

Spinoza and Democracy

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Perhaps the most striking feature of Benedict Spinoza's political philosophy is his defense of democracy as the best regime. Indeed, as one commentator observed with only slight exaggeration, Spinoza is arguably "the first democrat in the history of philosophy" (Feuer 1980: 139). Spinoza bases the superiority of democracy on two central claims; namely, that democracy is the most rational as well as the most natural regime. It is most rational in the sense that a large collectivity of individuals is less subject to irrational and destructive passions than a single monarch or an aristocratic elite.¹ It is most natural in the sense that democracy "approaches most closely to the freedom nature bestows on every person" (TTP 16.11, 20.14). Among the various elements of Spinoza's philosophy, it is the naturalness and inherent rationality of democracy that thus place it at the peak of political possibilities.

However, Spinoza's praise of democracy is not unproblematic. As several commentators have noted (Smith 1997: 121-22; Smith 2003: 132-33; Mara 1982: 142), despite his claims about the rationality of democracy, Spinoza's writings are replete with pessimistic expressions about the capacity of most human beings to act rationally, either as individuals or in a collectivity (TP 1.5, 2.18; TTP 16.3).² Likewise, Spinoza's unflattering account of human beings in a state of nature in which all individuals are "by nature enemies" (TP 2.14) indicates that there is no obvious connection between the naturalness of an institution and its facility to provide adequately for human needs (McShea 1968: 82; Battisti 1977: 631-2). What then are we to make of Spinoza's claims about democracy if, as he insists, the multitude who form the foundation of democratic government are not reliably rational and nature does not support human sociability? It is not difficult to imagine with only a minor alteration of the terms of Spinoza's argument that democracy's putative areas of strength—reason and naturalness—could also be seen as its greatest defects.

In order to address these complexities, this paper will reconsider Spinoza's argument in light of a specific question: Does Spinoza believe that the superiority of democracy is essential or instrumental? By instrumental, I mean an argument based on the assumption that there is a given aim of political life that democracy tends to produce more regularly and more completely than other regimes, although not exclusively. For example, the proper end of political life is X and there are various instruments possessing distinct natures that are typically more or less successful at securing X. The instrumental understanding of democracy's superiority, which is the view shared by most commentators, assumes that for Spinoza the aim of political life is the rather low goal of providing for basic human physical needs such as security and peace (Gildin 1973: 385; Geismann 1991; DenUyl 2008: 12, 16; DenUyl 1983: 166-67; Mara 1982: 135-36; Curley 1996: 331). According to the instrumentalist interpretation, Spinoza identifies a problem in the state of nature that government is designed to solve, and democracy simply does it better than any other political arrangement.

The more radical claim is that the superiority of democracy is an essential element of its nature. From an essentialist perspective, the premise is that democracy establishes conditions or embodies a vital principle that no other regime even approximates. For example, there is a principle of quality in democracy (Q) that makes the proper aim of politics (X) achievable such that even a mediocre democracy would be superior to the very best aristocracy or monarchy. Alternatively, Q may stand in for the perfection of the fundamental principles animating every

¹ Spinoza 2007: 16.9, 20.2 (hereafter TTP chapter and section) and Spinoza 2000: 6.3 (hereafter TP chapter and section)

² See also Spinoza 2006: 4.54s.129 (hereafter E part, then preface, proposition, scholia, corollary, appendix, definition or axiom, and finally page).

conceivable form of government. The operating assumption for the essentialist approach is that the aim of political life is more elevated than just security, and rather that Spinoza identifies a substantive idea of a human good or end such as the promotion of moral virtue and individual intellectual development that democracy actively and in some sense uniquely among regimes promotes (e.g., Rosenthal 2001: 335; Smith 2003: 144; Kossman 2000: 81; Israel 2004: 26). To the extent that other regimes reflect this principle Q, they too are democratic. In other words, the essential superiority of democracy would reduce every form of political arrangement into categories of more or less perfect democracies.

The aim of this paper is two-fold. First, it will examine Spinoza's claims about democracy to demonstrate that his argument for superiority rests on the tendency of democracy to produce a salutary and formative purpose. Thus, Spinoza believes that the superiority of democracy lies in part in its instrumentality in facilitating a specific purpose. This purpose extends, however, beyond simply establishing peace and security, and rather includes democracy's capacity to provide the best translation into political and social terms of an authoritative moral idea based on human equality. One goal of this paper then is to provide an analysis of Spinoza's account of this formative purpose in light of his claims about democracy's reasonableness and naturalness.

The second aim of this paper is to consider what it would take in Spinoza's terms for the superiority of democracy to be essential as opposed to merely instrumental. It will be argued that Spinoza believed that the formative purpose of democracy is the basis for its essential superiority because this formative purpose involves the promotion of a democratic political culture that makes achievement of individual development and sound social order the conscious goal of political association. Spinoza's account of democracy reveals his assumption that the construction of social reality is a fundamentally democratic phenomenon. Thus, democracy plays the same theoretical role in Spinoza's political philosophy that the concept of substance supplies in his metaphysics—pure democracy is the prime socio-political matter out of which all other conceivable arrangements are modifications. For Spinoza, a regime's capacity to form "one mind" among the body politic replaces traditional notions of sovereignty as the measure of a government's strength and utility. On the basis of an examination of both Spinoza's political philosophy and his metaphysics, we will see that Spinoza identified democracy as the perfection of the state precisely because it best reflects the natural dynamic of power relations among the governors and the governed.

The superiority of democracy would not, however, be essential to its nature if it were not also the regime that makes individual distinction and development one of its proper goals. The formative purpose of democracy, on one level, involves turning naturally selfish and passionate beings into citizens capable of adhering to rule of law (TP 5.2). However, I will argue that the superiority of democracy is also connected to its capacity to promote Spinoza's vision of human excellence in his metaphysical work *The Ethics*. Although metaphysics appears distant from the theoretical concerns raised by democracy, the ideas of human freedom, virtue, and the scientific perspective aiming at knowledge of natural causes are deeply embedded in Spinoza's argument for democracy. While he never suggests that individual intellectual perfection is simply reducible to the effects of social experience, Spinoza does identify an important socio-political dimension to individual development and even, I shall argue, illuminates a direct causal relation between the possibility of human perfection through philosophy, and the perfection of the political regime embodied in the "free state," or democracy.

The paper proceeds in four sections. Sections one and two examine Spinoza's arguments about the naturalness and rationality of democracy respectively. It will be shown that Spinoza's account of natural right and the state of nature reflect important aspects of his support for democracy. Section three considers Spinoza's reevaluation of standard notions of sovereignty and political legitimacy, and his coincident effort to replace the traditional paradigms of regime classification with a new understanding of the democratic foundation of social reality. Section four examines the formative purpose which Spinoza maintains if the basis for the superiority of democracy. This section will try to highlight the way in which Spinoza's account of democratic political culture is structured so as to draw out and ultimately connect the purpose of political society and the most fundamental drives and capacities of the human mind.

Democracy and Natural Right

Before we can determine whether the superiority of democracy is for Spinoza essential to its nature or instrumental to some independent good, it is necessary to examine the grounds of his case for democracy; namely, its naturalness and its rationality. We will begin by considering the question of nature and then turn in the following section to the issue of democracy's rationality.

