

## Philosophies for a second nature: strategies of finite

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### **Abstract**

The article discusses both (i) the affinities between Vauvenargues and Spinoza, and (ii) the way Laurent Bove examines this relationship. To counter all the attempts made by Vauvenargues to hoodwink his readers and, especially the censorship of his time, Bove sets out with the aim of reconstructing the philosopher's concealed metaphysical premises. As we explore Vauvenargues' philosophy (in which Pascal plays a major role), it becomes clear that the conceptual twists and turns of the Provençal writer are aimed at advocating a kind of philosophy which recognizes the value of *finite*, (the ontological condition of mankind) – and that this is a type of Spinozism.

### **Keywords**

Vauvenargues, Spinoza, Pascal, finite, necessity, liberty.

The recent book by Laurent Bove, *Vauvenargues ou le séditieux* [*Vauvenargue or the dissident*]<sup>1</sup>, is a systematic and creative study of a leading author – both on account of the strength of his philosophy in itself and because he is a representative of a crucial period in the history of French philosophy and literature – although he is seriously neglected today. However, Bove’s merit does not simply lie in the fact that he has (perhaps for the first time) made Vauvenargues’ philosophy clear and accessible but that he has shown the close affinity of the philosopher’s work (fragmentary and as we shall see, highly camouflaged) with the prevailing ideas that Bove describes as *the historical current of real humanism*; a humanism destitute of any kind of optimism or utopian aspirations (Bove, 2010: 163). In this way, alongside the direct influences of the philosophers which – as far as we know – Vauvenargues was familiar with – it is possible to discern affinities with authors such as Spinoza and Machiavelli.

In the course of this article, we will attempt to follow Bove’s text, and summarize and comment on his arguments. Our aim is to show that although the affinities discerned by Bove between Vauvenargues and Spinoza did not stem from the direct influence of the Dutch philosopher, they cannot be simply ascribed to an interpretive contrivance. Yves Citton, in an inspired review of Bove’s work, states that in his work, Spinozism constitutes a “principle of intelligibility” and provides a “cohesive framework” for interpreting Vauvenargues. We will argue that although this is true, Citton’s words are not entirely fair since what Bove understands, both with regard to Vauvenargues and to the traditional way of interpreting this author, is something more ambitious. The real aim of this author, who is so often misinterpreted, is in truth to make *a second reading genre*.

This reading, as we learn from Althusser (2008: 17), does not simply involve a conception of knowledge that is governed by a mere *vision*, where the nature of the objects of knowledge is reduced to the condition of a *datum*, – from what is found to be naturally available – and permanently visible – to the discovery of what one sees. This perspective confines us to a voluntarist conception of the act of knowing and keeps us hostage to

"the speculative myth of knowledge as the view of a given object". In this case, a good reading will depend on a kind of virtue, which although a moral entity will also be subject to the failings of short-sightedness or blindness. It is not this kind of reading that we are talking about but rather a reading that involves the premise of what is known, (as well as its conclusions) and where it is understood that the invisible does not lie outside the visible but within. Or as Althusser states – somewhat hermetically: it is a question of "understanding the necessary and paradoxical identity of not-seeing and seeing, in the act of seeing itself" (Ibidem: 20).

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The opposite of *the second reading genre*, as the Spinozean<sup>2</sup>, Althusser calls it, is not the mere 'not-seeing' where the remedy involves a moral warning in which someone's attention is drawn to something that has always been present. Rather it has not been possible to notice it because there is a lack of a vision that is sufficiently sharp or disciplined. The reading which concerns us does not investigate something which the individual had ceased to see beforehand by means of another reading – as if the sign of whether a reading is suitable consisted simply of seeing something that *ought to be seen*, (and as though everything can be reduced to a simple calculation of the objects that are seen and not seen). The second reading genre does not question the lack or deficiency of being, that the first reading genre undergoes; rather it criticizes what this reading has seen and how it has seen something – not what escaped its attention but what took possession of it without it being aware of the fact. The invisible does not lie outside but within. When in confrontation with the first reading, the second reading shouts out something which the other only whispers; it does not impose its externality but reveals an inner state and the premises of its conclusions are made apparent. In other words, we are reminded of Foucault (1984: 14): it is a question of exposing and shedding light on something which is thought about in silence.

The reading carried out by Bove, which was enlivened by the task of preparing (together with Daniel Acke, Jean Dagen and Jeroom Vercruysse,) an edition of *Œuvres Complètes de Vauvenargues* [*The Complete Works of Vauvenargues*], is not simply more complete than other readings undertaken of Vauvenargues in the past. There is no doubt that the scope of the work involved when preparing an edition of the complete works of the author, allowed him (compared with other specialists devoted to the subject) to have access to an even more voluminous set of the works of Vauvenargues. However, what matters is to be able to map out the premises that are implicit in Vauvenargues' thoughts. This entails a systematic arrangement of the theories he is presumed to have had but which (for biographical reasons that will be outlined in the first section of this article) were either skillfully camouflaged or simply suppressed. And returning to Althusser, the perception of assumptions does not depend on casting a sharp light on them – and even less on the discovery of biographical reasons that can explain this camouflage or suppression. What it requires is an extensive investigation that is able to discover the internal laws of the text and illustrate its intrinsic order, in such a way that "the text itself tells us that it is keeping silent" and what it is keeping silent about.

Hence Bove seeks to show that the texts of Vauvenargues keep quiet about Spinoza, or rather keep silent about Spinozism. Thus as Yves Citton understood very well and as the author himself openly declares, it is not a question of showing the affiliation of Vauvenargues with a philosophy that he hardly ever mentions but rather of showing that a set of his premises expresses a form of Spinozism. This is a Spinozism that is indelibly linked to the authentic expression of Spinoza's thoughts or, more precisely,

concerns a kind of sensibility that can be found in the so-called *Radical Enlightenment*, in the way delineated by Jonathan Israel. It thus entails a heterogeneous perspective that encompasses Deist, naturalist and atheist systems of thought, which reject divine providence, revelation and miracles as well as any belief in so-called *Paradise*. The basic premises of Vauvenargues and his silence which becomes eloquent when it is revealed in the chronological order of his texts, express in themselves a certain *Spinozism*. Thus what Bove appears to see is not merely signs of affinities between Vauvenargues and Spinoza, but proof of an underlying relationship between the authors. Furthermore, when we analyze Bove's text, we will see what comprises this *Spinozism* so that a conclusion can be reached about whether the author has been successful in his aims.

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### **About Vauvenargues and his Place in the History of Philosophy**

Vauvenargues was born three years after J-J Rousseau, on August 5th, 1715. He was a close friend of Victor de Mirabeau, the father of Honoré Mirabeau – a key figure in the first stage of the French Revolution. In 1743, as a result of a letter in which he gave an account of the differences between Corneille and Racine, Vauvenargues made contact with Voltaire, who became so attached to him that on May 9th 1746, he honored his friend with the following words expressed during a welcoming speech at the French Academy: “a man of eloquence and profundity who was trained in the heat of war” (Voltaire, 1789: 22). Vauvenargues, whose health was seriously weakened by many years devoted to military service – from 1733 to 1745 –, died a young man at the age of 31, on May 28th, 1747.

In his *Introduction*, Bove gives an account of the genealogy of the readings carried out on the works of Vauvenargues, most of which have remained mired in explicating the literal meaning of his words. This philosopher-in arms wrote at a time of transition that is poised between a fleeting era of an aristocratic stamp but characterized by great freedom of thought and the dawning of a new period where there was a collective sharing of knowledge which, unlike the previous period, involved the need to write for a large public (Bove, 2010: 61). As a means of avoiding the controversy that the publication of his theories would certainly have aroused and also ensuring his ideas had a better chance of being conveyed in a useful and effective way (Ibid.: 63), Vauvenargues deliberately suppressed the metaphysical premises underlying his philosophical inquiries and even took pains to distract the attention of the reader from any vestiges of this kind of thinking.

