

A SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE ON DESIRE

The problem of the common good

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Abstract: While in the *TIE* Spinoza begins to look for an eternal source of joy, writing the *Ethics* he realizes that, besides being eternal, the object of our desire should also be common, namely it has to be something that everybody would desire and, at the same time, can possess. According to Spinoza, it is due the emotional variability among humans that the conflicts which tear societies apart are never-ending. In fact, what good and evil are is defined by our desire: what is useful to us, we call ‘good’. But given that our desires differ, as do our natures, it is hard to find a common source of joy. Nonetheless, Spinoza thinks he finds it in the knowledge and love of God. Provided that we are *reasonable* (that is, we are not overwhelmed by our passions) we understand that our desire is only fulfilled by this knowledge and not by all those material goods that are “*vana et futilia*”. However, as I will argue in this paper, when it comes to describing what *common good* means to a society, and what policies it should entail, Spinoza struggles to give a coherent answer. The reasons for this ambiguity, I shall argue, lay at the core of the theory of desire as the striving to persevere in our being.

Keywords: Spinoza; Common Good; Desire; Commonality; Exclusivity

1. The search for a good that is common

At a certain point in his life, Spinoza realized that the goods of fortune are “*vana et futilia*” and began to look for an *eternal* source of joy. Later, while writing the *Ethics*, Spinoza understood that this source of joy, besides being eternal, should also be common. For every man to desire and strive for it, it should be a common good, namely something that everybody would desire and, at the same time, could possess. Analysing human affectivity, the philosopher figures out that the goods of fortune are uncertain not only because they do not last forever, but also because they are subjective and exclusive. They are subjective, because someone may love something we hate, and they are exclusive, because only one (or a few) can own them. While the goods of fortune’s subjectivity generates *ambition*, exclusivity engenders *jealousy* and *envy*. These affects are at the origin of conflicts and quarrels between human beings (stemming from a conflict of recognition in the first case and a conflict of appropriation in the second). This is what happens if we are dominated by passions (or *when* we are dominated by passions).

Yet, Spinoza seems to suggest that, as long as our thoughts and actions follow only from our nature, we acknowledge what *we have in common*, and thus we identify what is really good for all of us and what everyone of us may possess without depriving others: the supreme good (*summum bonum*). Our supreme joy (*beatitudo*) is to know and love God by the third kind of knowledge. Besides being eternal, the love of God is also common¹ and, consequently, it cannot be affected by jealousy.² As the supreme good is common, common is the path to conquer it, and common the joy that comes for enjoying it.

In the *Theological-Political Treatise* (henceforth, *TTP*) and in the *Political Treatise* (henceforth, *TP*)³ Spinoza faces the problem of the common good too. On the one hand, this may be obvious: what is a well-drawn political theory if not an attempt to understand what would be good for the entire human society? In fact, one of Spinoza's goals there is precisely to determine how the common good (*bonum commune*), or the common welfare (*communis salus*),⁴ as it is sometimes called, may be obtained and preserved. However, when we look for a definition of what this common good is, and what policies it entails, we are likely to find ourselves disappointed. For Spinoza mentions neither the knowledge and the love of God (eventually shared with all human beings) nor the *beatitudo* that comes from enjoying it. He never actually gives a univocal definition of what political common good really is. On first glance, the common good of a society varies between a set of moral rules we all agree upon (which are, ultimately, arbitrary) and the mere safety of the state, namely its stability, its “peace and piety”,⁵ as we read at the beginning of the *TTP*; in other cases, Spinoza denounces the ideological use of the “common good”, as a tool for justifying an iniquitous or tyrannic policy.⁶ We could dismiss this ambiguity by assuming that any reference to a political

¹ Baruch SPINOZA, *Opera*, im auftrag der Heidelberger akademie der wissenschaften herausgegeben, C. Gebhardt, C. Winter, Heidelberg 1925, E4p36, tr. eng. Edwin CURLEY, *The collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, Princeton University Press, Princeton and London 1985.

² Baruch SPINOZA, E5p20.

³ For now I will treat the two treatises as if they were identical. Later on, I will examine the differences between the *TTP* and the *TP* in more depth.

⁴ It could be argued that the welfare (or well-being, for latin *salus*) differs from the “common good”. However, with *salus* Spinoza refers both to the salvation of the individual (his blessedness, the supreme good, see E5p36scho.) and to the safety of the state.

