct. Why is the alternative to monism that "I am God"? To answer this question will lead us to the heart of what Jacobi means by "nihilism."

The letter starts in a laudatory tone. Jacobi says at the very beginning that "I consider you [i.e., Fichte] the true Messiah" of philosophy (J 501). It soon becomes clear, however, that this praise paves the way to argue that all "philosophy pure through and through" (J 501), or all true philosophy, is a form of Spinozism, which is to say, a form of monism. What characterizes Fichte's philosophy is a "transfiguration of materialism into idealism" that is "realized through Spinoza"—what Jacobi also calls an "inverted Spinozism" (J 502).¹⁸ Spinoza argues that there is nothing outside the substance. In this sense, nothing new can be created that is not part of the substance. There is no creation out of nothing or creation *ex nihilo*. Fichte, following in the footsteps of Kant's transcendental idealism, shows that all condition of knowledge is the I or the self in its encounter with the not-I.¹⁹

We see at this point why Jacobi says that the highest or purest philosopher will have to admit that "I am God." In Fichte's "inverted Spinozism," it is no longer the substance but the I itself outside of which nothing exists. Differently put, Jacobi understands monism as series of equivalences, which in Spinoza are [substance = rejection of creation ex nihilo = God] whereas in Fichte the I is added on [substance = rejection of creation ex nihilo = God = I]. If in Spinoza the substance is the condition of knowledge, as we learn in Part I of the *Ethics*, the condition of all knowledge for Fichte is the I—and, notes Jacobi, they are both monists.

This "inverted Spinozism" that adds the "I" to the series of equivalences that characterize monism contains more than a hint that the philosopher is a megalomaniac madman. This hint is taken up by Jacobi's friend, the novelist Jean Paul, who creates a character that goes insane as a result of being Fichte's student. Jean Paul invents a new noun to describe this specific condition of madness, *der Doppelgänger*.²⁰

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18The argument that all philosophy results in Spinozism or monism is already prefigured in the pantheism controversy. The new element here is to introduce transcendental idealism into this position.

19 See Fichte 1982.

20 I explain in detail the invention of the work "doppelgänger" in details in the first chapter Vardoulakis 2010.

Jacobi also invents a name to describe this condition. That name is “nihilism” (*J* 519). In the Green Letter, nihilism signifies that “nothing is outside the I” (*J* 509), that is, the I becomes an equivalent of the substance outside of which nothing exists, according to monism. This turn to the I rejects creation *ex nihilo* and hence is created “from nothing, to nothing, for nothing, into nothing” (*J* 508). Or, differently put, Jacobi suggests that the nothing itself becomes substantialized and incorporated within the I.

This nihilism has two interrelated effects. The first is the determination of monism as naturalism, where naturalism signifies the predominance of scientific knowledge. Jacobi’s critique of Fichte’s “inverted Spinozism” essentially consists in saying that as soon as the nothing becomes part of the substance and the I, then monism both bases itself on epistemology (cf. *J* 512) and this knowledge needs to include the nothing and is thereby contaminated by, it becomes a knowledge of nothing, an empty vessel of nothingness. Or, in Jacobi’s memorable turn of phrase, it is “a materialism without matter” (*J* 502). And, in a longer passage: “pure reason only takes hold of itself. The philosophizing of pure reason must therefore be a chemical process through which everything outside reason is changed into nothing, and reason alone is left, a spirit so pure that, in its purity, it cannot itself *be*, but can only produce everything” (*J* 507). This circularity or *petitio principii* of transcendental idealism as monism results in nothing.

From the beginning of the letter and throughout, Jacobi repeatedly contrasts this “knowledge of nothing” that he proclaims to be the highest possible philosophical achievement, to his own “consciousness of non-knowing” (*J* 499). Jacobi very soon and very clearly states the result of the difference: nihilism, “insofar as it [is] ... simply scientific or purely rational” leads to atheism since it “abolishes natural faith” (*J* 500). If there is nothing outside the I as the precondition of natural knowledge in monism, then indeed there is no God outside the I and it is not too much of a stretch to concur with Jacobi, given his premises, that the I becomes God—albeit a God reigning over nothing. In the disjunctive manner in which his argument is presented, Jacobi’s alternative is clear: “I understand by ‘the true’ something which is *prior to* and *outside* knowledge; that which first gives a value to knowledge and to *the faculty* of knowledge, *to reason*” (*J* 513). Or to state the disjunction more starkly, it is either the atheism of nihilism or the religiosity of any kind of thought that rejects monism.

The second effect follows on from the first, according to Jacobi, and it consists in the impossibility of any possible ethico-political import for monism. “But the *good*—what is that?—I have no answer, if there is no God” (*J* 515). Unless there is no outside, unless there are moral principles that are independent of the knowing-I, or, which is the same for Jacobi, unless monism is refuted, there is no morality. Strauss, as we will see

shortly, will take this a step further arguing that monism is not simply a lack of morality but moreover resolutely immoral because it consists in an instrumental reasoning that is egotistical and self-serving.

