

BENEDICT SPINOZA: EPISTEMIC DEMOCRAT

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In Benedict Spinoza's time, defenders of republican or popular forms of government were compelled to explain what makes a republic superior to other regime forms. Contemporary democratic theorists confront a similar question: what makes democratic governing procedures superior to alternative procedures? A typical approach to this question in Spinoza's time and ours is to appeal to some norm (for example, fairness or liberty) that is intrinsically and uniquely satisfied by democratic governing procedures. For instance, some early modern republicans defend popular governance by arguing that liberty is only possible in a self-governing state. Indeed, some claim that liberty is *constituted* by republican citizenship. Several commentators have assumed that Spinoza was a typical republican in this respect.¹

In this paper, I will argue that at the core of Spinoza's political theory is an instrumental, rather than an intrinsic, defense of democratic procedures. Specifically, Spinoza embraces democratic decision procedures primarily because they tend to result in better decisions, defined relative to a procedure-independent standard of correctness or goodness. In contemporary terms, Spinoza embraces an epistemic defense of democracy. In what follows, I will examine Spinoza's defense of collective governance, showing not only how it differs from other accounts of his time but also how it might contribute to current debates about the epistemic standing of popular governing bodies. The paper is divided into three sections. In the opening section, I defend the thesis that has been contested in recent years that Spinoza was, in fact, a consistent democrat. The second section focuses on procedural (that is, intrinsic) defenses of democracy, paying particular attention to the republican version of proceduralism that was prominent in Spinoza's time. Here I argue that Spinoza's defense of democracy was not principally procedural; democratic procedures are neither necessary nor sufficient for securing political liberty. And in the final section, I present my case for reading Spinoza as an epistemic

democrat. Here I compare his epistemic defense with contemporary versions. What we find are not only striking anticipations of contemporary arguments but also largely neglected lines of argumentation that reveal both the potential epistemic advantages of democracy and the ways in which these advantages can be undermined.

1. WAS SPINOZA A DEMOCRAT?

It is widely assumed that Spinoza's commitment to democracy was a rather uneasy one. Lewis Feuer, for instance, claims that Spinoza's democratic theory was "divided against itself," due to his "feelings of withdrawal" and "mistrust of the multitude." Leo Strauss, too, paints Spinoza as a very reluctant democrat with a dim view of the masses and a belief in an "unbridgeable gulf" between the wise and the vulgar. This interpretation is nourished by Spinoza's repeated suggestion that common people cannot be expected to exercise reason and good judgment; they are ineluctably mired in superstition and prejudice. But even if Spinoza was not a spirited populist, his commitment to democracy in his first political treatise, the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (hereafter TTP), remains quite evident.²

However, there is some disagreement about whether Spinoza still believed in the superiority of democracy by the time he wrote the later *Tractatus Politicus* (hereafter TP). The textual evidence on this matter is rather limited, in part because the TP remained unfinished at the time of Spinoza's death on February 21, 1677. The work ends just as he had begun the first of what would likely have been two chapters devoted to democracy. Feuer has raised the possibility that it is no mere accident that the chapters on democracy remain unfinished: "Did he come to a dead halt, unable to affirm that democratic faith which had animated the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*? Did he stop before an insoluble, insuperable problem, baffled by the mob, by the shadows of the slaves dancing around the mangled body of John de Witt" (*Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*, 151; cf. 196). The reference here is to the brutal murders of Johan de Witt, the former republican Grand Pensionary (chief statesman and legal advisor), and his brother Cornelius at the hands of a zealous mob in 1672. Spinoza was a great admirer of Johan De Witt's leadership and his campaign of "true freedom" (*ware vrijheid*), and his murder apparently elicited uncommon outrage in Spinoza.³ On Feuer's narrative, this horrific event left Spinoza with an even deeper distrust of the masses, and this shift in attitude partially explains why Spinoza wrote another political treatise (*ibid.*, chap. 5). Ultimately, Feuer leaves us with a picture of Spinoza as fundamentally conflicted, torn between a fear of despotism and a fear of populism.

Raia Prokhovnik has maintained even more pointedly that Spinoza had abandoned his advocacy of democracy by the time he wrote the TP. She claims that in the later treatise Spinoza evidently preferred aristocracy.⁴ Like Feuer, Prokhovnik argues that there is a “marked shift in the course of Spinoza’s political writings, away from democracy” (“From Democracy to Aristocracy,” 109), though she speculates less about the historical and psychological reasons for this. Prokhovnik places most of the weight of her claim on Spinoza’s apparent approval in the later treatise for a certain form of decentralized aristocracy.

I do not think that there is much evidence to support the view that Spinoza grew to prefer aristocracy to democracy by the end of his life.⁵ Quite obviously, praise for one regime form in no way precludes equal or greater approval for another, so we should not assume that by lauding a certain form of aristocracy, Spinoza is rejecting democracy. And when Spinoza explicitly compares the relative virtues of democracy and aristocracy, he makes it clear that democracies are generally to be preferred.⁶ He claims that democracies are the most absolute form of government (TP 11/1, 8/3),⁷ which for him means that they are the most stable, cohesive, and harmonious. And while Spinoza does note that a government composed of a small group of well-bred patricians may be superior to a democracy in theory, in reality the self-serving and divisive practices of these elites undermine any theoretical advantages that this regime form might possess. I will return to this point later in the paper. What I wish to underscore here is just that when Spinoza directly addresses the question of the comparative value of democracies and aristocracies in the TP, democracies are presented as superior.