⁵ Notice that *peace* is different from *piety*. If *peace* may be understood as “stability” (an opinion that in any case Spinoza will change in the *TP*, where peace cannot be described as the simple absence of war), piety (*pietas*) is “The Desire to do good generated in us by our living according to the guidance of reason” E3p37scho1.

⁶ See for instance *TP*, 7.22 and Filippo DEL LUCHESE, *Tumulti e indignatio. Conflitto, diritto e moltitudine in Machiavelli e Spinoza*, Ghibli, Milano 2004, pp. 134-136.

common good is only rhetorical,⁷ but Spinoza seems to be seriously engaged with the problem of particularity, exclusivity and commonality in politics. Consider, for instance, the Hebrews, who were so convinced that they were the *only people elected* by God, the only people to exclusively enjoy his love and consideration, that they have attracted foreign nations' hatred; moreover, one of the biggest faults of the ancient Hebrew state, which finally led to its fall, is that they granted all legislative power to the Levites *alone*, and so they *excluded* all the other families.

Notwithstanding this, in the political treatises Spinoza does not change his mind about the nature of the common good: he still thinks that it is to love and to know God, but this emerges as an individual conquest, so that political common good appears as a 'second degree' common good, which enables individual achievement.

If this is true, however, many problems arise. In the first place, it seems paradoxical that what would be good for all of us can only be accomplished in private, by each individual. Second, I argue that Spinoza would not be satisfied with this conclusion: in the *Ethics*, as well as in the political treatises, he seems to aim to a society governed by an union of intents and actions, and not a mere instrument for keeping the minimum degree of peace that is needed in order to look for our supreme – and common – good. I suggest that the real problem lays in Spinoza's conception of *desire* as the essence of everything: since desire is the effort of anything to persevere in *its* being, and what is good depends on what we desire, it is difficult to see how we could think about a common good, because *common*, by definition, is something that "does not constitute the essence of any singular thing".⁸ The problem of common good will finally lead us to another key-issue of Spinoza's philosophy, namely, whether this essence is particular to any individual or, on the contrary, is shared between individuals of the same nature.

2. "Common" and "good" in the *Ethics*

In order to understand how Spinoza can identify the common good with the love and knowledge of God in the *Ethics*, let us begin asking what it means to be "good" and what it means to be "common" in Spinozistic terms and how we should understand the relation between what is common and what is good.

⁷ Certainly, sometimes Spinoza refers to the common good generically, so to match with his public's vocabulary, but, as we will see, Spinoza's concept of the common good cannot be reduced to a lexical vestige.

⁸ Baruch SPINOZA, E2p37.

In Spinoza's view, since our essence is *desire*, namely the "striving to persevere in [our] being",⁹ *good* is everything that favours this effort by increasing our power of acting and thinking, so that "we judge something to be good because we strive for it".¹⁰ Consequently, as we strive to persevere in our being, we also strive to feel joyful. Good and evil are not universal moral concepts, but rather "every kind of Joy, and whatever leads to it" and "every kind of Sadness, and especially what frustrates longing".¹¹ Now, every one of us has its being, so that what is good for us, may be bad for someone else. As Spinoza puts it, "each one, from his own affect, judges, or evaluates, what is good and what is bad".¹² Given that good and evil are only "modes of thinking" which are formed by comparison, music, for instance, would be good for "one who is in Melancholy", but "bad for one who is mourning, and neither good nor bad to one who is deaf".¹³ Since we all strive to persevere in our being, and to look for what is good for us, but all hold different views about what is good (because we all have different beings) we all love and hate different things.¹⁴ Nevertheless, we do not live completely alone: since childhood, we are exposed to others, whose affects we tend to imitate.¹⁵ As long as we strive to bring about what is good for us, we also try either to bring about what others think is good¹⁶ or to make others accept our view about what is good, and to live according to it.¹⁷ Clearly, all this effort provokes a lot of stress, and causes quarrels between human beings ("they all hate one another" says Spinoza in E3p31scho.). However, this happens only because we are dominated by passions, so that we *imagine* that certain things are good for us. This is to say that we have an inadequate idea of what "good" is.¹⁸ If we could understand what was really good for us, we would realize that it is not different from what is good for others, because we all belong to human nature.¹⁹ Now, good is whatever favours our effort, and for all human beings this is

⁹ Baruch SPINOZA, E3p6.

¹⁰ Baruch SPINOZA, E3p9scho.

