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## THE ROLE OF TOLERATION IN SPINOZA'S EPISTEMIC DEMOCRACY

Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise (TTP)* contains one of the earliest systematically supported defences of toleration for the political realm. Throughout chapters 13–17, Spinoza offers a theological argument in favour of toleration, according to which, in broad terms, true religion does not require taking sides in theological disputes since no religious sect attains the exclusive claim to defining the true and the good, that is, to be the only holder of true faith. The theological argument for toleration paves the way for the political argument for toleration that culminates the *TTP*.<sup>1</sup> There, in chapter 20, and in line with the book's title, Spinoza maintains that

rule over minds is considered violent, and ... the supreme majesty seems to wrong its subjects and to usurp their right whenever it tries to prescribe to everyone what they must embrace as true and reject as false, and, further, by what opinions everyone's mind ought to be moved in its devotion to God. (*TTP* 20, C 2:344)<sup>2</sup>

The political argument for toleration can be regarded from two angles: the state's and the individual's. Focusing on the state, Spinoza warns of the harmful implications of state interference in the tasks of defining the true and the good. Overshadowing individual judgment leads to favouring the beliefs of some against the beliefs of others in a shared collective environment. This

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<sup>1</sup> Edwin CURLEY, "Castelio vs. Spinoza on Religious Toleration," *The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy* 7 (2010): 89–110.

<sup>2</sup> Citations from Spinoza's works are from Curley's 2-volume edition of Spinoza: 1985 (C 1 = vol. 1) and 2016 (C 2 = vol. 2).

imbalance weakens the state rather than strengthens it. A strong, robust, and stable state, expressive of natural law to the highest possible degrees, should not only allow individual freedom but also promote and secure it. The state should not place itself as an entity that defines or supports a particular creed to avoid controversies and guarantee security. Instead, it should follow the opposite strategy, remaining neutral above all religious sects.

Focusing on the individual, though, the argument is neither normative nor related to stability—it is a matter of sheer fact since it is utterly impossible for anyone to “transfer to another person his natural right, or faculty, of reasoning freely, and of judging concerning anything whatever” (*TTP* 20, C 2:344), especially that which is to be considered as true and as false. Religious conversion by force is not only unnecessary for salvation; it is also, strictly speaking, impossible in practice.<sup>3</sup> The capacity for judging is embedded in each individual’s power, which equates with their natural right, and cannot be overcome or dismissed. The individual, not the state, is the subject par excellence of judgment concerning the true and the good.

In the *Political Treatise* (*TP*), however, multiplicity takes centre stage. The multitude, a concept that Spinoza had seldom used until his final work, appears then to emphasise that each individual’s natural right is strengthened by numbers. This argument from multiplicity embedded in what has been termed “the strategy of the *conatus*”<sup>4</sup> implies not only that democracy is the most natural of regimes in the sense that it is the most powerful but also that the more powerful individuals become with others, the more likely they are to avoid error in judgment. Unlike monarchies and aristocracies, which often depend on the superior (and contingent) cognitive abilities of few, democracies gain from the mere agglomeration of opinion. Spinoza deviates from a previous tradition that accuses the people and the plebs of epistemic incompetency and instead emphasises that the multitude is indeed capable of truth and judgment, and in a more stable manner than competing regimes if only it is given the relevant information that it needs in order to generate judgment (*TP* VII.27, C 2:559).

Does this contrast mean that the *TP*’s argument from multiplicity undermines the *TTP*’s political argument for toleration? Indeed, in the *TP*, the multitude seems to become the subject par excellence of truth and judgment, and

<sup>3</sup> Matthew J. KISNER, “Spinoza’s Defense of Toleration: The Argument from Pluralism,” *Roczniki Filozoficzne* 70, no. 4 (2022): 214.

<sup>4</sup> Laurent BOVE, *Affirmation and Resistance in Spinoza. Strategy of the Conatus* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023).

the wisest individuals, regarded as detached from the state, can adequately be called enemies of the state (*TP* III.8, C 2:521). If the many now trump the unit, the individual, in the capacity for judgment, can the political argument for toleration, which privileges the individual as a holder of the unalienable capacity for truth and judgment, still hold water?

In the following pages, I demonstrate that the strain under which the political argument for toleration seems to be due to the *TP*'s emphasis on the epistemic competencies of the many is only apparent. In order to achieve this, I show that Spinoza, under the likely influence of Machiavelli's *Discourses*, does seem to endorse a particular form of epistemic democracy, which in turn requires both multiplicity and diversity. The upshot is that we find a third argument for toleration in the *TP* embedded in the argument from epistemic democracy. Section 1 offers an overview of Spinoza's explicit shift towards multiplicity in the *TP*. Section 2 follows the implications of this shift for political judgment and concludes that Spinoza's conception of democracy in the *TP* qualifies as a form of epistemic democracy. Finally, section 3 fleshes out an argument for toleration in the connection between the multitude and epistemic competency.

