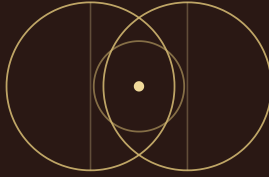


KUTTY STAUDER



The Geometry of Consent

A Spinozan Treatise on Influence, Manipulation, and
Propaganda

CORRECTED COMPLETE EDITION · SEPTEMBER 2026 · SAMPLE

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Deductive claims, documentary claims, and empirical claims are marked separately. Philosophical inspiration: Baruch Spinoza. Verdicts on historical episodes and published studies are only as strong as the cited sources.

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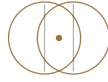
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Philosophical inspiration: Baruch Spinoza. Contemporary prose and applications are by the author, not quotations from Spinoza unless expressly identified.

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PART I

The Abuse of Words

How to Read This Treatise

Abstract

This treatise applies the geometric method of Spinoza's *Ethics* to the subject of influence, manipulation, and propaganda. Its central claim is definitional rather than empirical. The literature of influence credits an instrument, whether a technique, a formula, or a practitioner, with a causal power that belongs to the material: to affects already present in the affected person, to conditions of access and repetition, and to the privation of knowledge about causes. Once the vocabulary is fixed, manipulation is shown to be a relation between an influence and the affected person's understanding of the cause of his own action, which makes it diagnosable, measurable, and reversible, and which dissolves the catalogue of tactics that the trade sells in its place. Twelve Definitions and twelve Axioms are established, drawn from verified propositions of the *Ethics* and the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. From them the treatise derives twenty-four Propositions with formal proofs, corollaries, and scholia, covering the mechanism of being moved, the material basis of propaganda, the conditions under which manipulation is unstable, and the conduct that follows. Documentary and empirical claims are separated from deductive ones and marked as such, because no demonstration can establish what happened in 1917 and no experiment can establish that a category error has been made. The treatise is accompanied by

a documentary dossier on Edward Bernays and a replication audit of the psychology of influence, and it reports verdicts on both, including the claims that fail.

Keywords: Spinoza, conatus, affect, inadequate ideas, propaganda, public relations, Bernays, manipulation, persuasion, replication crisis.

Prolegomenon

This is the complete text of six Parts, with appendices. The Definitions and Axioms of Part I govern the demonstrations that follow. Documentary claims that establish what happened are proved, if they are proved at all, in Part III and Appendix B. Empirical claims that establish a measurement are proved, if they are proved at all, in Part IV and Appendix A. Geometric Parts may cite those findings as illustrations, and they mark the citation so that it is not mistaken for a step in a proof. The three warrants are not substituted for one another.

The scope of the whole work. It treats influence as a case of causation, and it refuses to treat it as a case of wrongdoing. It covers the mechanism by which one person's power of acting is increased or diminished by another, the material conditions under which that mechanism operates at scale, and the conduct that follows for a person who wishes to be less moved and more nearly the cause of his own motion. It treats the modern influence industry as a body of claims to be audited rather than a body of knowledge to be applied.

What it does not cover. It does not teach techniques of influence. It contains no scripts, no formulas, and no procedures for moving others, and this is a consequence of its argument rather than a concession to taste: if Proposition I is correct, such procedures cannot be transferred as procedures. It does not adjudicate the moral status of particular practitioners, and it does not treat moral vocabulary as a source of causal explanation. It does not claim that human beings are free of influence, because that claim is inco-

herent, and it does not claim that influence is omnipotent, because that claim is false and is sold to the credulous. Where the evidence is thin, the text says so. Where a widely repeated claim was found to be unsupported by the documents, the text reports the correction and names the source of the error.

The method. Three kinds of claim appear in this work and they are never confounded. Deductive claims are established by demonstration from the Definitions and Axioms, in the manner of the *Ethics*, and are valid or invalid. Documentary claims are established by archives, dated publications, and primary testimony, and are true or false, and are always open to revision by better evidence. Empirical claims are established by measurement, replication, and meta-analysis, and are reported with their effect sizes and their replication status. The manipulation industry's own mistake is repeated in reverse by many of its critics, who refute a historical claim with a statistical argument or a statistical claim with a philosophical one. Each claim is tried in its own court.

The reader. No prior knowledge of Spinoza is assumed, and no mathematics is used. The reader is assumed to be capable of following a proof, to be willing to hold a conclusion in suspension until it is derived, and to prefer an account of causes to an account of villains. The reader who wants the villains will find them in Part III, where the documents are, and will find that the documents are less flattering to the legend than the legend is to itself.