The strategy of dissimulation was so successful that the work of Vauvenargues was very often wholly misunderstood – to such an extent that it even duped the Jesuits of the *Journal de Trévoux* (p.34). The particular work, as is clear from a reading of its *Introduction to the knowledge of the human spirit (ICEH)* – states that, through a knowledge of strict necessity, there prevails a strong theory of action which is apparently compatible with the idea of free will. The Jesuits stated that Vauvenargues was a truly pious author who honored religion and virtue. When he was admonished by the censors on account of the meaning of a passage that was in an article called *Love of the Sciences and Arts*, which formed a part of the first edition of the *Encyclopédie*, the editors – presumably d'Alembert, according to Bove – stated in his defense, that the passage had been deleted from the *ICEH* work, which in the judgment of the encyclopedists ensured that the text would be secure from any further accusation of heterodoxy.

According to Gerard Bras, who wrote a fine review of Bove's book, “the merit of his [Bove's] reading is twofold: to establish encryption through the frequency analysis of the manuscripts and to make them clear through a knowledge of the context” (BRAS,

2011). In the end, Bove draws attention to the fact that when the first edition of *ICEH*, was being prepared in 1746, Vauvenargues had wanted to add the short fragment *On freedom*, as a preface to his *Introduction*. This is a piece where he formulates his thesis of strict necessity; in other words, he had intended to make clear how the two issues – the question of freedom and necessity – are intertwined. In this fragment, Vauvenargues states that “the will is never the guiding principle of our actions but only the last resort” (Vauvenargues, 2007: 215). According to Bove, it was because he deemed this publication to be dangerous that this Provençal philosopher withdrew his fragment from being published together with the *ICEH*. The *Introduction* was the only text published in Vauvenargues’ lifetime.

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In 1857, while some texts were being republished that were more strikingly affected by the theory of strict necessity<sup>3</sup>, D-L Gilbert condemned the contradictions that could be found in these passages and what he regarded as the authentic philosophy of Vauvenargues. Like Gilbert, there were many others who insisted on believing there was a contradiction between Vauvenargues’ action theory that is present in the *ICEH*, and the defense of necessity, including Fernand Vial, in 1938, Giacomo Cavalucci, in 1939, and Michel Mohrt, in 1957. There were only a few who like Prévost-Paradol, in the mid-19th Century, managed to understand the degree of reconciliation which binds necessity and freedom, as understood by Vauvenargues, and which reveals a certain affinity with Spinoza. Prévost-Paradol was, as Bove suggests, the first to point out the relationship between *A Treatise on Free Will*, by Vauvenargues, with the *Ethics* and *Letter to Oldenburg*, by Spinoza.

And it is by following in the footsteps of Prévost-Paradol that Bove undertakes his reading of Vauvenargues, and rejects outright the theoretical basis on which Maurice Paléologue, seeks to read Vauvenargues without taking notice of his metaphysics (p.64). Hence, according to Bove, the real meaning of Vauvenargues’ thought cannot be disclosed except through a ‘joint frequency’ of his dealings with metaphysics and morality. And it is a *traded*, nebulous and fragmented Spinozist affiliation that allows us to have an appropriate understanding of how a philosophy of action can also be, without any contradiction, a philosophy of strict necessity. The relationship with Spinoza is thus far from being straightforward. It takes place through a reading carried out by Vauvenargues of the works of Malebranche, Locke and, in particular, Boulainvilliers. In the case of Pascal, his reading took place by a direct route, but nonetheless, it shows his ability to fully absorb opposite principles in such a way that it is clear that he does not derive from him a philosophy of the *fall*, in a teleological manner, but rather a recognition of the value of finite as a powerful force.

### **The Unsuspected “Spinozist”**

The first part of Bove’s book *Le « spinozisme » de Vauvenargues (The “Spinozism” of Vauvenargues)* addresses the relationship of Vauvenargues with Spinozism directly, since Spinozism, (as we pointed out at the beginning of this article) does not refer to the culmination of the Dutch philosopher’s thoughts but is largely concerned with refuting a teleological and moral conception of the universe which is grounded on a necessitarian and dynamic ontology that reconciles freedom with necessity.

Bove (2010: 76-78) distinguishes between the type of animism that applies to the philosophy of Vauvenargues – and of Spinoza – types of animism that are either founded on a strict distinction between living beings and inanimate objects or else deny the

individuality of existing things. The animism of Vauvenargues is based on four dimensions. *In the first place*, the activity of each being is found to be in a record of “absolute and continuous dependence” on a relationship with God, or rather with Nature. *In the second place*, acting means producing; in other words, action cannot be understood as a mere accident of the subject agent but rather as something that forms a part of his very power to act and as a necessary effect of his essence. *In the third place*, essences are always singular, which means that it should be stressed that we are not concerned here with Pantheism. Neither Vauvenargues nor Spinoza support the existence of a *soul of the world*, which implies that the essences are always singular. *In the fourth place*, there is no opposition between freedom of action and universal necessity. Vauvenargues – like Spinoza, (but in contrast with Descartes and Hobbes) – distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic causality. This philosopher-in-arms thus supports the theory of “free necessity” (Spinoza, 1988: 337); that is “the violence that our desires undergo outside us is entirely distinct from the necessity of our actions. An involuntary action is not something free in itself; but a necessary action can be voluntary and free, as a result. Hence, necessity does not in any way preclude freedom” (Vauvenargues, 1997: 231).

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Vauvenargues, in the same way as Spinoza – and on this occasion also like Hobbes (1974:41; Hobbes, 1999:37) – adopts a position with regard to free will that is opposed to stoicism; it postulates that the will is nothing more than the last of the desires and is something which finally takes place in the midst of a bitter clash of contradictory impulses. When victorious this desire (or intrigue) can lead to action. And it is because we are aware of our desires but not of the causal links that engender them and rearrange them at great speed and in infinite spirals<sup>4</sup>, that we deem ourselves to be free – free possessors of independent wills. According to Vauvenargues, the will can never be regarded as a first or independent principle (Vauvenargues, 1997: 227). Once emancipated from the idea of will, freedom must finally be viewed as an active attempt to investigate the natural determinations on which the desires through which we act, depend.

In contrast with a series of formulations that stem from a conception of logic which bear all the hallmarks of Cartesianism, (and in which a distinction is drawn between thought and desire), Vauvenargues argues that thinking necessarily involves wanting something. Ideas are thus not sterile items devoid of any volitional value. In itself, knowledge of truth does not have any force; this is because “it can only triumph, to the extent that we are affected by it” (Ibidem: 87)<sup>5</sup>. Nonetheless at this point, as Bove makes clear, there is an important divergence between Vauvenargues and Spinoza, because while the latter argued that there is a need for a demonstrative mediation of the concept of obtaining access to truth, Vauvenargues supported the notion that it is possible to gain immediate access, since this is made available by *sentiment* – “knowing through sentiment is thus, the highest degree of knowledge; there is no need to ask the reason for something which we know through sentiment” (Ibidem:153) –, which according to Spinoza’s philosophy represented confusing the first and third kinds of knowledge. Thus Vauvenargues can be tentatively placed alongside Spinoza, as a part of the romantic generation that preceded Hegel (1969: 8). Along this path, there is also a valuing of instinct with a capacity for truth that according to the philosophy of Vauvenargues, involves the defence of the existence of an immanent practical rationality by recourse to social practices. It concerns a reason for going back to Maxim 268 of La Rochefoucauld, which later had repercussions in the work of Burke<sup>6</sup>.

