From the King's Two Bodies to the People's Two Bodies: Spinoza on the Body Politic

Marin Terpstra

Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

m.terpstra@ftr.ru.nl

Abstract

In this article, using Spinoza's treatment of the image of the political body, I aim to show what happens to the concept of a healthy commonwealth linked to a monarchist model of political order when transformed into a new context: the emergence of a democratic political order. The traditional representation of the body politic becomes problematic when people, understood as individual natural bodies, are taken as the starting point in political theory. Spinoza's understanding of the composite body, and the assumption that each body is composed, raises the question of the stability or instability of this composition. This has implications for the way one looks at the political order's conditions of possibility, I argue, and at the same time reveals the imaginary nature of the political body.

Keywords

political bodies – natural bodies – monarchy – democracy – (in)stability of political order – imagination

1 Introduction

What changes in the image of the “body politic” when that image is used in a context different to its original environment, no longer in a monarchy, but in a nascent democracy? After all, images, ideas, and words can survive even if the context in which they were created has changed or even disappeared altogether. In this contribution, I attempt to answer this question by giving an accurate reading of how Spinoza uses the idea of the political body. I show that Spinoza

begins to tinker with this imagery and eventually problematizes it. As Miguel Vatter made clear, in the Renaissance and especially in Machiavelli's case, a concept of state (*stato*) emerges that breaks free from class society, especially from the rule of certain classes, and instead focuses on a concept of "the political unity of people" as the objective of government.¹ The next step is the idea of a people doing the governing themselves, an idea that we see emerging in Spinoza, then later in Rousseau and Sieyès. Looking at how Spinoza reflects the image of the political body can give us some insights into the mirrored changing political dynamics and configurations which formed the context for his work.

Roughly speaking, the political body had been used in three ways, all of which are narrowly linked to monarchy: (1) as a normative model of a social and political order, in which the king is the head (and therefore also part of the political body); (2) as the body of the person representing the political community, in which the king embodies the community;² and (3) as an object of care and management, in which the king acts as a physician (coming from the outside) to protect the political body from illness and to guard its health.³ In a democracy, which means essentially the self-government of the people by the people, the idea of the political body can no longer be used in any of these ways; it may even lose its meaning and importance altogether. In this transformation, it becomes difficult to see the image of "political body" as anything other than merely a product of imagination.

I focus on the interpretation of the body image as a sociological narrative that says that different parts put together form a whole in which all parts are needed and all have a role.⁴ The sociological narrative is a disciplinary model insofar as it gives all parts a task from which they cannot deviate; these tasks should not be confused.⁵ A healthy body is a body in which all organs work

1 Miguel Vatter, "Republics Are a Species of State: Machiavelli and the Genealogy of the Modern State," in *Social Research*, 81 (2014), 217-241, at 230.

2 See Ernst Kantorowicz's classic study, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ, 1957), whose title I used for my contribution.

3 There is variation in the use of this image; see Vasileios Syros, "Galenic Medicine and Social Stability in Early Modern Florence and the Islamic Empires," *Journal of Early Modern History*, 17 (2013), 161-213.

4 See the methodological introduction in Albrecht Koschorke, Susanne Lüdemann, Thomas Frank and Ethel Matala de Mazza, *Der fiktive Staat. Konstruktion des politischen Körpers in der Geschichte Europas* (Frankfurt am Main, 2007), 55-68. Much of what in this book is presented as the result of theories of the last decades can already be detected *in nuce* in Spinoza's deconstruction of the image of the body politic.

5 A good example of this way of thinking is a quote from a work by Abū'l-Fazl: "A special responsibility of the ruler is thus to establish and differentiate the parts of the political com-

well together and benefit the whole. Illness and decay, and ultimately death occur when the bodily parts no longer work properly or when they work against each other. Illness is the decline into the state of nature, health is the merging of people into a peaceful and prosperous whole: the civil state. This aligns with the general notion that the design and instrumentalization of bodies are key elements in every culture: measures to prevent disease, exercises in the customs and rituals of a society, markings referring to rank, identity, and so on. In short, the transformation of the natural body into a social or cultural body is the condition for the possibility of the emergence of a political or mystical body, one in which the attributes and movements of human bodies merge with collective movements. The political body is socially constructed, a corporation, or an embodiment.

The image of the body politic appeared in history as soon as resemblances were identified between the organization and physical health of a natural body (usually that of a human being) and the organization and health of a political community. The comparison hinges on the harmony and organization of the various functions and roles in the greater system of the body. A well-known example of this comparison is Plato's division of man and state into three layers: a stomach (*eros*), a heart (*thymos*), and a head (*logos*); with their corollaries in the classes of a society, respectively: *epithymetikon* producing and seeking pleasure; *thymoeides* signaling obedience to the directions of the *logistikon*, who gently rule through the love of learning. Subsequently, the idea emerged, especially in medieval political theology, that a living person could function as the embodiment or representation of a unity of a higher order: in the case of a king, we can speak of his natural body and his political body. The political or mystical body elevates the status of the physical person to one that is quasi-divine or even angelic, a status that is usually expressed in the form of ceremony and symbols. Finally, we encounter the idea that where a group of people comes together in a political community, their natural bodies and spirits form a composite body. The body is composed of organs, parts, or limbs, or can be divided into different moods or humors.

This idea changed character once the first democratic or nation-state theories entered the stage. At times, we encounter a headless body, identical to the

munity, entrust his subjects with specific functions, put each of these in its proper place, and guard against the excessive growth of any part of the state. Societal disorder occurs when any one part grows to dominate the others and disturb the equilibrium of the body politic. One of the cardinal features of the authentic ruler lies in his very ability to recognize and treat the ailments afflicting the body politic." (Quoted from Syros, "Galenic Medicine and Social Stability," 195.)

collection of citizens.⁶ Abraham Bosse's well-known image for the frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* merges three aspects into one unified whole: (1) the union of the citizens is depicted as one body, (2) which is represented by the sovereign, who (3) appears as the patron of a peaceful and prosperous – and therefore healthy – society. Exactly how seriously Hobbes took this imagery in the *Leviathan* is another question. The idea of a union of the citizens in the (political) body of the monarch, and the concomitant idea that any break from this association can be interpreted as a phenomenon of disease leading to civil war – meaning the collapse of this artificial body – indicates that this image is more than mere allegorical play.⁷

2 Spinoza and the *Body Politic*

Spinoza's contributions to our understanding of the image of the body politic have been rather overlooked by historians, perhaps eclipsed by Hobbes and his *Leviathan*.⁸ Perhaps this is also due to the fact that Spinoza only occasionally draws on the ideas associated with the image. The word *corpus* was at the time often used in a neutral, general sense, referring to a more or less coherent whole: of laws, of institutions, of people, of classes. Examples of this general usage of the term can also be found in Spinoza's *Tractatus Politicus*.⁹ However, things aren't quite as neutral when the political body and the human body become connected, especially in organicist, corporatist, and monarchist conceptions of the state. As will be shown later on, in this context the concept of the political body is problematic for Spinoza, especially because he tends to understand political regimes in the light of a more liberal and democratic view

6 There is abundant literature available on this image; I primarily refer to Horst Bredekamp, *Thomas Hobbes. Der Leviathan. Das Urbild des modernen Staates und seine Gegenbilder. 1651-2001*, 4th ed. (Berlin, 2012); Dario Gamboni, "Composing the Body Politic. Composite Images and Political Representation, 1651-2004," in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, eds., *Making Things Public. Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge, MA, London, 2005), 162-195.

