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Citizens' Political Responsibility and Collective Identity: A Spinozistic Answer to Jaspers's Question on Guilt

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Abstract
The question on guilt that Jaspers poses to the Germans was not only valid after the Holocaust, it can be raised to other peoples who must answer for the crimes committed by the state which act on behalf of the people that gave support to them. In this paper, I elaborate a notion of citizens' political responsibility in order to argue to what extent—and under what circumstances—the citizens of a political community must respond for the deeds of the political institutions that govern them. For that purpose, I try to explain Spinoza's notion of political authority in relation to Jaspers' notion of political guilt. This Spinozistic approach has the advantage of freeing us from moral guilt—a misleading notion in political arena as I will argue—but it demands from us a genuine self-reflective and therapeutic procedure that if applied to politics would reveal a different path from Jaspers' guilt. The aim of this therapeutic is to bring about a profound change in the personal and political identity of both citizen and political community.

Keywords Political responsibility · Political guilt · Asymmetrical freedom · Therapeutics · Identity change · Karl Jaspers · Spinoza

1 Introduction

In *The Question of German Guilt,* Karl Jaspers respond to the indictment by international public opinion according to which "[all Germans] are guilty" (Jaspers 1961: 47).[1] For Jaspers, this sort of collective accusation can be morally dangerous, as it entails judging people not for what they do but for what they are. This accusation is only valid at the level of citizens' political responsibility. As members of the political community, citizens must answer for the deeds of political institutions that

[1] This book is a compilation of a series of lectures that Jaspers delivered during the winter semester of 1945–1946 at Heidelberg University.

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govern them. Jaspers assumes the old saying that "a people answer for its polity" (Jaspers 1961: 61). However, in his discussion of what guilt means at the political level, Jaspers is ambiguous. On the one hand, he affirms that political guilt must be separated from both moral and legal considerations, and on the other, he affirms that the source of all our different sorts of guilt, including political guilt, is the fact that power is not in the service of the basic rights of all citizens. Instead the opposite is true (Jaspers 1961: 34). This raises the question of the nature of political guilt. Is there a moral foundation for the affirmation that 'a people answers for its polity'?

For Jaspers, the nature of German guilt was not criminal and the aim of his philosophical reflection was not to prove that all Germans were responsible for the crimes,[2] that is the work of the judicial system, of the Nuremberg trials.[3] For Jaspers, the key question is political and moral: to what extent are a people responsible for the actions of a political regime. According to Jaspers, the German people acted in a permissive way that, even if they were not criminal, made possible the emergence and the success of the Nazi regime. The question that Jaspers poses to the Germans is not only valid after the Holocaust, it can be raised to other peoples who must answer for the crimes committed by the state that people support. That is, the question arises when citizens must assume their political responsibility that is derived from their support given to the regime.

The purpose of this paper is to elaborate a notion of citizens' political responsibility made from the tension between politics and morality via a Spinozistic analysis of the legitimacy—or the lack of legitimacy—of both political communities and political institutions. For Spinoza to speak in terms of political guilt when we are analyzing a political situation implies introducing an erroneous understanding of free will. Based on Spinoza, I will argue, it is possible to build a concept of political responsibility without the idea of guilt in a moral sense. Spinoza states we are responsible only for those actions that are the result of following reason. From this asymmetrical notion of freedom, in contrast to Jaspers, Spinoza would not say that people are guilty of choosing an evil regime. The Spinozistic notion of citizens' political responsibility I am going to defend in this paper is more radical than Jaspers's lean on guilt, because it demands from citizens a therapeutic self-examination that if applied to politics, when a people are dealing with a violent past, would bring about a profound change in the personal and collective identity. A change that makes possible reestablishing the unity between the past and present members of the same political community. For answering Jaspers's quest, instead of facing moral guilt, this therapeutic practice leads people to overcome their old inherited identity and build a new collective identity that gives a new meaning to what it means to be a German or, for that matter, a member of any other people trying to answer for the actions of its political institutions.

[2] There is no agreement about the number of Germans who participated in the crimes. According to Goldhagen (1997, 166–167), the number can range from over 100,000 to 1,000,000 or more. See also Hilberg (1985).

[3] As is well known, only the leaders were judged in the Nuremberg trials. For an excellent analysis about the relation between collective traumas and juridical trials, see Felman (2002).

To offer a sound argument for my claims, in Sect. 2, I discuss Paul Ricoeur's genealogy of the Christian notion of guilt to show that there is a double process of recognizing guilt, the evildoer has to accept that she or he has done something wrong and that a sincere change in her or his heart has occurred. In Jaspers's terms, this process cannot be imposed by external or legal forces, it would be the outcomes of self-reflection. In Sect. 3, from Spinoza's naturalistic conception of political authority, I argue that if a political regime imposes a concept of justice that is contrary to the people's concept, unlike to the Nazi regime as Jaspers argues, then it does not have the right to command in the eyes of the people. In Sect. 4, I try to explain how for Spinoza it is possible the existence of oppressive regimes grounded on passions as transmitted through false narratives. In contrast to Jaspers, Spinoza would not say that people are guilty of choosing an evil regime because they are determined by passions, that is, they are not free to rationally choose the good. In Sect. 5, I elaborate a concept of citizens' political responsibility derived from Spinoza's notion of political authority. Here, I develop an 'agent-based argument' to show: that the government is an agent of the people whose central role is to enforce 'the common law,' which constitutes the essence of the commonwealth, and that a ruler deserves to have political authority only if it represents the people and promotes their interests. In this sense, the political authority—in contrast to power based on force—appeals to an 'us', that is, to a community that in turn is challenged by that political authority, by the power and criminal actions exercised by that authority. Finally, in Sect. 6, from Spinoza's therapeutics—a pass from being dominated by passions to being guided by reason—I derived a process of identity change, as it implies a new and complete re-description of who I am and of which community I a member of.