Feuer’s claim that the TP reveals a greater scorn and distrust of the masses than the earlier treatise also strikes me as unfounded.⁸ In both works Spinoza expresses views that may be interpreted as elitist or antiegalitarian, but he is also highly critical of those who wish to exclude the masses from political involvement. In an important passage to which I will return later, Spinoza criticizes those who would blame individuals rather than political institutions for the poor judgments of common people (TP 7/27). So, while he does not regard the masses with cheery optimism—and who did in his times?—nor did he come to regard widespread participation as a political liability. Rather, for reasons that we will explore in section three, he thought that the people could, under favorable conditions, govern relatively wisely. And this approval of the collective wisdom of the masses is even more pronounced in the TP than it is in the TTP.

One matter on which I agree with Prokhovnik is that “secure institutional foundations, rather than the particular form of the relationship

between ruler and ruled, is the factor to which Spinoza attributes the success of states" ("From Democracy to Aristocracy," 108).⁹ The way in which the state is organized is more important than regime type. However, when we look at the organizational recommendations that Spinoza makes, we find that they are effectively democratic, by which I mean they foster the participation of the masses in governance and lead to the diffusion of political power. As Etienne Balibar notes, in the TP Spinoza gives us more than a theory of democracy: he provides us with a "theory of democratization, which is valid for *every* regime."¹⁰ It is not in his stunted commentary on democracy but in his presentation of democratized versions of monarchy and aristocracy that we find Spinoza's greatest defense of popular governance. Rather than abandoning the democratic views of the TTP, Spinoza actually seems to *expand* his theory of democracy to apply even to regimes that are not themselves nominal democracies.

2. SPINOZA AND PROCEDURAL DEFENSES OF DEMOCRACY

In my view, then, we have good reason to believe that Spinoza was a consistent democrat. The question that we want to ask now is *why* Spinoza was a democrat. On what grounds does Spinoza base his defense of democracy? Defenses of democracy may appeal to the intrinsically good features of democratic procedures, the good consequences that follow from such procedures, or to a combination of intrinsic and instrumental features. Those who rest their defense exclusively on the intrinsic features of the procedures are often referred to as "proceduralists." Those who appeal to consequences that follow from such procedures are often dubbed "instrumentalists."¹¹

According to a proceduralist line of defense, democratic procedures intrinsically satisfy some ideal or norm better than alternatives. One of the appealing features of proceduralism is that, unlike instrumentalism, it does not depend on identifying an independent standard by which we can judge the quality of outcomes. Indeed, the fact of broad disagreement about substantive political matters is sometimes invoked in defense of proceduralism, for if there is no widely accepted standard of just or good outcomes, then—so the argument runs—we ought to be primarily concerned with procedural norms.¹²

Among the norms invoked by proceduralists are fairness, equality (Thomas Christiano), reciprocity or mutual respect (Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson),¹³ and freedom (Carol Gould).¹⁴ I wish to focus my attention on this last norm, for reasons that will become clear momentarily. Michael Sandel, for instance, has defended the view that there is an internal connection between living in a republic, or a self-governing

state, and being free. He claims that, according to the republican view that he defends, “liberty is understood as a consequence of self-government. I am free insofar as I am a member of a political community that controls its own fate.”¹⁵ Philip Pettit, too, has argued that there is an intrinsic connection between liberty and democratic self-governance. He maintains that freedom from domination depends on the existence of certain republican institutions, which embody democratic principles.¹⁶ Indeed, he contends that such institutions not only provide conditions in which liberty can be cultivated, they positively constitute such liberty:

The presence of certain antibodies in your blood makes it the case that you are immune to a certain disease, but it does not cause your immunity. . . . [B]y analogy, the presence in the polity of such and such empowering and protective arrangements makes it the case that you are more or less immune to arbitrary interference, but it does not cause that immunity; it *constitutes* it.¹⁷

To be sure, Pettit is not claiming here that living in *any* nominal democracy makes one free, *ipso facto*. Rather, he is claiming that if certain institutional conditions are in place and if certain additional conditions obtain in civil society, membership in such a republic will constitute one’s freedom.¹⁸

The claim that Sandel and Pettit make, in somewhat different ways,¹⁹ is that being a citizen in a well-ordered democracy is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for liberty. It is a necessary condition because, in any other form of governance, the people are at the mercy of the rulers. It is a sufficient condition because, in a well-structured democracy, one is free from domination or arbitrary rule, which is what republican liberty denotes.

By understanding liberty in this way, Sandel and Pettit self-consciously situate themselves within a rich history of republican thought that spans back to ancient times. This way of defending popular governance was rather prominent in Spinoza’s time.²⁰ Roman republicanism was revived in the Renaissance period, most notably by Niccolò Machiavelli. In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli argues that individual liberty is bound up with social liberty; one cannot be free from the domination of others unless one lives in a free polity (*vivere libero*), a republic.²¹ This way of conceiving of liberty was embraced by a number of seventeenth-century British thinkers.²²

One also finds traces of this view in the pamphlet literature in support of the Dutch Revolt from the Spanish Hapsburgs at the end of the sixteenth century and in the Dutch republican literature that emerged in the middle of the seventeenth century.²³ While these works do not contain the sort of careful, sustained republican theorizing that one finds

in, say, Machiavelli or Harrington, they do present a nostalgic vision of ancient Batavian freedom, which was secured when their ancestors (the tribal Batavi) parried the advances of the Romans. And the ideal of republican liberty became especially important in the Netherlands during the period of 1650–72 when the United Provinces governed without a stadholder, or monarchical figure. During this period, Pieter de la Court, a Dutch republican whose writings profoundly influenced Spinoza, referred to monarchs as “base and slavish opposers of Liberty.”²⁴ He maintained that the Dutch people “became not free but by the death of the last stadholder and captain general,” for only then were they “subject to none of what quality soever, but only to reason, and to the laws of their own country” (*True Interest and Political Maxims*, 11, 381). In short, republicans throughout early modern Europe—including two of the figures who most influenced Spinoza: Machiavelli and De la Court—had defended popular governance on the grounds that only in a republic does one preserve one’s liberty. In other words, they defended republics on procedural grounds in the sense described above. This gives us some circumstantial reasons to expect that Spinoza might himself invoke this form of procedural defense in favor of democracy.