7 The unity of the state is described in chapter 17 of the *Leviathan*; the diseases in chapter 29.

8 Spinoza is missing in several compilation works with which I am familiar: David George Hale, *The Body Politic. A Political Metaphor in Renaissance English Literature* (The Hague, 1971); Gerhard Dohrn-van Rossum, "Organ, Organismus, Organisation, politischer Körper" (1-v1), in Otto Brunner, Werner Conze and Reinhart Koselleck, eds., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. 4 (Stuttgart, 1978), 520-569; and Koschorke et al., *Der fiktive Staat*.

9 For example, "imperii autem integrum corpus Civitas" (3.1), "civitatis corpus" (6.19), and "imperii corpus" (9.14), in Spinoza, *Complete Works*, ed. Michael L. Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley, (Indianapolis, IN, 2002), 689, 704, and 746.

on society.¹⁰ It seems then that a simple transference of the idea of the two bodies from the king to the people does not speak for itself. A comparison between human and political body also becomes less tenable when all people become “similar,” all being citizens, instead of clustered into different classes with different functions. So why continue using the image of the body politic at all?

It is not altogether clear whether Spinoza takes the metaphor of the political body seriously and whether it is a building block of his own political philosophy. He often simply perceives it as an element in the collective imagination of the people he is describing, by which he means a form of mental confusion. The same can be said for his views on moral ideas, which “are nothing but modes of thinking” that “indicate nothing positive in things,” but which still need to be retained, as they can be useful in modeling human life and society.¹¹ We find this same tendency in Spinoza’s hermeneutics of the Bible. Here he carefully examines the logic inherent in the imagination of “the old people,” on the basis of the letter of the text. Evidently, it is not always clear what Spinoza himself considers “the truth,” i.e., what can reasonably be assumed. The way people imagine the regime they enact is one thing, but the enactment itself is another.¹² Whether people transfer their right to God or “resolve to live only by the dictates of reason,” in the end it is the people who decide by their operations. And what they do can be something different from what they believe themselves to be doing. This same diagnosis can, for example, be found in Spinoza’s analysis of the system of monarchy, as will be seen in section 8 below. There is reason to suspect that Spinoza considered the political body itself to be an imaginary construction that leads to a confused, but not inevitably harmful, understanding of the state.

Spinoza put an end to the merging of the three aspects as they appear in Hobbes’s political thinking (as mentioned in the introduction), and instead he discusses them as separate issues. He sharply distinguishes between (a) the composition of the political body, (b) the monarchic interpretation of the political body, and (c) the health of the political body made up of citizens. These three aspects can be found in different parts in the *Tractatus Politicus*: a

10 Laurent Bove, *La stratégie du conatus. Affirmation et résistance chez Spinoza* (Paris, 1996), esp. 16–17, 97, and 241–264.

11 See the Preface of Book IV of the *Ethica*, *Complete Works*, 321–322.

12 Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 19.6: “magis mente, quam opera” in *Complete Works*, 559: “notional rather than practical.” In Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel’s translation (*Theological-Political Treatise. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2007), 240), the translation reads: “they could only do this in intention rather than reality.”

general and sketchy idea emerges of a political community as a (composite) body guided, as it were, by one spirit (chapter 3); elsewhere the doctrine of the two bodies of the king is addressed (chapter 7); and the deployment of the medical representation of the political body (chapter 5 and especially chapter 10). I will here focus on this treatise except for my sections 5 and 6 on the “composite body,” where I will refer instead to *Ethica* and *Letter 32*.¹³ That Spinoza does not discuss these aspects in conjunction is significant. A connection between the three themes remains, however, residing in Spinoza's focus on the democratic foundation of society, and hence the idea of a people constituting themselves into a collective order. The question is whether Spinoza's approach allows the traditional metaphor of the king's two bodies to reemerge as two bodies of the people.

Whether a political community, like a human being, can be perceived as a (composite) body – a social or political body – has long been a point of discussion among Spinoza experts. Spinoza is not sufficiently clear in his writings, and relevant statements have not been developed sufficiently to provide a definitive answer on Spinoza's judgement on this.¹⁴ Central to this debate are the questions of whether the laws that apply to the human body can also apply to a social context, or whether Spinoza does recognize laws for the history of human relationships distinct from the natural laws. In chapter 4 of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, he states that human laws are decisions made by people to govern people, but that these laws can only be effective if they cohere with the laws of (human) nature. Hence, although Spinoza acknowledges the existence of man-made constructions in this world, he never gives us the impression he believes there are other effective types of law acting in unison with the laws of nature. Viewed from today's perspective, we might say that, in the seventeenth century, society had not yet fully distinguished itself from nature as an object of science.¹⁵ However, it must have been clear to Spinoza that differences in the constituent parts of the two types of body implied functional

13 In the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* the metaphor can hardly be found. The only exception is in chapter 3, where Spinoza depicts the establishment of a commonwealth as a concentration of “the strength of all its members into one body, as it were, a social body” (“omnium vires ad unum quasi corpus, nempe societatis, redigere”); *Complete Works*, 418. Martin D. Yaffe concludes that for Spinoza, society can be reduced to a management of bodies, which is a purely physical affair: “Body and the Body Politic in Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*,” in Paul J. Bagley, ed., *Piety, Peace, and the Freedom to Philosophize* (Dordrecht–Boston, MA–London, 1999), 159–181.

14 An overview is given by Nancy K. Levene in *Spinoza's Revelation. Religion, Democracy, and Reason* (Cambridge, 2004), 139–142, where she refers to “social bodies.”

15 See Niklas Luhmann, “Wie ist soziale Ordnung möglich?,” in *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt am Main, 1981), 195–285.

differences: on the one hand we have limbs, organs, body parts, humors, and so on, and on the other hand, we have people's distinct actions, characters, and ambitions.¹⁶ In addition, he would not have dared to proclaim that the arrangement of a human body is monarchic, aristocratic, or democratic in nature. In my view, the tangential role of the body politic metaphor in his work is sufficient proof that Spinoza was fully aware of these differences. The only area of comparison for which he seems to allow is that both the human body and the political body are subject to the same fundamental laws of nature: their survival depends on their capacity (*potentia*) to realize and sustain themselves in the world. This applies to all forms of existence (modes) in – or of – nature, so naturally applies also for humans as well as the whole of society. As to the wider analogy of the two bodies, nowhere is Spinoza tempted to accept the comparison or to subsequently see one individual as the embodiment of that great body.

