

Transcript

Roundtable - Martin Saar and Mogens Laerke on democracy, public reasoning and the imagination

Dan Taylor:

This round table is on democracy, public reasoning and imagination and it is my joy and my honour to have here two of the most brilliant minds on Spinoza who have both published recent or fairly recent books on Spinoza's politics in different ways. I'll introduce first Martin Saar, he's professor of social philosophy at Goethe University at Frankfurt am Main ... and Martin is going to talk first. But before he does, I'll introduce second Mogens Laerke, he's a senior researcher at the CNRS, he's currently based at the Maison Francaise at Oxford visiting from the Research Institute ihrim at the Ecole Normale Superieure of Lyon. Mogens, you might have just heard before we started, just published with Oxford University Press, an absolutely brilliant book on the freedom of philosophizing in the TTP. I think, with that, we'll start.

What the format will be, just so you know, Martin will kind of get us started talking about 15 minutes and then Mogens will talk for another 15 minutes. I'll then pitch some questions to them and we might try and follow up see what agreements and disagreements there might be especially in terms of the applicability of Spinoza's TTP to today and then after that it's over to the audience. We want this to be like, as much as we can with the technology, an engaging round table, so, with that, I'll pass to Martin, thank you.

Martin Saar:

Dan, this is a pleasure. Thank you to Marie, thank you for inviting me and having me on this round table during the day. So, this is a pleasure, so I have 10 to 15 minutes, so I'll get started, and my comments could be titled something like: "Ultimate grounds, political power, philosophical critique".

My very personal favourite historical feature of the Tractatus Theologico-Politicus is, as for many others of you maybe, how it came into being, and its status as an interruption of the Ethics. The biographical evidence is pretty reliable: around 1665 Spinoza felt that his own philosophical system that was about to emerge from his manuscript that was to become the Ethics could wait, and that the times called for a different and more focused philosophical intervention. And this is what Spinoza must have felt: the urgency not only of the theoretical content, but also of the form and the specific point of departure of a philosophical contribution and intervention. The task of setting ... shedding some light on questions that haunts the present. And imagine other great minds, in a way leaving their main work behind, to spend five years on something much more occasional and much more smallish, let's say, so which untruths and which mystifications made this step necessary.

Let me recapitulate carelessly, briefly of course, some of the steps of the argument, in the first and the second part of the Treatise. And let me suggest some broad gestures concerning the question why this might still somehow matter.

So first, theology. The first and much longer part of the TTP famously deals with a strained relationship between theology and philosophy. We've heard about this today already, and the claims

to know proponents of both ways. Since Protestant Christianity and particularly Calvinism, the dominant confession in the social world Spinoza was sharing, is a religion of the book and not the authority of scripture, Spinoza has to address the authority and status of the Bible and its interpretation, and he has to comment on the nature and the grounds of the Christian tenets of faith.

The general answer and the first part to the question "what is the relationship between theology and philosophy?" is simple even if the specifics are pretty pretty complex. The answer is they are separate forms of activity, and even if it seems that they share a realm of themes, and that they raise competing claims to knowledge - they don't. Theology is not metaphysics, religious teaching is not philosophy. The one is based on moral certainty and uses the images, metaphors and tropes to reinforce the obedience to the law of God. The other tries to establish intellectual certainty with the means of the light of human reason. So, theology cannot even claim to know things in the way a philosophical doctrine tries to. The apparent conflict of truths appears to be an effect of a misunderstanding from the side of religion. This strategy of isolation and differentiation carves out a space for both activities and secures, and this might be the ultimate goal of the TTP, a "safe space" we might say, a right to, and a legitimacy of, philosophical knowledge or of philosophizing. And I also recommend of course Mogens's brilliant book for all the details of this story.

What I want to focus on and highlight is the methodological or meta-theoretical form of Spinoza's argument. Theologians claiming knowledge and condemning secular or heretic views appeal to a form of epistemic authority that would grant them a foundational, non-disputable position. But neither the biblical teachings nor the status of bible interpretation are called or justified. By dissecting these arguments or claims to authority, Spinoza can establish in a sort of imminent critique that the ambitions of theology have to be restricted to its practical side, important as it is. And let me translate this into a different philosophical language. Spinoza strategy rests on the conception of the logics or forms of discourse. It analyses and dissects epistemic claims and refers them back to their practical pragmatic contexts and functions. This is a discourse analysis of sorts, or even an ideology critique. What this does is situating theories in their practical contexts, unmasking the non-purity, the non-neutrality of supposedly objective knowledge, but not debunking the ideological or worldview dimension of certain forms of discourse, but showing this to be their main function.

So, for current philosophizing this might mean to be similarly critical, similarly reflexive about one's own grounds to know, but also similarly relentless in attacking flawed claims to knowledge. Spinozists are non or anti-foundationalists, in that they think that the possession of ultimate foundations are not part of the epistemic game named philosophy, but something else and worthy of philosophical rebuttal. And we might apply this to esotericism, conspiracy theories but also of course in the false belief in science as in scientism or we in Frankfurt call positivism. Spinozism, as applied philosophy, is the systematic critique of non-epistemic claims to knowledge, of semblances of knowledge, of pseudo-knowledge.

