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Ontology

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The Ideal (of) Democracy: Multitude and Multiplicity in Spinoza's Political Ontology

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0 Introduction

In spite of the clear fact that the variety in political systems has substantially decreased over the past centuries, up to a point where most states at least pretend to be of the same kind, the issue of political organization continues to divide philosophers. This is not because of the problems political practice faces today in implementing or refining the ideal of democracy, as this would not preclude that the resolution of these difficulties is eventually up to the praxis of politics.¹ It is rather because of the recognition that the ideal of democracy does not have a clear unity. Many thinkers have attacked the currently prevalent notion of democracy because they insist that its alliance with other political ideas, such as liberalism or capitalism, is deeply disingenuous.² An interesting way to challenge these alliances is that of going back in the history of democratic thought and examining how major proponents of it can be used to construct alternatives to contemporary theories and practices. One figure who has proven to be exceptionally valuable in this project is Spinoza.

Spinoza's value in this discussion derives from two features of his thought. First and foremost is his complex and ambiguous position towards democracy. Whereas the *Theologico-Political Treatise* (TTP), the only major work of his to be published during his lifetime, albeit anonymously, seems to endorse values we would call liberal, his later, unfinished work on political theory, the *Political Treatise*, shows considerable reservations to the passions of the masses. This ambiguity is perhaps unresolved within Spinoza's work because the *Political Treatise* (TP) breaks off after the initial paragraphs of the chapter(s?) on democracy, the best form of dominion. In a way, Spinoza's death left his latest attempt at reconceiving democracy unfinished and offers an opportunity for others to set off where he stopped.

¹ Hannah Arendt does in fact seem to believe that political philosophy is largely rendered oblivious by the praxis of democratic citizens (H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (2nd ed.), Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998, p. 5).

² Cf. N. Bobbio, *Liberalism and Democracy*, London: Verso, 1990; C. Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London: Verso, 2005.

The other major reason why Spinoza is so popular among continental political philosophers is that he combines a very elaborate metaphysical system with a clear and equally thought-through political message. This invites readers to relate both theories to each other and engage in what we would now call "political ontology". This opens new ways of interpreting Spinoza's political theory that are not as easily obscured by our preconceived notions of politics. In particular, it may serve as the key to (re-)constructing Spinoza's last considered view on democracy.³

In this paper, I take up these two threads by starting off with an examination of Spinoza's political ontology. I will do this by indicating how Spinoza can be taken to tackle with the difficulty of the ontological status of political entities running through Western political theory (Section I). An investigation of his version of the social contract theory in light of the question concerning political ontology will then reveal that Spinoza may have drawn heavily on his epistemological views to inform his political ontology (Section II). This allows us to draw up Spinoza's classification of political systems according to his classification of forms of knowledge and to transpose the resolution of the difficulties faced by the lower forms of knowledge in the higher to the overcoming of the antinomies faced by lower forms of dominion in the higher (Sections III, IV and V). In particular, it allows us to distinguish between three forms of democracy in Spinoza, the third of which represents the ideal form.

1 Political ontology

The very idea of "political ontology" may seem strange to some, since we generally conceive of ontology and political theory as relatively far removed in the classification of philosophical sub-disciplines. Although contemporary philosophers are generally skeptical towards the idea of classification, they usually allow for it in the notion of a sub-discipline, even if it were only so that they could purport to be able to make advances in one terrain without pretending to have any outstanding qualifications in others. It is ironical, therefore, that the philosopher to whom we owe most of our practice of sub-division, as well as the names of several paradigmatic subdivisions, felt quite insecure in indicating the precise domain of political philosophy.

Aristotle, indeed, regarded political philosophy as the master art, meaning that it is the most inclusive art.⁴ This immediately raises a problem, because it suggests that

³ E.g. A. Negri, "Reliqua desiderantur: a conjecture for a definition of the concept of democracy in the final Spinoza", in: A. Negri, *Subversive Spinoza: (un)contemporary variations*. T.S. Murphy (ed.) Manchester: Manchester University press, 2004, p. 28-58.

⁴ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094a.

political science has as its object all the objects of the sciences included in it.⁵ In the *Politics*, Aristotle refines this suggestion from the *Nicomachean Ethics* by establishing that the object of political science is the polis, the state, which is the highest of all possible communities, and is therefore inclusive of the goods of the latter.⁶ This grants a great deal more plausibility to political science's claim to be both a science with an object of its own and the most inclusive of all sciences. Indeed, an adequate government should put to use all other sciences in order to allow the state to live up to its potential. In proposing this solution, however, Aristotle uncovered another, deeper difficulty by raising the unsettling question concerning the ontological status of the state.