There are some passages that would seem to suggest that Spinoza did indeed adopt a procedural, republican defense. For instance, at several points in the TTP, he declares that democracies are the most natural form of government and that they best preserve our natural liberty and equality (for example, TTP 16/202, III/195; TTP 20/257, III/244). This suggests that democracies, by their very nature, best satisfy the political norms of liberty and equality. The republican overtones are most pronounced when he writes the following: “[subordination] has no place in a society whose government is in the hands of all and where laws are made by common consent. In such a society, whether the number of laws is increased or reduced, the people remain just as free, since they are not acting under the authority of another but by their own proper consent” (TTP 5/73, III/74).²⁵ The claim here is quintessentially republican: popular forms of governance preserve the natural liberty of their citizens because, in them, one is able to participate in one’s own governance.²⁶ Passages like these have led scholars like Prokhovnik to claim that, in the TTP, Spinoza holds that “the liberty of subjects in civil society is guaranteed by the state, by its being self-governing” (*Spinoza and Republicanism*, 204).²⁷

On the whole, though, Spinoza’s adoption of the proceduralist line is rather half-hearted, at best.²⁸ He generally denies that there is an intrinsic connection between democratic citizenship and freedom. For instance, he criticizes those who thought that by making Holland a republic the Dutch would *ipso facto* recover their freedom: “the people

of Holland thought that to regain their freedom they had only to secede from their count and cut off the head of the body politic; they never thought of reorganizing their state, but left all its other parts in their original form” (TP 9/14). Living in a democracy is not a sufficient guarantee of freedom. Nor is it necessary that one live in a democracy in order to be free. Spinoza states unequivocally in the TP that “people can preserve quite a considerable degree of freedom under a king” (TP 7/31). In short, Spinoza in general denies that democratic citizenship is either a necessary or sufficient condition for being free. What matters most for Spinoza is the *quality* of the legislation, not the *source* of it.

A striking expression of this point comes in TTP XVI. Here Spinoza maintains that one always stands under the authority (*sub potestate*) of the state, irrespective of regime form. However, one’s dependency on the authority of the sovereign—whether monarchical or popular—does not reduce one to a condition of servitude, since what really matter are the outcomes of the laws, specifically, whether one’s welfare is served:

[I]t is not acting on command in itself that makes someone a slave, but rather the reason for so acting. If the purpose of the action is not his own advantage but that of the ruler, then the agent is indeed a slave and useless to himself. But in a state where the safety of the whole people, not that of the ruler is the supreme law, he who obeys the sovereign in all things should not be called a slave useless to himself but rather a subject. The freest state, therefore, is that whose laws are founded on sound reason; for there each man can be free whenever he wishes. (TTP 16/201, III/194–95)

What we will see in the next section is that Spinoza does think that democratic decision procedures are more likely than alternatives to result in wise or salutary laws, laws that serve the general good. Here it was sufficient to point out that, despite circumstantial reasons to expect Spinoza to defend democracy on procedural, republican grounds, in fact, Spinoza largely eschews this line of argumentation, and in this respect at least, he deviates from at least a certain strand of republicanism.

3. SPINOZA AS EPISTEMIC DEMOCRAT

In the preceding section, I noted in passing that one of the appeals of procedural defenses of democracy is that such accounts may remain agnostic about the quality of the outcomes that follow from democratic decision procedures; that is, proceduralists need not establish the superiority of democratic policies or legislation relative to objective standards of justice or goodness. On a procedural account, what matters are simply the norms that democracies are thought to embody. But by avoiding problems surrounding how we measure substantive justice, pure pro-

ceduralism faces its own problem, since it is not clear that procedural norms are sufficient for defending democratic governance.

In recent years, David Estlund has suggested that alternative, non-democratic decision procedures can equally well satisfy norms such as fairness and equal respect. Democracies do not have a monopoly on procedural fairness; flipping a coin or adopting some other randomized selection method equally satisfies a concern for fairness. But, despite being fair, random decision procedures do not give us much reason to comply with such decisions.²⁹ If one wishes to offer a full defense of democracies, one must look beyond procedural norms.³⁰ One must look to the epistemic merits of democracy.

Epistemic defenses are instrumentalist—that is, they appeal to the products of democratic procedures rather than to the intrinsic features of these procedures. Specifically, epistemic defenses make at least the following three claims: (1) for at least *some* political choices, there are if not facts of the matter about what *ought* to be done at least objectively better or worse decisions;³¹ (2) good or just outcomes are defined independently of any procedure. Otherwise put, what is good or just is not *constituted* by its being the product of a collective will, no matter how this will is aggregated;³² and (3) democratic decision procedures will be better than alternatives at producing just or good results.