¹¹ Baruch SPINOZA, E3p39scho.

¹² Baruch SPINOZA, E3p39scho.

¹³ Baruch SPINOZA, E4pref.

¹⁴ Baruch SPINOZA, E3p51 and E3p57.

¹⁵ Baruch SPINOZA, E3p32scho.

¹⁶ Baruch SPINOZA, E3p29.

¹⁷ Baruch SPINOZA, E3p31scho.

¹⁸ Baruch SPINOZA, E4p62.

¹⁹ Spinoza, in the *Preface of Ethics 4* and in E4def1,2, calls *good* and *evil* what we "*certainly* know to be useful to us" and in E4p14 he talks about the "*true knowledge* of good and evil". Of course, if we were free, we "will form no concept of good and evil" (E4p68), but we are not. So, although Spinoza is quite disappointed by this, we are forced to use *good* and *evil* as concepts, but, as he states beginning *Ethics 4*, we should, from now on, consider *good* whatever is *really useful to all of us*. And this true

understanding.²⁰ So, knowledge is what really increases our power of acting and thinking, but what kind of knowledge? What should we know, how should we understand? While interpreting the world through the lens of the second kind of knowledge is certainly a step further, it is only by the third kind of knowledge that we finally grasp what is the *summum bonum* for all of us: knowing and loving God.²¹ Only when we get there, are we truly joyful and, moreover, blessed.

Now let us look to what *common* means and how it is strictly related to the definition of *good*. According to Spinoza, what is common “is equally in the part and in the whole, does not constitute the essence of any singular thing”.²² We label things ‘good’ or ‘bad’ according to the effect they have on us. If it is joy, and so they increase our power of acting and thinking, they are good. But not everything can be either good or evil, which is to say, that not everything can affect us. For something to be good, it must have at least something in common with us.²³ But, says Spinoza, “no thing can be evil through what it has in common with our nature”;²⁴ it follows that “the more a thing agrees with our nature, the more useful, or better, it is for us”.²⁵ With this in mind, we might ask: what is that thing that resembles us the most, which we will imitate? To which Spinoza’s answer is: another human being. This is why Spinoza thinks that “there is no singular thing in Nature that is more useful to man than a man” (which means ‘nothing is better’).²⁶ If we look to human behaviour, we notice that, as children, we imitate our parents’ affects, not (for example) our dog’s, and thus we shape our idea of what is good and what is not based on our parents’ conception of them,²⁷ and not on our dog’s. However, as soon as we develop our being and encounter other people, conflict begins, and it seems that all commonality is lost: we start to form different conceptions about what is good for us, and we discover that others think and act differently to how we expected. Even when we imitate others’ affects and ideas, the problem persists. Far from resolving the latent conflicts between human beings, the imitation of the affects

knowledge of good and evil” is shaped on the model of human nature. so that good is whatever approaches “nearer and nearer to this model”. As we will see later on, the problem in defining the common good is strictly related to the interpretation of “the model of human nature”. On this see Francesco TOTO, *Spinoza modello e ragione*, “Isonomia”, 2019.

²⁰ Baruch SPINOZA, E4p27.

²¹ Baruch SPINOZA, E4p36scho.

²² Baruch SPINOZA, E2p37.

²³ Baruch SPINOZA, E4p29.

²⁴ Baruch SPINOZA, E4p30.

²⁵ Baruch SPINOZA, E4p31cor.

²⁶ But, he precises, only insofar he (or she) “lives according to the guidance of reason” (E4p35cor1). We shall see later the consequences of this limitation.

²⁷ Baruch SPINOZA, KV 2.7.

(despite grounding human sociability in nature) is one further reason for disputes. The fact that we love (or desire, or hate) with “greater constancy” what “a thing like us” loves (or desire, or hate)²⁸ implies that “if we imagine that someone enjoys some thing that *only one can possess*, we shall strive to bring it about that he does not possess it”.²⁹ If someone conquers what we desired, we will experience *jealousy*,³⁰ a mix of envy, love and hate. As children, we strived to possess everything for ourselves³¹ and perhaps our parents let us do that, but others will not be this ‘generous’. The diversity between our own and other’s conception of what is good, argues Spinoza, stems from this: that we all are dominated by passions and we imagine. As we saw above, what would be good for all of us would be understanding, because *reason is what we all have in common*. When we follow our reason, we discover what we have in common, despite our differences, and “we agree in nature”.³² Spinoza uses here the same example he used before, when he explains:

