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The Unrest of the Enlightened Self: The Scope of Human Action in Spinoza

La inquietud del yo ilustrado. El alcance de la acción humana en Spinoza

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Abstract

My aim in this paper is to examine some of the distinctive facets of human action in Spinoza's philosophy and show their intrinsic connection with each other. By analyzing in detail how Spinoza addresses different aspects of human action in his main work, the *Ethics*, it is possible to notice that for him free human agency implies two interrelated features: on the one hand, the adequate knowledge of the causes that determine it, and, on the other hand, a growing capacity to impact with greater power the scenarios in which it takes place. Thus, in contrast with quietist and passive readings, I show in the following that the two aforementioned characteristics are part of the Spinozian philosophical conception of agency as such. By pursuing this line of thought, it is also possible to establish a link—not always noticed in the secondary literature—with some of the central lines of thought contained in the *Theological-Political Treatise*. In discussing these theses, I advance the idea that the Spinozian conception of human agency involves a serious readjustment of the metaphysical vision of the agent, a change in her conduct and ethical practices, and an altogether different conception of politics and religion.

Keywords: Spinoza; human agency; metaphysical psychology; ethics; politics; activity; passivity.

Resumen

Mi objetivo en este artículo es examinar algunas de las facetas distintivas de la acción humana en la filosofía de Spinoza y mostrar su interconexión intrínseca. A través de un análisis minucioso de cómo Spinoza aborda distintos aspectos de la acción humana en su obra principal, la *Ética*, es posible advertir que, para él, la libre agencia humana implica dos rasgos interrelacionados: por un lado, el conocimiento adecuado de las causas que la determinan y, por otro, una creciente capacidad para incidir con mayor potencia en los escenarios en los que tiene lugar. Así, frente a las lecturas quietistas y pasivas, muestro a continuación que las dos características mencionadas forman parte de la concepción filosófica espinozista de la agencia como tal. Si se recorre esta línea de pensamiento, también es posible

establecer un vínculo —no siempre advertido en la literatura secundaria— con algunas de las ideas centrales contenidas en el *Tratado teológico-político*. Al discutir estas tesis, presento la idea de que la concepción espinozista de la agencia humana implica un reajuste importante de la visión metafísica del agente, un cambio en su conducta y en sus prácticas éticas, y una concepción totalmente distinta de la política y la religión.

Palabras clave: Spinoza; agencia humana; psicología metafísica; ética; política; actividad; pasividad.

Introduction¹

In his philosophy of human action—as developed in his most important and central treatise, the *Ethics* (or, in its full Latin title, *Ethica ordine geometrico demonstrata*)—Baruch Spinoza introduces a very challenging view of how human agency must be understood. To his mind, we human beings are prone to conceive our powers of action as being radically distinct from those that govern the rest of the natural universe. By means of a conveying metaphor, Spinoza claims that we have an irresistible tendency to deem ourselves as being a “kingdom

¹ This article was produced with the support of a research project funded by Universidad Panamericana entitled: “UP-CI-2020-MEX-18-FIL: Razón, Verdad y Diálogo. G. W. Leibniz y la recepción de las tradiciones aristotélicas.” I will quote Spinoza’s *Ethics* with a Roman numeral for each of the five parts of the book. Also, the following abbreviations will be employed: a = axiom; da = definition of the affects in the third part of the *Ethics*; app = appendix; c = corollary; d = definition (when not after a proposition number); d = demonstration (when after a proposition number); le = lemma; p = proposition; po = postulate; pref = preface; s = scholium. (For example, 1p16c1 refers to the first corollary of the sixteenth proposition in the first part of the *Ethics*). Other works of Spinoza, such as the *Theological-Political Treatise* (*TTP*), the *Political Treatise* (*TP*), and the *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (*TdIE*) will be quoted indicating the respective book of the treatise in question and its page in Gebhardt’s canonical edition. The *Letters* will be quoted only by their traditional Roman numeral. All the translations were taken from Spinoza (2002) except for those of the *TTP*, where I use Silverthorne’s and Isreal’s translation of Spinoza (2007). For the Latin originals I use Carl Gebhardt’s *Spinoza Opera* (Spinoza, 1925).

within a kingdom" (*imperium in imperio*) (*Ethics* IIIpref), that is to say, we believe that the laws that rule over the entire realm of nature do not apply to us, or only in a very indirect way, leading thereby to imagining ourselves as having absolute autonomy from the chains of natural causes and effects that surround us.

The reasons thereof are manifold, but the following ones seem to be of great relevance: 1) we have a false understanding, metaphysically speaking, of what nature actually is—including human nature *per se*—and what it involves; 2) we deem our reason as having absolute power over our affects—which implies a false view of what human reason and human affects actually are; and, lastly, 3) we have an incorrect conception of wherein human happiness and—in Spinoza's own words—human *freedom* actually lie. His *Ethics*—and his entire philosophical project, for that matter—can be seen, in a way, as a profound revision and clarification of these misunderstandings, which ought to conduce us to a more rational and achieved existence.