The claim that democracy is the most natural form of government is central to Spinoza's claim for its superiority. But how exactly is it most natural and why is what is most natural superior in terms of political arrangements? In order to address these questions, we need to consider the two distinct but connected accounts of nature presented in Spinoza's political theory, on the one hand, and in his metaphysics, on the other.

For our purposes, the key treatment of nature in Spinoza's political philosophy is his seminal account of the state of nature in chapter 16 of the *Theologico-Political Treatise* for it is here that Spinoza argues the foundations of every state derive from "the natural right (*jus*) which everyone possesses" (TTP 16.1). If one aspect of the strength of democracy is that it most closely approaches the "freedom nature bestows on every person" (TTP 16.11), then the state of nature is crucial for understanding Spinoza's account of democracy. The main feature of Spinoza's state of nature theory is its curious mix of freedom and determinism. By nature, Spinoza states, "each individual thing has sovereign right to do everything it can do" (TTP 16.2). The only limits on natural freedom are physiological, not moral. Natural right is then simply "the rules determining the nature of each individual thing" (TTP 16.2). These rules are not moral or ethical, but rather the innate characteristics of species or natural kinds. As Spinoza explains by means of one of the most famous demonstrations in his entire corpus, "fish are determined by nature to swim and big fish eat little ones" (TTTP 16.2). The natural root of the political equality that Spinoza associates with democracy is clearly visible in the state of nature for the "supreme law of nature" requires nothing more than that "each thing strives to persists in its own state so far as it can" (TTP 16.2). This morally blameless natural preservationist striving or "*conatus*" is possessed by every creature and is subject to the same universal limitation: "what no one desires or no one can do" (TTP 16.4).³

The egalitarian distribution of natural right also, however, produces stark inequalities in the natural condition. Not only are all fish constrained to inhabit water and big fish blamelessly eat little fish, but as Spinoza relates: "There is in Nature no individual thing that is not surpassed in strength and power by some other thing...by which the said thing can be destroyed" (E 4.ax. 105). That is to say, there is always a bigger fish. The logic of the blameless exercise of preservationist striving in the state of nature culminates in Spinoza's striking claim that "the right

³ For the central role of *conatus* in Spinoza's account of human psychology, see E 3.P6-7.66-67.

of each thing extends so far as its determined power extends” (TTP 16.2), or in other words “the natural right of every individual is coextensive with its power” (TP 2.4).

Does Spinoza mean by this that in the state of nature (and by extension democracy) might makes right, so that if a being can do something, it must have a concurrent right to do it? The answer appears to be that in principle might or power does indeed constitute the natural basis of right insofar as Spinoza does not identify any other external principle of natural justice that can control or even justify actions. Spinoza insists that right is grounded in natural desire, especially self-preservation, and does not strictly speaking rely on reason (TTP 16.3). There is no transcendent rational standard by which to authorize actions in the state of nature. Indeed, Spinoza appeals to the authority of St. Paul no less to support his radically conventionalist conclusion that there is no good and evil in the state of nature before “law is established” by human society (TTP 16.2).

Equality is a problematic in Spinoza’s state of nature because while the equal right shared by all creatures to strive for their preservation grounds natural right, it is precisely the egalitarian basis of this right that makes the successful application of this right difficult. While humankind may display greater equality than there is among fish, this only produces a greater sense of powerlessness vis-à-vis the whole of nature including other human beings. So little actual power, and thus right, does the individual have relative to the rest of nature that Spinoza admits “as long as human natural right is determined by the power of each single individual and is possessed by each alone, it is of no account and is notional rather than factual” (TP 2.15). To make matters worse, not only does the individual have little actual power to preserve oneself in the state of nature, Spinoza concludes that human beings are “by nature enemies” (TP 2.14) because of the relative equality within their kind, which makes all individuals competitors for survival.

The naturalness of democracy is thus in one sense simply a logical deduction from the natural right that lies at the foundation of every state. Democracy is natural insofar as it rests on the simple but naturally sound logic that majorities have the power, and thus the right to compel obedience from minorities (Smith 1997: 133, 136). Moreover, by the terms of Spinoza’s natural right theory, democracy is the strongest government because of its reliance on the power of the multitude. Compared to other regimes built on anything less than a popular foundation, democracy produces a greater capacity to secure the preservation of individuals by collecting their power as a multitude. As Spinoza reasons: The greater the number of men who thus unite into one body, the more right they will all collectively possess” (TP 2.15, 2.13; cf. McShea 1968: 82). The naturalness of democracy is thus demonstrable as an inverse relation to the state of nature as individual right means very little in the totality of nature, but acquires greater salience literally with the size of the collectivity to which the individual is united.

The naturalness of democracy understood in this way clearly holds troubling normative and empirical implications. To start, if democracy is the form of government most like the state of nature, then Spinoza seems to be basing at least part of his claim for the superiority of democracy on the premise that the individual in a democracy has very little power or right compared to the collectivity. One vote really doesn’t make a difference, but tens of thousands of likeminded individuals may have an impact on the democratic process. Even as an empirical observation Spinoza’s natural right theory hardly establishes an ironclad argument for the naturalness of democracy. For instance, could the claim that right is coextensive with power not also easily justify the rule of a heavily armed minority or “enforcement cadre” (Curley 1996: 326)? At the very least, it is not clear why on the basis of Spinoza’s treatment of the state of

nature anti- or undemocratic political possibilities would not satisfy the requirements of rightful rule.

For its part, Spinoza's metaphysical account of nature supports the central claim of his political theory that democracy is a microcosm of nature. It does so, however, while effectively collapsing any distinction between human and non-human nature. "Individuals" in the state of nature are similar to species or natural kinds according to which each particular in its kind is free to act within the natural laws of its kind. Spinoza draws the connection between his metaphysics and the state of nature account quite explicitly when he proposes that "the power of nature is the very power of God who has supreme right to all things" (TTP 16.2). By virtue of Spinoza's celebrated doctrine of substance, God is the totality of all material things in the world of which every particular is simply a mode of universal and eternal substance.⁴ God is the one "self-caused" being "whose essence involves existence," that is to say, God is the one substance "which is in itself and is conceived through itself" (E1.def1.3; E1.def3.4). The identification of God with the unity of substance "consisting of infinite attributes" means that all individuals are simply modes of attributes of God "which necessarily exist" (E1.def6.4; E1.22-23).

Spinoza's state of nature account is constructed on the basis of the central principles of his metaphysics. The essence of nature is God, and thus "the universal power of the whole of nature is nothing but the power of all individual things together" (TTP 16.2). It is on the basis of this global perspective of nature that "each individual thing has the sovereign right to do everything it can do" (TTP 16.2). As the greatest collected power of individuals, democracy would then be the best translation in political terms of the central metaphysical truth embodied by Spinoza's concept of God.