We noted in the previous section one problem with epistemic defenses, namely, that they depend on an objective standard of goodness or justice, for which there is certainly no existing consensus. Of course, the absence of consensus is not grounds for abandoning the claim of objectivity, but real problems remain concerning how we establish or identify such a standard and how we measure outcomes against it. We can sidestep this problem to some extent if there are independent reasons for supposing that democracies make reliably better decisions than other procedures. But why should we suppose that the masses exercise reliably better judgment than other decision procedures?

To see how one might answer this question, I propose that we look to Spinoza. Some will undoubtedly look askance at such a proposal. After all, how could the same person who discouraged common people from reading the TTP because “the constancy of the common people is obstinacy. . . . [T]hey are not governed by reason but swayed by impulse in approving or finding fault” (preface/12, III/14) also have faith in the wisdom of crowds? Steven Smith’s remarks on the character of Spinoza’s defense of democracy may be taken as representative of a skeptical position. He writes, “Ironically, Spinoza, the first avowed defender of democracy, did not hold any great confidence in the wisdom, actual or potential, of the people as a whole” (*Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Ques-*

tion of Jewish Identity, 121), adding in a more recent work that Spinoza believes in neither the “the superior wisdom of popular assemblies” nor the “virtues of deliberation” (*Spinoza’s Book of Life*, 132). While I can understand why Smith holds such views—after all, Spinoza certainly did not believe that most people were likely to become rational or to exercise consistently good judgment—this characterization is, in fact, misguided. Spinoza *did* believe in the superior wisdom of democratic bodies, for reasons that are interesting and instructive.

For instance, despite his claims about the limited rationality of the average person, Spinoza makes it clear that he regards deliberation as a powerful tool for bringing new information and new perspectives to light and for improving our grounds for belief in general. In one particularly inspired, and arguably overblown, passage, Spinoza writes, “[T]he fact is that human wits are too blunt to get to the heart of all problems immediately; but they are sharpened by the give and take of discussion and debate, and by exploring every possible course men eventually discover the measures they wish, measures which all approve and which no one would have thought of before the discussion” (TP 9/14). And while Spinoza recognizes that deliberative decision-making bodies may be inefficient, he concludes that this downside is more than offset by the improvement in the quality of decisions that follow vigorous debate (*ibid.*).

This is especially true when the deliberating body is sizable.³³ This explains why Spinoza claims in the TTP that “there is less reason in a democratic state to fear absurd proceedings. For it is almost impossible that the majority of a large assembly would agree on the same irrational decision” (TTP 16/200–1; III/194). After exposure to a wide range of views, members of a large deliberative group are at least likely to avoid very bad decisions and may well converge on good decisions.

The potential epistemic advantages of sizeable deliberative bodies have been duly noted in the contemporary work on democracy.³⁴ But while the epistemic upside to deliberation appears to be considerable, there is also plenty of evidence that deliberation can also amplify confusion and confound judgment. Cass Sunstein, for instance, has highlighted a number of studies that reveal how susceptible deliberative bodies are to group-think, information cascades, suppressed profiles, and ideological amplification.³⁵

Was Spinoza aware of the ways in which deliberation might undermine judgment? His suggestion that a postdeliberative majority is almost certain to avoid irrational decisions suggests that perhaps he was not sufficiently attuned to this concern. But even if passages like this indicate that Spinoza might be too sanguine about democratic deci-

sion making, he was surely aware of the psychological propensities that threaten deliberation. He had, of course, witnessed the “mob mentality” that led to the de Witt murders. And he delineates in great detail in *Ethics* III the very psychological mechanism that leads to conformity and ideological amplification—namely, our tendency to imitate the affects and judgments of others (E IIP27, II/160 ff.).³⁶ And it is clear that Spinoza recognizes the threat of conformism and of corrosive social influences in general. Indeed, the TTP, Spinoza’s great paean to independence of thought, may be read as a guide for protection against such influences. The greatest threat to independence of judgment is religious superstition,³⁷ which engulfs and clouds the mind. This is why most of the TTP is devoted to undercutting religion’s claim to authority in both theoretical and political matters.

Moreover, Spinoza takes superstition itself to be a byproduct of fear. He states quite emphatically in the preface to the TTP that “fear is the root from which superstition is born. . . . [P]eople are swayed by credulity only so long as they are afraid” (preface/4, III/6).³⁸ So, only if we can diminish the conditions that give rise to fear can we hope to restrain superstition. In short, Spinoza is quite insistent that certain environmental conditions must be met in order to have any hope of protecting the independence of thought on which group rationality depends. In conditions of fear, we cannot hope to deliberate productively and judge clearly. And as long as people are fearful and superstitious, we certainly cannot take consensus or a close approximation thereof as evidence of correctness.

So, when Spinoza claims that “it is almost impossible that the majority of a large assembly would agree on the same irrational decision” (TTP 16/200–1; III/194), he must be envisioning a situation where the decision is made under relatively good cognitive conditions (that is, conditions where manipulation, fear, pressures to conform, etc., are negligible and where there is good access to information). If decisions are made under fearful conditions—in which participants are likely to have their judgments distorted by superstition—we cannot put nearly as much faith in majority opinions. This position carries interesting implications for understanding Spinoza’s defense of deliberative democracy. On the one hand, he seems to think that, under good cognitive conditions, the process of deliberation should give democratic assemblies a strong epistemic standing. However, he also seems to recognize—or, at least, *had the resources to recognize*—just how contingent these epistemic advantages are on the preservation of good cognitive conditions. Specifically, good collective judgment requires that independence of thought be protected, which itself requires that fear and superstition be minimized. His epistemic argument, thus, alerts us not only to the potential value of democracies but also to the precariousness of this value.