If the ideas are inseparable from a certain volitional dimension, this means that Vauvenargues also drew close to Spinoza with regard to a fundamental issue: the attitude

of monism to the relationship between the body and soul. Bove (2010: 88-94) thus distinguishes between four crucial factors with regard to the monism of Vauvenargues. *In the first place* – and here Vauvenargues adopts a stance closely related to Montaigne<sup>7</sup> – there is a necessary link between the states of the body and the feelings of the soul. *In the second place*, there is an intimate relationship between the poverty of ideas and the constraints or narrowness of the relationships that form both the individual and collective body.

*In the third place*, physical feelings, the ideas that correspond to them in the mind and the feelings which accompany them, must be understood under one and the same notion – knowledge, a living union of the mind and body. The mind is not, as Bove states very well, anything except the ‘affected’ body. This follows an avenue that opens up to a kind of epicurism: “the greatest perfection of the soul is to be capable of pleasure” (*Maxim 546*). The diminution of the power to act and think with the mind, should thus be related to a reduction in the capacity to feel and to have a physical feeling. The body should not be conceived as the enemy of the mind but is the same mind that is the enemy of itself, in so far as it “stands aloof from the body in an artificial way and imposes its will on it as an oppressive reason” (Bove, 2010: 91) – “the soul (*âme*) becomes hardened with the body” (*Maxim 621*). *In the fourth place*, since the body is a direct expression of nature, it must serve as a model of human nature. In arguing against the conventional complaints of moralists who reject reality in support of a supposedly human nature that is expected to adopt a superior stance to the feelings of the body (which is the same as imagining man as forming an essential part of nature) Vauvenargues states that “everything that nature does is in its place and such as it should be and it is as foolish to laugh at it as to complain about it” (Vauvenargues, 1857<sup>8</sup> apud Bove, 2010: 93).

Following closely the philosophy of Vauvenargues, Bove concludes that “philosophy separated from life is nothing more than a long servitude, in so far as it subjects existence to utopian, transcendental and repressive rules, which on a single occasion Spinoza demonstrated to be a theoretical void and practical powerlessness” (Bove, 2010: 93-94). It is a feature that characterizes Vauvenargues’ pedagogy that each thing is measured by itself and in terms of its own perfection: “I would like each person to assess himself through his own strength, examine his own temperament and make an effort to extend it, enhance it and embellish it, instead of subjecting it to constraints and abandoning it” (Vauvenargues, 1857<sup>9</sup> apud Bove, 2010: 93). In this way, virtue is not defined as an extrinsic rule, or a moralistic standard but in the manner of Machiavelli, is raised – or perhaps we should say debased – to the condition of the power to act. The more someone is endowed with virtue, the more he is compelled to seek something that is useful for the assertion of his being and of his own power to act.

The *Conatus* of Vauvenargues is not a form of inertia – although as conceived by Boulainvilliers, it is associated with indolence (*paresse*) –, but is, above all, an instinct that encourages us to grow (Vauvenargues, 1997: 67), an instinct that is closely bound up with ambition. Thus it can be seen that Vauvenargues’ theory of passions is founded on the power to act and is a real *conatus-in-arms*, as inspired by Machiavelli. But the *Conatus* is also a “love of being or the perfection of being” (*Ibidem*: 63) or even if we remember Spinoza, the *Conatus* is a “natural love that exists in each thing” (Spinoza, 2009: 419).

While the *Conatus* is a dynamic force of affirmation where “everything lives by action” (*Maxim 198*); the sentiment of powerlessness is also inherent in existence. Since as Spinoza stated, man is only a finite mode, that is a part of Nature, “the strength through which man is able to persevere in existence is limited and surpassed to an infinite degree by the

power of external causes” (Spinoza, 2007: 273). Thus a notion enters the scene that is not only taught by Nature – and this is a mixture of the dependence and necessity that surrounds it – as the main dynamic principle of action, but also as the constraining force of singular powers. Here are the keynotes of a real drama of finitude inspired by Pascal.

But Vauvenargues was not content with a drama of finitude that was simply correlated with our experience of imperfection; ultimately, a similar drama was associated with the experience of the “emptiness of heart” (*vide du cœur*). And it is only from the *perspective of the void* that we can conceive of a human life that is completely given up to itself and that once again re-enacts the statement by Protagoras that: “man is the measure of all things”. The awareness of the void releases us from the moral prison of right and wrong, as well as from all belief in any other rational power for a *value* which is not desire. As a result, human existence does not obey any precept that existed previously but this does not imply that it does not prescribe anything that is based on itself; in the end, value and meaning derive, overwhelmingly, from human activity itself. Although it resides in Nature, power is its primary and founding principle; it is thus clear that the finite that enlivens the drama also involves an experience of the void that moves us, *contrario sensu*, far beyond the horizon of absence. It is owing to finite that the void takes on a shape of eloquence (Ibidem: 112).

It is by setting out from the second nature, in its positive sense, (and which involves indefinite productivity) that Vauvenargues develops his argument about notions of love-of-self (*amor de soi*) and self-love (*amour-propre*). Vauvenargues has the merit of having been the person who drew the distinction between love-of-self and self-love which harking back to Abbadie and Mandeville, was popularized by Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Whereas self-love proceeds through comparisons that endow the void with strategies of the subjective self that are governed by self-interest, love-of-self is, as a result, displaced. Hence it entails a certain openness to the world which leads us to love ourselves as if we were poised above ourselves and outside ourselves. According to Bove, this strange love is Vauvenargue’s equivalent of the *acquiescentia in se ipso*, (self-complacency) which Spinoza talks to us about (Ibidem: 393).

Vauvenargues associates expectation (*esperance*) with love-of-self and this involves a full enjoyment of the present moment. This occurs in such a way that through the action of desire both as *cupiditas*, and affirmation, our own power to act is proclaimed, and our own activities are situated beyond the domain of absence and endow existence with meaning. But like love-of-self it decays and is turned into self-love, expectation becomes hope (*espoir*), desire appears as *desiderium*, while absence is what interrupts the enjoyment of the present. And that same force that leads us to take a lofty view of the things that constrain our power to act, either results in an avid and frantic state of despair or in a kind of torpor or fatigue with regard to life – which is nothing more than another kind of despair.

Expectation that is linked to *hope* can cause a feeling of repulsion among readers familiar with Spinoza. It is inseparable from a certain liking for the present life which according to Bove, allows us to associate it with the power to act through Habit and its activities are inseparable from the ability of the body to make a connection between its feelings by fixing the duration of the present moment within a vivid time frame – a contraction of “a retained past and an anticipated future”<sup>10</sup> (Bove, 2010: 115). Habit is in these terms, a fundamental activity of the body, which constitutes its existence in the form of present time. Expectation – which is thus always tempered by Habit – involves the faith of powerful spirits in the appropriate inclusion of their power to act in a sequence of time – it is like the confidence felt in scoring a goal by a striker when, at a decisive moment

he knows he is well positioned against the defense of the opposing team. This kind of expectation is contrary to any absenteeism; it makes action (which is the fundamental principle of existence and the foreseeable future), a constituent part of the present.

In contrast, glory and virtue are the natural corollary of the positive assertion of the power to be and act and are unimpeded by the horizon of imperfection and absence – in short, the moral horizon. Thus they are not all ideas to be carried out or values to be espoused; what they express, above all is the conquest of the present. In these terms, glory is a kind of immanent – and social – reward for virtue because it nurtures (and is proof of) the expansion of *Conatus* under the aegis of interdependence which is an intrinsic part of the human condition: “[mankind ] is the only end of my actions and the object of my whole life” (Vauvenargues, 1997:40).