I have said that Paul hates Peter because he imagines that Peter possesses what Paul himself also loves. At first glance it seems to follow from this that these two are injurious to one another because they love the same thing (...) but if we are willing to examine the matter fairly, we shall see that (...) for these two are not troublesome to one another insofar as they agree in nature, i.e., insofar as each loves the same thing, but insofar as they disagree with one another. For insofar as each loves the same thing, each one’s love is thereby encouraged (...) Instead, as I have said, the cause of [their enmity] is nothing but the fact that (as we suppose) they disagree in nature. For we suppose that Peter has the idea of a thing he loves which is already possessed, whereas Paul has the idea of a thing he loves which is lost. That is why the one is affected with Joy and the other with Sadness, and to that extent they are contrary to one another.³³

So Peter and Paul agree in nature as long as they love the same thing. But Spinoza acknowledges that this change of perspective is not enough, for he admits that “the greatest good men seek from an affect is often such that only one can possess it fully, those who love are not of one mind in their love—while they rejoice to sing the praises of the thing they love, they fear to be believed”.³⁴ So the problem also lies in the object of our love. Only if we take knowledge to be our supreme good, can we avoid the problem of appropriation, because knowledge is a non-exclusive good. In fact, what is really good for all of us, the *summum bonum*, is also “common to all, and can be enjoyed

²⁸ Baruch SPINOZA, E3p29.

²⁹ Baruch SPINOZA, E3p32. The italic is mine.

³⁰ Baruch SPINOZA, E3p35.

³¹ Baruch SPINOZA, E3p32scho.

³² Baruch SPINOZA, E4p35.

³³ Baruch SPINOZA, E4p34cor.

³⁴ Baruch SPINOZA, E4p37schol.

by all equally”.³⁵ As loving an exclusive good causes jealousy and envy, loving God cannot lead to envy and jealousy.³⁶

To sum up, following the *Ethics* we discovered that, according to Spinoza, the common good is knowing and loving God, the supreme good, the only one which is truly “common”: it follows from what is common to human nature – reason – and can be enjoyed by all of us at the same time.

On the other hand, what are most useful (and therefore good) to us are others human beings,³⁷ because they are what have most in common with us, and what we have in common, as a matter of necessity, is our reason.³⁸ So, as long as we think and act reasonably, we are “most useful”,³⁹ we are “God”,⁴⁰ to one another.

This may lead us to think that the common good which guides, as a target, the actions of a society should be, precisely, living knowing and loving God along with other human beings. Spinoza does not dismiss this idea completely, as we may argue moving from E4p37: “The good which everyone who seeks virtue wants for himself, he also desires for other men; and this Desire is greater as his knowledge of God is greater”. Here Spinoza seems to imply that this would be the real goal: loving and knowing God, I try to convince my fellows to do the same, and ‘we all live happily together’. Instead, reading *Ethics* 4p37-40, which, as has been suggested,⁴¹ show how society is crucial to the development of the individual, we get another idea. Here Spinoza clarifies that it is true that society is essential for the individual, because human beings “can hardly live a solitary life”.⁴² However, for “men can disagree in nature insofar as they are torn by

³⁵ Baruch SPINOZA, E4p36.

³⁶ Baruch SPINOZA, E5p20.

³⁷ Spinoza does not contradict himself when he says that what is most useful to us is the knowledge and the love of God on the one hand, and our similars on the other. In fact, when we all love and know God, we are all reasonable. See also Francesco TOTO, *L'individualità dei corpi. Percorsi nell'Etica di Spinoza*, Mimesis, Milano 2014, pp. 444-445. The problem, as we shall see, is if we could actually *desire* something that is common to all.

³⁸ I say “mostly” because we could also ‘agree in passion’, it is to say, we could share the same affect. In the *Ethics* he says that “men *can* disagree in nature insofar as they are torn by affects which are passions”: they *can*, they not have to. Furthermore, in the *TTP* and the *TP* we often read about people moved to political actions by a common emotion: see eg. Baruch SPINOZA, *TTP*, 17, G216, tr. Eng. Edwin CURLEY, Edwin Curley, *The collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 2, Princeton University Press, Princeton and London 2016, p. 315, “*communis metus*”; *TP*, 3.9, G288, Curley, 2, p. 521 “*communem metus*”, *TP*, 6.1, G297, Curley, 2, p. 531 “*communi affectu*”.