Second, politics. The chapters 16 to 20 of the TTP are overly political, a contribution to political philosophy in the Hobbesian fashion, a contribution to natural law theory under the question of the rights and the limits of the state, but also the proposals in this part of course as you all know concern religion and theology. But now from a different angle, namely seen as forces that restrict and condition political rule. Spinoza is taking up an issue that is ultra-relevant for the political culture of his time. Namely, the question whether state authorities should model themselves after religious leaders who execute the will of God. And this is why the old Jewish history is the theme of the lengthy chapters 17-18.

But it is as you all know preceded by a freestanding, we might even say secular image, of the state as arising out of collective will in chapter 16. The philosophical analysis of the structure of the state makes clear that it is nothing else but a product of the joining of forces, of a collective of limitedly powerful subjects, sharing and therefore increasing their overall power as it were. This end, and to be able to preserve this collectively borne power, constraints the state to do nothing to weaken the citizens power and well-being. And this leads directly to the demands to restrict the religious powers in their influence on politics. It leads to a certain kind of freedom of speech, of religious belief and practice. And to a certain kind of general toleration, with all the problems of interpretation whether this is classically liberal or not again.

Let me rephrase and highlight some elements of this philosophical construction. Spinoza is first a constructivist about the state disassembling it into acts of founding and forms of establishing an order that derives from natural impulses, but gains a new completely artificial form, that is in need of constant legitimation and constant affirmation by its numbers. That means there is nothing given, nothing natural, nothing self-understood about political rule and domination.

Spinoza is - second - thinking from below, from the formless mass of subjects that form into a state conceptually prioritizing what in the TP [Political Treatise] will be called the *multitudo* but the quasi-contractualist picture of the TTP already contains all of its elements and this is what many call Spinoza's implied vision of radical democracy.

Spinoza is - third - at the same time respecting and containing political difference. He knows that the people forming a state, or forming a political community are different in their identities, powers, capacities, both bodily and intellectual, in their desires, in their urges and interests. The process of founding a state or a community makes use of all of these differences, without denying them. Every power joining others, adding something into the ultra-powerful machinery that is to emerge. But afterwards, nothing would be more harmful than to hand over this machine to some with a particular creed or a particular interest and allow them to crush the differences they take to be aberrations or heresies.

So, building on difference and preserving difference but within the unitary functional form of the state - this seems to be the imperative of Spinozist statecraft. And this is why the state has to treat the true believers and the heretics alike, so that all can strive in a whole that increases its overall power, by allowing for difference in its many parts, in its many ... maybe a thousand plateaus and levels.

I guess you see where I'm heading: recommending a politics of plural constitution, of multiplicity and difference, as Spinoza does, to me still seems apt to describe the structure of hyper-differentiated diverse societies as ours, and to recognize their main danger, namely, the hegemony and the privilege of some. Attacking certain false ideas about the state amounts to attacking a certain ideology of homogeneity and natural order and it means reminding the polity that it's based, is comprised of the many who are not one and who cannot be made one except by force. A political order capable of granting liberties and of accepting dissensus, however, will remain dynamic and processual and this might be an endless source for individual and collective human flourishing, and this is what Spinoza believed, and it might still be true.

My third and last part: the theological-political. The philosopher intervening into the religious and political debates of his time is fighting on two front lines. Against dogmatic theology, the claims of

reason and philosophy are defended. Theology's teachings are practical, not theoretical, and there are no basis for the regulation of what everyone should think. Against political rulers who take themselves to be exempt from critique, the denaturalizing analysis of the state as a composite being is another effective demystification. Political authority arises from the popular base of the entire polity and must not be a weapon in the hands of some, as it is more often than not.

A fine balance of freedoms and liberties, combined with a strong and functional state apparatus, is not in the service of one group. And an encouragement of productive civil encounters is what the philosopher can propose. But this vision of politics is obscured by half-truths, by errors and ideologies. To fight them is a war of ideas. It is extreme ... it means struggling with knowledge against knowledge - epistemic warfare one might say. And all parties in it will rely on, and use, imaginary and affective means. And they will be bound by fantasies and phantasms about themselves. So public reasoning, or philosophy as a public practice, will not deny or delegitimize these affective resources and motivations to their core, but it will deny them any claim to generality and dominance. It will rather call for a constant negotiation of the universal, confronting political epistemic subjects with something they not already feel and know about themselves. Public reasoning or philosophy as a public practice is offering them perspectives that might help them overcome their own limitations. But this de-centring, possibly liberatory experience, has to be made if possible by all citizens. It will what a century later will be called Enlightenment. Thank you.

Dan Taylor:

Great, thank you very much Martin so I'll now invite Mogens to speak next.

Mogens Laerke:

Okay so thank you very much Dan and thank you to Marie also for inviting me. So, I guess the very brief paper I'll read this is actually it's a kind of draft for a blog that OUP asked me to make and which I entitled provisionally "What kind of democrat was Spinoza", so here it goes.