### 1. SPINOZA'S RECONFIGURATION OF PLURALITY

For Spinoza, numbers matter. But they matter differently throughout his work. In the *Ethics*, for instance, ontological status in *Natura naturata* arises from the unit—the one. Spinoza refers to the unit in part II by employing four different terms: the finite, the particular, the singular, and the individual.

A thing is called *finite* if it “can be limited by another of the same nature” (*E1def2*, C 1:408). The finite arises from the encounter with another similar in kind, and results from the clash between different affirmations that end up being also reciprocal negations. This is the sense in which “a determination is a negation”, according to Spinoza's phrasing in letter 50 (C 2:407). The *particular* is somewhat different: “particular things are nothing but affections of God's attributes, *or* modes by which God's attributes are expressed in a certain and determinate way” (*E1p25cor*, C 1:431). The particular is the result of God's immanent causality, that is, in the certain (and not general or abstract) modes of the essence of God that makes itself exist by becoming determined. Whereas the finite must look beyond itself to affirm its finitude, the particular must be looked at as a precise moment of infinite causality to

affirm its particularity. In the definition of the finite, there is no causal production of anything, only a demarcation of limits; in the definition of the particular, God's self-causality is already in play, that is, the particular is the affirmation of God's effects *qua* certain and determined.

The *singular* adds a different layer to these terms. Singular things are those "that are finite and have a determinate existence" (*E2def7*), that is, those things that are finite and particular but to which a new quality is added: "if a number of individuals so concur in one action that together they are all the cause of one effect, I consider them all, to that extent, as one singular thing" (*E2def7*, C 1:447). The singular is not the same as the indivisible or the absence of added numbers or multiplicity, but amounts instead to composition. The singular thing must then be finite, particular and a centre of imputation of action, of cooperation for the same action. Because it can be composite, the singular is the precise ontological dimension of relation, that is, of a causal relation: the singular is the finite mode insofar as it is a cause in relation to its effect, and admits within itself relations of cooperation between particulars in the production of common effects. Whereas the particular is the unit *qua* effect, the singular is the unit *qua* certain and determinate cause.

In this definition, Spinoza mentions individuals. However, such individuals seem to be in a singular thing but are not necessarily singular things themselves. According to the terminology of letter 32, the individual is treated here mostly as part of a whole—it does not yet have positivity in itself, only positivity for and in others. It is merely an individual-part lacking the affirmation of its own definition to acquire real consistency in God as an individual-whole. It is not entirely true, then, that the concepts of "the individual" and "singular thing" are synonymous in *E2def7*, as authors such as Edwin Curley<sup>5</sup> maintain. This definition does not appear until *E2*, and related to bodies: individuals are now "composite bodies" (*individuum, sive corpus compositum*) (*E2p13Ax3*, C 1:460). It is here, in the relational nature of the composite body, that Spinoza defines the *individual*. From the viewpoint of extension, the composite thing is the first stage of reality at the level of *Natura naturata*. The individual is the unit that culminates the progressive series of reification, which begins in the finite's negation, passes through God's thing-effect that is the particular, and through God's thing-cause that is the singular. The individual is also finite and, insofar as it exists in God's immanent causality, it is also particular and singular. In individuals, the

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<sup>5</sup> Edwin CURLEY, *Behind the Geometrical Method, A Reading of Spinoza's Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 156–57.

composite, the multiple, acquires ontological status by becoming a unit. According to this definition, then, the individual is not just an individual-part of a singular thing; it is chiefly an individual-whole or the reality of the multiple in a unit.

Within this frame of reference, numbers matter not only to determine the coming about of an individual unit but also to assess the degree of reality expressed by each individual unit. The more parts an individual has, the more complex it is, the more perfection it is likely to express. The higher the complexity, the higher the likelihood that bodies will affect and be affected to higher degrees. The strategy of the *conatus* is an itinerary of more and more composition, of more and more parts within an individual unit.

This is entirely consistent with the *TTP*'s emphasis on the priority of the unit. The most complex individuals are those able to express the highest degrees of perfection in *Natura naturata* from the viewpoint of all attributes. Given that Spinoza never explicitly takes the Hobbesian-like leap forward of providing ontological density to the state,<sup>6</sup> always preserving within human individuals a sphere of power that cannot combine into a larger (political) individual, the most complex individuals are human individuals. They are the ones who meet the requirements for being holders of natural rights, and they are the ones who become the most powerful individuals by joining efforts in one political unit via the social contract mechanism. The political argument for toleration is the corollary of this setting, as the capacity to judge what is true and false is not only inalienable among human individuals but also a standard characteristic of those considered the most complex units from the viewpoint of both extension and thought.