³⁹ Baruch SPINOZA, E4p37dem.

⁴⁰ Baruch SPINOZA, E4p35scho.

⁴¹ Alexandre MATHERON, *Éthique et politique chez Spinoza*, in *Études sur Spinoza et les philosophes de l'âge classique*, ed. Pierre-François Moreau, ENS, Lyon 2011, pp. 196-197.

⁴² Baruch SPINOZA, E4p35scho.

affects which are passions”,⁴³ we need a society where what is good and what is evil is established once for all and for all of us and so it is ‘common by decision’. Even within a society, however, not all human beings are the most useful things to us, but only those who think and act according to reason. We seem to not need the “ignorants” whose favours “a free man (...) strives to avoid”.⁴⁴ So others are necessary in order to survive, but they seem to be almost irrelevant concerning the development of our reason. In other words, the path to the supreme good, the only one which is truly common, is, paradoxically, a solitary one.

After the ‘birth’ of society, good is no longer what is considered good by the individual, but everything that is useful to preserve the commonwealth.⁴⁵ However, this does not imply that political common good is transcendent, namely it is not independent nor superior to individual good.⁴⁶ So, what is the common good of a society? How does Spinoza deal with the issues connected to exclusivity? We might expect to find a definitive answer in the *TTP* and in the *TP*, but if so we will be largely disappointed.

3. Political common good in the *TTP* and in the *TP*

In the *TTP*, *common* (when significant) is mostly related to *reason*: common to all human beings are those notions (*notiones communes*)⁴⁷ on which *natural understanding* is built. Since common is what follows from reason, we should not be surprised that Spinoza describes the knowledge and love of God as our supreme good in the *TTP* too. Further, since a law is “a principle of living which men prescribe to themselves or to others for some end”, while the *divine law* aims at the supreme good, knowing and loving God, the *human law* prescribes those rules “which serve only to protect life and the republic”.⁴⁸ These positive rules are, hence, merely instrumental to the end of loving and knowing God and we need them in order to live safely. As it goes for the ideas of good and evil, that we would not form if we were free, so it goes for (human) laws: “if nature so constituted men that they desired nothing except what true reason teaches

⁴³ Baruch SPINOZA, E4p33.

⁴⁴ Baruch SPINOZA, E4p70.

⁴⁵ Baruch SPINOZA, E4p40.

⁴⁶ Filippo DEL LUCHESE, *Tumulti e indignatio. Conflitto, diritto e moltitudine in Machiavelli e Spinoza*, Ghibli, Milano 2004, p. 132.

⁴⁷ Common notions are “conoscenze [che] concernono gli elementi comuni alla natura dell’individuo conoscente (caratterizzato sempre da un corpo) e all’oggetto conosciuto” Francesco CERRATO, *Cause e nozioni comuni nella filosofia di Spinoza*, Quolibet, Macerata 2008, in particular pp. 75-122 (quoted p. 86).

⁴⁸ Baruch SPINOZA, *TTP*, 4, G59, Curley, 2, p. 127.

them to desire, then of course a society could exist without laws”.⁴⁹ Thus, as it was in the *Ethics*, the supreme and common good is to love and know God, the end of *lex divina*; the safety of the state, and each *lex humana*, is nothing more than instrumental to the one and only good.

In the *TP* Spinoza consistently maintains that, given that human beings will always be prone to passions, a political theory should indicate which are the best ways to govern and to keep the state safe, ‘notwithstanding its citizens’. This is why Spinoza here seems to think that the only common good to look after in a society is the safety of the state. In fact, “people who persuade themselves that a multitude, which may be divided over public affairs, can be induced to live only according to the prescription of reason, those people are dreaming of the golden age of the Poets”, says Spinoza. Consequently, while “freedom of mind, or strength of character, is a private virtue”, “the virtue of the state is security”.⁵⁰ Living following the path of *Ethics 5* is too difficult, argues Spinoza; educating citizens to live according to reason does not figure among the duties of the state.