In this paper, my aim will be to address the three above-mentioned topics—first and foremost as they are dealt with in his main work, the *Ethics*—so as to explain why, in my interpretation, it is possible to notice that for Spinoza enlightened human agency implies two distinctive features that are closely interrelated: on the one hand, the adequate knowledge of the causes that determine it, and, on the other hand, a growing capacity to impact with greater power the scenarios in which it unfolds.² It will be my goal as well to show that there is a deep and

² In this sense, the present study can be read as a contribution to the literature against quietist and passive interpretations that have been elaborated in the last years, such as the ones of Carlisle (2017) and Kisner (2020). A fairly good impression of what is meant by passivity in the context of this discussion can be derived from the following remark: "Since being an adequate cause is inconsistent with being passive, if things are only active when they are an adequate cause, then passivity can only be valuable instrumentally, as a means to the end of being an adequate cause. However, since Spinoza equates striving with virtue, and we strive when we are passively affected, it follows that being passively affected is constitutive of our virtue, which implies that passivity has the same value as virtue: intrinsic value" (Kisner, 2020, p. 57). In my opinion, as I will argue throughout this paper, the opposite is actually the case. While identifying one's *conatus* implies understanding the order of causes by which one is determined, this is only a condition of possibility for an enlightened agency that seeks a greater impact from different fronts. Understanding one's

robust conceptual link between these topics that is manifest not only in the *Ethics* but also in the *Theological-Political Treatise*—a connection that has often been overlooked in the literature.³ By focusing in this paper on the active and dynamic dimension of human agency, I intend to put forward a reading of Spinoza's philosophy that allows us to connect some crucial aspects that often are not sufficiently explored from certain crucial theoretical angles.⁴

God, nature, and finite beings (humans)

At the beginning of Spinoza's *Ethics*, a polemical discussion is introduced which, in general terms, has led to consider Spinoza's proposal as a pantheistic one—a subject which is nonetheless still much debated as to its exact meaning. It is not the purpose of this paper to explore all these theses in detail; however, one must at least point out that, for Spinoza, God is the only substance that exists, that it is not limited by any other substance or entity, and that it possesses infinite attributes and modes (cfr. *Ethics* Id3-6). Finite beings—among which we human beings stand out due to our self-awareness—are modes of that substance, which acts according to its own nature, in a perfectly coherent way, with absolute necessity (cfr. *Ethics* Ip16).

This is, certainly, a crucial point for Spinoza's whole argument: things act and can only act according to the laws that govern their own very nature. In other words, to imagine that something can capriciously or arbitrarily act on the basis of alien laws or principles—and not on

own *conatus* implies thus a broader agency in the world, even when this serves only to politically secure, say, one's own contemplative capacity. Similarly, this is also the case when the radius of our agency is enlarged through our cooperation with others by means, for instance, of institutional arrangements.

³ Thus, for example, in authoritative collective commentaries such as those edited by Melamed & Rosenthal (2010) and by Höffe (2014) devoted to the *TTP* there is no detailed contribution on the passions associated with fanatical and superstitious behavior that are at odds with the kind of enlightened and extended agency that Spinoza proposes as an ideal of conduct. On the contrary, a reading that goes in the direction I am sketching out is that of Placencia (2015). The present contribution follows this and other interpretative efforts that seek to remedy these points in the specialized discussion.

⁴ Here, I would like to express my gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers of this paper, whose observations and comments helped me flesh out more clearly my aims with this study.

the grounds of the principles that are the most essential to its own nature—is ludicrous. This applies in a much more radical and eminent way to God himself, a being whose very concept implies his existence or, as Spinoza puts it, is *causa sui* (*Ethics* Id1). To suppose that God can decide to act or not to act in changeable and vacillating ways and that his freedom should precisely consist in doing and undoing things without any sufficient reason is, for Spinoza, tantamount to projecting on the divine substance erratic ideas or notions derived from a misguided anthropocentrism (cfr. *Ethics* Ip14s1). Spinoza's views on this, as is well known, clearly depart from the traditional religious ones that project unto God the personality of, say, a human being.

On the contrary, God's actions are fully consistent with his own nature. This implies that he acts out of necessity without this contradicting or preventing us from affirming that he possesses freedom in a real, eminent, and true sense. For freedom, in Spinoza's view, consists in acting according to one's own nature—freedom is not, as one could put it, a *libertas indifferentiae* of the will (cfr. *Ethics* Ip32). Therefore, the natural order—which is nothing other than the manifestation of God's productive activity—is necessary insofar as said order corresponds to stable laws and principles that govern things to occur exactly in the way they do and not otherwise. Whether we know it or not, all things in the universe do nothing more than to express the perennial and necessary character of the divine substance (cfr. *Ethics* Ip33 and s1-2). Furthermore, the various entities of the universe are God's own ways of knowing himself—and this is so because, among other things, God not only produces them but preserves them in their being within the web of natural entities.

Some consequences of the above are clearly disruptive. On the one hand, this implies breaking with the classical and ancient view of seeing a teleological causality in the order of nature (cfr. *Ethics* Iapp). Spinoza goes to great lengths to show that teleological causality is nothing more than wishful thinking or, figuratively speaking, the asylum of our ignorance. On the other hand, as already noted, this implies a frontal break with anthropocentrism, which, in the opinion of Spinoza, makes us judge things as good or bad according to whether or not they suit our specific nature, or, even worse, according to whether or not they respond to our particular desires or whims. In short, God for Spinoza does not act according to any kind of “plan”, as if God were deliberating

to do or not do certain things, and then would suddenly “decide” to act in accordance with his idiosyncratic resolution.