However, once again the political implications of Spinoza's account of nature by no means simply point to an obviously optimistic reading of democracy. Spinoza's pantheistic metaphysics effectively eliminates God as an extrinsic normative force in the natural order. By positing God as the totality of material substance and all its infinite attributes, real and potential, Spinoza requires us to expand our mental horizons beyond the confines of an anthropocentric view of natural right. Nature by this logic is not a static concept reflecting a fixed reality because the exercise of natural right is constantly changing the conditions that could be called natural. Despite some suggestion to the contrary from Spinoza himself, grasping nature is not simply a matter of adding up all the individuals in material form because individuals (smaller fish) are constantly being eliminated and replaced. Natural right is both the cause and the reflection of principles of change in nature. Thus it is not surprising that Spinoza's metaphysics radicalizes the amoral character of his state of nature theory by proposing not only that there is no good and evil in nature, but also that evil is simply a metaphor for inadequate scientific knowledge (E4.P64.134; TP 2.8). By placing the focus on causality as the key principle of intelligibility in nature, Spinoza presents a conception of nature that is characterized by the fluid dynamic of change rather than stability of natural kinds.⁵ The scientific perspective animating Spinoza's metaphysics makes the intelligibility of nature inseparable from awareness of constant change.

The political implications of Spinoza's metaphysics as it relates to democracy are thus two-fold. First, if democracy is the most natural regime, then it is also in Spinoza's terms the

⁴ For good treatments of Spinoza's conception of substance and its potential political implications, see DenUyl 2008: 96-102 and Smith 2003: 32-49.

⁵ However, the fact that Spinoza does not appear to have any distinct idea of extinction might suggest some element of stability or even permanence in his notion of natural kinds.

most unstable government. Or more positively, one could say that democracy is the form of government most reflective of the fluid dynamic of change in power relations caused by natural right. Second, Spinoza's metaphysical account of nature only confirms the suspicion that natural equality is a problem for politics. In one sense, democracy appears to be the complete antithesis of the state of nature rather than its closest political approximation. In democracy, the negligible natural right or power of the individual is pooled to produce a genuinely effectual power relation. It does so, however, while not redressing the natural imbalance of power between the individual and the multitude that govern. The individual could be as defenseless and right-less vis-à-vis the political community as one could be in relation to the whole of nature. Thus, on its own the naturalness of democracy appears to recommend it very little.

The Reasonableness of Democracy

Spinoza's second major argument for the superiority of democracy is that it is the most rational form of government. In this respect, he dramatically departs from the venerable tradition of philosophical anti-democrats dating back to Plato. The challenges confronting our efforts include not only analyzing Spinoza's claim that government by the many is rational, but also making sense of the tension between the two arguments composing Spinoza's defense of democracy; namely, its rationality and its naturalness. As we have just seen, the state of nature is for Spinoza the condition least impacted by reason, so that what is natural and what is rational appear to be mutually exclusive categories. Democracy can be the most natural or the most rational regime, but it is not clear how it can be both at once.

It is useful to begin by recognizing that Spinoza argues democracy is the most rational government in several senses. First, he extrapolates from the natural right to self-preservation that a majority in any society would never seek to harm itself (Smith 1997: 133). This is analogous to the classical republican argument that contrasts the public virtue of the citizen against the corrupt, self-interested courtiers and elites. However, classical republicans were typically not democrats, favoring rather mixed or balanced constitutions.⁶ Moreover, the historical charge against democracy from philosophers was never really about the motives of the people, but rather about popular ignorance and intemperance. Thus, the more controversial claim Spinoza makes for democracy is that irrational ideas are unlikely to filter through the legislative process: "For it is almost impossible that the majority of a large assembly would agree on the same irrational decision" (TTP 16.9). This assumes that a common impulse or passion will not work through a large group, but given the centrality of the passions in Spinoza's account of human psychology, what could give him any confidence about this?

The argument based on popular motives and common sense tends at best to support the superiority of democracy negatively. That is to say, it may be less prone to irrationality than a corrupt noble class or a foolish monarch unchecked by any other power. However, Spinoza's more radical claim is that democracy has the capacity to control human appetites and desires by bringing individuals within the "limits of reason, so that they may dwell in peace and harmony" (TTP 16.9). The inherent rationality of democracy thus reduces on one level to an empirical question insofar as democratic government is able to bring more people to unite in support of civil laws. Spinoza assumes that a large group of people can only unite around laws that are based on sound reason (TP 2.21, 3.7). The theoretical inclusiveness of democracy allows for the creation of stable rational consensus that filters out extremes. Reason would thus serve as a

⁶ For Spinoza's relation to the classical republican literature, see Blom 1985.

unifying force in society. But upon what specific rational conclusions does Spinoza expect a democratic people to unite?

The obvious candidate for such a principle of practical reason is self-preservation. However, Spinoza's natural right theory gives no special status to reason as a constitutive element of right. If anything, natural right has more to do with pleasure and pain than with reason, which is just as well for Spinoza believes that "men are led by blind passion more than by reason" (TP 2.5). It is for this reason that there is no difference between the fool and the wise man in the state of nature (TTP 16.2). We must be careful, however, to distinguish between an argument that reason is constitutive of right, which Spinoza emphatically rejects, and an argument about right that discards any rational standard whatsoever, an argument which Spinoza does not make. Even within the 'might makes right' logic of Spinoza's natural right theory there is a role for reason to help determine the limits of right: "what no one desires or can do" (TTP 16.4). Spinoza hereby opens up the possibility for some implicit a priori conclusions of practical reason that are not the product of experience (TP 4.4). Thus, while Spinoza's account of nature precludes any transcendent standard of action containing strong normative content, it may be possible as Curley suggests, to identify a rather weaker, but by no means negligible, claim for reason's role in determination of right (Curley 1996: 318-22). In this view, self-destruction limits right for both the individual and the state are bound by the "universal rules governing natural things in general and *reason in particular*" (TP 4.4 italics added). Both the state and the individual in the state of nature can do wrong, not by violating a transcendent moral code but rather if "it does, or suffers to be done, things that cause its downfall" (TP 4.4).

By insisting that nothing does right when it acts self-destructively, Spinoza quietly smuggles into his argument a notion of right that is not simply reducible to power. Individuals and states have the power to do all manner of stupid and self-destructive actions, but in doing so they contradict some vital rational element of their own drive for survival. While Spinoza frequently collapses the individual and the state when discussing natural right, it is important to observe key differences between them as well. When a government acts contrary to reason, and thus "falls short of its own self, or does wrong" (TP 4.4), this impacts infinitely more individuals than could any individual actor. The political community, Spinoza insists, alters the individual's relation to questions of right so much that he even dismisses the possibility of good and evil, right and wrong prior to civil law (TP 2.18, TTP 16.2). The state thus embodies a principle of reason and collective preservation that is not simply reducible to the reason of all individuals that compose it. The political "self," as a relational construct, can bring many individuals under the rule of reason their complex interaction with the laws. Democracy, then, would be the most rational government if it does one or both of two things. First, if it brings more individuals under the rule of law than any other government. And second, if it provides the most consistently rational policies that best secure its citizens.