However, both in the *TTP* and in the *TP*, the rules of living are also common, whenever they are the fruit of a common agreement (*consensus*), and they establish common rights (*jura communia*). In the *TTP*, the rules of living, despite not being natural, should not be completely arbitrary, but shaped on the model of human nature. When defending democracy, Spinoza states that “very rarely can it happen that the supreme ‘powers command great absurdities. To look out for their own interests and retain their sovereignty it is incumbent on them most of all to consult the common good, and to direct everything according to the dictate of reason’”.⁵¹ In a democracy every citizen may participate in discussion and contribute to decisions about which common rules we should live by. In this case, the political common good emerges as an ‘empty container’, which has to be filled through confrontation. We set rules to live “more safely and conveniently” and the best way to do it is bargaining on the ‘contents’ of the common good.⁵² What policies political common good entails remains thus undetermined, until most of us agree on what has to be considered as good (and what as evil). When this agreement is lacking, however, the appeal to the “common good” may be used as an ideological tool by those who govern, in order to convince the

⁴⁹ Baruch SPINOZA, *TTP*, 5, G73, Curley, 2, p. 144.

⁵⁰ Baruch SPINOZA, *TP*, 1.5-6, G275, Curley, 2, p. 506.

⁵¹ Baruch SPINOZA, *TTP*, 16, G194, Curley, 2, p. 288.

⁵² Filippo DEL LUCCHESI, *Tumulti e indignatio. Conflitto, diritto e moltitudine in Machiavelli e Spinoza*, Ghibli, Milano 2004, pp. 134-136.

citizens of the goodness of a policy, though they are in fact only considering their own benefit.⁵³

Therefore, the common good of a society can hardly be reduced to the mere safety of the state, which, in turn, guarantees the safety of the individual: it implies a certain kind of *agreement* between citizens. Despite being positive, the conception of good and evil inside a given society cannot stray too far from what would be naturally good (and evil). Moreover, interpreting the common good as the simple safety of the state contrasts with what Spinoza identifies as peace and harmony when he says that “peace does not consist in the privation of war, but in a union or harmony of minds (*animorum unione*)”.⁵⁴ Mere survival is not the end of politics: the real goal is harmony, a condition where there is a unity of minds. As it was in E4p37 Spinoza seems to aim at something more than a state of non-conflictuality. E4p18scho. reinforces this idea:

To man, then, there is nothing more useful than man. Man, I say, can wish for nothing more helpful to the preservation of his being than that *all should so agree in all things that the Minds and Bodies of all would compose, as it were, one Mind and one Body*; that all should strive together, as far as they can, to preserve their being; and that *all, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage of all*.⁵⁵

But it seems that this unity, based on the *vera Mentis virtute*,⁵⁶ can only arise, once again, from what we naturally have in common: our reason. It is true that Spinoza does not deny that we could also agree by passion, sharing one affect, but is also true that such an agreement can hardly be identified with a condition of peace. This kind of consensus is only temporary and accidental, while peace to be called like that requires stability; more, it requires a certain kind of eternity.⁵⁷

To sum up, sometimes Spinoza reduces political common good to the safety of the state: consistently with what he said in the *Ethics*, political common good is a condition for the individual ‘conquest’ of the true common good. Elsewhere, taking care of the common good means to protect those positive rules we all agreed upon: although they are not common by nature, but common by decision, they enable men to live more or less peacefully. Besides, common good may also represent a mere ideological keyword,

⁵³ Baruch SPINOZA, *TP*, 7.29, G321, Curley, 2, p. 560.

⁵⁴ Baruch SPINOZA, *TP*, 6.5, G298, Curley, 2, p. 533.

⁵⁵ The italic is mine.

⁵⁶ Baruch SPINOZA, *TP*, 5.5, G296, Curley, 2, p. 530: “Cum ergo dicimus, illud imperium optimum esse, ubi homines concorditer vitam transigunt, vitam humanam intelligo, quae non sola sanguinis circulatione, et aliis, quae omnibus animalibus sunt communia, sed quae maxime ratione, vera Mentis virtute, et vita definitur”.

⁵⁷ See Pierre-François MOREAU, *Ulysse, l'État, l'Éternité*, in *L'expérience de l'éternité : philosophie, mystique, clinique*, ed. A. Feneuil e I. Krtolica, Hermann, Paris 2018, pp. 13-28.

useful in order to justify particular policies. These three meanings show how Spinoza finds it difficult to determine what exactly political common good is, provided that it is not the common and supreme good of the *Ethics*, but its precondition. Nevertheless, when clarifying what a society should aim for – peace – Spinoza describes it as a state of harmony and unity that seems hardly achievable without natural commonality. So, why does Spinoza find it so difficult to resolve the problem of social common good?