The rejection of the political import of monism is best developed in an important appendix to the letter, in which Jacobi seeks to demonstrate that monism entails the erasure of freedom. Monism turns the human into “a machine, an automaton” because the human is presented as acting “deeds blindly and of necessity, in sequence according to the *necessary* order of cause and effect, i.e. the mechanics of nature” (J 532 and 531). Jacobi follows a long tradition of understanding the free will as the separation of spirit from body and the superiority of the former over the latter.²¹ By contrast, monism posits the identity of mind and body, since they are both included in the all-encompassing substance. Thus, they are both subject to the same laws of nature. But, proclaims Jacobi, “the union of the necessity of nature and freedom in one and the same being is an absolutely incomprehensible fact; a *miracle and a mystery* comparable to creation” (J 530). Creation *ex nihilo*, a decisive property of the divine in the Judeo-Christian tradition that understands God as the “creator,” is rejected by monism as a mystery and a miracle that is incomprehensible. Jacobi’s rejection of political monism seeks to turn the table on monism. It is the rejection of creation *ex nihilo* that is “a miracle and a mystery” since then it would be totally impossible to conceive of human freedom.

We see then a clear trajectory from the initial reaction to Spinoza as it is crystalized in Bayle’s vehement rejection of monism to Jacobi’s adaptation of the same argumentative strategies to reject transcendental idealism as an “inverted Spinozism.” Monism is nihilism, which essentially means there is nothing ethical or political about it. A monist is trapped inside their own mind, a self-proclaimed God incapable of giving an account of their own deeds. Monism is nihilism because political monism is bankrupt.

3. Leo Strauss: Monism as Epicureanism

Leo Strauss’s significant contribution in this construction of nihilism as apolitical through the reception history of Spinoza consists in illustrating the epicurean provenance of Spinoza’s monism. The predominant idea of this reception history from Bayle onward remains unaltered, namely, that Spinozan metaphysics is incommensurable with any politics, but it is both historicized and accentuated through the recognition of the epicurean influence.

Monism as epicureanism is the pivot of Strauss’s book *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft: Untersuchungen zu Spinozas Theologisch-politischem Traktat* from 1930. The influence of Strauss’s interpretation of the *Theological Political*

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21 See Vardoulakis 2016.

Treatise extends beyond his book, translated as *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* in 1965.²² His seminars on Spinoza at Chicago University influenced generations of scholars.²³ In both the book and the classroom, his attack on Spinoza's monism is ferocious and it is not inconceivable that it played a role in dissuading subsequent scholars from further exploring Spinoza's epicureanism.

The entire argument of *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* is framed as a mortal combat between two metaphysical ideas, namely, the epicurean insistence that nothing comes out of nothing and the opposing idea that God can create something *ex nihilo*, which Strauss links to Jewish metaphysics and Biblical faith.²⁴ The central metaphysical conflict that organizes Strauss' discourse is profoundly indebted to Jacobi, on whose epistemology Strauss had completed his doctorate under Ernst Cassirer's supervision in 1922.

There is only one reference to Jacobi in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, but it is telling: "on the basis of unbelieving science one could not but arrive at Spinoza's results." These results include monism. Strauss continues: "But would this basis itself thus be justified?" In other words, can the mind on its own accord, without support in something external that is not rational, and which thereby inscribes a certain faith in the process, justify this presupposition? Strauss does not explicitly answer this question, saying instead that it "was Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi who posed this question, and by so doing lifted the interpretation of Spinoza—or what amounts to the same thing, the critique of Spinoza—on to its proper plane" (CR 204). Strauss follows Jacobi, whose answer to the above question, as we saw, is a categorical "no."

The two main themes of the Green Letter—namely, the atheism of monism and its lack of ethical and political import—are central to Strauss's account. He insists that Spinoza and other epicurean atheists have failed to show that reason succeeds in undermining faith. "The orthodox premise [i.e., belief in God, revelation etc.] cannot be refuted by experience or by recourse to the principle of contradiction" (CR 29). He expands: "The last word and the ultimate justification of Spinoza's critique is the atheism from intellectual probity. ... Yet this claim ... can not deceive one about the fact that its basis is an act of will, of belief, and, being based on belief, is fatal to any philosophy" (CR 30). Strauss's pivotal argument in his engagement with epicureanism is that monism relies, on the one hand, on the capacity of reason to refute revelation through a complete scientific explanation, but, on the other, epicureanism cannot do so without surreptitiously introducing belief in the capacity

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22 Strauss 1997. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as CR.

23 Strauss 1959.

24 Cf. Vatter 2004, esp. 180–82.

of reason. This is *mutatis mutandi* Jacobi's argument, which amounts to saying that the naturalism entailed by monism rests on a *petitio principii*.

Strauss draws a further conclusion: "Philosophy, the quest for evident and necessary knowledge, rests itself on an unevident decision, on an act of the will, just as faith does. Hence the antagonism between Spinoza and Judaism, between unbelief and belief, is ultimately not theoretical but moral" (CR 29). Despite appearances, the monism that Strauss ascribes to Spinoza is not primarily "theoretical," that is, confined to epistemology, but "moral," that is, it pertains to an attitude toward the world. Thus, monism as an attitude is first atheist—and hence "moral"—and secondarily theoretical. Strauss defines this practical or "moral" attitude of monism as epicurean:

Epicurus' criticism of religion is one source, and the most important one, of seventeenth century criticism of religion. Epicurus is conscious of his motive. It is expressly the root first of his criticism of religion and then of his science. Were we not in awe of active and effectual gods, science, according to Epicurus' expressed opinion, would be in essential part superfluous. For Epicurus, the basic aim of knowledge is to achieve a condition of *eudaimonia*, by means of reasoning. This *eudaimonia* does not consist in the scientific investigation itself; science is no more than the indispensable means of attaining the condition. (CR 38)

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Volume 8
Issue 1

This original "moral" motive is peace of mind or tranquility, what Strauss designates as *eudaimonia*. That's the end of the epicurean moral attitude.²⁵ Scientific knowledge is only the means toward that end. Atheism precedes theoretical knowledge—which is a mark of epicureanism, according to Strauss.

