
To Conserve is To Create: a Review of *Spinoza's Paradoxical Conservatism*

Fabio Carnevali*

Abstract

In this book, François Zourabichvili addresses three major themes of Spinoza's philosophy, namely ethical emendation, childhood, and politics. Through the notion of transformation, the author argues that Spinozism is a "paradoxical conservatism" insofar as the Dutch philosopher develops a theory in which a transformation of the essence means death, and the main concern of this system is to create something that will be able to conserve itself. In this review, I argue that by linking together the problems of emendation, pedagogy, and political change, Zourabichvili grants a striking political relevance to both ethical emendation and pedagogy, introducing an alternative to revolutionary change without being less radical.

Keywords: Spinoza, Zourabichvili, transformation, conservatism, pedagogy, emendation, revolution

Using the lens of transformation, François Zourabichvili in *Spinoza's Paradoxical Conservatism* argues that one can find a peculiar conservatism in Spinoza's philosophy that ought to be understood in a sense that can be summarised by the Nietzschean formula "Become who you are!" First published in French in 2002 under the title *Le conservatisme paradoxal de Spinoza. Enfance et royauté*, this book appeared along with another important work by Zourabichvili, *Spinoza. Une physique de la pensée*, and is now available in English translation by Gil Morejón, published by Edinburgh University Press in the series "Spinoza Studies." This translation of one of the pioneering works on the theme of childhood in Spinoza opens new possibilities for Spinoza scholarship, deepening interest in a blind spot of Spinoza's philosophy, as Spinoza's work often discusses childhood without ever really developing a pedagogy. The English translation adds some remarks by Pierre Macherey to the three sections of the book. The three studies show that transformation, a change in the essence of the individual, means death and argue that the ethical conversion and the growth of the child must be understood as mutations without transformation.

In this review I argue that Zourabichvili establishes a link between ethical, pedagogical, and political fields that allows him to maintain that Spinoza extends the condition of childhood to the

* Università di Palermo: fabio.carnevali01@unipa.it; <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-3033-9248>

majority of adults. From this point of view, ethical conversion can be seen as a process of re-education, education can be seen as an ethical task, and civilization can be thought of as a process of growth both from an ethical and from a pedagogical perspective, as the example of Moses testifies. I will thus first consider childhood and pedagogy and then move on to the political issue, which Zourabichvili ties to the education of the child, analogizing the child to the Hebrew people. Finally, I focus on the problem of transformation in relation to ethical conversion which, being the condition of childhood extended to adults, poses once again the problem of education.

The main novelty Spinoza introduces, according to Zourabichvili, is his removal of the idea of privation: the child is not a lacking adult, and childhood is conceived as a natural and necessary thing, as stated in E5p6s (G II 285).¹ Moving away from the idea of the child as lacking something (speech, reason, ability to walk...), the new image of childhood also brings in the idea that the passage from childhood to adulthood could be a transformation: if the child is a part of the natural order, then it must have its own nature, and transformation seems inevitable in the process of growth. Zourabichvili argues that one must think of this process as a mutation without transformation. We know from E4p39s (G II 240) that death is a change in the relation of motion and rest of the parts of the body, that is, transformation. Furthermore, E5p39s (G II 305) tells us that in this life we strive to change the infant's body into one capable of a great many things. If the child is to be considered as such, the change of the body that E5p39s claims is our main goal in this life must be thought of as change without transformation. This raises the question of the nature of the child: how can we conceive the nature of the child as a positivity without implying a change in the essence in the process of growth?

Zourabichvili argues that the child does not have a different nature from the adult, but its condition of dependence testifies to its incapability of self-affirmation. The child needs to be helped to learn to affirm its own nature in a pedagogical process that from this perspective overlaps with the process of emendation. If one considers the consequences of the reciprocal assimilation of ethics and education, the child does not need to change its nature: instead, it needs to increase its power to act and learn to affirm a nature that is already present. The need for education leads to the problem of a Spinozist pedagogy, which Spinoza does not explicitly develop. Zourabichvili insists that if it weren't for his premature death, Spinoza would have taken up pedagogy after the *Ethics*, presenting Spinoza "as the philosopher who was permanently haunted by the problem of education."² A Spinozist pedagogy aims at autonomisation, that is, becoming capable of self-affirmation. The child is "as it were, in a state of equilibrium" (E3p32s/G II 165), which Zourabichvili reads as the absence of a *habitus* in childish affectivity, that makes it extremely subject to external determination. If the child is to become active and free, it needs to change its body into one that is more capable and consequently its mind into one in which "whatever is related to its memory or imagination is of hardly any moment in relation to the intellect" (E5p39s/G II 305).

Especially in the first phase, obedience plays an important role and, despite not being freedom, nevertheless is not slavery. The crucial notion here is that of being "of use to oneself": one is not a

1 With regard to quotes from Spinoza's work, I am using Curley's translation. See Baruch Spinoza, *The Collected Work of Spinoza*, trans. and ed. E. Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

2 François Zourabichvili, *Spinoza's Paradoxical Conservatism*, trans. Gil Morejón (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 257.

slave when they obey to an order that aims to their utility. The Spinozist educator, like Moses, provides for the freedom of the child, which at once founds and limits the authority of parents. According to Zourabichvili, threats and promises are not proper pedagogical means because they lead children to avoid evil because of its consequences rather than because of its nature. If threats become a regular means and the student is guided by fear, in fact, they will avoid evil only because of its consequences and will associate study with sad affects. The internalisation of non-servile obedience extracts the child from the corruptibility implied by disobedience and thus is the first step toward the child's capability to affirm their *conatus*. The process of becoming adult thus coincides with learning how to affirm one's own nature. The *conatus* of the adult is already present in the newborn, but it needs to increase its power to affirm itself.