Aristotle is not oblivious to this issue, and answers it quite elegantly. He refuses to acknowledge that a state is a queer entity and sees it as the endpoint of a natural tendency in man to associate into communities of different sorts.⁷ Unfortunately, this issue seems to subsume the state unproblematically under a class of entities like families, beehives and anthills. The difference, then, can be found in the fact that the state is a kind of second-order community, which structures otherwise loose associations of communities. The ways of structuring them are derived from the various kinds of friendship that are formative of natural communities, and can even be considered sublimations of the latter.⁸ These sublimations are called constitutions, the ways in which the state is structured and in which it governs itself. To Aristotle, the major prerequisite of the state is unanimity, acquired through the constitution's respecting the proportions of the powers of the elements of the state (justice). The ultimate goal of political science, therefore, is establishing the best way to insure the stability of the state.

The practical upshot of this operation, which is formative of Western political thought, is that all political science is, to a greater or lesser extent, directed at stability. Even revolutionary practices have mainly intended to obviate the need for revolution by installing the required proportionality⁹. The theoretical upshot, however, is that political philosophy becomes the reflection on the relation between the state as a structure and the state as an entity. This issue is far from an intellectual *Spielerei*: one's answer to it defines one's idea of justice and of political practice. Machiavellian and Hobbesian politics, for instance, are built around the central premise that there is a radical gap between the state and its structuring capacities on the one hand and the relations and associations it

⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094b.

⁶ *Politics* 1252a.

⁷ *Politics* 1254a.

⁸ *Nicomachean Ethics* 1161a-1161b.

⁹ Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Marxist concept of the permanent revolution. In spite of what its name might suggest, it simply means continuing the revolution until "all the more or less propertied classes have been driven from their ruling positions" (*Marx-Engels Werke*, Berlin: Dietz, 1956-1990, Bd.7, esp. 247-248) As long as this is not completed, class antagonisms will remain or even be exacerbated instead of abolished. It is thus apparent that the permanent revolution is the idea to continue this one revolution until all further need for revolution has been dispelled.

structures on the other. For Machiavelli, this implies that political practice cannot be judged by morality, which has its legitimate domain in human relations. For Hobbes, it means that the very idea of a human relation outside of a state is a questionable concept. He remains in doubt, however, as to whether the state is an individual composed of parts in any physical sense or a rational operation silencing the vicissitudes of human nature¹⁰.

In sum, the entire tradition of Western political philosophy can be said to be primarily oriented towards the issue of the ontological status of the state. Nowhere, however, is the fact that this issue remains unresolved and continues to form the organizing tension of political practice as well as theory, as palpable as in Spinoza's political philosophy. Admittedly, this tension may be due to his desire to integrate Hobbes's brilliant appropriation of the natural law-doctrine with Aristotle's naturalism. The reason, however, why he regards this unification as necessary, is that he acknowledges that neither theory is free from this tension, and that every adequate political theory must deal with this issue openly. It is this uncovering of the political paradox that informs Spinoza's account of democracy.

2 The multitude matters

The problem of political ontology, the fundamental tension between the state as a structure and the state as a totality of human relations, reveals itself to Spinoza as the tension between naturalism and contractarianism. A properly naturalist theory of politics postulates a continuity between the natural relations in the state of nature and the juridically regulated relations in society, whereas a contractarian theory describes the origin of the state as a radical rupture with the state of nature. Spinoza's simultaneous endorsement of both theories, then, is not a mark of irresolution or an uncritical concurrence of opposed influences, but a deliberate choice for the overt treatment of the fundamental tension of political ontology. In allowing an opposition to operate at the heart of political philosophy, he is faced by the challenge of conceptualizing both opposites and their mutual relations.

Spinoza's theory of natural right is amazingly simple: it consists mainly in an equation of natural right with the law of nature¹¹. As a thoroughgoing determinist, he advances that, in the state of nature, each has as much right as he has power. It is important to note two things here. On the one hand, Spinoza distinguishes the power inherent in each thing insofar as it is a natural entity (*potentia*) from political power

¹⁰ This latter tendency in Hobbes has been famously identified by Leo Strauss: L. Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and its Genesis*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936, esp. p. 13.

¹¹ TP II, 3.