Both of these possibilities are complicated by Spinoza's expressed pessimism about the rationality of the multitude. Can democratic government be rational, if the multitude who are the base of its power are not? At one point Spinoza defines democracy as "a united gathering of people which collectively has the sovereign right to do all that it has the power to do" (TTP 16.8). But power, as we have seen, is not identical to right. As several commentators have observed, Spinoza's statements about the multitude are hardly encouraging (Smith 1997: 121-22; Smith 2003: 132-33; Mara 1982: 142). Distributed liberally throughout Spinoza's corpus are many less than flattering references to the "capricious mind of the multitude...governed not by reason but by passion alone" (TTP 17.4), to the "fairy tale" belief that the common people can

live solely by reason (TP 1.5, 6.1), and Spinoza's classic contribution to the anthem of bourgeois distrust toward the masses: "The mob is fearsome, if it does not fear" (E4.P54s.129).

It will hardly do to observe that Spinoza can be a committed democrat without being naïve about the rational capacities of the multitude (Feuer 1980: 133). This is undoubtedly true, however, the anti-popular sentiments in these passages cannot be dismissed so easily. It is useful to place these remarks in the context of Spinoza's attack on monarchy for his complaints about the effect of human passions cut at least as much and probably more against the irrationality of aristocracy and monarchy than against democracy.⁷ Indeed the most prominent practical example of a regime in Spinoza's political writings—the Hebrew polity of the Old Testament—was, he insists much more peaceful and secure as a republic than when it transformed into a monarchy (TTP 18.4). Thus, Spinoza's concerns about the irrationality of the multitude need not disqualify it as the best regime.

The more fundamental problem involves making sense of Spinoza's claim that democracy is both the most rational and the most natural regime, given that the state of nature is of all the theoretical possibilities for human life, the least characterized by reason? It seems that the more Spinoza gives to the natural power of reason, the less intelligible his state of nature account becomes. While on the one hand, Spinoza insists à la Hobbes that all human beings are naturally enemies because of the primacy of the passions, especially fear, he also surprisingly endorses the traditional scholastic view of natural sociability (TP 2.14-15). Reason shows "men's true interest" is to escape the "misery of solitary life" for "nothing is more advantageous to man than man" (TTP 16.5 [see also TTP 5.7-9]; E4.P18s.112). Reason indicates the way to exit the state of nature through a contract by which everyone surrenders their natural freedom and reaches an agreement "to decide everything by the sole dictate of reason" (TTP 16.5). Thus, in Spinoza's formal account of the origin of government, it is reason that supplies the remedy for the defects in nature for even if individuals do not naturally desire what is to their advantage, they can be brought to see it and the passions of "hope for greater good and fear of greater loss" (TTP 16.5) can be brought to support the conclusions of reason.

Spinoza's argument for natural sociability helps us to further clarify his understanding of the reasonableness of democracy. His primary theoretical concern is not to explain how the irrational multitude can attain sufficient reason to form society. The passions of fear, hope and his confidence in a democratized epistemology by which "everyone has the power of clearly and distinctly understanding himself and his emotions, if not absolutely, at least in part" (E5.P4s.146) probably suffice in this respect. Quite the contrary, the main theoretical thrust of Spinoza's argument about human sociability is to undermine the notion of the state of nature as a pre-civil condition. There is no equivalent to Locke's theory of the dissolution of government in Spinoza's political theory because the latter assumes that "it is impossible that men should ever utterly dissolve" civil order (TP 6.1). Whereas several of Spinoza's contemporaries such as Samuel Pufendorf and Hugo Grotius drew highly conservative political implications from the premise of natural sociability, Spinoza emphatically does not follow their authoritarian reading

⁷ At one point in the unfinished eleventh chapter of the *Political Treatise* devoted to analyzing the nature of democracy, Spinoza makes the surprising claim that if the patrician class who rule an aristocratic state could select their membership freed of bias and guided by zeal for the public good, "there would be no state to compare with aristocracy" (TP 11.2). This statement has led some commentators to conclude that a form of aristocracy is Spinoza's genuine best regime rather than democracy (McShea 1968: 123, Prokhovnik 2004: 210). This interpretation is mistaken, however, because Spinoza's point here is to show that human nature and long experience reveal the irreducible problem in relying on the virtues of individuals as the basis of rule. Thus, this gesture toward an idealized aristocracy only strengthens Spinoza's case for democracy.

of the normative character of contracting.⁸ Rather Spinoza posits a conception of human reason that undermines any effort to present contract as a legitimating instrument for government power, or even simply as an explanatory device to account for the transition from the state of nature to civil society (McShea 1968: 85). With respect to the issue of democracy specifically, the situation seems to be, if sociability is a product of reason, then democracy can be both the most rational and the most natural form of government insofar as it most fully reflects the requirements of human sociability. A further examination of this possibility to which we now turn.

Sovereignty and Democracy

On the surface Spinoza's association of democracy and nature hardly looks like a recipe for good government. Nature, for Spinoza, is amoral, conflict ridden and an inherently unstable condition of constantly changing power relations. His efforts to identify democracy with reason seem similarly problematic precisely because of this underlying conception of nature. However, as we have seen, Spinoza's argument for natural human sociability presents a potential means to resolve the tension between the two claims that set democracy as the peak of political possibilities.

Spinoza's reflections upon sociability not only raise important questions about the status of his state of nature account, they also require us to consider his attitude towards political legitimacy and obligation. Among Spinoza's contemporaries, contract theory and the doctrine of sovereignty were the primary conceptual devices through which they sought to explain the legitimacy of government and the political obligations of subjects and citizens. However, while Spinoza employs the vocabulary of contractualism and sovereignty in both of his major political writings, he systematically denudes these concepts of their conventional meaning.⁹ I will argue that the central point of Spinoza's treatment of sovereignty and contract is to show their inadequacy as explanatory devices for political legitimacy. It is the concept of democracy that provides the basis of Spinoza's alternative account of political phenomena.

Spinoza's manner of discussing the origin of government and the rights of sovereign powers has been noted by many commentators to be curious, if not outright contradictory, inasmuch as he presents a decidedly absolutist formal account of contract and sovereignty, and then proceeds almost immediately to undermine the conditions that make this formal absolutism possible (Gildin 1973: 378, Curley 1996: 317, Prokhovnik 2004: 228). In order to understand this process, however, it is good to recognize Spinoza's assumption about the theoretical connection between the putative transition from the state of nature to political society, on the one hand, and the power of government established by this process, on the other. The starting point of this formal account is the Hobbesian recognition by a number of individuals of the need to leave the conflict-ridden state of nature. Reason combines with the passions of fear and hope to inform individuals of the need to honor their promises and most importantly that individuals cannot retain their natural right entire (TTP 16.7, TP 3.6). Spinoza presents this act of contracting as a kind of transfer of power whereby individuals "transfer all the power they possess to society," and thus effectively surrender to the sovereign their right to be judge of the

⁸ For the authoritarian contract theory of Grotius and Pufendorf, see Ward 2004: chs. 3 and 5.