But, even if we accept that, under relatively good cognitive conditions, democracies will tend to make good decisions, do we have a reason to believe that these decisions will be superior to those made by, say, educated elites? Spinoza argues that we do, relying on the assumption that accountability mechanisms tend to increase the quality of decisions. And in democratically organized states, there will generally be greater accountability than in other forms of political organization. In regimes where the governors do not have to answer to the governed, the ruling class will tend to legislate in a self-serving manner, which is likely to come at the cost of the general good. As Spinoza succinctly puts it, “[W]hen all decisions are made by a few men who have only themselves to please, freedom and the common good are lost” (TP 9/14). By contrast, democratic accountability enhances the quality of governance by checking the ability of political agents to act in a purely self-interested manner. Democracies are designed to “avoid the follies of appetite and as much as possible to bring men within the limits of reason” (TTP 16/201; III/194).

One reason why public accountability protects against the “follies of appetite” is that the very act of having to justify one’s position in a public setting requires that one invoke public rather than private reasons. In a revealing passage in which he explains why larger assemblies tend to govern rationally, Spinoza writes, “The will of so large a council must be determined by reason rather than by caprice; since evil passions draw men in different directions, and *they can be guided as if by one mind only in so far as they aim at ends which are honorable, or at any rate appear to be so*” (TP 8/6—my emphasis). Spinoza’s point here about being compelled to aim at honorable or apparently honorable ends resembles Jon Elster’s claim that “in a political debate it is pragmatically impossible to argue that a given solution should be chosen just because it is good for oneself. By the very act of engaging in a public debate—by arguing rather than bargaining—one has ruled out the possibility of invoking such reasons.”³⁹ Of course, public justification does not necessarily prevent one from acting in self-serving ways; it just demands that one invoke publicly accessible reasons for pursuing these goals. So, as long as there are apparently honorable reasons in favor of a position, one can reasonably advance it and seek to persuade others to do likewise. While this may leave plenty of room for chicanery, nevertheless, there is surely some truth to the suggestion that public justification will serve as at least a mild constraint on the follies of appetite.

In addition to the ways that public justification steers individuals toward the common good, Spinoza envisions the adoption of further accountability mechanisms designed to increase the quality of political decisions. These accountability mechanisms will be more formal and likely more effective in a democracy but may exist in a less official

manner in other regimes. For instance, in a well-structured monarchy, “the king . . . whether motivated by fear of the people or by his desire to win over the greater part of an armed populace, or whether he is led by nobility of spirit to have regard to the public interest, will always ratify the opinion that is supported by most votes” (TP 7/11). That is, in a democratized monarchy, the monarch will be compelled to comply with certain “fundamental laws” (TP 7/1)⁴⁰ and will make judgments based on the advice of a group of citizen counselors (TP 7/3). And the counselors themselves, in order to keep their posts, will have to satisfy the interests of the multitudes; their “private fortune and advantage” will be made to “depend on the general welfare and the peace of all” (TP 7/4).

The basic idea is to structure the state in such a way that generally one cannot advance one’s own interests without also advancing the interests of others. This notion of balancing interests is at the heart of Spinoza’s normative theorizing in the TP.⁴¹ In order to keep the interests of a commonwealth effectively in balance, political power must be widely dispersed,⁴² and the retention of the higher, more powerful, posts must be contingent on the perceived success of one’s decision making. The most obvious way that this works is by adopting procedures that facilitate feedback cycles, like periodic elections, term limits, and the rotation of offices, all of which Spinoza recommends.

These procedures work in part because of certain basic features of human psychology, such as ambition (*ambitio*). Ambition, which Spinoza defines as love of esteem (E IIIapp.42),⁴³ leads men to try to obtain and retain certain political positions (TP 7/6) and, more generally, to “win popularity with the people, governing by kindness rather than by fear” (TP 9/14). However, ambition itself may not be a sufficient check against the “follies of appetite,” so the lack of formal accountability in the cases of monarchies and aristocracies will typically make them not only less balanced and less stable than democracies but also less rational (TP 11/1).

It is, I think, one of the more noteworthy features of Spinoza’s defense that he recognizes that good judgment depends not only on intellectual powers but also on appetitive control. This general point is made explicit in his discussion of the relative rationality of aristocracies and democracies:

It is true that, if patricians were of such a nature that in choosing their colleagues they could free themselves from all bias and be guided only by zeal for the public good, there would be no state to compare with aristocracy. But experience has abundantly taught us that the very opposite is the case, especially with oligarchies where the will

of the patricians, in the absence of rivals, is quite unrestrained by law. (TP 11/2)

If good judgment depended exclusively on the knowledge that one possesses, aristocracies would likely outperform democracies, according to Spinoza. But, in fact, good judgment depends not only on having true beliefs but also on having control over one's affects. It should be evident, then, why Spinoza thinks that a knowledgeable elite will generally exhibit worse judgment than a democratic body: they are more susceptible to follies of appetite! The great irony here is that a democracy, of all regime forms, is most likely to exhibit control over its own appetites. Spinoza effectively upends the Platonic order.⁴⁴

By highlighting the ways that accountability mechanisms can boost a polity's epistemic position, Spinoza offers an important line of argument that has been largely ignored by contemporary epistemic democrats.⁴⁵ And, in doing so, he gives us a greater reason to believe in the epistemic prospects of *real-world* democracies. To understand what I mean, consider the fact that many contemporary epistemic democrats, like Joshua Cohen, often rest their defense on the assumption that "voting expresses beliefs about what the correct policies are . . . not personal preferences for policies" ("An Epistemic Conception of Democracy," 34).⁴⁶ The reasoning here seems to be that democracies could make good on whatever epistemic advantages they have only if people actually vote based on what they believe to be right or just rather than based on what they want. If this were the case, the epistemic defense would depend on highly idealized assumptions about human motivation. However, Spinoza suggests that democracies, in fact, have epistemic advantages over other regimes not in spite of but *because of* people's tendency to act in self-serving ways. His insights, thus, may significantly fortify the epistemic defense, revealing how an apparent weakness of democracies—namely, the graspingness of most individuals—may actually be a strength, provided that certain institutional checks are adopted.

