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Logical Polis. The Philosophical Foundation of Democracy According to B. Spinoza

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Abstract

Benedict Spinoza, the seventeenth-century rationalist philosopher, is, according to some authors, the first theorist to offer serious philosophical arguments justifying the idea of democracy as the best (and most natural) political system. Spinoza's political philosophy is, therefore, one of the first to be examined in today's political situation, which is often characterized by the phrase "crisis of (liberal) democracy". This study attempts to capture the philosophical arguments used by Spinoza to support his pro-democratic conclusions, detects his initial assumptions, and illuminates what specifically should characterize a democratic regime in his imagination. Among the primary sources used for this purpose are both those writings of Spinoza that are traditionally understood as political-philosophical (*Theologico-Political Treatise* and *Political Treatise*) and Spinoza's most famous work (*Ethics, Demonstrated in Geometrical Order*). Although the latter may appear distant from the issue at hand, some of the most strongly formulated relevant positions are found in it. The intention of the present study is twofold: first, to demonstrate on the example of Spinoza's thought how inextricably the preference for a democratic regime is linked to certain philosophical premises, not only ethical and axiological but also gnoseological and ontological ones; and more importantly, second, to formulate a hypothetical answer that Spinoza would have given to the question of the crisis of democracy and the possibilities of its solution.

Keywords

Spinoza, democracy, crisis of democracy, pantheism, holism

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Motto: "… as many as possible, thinking as much as possible …" (Balibar 2008: 99)

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1. Introduction

The association of a seventeenth-century philosopher who maintained that our greatest good is the knowledge of God with the issue of politics and its contemporary problems may seem strained and unproductive. His line of argument tends to be primarily speculative, and also his reclusive habits and considerable degree of social isolation seem to lend themselves to taking his views on matters that have a practical dimension with a grain of salt. However, such a methodological view is based on certain ontological and gnoseological assumptions, which, for one thing, Spinoza himself did not share, and for another, are becoming increasingly remote from an ever-growing section of contemporary theoretical discussions.

Spinoza is a truly remarkable thinker. The circumstances of his life and the reception of his work were characterized by many extremes, but his own thinking was outstandingly well-measured. Whereas his predecessor René Descartes belonged to the tradition of what might be called the philosophy of sharp contrasts, Spinoza rejected black-and-white conceptualization, seeking instead to locate the distinctiveness of different realities in the discovery of the degree of certain qualities that characterize them. This type of thinking can be described as incremental holism (Tippelt 2010). The holistic nature of Spinoza's thinking leads us to the fact that his views on the proper ordering of the state are closely systematically related to his understanding of good/evil and the process of cognition, as well as the totality of reality and God. His incrementalism then allows him to compare different types of government through the degree to which they enable the fulfilment of the meaning of the state.[2]

The most distinctive specifics of Spinoza's thought - his holism and his incrementalism – which allow him to bridge various theoretical gaps and traps,[3] are also some of the features of the thinking that seems to have gained ground in the last few decades. Incremental holism seems to be replacing a paradigm of thought that could be traced back at least several centuries, perhaps even millennia. I am referring to the profound and far-reaching transformation that is often described by the term "paradigm shift" in reference to the work of Thomas Kuhn (Kuhn 1970). In the broader sense of the ideological underpinnings of a complete global change of socio-political and cultural paradigm, this term was popularized by Fritjof Capra (1982). I suggest that the extent to

[2] In the preface to his book *Spinoza and Politics* (2008), Étienne Balibar states that he presents an experiment to test the unity of Spinoza's thought. The assumption that philosophy and politics depend on each other leads him to attempt to introduce the reader to Spinoza's philosophy through the political reality in which he participated and the political positions he held (Balibar 2008: xxii). We read the result of this experiment in the conclusion: "... knowledge is praxis, and the struggle for knowledge (that is, philosophy) is a political praxis" (Balibar 2008: 98).

[3] Cf. Thomas Kuhn's term "anomaly," which is defined as "a violation of the paradigm-induced expectations that govern normal science" (Kuhn 1970: 52).

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which Spinoza conforms to these conceptual trends is precisely the reason why it has been increasingly the subject of interpretation and commentary for several decades (e.g. Deleuze 1988; Rigaux 2008). I also believe that Spinoza was significantly ahead of his time in this respect and that this is also the reason why he is, according to some commentators (e.g. Feuer 1980; Rosen 1987; Smith 1997), the first theorist to offer serious philosophical arguments justifying the idea of democracy as the best (and also the most natural) political system.