4. What do we desire?

Spinoza's approach to the topic of common good reveals that he is aware of the issues concerning commonality and exclusivity, but, as I argue, he fails to deliver a consistent answer. Even if for the individual the problem can be 'easily' solved by defining common good as he love and the knowledge of God, it still remains when we look at society as a whole. As we read in the *Ethics*, while we are necessary and truly useful to one-another in order to survive, in order to develop our reason we seem to need only those who are already reasonable. In this case, political common good either as the survival of the state or as the rules which follow from human law would be merely instrumental, functional in terms of preparing the ground on which reason may develop individually. Only once this mode of thinking has been adopted may we share it with other human beings. Again, it may seem paradoxical that the path to the common good is, ultimately, a lonely one.

More importantly, I think that Spinoza will not be satisfied with this solution because, according to him, men are always prone to passions and, being a part of nature, they are "necessarily passive". Consequently, social common good, as loving and knowing God together with our fellow men, would remain a virtual possibility, doomed never to see the light. Notwithstanding this, Spinoza does not give up the idea of a society where there is a true unity, of hearts and thoughts.

I suggest that the key problem lies in Spinoza's definition of the individual. Spinoza maintains that what constitutes the essence of any particular thing is the striving to persevere in its being, which is *desire*. What each one of us considers good depends on what we desire, so what is good is subjective. However, this is Spinoza's argument, we all have something in common, our reason, so, if only we could recognize this commonality and empower our reason, we would understand that there is only one supreme good and this is common to all of us. The problem here is that *common* is, precisely, what does not constitute the essence of any particular thing. In fact, Spinoza

says that while human beings are *similar* to one-another, they are not identical⁵⁸ and, because of that “the nature of one Desire must differ from the nature of the other as much as the affects from which each arises differ from one another”.⁵⁹ So, how could we all naturally desire, and hence consider good, something that is common to all of us?⁶⁰

It could be answered that, *as human beings*, our true desire is to acquire knowledge (which, in turn, means developing our reason). However, this would imply thinking that, as human beings, we all share one essence, the *essence of human nature*. In this case, for instance, our striving as individuals would be persevering in our being (so, to recall Spinoza’s example, if we are melancholic we should listen to music) and, as human beings, it would be persevering in the common being (to know and to love God). To rephrase: there seems to be two kinds of *conatus*: one of the individual (persevere in its being), and one of human nature (the *conatus intelligendi*). But these strivings are what constitute the essence of a given thing. The question turns out to be whether we should consider as modes having an essence the individuals or the human nature. This is a long-standing debate in Spinoza scholarship,⁶¹ which I cannot approach here. My point is, more modestly, to show that the ambiguity of Spinoza’s notion of common good ultimately depends on the tension between the definition of the individual, as having his own *conatus* (which means his own perception of what good and evil are) and the hypothetical existence of a human nature, whose essence is the striving to know that,

⁵⁸ See Alexandre MATHERON, *Les fondements d’une éthique de la similitude* in *Études sur Spinoza et les philosophes de l’âge classique*, ed. Pierre-François Moreau, ENS, Lyon 2011, pp. 665-680 and Hasana SHARP, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2011, p.130.

⁵⁹ Baruch SPINOZA, E3p57dem.

⁶⁰ I completely agree on how Beth LORD, *Outside of human nature: Spinoza on affective difference*, in this section of “InCircolo” (pp. 461-472) faces the same problem, though approaching it from another point of view. Lord argues that we all may form one single body, but only insofar each one of us communicates with the others. Like this (as the definition of the individual implies), we would share the same desire, the same striving. However, this agreement exists only among those who are rational: they agree in nature and so they are a part of human nature. By contrast, those who are overwhelmed by their passions disagree in nature, and this means that, as long as they are in this condition, they have to be considered outside of human nature. If Lord is right, thinking about a political common good (understood as a shared desire) is even harder; only the ‘sages’ may judge and decide what political common good is. The problem is far to be resolved thus. First, none of us is rational all the time. Second, we should imagine a society in which the ‘sages’ impose on those who are not their view on the common good. This imposition clearly resembles a form of ambition, more than a pedagogic intent, and ambition is precisely one of the main causes of conflict. A society build on ambition, as Spinoza argues, may exist, but it will not last.

⁶¹ For a sum see Cristopher MARTIN, *The Framework of Essences in Spinoza’s Ethics*, “British Journal for the History of Philosophy”, 16, 3, 2008, pp. 489-509.

being common to all human beings, indicates what should be considered good (and evil) by all of us.

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