2 Jaspers on Political Guilt

The guilt that Jaspers is exploring in his lectures is the painful feeling that one has when one recognizes that they have willingly done something wrong to somebody else. This notion of guilt has deep roots in Christianity. In this respect Paul Ricoeur, in his detailed analysis of the genealogy of guilt, warns us that—according to the Christian outlook—guilt is the subjective, internal aspect of sin, the consciousness of fault. In this sense, one must not confuse guilt with sin or fault (Ricoeur 1967: 100), for there are evildoers who do not recognize their faults and, at the same time, there are cases in which one feels guilty without committing a wrong. According to Ricoeur, the Christian notion of guilt arises after a long process of internalization of sin. In this process, three old traditions converge and enter into tension: the Greek tradition that links the law of the city with responsibility; the Judaic tradition, especially the Pharisees, which focuses on "the refinement of ethical awareness" (Ricoeur 1967: 100); and the Pauline tradition that links ours faults with a liberty whose aim is the realization of justice, which for Paul, was the same as Christ. A shared aspect of those three traditions is the idea that the consciousness of guilt is grounded in "the evil use of liberty" (Ricoeur 1967: 102). For Ricoeur, in these traditions one feels guilty if one is aware of having freely broken either the law of

the city, the law of God, or the moral law. In the Christian view, guilt is also tied to another element that has been common in Western civilizations, namely, deserving punishment. In the Christian tradition, guilt means internal punishment as well as the consciousness that if one has committed a fault one ought to suffer pain. Putting together internal punishment and freedom, one can conclude that the person who deserves punishment is someone who has freely committed a crime, a sin, or a fault. These two aspects of the Christian notion of guilt are spread throughout Jaspers's reflections. They entail the demand that the evildoer not only recognizes that a fault has been committed, but also that he or she is responsible for the wrongdoing.

Accordingly, there is a double process in the recognition of guilt. On the one hand, the evildoer has to recognize that he has committed something wrong that is morally evil. On the other hand, the evildoer has to have a change of heart and feel guilty. That is, he or she has to judge him or herself as partly or totally responsible for these deeds. As Jaspers says, "Brainwork is not all that this requires. The intellect must put the heart to work, arouse it to an inner activity which in turn carries the brainwork" (Jaspers 1961: 16). It is clear that this process cannot be imposed by external forces such criminal trials. Instead, it requires a process of self-reflection, a sincere dialogue with one's own consciousness. In addition, given that the attitudes and actions that are the object of examination here are not merely individual (for they are a tragic expression of the public ethos that made possible the existence of an oppressive society), this process of self-reflection should not be a monologue but a dialogue among all Germans. In other words, Germans have to recognize before themselves and before others, especially victims, that their attitudes and deeds caused terrible and irreparable damage. In Jaspers's terms, the sort of truth involved here is a communicative one; that is, a truth that can only be reached through an inter-subjective reflection. For this reason, Jaspers delivered his lectures in the voice of the 'we.' This 'we' alludes to the moral and political community that Jaspers belongs to—i.e., Germany. The object of Jaspers's lectures is not to deal with a personal issue regarding the faults of the individuals, but to deliberate about actions committed by both the state and the citizens in the name of the community. Although Jaspers has to deal with a dilemma facing all Germans, the central question posed in his lectures is how a political community who identify themselves as a nation ought to face the crimes committed by institutions such as the state, which act on behalf of the people that gave support to them.

For Jaspers, this sincere and open dialogue among Germans was the only way to deal with the devastating consequences of the implantation of the totalitarian regime. This regime created a profound sense of distrust among people, a distrust that destroyed all common ground and, consequently, the basis of the political community. In Germany, after the war, Jaspers notes, "the common is the non-community" (Jaspers 1961: 18). The aim of the process of collective self-reflection is precisely to rebuild the grounds that will allow Germans to establish a democratic nation that other nations can trust. For Jaspers, this inter-subjective process is a process of learning "to speak with each other" (Jaspers 1961: 11).[4] The need for such

[4] On this process of collective self-reflection, Ronny Miron asserts that in Jaspers the collective dimension of the experience of guilt is referred to a concrete historical circumstance. For Miron, the idea of historicity plays a fundamental role, since the individuals, in a given situation and before an event that

a process is clear, as it is impossible to find a common ground if no one is able to trust anyone else. How can people know what binds them to others if everyone distrusts everyone else? For Jaspers, a serious dialogue among citizens requires three conditions: (1) before judging others, each party has to listen to the others' reasons and opinions, to try to see things from the others' points of view; (2) do not give opinions before questioning them (i.e., to support our opinions with reasons and not with external authorities); and (3) to suspend prejudices and negative feelings such as hatred, pride, indignation, revenge, and scorn toward others. Jaspers writes that, "We must suspend such sentiments to see the truth, to be of good will in the world" (Jaspers 1961: 12). In contrast to the fascist way of thinking, in which peoples' feelings are often manipulated, by engaging in meaningful discussions with each other "we want to affect no fanatic will, nor to outshout each other … we do not want to force opinions on one another" (Jaspers 1961: 13). To reach the point in which members of a political community can share their feelings, a deliberative process of self-knowledge is necessary. That is, an open dialogue to question what we as a community ought to be. At this point, I argue that Spinoza's ethics theory and his political philosophy can illuminate this process and provide a subtle argument on the problem of the political responsibility of communities with a dark past.

3 Spinoza's Conception of Political Authority

Many commentators on Hobbes and Spinoza agree that both thinkers try to build a naturalistic concept of political authority. The central claim of this theory is the idea that political obligations can only be derived from facts. As C.B. Macpherson notes, before Hobbes the dominant thesis of political authority was Aristotelian, a naturalistic concept (Macpherson 1962). The way that Aristotle derives political authority from facts is by assuming a teleological concept of nature. In contrast to the Aristotelian approach, both Spinoza and Hobbes share the following theses: (1) natural rights, justice, and political obligations are determined by power and (2) nature is a mechanical and non-teleological system. Using different arguments, Spinoza and Hobbes held that human beings do not incline towards some kind of natural end. The core of Spinoza and Hobbes's views is the deduction of political authority from this concept of nature. In general, the deduction is made in three stages.

The first stage is related to the assumption that all human beings in the state of nature are roughly equal. For Hobbes, this means that each human being has more or less the same capacity to destroy other human beings and more or less the same weakness to be destroyed (Hobbes 1975: chapter XIII). Spinoza defends a similar idea when he affirms that human beings are finite and are therefore not invincible

Footnote 4 (continued)

confront their lives as individuals belonging to a group, question their common past, "The individual's reflexive turning to historical knowledge causes a fundamental change in himself, as a result of which the general and impersonal element is removed from this knowledge. It now serves as a framework within whose boundaries the person organizes his life story and his self-consciousness as an individual" (Miron 2010: 240).

(*E*4ax; *E*4p3dem).[5] In addition, Spinoza agrees with the common-sense principle according to which, to act alone, *ceteris paribus*, has less force and thereby its effect is weaker than to act in concert with others (*E*4p35scho). The necessary consequence of this principle is that the more people there are within a community and the more people who support the government, the more powerful and effective are the community and the government.

The second stage concerns the notion of nature. As I said before, both Spinoza and Hobbes see natural beings, including humans, as mechanical and material systems that "seek to preserve their own motion" (Macpherson 1962: 76). A subtler formulation of this principle is Spinoza's notion of *conatus*: "every thing in nature strives to persevere in its being" (*E*3p6). According to Spinoza, every being is not just an effect of another thing, it also produces something—it is a cause. Spinoza thinks that the proper activity of any natural phenomenon is not its self-destruction. Therefore, the destruction of any object is the result of external causes (*E*4p4). In the case of human beings, one of their distinctive aspects is that *conatus* is linked with a consciousness of it (*E*3p9).