However, just as we saw with the epistemic potential of deliberation, the epistemic merits of accountability mechanisms depend on the existence of relatively good cognitive conditions. For instance, elections and rotations of office only effectively regulate the behavior of governors if the people are capable of recognizing when their interests are being served. This requires that people be moderately competent judges of what is good for them, which, in turn, requires that they have access to relatively good information on the basis of which they form their judgments.

Interestingly, Spinoza seems to recognize that mass irrationality is largely the product of inadequate access to information. In a remarkable

passage in which he defends the involvement of the masses in politics against the charge that common people are too stupid and tempestuous to participate, Spinoza argues that differences between people's intellectual and moral capacities are primarily the result of circumstance, claiming that "all men share in the same nature; it is power and culture that mislead us" (TP 7/27). When it comes to political matters, the primary reason that most people are poor judges is that leaders tend to be obscurantist:

[T]hat "there is no truth or judgment in the common people" is not surprising, since the important affairs of state are conducted without their knowledge, and from the little that cannot be concealed they can only make conjecture. . . . So to seek to conduct all business without the knowledge of the citizens and then to expect them not to misjudge things and to put a bad interpretation on everything, this is the height of folly. (TP 7/27)

Spinoza follows this observation with a plea for political transparency: "it is far better for the honest policies of a state to be open to its enemies than for the guilty secrets of tyrants to be kept hidden from the citizens" (TP 7/29). Without adequate access to information, the people cannot effectively hold leaders accountable, and the epistemic advantage of popular participation in governance will be lost.

Spinoza's defense of democracy, then, is at once promising and sobering. On the one hand, he gives us reason to suppose that large, transparent deliberative bodies constrained by accountability mechanisms are likely to make better judgments than other systems of governance. However, he also suggests that this advantage is quite tenuous, depending heavily on institutions and practices that foster good cognitive conditions. One of the most important lessons, then, that we may take away from Spinoza's account is that, in the absence of good cognitive conditions, an otherwise rational populace may well be reduced to a muddled mob.

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NOTES

1. Raia Prokhovnik, *Spinoza and Republicanism* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 204; Steven B. Smith, *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 164; Susan James, "Power and Difference: Spinoza's Conception of Freedom," *The*

Journal of Political Philosophy 4, no. 3 (1996): 207–28, esp. 209n4; Quentin Skinner, “The Idea of Negative Liberty: Philosophical and Historical Perspectives,” in *Philosophy in History*, ed. Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 193–221, esp. 217n35. Once cited in the notes, a work will henceforth be cited in the text.

2. Lewis Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism* (Boston: Beacon, 1958), 103; Leo Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, trans. E. M. Sinclair (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 245ff. Regarding Spinoza as a populist, both Douglas J. Den Uyl (*Power, State and Freedom: An interpretation of Spinoza’s Political Philosophy* [Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum & Company, 1983], 162–63) and Steven B. Smith (*Spinoza’s Book of Life: Freedom and Redemption in the Ethics* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003], 132) portray Spinoza’s embrace of democracy as “unsentimental” and somewhat begrudging.

3. According to one famous account, Spinoza had to be restrained by his landlord from taking a sign that read “*ultimi barbarorum*” (ultimate of barbarians) to the site of the massacre (Jakob Freudenthal, *Die Lebensgeschichte Spinoza’s in Quellenschriften, Urkunden and Nichtamtlichen Nachrichten* [Leipzig: Verlag Von Veit, 1899], 201).

4. Prokhovnik, *Spinoza and Republicanism*, 210; and idem, “From Democracy to Aristocracy: Spinoza, Reason and Politics,” *History of European Ideas* 23, nos. 2–4 (1997): 105–115, at 106 and 109.

5. Cf. Robert McShea: “Spinoza’s defense of the DeWitt regime and of dispersed aristocracy has been mistaken for a shift from the preference for democracy evinced in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* to a preference for aristocracy in the *Tractatus Politicus*. . . . [O]nly the most casual reading could bring about such a belief; a more exact study of the text shows quite the opposite” (*The Political Philosophy of Spinoza* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1968], 123).

6. I say “generally” because Spinoza is careful to avoid claiming that there is one best model for all people at all times—in some circumstances, autocratic forms of governance might be preferable (see, e.g., TP 7/26).

7. All references to the *Tractatus Politicus* (TP) are to Samuel Shirley’s translation, with introduction and notes by Steven Barbone and Lee Rice (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2000). Citations of the TP refer to the chapters/sections (e.g., 5/4 refers to chap. 5, sect. 4). All Latin passages refer to *Spinoza Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhardt, 4 vols. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925). All quotations from the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (TTP) are taken from the translation by Jonathan Israel and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Citations refer to the chapter, followed by page number (e.g., 20/257 refers to chap. 20, p. 257), and are followed by the Gebhardt number.