⁹ This is in contrast to the view of several commentators who maintain that one of the big differences between TTP and TP is that there is little or no discussion of contract in the latter work (Balibar 1998: 50-51, Prokhovnik 2004: 208, Feuer 1980: 139-40). However, this overlooks the fact that the crucial chapter 4 of TP "Rights of Sovereign Powers" deals quite directly with the idea of contract (e.g. TP 4.6).

means of their own self-defense (TTP 16.7-8, TP 3.3). Spinoza practically concludes this formal account of contract with a Hobbesian flourish by requiring absolute obedience to the sovereign without any reservation or institutional check that would destroy the unity of sovereign power (TTP 16.8, 16.21). Spinoza insists that individuals party to the contract “are obliged to carry out absolutely all the commands of the sovereign power, however, absurd they may be” (TTP 16.8). Reason apparently requires nothing less.

Spinoza’s treatment of sovereignty and contract presents something of a paradox. On one level, standard contractualism is perfectly in keeping with Spinoza’s metaphysics and its emphasis on the logical priority of efficient causality. The contract motif thus has a certain epistemic value in the larger context of Spinoza’s political theory. However, on a more fundamental level, the formal properties of Spinoza’s account of contract and sovereignty appear to contradict the central tenets of his metaphysics for according to Spinoza’s natural philosophy of power the right of the state (as of the individual) can only be based on its power. The state emphatically is not authorized by any moral right inhering in the individuals who compose it. In the context of Spinoza’s natural right theory the notion of individuals transferring power to the state is either fantasy or redundant because the state does not need to justify its power if it can exercise it.

Our suspicions that Spinoza’s fuller reflections on the nature of the state differ considerably from his initial formal account are confirmed when he admits that while his treatment of contract and sovereignty generally conforms to practice, these concepts in many respects “will always remain merely theoretical” (TTP 17.1). The largely theoretical character of Spinoza’s account of sovereignty assumes particular urgency when we recognize that this entire discussion assumes that the model is set by “the fundamentals of the democratic republic” (TTP 16.11). In stark contrast to Hobbes, Spinoza maintains that it is democracy rather than monarchy that expresses the essence of political construction, and thus democracy is the only form of government that he feels the need “to discuss explicitly” (TTP 16.11) in the context of a treatment of contract and sovereignty. Spinoza claims that to understand the other forms of government, one needs only to refer back to the conclusions he has “just proved” with the example of democracy (TTP 16.11). This puts Spinoza’s absolutist rhetoric in a new light as it turns out that democracy is the only regime that Spinoza believes can practically fulfill Hobbes’ theoretical requirements of absolutism as anything less than a majority in society is unlikely to be capable of securing obedience in the long-term.

Spinoza’s treatment of the connection between democracy and the idea of sovereignty contains more than simply a critique of Hobbes’ political philosophy. Rather Spinoza employs this theoretical postulation of democratized absolutism to attack the very foundations of the dominant accounts of political legitimacy and obligation in seventeenth-century Europe.¹⁰ Spinoza’s reconsideration of these issues revolves around two key propositions. First, he challenges the assumption that the transfer of natural right from individuals to the sovereign can ever be complete for the transferee never “ceases to be a human being” with an element of natural freedom (TTP 17.1). Spinoza herein identifies a basic principle of subjectivity or

¹⁰ Feuer (1980: 140), Kossman (2000: 72) and Prokhovnik (2004: 208) argue that Spinoza’s theory of absolute sovereignty is directed primarily against the views of mixed constitutionalism then influential among the Orangist faction in Holland. While the Dutch context is certainly important for understanding Spinoza, his argument for democracy is a more radical innovation that sought to undermine the philosophical foundations of the very idea of conceiving of government as a form of contract. For more on Spinoza’s relation to the seventeenth-century absolutist sovereignty theory, see Ward 2009: 97-100.

interiority which ensures that regardless of the pretensions of contractual absolutism, no individual can ever fully surrender their “faculty of judgment,” or cease to be “master of their own thoughts” (TTP 3.8, 20.4). He also however points to a logical conclusion deduced from his natural rights philosophy as another important limit on the extent of obligation contract can reasonably produce. Promise breaking is, it turns out, a matter of right for Spinoza, if the violation of trust serves a rational end such as self-preservation (TTP 16.6). Self-interest provides a rational standard of a kind for obligation. Spinoza herein does not so much depart from Hobbes as expose largely unspoken normative assumptions buried in the logic of Hobbesian contractualism. Hobbes’ entire project depends, in Spinoza’s view, on assumptions about the moral investment implied in contract that simply expect more from the capacity to adhere to duty than Hobbes’ own account of human psychology can reasonably support.

The second proposition operating in Spinoza’s reworking of contractualism has to do with the assumption that governments are obliged to serve the common good not due to contractual obligations, but rather by virtue of the fact that ruling exclusively for the sake of a mere section of society will require violence. Spinoza’s association of reason with the common good, on the one hand, and violence with particular interests, on the other, supplies the context for his astonishing claim that “no one has maintained a violent government for long” (TTP 16.9). This argument goes beyond merely making gestures toward some expression of consent being necessary to found legitimate governments. That argument is, as Hobbes tried to demonstrate, adaptable to explaining the founding of potentially very authoritarian monarchies. Rather Spinoza’s aim with regard to illuminating the conflict between reason and violence is to make a specific point about the nature of democracy.

Democracy, as Spinoza presents it, involves the practical recognition that every government is “at greater risk from its own citizens... than from its [external] enemies” (TTP 17.1). In democracy uniquely among regime types, no individual “transfers their natural right to another in such a way that they are not thereafter consulted but rather to the majority of the whole society of which they are a part” (TTP 16.11). It is consultation rather than consent, a process of communication rather than a single formative expression of intent that separates democracy from every other political arrangement. However, democracy also emerges as the fullest expression or even theoretical perfection of the operating principles of every stable regime with the signal difference being that in democracy the permanent communicative relation of rulers and ruled is part of “the explicit mode of operation of the political system” (Walther 1993: 55). It is not surprising then with this democratic principle of consultation as a model that in his comparative regime analysis in the *Political Treatise* Spinoza makes the incorporation of consultative principles into monarchy and aristocracy the basis for their improvement (TP chs. 6-10).

The paradigm shift from contractualism to Spinoza’s conception of democracy requires that securing the loyalty of the people replaces compelling obedience as the central political problem. Indeed, one important aim of Spinoza’s extended discussion of the biblical Hebrew Republic in chapters 17 and 18 of the *Theologico-Political Treatise* is to demonstrate the ways in which the Mosaic regime succeeded and failed in securing the loyalty of the people. If, as Spinoza suggests, the real test of political success lies in “devising a form of government that was not in greater danger from its own citizens than from foreign foes,” then the key to establishing a durable state “depends chiefly upon the loyalty of its subjects” (TTP 17.4, 17.2). By replacing obedience with loyalty as the prime political imperative, Spinoza confirms the central role of human subjectivity and psychological interiority in his naturalistic account of the

state: “Obedience is less a question of an external than an internal action of mind. Hence he is most under the dominion of another who resolves to obey every order of another wholeheartedly” (TTP 17.2). To the extent that a meaningful consultative, if not even electoral, process is required to secure this loyalty, then democracy reflects a flesh and blood political truth, which can never be reduced to the formal abstractions of contract and sovereignty doctrine.