In the *TP*, though, the value of plurality seems to gain some independence from the unit. There, the term *multitudo* breaks out somewhat unexpectedly and overwhelmingly. Until this text, Spinoza had only mentioned it fourteen times, and not once does it appear in the *Ethics*. However, in the *TP*, one of Spinoza's shortest texts, the word appears a few dozen times. Not only does it appear often, but it also seems to have gained a new meaning. Until the *TP*, the multitude appeared in different contexts and with different meanings, sometimes indicating a certain number of individuals or things in mathematical language, sometimes being synonymous with the vulgar, the mob or the

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<sup>6</sup> Andre Santos CAMPOS, "The Individuality of the State in Spinoza's Political Philosophy," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 92 (2010): 1–48.

plebs, sharing with these terms all the negative characteristics that the political-philosophical literature has always attributed to them.<sup>7</sup>

The mathematical sense is visible in letters 12, 34 and 81. In the latter, dated 5 May 1676, and hence from around the same time that Spinoza was writing the *TP* (L 84, C 2:488), the term pops up five times in a short paragraph. Spinoza maintains that

[Mathematicians] do not infer infinity of the parts from their multiplicity [*multitudo*], [and this] is evident from the fact that if they inferred it from their multiplicity, we could not conceive a greater multiplicity of parts, but their multiplicity would have to be greater than any given multiplicity, which is false. For in the whole space between two circles having different centres we conceive twice as great a multiplicity of parts as in half of the same space. Nevertheless, the number of parts, both in the half and in the whole space, is greater than every assignable number. (L 81, C 2:484–85)

In this context, the multitude designates only a certain multiplicity of elements, as Edwin Curley's translation highlights. It is synonymous with a high, albeit imprecise, number. In addition, it is not entirely indefinite insofar as a larger multitude can always be conceived, which is why it cannot be equated with the infinite, nor does it help to define the infinite. Because it does not correspond to anything substantive, it is a mere figment of the imagination that helps to capture, through inadequate understanding, the nature of the attributes and modes.

The gap between the multitude and the essences of things that is visible here also appears in the political sense in which Spinoza employs the term before the *TP*. In the *TTP*, the multitude is a mere part of the social whole, the most disqualified part with which instituted powers must deal and whose inconstancy has to be ruled and contained so that the collective is preserved in peace. The multitude is either "superstitious" (*TTP* Preface, C 2:68) or of a "changeable ... mentality" (*TTP* XVIII, C 2:298–99), or even "savage" (*TTP* XVIII, C 2:328). It is indistinguishable from any of the other terms commonly presented as synonyms, such as the vulgar, the plebs, the mob and the people. A good example is *TTP* XVIII (C 2:327–28), where Spinoza mentions "the mob" and "the multitude" in two consecutive lines in order to refer to the same thing.

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<sup>7</sup> Riccardo CAPORALI, *La fabbrica dell'imperium* (Naples: Liguori Editore, 2000), 149–58.

In the *TP*, however, the multitude seems to appear as a subject of the very power by which the state is defined. Most importantly, it ceases to be understood as part of a whole and begins to equate with the whole in such a way that its power is understood as expressing the power of the state.

This has two sorts of implications. The first relates to the mathematical sense. The multitude is no longer a mere inadequate idea that equates with an imprecise large number, as it absorbs the properties of the unit by being considered *one* multitude, even though it is not “one” but “many”. It is a multiplicity that can be grasped by human understanding as if it were a unit rather than the indefinite gathering of things that are never glued together to the point of giving rise to a unit. The second implication relates to the political sense. Since the multitude is now treated as if it were a unit, it can take centre stage in the language of power. The gist is that it loses the pejorative connotations that were attributed to similar terms, such as the plebs or the mob. Instead, it absorbs some of the properties that Spinoza previously attributed to units alone. For instance, “the best state”, the one where men live “mostly by reason, the true virtue and life of the mind” is set up by “a free multitude” (*TP* V.5–6, C 2:530), not by scattered individuals nor by a people (*qua* unit). There is no longer the need to congregate plurality into a unit in order to establish the locus of power. Instead, in the *TP*, power lies in large numbers: “the power of a state, and hence its right, are to be reckoned by the number of its citizens” (*TP* VII.18, C 2:553).

The right of the state arises as a power of the multitude, not as a power subtracted from the multitude. It is in the power of numbers that lies the deciphering key for each and everyone to become more powerful since isolation is nothing but the expression of a power that is merely an opinion, not fact (*TP* II.15, C 2:513). This is also the reason why so-called absolute monarchies are not factual, as they never really depend on the power of one man alone, for “right is determined only by power”, and “the power of one man is quite unequal to bearing such a burden” (*TP* VI.5, C 2:533). Rather, it is only in the connections between individuals that the order of nature unfolds—connections that make each of them a web of effects and affects that, when expanding or contracting, make individuals either *sui juris* or *alterius juris*.