In the present study, I will refer most frequently to three of Spinoza's works. The earliest of these, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP), was published during his lifetime, albeit anonymously; the other two, the *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata* (Ethics) and the *Tractatus Politicus* (TP) were published posthumously. The last of these unfortunately remained unfinished, while the two preceding writings (Ethics in particular) are considerably systematic and elaborate. Of the secondary authors dealing with the totality of Spinoza's work, I particularly appreciate Gilles Deleuze (1988 and 1990) and Jon Wetlesen (1979), while regarding Spinoza's political-philosophical views I rely mainly on Étienne Balibar (2008).

In the following sections I will first discuss Spinoza's notion of democracy (section "Dual Democracy"). I will then move on to an interpretation of Spinoza's systematic philosophical justification of democracy as the best political system. Here I will proceed deductively, i.e. in the spirit of Spinoza's thought, from his view of God and the totality of being (section "The Democracy of Nature"), through his conception of the processes and instruments of cognition and communication (section "Direct Access to Truth"), to those insights of his that might help us in the situation of the crisis of democracy (section "Crisis of Democracy?").

2. Dual democracy

The casual reader of Spinoza will quickly discover that democracy is one of his key concepts. This is not by accident; at least two of his major works contain arguments justifying why this social system is the best (TTP and TP). This may come as something of a surprise. First, because Spinoza is known as one of the boldest philosophers who did not shy away from the most abstract and speculative heights. To many, the connection between philosophy, which is to such an extent divorced from our immediate experience, and political theory or even political practice may seem somewhat unnatural. A more empirical political scientist might ask what can "a God-intoxicated man", as the German poet Novalis called him, know about good governance, and why should he care at all.

Such underestimation can be rejected for at least two reasons. First, Spinoza was not as far from political practice as a reading of his writings might suggest. Among his closest friends were the brothers Johan and Cornelis de Witt, both major political figures in the Netherlands during the so-called Dutch Golden Age. When Spinoza was forty, an

angry mob lynched and burned his friends. Some body parts were sold as souvenirs; others were roasted and eaten (Havercroft 2010: 120). Given the political themes Spinoza focused on, the suicide of his early teacher Uriel Da Costa, which the thinker is said to have committed after being spat upon and trampled on the steps of a synagogue by decree of the Amsterdam Jewish community, was probably a defining moment for him (Nadler 2018: 78–84). Spinoza's views on the importance of religious tolerance and freedom of speech were certainly influenced by the fact that at the age of about 23, he was excommunicated for life, cursed with every available curse, and all members of the Jewish community were forbidden to have any contact with him and to avoid being near him, including physically. A similar stance was soon taken against him by several Christian communities, and his texts were placed on the Vatican's list of banned books. There are uncertain reports that he twice escaped assassination attempts with good luck (Nadler 2018: 116–154). In these biographical contexts, it is, I think, clear that Spinoza simply had to be interested in immediate political realities.

The second reason why we should not forget Spinoza in the matter of democratic governance is that he understands the nature of reality itself as "democratic". Balibar refers to this ambiguity of Spinoza's concept of democracy as the "theoretical privilege of democracy" (Balibar 2008: 33) and outlines it as follows: "It is as if the concept of democracy were being given a double theoretical inscription. On the one hand, it is a particular kind of political order, which results from determinate causes. But it is also the 'truth' of every political order, in relation to which the internal consistency, causes and ultimate tendencies of their constitutions can be assessed" (Balibar 2008: 33). Spinoza, as will be shown, had reasons to think that something analogous to democracy in the sense of a particular arrangement in a particular state is characteristic of reality as such, and it was with respect to such a substantive, ontological "democracy" that he pleaded for democracy in this particular (institutional) sense. The point is that (institutional) democracy embodies in the most straightforward and transparent way the mechanism that is present in every state and every society (Balibar 2008: 34). Democracy makes this embodiment possible by guaranteeing the greatest degree of freedom, and thus the greatest degree of civil obedience. Human nature as developed through cultivation, which Spinoza calls the "emendation of the intellect" (cf. Spinoza 2002: 1–30), leads to a conscious and deliberate union of individual powers and their transfer to collective authority. Democracy thus emerges as a "natural state," but one that can be variously distorted in relation to the extent to which our intellect is not sufficiently emended.

