

## DEMOCRACY AND ETERNITY IN SPINOZA

In commenting the last propositions of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, Pierre Hadot – correctly – refers to the important pages by Schopenhauer. And the latter, in his major work, *The World as Will and Representation*, explicitly refers to Spinoza. Just as Franco Lo Piparo highlighted the link between Wittgenstein and Gramsci, through Piero Sraffa, it would be interesting to explore the link between Wittgenstein and Spinoza, through Schopenhauer. This is an operation that would require skills that I do not possess. I will limit myself, rather, to returning in my own way to a theme that has engaged several scholars of Spinoza: the relationship between democracy and eternity. Another perspective for considering the relationship between praxis and mysticism, accepting what Wittgenstein says: ‘eternal life belongs to those who live in the present’. If anything, it will be a question of understanding, this is my objective, whether the intuition that makes us grasp the singular essence of things, or rather ourselves as part of God's infinite productive potency, is a silent move or, rather, one full of words, cooperation and social conflicts; a matter for the multitude and not for the wise.

Inverting the order in the title, I shall start from eternity. According to Spinoza, as for Wittgenstein, it is possible to experience eternity: vision, intuition; to show rather than to speak. And also for Spinoza this is a laborious experience to be achieved, the result of research, and a liberation that few can complete. According to his *Ethics*, specifically, we feel that we are eternal when we achieve the third kind of knowledge, that is, when we grasp the singular essence of things and of ourselves.

However, what does this expression – ‘singular essence’ – mean? The singular and actual essence of each thing, Spinoza clarifies at the beginning of the third part of *Ethics*, is the *conatus*, an endeavor or potency (*potentia*) to persist in existence. In the animal whose body is capable more than others of suffering and doing many things, in other words capable more than others of self-reflection and self-awareness, i.e. the human animal, the *conatus* takes the form of desire (*cupiditas*). Certainly it is striking that essence, form or nature, in Spinoza is not only actual, but also singular. Deleuze-Guattari, in their *A Thousand Plateaus*, rightly speak of ‘accidental form’: in short, a nature or potency that in being eternal is also, in existence, determined. And this – we understand with Spinoza – is because God, or nature, expresses itself in multiple finite modes. Again: nature is the immanent, not transcendent, cause of everything, whether it be a physical or biological body, a human or non-human animal. In this sense – we are already in the fourth part of *Ethics* – the potency that concerns us is part or degree – intending potency as an intensive, not an extensive, quantity – of God's infinite productive/generative potency.

Our desire, however, varies continually. This is due to encounters, to affections: we are a finite mode, precisely. When affections compress our desire to live, we are sad and hate the object that has determined our sadness. On the contrary, there are affections that increase our potency, so that we are joyful and love the source of our happiness. The world of affections we suffer, the world of passions, is that of the first kind of knowledge: imagination. The image is a psychic trace of the external object that we touch, see, feel, eat, etc. The image is the idea with which the mind thinks about the affection of our body. In the world of imagination, we are shipwrecked in the sea, pushed from one side to the other.

When, starting from the continuous fluctuations, do we become rational? When, by implementing joyful encounters, we learn the rules that combine bodies and things. We learn, that is, to be an adequate cause of our actions and thoughts. We will never stop suffering, because we are not God, that is, the totality of nature, but we understand the cause of pain, we grasp its necessity, so we learn to change course, avoid wrong encounters, do without harmful love. From the world of imagination we have moved on to the world of common notions: what bodies and things have in

common is what regulates positive, joyful, stable combinations. The more I have these notions, the more active I am, the freer I am. But the most important common notion for the animal that we are is this: there is nothing more useful, in order to be happy, than the emotional, productive, institutional combination of animals that desire, think and speak. Common notions, thus friendship, piety, *civitas*. This is the second kind of knowledge. Not cold rationalism, let us be clear: reason, if anything, allows us to surf and to make the most of the waves and the wind. From the shipwreck to the surfer, or simply to the skillful swimmer. And here a common good, one that is never scarce, but that on the contrary is increased by sharing, appears: acting according to reason, in fact, means to understand the rules of composition in the best possible way, to know the causes, to be an adequate cause of one's own practice. The more we gain this type knowledge, adds Spinoza, the more we want others to gain it as well.