Concerning the political problem, Zourabichvili addresses his work in a part on the chimerical nature of absolute monarchy and another one on free multitudes. The problem of transformation is raised by two issues: monarchical absolutism and revolution. The discussion of absolute monarchy reveals the militant importance of Spinoza's *Political Treatise*. Even though the *TP* aims to provide as much stability as possible to each form of the state, Spinoza sees absolute monarchy as a political chimera whose main problem is the humanity and mortality of the king, leading either to a mystification that mistakes the sovereign power for God's power or to theocracy that does not need any mystification as the power is exercised by regents only. This mistake is founded on the false conception of God as endowed with free will. A God that is free to abstain from creating what it conceives is an impotent God. Arbitrariness involves variability, that is, transformation. As divine will cannot be inconstant, God's rule cannot be analogized with that of a king anymore.

Revolution is not a solution to the oppression of such a tyrannical regime, Zourabichvili argues, because it does not eliminate the causes of oppression, as the people who carry it will have too much political memory and will in turn embrace tyranny. Revolution is a transformation that has no positive effect on the process of civilization, which for Spinoza corresponds to democracy and the elevation of the people to true peace, a multitude dominated by joyous passions. This leads Zourabichvili to claim that the only historical opportunities for a change of regime are tied to political births like that of the Hebrews after their flight from Egypt. In this sense, Zourabichvili argues that a multitude becomes educated in the struggle for its independence, when the striving for self-conservation makes citizens fight as if they were a single human being and where virtue and freedom are the prize.

Finally, education is not only tied to politics, but to a more individual dimension that can be identified with ethical conversion, the path that leads from the *institutum commune vitae* to the *institutum novum*. Childhood is not a mere chronological phase that ends with the biological growth of the individual, but a condition that affects most human beings, even those who look like adults but did not cultivate reason, and are thus *infans adultus*. This last expression takes us to the heart of the problem of ethical change, as Gil Morejón explains in the introduction: "the illusion of this change being a transformation arises from a double misrecognition: our initial misery comes from the fact that we find ourselves living in a foreign and hostile element, which we confusedly think is proper to us, and on whose basis we then misunderstand our own natures."³

3 Gil Morejón, "The Problem of Transformation in Spinoza's Metaphysics according to Zourabichvili," in Zourabichvili, *Spinoza's Paradoxical Conservatism*, XIX.

Although the chimerical figure of the *infans adultus* is discussed mostly in the second study concerning childhood, it underscores the condition of the apparent adult who in reality has never ceased to be a child. The ethical conversion, involving a change in one's element, appears at first glance to be a transformation, but it isn't, for the element toward which we usually direct our striving in our everyday life is foreign to our nature. The path to ethical conversion is showed through the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*: making everyday goods the end of one's striving leads to a life that is foreign to one's proper element, so the difference between the two *instituta vitae* lies in one's relation with these goods. Emendation, Zourabichvili argues, consists of a "reverse transformation,"⁴ that is, a redirection of the striving toward a new end, the supreme good. Here the notion of usefulness is crucial: the concrete manifestation of striving toward the useful depends on how one represents the useful. Emendation is what allows us to understand ourselves adequately as part of nature: we do not cease to imply the other as our nature is relational; rather, we stop confusing it with ourselves and start living in our own element.

Having analysed Zourabichvili's arguments, we see that ethical emendation, the development of the child, and the process of civilization of the free multitude do not involve transformation; this allows him to argue that an alternative meaning of the verb "to conserve" is "to create," or *to make exist what conserves itself*.⁵ Zourabichvili provides a new notion of conservatism that lets us read Spinoza's philosophy from a perspective that grants the possibility of radical change on each of the three planes discussed while simultaneously denying any positive role to transformation. The political consequences of this interpretation are striking as it provides a theoretical substrate for a subversion of the meaning of revolutionary change itself, allowing it to be understood as the political equivalent of emendation rather than a violent outburst. Zourabichvili's original perspective on transformation not only sheds light on the themes of childhood and pedagogy, but also grants them a political value as having the capacity to be an alternative to revolution, one that is no less radical.

References

- Macherey, Pierre. "Pierre Macherey and François Zourabichvili on Spinoza's Paradoxical Conservatism." In *Spinoza's Paradoxical Conservatism*, translated by G. Morejón, 249–271. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023.
- Morejón, Gil. "The Problem of Transformation in Spinoza's Metaphysics according to Zourabichvili." In *Spinoza's Paradoxical Conservatism*, translated by G. Morejón, xvi–xxiv. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023.
- Zourabichvili, François. *Spinoza's Paradoxical Conservatism*. Translated by G. Morejón. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023.

4 Zourabichvili, *Spinoza's Paradoxical Conservatism*, 80.

5 Zourabichvili, *Spinoza's Paradoxical Conservatism*, 247.