Strauss's next move consists in a frontal assault on this moral attitude of monism. Strauss does so through the qualitative distinction between two senses of morality, the monist/ epicurean one and the religious/ Jewish one. He asserts a "moral antagonism" due to "the Jewish designation of the unbeliever as Epicurean" because "from every point of view Epicureanism may be said to be the classic form of the critique of religion and the basic stratum of the tradition of the critique of religion" (CR 29). The morality that is opposed to a metaphysics of revelation is simultaneously heretical and epicurean. It is worth remembering that the word "heretical" is the same as the word "epicurean" in Hebrew.²⁶ Strauss wastes no time in castigating the epicurean morality: "Epicureanism can lead only to a *mercenary morality*

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²⁵ The most usual word to describe the telos of epicurean morality is *ataraxia*, translated into Latin as *beatitudo*. See Vardoulakis 2020, Introduction.

²⁶ On this, see Montag 2012.

whereas traditional Jewish morality is not mercenary. ... Epicureanism is so radically mercenary that it conceives of its theoretical doctrines as the means for liberating the mind from the terrors of religious fear, of the fear of death, and of natural necessity” (CR 29, emphasis added). Epicurean morality is “mercenary” in the sense that it does not rely on principles but on the calculation of utility. It is mercenary because it consists in the instrumental pursuit of happiness.

Strauss repeatedly returns to the question of miracles because Spinoza’s refutation of miracles is the key to the choice between faith and the “mercenary morality” of epicurean monism that rejects creation *ex nihilo*. Strauss thus stages the “moral antagonism” between epicureanism and religion in terms of miracles: “With the doctrine of the eternity of the world the denial of miracles is given, with the doctrine of the creation of the world the possibility of miracles is admitted” (CR 151). There is either the rejection of creation *ex nihilo*, or creation and, if the latter, then there are miracles, because “creation of the world is the pre-condition of miracles” (CR 186). The rhetoric of the disjunction in presenting the core issue is reminiscent of Jacobi. Where Strauss himself stands at this binary is clear as he repeats three times that the epicurean rejection of miracles is an attitude that consists in merely laughing them off (CR 29, 144, and 146).

Let me summarize Strauss’s critique thus far. First, Strauss holds that Spinoza cannot assert monism as the fact that there is nothing outside our rational capacity to know, unless a belief heterogeneous to reason is presupposed. Second, Strauss discerns a moral attitude as being more primary than any theoretical contemplation in Spinoza’s monism. And, third, Strauss designates this monism as epicurean and disparages its “mercenary morality.” The antagonism against the mercenary epicurean morality is insufficient unless Strauss denies it any effectivity whatsoever.

Strauss makes this fourth move by forcefully rejecting any *political motives* to monism. Spinoza’s monism is, to use Strauss’s words, “not at all political” (CR 227). Strauss justifies this position by indicating that the political motives associated with the tradition of the critique of religion are Averroist and Machiavellian, which are “traditions of very different origin” than epicureanism (CR 48–49). This seems like a weak argument given Strauss grants that “after the rediscovery of Epicurean philosophy by the humanists” these traditions merged (CR 48). Nonetheless, according to Strauss, it is only epicureanism that is monist. Hence, the strong point here is to deny monism any political import.²⁷

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27The rejection of the political import of epicureanism on the grounds that tranquillity of the mind is not political is a constant theme that runs throughout Strauss’s works. For instance, see Strauss 1953, 109–113; Strauss 2011, 67–69; Strauss 1967.

So, where can the political impulse of the *Theological Political Treatise* be located if not in Spinoza's epicureanism? The only possibility of a Spinozan politics in *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* arises in Chapter 9 where Strauss argues for the importance of the statesman as the wise man separated from the multitude (CR 229).²⁸ Strauss can arrive at this position by separating monism from the anti-authoritarianism of epicureanism—of which more in the next section. The result of this separation in Strauss's interpretation is that the authority of the statesman disavows the epicurean "mercenary morality" of Spinoza's monism and atheism. It is as if—to put it differently—Spinoza saves himself from epicureanism by developing a politics that is thoroughly incompatible with his monist metaphysics and the "mercenary morality" they entail. Spinoza saves himself from his own epicureanism, that is, from his apolitical monism.

There is something highly paradoxical—I almost said unbelievable—in this move whereby Spinoza recuperates himself through a spectacular self-amputation. It is surely one thing to say that a philosopher cannot be entirely consistent over a whole oeuvre, and another to impute such a schizophrenic split between Spinoza's ethics—his "mercenary morality"—and politics. It is doubtful that Strauss would have been able to make such a radical claim had he not been following in the footsteps of two and a half centuries of reception of Spinoza's monism as apolitical. Following the line of interpretation popularized by Bayle and enhanced by Jacobi, Strauss simply has to append a politics that is distinct from Spinoza's metaphysics, a gesture that complements the earlier reception history that could not account for Spinoza's obvious interest in politics in the two treatises.