Spinoza considers that from the perspective of nature, that is, from a scientific point of view, it does not make sense to say that human beings have natural rights and obligations or that some beings are naturally entitled to political authority. Nevertheless, using his notion of *conatus*, he considers it possible to redefine these normative notions in terms of the relation between our own desires and interests and our powers. Thus, Spinoza espouses that I have the right to do a certain kind of activity if I need to and if I have enough power to accomplish it. According to Spinoza, natural rights are not mere desires but are something that I really can achieve. In this sense, Spinoza says that, "the right of each one is defined by his virtue or power" (*E*4p37sch1). Therefore, the natural right of a person is not a set of actions and objects that he or she is permitted to do and to own regardless of his or her powers or capacities. In contrast are our own forces. These are in comparison with the forces of others and determine the range of alternatives open to us and upon which we have rights. Spinoza also maintains that the way someone chooses between these alternatives is not something determined arbitrarily. He believes that there is always a causal explanation of these choices, to the extent that they are the result of the tensions and interactions of the desires and forces involved in each alternative. Under this outlook, in the absence of political institutions, natural rights express what I can do to preserve my life, while natural obligations indicate the limits imposed upon my own forces by external forces (*TTP* 16, 189–190).[6]

The third stage of the deduction refers to Hobbes and Spinoza's thesis according to which moral terms (e.g., justice and injustice, right and wrong, and merit and sin) are social conventions whose meaning and application depends on political

[5] References to Spinoza's *Ethics* (1994) are given following these abbreviations: *E Ethica*, *E1 Ethics* Part I (II… V), *app* appendix, *ax* axiom, *c* corollary, *def* definition, *def.aff* Definition of Affect, *dem* demonstration, *exp* explanation, *gen.def.aff* General Definition of Affect, *lemma* lemma, *p* proposition, *post* postulate, *pref* preface, *scho* scholium.

[6] See Spinoza's *A Theological Political Treatise and A Political Treatise*, (1951), hereafter *TTP* followed by chapter, page; and *TP* followed by chapter:section, respectively.

authority (*E*4p37scho2). To say that these terms are social conventions means that they are neither natural objects nor natural laws; rather they are social rules historically produced within a society. If so, then how is this compatible with the previous assumption that power determines right? In other words, how is possible to say, for instance, that someone has the right to do X because he or she acts according to the social conventions, and at the same time to say that he or she has this right because he or she either has the power to do it or has been authorized to do it by those who have the power? A Spinozistic answer to this question is interesting for it sheds light upon a crucial aspect of the issue of political guilt.

In a political society—a society ruled by political institutions—terms like just and unjust, right and wrong, and merit and sin express what the members of this society are permitted to do. If one sees a society as a space of cooperation, these terms can be seen as expressions of general rules of cooperation that citizens have to follow as long as they are members of the society. For this reason, it makes no sense to use these terms outside of society. Indeed, for both Spinoza and Hobbes, in the state of nature (where there is no society) it is absurd to say that to do this or that is just or unjust. As I said above, for modern contractualism, the state of nature is a situation in which everyone tries to survive by his or her own striving. In this state, common rules do not exist. Human beings, however, are not self-sufficient, and for survival we need to help each other, we need cooperation. Therefore, the question is not about whether it is better to live alone than to live together, but what kind of community we should live in. For Spinoza, as for all modern contractualists except Kant, the best society is that in which rules of cooperation are in accordance with the particular needs of everyone. In this regard, Spinoza affirms that what is just and unjust, right and wrong are and should be determined by "common agreement" (*E*4p37; see also *E*4p37scho2; *TP* 2:18–19; *TTP* 16, 191) between the members of the commonwealth. Given the assumptions of equal power and rights determined by power, this statement is a necessary conclusion because if that were not the case, then a minority would impose its view upon the majority. Thus, the accepted meaning of right and justice would not be the expression of a common agreement. In sum, if one wishes to live in society, one has to follow the rules of cooperation and therefore accept the notions of justice and right that people usually accept. However, at the same time, the majority, if not all, would follow these rules if they are in accordance with people's interests. If this is not the case, under the principle of equal distribution, the majority would try to create another commonwealth.[7]

Of these three arguments, one can derive who must have political authority. The person who claims to have the right to command in a political society is someone who has the power, that is, the force to do it. But this power can be obtained if the rulers, through their laws and actions, satisfy the needs and desires of the population. A political regime that imposes a concept of justice that is contrary to the

[7] As Spinoza said, "We may, therefore, conclude that a compact is only made valid by its utility, without which it becomes null and void. It is, therefore, foolish to ask a man to keep his faith with us for ever, unless we also endeavor that the violation of the compact we enter into shall involve for the violator more harm than good. This consideration should have very great weight in forming a state" (*TTP* 16, 192).

people's concept does not have the right to command in the eyes of the people. However, given the principle of equal distribution of power, a sovereign that lacks the support of the people cannot survive for long in power. In this sense, the power of the ruler is limited by the people's rights. Thus, the power of the multitude puts limits on the rulers.

If we take these statements as descriptions about how societies and states have been created, transformed, and destroyed, then they are patently false. An obvious conclusion of these statements would be that most societies would satisfy the needs of the population and would not be oppressive, at least to the majority. However, the opposite has occurred throughout history. Most societies and political regimes have been and are still oppressive, and most of the world's population lives in poverty. In Spinoza's reflections about the relation between affect and reason provided in the fourth and fifth parts of *The Ethics*, there are many elements that help build a convincing answer to this objection. To show this, it is necessary to briefly explain Spinoza's theory of the passions.

4 Passions and the Political Community

Though Spinoza is not entirely clear, he seems to conceive reason in a practical sense as an intellectual power that allows us to identify under given social and natural circumstances what is the best form of life and the best alternatives on hand to survive and to pursue happiness.[8] In the sphere of politics, reason will show us the best systems that guarantee "peace and security of life" (*TP* 5, 2.) and freedom (*TTP* 20, 240–41). It is reason that proves, for instance, that it is better to live in a democratic society in which the principles of justice and the system of law are established with the acquiescence of the multitude.[9] Human beings, however, are finite beings subject to the sway of the imagination and passions. Spinoza defines passions as the affects of the body and their ideas, which are produced by external forces (*E*3def3). In the *Theologico-Political Treatise*, Spinoza shows that, in the case of human beings, these passions are produced and transmitted through narratives, especially those that constitute the core of culture such as religious traditions, moral customs, and political concepts. Love and hatred, hope and fear, revenge and forgiveness, all these passions and the narratives behind them often blur and confuse us about our needs and the means to satisfy them. Furthermore, force is for Spinoza

[8] For Spinoza, there is an intrinsic relation between happiness and survival. Thus, all beings try to survive as much as they can, and insofar as one enjoys, one is happier. However, one enjoys because one's power to act has increased. Therefore, being happier implies having more power and therefore a greater capacity to survive. See, e.g., *E*3p11scho, *E*3p13, and *E*3p28.