Given the crucial importance that the notion and practical possibility of the emendation of the intellect has, according to Spinoza, for the ethical life and its axiological dimension, it is to be understood that when Spinoza first mentions democracy and civil law in TTP, he writes about the necessity of observing the basic rule "only deeds are arraigned, and words are not punished" (Spinoza 2002: 390). A more precise definition from the same work is similarly uncompromising: "Such a community's right is called a

democracy, which can therefore be defined as a united body of men which corporately possesses sovereign right over everything within its power" (Spinoza 2002: 530). Spinoza's classification of political regimes, in the context of which we might further understand the nature of democracy, is neither clear nor settled in his work. While in TTP he speaks of theocracy, monarchy and democracy (Spinoza 2002: 526–535), in TP he distinguishes between monarchy, aristocracy and democracy (Spinoza 2002: 700–754). One might find some development of opinion in this, but I think one can be content with the hypothesis that the cause of this ambiguity is primarily contextual - while TTP is largely an analysis and commentary on Old Testament texts and Jewish history, TP is a late work where Spinoza aims for a more "geometrical," i.e. systematic and purely logical form of interpretation.

Such interpretive challenges are typical of Spinoza's work. For example, his classification of different kinds of knowledge is similarly "dual": while in his early Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect he distinguishes four degrees of knowledge (Spinoza 2002: 7), in his Ethics he distinguishes only three (Spinoza 2002: 267–268). However, careful interpretation has convincingly shown that this discrepancy does not pose a substantive problem (Tippelt 2010: 36–37), since his incrementalism allows us to understand the essential qualities (sensible knowledge, rational knowledge, etc., like monarchy, aristocracy, etc.) as distributed on a single scale, since the reality they refer to is one. This even allows Balibar to conclude that "theocracy is equivalent to democracy" (Balibar 2008: 47). The point is that if a theocracy is a form where all law is not transferred to any man but only to God, and where the enemies of the state are seen as enemies of God and the laws of the state are his commandments (Spinoza 2002: 539–540), then from Spinoza's perspective such a form is the essence of any situation that may arise. But this can be understood when we become more familiar with Spinoza's ontology.

3. Democracy of nature. Onto-theological justification of the idea of democracy

Spinoza is one of the most prominent figures in the metaphysical tradition that Martin Heidegger has described as onto-theological (Heidegger 1957: 68–69). Metaphysics is concerned with questions relating to the structure of reality, the definition of being and the nature of being, and onto-theology, according to Heidegger, conceives of God as the supreme being who grounds everything else. While some other thinkers belonging to this tradition, such as Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle, have distinguished the divine being from other reality substantively (numerically) (Boulnois 1995), Spinoza's thesis is that anything that exists is a modus (modification) of the only existing thing (Spinoza 2002: 217–243). This has far-reaching implications, of which let us note three: first, the totality of nature (the universe, being) is materially identical with every individual thing that one

is accustomed to perceive in ordinary experience as distinct from all other things (Spinoza 2002: 255); second, nature is identical with God (Spinoza 2002: 321); and third, the mind is the same thing as the body (Spinoza 2002: 280; Marschall 2009). Spinoza's conception is often called monism or substance monism because the only thing that exists according to him is referred to as substance (Spinoza 2002: 217).

This concept has been interestingly discussed in the context of the political-philosophical issue of governance. The "substantive" tradition, which places the notion of this permanent, independent and therefore inert basis at the centre of philosophical systems, has been subjected to criticism, often assessed as overwhelming (Machovec 1968), by Egon Bondy (2007). Milan Valach, like Bondy a supporter of direct democracy, generalized Bundy's conclusions to the effect that the substantive ontological model is the basis of a totalitarian ethical conception that in practice leads to political totalitarianism (Valach 1993). Political totalitarianism shares with the substantive model a basic split in reality, and thus conceptual ontological dualism, according to these authors, allows for the legitimation of social and political inequality. Substance, the enduring basis of being, has the function of an archetype that is realized in society through various forms of authoritarian rule.