One of the most radical shifts in the reception of Spinoza since 1968 is arguably the insight that his metaphysics and his politics are inseparable. After the work of Gilles Deleuze, we know that Spinoza is critical of the metaphysical hierarchies characterizing Platonism and the political hierarchies that are modelled on them.²⁹ Perhaps even more significant is the work of Antonio Negri, who has systematically argued that a metaphysics of necessity implies a politics and that it is a political decision to remain oblivious to this fact.³⁰ Balibar also starts from the premise that Spinoza's politics and metaphysics are inextricable, even though his reading is different from Negri's.³¹ Finally, perhaps the most

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28 This idea from the 1930 book is further developed a couple of decades later in Strauss 1988. This is the essay in which Strauss develops his thesis about an esoteric and an exoteric reading of the *Theological Political Treatise*. Of the many critiques of Strauss's 1988, the most detailed one is perhaps Levene 2000.

29 Deleuze, 1992; see also Deleuze 1990.

30 See, for instance, Negri 2006, and specifically for Spinoza, Negri 1991.

31 Balibar 1998.

thorough examination of the way in which naturalism is political is Hasana Sharp's *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*. Sharp argues that the concept of nature is not divorced from history and politics because "being natural [in Spinoza] means being situated within a particular time, place, and causal nexus."³²

Nonetheless, Strauss's claim may still appear convincing if he is correct that Spinoza is an epicurean monist and if epicureanism lacks a politics.³³ We have to turn to the monism peculiar to epicureanism to truly assess whether a political monism is a viable possibility.

4. Epicurean Monism

A key feature of Epicurus's epistemology is the rejection of the separation of theory and praxis that we find in Plato and Aristotle. As a result, practical knowledge, or what Epicurus calls *phronesis*, emerges as the primary form of knowledge. Let us start with Epicurus's letter to Herodotus, his most detailed account of a theory of knowledge, to see why Epicurus places so much emphasis on phronesis.

Epicurus begins by stressing that there are two sources of knowledge, either directly through perceptions, or indirectly through words that communicate experiences. But for this empirical conception of knowledge to be possible, Epicurus asserts that it is required to assume regularity in nature. He summarizes this position by saying that "nothing is created out of nothing" (X.38).³⁴ The rejection of the possibility of creation *ex nihilo* was prevalent amongst the "physiologists" who tried to explain nature in material terms.³⁵ For instance, the same view was held by Democritus, the atomist who greatly influenced Epicurus (IX.44). Significantly, Epicurus recognizes that the rejection of creation *ex nihilo* can be expressed in terms of totality: "There is nothing outside the totality [$\tau\acute{o}$ $\pi\acute{\alpha}\nu$]—nothing that can enter the totality in order to change it" (X.39). The recognition that the rejection of creation *ex nihilo* entails a totality outside of which nothing exists essentially asserts that knowledge is possible on condition that there are no divine interventions that change the laws of nature.³⁶ Or, knowledge presupposes a complete or unchanging totality. This is the position that centuries later will be given the name monism.

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32 Sharp 2011, 8.

33 It is a common accusation that epicureanism lacks a politics. For a critique of this view, see Brown 2009.

34 Diogenes Laertius 1931. References in-text by book number followed by paragraph number.

35 Aristotle 1933, 986b.

36 This is the reason, as Frederick Lange (1866) explains in his monumental history of materialism, that the idea of the rejection of the creation *ex nihilo* played such a decisive role in the development of modern empiricism. This is also why epicureanism is important for the scientific revolution (see Wilson 2008).

The presupposition of a totality for knowledge to be possible leads to the primacy of practical judgment. As soon as we impute a totality of being, a complete theoretical knowledge of that totality appears impossible. Thus, knowledge always begins with a practical purpose. Epicurus designates this end as tranquility. The word that he uses at the beginning of the letter to Herodotus is *γαληνισμός*, which is more commonly expressed in his writings as *ἀταραξία* (*ataraxia*) and its cognates signifying the serenity and blessedness characteristic of the wise person who has phronesis (see e.g. X.83, 85, and 124–125). The letter to Menoeceus says that such a disposition makes the wise person live “like a god amongst humans” (X.135). *Ataraxia* means literally the absence or negation of “anxiety” (*τάραχος*)—and fear of death is singled out as the most detrimental anxiety in our pursuit of blessedness (X.81–82).

As we know from Aristotle’s Book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which is the most detailed discussion of phronesis from ancient Greek philosophy, phronesis signifies a balanced relation between thought and emotion in the process of making judgments about how to act.³⁷ The mutual support between phronesis and *ataraxia* is clear. *Ataraxia* is the state of mind and body that results from the balanced exercise of thought and emotion characteristic of phronesis (X.132 and X.140). Differently put, *ataraxia* is the state in which we are *free from* the dominance of emotions such as fear of death that curtail our calculative capacity, *as well as free* from the illusion that the mind or the spirit can predominate over the body.