Some scholars have already explored Spinoza's democratic reformulation of the political body. In a not yet published paper, Julie Henry carefully demonstrates how Spinoza interprets the representation of the political body in a way that is consistent with his vision of a political community constituted by a free people.¹⁷ Etienne Balibar, among others, has made it clear that Spinoza distinguishes himself from Machiavelli and Hobbes – indebted for much though he is to each of them – by shifting attention from the ideas of an absolute sovereign, a social contract, and the representation of the community as a political body, to the dynamic forces of the multitude that lead to – or may lead to – a stable political community. The individuals unite into a state that becomes itself something like an individual subject with the same desire for self-preservation.¹⁸

3 The Connection of Natural and Political Bodies

To be clear, Spinoza never speaks of “the people's two bodies” in the way that Kantorowicz speaks of the king's two bodies. The king possesses a natural body, just like any other human, and as such has wishes and interests

16 New ideas about the human body in Renaissance and early modern medicine had already given rise to doubts about the usefulness of this analogy; see Dohrn-van Rossum, “Organ, Organismus, Organisation, politischer Körper,” 549–550.

17 See Julie Henry, “The Body Politic in Spinoza's Political Treatise. Maintaining its Form with Regard to Freedom of Judgement,” <www.academia.edu/5410806/The_body_politic_in_Spinozas_Political_Treatise_Maintaining_its_form_with_regard_with_freedom_of_judgment>, last accessed 4 March 2020.

18 Etienne Balibar, *Spinoza et la politique* (Paris, 1985), 78–86.

associated with his own physical existence. Next to this natural body, the king also has a political body, or perhaps it could even be said that the king *is* a political body. The political community acts in, and through, the king: what the king does, the state does. In fact, this same doctrine applies to every person who performs a public function and coincides with that function for a period of time. This understanding of the political body therefore presupposes that the action of a political community is embodied in a person, and that this person must transform himself into a public person. The representation of the political body is linked to a whole *mise-en-scène* that conceals the king's natural body so that the audience sees the king only as a public person: the embodiment of the community, or the political body. In that sense, it is difficult to imagine how this doctrine could be transferred from monarchy to democracy.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Spinoza refers still to the political body in his thoughts on this transition. For Spinoza, the political body is primarily a composite body, a form of existence in nature that is just as much subject to the laws of origin, flowering, and decay as all other natural things. This line of thinking carries with it a certain medicalization of the political body, with an emphasis on health and disease, not on a political theology of the elevation of people into a sacred dimension. Nevertheless, Spinoza remains indebted in some respects to the ideas contained in the doctrine of the two bodies of the king.

Spinoza's approach, which I shall illustrate in the following sections of this paper, can be clarified even further if we compare it to the legal concepts that make up the political theology of the political body. As Kantorowicz has shown, lawyers in the Middle Ages and the early modern period primarily used the political body imagery to demarcate the legal competences of authorities in the church and (nascent) state, and to regulate their relations, as well as those between the authorities and their subjects. In addition, the image is a normative model that calls on all groups within a state, each with its own function, to work together in harmony, and – above all – not to believe that one organ or limb is more important than any other. In order to achieve this, the body must be guided by its head – the seat of the mind – to impart the discipline and virtue needed for participating in society and spiritual salvation. Similarly, a society of people can only function if every person performs his duties and is subordinate to the leadership of the head of state.²⁰ The image represents a sociological, normative, and diagnostic model of the health of a community or society. In medieval political theology, as Kantorowicz shows, health or

19 However, the image of the people as a mystical body can also be found in medieval political theology; see, for example, Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 210.

20 See esp. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 193–272 (chapter 5).

wellbeing is associated with grace. Extrapolating upon this idea of a healthy society, it seems that the political body – possessed of collective regenerative powers not given to the individual – could have eternal life, or could, at the very least, participate in a kind of eternity. In Spinoza's thoughts, we see that the political body, along with people's participation in the political body, allows for a transcendence above the transience of nature. Although he rephrases this idea in terms of *potentia*, in the sense that the increase of power enhances people's perseverance, the political community has not yet lost its quasi-divine meaning, even for Spinoza. Not only is all power derived from the power of God or nature, but the extension of existence also depends on how much a body acts according to its own nature.²¹ A fuller elaboration on Spinoza's theology is beyond the scope of this present paper. Let us instead examine the parts of Spinoza's texts relevant to the body politic.

4 A Political Body as if Guided by One Mind

This theological background, the longing for participation in eternity, might be the reason why Spinoza to some extent sticks to the image of a political body. And yet, the focus on nature and democracy problematizes this image. An understanding of the political body as a composite anatomy differs from seeing in the political body a divine reflection of unity or harmony. Spinoza's ideas have become much more secular. If people work cooperatively and are like-minded, they can be more powerful together than each would be on their own; the addition of power, creating the power of the multitude, offers people more control over the natural conditions of life, especially when this power is placed in the hands of effective government.²² People are inclined to proceed this way because individually, each person, isolated and unprotected, has a right to everything, but most of the time lacks the power to enforce this right. In the end, individuals are powerless to protect themselves. Fear (or other emotions) – and perhaps some common sense – drives people together in the hope that the establishment of common rights will protect them. In short, their composition into a collective body is directed by human motivation. This means that this

21 By 'nature' Spinoza not only means the physical condition of a human, but also the idea of the essence of a human being in God's mind, that is, what a human would be if he could fully live according to his capabilities. See *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 16.2 in *Complete Works*, 527; E2P7-9, *Complete Works*, 247-249. I will use the standard reference to the *Ethica*, in this case the second book of the *Ethica*, Propositions 7-9. In what follows, D stands for Definition, S for Scholium, L for Lemma.