(*potestas*).¹² As a result, the patterns of domination and association in the state of nature are radically individual and occasional¹³. On the other hand, the power here is not merely effective action, but also the way in which one can move another to behavior that is in accordance with one's striving for self-preservation¹⁴. Thus, Nietzsche could not be further from an adequate understanding of Spinoza's analysis of power as when he quips that the statement "*unusquisque tantum juris habet, quantum potentia valet*" (each has as much right as he has power) should be replaced by "*unusquisque tantum juris habet, quantum potentia valere creditur*" (each has as much right as he is believed to have power)¹⁵. In fact, our power includes our capacity to make others believe (rightly or not) that we have a certain amount of power in a more direct sense.

These remarks lead to two important conclusions about the nature of human association in the state of nature. First and foremost, they mean that humans are to be considered as always already involved in substantial associations that are more than mere herds or families. These associations are very unstable, because they are immediately constituted by the passions. Nonetheless, their instability is not ontological: the disruption is only possible if there is a breach in proportionality, if the powers of the constituents are not adequately reflected in the structure. In the state of nature, however, these two poles are identical: might is right. Thus, even though associations may be unstable, the totality of associations is not: the ontological factum of association is eternal.

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This naturalism is joined to a contractarian theory stipulating how the various constituents of the state transfer their powers to a sole authority, who from then on rules through Power (*potestas*) over his subjects¹⁶. In Hobbes's infamous version of this theory, individuals have no actual right to limit the powers of the state, since they have surrendered all of their rights to the supreme authority in order to render the stability of the state possible¹⁷. Indeed, the state demands unity and obedience, because the private right of individuals can always be a source of its disintegration¹⁸. Thus, the stability of the state rests on the monopoly on power exercised by authority in order to bar the eternal possibility of the dissolution into the state of nature.

¹² This distinction has been mainly brought to the fore of research on Spinoza's political theory by Antonio Negri (A. Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

¹³ For this reason, Alexandre Matheron defines it as a state of fluctuating interdependence (A. Matheron, *Individu et Communauté chez Spinoza*, Paris: Minuit, 1969, p. 305).

¹⁴ TP II, 9-10.

¹⁵ MA, KSA II, 91, emphasis added.

¹⁶ TTP XVI.

¹⁷ *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, B. Molesworth (ed.), Darmstadt: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1966, vol. 3, p. 157-158.

¹⁸ TP III, 3.

Through this process, the horizontal dynamics of the natural state is reorganized into a vertical subsumption of the civil state under a particular dominion¹⁹. This process of subsumption is the juridical order, i.e., the representation of the proportions of the powers of the state in the dominion. In order for this proportionality to count, the power of the state's constituents is translated into their public import, the *res publicae*, whereas the public character of man is structured by the power of the dominion. Thus, the two kinds of power are indexed into each other by means of justice. Nonetheless, they both derive from the power of the natural form of the community, the multitude, which is best conceived of as the civil state in abstraction from the structure exacted upon it by the dominion. In this way, the barred possibility is not only the constitutive negation of the state, as Agamben²⁰ would have it, but also its constitutive affirmation: pre-structural power articulates itself into powers (free individuals) and the limits imposed on them by juridical rule.

The negation constitutive of the state, the barring of the state of nature, however, is not as complete as it should be, for within the minds of its constituents, it retains some of its fickleness. The rule we exact over another's body can be perfect, but we can never hope to control another's mind completely. Any passion can disrupt the love or fear giving rise to his obedience at any time.²¹ In this way, the multitude retains its active power even after it has articulated itself into the vertical, reified structures of the state. This does not mean, however, that it has always a formative function for the state. On the contrary, it retains its constitutive power only as a check on the formal organization, i.e. as matter. This is best expressed by denying that the multitude *forms* and maintaining instead that it *matters*.

3 Political Epistemology

As we saw in the previous section, Spinoza conceives of the civil state as regulating the inherent multiplicity of individuality. This structure derives its political power (*potestas*) from the multitude itself, and is therefore a structure, which remains intimately linked to the capacities of those that make up the multitude. This already sets the tables for the following discussion: a dominion worth examination by the political philosopher is one that is a structure imposed by the multitude itself, and not one that is imposed from the outside.²² It is in this limitation that Spinoza shows his allegiance to the same metaphysical idea that lay behind his version of the social-contract theory from the

¹⁹ TP III, 1.

²⁰ G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 18.

²¹ TP II, 10.

²² TP V, 6.

Theological-Political Treatise, despite all other shifts that may have occurred during both books.