In other words, numbers matter for actuality. Multiplicity is the only strategy available for the *conatus* to persevere: “the more connections [two men] have formed in this way, the more right they’ll have together” (*TP* II.13, C 2:513); “the greater the number of commonwealths which enter into an agreement..., the less each one must be feared by the others” (*TP* III.16, C 2:524).

However, given that the power to judge about the true and the false is proper to the highest degrees of complexity in *Natura naturata*, how does this shift affect the political argument for toleration? If the multitude now trumps the unit, the individual, in the itinerary of empowerment, will not that imply that it is by the multitude that judgment concerning the true and the false should be conducted less imperfectly? Will not sheer numbers become more valuable than the individual unit within the strategy of the *conatus*? In order to provide an answer to these questions, it is crucial to focus on the consequences that this shift produces in political judgment.

## 2. SPINOZA'S EPISTEMIC DEMOCRACY

Spinoza's sustained defence of democracy as "the most natural state, and the one which approach[es] most nearly the freedom nature concedes to everyone" (*TTP* XVI, C 2:289) follows from the consistency of his philosophical system. Rather than previously establishing democracy as the horizon to pursue and then developing an argumentative itinerary that leads to it (as if democracy expressed the teleological objective of politics itself, a strategy so often pursued by eschatological doctrines and end-of-history narratives), Spinoza's endorsement of democracy is the outcome of his metaphysical project, the inevitable corollary of his ontology of Nature. The history of immanent causality, among finite modes, is expansive of Nature's very causality or power, which means that the greater power there is among politically aggregated individuals, the more powerful this aggregate is and the more expressive of natural causality.

In this sense, there is no difference whatsoever between the *TTP*, the *Ethics* and the *TP*. Spinoza could not have endorsed a regime other than democracy in any of these works without contradicting the metaphysical foundations in which such endorsement would lie. Since democracy typically involves rule by people in higher numbers when compared to other regimes, the "numbers-matter argument" seems inextricably connected to Spinoza's argument from democracy without the need to prioritise the multitude in the itinerary of empowerment, as this connection is already evident in the *TTP*.

What the concept of the multitude emerging from the *TP* highlights anew in Spinoza's defence of democracy is the fact that the unit achieved by establishing a state never really collapses the importance of multiplicity for increasing political power. The multitude always lies beneath any given state



structure or regime, whether democratic or not: “this right, which is defined by the power of a multitude, is usually called sovereignty” [*imperium*] (*TP* II.17, C 2:514). The state has no power except that which is afforded by individuals who come together in high numbers, which means political power is necessarily a power of the multitude, not a power transferred from the multitude.<sup>8</sup> Regardless of the form of state, the multitude remains the genuine locus of power without ever ceasing to be multiple.

The upshot is that the multitude is a critical element of every single process of political empowerment, even in those that are not democratic. A multitude does not make a democracy, although there is no democracy without the power of the multitude. In the *TP*, a democracy is determined by tracing “the responsibility for public affairs ... [to] a council made up of the common multitude” (*TP* II.17, C 2:514). The multitude becomes democratic then by leading itself “as if by one mind” (*TP* II.16, C 2:514), that is, by acting as if it were capable of overcoming its inherent multiplicity. When it does, it gives rise to a democratic state, to the image of the unit, but it does not disappear inside the unit. By persisting as the locus of empowerment by high numbers, the multitude never really becomes an entity that in itself possesses rights in the same way that each of the individuals in it can possess, as it always remains a multiplicity of individual powers. Thus, given that the powers of individuals follow from a succession of affects and a common affect more than from reason (*TP* VI.1, C 2:532), there is an irremediable distinction between individuals and the multitude: individual affects presuppose a prior unit, the unit of a self who wills and acts; the multitude, in contrast, can only attain such unit by metaphor, “as if it were” (*veluti*) a unit.

Spinoza describes the imagery of the unit by resorting to a concept associated with the attribute of the understanding—“as if by one *mind*”. The political *body* gives way to a political *mind*. This suggests an epistemic dimension lurking behind this argumentative path. But how so? Men are said to be “guided more by affect than by reason”, so “a multitude naturally agrees, and wishes to be led, as if by one mind, not because reason is guiding them, but because of some common affect” (*TP* VI.1, C 2:532). What is specifically

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<sup>8</sup> This partially helps to explain the reason why the social contract mechanism loses bite in the *TP*: see Alexandre MATHERON, *Individu et communauté chez Spinoza* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1969), 307–30; Douglas DEN UYL, *Power, State and Freedom* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1983), 23–39; Antonio NEGRI, *Subversive Spinoza. (Un)contemporary variations* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 30–33. For the view that the social contract does not disappear in the *TP*, though, but is rather reconstructed in a way that requires continuity and plurality, see Andre Santos CAMPOS, *Spinoza's Revolutions in Natural Law* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012), 138–47.

epistemic about the multitude if reason is cut out from it, not only because the individuals that comprise it are guided chiefly by the affects but also because the multitude itself cannot reason its way into *one* particular judgment without losing its embedded multiplicity?