So recent studies of Spinoza's political theory in contemporary perspective have to a large extent, with some notable exceptions - I'll especially mention the person who gave the opening lecture to this conference yesterday - situated Spinoza's philosophy in one of two categories. Depicting him either as a defender of individual free speech and liberal democracy, or as a champion of radical democracy and collective popular power. For some he is something like a centrist liberal supporter of the equal individual rights of all citizens to speak truth to power. For others he's more like a left-wing populist, championing the power of the multitude against an inherently oppressive state. Either way, whether the emphasis is put on the individual or on the multitude, Spinoza actually and potentially provides fodder for populist positions where the culpable elite is construed as an invasive popular government seeking to curb individual freedoms, or as a mere representative of global corporate interest embedded within the structures of government. Spinoza's political theory has largely been perceived as a theoretical source of possible resistance to excessive state power.

Now a lot of philosophically valuable and politically potent commentary has been produced on both sides ... on this divide, between readers of Spinoza. All of it attempts implicitly or explicitly to enrol the philosopher in the service of whatever political project the authors wish to promote. And yet, I think we can learn considerably more from Spinoza if we let him address his own historical circumstances, before we ask, we begin asking him of what use his political theory may be to us in ours. And the fact

is that neither US-style liberalism nor radical democracy was on the menu anywhere in late 17th century Europe when Spinoza wrote his texts.

Moreover and, very importantly, nothing in his immediate political circumstances suggests that he would consider that state power represents the principal threat to the freedom of citizens or the civil laws to be necessarily restrictions put on that freedom. Indeed, it is the contrary: those circumstances would rather make us expect him to defend state power as a means to secure freedom of citizens and the civil laws to be the political instrument for achieving that.

And this indeed he did, when Spinoza published his *Tractatus* anonymously in 1670 in order to, as he said, defend the freedom of philosophizing, he was mainly advocating for a certain kind of citizen as others among the Dutch republican thinkers of his generation. Perhaps, most importantly, the brothers Johann and Pieter de la Court. He was seeking to highlight the potential of a new political class that began to emerge in his lifetime and to which many Spinoza's closest friends belonged. A financially independent, well-educated and increasingly secular urban population, eager to have their word in governance. The "wise merchants", as Caspar Baleos called them, in his famous inaugural lecture as rector of the illustrious school of Amsterdam in 1632.

These "wise merchants" were for Spinoza those what he called best citizens, whom he said a good education, integrity of character and virtue have made more free. And Spinoza put much confidence in the capacity of these best citizens, to lead a great democratic reform of the political structures of council and command of political consultation, participation and decision making. His *Tractatus* was aimed at demonstrating the societal benefits of giving this new breed of citizens what they wanted, not just by permitting but also promoting and supporting the creation and consolidation of a public sphere, where they could interact and participate in political deliberations. A public sphere of free philosophizing, where private men could come together to exchange in public.

I do not think we will succeed in understanding the meaning of Spinoza's political theory if we do not take into account the fact that he was responding to this particular set of historical circumstances tied to the transformations that the political landscape underwent in mid mixed 17th century Dutch republic. This said, while elaborating his response to those circumstances he also created ... as he said while elaborating his response to those circumstances, he also created a political theory of democratic governance, of republican ideals of society and religion, of civil education and popular participation in politics. That, *mutatis mutandis*, also speaks directly to a wide range of today's political issues, including, just to mention a few: free speech, political lying, deception and flattery, cultural and religious prejudices, the rationality of public discourse or the fundamental mechanisms of democratic deliberation and majority rule. And among these present-day issues that Spinoza's texts can help us address, we also find that populism if you understand by populism if we understand by populism. a kind of politics that seeks to cater for the interests of a perceived class of ordinary people persistent upon opposition to economic political and or intellectual elites.

This question of Spinoza and populism is far from foreign from present-day commentary. He has been depicted as a radical democrat who champions the power of the general multitude against an oppressive state. At the other end of the interpretative spectrum, he has also been described as an almost libertarian defender of free speech. That is, of the right of each and every citizen to promote their opinion and beliefs in the public sphere, whatever those opinions and beliefs may be. And on both interpretations, it is not a big step to also proclaim Spinoza to be some kind of populist. It does not however take much study of the historical context to realize that Spinoza's political theory could

not have been conceived for either of those purposes. In fact, I think there is no way we can simply co-opt Spinoza for whatever political agenda or political theory one wants to push without doing violence to his text, of glossing over the specificity of his position.

But this should of course not prompt us then to declare Spinoza's take on democratic participation and freedom of expression to be antiquated, of merely historical relevance. For once we grasp it within its proper context and according to its own specificity, Spinoza's democratic republicanism and conception of a public sphere of free philosophizing perhaps responds better to a whole range of present-day conundrums than any of the options mentioned already. Spinozism cannot be subsumed ... under any of those options and that is exactly why it is rewarding to read him.

Now in Spinoza's time, the greatest political fault line opposed the defenders of prerogatives of the Spanish crown in the Netherlands, the so-called Orangists and those who defended the republican freedom of the Netherlands and the so-called true freedom ushered in by Johan De Witt, ... who ruled in the 1650s and 1660s. And it is here crucial to realize at that time the idea of broad public consultation and populist rule was associated with the Orangist side of the political equation, as opposed to the badly disguised oligarchy of the Dutch republican regime, which was organized around the elite of the state regions and their privileges within that historical framework.