However, both Bondy and Valach overlook the fact that the concept of substance does not have to be interpreted only dualistically, i.e. it does not have to be part of only a dualistic conceptual framework. For Bondy, the substance model has always been a dualism, and Valach adopted his conception. They both assume that if substance (God, Nature, Matter, World Soul, Absolute Spirit, etc.) is permanent, completely free and unchanging in its independence – because it is not externally influenced – then the individuals derived from it are ephemeral, unstable, unfree, without higher value, and dependent. Substantive ontology, onto-theology, and hence the whole metaphysical tradition, appears in this light as latent totalitarianism, in which assessment of above-mentioned authors were far from alone (cf. Derrida 1978). Spinoza's revolutionary innovation, however, lies precisely in the fact that the particulars in his conception were not separated from the substance, but participate in it as its modifications.;

In fact, Spinoza's conception was explicitly directed against the ontological dualism represented in his time by the philosophy of René Descartes, to the interpretation of which Spinoza devoted an early work, Principles of Cartesian Philosophy and Metaphysical Thoughts (Spinoza 2002: 108–212). Spinoza's magnum opus, Ethics, can then be well grasped as a comprehensive presentation of a non-dualist alternative to Cartesian philosophy, in which Descartes himself (unlike other philosophers) is even named several times. Descartes undoubtedly belongs to all the traditions mentioned - onto-theological, metaphysical and substantive. When we speak of his dualism, we are referring to the way in which he radically split reality conceptually into two domains that are so little connected that explaining their mutual interaction is extremely difficult. Descartes referred to these two domains as "res extensa" (extended thing) and "res

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cogitans" (thinking thing), understanding them as "finite substances" and adopting the name "psychophysical problem" for the question of their interrelation. Both finite substances are derived from one other substance that is infinite, see God (Descartes 2017: 27–34).

Descartes' dualism seemed to Spinoza to be completely confused. If a substance is a cause of itself, it must necessarily be unconstrained by anything, and therefore infinite. As such, it is necessarily one and eternal, and therefore whatever is in it is part of it, and only as part of it can it be understood (Spinoza 2002: 217–243). Spinoza does not thereby deny ordinary experience, characterized by its corporeality and its distinct difference from thought. His significant innovation was to grasp these qualities not as different substances, things or individuals, but as "attributes," that is, forms of manifestation of a single substance, or ways in which that single substance can be understood. This is true both at the level of abstract ontology and, for example, in the field of anthropology: we cannot say (according to Spinoza) that the mind controls the body; in fact, the mind is only one of the ways in which the same thing manifests itself that also manifests itself as a body. Everything is spiritual, and everything is also material. There is no God to rule over the reality he created somewhere outside himself, although there is a God, but one who is identical with all reality.

The suspicion of the anti-democratic potential of Spinoza's substantialism seems to have been allayed, but there is another one concerning his monism/pantheism (a concept that blurs the distinction between God and the created world). According to Alexis de Tocqueville, who viewed the seductiveness of pantheism, this religious conception holds the threat of becoming the metaphysical basis of democratic despotism (Tocqueville 2002: 513–514). The fear that pantheism, however seductive to the democratic mind, may ultimately drown all democracy in despotism, is based on the notion that pantheism is an implicit fatalism manifested by a surrender to the "forces of the age." According to Tocqueville, pantheism threatens individuality because it declares that all is one. But there is an obvious misunderstanding here. One can certainly agree that pantheism can be abused by the forces of propaganda and manipulation to contribute to the creation of a malleable unified mass. However, a more careful consideration of the Spinozist view leads to a more pro-democratic view: that all things form a unity in their interconnectedness does not mean that they cease to exist; on the contrary, they exist precisely through their interconnectedness as the effects of necessary causes and causes of necessary effects. Determinism does not imitate the "shadiness" of events, their unreality; on the contrary, what guarantees the full significance and reality of events is precisely the universal causality.

We must give Spinoza's ontological determinism more thought. Indeed, the idea of democracy could seemingly be contradicted by this conception, since in its anthropological application it amounts to a denial of the existence of free will. Indeed, in TTP Spinoza argues that humans do everything "according to Nature's laws or that they

are regulated by God's decree and direction" (Spinoza 2002: 417). If humans do not have the ability to make free choices, then what is the point of democracy? What good is a fundamentally unfree person's formal ability to participate - even indirectly, as in a representative democracy - in political decision-making if they never do so of their own free will? The essence of these objections can already be found in the so-called "pantheism controversy" (cf. Jacobi 2004), the subject of which could be summarized in a nutshell as the question of whether the fatalist must give up on ethics, or whether the consideration of good and evil is relevant for someone who understands all events as predetermined.