22 *Tractatus Politicus*, 2.13 and 2.16-17 in *Complete Works*, 686-687.

composition is not self-evident, since people often get swept away by the emotions that can result in conflict.²³ From the perspective of nature as a whole, and the nature of individuals in particular, the formation of a political community is a constant challenge, unlikely ever to produce a community that could ever act with the same unity of purpose as a body, in the same way that the limbs of a body work together. Importantly, there is no mention in Spinoza of a social contract to settle things. Nothing is settled, because the existence of a political body, of people acting together under a communal right, depends entirely on their mental state. In the second section of the third chapter in the *Tractatus Politicus*, which is devoted to the foundation of a political community, we read:

... the right of the state or of the sovereign is nothing more than the right of Nature itself and is determined by the power not of each individual but of a people which is guided as if [*veluti*] by one mind. That is to say, just as each individual in the natural state has as much right as the power he possesses, the same is true of the body and mind of the entire state.²⁴

In this passage, the “one mind” contrasts with the focus on society as a mere body, as found in the earlier quote from the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (note 13). This notion of “one mind” seems to echo Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians (12:12–26), which involves the image of the political community as a spirited body. First found in Tacitus, this image was well known at the time, and Paul adapts it to a model of the Christian community, analogous to the body of Christ led by the spirit of Christ, which is love.²⁵ But Spinoza is not talking about a mystical body – he immediately rephrases the notion of the “one mind” in terms of *potentia*, which negates the Christian meaning. He draws a comparison between the individual who, in his natural state, has the mental and physical abilities necessary to persist in existence (*potentia*), and the state that is equally dependent on mental and physical abilities in order to continue to exist (which Spinoza calls the *potentia multitudinis*).²⁶ Still, Spinoza never equates statehood with personhood, but rather points out that the units of body and mind in both are bound by the same natural conditions. In

23 Ibid., 2.14, 686.

24 Ibid., 3.2, 690.

25 Koschorke et al., *Der fiktive Staat*, 71–77.

26 Marin Terpstra, “What does Spinoza mean by ‘*potentia multitudinis*’?”, in Etienne Balibar, Helmut Seidel and Manfred Walther, eds., *Freiheit und Notwendigkeit. Ethische und politische Aspekte bei Spinoza und in der Geschichte des (Anti-)Spinozismus* (Würzburg, 1994), 85–98.

both cases, the urge to persist in existence also depends on the joining of forces within these units. Even the individual is not always guided by one mind – this is only the case when he uses his reason and directs his emotions towards his own interests. The fourth part of *Ethica* describes on what conditions a human being torn apart by his passions becomes and remains a reasonable human being who acts according to his own nature; right in the middle of that part (the scholia of proposition 37), religion and the state appear as important steps in that transition. But when it comes to the state, it seems even less obvious that mental faculties converge on the same idea. For such a political body to be viable, it must first appear that it is led by one spirit, or that all members of this political body are united in the same imaginary space.²⁷

Spinoza refers to a common and traditional idea and then reformulates it in terms of his naturalistic idiom and his ideas on what is expedient for the individual and collective life of people. He must, however, resolve one problem associated with this concept: how to make credible the required legal competence of this body politic or collective entity, especially when such an entity is traditionally only operational when embodied by a natural person, a king? How should this unified legal competence find expression for a political elite, or a council made up of citizens? The phrases *veluti* or *quasi* (as if) are clues to understanding the problem, given our current view that only real, natural persons – and not even all persons – are legally competent. Furthermore, it will appear that Spinoza sees the political body primarily as the joint forces of a people, of all citizens. The state is “the practical solution to a simply technical problem of how to control ‘spirits’ by means of the bodies at one’s disposal.”²⁸ Specifically, he tries to show how people, starting from the natural state, can end up in a state in which they jointly create one body with its own mind focused on the same idea. The people thus exist on two corporeal levels: as individuals they exist as a multitude and variety of natural bodies, and collectively they exist as a fictional, political body that arises when these bodies come together in unison, guided by one spirit. Spinoza’s major contribution to this debate is that this collective existence is not self-evident, and yet is necessary if people want to live a good life. In his thinking, the natural bodies are paramount and those who do not take this into account can never design or manage a political body that will have any chance of survival. After all:

27 Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings. Spinoza, Past and Present* (London–New York, 1999).

28 Yaffe, “Body and the Body Politic,” 180.

... nature creates individuals, not nations, and it is only difference of language, of laws, and of established customs that divides individuals into nations. And only the last two, laws and customs, can be the source of the particular character, the particular mode of life, the particular set of attitudes that signalise each nation.²⁹

5 The Idea of the Composite Body

The comparison between the human body and the political body is not the same as one between a natural being that exists as a unity and an artificial being composed of a multitude and diversity of people, both physically and mentally. In order to understand the (one) mind, Spinoza writes, we first have to understand what a body is. In fact, the human body is also a composite body: a body that is itself composed of smaller bodies.³⁰ And that to infinity – Spinoza does not seem to posit a smallest unit. The primal forces of the physical sphere (or the attribute ‘extension,’ which is one aspect of the one and only substance that he allows for)³¹ are movement and rest, in various degrees. In short, both bodies – human and political – are composite bodies and will continue to exist as long as the composition itself is stable and remains that way.

When a number of bodies of the same or different magnitude form close contact with one another through the pressure of the other bodies upon them, or if they are moving at the same or different rates of speed so as to preserve an unvarying relation of movement among themselves, these bodies are said to be united with one another and all together to form one body or individual thing, which is distinguished from other things through this union of bodies.³²

The postulates at the end of this appendix of proposition 13 confirm that all bodies are composite bodies. Body parts are not the same and can be very different. Spinoza expresses this rather mechanically in terms of differences in – and gradations of – hardness, softness, and fluidity. Think of animals in terms of the skeleton, the muscles, and the blood; think of a landscape in terms of

²⁹ *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 17.26 in *Complete Works*, 548.

³⁰ We find all of this in an appendix of proposition 13 of the second part of the *Ethica*; *Complete Works*, 251–255.

³¹ E2D1: “By ‘body’ I understand a mode that expresses in a definite and determinate way God’s essence insofar as he is considered as an extended thing”; *Complete Works*, 244.

³² E2P13S+D; *Complete Works*, 253.

rocks, mud, and rivers – but Spinoza is not that specific here. Bodies are subject to environmental influences that can change their composition, just as, conversely, these bodies can change the composition of their environment. Moreover, bodies do not survive if they do not feed on bodies from the environment: the life of a body needs constant recovery. The natural tendency to entropy can be countered by the organism itself, as long as it organizes itself in an adequate way.³³ Spinoza therefore decides on a *conditional* (and therefore not substantial) existence of bodies:

... the individual thing so composed retains its own nature, whether as a whole it is moving or at rest, and in whatever direction it moves, *provided* that each constituent part retains its own motion and continues to communicate this motion to the other parts.³⁴

The only thing that seems able to retain its own character eternally, despite the constant changes that take place within it, the only thing that forms a sort of self-ordering and dynamic but everlasting system, is nature as a whole:

We thus see how a composite individual can be affected in many ways and yet preserve its nature. [...] If we thus continue to infinity, we shall readily conceive the whole of Nature as one individual whose parts – that is, all the constituent bodies – vary in infinite ways without any change in the individual as a whole.³⁵

From the smallest constituent parts to the all-encompassing whole, we only see composite bodies. What is striking about this series, which as such does not deviate from the traditional representation, is that it remains within the scope of natural phenomena. Here Spinoza does not refer to a political body as an intermediate stage. Does this mean that Spinoza sees no place for the state in the natural order, or, conversely, that to him the state is only one of the possible

33 Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza. Unfolding the Latent Processes of His Reasoning* [1934] (Cambridge, MA, 1962), Part II, 64-70; the author believes that Spinoza largely takes over the representation of bodies which can be traced back to Aristotle, except for the idea that bodies themselves are substances. Spinoza's basic idea that there is only one substance and that everything that exists is only a modification of that one substance means that not a single thing is a definite being, but a temporary figuration instead. Nothing is permanent in itself; nothing can be viable in itself.