It is remarkable that a defender of Dutch republicanism should also champion broad democratic participation in the way that Spinoza did, but it also invites us to exercise considerable caution before we went venture to ascribe any straightforward alignment of Spinoza's republican deals and broadly democratic aspirations. Because Dutch republicanism remained on the whole wedded to the idea that participation in political deliberation and decision making remained conditioned on some requirement of acquired political competence. Not everybody was invited to the party, so to speak. So, Spinoza's favourite democracy we learned in the *Tractatus Politicus* was a society where, as he says, everyone who is bound only by the laws and who is his own master and lives honourably has the right to vote in the supreme council and to stand for political officers.

Now, the additional requirement here to be one's own master prompt Spinoza's infamous exclusion of women from voting rights and political office. But the demonstrable awfulness on every level: logical, rhetorical, and ethical of this argument ... that it develops to that particular effect, the exclusion of women, has tended to overshadow the broader systematic meaning of the requirement of self-mastery for citizens of a democratic republic.

All this cast considerable doubt on any presupposition Spinoza's programme for democratic reform was principally motivated by a concern for either popular sovereignty or for individual freedom. It was governed by republican concern for collective political freedom peace and security. Spinoza did indeed argue, as one of the first in modern political theory, that a democratic state form offered the best path to achieve such collective political freedom, but only under certain conditions that reflected his suspicion towards theories placing excessive weight either on popular sovereignty or on individual liberty.

First, according to Spinoza, a democratic state form becomes dysfunctional and degenerates into mob rule if it doesn't include adjacent structures of free public consultation. So, a broad public sphere ... and they have to be sufficiently robust and protected by the state to withstand the threats from ill-intended or violent citizens or from those what he called "worst men" who censure publicly those who disagree and who persecute in a hostile spirit. This is a key insight for Spinoza, and I think an

important one for us too. What is most important for securing a public sphere in which all citizens can participate with equal right and without fear is not, as free speech advocates would have it, to isolate the public's fear from state violence, it is to protect by means of state institutions and legal safeguards the public sphere from violence perpetrated by other citizens.

So, Spinoza's call for state control over the church in chapter 19 is the most striking consequence of that approach, one that has been declared paradoxical by liberal readers of Spinoza, but which is in fact a direct consequence of one of the most basic features of his understanding of political freedom. Namely, that it consists first of all in state-guaranteed freedom from the violence of others, which allows us to express our own judgments freely in the public sphere without fear of persecution from other citizens. And to obtain such political freedom requires appropriate state regulation of public speech, not deregulation.

Second, in order to assert a certain that democratic participation does not fall into disrepair and the public sphere eventually collapses into a chaotic mix of bigotry, deception and flattering, citizens must have received what must have received a liberal education which has taught them how to judge for themselves rather than simply spewing prejudices. And a civic education which has taught them to abide by basic rules of non-violence and respect for the social contract, for them to never represent the violent threat to other citizens.

So, what kind of democrat was Spinoza? Well one thing he certainly was not was a liberalist defender of free speech. Was he anything like a left populist then did he believe that political decision-making should be in the hands of the people as opposed to perceived economic political or intellectual elites? Making up of him as is sometimes done a partisan a popular power for the sole reason that he claims that political power ultimately lies with the people is hardly enough to put him in that basket. It is in fact just standard republican fare giving that he does not claim that public authority and I'm here referring to the proper notion of *auctoritas*, not the intractable term *imperium*, but that public authority necessarily also lies with the people. For this he does not say, in Spinoza, power lies with the people, public authority with the sovereign, exactly as in Cicero, power belongs to the people but authority to the senate.

So, he was perhaps a populist in the sense that he rejected the old courtly structures of privy councils, of special advisors that he saw as too self-interested, perhaps a little bit like lobbyists these days. And that he favoured a broad interface of public consultation between the general citizenry and the sovereign power. A political construction wherein as he says no one so transfers his natural right that in the future there's no consultation with him. He did however also subscribe to a certain form of elitism by setting as condition for such a broad public consultation to be in any way beneficial for society and for a democratic public sphere to operate as it should that this same body of citizens should be sufficiently well educated and self-possessed to be worthwhile consulting. He did not think that participatory democracy was particularly beneficial for what he calls a "wretched people" subjected to their own prejudices and willing to fight for their slavery as if it was for their freedom. Spinoza's extended analysis of the ancient Hebrew Republic shows exactly this.

But we could also wonder a bit if what happened at the US Capitol in January doesn't show it as well in any case.

In any case, without necessarily requiring people to possess any particular scientific competence or elite knowledge, Spinoza thought that citizens should be capable of speaking up for themselves,

rather than simply running the prejudiced errands of others. And they should be equally and fully committed to the common republican project to which they were summoned to contribute.

It is sometimes argued that Spinoza's commitment to democracy was somewhat mitigated because of the conditions that he lays upon it. But I don't think it was. I think it was exactly conditional, namely conditional upon the states, the state of the citizens living within it. So, thank you very much.

