

Essay against giving

By Pascal SÉVÉRAC

Essay against giving: using the Spinozist concept of *conatus* (striving) to analyse the self-serving structure of giving in all its guises, Lordon offers a worthy mix of philosophy and social sciences. Through *conatus*, giving appears as a construct of selflessness that is concerned in fact with averting the violence that stems from human relationships. But doesn't *conatus*, as expounded in Spinozist philosophy, portray a purely warlike anthropology?

Review of Frédéric Lordon's *L'intérêt souverain. Essai d'anthropologie économique Spinoziste (Sovereign Interest. An Essay on Spinozist Economic Anthropology)*. La découverte, 2006, 235 p., 23 €.

For some years now, Spinozist philosophy has been the subject of lively interest, not only within historical and philosophical circles but also more widely, in both closely and less closely-associated fields : philosophy of mind (around the so-called 'mind-body problem'), psychotherapy, (psychoanalysis, psychomotricity, child psychiatry...), biology (through the reflections of neurobiologists like J.-P. Changeux in France or A. R. Damasio in the USA) and finally human sciences, particularly social sciences¹. Is it simply fashionable ? Whether it is or not, excellent work on the subject exists in each of these fields. Frédéric Lordon's book is no exception, in the relevance of his use of Spinozist ideas and the precision of his references to Spinoza's text – in this case, his *magnum opus*, the *Ethics*, completed in 1675. Lordon's general plan, as research director at CNRS (France's National Centre for Scientific Research) and a member of its theoretical and applied economics laboratory, is to establish a programme of research around the potential for Spinozist social sciences : *L'intérêt souverain* represents an important stage in this process : not the first, as Spinoza has already been the central

¹ Under the guidance of Frédéric Lordon and Yves Citton, a richly-prefaced collection of articles has recently been published: *Spinoza et les sciences sociales. De la puissance de la multitude à l'économie des affects*. Editions Amsterdam 2008.

reference in several of Lordon's articles as well as in an exposé on financial capitalism, *La politique du capital (The Politics of Capital)* (Odile Jacob, 2002). But it is without doubt a decisive stage, in that it positions the Spinozist concept of *conatus* as the basic principle for understanding social relationships.

Conatus as self-interest

So what is Spinoza's *conatus*, and in what sense is its integration into the social sciences relevant? According to Spinoza, *conatus* represents the striving of each thing, as far as it can by its own power, to persevere in being. Lordon sees *conatus* as the interest each person takes in himself "if *conatus* is effort, it is also fundamentally interest – interest in persevering in being, in other words, maintaining existence and activity. It is *interest in using one's capabilities* and augmenting them. It is self-interest because it is the expression of something on which one's very existence depends². As Lordon points out, it's useless to try and explain this view of *conatus* starting from the ontology of causal activity on which the first part of the *Ethics* is based. We should simply take from this the point that it can serve as a first principle of a social science anthropology and that this inherent striving characterising each thing and therefore each human individual – or even each human group sufficiently cohesive to act as one – is a causal principal explaining the many and varied activities around affirming one's own power to act and think. In the opening chapter of his work ("The matter of things") Lordon draws out one particular activity that logically comes first: "pronation" – the direct, and most often violent, taking of things. Taking is the primary act by which each *conatus* affirms its egocentric power: taking material things for nourishment, for protection, for self-preservation. From here we can see how interpersonal relationships unfold: if the pronation characterising each existence is driven by inherent conation, then it is in the combative scenarios of forceful and violent interaction – primarily physical violence – that these *conatus* meet and do battle. How then, in this context, can we make sense of the activity that appears to be the opposite of taking, inasmuch as it seems peaceful and altruistic: the activity of giving?

The purpose of giving

This is the question around which Lordon's whole work revolves. *Conatus* plays a key role by demonstrating how even giving, in its various forms, is an expression of the interest that each person takes first and foremost in *himself*. As a principal for understanding the social world, *conatus* stands up not only against rational choice theory, developed from the utilitarianist economic science that predominates in the social sciences, but especially against

² p. 34.

the opposing sociological trend which, taking its lead from the ideas of Marcel Mauss, has evolved into an eponymous school of thought – the Anti-Utilitarianist Movement in Social Sciences, or MAUSS – led notably by A. Caillé and J. Godbout. In one respect, Lordon, who recognises himself as coming from the so-called Regulation School, rejects the construct of *homo æconomicus*, that is, a selfish, calculating figure, master of his decisions and the motives that justify them: without doubt, such a construct affirms the self-interested nature of choice, but it courts an over simplistic concept of interest – transparent to itself, always contemplated in a reasoned, cold, controlled way. However, the real target of Lordon’s exposé is not this – it is the flipside, the side of those who imagine “real” social relationships between altruistic donors working for an interdependent society, rather than calculating egoists, working for a market society. Because, if *homo æconomicus* fails to take account of all the force of passion behind *conatus*, which in truth only reasons by affect, then the construct of *homo donator*, having like the former reduced interest to conscious, methodical calculation, appears purely and simply to deny what is, according to Lordon, the first principle of giving: the unconfessed self-interest of selflessness.