34 E2P13L7; *Complete Works*, 254 (my emphasis).

35 Ibid., 254-255.

composite bodies that nature knows? There is a long tradition in which the term 'mystical body'

was applicable to every size and rank of *universitas* within the hierarchy of corporate communities of which mediaeval social philosophy, in a blending or fusion of Augustinian and Aristotelian definitions, distinguished five: household, neighborhood, city, kingdom, and universe.³⁶

Whereas tradition presents as a given the purposefulness of living beings participating in the greater totality, and with regard to people, a desire to live in a community, this is no longer self-evident for Spinoza. In his eyes, nature knows no purpose.³⁷

The elaboration on the composite body is an addition to proposition 13, in which he states that the body is the object of the idea that constitutes the human mind, or rather, the human mind is nothing but the body as it exists in another attribute: thinking. This is not the time to comment on Spinoza's teachings concerning the relationship between mind and body. The question is whether that which applies to a human being can also apply to the state as a composite body. Is the (one) mind of the political body also constituted by the idea of which this body is the object? And how should we understand this? One thing is certain: although the similarity in the composition of the two kinds of bodies can still logically be concluded from his doctrine of the composite bodies and the nature of the mind that forms the idea of the body, nowhere does Spinoza seem to have explicitly asked himself this question of the extent to which the human mind and the (one) mind of the political body may share these attributes.

6 Nature and State: Not Necessarily a Harmony

The metaphysical idea of the composite body, and the mind that is the idea of it, are important for a good understanding of what Spinoza says about the representation of the "political body." A distinction must be made between three questions: whether a political community is possible, whether it is probable, and whether it is reasonably required. Spinoza answered the first and third questions in the affirmative, but the answer to the second question, the question of probability, remains dependent on the circumstances. Nature's internal

³⁶ Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 209.

³⁷ See the Appendix following the first part of the *Ethica; Complete Works*, 238-243.

purpose is not to turn humans into reasonable beings. Reasonableness is merely a condition that determines whether a collective project such as the state succeeds. If we start from what is best for people (what is reasonably required for a good life), then the instability of the natural state can and should be transformed into the relative stability of a social and political order.

Remarkably, in one of his letters to Henry Oldenburg, which was written during the year in which he started working on the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Spinoza failed to give a clear, affirmative answer to the question regarding the grounds for an accord or coherence between nature's parts. He not only indicated that the harmonious cooperation between nature's parts was a question that surpassed his factual knowledge of nature, he also indicated that concepts such as order or disorder (read: harmony and disharmony) were not suitable for describing nature.³⁸ Since each part has its own nature with its own effects, the merging of several parts could also occur because of the absence of opposition and partial adaptation of the parts to each other. Harmony is conditional; it is a possibility, not a requirement, and it is certainly not normative.

Oldenburg's response, while admitting to some lingering doubts, nevertheless shows that he had grasped something of Spinoza's meaning: "... although I do not quite follow how we can banish order and symmetry from Nature, as you seem to do."³⁹ This answer shows that Spinoza was actually deconstructing a common idea. The distinction he introduced was rather: does something work in accordance with (the laws of) its own nature or, to a greater or lesser extent, in accordance with (the laws of) the nature of other things in its environment? In the first case we consider something as a whole, and in the second case as a part. Whether it is part or whole depends on our point of view. The universe has a fixed relationship between movement and rest, but all its parts are constantly changing, partly under each other's influence. Spinoza calls this "harmonizing," but this concept does not exclude frictions and collisions between parts, nor does it break up what was previously and temporarily a whole. Whether a political body comes into existence and continues to exist, therefore, depends on the relations between this body and its environment, and the relations between the bodies that exist and work inside of it.

It is precisely this question about the possibility of the disintegration or change of a political body with which Spinoza begins chapter 10 of the *Tractatus Politicus*. He seems to accept the image of the political body and the

38 Letter No. 32, signed 20 November 1665; *Complete Works*, 848.

39 Letter No. 33, written by Henry Oldenburg to Spinoza on 8 December 1665; *Complete Works*, 851.

diseases that threaten it, but he does so only in an explanation that emphasizes that the constancy or instability of a political community are dependent on social mechanisms and human passions. A metaphor like the body politic, by itself, provides no understanding or knowledge. Instead, Spinoza offers an elaboration on the idea that harmony between the parts in a whole is a possibility, just like disharmony. Rather than speaking of the political body of the king, Spinoza favors an institutional solution, namely a council that is large enough so that no one can become a dictator. The sword should not be in the hands of a natural person, but in those of a collective “legal personality” (*non penes personam aliquam naturalem, sed civilem*).⁴⁰

Spinoza uses the term “political body” in a quote from Livy, which he had found in Machiavelli’s *Discorsi*: a passage about maintaining a political order that changes over time in such a way that it begins to deviate from the constitution it had at its beginning. The political body absorbs many events, is affected by them, and occasionally needs purification. With this passage, Spinoza builds on the medical connotations present in the body metaphor. Malignant elements and causes of illness – and ultimately, death – should not be allowed to prosper in a state. Ailments must be countered with appropriate remedies to keep the political body healthy. Only an “unavoidable fatal incident” can then be cause for decay. However, a political community is able to look after its own health. This remedy should bring the state back to its original design – a classical Roman idea (*restitutio in integro*) that Machiavelli adopts, with Spinoza following in his footsteps. But he also knew that a temporary dictatorship (an “interim manager” who puts things in order) should not be too strict: maintaining order should happen cautiously and moderately. The ways in which Spinoza recognizes the dynamic elements of social and political life are always related to the maintenance of the overall order of movement of the constituent parts (the citizens). The goal is to keep the balance between maintaining the political order, and to leave open the social and private lives of the members of the political community. Maintaining the political order too strictly will stifle life in society, while letting go of the reins too freely will inversely lead to the decline of the state. This fine balance, sought under the aspect of self-preservation, shows a structural similarity between the human and the political body: the stability of the organization of the composition must be able to coincide with the dynamics of a life that entails constant changes. Just like the human body, the political body can adapt to changes, provided it can also preserve its constitution. This principle in turn refers to the metaphysical idea of the compound body discussed earlier: “The human mind is capable of perceiving

⁴⁰ *Tractatus Politicus*, 10.2; *Complete Works*, 748.

a great many things, and this capacity will vary in proportion to the variety of states which its body can assume.”⁴¹

The political diseases that Spinoza identified arise mainly from people's passions, which can cause turmoil in society. However, these passions are only harmful to the community in their extreme forms. Prohibition or suppression of these passions can cause even more damage, and may even encourage vicious behavior – the opposite of the desired effect. A political community should never fall into puritanism, which is a treatment worse than the disease. It is better to arrange the state in such a way that human passions, such as greed, ambition, or others, are given an outlet that is beneficial to society. The normative image of the political body has virtually disappeared here: no division of tasks, no ranking of soul and body, no harmonious combination of the social classes and professional groups. At its core, the political body (as described by Spinoza) is about the sensible management of human aspirations, which mainly consists of the proper organization of the political and social order. The traditional representation of the political body is abolished in order to construct a well-functioning society that can be destroyed only by external causes. The eternity of a political order is no longer a gift from heaven borne by princes, but instead a possibility that lies in the hands of the people – as long as they know how to channel their human ambitions.