The epicurean refusal of the separation of mind and body combines the materialism of monism—no transcendence and no creation—with the inseparability of thought and emotion characteristic of phronesis. The interconnection of thought and emotion entails that no body is created out of nothing and that no mind contains a transcendent quality. When the body dies, the mind dies with it—there is no immortal soul or spirit that outlives the body. This means that—as Epicurus puts in a phrase that was perhaps his best known in antiquity—“death ... is nothing to us” (X.126). The reason is that, while we are alive, we should concern ourselves with living—as Spinoza puts it in Proposition 67 of Part IV of the *Ethics*, one is free when their activity “is a meditation on life”—and when we are dead, we feel nothing and hence death can no longer affect us. The fear of death, then, is a state in which our knowledge starts from false premises and as such derails our judgment by overwhelming our emotions. In other words, it derails the balance of thought and emotion in phronesis that *ataraxia* requires.

A significant effect of this metaphysics that refuses a separation of mind and body is a stringent anti-authoritarianism that is best known from the opening of Lucretius *On the Nature of Things*. In this epic poem

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37 Aristotle 2003, 1139b.

written to popularize Epicurus's ideas in Rome, Lucretius rails against what he calls *religio* because it generates fear to manipulate people—to ideologically trap them, as we might say today. Or, in the vocabulary used above: *religio* prevents people from exercising their phronesis. In the context of the poem, it is clear that the word *religio* does not mean simply religion, but signifies more broadly both religious and political authority. Lucretius's example is the sacrifice of Iphigeneia.³⁸ Her father, Agamemnon, does not sacrifice her only because he is ill-advised about the reasons why the winds won't carry his Greek fleet to Troy. In addition, he draws his justification for the sacrifice from the matrix of beliefs and practices instituted as religion. Thus, in *religio*, as the example of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia demonstrates, collude those who derive their authority through theological and through political means. This “evil” of *religio*, as Lucretius puts it, indicates a vehement anti-authoritarianism that characterizes the entire epicurean school.³⁹

Let me recap at this point. Bayle and Jacobi are correct to stress that epistemology and metaphysics are connected. But the practical element of epicurean monism contradicts the separation of theory and praxis suggested by Bayle's analysis, and the inseparability of mind and body casts doubt on Jacobi's conception of an “inverted Spinozism” that emanates from an I that conceives of itself as God. Monism is not nihilism. Further, monism can indeed be understood in epicurean terms—Strauss is right. But if Strauss is correct that Spinoza is an epicurean, then Spinoza's politics cannot rely on a purported wise statesman that rises above the masses, as this accords with the figure of *religio* that epicureanism so fiercely opposes.

5. The Politics of Phronesis: The Calculation of Utility

And yet, even if these criticisms ultimately miss the mark about monism, the nature of a monist politics is still unclear. How is epicurean monism political? The anti-authoritarian impulse is certainly pivotal, but as I discuss this in *Spinoza, the Epicurean* in detail, I will turn here instead to something that forms its basis, namely, the nature of practical knowledge that we find in epicurean monism. Political monism is inseparable from our capacity to form practical judgments, or to exercise phronesis.

Differently put, political monism signals a tradition of thinking the political in different terms than the two paradigms that predominate in the Occident from antiquity to early modernity. These are the understanding of the political in terms of the statesman or lawgiver, and, second, the paradigm that concentrates on the three forms of government—monarchy, aristocracy and democracy. As opposed to this

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38 Lucretius 1924, 1.80 ff.

39 Lucretius 1924, 1.110

double tradition that dominates political discourse in the West, political monism emphasizes the importance of judgment. We find this alternative approach to the political arising within the epicurean school.

Let me quote a long, significant passage from Epicurus's letter to Menoeceus that plays a crucial role in understanding the importance of phronesis for epicureanism. This passage should be seen in the context of the accusation that epicureanism is a sensualist philosophy that privileges pleasure over everything else, which is to say that it is hedonistic and non-political:

When we say, then, that pleasure is the end of action [ἡδονὴν τέλος ὑπάρχειν], we do not mean the pleasure of the prodigal or the pleasures of sensuality, as we are understood to do by some through ignorance, prejudice, or willful misrepresentation. By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of anxiety in the soul [τὸ μῆτε ἀλγεῖν κατὰ σῶμα μῆτε ταραττεσθαι κατὰ ψυχὴν]. It is not an unbroken succession of drinking bouts and of revelry, not sexual love, not the enjoyment of the fish and other delicacies of a luxurious table, which produce a pleasant life [τὸν ἡδὺν γεννᾶ βίον]: it is sober reasoning [νήφων λογισμὸς] that calculates the causes of every judgment to do or avoid doing something [τὰς αἰτίας ἐξερευνῶν πάσης αἰρέσεως καὶ φυγῆς], and banishing those beliefs through which the greatest tumults take possession of the soul. *Of all this the principle and the greatest good is phronesis* [τούτων δὲ πάντων ἀρχὴ καὶ μέγιστον ἀγαθὸν φρόνησις]. Wherefore phronesis is more significant [τιμιώτερον] even than philosophy; *from it spring all the other virtues* [ἐξ ἧς αἱ λοιπαὶ πεφύκασιν ἀρεταί], for it teaches that we cannot lead a life of pleasure that is not also a life of phronesis, honour, and justice; nor lead a life of phronesis, honour, and justice that is not also a life of pleasure. For the virtues have grown into one with a pleasant life, and a pleasant life is inseparable from them. (X.131–32, emphasis added)

This is not simply a passage that blatantly contradicts the interpretation of epicureanism as hedonistic. Also, the emphasis on phronesis introduces a number of ideas that are vital to political monism.