Dan Taylor:

Thank you very much Mogens, so what will happen here I'll give a brief response and I'm going to ask Martin to respond to Mogens and then we're going to have another exchange after that and I'll just summarize some fascinating things that are coming up. But probably you've been observing and thinking about this too what we're getting is two quite different ways of approaching Spinoza. And I'll put my hand up and make a confession that I've recently written about Spinoza in terms of left populism so I'm the kind of the problem in terms of the risks of using Spinoza for unSpinozan purposes and this is a great difficulty when we're looking at Spinoza to work with Spinoza in his context in a historical way as Mogens does brilliantly in his latest book but then the possibilities that are laid out when we think about Spinoza's politics or his metaphysics in our own context and in our own times and there is this floating question about whether we can, whether we should, is it wise and this is something that I want us to really drill into in the Q and A strand that I'd like us to explore. And so, Martin and Mogens I'll ask you to kind of maybe direct some of your answers to this in both of your presentations the figure of persecution and the ambitious theologian has come up and I'm interested in this problem of intolerance, persecution, prejudice. It obviously has a basis in Spinoza's own time and of course it has a great basis right now. Mogens mentioned the attack on the Capitol and we can think about polarization in our own times. Now one of the great difficulties and this is going to be directed at Martin first when we're thinking about democracy, we're thinking about in your presentation like an immanent power of the people but what do we do in societies where the demos, the people are divided and polarized where some hate other groups of the people in different ways what would be the role here for collegial reasoning or the imagination in this respect? So, Martin I'll ask you if you don't mind just to kind of help us figure out this problem of prejudice and persecution and then Mogens if you can you can freewheel off that or you can freewheel based on what Martin says, it's really up to you. So, Martin first.

Martin Saar:

Yes, thank you Dan and thank you Mogens. Yeah, this was brilliant, and the only point where we really really disagree is in the opening remarks where you laid out the map. And I would have to say, but this would be a completely different discussion, so if I would spell out what I mean by radical democracy this would not resemble what you take this camp to say. But this has to do with that radical democracy is as much an umbrella term as the term republicanism. And in the history of political ideas, so this also has acquired so many meanings and radical democracy has also become something like that. So, I don't mean the immediate anti-state spontaneous anarchist position that maybe the early Negri proposed, but radical democracy for me is connected to other ideas and also pretty much about ideas about the state, as you also were mentioning them. So, for me, being a radical democrat doesn't mean that I pitch the power of the multitude against the power of the state, on the contrary. But this has to do with other commitments I have, has to do with Ernesto Laclau maybe another, and other theories and, also, by the way, with whom you also use in your own book to elucidate what the importance of the public sphere is. So, it could be that in the end we are pretty

much on the same page on a lot of sociological and political issues in the present, but that's just an opening remark.

So, Dan, let me respond to the question of intolerance, persecution, prejudice on the side of citizens and whether completely polarized societies fare well when they are democratic. And I could easily respond with a thing Mogens said at the end. So, the value of democracy is conditioned on the polity or the people or the political community it is to be thought of for. And therefore, I would also say democratic institutions means practices can turn foul, given a certain political climate atmosphere and situation. So, if we would really think that our more or less pluralist societies are utterly polarized and utterly comprised of different subgroups at war with each other - and this is what the rightist narrative about what identity politics is all about sometimes sounds like - then democracy would not be a good idea. So, democracy can only work as a collective practice and also probably as a set of institutions when there is some orientation towards something like the common good, the universal, the common, you name it. So there has to be some logics or dynamics of universalization, may even of fairness, maybe even a sense of common justice, that is probably indispensable for the health and the functioning of democratic practices.

So therefore, I see the point that when some people at the moment say in a kind of diagnostic of the present, we are so divided or so polarized that not even the democratic remedies seem to hold. I think there's something to be said but then we would have to work on let's say the premises of this diagnosis. And I would still say that most more or less functioning democracies might look like they are completely polarized or segregated or in a way comprised of insular subjectivities, that are not connected to each other. But it might not be true, and I think exactly what Mogens is pointing to would be the indicator if there is some kind of public discourse, some kind of public exchange, might be, maybe even something we might call public culture. And there is a sort of communication than the process of social, civil and democratic interaction that maybe generates exactly the kind of competences democrats need.

And it's true Spinoza himself thought this is probably not for everyone, and this was of course a sociological or a political stance about the societies of his own time. But I think we could say that our a little bit egalitarian societies at least grant many opportunities to anyone to participate, and everything else are problems of let's say the oligarchical structures that our societies, who are by the way capitalist societies, also generate and possess. But there is no no barrier or no block in general that impedes us from becoming ever more democratic, and therefore I would be hesitant to subscribe to the ultra-grim diagnosis that in our societies anyway we have lost the spark of a certain kind of radical egalitarianism that must be part of any democratic story. But I could see that at the moment it doesn't look too bright, but the Spinozist picture would be there has to be something like this, there has to be a form of deliberation participation, also epistemic exchange, that can generate some kind of a common orientation and maybe even something what many political theorists call a democratic ethos. And I think this is also something he had in mind maybe in other words and maybe the term virtual is still apt for exactly this.

Mogens Laerke:

Okay so Dan do you want me to say something now?

Dan Taylor:

Yeah, you're welcome to just you can freewheel off that or we can talk about the democratic ethos and the kinds of civic practices that you talk about in your book and alluded to in the presentation it's really up to you.

