Transcript

Dimitris Vardoulakis - "On the sources of Spinoza's account of social formation"

Dimitris Vardoulakis:

Thank you Dan, and thanks Marie, for organizing this conference. It's great to see people from around the world Participating, and thanks for the introduction Dan, that's very flattering. So, what I'll like to do today is I'll talk about a passage which I do also talk in the book [Spinoza, The Epicurean], but after I talked about in the book, I sort of found a set of other connections that I hadn't realized. So, this is a kind of extension, a sense of some of the themes that I was developing in the book, and that passage is a passage that occurs in roughly in the middle of Chapter Five [of the TTP]. So, let me give you the background.

It's a strange passage for the following reasons. So, in Chapter Four of the Theological-Political Treatise, Spinoza provides a definition of the law, and it makes a distinction between human and divine law. Human law is something that is constructed, something that depends on our will, he says. Whereas divine law is something absolutely necessary. And, after he makes that definition, he, in an analysis of this point, four points follow as a result of that, and he says I'm gonna discuss the first two points in Chapter Four and then he turns to the next two points in Chapter Five. The third point is the point about ceremonies and here he discusses in particular the ceremonies of the Jewish state. And he says well, what are we to make about these ceremonies, are they divinely ordained or are they human creations? And he falls very strongly on the latter. He insists that these are human creations and that's why they're mutable. And that's why he also says that the human ceremonies, the ceremonies of the Jewish state when the Jewish state discontinued, they didn't have any real function to play anymore.

So, he proceeds this argumentation, the beginning of Chapter five proceeds through references to the Bible to make this point. And then suddenly he stops. He says at this point: I would like to argue, to make the same argument, but from a universal perspective. And at that point the kind of flow kind of interrupts, there's a kind of different voice in the text, and that different voice in the text kind of provides an incredibly dense account, it's less than two pages in the Gebhardt edition, it's almost a page in the Gebhardt edition. Again, a very short dense account about social formation. The upshot of which is that social formation is both natural and constructed, in ways that I will describe. And it's also a very strange passage because, even though this hasn't been noticed, it provides the first kind of intimation of the notion of the notion of democracy, that we find ... by saying that there is a kind of regime of power where everybody renders obedience to themselves, that notion of equality and freedom the characterises Spinoza's philosophy.

Now this passage in a sense kind of sticks out, doesn't seem to quite fit the argument as it's developing in Chapter Five. I was always wondering where does he get it from, and what is he trying to do exactly? And why does he make this argument...? The argument there is basically that the ceremonies point to something about the law, and the formation of the ceremonies ultimately point to how society is constructed, how society is formed. And the fact that he points both to natural causes and the kind of constructivist account of society, this is kind of unusual. That occurs in that short passage of about two pages. So, I was always very intrigued with that passage. I was also very

intrigued by the fact that it doesn't seem to have been noticed very much at all, in the voluminous secondary literature on Spinoza. So that's the problem, the issue that I'm concerned with... what is this passage about? How would you understand it, and in particular what are the sources of this passage? So, I'd like to... the third Part of the paper - I've just finished the first Part - the third Part will be about the sources of this passage in Hermarchus, who is an Epicurean philosopher. And the fourth Part will be an analysis of the passage in Spinoza.

But before I go there, I'd like to do a bit of contextualizing about what I mean by Epicureanism, and about who Hermarchus is because, he is not a very well-known figure. So, there are various accounts of Epicureanism... so Part two now. There are various accounts of Epicureanism... as naturalism... as hedonism and so on and so forth. And for a number of reasons, I argue in the book, there actually is a kind of political Epicureanism that is also has a kind of ontological basis and that's the kind of Epicureanism that attracts Spinoza, that's kind of Epicureanism that we find in the Theological-Political Treatise.