There are two principal conclusions that we can draw from Spinoza’s account of sovereignty and contract. First, while Spinoza retains some features of formal contractualism, he nonetheless empties this concept of any strong normative or juridical content à la Hobbes, Grotius, and Pufendorf (Geismann 1991: 36, 44, DenUyl 1983: 7, 11). The tension between the formal unity of power expressed in sovereignty and the actuality of power relations due to the natural force of society is, according to Spinoza, irresolvable within the terms of contractualism (cf. Balibar 1998: 57-58). The state of nature remains a feature of political life not as the vestige of pre-civil individual rights, but rather as a concrete manifestation of the irreducible subjectivity in human psychology. Spinoza suggests that contract may perhaps retain some semantic value, if it is accompanied with a conceptual flexibility that expresses a wide variety of consensual possibilities ranging from the minimal conditions such as the fluid arrangement of social forces in a non-revolutionary situation to the maximal (i.e., most democratic) condition which expresses the popular will of society structurally through majoritarian political institutions. However, democracy like Spinoza’s concept of nature itself, reflects a fundamental duality that contract is simply incapable of expressing fully; that is to say, the duality of a thing expressing both existing power relations and the constantly unfolding process of change. Democracy reflects this process of change underlying any formal political arrangement.

The second principal conclusion we can draw from Spinoza’s treatment of sovereignty and contract relates to his understanding of the connection between democracy and the totality of nature. Spinoza employed democracy as the model for his account of political sovereignty, and justified this approach on the grounds that democracy most closely approximates the state of nature. The “foundations of the other forms of government” are “clear enough” from what we know about democracy (TTP 16.11). Democracy then serves on the political level a role parallel to the one played by the doctrine of substance in Spinoza’s metaphysics. The naturalness of democracy, and the metaphorical state of nature from which this naturalness partly derives, signifies the status of democracy as the prime and universal political matter in relation to which all other regimes are modes. Thus, Spinoza’s philosophical monism has a political counterpart in democracy.

The Formative Purpose of Democracy

Spinoza’s attempt to reveal the theoretical difficulties that the standard notions of contract and sovereignty confront in reconciling the formal unity of power and the actuality of power relations in real societies allows us to achieve some clarity with respect to his claims about the superiority of democracy. For Spinoza, democracy is a concept encompassing multiple phenomena in relation to the rational expression of power, but it is at root a principle of equality that operates at both the material and psychological level. On the material level, democracy expresses the equality deriving from the calculus of physical power inhering in natural right. Democracy thus is the strongest form of government because it is structurally disposed to collect the greatest mass of individual powers into a social force capable of compelling obedience to its rule. With respect to human psychology, it is the government type most consistent with the principles of

subjectivity and individual freedom that signify a sphere of mental interiority that simply cannot be surrendered to society.

The central question then for our purposes is: How can these two aspects of Spinoza's account of democracy be reconciled—the one reflecting communal pressures of weight and number (not to mention brute force) and the other the incipient anarchy of irreducible subjectivity? In other words, Spinoza's treatment of democracy presents a double problem in conceiving how any society can be formed from such radically free beings, or conversely, how any measure of individual freedom can be guaranteed in a system of government explicitly built upon massive social forces?

I shall argue that the formative purpose to combine natural communal force and individual subjective freedom is both the defining characteristic of Spinoza's idea of democracy and the basis for his claim for its essential superiority among regime types. The essential superiority of democracy lies in its capacity to generate the social reality Spinoza describes as "one mind." This principle of unity implies that every state is built upon a psychic union more or less stable depending on the extent and depth of intellectual agreement on fundamental principles. The formative purpose of democracy then aims at nothing less than the reconciliation of individual development and social good, between the "free state" and the "free man," even as Spinoza's idea of democracy presupposes a distinct causal relation between the two conditions.

In order to understand this formative purpose, it is necessary to examine how this purpose manifests on the social and individual level. In terms of social reality, Spinoza presents democracy as the perfection of the state. By this is meant democracy's capacity to advance the primary goals of the state; namely, to promote peace, security, and personal freedom. Understood simply as a function of natural right, democracy is the logical conclusion to the idea of social construction for if each individual "has that much less right the more he is exceeded in power by the others collectively," (TP 2.16) then democracy is the strongest government and produces the weakest individuals. Democracy is both the perfection of collective human power and a kind of normative force, for the mind of the state seeks to guide all citizens in regard to "what is good, what is bad, what is fair and what is unfair" (TP 4.1). This is the natural power coinciding with any force that assumes the exclusive right to make laws. Thus, in terms of natural right, the individual appears to be subsumed in Spinoza's democratic social reality.

However, the reconciliation of the individual and society emerges as the central preoccupation of Spinoza's conception of democratic unity. The rational basis of the state in the process of becoming perfected as "one mind" depends on the assumption that the state cannot represent one mind unless "its laws are such as prescribed by reason" (TP 2.12, 3.7). Democracy is the best state precisely because the unity of its social power is "founded on and guided by reason" (TP 5.1). In democracy the individual participates in this unity not simply due to coercive power of the state, but rather primarily because the perfected state encourages a way of life characterized "by reason, the true virtue and life of the mind" (TP 5.5). The enhanced rationality of democracy is then not contingent upon circumstances for it is central to its very nature. Thus, the democratic perfection of social reality has transcendent political significance inasmuch as society and the state reflect an idea of right that is more than simply the aggregated sum of individual powers, "but [rather] of a people that is guided as if by one mind" (TP 3.2). This singleness, for Spinoza, is only achievable in a democratic government in which "the safety of the whole people" is supreme law, and thus every individual can rationally submit to its rule without prejudice (TTP 16.10). Spinoza here, of course, assumes that majority rule is a reasonable simulacrum of the unanimity that is impossible to achieve (TTP 20.14) because it is

government by a “majority of the whole of which each individual is a part” (TTP 16.11).¹¹ Reason narrows the criteria of the state, even as it facilitates expansion of the popular foundation.

For Spinoza, democratic unity is a fundamentally intellectual condition intersecting subjectivity and massive social forces. Spinoza’s natural right philosophy clearly recognizes that democratic government, more than any other form, has the right (i.e., power) to oppress individuals and use violence to secure peace. However, as we have seen, he identified an important rational dimension in right, which provides some genuine normative content to his largely utilitarian reflection that “we have moved from arguing about right, and are now discussing what is beneficial” (TTP 20.3). There is right as power and then there is doing right intelligently. Spinoza’s fundamental point about democracy, however, extends beyond empirical observations about its utility, and points rather to a heightened awareness of the rational sense of right as a function of subjective freedom or autonomy. As Spinoza claims: “Everyone by *supreme right of nature*, remains master of their own thoughts” (TTP 20.4, italics added). The reference to the “supreme right of nature” indicates that the ground for rejecting authoritarian government is not purely empirical or pragmatic. It relates largely, if not primarily, to a quality deriving from human reason that resembles contemporary notions of dignity (contra DenUyl 2008: 59). While at times, Spinoza seems to suggest a utilitarian ground for freedom by insisting that persecutory laws are “completely useless” (TTP 20.12), at other points he indicates that the real problem of oppression lies less in its ineffectiveness than in the palpable violation of human nature it produces. Tyrannical governments are not castles in the air, but rather are “more like a desert than a commonwealth,” (TP 5.4) because they seek to transform human beings “from rational beings into beasts or automata” (TTP 20.6). The terrible vice of tyranny then is that it can to some extent achieve the goal of degrading humanity to which it aims.