In the last three paragraphs of the same chapter 10, Spinoza offers his concluding thoughts: people must be governed in such a way that they believe they are increasing their prosperity and satisfying their ambitions in freedom, without realizing that they are being directed. This leads people into the political body, which in turn is led (as it were) by one spirit. Incidentally, this spirit is not only one of reasonableness, but also and most importantly, it is one of a communality of feelings, or an emotional communality. Reasonableness alone is not enough; there must be a certain balance between the feelings that make people act in the interests of society. The spirit (the “one mind”) is, above all, the dynamic self-organization of a group of people who, under the influence of the stimuli of a well-organized political order, forms a whole that is not subject to fatal internal struggle.⁴² This shows that this “one mind” is only “one” in appearance. This may seem obvious to an outside observer seeing people coexisting peacefully, but it will not necessarily seem so for all participants. In

41 E2P14; *Complete Works*, 255.

42 In this sense, Spinoza prefigures a contemporary notion we can find in the work of Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago, IL, 1972) or in Erich Jantsch, *Die Selbstorganisation des Universums. Vom Urknall zum menschlichen Geist* [1979] (Munich, 1986), 227–231 (“Geist als dynamisches Prinzip”): “Spirit [Geist] simply appears in this regard as the dynamics of self-organization as such” (my translation).

this sense, the work done by an apparent consensus (“one mind”) seems more akin that effected by an “invisible hand.”

7 Human Nature and the Formation of a Political Body

Let us return to Spinoza's general political theory as outlined in the first chapters of the *Tractatus Politicus*. The main underlying problem is that it is not self-evident for a person to be responsible for anything other than his own physical existence and mental wellbeing. Only under special circumstances will a person take responsibility for a larger whole, such as a political body – even when the person feels or argues that living in a political community is a greater good, the pursuit whereof is in their best interests. In the opening passages of the *Tractatus Politicus*, Spinoza makes clear that with political practice and political thinking, one must take the people as they are, instead of taking as a starting point how people ought to be. This is not meant as a license for people to do whatever they want, but as a caution to create a more realistic view of the formation of a political community. People are relatively independent beings whose behavior follows certain patterns; one must always keep this in mind instead of trying to change human nature. In certain cases, political leaders have succeeded in managing people in order to create a peaceful and prosperous community. Spinoza only wishes to illustrate that these successful attempts at community formation are consistent with human nature.⁴³ As Spinoza points out, there are similarities between analyzing a community of people and the weather, as both are dynamic systems. This gives us a new metaphor, next to the one of the political body. The weather system has no “head” or “leading principle”; rather, the cooperation of all the elements constitutes “the state” it is in at any given time, i.e., the conditions of the system at a particular time.

Spinoza does acknowledge, however, that contrary to the weather, the elements in a social system have a desire for a good life. In another passage in which the usefulness of his teaching is explained, he notes that a healthy society is not a community of people led and ruled as slaves, but one of people who “do freely what is best.”⁴⁴ This is also the core idea of the *Tractatus Politicus*, and is elaborated in chapter 5 especially. There, Spinoza writes:

43 *Tractatus Politicus*, 1.4 in *Complete Works*, 681.

44 E2P49S: “sed ut liberè ea, quae optima sunt, agant”; *Complete Works*, 277.

So, when we say that the best state is one where men pass their lives in harmony, I am speaking of human life, which is characterised not just by the circulation of the blood and other features common to all animals, but especially by reason, the true virtue and life of the mind.⁴⁵

This passage recalls the opening of Aristotle's *Politics*, in which the distinction between animals and people is linked to the discussion of law and injustice, good and evil. That makes man a political animal. However, Spinoza does not concern himself with the role of the citizen in the political community and its deliberations; rather, he is concerned with the ability of people to live within the state, to enjoy some measure of wellbeing despite – and thanks to – the existence of the state. This emphasis on the wellbeing of citizens as individuals makes Spinoza deviate from one aspect of the traditional representation of the political body: that where the members only exist as functional parts of a (unified) whole. Spinoza, on the other hand, formulates a fundamental principle of liberalism: the political community exists for the benefit of individuals, and not vice versa. Individuals are not divided according to their social function or status, but as natural beings with their own existence and desires. A healthy society is therefore not primarily the stage for the harmonious cooperation of the various components, but for the flourishing of human lives.

Spinoza brings to the fore a different understanding of the health of a society. First and foremost, this emphasis on the health of the individual means that man should be allowed to live according to his own nature, a moral ideal Spinoza explains in his *Ethica*. A free person is a person who can use his mind and, more importantly, a person able to understand himself as a part of Nature (or God). Such a person must also be able to express himself freely, as Spinoza argues in the famous chapter 20 of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Man is primarily a citizen of the cosmos, and only secondarily a citizen of the state in which he has ended up by chance. However, the fact that he prioritizes the importance of man as a part of Nature does not mean that Spinoza overlooked the importance for people of a stable political order.

More than the “people's body,” the mental state of the citizens is the object of his argument: when aligned, the body and mind form a power that no government can ignore. The roots of Spinoza's argument rest in the idea that the way people judge events in their lives depends on their own nature. A government or a church can attempt to change people's minds, but the understanding and appreciation that people have of the world around them is a factor in

45 *Tractatus Politicus*, 5,5 in *Complete Works*, 699.

itself. To Spinoza, the principle of freedom of thought is not a normative concept, but merely a limit to the state's power:

So however much sovereigns *are believed* to possess unlimited right and to be the interpreters of law and piety, they will never succeed in preventing men from exercising their own particular judgment on any matters whatsoever and from being influenced accordingly by a variety of emotions. [...] Therefore the most tyrannical government will be the one where the individual is denied the freedom to express and to communicate to others what he thinks, and a moderate government is one where this freedom is granted to every man.⁴⁶

Again, we see Spinoza commenting on generally accepted but inadequate ideas which he attempts to transform into a more realistic picture. The formation of a political body relies on the unanimous will of the citizens to constitute a community. This unity is not a given and can never be achieved through obedience to a "head of state" alone. Spinoza expresses serious doubts regarding the ways in which monarchs attempt to build this unity, and he opposes the core of the views of his contemporaries and predecessors that the political body is something that can be represented by one person. The government – or rather, all people involved in the state administration – can only do their best to preserve unity. Ultimately, all depends on the judgment of the citizens. Public opinion, we could nowadays argue, is the real power that can either hold the state together or cause it to fall apart. The idea of one mind constituting the people's political body colors Spinoza's analysis of monarchy.