[9] It is in this way that I interpret the following passage of *The Political Treatise,* "For, first of all, it must be considered, that, as in the state of nature the man who is led by reason is most powerful and most independent, so too that commonwealth will be most powerful and most independent, which is founded and guided by reason. For the right of the commonwealth is determined by the power of the multitude, which is led, as it were, by one mind. But this unity of mind can in no wise be conceived, unless the commonwealth pursues chiefly the very end, which sound reason teaches is to the interest of all men" (*TP* 3:7).

an insufficient explanation for the existence of oppressive regimes. He writes that, "human nature will not submit to absolute repression. Violent governments as Seneca says, never last long" (*TTP* 5, 74). In *A Political Treatise,* Spinoza reaffirms this idea saying that a political regime grounded on force is unstable because "it gives occasion for many to conspire together" (*TP* 3:9). Thus, it is the confluence of religious and non-religious narratives and traditions, social and political institutions, and in general all the agents that contrive in the creation, transformation, and destruction of images and passions that explain the success of oppressive regimes. Spinoza acknowledges that people—including the masses and also political and religious leaders—have the natural tendency to be affected and to be moved by false narratives or false beliefs that he calls 'superstitions.' Thus, superstition can disrupt the individual and collective agency inside of a political community. Furthermore, for Spinoza, it is fear that "engendered, preserve, and fostered" superstition (*TTP* Preface, 5–6).[10]

Connecting passions to the question of political guilt, one finds Spinoza has two attitudes toward guilt.[11] While at first sight they seem incompatible with his notion of freedom, they harmonize at a deeper level. On the one hand, although Spinoza seems to dismiss in general the notion of guilt—in fact he states that "he who repents what he has done is twice wretched or lacked in power" (*E*4p54)—, he recognizes that this feeling is a necessary element of social control. Indeed, he holds that as long as ordinary people are prone to be affected by passion and to dismiss reason, feelings such as indignation, repentance, pity, and humility can counteract the destructive consequences of selfish passions like ambition, self-esteem, and pride (*E*4p37scho2). On the other hand, Spinoza considers that the use of guilt for the analysis of political phenomena is inappropriate. As is well known, Spinoza, like Hobbes, is a strong defender of determinism and therefore he is against the use of any notion that implies some idea of freedom incompatible with the causal order of nature. Nevertheless, this is precisely the case with the Christian concept of guilt, which is behind Jaspers's view of political guilt. For this concept, the condition of holding someone guilty is that in the moment of committing one's misdeed, the person was free in the sense of free will. That person was able to choose between different alternatives. This notion of free will entails that human beings, if they are free, are the last and the only cause of certain events. In other words, for the defenders of this concept of freedom, there

[10] As Susan James rightly points out, "What makes superstition so ominous it not its epistemological status, but rather something about the psychic condition of its victims, namely the rigidity with which they adhere to a particular affective outlook, and the intransigence with which they cling to the various beliefs and feelings that it sustains. Viewed like this, superstition is worlds away from the ignorant misconstrual of nature, or from the cynical manipulation of popular passions for political gain. It is a form of obsession that disempowers the self by shutting down its capacity to modify its own beliefs and affects and making it resistant to external remedies" (James 2012: 15).

[11] Spinoza does not actually use the term 'guilt.' Instead he uses the notion of repentance. However, the way he defines this term is very close to Jaspers's notion of guilt. Thus, Spinoza writes, "repentance is a sadness accompanied by the idea of some deed we believe ourselves to have done from a free decision of mind" (*E*3def.aff27); and "Otherwise, I shall call *joy accompanied by the idea of internal cause*, *self-esteem,* and *the sadness contrary to it, repentance*" (*E*3p30scho).

are events in which finite things like the free choice of humans are the cause but not effect of some occurrence. For Spinoza, such a concept plainly contradicts the principle of causality regarding finite beings, establishing that “it cannot exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and to produce an effect by another cause, which is also finite and has a determinate existence; and again this cause also can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another; which is also finite and has a determinate existence, and so on, to infinity” (*E*1p28). Thus, given that the necessary condition for being guilty is the freedom of the will and because this notion contradicts the principle of causality, the notion of guilt is untenable from a rational point of view. In contrast to Kant, Spinoza believes that we, as human beings, do not have the capacity to choose between following reason or following imagination, nor does he think we are free to decide between this or that regime. Therefore, from Spinoza’s viewpoint, to speak in terms of political guilt when we are analyzing a political situation implies introducing a false assumption that can hinder the endeavor to understand what happened.

Although Spinoza strongly criticizes the notion of free will, he does not deny that humans can be free in some sense. In *The Ethics,* he proposes another notion of freedom that is compatible with the principle of causality. Don Garret has rightly characterized Spinoza’s new concept as asymmetrical freedom (Garrett 1995: 276–282). Based on this notion, I think, it is possible to build a concept of political responsibility without the idea of guilt in a moral sense, which, at the same time, is not neutral. Spinoza’s theory of freedom is opposed to the traditional notion of responsibility, which holds human beings responsible for both good and evil actions. Instead, Spinoza states we are responsible for those actions that are the result of following reason. Furthermore, he claims that to be free is to act according to the principles of one’s own nature (*E*3def2), which in the case of human beings means being guided by reason (*E*4p66scho). Now, given that reason always recommends the act that is best for my existence (i.e., for my survival) to act freely implies acting rightly in Spinoza’s view. In contrast, when we are entirely determined by our passions we are prone to act against our own interests. Furthermore, passions are determined by external forces and so when one follows one’s passions, one is not free. From this outlook, one can reach the conclusion that if one is responsible for something when one is free, then one is only responsible for those actions that are good but not for actions that are bad. Here it is clear in what sense a Spinozistic approach to political responsibility is not neutral. In contrast to Jaspers, Spinoza would not say that people are guilty of choosing an evil regime, for there are many external factors that push them to take this path. However, people are responsible for good governments when, following reason, they take this path.