The answer to this question is twofold. On the one hand, since power is expressed by all attributes equally, it corresponds to the power to do and the power to know how to do, the act and the idea of the act, so that where there is greater naturalness (e.g., an empowered multitude in a democracy), there will also be the conditions of the higher degrees of understanding. On the other hand, the multitude functions as a “rationality operator”<sup>9</sup> by providing the conditions for men to judge according to what reason prescribes. For instance, in the aristocratic state,

The will of a council so large cannot be determined so much by immoderate desire as by reason. Indeed, evil affects pull men in different directions. They can't be led as if by one mind except insofar as what they desire is honorable, or at least has the appearance of being honorable. (*TP VIII.6, C 2:567*)

The state's political power emerges only from a weave of affects that constitute the common—a common which is in accordance with reason but not generated by the exercise of reason. It is through the imagination and *experientia vaga*, which is shared by all human individuals alike, that men come together and build the greatest power in high numbers. The more individuals, the bigger the multitude, the more affects; the more affects, the greater the number of shared experiences (*experientiae*), the greater the probability of more people being able to identify that which contradicts the common, that is, error, even if they are all guided by the imagination rather than reason.

In this respect, Spinoza's inspiration is undoubtedly Machiavelli. In the *Discourses on Livy*, the Florentine draws a sharp distinction between those more competent to found new cities and those more competent to rule ordered cities—whereas princes are best suited to perform the former, peoples are far more suited to do the latter. The reason, surprisingly, is mainly epistemic: the people, because comprised of high numbers, contains the conditions for reaching more stable and less erroneous decisions. In Machiavelli's words,

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<sup>9</sup> Diogo Pires AURÉLIO, *O mais natural dos regimes* (Lisbon: Temas & Debates, 2014), 383.

If, thus, one is reasoning about a prince obligated to the laws and about a people fettered by them, more virtue will always be seen in the people than in the prince; if one reasons about both as unshackled, fewer errors will be seen in the people than in the prince – and those lesser and having greater remedies.  
(MACHIAVELLI 1996, 118)

This capacity is visible in many instances of collective decision-making. The people makes far better choices of magistrates than a prince; it is capable of deciding between two equally competent orators who state opposite cases (MACHIAVELLI 1996, 118); it can adapt itself easier to the variations of times (MACHIAVELLI 1996, 240). Most importantly, peoples “are capable of truth and easily yield when the truth is told them by a man worthy of faith” (MACHIAVELLI 1996, 17). Multiplicity is key in such epistemic competency. The connection between multiplicity and epistemic competency is so paramount in Machiavelli that even princes are expected to embrace multiplicity if they are to preserve power. By concentrating power in one, principalities are too dependent on the character traits of the one in power, which makes them less adaptive to change. The way to overcome this fault is for the prince’s *virtù* to incarnate multiplicity. Princes must sometimes be good, sometimes bad, sometimes act like a lion, sometimes like a fox (MACHIAVELLI 1998, 68–70), multiplying, unfolding into various identities, and putting on different masks just to preserve their power.

Spinoza’s emphasis on the multitude in the *TP* bears the marks of Machiavelli’s people in the *Discourses*, which involves the connection between multiplicity and epistemic competency. The result is something resembling an epistemic argument in favour of democracy lying at the heart of the multitude:

When the few decide everything, simply on the basis of their own affects, freedom and the common good are lost. For human wits are too sluggish to penetrate everything right away. But by asking advice, listening, and arguing, they’re sharpened. When people try all means, in the end they find ways to do things they want which everyone approves, and no one had ever thought of before.  
(*TP* IX.14, C 2:594)

What is interesting to note here is that such epistemic advantages found in high numbers are not specific to democracies, as they can be found in large councils in aristocracies, for instance. The epistemic advantages are embedded in the power of the multitude, not in democracy as such. However, because democracies express the more extensive power of the larger mul-

titude, the epistemic dimension ends up favouring democracy indirectly. This is the sense in which Spinoza can be said to make a case for “epistemic democracy”: he arrives at a defence of democracy in comparison with other models of political organisation due to the fact that it provides the best epistemic conditions for reaching good (or, at least, less bad) decisions.

Hence, it’s not that Spinoza is a democrat, and democracy has the contingent advantage of generating the best results. It is the opposite. What makes Spinoza an epistemic democrat is his commitment to the thesis that the choice of the political regime must focus on obtaining the best results, those that favour empowerment and the strategy of the *conatus*. This implies a primary commitment to a government of the most epistemically competent and a secondary commitment to a government by the people. The defence of epistemic democracy represents a variety of government by the most epistemically competent, which coincides extensionally with government by the people, along an argumentative path that ultimately makes the two indistinguishable, both in theory and in practice.