Mogens Laerke:

Okay fine so great Martin let me just begin following up on your first... I'm patiently aware of having characterized the left-wing depiction of Spinoza. I mean I think I probably characterized it to the character sort of made a character too many left wings yeah, I mean I probably have to do something about that anyway so putting that to one side. I'd like to spin off a little bit about what you said about polarization because it's actually a bit of a... I think it really is a bit of a problem in Spinoza. And it's a problem that he doesn't really address but you can see where I think where at least in his theory where it would have to be addressed at some level. One of the things that that I've been very interested in Spinoza in prognosis political theory has been to try to take take up this this this notion that Dan also talked about before about collegiality which shows up a few times but with this has hardly been thematized in in the commentaries I think the only place I've actually evolved thematization of it before myself, is in Dan's book ... which is this principle of collegiality that Spinoza sort of takes out from the political discourse in the 17th century which is basically the principle of the principle of majority rule.

Which is the idea collegiality is the basic corporate principle according to which when you're in a corporation everybody agrees. So, there's a basis agreement that everybody will submit to majority rule. So, this is sort of a two-level rocket, and the way that Spinoza implements the principle of collegiality into the concept of democracy is the idea that there's a republican foundation, which is based on everybody agrees to some given principle of deliberation. And the democratic and the democratic kind of rule that principle of deliberation is just happens to be according to majority rule. So, it is within that kind of structure of collegialism I think that the question of polarization comes up. Because within that kind of conception where you have, in between, on the one hand, everybody agrees to something and everybody agrees to what the bigger part of the whole thinks, what you have is that - Spinoza has this phrase that I think is very important, that he wants to make a society where nobody gives up their natural let's say their natural power so much that they also give up their right to be consulted - and he uses the word consulted. So, what we have here, is that we have in Spinoza we have a basic political structure, that's built up around, on the one hand, sovereign command who makes the decisions or who carries them out. And then also building a a structural council or a structure of well maybe the sovereign authority can makes the decision, but they also have sort of an obligation to consult with other people and that's what goes on in majority rule democracy, well-functioning democracy, is the idea that it's the greater part that rules and makes the decisions, but is the whole but the whole including minority gains, or maintains the right to be consulted. And if you don't have both sides of this, on the one hand, yet you have sovereign power that is unimpeded and can carry out whatever it decides, and on the other hand the sovereign power having a real obligation to consult with everybody, even those that are not part of their own majority before making decisions. I think that kind of double structure of counsel and command is absolutely central to Spinoza's conception over democracy and it comes I think it's something that he took out from Grotius, but it's sort of a longer story.

In any case, with regard to this question of that polarized public sphere, as it were. The problem is that within such a structure, the idea is that the majority should consult the minority, and then within that process of deliberation the relation between the minority and the majority should on each case always be renegotiated. As you talked about this notion, this is ... I mean Spinoza doesn't say anything about it, but presumably the idea was that the majority should always in deliberation be renegotiated so that one politician you know speaks with everybody and then one politician decides well actually I think we can go to US politics some one Republican thinks that or maybe the Democrats are right and we'll vote with them once in a while but right now [inaudible] it does not happen do it it is extremely polarized which means that the the whole dynamics of political council and the whole dynamics according to which the council on command should function with these constantly renegotiated majorities has simply fallen away.

So at least we can use Spinoza to diagnose the problem in a very very quite simple but also very precise manner, but I'm not quite sure that so he's very good for diagnosing it I'm not quite sure that he has any theory of how to overcome it or how to as it were reboot negotiations as it were. I don't know whether Martin whether you have any idea of whether there's anywhere in Spinoza where he has a fear of how you rebuild reboot negotiation, how you overcome entrenched majority rule? I don't know, I mean I haven't found anything, but that's at least what I think about it. I think it also has a very good way of structuring these questions, but not not a good way he doesn't have a way to respond to it really.

Martin Saar:

Dan, can I just respond in two sentences? It's just I think we agree on that point really I think totally and what you call or what also in the text is called consultation or counsel is of course pretty close what democratic theory from the 19th on has called the principles of deliberation. And so, the need for consultation and in that also Spinoza seems to be pretty straightforward and he's not on the side of majority rule as a principle that is freestanding. So majority rule only makes sense if you have rights that secure also the say and the voice of the minority. So, it's a double as you say it's a double gesture between majority principle and protection of minorities at the same time.

And having a right and an obligation to consultate is probably the best, the most abstract principle you can have and what I was trying to say in terms of difference was in a way nothing else. We just wanted to say that state agencies also let's say bodies and parliaments in the way should be geared towards taking in as many points of view as possible, and also trying to find for what the non-majoritarian positions are. Not to make them the dominant or let's say acting principles, but just to have the full picture and this is probably the quasi-universalist in a way core of that theory. And it's not that in the end he says there should not be a strong executive, there should be because the state has to be protected, but it should be one that is informed from all sides and all we have are these little remarks on how in a monarchy the king also has to consult also the aristocratic governments, but this is more the TP stuff on institutional design.

These are sometimes so clear-sighted implementations of these kind of principles, but I also would not see that he has a clear solution because he seems to trust in the let's say the mere dynamics or process of consultation or communication. So, he is in a way a real Habermasian, as you depict him in one of your chapters, in that he trusts that if you force a political ruler or political decider to listen to the points of views of the other people, there will be something happening that is not at the whim of this one person. And I think we should see that this is also something like a rationalist, a deep

rationalist conviction that as far as you have to listen to others and give reasons, defend yourself, in a way make room for deliberation, you will have ... it will be very hard for you to just execute your own will. So, there will be let's say deliberative and maybe even justificatory dynamics that will force everyone to accord to some kind of shared common reasonable criteria. And this is I think something he deeply believes and this is Habermasian to the bone.