8. Cf. Den Uyl, *Power, State and Freedom*, 165.

9. See J. G.A. Pocock, “Spinoza and Harrington: An Exercise in Comparison,” *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 102 (1987): 435–49; and Justin Steinberg, “On Being *Sui Iuris*: Spinoza and

the Republican Idea of Liberty,” *History of European Ideas* 34, no. 3 (2008): 239–49.

10. Etienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, trans. Peter Snowdon (London: Verso, 1998), 121. Cf. Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 261–62).

11. One prominent form of instrumentalism is the “epistemic defense,” which will be the focus of section three.

12. Thomas Christiano, for instance, has presented an equality-based proceduralist argument along these lines. He argues that that any measurement of equal welfare or equal promotion of interests is bound to be deeply contestable. However, while devising a decision procedure that reliably and evidently results in egalitarian outcomes may be regarded as a quixotic pursuit, it is widely accepted that democracies, by their very nature, do promote procedural equality, as majoritarian principles give “each person the same chance as every other to affect the outcomes” (*The Rule of the Many* [Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996], 55).

13. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, for instance, advocate a form of deliberative democracy that has reciprocity, or reason-governed discussion, as its “first principle” (*Democracy and Disagreement* [Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996], 2). The procedural character of their defense here is evident in their claim that “neither our discussion of the cases nor our analysis of moral arguments purports to prove empirically that deliberation produces the morally best decisions and policies. . . . We focus on what we believe must be prior to any empirical investigation of this kind: the clarification of the character of deliberation itself” (6–7).

14. Carol Gould, *Rethinking Democracy: Freedom and Social Cooperation in Politics, Economics and Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

15. Michael Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 26.

16. I should note that, while I am yoking together republics and democracies, they are obviously not the same thing. Republics were not necessarily populist, and they often included a mixed constitution or a balance between the patricians and the plebs. Nevertheless, republics and democracies both include a popular dimension to government. Philip Pettit admits the close relationship: “the ideal of [republican] freedom, as long traditions have emphasized, is intimately tied up with the ideal of democracy” (*A Theory of Freedom: From the Psychology to the Politics of Agency* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001], 154).

17. Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 108.

18. We will see that once “nonarbitrary” conditions are set up, certain instrumental (epistemic) goods should fall out. The question is what is doing the bulk of the justificatory work: is it the intrinsic conditions (of nonarbitrariness),

or is it the consequences that result? I suspect that Pettit would say that it is the former, although good consequences are nonaccidentally related to these conditions.

19. Pettit wrote a review essay of Sandel's *Democracy's Discontent* in which he expresses sympathy for Sandel's project while offering some constructive criticisms for how Sandel can make his version of republicanism more determinate and compelling; see Philip Pettit, "Reworking Sandel's Republicanism," *Journal of Philosophy* 95 (1998): 73–96.

20. It should be noted that early modern republicans were generally not populists; most of them defended a mixed constitution in which the power of the plebs is offset by the power of a group of patricians.

21. See, for instance, *Discourses*, II.ii; cf. I.i–I.v. There is some reason to think, however, that Machiavelli's defense of the republic was not entirely procedural: he seems at times to take the relationship between living in a republic and being free to be instrumental rather than intrinsic.

22. E.g., Algernon Sidney, John Milton, James Harrington, etc. For a comprehensive overview of the republican ideal of liberty in seventeenth-century England, see Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

23. See Martin van Gelderen, *The Political Thought of the Dutch Revolt 1555–1590* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and idem, "The Machiavellian Moment and the Dutch Revolt: The Rise of Neostoicism and Dutch Republicanism," in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 205–23.

24. Pieter de la Court, *The True Interest and Political Maxims, of the Republic of Holland* (New York, 1972), 12. It is difficult to disentangle Pieter's work from his brother Johan's. Undoubtedly, though, Pieter was the more prominent figure, since Johan died in 1660 (before any significant publications).

25. Elsewhere in the TTP, he articulates the position of the citizen in a democracy in a somewhat milder, though no less republican, manner: "In a democracy no one transfers their natural right to another in such a way that they are not thereafter consulted but rather to the majority of the whole of society of which they are a part. In this way all remain equal as they had been previously, in the state of nature" (TTP 16/202, III/195).

26. "Natural equality" is preserved in a democracy for the same reason that "natural liberty" is preserved: democracies protect against domination or rule without consent that would violate these natural conditions (i.e., equality and liberty). In this passage, Spinoza uses the notions of "natural freedom" and "natural equality" interchangeably.

27. See also Susan James's claim that most commentators "underestimate the republican antecedents of [Spinoza's] analysis of freedom" ("Power and Difference," 209n4). Steven Smith also cites "self-government" as one of the "cardinal ingredients" of Spinoza's conception of political liberty (*Spinoza, Lib-*

eralism, and the Question of Jewish Identity, 164). And Quentin Skinner claims that standard interpretations “underestimate the extent to which Spinoza is restating classical republican ideas, especially as developed by Machiavelli in the *Discourses*” (“The Idea of Negative Liberty,” 217n35; see also 204), the liberty of self-governance being one of the primary ideas.