### 3. EPISTEMIC DEMOCRACY’S ARGUMENT FOR TOLERATION

Just as the multitude is absent from the *TTP*, so is toleration absent from the *TP*. This may seem strange at first, given that toleration played such a prominent role in Spinoza’s defence of free states in the *TTP* and that it does not seem to contradict the basic tenets of the *TP*’s political theory. Still, the strangeness soon dissipates once we can unpack an argument for toleration embedded in the connection between the multitude and epistemic competency.

In principle, the multitude exercises power while remaining plural. Spinoza identifies only two exceptions to this capacity:

A multitude freely transfers to a King only what it cannot have absolutely in its power, i.e., an end to controversies and speed in making decisions. (*TP* VII.5, C 2:547)

The reason for these shortcomings of multiplicity is straightforward. The multitude cannot put an end to controversies because they occur within itself. It lacks the imagery with which to impose itself, as if a third party, as an arbiter, on its parts. In order to achieve this, the multitude must convert pure multiplicity into a semblance of unit—if not a complete unit that brings

together into a supreme power the forces of what previously remained dispersed, as in Hobbes, at least a unit through which multiplicity channels its decision-making capacities and justifies itself as *that* multiplicity (and not any other). In other words, the multitude must be led as if by one mind (*una veluti mente*).

The multitude cannot also make speedy decisions due to its inherent multiplicity. The political decision of the many is precisely that: *one* decision. This entails two things. First, deciding means stopping the potentially never-ending deliberative procedure in which each individual can participate as a member of the many. The decision involves a conversion from pure multiplicity to a semblance of unity, as the decision that pertains to *that* specific group of people. Even if the multitude does not become a unit, decisions can be imputed to it as if it were a unit. Second, when the many have to decide on issues that must be faced quickly under threat of irremediable harm, there will likely be a temporal disparity between how long the deliberative process of the many can take and how urgent the required decisions are. In such instances, the decision also halts the deliberative process by setting a limit to the number of personal opinions that can be delivered within such a decision-making process. Multiplicity must be suspended, and the multitude must act as a unit to generate timely decisions.

In any other instances, however, the multitude seems to have no reason to transfer its power, which suggests that it contains adequate epistemic conditions to reach appropriate decisions. But how so? How can a pure multiplicity of heads be better than any single head simply due to an increase in numbers?

To answer this question, two steps are in order. The first is to clarify the nature of this plural intelligence. The second is to flesh out how it might work. The conjunction of the two will result in an argument for toleration.

Regarding the first, we must avoid misconstruing Spinoza's multitude as a form of group intelligence. He does not claim that groups are better at reasoning than wise individuals or that the many as a group can be more intelligent than any individual within them. Spinoza's epistemology in the *Ethics* is human-centred: only human individuals seem capable of understanding in accordance with all three kinds of knowledge, especially intuitive science. Most importantly, Spinoza's progressive conception of composite bodies in part II entails that higher complexity equates with more perfection. The more individuals are composed of other individuals, the more the complex individuals express Nature's perfection. Insofar as the multitude never really becomes a unit, it falls short of becoming an individual in the ontological

sense and hence cannot be more complex and more perfect (including from the viewpoint of the attribute of thought) than the human individuals that comprise it.

This may appear incompatible with the claim that numbers increase epistemic competency, but not necessarily so because the multitude is the locus of power together with others—the multitude is primarily a *political* concept. Whatever epistemic qualities it may have will likely pertain solely to the context in which the multitude can exercise its power—a political context. If it can judge the true and false better than any individual, it will not be about the true and false in general nor the true and false for each, but about the true and false for all, for the many. A sphere of cognitive judgment limits the multitude: the shared, the common, that which is proper of the many *qua* many, not *qua* a composite unit. The upshot is that the multitude will be far more competent in judging and reaching decisions regarding the true and false, the good and bad, *that pertain to what is common to the many* than any single individual, but not necessarily so regarding any other matter. In this sense, the multitude’s epistemic limitations allow us to reach a similar conclusion to the one displayed by the theological argument for toleration: no one, no one group or collective, can make a reasonable claim for the monopoly of true judgment in general.

This leads us to the second step in the explanation: How can multiplicity amount to epistemic competency? In this respect, Spinoza’s argument does not differ substantively from contemporary variants of epistemic democracy. Multiplicity brings forward two epistemic advantages (or “theorems”, according to H el ene Landemore<sup>10</sup>): one regarding sheer numbers and the other regarding diversity.

The first entails that numbers simply trump individual ability when deliberating on issues that pertain to all the members of the multitude. This is especially visible in monarchies:

a King ... by himself ... can’t know what is advantageous for the state. For this purpose,... it’s necessary for him to have many citizens as counsellors. And because there is no way we can conceive that there can be a solution to the problem they’re being consulted about which will escape such a large number of men, it follows that no solution conducive to the people’s well-being is conceivable, except for the opinions this council reports to the King. (*TP VII.5, C 2:547*)

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<sup>10</sup> H el ene LANDEMORE, *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 104.