8 Spinoza's Criticism of Monarchy

Remarkably enough, Spinoza seems to accept the representation of the political order as a body in his treatise on the monarchy in the *Tractatus Politicus*:

To sum up, the king is to be regarded as the mind of the commonwealth, and this council as the mind's external senses or body of the commonwealth, through which the mind perceives the condition of the commonwealth and does what it decides is best for itself.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 20.3-4 in *Complete Works*, 566-567 (my emphasis).

⁴⁷ *Tractatus Politicus*, 6.19 in *Complete Works*, 704.

Here, we find a common static image of the political body. However, Spinoza's analysis of the monarchist political order shows something else: the scope of his argument is the question of how such an order can remain stable, or what measures are needed in order to combat the inherent instability of monarchy. His reference to the traditional image is misleading: the representation of the political body primarily refers to the dynamic aspect of the political order. After all, the passage discusses a body composed over a certain period: it arises, lives and grows, and can perish. Moreover, this body is subject to constant change, which is possible due to the way it is composed. The body is involved in movement and change, which conflicts with the normative tenor of the more static or substantial image of the political body put forward by his contemporaries and predecessors: one with eternal life.

Chapters 6 and 7 of the *Tractatus Politicus* are dedicated to the topic of the monarchy. Spinoza rejects an absolutist monarchy that reduces citizens to subjects or slaves, and instead sees a monarchy as a viable project if based on the consent of the citizens and in constant deliberation with its citizens. As we will see in a moment, the essence of Spinoza's reasoning is based on consistently thinking through the king's *natural* body, which removes all mysticism surrounding it. In this reasoning, the deconstruction of the political body is most clearly visible. Since we have to understand the formation of a political community from the perspective of human nature, and people are generally guided by emotional movements rather than reason, a political order is generally based on a common sense. This particularly applies to monarchy.

But can political power be concentrated in one person? Spinoza does not think so: a prince is just a person with limited power. Spinoza's criticism is that no human (as a natural being) is capable of taking on a public role on his own. In the end, a monarch is just one human among many: subject to the same weaknesses and temptations as anyone else. Spinoza expresses this thought as follows:

And in fact, those who believe that one man by himself can hold the supreme right of the commonwealth are greatly mistaken. For right is determined by power alone, but the power of one man is far from being capable of sustaining so heavy a load.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Ibid., 6.4, 701. In the previous paragraph, Spinoza has further specified: "For no man is so vigilant that he does not sometimes nod, and no one has ever been so resolute and upright as not sometimes to break down and suffer himself to be overcome just when strength of mind is most needed."

Furthermore, if the king is a boy, or a sick man, or burdened by old age, he is a king only on sufferance, and the sovereignty is really in the hands of those who administer the most important affairs of state, or of those who are nearest to the king [...].⁴⁹

This means that the monarch is forced to seek support from other people who can take over certain leadership duties, in turn ensuring that the political order does not become a monarchy, but rather a concealed aristocracy. Spinoza could have concluded that these people are vulnerable in the same way. The weaknesses and pathologies of the court and ministers, however, can be neutralized in other ways. With natural bodies paramount, for Spinoza the political body can be seen only as an impersonal order that causes people to behave “according to reason.” Monarchy exists *magis mente, quam opera*, as the above-quoted phrase (note 12) stated out the Hebrew theocracy. It is because the monarch is only human that he will fear his subjects above all. Spinoza observes that the reason that princes hide behind their thick castle walls is because they fear their subjects more than foreign enemies. And they will also try to protect the citizens to obtain their favor.⁵⁰

From this, one might infer that the doctrine of the king's two bodies is but a myth, or even an outright fallacy. The king is a toy in the hands of his court and servants. The entire legal fiction about whether the monarch can be the embodiment of the political community, or the head of the political body of its citizens, is built on the quicksand called human nature. When considering this concept, we have to ask ourselves what people actually can and cannot do – how far does the power of man reach? But a monarchy is not impossible: a monarch who appears to succeed in protecting the safety and prosperity of the citizens, and in giving them rights, can be considered a sovereign. Still, political systems can be sustained only as long as they do not transgress the wishes of the majority of citizens; this is a power that restrains and directs the government of a political community (*potentia multitudinis*).

Nevertheless, Spinoza takes a different approach in his subsequent chapter, which explores a variation on the teachings of the king's two bodies. The king, as a natural person, cannot be a legislator, and is instead subordinate to the laws – or rather, the constitution or foundation of the political community. Subordinating the king to this foundation, however, is simultaneously obedience to the King as the very political function. After all, the principles of this foundation are “eternal royal decrees.” Officials must obey the King while also

49 Ibid., 6.5, 702.

50 Ibid., 6.8, 702.

opposing the king's decisions on their behalf. They obey the political or mystical body of the King, not the natural body of the king. But then it follows: "Kings are not gods, but men." The king is part of the political body, which can itself be described as royal.

Thus, if a monarchy is to be stable, it must be so organized that everything is done only by the king's decree – that is, that all law is the explicit will of the king – but not everything willed by the king is law.⁵¹

Here, Spinoza neglects to explain how these decisions are taken. Rather, he offers a condition: only a political body that exists "forever," that is, one that is independent of the will of individuals (but not independent of common sense or that which most people consider reasonable), can achieve peace, bring prosperity, and prevent people from becoming slaves to a ruler. Again, Spinoza reiterates that the governance of the political body cannot depend on a single person, because nobody can perceive everything and always be vigilant. That is why it is essential for the monarch to attain the support of the counsellors, selected from among the citizens, to prevent a monarchy from becoming an invisible aristocracy. The council must comprise a large number of people – only through such a cooperation can they avoid people promoting solely their own benefit, as they are naturally inclined to do. Grace must come from the organization of the political order if there is to be an imitation of the public person (who has the public interest in mind). Motivation can also be ambition: holding a high office is honorable, and to earn this respect, someone must behave in a virtuous manner. After all, why would citizens transfer their power to one particular person or council, when they can also take care of public affairs themselves? Generally speaking, this transference of power will only happen if they cannot work it out themselves.⁵² This condition also means that the sustainability of a regime depends on the benefit it brings to the citizens. This principle applies in particular to a king, who must live up to the approval of the people.⁵³

In an important section for our topic, Spinoza again emphasizes that a political body must exist forever, whenever this is possible.⁵⁴ Of course, we must not understand the word 'eternal' literally. Spinoza intends to say that the political body should exist independently, outside of the natural bodies that

⁵¹ Ibid., 7.1, 709.