Spinoza, however, goes beyond the dualistic level on which this question is posed. This key point is well captured by Balibar: "From this standpoint, free will is a mere fiction. But again, there is a crucial difference: Spinoza does not identify the eternal will of God with grace, in opposition to human nature; in a striking and decisive move, he identifies it with nature itself, in its totality and its necessity" (Balibar 2008: 12). The Spinozist identification of the "eternal will of God" with nature and its order abolishes the substantive duality of the determinate and the predetermined, the active and the passive. In TTP, Spinoza was acutely aware of the importance of abandoning the idea of God "as ruler, lawgiver, king, merciful, just, and so on" (Spinoza 2002: 431): "Thus they imagine that there are two powers quite distinct from each other, the power of God and the power of Nature… God's power to be like the rule of some royal potentate, and Nature's power to be a kind of force and energy" (Spinoza 2002: 444).

In Spinoza's pantheistic view, we are not the controlled material or instruments, but rather, as it were, the limbs, the parts of the body of that one lawgiver - a metaphor that may be reminiscent of the famous cover of Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan. There are several respects in which the philosophies of Hobbes and Spinoza converge, but in terms of the relationship between the individual and the whole, we find important differences: Leviathan is an artificial being and is subject to natural laws, rather than determining them. Thus, whereas in Hobbes individuals are subject to laws they do not themselves create, in Spinoza nothing ever happens to anything in which it does not itself have a share. In particular, the comparison with Hobbes shows that Spinoza's entire philosophy is "inherently democratic" - there is never, at any ontological level, any one-sided determination at work. For Spinoza, nature itself is democratic because its power is the sum of the power of individual things, and nothing that happens to it is ultimately the result of anything it is not.

Thus, much as freedom of the will is a mere dream, it is also a "toy" that can be discarded, for Ethics sees real freedom in something else: "That thing is said to be free which exists solely from the necessity of its own nature, and is determined to action by itself alone" (Spinoza 2002: 217). There is only one such thing, the substance (Deus sive natura), from which, however, the individual is not materially different, but a modification of it. The long line of rational insights demonstrated in Ethics leads the individual to a

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certain steadfastness, inner liberation and peace.[4] The man who has cultivated his understanding of life to the point where he can live rationally is, according to Spinoza, the best citizen. He understands that "the man who is guided by reason is more free in a state where he lives under a system of law than in solitude where he obeys only himself" (Spinoza 2002: 357). He obeys the law not out of fear but because he wants to live freely. To be free is to follow one's own nature, and this is best possible where there is peace and security.[5] Not out of free will, but for rational reasons, the individual accepts the social contract, and insofar as he is rational, he wants the good of the whole community. This is true as long as the state fulfils its purpose, i.e. creates the conditions for individual freedom.[6]

If everyone has a rational nature that necessarily leads them to seek cooperation, tolerance and non-violence, then what is the need for the state? While Spinoza argues in TP that the better the state is organized in terms of peace and security - and nothing else - the less rebellion and contempt for the law there is, he nevertheless acknowledges that "men are not born to be citizens but are made so" (Spinoza 2002: 699). If everyone reasonably did what is useful, laws would not be necessary, but people are usually plagued by what Spinoza called passive affects, passions (Spinoza 2002: 277–319). However, passions such as hatred, domination and envy can also be the source of social bonds (Balibar 2008: 85); the political body must protect its purpose through laws, because its greatest danger is not outsiders but its own inhabitants (Spinoza 2002: 702). In a state that fulfils its purpose, every rational, and therefore intrinsically free, person is indeed content, but just as the individual's knowledge, the degree of their self-understanding and self-liberation evolves, so does the state and its forms, and so achieving a well-functioning democracy is "very difficult, yet it can be found", which is not at all surprising, since "all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare" (cf. Spinoza 2002: 382). The role of knowledge, as Spinoza understands it, in relation to democracy is the subject of the following section.