Hence glory is bound up with love-of-self and not self-love, as we had at first supposed. It is not reduced to an ambition to dominate that is only driven by pride and arrogance and which seeks submission for the sake of submission. On the contrary, since it is fostered by a spiritual grandeur, the glory claims an inner recognition of our merit together with that of those similar to us because before you can win the esteem of men, it is necessary to “make them wish to win our [esteem] through having a real merit” (Ibidem: 79). For example it is stated that patience can effectively take the place of violence as being suitable for the ambition of dominance.

Bove (2010: 123-125) distinguishes between four aspects of Vauvenargues' conception of glory which again send us back to Spinoza. *In the first place*, there is an essential unity between virtue and glory. *In the second place*, glory is an essential element in the constitution of the collective life. *In the third place*, the desire for glory cannot be reduced to an ambition for dominance, which may derive from it. *In the fourth place*, glory envisages a state of harmony between men under the sovereignty of virtue and Reason.

The analysis of glory undertaken by Vauvenargues is embedded in the Spinozist logic of the imitation of ‘affects’ (Spinoza, 2007: 195), which distances him from the notion of stoical pride that is based on a conception of freedom as independence. The *sense of belonging*, which is constantly being invoked by Vauvenargues as an ethical imperative – “is not necessary except as a sense of belonging” (Vauvenargues, 1997: 107). He is completely unaware of the stoical formulation but on the contrary sends us back to the law of the independence of things that forms the basis of his ontology. We ourselves can only possess it if we forget the illusory logic of self-love and incorporate our power to act in the immanent dynamics of virtue and glory. Since it is more accustomed to being handled in a Machiavellian than a strictly Spinozist way, the approach of Vauvenargues to the problem of glory is kept on a political and historical plane. This avoids setting out to a metaphysical sphere where Spinoza discovers an immanent glory that does not exist except from the standpoint of eternity. It is thus beyond the reach of other men and consists of the contemplation of the very power to act.<sup>11</sup>

### **A Strange Pascalian**

In opposition to any kind of nihilism that involves absenteeism, derision or arrogance towards the world and people, Vauvenargues echoed the words of Pascal – “all good maxims are in the world; all that is needed is to apply them” (Vauvenargues, 1997: 39) – and stated that “those who combat the prejudices of the people think that they themselves are not people” (*Maxim 325*). Both formulations are quite symptomatic of his thinking and return us to one of his greatest intellectual influences: Pascal. Vauvenargues

inherited from him a distrust with regard to the problematic individualist, voluntarist and adherent of artificialism that was characteristic of contractualism. Like Pascal, he preferred to explain the union between men entirely in terms of their passions, habits, desires and interests. As a result, reason did not hold any kind of privileged place in the process of configuring the social life.

Vauvenargues thus rejected the existence of a natural right or natural law in a rational and moral sense. For this reason, there was no right that was not positive. Now this means that every argument concerned with legitimacy loses its sacrosanct character; in the last analysis, everything is founded on an act of violence. But the disorder and chaos caused by violence are not completely negative phenomena since they can support the desire for glory and freedom, which are always worth more than the peace that emerges from servitude and weakness.

Despite the notable influence of Pascal, Vauvenargues stated that “Pascal was mistaken in his system” (Vauvenargues, 1994<sup>12</sup> apud Bove, 2010: 152). And he explained why, unlike Pascal, he believed in a solution to the problem of human freedom with regard to the divine power which in his view, would allow the Holy Scripture to achieve a level of consistency between its different parts as well as with reason. The “doctrine of dependence”, on which Vauvenargues erected his metaphysical system, is “the eternal chain of the world” (Vauvenargues, 1997: 231) which interlinks everything – and does not exclude the exercise of human freedom. Hence, unlike Pascal, Vauvenargues supported the constitutive power of the finite. (Ibidem: 157).

As a result, Bove detects an almost Augustinian quality in the argument of Vauvenargues, which he divides into three areas (Ibidem: 153-154). *In the first place*, the need not to remove the possibility of freedom – only under duress – and here is the issue of free necessity. *In the second place*, free necessity is compatible with the question of efficacious grace and of gratuitous predestination, both explored by St. Augustine. *In the third place*, Vauvenargues states that God does not desire the salvation of everybody and that thus, not all mankind will receive grace.

Vauvenargues outlines a monist and immanentist metaphysics where reason, (which discloses the reconciliation of Scripture with itself), leads the reader to an ethics of salvation which is embedded in this world. Thus unlike in Pascal, Scripture is not employed to reveal the contradictions of nature but on the contrary, it is natural reason – as an inherent faculty of nature itself – that is able to solve the contradictions (that include contradictions in the reading of Scripture) by keeping a distance from it.

It is the need to read scripture as reason, which is what is meant by ‘reconciling it with itself’, that prompted Vauvenargues (through a teleological inspiration) to make a criticism of the anti-Semitism, (also of a teleological inspiration) that is present in Pascal, as a corollary of his apologetics. After all, if in the opinion of Vauvenargues, human nature is the same everywhere, the Jews are not, as a matter of consistency, any more subject to vice or virtue than any other people. The ascension of Christ is not a sign that the Jews are cursed and thus should not lead them to be persecuted as a punishment for the sin they committed against Jesus. As Vauvenargues argued, the persecution occurred earlier. What changes with the advent of Christianity is the fact that this oppression begins to become an organized process.

Buttressed by a perspective that human nature can be viewed as a universal fact Vauvenargues believes that Scripture – and the history of the Hebrews which is linked to it – involves the rejection of every kind of teleological assumption that blurs the

diversity of historical events. This entails adopting a single standpoint with regard to the affirmative positivity of the finite, where power, passions and desires in all their violence and disorder, are conceived as setting the bearings for humanity, virtue and freedom (Ibidem: 163). It is precisely this recognition of the value of 'the second nature' that explains the close affinity of Vauvenargues with Boulainvilliers.

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Vauvenargues was able to find in the works of Boulainvilliers – notably in *État de la France* [*The State of France*] and *Histoire de l'ancien gouvernement* [*History of the former government*] –, the theses of the *Theologico-political treatise* and *Political Treatise* of Spinoza. De Boulainvilliers, who read the works of the Dutch philosopher extensively, incorporated an outline of his concept of feudalism, while Vauvenargues assimilated the argument about unlawful proceedings without however retaining the substance of the key issue which in addressing the question of an aristocratic reaction to absolutist France, was concerned with the determination of a constituent moment in French history. This involved both the king who held absolute sovereignty over all his subjects and the nobility whose supreme authority had been acquired in a definitive way in the distant past, by the war of conquest that they had engaged in against the Gauls.

In the case of Boulainvilliers, whom Vauvenargues described as being "good, right in the marrow of his bones" (Vauvenargues, 1857<sup>13</sup> apud Bove, 2010: 93), an appraisal of the temperament and stability of a people depended on a knowledge of their history and the dynamics of the forces that originally shaped their social fabric. The fundamental rights of a people thus do not have anything to do with strictly legal factors; they are not the abstract creation of a legislator and still less the result of a contract. On the contrary, they are the result of a standard practice. The argument of Boulainvilliers is thus supported by two key pillars. *In the first place*, he brings together the history of power relations on the one hand and public rights on the other. And it is as a result of this interaction, that he claims to be able to speak about the validity and justice of existing rights as well as the intention to exercise them. *In the second place*, Boulainvilliers deals with the question of the inalienability of natural rights that puts it in a collision course with a contractualist perspective.

Boulainvilliers supports a system of political theorizing that is based on the principles of the right of war, which, unlike the notion of the right of resistance, rejects the assumption of a juridical-political or even moral contract. In contrast, the right of war is grounded on a conception of sociability as a power game which places us in the ideological position of a *model of war*, that is resistant to any kind of predetermined axiological framework such as for example *the model of the contract*<sup>14</sup>The right of war which is its own natural right and conceived beyond the dichotomy *the nature/the civil state*, is raised to the condition of the constitutive element in a society's strength of perseverance. This strength is based on the spectrum of the collective experiences of meaning and from this standpoint, can never be conceived under the banner of its reproduction or through a resuscitation of its original state. However, the assertion of the ineluctable character of the right of war as an immanent principle of civil order does not mean that we are at once placed in a libertarian political dimension. After all, the immanent relationships of power and desire which underlie this conception can lead to both more libertarian political configurations while at the same time, giving rise to serious situations of servitude.

