

EXPLICATIO AND IMPERIUM: ON THE CONTINUITY BETWEEN THE ONTOLOGICAL CONDITION AND THE POLITICAL EXISTENCE

EXPLICATIO E IMPERIUM: SOBRE A CONTINUIDADE ENTRE A CONDIÇÃO ONTOLÓGICA E A EXISTÊNCIA POLÍTICA

Lisete Rodrigues*

lisete-rodrigues@campus.ul.pt

Taking the overlap between the ethical account of human existence and the political plane of action as a fundamental backdrop, this paper intends to show the ontological character of Spinoza's account of the fundamentals of the political existence. *Explicatio* and *imperium* are the two terms from which the argued continuity is perceived. We propose to do it by exploring the essential connection between Spinoza's ontological fundamentals and their expression as the category of political existence. In this sense, the human existence, taken ontologically as *explicatio*, as an enduring effort of unfoldment, narrative, expression of the natural force through which the human being begins to exist and tries to persevere in existing can be understood through its connexion with the political category of *imperium*, and, necessarily, vice versa.

Notwithstanding the diversity of concrete social and political life forms, the necessity of human existence inside any form of common law and among the common society of men is deduced from that same ontological condition. The notion of *imperium* sprouts from the same process of perseveration in existence of the collective body that is naturally constituted, accordingly with the elemental dictates of reason. This continuity between the ontological conditions of existence and the political reality itself can be a useful tool to understand Spinoza's contribution to think the political community, by introducing an immanentist thinking of its reality, definition and processuality, doing without any transcendent order of pre given ends.

Key Words: Spinoza, Ontology, Politics, Political Community, *Ex communi*

* CFUL-Centro de Filosofia da Universidade de Lisboa/FCT, Lisboa, Portugal.

Tomando como pano de fundo a relação de continuidade entre o plano ético de compreensão da existência humana e o plano político da existência e acção em comunidade, procuramos destacar o carácter ontológico da fundamentação espinosana da existência política. *Explicatio* e *imperium* são os dois termos a partir dos quais se percebe a continuidade entre a condição ontológica e a existência política. Essa continuidade é argumentada através da exploração da conexão essencial entre os fundamentos ontológicos do sistema espinosano e a sua expressão sob a noção de existência política. Neste sentido, e na medida em que a existência humana é considerada numa perspectiva ontológica enquanto *explicatio*, isto é, como um esforço persistente de desdobramento, de narrativa, e de expressão da força natural pela qual o ser humano começa a existir e se esforça por perseverar na existência, aquela pode ser compreendida na sua conexão com a categoria política de *imperium*, e, necessariamente, vice-versa.

Não obstante a diversidade de formas concretas que a vida social e política pode revestir, a necessidade da existência humana no seio de alguma forma de lei comum e enquanto elemento da sociedade comum de seres humanos é ela mesma deduzida daquela condição ontológica. A noção de *imperium* ganha forma a partir do mesmo processo de perseverança na existência, referindo-se agora à existência de um corpo colectivo, naturalmente constituído, segundo os ditames da razão. Esta continuidade entre as condições ontológicas da própria existência humana e a realidade política ela mesma, pode revelar-se útil para um entendimento do contributo do pensamento espinosano no que concerne a noção de comunidade política, ao possibilitar um pensamento imanentista da sua realidade, definição e processualidade, dispensando qualquer ordem transcendente de fins previamente dados.

Palavras-chave: Espinosa, Ontologia, Política, Comunidade Política, *Ex communi*

§1

It is almost impossible to give a faithful account of the continuity between the ontological condition and the political existence concerning Spinoza's thought without having recourse to his original terms. In order to grasp the connection involving the ontological fundamentals and their expression as a political existence, we need to consider the *Political Treatise's* original sentence whereby the concept of *imperium* is introduced: "*Hoc jus, quod multitudinis potentia definitur, imperium appellari solet.*"^[1]

1 Spinoza, B.; *Tractatus Politicus* (TP chapter/paragraph), 2/17. On the English translation, by Samuel Shirley, one can read: "This right, which is defined by the power of a people, is usually called sovereignty [...]". For the sake of our argument, we won't use any of the current translations for the original term 'imperium', such as: 'sovereignty' (SHIRLEY, 2002), 'souveraineté' (RAMOND, 2005), 'estado' (AURÉLIO, 2008), or 'pouvoir public' (APPUHN, 1964). We'll be