The more people there are, the more input comes into decision-making. The inclusion of more people in the multitude is likely to yield better outcomes than less inclusive alternatives since it increases the levels of input, such as a variety of perspectives, heuristics, interpretations, information and predictive models that may matter at some point in the decision-making process. What matters most to reach those decisions that are increasingly conducive to the empowerment strategies of each and every member of the multitude is not so much the individual ability to understand what is best for each or for the multitude but rather the size of available information and tools for interpreting this information.

The second epistemic advantage is that multiplicity fosters the conditions for diversity, and diversity trumps individual ability<sup>11</sup> when deliberating on issues that pertain to all the members of the multitude since it (i) preserves political stability and (ii) holds epistemic value. Spinoza emphasises clearly the connection between diversity and stability:

The counselors chosen ought, necessarily, to be those whose personal situation and advantage depend on peace and the common well-being of everyone. To this end, it's clear that if some are chosen from each kind or class of citizens, that will be to the advantage of the majority of the subjects, because they'll have the greatest number of votes in this council. (*TP* VII.4, C 2:546)

The variety of perspectives and personal interests in the domain of the common enriches the multitude's capacity to decide what is best in issues within its power insofar as it prevents the multitude's judgments about the common good from being captured by an individual's judgment about the good for him. The greater the number of individuals, the greater the probability of finding prudent and wise men; the more prudent and wise men there are, the greater the number of factions or visions of the common good available in the multitude, and the less likely that power will be captured by one or by a few. The many seem here the best safeguard against corruption, that is, against the capture of the common good by a private good.

In addition, there is also a connection between diversity and epistemic value. Because the multitude remains multiple and never solidifies as a unit, whatever is genuinely natural in it comes from human individuals. Each new

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<sup>11</sup> Lu HONG, and Scott E. PAGE, "Groups of Diverse Problem Solvers Can Outperform Groups of High-Ability Problem Solvers," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 101 (2004): 385–89.

individual adds to the multitude: reality, natural law, force, and cognitive ability. In the latter case, each new individual adds information, opinion and decision-making capacity, all from each person's unique perspective, regarding what is true and false in common, what is good and bad for herself and for all, and what is useful or useless in her strategy of the *conatus*. Since it never becomes a unit, the multitude never faces the risk of homogenisation, as might occur with a Hobbesian-like social contract. It is plausible, then, that the more people there are with their unique perspectives, the more likely they will bring a non-unified worldview to the deliberation procedure. This enlivens the very procedure by introducing novel ways to face shared problems—a group of epistemically diverse people might be better at coming up with solutions to particular problems than a group of epistemically similar people since people who think alike tend to insist on the same shared points of their reasoning and not come into contact with alternative forms of reasoning regarding the same matter which may, in comparison, show to lead to a less suboptimal solution.<sup>12</sup>

When we consider the two epistemic advantages of multiplicity together—that sheer numbers can trump epistemically the few and that diversity is epistemically more suitable than homogeneity when it comes to political decision-making—the result is a new argument for toleration. In fact, toleration becomes a normative requirement of diversity embedded in the very idea of multiplicity. Because political communities are stronger and more stable the more expressive of Nature they are, they will have more power (in force and decision-making capacity) the larger and more diverse the multitude is. It is in the best interest of every member of the multitude that more and more individuals join the multitude and that each adds a novel cognitive perspective to the (almost-)whole: large numbers and diversity are the fertile ground for becoming *sui juris*.

This cognitive perspective does not have to be a different conception of the good, a different judgment on what is true and false in general, or an original religious belief. Spinoza does not have to commit to a prescribed form of religious or moral pluralism to make a case for diversity within the epistemic argument in favour of the multitude.<sup>13</sup> All he needs to do is to maintain that

<sup>12</sup> LANDEMORE, *Democratic Reason*, 103.

<sup>13</sup> In this light, I do not disagree with Justin Steinberg when he maintains that Spinoza eschews sceptical, pluralistic, and rights-based arguments for toleration; see Justin STEINBERG, "Spinoza's Curious Defense of Toleration," in *Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise: A Critical Guide*, ed. Yitzhak Melamed and Michael Rosenthal (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), 210–30. For a



the strategy of the *conatus* for each of the members of the multitude is reinforced by not opposing nor prohibiting admittance into the multitude of new individuals who endorse different viewpoints on the true and false, on the good and bad, provided that all individuals share the common affect that constitutes the multitude in the first place.