In the case of the Germans and the Nazi regime, the defender of this Spinozistic concept of political responsibility would say that Germans are not politically responsible for what happened during the existence of that regime. This, however, does not mean that for Spinoza the crimes committed by the Nazis and the attitudes of the Germans toward the Jews were not evil in a meaningful sense. The thesis I am going to defend in the remainder of this paper is that Spinoza’s theory of political responsibility is more radical than Jaspers’s lean on guilt.

5 Spinoza's View of Political Responsibility

Spinoza's claims about acting by reason allow us to build a theory of political responsibility grounded on an 'agent-based argument.' In *A Political Treatise*, with regard to the constitution of the commonwealth, Spinoza affirms that, "[its] right is determined by the power of the multitude, which is led, as it were, by one mind" (*TP* 3:7). As I said above, to ensure unity the multitude has to agree to the following points: the ends of the community (to which Spinoza would include security, freedom and the well-being of citizens), the rights of the citizens, and the obligations and laws citizens must abide by.[12] In *A Theological-Political Treatise,* Spinoza tries to prove that political regimes that are closer to the postulates of reason are free and democratic systems because these regimes protect not only the life and well-being of citizens but also their political and civil rights.[13] Now, the issue of political responsibility can be separated in two related questions: first, what kind of commonwealth and system of rules would citizens wish to belong to and therefore endorse? Second, what kind of government would they approve to carry out the principles that constitute the unity and the commonwealth? Next, I will briefly explain how Spinoza would answer these questions.

With regard to the first question, a despotic political system that overrides all freedoms of the multitude would not have the support of the people after rational deliberation. Accordingly, given Spinoza's notion of freedom, he believes we are free and therefore responsible if and only if we endorse a political society that is closest to a free society. Indeed, we are not free and not responsible if we support a despotic or oppressive society.

Though Spinoza uses contractualist terms such as the state of nature, covenant, and political society, he does not believe in the existence of a pure state of nature in which people live without any kind of political institutions. His notion of a covenant, which he uses to explain the creation of the political community, must be understood in terms of the behavior of people that explicitly or implicitly expresses the endorsement of the system of rules that govern society. Such behavior or practices are partly determined by people's understanding of what is a good life, what is just, and so on. These views are not born spontaneously; they are embedded in traditions that through different means have been transmitted from one generation to another. These traditions are learned and transformed by people in different spaces, like the family, the school, the church, the workplace, the media, etc. Whence, the idea that

[12] For Spinoza, the multitude is a kind of political commonwealth even before the conformation of the state, and ultimately it supports the sovereign power. For Hobbes, in *Leviathan,* a multitude cannot be a commonwealth, it has to be transformed into a 'people,' and its principle of unity only can be reached through the external force of the state or Leviathan. See Hobbes (1975, Chapters XVII and XVIII). In contrast, Spinoza claims the sovereign is responsible for both the political and the judicial. For a contemporary interpretation see Virno (2004).

[13] "In a democracy, irrational commands are still less to be feared: for it is almost impossible that the majority of a people, especially if it be a large one, should agree in a irrational design: and moreover, the basis and aim of a democracy is to avoid the desires as irrational, and to bring men as far as possible under the control of reason, so that they live in peace and harmony: if the basis be removed the whole fabric falls to ruin." *TTP* 16, 194.

we become self-reflective subjects, critics of our traditions, is not a miracle or something that is already there in human nature. Rather, it is the result of a historical process. In reality, it is the avatars of the traditions and practices with their contradictions and tensions, with their encounters and wars with other traditions that lead to the development of either self-reflective beings or slaves. Under this approach, whether people endorse an oppressive society like the Nazi's or a free democratic society deeply depends on the traditions and practices people believe and follow.[14]

In *History and Memory after Auschwitz,* Dominick LaCapra argues that the Nazi's endeavor to annihilate all Jews resulted not only because of the criminal activities of the Nazis and the failures of the process of modernization but more importantly because of the anti-Semitism encrusted in the German ethos (LaCapra 1998: 190). Here ethos means not the character of a collective subject—the German people—but rather the common beliefs and practices of most of individuals that consider themselves Germans. Assuming LaCapra's interpretation, if one follows a Spinozistic approach, one can say that although the Nazi regime was certainly possible thanks to the support of the Germans, this does not mean they are guilty because their support is neither the outcome of free choice nor are Germans intrinsically an evil people.

With regard to the second question of political responsibility, which concerns the creation and dissolution of government, Spinoza, 20 years before John Locke's *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, holds that the strength of a state depends on the extent of the endorsement it gets from the multitude. Taking into consideration the problematic notion of the interests of people, it is possible to distinguish between good governments and bad ones: the former are those that effectively protect the interests of all citizens, whereas the latter are those that only defend the interests of a minority (*TP* 2:9). From these observations one can derive four kinds of situations: **a**. people support a good government; **b**. people support a bad government; **c**. people do not support a good government; and **d**. people do not support a bad government.

From the standpoint of reason, most people's behavior is compatible with their own interests in situations **a** and **d**. Situation **a** corresponds to a peaceful society with a democratic political system in which there is harmony between the interests of the people and the actions of the government. Situation **d**, on the contrary, represents a society in turmoil or close to it; in this state, people are rightly discontented with the government's policies. In sum, in these two cases people seem to act as if they are free.[15]

[14] Spinoza believes that the duty of obedience to the government cannot excuse citizens from their responsibilities. Obedience does not imply the right to abdicate before the state or to suspend your faculty of judgment in front of the government's evils commands. Regarding blind obedience, Spinoza states, "In the second place it comes to be considered, that subjects are so far dependent not on themselves, but on the commonwealth, as they fear its power or treats, or as they love the civil state." (*TP* 2:10).

[15] I say that they seem to act freely and not that they act freely because it is possible that people behave in any of these ways motivated by passions or superstitions.

In contrast, people's behavior in situations **b** and **c** seems to be irrational in so far as they are acting against their own interests. Thus, in situation **b**, people are suffering but support their government. This is a case where people are entirely dominated by their passions. Situation **c** represents the case when there is a good government that has been imposed by external forces. In this case, people oppose the government because traditions opposed to the government still dominate people's minds. In these two cases, people's minds are dominated by passions and therefore they are not politically responsible for their political stand.

Taking into account these four situations, it is time to explain in what sense Spinoza's theory of political authority and the corresponding notion of citizens' political responsibility relies on an 'agent-based argument.' The core of this argument is the distinction between the ends and the creation of the government and those of the commonwealth. In chapter II of *A* P*olitical Treatise,* Spinoza writes:

> This right [the common law], which is determined by the power of a multitude, is generally called dominion. And, speaking generally, he holds dominion, to whom are entrusted by common consent affairs of state... But if this charge belongs to a council, composed of the general multitude, then the dominion is called a democracy; if the council be composed of certain chosen persons, then it is an aristocracy; and if, lastly, the care of affairs of state and, consequently, the dominion rest with one man, then it has the name of monarchy (*TP* 2:17).