So, the starting point, the sort of ontological point of Epicureanism, is we need to realize that Epicureanism is a kind of monism. And what I mean by this is the idea that there is no transcendence, there is immanence, but there is no transcendence there is ... it rejects creationism, there is no creation ex-nihilo, and it poses the idea that there is a totality outside of which nothing exists. Now the problem with monism traditionally, and that's the problem behind for instance in the fourth century, when there's this big debate about evil that someone like St Augustine kind of intervenes with his theory of free will. But the big problem of monism is how can we account for action if there is a totality outside of which nothing exists. If there's like a comprehensive substance where that includes everything, then any action that we undertake is basically inconsequential, it doesn't change anything. And remember of course that is the sort of major critique that Spinoza is facing in the first sort of wave of critique that he's facing after the publication of Opera Posthuma. When Bayle writes in his entry on Spinozism, that Spinoza writes that ten thousand Germans killed ten thousand Turks, he should actually be writing... what he actually means is that God transformed into the mode of ten thousand Germans kills God transformed to the mode of ten thousand Turks... this is a kind of reductum ad absurdum of the point I was making a moment ago, namely that there is a problem to account for action and change the moment we posit monism as a kind of ontological principle. And that monism as an ontological principle of course comes through in Chapter four with the idea of divine laws as absolute necessity. And it's not accidental of course that Spinoza discusses for instance the fall, Adam and the fall, in Chapter four, which is you know... the very kind of narrative that Augustine himself discussed, to solving his own way, that I'm not gonna go into now, the very same problem.

So, what is briefly speaking Spinoza's solution to this problem? Spinoza's solution is to say well, we we can understand reality from in a sense two perspectives. One is the causal perspective, that will give us the definition of the totality, a definition of cause. Indeed, God is defined in Part One the Ethics as the immanent cause, right. But at the same time in order to talk about action, in order to talk about the possibility of change, we need to talk about utility. The definition in Part Four of the Ethics says the good is that which is utilise. Okay and this is the point that I make in the book, is that this is a very Epicurean way of thinking about the problem of action, because of the way in which the concept of phronesis was discussed in Epicureanism. Phronesis in Epicureanism is a concept that - I don't know whether you heard, there was a train that was blowing its horn - but anyway phronesis in Epicureanism is a concept that is geared towards a kind of calculation, calculating the ends of our actions, where the ends are understood as something that arises in the process of acting, and something which is never stable, something which is fallible, or something which is contingent,

something like that okay. So phronesis is also a natural capacity but because it arises as part of our actions it's also something that is constructed every time ... we act we enact phronesis a kind of performative, if you want, even though it's a natural capacity.

So, what I argue in the book is that this notion of phronesis or calculation of utility is absolutely central to Spinoza's project. And I kind of link that back to the discussion of phronesis in Epicurus and some passages in Lucretius and so on and so forth.

Now alongside Epicurus and Lucretius the sort of more famous Epicureans there was another figure, I mean there were many significant Epicurean figures, indeed it was one of the four major schools of philosophy and we know that Epicureanism, Epicurean philosophers published thousands of books but only one of them has survived Lucretius' De Rerum Natura and only a few letters that Epicurus wrote and the principal doctrines have survived from Epicurus's works. But Hermarchus is a very interesting figure because... I'm not sure how you pronounce it in English... he was Epicurus' student and he succeeded Epicurus as the head of the garden, as the head of the Epicurean school. So, we will have some information about Hermerchus for instance in the biographical Part of the Diogenes Laertius "In the lives of Philosophers" and clearly, he was a major figure of the Epicurean school, and he wrote many books, the refutation of Empedocles is the sort of most famous one in various volumes. Nothing of which has survived of Hermarchus, with the exception of a kind of we don't even know whether it's a paraphrase or a quotation. But it exists in Porphyry's book "De Absentia", or on abstaining from eating meat, which is written of course centuries later okay. And De Absentia is a book that kind of looks at social and political philosophy to make the argument why it is advisable or good not to eat meat. And ... Porphyry gives an account of how different schools of philosophy deal with that argument and he turns to Hermarchus in order to provide the Epicurean account. So that's the sort of background, the sort of context, to sort of understand the sort of the sort of general kind of framework within which I'm sort of looking at that passage in Spinoza in comparison to the passage from Epicurus.

Now what what is interesting... so let me talk about the Hermarchus passage now, which is... as I said would not know whether it's a quotation or a paraphrase and it's contained in Porphyry's book De Absentia. So, the first point to note is very often the argument is made that ... Epicureanism is apolitical, it doesn't have a politics and that is mostly based on a comment by Diogenes Laertius. Anyway, but I'm not going to go there but very often the argument is... for instance Leo Strauss in his book on Spinoza which is the book that has the most extensive discussion of Epicureanism in Spinoza before the book "Spinoza the Epicurean"... Leo Strauss argues that Spinoza is Epicurean but because Epicureanism lacks a politics Spinoza's politics actually is a combination of Averroism and Machiavellianism. So, Leo Strauss follows that kind of a very common line whereby Epicurean is misunderstood as apolitical.