Mogens Laerke:

Yeah, I mean there's bits of in there that I think is Habermas and also, I think there are bits in there that are not Habermas. But one of the things that are important I think, one of the things you said in the beginning is not democracy on under all circumstances. I mean one way I think maybe one can put it is that what Spinoza does not believe in is democracy without republicanism, yeah the idea I mean which is basically a republicanism is just the basic idea that everybody and they can be in an aristocratic republic, a monarchical republic, no matter that everyone is committed to whatever principle of liberation has been decided upon. So, if you have a democratic republic, if you have a democracy where the people is supposed to decide but it's not say say subtended or is not held up by a commitment by all citizens to sort of a republican commitment by all citizens to democratic rule or majority rule when then democracy, if you have democracy without republican sense, then it's going to fall apart.

Why? Because it's going to happen exactly what happened at the Capitol on the 6th of January is that if people don't like what the majority of people ...if they don't respect, if they come to the point where they say well we will go with what the majority says as long we're part of the majority and if it's the other guys who win then our commitment to the republican idea of you know all of committing to the same thing as it were well that was just fall away. So, if you have a democracy without republicanism, then it falls apart it just sort of collapses into mob rule and I think that's a very that's a very... I mean democracy doesn't doesn't stand on his own as it were.

Mogens Laerke:

Yeah, that's true even if I would think there is room for something like an agonistic republicanism where the basis of on what you have to agree on is pretty pretty slim. So, most republicanism are more substantial here, but so having it, I have in mind John McCormick's book on Machiavellian republicanism where he says sometimes it's enough that we agree that there are some parties that have to in a way keep each other in check and in balance. And sometimes this looks like a civil war, but it's actually held together by certain kind of balance of forces. And even that would be a more or less republican but not so peaceful, not so peaceful a picture, but I agree under the Capitol of course even yeah things become complicated if the president in a way provokes these things. And then things get really complicated, because he is in a way representative of the whole or of the universal and then what does it mean to say I as a person say that you have to rebel against the institutions I stand in, so yeah but that's another another problem.

Martin Saar:

Yeah, sure so I think one of the things so so this about the the agonistics yeah, I think I think that's true but it's on the basis of pre-established principles that we can all... the wars are supposed as Pierre Bayle called them they're supposed to be innocent in the sense that we have to exclude a whole bunch of things from the sphere in which these fights take place before we engage in them.

And that's the state that has to act certain that so that's first of all we have to exclude violence so so the state has to be there to a certain that citizens when they discuss to each other they don't cut each other's throats as well.

So that's the first thing but the other thing is and that is much more I mean that's one thing and it's quite easily instead of theorized by Spinoza in terms of of the basic structures of sovereignty, but I think there's another problem and another thing in that that has to be within that sort of public sphere where this agonistic thing is going on. Where these innocent wars between opinions and ideologies and ideas and so on and so forth where they go on other things that need to be excluded and which you cannot do simply by law, like you can exclude violence by law, and that's all the things that have to do with deception and flattering and prejudice. And all these things that within a well-developed public sphere where people deliberate with each other what do you do with people who try to trick you, what do you do with people who just flatter you, who don't tell ... the truth? What do you do with people who are constantly lying? I mean how do you deal with that in public deliberation, and the thing is you know it doesn't have a simple answer to that, because you can't do that by law. He says it again and again and again: deception cannot be eliminated by law, it's not the state to tell you, I mean if you go out and lie in the public sphere well you can't be put in prison for that and you shouldn't be. So how do you overcome this? And I think that Spinoza has ... some conceptions of how to overcome. I think the very first mechanism that he comes up with is education. You need to educate people with basic republican principles which will make them say participate in the public sphere in view of the common good. And you only have that if you have indoctrinated people with basic republican principles about common commitment to the state.

I think one of those doctrines for example is the social contract. We should all be indoctrinated with the idea that we are all equally committed to this ... I think also what he calls the the doctrines of universal faith that we should all behave with charity and justice and so on and so forth. Those are also part of these things that are supposed to structure the way that we intervene in the public sphere so that we don't do it always in self-interest, deception, flattering. So, he has all these ways of you know he has some tools, namely education, actually both education and and a good management of religion within the state, to overcome at least some of these problems with deception and flattering which will make a public sphere a better deliberative space, where people will speak correctly.

And then you also have ... he has quite an elaborate theory of what public deliberation should look like, so that it works properly. It's a very curious chapter in the TTP that people never talk about, it's the chapter 11 about the letters to the about the apostles' letters and mostly Saint Paul, where he speaks about how ... I mean why the hell did Spinoza certainly put in a chapter in TTP about the apostles' letters? It's the only chapter in the TTP that's about the New Testament and then he decides to write about the apostles' letters, why the hell?! I mean there must be some some fundamental reason why he thought that that was important to get in there and as I think the reason is that the apostles' letters, the way that the apostles write to other people, or what he calls them as he says they are predict that they're there and do it that are indeed dealing a predication ex-cognition as he says from reason or from cognition. They provide a kind of model for how you should behave in the public sphere. They provide a model for free philosophizing basically. So, what they do is that they speak openly, boldly, without deception, taking the other to be ... taking the people that they talk to be equal to themselves. They speak as he says in a perplexed kind of way so non-unpredictably or for the others we'll follow that with it with basic falsification procedures so on and so forth. I mean there's a whole list of say rules for how you should behave in the public sphere.