These are the general properties of the civil state as Spinoza pictured it at time of the Political Treatise. With this general conception of the civil state in place, he can draw up the particular forms of structure it can undergo. In the Political Treatise, Spinoza simply adopts a version of the traditional subdivision of forms of political rule: the rule by the one, monarchy, the rule by the few, aristocracy, and the rule by the many or all, democracy.²³ It is important to note, however, that the distinction between the good and the bad versions of either form has been dropped from the subdivisions used by Aristotle and by one of the great ideologists of feudal monarchical rule, Aquinas. Thus, categorizing democracy as the best of all bad dominions whilst being the worst of all good dominions is an option he radically refuses from the very onset.

This reappearance of the traditional division of forms of dominion is not, however, a shift back to the traditional judgment on their relative worth. In most treatises, democracy was considered the worst of all political forms because it is the most susceptible to dissolution and demagogy. Spinoza seems at times to share this view of democracy and its relation to violence. He seems, thus, to appreciate the aporia that led ancient and medieval scholars to adopt a double series in which democracy figures both as the worst of all good systems and the best of all bad systems. It is in response to this aporia that Spinoza reaches for his political epistemology.

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Since the civil state is a structure regulating the inherent multiplicity of the individual, its basis lies in the capacity of man to unite the disparate into an image that reflects and unites the various individualities. In other words, it grounds in man's epistemic capacity. Any proper analysis of the various dominions structuring the state should, then, follow the path of epistemology. In this way, Spinoza's political ontology points towards a political epistemology, dealing with the state as a conceptualization of the multitude.

4 The three kinds of democracy

Spinoza distinguishes three ways in which man can conceptualize. The first way is through imagination. Like any scientifically minded rationalist, Spinoza does not regard imagination, which unites knowledge from vague experience and knowledge from

²³ Balibar stresses this shift back to the traditional subdivision from one that gives central place to theocracy (E. Balibar, *Spinoza et la Politique*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, p. 64).

hearsay²⁴, as an adequate source of information. This seemingly mundane statement transforms into a powerful critique of traditional epistemology, since he identifies imaginative knowledge with our common way of forming concepts. The two basic mechanisms of imagination are confusion and contraction. A great variety of images, each representing the affection of our body by a state of affairs, is contracted into a single image, up to the point where the particularities are lost out of sight.²⁵

A dominion constituted through imaginative means can therefore follow two paths. On the one hand, it can impose the image of the good relative to one individual (in monarchy), or to a limited part of the individuals constituting the state (in aristocracy) on the state as a whole.²⁶ This method is a pattern of domination, which is usually exacted by means other than political power, since political power itself rests on the success of the imposition of the paradigm as hegemonic²⁷.

The stability of these kinds of states is largely dependent on their ability to stretch the model beyond its actual legitimacy, and beyond any temporary success. For this reason, Spinoza sees the problem of succession as the weakest point of monarchy: it can exact the greatest amount of homogeneity, but is drastically limited to a single individual. Kantorowicz's research in political theology revealed how medieval jurists were aware of this and formulated metaphysical, even mystical conceptions of the nature of rule in order to guarantee the continuity of dynasties and avoid the "little interregnum" that threatened to disturb juridical order during the time of succession.²⁸

On the other hand, the state can take into account a large variety or all of the conceptions of the good at work in society. In doing so, it ends up with a confused image which leads to bitter contradictions and which ultimately differs little from the state of nature. This state is of course the form of democracy so eagerly criticized by classical and medieval philosophers.

Closer analysis of Spinoza's hierarchy of dominions thus reveals that he links the traditional hierarchy with the imaginative conception of knowledge. This knowledge

²⁴ *Ethics* II, prop 40, comm 2

²⁵ *Ethics* II, prop 40, comm 1

²⁶ TP II, 17.

²⁷ For this reason, Gramsci states explicitly that "by the 'State' should be understood not only the apparatus of government, but also the "private" apparatus of "hegemony" or civil society" (Q. Hoare & G. Nowell Smith (eds.), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Gramsci*, New York: International Publishers, 1971, p. 261), i.e. "the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules" (id., p.244). The hegemony forms "the basis for the State in the narrow sense of the governmental-coercive apparatus" (Q. Hoare & G. Nowell Smith (eds.), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Gramsci*, p. 265).