In this passage, Spinoza distinguishes between the power of the multitude (the commonwealth) that creates the political regime, that is, the dominion, the common law, and the political regimen—democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy—that has the authority to enforce the law. Based on the above passage and his view about the relation between reason, imagination, and *conatus,* one can construct the agent-based argument. The argument has two parts: one is descriptive and the other is normative.

The descriptive argument affirms that the government is an agent of the people whose central role is to enforce 'the common law,' which constitutes the essence of the commonwealth. This part of the argument is descriptive because it attempts to explain how a government can lose popular support. Accordingly, if a government acts against the common law, the government is no longer the agent of the people. However, given that there is no commonwealth without government, in situations like this either the commonwealth is dissolved or a new government is elected. Such a dilemma is characteristic of the moments of crisis that can lead to revolution or reform. Thus, Spinoza's central aim is not to advise rulers how to survive but rather to establish the best commonwealth and the best government for the multitude. This leads us to the normative argument.

As I said earlier, for Spinoza a commonwealth is more powerful if its system of laws is closer to the rules of reason, that is, to the interests and preservation of the citizens as a people. These interests can be called the true interests of the multitude. I also said that for Spinoza the closest of all political systems to reason's requirements are free and democratic societies. He explains this follows:

> But be it remarked that, by the dominion which I have said is established for this end [the realization of human life according to the precepts of reason], I

> intend that which has been established by a free multitude, not that which is acquired over a multitude by right of war. For a free multitude is guided more by hope than fear; a conquered one, more by fear than hope: inasmuch as the former aims at making use of life, the latter but at escaping death. The former, I say, aims at living its own ends, the latter is forced to belong to the conqueror; and so we say that this is enslaved, but that free (*TP* 5:6).

In this passage, Spinoza clearly distinguishes between two forms for creating a political regime or dominion: one is established by a free multitude, that is, by a rational deliberative process made by all the members of the political community, and the other by a multitude guided by fear leading to the creation of a commonwealth split between masters and slaves. For Spinoza, the regime formed by a free multitude is the more appropriate for the sake of a free and rational existence. Taking into consideration this distinction, one can formulate the normative argument in the following terms: a ruler deserves to have political authority if it represents the people (i.e., if it is supported by the people) and if it is for the people in the sense that defends and promotes the true interests of the people.[16] To understand the significance of this argument is necessary to again analyze the four cases discussed above.

In situation **a**, the sovereign is supported by the people and the system of law truly defends the true interests of the people. This is the best situation because here the government is the strongest and the multitude the freest. At the other extreme one finds situation **b**, with a government whose laws and policies are against the true interests of the population, although the rulers have the people's support. This situation represents those tyrannical and populist governments beloved by the people. Paradoxically these two situations have something in common: the stability of the political regime. Although situation **b** is the worst situation for the multitude, compared with case **c** and case **d**, the political regime is strong. Here, the power of passions and imagination are not only allied with the forces of government, but it is also clearly stronger than the power of reason. In situation **d**, the government is the weakest because it is bad —as in **b**— but citizens here are opposed to the oppressive government; it seems that people's minds are freer than in **b**. In this case, the power of reason is stronger or at least coincides with the power of people's imagination. Lastly, in situation **c**, where the state's policies represent the true interests of people but lacks popular support, reason is allied with the forces of the government but is confronted by the forces of imagination that dominate peoples' minds. This scenario represents those societies with an authoritarian ethos in which their governments are not dominated by that ethos and try to resist society's pressures.

From these observations, one can derive two conclusions: on the one hand, political power is determined not only by physical forces and wisdom but by the sway of passions; on the other hand, although all existent political powers are the result of power's struggle, this does not mean that they are the best for the multitude. Political

[16] For argument's sake, I assume for one moment that there are no strong divergences within the community. In addition, when I speak of 'people,' I am referring to the majority.

success does not entail well-being for the people. These conclusions lead us to a paradox in the Spinozistic approach we are following because given that this approach assumes the principle that power determines what is right, how can be said that a political regime that has been determined by power's struggle is not the right one or the best?

Using Spinoza's notion of *conatus*, one can construct a convincing answer to this objection. As stated earlier, Spinoza considers that good and evil are not divine and transcendent notions that put limits on our wishes and necessities. Rather, he considers that our moral convictions are determined by our desires. Indeed, he writes "we neither strive for, nor will, neither want nor desire anything because we judge it to be good; on the contrary, we judge something to be good because we strive for it, will it, want it, and desire it" (*E*3p9scho1). Thus, it is important to recall that Spinoza believes that to have a right to do something implies both the desire to it and the power to do it. For Spinoza, joy, love, and in general all pleasures express an increase in our power or *conatus*, and for this reason prima facie are good for us. However, as complex organisms, that is, as organisms that have to keep a certain harmony or proportion between their different parts, these positive affects can be harmful in as far as they increase in excess the power of one part of our body. In contrast, sadness, hatred, and all painful emotions diminish our bodily powers and so they are bad for us, but when they counteract the excess of our pleasures they can be good. Human beings, as do all natural beings, strive to increase their power, that is, their capacity to exist, to affect, and to be affected by others without being destroyed. We desire to be with those persons and objects that give us joy and we desire to avoid those things that produce pain (*E*3p25, p. 26). In this sense, a perfect, invincible organism would be something that can control or resist the negative effects of all these passions; such an organism would have the capacity to always act according to reason. However, human beings are singular finite beings that are not invulnerable. In this sense, in the only axiom of part four of *The Ethics*, Spinoza asserts something that today nobody would doubt: "there is not singular thing in Nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger. Whatever one is given, there is another more powerful by which the first can be destroyed" (*E*4ax). In the political sphere, the multitude can see governments as a means to satisfy their needs, to protect their lives, and to produce the conditions to reach happiness. Unfortunately, political regimes are not the effect of a rational and free process of decision making; instead, they are created, transformed, and destroyed by the conflicting impact of external forces on the people, something that Spinoza calls passions. Human beings are finite and we usually exist under uncertainty. It is a fact that people's political choices are not usually based on exhaustive and adequate information but instead on confused ideas, prejudices, and emotions. Hence, there is no warrant that people will embrace a good commonwealth and a good government. In conclusion, according to Spinoza, not all political regimes imposed by the confluence of different powers are the best for the multitude, and yet there is no right that is not determined by power.