Indeed, the main flaw behind teleological thinking regarding the order of nature is that, in order for it to be attested, one would have to be able to know the mind of the designer of the instrument, the object, or the entity in question. Since this turns out to be a metaphysical impossibility, we ascribe to a higher intelligence the creation or production of a being with such and such characteristics that conform to the particular representation of a given end that we posit. Dispelling this error in our way of thinking is not only crucial in order to have a more adequate metaphysical vision of the cosmos, but also in order to be able to act and live in a much more coherent and consistent way. Otherwise, things appear to us randomly as good or bad, and we are left in perplexity as to why God would dispose this. But the main problem lies in the fact that we imagine that such and such things must be good *for human nature*, but not for nature as *a whole*. Since God expresses himself with perfect necessity not only in human beings but in nature as a whole, it is in the latter that we must locate (so to speak) the fundamental principle of action of the divine substance (cfr. Nadler, 2006, pp. 84ff). Thus, correcting our way of thinking implies correcting our way of acting.

As I mentioned earlier, the purpose I am pursuing in this paper is not, by any means, a systematic evaluation of Spinoza’s metaphysical theses. Reviewing this part of his thought only aims at highlighting the role of human beings and their enlightened agency in this framework. Without being able to address in all detail the metaphysical background of this question, it is possible to say in general terms that human beings act, in the Spinozian view, at least in one respect in the same way as God does: we act in consonance and conformity with the dictates proper to our nature (*Ethics* IIp10c1). In fact, we should not be distinguished from the rest of the entities of the world, since we all abide—knowingly or not—by the necessity introduced by God in the entire order of things. But, within this order (and this is a crucial point), the human being has also a distinctive nature of her own, since she acts in a specific way that no other living being exactly shares, namely, according to sophisticated wishes, intentions, desires, and, most importantly, as we will see in the next section, according to volitional states—whether of an active or a passive nature—that also express the totality of herself (cfr. *Ethics* IIIId1-

3).⁵ Furthermore, by having a very particular and specific notice of these emotions—a capacity which, although unfrequently manifested in the vast majority of human beings, does belong to our nature as species—individuals are able to reshape their lives and strive for ends which they dismissed in the past—nothing in Spinoza’s view prevents the fact that we act “intentionally”; it is only, in the end, a matter of recognizing that this capacity is rule-governed and not capricious, and that acting intentionally for Spinoza, in its most perfect or achieved expression, will respond to the way in which our rational nature interacts with the nature of *everything that surrounds us*. In a word, it belongs to the inherent plasticity of human nature the possibility of transforming itself in one way or another, but within the particular limits and governed by the specific principles that constitute its essence.⁶

⁵ For an interesting discussion of the status of non-human animals in Spinoza, see Sharp (2011).

⁶ It is appropriate to say, in this context, that, unlike Della Roca (1996) and Lin (2006), I do not consider that conceding this point implies accepting an intrinsically teleological view of human agency, which is completely contrary to the causal model that Spinoza defends throughout his *Ethics* (*contra* Della Roca and Lin, see Bennett, 1984). The above is not refuted either by the human practice of describing one’s actions in terms of ends or even by the fact that one regards oneself phenomenologically as a free cause (in the sense of being a cause not determined by anything else). In fact, as Melamed correctly observes, Spinoza does not deny, in any sense, that we can phenomenologically experience freedom. But to postulate a phantastic faculty that, without conformity to principles and rules, generates a certain kind of actions is tantamount to engaging in confusion. Following Melamed (2017, pp. 129-131), I consider that, for Spinoza, this confusion is generated by not delimiting the correct relations between our volitions, our awareness of volitions, and the ignorance of the causes of these volitions. I would add to this, however, that the *phenomenological experience* of freedom is of crucial importance, since by virtue of it the individual can be motivated, as we shall see later, to become a more powerful cause of nature. In this way, the agent widens her circle of action and obtains the peculiar yet characteristic form of freedom that Spinoza defends. Certainly, at the end of the day (and this must be said) the Spinozian agent will realize—once she reaches the point of view of “intuitive science”—that her ordinary conceptions of freedom and agency were incorrect and misguided and were in need of deep philosophical clarification.

Having in mind these metaphysical theses of Spinoza, let us now discuss what he has to say about the nature of human affects and their role in our conduct specifically.

Volitional states and the *conatus*

As human beings, we are affected in a variety of ways by the different situations, contexts, objects, and entities that surround us. Inevitably, these exchanges with the rest of nature conform and constitute what we are (cfr. *Ethics* IIIpo1-2). In this sense, Spinoza seems to identify a primordial feature that manifests itself in everything there is, namely, the striving of something to preserve and affirm its being. This is what he calls, in Latin, *conatus*, a term which is not easy to translate: one could render it into English either as “effort”, “endeavor”, “impulse”, “inclination”, “tendency”, “undertaking”, or “striving”.⁷ In words of Spinoza: “Therefore, the power of any thing, or the *conatus* with which it acts or endeavors to act, alone or in conjunction with other things, that is, the power or *conatus* by which it endeavors to persist in its own being, is nothing but the given, or actual, essence of the thing” (*Ethics* IIIp7d1).⁸

Most certainly, the Latin term *conatus* conveys this entire semantic field: it is the active tendency of a being towards its own preservation—and we could even say, when it is conveniently channeled, towards its most adequate development. In a very specific way, living beings display this impulse insofar as they seek *prima facie* what augments and increases their power, and conversely avoid what diminishes and weakens their capacities, talents, abilities, etcetera. Spinoza seems to believe that this is a tendency or impulse that is deeply embedded in the nature of every being. Whereas in inanimate objects or beings this tendency is manifest insofar as they do not cease to exist out of the

⁷ It is widely acknowledged that Spinoza (although he does not explicitly refer to this) inherited this philosophical term or category from the ancient Stoics. In a more specific way, this Spinozian category can be seen as a free appropriation of the Stoic notion of *oikeiosis*. For a discussion regarding Spinoza and the diverse Stoic influences in his thought, see DeBrabander (2007) and Miller (2015).