So, it is interesting then that... for the passage in Porphyry about Hermarchus, whether it's a paraphrase or copying we would not know, it clearly shows that the Epicurean school has political concerns. In fact, the first point... I'll discuss three points I think there are three major points in that passage.

The first point is that the Epicurean school has done a genealogy: genealogia. To my knowledge this is the earliest use of the term genealogy in the philosophical context right. A genealogy of the laws of different states, so clearly they're interested in political philosophy. A genealogy of the laws of different states and... they have concluded says Hermarchus or Porphyry paraphrasing Hermarchus...

they have concluded he says that the political is constituted, the system it's constituted, or is formed because of the calculation of utility... the calculation of [inaudible].

And he goes on to to sort of vindicate that this calculation of utility is both something natural to the human but also something that... it requires that construction or formation that characterizes the kind of enactment of that calculation of utility. Therefore, the laws of all the states that they have reviewed in that genealogy are based on the calculation of utility, and because of that, the laws are both... the law formation and social formation and political formation is both natural and constructed. They're both in naturalist and ... I mean that's not what Porphyry says or Hermarchus says ... they don't use that terminology because he's not available to them but that the two elements the natural and the constructed element are clearly present.

And then the second point he makes is, and then you know the turn of the argument is when he goes [inaudible] even now even after the formation the first formation of societies the sort of same schema, the sort ... the natural the constructed persist...they persist because he says the the laws are obeyed because of two different reasons.

And that is on the one hand, we obey the laws because it is rational to do so, it is when we calculate our utility, we calculate that it is to our utility to follow the laws. And that creates a kind of "society of equals", again a "democratic" society. But also, the laws came before because of the fear of punishment. So, there is both a kind of rational and a kind of emotional reason whereby we follow the laws, even now. So that sort of double constitution of society is not simply at the point of origin, but at the point of the preservation of society

And then the third point is there is a kind of dialectic that Hermarchus describes between the calculation of utility and, or the sort of irrational aspect of how the laws are constructed and obeyed, and the sort of emotional aspect which kind of tells us how people might just simply follow the laws and be good citizens and participate in a society it's a sort of fear of punishment. And he says if everybody had the capacity to calculate ... that is actually the key point ... if everybody had the capacity to calculate their utility rationally, properly, to find their true utility, no law would be required there would be no need for the law to tell us what not to do, if a conclusive and a proper calculation of utility, that sort of rational function that the Epicureans call phronesis or the calculation of [inaudible], of utility, if that was done properly there would be no a requirement for law, and everybody would have been able to live atheretos[?], that is without an authority posed upon them, or more simply freely. But because that is not the case, we require laws and we require the fear of the law. So, there is this kind of conflict between the two rationalities as phronesis, as calculation of utility, is great but it's not enough. It also requires the emotional kind of element. And the sort of the rest of the political discussion in Hermarchus is as it is recorded in in Porphyry about the interaction between phronesis and emotion and the sort of emotional kind of disposition.

So, to repeat then, Hermarchus's argument as it is presented in Porphyry in just a few pages in in book one of De Absentia has three parts, okay it takes three steps. The first to say the sociality is premised on the calculation of utility, which makes it both natural and constructivist in our terms. The second is - so that's the origin of sight - the second is that even now kenin[?] any society that preserves itself has a sort of double basis, in the sense that it both calculates the utility and has a kind of emotional basis. And third there is a kind of dialectical tension, if you want to call it like that, between the calculation of utility and the emotion because... ideally, we can kind of say that it would have been possible to have a society without laws if everyone could calculate the utility correctly. But

because it's not possible, we need obedience, we need political authority, and that creates a kind of tension between the two. So that's the account in Hermarchus.