6 Applying Spinoza's Therapeutics

Despite the profound differences between Spinoza's political philosophy and Jaspers's reflections on German guilt, they share a significant element: the idea that the only way to overcome profound and tragic political crises is via a process of self-reflection. For Jaspers, the situation in Germany after the Second World War was not merely that of a vanquished nation, it told of a people who helped a state commit atrocious crimes and who chose with its endorsement of Nazism to be an enslaved people. Overcoming this situation requires, according to Jaspers, a profound change in the hearts of most Germans. Such a change essentially requires that Germans recognize themselves as guilty in a political, moral, and metaphysical sense. Meanwhile, Spinoza's political reflections were made in the context of a profound crisis in the Dutch republic. This was a moment when Dutch Protestants tried to impose a theological regime. Spinoza saw this critical moment as a battle between those, like him, who defended the existence of a secular democratic society and the reactionary forces that defended the primacy of religious faith. In this context, Spinoza asserts that the task of philosophy is to free humanity from the chains of passions in the individual sphere as well as in the political one.[17] In the fifth part of *The Ethics*, Spinoza offers a self-reflective therapeutic procedure that if applied to politics would reveal a different path from Jaspers's process of guilt. The aim of Spinoza's therapy is not to make people feel sincere repentance, but to bring about a profound change in the personal and political identity of each citizen and of the people as a whole. But what does this change mean? And how is it made?

Spinoza's therapeutics is basically a process of enlightenment by way of which we pass from being passive and dominated by passions and imagination to being active and guided by reason. This process demands two requirements. First, individuals and societies should have the capacity to know themselves and their affections. For Spinoza, this is a central condition of being human: "there is no affection of the body of which we cannot form a clear and distinct concept" (E5p4). This means that we are able to recognize whether we suffer or enjoy, hate or love, and the causes of these feelings. Second, for a real transformation, Spinoza considers that human beings must "have the power of ordering and connecting the affections of the body to the order of intellect" (E5p10). Furthermore, "By this power of rightly ordering and connecting the affections of the body, we can bring it about that we are not easily affected with evil affects. For [by E5p7] a greater force is required for restraining affects ordered and connected according to the order of the intellect than for restraining those which are uncertain and random" (E5p10scho). This requirement cannot be satisfied under circumstances that seriously hinder our capacity to adequately reflect in our own interests and in the social and natural environment under which we live. One of the key aspects of a despotic and oppressive society is that people do not have the means to know what their needs are or their causes. The key aspect of Spinoza's therapy is the idea that a profound knowledge of our passions,

[17] For an excellent interpretation about the Dutch Republic and the significance of Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise* in his time, see James (2012).

that is, of the mechanisms that are behind them, modify not just the way we see the objects that affect us but also our affections in themselves.

As I mentioned above, the aim of Spinoza's therapeutics is to change the identity of either the individual or the society as a whole. According to Spinoza, a person who is generally guided by passions is different, not just in degree but also in kind, from a person who is often guided by reason. Therefore, to pass from being dominated by passions to being guided by reason is a qualitative change that I call identity change, as it implies a new and complete re-description of who I am. This transformation contains the following three elements.

First, there is something perplexing in Spinoza's therapeutics, as the requirements necessary to accomplish its ends refer to the powers expected to be reached at the end of the process. Is not the aim of therapeutics to give us the power to understand ourselves and to control our passions, that is, to order them in accordance with our understanding? One way to solve this problem is to consider these conditions as the 'innate capacities' of all human beings. If so, the problem would not be how to acquire them but how to use them. This interpretation implies that, for Spinoza, there is a general essence of human nature where reason, imagination, and will are faculties that all human beings own. Spinoza, however, does not maintain these theses. In his analyses of the so-called 'common notions,' he defends an anti-essentialist view of human nature, very close to nominalism. Thus, he affirms that universal terms or classes such as dog, man, or horse are confused and inadequate ideas; they are abstractions that leave aside particular aspects of each singular thing. For Spinoza, these universal notions are images that express the limits of the human body and the human imagination. In this sense, Spinoza writes: "[universal notions] have arisen from similar causes, namely, because so many images (e.g., of men) are formed at one time in the human body that they surpass the power of imagining" (*E*2p40scho1). In contrast to Aristotle, Spinoza considers that reason, imagination, and will are not potentialities that have to be actualized but are mere notions that refer to a set of adequate ideas (reason), images (imaginations), and desires (will) that a person can own in a certain moment. According to Spinoza, neither universal notions nor common notions (Spinoza's name for laws of nature), which for him are true, constitute the essence of any singular thing. Furthermore, besides the natural order—which he explains through the notions of God, attributes, and infinite modes—, he considers that only existent things are singular finite beings. In short, there are no universal beings or general essences. The universal notions express the way a human body has been affected by other bodies. When such notions are shared by a group of people, it means that a set of human bodies has been affected in similar ways. In other words, people agree on certain notions if they live together in the same space and in the same time. Hence, universal notions like men and women or moral terms like right and wrong are the product of specific social and natural interactions. Thus, they are part of a concrete context (*E*2p40scho1).

Second, in the preface of the fourth part of *The Ethics*, Spinoza makes an observation about how humans usually conceive nature and construct moral notions that is necessary for understanding his therapy. He describes how human beings that are "conscious of their actions and appetites but not aware of the causes by which they are determined to want something" (*E*4pref) tend to see nature as a system of ends

and means. This view together with the fact that all beings seek their own advantage (*conatus*), leads human beings to form models of explanation that include the ends for which can be useful. Likewise, we form an "idea of man as a model of human nature which we may look to" (*E*4pref). Thus, for Spinoza, the idea of humanity that we form as members of some community usually contains the ends that the members of the community believe humans must achieve. Within each epoch, each society has a particular model of humanity. In the case of Spinoza, the conditions of his therapeutics expressed a view shared by most modern philosophers and liberal politicians of the seventeenth century—the dismantling of the old medieval order by imposing a new social order based on reason, and more concretely on the idea of individual freedom. From the point of view of nature, however, the modern notion of humanity is not truer or less false than the medieval one. Nevertheless, Spinoza considers that the idea of humanity guided by reason was something that those who want to be free should strive for.[18] In his analysis in *A Theological-Political Treatise* of the conditions of the Jewish people in the Old Testament, Spinoza shows that the idea of freedom is not something that is embedded in human nature, but instead is the outcome of a historical process. Despite the fact that Spinoza believes that every epoch and society defines and strives to defend the answer to the question 'what is humanity,' he was not a moral and political relativist. It was the central aim of *The Ethics* and his political writings to show that for human existence or human *conatus*, it was better to live in free and democratic societies. In this regard, his rejection of teleological explanations implies that there is nothing in nature that shows us that its future path would be compatible with the existence of such kind of societies. Given our finitude, the future of political communities is for us always uncertain.