The first point to note is the startling predicate to pleasure that Epicurus provides, namely “sober reasoning.” The word for reasoning here is *logismos* (λογισμὸς), not *logos*. If *logos* is what has come to be understood as Reason, *logismos* in the masculine or *to logistikon* in the neuter is instrumental reasoning—as, for instance, Aristotle makes clear in the opening of Book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which is concerned with Aristotle's own analysis of phronesis. The life of pleasure requires this kind of instrumental thinking that identifies means and ends.

A distinctive feature of this instrumental reasoning is that it posits the inseparability of mind and body—it is, as Epicurus says, the absence of pain in the body and of anxiety in the soul. This accords with the epicurean insistence that the end of action is the absence of anxiety, or *ataraxia*, as I pointed out in the previous section. It is instructive to turn to Spinoza briefly. This instrumental reasoning coupled with the inseparability of mind and body is translated into the following proposition in Spinoza: “From the guidance of reason, we pursue [*ex rationis ductu sequemur*] the greater of two goods or the lesser of two evils” (*E IV*, P65). Spinoza immediately explains that this calculative or instrumental reasoning is not confined to the present but also includes the future in its considerations (*E IV*, P66). In fact, Spinoza is not unique in expressing the combination of instrumentality with the inseparability of mind and body this way—the same articulation is often employed by other philosophers from the seventeenth century working in the materialist tradition, for instance, Hobbes often uses an almost identical formulation. In any case, the point I am making is that this *logismos* is not abstract or theoretical reasoning but rather a practical kind of reasoning that entrains ends and considers action while posing the inseparability of mind and body.

When Epicurus writes that this practical reasoning is more significant than philosophy, he is pointing out to a reversal of Aristotle’s position. According to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, theoretical reason leads to wisdom and virtue more than practical reason. I cannot digress here into a detailed discussion of Aristotle’s conception of phronesis.⁴⁰ I only want to remind us of the point that Heidegger makes when discussing the priority of theoretical over practical reason in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, namely, that this is the starting point of metaphysics and onto-theology.⁴¹ We see Epicurus here evading that move. For him, the primary kind of knowledge is practical and it is articulated in the form of judgments that are calculations about utility—that is, calculations that combine ratiocination with considerations about the body.

Epicurus designates this practical, instrumental judgment as phronesis. This is the standard Greek name for this practical knowledge that he describes here. What is unusual in Epicurus is that he makes phronesis the precondition of both the good and of virtue. Such a move is indicative of his materialism—of the fact that knowledge is not abstract but rather articulated through its effects and how it impacts on the corporeal. It is the fact that—to use a contemporary formulation—knowledge is power. The suggestion that the good and virtue require phronesis is a bold one. Phronesis is a judgment that arises

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⁴⁰ I provide a juxtaposition of Aristotle and Epicurus’s conceptions of phronesis in Vardoulakis 2020, ch. 1.

⁴¹ Heidegger 1997.

by assessing—or, calculating—one’s given circumstances. Because it is a response to materiality, phronesis can never aspire to a thorough formalization. Materiality is contingent and hence unthematizable. Any calculation in relation to materiality is faced with its ineluctable unpredictability. Spinoza is fully cognizant of this point and he embraces its positive potential. The notion of error is constitutive of his understanding of politics and of history.⁴² The seeming deficiency of phronesis—the fact that it has not steadfast rules to prove its validity or that it has to think “without banisters”—is turned into a positive heuristic principle by Spinoza.

There is one final insight in this passage from Epicurus. I am referring to the circularity between phronesis and pleasure. The corresponding idea in Spinoza is that there are two paths to virtue and the good, the path of the emotions relying on obedience and the path of reason relying on the calculation of utility. Etienne Balibar is the only reader of Spinoza who has noticed this feature in a series of writings, starting with his exceptional analysis of Proposition 37 of Part IV of the *Ethics* and culminating in his conception of transindividuality.⁴³ In other words, the theory of judgment as phronesis or as the calculation of utility that we find in Spinoza is not a judgment that relies on the individual, as is the case in Kant, but is rather a kind of calculation of one’s utility that includes the other in its calculations. Or, differently put, it is a calculation of reciprocal utility. As I argue in *Spinoza, the Epicurean*, the entire politics of Spinoza’s *Theological Political Treatise* revolves around the question of how this reciprocal calculation can be successful.

We see then that far from being non-political, epicurean monism is deeply political. Political monism sidesteps the two great traditions of politics that come from antiquity. The center of its politics is not sovereignty or authority, nor is it a notion of politics that relies on the distinction between different constitutional regime—democracy, aristocracy and monarchy. Rather, political monism pivots around a notion of practical judgment as the calculation of communal utility. This notion of practical judgment is completely elided in the critiques of Spinoza that discern in his monism a renunciation of the political.

6. Spinoza’s Political Monism: The Use of Miracles

It is time to turn to Spinoza, the figure Bayle, Jacobi and Strauss single out to conduct their polemic against political monism. I will refer to Chapter 6 of the *Theological Political Treatise*, his major political work published in his lifetime, because it is the only chapter of the *Treatise*

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42 See Vardoulakis 2020, ch. 2.