In the short piece with the title *Corneille and Racine*, which is included in his *Réflexions critiques sur quelques poètes* [*Critical thoughts on certain poets*], Vauvenargues seeks, in the area of literature, to make a clear distinction between a perspective where people

are described as they ought to be (Corneille) and a mundane standpoint that seeks to describe human reality as it really appears (Racine). In contrast with a chimerical feature, formulated from his reading of Corneille, Vauvenargues draws attention to *naive truth*. This, which in a Machiavellian manner and *from the effectual truth of the matter*, is directly inspired by Racine, who describes things “in their perfection, and a way that is free, powerful, fruitful, peaceful and full of sublimity and grace”. As a result he allows one to glimpse a conception of *perfection* that has nothing to do with its moral apprehension and is linked to ideas found in the duality of the model and ‘absence’ and which have an effect on the hierarchization of reality. Like Spinoza – who states that “by reality and perfection I understand the same thing” (Spinoza, 2007: 81), Vauvenargues believes that things must be apprehended through their positive affirmation, while care must always be taken to ensure that their singularity is not regarded with disdain.

In this respect, Bove is immersed in the analysis that Vauvenargues undertakes of two fictional characters that are carried out in the short piece referred to above. In this investigation, Bove perceives in Vauvenargues a real logic of passions, which again places him in the vicinity of Machiavelli, despite the fact that the Provençal writer never mentions the Florentine secretary in his works. Vauvenargues asserts the plasticity of human behavior, which can never be subjected to a transcendental rule that determines its nature – whether virtuous or iniquitous – to the vagaries of the circumstances in which it takes place.

Since a comprehensive investigation of society must take account of things in their full affirmation and heterogeneity, while at the same time everything depends on the occasion and its circumstances, Vauvenargues veers towards a form of politics that is fiercely competitive and far removed from any axiological model. This involves applying a predetermined rule to a wide range of events linked to a real *model of war*, on the basis of a reversal of the famous phrase by Clausewitz, “politics is the continuation of war by other means” (Bove, 2008). Vauvenargues’ explanation of the origins of society thus reverts both to the weakness, fear and mutual identification between people and the dynamics of ambition and glory played out with strong passions.

The model of war involves the primacy of a rationale of passion. And Vauvenargues derives from it a notion of the common good and the general interest that is closer to Thrasymachus, in Book 1 of Plato’s *Republic*, than to his immediate contemporary J-J Rousseau. By following this path, he defines the institutions of the State as being correlated (in the juridical-political sphere), to the relations of power and social inequality that are present in the living world. “The laws”, Bove argues, “like the State are thus de facto, an invention of the strongest, that is the most affluent and are aimed, in the long run, at ensuring their dominance and wealth.” (Bove, 2008: 192). Vauvenargues thus states that it is neither through the means of the State or by the mere grace of nature, that a situation of inequality came about *ab initio*, –, and that it is possible for equity to be attained but only through the strength of numbers of the weakest. It is again through the model of war that Vauvenargues strives to give an answer to the problem of justice or injustice – not by condemning a historical crime committed against nature but, on the contrary, by setting out from the assumption that the social State is a continuation of the state of nature (*Maxim 187*), while admitting that the reshaping of society is always – and legitimately – a clear way of opening up a path to allow the people to act as a battering-ram. Social peace “cannot exist without a pact through which the weakest are subjugated by force until they again find an occasion to bring to bear (and by force of arms) their rights” (Ibidem: 194).

In summary, there is a latent state of war in the whole of society even though the social order often arises through a logic of passions, habitual subjection and weakness of spirit, which make people grow so accustomed to servitude that they even come to adore it. Rather than eradicating the Social State, this state of war nurtures it and allows it to persevere through a period of antagonism. According to Vauvenargues, there exists in this latent war, a desire for freedom, which not only corresponds to it but also forms its underlying basis. Vauvenargues also derives a certain enthusiasm from it with regard to the revolutionary experiences of his time, such as the Second English Civil War (1648-49) which in contrast was criticized by Spinoza – “after much blood had been shed, it ended up by welcoming a new monarch under another name (as if the whole question only concerned a name)” (Spinoza, 2004: 369). But Vauvenargues should not be regarded as a political romantic either, because in his opposition to mere voluntarism, he said that “to combat an abuse, it is necessary to make an appraisal of whether or not we are destroying its foundations” (*Maxim 25*).

Through the philosophy of Vauvenargues, Bove deconstructs the hegemonic viewpoint that necessarily associates enlightenment thinking with the emergence of a “paradigm centred on the law” – as it is called by Pocock (2003: 83). “Vauvenargues justifies disobedience to these laws which are fraudulently described as ‘public liberty’, and ‘the servitude of each private individual’, in the same way that he justifies the libertarian audacity and violence of a revolutionary undertaking” (Ibidem: 266). In other words, in contrast with the supporters of the hegemonic enlightenment of his time, Vauvenargues rejected any attempt to confuse the law with liberty. In view of this, Bove states that Vauvenargues anticipated a criticism based on what Deleuze<sup>15</sup> had written. He also anticipated the libertine critical outlook (Sade) and revolutionary critique (Saint-Just) of the juridical paradigm that was based on a system of rights and responsibilities. In its place (on the basis of Vauvenargues), it was possible to devise a dynamic model of action where institutions were regulated by the least number of laws conceivable.

Thus like Machiavelli who attributed the grandeur of the Roman Republic to its tumults and disorders (Machiavelli, 1973: 390), Vauvenargues said that “men never carry out grandiose schemes unless this allows them to commit a lot of follies with impunity” (*Maxim 675*). To err becomes imperative to avoid a greater evil – servitude, the belittling of the power to act. The superiority of a republic over other forms of government thus stems from its intrinsically chaotic character and the fact that it is subject to vices and completely subverts the most strictly controlled system. The republic is the government of risk, value and plurality and it is only by means of these values that liberty can be established on the basis of everyday life. Bove concludes that in the opinion of Vauvenargues, the republic is the most natural kind of regime that can exist (Ibidem: 200).

Vauvenargues cannot be regarded either as an enthusiast of modern society as was later the case with Benjamin Constant, or in the manner of Rousseau, or as someone nostalgic for a supposed natural simplicity corrupted by the advent of social development. In contrast, he believes it is necessary that there should be (i) a metaphysics of action and necessity in which true virtue is embedded in a *model of war* with (ii) an awareness of the constitutive aspect of time. Finally, Vauvenargues stated peremptorily that “human nature can acquire its maturity and perfection from time”. The ‘becoming’ aspect of freedom must be embedded in the productive power of nature conceived as a process. In this regard, Bove suggests that what can be found in Vauvenargues, in the same way as in epicureanism and classical stoicism, is a reflection of the singular *limit*, which (in the

inseparable bond between utility and necessity itself), involves a point of reconciliation between living and feeling on the one hand and thinking and inventing on the other.

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### **From Being as Becoming**

While Voltaire and Frederick the Great wrote “that the world of revolutions seems to have been completely banished from our age” (FREDERICK II, 1789, p.iii), Vauvenargues thought that the contradictions of French society in his time showed the country was really on the advent of a revolutionary period. It was finally necessary to overcome the hegemony of simply living for death and to oppose a deadly and servile fate by refounding a kind of virtue that did not encompass “imaginary qualities that do not belong to human nature”, but rather a certain power and spiritual grandeur (Vauvenargues, 1997: 187). Vauvenargues thus spoke in the name of a naturalist rationalism according to which true reason is not something that can be placed beyond the limits of nature. On the contrary, as a product of its own natural powers, like reason, it is embedded in the sphere of the immanent force in nature, alongside the passions and feelings.