Thus, one of the major interpretive challenges posed by Spinoza’s treatment of democracy lies in harmonizing the considerable empiricism of his natural right philosophy with his use of the heavily normative-laden discourse of freedom and slavery. While peace and security are definitely among the proper goals of the state, Spinoza insists that the virtues of peace cannot simply be reduced to an empirical question of measuring the absence of social conflict for “if slavery, barbarism, and desolation are to be called peace, there can be nothing more wretched for mankind than peace” (TP 6.4). Spinoza admits that on one level this remains a largely empirical question for he assumes that genuine peace is really only a product of democracy. However, the operative term here is “genuine” peace. Spinoza’s qualification relates to the notion of human dignity according to which slavery is synonymous with the rule of the passions. It is the rational dimension of human nature that supplies the basis of equality, and provides the chief source of resistance to the pretensions of authoritarian government. Spinoza’s point is not that dignity is the foundation for exalted teleological assumptions about the state, or for that matter human nature, but central to Spinoza’s democratic creed is the idea that human reason at the very least grounds political equality. It is on this basis that Spinoza concludes “the true purpose of the state is in fact freedom” (TTP 20.6). The primary concern then of the democratic state is its moral foundation, rather than metaphysical aspirations, and the intellectual

¹¹ With this Spinoza is perhaps open to the charge that his idea of democracy is naïve about the harmony between majority rule and minority and individual rights. Spinoza would likely respond to his critics that the more dangerous naiveté among liberals would be relying on formal institutions to defend individual freedom without broad public support. In this sense, Spinoza would posit democracy and a democratic political culture rather than institutionalism as a reflection of genuine political realism.

basis of the superiority of democracy is that it alone among regimes has as one of its basic principles a consultative process that regularly refers the state back to its efficient cause.

The formative purpose of democracy also operates at the level of the individual for Spinoza identifies features of human nature which require that peace and security cannot exhaust the aim of political association. Insofar as democracy is the perfection of the state, the issue of the status of the individual emerges with greater urgency. Individual development is a theme both in Spinoza's metaphysical and political writings. However, it is in the context of his metaphysics that the intellectual foundations of his idea of human dignity, so pivotal to Spinoza's democratic politics, are most fully illuminated. As is well known, "freedom" and "blessedness" are the two central concepts in Spinoza's account of virtue in the *Ethics*. Freedom is primarily a mental condition reflecting the dignity derived from the active power of rational self-control: "the degree and nature of its [the mind's] command over the emotions and in checking and controlling them" (E5.pref.143). Conversely, "human bondage" is an essentially passive intellectual state in which individuals are enthralled to their emotions and suffer from the ignorance produced by an inadequate understanding of natural causes (E4.pref.103; E4.P2.106). For our purposes, it suffices to recognize the extent to which Spinoza attempts to intellectualize the concept of freedom, and indeed is prepared to import morally charged terms with political resonance such as slavery and bondage into what amounts to a philosophy of mind. The analog for truncated intellectual development is quite explicitly political slavery.

This politicization of mind is, however, less apparent in Spinoza's famous discussion of "blessedness" in Part 5 of the *Ethics*. Blessedness is the term Spinoza uses to describe the "highest conatus of mind," namely the intellectual love of God (E5.P25.154). Given Spinoza's pantheistic doctrine of substance, the intellectual love of God amounts to a dedicated striving for a scientific understanding of nature and humanity's place in it (E4.P57.130). The effect of this intellectual love of God on the individual is, Spinoza suggests, a conception of happiness: "Blessedness is nothing other than that self-contentment that arises from the intuitive knowledge of God" (E4.App.139; E4.P37s1.119).¹² The upshot of Spinoza's account of blessedness is that it makes philosophy, or at least a highly scientific modern natural philosophy, the sine qua non of human happiness. It also, however, seems to suggest a radically de-politicized notion of virtue associated more with astrophysics and molecular biology than moral philosophy. In this sense, individual perfection not only appears to be unrelated to social virtue (that is to say to justice), but it also raises serious doubts about human equality. The happy individual is a knower whose perfection depends on faculties and opportunities that may or may not be distributed equally among humankind. As Spinoza opines: "All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare" (E5.P42.161).

We may thus safely conclude that given the profoundly naturalistic basis of Spinoza's metaphysics, it would be absurd to reduce individual perfection to a mere by-product of social existence. However, this begs the question of what role, if any, democracy plays in individual development? Does the political excellence of the best regime type have any relation, causal or otherwise, to the promotion of philosophy? This question has generated considerable debate among Spinoza scholars. The majority of commentators tend to interpret Spinoza's view of the aim of politics as a low one focused on securing peace and order (e.g., Curley 1996, Mara 1982, DenUyl 2008). In this view, democracy is essentially no better or worse at promoting human excellence, although it does best the less exalted job that politics is meant to do. For others,

¹² Of the three kinds of knowledge Spinoza identifies at E2.P40s2.51, that is "imagination," "reason," and "intuition," blessedness or the intellectual love of God is primarily related to the last of these.

Spinoza's endorsement of democracy is connected to his perception that it is the regime that best promotes, not only peace and security, but also intellectual virtue, and thus most adequately fulfills the true and highest aim of political life (e.g., Smith 2003: 141, Kossman 2000: 81). In other words, there is wide agreement that for Spinoza the perfection of the state revolves around producing "one mind," but with respect to what exactly?

There is certainly textual evidence to support the argument that politics has very little to do with Spinoza's idea of happiness and individual perfection. For instance, when he lists the "three principal categories" of human desire as (i) the understanding of things through "their primary causes," (ii) the acquisition of the "habit of virtue" and (iii) to live "securely and in good health," Spinoza states that the attainment of the first two desires "depends chiefly on our own capabilities" (TTP 3.5). Not only does living in peace and security depend primarily on external causes that the intellectual desires do not, but Spinoza also draws no apparent connection between the satisfaction of the last desire and the two others. The impression that political society has little to do with promoting intellectual excellence is only intensified by Spinoza's claim that "absolutely no one can be compelled to be happy by force of law" (TTP 7.22), not to mention his frequent statements that the aim of the state is peace and security (TTP 20.6; TP 1.6, 3.3, 3.6). If the aim of politics is purely security this would indicate that the superiority of democracy is fundamentally instrumental, and that Spinoza understood individual freedom and subjectivity primarily as concerns connected to the issue of peace and security.

However, there are also features of Spinoza's argument that suggest he saw a more formative role for the state in individual development. On the most basic level, it is important to observe that Spinoza's account of natural sociability contains a strong indication that there is a social dimension to individual development. The aim of every state, he claims, is for individuals "to live securely and satisfyingly" (TTP 3.6, italics added). What precisely does the qualifier "satisfyingly" add to Spinoza's apparent focus on security? Surprisingly, it is in the *Ethics* rather than the political writings that Spinoza clarifies the community's role in promoting humans satisfaction. It is here that Spinoza reaffirms the intrinsic rationality of social existence in contrast to the theoretical state of nature: "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" (E4.P73.137). Moreover, the character of the state makes a difference for if a person "dwells among individuals who are in harmony with man's nature, by that very fact his power of [intellectual] activity will be assisted and fostered" (E4.App.139). Simply put, the people around us have an impact for good or ill on our capacity for intellectual development. Spinoza even goes so far as to draw a connection between social forces and the highest state of intellectual development when he claims that a community that encourages "humility, repentance, and reverence" allows for individuals to "live by the guidance of reason," and ultimately to "become free men and enjoy the life of the blessed" (E4.P54s.129). While blessedness is clearly a function of personal autonomy and intellectual freedom, we can at least conclude that Spinoza did not intend to claim that individual development is impervious to the influence of social, and even political, forces.