Clearly, it would be unfair to reproach those who give for enchanting their gestures by believing, or making believe, that the relationships they develop with others are selfless. But it is more surprising to see a school of thought succumb, according to the author, to the sirens of wishful thinking, by judging that these relationships are actually as the protagonists often imagine. Lordon looks to Mauss himself for the main arguments against this theoretical stance : true, giving remains the anthropologist’s rock of eternal moral doctrine³ ; but he also affirms that “*fundamentally*, just as such gifts are not free, neither are they genuinely selfless”⁴. The interest sought by the giving/counter-giving institution analysed by Mauss and Sahlins is primarily peaceful. Thus, for the Trobriands islanders, as Lordon reminds us in his second chapter (“The dangerous and base economy”), *kula*, a ceremonial gift exchange establishing inter-group relationships through the mediation of their chiefs, serves to pacify the raw violence of market exchange. Likewise *gimwali*, (barter), via a face-to-face between two embittered individuals driven by gain, and whose exchange “is not far from a savage grip”⁵. This is giving/counter-giving used to check and sublimate the *quid pro quo*: *kula* replaces *gimwali* where individual becomes group, subduing the activity of pronation by making the symbolic acquisition of prestige central to the material object acquired. Ceremonial exchange remains combative, because giving outdoes the rival. But this regulated competition civilises *conatus* by re-focusing it on winning honour.

³ *Essai sur le don (The Gift)*, « Conclusions de morale », PUF, « Quadrige », p. 263-264.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 268. Quoted by Lordon, p. 96.

⁵ Lordon, p. 78.

At the end of chapter 2, Lordon draws a distinction between “three historical forms of ‘taking’ ”: symbolic exchange, which aims to maintain social relationships by alliance and only allows “taking” in the form of “receiving”; market exchange, which is closest to direct, brutal pronation, even if it requires institutional mediation (currency, law); and finally, an intermediate form of exchange, combining the two and characterised by the individual and moral connection between giver and receiver. To introduce giving and counter-giving was to redirect physical violence towards a more pacifying, symbolic violence; from this point, via the morals of selflessness, a language and practice veiling the native violence of *conatus* became internalised, even in the intent of the conscious individual. Chapters 3 and 4 are therefore dedicated to this latter form of exchange. In chapter 3 (“The games of interest”), Lordon dissociates himself from Bartolomé Clavero’s⁶ version of giving: The practice of counter-giving conceived in the Middle Ages in reaction to usury is referred to by Clavero as *antidora*. Money must be loaned not calculatingly, but in friendship; it must be repaid by moral, not legal obligation. *Antidora* stems from the morals of honour and gratitude, and the surplus potentially awarded the donor by the recipient is referred to as *benefit*, in other words, money given in kindness (*beneficium*) and graciously repaid.

In chapter 4, “The tragic-comedy of benefits”, Lordon enriches the logic of this early form of collective denial – designed to disguise self-serving exchanges as simple friendship – by studying the doctrine of benefits developed by Seneca several centuries earlier. Why “tragi-comedy”? It is a social comedy, since, via the hypocrisy of gratitude – of “visibly emotional repayment” – everything is done to soften the symbolic violence of debt recovery (exaction). Seneca formulates a code for donor and donee to counter ingratitude; but in so doing he is sensitive to what lurks below the surface of social relationships: “therefore one can sometimes laugh at kindness, but what kindness is battling against is no laughing matter. What Seneca wants to keep at bay is that state of social catastrophe – unbridled pronating *conatus* [...]. Behind the initial obsession with ingratitude, which one might have seen as superficial, there is a second, more profound: social chaos”⁷. This is comedy as the antidote to the tragedy of the situation.

***Conatus*, an antisocial force?**

By such insistence on the enduring conflict in social dealings, the author’s remarks are even more Spinozist than he admits. Indeed, Spinoza confirmed this in his own way when, in one of his letters, he defined the difference between himself and Hobbes: “for me, there is no hiatus but rather, continuity, between the state of nature and the state of society. Better still: there is a momentum driving the state of nature *towards* a state of society. As the right of war – in other words, the battle of strength – prevails in the state of nature, society never breaks

⁶ B. Clavero, *La grâce du don. Anthropologie catholique de l'économie moderne*, Albin Michel, 1996.