[4] "The wise man, insofar as he is considered as such, suffers scarcely any disturbance of spirit, but being conscious, by virtue of a certain eternal necessity, of himself, of God and of things, never ceases to be, but always possesses true spiritual contentment." (Spinoza 2002: 382)

[5] "The best way to organize a state is easily discovered by considering the purpose of civil order, which is nothing other than peace and security of life." (Spinoza 2002: 699)

[6] "It is not, I repeat, the purpose of the state to transform men from rational beings into beasts or puppets, but rather to enable them to develop their mental and physical faculties in safety, to use their reason without restraint and to refrain from the strife and the vicious mutual abuse that are prompted by hatred, anger or deceit. Thus the purpose of the state is, in reality, freedom." (Spinoza 2002: 567)

4. Direct access to the truth. Gnoseological and ethical point of view

The issue of knowledge is closely related to democracy in at least two fundamental respects. First, it is the question of who is capable of such a depth of understanding of politically relevant matters as to be competent to make decisions on matters of common and long-term importance. A cursory acquaintance with Spinoza's philosophy often gives the impression of elitism rather than a pro-democratic mentality. If Spinoza was showing how commonly people are wrong about the most important things (and his experience of the reception of his ideas could only confirm the strength of common opinion), should he not have sided with Plato, who recommended that a "philosopher king" should rule?[7] The second reason for the relevance of gnoseology to democracy is more specifically Spinozist: if an "ignorant man" cultivates his affectivity through the refinement of reason, then, according to the Ethics, he gradually ceases to be "driven hither and thither by external causes" and becomes aware "of himself, God, and things." He ceases to fear that "as soon as he ceases to be passive, he at once ceases to be at all," and so can be guided by his nature and reason (Spinoza 2002: 382).

The competence to decide can be grasped on the level of the theory of knowledge as the openness of access to the truth, or as the degree of openness of access to it. From this point of view, the question of democracy was examined by the proponent of its direct form. For instance, Valach (2009) points out that from a gnoseological point of view, two types of thinking can be distinguished, one of which appears to be more or less totalitarian in the political dimension, and the other more or less democratic. Totalitarian thinking builds on the assumption of the existence of absolute truth and on the hypothesis that only some have access to absolute truth.[8] Immutability is the "mantra" of totalitarian thinking - either the absolute truth itself is immutable, or something that ensures that the same people have access to it, despite the fact that the truth itself changes.

Some proponents of democracy, especially its direct or semi-direct forms, derive their arguments from gnoseological relativism (Polák 2013). If truth is a matter of point of view, it seems that everyone "has something to say." However, Spinoza was certainly not a relativist and insisted that his philosophy was the right one: "I do not presume that I have found the best philosophy, but I know that what I understand is the true one," he wrote in a letter near the end of his life (Spinoza 2002: 949). The essence of the totalitarian conception of truth, then, is not whether truth is absolute or relative, but that truth is "separate" and access to it is not self-evident. It is on the privilege of open access

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[7] "Until philosophers are kings, or the kings and princes of this world have the spirit and power of philosophy, and political greatness and wisdom meet in one, and those commoner natures who pursue either to the exclusion of the other are compelled to stand aside, cities will never have rest from their evils" (Plato 1888: 170-171).

[8] Valach's generalizing approach here is somewhat similar to that of Karl Popper (cf. Popper 2020), the two of them also sharing their anti-authoritarian agenda.

to the truth that the totalitarian bases his claim to rule on his exception of holding the keys to the door that allows him passage into the space of truth that is denied to the "uninitiated."

In what sense can truth be separated? Where is truth if only the rich, the educated, the experienced, the successful, the elected, etc. have access to it? It turns out that authoritarian or totalitarian thinking is based on the assumption of ontological dualism that we have already encountered above. The totalitarian is an implicit substantive dualist - he believes in the existence of a "second reality" that is ontologically (i.e., in terms of quality of being) superior to the world in which we live and to which our "democratically available" knowledge pertains. The totalitarian principle that only some have access to the truth is reflected in the political model of power dualism, which is realized in social practice through the creation of a hierarchical structure in the form of a power pyramid.[9] In contrast, the proponent of democracy does not deny the existence of absolute truth but argues that all have access to the truth to varying degrees, according to their abilities, interests and experience. Absolute truth, in this view, may be immutable or may change, but it is not separate from the reality in which we live, and therefore it cannot be denied that everyone has access to it.

Access to the truth, the knowledge of truth, is incremental in Spinoza. Its lowest level is knowledge by hearsay, followed by immediate sensory experience, above which is reasoning with the help of general concepts, and its highest level is intuitive knowledge, which is based on the view that everything is contained in God, and which is thoroughly developed in the final part of Ethics (Spinoza 2002: 243–277). The content of our knowledge, ideas, are constituted by our affects (states of joy and sorrow), and we make decisions and act on the basis of them. The quality of affects reflects the degree of cognition: while lower degrees of cognition (inadequate ideas) constitute passive and mostly sad affects, intuitions shape joyful activity (Spinoza 2002: 363–382). By affect, Spinoza did not mean some fleeting surface state. Rather, it can be said that in parallel with the degree of access to truth, according to him, one's overall character changes, including one's goals and one's motivations.