43 Balibar 2020.

that argues explicitly from monism.⁴⁴ This is the chapter in which Spinoza discusses miracles. Usually Spinoza's argument is presented as a critique of miracles—that's how Strauss, for instance, understands it. I argue it is better to view his argument as asking the question as to how miracles retain a certain utility, despite the fact that monism entails that miracles do not exist. Spinoza is not primarily concerned with whether miracles exist—in fact, he settles that question early on in the chapter. Rather, he is concerned with the *political* implications miracles, and in particular with the kind of practical judgments that pertain to their utility. Spinoza is concerned with the nexus of miracles with phronesis, thereby demonstrating a practical use of political monism.

The argument of Chapter 6 of Spinoza's *Theological Political Treatise* may appear deceptively simple, presented in the disjunction: either monism or miracles—which is not dissimilar from the disjunction that organizes Jacobi and Leo Strauss's readings. Monism is not simply an ontological doctrine for Spinoza. Rather, following Epicurus's insight, monism is *both* an epistemological matter—the fact that knowledge needs to presuppose a totality outside of which nothing exists—and also a political one—namely, the primacy of practical judgment. Thus monism in Spinoza has a distinctly political flavor, one that is inseparable from the calculation of utility.

Spinoza argues for monism in two distinct ways, as is often the case in the *Theological Political Treatise*, namely, using arguments from reason and from Scriptural authority. The latter relies on *Ecclesiastes* that states, in Spinoza's paraphrase, that "Nature observes a fixed and immutable order, that God has been the same throughout all ages that are known or unknown to us, that the laws of Nature are so perfect and fruitful that nothing can be added or taken away from them" (84). It is worth remembering, as Warren Montag reminds us, that this doctrine from *Ecclesiastes* was regarded as heretical in the Jewish tradition.⁴⁵ The inference from the monism of *Ecclesiastes* Spinoza draws is that "miracles seem something strange only because of human ignorance [*propter hominum ignorantiam*]" (84/95).⁴⁶ If the laws of God and nature are the same and immutable, then miracles, understood as the suspension of natural law, are impossible.

The same argument is pursued also from reason. Thus, Spinoza argues that if the laws of nature are the same as divine laws, then it

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44 Spinoza 2001, hereafter cited parenthetically by page number. I have often altered the translation. For the Latin, I have used Spinoza 1924). The *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* is contained in Volume 3. All page references to this edition follow after the English edition.

45 Montag 2012.

46 Strauss draws attention to *Ecclesiastes*, according to which "nature maintains a fixed and unalterable order, and hence that there are no miracles" to construct the either/ or that structures his book: either epicurean monism or miracles and religion (CR 121)

is impossible to interrupt them: “if anyone were to maintain that God performs some act contrary to the laws of Nature, he would at the same time have to maintain that God acts contrary to his own nature—of which nothing could be more absurd [*quo nihil absurdius*]” (72/83). Spinoza further holds that to imagine that God made nature imperfect so that he has to intervene to rectify its faults “I consider to be utterly divorced from reason [*ratione alienissimum*]” (73/83). And, echoing the Appendix to Part I of the *Ethics*, he says that “recourse to the will of God ... is no more than a ridiculous way of avowing one’s ignorance [*ridiculus sane modus ignorantiam profitendi*]” (75/86). Spinoza then infers that to suppose that there is creation *ex nihilo* making miracles possible, far from proving God’s existence, is on the contrary a way to “cast doubt on it.” (74). Differently put, the perfection of nature on the grounds that its laws are the same as divine law cannot accommodate any events such as miracles that suggest a rupture in the completeness of God or nature.

Why does Spinoza need two proofs of monism, both from Scripture and from reason? In a move typical of the *Theological Political Treatise*, Spinoza explains that it is a matter of expediency, since the exercise of reason that enables a conception of God as one and of his natural laws as immutable is a rare capacity for humans. And even if one has such a capacity, still natural or divine laws “are not all known to us [*omnes nobis notae non sint*]” (73/83). Not only are they not known—more precisely, they are not knowable. Spinoza is repeating here Epicurus’s idea of the totality (*to pan*) as it is related to phronesis (X.39). From monism we impute that knowledge is impossible unless we presuppose a totality. This is the epicurean principle of the immutability of natural laws that was so crucial for empiricism and the rise of scientific inquiry in modernity.⁴⁷ It is essentially the argument against miracles: if we do not take the laws of nature as perfect but as mutable or as subject to the whims of meddling gods, then no knowledge can be derived as anything we know can change all of a sudden and without warning through miracles. From monism we also need to impute that not everything is knowable. We cannot know everything that happens, nor all the laws of nature—as this would lift our knowledge on a par to the knowledge of God, which is impossible. This is why for Epicurus the primary form of knowledge is phronesis, which is the source of all virtue, as we saw earlier. This is why, in other words, monism requires the primacy of practical knowledge or the calculation of utility. We discover, then, in Chapter 6 of the *Theological Political Treatise* an epicurean strategy of arguing.

It is instructive to notice how the entire Chapter 6 is framed. The multitude (*vulgus*) understands an occurrence to be a miracle when its causes are unknown. Significantly, Spinoza does not stop here. As we saw above, ultimately no one has the capacity to know all causes that

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47 See Lange 1866; and Wilson 200).

operate within the totality. This entails the primacy of the practical for monism. Consistent with this position, Spinoza adds: “particularly if such an event is to their profit or advantage [*lucrum aut commodum*]” (71/81). The human inability to know all causes necessitates a comportment to the world that consists in starting with the calculation of utility. From this practical perspective, miracles are useful in helping the multitude to form practical judgments. Miracles are not divine interventions that subvert natural laws but rather ancillaries to the exercise of pronesis.