⁸ In order to present a more readable version of the text, I will not reproduce the numerous cross-references that Spinoza himself provides throughout the *Ethics*.

blue—unless a particular chain of causes and effects makes this indeed happen—in living creatures or beings, in turn, this is exhibited in the way they behave themselves as affirming their own existence. In the case of human beings, this tendency acquires a very specific form in the way they conduct themselves and determine their course of life. To be sure, there are many human beings that strive in various ways to hinder, sabotage, or damage themselves through different patterns of behavior, but this occurs—as one may put it in Socratic terms—unknowingly or through ignorance, that is to say, by having an incorrect understanding of things *in general*. For, if their knowledge (reason) matched in a perfectly coherent way their nature, they would not pursue fantastic projects nor would they harvest emotions which could be deemed as self-neglecting or self-destroying.⁹

Thus, this is the basic criterion which Spinoza uses to classify volitions that ensue from one's own *conatus*: volitional states can either promote the existence, power, and being of a specific creature, or rather undermine, weaken, or dent his different projects and strivings. Spinoza speaks primarily of three kinds of volitional states: the first one is related to the things we either do not possess yet, or we do possess and want to persevere in having them: this is what Spinoza calls either desire (*cupiditas*) or appetite (*appetitus*)—terms that are synonyms in his thought (cfr. *Ethics* IIIp9s1). The second kind are those volitional states which are in fact self-affirming and positive towards the whole well-being and power of the individual in question—the affections or *affectus*, as he will go to characterize them in his jargon—and the third kind, as it has been mentioned, are those volitional states that hinder or prevent the individual or living creature from reaching the ideal goal of its most intimate strivings and appetites—these are the passions or *passiones*, in Spinoza's idiosyncratic vocabulary (cfr. *Ethics* IIIId1-3).

As can be seen, the classification of the volitional states of human beings depends on whether they promote or not, in an integral and holistic way, the projects, strivings, and ends of the individual. But more importantly: whereas *affectus* are for Spinoza active and affirming by definition, *passiones*, in turn, are passive and servile, and lead the individuals to servitude and bondage. Human beings who are controlled

⁹ For an interesting discussion of these kinds of cases in which actors conduct themselves contrary to what one assumes, as a species, their *conatus* should be, see Carriero's (2017) sharp contribution.

by their appetites, who deem that their happiness consists in achieving this or that goal—which more often than not are vulgar, material ends such as glory, money, or carnal pleasures (cfr. *Ethics* Vp10s1; *TdIE* 5-7)—and are insensible to other kind of considerations that would lead them to reassess their projects and priorities, are dragged, so to speak, to behave in this or that way, without ever having proper control over their lives.

An almost inevitable consequence of this is that, since the goals they embrace depend on changeable and contingent affairs that can only render transient delight, they will most surely be confronted with a mindset that Spinoza calls sadness (*tristitia*). On the contrary, enlightened human beings who have reached a correct understanding of the true order of things will be able to attain happiness (*beatitudo*) or the highest good (*summum bonum*) (cfr. *Ethics* p11s1), which Spinoza associates with the affective state of joy (*laetitia*): an affective state of what we could call a self-rewarding virtue, since having it leads to a fulfilled and accomplished existence (cfr. *Ethics* IIIs1).¹⁰ Individuals who attain this higher-order notion of things are led ultimately towards an intellectual love of God (*amor intellectualis Dei*), a love which, in turn, ought to make us human beings give proper value to all the activities we perform and all the projects we embark upon.

Before delving in the next section into Spinoza's theory of the intellectual love of God, a general reflection on the nature of affects and emotions in their embeddedness within human nature is very much in order. As I claimed before, for Spinoza there is no absolute dominion of reason over the passions—at least not in a direct, straight-forward way. Emotional states cannot be said to depend on the unilateral decisions of an individual. For instance, if I am depressed because I was not able to obtain something for which I invested all my energies and endeavors for years, it is very unlikely that I can simply “decide” not to be sad, frustrated, or angered, and then move forward with my life as if nothing

¹⁰ These two affective or emotional states are, of course, not the only ones there are, but for Spinoza these are indeed the central and fundamental ones, which give rise to a plurality of emotions, sentiments, feelings, etcetera, depending on the nature of the situations, persons, and things with which we get to interact. The task of the third book of the *Ethics* consists precisely in describing this whole series of emotional varieties. For a detailed treatment of this subject see Jacquet (2018) and Sangiacomo (2019).

ever happened. If these sentiments are to be controlled or transcended, this will not happen because I simply choose in a given moment not to have them.

Rather, what seems more likely is that I will have to assimilate and reinterpret everything I went through, act accordingly to a new vision of my past, and generate the correct stimuli by engaging with other kind of projects and activities that, with a new frame of mind, will seem to be compensating, equally or more important, worth-pursuing, etcetera. To obtain the frame of mind that allows human beings not to be defeated by external circumstances and affirm rejoicingly their *conatus* is that in which, as we will see in the next section, Spinozian freedom consists.