I would like to suggest that in Spinoza's view the formative impact of politics, and indeed the aim of the democratic state, is inseparable from the intellectual development of the individual. His most striking expression of this formative role is perhaps his reflection that "Men are not born to be citizens, but are made so" (TP 5.2). How does Spinoza believe that citizens are produced out of basic human material? Does citizenship bear any relation to enhancement of rational capacities beyond simply the requirements of peace and security? In response to the first

question, Spinoza clearly believes that the state plays an enormous role in the construction of civic personality, for even if political obedience is a result of “the internal action of mind,” he nonetheless admits that “minds too are to some degree subject to the sovereign power, which has various ways to ensure that a very large part of the people believes, loves, hates, etc., what the sovereign wants them to” (TTP 17.2). The state can influence, and even subject, a person’s judgment for good or ill in “almost unbelievable ways” (TTP 20.2). Thus there is little mystery as to what Spinoza believed to be the primary external cause of individual judgments and loyalties.

The central question for our purposes, however, is the role of democracy in Spinoza’s conception of citizenship. We must avoid even the slightest impression that Spinoza was some kind of extreme communitarian who believed all politics is good, or appear to deny that he maintained that politics, not to mention theology, frequently interferes with individual intellectual development. He clearly did think that much of what passes for politics is bad and that historically government and the churches have done far more to hinder human development than to promote it. Rather in keeping with the narrower focus of this paper, the question remains whether Spinoza thought democracy, the most natural and rational regime, promotes individual excellence or can reasonably be understood to include such development as one of its principal goals. Does the superiority of democracy perhaps rest precisely on its unique capacity to assist individual intellectual development, in addition to securing peace?

In order to address this question, it is important to recall that while Spinoza judges democracy favorably at least in part because of its capacity to secure peace, he also maintains that peace cannot be reduced to a condition characterized by an absence of conflict. Rather Spinoza defines peace as absence of fear and presence of hope. The pivotal feature of Spinoza’s conception of peace is that it is primarily a product of his idea of virtue. The intellectual root of peace is a virtue coming from “strength of mind,” promoted most emphatically and deliberately as the “highest aim” of society in democracy (TP 5.4). The “best state” allows individuals to pass their lives in “harmony” with physical security, but “especially by reason, the true virtue and life of the mind” (TP 5.5). In effect what makes the “best state” superior is that it allows individuals to live “satisfyingly,” that is to say in a “union and harmony of minds” befitting a rational creature (TP 6.3, TTP 3.6, 20.6). Insofar as peace is a social condition with specific intellectual requirements, and democracy is the “best state” to secure the peace, then Spinoza implicitly draws a connection between democracy and the intellectual virtue derived from rational self-control and adequate ideas about the causes of things. The suggestion is that knowledge about human passions and the operation of mind provides understanding of the causes of war and strife. Indeed, Spinoza drew these political implications quite explicitly out of his metaphysics in the *Ethics* as he claimed among the many benefits flowing from his philosophy of mind is “that it teaches the manner in which citizens should be governed and led; namely, not so as to be slaves, but so as to do freely what is best” (E2.P49s.60). Surprisingly, Spinoza indicates that some measure of philosophy contributes to the achievement of the primary goal of political society. The superiority of the best regime thus seems inseparable from the relation of philosophy and politics.

It is with respect to the freedom to philosophize that the connection between the two elements of the formative purpose of democracy—social and individual—becomes most apparent. Near the conclusion of the *Theologico-Political Treatise* Spinoza imposes another crucial criterion for political excellence, which is that “the best state accords everyone the same liberty to philosophize” (TTP 20.9). He thus explicitly connects the superiority of democracy to

a certain kind of freedom to pursue the highest human activity; namely, philosophy (cf. Mara 1982: 135-36). It is in this sense that “the true purpose of the state is in fact freedom” (TTP 20.6). He applauds the freedom to philosophize at least partly on the utilitarian grounds that the benefits of free speech and free-thinking outweigh any advantages, especially as freedom to philosophize contributes to the “advancement of the arts and sciences” (TTP 20.10). However, with the by now familiar Spinozist mixture of utility and ontology, Spinoza concludes that “liberty of judgment” is both “without question a virtue and cannot be suppressed” anyways (TTP 20.10). The virtue of democracy then is that it mirrors Spinoza’s metaphysical determinism on the political and social level: “Things which cannot be prevented must necessarily be allowed, even though they are often harmful” (TTP 20.10). Spinoza’s political naturalism depends on philosophy, an activity that is impossible in the state of nature prior to the establishment of law to control human passions. Yet democracy is of all governments the most open to philosophy and science, paradoxically because it is the form of government most like the state of nature with respect to a culture of freedom and institutionalized recognition of individual subjectivity. In essence, the superiority of democracy derives from the fact that it is the only regime that makes the freedom to philosophize an essential condition for the construction of social reality.

The formation of “one mind” aimed at by democratic society does not mean that Spinoza envisioned mass philosophizing. It more properly reflects his concern to demonstrate that the perfection of the state presupposes fundamental societal agreement about the importance of intellectual freedom. This is a vision of society in which philosophy will likely never be central to the lives of more than a few, even as it remains present to all through advances in the arts and sciences. While individual happiness is not reducible to social existence (contra Montag 1999: 63 and Balibar 1998: 125)—democratic or otherwise—Spinoza does posit the basis for a distinct causal relation. Spinoza’s democratic society is defined by its unique capacity to generate mass public support for the recurring reexamination of the nature of this relation.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to demonstrate that Spinoza understood the virtue of democracy to lie in its essential superiority as a principle of social construction, rather than simply its instrumental value for the achievement of an extrinsic good such as peace or security. This essential superiority can be described as a function of democracy’s formative purpose, which involves the embodiment of a moral idea including both sound social order and individual development. Democracy, uniquely among regimes, has as its explicit operating principle the reconciliation of two distinct conceptions of freedom, the one primarily a function of physical preservation and the other an intellectual striving for knowledge of God and nature. In Spinoza’s political philosophy we see arguably the first philosophical effort to limn the features of a democratic political culture that extends thinking about democracy beyond formal institutions.

Spinoza’s nascent democratic political culture would strive confidently to harmonize the demands of political justice and the claims of individual autonomy. Today we are much more inclined than was Spinoza to accept the incommensurability between them. However, Spinoza perhaps remains a salutary reminder that many of our deeply rooted assumptions post-1989 about the superiority of liberal democracy rest on more expansive claims about the requirements of human flourishing than we typically care to admit.

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