Unless reason is found beyond the sphere of mundane determinations that assail us, it cannot extricate us from the regime of necessity, which pervades reality and oppresses us. In other words, reason does not at once place us in the possession of our own subjectivity and the whole amalgam of prejudices and passions that shape it. Hence, change depends on active work carried out within our own materiality: “it is not easy to change one’s own heart but (...) real grandeur consists of this work” (Ibidem: 280). True reason must work in a natural *continuum* and act on this basis simply because, in any event, there is no other space in which it can move. As Bove tells us “The opposite of a wise man is not the passionate man but the frivolous spirit who being devoid of any feelings lacks a being and for this reason finds himself deprived of any virtue” (Ibidem: 233).

A true policy must be governed by the experience of people without seeking to undertake anything except all the good that it can achieve. And it is by means of the notion of familiarity that the experience of mankind becomes a constitutive feature of political practice. Setting out from this concept, Vauvenargues defines a multiple conception of sovereignty. This contradicts its unitarist conceptions (such as those which can be discerned in Bodin and Hobbes) and involves the requirement of conceiving sovereignty as a space that is conducive to variety and appropriate for the ‘multiple’ (Ibidem: 225)<sup>16</sup>. The political need for the formation of the collective is thus expressed in a conception of political will, which, before it can become meaningful and truly rational, must be fully embedded in the practices and passions of the people. “Without familiarity with the multiple”, Bove states, “political action is empty, powerless and blind” (Ibidem: 259).

A rational system can only be finalized through the collective experience of the knowledge of the people. In this respect, Vauvenargues makes one of his peremptory judgments: “I don’t believe that there is anything more dangerous or which is more stifling to the spirit than always to live with the same people” (Ibidem: 268). From this strategy of multiplicity, however, Vauvenargues infers that truth cannot be conceived as an esoteric experience that, generally speaking, can take place at a specific moment. On the contrary, truth largely entails the task of systematizing and harmonizing a kind of knowledge that is being progressively broadened so that it can increasingly cover more partial truths. As a result, political wisdom includes a certain plasticity of the body politic, in so far as it forms a single being with the body of its kingdom.

Although according to Vauvenargues, there is an order in things, this order cannot be detected, as far as we can see, by means of a teleological rationality. In the end, according to the Provençal philosopher, the order does not result in an extrinsic relationship to things since:

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Everything that possesses being has an order; that is, a certain manner of existing that is as essential to it as to its own being: if you pick up a piece of clay at random, in whatever state you leave it, this clay will have certain relations, a form and a particular set of proportions or in other words, an order. This order will even replace a superior agent if it is left undisturbed. It is not surprising then that the universe has its own laws and a certain economic system" (Ibidem: 241).

Hence it can be seen that order results from being itself which implies, as Bréhier has confirmed, the refusal to accept any postulated Finalism as well as any feeling or any previous or simply external value. Thus it is a question of an "empty order".

In this sense, it is under the banner of the void that the revolutionary power of love must be understood, as well as the desire for glory. In a social situation in which political will was completely hampered by the contradictions inherent in the political economy and in which sharp disparities of wealth formed a striking contrast with the fundamental requirements of a level of equity required to maintain a balance in a monarchical regime, civil wars emerged as an inevitable fatality. In this situation, "people cannot be prevented from innovating since they cannot be prevented from loving glory and change or of nurturing the expectation of being able to improve their lives" (Vauvenargues, 1994<sup>17</sup> apud Bove, 2010: 246-247). Hence as is evoked by *Clodius or the dissident*, "in a situation where everything is changing and that is witnessing change all around it, it is impossible for the State not, in its turn, to change the government" (Ibidem: 247). Dissidence does not therefore contradict the order of things but confronts it as a "void", which is a sign of the creative and relentless power of nature.

According to Vauvenargues, the only way of dislodging philosophy from its state of dogmatic stagnation, where it has been held captive by Finalism, as much as by the lucubrations of imaginary qualities, is sentiment. By this means, the justification for the present state of things becomes intolerable and stirs up indignation because, reason, in itself, never provides a good opportunity for action or even prompts a single desire. "A strong spirit cannot undergo the humiliation of explaining by means of words and wearily beating about the bush," (Ibidem: 144) but desires something that it can get to know through the climactic illumination of sentiment.

Knowing through sentiment is Bove tells us, "knowing nature 'naturally', knowing it through reason and in 'its reason' which is disproportionate, knowing it actively in its activity which is anxiety. Thus knowing it with 'power' and in the activity of its power" (Ibidem: 251).

It is clear that effectively there is an affinity between Vauvenargues and something that was later to be described as "Romanticism", which was renowned precisely for its belief that immediate access to truth could be obtained through aesthetics and hence the superiority of this sphere to reason. Vauvenargues states that, "no great truth is attained without enthusiasm: discussions conducted in cold blood don't discover anything; it's perhaps necessary to have both fire and precision to become a real philosopher" (*Maxim* 335). But in contrast with the Romantics, this philosopher-in-arms never pursued a mystical path to gain access to the truth. Moreover, Bove argues that in this sense, Vauvenargues does not strictly speak of a devotion or an irrational fervor but rather of the need to conceive truth as an object of deep love, which is incompatible with the banality of

petty desires. The enthusiasm that is in question is thus confused with the *Conatus* itself of the philosopher; like the poet, he is a true powerhouse of invention.

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Knowing through sentiment is the same as being placed in the same active regime of the real – a regime that is pure activity and pure productivity. This does not mean, *a contrario sensu*, that knowing is out of step with reason but rather that knowing is in conformity with natural reason which has a recursion with the ‘affective’ regime that allows passions to be apprehended in a strictly cognitive dimension and also allows the reason, need and *order* of the passions to be disclosed. In these terms Bove supports the idea that Vauvenargues’ knowledge of sentiment was an eminently rational form of knowledge although its framework rejects any attempt to impose a standard, model or system of measurement on the real. In short, it is a question of a knowledge of singularities.

It is also in pursuit of a knowledge of singularities that Vauvenargues rejects the formulation of new private ideologies that are imposed from above, on the movement of the ‘multitude’: “those that combat the prejudices of the people believe they are not a part of the people” (*Maxim* 325). But at this point things take on a conservative tenor and Bove seeks to rebut these possible accusations. He argues that it is necessary to understand the imaginative domain of humans with a view to: (i) becoming aware that the formation of beliefs and prejudices is the result of the imaginative constitution of humans themselves in their vital affirmative strength and that this strength is its principle; (ii) philosophic reason which entails understanding things in their need, can be reconciled with human imagination which is concerned with inventing them and (iii) putting into effect a dynamic unity of reflection and imagination that is capable of recreating an anthropological dimension of time.

Obviously dissidence depends on desire. It is the domain that is invested with most anxiety, most desire for innovation and according to Vauvenargues, is made up of the oppressed. On this basis, innovation can be thought of as not merely meaning a utopian imagination but implies that reason can be found to lie within existing reality itself. Hence the oppressed emerge as privileged agents of a political fulcrum in which the multiplicity and intensity of desires are really able to subvert the collective body – a subversion that creates the right conditions for the perseverance of collectivity. “It is necessary, as Clodius said, “for everything to change and nothing to remain stable” (Vauvenargues, 1857<sup>18</sup> apud Bove, 2010: 247).