This reinforcement can be considered a normative requirement for toleration within the strategy of the *conatus* insofar as it depends on diversity of opinion and judgment, which can eventually (albeit not necessarily) take the form of religious and moral pluralism. Most importantly, because diversity is paramount to improving the multitude's decision-making capacities, each new and different individual judgment on the true and false, on the good and bad, adds to the multitude, which means no one can remain indifferent to this judgment *qua* additional cognitive input. Toleration stands in between the non-rejection of difference and mere indifference. It combines some minimum form of mutual resemblance and identification<sup>14</sup> (the shared affects that constitute the multitude in the first place, which are brought about specifically by the mechanism of the imitation of the affects laid out in part III of the *Ethics* and restated in the first chapter of the *TP*) with the conflicts inherent in disagreement. But this is precisely the environment in which the multitude can generate the best solutions for the most complicated problems faced by all in common and display what may ultimately be termed a public virtue.<sup>15</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Part of the argument for toleration contained in the *TTP* is that "the less freedom of judgment is conceded to men, the further their distance from the most natural state" (*TTP* XX, C 2:236). The connection here is between epistemic capacity by individuals and "the most natural state", that is, something resembling democracy. This connection is not explicit in the *TP*. However, it

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slightly different view regarding religious pluralism, see KISNER, "Spinoza's Defense of Toleration," 225.

<sup>14</sup> I follow here John Dunn, who claims that "to move from a minimal registering of difference to a reasonably robust tolerance requires the mechanism of identification, a recapturing of resemblance at a slightly more abstract level"; see his *The Cunning of Unreason* (Suffolk: Harper Collins, 2000), 103.

<sup>15</sup> Michael ROSENTHAL, "Tolerance as a Virtue in Spinoza's *Ethics*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39 (2001): 535–57.

is still there, as Spinoza associates epistemic capacity to the multitude's power, and the multitude's higher power with the most natural state. Most importantly, the equation of high numbers with good decision-making skills that first makes its appearance in the *TP* does not function in an all-or-nothing fashion. Just because a lot of people show up to deliberate, that does not necessarily mean that they will decide on a better outcome than if fewer people had shown up—it is necessary that a lot of different people show up in order to improve the epistemic conditions of joint deliberation. It is in this sense that the multitude can be said to contain an argument for toleration. The more and diverse the people who show up, the better the epistemic conditions. The equation turns out to be a matter of degree, and, in turn, toleration is the normative requirement for attaining “the most natural state”.

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#### THE ROLE OF TOLERATION IN SPINOZA'S EPISTEMIC DEMOCRACY

##### Summary

Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise (TTP)* contains two main arguments for toleration, one theological, the other political. In light of the latter, the capacity for judging is embedded in each individual's power and cannot be overcome or dismissed. The individual, not the state, is the subject par excellence of judgment concerning the true and the good. In the *Political Treatise (TP)*, however, multiplicity takes centre stage. The multitude, a concept that Spinoza had seldom used until then, appears to emphasise that the more powerful individuals become with others, the more likely they are to avoid error in judgment. Does this contrast mean that the *TP*'s argument from multiplicity undermines the *TTP*'s political argument for toleration? In this paper, I demonstrate that the strain under which the political argument for toleration seems to be due to the *TP*'s emphasis on the epistemic competencies of the many is only apparent. To achieve this, I show that Spinoza, under Machiavelli's influence, endorses a particular form of epistemic democracy, which in turn requires both multiplicity and diversity. The upshot is that we find a third argument for toleration in the *TP* embedded in the argument from epistemic democracy.

**Keywords:** Spinoza; toleration; epistemic democracy; multiplicity; multitude; *Political Treatise*

#### ROLA TOLERANCJI W DEMOKRACJI EPISTEMICZNEJ SPINOZY

##### Streszczenie

*Traktat teologiczno-polityczny (TTP)* Spinozy zawiera dwa główne argumenty za tolerancją, jeden teologiczny, drugi polityczny. W świetle tego drugiego, zdolność do osądzania ma podstawę w mocy każdej jednostki i nie może być przewyciężona ani odrzucona. To jednostka, a nie państwo, jest *par excellence* podmiotem osądu tego, co prawdziwe i dobre. Jednak w *Traktacie politycznym (TP)* tłum zajmuje centralne miejsce. Tłum, pojęcie, którego Spinoza rzadko używa we wcześniejszych pracach, wydaje się podkreślać, że im potężniejsze jednostki stają się wespół z innymi, tym bardziej prawdopodobne jest, że unikną błędu w osądzie. Czy ten kontrast oznacza, że argument *TP* odwołujący się do tłumy podważa polityczny argument *TTP* za tolerancją? W niniejszym artykule pokazuję, że zagrożenie, jakie dla argumentu politycznego za tolerancją wydaje się stanowić podkreślenie w *TP* epistemicznych kompetencji tłumy, jest tylko pozorne. W tym celu dowodzę, że

Spinoza, pod wpływem Machiavellego, popiera szczególną formę demokracji epistemicznej, która z kolei wymaga zarówno wielości, jak i różnorodności. W rezultacie odkrywamy trzeci argument za tolerancją w *TP*, wywodzący się z argumentu z demokracji epistemicznej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Spinoza; tolerancja; demokracja epistemiczna; mnogość; tłum; *Traktat polityczny*