And then you turn to the passage in Book Five [TTP], the sort of second proof about the ceremonies not been part of divine law and being part of human law. And what is striking, if you compare the two passages, the striking thing these three steps that I described in Hermarchus are exactly present in Spinoza too. So, the first part, the first point that Spinoza makes in that passage is that society is formed for the advantage, the word that he uses there is perutilius [?] so utility in general, utility and its cognates in Latin is a translation of tosinferon in Greek, which is exactly the word that Hermachus kind of uses. Society is formed for the advantage of the people that are members of the society and it requires a kind of rational operation whereby which is kind of natural, and therefore that gives us a sort of basis of the both natural and constructed nature of society, because that calculation of the advantage or the utility is precisely that notion of phronesis that we saw in Hermarchus as well. That passage that I have in mind is the sort of passage that kind of reminds us of... is kind of reminiscent of Adam Smith. He describes how the society is formed for the advantage of the people and he justifies it by saying that "people cannot do everything on their own, you know they could not even eat, dress, cut their hair, shave, make merry, do anything whatsoever, except in accordance with commands and distractions laid down by the law, and this was not all and it had to have certain signs..." sorry I'm seeing I'm looking at the wrong passage I'm very sorry about that... I should have opened the page beforehand...

[Continues reading] "We see that those who live in a barbarous way with no civilizing influences live a wretched and almost brutish existence and even, so their fewer and poor and crude resources are not acquired without some degree of mutual health". So, there's a kind of rational kind of propensity to provide mutual help, so that they share the different resources that have at their disposal. But that at the same time is conducive to constructing a society. So that's the first step in Spinoza.

The second step is ... he provides a distinction between democracy - he doesn't name democracy but is the same idea he says, you know we can have a state whereby everybody renders obedience to themselves, which is how he defines democracy later - or he says if that is not possible people should be obeying there should be figures of authority that people should think that are particularly exceptional and they should attract our obedience. And that obedience is a kind of emotional kind of disposition whereas when we render obedience to ourselves, it's a sort of through the calculation of our utility. So, we see exactly that same distinction between, even now during the the phase of the preservation of society, who have on the one hand the operation of phronesis and on the other the sort of emotional disposition that has to do with the with obedience.

And the third element in Spinoza is... Spinoza also says explicitly that if people calculate their true utility, ... then laws would strictly not be necessary. But that's not the case because we know the better but do the worse, and because we go astray in our calculations, we're forced to have laws that need to be obeyed and an authority that regulates these laws. So, the third point that Hermarchus made. The possibility of a lawless society based on phronesis because everybody can calculate the utility properly, which is actually simply a fantasy, and you know you need the sort of obedience as a kind of dialectical counterpoint to create the tension between phronesis and emotion, so that we can give an account of society.

So, we see exactly the three same steps about social formation in Hermachus and Spinoza. And we see also that these these three steps provide an account of society that is understood both in

naturalist and constructivist terms. It is not the sort of rational animal of Aristotle's politics nor is it the artificial animal that Hobbes is talking about in Leviathan. It is a bit of both, there is a combination of both. There is a difference at the end of the passage in Chapter five and and Hermarchus. The difference is that Spinoza kind of indicates the tensions that exist... highlights the tensions that exist as a relation of the dialectic between phronesis and calculation of utility and the emotions and the demand to obey. And there's a kind of ... potential for social conflict and political conflict there. And that element is absent in Hermarchus. But apart from that similarity between these passages is quite astonishing.

So maybe I can leave it there, I mean... I can summarize very quickly what I said, I mean there's this strange passage ...

[interruption: if you could summarize in the next minute or so, that would be perfect]

[Speaker continues]: yeah, I just want to sort of go very very quickly through what I said I actually I forgot to check the time when I started so I don't know how long I've been you know

[interruption: if you could finish the next minute that would be great, but it's been awesome]

[Speaker continues]: ok so there's a strange passage in Chapter Five that explicitly addresses social formation, and it's very dense and obscure. Where does he get it from? Well, if you compare that passage with the passage about social formation, the only passage about explicitly about social information that we find in the Epicurean tradition, with an exception that I'm trying to talk about in question time, and that is the passage of Hermarchus in Porphyry's De Absentia... they have exactly the three same moves. The two texts kind of mirror each other. So, I just found that very intriguing. And it's also really important that if we realize that kind of influence or that kind of confluence, then it becomes clear that Spinoza's position is neither a naturalist nor constructivist, but a combination of the two. Thank you.