The lens of eternity: seeing the world *sub specie aeternitatis*

In Spinoza's view, human beings have the power to transform their passions into affects by deeming their own affective states correctly in relation to the cosmos. If we have an incorrect idea or conception of what goes on or happens to us, we will react to that in a way that will govern us and make us prey of external circumstances. On the contrary, if we recognize that things that happen to us happen in a necessary way, that is to say, if we acknowledge that things can only act and behave according to the patterns and rules that govern their nature, we will consequently obtain a truer understanding of everything that surrounds us.¹¹ In other terms, we will be able to have an insight into nature that

¹¹ Spinoza provides a typology of different kinds of knowledge that relate to our global understanding of the order of nature. Given its capital importance, it is convenient to present it *in extenso*: "From all that has already been said it is quite clear that we perceive many things and form universal notions: 1. From individual objects presented to us through the senses in a fragmentary and confused manner without any intellectual order; and therefore I call such perceptions 'knowledge from casual experience.' 2. From symbols. For example, from having heard or read certain words we call things to mind and we form certain ideas of them similar to those through which we imagine things. Both these ways of regarding things I shall in future refer to as 'knowledge of the first kind,' 'opinion,' or 'imagination.' 3. From the fact that we have common notions and adequate ideas of the properties of things. I shall refer to this as 'reason' and 'knowledge of the second kind.' Apart from these two kinds of knowledge there is, as I shall later show, a third kind of knowledge, which I shall refer to as 'intuitive science' [translation modified]. This kind of knowledge proceeds from an adequate idea of the formal essence of certain attributes of

will enable us to not act dominated by false beliefs such as superstition, fanaticism, incredulity, fantasy, and delusion. In Spinoza's opinion, reaching this understanding of things will have a liberating effect for the individual—a liberating effect equivalent to the true freedom we human beings can obtain.

Consequently, freedom does not consist for Spinoza in the capacity of choosing the best option among many. Rather, for him, freedom (*libertas*)—and, consequently, happiness (*beatitudo*)—consists in recognizing the nature of everything as necessary, in shaping one's own affective states accordingly, and in the striving that derives from this that will, in principle, not be directed towards the obtention of futile ends, but towards God himself, who can be equated by the individual with the entire order of nature. To be sure, the agent who reaches what Spinoza labels "intuitive science" will also reach such a powerful understanding of things that her ideas of them will be neither confuse nor obscure. Hence, she will also be in the condition of living her life, as the ancient Stoics used to say, in accordance with nature. But unlike the Stoic sage, the Spinozian enlightened individual will not deem or consider what happens to her as a part of a divine design since, as we saw before, considerations of that sort would imply, among other things, ascribing to God a misleading idea of what we mistakenly consider human agency to be.

In short, the Spinozian cosmos or universe is one in which providence—at least traditionally understood—does not have any proper place. But Spinoza believes that to acknowledge this is precisely what will make individuals obtain the freedom accessible to them. To put it one way, whereas the Stoic sage found comfort in the thought of providence as something that justified the necessity of the order of things, the lack of providence is precisely what liberates the Spinozian agent, who knows that everything that she can perform flows, so to speak, from a correct understanding of the cosmos as such, and also from her own very nature. In a way, then, the realm of possibilities is

God to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things" (*Ethics* IIp40s2). Again, it is impossible to delve into the complexities of these varieties or degrees of knowledge. For our purposes, it suffices to say that obtaining the *scientia intuitiva* that Spinoza speaks about is what enables human beings to transcend their passions, to purify their understanding of things and, lastly, to contemplate the order of nature as necessary.

more “open” for such agents, since what they can do depends first and foremost on their degree of personal enlightenment and philosophical progression—for example, not being able to reach this or that goal (by impediment or impossibility) will not have a negative effect upon the enlightened individual in terms of deep frustration or immoderate anger.

Since individual human actors who acknowledge this will act in conformity to their own nature and in a way that augments their powers of transforming the world, they will not be refrained by considerations that leave them in the dark. Furthermore, as we have said, their efforts will not be directed towards the consecution of vain goals, such as honor, glory, or carnal pleasure (cfr. *Ethics* Vp10s1; *TdiE* 5-7), but rather towards the contemplation of the entire order of nature in the most proper way, which in turn will lead the enlightened Spinozian agents to consider the real importance of every kind of goal or good hierarchically in the most correct fashion and deal with the adversities or obstacles of life, not with sadness, but even with joy.

To be able to contemplate the world from this point of view is what Spinoza regards as observing it from the “standpoint of eternity” (*sub specie aeternitatis*) (*Ethics* Vp23). By means of doing this, the soul recognizes, in Spinoza’s view, its own “eternal” character and actualizes one of its most fundamental powers.¹² Although some commentators disagree on some specific details of this (cfr. Nadler, 2020, pp. 172ff), it can be confidently stated that Spinoza does not accept traditional religious views of the afterlife. For him, the view according to which we must act morally because of rewards and punishments that we

¹² A crucial aspect of this—which is sometimes overlooked among commentators—is to adjust one’s view of temporality. Indeed, for Spinoza, a strong cause of the dominance of our passions over our conduct lies in our allowing ourselves to be guided by our expectations of what might have been or what will be. In contrast, the Spinozian enlightened individual, in being guided by her reason, does not allow herself to be confused by such kind of hopes. As Lebuffe correctly explains: “So the power of ideas of reason works, in general, to help minds to act in the face of those passions that relate to what the mind regards as absent (that is, as uncertain or, alternatively, as in the past or future). Such passions tend to be weaker influences on human minds. In addition, reason works to help minds act in the ways that reason recommends, that is, to follow the commands of reason and to act in the way that those act who are guided by reason” (2017, p. 317).