This sentence represents a crucial point on the process of passage from the state of nature to the state of society, manifest by the introduction of the concept of *imperium* as a consequence, an effect of a natural course of action, through which the human action experiences itself as the origin of a specific order of reality. Despite being an effect of human action, this order of collective existence is itself a part of Nature, expressing the same power by which every finite being starts existing and perseveres in existence, and is equally submitted to the laws or rules of Nature.^[2]

The critical aspect of this continuity is recognized through its negative: that is, the believe of many that think of men as an *imperium in imperio* (TP 2/6) < an empire within an empire >. On the contrary, the argued continuity of the elements that underlie both the state of nature and the state of society, softens this distinction, allowing its perception as two degrees of existence or reality, and a dialectical relation of passage from one to the other^[3]. Likewise, this continuity brings forth a political conception where the narrative of foundation as a possibility of escaping the natural order of being has no place.

It is therefore within the order of being, with its materials, conditions, and laws (taking things as they are and not from the stand of what we think they should be), that the notion of political existence can be understood in its natural fundamentals and intrinsic processuality^[4].

The *Political Treatise* starts where the *Ethics* ends and opens to a line of political consequences of its “metaphysics of power”^[5]. In this sense, it seems rather relevant to retrace the path that leads to the above quoted sentence: «*Hoc jus, quod multitudinis potentia definitur, imperium appellari solet.*», trying to bring forth the key elements for an understanding of the enactment of the political community.

using instead the broader notion of ‘political existence’ to give an account of the ontological ground of which ‘imperium’ is a specific field. In spite of that, there seem to be strong reasons to avoid translating ‘imperium’, on what we agree with other interpreters (ANDRADE, 2011).

- 2 TP 2/4: “By the right of Nature, then, I understand the laws or rules of Nature in accordance with which all things come to be; that is, the very power of Nature. So the natural right of Nature as a whole, and consequently the natural right of every individual, is coextensive with its power. Consequently, whatever each man does from the laws of his own nature, he does by the sovereign right of Nature, and he has as much right over Nature as his power extends.”
- 3 This dialectical aspect of the relation of passage from one kind of existence to another will be addressed below (§4).
- 4 TP 1/7: “Finally, since all men everywhere, whether barbarian or civilized, enter into relationships with one another and set up some kind of civil order, one should not look for the causes and natural foundations of the state <imperii> in the teachings of reason, but deduce them from the nature and condition of men in general.”
- 5 MOREAU, P.-F.; “Préface”, in BILLECOQ, 2009.

§2

The subject of this sentence is the power of the multitude, and its action consists on the definition of a right that is hold in common, by means of several human beings coming together and joining their forces, enacting a more powerful agency of right: “If two men come together and join forces, they have more power over Nature, and consequently more right, than either one alone; and the greater the number who form a union in this way, the more right they will together possess.” (TP 2/13).

The right of every single individual becomes the political aspect of its own essence, of that power or striving < conatus > “by which it (either alone or with others) does anything, or strives to do anything”^[6], that is, the power or striving to persevere in its being. In what concerns the human essence, this strive is said specifically as desire < cupiditas > (E3Aff.Def.1): “Desire is man’s very essence, insofar as it is conceived to be determined, from any given affection of it, to do something.”

That striving or endeavour to persevere in existence is a consequence of the ontological status of human being. Its position towards being is that of a relative being, dependent on another one to begin existing and to persevere in existence. Although itself essentially constituted with the same power that constitutes God, the fact the human essence does not involve its own existence, implies a condition of being in relation and being of relation. Contrarily, God’s absoluteness stems from the coincidence between its essence and existence, putting him as being itself, whereby its power or existence is one of absolute expression, without any strive to persevere in existence, hence necessarily without otherness or a relation whatsoever.

The human condition, accounted for either on an ethical perspective, either on a political one, is always and in all places the same: it is considered as *explicatio*, as an enduring effort of unfoldment, narrative, affirmation and expression of the natural force through which the human being begins to exist and tries to persevere in existence^[7].

6 Spinoza, B.; *Ethics*, book 3 – *Concerning The Origin And Nature Of The Emotions* -, Proposition 7, (E3P7).

7 E4Preface *in fine*: «Finally, by perfection in general I shall understand reality, as I have said; that is, the essence of anything whatsoever in as far as it exists and acts in a definite manner, without taking duration into account. For no individual thing can be said to be more perfect on the grounds that it has continued in existence over a greater period of time. The duration of things cannot be determined from their essence, for the essence of things involves no fixed and determinate period of time. But any thing whatsoever, whether it be more perfect or less perfect, will always be able to persist in existing with that same force whereby it begins to exist, so that in this respect all things are equal.” [my underline]

In line with that ontological status, the human being, conceived in its singularity, is constitutively dependent on another, implying otherness or alterity as its own regime of existence. This alterity allows us to understand that *explicatio* also as an exposure and an exposition towards the regime of otherness in which and from which its own narrative takes place.