Nature always remains the same, for it is based on the concept of the individual as such: "Each thing, insofar as it is in itself, endeavours to persist in its own being. The conatus (striving) with which each thing endeavours to persist in its own being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing itself" (Spinoza 2002: 283). But our ability to conform to our conatus, our capacity to persist, is graded according to the extent to which we are confounded by the conflicts of our passive affects, shaped by inadequate knowledge based on kaleidoscopic sensory or mediated experience, and the extent to which we can balance

[9] Cf. Valach: "The Substantive Ontological Model thus presents itself to us as the basis of an ethical conception which, whether it spells it out or merely contains it unspokenly, is totalitarian (and in its practice is the basis of political totality)" (Valach 1993: 95).

or overcome these passive affects with active affects, shaped by our adequate rational grasp and intuitive insight into the holistic nature of reality in its mosaic interdetermination of all things (Spinoza 2002: 325).

In direct proportion to our cognition and the quality of our affectivity, our view of the meaningfulness of the political community becomes clearer. “In the case of all actions to which we are determined by a passive emotion, we can be determined thereto by reason without that emotion,” he says in Ethics (Spinoza 2002: 351). While the ignorant person is motivated to civil obedience by fear of threat to his conatus, the wise person knows that his ability to remain in being will be most aided by other people and harmonious cooperation with them. This is a strongly pro-democratic argument. If an individual understands in what respect a rule benefits him, he cheerfully accepts it, whereas if he does not understand it, he perceives it as an external compulsion and is only able to submit to it grudgingly, only implicitly and unreliably. Thus, the state, which fulfils its purpose of providing peace and security for the free life of the individual, has the opportunity to exploit the far wider potential of its citizens than a despotism whose stability is necessarily threatened by their discontent.[10]

5. A crisis of democracy? An update on Spinoza's reflections

In today’s political situation, which is often characterized by the phrase “crisis of (liberal) democracy” (e.g. Baroš, Bláhová and Dufek 2019; Crouch 2004; Norris 2011; but also already Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki 1975), the question arises whether Spinoza offers any suggestions that might help us to cope with this situation. As explained in the previous section, the state can arise not only from passions (especially the fear of death) but also from the active affect of love for life, for community and for God. In addition to the distinction between passivity and activity, the motivating affects of individuals can also be distinguished according to whether they have the value of joy or sorrow. While joyful affects such as love strengthen us, sad ones such as fear weaken us, and so it is logical that the management of a community should seek to ensure that its members are motivated to participate actively in its development primarily by the active affect of love.

Love and other joyful affects arise in us as a result of the cultivation of our intellect. While fear, which is always irrational, is constituted by inadequate and chaotic ideas, love is shaped by the intellect, which is based on the association of ideas, and thus benefits from the association of different minds, because they too are ideas (of the respective bodies). Therefore, it is logical for the community to strive to provide an environment that allows for the freest possible communication. The basic rule of social life in such a “logical community,” then, according to TTP, is that “only deeds are arraigned, and words are not

[10] Cf. Balibar: “Thus political society has an immanent power through which it can be transformed so as to become the context of the life that is properly ‘human,’ a life that is lived with joy” (Balibar 2008: 98).

punished" (Spinoza 2002: 390). The importance of communication and its freedom is also highlighted by Balibar: "Passions and reason are both, in the final analysis, modes of communication between bodies and between ideas of bodies. In the same way, political regimes should be thought of as orders of communication: some of them are conflictual and unstable, others are coherent and stable" (Balibar 2008: 95).

A political regime in crisis should therefore first and foremost restore the freedom of communication (the mutual exchange of ideas), which must certainly not take the form of mere passive information of the citizens by the management of the state. The people's opinion must not be manipulated, but efforts to rationalize public debate should be encouraged. Given that the greatest danger to the state is not foreigners but its own inhabitants (Spinoza 2002: 702), citizens must be constrained as little as possible, as they will have no interest in undermining state authority. Since everyone ultimately values their own freedom most, it turns out that the best guarantee and means of strengthening political stability is freedom of thought and expression (Spinoza 2002: 566–572).