might receive in the afterlife is completely misguided (cfr. *Ethics* Vp41). Virtue—which, in his view, consists in acts of piety and justice (cfr. *TTP* XIII, 171-172)—augment the power and the sphere of action of the individual, and this all the more so when our knowledge of the divine is more robust and grounded. The fact that we can consider affairs from the standpoint of eternity means that we can partake, in one way or another, in eternity, even though this must not necessarily imply that human beings have, as it was said before, a personal afterlife. For the individual, her existence seems to be all the more secure insofar as her actions are carried out on the grounds of this fundamental metaphysical conviction (cfr. *Ethics* Vp23). In Spinoza's eloquent words: "*The mind's intellectual love toward God [mentis amor intellectualis erga Deum] is the love of God [ipse Dei amor] wherewith God loves himself not insofar as he is infinite [infinitus], but insofar as he can be explicated through the essence of the human mind considered under a form of eternity [sub speciem aeternitatis consideratam]. That is, the mind's intellectual love toward God is part of the infinite love wherewith God loves himself*" (*Ethics* Vp36; the emphasis is in the original). In sum, the ultimate degree of intuitive science makes us realize our proper place within the cosmos, which is, as has been often remarked already, nothing other than the expression of God's necessary nature, which we are part of. Having this insight transforms entirely the way we humans conceive our place in the universe and act within it.

Many things could still be said about Spinoza's particular understanding of happiness. But a crucial implication of the above which I want to highlight is that the individuals who act on these grounds do not enter in conflict with one another. By virtue of their thorough knowledge of reality, agents will not enter into unnecessary disputes or discord that would lead to a form of enmity. Kant, for instance, had stated in his practical philosophy that individuals who act morally are not led to eudaimonistic conflicts (cfr. *AK* V, *KpV* 27-28). And indeed, Spinoza argues for a similar idea in his *Ethics*. In his case, this happens not on the grounds of the categorical imperative, but rather on the grounds of a holistic understanding of reality. Spinoza's virtuous agent knows how to give each good its due measure and value. Since the greatest good towards which she aspires is the love of God—a God, it must be said, from whom she does not expect neither reciprocal love, nor a particular benevolence, nor any kind of reward (cfr. *Ethics* Vp10)—she does not enter into conflicts of interest with rude human beings who lead their lives in pursuit of mutable and contingent goods.

Up to this point, we have summarily described how one can attain happiness or the highest good in Spinoza's philosophy of human action. As a corollary, we shall now turn to some important theses that appear in his *Theological-Political Treatise*. In this work, we will see how some important concepts that are treated in his *Ethics* reappear, but under a different perspective. Recognizing this aspect, however, is crucial in order to understand a unitary motif of Spinoza's oeuvre. A brief review in this regard will allow us, in the conclusions, to establish some of the most characteristic features of human action according to Spinoza.

An apology of freedom and democracy: Spinoza's political philosophy

In Spinoza's political philosophy, we find a thesis that directly connects with his interest for human emotions and affective states. According to a key assertion of the preface of the *Theological Political Treatise*:

If men were always able to regulate their affairs with sure judgment [*certo consilio*], or if fortune always smiled upon them, they would not get caught up in any superstition [*superstitione tenerentur*]. But since people are often reduced to such desperate straits [*angustiarum rediguntur*] that they cannot arrive at any solid judgment and as the good things of fortune for which they have a boundless desire are quite uncertain, they fluctuate wretchedly between hope and fear [*dum spe et metu*] (*TTP* prol., 5).

In effect, Spinoza denounces the fact that most human beings live dragged by unfounded fears and hopes. For this reason, they are led to take the most absurd solutions and proposals as remedies for their ills. In other words, if human beings could find a way of conducting their lives in which neither superstition, nor fanaticism, nor irrational fears were incentives for their actions, they could lead a freer and fuller life. However, since the opposite is the case, they fall prey to the most diverse leaders who, taking advantage of their anxieties and insecurities, promise them the greatest goods and rewards. Hence the tremendously influential role that religion has played in the organization of community life since ancient times. Appealing to the power of God and heavenly

powers, rulers have taken advantage of people's irrational fears to subjugate them under all kinds of domination. This fact is what leads Spinoza to make a detailed review and study of the Scriptures, with emphasis on the Old Testament, but without neglecting, in several key points, central teachings of the New Testament.

From the Lutheran Reformation onwards, it was certainly a novelty in the Christian context to be able to study the Scriptures critically. Of course, from the Jewish perspective, this was not a novelty in the same sense, as the Talmudic tradition attests. However, even from within the Jewish tradition itself, Spinoza's efforts turned out to be novel and radically innovative, since he set out to make not so much a faith-based as a historical, exegetical analysis (cfr. Gadamer, [1968] 1986; Placencia, 2013). Without going into all detail, we can recall here Spinoza's main theses in this regard: the sacred writers were not philosophers, but ordinary persons who sought to transmit certain fundamental truths to people who were not very educated and cultivated.

Concretely, Spinoza provides thorough analyses of the figure of Moses and the guidelines and rules he gave to his people: these guidelines and rules seem to make sense only in the horizon of a specific political and social community that shared common practices. In other words, the guidelines and rules that Moses gave to the Hebrew people seem to be valid only to the extent that certain structures of common life were at hand. Outside of such context, it is impossible to think that they have the same validity or that they should be implemented unilaterally in any other scenario. It is in the light of these premises that Spinoza intends to affirm that, ultimately, religion must be interpreted, in its deepest and most intimate sense, as acts of piety and justice that are truly conducive to fostering human ties and relationships (cfr. *TTP* XIII, 171-172). It is a mistake to think that what we find in the sacred texts is a mysterious voice that speaks from a distant world or reality. Rather, what we discover there are the voices of human beings trying to enlighten one another about their own condition. Symbols, miracles, and fantastic stories serve rhetorical and pedagogical goals, but one should not think that divinity lies *per se* in such matters. Rather, these elements are the most appropriate means of expression to convey perennial values to the human community.