The ethical account of human existence hence refers to a regime of alterity, through the understanding of which, the agonistic, sad and impotent disposition gets to be transformed with the same materials, that is, the human essence or desire, by means of the perception of the constituent role of otherness in one's own power or striving to persevere in its being.

It is within and from that same striving or effort to persevere in existence that the conditions of a political existence are developed. In the closing lines of the Preface to Ethics four, this ontological condition is recognized as a principle in face of which all things are equal (see quote on previous footnote). This equality becomes the corner stone for the understanding of the natural fundamentals of the political existence or *imperium*.

But since we are here discussing the universal power or right of Nature, we cannot acknowledge any difference between desires that are engendered in us by reason and those arising from other causes. For in both cases they are the effects of Nature, explicating < explicant > the natural force whereby man strives to persist in his own being. (TP 2/5) [my underline]

In this sense, when we read on the *Political Treatise* that the right of nature or power, in what concerns human beings, must be defined by any desire through which human beings are determined to act and try to persevere themselves, it becomes evident the political translation of that *explicatio* as the right politically instituted. That is to say, that even when we change from the singular existence, and an ethical account of it, to a collective body and its political expression, we keep referring to the human existence as constitutively in relation with another, and always from the perspective of an essential effort of unfoldment.

This effort of unfoldment is perceptible on the choice of words involved on the fundamentals of political existence. On one hand, there is the natural exposition of human beings to affects, said in the double sense of the original *obnoxius*: as exposition and as submission (TP 2/14). On the other hand, Spinoza clearly identifies the right of nature with the power < *potentia* > that constitutes the human essence, and therefore with *cupiditas* or desire (TP 2/5). On this same subchapter he also openly nullifies any qualitative distinc-

tion among *cupiditates*, since they all are equally nature effects *explicating* < *explicant* > *the natural force whereby man strives to persist in his own being*.

So the entire plane of determination, said by the economy of affects, either on an ethical account or on a political perspective, is grounded on this condition of an *explicatio* and thereby apprehensible by the human intellect. Although dealing with an equal ontological condition of numerous singular essences striving to persist in its own being, nevertheless this same condition hosts the political existence. How?

That ontological grounded equality allows a quantitative conception of this right or power, no matter if concerning the wise or the ignorant human being. The fundamental political premise is the enacting capacity of the act of joining together individual natures entirely alike and the composition of a more powerful collective singularity (E4P18S; TP 2/13).

The experience of composition of a new singularity stems from the conception of human existence as unfoldment, taken in their equal condition of exposure to otherness. This same composition underlies that initial action of a collective subject, that is the power of the multitude < *multitudinis potentia* >, through which the political meaning of that joining together is defined.

Imperium becomes therefore simultaneously the name of the political condition and principle of determination, evolving from that same metaphysics of power and as a way of strengthening the most adequate conditions for the affirmation of human essence.

§3

What makes then this principle of determination a political one?

The distinctive element of the political meaning of this joining together is the nature of the composition and the degree of *explicatio*, of unfoldment that is achieved. The political character of this order of existence lies on the specificity of the reconfiguration of the regime of otherness.

Prior to the passage to a state of society, there is a regime of individualized relations, dichotomized between the right of another and one owns' right, in a subtractive dialectic, that leads to the nullifying of the involved individual rights, by means of a relation that is one of power understood as domination: *potestas* instead of *imperium*. In this sense, the other singularity with whom I necessarily come across and who is a constituent agent of my own determination, hence, my affects, is the most of the time a natural enemy and a stranger < *hostis* > (TP 2/14).

The state of society emerges from the evidence of the inadequacy of such an order of hostile existence to accomplish the joyful affections through which the human existence enhances its power to persevere in its being^[8]. That same condition of being with others, among others and through otherness starts to be transformed by means of a decisive joining together in such terms that an order of a life in common and in accordance to a common judgment is formed. (TP 2/15).