⁵² Ibid., 7.3-6, 710-711.

⁵³ Ibid., 7.11, 713.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 7.25, 718-719.

compose it. The political body is just as mortal as a natural body, and therefore Spinoza considers it dangerous to change the nature or identity of the political body. The transition between the death of a king and the appointment of his successor entails a period in which there is no political authority. That is why succession in monarchy is a problem. The succession must fit inside the rules of a political community and not depend on the preferences of one person. Succession is preferred because this allows the political body to be eternal (assuming there is an heir). Otherwise, the prince must be chosen by the people over and over again, which promotes instability through constant changes in authority. The succession, however, should not be placed in the hands of an absolute ruling prince, because he can then consider his empire his own property. Neither a prince nor a people (or the strongest part of it) can claim ownership of the political body. The state is an independent body with its own will: its laws. This law of the state is eternal, or rather, it has a divine or heavenly character.

The two chapters on monarchy illustrate the extent to which the teachings of the king's two bodies still influenced Spinoza's thoughts, although it remains unknown by which sources containing the doctrine his work was informed.⁵⁵ The representation of the political or mystical body served primarily to give the kingship a supernatural character. The king was a god, not by nature, but by grace.⁵⁶ These terms obviously do not fit a naturalistic thinking that equates God and Nature, and no longer recognizes supernatural reality. For Spinoza, the heavenly character of the state must come from elsewhere if it is to retain the effect of the imagery of the political body. This leads him to claim that the only possibility is that the political body exists in the collective imagination of people. In this regard at least, the political body may appear to be guided by one mind.

9 Conclusion: The Imagination of the State

The image of the king's two bodies refers to the separation between the natural existence of a person and his existence in a non-natural order: a social, cultural, religious, or political order that elevates this person beyond his purely

⁵⁵ It is likely that Spinoza was familiar with the English political debates of his time; it should be worthwhile to compare his arguments with the material of the debate between monarchists and defenders of Parliament in the middle of the seventeenth century; see Koschorke et al., *Der fiktive Staat*, 119–131.

⁵⁶ Ernst H. Kantorowicz, "Deus per naturam, deus per gratiam: A Note on Mediaeval Political Theology," in *Selected Studies* (Locust Valley, NY, 1965), 121–137.

natural existence. Secularization could be interpreted as the dismantling of the latter: people are merely people, and everything they do is just their own “natural” behavior. At the core of Spinoza’s argument is a certain undermining of a “political-theological” scheme, or rather a revision of this scheme in the light of the recognition of what is humanly possible: the nature of man – that is, the natural man – becomes the standard of political order. This yardstick retains the same high quality (i.e., being the expression of divine power) in Spinoza’s discourse, but has mainly become a “theory” that has yet to be proven to fully obtain in “practice”. This revision of the “political-theological” scheme, outlined at the beginning of chapter 17 of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, is the core of the turn his argument takes in the subsequent chapters to the treatment of religious representations of the state. People live a political life that exists in their minds, and they live it according to this mental construction. It is “the discovery of the political imaginary as such” that was part of the critical analysis of (absolutist) monarchy.⁵⁷

A monarchy understood as a form of government in which the political power is in the hands of one person is contrary to (human) nature; hence monarchy cannot be anything but an imaginary construction. However, despite its imaginary character, people can still believe in the validity of this construction. Spinoza’s suggestion is that it is the habituation of a people to a certain political order, or the anchoring of a political order in the state of mind of a people, that makes it impossible or dangerous to enact a change of regime. The law of circularity, a well-known figure in political thought, from Plato (the last part of the *Politeia*) to Machiavelli (the introduction to his *Discorsi*), is not a socio-historical one, but instead the result of people’s attachment to their imagined world from which it is hard to escape. In chapter 18, Spinoza offers an interesting example of an attempt to change the regime: the civil war in England from 1640–1660. This war revolved around the power struggles between king and parliament, one of the arrangements in which the king’s two bodies played a decisive role.⁵⁸ This same example is also found in Thomas Hobbes’s posthumously published *Behemoth*, which concludes thus: “I have seen this revolution in a circular motion.” It is not clear whether Spinoza was familiar with this text. The tale of the civil war begins with the decapitation of the king (Charles I) and ends with the recovery of his son (Charles II), whose head, depicted on the front plate of the *Leviathan*, adorns the body assembled by the citizens.

57 Koschorke et al., *Der fiktive Staat*, 153: “die Entdeckung des politischen Imaginären *als solchem*.”

58 See the first two chapters in Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies*, which are the prelude to his treatment of medieval political theology.

Between these two events, decapitation and accepting a new head of the state, the people hesitated between the pursuit of three different outcomes: (1) avenging the killed king and restoring the old order; (2) moving towards a parliamentary political order; or (3) continuing the monarchy in a different form.

Too late, then, did the people come to realise that to save their country they had done nothing other than violate the right of their lawful king and change everything for the worse. Therefore, when the opportunity came, it decided to retrace its steps, and was not satisfied until it saw a complete restoration of the former state of affairs.⁵⁹

Citizens can attempt to change their political reality, but monarchy continues to exist in their imagination. The monarch is primarily the embodiment of a shared representation of the state as a unified political body; he occupies a place in the imaginary scheme of the people.

The representation of the political body offers the necessary script by which to stage a society. When there is consensus about this imagination, people will act in accordance with this *mise-en-scène*. If they deviate from the script, and reality changes so that no one sufficiently understands it, they revert to the previous staging – the monarchy. However, Spinoza believes that it is possible to disrupt this pattern. The contradictions within a political community can be so strong that a different form of state becomes necessary.⁶⁰ The science of nature teaches us that humans are natural beings who can develop into reasonable and free people through practice and education.⁶¹ This leaves room for the rise of a political body that corresponds to this state of mind: a society that does justice to the interests of citizens, to the desire of citizens for a free, prosperous, and peaceful life. The deconstruction of the representation of the political body by Spinoza reflects this transformation of the political community, the transition from a monarchic representation of the political body to the democratic shaping of society in which the bodies of the people will tend to become one body, if the people want it this way.

59 *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 18.8 in *Complete Works*, 556.

60 *Tractatus Politicus*, 6.2, 701.

61 An analysis of the social dynamics behind regime change is given in Marin Terpstra, "An Analysis of Power Relations and Class Relations in Spinoza's *Tractatus Politicus*," in *Studia Spinozana*, 9 (1995), 79–105. More recently, Martin Saar has given a synthesis of Spinoza's dynamic political theory in *Die Immanenz der Macht. Politische Theorie nach Spinoza* (Frankfurt am Main, 2015).