In Chapter 6 Spinoza’s aim is not a critique of miracles as such, but rather to show the ways in which miracles can be used for practical purposes; with how miracles can mobilize motives for actions that rely on the calculation of utility, that is, in epicurean terms, on pronesis. This point is reinforced at the end of the chapter. I quote the entire passage that summarizes the discussion about monism and the rejection of miracles:

Consequently [*quare*], on these matters [i.e., on miracles] everyone is entitled to hold whatever view he feels will better bring him with sincere heart to the worship of God and to religion. This was also the opinion of Josephus, for towards the end of Book 2 of his *Antiquities*, he writes as follows: “Let no one baulk at the word miracle, if men of ancient times, unsophisticated as they were, see the road to safety open up through the sea, whether revealed by God’s will or of its own accord. Those men, too, who accompanied Alexander, king of Macedon, men of much more recent times, found the Pamphylian sea divide for them, offering a passage when there was no other way, it being God’s will to destroy the Persian empire through him. This is admitted to be true by all who have written of Alexander’s deeds. Therefore on these matters let everyone think as he will.” Such are the words of Josephus, showing his attitude to belief in miracles. (85/96)

Spinoza quotes Josephus here as agreeing with him in the sense that it does not matter whether miracles really occur or not, so long as they are believed to occur in such a way as to motivate the right kind of action. It little matters if the waters parted through divine intervention to let the Jews or the Macedonians through—what matters is that the Jews and the Macedonians believed that there was a divine intervention, which motivated them to achieve their respective ends. Thus, miracles are not concerned with theoretical knowledge about God and the immutable natural laws. Rather, miracles are means that partake in the operation of the instrumental reasoning of those who perceive them as miracles. Miracles are useful to help the people think about their utility.

The invention of nihilism leads to the rejection of political monism. But if monism is positioned within its epicurean framework, not only does it *not* eradicate particularity and history, as the reception of Spinoza following Bayle, Jacobi and Strauss suggests. Rather, monism entails that knowledge does not reside in the subject's mind as it perceives external objects. As such the practical—ethical no less that political—judgments are not trapped within an interiority that denies the world; quite the opposite, judgment is discernible in the effects.

This makes monism political through and through. Thus, to refer to one of Bayle's examples I cited above, epicurean monism is not concerned with the chemical constitution of the body burned at the stake, but rather with the motivations of those who thought it prudent that such an auto-da-fé would be beneficial to the society. In other words, the question for Spinoza is not how the alive and the burnt body both refer to a common substance, but rather how the impossibility of knowing that common substance can lead to chains of reasoning that justify the exercise of capital punishment.

Further, epicurean monism is not a "mercenary morality" that rejects all political motives in the service of personal self-interest, as Strauss contends. To the contrary, epicurean monism shows that any attempt to sideline utility leads to the political affirmation of an authority that "knows better than us" and whom we therefore have to obey—which is precisely what Strauss proposes. Differently put, epicurean monism is political through and through because it provides a matrix of interrogation and critique of any authority or political power.

Central to the political monism is a shift of emphasis in how the political is understood. It is no longer reduced to governance and the statesman, nor is it a politics that relies on principles as universal values beyond dispute. Instead, it focusses on phronesis, the practical judgments that we are called to make by taking consideration of others. As practical judgments that respond to the given circumstances and hence devoid of steadfast criteria, the judgments of phronesis are contestable. This may rob them of a veneer of universality but makes them immanently democratic. Political monism, then, promotes a sense of agonistic democracy.⁴⁸

So why has the idea that monism is apolitical prevailed? If Spinoza's philosophy includes an account of action through phronesis as the calculation of utility, why has the old argument that we trace back to Bayle become canonical? This is a different story that I cannot recount here in detail, but in brief I point out Martin Heidegger's critical role. His conception of being as one and unified is monist in nature,

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48 I made this argument in much more detail in Vardoulakis, 2018.

but he vehemently rejects the epicurean and Spinozist account of action, because he argues that instrumentality blocks the path to the unconcealment or truth of being. Heidegger holds that instrumentality works in the service of technology and science contributing to the enslavement of modern man. This argument entrenches the rejection of the kind of monism derived from Spinoza and the epicureans. The price that Heidegger has to pay by consummating the critique of Bayle and Jacobi is that he ultimately finds it hard to provide an account of action within his own version of monism.⁴⁹

I add Heidegger to this narrative about the supposed apolitical nature of monism so as to suggest that the topic is far from irrelevant today. Any critique of instrumentality inspired by Heidegger can be analyzed in terms of the story that I have sketched above. Given the prevalence and influence of Heidegger's argument, it is an urgent philosophical task today to revisit and review the construction of apolitical monism. Rather than a footnote in the history of ideas of the seventeenth century, the blind acceptance of an apolitical monism needs to be overcome for a renewal of the political discourse of contemporary philosophy.

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⁴⁹The idea in this paragraph are a summary of my *The Ruse of Techne* (forthcoming).

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