The knowledge of the people is inseparable from a certain love for them, which is the only proof of a great king. Through his eloquence, which is also sovereign, he is able to bring about a common practice in which the discontent of disturbed spirits is concentrated into a single power or common anxiety that is able to rid itself of the moribund epoch to the benefit of a new living generation and a new creation of meaning. But what is in play is not so much the capacity of this *great soul* to concentrate all its scattered longings by virtue of its decisiveness and will. It is rather a power that exists in a permeable state where activity is (in addition and to the same extent) defined by its passiveness and its capacity to be ‘affected’ by the range of desires that pervade its collectivity, as well as endowing it with an ontological character, a consolidation of concrete space and the cooperation of the acting powers. Effectively, it concerns both the cognitive skills of the prince and to an equal degree, an affective skill. With regard to this, Bove states that “the love of the prince by his people is nothing more than a metaphor for the love of the body politic” (*Ibidem*: 259). This love is a true kind of ‘familiarity’.

In view of this, Bove believes that Vauvenargues offers a means of overcoming the contradiction between the power and utility of each person on the one hand and the affirmation of the sovereignty of the State on the other. In Book 3 of *Introduction à la connaissance de l'esprit humain [Introduction to the knowledge of the human spirit]*, Vauvenargues identifies virtue with the primacy of a general interest in personal interests. However, far from reverting to a moral choice, which is imbued with a rationale of sacrifice this prerogative is proof of a concrete situation in which individual virtue is instilled with the fulfilment of a collective life, since the desire for glory is a clear sign of this permeability. This is the precise meaning of the identification of *the love of the prince by the people* with the *love for the body politic itself*, since individual love, which can be expressed in the form of a *love of being* is in its proper formulation, *a love of being with*.

Familiarity is both the means of conserving the power to act collectively and upgrading the exercise of power by the State as a vehicle of change – which is also a form of conservation (but expressed through the vitality of the body politic, rather than the type of government) – when the gulf that separates the people from the government has become much too wide. In this case, it is not the familiarity of Louis XI that is in play, but the seditious familiarity of Catiline or Clodius. In both cases, however, it concerns a criticism of transcendental political reason.

### Final Considerations

Bove argues that the ontology of Vauvenargues is expressed as much through the model of the productive power of the real in a Spinozist matrix, as by the “second nature”, which harks back to Pascal. In the light of these arguments, the relationship with Pascal is clearly evident and can be inferred both by the references that Vauvenargues makes to his work and by indirect allusions. The relationship with Spinoza is, in its turn, either oblique or very direct and mediated by Boulainvilliers, Locke and Malebranche – or else underground. The notion of the “power to act”, in this sense, according to Bove, derived from a reading of Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Unlike Locke, however, Vauvenargues embedded his argument within a radically necessarist logic to such an extent that it emerges as a reflection on *free necessity*. The Spinozist outlines are in this respect, flagrantly obvious. Vauvenargues distinguishes between (i) active power determined by an external action and (ii) actions which strictly stem from the constitutive principle of our being.

Setting out from a doctrine of necessity, Vauvenargues seeks to distance himself from the philosophic strategies of the petty sectarian bravado, which expressed disdain for the living reality movement and its capacity for common reinvention. Bove distinguishes between three dimensions of Vauvenargues’ philosophic project. *In the first place*, it addresses the question of transforming the “second nature” of Pascal in the field of operations that involve a strategy of finite, by endowing it with a positive conception of the activity of being finite. *In the second place*, Vauvenargues seeks to remove the taint of fatalism, which was attached to necessarist systems. *In the third place*, there is in play a reconciliation of private reflection about sedition with the transformative routes that already exist in society.

In so far as he proposes a union between the mind and body, Vauvenargues subverts his Pascalian legacy since in his view, we are only “outside our place” when we seek to dispel the universal laws of the second nature by lapsing into an illusory, utopian and

mystical state, which entails regarding people not as they are but as they would like to be. In the view of Vauvenargues, this world, which is circumscribed by the second nature, is the only world that exists. Salvation does not exist except through the “second nature”, that is, beyond the interminable play of varied and multiple power relations – and the heteronomy that always arises from the game.

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But again it should be stressed that this perspective does not involve a complete submission to surrounding determinations. In the end, despite being devoid of any pre-established meaning or value, the universe has a determined order and a certain economic system, which, in the opinion of Vauvenargues, entitles it to the name of *providence*. Nonetheless, it is a strange providence because, deprived of any transcendental sense, it closely corresponds to an immutable and necessary order. The road to salvation and beatitude was the same as the concrete exercise of the power to act and increases the power of perseverance through an understanding of this universal order.

If everything is expressed in ontological terms, imperfections or finite cannot be conceived as evils of human nature but according to Bove, as “the logical and even ontological effects of individuation” (p.284). In a necessitarian philosophy, nature does not admit voids and imperfections like the effects of the power of nature itself, but is full of being and for this reason, full of perfection. Moreover, rather than being apprehended negatively as the manifestation of a lack, which through despair and melancholy, leads to an exhaustion of our strength, anxiety itself is largely conceived in positive terms as involving an activity that is opposed to fate. Rather than consisting of the domineering factors that constrain our capacity to act, it can be viewed as something that instigates us to persevere. It is through anxiety that we bear our existence.

The tone is thus strongly anti-Pascalian and anti-teleological. It does not concern nostalgia for a lost perfection or infinitude, which would imply, in the sphere of the logic of the fall, a search for *the first nature*. What is in play is an anxiety as love for life, which unlike hope (*espoir*), which shifts our desire towards a future time that is at the mercy of fate, is embedded in the present and involves the productive and creative activities of being finite. Anxiety has nothing to do with hope but rather – as we have seen – with expectation. And in so far as it is concerned with an undefined growth of being and power that is resistant to any specific predicate, it is a true *desire without an object*. Nevertheless, there is no situation in which anxiety is more sharply defined than in the desire for glory.

The *Conatus* of Vauvenargues is thus a strengthening of the power to act since, in contrast with what is argued by Boulainvilliers, it is refractory in resisting any concept of inertia. And so long as it is embedded in the sphere of the finite – and exactly for this reason, this *Conatus* is an indeterminate power of regeneration that can overcome the previously set limits of its finite nature. In this way, an experience of infinitude is rediscovered through the pathway of the finite. A hundred years before Hegel, Vauvenargues offers us a conception that is able to reconcile the finite with the infinite. The continual production of new actions and new thoughts is a necessary effect of our perceptible nature. Moreover, it is as a result of this continual growth of being that we can go beyond the frontiers of being that lead to death because the more we succumb to the need to take a rest, the more we draw closer to a real death.

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The reference to Spinoza, in Bove’s work, as Yves Citton noted, does not refer so much to the direct influence that Spinoza could have had on Vauvenargues, as if he had his

eyes fastened on the Dutch philosopher's work when he composed his works. After all, Vauvenargues did not understand Latin and never mentioned Spinoza, except on one occasion. It first involves setting out a "plan of consistency" which can allow the fragmentary and apparently contradictory work of Vauvenargues to be properly organized. We argue that as well as this, attention should be drawn to the fact that the relation of Vauvenargues' thinking with Spinozism cannot be limited to an observation about the simple affinity between the two. This is to suggest that the reference to Spinoza was completely alien to the text and can only be explained as the fortuitous result of attempting to bestow a greater degree of intelligibility on the work of Vauvenargues, and even help to offer a more powerful interpretation of the work of the Provençal author and enable us to resolve his apparent contradictions.

The reading carried out by Bove, which involves explaining the inner premises of Vauvenargues' thinking, conforms to a methodology that is as much Althusserian as Spinozean. It allows us to discover in this philosopher-in-arms an author who is powerfully influenced by a necessitarian and dynamic ontology. As well as implying the rejection of every kind of teleological or moral conception, whether of nature or society, this seeks to reconcile freedom with necessity. The relationship with Spinoza was to some extent a matter of choice as Jonathan Israel (2002) demonstrates, and after the death of Spinoza, Spinozism broke loose from its original creator and led to multifarious forms that were at times contradictory with each other.<sup>19</sup> Although the necessitarian systems inspired by Spinozism began to pervade the European imagination from the end of the 17th Century, there were few writers who kept so provocatively close to some of the most basic brands of the Spinozist style<sup>20</sup> as Vauvenargues. The systematization of the metaphysical assumptions of Vauvenargues' philosophy disclose an affinity that is not merely circumstantial but also structural.