Spinoza's expression to this change of regime of otherness is *ex communi: ex communi omnium sententia vivere* (TP 2/15) < live in accordance with the common judgment of all >; *ex communi consensu* (TP 2/16,17) < from a common agreement >; *ex communi decreto vel consensu* (TP 2/19) < the common decree or agreement >; *ex communi imperii jure* (TP 2/19). These are all present on the decisive subchapters concerning the introduction of *imperium*.

Ex communi is thence the fundamental preposition of any political instauration, constituency or political line of action as such. It becomes the key operator of the passage from a state for the most part hostile to the other (keeping the Latin ambiguity of *hostis* both as enemy and as stranger or foreigner), to one of hospitality. The condition of this particular way of joining together and accomplishing by a certain composition a political existence, relies on the intuition of that equality regarding the effort of unfoldment, and its position as the immanent source of any political process.

This immanency is expressed by the preposition *ex*, which can be translated as: "out of, from; by reason of; according to; because of, as a result of" and associates both a meaning of origin, of initial point of a given move, of the extrinsic direction of it, as well of conformity between the initial point and the subsequent one, and finally, also means the material from which anything is produced. The preposition *ex* concentrates all the aspects of the productive action, and its joining together with the adjective 'common' referred to political enactments and to the political existence itself, is rather relevant to the point we're trying to make here. In fact, Spinoza applies that

8 This perception of the inadequacy of a given order of existence implies therefore a preparatory process from which a critical apprehension of the human endeavour and effort of affirmation is driven. From here follows the difficulty regarding the precedence between the existent order and the capacity to put forward a definition of a different kind of existence, by means of a rational deduction of the positive elements for that vital unfoldment. Alexandre Matheron refers precisely this mutual dependence between the activity of reason and its empirical conditions, as the 'complete cycle of rational life': "knowing in order to better organize the world, in order to know better still." in MATHERON, A.; 1988: 253 (reference from DEBRABANDER; 2007:43-44.).

genetic-operative bond to the understanding of the political enactment: that is, the agent and the process of fabrication of a certain *imperium* (using here Spinoza's expression of the 'imperii fabricam'- TP 7/26) expresses the unity among the definition and the conditions of affirmation of the defined.

The onto-political category of the *ex communi* is thence the expression of that unity as well as of the possibility of a political consequence for the ethical process that culminates on *Ethics V*.

Besides this onto-political aspect, this expression can be understood on a another tone, evoking the much more canonical one of 'excommunicatio'. The latter refers to someone's compulsory expulsion from a communion or a community of faith, revealing, even if in a negative way, by this possibility of expulsion and proscription a conception of collective existence that is one of belonging to an identitary common principle, such as a religious belief, ethnicity, nationality. On the particular case of the excommunication, it refers solely to the religious element and to the external moral decrees from where a particular individual can be judged.

Despite their difference, they share a common root: 'ex+communis'. In fact, Spinoza's use of the preposition *ex communi* seems to interpellate this identitary conception of collective existence, and reverse its premises. The political existence as something defined through the enacting capacity of a more powerful power < potentia > is permanently said on an immanent relation between those who constitute the given political community and the power of the political community itself. From here follows an immanentist conception of community, whose particular aspects are historically diversified. Besides the waning of an identitary buttress, to which every individual is at any time subordinated, as well the possibility of any community whatsoever, this conception accommodates existence itself as a valid political criteria, of which *ex communi* can be a valid name.

That nature of the emancipatory process that culminates on the final propositions of *Ethics V*, whereby one can experience himself under the perspective of *causa in se* and *per se*, has here a political translation, both on what concerns the agent of politics and on what refers to the nature of its effects. So, where we previously had the definition of virtue as:

By *virtue* and *power* I mean the same thing; that is (Pr. 7, III), virtue, insofar as it is related to man, is man's very essence, or nature, insofar as he has power to bring about that which can be understood solely through the laws of his own nature < ipsius naturae leges intelligere >. (E4def.8)

that culminated as ‘acquiescentia in se ipso’ (E3def.aff. 25) as “a joy born of the fact that a man considers himself and his own power of acting.» < se ipsum suamque agendi potentiam contemplatur >; we now have the same ontological ground translated from the collective perspective of the *ex communi explicatio* that expresses itself as the founding and fundamental ‘sui juris’. *Ex communi* is then not only the name of the instituent political act, but also of the condition, even if in multiple structures, of the reality of the political existence, or the *imperium*.