⁷ p. 145.

out of this “silent war”, to use Foucault’s words⁸, that characterises mankind’s encounters of passion. The various institutions of the social world (such as morality or law) do not overcome the logic of passions whereby each *conatus* affirms its power; they simply articulate it in such a way that humans contrive to agree more than fight. So the consensus that forms communities is born as much of affect as of dissension: compliance with a moral or political norm is only out of fear of chastisement for disobedience, or out of hope for the promise of obedience rewarded. But then if consensus, like dissension, is affective; if substantive law, like natural law is essentially a passion-led expression of the power of the multitudes, one cannot avoid reducing *conatus* – as the author even does at times – to a “fundamentally antisocial force”⁹. Such a simplification would come down to playing with a concept that perhaps owes more to Hobbes than Spinoza: it would be to think of human nature as the thing that inevitably divides us and can never unite us; it would be to think of the pacifying device of the power of *Leviathan* as the other side of passion’s power to divide. In Spinoza’s opinion, the nature of mankind, in other words the affective logic of *conatus*, doesn’t only lead to conflict: it also leads to harmony and union – often born of passion, sometimes born of reason. One of the great difficulties in Spinozist thought, and on which much of today’s interpretation converges, is grasping this double jointedness between unions and disunions of passion on the one hand, and between compositions of passion and the potential to rationalise them on the other.

Lordon, however, is not blind to these problems, which he addresses in his own way when he critiques the morals of selflessness in the two final chapters of his work (chapter 5 : “*Conatus, interesse, timesis*” and chapter 6 : “Social and mental structures of interest in selflessness”). This critique calls particularly on proposition 27 in part III of the *Ethics*, which deals with affective imitation: Spinoza said that when we believe an entity like ourselves, towards which we feel no emotion, to be affected by a certain emotion, we then feel a similar emotion. This affective contagion particularly explains charitable giving, which springs not from a rush of pure altruism but from phenomena of passion derived straight from the effort of each of us to persevere in being. For example, charity is born out of pity, whereby we feel the sadness that we imagine others feel and that drives us to banish it – for others as well as ourselves – for others *because* for ourselves. The affected *conatus* is an effort to destroy anything that diminishes our power (our sadnesses) and preserve anything that increases it (our joys). But as Lordon shows, to this passive form of kindness is added an active one: because there does exist genuine, rational generosity which of course is nothing other than self-interest. He sets the interests of rational generosity against the illusion of selfless generosity. For him, Spinozism is “the utilitarianism of power”¹⁰, which does not deny the

⁸ « *Il faut défendre la société* », *Cours au Collège de France*, Seuil/Gallimard, 1997, p. 16. The idea that Foucault also expresses, by reversing Clausewitz’s well-known phrase : war is merely a continuation of politics.

⁹ p. 83.

¹⁰ p. 158.

reality of giving but distinguishes “servitudinal giving”, which is merely a fool’s bargain, from “fortitudinous giving”¹¹, grounded in the idea that nothing is more useful to man than man himself. To be as useful as possible to others for the sole and good reason of being as useful as possible to oneself: such is the ethical perspective of Spinozist philosophy. It would be interesting to confront this ethical finality with stoicism, which the author seldom mentions when examining Seneca’s theory of benefits: in this concept of the regulated use of kindness, is there not also the search for a certain concurrence with itself? Isn’t the stoic ethics of kindness based on the distinction between what concerns our own freedom and need only be sought (harmony with others to be in harmony with oneself) and what is surely preferable but never really in our hands (glory, recognition)? There seem to be several avenues of unexplored discussion in this.

However, as the author shows, it remains that most giving activities are driven by passions rather than reason, in pursuit of moral benefits most often associated with the happiness bestowed by obtaining group approval. The author reminds us, as did Bourdieu, that “the group’s recognition first goes to those who recognise the group”¹²: the individual *conatus* participates in a collective one that strives to move the group forward and allows us to get the measure of interpreting moral giving: this unilateral giving (without expectations of reciprocity) is not the scene where the public disappears, allowing pure intention to triumph as Hénaff believes for example¹³. Rather, it is the result of working to internalise society’s demands into a single moral conscience. “For the payer also to be payee, his little payment process must connect to the big central bank of the moral collective. And the feelings of happiness with which he appears to reward *himself* are dependent on credit extended by the group as a *pool* of affective resources. Once the group is forgotten or silent, the moral conscience is free to delude itself that it acted autonomously and made its own judgements. Or it can be content to bask without further question in the happiness of joyful feelings.”¹⁴.

Whether it is a question of pacificatory (ceremonial) giving, cooperative giving (to collectivise) or unilateral giving (charity), Lordon sees a single structure behind the history of giving: it is a matter of interesting the individual *conatus* in selflessness, bending it to the norms of a social *conatus* by a process that is – to return to the vocabulary of a certain psychoanalytical vein running through the entire work – tantamount to “sublimating” inherent pronative violence and “denying” the benefits of prestige, whether objectified or internalised. This process is more a matter of “trial without cause” than of an individual or collective decision: it manifests itself in each individual by a mental form of practical sense – of *timesis*, says the author – the ability to appreciate, without assessment, what should be

¹¹ p. 157.

¹² p. 82.

¹³ *Le prix de la vérité. Le don, l’argent, la philosophie*, Seuil 2002.

¹⁴ p. 189-190.

given, received or returned, and how. Thus, this Spinozist anthropology of giving brings to light a collective rationality without rational calculation: a process of civilisation of the group, *by* the group.

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