A note on the text. Citations of the form E4P7 refer to Part IV, Proposition 7 of Spinoza's *Ethics*; E3D1 refers to a Definition in Part III; Definition of the Emotions XIII refers to Spinoza's numbered list of affects at the end of Part III. Every such reference in this work was checked against the text before it was used. Related propositions may be consulted by a reader who wishes to test the chain.

The Confusion of Tongues

Every book in this field fails at the first step, and the failure is definitional rather than empirical. This Part fixes the vocabulary. It does not report findings, because no finding is possible until the words are distinguished. The Definitions and Axioms established here govern every Proposition in the five Parts that follow.

"Most writers on the emotions and on human conduct seem to be treating rather of matters outside nature than of natural phenomena following nature's general laws. They appear to conceive man to be situated in nature as a kingdom within a kingdom: for they believe that he disturbs rather than follows nature's order, that he has absolute control over his actions, and that he is determined solely by himself."

Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part III, Preface

Every book written about influence fails at the first step, and the failure is definitional rather than empirical. The words are used as moral labels and then treated as causal categories, and the substitution is never announced. Nothing that follows from a conflated term can be tested, refuted, or acted upon, which is precisely why the conflation survives. It is not an accident of sloppy writing. It is the product.

Consider what a single act may be called. A physician explains to a frightened man why he must take a drug, and the man takes it. An advertiser repeats a claim about a drug until a bored man buys it. A state broadcasts a reason to enlist until a young man enlists. A friend exploits a confidence to extract money. A teacher installs a habit of reading. A platform orders a feed so that a particular mood is produced in a hundred million people who never

learn that the ordering was determined. Six acts, one vocabulary, and the vocabulary assigns them to praise or blame before anyone has asked what happened.

There are six distinct questions hidden in this single word, and each of them can be answered separately:

What was done, in the way of causes. To whom it was done, and in what condition that person already was. What the effect actually was, measured rather than asserted. By what right it was done. What the affected person understood about the cause of his own action. Under what material conditions it was done, including who controlled the channel, the repetition, and the alternative.

The literature answers the fourth question, which is moral, and reports the answer as if it were the second and the third, which are causal. That is the whole trick. A technique is called dark because the practitioner is disliked, not because the technique does anything that an admired practitioner does not also do. The same hundred repetitions are instruction when a school does them and manipulation when a brand does them. The same appeal to fear is public health when the speaker is trusted and propaganda when the speaker is not. Under examination, the labels track the identity of the agent and the interests of the labeller. They do not track mechanism.

Spinoza's method begins with deflation of exactly this kind. The *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* opens by distinguishing prophecy, knowledge, and imagination, because the political disputes of his century were conducted with a word that carried three meanings at once. The *Ethics* opens with eight definitions before a single assertion is made, and the definitions are not preliminaries to the argument. They are the argument's first act. Spinoza distinguishes three kinds of knowledge, and the first of them is opinion or imagination, the knowledge of things from signs, report and chance experience (E2P40S2). To define is to move an idea out of that first kind. A definition that does not distinguish its object from everything else is not a rough tool awaiting refinement. It is a defect, and defects propagate.

The confusion of tongues is not innocent, and it is not merely academic. It is the merchandise. A trade that sells power over other people cannot sell the true mechanism, because the true mechanism is thin: a few affects, repetition, and access to channels. It can sell far more if the mechanism is left vague, because vagueness permits the buyer to project onto the seller whatever power the buyer fears or desires. The seller of influence therefore has a direct interest in the conflation of the six questions. His product is the confusion, and the techniques are the packaging.

Three consequences follow, and they organize the rest of this book. First, since the vocabulary is moral rather than causal, the field has no way to be wrong. A failed attempt is explained as bad execution and not as false theory. Second, since the categories do not distinguish causes, the literature substitutes catalogues of anecdotes for a mechanism, which is why the catalogues proliferate and why none of them converges. Third, the person who wishes to be less moved has been given nothing to work with, because moral labels cannot be converted into causal knowledge. He can only become more suspicious, which is itself an affect, and which is itself sellable.

The remedy is not more suspicion. It is definition. What follows in this Part is an attempt to give the subject the vocabulary Spinoza would have given it: a small set of terms that name causal relations, and no terms that name sins.