Bove found in Vauvenargues a philosopher who, like Spinoza and also like Machiavelli, refused to a "write a new 'private' and political *Weltanschauung*, against the real movement of the 'masses'", but on the contrary, preferred "to concentrate his reflections on the very movement that asserted, in absolute terms, the existence of the *multitudinis potentia* [power of the people]" (Bove, 1996: 17). In this concept, Bove did not simply acknowledge that the philosopher was making an apology for the masses but also took account of the 'multitude' as a central feature of political reflection and not just as an abstract basis of the socio-political order.<sup>21</sup> The multitudes with their historical forms of existence and 'affective' economy thus comprised the basis for an investigation of the shaping (and conditions for the reshaping) of political reality. In the light of a metaphysics of strict necessity that is antithetical to voluntarism, this draws attention to the peculiar way that these authors conceived the advent of the revolution or – to ensure that we remain in the semantic domain of Vauvenargues – of dissension. In all the cases, it involves thinking about transformation by setting out from the dimension of a "second nature"<sup>22</sup>, based on our elements (Spinoza, 2009: 397). We remember that "it is just as difficult and dangerous to try to free a people that want to remain servile as it is to enslave a people that wants to remain free" (Machiavelli, 1982: 179); it is a question of drawing up a *strategy of finite*, or a *strategy of Conatus*.

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**Quote this article**

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**Notes**

1. BOVE, Laurent. *Vauvenargues or the dissident. Between Pascal and Spinoza. A philosophy for the second nature*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2010.
2. Cf. ALTHUSSER, Louis. *From Capital to Marx's philosophy*. In: Lire le Capital. Paris: PUF, 2008, p. 14.
3. These texts are those that form the edition of Suard, published in 1806, which had the title *Complete Works of Vauvenargues, new edition augmented with several unpublished works with critical and grammatical notes*. The texts referred to are: *Traité sur le libre arbitre (Treatise on arbitrary freedom)*, [*The Discourse on Freedom*], followed by *A response à quelques objections, o Discours sur la liberté (A reply to some objections)*, [*The Discourse on Freedom*], followed by *Réponse aux conséquences de la nécessité*, [Reply to the Consequences of Necessity] as well as some short pieces *Sur la justice, Sur la Providence, Sur l'économie de l'univers* [*On justice, On Providence, On the economy of the universe*] and *Imitation of Pascal*. The edition of D-L Gilbert, of 1857, has the title *Œuvres de Vauvenargues édition nouvelle précédée de l'éloge de Vauvenargues, et accompagnée de notes et commentaires* [*Works of Vauvenargues (new edition preceded by a eulogy of Vauvenargues and accompanied by notes and commentaries)*].
4. Cf. SPINOZA, Baruch. *Ethics*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica Editora, 2007, p. 145 (E II, prop. 48).
5. Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 226. With regard to the powerlessness of reason, Bove reminds us of the pertinence of Ethics IV, Propositions 15 and 16 scholium, as well as scholium 2 of proposition 37.
6. Burke employed this argument to criticize the revolutionary phase of the French Enlightenment during the French Revolution BURKE, Edmund. *Reflections of the Revolution in France*. Brasília: Ed. UNB, 1997, p. 108.
7. Remembering Montaigne's observation: "it is certain that our understanding, our judgement and the faculties of our soul undergo a change that corresponds to the continuous physical alterations of the body. Isn't our spirit more acute, our memory more lively, our logical reasoning much quicker when we are in good health?" (MONTAIGNE, Michel de. *Essays*. In: *Os Pensadores*, vol. XI. São Paulo: Abril Cultural, 1972, p. 265 (II, 12).
8. VAUVENARGUES, *Essay on some characters: Le rieur*. In: D-L Gilbert (org.), *Works of Vauvenargues* (vol. I), Paris: Furne et Cie, 1857, p. 314. *Apud*: BOVE, Laurent. *Vauvenargues or the dissident*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2010, p. 93.

9. *Idem. Letter of 10th May 1740 to Mirabeau*. In: D-L Gilbert (org.), *Works of Vauvenargues* (vol. II), Paris: Furne et Cie, 1857, p. 206. *Apud*: BOVE, Laurent. *Vauvenargues or the dissident*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2010, p. 93. 128
10. Bove reminds us that in Ethics IV, Prop. 52, Spinoza unusually brings together the strength of perseverance in his being, expectation and *acquiescentia in se ipso* (p. 117).
11. Cf., in this regard Ethics V, Prop. 36 (SPINOZA, Baruch. *Ethics*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica Editora, 2007, p.401), in which Spinoza employs the notion of glory to stand for the identification of the intellectual love of the mind towards God with the love of God for mankind – beatitude.
12. VAUVENARGUES. *Fragments on Montaigne*. Paris : Honoré Champion, 1994, p. 109 (3[19]). *Apud*: BOVE, Laurent. *Vauvenargues or the dissident*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2010, p. 152.
13. VAUVENARGUES, *Lettre à Mirabeau du 19 août 1740 [Letter to Mirabeau of 19th August, 1740]*. In : D-L Gilbert (org.), *Œuvres de Vauvenargues [Works of Vauvenargues]* (vol. II), Paris: Furne et Cie, 1857, p. 221. *Apud* : BOVE, Laurent. *Vauvenargues ou le séditieux [Vauvenargues or the dissident]*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2010, p. 93.
14. Cf. BOVE, Laurent. *Vauvenargues ou le séditieux [Vauvenargues or the dissident]*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2010, p. 186, where the author mentions the *model of war*. With regard to the same author, also see: “The Right of War and the Common Right in Spinozist Politics”. In: *Conatus*, 2, n° 4, dez. 2008. [December 4th, 2008]
15. Cf. DELEUZE, Gilles. *Presentation of Sacher Masoch, the cold and the cruel*. Paris : Éditions de Minuit, 1967, pp. 10-18 e 78-79.
16. Cf., with regard to, VAUVENARGUES, *Dialogues: Philippe II and Comines*. In : D-L Gilbert (org.), *Works of Vauvenargues* (vol. II), Paris: Furne et Cie, 1857, pp. 27-29.
17. VAUVENARGUES. *Fragments on Montaigne*, Paris : Honoré Champion, 1994, p. 103 (n° 9 [16]). *Apud*: BOVE, Laurent. *Vauvenargues or the dissident*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2010, pp. 246-247.
18. *Essai sur quelques caractères: Clodius, ou le Séditieux [Essay on some characters : Clodius or the dissident]*. In : D-L Gilbert (org.), *Œuvres de Vauvenargues [Works of Vauvenargues]* (vol. I), Paris: Furne et Cie, 1857, p. 345. *Apud*: BOVE, Laurent. *Vauvenargues ou le séditieux [Vauvenargues or the dissident]*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2010, p. 247.
19. Spinoza himself was criticized both for his naturalist atheism and for his mystical transcendentalism.
20. For an analysis of *style* as a means of interpreting the similarities and dissimilarities that exist between different authors, see MANHEIM, Karl. *Conservative Thought*. In: *Essays on Sociology and Social Psychology*. Londres: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953.
21. In a purely circumstantial and stylistic way the terms *mass* and *multitude* can be treated as synonyms.

22. It is clear from all the reasons adduced throughout the text, that it is not a question of a Pascalean second nature but a reinvigorated second nature that is situated beyond the teleological horizon of the fall.

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