28. See Steinberg, “On Being *Sui Iuris*,” and Pocock, “Spinoza and Harrington.”

29. See David Estlund, “Beyond Fairness and Deliberation: The Epistemic Dimension of Democratic Authority,” in *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, ed. James Bohman and William Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 173–204. Estlund is fundamentally concerned with establishing the authority of democratic decisions—that is, he wants to show that we have moral and epistemic reasons to regard such decisions as legitimate even when we disagree with them. As an anonymous reader has pointed out, this is different from Spinoza’s project of showing why democracy is the best form of governance. Spinoza, unlike, say, Hobbes, appears to be relatively uninterested in the question of legitimacy. However, we can imagine him claiming that, in revealing the epistemic merits of democracies, he *is* giving us reasons to comply with the laws that follow from such procedures.

30. There is a presumption that voting procedures are more likely than nonvoting procedures to produce good outcomes, and without this presumption, our commitment to democracy might well be undermined to some extent.

31. At this point, one might protest that, if there is a matter of fact about what ought to be done that is identifiable independently of the decision of the group, we do not have a need for a decision procedure—voting becomes otiose; see Jules Coleman and John Ferejohn, “Democracy and Social Choice,” *Ethics* 97 (1986): 6–25, at 17. This objection misses the mark since identifying a standard for measuring good outcomes is clearly distinct from determining how to promote these outcomes. This can be seen from the fact that two utilitarians who agree in general about what is good can disagree about what decision procedure to adopt for promoting that good.

32. As Joshua Cohen puts it, the claim of “epistemic populism” is that “the judgments of majorities, made under suitable conditions, provide a reasonable, although *imperfect procedure* for determining the general will” (“An Epistemic Conception of Democracy,” *Ethics* 97 [1986]: 26–38, at 29).

33. See TTP 16/184; TP 8/7.

34. For instance, some have noted that the scope of participation in a democracy is a decisive mark in its favor because of the so-called Condorcet Jury Theorem (see Bernard Grofman and Scott Feld, “Rousseau’s General Will: A Condorcetian Perspective,” *American Political Science Review* 82, no. 2 [1988]: 567–76; and Brian Barry, *Political Argument* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965]). The Jury Theorem states that if individuals are competent (defined here as being more likely than not to choose correctly between two options), then the reliability of the group is increased as it is made larger.

35. See Cass Sunstein, "The Law of Group Polarization," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 10, no. 2 (2002): 175–95; idem, *Why Societies Need Dissent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); and Sunstein, David Schkade, and Reid Hastie, "What Happened on Deliberation Day?" *California Law Review* 95 (2007): 915–40. In this last work, Sunstein, Hastie, and Schkade report on the findings of an experiment that was conducted to test the effects of deliberation people's political views. The authors found the results to be disheartening. They conducted this experiment in two Colorado cities: Boulder and Colorado Springs. What they discovered was that in Boulder, a bastion of liberalism, the participants' views became even more liberal after deliberation; and in Colorado Springs, which is predominantly conservative, participants' views became more conservative. The authors conclude that, at least under certain conditions, deliberation might simply reinforce many people's predeliberative inclinations rather than opening people's minds. Put rather crudely, we might say that the conclusion of these studies is that, due to social (i.e., reputational) pressures or informational biases, one's independence of judgment is likely to be compromised in certain deliberative contexts. If Sunstein et al. are right, while deliberation has the potential to enhance competence, it also has the potential to reinforce biases and actually inhibit individual rationality.

36. All references to *Ethics* (E) are taken from Benedictus de Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. E. M. Curley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).

37. See esp. TTP preface (and passim); cf. TP 8/46.

38. Cf. "it is dread that makes men so irrational" (preface/4, III/5).

39. John Elster, "The Market and the Forum: Three Varieties of Political Theory," *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, ed. James Bohman and William Rehg. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 3–33, at 12.

40. These constitutional checks are to be understood as the king's "permanent decrees" (*aeterna decreta*), expressing his real interests, which are not to be contravened. Spinoza likens these "decrees" to Ulysses' order that his oarsmen keep him bound to the mast of his ship even when he is beckoned by the Sirens' song (TP 7/1).

41. Cf. McShea, *Political Philosophy of Spinoza*, 109. Balancing interests was a central feature of De la Court's writings. For a good discussion, see Eco Haitsma Mulier, *The Myth of Venice and Dutch Republican Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. Gerard T. Moran (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1980).

42. Among other things, Spinoza thinks that the diffusion of power into the hands of many will have the effect of reducing the power of factions. In a passage that anticipates Madison's argument in *Federalist* #10, Spinoza writes, "[N]ow if those chosen [to govern] are only two in number, the one will endeavour to gain superiority over the other, and because of their excessive power the state is likely to split into two factions, or into three, four, or five factions if the government is in the hands of three, four, or five men. But the more there are to share in the government, the weaker the factions will be" (TP 8/1).

43. For a discussion of the political significance of ambition, see Michael Rosenthal, "Tolerance as a Virtue in Spinoza's *Ethics*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39, no. 4 (2001): 535–57; and idem, "Spinoza's Republican Argument for Toleration," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 11, no. 3 (2003): 320–37.

44. These observations fit with Spinoza's more general view that the cognitive is inextricably bound up with the conative. This is a point that he insists upon in the opening propositions to E IV, where he develops his account of weakness of will: to be fully rational it is not enough for one to have true beliefs; one must also have control over the passions (E IVP15–17).

45. E.g., Estlund ("Beyond Fairness and Deliberation") and Cohen ("An Epistemic Conception of Democracy") fail to address this particular concern. A notable exception to this is Elisabeth Anderson, "The Epistemology of Democracy," *Episteme* 3 (2006): 9–23.

46. Cf. Estlund: "participants [must] sincerely address questions of justice, not of interest group advantage" ("Beyond Fairness and Deliberation," 190).