To know with this second kind of knowledge means to gain autonomy – this must be stressed. From what? Obviously, from sad passions (envy, jealousy, immoderate ambition, etc.), from destructive conflicts, from illness. To desire according to reason, then, coincides with the extension of friendship, because our practical life is now directed by strength of mind and generosity (other individuals are what is most useful to us). And the freer we are, the freer the political institutions that govern us. Indeed: if the State has a decisive objective, no doubt for Spinoza this is to conquer collective freedom. He writes, in a famous passage of his *Tractatus theologico-politicus*:

From the foundations of commonwealth, as already explained, it follows most obviously that its purpose is not dominium, nor the coercion of men by fear, nor that they should act at the arbitrary bidding of others; on the contrary, it is that every one may be free from fear, that he may live securely, in so far as this is possible, that is to say, that he may possess in the best sense his natural right [*potentia*/desire] to existence, and to the fruits of his industry. It is not, I say, the end of the State from rational beings to make men brute beasts or automatons; on the contrary, its end is that mind and body may unimpeded perform their functions, that every one may enjoy the free use of his reason, and that hatred, anger, deceit, and strife should cease from

among its members. The end aim of the State, in fact, is liberty.

Spinoza 1962: 344

Needless to say that the political form in question, for Spinoza, is democracy. That is, the potency of the whole of society. Again: a constituted power that rests on the self-regulating capacity of each one and that is continually renewed by the constituent potency of the multitude – a true and unique source of legislation and legitimacy.

But I have jumped ahead, and above all I have not yet clarified what the experience of eternity is. In the fifth and last part of the *Ethics*, after presenting the strength of the intellect, Spinoza takes the final step: the conquest of the third kind of knowledge. With words that we can find in part in the last propositions of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, this is a knowledge of things ‘under the aspect of eternity’ (*sub specie aeternitatis*).

But what does all this mean for Spinoza? It means to understand the essence of things as well as that of oneself; for our mind, to have an idea of the essence of our body, that is to grasp the desire that precedes us, accompanies us and surpasses us, as part or a degree of the infinite productive potency of God, of nature in its generative totality. A knowledge that is rather an intuition, but also and fundamentally love for nature as an eternal production of differences and compositions.

No doubt also Spinoza, at these ‘heights’, refers to a far from easy, and certainly rare, experiment – to be had in existence, in the present. But this is not necessarily a silent and solitary moment. Firstly because in Spinoza every kind of knowledge is also, and always, a form of praxis: since there is no distinction between body and mind, since the latter is always incorporated and the body is always thinking, the potency of the intellect coincides with the capacity to act freely, to be autonomous, that is, to be adequate cause of one's actions. As we have seen, this freedom is only achieved through cooperation, friendship, and democratic political institutions. What's more, freedom, in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, is mainly freedom of speech and thought; but thoughts and words are not separated from the desire to persist in existence, if anything they are expressions and

articulations of this. Secondly, from what has just been said, we must fully grasp the notion of singular essence: part (finite) of the infinite productivity of nature, or productivity – as far as we are concerned – of thought, of words, of the body with its ability to be affectionate and to act. It is therefore clear why the experience of eternity is much easier only through democratic practice, where the freedom of each person is increased by the freedom of all.

In concluding, however, it must be made clear that Spinoza was a ‘pupil’ of Machiavelli. Like him, he did not worry about having-to-be, but took social relations seriously for what they are: constantly animated by oppression, sad passions, violence. The democracy outlined in the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, in the *Tractatus politicus*, Spinoza's last work, is ‘defeated’ by his premature death: chapter XI, dedicated to democracy, was not completed. But in the first chapters, the most anthropological ones, we find some fundamental indications. Among often destructive passions (envy and ambition), some retain a decisive political, constituent force: these are sympathy (*miser cordia*) and indignation. In feeling with our bodies the pain of others, *imitatio affectuum*, we resist the domination of one or a few. More than a stable form of government, possible only in a completely liberated world, democracy is *showed* – to revive a term dear to Wittgenstein – by sedition and revolt against unjust laws and inequality. More than a State, this is a practice, a free and eternal becoming.

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