Democracy, especially direct or semi-direct democracy, is sometimes perceived as dangerous (cf. democratic despotism – Tocqueville 2002: 513) or inappropriate in case of an urgent need for action. However, that democracy has its risks is not news; risk is inherent to freedom. It is not possible to give up all risks, because this would also mean giving up all meaning (recall that "the purpose of the state is, in reality, freedom" - Spinoza 2002: 567). Bemoaning the lack of responsibility of citizens is false, because it is the situation of small risks and limited freedom that leads to irresponsibility. From the perspective of the ontology laid out in the section "The Democracy of Nature," each individual has a direct influence on the whole in which he or she participates. If we take this fact seriously, we cannot ignore the fact that it implies everyone is directly responsible for the whole. It is the denial of this responsibility and a life seemingly free of risk that leads to the demoralization of citizens. Citizens, through their tolerance of the law and their obedience, still participate in the formation of the whole, but with their limited ability to intervene in collective decision-making, their "commitment" decreases and their capacity to reason declines. A functioning democracy, on the other hand, allows for the relatively unobstructed and uncomplicated operation of that undeniable reality of our direct participation in the whole and direct access to the truths that concern it. This participation involves risks, but these are balanced by the responsibility to which the sense of freedom leads us.

The recipe for averting the crisis of democracy is therefore certainly not to choose an undemocratic alternative, but rather to remove its obstacles by deepening it. The citizen's participation in the co-creation of collectively relevant decision-making is both healthy in the sense that it empowers the individual in his freedom and responsibility and motivates him in his efforts to improve his reason, and it is adequate to the natural competence of each individual, which consists in the undeniable existence of a certain degree of true knowledge. The instruments of direct democracy lend themselves as a way

of shifting part of the responsibility to the citizens and thus reflecting the ontological fact of direct participation in a concrete political reality without the disadvantages of possible distortion due to over-mediation. As an analogous reflection of the gnoseological fact of direct access to the truth, it is then possible to propose the extension of transparency consistently in all public affairs. If it seems that the basic requirements for transparency have already been enforced, I propose the following: if all agenda relevant in collective decision-making is to be publicly available, this also means the publicity of all voting (e.g., in the form of a publicly accessible database of the votes of all voters).

6. Conclusion

The present study has attempted to show the relevance of Spinoza's political-philosophical thought for our times. In his philosophical system, whose central concept is substance or free thing (causa sui), he justified democracy as the natural and therefore the best state. He did so in a time that did not favour his vision of the world, thanks to which he may stand out as closer to the current mindset. With his incrementalist-holistic thinking, he was able to grasp the significance of efforts to democratize society, and so it makes sense to turn to him when in doubt about its effectiveness. From the perspective of Spinoza's onto-theology, democracy in the sense of participation in the greater whole and in all of reality, in their formation and meaning, is natural, even divine. The purpose of democracy as a set of legally established procedures is only to ensure that in the political environment the natural participation of each individual in reality is distorted, complicated and obscured as little as possible. Democracy can emerge from its crisis strengthened if it understands the crisis as a reminder of the overlooked deficiencies.

The purpose of the state is not to control, restrict and educate, but to empower and provide room for free development. Restricting the freedom to present information, communication and freedom of speech is the worst thing the state can do. Realistically speaking, it is rather a matter of ensuring that the degree of restriction by the state does not exceed the degree of tolerance of which citizens are capable, and at the same time that citizens do not relent in their efforts to have restrictions on personal freedom removed as far as possible. From Spinoza's point of view, each of us actually participates in collective processes, and no democratic procedure establishes this participation, but only - ideally - removes the distortion imposed by an excessive degree of mediation. If this share is not respected, the individual becomes dangerous to the state, and his share of reality is realized through the effect of this danger. The "logical community" therefore does not restrict the individual in his views and their expression, thus allowing him to become a

wise man who values his freedom, and thus is most motivated to obey the laws and protect his state.[11]

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[11] "The military force should be composed only of citizens, with no exemptions… the military force… is to be assigned no pay, freedom being the supreme reward for military service. In a state of Nature it is simply for freedom's sake that each strives his best to defend himself, and he expects no other reward for his valor in war but his independence. Now in a civil order the citizens as a body are to be considered as a man in a state of Nature; so in fighting on behalf of that civil order they are all battling for themselves and serving themselves" (Spinoza 2002: 715–717).

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