Leaving aside whether one agrees with Spinoza's biblical hermeneutics, what is certain is that he detects that the rulers of his time and in the past have taken advantage of the ignorance of the

people to legitimize certain forms of domination by appealing to either supernatural elements or to powers that they would have inherited by the most venerable figures of the past. Like other philosophers of his time, Spinoza seeks to detect rationally the foundations of authentic legitimacy of all political power. In doing that, he establishes in this context of discussion some tacit yet extremely important links with some of the most fundamental theses of his *Ethics*—in particular, with regard to the scope of an enlightened rational agency and with the affective reactions we are prone to (and must transcend) in the political domain.

According to Spinoza, every being acts in accordance with natural right. However, in his thought, natural right or law does not have the usual connotations we attach to it. For Spinoza, natural right derives from the power that every living being has to affirm its own capacity of action in an unrestricted way— to illustrate this point, for instance, he goes as far as to say that a big fish has a natural right to eat a little one (surely, we could say, the little fish would be in its natural right to swim away from this threat!) (cfr. *TTP XVI*, 189). In the state of nature, every living being has the right to act in a way that is consistent with its own powers and capacities. Giving up an unlimited capacity to unilaterally exercise one's natural talents can only happen due to the expectation of obtaining even greater benefits and in view of the possibility of continuing to exercise these talents (albeit, most probably, in a different way) (cfr. *TTP XV*, 191-192; *TP* 276-284). In Spinoza's view, this is what happens when one makes the transition from the state of nature to the civil state. In this transition, the principle that operates is that of securing, in the best way available, one's own capacity for action, so that it is not only left unaffected but may even increase.

Unlike Hobbes—whom he intensely read—Spinoza does not propose the famous principle of *exeundum e statu naturali* from the fear of a violent death, but from the metaphysical thesis that a collective, in due harmony and congruence, will widen the circle of its capacity to act, to look after its interests, and to seek its own happiness.¹³ As Spinoza lucidly puts it:

Acting on command [*ex mandato*], that is, from obedience [*obediential*], does take away liberty in some

¹³ For a very useful and detailed comparison between Hobbes and Spinoza, see Steinberg (2019).

sense [*libertatem quidem aliquo modo tollit*], but it is not acting on command in itself that makes someone a slave [*seruum fecit*], but rather the reason for so acting [*actionis ratio*]. If the purpose of the action is not his own advantage but that of the ruler [*imperantis utilitas*], then the agent is indeed a slave and useless to himself. But in a state and government where the safety of the whole people [*salus totius populi*], not that of the ruler, is the supreme law [*summa lex*], he who obeys the sovereign in all things should not be called a slave useless to himself but rather a subject [*subditus*] (*TTP XVI*, 194-195).

From this passage it follows that, under an optimal political order such as the one described here, one is rationally extending the scope of one's agency insofar as one follows the mandates that apply to the collectivity. In this context of action, what in the surface appears as passivity actually becomes the most appropriate way to ensure the preservation and achievement of the agent's highest ends.

In addition, and in line with the above, it is worth emphasizing Spinoza's merit in saying that a political state such as the one he conceives of—which allows the greatest freedom and the greatest capacity for action to each of its citizens—is one of a *democratic* nature (*TTP XVI*, 193-194). Thus, within the great Western canon of philosophy, Spinoza seems to be the first thinker who made a frontal and explicit defense of democracy (cfr. Levene, 2004), since he thought that, in such a regime, it would be all the more improbable that the members of civil society would naively transfer their natural right without having secured a certain sphere of non-negotiable freedom—in doing this, Spinoza is certainly praising the Dutch kingdom, and, in particular, the city of Amsterdam in which he himself lived and in which every individual could have the most adequate and convenient freedom of thought, especially with regard to religious matters and affairs (cfr. *TTP XX*, 246).¹⁴

¹⁴ In this sense, one should distinguish the religious Jewish community in Amsterdam that brought about Spinoza's excommunication from the political and social environment there, where diverse religious and worldviews could coexist. Certainly, this latter political and social dimension of Amsterdam is the one that Spinoza praises.

To be sure, not every individual in a community will reach the profound degree of understanding of reality that Spinoza advocates in his *Ethics*. But precisely because of this it is all the more important to secure an environment that, on the one hand, allows citizens to be in a permanent position to expand their capacity for action—even if this never fully materializes—and that, on the other hand, gives them the freedom to express their views and opinions. This last point is of crucial importance for the well-being of a commonwealth, since, in Spinoza's view, citizens will be all the more enslaved by their beliefs and misconceptions the less they are allowed to express them. In that sense, for the benefit of the commonwealth itself and for the lasting reign of the political powers, it is most convenient that the latter advocate tolerance and do not restrict the liberty of thought and belief.