The passage from the state of nature to the state of society, as a change on the regime of otherness, is well put through the difference between (i) an existence where even though one is in control of his own power or right of nature < sui juris >, it lasts only as long as he can escape < *cavere* > the oppression that follows the encounter with someone more powerful < ab alio opprimatur >; and (ii) a different existence where that encounter takes place as visiting, approaching or assembling. It is under this first condition of hospitality that the subsequent joining of forces can be materialized as a common right and as a collective existence led *as if* by one mind < una veluti mente ducuntur > (TP 2/16).

§4

As we’ve seen on our leading quote, *imperium* can be read as the name of that common right, that is, of that line of action *ex communi* and also of the specific nature of its effects. This materialization of a political existence as if < veluti > it was a single mind allows us to understand the concept of *imperium* on a permanent twofold meaning. First, as the name of the political instauration, or constituency, said by the defining act of an *explicatio ex communi*, regardless the different concrete forms of social and political orders. Secondly, as the name of that same concrete order of command or government of the power of the multitude.

The continuity between the so called state of nature and the state of society is therefore itself a necessary consequence of the connection that puts the ontological condition of the political agent as an absolute criteria of any political reality whatsoever.

On the other hand, the dialectical relation between the so called state of nature and the state of society captures the intrinsic tension of any plane of existence, from which sprouts the constituent act of political affirmation and unfoldment, here designated as *imperium* and as an affirmative

response that somehow overcomes the subtractive regime of otherness. The political definition, as we've tried to put it, is therefore not only this change of the regime of otherness (from a subtractive to an affirmative one), but the power to strive for the unfoldment and reality of the political existence itself.

In this context, the degree of *explicatio* involved on a concrete form of *imperium*, is therefore decided by the degree of reality that the constituent regime of otherness can achieve, decided by the permanent relation of necessity between the *ex communi explicatio* and the command, the two inseparable aspects of *imperium* itself.

This permanent twofold character of *imperium* is also the condition of its eternity, that is, of the encounter between its material principle and the operative plane of existence. That dialectical relation is imported to the political state, and is translated on the rules for political commandment, with the specific *imperium* fundamentals always kept in mind. In this sense, on the *Political Treatise*, we can see that every analysis of a concrete form of *imperium* consists first on laying down its fundamentals and secondly on deducing the best set of rules to achieve an adequate relation < ratio > between the multiple powers that institute, sustain and depend on the created totality.

This means that if the material base of both *imperium's* definition and enactment, is the *ex communi* existence, that is *from or according or because of the common_*, *the joint* , *or the general_* –, than the *eternity* of a given *imperium* is said on the extent of the adequate *explicatio* or affirmation of the nature of that common power (as a possible translation of that *ex communi*) contained on its practical definition.

The entire reflection presented on the *Political Treatise* can thence be read as a theoretical effort to demonstrate what are the genetic-operative implications of the main concrete forms of *imperium*, taking to the limit the process of separation of that two constitutive aspects: “institueny” and command.

Having present the above mentioned continuity between state of nature and state of society, or between the ontological ground of any existence and the political existence itself, it can be deduced the inextricability of those two aspects. At this light, we can perceive a slight hierarchical relation among institueny and command. The second one is always contained on the first one, meaning that the practical horizon of command should attend, negatively, to the internal restrictions involved on its genetic institueny, and positively, to the collective effort of narrative and unfoldment.

The adequate relation between those two aspects is therefore the condition for an eternal form of political existence, without a temporal meaning, instead, as the expression of a kind of becoming existence, by containing in its essence its material principle, and by becoming aware of the process of political definition. Accordingly, the adequacy between those two inseparable aspects of the political existence, has to be expressed permanently on the reality or perfection of the collective existence. Keeping that fundamental continuity, the level of the collective body's effort of unfoldment has its translation on the plane of the collective dispositive of affects.

The *ex communi* nature of the instituent agent finds on the collective dispositive of affects its truthful translation, as the expression of the political plane of determination, of affection of that collective essence, *as if* it was driven by only one mind. The distance and relation of those two aspects (institueny and command) configures then a less powerful *imperium*, and even its dissolution and, on the exact opposition, their proximity or coincidence configures an *imperium absolutum*.

From here easily follows the deduction that “if there is such a thing as absolute *imperium*, it is really that which is held by the people as a whole”. (TP, 8/3).

The material base of both these definition and enactment, said by the *ex communi* – *from or according or because of the common, the joint or the general* - that we've seen emerging as a response to the subtractive regime of otherness, is the token of its truthfulness and of its contrary (TP 8/6).

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