²⁸ E. H. Kantorowicz, *The King's two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997, chapter 7.

makes the dichotomy between synchronous stability, i.e. the homogeneity of a society at any given moment, and diachronous stability, i.e. the sustainment of stability over time, insuperable, and forces one to either sacrifice the present to the future, or the future to the present. This realization leads him to turn to other forms of knowledge in search for an adequate form of dominion.²⁹

The second in Spinoza's much debated hierarchy of the forms of knowledge is reason. Amidst the many confusing and unclear definitions of this contact with the external, is the suggestion that it is knowledge through common notions. There is, according to Spinoza, nothing particularly mystical about these notions: each one of us possesses them fully and adequately. They express merely what it means to be conceived under a particular attribute, such as thought or extension. Thus, reason starts from knowledge of more encompassing individuals than our minds and bodies, and ideally from the most encompassing of all individuals, *Deus sive Natura*. The more encompassing individual, which serves as the basis for the conception of good and bad, the particular juridical structure, of the rational state, is the idea of humanity.

The rationalist, totalizing projections of Spinoza's metaphysics, would thus turn out to be veined by a humanist vision. This humanism, however, suffers from a serious drawback. On Spinoza's own account, there is no real good or bad. Admittedly, he sometimes speaks as though there were a true, transcendent good over and above the vain and inane aspirations of men³⁰, but as we shall see, this actually refers to a negation of the true good turned into an affirmation, a positive power. Nothing good can come from such idealism, which merely entertains elitist thoughts from a traditional standpoint *de contemptu mundi*³¹. Spinoza's is a philosophy of life, not of ascetism, despite its apparent elitist traits.³²

The idea of humanity should therefore not be conceived as having any particular essence over and above the totality of humans. This express denial of humanism's latent essentialism seems to render the very cohabitation of man, let alone cosmopolitanism, impossible. The idea of the coinciding of particular interests in a state depends on metaphysical convictions that Spinoza finds highly implausible. In this way he anticipates the criticisms of the liberal state advanced over two centuries later by Carl Schmitt.³³ Far from epitomizing the doctrine leading to the ultimate dissolution of the very idea of the

²⁹ I thus disagree with Negri's celebration of imagination in Spinoza's system and his criticism of intuitive knowledge as a regress to the mystical reverence of the bourgeois utopia.

³⁰ *Tractatus de Intellectus Emendatione* §§ 12-13.

³¹ *Ethics* III, praefatio; TP I, 1

³² G. Deleuze, *Spinoza: Philosophie Pratique*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1981, p.21.

³³ C. Schmitt, *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität*, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2009, p. 14; pp. 63-64.

state³⁴, he already sketched the path beyond the irresolution of liberal democracy through a radical theory of citizenship.

It has now become apparent that Spinoza could not have envisaged rationality and humanism as a sufficient answer to the problem of political organization. The latent mattering power of the multitude cannot be adequately barred by means of the models based on the first two forms of knowledge. This means that the state in which the powers of the constituents coincide naturally with the juridical structure remains an unrealizable ideal. This is not Spinoza's final word, however: in the face of the necessary dissolution of the utopia, he postulates the bold solution of a radical dystopia.

This dystopia is rooted in intuitive knowledge, the final and highest form of knowledge, which remains disappointingly vague in Spinoza's writings. What is clear, however, is that Spinoza does not conceive of it as a mystical insight providing a union with God. He rather sees it as the way in which the passivity and emptiness of rational knowledge can be brought to bear on an individual.³⁵ Since the minds of others are merely the ideas of their bodies, our acquiring adequate knowledge of them means assimilating their minds without abolishing the particularity of either our own mind or of the assimilated mind. Thus, the multiplicity of the state is integrated in its constituents through a process of active, learning-based citizenship. The latent instability is displaced in the very minds of men, rather than being the result of the failed negotiations between parties and other interest groups. The citizen of the future has surrendered his own homogeneity to his particularity, thus integrating and taking part in the dynamics of forces constitutive of the state.

This is not an abstract, peculiar metaphysics devoid of practical consequences. On the contrary, in tackling the issue of multiplicity through a theory of active citizenship, Spinoza formulates the basis of a plausible practice, which may serve to integrate states that are faced by a frightening lack of homogeneity. Thus, he offers one of the few philosophically informed, useful paradigms of European integration yet.

³⁴ C. Schmitt, *Der Leviathan in der Staatslehre des Thomas Hobbes. Sinn und Fehlschlag eines politischen Symbols*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982, 86-89.

³⁵ This follows from the combination of *Ethics V*, prop 25 and prop 27: the third kind of knowledge pertains to individual things and results in acquiescence. Although rational knowledge is a necessary ingredient for this kind of knowledge (*Ethics V*, prop 28) it is not itself capable of grounding the moral outlook.