So, he actually has a quite a lot of things to say about the way how this what you call agonistic sphere for public deliberation should actually be structured it's not just ... I mean sometimes people will compare ... I mean one of the things that really can get me out of my chair and upset about it is that people sometimes will compare the space of free philosophizing or public deliberation Spinoza with something like ... John Stuart Mill says of liberty yeah and compare it you know to the free exchange of goods so that is something like market forces that are supposed to or something comparable to market forces that's supposed to regulate this sort of space on its own. I think that's totally wrong. How do you think Spinoza, he thinks ... no he cannot regulate it on his own. Public deliberation will have to be structured in a particular way so people behave in certain ways, not just excluding violence but also excluding a whole bunch of other things.

So, deception, flattery and so on and also that they speak to other people in a particular way as equals and so on and so forth. This is where we get something that looks like a Habermasian thing, because you end up with something like what Habermas speaks about. As you know for the places where you engage in discussing in social reproduction... the kind of discursive room you enter in order to solve problematic claims within public discourse. So, you know where only the better arguments invalid and so on and so forth. all these things I mean other way I mean there are other things in Spinoza that makes that those those kind of equal deliberations somewhat different than in Habermas, but at least there's this I mean there's this ... I mean it's a very structured place for public deliberation, it's not just any old agon, not any old.

Martin Saar:

Yes that's right...

Dan Taylor:

Before we go into the wider Q and A I just want to pitch one question over to Martin and I'm just gonna invite you to comment really one of the key parts of what Mogens is presenting. And that he argues in the book is the role of education and I guess something else that's coming up is a kind of theory of citizenship. And these are both fascinating avenues for working with Spinoza, because Spinoza doesn't explicitly at length deal with either. And so, you mentioned earlier Martin about virtue and democratic ethos and so on and so I wondered if you could give a brief remark or two about what you would see as features of a democratic education or of a kind of democratic virtue maybe in relation to what Mogens has just said?

Martin Saar:

So, I think it's it's clear and Mogens is absolutely right so the question of how do democratic citizens come about, because they're not born they're made. As he says echoing before, education is crucial and education in my philosophical lexicon just means subject formation. So, education is for me is a classical name or [inaudible] for what we also talk about when we talk about let's say political or democratic subjectivation. And this will hinge on practices, of which practices connected to the educational institutions are probably the most important but not the only ones.

So, there might be a broad sense of the term culture that in a way also captures this. Because we're not only educated in schools and in universities but also let's say in the media space, in daily life, in the world and in systemic workplace relations. So, this would be so my only so defence against the

term education in the narrowly understood sense. But that's not what you mean, it just means that a democratic culture presupposes a subject initiated into the practices that comprise a democratic culture. And we have to talk about these institutions and how to frame them and also who's in charge of them and this includes questions of who is funding educational institutions or not ... are there private educational sites and all of these kind of problems so who has access to rich educational means and resources. And I see also ... it's been also being incredibly sensitive to exactly these kinds of questions, so what are the let's say material preconditions of participation and collective flourishing. And they will be ... this will be hardcore material questions, so about money and means and places and architecture and and buses that bring you to schools on earth and all of these kind of things. So, for me these are the the big questions, and again I'm convinced of readings and this is also following just brought up in the chat who say that Spinoza also saw the ambivalence of these institutions of course too.

And connecting this to the question of evil he also saw that some institutions form let's say deficient and illiterate subjects. And he was also I think pretty sensitive to the problem that serious social inequalities also produce asymmetries in the public or sphere or public culture and this is also something he was trying to address and this also connects again to the David problem and the idea that Dutch republicanism at the time had a let's say boldly aristocratic kind of side so there was not so much egalitarianism as Jonathan Israel wanted to have it in reading these documents. And in a way we know I was also negotiating here between a more egalitarian and a more elitist kind of account and he's also I think hard to pin down so in the political divides between these two camps let's say.

But therefore, so these and I'm just saying yes so these are the questions he is addressing in let's say a structural way even if most of the concrete specific proposals for us are of course not to be taken at face value because they apply to a set of institutions and a public culture that is not ours, ours being one that is highly mediated, highly differentiated and much much bigger. So, you have to talk about also mass society and what mass societies can do in terms of education and how you in a way overcome certain class divisions that at the moment were at the moment he was writing were just emerging in a certain let's say early modern form. And then of course you would have other ... you would need other theoretical and I would even say sociological resources to in a way make sense of this and for me some of the readings that are trying to bring together let's say the political Spinoza with the sociological Bourdieu make a lot of sense because they also can elucidate habitus transformation in a certain culture and under certain political conditions and this is where I would also want my Spinoza to go.

Dan Taylor:

This is brilliant thank you so much.