Actually, even if citizens did explicitly renounce to their freedom of thought and belief, a pact of this sort would not have any kind of binding legal character: such an agreement can in no way foster their natural right, goes directly against what human persons are—that is, thinking and sentient beings—and, as a matter of fact, cannot be legally enforced at all, since individuals will always have an internal forum in which they forge their own ideas and representations of religion and divinity (cfr. *TTP XVI*, 192; *XX*, 242). At the end of the day, this is why Spinoza is more interested in speaking of a freedom to philosophize (*libertas philosophandi*) than of a freedom of religion or belief, for the central debate about toleration revolves mainly around individuals being able to think for themselves and to correct their ways of judging reality (cfr. *TTP XX*, 243).¹⁵

Undoubtedly, Spinoza's defense of tolerance is, at least in one respect, strange to the contemporary mentality, since, unlike the most widespread contemporary view, it does not rest on a robust understanding of the inalienable rights of individuals that no authority

¹⁵ Unlike some modern thinkers who were champions of tolerance, such as Locke, Spinoza seems to endorse a radically different attitude towards this so-called virtue. For Spinoza, what is altogether best is that people have the possibility of purifying and correcting their misguided religious views by philosophical analysis and dialogue. In other terms, it is not all that important to him that a collective group is able to hold different and contradictory opinions of religious affairs. That is why, as Jonathan Israel (2006, p. 160) puts it, for Spinoza freedom of thought is more relevant and crucial than freedom of belief.

has the power to undermine or transgress (although his language does occasionally have echoes of this sort). Rather, as can be seen, his defense seems to be also along the lines that it is inconvenient *for pragmatic purposes*—or from the perspective of *Realpolitik*, as one could say—for the political conglomerate to suppress the freedom or liberty of thought and belief, since, if it does so, it will not flourish for long—passions that cannot be expressed become, in the philosopher's opinion, more and more recalcitrant and entrenched (cfr. Steinberg, 2010). For Spinoza, there are two important tendencies that must be neutralized: on the one hand, the common people must be able to correct their mistaken and (more often than not) vulgar beliefs in the religious order—which, in the language of the *Ethics*, make them prone to *passions*—and, on the other hand, a theological caste must be prevented from arbitrarily imposing religious visions that go against public happiness and welfare.

Although his defense of toleration is also based on this particular framework, it is striking that Spinoza's philosophy of politics and law is structured around principles such as that citizens should seek the greatest possible enlightenment, that it is necessary to help them correct their errors and passions in religious matters by means of having a public open sphere, and, above all, that it is all the more convenient to have a vision of political authority that is founded rationally. Fanaticism and persecution—two evils that Spinoza had to face in his own life—occur, to a great extent, for instance, when biblical texts are distorted for ideological purposes, and when the affective states of citizens are manipulated through superstition and fear. Thus, we see that a sharper understanding of reality is a condition for the possibility of a more successful and fulfilled life. And this is the path that Spinoza suggests to us.

Conclusions

After this systematic review of some of the central theses of Spinoza's thought, I would like to highlight the following central points that allow us to form an idea of what human agency implies, as a whole, for him. As emphasized at the outset, for Spinoza, understanding the human being's capacity for action implies above all locating her place within nature. In other words, we have the task of understanding ourselves better by rejecting a vision of things grounded on hidden causes or effects. On the contrary, the more enlightened we will be about our own condition, the more we will understand the web of causes and effects in which we

must inevitably conduct our lives. In this sense, rather than trying to place Spinoza within the current categories of the debate on freedom of will,¹⁶ what I consider crucial is to recognize in his thought an invitation to rethink human agency based on its insertion in the rest of nature. Contrary to what one might think, an attempt to think of human agency in this way does not constrain individuals to act in this or that way, nor does it induce them to fold their arms and embrace quietism or, even worse, fatalism.¹⁷ In Spinoza's whole philosophy and discourse, what we find is precisely the opposite. The more the individual knows the true causes of things, the more she will be able to understand her own affective reactions to them and the more she will be able to redirect them intelligently and strategically in such a way that her circle of action will be increasingly widened.

Therefore, we could say that Spinoza is a thinker who advocates philosophical freedom as the most appropriate means to emancipate individuals from a series of causes and effects that generate in them the impression of being victims or preys to unknown forces. Clearly, this turns out to be something completely distinctive, unique, and proper to human beings, who, unlike other natural beings known to us, have the capacity for reflection that places them beyond simple immediacy. As already mentioned, Spinoza denies that we have the capacity to decide at will what kind of emotions or affective reactions we wish to have. However, his works do open a way to think that, to the extent that we delve without veils or fears into the profound study of nature, the more we will be able to adequately interpret, both intellectually and affectively, our role in the universe and act accordingly.

In Spinoza's judgment, this should also be applicable to the political sphere—a thesis that was also put to the test and explored in this paper, highlighting aspects that are often not acknowledged by some

¹⁶ For the reader interested in attempts of this sort—which, as one can conjecture, diverge from one another considerably—I recommend consulting the different essays contained in Goldenbaum & Kluz (2006).

¹⁷ As Douglas has recently put it, Spinoza's framework could lead, at first sight, to the idea that we should embrace "complacent quietism, a license to accept the way you are and give up hope of improving either yourself or the world" (2020, p. 121). Like Douglas, as I hope this paper has shown, I maintain that there are elements of great weight that make it impossible to attribute such a position to Spinoza.

commentators in the literature—in which we also wish not to be stifled or repressed by arbitrary designs. In this sense, Spinoza is fully in line with several contemporary developments in political philosophy that recognize a fundamental role for emotions and affections in the life of the political community (cfr. Nussbaum, 2003 and 2013). Whether it is to eradicate various kinds of fanaticism or superstition that make up the political ideology of various factions, or whether it is to promote the kind of affections that make human beings more self-critical and thoughtful, Spinoza's philosophy reveals itself as an invaluable tool for the betterment of our lives. Regardless of whether one adopts each and every one of his views, what is clear is that Spinoza does give the human being a specific and clear role in the natural order of things, and with his works he invites us to have a more enlightened existence, less dominated by fears and superstitions of an authoritarian or dogmatic nature. This, in my opinion, seems to be his perennial legacy, which continues to exhort us to reflect on several of these issues from the coordinates of our present.

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