The third element refers to the relations between the constitution of identity and the question of how to acquire true and adequate ideas. For Spinoza, a child of 5 years old, a dog, and a drunk, despite their differences, have in common the fact of being determined by passions. At the same time, they are different in kind or nature from the sober and wise adult, even if this person was years ago the young child or the night before the drunk. Because Spinoza considers that as 'the faculty of reason' and 'the faculty of imagination' do not exist, and adequate ideas and inadequate ideas or images do, the question of how to change from a being dominated by passions to one guided by reason is linked to the question of how to acquire true ideas. In his theory of truth, Spinoza affirms that the process of knowledge has to start from a true idea or adequate definition. Likewise, the conditions of his therapeutics assume a similar start point: to have the power to understand ourselves is to say that we have some true ideas about ourselves. The difficult problem is how to obtain a true idea when one has none.

[18] In the fourth part of *The Ethics*, Spinoza proposes his model of a 'Free Man.' A free man always has, as rule of life, to be guided by reason and not to be led by an affect or by opinion. This free man is a reasonable person that desires the good directly and he is capable to develop virtues like thankfulness, to act honestly, and to never deceive to avoid things, actions, and emotions that could harm to himself or others. See *E*4p67–73.

Although in regard to this question Spinoza is mute,[19] based on what has been said here, I will offer an answer that is compatible with his anti-essentialism. Taking into consideration Spinoza's determinism, one may say that there are certain social and natural circumstances that are favorable for the acquisition of true ideas, and there are others in which they are not. Examples of the former are free and democratic political regimes, and an example of the latter is despotic regimes. In the former, the free interaction between ideas, striving to educate people in sciences, the open participation of all members of the community, and the constant and mutual critique of opinions and arguments make possible the construction of theories and arguments closer to the requirements of adequate ideas. Thus, they provide complete explanations of phenomena. In contrast, in despotic societies in which free speech is prohibited, an adequate education of the whole population is practically nonexistent. Where the only accepted opinions are those of the rulers, finding true ideas is almost impossible. Furthermore, each human being, each society, and even the most powerful, does not have enough power to change by itself the political, cultural, social, and natural conditions under which it lives. This is a realistic view of politics and society; one cannot expect people who have been enslaved for a long time to suddenly wake up 1 day and to start fighting, alone, for their freedom. Thus, the question of having true ideas is not merely an epistemological question but also a political one. However, once we are in possession of true ideas it is possible to apply therapeutics. With regard to political communities, one may say that therapeutics on the social level would be arguably the most adequate means to transform society. Nevertheless, there is no guarantee that this process can be successful because insofar as societies and individuals are finite, there is always the chance that external forces will hinder our efforts. The therapeutic process and the transformation of the polity therefore go together; the freer the society, the truer knowledge can be obtained and vice versa.

Taking this into consideration, and given the above assumptions, the application of Spinoza's therapeutics in the political terrain would have three steps:

First, to know and evaluate the facts. In the case of Germany, this means that instead of seeing themselves as a 'vanquished nation,' they had to recognize that the Holocaust happened, and that it was a terrible tragedy that should not have occurred.

Secondly, to know the causes of what happened. For Spinoza, to have a true or adequate knowledge of an event is not merely to establish the facts but to determine the complete series of its causes. In this sense, Germans had to recognize that they were one important factor, but not the only one, that produced the emergence of Nazism and the perpetration of the Holocaust.

Lastly, to change our conceptions, feelings, and attitudes toward others and ourselves. The aim of this step is to change the way we describe and treat others and ourselves; that is, to change our personal, social, and political identity. For Germans

[19] For this reason, there are many commentators who consider that Spinoza is an innatist. Although they may be right, the problem is that this innatism is not compatible with Spinoza's assessments that support anti-essentialism. See De Dijn's commentary about Spinoza's true idea (*idea vera*), 'inborn tools' (*innata instrumenta*), and 'inborn power' (*vis nativa*), and their relation with his scientific method and his theory of truth (*TIE* § 30–49), in De Dijn (1996, 76–90).

this has implied two things. First, they must have learned to see Jews, Gypsies, Communists, homosexuals, and all other victims as human beings that must be treated with dignity. Second, Germans had to recognize that Nazi crimes were perpetrated in collaboration with a people who had lost their sense of humanity, by a people who had become inhuman. Consequently, when Germans became human again, they had to change their ethos, the culture that brings them to that tragic situation, but such a change would have implied radically transforming all aspects of their identity—in short, they would give up being German.[20]

7 Conclusion

In this paper I have elaborated a Spinozistic concept of political responsibility that answers the question posed by Jaspers's *Question of German Guilt.* The focus of this view lies on the idea of asymmetrical freedom. Using such a notion, I have shown from Spinoza's point of view the difficulties of the notion of guilt in its moral and political sense: hindering an adequate explanation of the events. In addition, I also consider that Spinoza's view has the advantage of taking seriously the real motivations of human beings: we are neither saints nor entirely prudent and rational beings. Most of us are prone to be swayed by superstition in all its forms. In this view, however, there is a weakness, a challenge that is not easy to overcome: how to deal with others. As we saw, a key aspect of Spinoza's political philosophy is his idea that the 'true interests' of a singular human being are something that only reason can reach. In this regard, Spinoza seems to conceive reason as an instrumental method, as a means to reach one's own happiness and thereby as an expression of the principle of self-love. Although Spinoza derives from this principle the idea that "in nature there is nothing more useful to a man than another man" (*E*4p35scho), one may argue that this does not seriously consider the interests of others because one is only concerned with others as far as they are useful to us. This challenge is especially urgent in the question regarding the relation between past generations and present ones. However, if we seriously consider, like Spinoza, that the true and ultimate aim of a political community and its political institutions is that individuals achieve moral autonomy, pace, security, and freedom (*TTP* 20, 220–221), then it is necessary to set political responsibility some normative obligations to assure that aim. Besides the origin of a political community, their members had the duty to answer for the political actions of its government, not only politically but also morally.

The Spinozistic views on citizens' political responsibility that I have been arguing, in this paper, not only could address Jaspers's question on collective guilt but also would throw light on a current political philosophy issue, that of transitional justice. In societies that have suffered, in their recent past, internal conflicts—in which massive violations of human rights have been perpetrated by both the State and non-state armed actors—how they should deal with the victims of the conflict

[20] It is impossible to explain how to do this here. However, one way is to show how it is possible for people to construct a new identity by questioning their own identity.

and how they should build democratic regimes in which citizens assume responsibility for both their past and their future. In this sense, the duty to know the past and to establish the true causes of the political harms and evils entails other normative obligations that I consider are duties of virtue in the Kantian sense: the duty to remember, the duty to forgive, and the duty to repair the victims. These duties have the purpose of reestablishing the unity between the past and present members of the same political community.

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